



SHIRTS

Lisa Clarkson

They wake together, as lovers often do. She makes breakfast, wetting cereal with milk; he cleans his teeth and shaves the grit from his face.

The sink needs a wipe, he thinks. He eats but does not taste. She watches herself eat and wonders whether she should reduce the portion tomorrow.

He needs a shirt, so unzips the wardrobe door. He says: my dear, the damp is getting worse; there is mould on my shirts. Her face twists and wrinkles as she rummages, muttering words towards her hands. She passes him an unspotted garment in pale blue. He pulls it around himself, even though it is a little tight around the middle these days.

Lovely, she says, and smiles. He walks away, and she watches through the window, dotted with moisture that glows gold in the streetlight.

It is cold, she thinks, but too early for a drink.

He passes through air hard and heavy with ice, his limbs stiff and awkward. His nipples rub against cheap polyester. They seem to be

trying to emit sparks, he thinks.

She takes his spoiled shirts and pours hot water over them, with lots of soap. She tries to scrub, but her hands turn red and threaten to blister. She watches the pale infected patches float.

He takes his coat off on the train and tugs his shirt down. A woman sits opposite; she is older, but not unattractive. He wonders if she will notice the strain on his buttons, and begins to feel clammy under his arms.

She wonders whether he feels unclean. When the water cools she briskly rubs the striped against the plain material. She thinks that maybe she is too rough. She releases the water, collects more in the bowl, and rubs again. She remembers massaging with these fingers. At last the shirts look clear, and she throws them into the depths of the washing-machine, where she can watch them spin and dance.

At work he sits, and is hidden behind a desk for hours, unnoticed. For a while he forgets his shirts, and worries about money instead.

She sits quietly and waits for the cycle to finish, thinking that there was a queen who died having worn a poisoned dress. She hopes he knows that she would not wish him to feel so unclean.

He waits until after lunch, which she had packed for him but contains to surprises, before he rings. He says he must, and will, be late home today.

She worries that he no longer trusts the nest, but does not say so. She irons the shirts and hangs them on the curtain-rail. She no longer trusts the walls of this house, she thinks.

He gets his usual train but gets off early, so that he can visit the shopping-centre before he goes home. He is glad that these people must stay open so late, but when he checks some prices he realises

why they do. He takes a selection of shirts to the changing-room. The woman there smiles at him, he thinks.

She wants to show him that she sympathises, even though her own clothes are safe. She takes a bus because the evenings scare her, and finds a shop that only sells clothes for men.

He looks in the mirror but does not turn to the side. It looks good, he decides. It is soft but black, and therefore manly. Perhaps he will not have to admit the price. She will like to see him in it.

She finds a shirt that is white and smooth. It would look well across his shoulders, she thinks. It is more than they can afford, but he will not mind if she does not tell him.

He goes to the queue and thinks: there are too many men in here.

She goes to the queue and thinks: there are too many men in here, but the one in front looks nice.

He turns, afraid because it is not often that someone touches him outside the home. They laugh and compare choices. She realises that she had selected the wrong size. He is ashamed that his would cost more. He says they should not buy them both, but she insists. She says: perhaps we should buy a proper wardrobe to protect these smart clothes.

He smiles, but his wallet feels heavy in his back pocket, although it is not full.

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