

The Little Black Dress

Vicky walks through a narrow mews she has taken by accident. She is only a few minutes from the club but feels lost, miles from anywhere. She comes to a stop outside a shop and gazes up at a little black dress that is short, sleeveless, unassuming. Like me, she thinks.

The thought whisks away as her curiosity moves from the dress to the mannequin wearing it. She has long brown hair, brown eyes and sulky lips like she's been waiting for a boyfriend and has reached the moment when she knows he's not going to show up. The mannequin's head is turned to one side and she has one leg slightly raised, as if she has better things to do than just stand there.

As Vicky glances at her watch, she glimpses someone she doesn't know in the window's reflection and leans closer to make sure it's her. She checks her hands, counts her fingers, then stares back again at the mannequin; her forlorn look is awfully real and she wonders how they do that, how they shape plaster and make it human.

The mews is unlit and she has to wind through a series of horse posts that are leaning at odd angles along the way. Rain polishes the old cobbles staring up at her like a sea of eyes. Crossing Sloane Square is a test of wills. The traffic comes at you like fleeing rats and the Albanian girls with their headscarves and sleeping babies always make her think of the story of the Good Samaritan as she passes them by.

The tube has
cars use public
thoughts. There
like an orang-utan,
passenger cuffing her about the ear. It belongs to a plump girl with blonde hair and an accent that drums like the train wheels, da-da da-da dum, da-da da-da dum, Norway or Finland, one of those places where they make luggage for exploring new worlds.

She gives up reading and just stands there staring at herself in the carriage window. She's wearing an anorak over a yellow jogging suit, the name of the club across her breast in green letters. Her eyes are glazed, her hair held back with an elastic band the postman has used to secure one of Fergus's bundles of letters.

When Vicky gets home, Fergus is browning cloves of garlic; there's an Irish jig on the radio. He kisses her on the side of the mouth and the wiry hair of his beard goes up her nose and makes her sneeze.

'Baby's got a cold, some good hot soup's what you need.'

'A cold glass of wine's what I need,' she replies. She gazes at herself in his blue eyes until he blinks.

'I'll open a bottle. You go and rest.' He turns to add a pinch of thyme to the pot. 'How was your day?'