

VERTIGO

Joanna Walsh



HIGH WYCOMBE

FIN DE COLLECTION

A friend told me to buy a red dress in Paris because I am leaving my husband. The right teller can make any tale, the right dresser can make any dress. Listen to me carefully: I am not the right teller.

Even to be static in Saint-Germain requires money. The white stone hotels charge so much a night just to stay still. So much is displayed in the windows: so little bought and sold. The women of the quarter are all over forty and smell of new shoe-leather. I walk the streets with them. It is impossible to see what kind of woman could inhabit the dresses on display – but some do, some must.

We turn into Le Bon Marché, the women and I.

Le Bon Marché is divided into departments: fashion, food, home. It is possible to find yourself in the wrong department, but nothing bad can happen here. Le Bon Marché is always the same and always different, like

those postcards where the Eiffel Tower is shown a hundred ways: in the sun, in fog, in sunsets, in snow. There are no postcards of the Eiffel Tower in the rain but it does rain in Paris, even in August, and when it does you can shelter in Le Bon Marché, running between the two ground-floor sections with one of its large orange bags suspended over your head (too short a dash to open an umbrella).

Fin de collection d'été. In Le Bon Marché it is already autumn. In 95-degree heat, we bury our faces in wool and corduroy. We long for frost, we who have waited so long for summer. In the *passerelle*, the walkway between the store's two buildings, a tape-loop breeze, the sound of water, photographs of a beach.

Je peux vous aider? the salesgirl asks the fat woman with angel's wings tattooed across her back. The woman mouths, *non*, and walks, with her thin companion, into the *passerelle*, suspended.

The first effect of abroad is strangeness. It makes me strange to myself. I experience a transfer, a transparency. I do not look like these women. I want to project these women's looks onto mine and with them all the history that has made these women look like themselves and not like me.



Fin de Collection

There is something about my face in the mirrors that catch it. Even at a distance it will never be right again, not even to a casual glance. Beauty: it's the upkeep that costs, that's what Balzac said, not the initial investment.

From time to time I change my mind and sell my clothes. I sell the striped ones and buy spotted ones. Then I sell the spotted ones and buy plaid. To change clothes is to take a plunge, to holiday. The thin girl in her checked jacket looks more appropriate than I do, though her clothes are cheaper. This makes me angry. How did her look slip by me? I was always too young. And now I am too old.

I cannot forgive her. I forgive only the beauties of past eras: the pasty flappers, the pointed New Lookers. They are no longer beautiful and cannot harm me now. Even your other women seemed tame until I saw the attention you paid them. I no longer know the value of anything. And if you do not see me, I am nothing. From the outside I look together. I forget that I am really no worse than anyone else. But how can I go on with nobody? And how, and when, and where can I be inflamed by your glance? I can't be friends with your friends. I can't go to dinner with you, don't even want to.



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But why does the fat woman always travel with the thin woman? Why the one less beautiful with one more beautiful? Why do there have to be two women, one always better than the other?

Je peux vous aider?

Non.

There are no red dresses in Le Bon Marché. *It isn't the dress: it's the woman in the dress.* (Chanel. Or Yves Saint Laurent.) Parisiennes wear grey, summer and winter: they provide their own colour. *Elegance is refusal.* (Chanel. Or YSL. Or someone.) To leave empty-handed is a triumph.

In any case, come December the first wisps of lace and chiffon will appear and with them bottomless skies reflected blue in mirror swimming pools.

To other people, perhaps, I still look fresh: to people who have not yet seen this dress, these shoes, but to myself, to you, I can never re-present the glamour of a first glance.

To appear for the first time is magnificent.

VAGUES

There are many people in the oyster restaurant and they all have different relations to each other, which warrant small adjustments: they ask each other courteously whether they wouldn't prefer to sit in places in which they are not sitting, but in which the others would prefer them to sit. Sometimes entire parties get up and the suggested adjustments are made; sometimes they only half get up then sit down again. Some of the tables in the restaurant face the beach and have high stools along one side so that diners can see the sea. Others have high stools on both sides so that some diners face the sea and others, the restaurant, but both, each other's faces. Because of the angle of the sun and of the straw shades over the tables, the people who face the sea are also more likely to be in the shade. Not everyone can face the sea, not everyone can be in the shade.



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The waitress passes. The people who face the sea cannot see her and cannot signal to her with their eyes. Facing the sea they can signal to nothing, as nothing on the beach can receive their signals, not the seagulls or the mother and toddler who are too far away, nor the occasional stork that picks through the rubbish. Yes, the beach has rubbish, though not much, and though the restaurant, by its presence, makes the rubbish unmentionable. All the beaches along this coast have some rubbish: either more or less than this beach. Here in the restaurant the diners who face the sea may notice it or ignore it, but they must accept the rubbish as part of the environment, just as they must accept the seaweed that covers the stones near the sea with a green slippery layer and which, unlike the rubbish, smells.

The smell of the seaweed must be accepted as part of the natural environment although it masks the scent of the oysters served at the bar, the smell of which is similar but different enough.

Farther along the beach, where the mother and toddler are paddling, the seaweed forms stripes of green that are pleasing, though this may be the effect of distance. The mother and toddler could have picked a better beach. Although all the beaches along this





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shore have some rubbish, some have less seaweed, and fewer stones. This beach is not good for paddling, but perhaps it is good for oysters. Yes, the seaweed the rubbish the smell the stones must all be part of the environment oysters prefer, which must be the reason the oyster restaurant is here, allowing the customers seated at the tables to look out at the beach and the sea and, looking, to understand that it must be the environment natural to oysters, and to approve.



Because he has chosen to sit at a table looking out at the sea, in order to see and approve the environment natural to oysters including the seaweed the rubbish the seagulls the stork the stones the mother and the toddler, he cannot signal to the waitress and it is because of this, or because she is insufficiently attentive, or because the oyster bar employs insufficient staff during the busy summer season, that the waitress does not arrive with his order.



He says,

‘Maybe they will bring the entire order at once, though I would have thought they would bring the drinks first.’

He says,

‘They do not have enough staff.’

Joanna Walsh

They employ the number of staff they can afford to employ and serve at a pace at which the staff is capable of serving. The capacity is natural and proportionally correct. Il faut attendre.

He says,

‘They have too many tables.’

We must also consider the number of staff the restaurant can afford to retain over the winter months, which we hope may remain steady although the population of the island must shrink by – what? – fifty – what? – seventy per cent – and during which the catch of oysters may remain the same or may increase because the winter months are more likely to contain the letter ‘r’, during which it is said oysters are best eaten, since during their spawning season, which is typically the months not containing the letter ‘r’, they become fatty, watery and soft, less flavourful than those harvested in the cooler, non-spawning months when the oysters are more desirable, lean and firm, with a bright seafood flavour, so that, although all the tables in the restaurant will not be filled in those winter months during which the population of the island shrinks by – what? – forty-five – what? – eighty per cent – we may hope that the number of serving staff employed by the restaurant will remain steady.

Theories:

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- *During the off-months for the visitors, which are the on-months for the oysters, are the oysters packed in ice or tinned and shipped to Paris?*
- *During the off-months for the visitors, which are the on-months for the oysters, do the serving staff shuck shells?*

Or

- *During the off-months for the visitors, which are the on-months for the oysters, are the restaurant and the oysters abandoned, and the staff laid off?*

The waitress passes our table again. She does not stop.

He says, 'I think these are summer staff. They don't know what they're doing.'

In another country my husband may be sleeping with another woman. He may have decided, having the option, being for once in the same city as her, finally to sleep with the woman with whom I know he has considered sleeping, although he has not slept with her up to now. It is lunchtime. Where my husband is, it is not lunchtime yet. If my husband sleeps with the woman he will do so in the evening. As he has not yet done so, as he has not yet even begun to travel to the

city where she lives, to which he is obliged to travel for work whether he sleeps with her or no, and as I am here in the oyster restaurant at lunchtime in another country, there is nothing I can do to prevent this.

The man sitting opposite me, looking out at the sea the seaweed the rubbish the seagulls the stork the stones, all of which I cannot see but which I know are behind me, does not want to wait for his oysters any longer. He has come here to relax but the oysters are too relaxed for him. He says, 'Do you want to leave?' He half gets up as though about to leave but does not.

He wants to punish someone for the oysters' slow pace. He wants to punish the waitress, who has not brought his order, by leaving. As he is facing the sea, he cannot signal to the waitress, so he wants to punish me by leaving. He does not leave. Because he does not leave, he wants to punish someone (the waitress? me?) by failing to enjoy his lunch.

Already he has asked the waitress several things. In the queue for tables he asked the waitress for a table although he was not yet at the front of the queue. When he asked, he did not ask her but he said, *Excusez-moi*, which means, *May I get through?*, then he asked, *Pardon?*, which means, *I'm sorry?*, then he made a noise that sounded French and indicated

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the tables with his hand. Then he asked, *Oui? Oui?*, which means, *Yes? Yes?* Then he asked me to ask the waitress for a table.

Each time a group of people passed along the path by the restaurant, on bikes or on foot, he looked at them anxiously in case they were able to join the queue, but he seated at a table before him. There are two entrances to the restaurant, both of which are visible from the door, and he watched both carefully to make sure no one bypassed the queue. When he arrived at the front of the queue, he made a false start toward a table, but the waitress did not respond. He did not repeat this movement so as not to abandon his position at the front of the queue. He stood squarely at the front of the queue so that no one could pass until another waitress arrived to give him a table.

He has made an enemy of the first waitress. She will enjoy serving her enemy. Perhaps he too will enjoy this combat. I do not enjoy combat with waiters and waitresses although I am now, by association, also her enemy.

Now he is here, seated at the table that looks out at the sea. It is the table he indicated, the table he desired, from which he can see the sea the beach the seagulls the stork the mother the stones the toddler

the seaweed the rubbish and, at the other side of the table interrupting his view of all these things, me.

He says,

'I want to leave.'

He says,

'Do you want to leave?'

He gets up from the table.

He sits down at the table.

He stands up and walks from the table to the nearest door of the restaurant, during which time the waitress brings the drinks.

Though I am able in some part to share his anxiety about the table the drinks the oysters I find, because he is so angry, that I can face their delay with complete equanimity.

The tables are each made from a semi-circular length of half the trunk of a tree set on wooden trestles. The high stools are of brightly coloured powdered metal. Above the tables, the umbrellas of natural straw spell relaxation.

He is not keen to relax. He is keen to get on. He is already late for his next station of relaxation, for the beach, where we have an appointment to meet some friends of his at a strict hour. He is worrying that we will be late, that they will be anxious, that



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they, that he, will not be able to relax. He takes out his phone to check the time. We must be on time for the deckchair, the towel.

A speedboat drives directly at the restaurant from the sea, so directly that I can see neither its sides nor any perspective, only its prow and the foam it generates. On its prow sit two people, a man and a woman, perfectly tan in black surf suits, and for a long time it looks like the boat will not stop and will continue to drive toward the restaurant, arriving, unlike the people passing on the path on the other side of the restaurant by bike or on foot, through neither of the restaurant's doors but directly through the tables, bypassing the queue entirely.



He gets out his phone and checks the time again. About this time my husband must be leaving for the city that is home to the woman with whom he has been thinking of sleeping. As I know my husband is unlikely to tell me the truth about whether he sleeps with the woman or not – though he may choose either to tell me that he has, when he has not, or that he has not, when he has – I have taken the precaution of being here in the oyster restaurant with this man who may wish to sleep with me. As my husband knows that I know he is unlikely to tell me the truth about

the woman with whom he will or will not have slept, so that, even if he tells me the truth, I will be unable to recognise whether or not he is being truthful, he must believe that if he sleeps with the woman, he will sleep with her entirely for his own pleasure. I, if I sleep with the man who is sitting opposite me at the restaurant, though I will not lie about whether I have slept with this man or not, will be unable to tell my husband anything he will accept as truthful, so must also, by consequence, make sure that, if I sleep with this man, it must be entirely for my own pleasure too.

The speedboat has turned and the people in it, revealed to be six in number, all uniformly and perfectly tan and black, are either on the boat or in the sea beside the boat and are, with no hurry, doing something or not doing something, perhaps mooring the boat so that they can come to the restaurant to eat oysters, or not mooring the boat but doing something else altogether.

They are slim and tan and their slowness has kept them slimmer and tanner than the people who wish immediately to be in the restaurant eating oysters.

He says, 'Perhaps they are mooring and are coming to the restaurant to eat.' At that moment, our oysters arrive and are eaten quickly.



Vagues

All the time we have been at the restaurant there has been the sound of the waves quietly repeating. *Vagues*, I think, undulate: *on-du-ler*. The sound of the waves is pitched and modulated precisely so as not to intrude, distract, but so as to remain constantly audible: *perfection*.