

Here's Looking At You

By Hilary Spiers

But for the spot of - what? blood? rust? - on the collar, the shirt looks fine, almost new. Bit cheeky, flashy even, with those orange and pink stripes, not a combination he would have chosen, but Vin had picked it. The shoes, a curious blue - he thinks of sapphires - fit him as if custom made. Perhaps they had been - just not for him. The suit is a little baggy, but anyone could tell it was a nice bit of schmutter, as his Gran used to say. He adjusts the spotted tie, smiling at himself in the mirror. His teeth look yellow in the artificial light.

'Nah,' says Vin from the doorway, startling him. The old man spins round, still nimble on his dancer's feet.

'No?'

'Not the tifter,' says Vin, taking a long drag on his cigarette. Behind him hangs a large No Smoking sign.

'Oh.' A reluctant hand creeps to his head. Until then, Terence had been confident of his hat selection, felt smart in it, a proper gent. And it looks unworn, in its own box, not like the other cast-offs, soiled with another's sweat and worse. He hesitates, feels the soft felt under his fingers. The Bogart, it's called. The Bogart, in gold letters on the smooth satin lining. 'I like it. Please, son.'

'Whatever.' Vin isn't interested. He's edgy, distracted. 'Just saying, no-one wears them no more. Not these days.'

The shop assistant's heels clack along the corridor to the storeroom. 'All right in there?' calls a nervous voice.

'Yeah, why?' says Vin aggressively. Terence winces.

There is a short silence. Then, 'You're not smoking, are you? Only we're non-smoking now.' She adds, in a rush, 'Look, we don't normally let people try things on. I'm doing you a favour.'

Vin crushes his cigarette out on the lino. 'Be out in a minute. It's me dad. Takes him a while.'

Terence stands in his socks and pants, conscious of his stale institutional smell, shrunken, vulnerable, in front of this big, angry stranger.

Vin strides ahead down the High Street, the bulging carrier bag swinging at his side. Clutching his hatbox and the cheap holdall they'd handed him that morning, Terence hurries along behind, heart thumping. Too many people, too much sky. The street is noisy with traffic and pedestrians yelling into mobile phones. He catches up with his son at the lights. Vin bounces impatiently from foot to foot, like a boxer limbering up.

'Give you a key,' he says, eyes on the speeding traffic. 'Bed's made up. Spare room.'

'You're not coming with me?' Panic closes Terence's throat. No, he can't, can't go to a strange flat, put the key in the lock, push open the door, step through to the unknown ... It's too soon. 'Vin, please ...'

'Business. Anyway, gotta stand on your own two feet.' Vin's phone rings. He looks briefly at the screen, stabs a button and says 'Ten minutes.' Sliding the mobile back in his pocket, he pulls out a key ring. It's a fish, enamelled, its scales articulated, so that it flexes with the weight of the key. Terence stares at it, then puts his hand out. The key drops into his creased palm, and Vin says '10b Miles Buildings, yeah? Here,' thrusting the carrier at his father. Then he's off, across the road, dodging the hooting cars, disappearing into a narrow alley before Terence can say anything. He stands bewildered on the edge of the pavement, laden. A woman tuts as she manoeuvres round him, banging his leg with her heavy bags. He shelters in a doorway, fingering the key ring in his pocket, thumb running over the scales.

'There you go, granddad,' says a young lad, laughing, thrusting a flyer into his hands as he runs past. Terence goes to drop it, but the word 'Tea' catches his eye. He's thirsty, a cup of tea would set him up, steady him. Perhaps then he'll feel better about the flat. Braver. He studies the crudely drawn

map, notices the venue is only a few yards away. Picking up bags and hatbox, he launches himself with sudden courage into the human tide and is swept along to the entrance of what looks like an old cinema. A stained red carpet leads to grand marble steps, now chipped and veined with dirt. Dusty Art Deco lamps line the staircase, up which two overweight women are struggling, their swollen ankles leaking over the sides of incongruously dainty shoes. One of them turns to look down at Terence. 'Don't be shy, love,' she says with a throaty laugh, 'We always need men.' She nudges her friend and the pair of them cackle, holding on to the thick brass handrail, before hauling themselves to the top.

Terence spots the Gents sign, pushing through a battered door to the urinals. There is only one cubicle, which he enters, relishing the luxury of a lock on the door. He sits for a moment on the closed seat, calming his breathing, hugging the bags on his lap. Then he unzips his jacket.

His new clothes feel good. He feels good. Transformed. At the threshold of the ballroom, he watches the couples spin by, ageing bodies rejuvenated by skill and practised footwork. Tea and cake perfume the air. Pushing his belongings under a table, he spots the woman who spoke to him on the stairs, sitting alone, a cup in front of her. Her friend is whirling around the floor in the arms of a cadaverous old man, concentrating fiercely. The familiar music enfolds him, tugging at distant memories.

'My,' says the woman with delight, as he walks over to her, muscles uncoiling, the first stirrings of confidence flowering in his heart, 'who's a smartypants? I like a man in a hat. You look like a film star. Like -'

'Yes,' smiles Terence, renewed, liberated. He doffs his fedora with old-fashioned gallantry. 'May I have the pleasure?'