DANIELLE WOOD

# THE WARDROBE

On the day Justine moved in with Henri, he pushed the clothes in his wardrobe to one side to make room for hers. The wardrobe, with its oak-heavy doors closed, had looked to be an antique. But inside was a modern maze of shelving and compartments, all of which were filled with clothes that seemed to Justine to be weighty with quality. There were jumpers — black, cream, caramel and toffee — in softest alpaca, or else in thick-spun merino, densely cabled. There were jackets in supple suede and leather, and a woollen winter coat lined with black fur as luxuriant as a bear's. The coat-hangers of dark polished timber looked expensive as well.

Justine had left behind everything but her nicest and most favourite things, but even these seemed tatty hanging in the wardrobe next to Henri's clothes. Thinning patches showed in cheap cotton, as did the pilling on part-synthetic jumpers. She could see the unevenness of her hems and how her seams frayed for lack of finishing.

'You don't really wear this,' Henri said without a question mark, singling out a beige cardigan.

'I don't?'

'Justine.'

It was ribbed, tweedy, and made mostly out of real wool. It had been loose to start with, but was now stretched at the side seams from being hung on the line. It had a wide collar and knobbly buttons that Justine now saw, for the first time, were woven out of vinyl and not leather. Not that she would have cared even if she had noticed before. It was a cardigan for being relaxed and comfortable and having nothing important to do. It was a Sunday cardigan.

'You'd look like something out of Starsky & Hutch,' he said, tugging the cardigan off its hanger. It more than filled the small bin in the corner of his bedroom, one of its sleeves reaching over the side as if waving for rescue. But Justine was not paying attention. Soon all of the clothes she was wearing, and all of the clothes he was wearing, were heaped on the floor beside his bed, and she was thinking how, even when he was undressed, he was better covered than her. Hung next to his in a wardrobe, she thought, her pale and freckled skin would look as threadbare as her clothes.

In the first few days that she lived with Henri, Justine spent time delving her toes into

the deep green plush of his carpet, padding over tiles of his bathroom floor, and wondering if any of these surfaces would ever feel as if they belonged to her. The decision to leave home had been an easy one. The only difficult thing had been the discussion with her mother, who had just looked down into the squares of her newspaper crossword puzzle when Justine asked her what she thought.

‘Well?’ Justine had prodded.

‘I’m not sure. That’s all.’

‘You think I’m too young.’

‘It’s not that.’

‘I’m nineteen years old. You were married by now.’

‘It’s not that,’ her mother had said, looking up at last. ‘Perhaps it’s just that I’ll miss you.’

‘You always knew I would go. Nobody stays out here. Well, nobody except Jill.’

Her mother had not leapt to the defence of her elder daughter (who showed no signs of moving on from her job in the local video store). She had simply sighed, indicating that she was, as ever, their incontrovertibly and irritatingly impartial referee.

‘I thought that when you went it would be for university, or for a job. Not for a man.’

‘He’s more interesting than guys my age. He knows all about things.’

‘I love you, darling, and I worry for you. That’s all.’

‘You don’t like him.’

‘We barely know him,’ her mother had said, and Justine had known herself to be included in the ‘we’.

Henri worked long hours, and in the evenings before he arrived home Justine walked the stairs between the storeys of the tall and narrow house, counting each of the steps in an effort to own them. She noticed how the green plush was flattened in the centre of each step between the lowest storey and the middle storey of the house, but on the stairs that led up to the attic it was as good as new. The attic was neither secret nor locked, only cold and disused, nothing in it but some old department store mannequins. They had been stranded there by a deal gone wrong. Henri often bought things cheaply and sold them at a profit: the walls of a long passageway in the house

were presently taken up with bolts of luscious imported fabrics. The buyer of the mannequins, Henri explained, had gone broke before the deal went through.

The mannequins disturbed Justine. She didn't like the way they bore their dismemberment so casually. The ebony girl balanced her torso on the locking pin that would have joined her to the racehorse legs that stood beside her.

A woman's upper body, its bald head the colour of stocking gussets, lay face down and parallel to its disconnected legs. Justine felt for the redhead most of all, because she reminded her of herself. She swivelled the mannequin's wig around the right way so that the edge of her thick, matted fringe rested on her painted eyebrows, and tried to find her missing arm. There was a pile of limbs in the corner, the paint of their skin chipping away from fingers and toes, but Justine couldn't find one to match the redhead's fair, pinkish skin.

Not long after the cardigan incident, Henri took Justine to a smart street in the city, to a boutique with shop girls as thin as straps of liquorice. One had a long ponytail and wore a miniature black dress and retro high heels. The other wore flares ruffled from the knees down and her hair in a sharp quiff that put Justine in mind of a shark fin. These women would be the type, Justine thought, to factor in the calories in the sugar-coating of their contraceptive pills. They greeted Henri like a pair of cats on heat, kissing his cheeks in the European style and brushing his lapels with their slender hands. Justine hung back in the doorway, taking in the opulence of the dressing-room drapes and the size of the gilt-framed mirrors, and wondering just how many other women Henri had brought here to shop.

'A redhead?' asked the ponytail girl, as if it were an unlikely choice.

'I like them fiery,' said Henri, grasping Justine by the waist, and the ponytail raised a dextrous and sceptical eyebrow.

'So we'll be staying away from most of the oranges, the pinks and the reds,' said the shark fin, making clacking noises with coat-hangers as she began flicking through the racks.

'And leaning towards rich creams, chocolate browns and greens, lovely greens,' said the ponytail, her voice melodious over the percussive clicks.

'Oh this, yes, this,' said the shark fin, pulling out a swish of soft green with striped ribbon trimming at the capped sleeves and at the waist.

'The martini dress. Oh, yes! You must have that. And this,' said the ponytail, bringing out a fitted coat in cream linen densely embroidered with burnished flowers and green leaves.

‘Which would go with these,’ said the shark fin, placing by Justine’s feet a pair of knee-high and high-heeled brown backless boots with square toes and brogue patterning.

‘Perfect,’ sighed the ponytail.

The shark fin held out a long, floating shirt in teal-coloured silk and Justine liked the forgiving width of its soft, draping folds.

‘That’s nice,’ she ventured, but Henri shook his head.

He nodded to a snug black brocade pants suit and an olive knit bolero and a wispy evening gown with a split framed by feathers; to a passing parade of tight pants and skirts, tops, jumpers, dresses, wraps, shoes and stockings. Justine came from a family of statuesque women who referred to themselves as ‘big-boned’. But to wear the sleek and fitted pieces Henri was selecting, she would need to be an X-ray.

‘You don’t think I should try these things on?’ she said, when the counter was piled with linen and satin and velvet and lace, and when the floor was stacked with boxes of shoes.

‘They’ll fit,’ he said.

‘I’m not always the same size in tops and bottoms.’

‘Don’t worry. They’ll fit.’

‘There’s no way I’ll get into this,’ she said, holding up the martini dress and looking in all the usual places for a size label, finding it in none. ‘This couldn’t be more than a ten, and I haven’t worn size ten anything since I was at high school.’

‘Ah, you’d be surprised.’

‘Trust him, hon,’ said the shark fin at the cash register. ‘Henri’s a real wizard with fit.’

Henri put all of her new clothes away in the wardrobe himself, folding jumpers into shop-perfect squares and evenly spacing the hanging garments, similar colours together, fronts all facing the same way. And then, when he had finished, he lay back against the pile of bolsters and pillows at the head of his bed and asked: ‘May I have the pleasure?’

‘We haven’t even talked about how much all this cost.’

This had been worrying her all day, sitting in the bottom of her stomach like the feeling she got when (contrary to her father's firm principle) she signed something without reading the fine print first.

'Why would you want to have a dull conversation like that when you've got a wardrobe full of new clothes to try on?' he said, smiling indulgently.

'So I don't need to worry?'

'No, you don't need to worry.'

But although the feeling was leavened, it did not disappear entirely.

'Okay then. Well, what do you want to see first?' she asked, manufacturing an extra degree of enthusiasm that had failed to arise naturally.

'Whatever pleases m'lady.'

She chose the martini dress, slipping it off its polished timber hanger and stretching out the waistline between her hands. It was tiny. There was no way. She pulled at the fabric again, but there was no give in it. Oh well, she thought, he would soon see what happened when you bought a woman clothes without having her try them on first. With the amount he must have spent, they would surely exchange. But when she slipped the green dress over her head, the fabric fell easily down over her rib-cage, tucked in to her waist, and flowed over her hips as if it had been made to fit no other body than her own. She twirled in the mirror, piled her hair on her head with her hands and twirled again.

'It's beautiful,' she said, although what she was thinking was I'm beautiful, and the mirror reflected her delight and surprise.

Justine's friends came down on cheap flights for a long weekend and she met up with them for lunch in the city.

'Oh my God, Justine, you look fantastic!'

'You've lost so much weight. In a good way. You look amazing.'

'I hardly recognised you. You look so chic.'

'What have you done to your hair?'

'Where did you get that dress? It must have cost a mint!'

‘Look at your nails. Are they fake?’

‘You’ve definitely been going to the gym.’

‘They’re not what I think they are. Are they? Are you kidding? They’re real? They are real Manolo Blahniks and Henri bought them for you himself? You didn’t even pick them out?’

‘What, he pays for everything? And you don’t even have to pay him back? There’s got to be a catch. Is he kinky in bed or something?’

‘Speaking of kinky, do you know what Manolo Blahnik calls that little line where your toes press up against each other? He calls it “toe cleavage”.’

‘He’s a shoemaker. It’s his business to be a foot fetishist.’

‘Are they comfortable? I don’t think I could walk in them. I’d never be able to go anywhere, I’d just have to sit around looking decorative.’

‘He bought you two pairs? What are the other ones like? Go on, describe. Every detail. Please tell me they come in red too.’

‘Talk about falling on your feet.’

‘Where do you find a man like that? I’m moving to this city. That’s it. Definitely.’

‘A man who buys you clothes. And shoes. And clothes and shoes like that. You hang on to that man, Juz.’

A Word from Rosie Little on:

The Shoe Goddess

Either you are, or you are not, one of the Shoe Goddess’s chosen ones. And, as it happens, I am. What does this mean? Well, let’s say that I have visited a shop and seen a pair of shoes that I like, but left without buying them. If the Shoe Goddess wants me to have these particular shoes, then she will whisper to me, for several days ‘the red shoes, the red shoes, the red shoes’ (if, in fact, the pair in question is red — which often, in my case, it is). She will whisper for about a week, by which time I have usually got the message and returned to the shop to pick up the shoes, knowing that they are cosmically destined to be mine.

I have learned, though, through bitter experience, that if I fail to follow the divine guidance of the Shoe Goddess, I will be punished. The very next time I spy a pair of

adorable shoes, the Shoe Goddess will intervene to ensure that they are available in every size but mine. Or, she will simply abandon me to my own judgment and allow me to buy a pair of bad shoes that are some combination of uncomfortable, unflattering and far too expensive. If, on the other hand, I listen to her words of wisdom, I will be rewarded. Perfect shoes will be on sale, or the last pair in the shop will be in my size. I must have pleased her tremendously once, for she directed me to a shop that sold very cheap sample shoes, each and every one of which was size six and a half. Can you imagine, an entire shop full of shoes in nothing but your own size? Bliss!

But, you know, there are always those who take things too far. When all's said and done, shoe fetishism is an ism, and we all know how people can lose their heads over those. You might think that Imelda Marcos was a true devotee of the Shoe Goddess, simply by virtue of the vast number (some say 3000, but she has only admitted to 1060) of pairs of size eight and a half shoes found in her Manila mansion after the coup of 1986. But I doubt that the Shoe Goddess approved of her at all. Personally, I don't believe that the Shoe Goddess wants anyone to own more pairs of shoes than they can wholeheartedly love at one time. And she certainly wouldn't want shoes to be confined for months and months on end to even the nicest or most cleverly designed of shoe racks. She would be conflicted about shoes being held captive in museums, too, for while she would argue that people should have the opportunity to admire the great shoes of history in three dimensions, she would, in her heart of hearts, rather that they were out being worn down to nothing on the feet of women who loved them.

Justine had been living with Henri for three months when he announced that he had to go overseas on business. She half-expected that he would leave her with a ring of heavy keys and a prohibition against entering the smallest room in the house. But he only gave her a copy of his itinerary and told her not to forget to arm the security system when she went out.

One weekend while he was away she took his car, a sleek black creature with wide leather seats and arm rests, and drove all the way home. She couldn't listen for long to the cymbal-clashing discordance of the orchestral music he had in the CD player, so she switched over to the radio, losing and finding stations as she left the city behind and crossed the state border, heading inland. She turned up the volume and sang, uninhibited, inside the dark-tinted windows; bought thickshakes from the highway drive-throughs and threw the empty cups on the passenger-side floor.

She arrived a little earlier than she had expected on a sunny afternoon following a morning of rain. Nobody was home and the daisy-spattered back lawn was steaming. Justine left her high heels on the porch and jumped off the edge, plunging her feet into the breathing green. Sherry woke from her old-dog dreams under the apple tree and shambled over to be patted. Justine caressed the soft fur at the old collie's throat and remembered how she was as a pup, setting and stalking before making a mad barking dash at kids running through sprinklers. It made her think of the paddling pool that

was probably lying, deflated, under the house, and of little fat hands sticky from the meltings of red icypoles. She crouched down and spoke to the dog in a playful growl. Sherry did her arthritic best to answer the challenge, hunkering down into the set pose, elbows on the ground. Then Justine wrestled her to the ground, where they were both content to lie, for a moment, panting in the sun.

When she got too hot Justine retreated to the porch, brushing ineffectually at the grass stains on her cream linen pants. She peered down through the trees to the bottom of the garden and saw that her father had taken down the old swing set that had been a present for her fourth birthday, and planted out a vegetable garden in its place. It made her feel partially erased. But she was pleased to see her oldest boots, their leather bleached and cracked, still in the tumble of outdoor shoes beside the back door. She was sure they were hers. Until she put them on and felt how they slopped around on her feet, their elastic sides not even close to hugging her ankles. Stay-at-home Jill must have had a pair exactly the same. And Justine's own boots must, after all, have been thrown away.

Henri came home from overseas with a large white box tied up with pale blue ribbon.

'I think it's time we had a party,' he said, placing the box on the bed and kissing her neck as she unravelled the loops and bows. She threw open the lid of the box to find a party dress in the same dainty pearlescent blue as the ribbon.

'Oh,' she said, lifting the perfectly folded dress out of its box by its shoulders and holding it against her body while her mirror-self did the same.

'Oh,' she said.

'You like it then?'

'Oh, Henri.'

She loved the length and the shape of the sleeves, the neckline and gently tapered waist. She loved the name on the label; a name she had only ever seen written in the pages of the most expensive of fashion magazines and had no idea how to pronounce. She loved every single thing about the dress, except:

'I'm not going to be able to fill these out,' she said, despondently, once she had calculated the amount of bosom required by the gathering at the bodice.

'When will you learn to trust me?' Henri asked.

Justine took off her clothes and stepped into the watery cool of the pale blue silk, expecting to be disappointed by puckers in unfulfilled fabric. But as Henri manoeuvred

the zip up the length of her back, she felt her breasts bloom into the softly gathered cups.

On the night of the party, it was as if the house had dressed up too, and it felt to Justine slightly strange, slightly remote, as if she were seeing it for the first time in a tuxedo and starched shirt. She had that special, but faintly useless, feeling in her own body, too; her newly polished fingernails too easily spoiled to touch things, her coiffure too unsteady to move her head too far to either side. She didn't know where to put her hands, or indeed herself, as Henri's guests began, in the early evening, to arrive.

The women were not young, but they were beautiful and dressed to be stroked in furs and feathers. The men guided their women through the hallways firmly, with fat and signet-ringed hands. For a laugh, Henri had brought the mannequins down from the attic. He had put them together with mix-and-match limbs, and found wigs only for some. But they were each dressed in party frocks — of indigo, scarlet, saffron, aquamarine — that were nearly as beautiful as Justine's own. On plaster-cast forearms Henri had balanced the caterer's platters. Some of the mannequins stood in corners, or within the frames of French windows, offering up the delicate nibbles; others were stationed beside linen-draped tables, gesturing invitingly towards sparkling forests of brimming champagne flutes.

Justine stood at the edge of a group of guests, listening, waiting for any of the speakers to join her to the conversation — by way of eye contact, at least. But with their glances they made a spider's web, and Justine could only watch it grow in complexity with each fresh exchange. She drifted away and tried several other groups, hovering on their peripheries until the embarrassment of her apparent insignificance became unbearable. She looked over to where Henri held court, his chest proud and puffed and covered by a waistcoat of the same claret colour as the fluid in his glass, but she did not want to go and simper at his side. She would show him that she could manage, that she could make herself useful. And so she went into the kitchen and took the plastic film from the top of a fresh platter of hors d'oeuvres.

She moved, purposefully now, between conversations, platter in hand, but the guests either waved her away as if she were an insect, or seemed not to see her at all. She made two complete circuits of the rooms into which the party had spread before giving up. She leaned on the wall just to one side of the open fire and popped a shrimp into her mouth, bursting its curled body between her teeth. Henri was looking at her from across the room, and suddenly she understood exactly what it meant to be caught in someone's gaze. She felt herself to be held there for a moment, trapped. Then she was released, Henri's eyes travelling to the ebony-skinned mannequin, who was bald but dressed in scarlet, standing with a plate of cheeses in her arms. He smiled and flicked his eyes back again to where Justine stood, identically posed. His smile broadened and she felt, first in her neck, and then simultaneously in her elbows and her knees, a stiffness that was creeping, seizing, cramping, aching. Before it reached her feet, her

hands, Justine dropped the platter and ran. For the door. For her life.

Justine is living at home again now. Most evenings Jill brings home movies from the shop for Justine to watch, but she's seen everything in stock. In the afternoons their mother tucks a crocheted blanket around Justine's immobile legs and wheels her out onto the porch. Justine hates it, the horrible parody of it, her mother sitting with her as if she were a toddler, turning the pages of picture books prescribed by the woman from the rehab clinic.

'Say "duck" darling,' her mother says, pointing. 'D-uck.'

'Uck.'

'Like this, love: d-uck.'

'Uck.'

'Not quite, sweetie. D-uck.'

When Justine gets tired, her eyelids fall closed with a faint click.

'Don't get frustrated, lovey. I know you're trying. You're improving so much. Just have one more go and then we'll give it a rest. Have a try. D-uck.'

'Daaaaa-ck.'

'Oh, clever girl! Well done. That's right. Duck. Oh, you're doing so well.'

This is what her mother says, but Justine can see her wondering how it is that they have been so reduced, down to words of one syllable. And Justine has no means by which she might explain.

She had been found early in the morning after the party, face down in a garden bed freshly planted out with pansies, less than two blocks from Henri's house. In the days that followed, the owners of the pansies told her mother their side of things, a hundred times.

'I said don't touch her,' the woman said. 'I said that's the way you get stuck with a needle. I thought she was a druggie, you see. But he doesn't listen to me.'

'I thought it was too late,' the man said. 'When I put my hand on her arm she was all hard and cold. I rolled her over and she was stiff as a board.'

'Then I had a good look at the dress,' the woman said. 'And I knew she must have

come from a good home.’

Even now, two years later, Justine holds the same pose, both arms bent ninety degrees, the fingers of each hand locked together in neat salutes. And still the doctors stick to their story and call it a stroke. They just ignore the things that don’t make sense. Like the almost synthetic texture of Justine’s hair, which no longer seems to grow. And the fact that her feet, two sizes smaller than they were when she left home, are arched and angled downwards, toes crimped together and pointed, as if in permanent acceptance of a high-heeled shoe.