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The Custodian and the Find

Katherine Duffy

She reaches for the handle of the second drawer on the chest, eases it open, and takes a breath as she glimpses the pink and white fabric, the gold buttons catching flickers of the bedroom light. Joy and satisfaction radiate from her stomach, tingling upwards towards her shoulders. Carefully, she lingers over the softness of the material, running her fingers over the texture of the fibres and the pad of her thumb over the glistening buttons. She considers lifting the jacket out. Two hands outstretched, she pauses. Uncertain and wavering, the drawer remains open with just one corner of the fabric ruffled in appearance, as the rest of the jacket remains undisturbed. She has been here many mornings prior. Should she lift the jacket out? She vacillates, pondering. When did she last wear it? She recalls excitedly matching the jacket with a plain black dress and black ballet flats, caught up in images of effortlessly chic, gamine, French ladies, misting themselves in *eau de parfum* and gliding confidently down some tree lined rue. She flushes rosy into her cheeks as she recalls the stark contrast of reality: being rammed into a busy tube, pressed against the arm pit of a rather large t-shirted gentleman, everything counter to the elegant imaginary she had pictured before leaving the flat. She had exited the tube, stood in front of the green and white tiled walls and tried to rub off the perspiration and frustration, shaking the sullied feeling that she had put her prized possession into such a contaminated space.

The ping of her iPhone message rudely disrupts her train of thought. Automatically she glances down. Friends are setting up a meeting for drinks after work. She absorbs the information, staring blankly at her phone, annoyed to have been taken out of the moment but easily succumbing to the enthralling glow of the screen. She absentmindedly moves her

Spotify playlist on and resumes her position in front of the chest of drawers, though feeling somewhat removed. She hesitates and re-traces her thoughts. The jacket deserves to go out. She feels caught and conflicted. She wants to give the jacket a good life, paralleled to the life of the imaginary previous owner, all joyous and chic and gliding. In the dull corner of her bedroom mirror this seems like a distant land. She sits on the edge of the bed, half dressed and unsure. Memories come to mind. The day of the find.

She was always looking. Looking for those treasures that take a lifetime to find, and hold lifetimes of love. She remembers the dizzying market atmosphere, the pounding sixties music. The excited crowd adorned with headscarves and empty, anticipating wicker baskets, in flares and oversized denim jackets, shoppers bricolaging across decades, pairing pieces without sanctity or reverence, throwing together looks as their aesthetic whims strike them. Then the large white iron gates open and the crowd disperses towards stalls towering with bowler hats and primary colour glass vases, champagne buckets and oversized doctor's bags, cravats overflowing from battered leather trunks. They huddle around stalls, acknowledging the seller through head nods and silent wide smiles, a union of one granting the other permission to start to sift through their wares, carefully at first and then more hurriedly as others approach the stall too. To the untrained eye it is chaotic and a jumble, with boxes and suitcases spewing Laura Ashley floral prints, flannel Ralph Lauren shirts hanging awaiting a hipster repurposing, gaberdine trench coats of work days long past adoring rails, and skip caps spuriously hanging on jaunty wooden hat stands. Standing in stark contrast to the orderly conventions and strategic merchandising of her high street shopping, the markets come alive as the crowd grows with energy and the possibilities of the find. The day is a designated 'a good one' and expectancy hangs in the air. Well-natured looking gives way to more frenzied trawling. Select stalls reverberate round, labelled as having 'good finds'. With

elbows jettisoning and eyes hurriedly scanning rails and table tops, the noise picks up as people start to haggle and exchange cash. Arms filled with purchases add to the throng and hubbub. Amongst all this, she remembers the find well.

Approaching the stall at the back of the hall. Clutch bags and pillar box hats bedecking the table, a rail of honey coloured trenches and pastel hued blouses to the right-hand side. She works systematically through the rail, back to front, feeling chiffon and silk as she moves between the garments. She glimpses the fabric. The knowing white and pink check, the rigidness of the shoulders against the hanger. Tentatively she pauses over the jacket, holding it by the right hand arm, looking it over, taking in the gold stitching and the dulled but still-golden buttons. Glancing over her shoulder, she lifts it off the rack and turns it around quickly to look for signs of wear or staining. Her eager fingers find the white silk lining and all the labelling intact. She checks the branding, subtly, for signs of authenticity and tell-tale signs of counterfeiting: labels hanging askew, top stitching over prominence, and linings made of polyester rather than sumptuous silk . A chest-full of excitement she had tried to suppress rises now from diaphragm to throat. With a gentle cough she clears her throat and tries to ask the seller nonchalantly how much they are looking for, for the jacket. With their round teashade glasses perched on the end of their nose, and flocks of dark curls piled atop their head, the seller gives her the well-scripted chat: the rarity of the jacket, the unparalleled condition and their story of the previous owner. This all fades into the background as she hangs on, waiting for that magic figure to be revealed. The figure which means her dream find could be hers, or will remain a dream lingering over. Reaching into her left pocket she rustles the money in there, to anchor her to the moment and give off that the impression that she is a serious buyer. The seller mumbles around a figure and she feels a smile rising on her cheeks. She dampens this down to retain her composure. Clasp the hanger in her right

hand, she holds the jacket out and examines it again from top to bottom. The seller holds her locked in her vision. They now have the tango of the purchase. Cautious not to smile, she adjusts her expression with intent, declaring that she needs to think about it. She approaches the rail and puts the jacket tentatively back. She continues to absently browse through the rail, all the while watching the shoulder of the pink and white fabric in the corner of her left eye. She notes the seller still chatting about the find and how it is a great buy. Caught in their respective roles, she politely responds that is 'a good find' but she 'isn't sure' and 'wants to look round.' Playing the disinterested buyer is hard with excitement fizzing around inside her without any release. She forces herself to say a curt 'thank you' and move away from the stall. She moves along the line of stalls, aiming to look disengaged but probably looking slightly more distracted than intended. With her heart now set on securing the jacket, she has a cursory look at other rails and smiles without purpose to other stallholders, all the while keeping a protective eye on the prized stall. Noting the time on her phone, she ponders how long she should leave it, how long is long enough to not be too eager. She wants that jacket. It is the stuff of dreams, of 1960s movies on rain filled afternoons, and the *Vogue* articles she had pinned to her childhood bedroom wall. Without friends to seek council with, as market shopping was always a solo activity for her, she hovers alone, glancing again at her phone and running her fingers over the banknotes in her left pocket. With her mind racing from outfit planning and the ways that this jacket would enrich everything, make it all come together, to considering only eating cereal as a result of the spend for the rest of the month, her mind settles on two figures; her starting figure and her buying figure. The exact figure will now be a result of her success, or not, in the dance of haggling. Going against her nature and instinct, she knows it is part of the process, no prices or labels on garments means the opportunity to play. It is a game with rules, of respecting the seller but being a serious buyer who has a ceiling to purchase and knows the worth of the garment. It is a tango and a tussle.

One that starts out strategic and builds to a crescendo of a successful sale. Taking a breath in, consciously pulling her shoulders back, she reapproaches the stall.

Passing shoppers blur in her side vision as she pivots and shifts to avoid elbows and shopping bags. The seller nods as she reaches the rail again. The tango has started. Grasping the arm of the jacket, she nods that she wants to try it on. A mirror perched against a table is nudged towards, she slips each of her arms in, the silk draping her arms and caressing her back, whilst the seller mumbles around the fit and stitching, which she hears and does not hear as she privately notes how the jacket delicately hugs her shoulders and hangs just above her waist with the gold stitching delicately on view as she moves and turns to appreciate her reflection in the haphazardly placed mirror. Quietly and contently she smiles in appreciation, but firmly readjusts her expression dropping her smile and squinting a little, eager to seem pleased but cautious. The etiquette of the dance is ever present as she pulls one arm out and then the other. Lingered over re-hanging the jacket and running her thumb and forefinger to caress the fabric, her first starting number comes out hurriedly as she mentions what she would be willing to pay. The seller grumbles and counters. Feet are planted steadily to the ground as the dance reaches a climax. Cash is rustled in her pocket as she explains she is a cash buyer. The rustling signifies that she is serious. With a simple agreement standing between the seller and the cash, and her and her prized treasure. With more grumbling and shrugging, the dancers of the haggle bow gallantly towards the finish line, with only £5-10 standing between the end. Tired but exuberant the dancers meet over the table, notes counted and balanced in one hand, the jacket folded and placed into a blue and red stiped polythene bag. The exchange happens. The weight of it in the flimsy plastic bag pulls on her right hand. She thanks the seller and turns away, hyper-attentive, almost cautious that someone will see her treasure. She ushers herself to the corner of the hall, where bored husbands and children impatiently wait, and glances down into the bag. The white and pink of the fabric looks soft

and serene against the imposter blue plastic. High from the dance and the rush of the find, she looks up around the hall. The smile that takes over her face claims the victory of the find.

Back in the bedroom, the strings of indie pop rock playing ambiently in the background, she re-focuses attention on the present. She thinks of all the finds she has had before, conquests if you will. The jacket is different. It was the fodder of adolescent dreaming and adult aspirations. She ponders her feelings. Her wardrobe makes her reasonably happy, from the scrawling flimsy Zara dresses and Top Shop polka dot prints, to the Instagram influencers peppering her timeline with their hauls, and the resulting random ASOS orders. The finds are different. The Zara dresses come and go, purposeful for an occasion: a wedding, a work night, a friend's birthday, worn and strewn across her bedroom floor without ceremony. The finds are different. The ephemerality of her main wardrobe is about purpose and utility. Filled with trends and regret. The jacket, on the other hand, is singled out. She feels almost protective. It has a story. Owners who took it on great adventures. It is loved. This isn't ownership, she thinks. She doesn't own the jacket. She is a caretaker, a caregiver, a custodian. She is there for a moment in the life story of the jacket. With this comes a pang of guilt. She should wear it, enjoy it, the jacket would want that, the old French dames of years past would want that. She stares at the drawer, tentatively reaching out her hand to the fabric but withdrawing it again, forlorn. If she wears the jacket today, it will be one less wear it will be able to have. It should be saved for another day. Sacrosanct. A better day. Today doesn't merit a wear. The jacket commands more. She reaches into the drawer and smooths down the fabric, running her hand lightly across the front pockets and golden seam. She pushes the drawer shut and re-enters the humdrum of her busy morning.

Exegesis

Set against the backdrop of the unconventional consumer journey away from the lure of the new, the saturated high street, and entrenched in the labours of the ‘thrill of the hunt’, vintage offers a space of play and possibility, of cherished objects and enduring relationships to the material. This is made all the more prominent when combined with current discourses of clothing sustainability and clothing longevity and the opportunities that second-hand and vintage afford. This short story explores the nuances of ownership within the vintage aesthetic. It problematises the relationship with the vintage object and the burdens of responsibility felt acutely as a custodianship within this complex material relationship.

In this short story, I take the opportunity to explore understandings of ownership and responsibility to the material within the vintage scene. I very much enjoyed the creative freedom to reflect on experiences of this complex material relationship and put forth the idea of custodianship to encapsulate this form of ownership. Vintage has been both a passion project and research pursuit over the last decade. This short story probes understandings of ownership and the responsibilities attributed with consumption. Inspired by my PhD empirical data collection over a two year period, this short story explores the complexities of the relationship of consumer and material object, of finding, caring and loving. My PhD research explored the framing of value in vintage and how spaces, practices and socialities intersected in the approach to vintage clothing. The ethnographic research explored vintage markets and the practices of buying, selling and appreciating vintage. Whilst not using quotes from participants or direct observations from field notes, the story mirrors the language used in the storytelling of participants, in how they described the moments of the find and the intricate movements of the haggling process. It also questions understandings of the use

phase of consumption and builds on the concept of custodianship to enhance notions of ownership in consumption theory.