

MISTAKEN

Arlette pushed through the heavy glass doors of the London department store and into the blaze of light that was Cosmetics. She was looking for a birthday present for her sister, but it was hard to concentrate. Her mind was on work and the speech the Dean had made earlier that week: *Changing demographics; Economic downturn; 80 per cent cuts in teaching budgets; 100 per cent cuts to Humanities' research. This university is going to have to innovate if it's going to survive.* That was the gist of his end of term message: *Innovate or ...*

Arlette brushed past a girl in a lab coat who was rolling her hands in a bowl of glycerine flecked with gold. Two middle-aged women stood listening humbly to her sales chatter: '... collagen repairs and revitalizes ... brightens and exfoliates ... luxurious ... scientifically proven ... space-age technology ...'

You have an opportunity to reinvent yourselves with this current curriculum review, the Dean had said. *You're all intelligent, creative people. I have every confidence ...*

Arlette stepped onto the escalator and rose up into Handbags and Accessories, cursing herself. She should have seen this coming. Why had she not been more proactive? She'd been languishing on a 0.4 contract for several years, hoping that a proper job would open up, and now look. That morning, her line manager, Hamish, had called her in for a meeting which began with: 'In the current climate'. He'd gone on to say a lot of other things such as: '... shared modules ... cross-funding ... inter-departmental collaborations ... focus on recruitment and retention ...' – tugging miserably at the diamond stud in his ear. They could reduce her hours if her modules didn't recruit so she would have to be 'super' flexible about class sizes and 'Perhaps we need a fresh approach? Courses our competitors haven't thought of? Modules we can flog to other degrees?' Arlette knew what he wanted. Sexy, buzzy titles to keep student numbers up. Bums on seats. *Luxurious. Scientifically proven. Space-age technology. You're all intelligent, creative people.* Damn, damn, damn. She didn't even want to think about it.

She paused in Womenswear to finger a pretty silver party dress. There was something about it that swept away all the stresses of the day and pitched her back to the feeling of being sixteen again: knowing nothing and wanting everything, burning with longings, dreaming of the life she was going to lead as soon as she could escape suburbia and her mother's 10 p.m. curfew. It was the colour, she decided, that particularly luminous shade of ice-blue. It reminded her of the sea in Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*. At sixteen, when she was supposed to be studying, she used to spend hours leafing through the art books in the library, fingering the shiny colour plates; the Géricault had been her favourite. Part of its power lay in the fact that she knew it depicted a real shipwreck: that the captain and crew had taken to the lifeboats and these poor wretches on the raft had expected to be towed to safety but instead were cut loose with almost no supplies; only the centre of the raft was safe; the kegs of water they'd been given fell into the sea and only wine remained; the weak and dying were kicked overboard and people ate the flesh of the already dead because there was no food. She liked the fact that it was a black man at the apex of the pyramid of bodies. He had his back to the viewer, waving at some invisible rescuer on the skyline. Take me away, take me away from here.

Arlette returned her attention to the dress, stroking the silver fabric with an open palm. Shipwreck chic. You had to be young to carry it off. Well, she wasn't exactly *old* – not yet. Her spirits lifted. *Innovate, Arlette. Be creative!*

She forgot all about her sister's present. She dropped her bag and coat in a quiet corner and stepped up to a mirror holding the dress under her chin, squinting. Too tinselly. She put it back and picked out another style. No again. Too badly made. But now she was

hooked on the idea of buying herself a dress. As her fingers skipped through the hangers on the rail she was vaguely aware of a noise at the edge of her attention, a voice calling, 'Excuse me!' *Innovate. Be creative.* Blue? Yellow? Cerise? She couldn't really blame Hamish. He had people digging pins into him from above. The message was clear, though. If she wanted to hang on to her job she must cobble together some up-to-the-minute-sounding outlines that Hamish could go off and sell to both senior management and students. It stuck in her craw to do it, but the alternative was probably unemployment, which her mother had been predicting for years.

She flicked more roughly through the ranks of cloth. Stripes. Flowers. Lace-effect. No to all that.

'EXCUSE me! Hul-LO!' The voice was getting louder and more furious, 'EXCUSE ME!!!'

At last Arlette had to turn. She saw a smartly dressed white woman and a girl of about twelve standing at one of the unattended cash desks. 'We'd like to PAY for this, IF you don't mind!'

For a brief out-of-body moment Arlette saw herself as she must appear to this woman: a thirty-something black woman rearranging the stock. Staff. Help. Service. (*You have an opportunity to re-invent yourself, Arlette ...*)

'... IF that's not too much trouble for you ...' the woman hissed.

Arlette blinked. How swiftly a woman like this could strip her of all her accomplishments: her grade 5 piano (with Distinction), her ballet lessons, her carefully modulated accent, her fistful of A* grades, her doctorate – gone, all gone in an instant. She opened her mouth to speak. But what could she say? I'm not a shop assistant, I'm a ... what? Not a Professor, nor a Reader. Not a HoD or a Chair. Not a mother, nor a wife, nor even properly the author of anything, not recently anyway. A great fury rose within her like an underwater wave, lifting her like a toy on the lip of a tsunami. She moved over to the cash desk, took the skimpy top they wanted, flipped it, folded it, slipped it into a bag from the pile under the counter and the woman handed over a credit card. It was beautifully easy. It flowed.

'Just a moment,' Arlette murmured in a silky tone. 'I need to get authorization.'

She spoke with such confidence that the woman seemed briefly hypnotized. One of the lifts opened as if by magic as she approached. She held the card between thumb and forefinger like an after-dinner mint, stepped inside, turned and blew the pair of them a little kiss. The woman gave a howl of outrage. 'My card!!' Then the lift doors closed and the computerized voice said: 'Going UP!' and Arlette was whisked away, laughing.

Excerpt from *Live Show, Drink Included* – Collected Stories © Vicky Grut