

## THE POWER OF PURPLE

Beige, Marjorie decided. You couldn't go wrong with beige. She slinked through the charity shop, her fingers darting among the coathangers. For the sake of anonymity she'd kept her sunglasses on, though the fickle weather had already made them redundant. She fumed, thinking of the jackets in her wardrobe at home. A woolly Windsmoor. A Barbour for the country. Yet here she was shivering before she'd even tackled Marks' chilled food section. On this occasion a second hand jacket would do. A temporary measure to ward off hypothermia while buying Harry's sausages.

Shapeless acrylic. Shrunken angora. However did the shop make any money? But what was this? Silk softer than babies' hair. And with a sheen tulip-petal smooth.

"What colour would you call that?" she asked the assistant.

The girl twiddled the silver stud in her lower lip. "Umm... Aubergine?"

"Aubergine," echoed Marjorie.

The jacket was a blouson style, with a zip up the front and a quilted lining. The lush fabric lured her to try it on.

"Looks good," commented the girl.

Marjorie raised an eyebrow. What was the name for those people who dressed in black? Oh, yes. Goths. She didn't usually accept fashion advice from Goths. But as she took another glance in the mirror she had to admit that for a sixty-two year old grandmother she looked pretty nifty. The colour set off her steely grey hair. And the jacket wasn't out of place over her beige skirt. But wasn't that the beauty of beige? It clashed with nothing.

"I don't need a bag," she told the girl.

In Marks, she searched for sausages in vain. Her silly sunglasses weren't helping.

She whipped them off and spotted a member of staff. "The sausages," she demanded. "The ones in the advert. 'Not just any sausages'. They aren't in their normal place."

The navy-clad woman nodded sympathetically. "I'm sorry, madam. The last packet flew off the shelf not five minutes ago."

Marjorie wandered away in a daze. It seemed as though they'd been having sausages on Wednesdays for centuries. Harry always used to come home from his meeting complaining about the young guns taking over the company. But with only a year to go until retirement, he'd reached the stage of marking time. Surely he could do without the comfort of his favourite sausages this once.

Passing a mirror, Marjorie glimpsed herself without her sunglasses. Aubergine? Had that Goth never seen an aubergine? In this light her new jacket was vivid purple. Her eyes flickered left and right. If she met somebody she knew, she'd say it was her daughter's jacket. Yes – she'd say Deborah had forgotten it one day so Marjorie had tried it out for a lark. As if she was the kind of person who went on larks. Well, perhaps when she was young. But not after forty years married to Harry.

As she crossed the road to the supermarket, she plunged her hands into the jacket's pockets and found a leaflet. And on the back, a shopping list. Hurray! Inspiration was exactly what she needed. She read it greedily. Tofu, beansprouts, celery. What could you make with these ingredients? A stir-fry?

"Tofu," she announced to Harry that evening.

"Hmm," he muttered, his face puckering as it did when confronted by anything new. "What are the crunchy bits?"

"Almonds."

"Will we be having this every Wednesday now?"

"Who knows?" she declared, irritated by his indifference. "There's a whole shelf of Delia Smith up there."

While Harry enjoyed his nightly run-in with the newsreader, Marjorie smoothed the shopping list on her lap. She was curious to know what sort of woman went out and bought a purple silk jacket. Well, obviously she had, but then she'd been a woman on a mission. In sunglasses. The handwriting on the list was full of artistic flourishes. She pictured a woman with hair like an Irish Setter and the kind of exotic name she'd longed for as a child. Aurora. Or Emerald.

"Hear that?" barked Harry. "The Police arrived to find the man in a fatal condition. A fatal condition, I ask you. Why can't they say he was dead?"

"What a shame," said Marjorie, thinking of the man who'd died. She turned over the list to study the leaflet.

"Yes, it's a great shame what's happening to the English language," replied Harry. "What's that you've got?"

"Trees for the terrified," read Marjorie.

"Dendrophobia," he said. "Fear of trees. There's a support group for everything nowadays."

"It's a talk at the library tomorrow. Teaches you to identify common types of tree."

"You're not interested in that, are you?"

She pondered for a moment. She had no particular interest in trees, it was true.

But she felt annoyed that Harry assumed he knew everything about her. "I could become interested in trees," she said, pretending not to notice how he rounded his eyes. She'd go just to spite him.

There was quite a crowd at the library. Marjorie perched on the edge of a brown plastic chair, self-conscious. Maybe she should have worn the beige jacket, or the olive. But there was something about the feel of the purple silk that she couldn't resist. She listened politely as the screen showed sycamore and ash; willow and hawthorn. But she kept one eye on the audience. Would the jacket's original owner be here, the chestnut-haired artist whom Marjorie had now decided to call Imogen?

When the talk ended, a woman approached Marjorie with a clipboard. But this wasn't Imogen, Marjorie decided. This woman was kind faced, but too plain.

"Can I ask you to sign our petition?" smiled the woman. "We're campaigning to save the oaks on the site of the new retail park. And we're also holding a demonstration tomorrow afternoon. If it's possible for you to come and support us, we'd be delighted to see you."

"A demonstration?" That was more Deborah's sort of thing. Or it had been in her student days, before she'd had the boys. Marjorie had never been one for demonstrating. "I'm not sure if I'll be able..."

"The oaks have been there for hundreds of years. If we don't stand up to the developers there'll be no end to it. We'll live in a concrete world. We'll - "

"Yes, yes. Ok.," said Marjorie, fearing the woman might become hysterical.

She'd had no intention of joining the protest. But as she lay in bed that night she began to think she should. Why fade into the background, always playing safe? The woman of her imagination wouldn't play safe. Imogen would have

strong opinions. Marjorie already knew she must like trees. She might even be there tomorrow, demonstrating.

She arrived at the site to find a carnival atmosphere. There were people in rainbow colours, with dreadlocks and beads. Women jiggled babies, keeping rhythm with the banjo player. It reminded Marjorie of the festival where the young went every summer. The place with the mud. Glastonbury.

"Yoo-hoo!" The woman with the clipboard gave her a trilling wave. "Marvellous to see you. Grab a placard. The T.V. crew are just getting ready."

"Television?" exclaimed Marjorie. But before she could object, someone thrust the corner of a sheet into her hands. Marjorie didn't even have chance to read the banner's slogan before she was propelled into the line of people circling the ancient trees.

"Save our oaks," they chanted. "Save our oaks."

Well, she couldn't be the only one not chanting, could she? Marjorie joined in with increasing gusto. These people were so ardent. So alive. And it was rather liberating to shout in public. The fervour of the crowd lifted her until she felt exhilarated. Suddenly she was part of something bigger than her own little life.

That night she followed the evening news with trepidation, throwing uncertain looks at Harry. The newsreader made his unfunny joke. The football report came on, and the weather forecast. She sighed in relief. Not on the national news, anyway. But then the regional news started. She hardly dared peek at the screen.

"Marjorie!"

Her spirits sank. "Yes, dear?"

"Is that, or is that not, *you*?"

"Yes, but there's no need to make such a convoluted sentence out of it."

"What did you think you were doing? Ranting like that - honestly! And what *is* that you're wearing?"

"Only my purple jacket," she replied as though she'd had it forever.

She watched as Harry's chest began to quiver. His cheeks turned pink. And gradually a deep, low chuckle warmed the room. "Mad old thing," he said affectionately.

Marjorie felt the muscles at the back of her neck relax as she saw he would not kick up a fuss. She felt a rush of fondness. He had a good heart, despite his dullness.

It hadn't been an easy marriage, but they were past the stage of divorcing and starting again. Now whatever either of them said or did was likely to be tolerated. And that too was liberating, Marjorie thought.

When she returned to town she saw a notice in the charity shop window. They must be advertising for help. Wouldn't that be a wonderful means to show her gratitude for the way the power of purple had coloured her life? No longer was she the dumpy grandmother, scuttling about her routines. She was the woman in the purple jacket.

But when she came close enough to read the notice, her lips formed an 'O' of consternation.

*'Did you buy a purple silk jacket last Wednesday? Owner desperate for safe return. Full refund given.'*

She bolted towards the market. She'd bought the jacket in good faith. Legally she was its owner. Wasn't she? How could she give it up after the magic it had wrought on her world?

Her feet began to drag. Was she being shallow, thinking an item of clothing had such influence? There were people who possessed no jackets, purple or

otherwise. And Marjorie could buy another. It wouldn't be the same. But it would be hers. Imogen was clearly anxious to be reunited with this particular jacket. Perhaps she'd seen Marjorie wearing it on television and yearned for it back. And now at least Marjorie could find out the truth. What kind of woman had the individuality, the self-assurance, to go and buy a purple silk jacket?

Behind the counter was a blonde in her forties. "The purple jacket," said Marjorie. "This is it." She spread out her arms to show her.

The woman gasped and pulled away a curtain concealing the stock room of the shop. Marjorie glimpsed a long-haired figure kneeling over a box. "Chris! Chris!" the woman shouted.

Marjorie adjusted her picture of the jacket's owner. From an Imogen to a Christine. And then, as the young man stood up, to a Christopher.

He was tall and thin with a straggly beard. "My jacket!"

"Your jacket?" murmured Marjorie.

"It's my trademark on stage. I'm a drummer with the Rock Hounds." He hooked his fingers into the pockets of his jeans, casting the blonde woman a glance. "Mum's a volunteer here. The shop had a donation of old records so I came to sort them out. My girlfriend came too. Ex-girlfriend now," he grimaced.

Marjorie nodded, thinking of the Goth.

"Mum popped to the bank, so Sharon watched the shop," continued Chris. "We'd had a row the night before. She'd given me a list of stuff to buy for a meal, but I forgot. Sharon got her own back by putting my jacket on sale."

"Is she the outdoor type?" Marjorie asked.

"Not really," he frowned.

"Only, the shopping list was still in your pocket, written on a leaflet about trees."

He shrugged. "Probably picked it up at the library while she checked her email."

"It's not my colour anyhow," said Marjorie, slipping out of the jacket's cosy softness.

"But you're wrong," Chris said. "You've got the presence to wear strong colours."

Marjorie patted her hair. "Oh, well, I don't know about that."

Chris took the jacket from her and held out a five pound note in return. "Let me give you something to thank you." He turned to a rack of Indian cotton scarves in peacock blues, scarlets and spicy yellows. He picked one out. "Burnt orange," he said. With the delicacy of an expert tailor he looped the scarf around her neck, draping it across her shoulder.

She'd jettison the scarf as soon as she could, thought Marjorie, moving to the door. Purple was one thing. It blended in once you got used to it. But orange?

She meandered along the High Street in the warm sun. How funny. She'd imagined the jacket belonging to an Imogen. A glamorous, fearless creature whom she rather admired. And all along its owner was a drummer in a rock band. She paused beside the estate agent's window to collect her thoughts.

If Imogen didn't exist, who was it who cooked stir-fry and went to talks; shouted in public and appeared on T.V.? She gazed at the image reflected back at her in the plate glass. A short, beige woman shot through with a brightly burning flame. And she realized it must be her.