

Coat and Shoes

by Tania Hershman

Walking in to work from an unfamiliar direction, I saw her, on a street I had never been down before. I was coming from his place, for the first time, after the first time. The first time, but not the first date. That's not me. I'm not one to... not one who... He worked me up to it. Dinners, films. That sort of thing.

So there I was, finding my way along streets I'd only glimpsed, persuading myself that my sense of the office would draw me. And there she was. Sitting on the pavement. Old, I thought. Lost, perhaps. And, as I came nearer, wearing only a nightdress, something thin, flimsy.

Off came my coat and shoes. That's not me, either. Not one to take off my coat outdoors, on a day like that. And shoes? Definitely not. But I looked at her, I took it all in and, without thinking, that's what I did.

I had to dress her. She was limp, like a doll, as I put her arms through the arms and her feet in the shoes. No-one said anything. I dressed her and she stared into the gutter.

When I finished, I almost apologized for that being all I had to give. I mean, I wasn't going to...Wasn't going to hand over my cardigan, my dress, my tights. It was windy. Not cold, or not if you're a person who's used to living in this damp, morbid place. The sun was out, spitting pitiful burns of warmth that ended as soon as they began.

"Do you...?" I asked her, the woman, still staring into the gutter, wearing my coat and shoes. "Your home.. is it...?"

She looked up at me. And I saw that now she wanted to know me, but I didn't say anything. She had my coat and shoes, wasn't that

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enough? I shook my head. She kept my gaze for another moment and then she dropped hers down again.

I stood for another minute, shifting from foot to foot, and then I raised my hand as if waving, raised it in a half-wave, then dropped it, foolish. Turned around and walked away. I didn't look back. I walked to my office without shoes, thinking of nothing except avoiding what you've got to be careful of on the pavements, what's left to be stepped on.

When I got there, to the office, I went into the toilets, shut myself in a cubicle. Would someone find her? Are they looking? And when they find her, when they help her back home, will they see that the coat and shoes... the coat and shoes aren't hers? What will they say? Will they say, "How strange. Someone dressed her. And whoever dressed her left her there like that." And will they think badly of me?

And if I told him? If I called him now, after our first night, what would he say to me? Would he say, "You should have...How could you...?" Or would he say, "Without shoes. You walked all that way...?" And if he said one thing and not the other, what would I say? If he said one thing, and not the other, what would I do?

