

A Dress to Die For

A short story by Isabel Wolff, first published in The Times, July 4th 2008

IT'S BEEN A YEAR NOW since I opened Flashback, my vintage dress shop. Before that I had a stall on Portobello but that was hard going, especially in the winter, having to haul the clothes in and out of the van on freezing dark mornings then standing around in the cold all day. So when a friend told me about a lease that was coming up on this site in Hampstead, I took a deep breath, decided to go for it and, so far, it's been a success. People seem to enjoy coming here - perhaps because the interior's modern and light and the clothes are well displayed with plenty of space between the hangers. So many vintage dress shops are a mess, with bags and shoes all over the place and the rails so crammed that you give yourself an upper body workout just going through them. Flashback isn't a bit like that - it's more like being somewhere nice, like Phase Eight. Then of course there are the clothes - a necessarily eclectic range from the flapper dresses of the Twenties to the New Look suits of the Fifties right through to the spangly bat-winged tops of the early Eighties. My customers say that coming into Flashback is like entering Aladdin's cave.



People ask me what I like most about what I do, and, of course, a great part of it is the pleasure I get from working with garments that are so well made. These clothes haven't been churned out by the thousand in some faceless factory - they've been made with real craftsmanship, artistry and pride.

Take this midnight blue silk taffeta evening dress for example. It's by Balenciaga from about 1960. Look at the elegant simplicity of the cut, and the way the hem is slightly raised to reveal shoes. Look at the deep band of silver beading that encrusts the neck and hemline. Where would you find something of this quality today? Then there's this oyster pink backless evening gown, from the mid-1930s. I adore its heavy cowl neckline and its sweeping fishtail hem, not to mention the miraculous bias cutting which makes the satin drape like oil.

So yes, the superb quality of vintage clothing is a major part of this job's appeal. But for me there's something else. Something philosophical, almost. Please don't laugh, but what I love most about these amazing old clothes is the thought that they contain someone's personal history. I find myself wondering about the women who wore them. I find myself speculating about their lives. I can never look at a garment - like this early 1940s green tweed suit here for example - without thinking about the woman who owned it. How old was she when she bought it? Was she married? Was she pretty? Did she work? Did she have children? As it has a British label I find myself wondering what happened to her during the war and whether or not she survived it. Then I look at this pair of embroidered evening slippers here, and I imagine the woman who owned these dainty shoes rising out of them and walking along in them, or dancing in them, or standing on tip-toe to kiss someone. I look at this little pillbox hat on its

stand, and I lift its veil as I'm doing now, and I try to imagine the face beneath it. Because the thing about vintage clothing is that you're not just buying fabric and thread - you're buying a piece of someone's past.

This is something I've always given a bit of thought to, not least because at times, when handling the clothes, and especially when trying a garment on myself, I've felt a sudden tiny shiver run the length of my spine as though my soul has in some way connected for a split second with the soul of its former wearer. I know it sounds crazy, but this has happened to me several times now; and it's even led me to wonder whether the spirit of a garment's former owner can in any way influence the life of its present one. No doubt you'll find this notion fanciful - the idea that a ghost can lurk in a suit or a dress; but something has recently happened to me - something shocking - which has made me believe that it can.

But before I tell you the story - and even thinking about it makes me feel faint - I need you to know how I source the clothes.

I mainly buy them at auction, especially at smaller provincial auctions where the prices are lower than in London; I also buy them from private sellers - either from people who bring things into the shop or who I visit at home. I also get clothes from specialist dealers who sell garments from a particular era. But whatever their origin I always try to find out at least a bit about their background, not just for its own interest, but because if there is a story then I like to tell it to whoever buys the garment so that its narrative thread, as it were, can go on.

For example, I sold an Ossie Clark "floating daisies" dress last week, and I knew that it had once belonged to Julie Christie because she had given it to a friend who had given it to her daughter who, 30 years later, sold it to me. The woman to whom I then sold it was thrilled to know this about the dress and said that it would very much add to the pleasure of wearing it.

But to return to my own story. Sorry, I just need a moment to collect myself. I've been feeling very shaky lately. All right . . .

I often buy things from an American dealer, Rick, who specialises in US clothing from the 1950s. He goes to and from the States buying and selling Rockabilly gear, what I call "Preppie Americana" menswear - sleeveless jumpers, Brooks Brothers blazers and sea island shirts. Rick also sells prom dresses, those wonderful jewel-coloured strapless evening dresses with satin bodices beneath which foam layers of stiffened tulle sparkle with sequins. These dresses are so ridiculously glamorous and frothy that I call them "cupcake" dresses. I hang them on the wall, like paintings, because I simply love looking at them - they make me feel happy. As you can see I have three of them over there - that candy pink one, the lime green one and the cornflower blue with the lace banding. There was a fourth dress which was the most glorious, intense yellow you could imagine. I sold it a fortnight ago. But what I've learned since has so upset me that I doubt I'll ever buy another prom dress again.

When Rick showed me these four dresses at his small warehouse in Camden I asked him, as I always do, whether he knew anything about their background. He told me that he'd bought them from a young

woman in LA who said that they'd belonged to her great-aunt and that they'd just been in a trunk for fifty-five years. Rick added that this girl had behaved rather strangely, as though there was more to say about the dresses but that she hadn't wanted to tell him.

Anyway, I was sitting in the shop one quiet Wednesday lunch time three weeks ago when a couple walked in. I immediately thought how odd they looked together because the girl was about twenty-five while her boyfriend was a good fifteen years older, maybe more. She was very pretty and petite - no more than five-foot-two, with glossy shoulder-length dark hair, warm brown eyes and an olive complexion - but with a noticeably hesitant, unconfident demeanour. The man was big and broad-shouldered with hands like paws. While she looked through the clothes he sat on the white sofa, which he almost filled, thumbing his BlackBerry. The girl spent two or three minutes going through the evening wear rail, apparently finding nothing. Then she looked at the cupcakes and I saw a light come into her eyes.

"How much is that yellow dress?" she asked me quietly.

"It's £300." She nodded slowly. "It's 100 per cent silk," I explained, "with hand-sewn crystals. Would you like to try it on?"

"Well..." The girl glanced anxiously at her boyfriend. "Is that okay, Clive?" He looked up from his BlackBerry and the girl indicated the yellow prom dress which I was now taking off the wall.

"No, it's not okay," he said flatly.

The girl's face fell. "Why not? It looks about the right size."

He continued thumbing his BlackBerry. "It's too colourful."

"I like bright colours."

"It's not appropriate for the occasion."

"But it's a dance."

"It's too colourful," he insisted. "It won't do. Plus it's not nearly smart enough." At that my dislike of the man turned to detestation.

"Let me try it," the girl pleaded. "Go on."

The man looked at her, rolled his eyes then turned back to his BlackBerry. "Ok-ay," he sighed. "If you must."

I showed the girl into the changing room and drew the linen curtain round the rail. When she emerged a minute later I drew in my breath. The dress fitted her perfectly and showed off her tiny waist, lovely

shoulders and slim arms. The deep yellow complemented her dark hair and warm skin while the subtle corseting flattered her bust. The tulle petticoats billowed around her in soft layers, the crystals winking in the sunlight.

“You look gorgeous,” I murmured. “Just...lovely.” She looked at me in the mirror and smiled, and as she did so she reminded me suddenly of a canary - a beautiful canary. “Would you like to try on a pair of shoes with it?” I asked her. “Just to see how it would look with heels?”

“Oh I won’t need to,” she said as she stared at herself, on tip-toe, in a side mirror. “It’s just...fantastic.” She seemed overwhelmed, as though she’d just been told some wonderful secret about herself. She gazed into the mirror again, turning this way and that, and now I suddenly noticed that her eyes were shining with emotion. “It makes me feel like I’m in...” She swallowed. “A fairytale.” She glanced nervously at her boyfriend. “Isn’t this dress gorgeous, Clive?” He didn’t reply. “Isn’t it just...to die for?”

Clive looked at her now, then shook his head and returned to his BlackBerry. “Like I say,” he said. “Much too bright. Plus it makes you look like you’re going to hop about in the ballet, not go to a sophisticated dinner dance at the Hilton. Here.” He stood up, went over to the evening rail and pulled out a Hardy Amies black wool crepe cocktail dress and held it against her. “Try this.”

“But I don’t - “

“Try this,” he repeated.

Crestfallen, the girl retreated into the fitting room, emerging a minute later in the Hardy Amies. The style was far too old for her and the colour drained the warmth from her complexion. She looked as though she were going to a funeral.

“That’s more like it.” Clive looked at her with evident satisfaction. Then he made a circulating gesture with his index finger and the girl rotated for him, wearily, her eyes turned to the ceiling. I saw her lower lip quiver.

“Perfect.” Clive thrust his hand into his jacket. “How much?” I glanced at the girl whose chin was dimpling with distress. “How much?” the man repeated as he flipped open his bulging wallet.

“But it’s the yellow one I like,” she croaked. “I like the yellow one.”

“Then you’ll just have to buy it yourself, won’t you? If you can afford it,” he added pleasantly. He looked at me. “I’ll ask you again,” he said evenly. “How much?”

“Oh. £150,” I replied, wishing that I could charge him three times that amount and give the girl the cupcake dress.

“Oh Clive. Please. I love that yellow dress, I just...adore it. It makes me feel...I don’t know...” A tear fell

onto her cheek. "Happy."

"C'mon, sweetheart," he moaned. "That little black number's just the ticket and I'm going to have some important clients there so I don't want you looking like bloody Tinker Bell do I?" He glanced at his Rolex. "Now stop messing about - I've got a conference call with the architects about the Kilburn development at three. Now - am I buying this little black number or not? Because if I'm not then you won't be coming to the Hilton with me on Saturday, I can tell you."

The girl hesitated for a few seconds then nodded mutely.

As I tore the receipt off the electronic reader the man held his hand out for the bag then slotted his card back into his wallet.

"Thanks," he said briskly. Then, with the girl trailing disconsolately behind him, he left.

"So much for her fairytale," I muttered as the door closed behind them. I felt almost as heartbroken as she did, not least because when a dress I love suits a customer so beautifully then I desperately want them to have it. I felt sad too that such a pretty young girl had opted to be with such a domineering older man. I presumed that it must be his money which attracted her to him, not that I was in any position to judge. God knows I'd gone out with some pretty awful men when I was her age. Nevertheless I found myself longing for some gorgeous Prince Charming, no more than thirty years old, to sweep her out of Clive's clutches then charge down to the shop with her and buy her the dress.

So potent was this fantasy that I actually put the dress to one side with a "reserved" label on it, hoping that the girl would come back. After two days I realised that I was being as irrational as I was being un-businesslike. Clive was clearly not the kind of man to change his mind. The girl would not be returning.

So it came as a very great surprise, the following Monday morning, to look up from a small repair I was doing to a Nina Ricci shirt and see the girl pushing on the door.

As she entered the shop she looked different, somehow, from how she had looked on the previous Wednesday. Her head was held higher, and there was a determined set to her mouth. And when she tried the dress on once more, emitting an audible sigh almost of ecstasy as she did so, she reminded me not so much of a canary, as of a sunflower. Without Clive's over-bearing presence she seemed transformed. And when she opened her bag and took out six fifty-pound notes and laid them on the counter she had an almost triumphant gleam in her eye.

"I'm so glad you've come back for it," I said, remembering her disappointment - and my own - five days earlier. I carefully folded the dress into its paper carrier. "I can't imagine anyone looking more wonderful in it than you will."

The girl smiled at me. "Thanks. But I simply had to have it," she added, as though she felt she had to

explain herself. "Once I'd tried it on, I had no choice. You see..." She shrugged. "The dress...claimed me."

"Well..." I smiled back at her. "I wish you lots of fun and happiness in it." Hopefully without the horrible Clive I added mentally.

Of course I wondered afterwards what had enabled the girl to buy the dress when she clearly hadn't had the money for it before. Perhaps she'd sold a piece of jewellery, I speculated. Perhaps she'd asked her parents or a friend to lend it to her. Perhaps Clive had relented - an idea I instantly discounted. But however the girl had come by the cash, that was one of the happiest sales I'd ever made.

Or so I thought.

Two days after the girl bought the dress, and exactly one week after she first came into the shop, our weekly free-sheet, the Hampstead Echo, dropped through the letterbox. I put down my mending and picked it up. On the front page was the usual stuff about over-zealous traffic wardens giving tickets to school run mums. Then I turned the page and my heart stopped. There, covering the top half of page 2 was a photo of Clive. The piece was captioned "Death of Local Businessman". My heart pounding like a drum, I read on.

"Tributes have been pouring in to local property developer, Clive Simms, 41, who died in an accident at his home in the early hours of Sunday. Mr Simms, who had just attended a function at the Hilton, where he had allegedly been drinking, fell thirty feet from the balcony of his house on Fitzjohn's Avenue. His girlfriend of two years, Susannah Wiley, who found his body the following morning, is said to be distraught."

I lowered the paper. My breath was coming in little gasps. And I was just trying to remember the exact demeanour of Susannah, as I now knew she was called, when she came in to buy the dress just - what? - two days after this had happened, when the phone rang.

I took a deep breath then picked up.

"Hi Sarah," said Rick in his American drawl. "I'm just calling because you know you asked me about the prom dresses you bought from me last month? Well I've now found out a bit about the background there."

"Oh yes?" I said faintly.

"Well...to be honest I'm not sure you'd want to pass this on to anyone you sold them to because it seems they have quite a tragic story."

"Really?" I felt my palm moisten as I gripped the handset.

“I was in LA again last week, and by chance I bumped into the girl who sold me those dresses. We were both in the Beverly Center doing some shopping, and she’s pretty cute actually so I asked her for a soda. And as we were sitting there I suddenly remembered that you’d wanted to know some more about the dresses, so I asked her, and this time she said that she’d tell me their history. But I’m afraid it’s none too nice.”

I stared out of the window. “Tell me.”

“Well, as I said to you before, they belonged to this girl’s great-aunt. She was a cocktail waitress in a bar in downtown Chicago in the early Fifties. She was in her twenties and used to wear them for work. Anyway - I’m not sure you’d want to tell anyone this, “specially anyone who buys the yellow dress.”

“Tell them what?” I asked weakly.

“Well, it seems the woman killed her boyfriend. Went round to his apartment in the dead of night and shot him.” I felt the hairs on my neck raise themselves up. “She tried to make it look like a break-in, but a neighbour spotted her leaving. Apparently the yellow of her dress was so bright that it could be seen in the dark. Anyway, the poor kid went to the chair. She was only 24.”

The floor came up to greet me. I sank onto my chair, the handset adrift in my lap.

“Apparently the guy was quite a bit older,” I could just hear Rick say. “He’d bullied her for years so I guess something inside of her must have just, snapped.”

I lifted my eyes to the other cupcake dresses then blinked.

“Sarah?” I heard. “You still there?”

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