

By Katherine Seligman

IMAGE  
ESSAY

# CONFESSIONS of an ambivalent bride



**E**ven in retrospect, with all the heat finally off, I still think I may have gotten married in a dress that had the biggest sleeves in North America.

My friends have continued to pooh pooh this. That's because they helped me pick it out. They had to. It was a month before the wedding and I had no idea what to wear.

I'd never had any fantasies about getting married, never imagined myself in some spectacular dress, in a special setting. I was ambivalent about the apparel, the location, the ceremony, about everything but the bridegroom.

This ambivalence was like a shadow that always followed me, a sensation so overpowering that it once prompted a bureau chief to yell at me, "Only a blowtorch will help you decide." I needed to plunge ahead to make a conscious, deliberate decision in the face of uncertainty. He was right. But this was such a public decision. It could be anything I wanted.

As the wedding loomed closer, a close friend, a woman whose enthusiasm is as intense as my ambivalence, decided to take me shopping. The first stop was one of those tradi-

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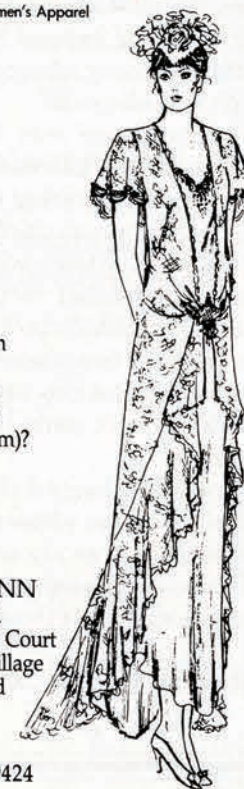
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tional bridal boutiques where the dresses are laden with pearls, glittery stones and other geegaws and the salesladies all call you honey and dear even if you're over 30. A woman at the front of the store asked me what I had in mind. I told her I wasn't sure.

"Well, when is your wedding, honey?" she asked, wrinkling her forehead with concern.

"About a month away," I answered.

That did it. I was clearly in the wrong place. "Our dresses have to be ordered four to six months in advance," she said, with obvious distaste. "But you can look at something off the rack."

This time it was her nose and not her brow that wrinkled. She handed me a card that asked pertinent questions like how many bridesmaids I'd be having, what color flowers I liked and my mother's name. I left the first two blank and pondered the third. My mother died six years ago, so should I put her name in there? Plus, wherever she was, she probably was annoyed that I wasn't wearing *her* dress, which she'd packed away all those years ago.

My worst fear was that if I wore the dress, I'd turn into her. My friend solved the dilemma by snatching the card and writing her name in the blank. "I'll be your mother for this event," she said. "Come over here and try some of these things on."

The first had small capped sleeves and a floor-length skirt with a long train. It looked like something that belonged on top of a wedding cake. My friend zipped me into another flowing gown that had a low-cut front and a tight bodice thronged with pearls. The saleslady arranged a long veil over my hair and told me to step up on a platform in front of the mirror.

I looked bewildered. "You look

lovely," she said. "With your hair up, you'll look perfect in this dress."

I couldn't take it off fast enough. My friend confessed she liked it. To tell the truth, she'd liked every dress I'd tried on so far. I was beginning to wonder if I could trust her.

Unruffled, she hustled me off to the next place, the fancy dress section of a department store. I wanted something unweddinglike, I told her, something you could wear again in public and no one would ever guess you'd been married in it. Or even that you'd gotten married.

"Why would you want something like that?" said my friend, a beautiful blonde who'd once had a formal wedding dress herself and wasn't intimidated. "Do something you've never done before."

I tried on white sheaths, sequined pastel dresses and a strapless evening gown. My friend thought I looked good in all of them. But I took each one off, handing it to her as I stood in my stocking feet staring at the next hanger. Years ago, my mother had occupied that same guest seat they put in dressing rooms while she watched me try on clothes and urged me to be quick. She hated to shop. As soon as she found one thing she liked on me, she'd say to the salesperson, "How many colors does this come in?" Then I'd have two of whatever it was, in different colors. They were supposed to last me twice as long, but, of course, never did.

My friend and I were exhausted after the latest foray, so we decided to postpone the dress hunt for another week. I was anxious by the time our next appointment rolled around. She suggested we go to a department store bridal boutique this time. I told her I couldn't. Then I agreed to just go and look.

The woman in charge looked like she was expecting the Queen of England to drop by for tea. She

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seemed in her 50s, was bejeweled, powdered and lipsticked, immaculately dressed in a tan suit, her hair swept up in a tortoise shell barrette. I volunteered that my wedding was less than a month away and I knew I probably couldn't order a unique creation. She told an underling to bring out some selections from the rack.

The first was floor-length silk and she said it was a copy of one worn by Caroline Kennedy. It was outlandish. "I don't even want a real wedding dress," I said. "Oh come on," my friend protested. "Try everything on."

So I did. And none was right. None, that is, until I saw this dress made of light gauzy material cut into the shape of petals. It was the kind of dress Glinda the Good Witch might have worn to a party in Oz. It had enormous sleeves and I thought I liked it. My friend liked it too.

"This one is perfect," she said. "I was just saying I liked them all to encourage you. But this one you liked. I could see it in your face."

I asked the woman to put it away for me. She tried to talk me into buying it on the spot, but I told her I needed to bring in a second consultant. She shook her head. "A second friend always disagrees and then you'll be back where you started," she warned.

She knew the wedding business but she didn't know me. I had to show it to another person, a good friend who is probably more ambivalent than I am, but has unimpeachable taste. That's why I saved her for last. She empathized with the ordeal of going to a bridal boutique. She didn't know if she could ever do anything like that, let alone get married. But she thought I should. If I survived, she might do it one day.

The chief saleswoman greeted us, this time a bit impatiently. Her

assistant brought out the dress and whisked off the cover. I looked at my friend, who can be inscrutable. I couldn't tell if she was horrified or just shocked. Bravely, I slipped on the dress. "Well?" I said. She burst into tears. "It looks terrible, doesn't it?" I said. "I knew it."

"No, I love it," she said. "I just got all sentimental thinking of you wearing it. You look like such a bride."

The assistant beamed. "I guess I'll take it," I said. "I think."

So I wore this dress, which *did* have huge billowing sleeves. I just did it. I plunged. And it did make a statement, though I'm not sure what. It was me. I guess. ■

Katherine Seligman is an Examiner staff writer.

**'80s Trivia Quiz Answers**

1. *The Monkey Business* 2. Pearl Harbor Day 3. He lived with an artificial heart. 4. Libya (it paid him \$200,000) 5. NBC found out that the actor's real name was Mark Chapman, the same as Lennon's killer. The actor had been using the stage name Mark Lindsay before Lennon was shot. 6. a) Jimmy "the Greek" Snyder, b) Arizona Gov. Evan Mecham, c) Interior Secretary James Watt, d) Interior Secretary Donald Hodel 7. Tipper Gore, Sen. Al Gore's wife 8. Zola Budd 9. Penis 10. Harry Truman 11. Douglas Ginsburg 12. a) the number of days of captivity of the 52 U.S. hostages in Iran, b) the number of points the Stock Market dropped in October 1987, c) the name of the controversial do-it-yourself French abortion pill, d) the micro-processing chip of IBM's PC computers, e) Ty Cobb's lifetime hits and Pete Rose's one-better total when he broke Cobb's record in 1985 (Rose finished with 4,256) 13. Cher 14. *Columbia, Challenger, Discovery, Atlantis*; *Columbia* was first 15 a) Jessica (McClure and Hahn), b) Max, Satchel, William and Henry, c) Baby Fae

  
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