My Mother's Wedding Dress

The Life and Afterlife of Clothes

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Extract

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'Married in black, you will wish yourself back.'

MY MOTHER WAS married in a black wedding dress, a French cocktail dress from an expensive boutique in Hampstead, close to where she lived at the time. It was October 1960, the beginning of many things: the winter, the decade, the marriage, and me. I was born eight months later, in June 1961, feet first and too small (little enough to fit into a bottom drawer, until a cot could be found; five pounds of jaundiced fretfulness; not the neatly stitched white-linen contents of the bottom drawer that my mother's mother would have planned). When I was eighteen and started to wear the dress – a narrow, corseted sheath, just above knee-length, hidden bones within its bodice and waist – I thought about my mother, and how slender she had been on her wedding day, no more than a girl herself, even though she was meant to be all grown up.

What became of the black dress? It has gone and disappeared, lost like my parents' marriage, yet it lives on in my memory, and in photographs of my mother's wedding day, and of me, when I wore it to my university graduation ceremony, a few weeks before my twenty-first birthday. Just as I cannot yet explain how or why or when I allowed such a precious bequest to slip through my fingers, neither can my mother tell me her precise reasons for buying the dress (and sometimes, when I wake up in the night and think about this, about what I don't know, and what I want to know, it feels as if something has unravelled within and without me). But what my mother can recall for me is this: she spent more, far more, on her wedding dress than anything else in her wardrobe; sixty pounds, which was a great deal of money in those days, especially for an impoverished twenty-one-year-old, newly arrived in London from South Africa.

'I bought it in a hurry,' she says.

'Why black?' I ask her.

'Why not?' she says.

Although the wedding dress was lined with a soft dark silk – worn and torn by the time I inherited it, wrinkling like an older woman's skin – its skirt was made of a scratchy woollen mohair beneath a satin bodice.

I sometimes wonder if my mother hoped it would keep her warm, in the unfamiliar coldness of London, even though the dress was sleeveless and really rather short. 'I thought it would be useful,' she says. To which I might reply, 'How useful is a French cocktail dress to a pregnant girl living in a rented one-bedroom flat in Hampstead?'

But that would be missing the point entirely. The dress, perhaps, was her way of declaring that she was a chic European now; that she had left behind the safe conformity of her colonial upbringing (a place more English than England, with its good manners and carefully observed social etiquette). Here was my mother – a pale-faced convent girl, with a family tree that was carefully traced back to a beatified Catholic martyr; the great-granddaughter of a colonel of the 11th Hussars – marrying a Jew. I was always taught never to say that word; to say 'Jewish' instead, to avoid the inflections of anti-Semitism; but isn't this how the story of my parents' wedding would have been told at the time, back home in South Africa? Hilary Garnett married Michael Picardie, a Jew, in London, in black.

Actually, I can't be certain how that story was told. South Africa was such a long way away – and when we did go there to visit my mother's parents, Pat and

Fred, they were far too polite to comment on their daughter's marriage. They were not wealthy, despite the titles and prosperity of previous generations on both sides of their family ('I'm a Balfour,' my grandmother used to say, with some pride, 'and your grandfather is a Garnett', not that those names meant anything to me). Pat and Fred are dead now, leaving me a set of Georgian silver cutlery and a clutch of unanswered questions; as discreetly silent in death as in life; though I have borrowed from my mother a map to their lost world, a copy of the Garnett family tree. My mother is not certain who wrote it ('One of the unmarried aunts, I think,' she says, 'a grand one in South Kensington'), but I have pored over the author's spidery Edwardian handwriting in order to decipher a small piece of the fabric of my past. It seems that my grandfather Fred was the son of a second son: his father had come to South Africa, lured there by the goldmines, but there was no fortune to be found, just blackwater fever, which killed my great-grandfather at the age of forty, leaving behind him a widow, May, and two children, Lillian and Fred. Someone had to support the family (and May, said to be a stubborn sort, didn't want charity from the rich relatives back home in England), so my grandfather left school at fifteen and trained to be an engineer. He was a

man who liked mending things, who could fix anything: even a broken heart, it seemed to me whenever my sister and I went to stay with my grandparents; not that my mother would have necessarily agreed.

Pat and Fred loved each other with a calm consistency quite unlike my own parents' marriage, and their lives were ruled by routine: up with the sun, the BBC World Service news just after breakfast, *The Times* crossword, tea and shortbread at 11 a.m. and half-past three; a brandy sundowner at six. The only disagreement of theirs I ever witnessed was over the last slice of avocado in a green salad: they both loved avocado, and wanted the other to enjoy the remaining piece. 'You have it,' said Fred to Pat; 'No *you* have it,' she replied, and so it went on, back and forth, until the excessive courtesy seemed suddenly to infuriate them, and my grandmother tried to throw the avocado onto my grandfather's plate, but missed, so that it fell onto the pristine white table cloth, green and smearing. What did Pat say then? Did she purse her lips, or laugh, shame-faced? Did the stain come out in the wash? Probably, scrubbed clean by my house-proud grandmother, though it remains on the linen forever for me, fixed there in memory, indelible, when so much else has faded away.

Despite the constancy in other parts of their life, Pat

and Fred did not stay put in their houses. When I was a child, they moved from Cape Town to Johannesburg, to and fro, several times, like stately migrating birds (following similar patterns, perhaps, to their parents and grandparents, Victorian and Edwardian colonials, who crossed oceans and continents, Australia, India, Africa, with no visible sign of complaint). But their wardrobes always seemed to stay the same: my grandfather's dark suits, neatly pressed, and his ironed white cotton shirts, kept in their place, to one side of my grandmother's equally respectable starched separates and modest neutral frocks. Of my grandmother's wedding dress there was no sign, not even a picture on the mahogany sideboard. She hated being photographed, complained always of her ugliness in front of a camera, and destroyed dozens of pictures as a result, but my mother managed to rescue one page from an album, which shows Pat in what looks like a long lace dress and a wide-brimmed hat. ('A beautiful coffee-coloured lace dress,' my mother says, 'I used to admire it so much as a little girl, and then one day it disappeared. Whatever can have become of it?')

Beneath the photograph, my grandmother has written, 'THE DAY 25–10–1930'. 'The' is underlined with four neat lines, each one shorter than the other,

so that it descends into an arrowhead. I know this is my grandmother's handwriting – I recognize it instantly, from all the airmail letters she sent us from South Africa, thin blue paper, covered with thin blue lines. When I look at the arrow now, it seems to lead somewhere else, to another day, an undated day, the first day that I remember, from that almost unimaginable time before my sister was born. My mother was pregnant, so it must have been 1964, maybe the end of '63, and I was just about two, and we had flown, without my father, to stay with her parents in South Africa. I remember the aeroplane – or more specifically, the glamour of its air hostess, who wore a jaunty hat and polished high heels, and had a little curtained annex of her own, with a mirror where she let me try on her lipstick – and I remember my grandparents' wardrobe. It was big: large enough for me to climb into it, and I stayed there, my cheeks against their lavender-scented clothes, until they called me outside to see a parade that was going past the window. (Recently, when I ask my mother if I am imagining things, she laughs, and says it's true, I did sit in the wardrobe, and sometimes my grandmother played with me in there, while I pretended to be an air hostess. 'And there was a parade, of sorts. It was Christmas, and the Salvation Army band came and did a concert outside

on the street.' My mother is silent for a moment, and then says, 'I wish I could remember their address . . .')

As for my father's parents: I never really knew them at all. Like Pat and Fred, they were émigrés, but from a very different place. They had escaped from Lithuania and Russia, ending up on ships to Cape Town, though they might as easily have gone to Liverpool or London or New York instead. My father's mother, whose name was Minnie, died when I was still very young, and his father, Granddad Louis, was in disgrace, having remarried a blonde shiksa called Marilyn, and frittered away the family's hard-earned savings and investments. I wish I had known Louis better – he was a poet and schoolteacher who abandoned Judaism and turned to spiritualism and séances instead, much to his family's annoyance – but I do have a photograph of him and Minnie that I treasure; a sepia picture of them on their wedding day. Her face is turned towards the camera, looking straight out at me, and she is wearing an elaborate white gown: long-sleeved and lacy, with a train gathered over one arm, and a big bouquet of creamy roses. She has two strings of pearls around her neck, and more pearls wound around her white headdress. She is beautiful – as pretty as a picture; like a still of a silent movie star. Louis is in a dark suit and a high-collared stiff white shirt, gazing

at his wife, apparently rapt at her beauty. My youngest son, who has seen this photograph on the mantelpiece of my study, says that Louis looks sinister, a bit like Dracula, ready to bite his bride's neck. I don't think so; I think he was just counting his blessings that day.

I have searched for the same look on my father's face in the pictures of my parents' wedding day: he is darkly handsome, like Louis, beside his sweet-faced smiling bride. They hardly knew each other – had met only twelve weeks before, in London; drawn together, perhaps, by what they had left behind in South Africa, even though their paths had never crossed in their homeland. Their parents were not at the wedding; and neither was my mother's twin brother – it was a quiet ceremony, in Hampstead registry office, witnessed by my mother's older brother, Richard, and their auntie Lil (Fred's sister Lillian, who lived in London, having escaped South Africa, leaving a husband behind). Lil is wearing her pearls, and Richard and my father are in buttoned-up dark suits; my father's from a Savile Row tailors, made for him when he first came to England, on a student scholarship to Oxford. Richard's tie is neatly knotted, as is the collar of his shirt, but my father is more rumpled: his striped tie does not sit quite as it should beneath his collar, as if he had wrestled with it the

morning of his wedding day. The pictures are black and white, so I cannot see the colour of his tie, or my mother's cloud of red hair, which nevertheless looks like a Renaissance angel's halo in the flash of the camera. To one side, above my father's cropped black curls, there is a blurring of white light (which my grandfather Louis would doubtless have seen as spiritual; evidence of the Other Side, come through to witness the ceremony). This light is there in all four of the photographs that I have of the wedding: pictures I have examined over and over again, like separate pieces of a jigsaw, that might eventually fit together and make more sense. In the first picture, my parents are smiling at one another, standing in front of the door to what I guess is the registry office; in the second, the door is open, and they are smiling at the camera, and I can see there is a rose pinned to my mother's dress, and rather disconcertingly, a stranger's face, hovering between their shoulders, like a materialized ghost in a Victorian photograph. In what I think of as the third picture (not that there is an order to them, apart from my own), they are sitting inside the registrar's office; Richard next to my mother, and my father on the other end of the sofa. Lil is behind them, standing, and my mother is leaning towards my father, though my father has both his hands on his suited knees, looking

rather disapproving, looking like the angry young man he was in those days, a political radical, a member of the ANC. In the final photograph, my parents are alone again, close up, leaving the registry office. They seem to be holding hands, but it's hard to tell – their fingers don't seem to be doing the right thing – and my mother is turned to my father, with a nervous not-smile, and my father is gazing at something else, away from the camera, something unseen in the middle distance. The photographs are stuck very tightly to the black paper pages of the album in which they are kept (glued there by my maternal grandparents, I think, who would have been sent them in South Africa; and then posted all the way back to London to my mother, months or even years later, probably). But just now, I lifted a corner of one of them, the last picture, and there, in tiny silver handwriting, the neatest capital letters, someone has written: 'JUST YOU TRY!'

I never saw my mother wearing her black wedding dress again; and it never did come in useful for her, as a party outfit or otherwise, as far as I could see. But she kept it safely, despite all the moves we made – from Hampstead to the English countryside (so cold, that winter, she remembers, stuck in a cottage in the middle of snowbound fields in rural Oxfordshire; no way out

for weeks at a time), and then to Liverpool, where my father was studying for a while, and south to Henley-on-Thames (how weird was *that* for a couple of young radicals?), and to London again, to a flat in Marylebone High Street, and afterwards to Oxford, where my father got a job as a university lecturer. Oh, and there were more moves – too many for me to remember – but the wedding dress came with her, even when my father did not.

The dress had a little matching jacket with it that buttoned up at the back; so neat and perfectly cut that when it was worn over the dress, you wouldn't necessarily guess that bare flesh was beneath; that something sleeveless was going on. My mother kept the jacket on during her wedding day, at least she did in the photographs; so perhaps it was me who turned the outfit into a party dress; jacketless, wanton, feeling myself to have been set free in a way that she was not. I don't remember my mother actually *giving* me the dress: I think I'd found it for myself one day, looking through her wardrobe. I'd always been interested in her clothes – they seemed to be material clues to her history, and mine; more significant, perhaps, because there were relatively few to examine. She was very frugal, unlike my sister and me when we grew up, and after this one

extravagance for her wedding day, bought herself little in the way of party outfits, though she made wonderfully exuberant dresses for us as children, which seemed like the most precious of gifts.

I'm not certain of the precise circumstances in which I first wore her wedding dress – but I remember the way it felt, stepping into it, holding my breath, while someone – my mother or my sister? – zipped it up at the back for me; and fastened hooks and eyes, too (for this was a dress that I could not put on or take off without help). It must have been shortly afterwards that I packed the dress into a battered suitcase when I left home, at eighteen, to go to Cambridge – a place where I thought I could re-invent myself, leave my family behind. But my running-away bag contained bits and pieces of my mother: not just the dress, but an old bone-handled bread knife, a brightly coloured blanket she had brought with her as a girl from South Africa, and her handwritten recipe for scones. My mother has very precise handwriting, small and carefully formed, and she wrote postcards to me at university, a time of great unhappiness in her life, though her sadness was kept between the lines. Her marriage had been tempestuous, marked by separations and reconciliations and several attempts at fresh starts, but now it was finally at an end. She

was forty, and I had gone, taking her wedding dress with me.

At university, I tended only to wear old clothes, other people's clothes: mainly stuff that I bought for very little money, from the stalls in Cambridge market. That might sound dismal, but the clothes were as exuberant as I was. There was a frilly rose-pink Sixties dress – layered, like petals, its pastel sweetness sabotaged by the fact that it was almost indecently short, especially when I cycled home in it, drunk and weaving under the wide night sky, my party face covered in the kisses of boys I had left behind. (One night, a policeman stopped me, and said I shouldn't be out so late alone, dressed like that; and I just laughed, and said I was too fast to catch.) I also bought Fifties cotton frocks – splashed with flowers, vivid pinks and greens, daisies running riot – and sparkling sequined cardigans that smelt of mothballs and cologne; and a long tulle ball gown, sherbet-lemony skirts cascading from its tightly fitted waist. I wore other women's shoes, too: still bearing the shape of their feet; precipitous heels from twenty years ago, Sixties lilac satin stilettos and black patent winkle-pickers and fake crocodile boots. It was all so cheap, but I treasured these things, my trove from jumble sales and charity shops, washed up into my arms.

If the contents of one's wardrobe are in any way the manifestation of one's inner self (which I believe them to be, some of the time, at least), then mine was a rag-tag bundle of other people's identities, assembled into something of my own. All those second-hand clothes are gone now, abandoned or lost or fallen apart; and I mourn none of them, not deeply, except the wedding dress. I feel that in losing it, the past is eluding me; as if I have lost a piece of my heart.