

The Devil Wears Prada

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Published by HarperCollins

Extract

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HarperCollinsPublishers
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

A Paperback Original
Published by HarperCollinsPublishers 2003

First published in the USA by
Doubleday, a division of Random House, Inc

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ISBN 0 00 715610 3

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The light hadn't even officially turned green at the intersection of 17th and Broadway before an army of overconfident yellow cabs roared past the tiny deathtrap I was attempting to navigate around the city streets. *Clutch, gas, shift* (neutral to first? Or first to second?), *release clutch*, I repeated over and over in my head, the mantra offering little comfort and even less direction amid the screeching midday traffic. The little car bucked wildly twice before it lurched forward through the intersection. My heart flip-flopped in my chest. Without warning, the lurching evened out and I began to pick up speed. Lots of speed. I glanced down to confirm visually that I was only in second gear, but the rear end of a cab loomed so large in the windshield that I could do nothing but jam my foot on the brake pedal so hard that my heel snapped off. *Shit!* Another pair of seven-hundred-dollar shoes sacrificed to my complete and utter lack of grace under pressure: this clocked in as my third such breakage this month. It was almost a relief when the car stalled (I'd obviously forgotten to press the clutch when attempting to brake for my life). I had a few seconds – peaceful seconds if one could overlook the angry honking and varied forms of the word 'fuck' being hurled at me from all directions – to pull off my Manolos and toss them into the passenger seat. There was nowhere to wipe my sweaty hands except for the suede Gucci pants that hugged my thighs and hips so tightly they'd both begun to tingle within minutes of my securing the final button. My fingers left wet streaks across the supple suede that swathed the tops of my now numb thighs. Attempting to drive this \$84,000 stick-shift convertible through the

obstacle-fraught streets of midtown at lunchtime pretty much demanded that I smoke a cigarette.

'Fuckin' move, lady!' hollered a swarthy driver whose chest hair threatened to overtake the wife-beater he wore. 'What do you think this is? Fuckin' drivin' school? Get outta the way!'

I raised a shaking hand to give him the finger and then turned my attention to the business at hand: getting nicotine coursing through my veins as quickly as possible. My hands were moist again with sweat, evidenced by the matches that kept slipping to the floor. The light turned green just as I managed to touch the fire to the end of the cigarette, and I was forced to leave it hanging between my lips as I negotiated the intricacies of *clutch, gas, shift* (neutral to first? Or first to second?), *release clutch*, the smoke wafting in and out of my mouth with each and every breath. It was another three blocks before the car moved smoothly enough for me to remove the cigarette, but it was already too late: the precariously long line of spent ash had found its way directly to the sweat stain on the pants. Awesome. But before I could consider that, counting the Manolos, I'd wrecked \$3,100 worth of merchandise in under three minutes, my cell phone bleated loudly. And as if the very essence of life itself didn't suck enough at that particular moment, the caller ID confirmed my worst fear: it was Her. Miranda Priestly. My boss.

'Ahn-dre-ah! Ahn-dre-ah! Can you hear me, Ahn-dre-ah?' she trilled the moment I snapped my Motorola open – no small feat considering both of my (bare) feet and hands were already contending with various obligations. I propped the phone between my ear and shoulder and tossed the cigarette out the window, where it narrowly missed hitting a bike messenger. He screamed out a few highly unoriginal 'fuck yous' before weaving forward.

'Yes, Miranda. Hi, I can hear you perfectly.'

'Ahn-dre-ah, where's my car? Did you drop it off at the garage yet?'

The light ahead of me blessedly turned red and looked as though it might be a long one. The car jerked to a stop without hitting anyone or anything, and I breathed a sigh of relief. 'I'm in the car right now, Miranda, and I should be at the garage in just a few minutes.' I figured she was probably concerned that everything was going well, so I reassured her that

there were no problems whatsoever and we should both arrive shortly in perfect condition.

'Whatever,' she said brusquely, cutting me off midsentence. 'I need you to pick up Madelaine and drop her off at the apartment before you come back to the office.' Click. The phone went dead. I stared at it for a few seconds before I realized that she'd deliberately hung up because she had provided all of the details I could hope to receive. Madelaine. Who the hell was Madelaine? Where was she at the moment? Did she know I was to pick her up? Why was she going back to Miranda's apartment? And why on earth – considering Miranda had a full-time driver, housekeeper, and nanny – was I the one who had to do it?

Remembering that it was illegal to talk on a cell phone while driving in New York and figuring the last thing I needed at that moment was a run-in with the NYPD, I pulled into the bus lane and switched my flashers on. Breathe in, breathe out, I coached myself, even remembering to apply the parking brake before taking my foot off the regular one. It had been years since I'd driven a stick-shift car – five years, actually, since a high school boyfriend had volunteered his car up for a few lessons that I'd decidedly flunked – but Miranda hadn't seemed to consider that when she'd called me into her office an hour and a half earlier.

'Ahn-dre-ah, my car needs to be picked up from the place and dropped off at the garage. Attend to it immediately, as we'll be needing it tonight to drive to the Hamptons. That's all.' I stood, rooted to the carpet in front of her behemoth desk, but she'd already blocked out my presence entirely. Or so I thought. 'That's *all*, Ahn-dre-ah. See to it right now,' she added, still not glancing up.

Ah, sure, Miranda, I thought to myself as I walked away, trying to figure out the first step in the assignment that was sure to have a million pitfalls along the way. First was definitely to find out at which 'place' the car was located. Most likely it was being repaired at the dealership, but it could obviously be at any one of a million auto shops in any one of the five boroughs. Or perhaps she'd lent it to a friend and it was currently occupying an expensive spot in a full-service garage somewhere on Park Avenue? Of course, there was always the chance that she was referring to a new car – brand unknown – that she'd just recently purchased that

hadn't yet been brought home from the (unknown) dealership. I had a lot of work to do.

I started by calling Miranda's nanny, but her cell phone went straight to voice mail. The housekeeper was next on the list and, for once, a big help. She was able to tell me that the car wasn't brand-new and it was in fact a 'convertible sports car in British racing green,' and that it was usually parked in a garage on Miranda's block, but she had no idea what the make was or where it might currently be residing. Next on the list was Miranda's husband's assistant, who informed me that, as far as she knew, the couple owned a top-of-the-line black Lincoln Navigator and some sort of small green Porsche. Yes! I had my first lead. One quick phone call to the Porsche dealership on Eleventh Avenue revealed that yes, they had just finished touching up the paint and installing a new disc-changer in a green Carrera 4 Cabriolet for a Ms. Miranda Priestly. Jackpot!

I ordered a Town Car to take me to the dealership, where I turned over a note I'd forged with Miranda's signature that instructed them to release the car to me. No one seemed to care whatsoever that I was in no way related to this woman, that some stranger had cruised into the place and requested someone else's Porsche. They tossed me the keys and only laughed when I'd asked them to back it out of the garage because I wasn't sure I could handle a stick shift in reverse. It'd taken me a half hour to get ten blocks, and I still hadn't figured out where or how to turn around so I'd actually be heading uptown, toward the parking place on Miranda's block that her housekeeper had described. The chances of my making it to 76th and Fifth without seriously injuring myself, the car, a biker, a pedestrian, or another vehicle were nonexistent, and this new call did nothing to calm my nerves.

Once again, I made the round of calls, but this time Miranda's nanny picked up on the second ring.

'Cara, hey, it's me.'

'Hey, what's up? Are you on the street? It sounds so loud.'

'Yeah, you could say that. I had to pick up Miranda's Porsche from the dealership. Only, I can't really drive stick. But now she called and wants me to pick up someone named Madelaine and drop her off at the apartment. Who the hell is Madelaine and where might she be?'

Cara laughed for what felt like ten minutes before she said, 'Madelaine's their Persian kitten and she's at the vet. Just got spayed. I was supposed to pick her up, but Miranda just called and told me to pick the twins up early from school so they can all head out to the Hamptons.'

'You're joking. I have to pick up a fucking cat with this Porsche? Without crashing? It's *never going to happen.*'

'She's at the East Side Animal Hospital, on Fifty-second between First and Second. Sorry, Andy, I have to get the girls now, but call if there's anything I can do, OK?'

Maneuvering the green beast to head uptown sapped my last reserves of concentration, and by the time I reached Second Avenue, the stress sent my body into meltdown. *It couldn't possibly get worse than this*, I thought as yet another cab came within a quarter-inch of the back bumper. A nick anywhere on the car would guarantee I lose my job – that much was obvious – but it just might cost me my life as well. Since there was obviously not a parking spot, legal or otherwise, in the middle of the day, I called the vet's office from outside and asked them to bring Madelaine to me. A kindly woman emerged a few minutes later (just enough time for me to field another call from Miranda, this one asking why I wasn't back at the office yet) with a cat-carrier, through the wicker bars of which I could see a mass of white fluff. The woman told me to drive very, very carefully because the kitten was 'experiencing some discomfort.' Right, lady. I'm driving very, very carefully solely to save my job and possibly my life – if the cat benefits from this, it's just a bonus.

With the basket on the passenger seat, I lit another cigarette and rubbed my freezing bare feet so my toes could resume gripping the clutch and brake pedal. *Clutch, gas, shift, release clutch*, I chanted, trying to ignore the kitten's pitiful meows every time I accelerated. She alternated between crying, hissing, and some sort of unidentifiable high-pitched screeching. By the time we reached Miranda's building, the kitten was nearly hysterical. I tried to soothe her, but she could sense my insincerity – and besides, I had no free hands to poke through the bars to offer a reassuring pat or nuzzle. So this was what four years of diagramming and deconstructing books, plays, short stories, and poems were for: a chance to comfort an over-pampered fur ball while trying not to demolish someone

else's really, really expensive car. Sweet life. Just as I had always dreamed.

I managed to dump the car at the garage and the cat with Miranda's doorman without further incident, but my hands were still shaking when I climbed into the chauffeured Town Car that had been following me all over town. The driver looked at me sympathetically and made some supportive comment about the difficulty of stick shifts, but I didn't feel much like chatting.

'Just heading back to the Elias-Clark building,' I said with a long sigh as the driver pulled around the block and headed south on Park Avenue. Since I rode the route every day – sometimes twice – I knew I had exactly eight minutes to breathe and collect myself and possibly even figure out a way to disguise the ash and sweat stains that had become permanent features on the Gucci suede. The shoes – well, those were beyond hope, at least until they could be fixed by the fleet of shoemakers *Runway* kept for such emergencies. The ride was actually over in six and a half minutes, and I had no choice but to hobble like an off-balance giraffe on my one flat, one four-inch heel arrangement. A quick stop in the Closet turned up a brand-new pair of knee-high maroon-colored Jimmy Choo's that looked great with the leather skirt I grabbed, tossing the suede pants in the 'Couture Cleaning' pile (where the basic prices for dry cleaning started at seventy-five dollars per item). The only stop left was a quick visit to the Beauty Closet, where one of the editors there took one look at my sweat-streaked makeup and whipped out a trunk full of fixers.

Not bad, I thought, looking in one of the omnipresent full-length mirrors. You might not even know that mere minutes before I was hovering precariously close to murdering myself and everyone around me. I strolled confidently into the assistants' suite outside Miranda's office and quietly took my seat, looking forward to a few free minutes before she returned from lunch.

'And-re-ah,' she called from her starkly furnished, deliberately cold office. 'Where are the car and the kitten?'

I leaped out of my seat and ran as fast as was possible on plush carpeting while wearing five-inch heels and stood before her desk. 'I left the car with the garage attendant and Madelaine with your doorman,

Miranda,' I said, proud to have completed both tasks without killing the car, the cat, or myself.

'And why would you do something like that?' she snarled, looking up from her copy of *Women's Wear Daily* for the first time since I'd walked in. 'I specifically requested that you bring both of them to the office, since the girls will be here momentarily and we need to leave.'

'Oh, well, actually, I thought you said that you wanted them to –'

'Enough. The details of your incompetence interest me very little. Go get the car and the kitten and bring them here. I'm expecting we'll be all ready to leave in fifteen minutes. Understood?'

Fifteen minutes? Was this woman hallucinating? It would take a minute or two to get downstairs and into a Town Car, another six or eight to get to her apartment, and then somewhere in the vicinity of three hours for me to find the kitten in her eighteen-room apartment, extract the bucking stick shift from its parking spot, and make my way the twenty blocks to the office.

'Of course, Miranda. Fifteen minutes.'

I started shaking again the moment I ran out of her office, wondering if my heart could just up and give out at the ripe old age of twenty-three. The first cigarette I lit landed directly on the top of my new Jimmys, where instead of falling to the cement it smoldered for just long enough to burn a small, neat hole. *Great*, I muttered. *That's just fucking great*. Chalk up my total as an even four grand for today's ruined merchandise – a new personal best. Maybe she'd die before I got back, I thought, deciding that now was the time to look on the bright side. Maybe, just maybe, she'd keel over from something rare and exotic and we'd all be released from her wellspring of misery. I relished a last drag before stamping out the cigarette and told myself to be rational. *You don't want her to die*, I thought, stretching out in the backseat. *Because if she does, you lose all hope of killing her yourself. And that would be a shame.*