Ring of Fashion

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“Taxi drivers with pimplles on their necks should be fired,” she muttered as she clicked her purse shut and began hauling her collection of suitcases, portfolios, swatchbooks, and bags up the walk. “NOT very pleasant.”

Returning home from a four day olympiad in Italy with time trials in the forty meter shopping spree and critiques of figures less shapely than compulsory skating figure “8’s,” Jean Hutton was in no mood for a wrestling match—Hutton verses key, packages, and neighbors’ cat slamming and sliding against the legs—“Open up, you damn door.”

Once she was inside, the rich dark walnut hat tree was hit with her trench coat. The matching antique commode in the hall was avalanched with swatch cards, while ivory shag carpeting was strewn with suede kilties, size 8½. As she continued up the open staircase, purse and gloves fell tumbling into a Pierre Cardin heap of leather.

“Mark, I’m home and heading for the shower. Any calls? Talk to me later,” and the trappings continued to shed, a path of couture rainments, vestiges of a chic businesswoman home for the night.

Finally stripped, Jean marched into her bathroom and twisted on the water faucets. Reaching for the bath oil beads, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror.

“Any more Italian sun and you’ll look like a ginger-snap, baby,” she mused.

And indeed, the evidence of almost half a century of living had begun to show.

Skin, you hang from femurs and ulna like Spanish moss off old Southern oaks.

Imagining herself as one of her clients, she coolly and calculatingly appraised herself.

“Well, Ms. Hutton, let me see what I have to work with. Hmmmm, feet like gunboats, legs like warclubs from the Second Punic War, a waist wasted between bun and breasts as flat as pennies on the railroad track. For you
Madame, may I suggest a black, double knit Givenchy tent."

_Such a snide bitch you are, Jean._

While she eased herself into the steaming tub, her mind flipped back to business. Taking advantage of a layover in New York City, the afternoon had been spent at a sidewalk sale in Greenwich Village. Within a block of the plaza, the adrenalin that transforms complacent housewives, mothers, even carefree teenagers, into fierce rivals competing for the proverbial gold cup had begun to flow. In reality this cup was the $3.00 per package boys' underwear at the low, low, back-to-school price of $1.00 or the cute $25.00 'Ronnie-didntmeanit' camisoles, price slashed to $5.00. Bodies with blurred faces of concentration had trooped steadily up and down the street, back and forth between racks and tables. It was as if an inner force was steering them around babes in strollers and female geriatrics stooped over pinching their feet into black granny shoes vented with paisley designs.

Jean had maneuvered past these and lines growing out from cash registers persistently ringing up sales. With an animal-like instinct the seasoned saler headed toward stores noted for fashion as well as bargains. Here the screech of hangars wrenched back and forth across metal rods and their click, click at being jerked on and off, on and off, were the loudest. The clerks were masked in snooty faces of "Next please." They darted beady, piercing eyes at her pausing to look and examine when the technique of most shoppers was to just snatch and pay. But, although surly at being stationed outside the secure confines of their tidy, little departments within the store, their expressions had undergone a quick change when Jean flipped off the name of her client, words enough to authorize a charge.

Slipping down further into the fragrant, oily warmth, she smiled at the thought of those harried clerks. Once a salesclerk herself, she remembered what sale days had felt like . . .

"Next please. Sir, do you want that?"

"Well . . .," the lean, young man stood in a stammering predicament. "I'm not sure what goes with it. Could you suggest a pair of trousers that would match?"

"Sir, please." Exasperated, Jean, then young and gangly, snatched up a pair of complementary slacks.

"Great, I'll take them."
Her “Thank you for shopping at blah, blah, blah” trailed off into a lingering look as she watched him merge into the rest of the shopping crush. *Nice butt,* she thought.

“Next please.”

The warm bath was beginning to relax her, and she let herself slip back into memories of the next encounter with Mark.

“Hi. I’m back.”

Jean glanced up from the rack of cardigans she was sorting.

“Oh, hi. The sale is over and the store is closing, did you need something?”

“I really liked the outfit I got today.”

“Well, good, I’m glad you liked it.” She moved on to the tie rack, which, after one day of “2 for 1,” looked like a garish silk macrame knot. He paddled after her.

“You really have a knack for matching things,” he said, referring to the pants she had chosen to match his shirt, but obviously appraising the sharp coordination of her dress, hose, shoes, jewelry, and even fingernail polish.

“Thank you, sir, but the store is closing in five minutes. Did you need something?”

That night over dinner she asked him why he was interested in her.

He admitted he had watched her from all the way across the store. Watched as she scowled and fumed at sweaters tossed onto the floor by slobbish shoppers, watched as she had caressed and refolded the soft, imported cashmere, watched as she had continually pushed her round tortoiseshells back up her rather large beak.

Teasingly he ranked her at number nine on his Ugly Duckling Scale.

But Mark also confessed of seeing more in her. She unconsciously dismissed the petty world of Vogue models with their seductive glances, and accepted the harsh reality that it was a world in which she would never live.

“Besides,” he had said, “you weren’t that bad and I needed someone to pick out my clothes . . .”

It had been that remark that had motivated her to finally, after four years of sales clerking, pioneer in the field of fashion coordination. Adept at sizing up personality, lifestyle, and physical features of people, she had successfully built an impressive list of clients in the upper echelons of
society. Her days were filled with appointments, fittings, and shopping trips everywhere from designer showrooms in Paris to dingy boutiques in Chinatown. A master at digging up fashion firsts and one-of-a-kind looks, the ugly duckling became the queen of Seventh Avenue, courted by firms wanting their lines promoted. *Feminique* sought her advice while Hutton parties were featured in *Women's Wear Daily*.

"Pick out clothes, ha," she quipped as she sloshed out of the tub.

After a brisk rubdown and liberal slathering of body toner and moistureizer, she cinched on her smokey grey velour robe and started downstairs.

She was halfway down the winding staircase when her scream pierced the house. Gripping the bannister, Jean bent over and pulled the swatch pin from her foot.

"DAMNATION!"

She gingerly stepped into her study.

"Mark, I'm going back to New York tomorrow. See what kind of flight you can get me."

With a glass of Perrier water in hand, she sat down at her desk, flipped on the automatic phone secretary, and began leafing through designer sketchbooks.

"Hello, uh, Jean? Oh, I hate these machines. I'll call back later, love."

Jean shook her head and chuckled at her friend's hang-up with the phone recorder.

"Hello. Mrs. Cliestman in L.A. needs an ensemble for her son's graduation and would like to set up a consultation about her fall wardrobe. Mrs. Tober in . . . ." and so her messages droned on.

She jotted down another style number, only half listening to the recording.

"Jean, Mark here."

Jean shot bolt upright at the sound of her husband's voice.

"You probably haven't noticed yet, but I'm gone."

"what is this bull?"

"I knew this would be the only way to reach you, the only way for me to get your attention long enough to tell you I'm getting out. I can't stand being a married widower anymore. I think our marriage went out with go-go boots and paper dresses. I know how much you love jewelry, so here's the wedding ring you gave me. Keep it. Maybe you
can turn it into a new fashion craze. Take care of yourself, Jean. This is Doormat Mark signing off.”

Jean’s eyes were riveted on the ring lying on the phone cradle. That ring had encircled the same finger—for twenty-one years. Once a sparkling gold— their bold, brash color of making love in the afternoon or splurging tightly-budgeted grocery money on an antique mirror—“perfect for the living room”—the color was now aged. Where once had been delicate beading around the top and bottom there was now smoothness, buffed plain by years of wear. Rounded and not very wide, only about one eighth of an inch, it was beginning to thin in back.

She flicked it onto the desk.

“You mean I’ve been talking to the walls?”

Suddenly she snatched up her height days and you’ll stop smoking water filter that she’d been using for two months and shoved in a Virginia Slim. The filter broke and a shower of quick tears cascaded down her grey velour.

“Damn you, Mark. I’ll make my own plane reserv-