

Hand-Me-Down Gown

How one bride found the perfect dress in an unexpected place

by Lisa Oram

I share my wedding dress with a stranger. She wore it, and I wore it, and we've never met. Or maybe she never wore it. I don't really know.

I bought my wedding dress at a consignment shop, and at first, I was obsessed with her, the previous owner. I wanted to know the story, how and why the dress wasn't preserved in a box in her basement. My imagination went wild: perhaps she had gotten divorced and cast off the dress in anger, perhaps she had been killed in a car accident just before her wedding, or been stood up at the altar. I hoped she didn't die just after the wedding, leaving the grief-stricken widower to dispose of the dress. The only good story I could imagine was that she, in fact, had called off the wedding, and in that case, I admired her courage. I just couldn't believe she was a pragmatist who wanted to recover some money from a top-of-the-line designer dress that I was getting for a steal.

As for me, I was not the kind of little girl who spent years dreaming of being a bride. In my 20s, I felt strongly that the very premise of marriage was flawed, that it was simply against human nature to be with one person for a lifetime. My own parents' marriage had failed after 23 years. Even those I knew who stayed in long marriages seemed unhappy: my aunt and uncle who barely spoke to each other or the neighbor who insulted her husband at every chance. By my own choice, I thought I would never marry.

But things changed, and at 34, I was happily engaged. Being a bride, however, still felt complicated. So much of what I associated with that role—the china and stemware, a big dress, the center aisle—just didn't fit. I knew what I didn't want, but not what to replace it with. I tackled what felt the hardest first: what to wear.

With my mother in the Midwest and me on the East Coast, I delved into the world of bridal shops on my own. I marched into the first store and declared I wanted to look simple and elegant. No train, no veil. No pouf, fluff or sparkle. The saleslady gave me a little smile, took me the arm and said, "They all say that the beginning, dear."

And she was right, partly. Seeing myself in the fairy-tale bridal gowns was shocking—and exciting. With a headpiece, I was a bride with a capital B and some part of me loved it. Still, I did not succumb immediately.

I looked at high-end shops, discount places, an antique clothing store; I talked to a seamstress. The consignment-shop dress began to stand out, but suddenly, I became superstitious. Do real brides wear used dresses?

I invited my mom to town once I had narrowed down some choices.

She's usually very conventional, but undaunted, she love the secondhand dress. It was simple and elegant, with short sleeves and an off-the-shoulder neckline. The bodice was made of 1-inch strips of silk, woven like a basket. At each corner of each square was tiny, white pearl. The skirt was plain. Not a thing prissy about this dress. I could move easily and imagined myself dancing. The price was right and it fit perfectly, as if it had been made just for me. But still, there could be no fantasy of that sort at the consignment shop. When I looked at myself in the mirror, I felt shadowed by that other woman who shared my size and sense of style.

My mom's position surprised me. She said my fear about a curse was ridiculous and blamed my poet's imagination. The money spent on dresses, she insisted, was a big waste and consigning was a great idea. She thought the dress was beautiful and looked great on me. But, she said, don't tell anyone where you bought it.

I was tired of thinking and looking, so I bought it. I resisted every temptation to ask about the previous owner—I had to start believing it didn't matter. It would sit in my closet for six months before I wore it, so I hoped time would help it feel mine. I thought I'd put it on once in a while to get used to wearing it and infuse with my spirit. My sister, who didn't know it came from a consignment shop, told me it was bad luck to wear the dress for practice.

I'm not sure how or why, but by the time the wedding rolled around, I loved my dress. I kept it on from dawn till dusk, savoring every minute. I danced. I twirled. I walked barefoot down the grassy aisle. I didn't know I should lift the skirt in the early-morning dew, so the bottom got muddy. During the ceremony, the rabbi, who has known me since I was 14 years old, said I was the only person he knew who would be married at a summer camp, "in full wedding regalia."

It fit. It all fit perfectly.

When I bought the dress, I had planned to pass it along to the next consignment-shopping bride when I was done. But as I prepared to take it in, my stomach twisted in a knot. I didn't want to let it go. I liked seeing it and touching the silk, remembering my "once in a lifetime." I had wanted to believe that I had broken the jinx and another bride could now enjoy the dress. I thought the consignment shop might include a note of good wishes from me, so the next bride wouldn't wonder, or worry, as I had.

In the end, I couldn't part with it. The box in the basement made perfect sense. My dress hangs in the closet still, muddy hem and all.

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