

Hot Day in the Garment District

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1955, the summer between my sophomore and junior years at Barnard: a hot, sticky New York July and August spent shuttling among airless showrooms in the garment district of the West 30s. I'd been hired by the Ford agency as a dress model to show out-of-town buyers how the fall junior line from Suzy Perette and her peers would look on normal-sized girls. Native New Yorker though I was, I'd known the garment industry at a remove, mostly from those of my classmates whose fathers were in it. That summer the clogged side streets, the incessant shouting matches between drivers of double-parked apparel trucks, the dresses and coats swaying from handcarts defiantly crossing honking cars, the office workers clumped and schmoozing on sidewalks became my daily world.

On days when no buyers showed up I'd be assigned sixth-grade filing tasks. It was impossible not to eavesdrop on the coffee-break talk coming from back rooms with opened doors. Face averted, my eyes widened as I heard about one design firm's double set of books; another's special gifts to certain auditors; and how a well-known designer stood transfixed in horror when her business-partner husband told her in front of the employees that he'd be accompanying her on her vacation to Mexico. Rumor had it she'd been planning to make the trip with her boyfriend. The sheltered daughter of modest civil servants, I thrilled at this font of delicious gossip.

In late August I was assigned to a firm for three days—Rothman Brothers Furs on West 35th Street. It was a small operation: a cache of minks and ermines in two unremarkable rooms a few doors down from the Empire State Building. One brother, tall and mournful, was the financial brains of the pair. The other, Marvin, was squat, simian-faced, and only a few inches taller than I was. Black wiry hair sprouted from his open shirt, thick arms from his rolled-up sleeves, and successful persuasion from his voice: Sales was in his blood. Seven buyers came in three days and none left without an order.

I spent my spare time amusing myself with copies of *Women's Wear Daily* and the *Racing Form*. Towards the end of the third day, after a buyer from Cedar Rapids had left, I stood alone in the empty showroom, the luxurious mink over my underwear, the way furs got modeled then, with nothing to detract from the line of the garment—just the bra, underpants, garter belt, nylons, and pointed-toed heels.

“Don't take it off yet.” I heard Marvin's thick voice just behind me. I turned toward him. He held me by the mink's collar. “Please.” Oddly, the word actually was please. “Open it and let me see your breasts?” Let him see my breasts! This man I'd met three days ago, a man old enough to be my father. Desire was in his eyes and voice. I was, at least technically, still a

virgin. I needn't dwell on how incredulous this will sound today to any woman under 50, but I did as he asked. Marvin drew my breasts outside the black lace cups, put his lips to my nipples. Breathing hard he kissed them one by one, then went no further. Instead, with a quiet touch of his salesman's pitch, he offered to set me up in an apartment in Queens as his part-time girlfriend; he was of course married with children. He'd pay half of my college tuition. I'd be under no obligation. "No, no," I stammered in shock, I couldn't, I wouldn't. He sighed, but wasn't surprised. "No, of course you couldn't and of course you wouldn't. But here's my card, if you ever change your mind."

Hanging onto the strap of the uptown Broadway local on my way home I could think of nothing else, all that night and for days afterward. It was the first time I'd been wanted so nakedly by anyone, least of all an older man, and now, blushing with incomprehension, I found myself wanting him back and knowing I would never act on that desire. I kept my would-be lover's card, but even though people in the garment business crossed paths daily in 7th Avenue coffee shops, I never saw Marvin again. Two weeks later, however, I didn't hesitate to shed the final technicality with my delighted boyfriend.