

Lady in Thread

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The dress rack stood reliably jam-packed at the very back of the store, past the rows and rows of all other kinds of clothing racks also stuffed to the point of bursting. Their contents spilled out onto the white vinyl floor in puddles of cheap polyester and cotton that piqued my curiosity. The best pieces always came from the floor: vintage Tripp NYC skirts, handmade velvet tops with dramatic trumpet sleeves any vampire would die again to own—things I encountered in my dreams, but rarely in my waking life.

Despite the temptation to stop and help the unhappy blue-shirted employees return the items to their respective racks, I headed straight to the dresses. Any pit-stops would throw my well-established Goodwill routine off, and before I knew it the store would be closing, and I would have to drive home in the dark. I'd only stopped in to reawaken my creativity after a particularly mind-numbing day of shuffling around columns outlining the latest celebrity gossip in disturbing detail at work, and it wouldn't be long before Goodwill's unique old-lady-mothball-perfume odor made my nose itch. That smell bothered me no matter how much time I spent in the store.

Thankfully, only a few other customers lingered around the store, which meant that I wouldn't have to put up with people choosing to stand right next to me in an otherwise empty aisle. I stood in front of the disorganized dress display mindlessly *flick, flick, flicking* through florals and stripes and animal prints, until I came across the inevitable snagged hanger. Its clear plastic arm poked out from between some disillusioned college girl's old neon pink prom dress and a buttercup-yellow skirt suit Jackie Kennedy would have adored. The hook had caught on the prom dress's sweetheart neckline before whatever garment the attached hanger held could tumble completely to the floor. Snagged hangers had enraged me many times before, so rather than swiping right past it, I parted the prom dress and Jackie's suit to stick it back on the rack. The overworked, underpaid employees already put up with too much to deal with minor annoyances.

I jumped back so quickly that my boots gave a high-pitched squeak.

"Oh my god!" I said.

"Help, help!" the small, brown-haired woman hanging in the snagged dress said. She was so short that her feet dangled above the ground even suspended from the prom dress rather than the rack, so the hanger crammed in between her shoulders and the dress pressed her chin flat against her chest. She flailed her arms and kicked her feet to no avail—somehow her frantic movements didn't affect the dress she hung in or the ones around it. That woman did *not* belong with the dresses.

“Oh my god,” I said again. “Hang on—I mean, wait a second, I’ll find someone to help get you down gently.” I turned to yell for one of the employees scurrying around the store, but the woman hissed at me.

“No! Do you think I would be hanging here if those assholes could see me? You’re the only person who’s acknowledged me in the week I’ve been hanging here.” Her voice sounded strained and strangled from the pressure of the hanger forcing her head down, like hands slightly compressed her throat.

“What do you mean? Of course I can see you—”

“I’m dead, you idiot! And I’m stuck in this dress that smells like piss and clam chowder, so get me down *quietly* before someone sees you acting crazy,” the woman said.

Now, I believed in ghosts. I absolutely believed in ghosts, but I could not believe I’d found one at Goodwill. Maybe all those hours of watching cheesy ghost hunting shows and horror movies had finally gone to my head, and the woman would disappear if I closed my eyes for a moment.

“Hey, hippie girl, what the hell are you doing?” the woman said. Well, she hadn’t disappeared. Too bad. I assumed her calling me a hippie came from my waist length, blonde hair, or possibly the tiered dress I’d made myself from gray floral curtains. Either way, it didn’t matter. I reached out to touch the woman’s arm, expecting my fingers to go right through her pale skin despite the fact that she appeared just as tangible as a living person. Instead, she felt like an ice cube: cold, solid, and almost slimy with moisture. I shuddered and pulled back.

What would happen if I just walked away? I could push the prom dress and skirt suit back together and leave, and the ghost woman would be someone else’s problem. But what kind of pathetic, weak person would ignore the pleas of someone who’d somehow ended up in Goodwill purgatory? That woman didn’t seem very pleasant, but she’d been a living, breathing person before, and helping her would mean I’d taken initiative for once.

“Alright,” I said. “I’ll help, but beyond getting you down from that rack, I have no idea what I can do for you.”

“Hallelujah, I get to go home with a hippie,” she said. I’d been reaching out to grab her hanger, but stopped when her words landed. I could accept the presence of ghosts at Goodwill, both in the form of otherworldly smells and of human souls. I could even accept that she’d called me a hippie, but bringing a ghost into my home would be an entirely different crisis.

“Go home with me?”

“What, you’re just gonna leave me on the filthy floor? Haven’t I suffered enough?”

“So, you want me to—”

A disinterested employee wandered by; some greasy teenager fed up with his life. He didn't look at me, but I shut up regardless. It seemed he really couldn't see the woman dangling there, since he kept on his not-so-merry way with his head down and his feet shuffling.

I continued, keeping my voice barely above a whisper: “You want me to take you home, and then what? Hang you up in my closet?”

“Very funny. No, there's got to be a way to get me out of this thing and into the Great Beyond, or down to Hell, or wherever I'm going. Let's be honest, I'm probably going to Hell, but it has to be better than this,” the woman said. She flailed around again, and I sighed. If a dead person could be so optimistic, then surely I could set my own cynicism aside.

“Okay. I'll have to buy your dress to get you out of here. Please don't make me look any crazier than I already do,” I said. “By the way, do you have a name?”

“Unfortunately.”

“Well, what is it?”

“Linda. Now, if you're done flirting with me, I'd like to get out of here,” Linda said. How asking for her name counted as flirting, I didn't know. Her attitude was starting to get on my nerves, so I didn't argue.

I grabbed the hanger with both hands to hoist Linda down, which turned out to be unnecessary. Much to my surprise, her presence in the dress didn't add any weight to it, though her body moved and folded with it. The layers of pale blue and purple chiffon that made up its skirt swished delicately in my hands, and the diamond applique in the middle of its square neckline sparkled even under Goodwill's gray, fluorescent lighting. Its rectangular straps were thick, but not in a clunky way, as was the pastel purple ribbon cinching in the waist. Too bad I wouldn't be able to squeeze that tiny thing on even if I sold my soul. It smelled absolutely rancid, anyway. Clam chowder, just like Linda had said.

Linda choked and wheezed all the way to the long, white counter full of registers at the front of the store, where I met the same drowsy-eyed teenager who'd trudged past me earlier.

“Hi, how's it going?” I said, laying Linda down on the counter as gently as I could. The kid's shiny, plastic nametag proudly announced him as ‘Rebel’ in between Sharpied-on bats and spiderwebs. The red streaks dyed in his black hair clashed with the cobalt blue of his Goodwill t-shirt. He reminded me of my teenage self—and my adult self, to be honest.

“Is this all for you, ma’am?” Rebel asked quietly. He wasn’t disinterested, after all, just shy and timid. Like I used to be, before I grew into my uncommon personality and style. My dark clothes and platform boots made me a target for snide comments all through school, but as an adult they drew people to me—outside of my stuffy, over-professional coworkers in graphic design, that was. My team handled the layout of a barely known tabloid magazine, so I didn’t understand why any of them believed they were so prestigious. Oddly enough, teenagers seemed to compliment me the most. I prided myself on being a little bit of a fairy goth-mother to the kids who were too afraid to wear their souls on the outside like I did. I’d even taken on a mentor role for a bubbly girl who fawned over my handmade velvet capelet one frigid winter day. We’d become like sisters, the two of us.

“Sure is,” I said. The way Linda’s being interacted with the dress continued to baffle me. If Rebel laid the dress down flat, Linda appeared to flatten out with it, except for her head and arms. If he folded the dress in half, Linda folded in half. It was like crumpling and straightening an invincible piece of paper over and over again. If Zak Bagans could see that, he’d scream and run for real.

Rebel scanned Linda’s tag, removed the hanger from her dress, and shook open a plastic bag to stuff her in. She grunted and whined while he folded her right in half across the waist and tucked her into the bag on her back. I couldn’t see her all squished up in there, but she probably didn’t look very happy. I handed Rebel my Goodwill Rewards card—if I had to take Linda home with me, I would certainly get my rewards points for it—but the machine made a loud, angry *beep* when he scanned it.

“Sorry, it’s only my second day,” Rebel said. His voice trembled ever so slightly.

“It’s okay, kiddo. Take your time,” I said.

“Hurry up, hurry up!” Linda hissed from inside the bag. I ignored her. “Tell that little freak to move his ass!”

“Shut up, asshole!” I said. No way in hell would I let her talk about a harmless, insecure teenager like that, even if he couldn’t hear her. Rebel froze with his hand hovering over the register screen, glancing up at me with black-rimmed owl eyes now screened by a wall of tears. Poor kid probably thought I was about to make his life miserable. “Sorry, that wasn’t about you. Sometimes I think out loud.”

Rebel didn’t say another word to me. I left the store with Linda in my hand and a heart full of guilt in my throat. I’d avoided doing so many things throughout my life for no reason other than fear and insecurity, and I hated that I might have driven that shy kid back into some reclusive pattern he’d just managed to break out of. I took Linda out of the bag to place her in my car so she would be more comfortable—if she could even feel anything—but made no attempt to be

gentle when throwing her down across the backseat.

She bounced and threw her arms up dramatically. “Jesus Christ on a cruise ship!”

“Sorry,” I said. Not really.

The atmosphere inside my little silver car felt heavy and awkward. Thankfully, my house wasn’t far. Should I talk to Linda, or just let her stew in her own misery? My first impression of her as rude, pushy, and a bit of a bitch had turned out to be correct, and I usually tried to avoid people like her for my own sanity. Silence it would be, at least if I could help it.

It turned out the choice wouldn’t be mine. Linda opened her big mouth to yap, yap, yap as soon as we came to a red light. “Christ, your car is filthy,” she said. “Maybe even worse than that dump store. I just don’t understand why anyone would ever choose to go in there—”

“Some people don’t have a choice. Some people can only afford to shop secondhand, which you’ve clearly never had to do, *Linda*. And some people just like helping the environment, or saving money, or whatever else.”

“Jesus, who put that stick up your ass?”

“Check your attitude, or I’ll turn this car around and donate you back to Goodwill,” I said. That shut Linda right up, and I thanked my lucky stars for it. Elitist snobs had been the bane of my existence for as long as I could remember. From the prissy little rich kids of elementary school to the stuck-up sorority sisters of college, all the way to the professional women in their pencil skirts and ankle-breaking heels, there had always been someone snickering at my outdated, secondhand clothes. I never went hungry as a kid, but my family certainly wasn’t well-off. Everything we owned came from garage sales and thrift stores, which I never minded. It taught me how to be resourceful and care for the few things I did own, but it didn’t stop the sting of side glances and cupped whispers from my peers. *She’s a trashy hillbilly*, they used to say. *A freak, a weirdo*. Those whispers carried with them a hidden meaning: She’s not one of us.

Now that I had adult money of my own, I continued to shop secondhand partially as a silent middle-finger to everyone who’d ever looked down on me for it. Apparently, going to thrift stores would only ever be trendy or cool if you had millions of followers to share your million-dollar hauls with. Well, I didn’t have that. I never would have that, and I didn’t need that to enjoy paying a quarter of the original price for clothing that had only been worn a few times before finding its way to me. Fast fashion would destroy us all.

“My name is Juliette, if you care,” I said as we approached the entrance to the small subdivision I lived in.

“Juliette. That’s the name I would have picked if I ever had a girl,” Linda said.

“Really?”

“No.”

I rolled my eyes. Why had I expected anything different from her? “You’re such a ray of sunshine, Linda. I hope you stick around forever,” I said.

“Gee, thanks. I’d love to spend eternity with a lazy hippie like you.”

I whipped my car into the driveway of my orange townhouse a little quicker than I usually did, nearly smashing into the bushes next to the path to my front door. Linda slid from the backseat and hit the floor with a shout.

“The hell is your problem, you little—”

Before she could hurl another insult at me, I slammed my door. Apparently, she got the message, since she merely glared at me as I pinched the straps of her dress and pulled her off the floor. I dreaded bringing that awful woman into my home, but I could always throw her right back out if we couldn’t set her free. Maybe she deserved a lifetime in Goodwill purgatory, anyway.

I brought Linda into my cozily cramped sewing room and arranged her in my desk chair as close to a sitting position as I could manage, then took the chair at my sewing table against the other wall. The two chairs were the only surfaces not covered in unfinished projects, or heaps of scrap fabric that I could never bring myself to get rid of. Linda couldn’t move beyond the confines of the dress, so her head and shoulders ended up hanging over the back of the chair. Even stretched to her full height, she didn’t appear to be any taller than tiny icon Danny DeVito, whose height I could reference thanks to the cardboard cutout of him standing in the corner of the room. The weirdest yet most touching birthday gift I’d ever gotten. It was no surprise that it had come from my mentee, who understood my appreciation for Danny DeVito’s sense of humor and genuine kindness better than anyone else. We might have truly been sisters in another life.

Linda craned her neck to look around, her eyes glancing over my disorganized fabric stash, cluttered bookshelves, and sewing table. She landed on the shelf of trinkets next to said sewing table, all of it thrifted: little porcelain ladies trailing parasols and coy glances over their shoulders, rubber bats and plastic jack-o-lanterns, and plenty of books. Anne Rice would always be my favorite.

“Wow, you’re some collector. Where’d you get all those neat little things?” Linda said.

“I can’t tell if you’re being sarcastic again or not.”

“No, no, I mean it.”

“Oh. Well, I got most of it secondhand. Just like I got the fabric this dress is made from secondhand, which you seem to hate,” I said, gesturing to the tiered, tank-style, calf-length dress I’d made myself, under which I wore a ribbed mock-neck shirt. The idea for the dress’s design had occurred to me as soon as I saw the sheer gray floral curtains it was made from hanging with the rest of the Goodwill linens.

“I don’t hate it, it’s just not my style. As you can see, I prefer classy over trashy, but there’s nothing wrong with being the other way around. For you.” *Trashy*. That word seemed to follow me everywhere, and hearing it from Linda’s snobby ass gave it even more bite. At that point, I just wanted her out of my sanctuary.

“To think I wasted ten dollars on you,” I said. That amount of money could have gotten me an entire stack of books, or sheets and curtains for upcycling. Instead, it had gotten me a pig-nosed, obnoxious woman in a dress that smelled so offensively rotten I had to open the one window in the room, which my desk sat against. Linda let her head fall back, and she stared at me while I looked out at the street. All those normal people going about their normal days.

“Are you photosynthesizing?” Linda said.

“No. Why?”

“Because you’re a hippie. Isn’t that how hippies eat?”

“I don’t think so. Either way, I’m not a hippie, so stop calling me that.”

“With all that blonde hair? Of course you are. Maybe that’s why you can see me and no one else can.”

“Again, I’m not a hippie, but you might be onto something. I’ve seen ghosts before—at least, I think I have. Nothing as solid as you, but maybe being open to the paranormal makes me more likely to experience it,” I said. “What do you think?”

“I’m all out of sarcasm, Scooby-Doo. Go ask Shaggy.”

Rather than take Linda’s bait, I walked over to my bookshelf to see if I happened to have any guides on banishing nasty jackasses from our realm laying around. No such luck. The closest thing I had was a rather tongue-in-cheek book on the paranormal for children, which, having laughed through it once or twice before, I knew did not contain any information even remotely relevant to my situation.

“So. Any ideas on how to get you out of that thing?” I said, turning back to Linda. She still lay with her head over the back of the chair and her hands limp at her sides.

“Not a one. I’m pretty new to the whole being dead thing,” Linda said. I hadn’t considered how she might have died yet. Rescuing a ghost from Goodwill apparently required my full attention, which I noted in case it ever happened again. If it did, though, I would probably just walk away like I should have done to Linda. But how *did* she die? There might be clues as to how we could free her in that answer.

“If you don’t mind me asking, how did you die? You can’t be any older than forty-five, and I don’t see any wounds on you,” I said.

“Wow, great eye. Is it my turn to ask you personal questions now?”

“No.”

“Fine. My idiot husband murdered me. He threw a big, romantic dinner for our twenty-fifth anniversary this year, and he put rat poison in my clam chowder. Why would he want to kill someone as stunningly beautiful and intelligent as me? So he could go be with his hot, twenty-something mistress. I knew about her, because I know everything, and he knew I knew, so he killed me before I could kill him.”

“Were you really going to kill him?”

“No. But I sure as hell would have taken everything he owned in the divorce.”

“That’s really awful, Linda. I’m sorry,” I said. Despite my growing dislike for Linda, I really did feel sorry. To think that she had slept next to the man who would eventually murder her for twenty-five years! Still, my sympathy didn’t mean I was willing to put up with Linda’s attitude any longer than I had to. She likely felt the same about me, since she’d called me *trashy*.

With nowhere else to start, we tried several things I’d seen in movies or read in books: burying the dress, chanting bullshit incantations from the internet, lighting candles, even throwing salt at Linda while yelling about God and the Devil. Linda screamed and cried through the last attempt, mostly for the sake of performance, but unfortunately remained bound to the dress. She and I both grew frustrated, and as we stewed in the growing heat of my shrinking sewing room, I had one last idea.

“When I was a kid, I read a story about someone putting on a dead person’s necklace and somehow freeing their spirit. Or getting possessed. I can’t really remember now, but it’s worth a shot,” I said.

Linda threw her arms straight up into the air from where she lay on the wood floor. “Oh, wow! Yes, what a great idea. Squish yourself into this dress with me—if you can even fit—and carry me around like a little, pathetic baby—”

“Listen, you ungrateful bitch, I’m doing everything I can! You think I know

any more about this than you do? I hope you do go straight to Hell,” I said.

A heaviness shrouded the room, like humidity hanging in the air after rain. Linda stared up at me with wide, unblinking blue eyes while I felt as though a crater had opened up in my stomach and sucked all my organs into it. What kind of miserable person would say such things, especially when a trip to Hell could really be in the cards?

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

Linda sighed. “But you should have. Maybe I would have been a better person in my life if more people talked to me like you just did.” She rolled her head to the side and stared out the window. “Truth be told, I was always one mean son-of-a-bitch, and I guess that made people afraid to put me in my place. If I could do it all over again—hell, listen to me. I’m being pathetic, but you know what I mean.”

“I guess so.”

“Let’s try your idea,” Linda said. “It really isn’t a bad one, I’m just an asshole.”

I slipped my dress off, leaving on my mock-neck and the bicycle shorts I always wore underneath, and carefully grabbed Linda by the straps of her dress. Undoing the zipper in the back of the dress with one hand was quite the battle, but squeezing that teeny tiny thing on would be a full-on war. I stepped in, tightened my grip on the dress, and prepared myself to pull like Linda’s afterlife depended on it.

The dress didn’t budge with my first pull. It stuck around my lower thighs and choked Linda hard, but she seemed to be pushed tighter up against the fabric than she had been before. My dumb idea might actually work. I squeezed my thighs together and pulled again. The dress gave a couple of inches, then a couple more, and finally I worked it up to the tops of my thighs. As I squeezed in, Linda squeezed out, her facial features contorting and flattening as if being shoved up against a pane of glass. Seams busted, my skin chafed against the dress, and no way in hell would this work—

All at once, our images peeled apart, and Linda tumbled forward onto the floor. She still wore a version of the same long, blue and purple dress stuck around my thighs, but now the skirt showed a ghostly green hue and floated slightly above the floor. Her loose brown curls shone and swished with every movement she made.

“Holy shit, I’m a mermaid!” Linda said. I nearly cried.

“You really are the same height as Danny DeVito,” was all I could think to say.

Linda tucked her knees up to her chest and pulled the world's slowest backflip, floating through the air like water while I kicked off the physical version of her dress. "Oh, I am gonna raise so much hell," she said. "Hey, I wonder if I can touch things now." Linda floated over to my bookshelf and swiped at my favorite porcelain lady; one hunched over a sewing machine, guiding a sheet of fabric under the needle like nothing else in the world mattered. Linda's hand went right through her.

"Try moving it with your mind," I said. "Sometimes movie ghosts can do that."

"Even better." Linda aimed a determined glare at the little seamstress and pursed her lips while we waited in anticipatory silence. Had there been any blood left in her, she would have burst a vessel from the intensity of her efforts. I watched the statue as intently as Linda, and it began to shudder. The sound of porcelain rapidly *clink, clink, clinking* joined us in the room as the statue wobbled on its base.

"Don't break her!" I said. The shuddering halted abruptly.

Linda whooped. "I'm a god! You know, Juliette, I couldn't have picked a better hippie to come home with."

"And I couldn't have picked a better mean bitch to bring home."

"You flatter me. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm gonna go haunt the shit out of my ex-husband."

You go girl, I thought. In spite of her many, many, *many* bad qualities, Linda's determination inspired me. She struck a Superman pose and floated straight up through the ceiling.

I sat down and started work on what would be the first original piece of clothing I ever attempted to sell the very next day. It turned out that freeing a ghost from eternity in a rotting dress could be quite motivating, and the success had been the push I needed to confront my own confinement. I worked a soulless desk job that barely allowed me to contribute anything of value to a dying magazine, surrounded by people who constantly let me know I didn't belong with them, to avoid struggling the way my family had when I was a kid. For the time being, I needed to keep that miserable job to survive, but that didn't mean I couldn't get started on what I really lived for. I didn't have a storefront to display my one-of-a-kind, handmade clothing in, but the internet could be one hell of a resource for attracting attention.

I'd already finished the design sketch, and needed to draft a pattern to execute it. Linda's dress greeted me from the corner of my sewing room, and every discouraging, intrusive thought that had managed to regenerate during work that day melted away once again. A quick dry cleaning had fixed the rotten smell of

the dress, and a few stitches had fixed the busted seams. The dress now adorned an old sewing form standing proudly next to Danny DeVito in the corner where I could constantly see them both. I would always remember the determined glint in Linda's eye as she floated through my ceiling to go wreak havoc, and I hoped to mirror it.

Something shiny and metallic glittered in the evening sunlight streaming onto the closed lid of my laptop—a beautiful silver necklace with a purple diamond winking in the center of its heart shaped charm. A handwritten note lay beside it:

Here you go, kid. This used to be mine, back when I had a body. Figured I'd better bring you something nice to wear, since that old dress won't fit you. It's my way of thanking you for putting up with me, even for a short while, and for giving me the chance to keep ruining my bastard husband's life from beyond the grave. Boo, you old bitch! That's what I would say to him if he could see me. I've already managed to scare his little mistress away, and I'm working on driving him totally bonkers. It's the little things that count—slamming doors, dumping all of his tighty-not-so-whities out on the floor, turning the cold water on while he's showering. I wish I could find a way to let him know it's me. Thanks, Juliette. I mean it.

The necklace would pair perfectly with my new design: a lace-up, off the shoulder gown with a bodice covered in jewels and a skirt drowning in layers and layers of pale blue and purple chiffon, lovingly called The Linda.