

The Blue Dress

Marcia Aldrich

The dress is more of a wound than a dress. After two babies I can't pour myself into it as I once did and that does not make me sad—just the opposite; it makes me glad. I'm glad that I can't hike the zipper up my back or fasten the tiny buttons in the cinched waist. Now if I tried to step into it, I would rip the fabric apart, tear it, split it, rend it to tatters and that would be a good thing, a very good thing for then I would see that in the blue dress I looked like someone drowning in a mirror.

Odd then, given my feelings about the dress, that I still have it. Usually I want to rid myself of reminders of troubling times, do everything I can to forget, become an amnesiac. I haven't kept the letters a man wrote me who I once loved. When he ended the affair, I threw away every word he had written, every trace of his presence in my life. With great solemnity I carried my bundle of him to the garage, lifted the enormous lid of the dumpster and threw it in with all the force I could muster. I wanted to put him behind me as completely and cleanly as I could—out of sight, out of mind. Little did I think then how those words had been learned by heart and would not be so easy to forget. In the subsequent days before the trash was picked up, my resolve did not weaken. There was no pawing through the garbage in the middle of the night trying to retrieve what I had cast behind me. The blue dress has met a different fate. Even though I never wear it, I've held onto it all these years, and visit it periodically like an invitation to the blues.

Once when I was a girl of ten, looking for a box of Halloween costumes stored in a crawl space in our basement, I stumbled upon a small suitcase I had never seen before. Something told me that it wasn't mine to open, but I squeezed the locks anyway and presto the lid was released. Inside the suitcase was stuffed with loose little square photographs of my two older step sisters, when they were under the age of five, along with photos of my mother and her first husband. My mother hadn't been married more than a few years before her first husband died in a mining accident leaving her a young widow

with two small girls. I had never encountered any of these images—she had secreted them away, perhaps in deference to my father. Why did my mother crawl on her hands and knees to visit the suitcase shoved as far back into the space as possible? Did those images of a happy life lost through no fault of her own console her?

My house has no basement, no crawl space, no subterranean caverns but it does have an attic whose eaves slant wickedly. You can't stand all the way up without hitting your head. Sometimes the dress calls to me in the late afternoon when I feel shaky. Instead of taking a shot of whiskey and feeling the burn slide down my throat, I visit the dress. As if undertaking a pilgrimage, I ascend a narrow stairway whose entrance is in my daughter's bedroom on the second floor of our house far, far away from where I bought the dress. The stairs are usually clogged with sleeping bags, summer fans, folding chairs, Christmas decorations and other seasonal items that have never quite reached the summit. Besides seasonal items, the attic is the spot where I deposit all the things I do not use but can't get rid of, relics of a past life and the feelings they provoke—jammed into boxes that block passage to the small closet on the far wall whose single light is burned out. Here is where the blue dress hangs.

I bought the dress the summer of the blackout, of 104 degrees, the second summer of the Son of Sam. I was young then and almost two years divorced from my college professor who I had met the fall of my sophomore year, married, and then divorced by the time I was a senior. To the best of my knowledge I was the only married student at Pomona, and then the only divorced one a year later. Quite an education—that—not the one I was expecting or prepared for and afterwards I spun my wheels. I had no long range plans, no sense of where I was going. I had moved from my father's house to my husband's house and had not learned the first thing about standing on my own. I was just trying to stay upright, pay the bills, if barely, and avoid emotional entanglements that might shatter me. After a year of working as a paralegal in a law firm in Philadelphia, a

job I thought of as tiding me over until my real work began whatever that was, I accepted the offer to work in their Manhattan office. It had become routine for me to visit one of my best friends from college, who lived in Greenwich Village finishing up her Masters at NYU, and so when I got this job offer we decided I would move into her one bedroom apartment on the top floor of the thirteen-story apartment building with a collapsed ceiling in the bedroom and serious cockroach problem for the summer. At the end of the summer Marian was moving to Boston to begin her doctoral studies at Harvard and I would take over her lease. That was the plan.

I should have known what I was getting into—after all, I had opened the cabinets in her apartment many times and found the hard-shelled bodies, surprisingly long and wide, scurry to find another port in the storm. I had been accosted on the streets and subways by panhandlers, leered at by men following me too closely. It wasn't as if this was the first time I felt like female prey. No, in my short life I had accumulated a long history as the preyed upon. But somehow the experiences were muted by my friend Marian who would grab my elbow and steer me in and out and away from the hands that sought to touch me. She walked with an attitude that said don't mess with me and remarkably no one did. She even frightened me a little bit. I let her guide me through the city.

I didn't have my bearings but I didn't know that then. On the basis of a few weekend visits I thought that I could handle the city. You would think that my romantic expectations would have been held in check or seen as the school girl rubbish that they were. They were not. I thought I was putting all the disappointments of the past few years behind me and starting fresh in a city I had never lived in. Like a young boy heading west, I fantasized about starting over, erasing my mistakes, and somehow getting back to where I thought I should have been—a young, single woman just starting life on her own. I pictured myself walking along Fifth Avenue with a spring in my step, and later I'd serve cocktails in my small but attractive apartment. I did not lay my marital history on the table—it was information I did not freely provide. When upon occasion my marital status did slip out, it provoked disbelief and wonder and I felt I had to provide an explanation. The story of my life, or some version of it, would be necessary to explain how I had gotten myself into this mess of a marriage and why I got out so

quickly. At the time it wasn't a story I was prepared or able to tell. I didn't understand it myself—it was a bafflement, a mistake, a failure, a wound. In my hazy fantasy of moving to Manhattan it never occurred to me that Marian would have her own life, and that instead of her handing me my new life all tied up with ribbons and bows I would have to make one of my own, something I was ill-equipped to do.

The day in June when I moved in, it was as if I was seeing the building for the first time. It was remarkably derelict. Riding the elevator up to the thirteenth floor, I noticed a sign scotch-taped to the wall and shifting the box I was carrying to my left hip I leaned in to read:

BEWARE. Rapist
Disguised As A Plumber
On Your Block

Underneath the bold caption, a brief description of how the rapist gained access to the women's apartments: he said the landlord sent him and the doors opened. Was the sign new, I wondered, or had I never noticed before? It had to be a mistake or a prank. The ominous warning was so out of keeping with what I wanted, with what I had moved to New York City for. That was the first sign that my move might have been a mistake, but because so much was riding on this fresh start I chose to deflect away my fear and respond with false bravado.

To Marian I said, "If our apartment's problems are typical, I can see how the doors might fly open to anyone claiming the landlord sent them."

Marian didn't laugh, but then she had lived on the thirteenth floor in the apartment for two years before I arrived and had long stopped pretending to be brave. She had watched as the ceiling in the bedroom split open and then sunk low and no one in management did a thing despite her repeated calls.

In the weeks of moving in and starting my job, the truer picture of New York City and my life in it emerged. Each morning I encountered exactly no one in the small hall on my floor, not a door opened or closed in my presence. I'd notice a bag of overflowing trash outside an apartment and the accompanying cockroaches but never see who the trash belonged to. Not a word, not a deed, not a hello not a goodbye, not a smile, not even a face, and certainly no names were exchanged as I rode the elevator down to the ground

floor and walked by the mailboxes before I exited the building onto Eleventh. If I required assistance, it was hard to believe anyone would emerge to help me. Who would come—ghosts? No sooner would the building's door slam shut when the gusts of hot dirty air hit me. The city was experiencing a brutal heat wave dripping with humidity. The grit would settle on my face and I'd wonder why I bothered to wash it. I'd take a sharp left and walk to the bus on Fifth Avenue, picking my way around mounds of white bags of trash the size of small whales sprawled across the sidewalks and spilling into the streets because there was now a garbage strike. I had to be careful not to trip over the legs of homeless men braced against the walls of buildings in makeshift abodes. Without Marian, hands touched me, sometimes tugging at my purse, lips were wetted. I took the bus on Fifth to my upscale place of work—the Steuben Glass Building on Fifty-Seventh near Central Park where I was not a lawyer and not a secretary but the only paralegal, neither fish nor fowl, in the heart of stores too expensive for me to even enter. I couldn't even find a place cheap enough to buy lunch. No heaps of trash bags overflowed upon the streets in this commercial district and I wondered what they did with the trash in midtown to make it disappear. And the homeless, where did they go? Here for a few blocks I could walk unimpeded. I took the elevator to the seventh floor and the leverage bonds department of the excessively air conditioned law firm and began collating documents in my cubicle. Ah romance!

To no one's surprise but my own, the single life wasn't measuring up to what I had imagined. Instead of taking one step forward, I was taking two steps back. Instead of building a life, I was unraveling the thin one I had. Work and home were lonely and in between a combat zone. Neither the lawyers nor the secretaries claimed me as one of them and I was never included in lunch plans or drinks after work. The work itself was more tedious than the tedious work I had done in Philadelphia because it was not enlivened by any companionship at all. In the Philadelphia firm I shared an office with another paralegal and even if we had to keep track of our time in six minute increments straight out of Kafka, at least we could escape for lunch and drinks at the end of the week. Marian was more absent than present, visiting her family on the Cape for weeks at a time and finishing her thesis.

To escape the leverage bonds and the trash bags and the dripping water from the hole in the ceiling and the wreckage I thought I had left behind and the loneliness, I went shopping by myself in the Village one humid Saturday afternoon. In the midst of the still hippie kingdom I stumbled upon a little retro store full of dresses that might have been specially made for Marilyn Monroe. I can't remember which movie of hers the store was named after—*Some Like It Hot* (which would have been appropriate) or *Seven Year Itch*. An electric blue skin the color of the morpho butterfly, iridescent in flight, spoke to me from its jammed place on the rack. I disentangled it and draped it over my arm carefully and moved into the makeshift changing room behind a drawn velvet curtain. It reminded me of the fuchsia dress Marilyn memorably wore like dagger and sheath in *Niagara*, a noir movie in color made before I was born about a marriage drowning at the falls and the only movie in which Marilyn died—her husband strangled her to death—though I didn't remember that then. I should have considered her unsavory end, how her slender neck was no match for her husband's powerful hands, before pulling the dress off the hanger. But instead I remembered the way men watched her walk. How the camera was in thrall to her sashaying in her high heels like a bell swinging back and forth. My dress was a mid-calf, love-cut dazzler made of clingy stretch material like silk jersey. A zipper ran from the buttocks to the midpoint of my back, where the material ended. I had to pour myself into the dress. To say the dress was fitted doesn't begin to get at its shape or the shape I assumed once I bled into it.

When I emerged from behind the dusky curtain to look at myself in the store's one full-length mirror an older saleswoman wearing a flounced gypsy costume in shades of purple with large hoop earrings nodded approval. She shook her arm covered with silver bangles for emphasis. *You were built for another time*, she said, *a time of curves*. She said I might do some damage in that dress, and we both laughed together. I threw back my head and it felt good. I hadn't laughed with anyone since I had moved to the city. I bought the dress even though I couldn't afford it and doubted I would wear it. It was one thing to try the dress on in a retro fantasy, but it was inappropriate for my workplace—it was trouble. The dress would likely hang in my closet where I would visit it and brush its sheeny bodice across my cheek.

But I did wear the dress that summer. Not right away. After the blackout in mid-July, something broke in me. I felt I had to do something and I pulled the dress from its hanger and slithered into it. The night of the blackout I had spent by myself curled up in the armchair by the window looking out on all the dark windows in the apartment buildings across the way and listening to the sirens that never stopped wailing. The city had boiled over. Looting, arson, fear, and anger. When the power came back on and I returned to work, I wore the dress with high-heel strappy sandals that were just as impractical as the dress to navigate my way along the pocked sidewalks. I now understood why Marilyn Monroe walked as slowly as she did. The dress was so tight that it required all my ingenuity to get up onto the bus—I had to hike the hem a few inches and turn sideways to achieve the necessary spread to mount that first step. I made a spectacle of myself getting on the bus and I liked it, at least I thought I did. I thought it was better to make a spectacle of myself rather than continue trying unsuccessfully to blend in. It was a dress that brought me attention from all manner of men. Starting off my dull workday became exciting—cab drivers, cab passengers, panhandlers, men on their way to work, men walking a dog noticed me. I was whistled at, greeted by crude salutations and shouts of raw appreciation. Even the male lawyers noticed me for the first time. I experienced the gamut of male response and felt I was the still center around which men pivoted and I felt hard and powerful.

And angry.

I wouldn't have been able to say why I felt angry then or even that it was anger acting in me. I didn't know what I saw in the shape and color of the dress, why I pulled it off the hanger or why I felt I belonged inside it. I couldn't have named my anger then—I didn't realize that the blue dress, tight like a bottle, was shaped like my anger. But I was angry, a desperate, free-ranging, impotent kind of anger that swung from one thing to another. I was angry at the way my father controlled my mother, my sisters, and me, how he plotted our lives, was the moneymaker and the dispenser of our allowances, he could say yes or he could say no, he could throw money in my face as he had or lock me in my bedroom until I was subdued. I remembered how when our neighbor had paid me for taking care of her horse for a week, my father didn't believe me when I said I didn't ask to be paid, that Mrs. Collingwood had forced the ten

dollars into my hand. I had given the money to my father as he had asked and he had torn the bill into little pieces and thrown them in the air in my direction. And then, of course, I had run into my room and refused to come out for dinner. I was angry that my father made me go to a prom with the son of one of his associates even when I didn't want to and knew the guy was seriously weird and aggressive. I was angry that my father never apologized when that same boy shot up our mailbox when he believed I slighted him. I had a whole laundry list of men I was angry with—the eighth grade science teacher who paddled me in front of the class because I jittered my legs while seated in my chair, and angry at the boys in fifth grade who stole my crutches when I broke my leg and locked me in the library closet and took turns kissing me, and all the boys who over the years thought they could put their hands on my breasts whenever they felt like it. I was angry that my father never stopped the marriage he was aghast at and knew was a disaster. And what about my professor who picked me up, drank me, and then threw me to the ground? If I had known that the blue of the dress I bought was the blue of the male morpho butterfly, not the female, I would have been angry about that too.

I was angry at so many instances of feeling powerless before some man starting so far back I couldn't even name all that I was angry about. And I was especially angry that a man posing as a plumber was terrorizing my block. I was angry that finally I was supposed to be charting my own independent course but I was afraid to go to a bookstore or a movie by myself at night and come out into the dark. Angry that I felt vulnerable standing under a streetlight, waiting at a bus stop, entering a subway station. I was angry that I was sitting by myself in my thirteenth story apartment with the ceiling dripping and listening to the cockroaches moving through their dark passageways going over and over all the mistakes I had made and couldn't be unmade. I was filled with stinking rage and I couldn't do a thing about it but get in that blue dress and make the men I walked by want me. I wanted to attract men and then toy with them the way I had been toyed with. I never wanted a man's hands to wrap around my tiny waist and I never reached out my arms to bring a man closer. When I wore the blue dress I was not looking for the warmth of touch. I didn't complain about the crudeness of the catcalls. I felt alive, the blood rushing to my cheeks. I felt my breasts swell under the tight binding,

the curve of my calves stabbed me, I felt myself walking and mounting the steps, I felt myself getting up and sitting down. I had never been so aware of myself. The blue dress was creating me and carrying me forward, or so I believed. I did not see then, but I was like the red-bellied woodpecker that flew into the glass when I was eleven. She used the tree outside the window as her launching pad. She started sideways, at an angle from the tree, and flew full speed ahead, without hesitation, directly at the window. I couldn't understand then what she was doing. She was deranged in some way I couldn't understand. Her pointed beak and red belly thumped against the glass and then she'd right herself and begin the identical process again. I expected to find her body in one of the planters. I couldn't believe she'd remain undeterred. I opened the glass door and ran outside, waving my arms to shoo her away. I sprayed water at her, hung purple towels from the railings. I tried everything I could to stop her and failed. She'd momentarily swerve away from the window and then come right back. Much later someone explained that she saw a rival in the glass and wanted to obliterate the sight. But then I thought she was pounding her own image to relieve herself of it. Still part of me believes she was turning on herself. And then the spell of madness was over. She was gone. The windows were covered with milky white trails, squiggles and claw marks, thick deposits where her beak landed, but she never broke through and she never fell into the planters.

By the end of the summer, when the temperature finally dropped, the police caught Sam and the sign about risky plumbers got layered over and it was done. Marian moved to Boston, but I did not take over her lease. My sojourn on the thirteenth floor under the ceiling with a hole to the sky was over. Nor did I continue in the leverage lease department in the Steuben Glass Building. The summer of the blue dress was over. I never wore the dress again. Nevertheless when I moved to Los Angeles I took the blue dress with me, carried it all the way across the country. Two years later, my apartment was robbed—the thief had cleaned me out, including almost all my clothes except for the blue dress. Did he see its impossible fit, the contortions that were required to fit oneself to the dress, and leave it behind? It has followed me wherever I have gone, up the coast to Seattle, and then across the country again to Michigan.

And I keep it still, though the dress is not what it once was. Hard to believe it ever held a blue sheen electric

enough to make me think of the iridescent flight of the blue morpho butterfly. That sheen is faded from years of sun light coming in from the lone window in the attic. To think I once felt powerful in its ruins. I never pull the dress off its hanger and hold it against my body. I never inhale its scent deeply and wish I could return to those days when I was willing to bleed to wear it.