



by  
Katie Haegele

# CUTE DRESS

There's an old neighborhood in Philadelphia called Chestnut Hill that I like a lot. I live on the outskirts of Philly, just a short city bus ride up the street, and some Saturdays when there isn't anything else to do I'll go down to the end of my street and stand on the bridge over the railroad tracks and wait for the 77 to come along so I can go over there. The bus line terminates at the top of Chestnut Hill's hill, along a wide, long street called Germantown Avenue. It's a beautiful part of town, with colonial buildings, old shade trees, and lovely little shops (some of them a little too lovely, if you know what I mean).

One day this winter I went over there to roam around and get a cup of tea and maybe, if I felt like it, walk all the way down the Avenue to the used book store I like. But when I hopped off the bus I was standing in front of a consignment shop I'd never seen before. A new thrift store, a fabulous thing to find. I peered in the window at neat rows of shoes before going in.

A strangely peppy woman, almost agitated, was working behind the counter by herself. She was youngish but older than me. She sang along to the too-loud music that was coming out of some radio and occasionally commented aloud on something to herself, clearly vamping for an audience (me?) as she poked at her laptop. Maybe that's where the music was coming from. I started pushing dresses past me on their rack and kept my eyes on the clothes.

But the lady turned out to be cool.

I could tell the place really was new because the back of the room was unfinished and just had a curtain tacked up across it, only partly concealing the junk on the floor back there. As I picked up the price tags I was dismayed to see that this was the kind of frou-frou consignment shop that only takes "better" clothing, but I noticed she had a sale rack so I decided I may as well look there.

Some of the stuff was good. I found a black satin skirt with a small waist, a black chiffon cocktail dress, and a skirt of thin, stretchy brown fabric with cream-colored polka dots, took them off the rack and carried them over my arm like a waiter, to where the owner was standing. She had auburn hair that hit at her shoulders and looked dry, natural red hair.

"Um, hi! Can I try these on?" *Of course* was the answer, and together we twittered to the back of the store and it was a whole big ordeal showing me how there wasn't a proper fitting room yet but there was this curtain covering the mess in the back so I could just go behind there, and the mirror was out here. I could just holler if I needed anything.

"I will, thanks," I called as I started peeling off my damp clothes. It was early September and it was still warm enough that walking around outside had made me sweaty. I tried on the satin skirt first and it was too big and wouldn't stay on my hips, so that was out. The polka dot one was a winner, slinky but not too tight, comfortable and eye-catching. I'd definitely get that, and wear it with a tank top and flip-flops while the weather was still warm.

I was getting a little dizzy trying to manage this changing in such a small space. My too-heavy handbag that had been hurting my shoulder was now in a heap in the corner, falling open and nearly spilling all the junk I had inside – my balled-up tissues and wallet and paperback – and my little sweaty-armpit cardigan was draped on top where I'd tossed it down. I grappled with the chiffon dress until I managed to zip it up in back, and it felt really tight but I had no idea how it looked. I'd have to step out into the middle of the shop to see a mirror.

"It's too tight, isn't it," I said to the store at large as I padded out carefully in bare feet, making my voice sound not like a question because I didn't want the lady to think for a second that I was one of those delusional women who wears embarrassing things because she thinks she's still the same size she was when she was 20. I KNEW this dress already loved it and I wanted her

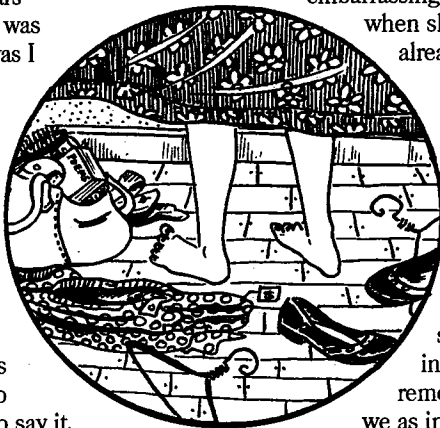
"Mmmm, no, I think it's fine," standing behind me as I were a couple of other themselves but they didn't was taller than me and I mirror as she tugged at the the waist. I got goosebumps

"I mean, we used to wear day!" she said, meaning we as we were both too young to that was an interesting way to say it, for it, for including me.

The dress hit at my knees, came up to my collarbones, was close at the waist, and had a fold of fabric across the front, which was the only special somethin' on this very simple dress. Although it was crazily small and tight it gapped weirdly at the back, across my shoulder blades, and as she tried to pat it flat the lady recommended a tailor right there on the Avenue who she guaranteed I could trust. "Look at the shirt he's wearing when you go in, he makes them all himself so you know he knows what he's doing." I bought the dress, which was marked 18 dollars, and the skirt, marked 16, and she knocked a few dollars off and gave them both to me for 30 bucks. I should go back there soon and see what she has in for the spring.

So far I have not taken this dress to the tailor to be fitted properly, and I have not had occasion to wear it anywhere either. I used to have lots of parties and events to go to, back when I worked for an alt weekly that had hook-ups with all the clubs and concert venues in the city, but not so much these days. I like it better this way. Quieter is nicer, healthier for me.

But I *have* put the dress on and marched around my living room for an imaginary audience a few times. The way it fits feels corset-close around my waist but because the drapey part covers my lower middle it doesn't look that tight, and I find this sexy, like I have a secret deep in the darkest part of me, something keeping me standing straight, holding my body erect and pretty, as if I'm being gripped by two large hands. At my imaginary living room party I walk in and out of the room in different pairs of shoes, and experiment with hair up versus hair down, and sip from a real glass of wine while I gaze out the window at the moon in a moony way, admired by the male onlookers on my couch who are not really there.



she said, coming over and looked in the mirror. There women milling around by pay attention. The woman could see us both in the straps in the back and felt at her touch.

stockings and girdles every in women, not us two because remember those days. I thought we as in womankind, and I liked her



illustrations by Mardou