

# In Providence: High Fashion



If you were downtown this weekend, you may have noticed her walking through Kennedy Plaza wearing a dress worth thousands of dollars. The dress was inherited. Her mother had it in a closet for years, and she told me that it was never intended to be worn.

“You know what an heirloom is? It’s an heirloom. It’s a dress and dresses aren’t usually heirlooms, but this one’s an heirloom. My mother got it as a present for a job she did. She used to clean houses, and this one house she cleaned, the lady was rich, and she had dresses from every person you can think of, every designer you’ve ever heard of, and when the lady died, the son, the oldest son, said my mother could take anything she wanted, and, by then, there wasn’t much left, but what there was, left in the closet, was this dress. My mother took it, and she kept in her closet in one of those dry-cleaning bags, and she would never let us take it out, and I don’t even know if she ever wore it, but she treasured that dress. She loved it.”

She’s lived in Providence her entire life, first off Manton Avenue, then in the southern part of the city with her first husband, and now in an apartment off Hope Street. Wherever she went, she took a collection of things left to her by her mother, and the dress was the prized possession.

“I did take it out once or twice, but never to wear. Not ever to wear. Just to look at. My son and my daughter used to tell me to put it on, and I told them, ‘No.’ I said we don’t wear this dress; it’s special. Like the china we had that I got from my grandmother. We never used the nice china and we never wear the dress. I won’t even tell you who made it, because you would die if you heard the name. A top designer who isn’t even around anymore. My mother put the fear of god in me about that dress. She had me thinking if I so much as touched it, it would go up in smoke. I would take it out, lay it out on my bed, and then it would go right back in the closet.”

Years ago, I attended a Fashion Week event at the Performing Arts Center, because I knew a designer who was featured in the show. As a theater person, the entire evening was a mystery to me. The outfits in each presentation were absolutely stunning, but the shows only took about 10 minutes, and there were hour-long breaks in between. Three hours after arriving, I was starving, and someone mentioned that there would be an after-party at the outdoor space of a restaurant downtown.

When I got there, everyone from the show was standing around with cocktails, but there was no food in sight. It was like a punishment straight from Dante. Three hours, no food and the wondrous odors of one of the best eateries in the city wafting over me and a bunch of fashionistas who didn’t seem hungry at all.

I stayed for about 15 minutes and then wound up at Antonio’s inhaling a chicken, bacon, and ranch like the plant from *Little Shop of Horrors*.

After that, I never really gave much thought to fashion. I admired it, of course, and the people who make it and wear it, but it seemed like something that would never be quite within my reach — like sports or EDM.

“You would never see me in anything expensive. I didn’t spend a lot of money on clothes. Make-up is my thing. I like make-up and I like to do my hair nice. I spend a lot of time and money on this hair. Other than that, I don’t care what I wear. I can’t tell you the last time I went somewhere nice to buy clothes.”

Lots of people have objects in their lives that they treat with extra care. If you grew up without access to works of art or antique furniture, you may end up cherishing things that could otherwise serve a purpose. China to eat on. Collectible toys for playing. A dress that’s meant to be worn and seen and enjoyed.

“Being sick does something to a person. When my mother got sick, the last time, she got quiet, and she was never quiet. That wasn’t her. She became a quiet person. When I came down with the virus, I thought that was it for me. Thank god for my kids. My daughter—I told her, ‘Don’t come to the house. You could get sick, too. She said, ‘Ma, if I get sick, I get sick.’ My son was the same way. They took care of me, and I beat it, but it was bad. I thought I was going to have to go to the hospital, and I told myself, I was not going to die in a hospital. I’m going to die in my house. In my bed. That’s what I thought was going to happen, but I got better. After that, I looked at that dress in the closet. ‘It’s coming out.’ That’s what I said to my daughter. ‘It’s coming out and I’m going to wear it.’ Why have a dress like that if you’re not going to wear it?”

She made plans with two of her friends to go out to eat on Saturday. It was her first outing in more than a year. So she decided to wear the dress.

“I parked a little far away. I didn’t want to pull up to the restaurant, walk in, sit down, eat, and go home.

I wanted to walk around in the dress. I had a nice time. I walked through Kennedy Plaza and all the way up Washington. My daughter wanted to kill me when I told her what I did today. She said, 'Ma, you could have been robbed.' What were they going to do? Tear the dress off me? I didn't have any cash on me. All I had was my nice dress. Nobody bothered me. They must have seen how happy I looked. When I used to ask my mother if she would put the dress on, she'd tell me, 'It wouldn't fit anyway. It's too small.' I didn't think I'd get on me either, but it fit like you wouldn't believe. What are the odds of that? Some dress made for some rich woman who died a long time ago, and it fit me like a glove."

Sometimes we make ordinary things into magical instruments for our memories, our nostalgia, and our hope that one day we can have a closet full of expensive dresses. And sometimes by letting ordinary things be ordinary, we find more magic in them than we ever expected.

"My daughter said, 'Ma, did you get a picture of yourself in the dress?' I told her my friends couldn't stop taking pictures of me in it. They were all excited, because they know about that dress. They know what it means to me. They were going crazy over it."

If you were downtown on Saturday night, you may have seen a woman walking around in a dress that fit her perfectly. You might have thought she was wealthy, and in some ways, you'd be right. Those of us who have made it through the past 14 months only to find ourselves eating out again, seeing friends again, and reassessing what means the most to us and what we want to take out and try on might be feeling wealthier than ever.