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Stitched to Kill

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A hideous dress bought second-hand for a Nerd Prom carries a macabre secret.

I own a murderer's dress.

I have it right here, in the way-back of the spare closet, haunting its murky depths where only mismatched shoes and too-small pants go to hang. Perhaps the murderer went somewhere to hang, too, only I don't remember her name so I can't pursue that line of inquiry.

It's an incredibly ugly thing, this dress. That's why I bought it. About 18 years ago, I was throwing a Nerd Prom for friends at which the point was to be unfashionable, outré, sans élan, lacking in je ne sais quoi. Grotesque, even.

In a rarely visited stall at an antique shop that specialized in limp doilies and oversized armoires with pocky mirrors, I found a handful of vintage wardrobe aberrations hanging on puffy silk hangers, was drawn to this particular creepy thing, and snagged it. Very Stephen King. I should have sensed a stirring in the dark matter, even then.

This gown is so terrible, Cinderella would not have been caught shoeless in it. Part Mrs. Brady from the Bunch, part Bond Girl from the '60s, it is a psychedelic Home Ec project run amok. It is obviously homemade – the hem rambles unevenly and the seams are those 5/8-inch-wide curiosities edged in pinking shear zig-zags never seen in off-the-rack. Johnny Depp would find the blousy sleeves too ostentatious for a pirate and the bodice is a violently hued acid yellow and electric orange print that resembles the intensely detailed patterns one sees in the art of persons with schizophrenia. Stripes of flowers that look as if a kindergartner drew them alternate with stripes of flowers that look as if a third-grader drew them, and paisley paramercia are set against an orange tie-dyed (oh, yes) background.

The whole mess culminates at the waist, where the previously vertical pattern abruptly shifts 90 degrees and becomes a horizontal belt edged in gold rick-rack. The long skirt would have been horrible on its own, but no, the paisley polyester has been sliced into wide bands and stitched onto it at sporadic intervals.

All in all, an excellent choice for a party meant to celebrate socially puzzled youth. The dress and party were a hit. The Science Fair portion of the evening featured a heated competition between Jell-O shaped like a human brain and the ubiquitous volcano made of exploding baking soda. The theme, "The Wonderful World of Fish," was enacted in interpretive dance, and more than one set of guests had located, purchased, and applied stick-on fake acne, so a sense of realism and teenage panic was in the air.

After the ball was over, the dress went back on the pink hanger and was moved to the rear of the cedar closet. Though I never wanted to wear it again, I could not quite part with it. It had clearly been created with no small amount of effort, and it bears the cachet of truly dreadful art crafted by some person who's well-meaning but utterly talentless.

Then one day while I was matching socks and folding laundry in front of one of those true crime television shows about slaughter in the suburbs, there it was. A woman had murdered her husband and his grown children suspected poisoning. The camera zoomed in on the couple's framed wedding photo: She was wearing my dress.

I shrieked. I dropped the socks. I was horrified. First, because this hideous thing should never have been worn with a straight face, much less for a legally binding event. And second, because, well, a killer wore my dress. A killer not only wore my dress, but in all likelihood, designed and sewed it, as well. There were killer cooties in the stitches around that rick-rack.

I retreated to the closet to stare at the gown and think.

This was the closest I've ever come to a murderer, so far as I knew. My wrists had slid through those same orange-and-green cuffs that had once circled her wrists. Someone zipped that zipper up her homicidal vertebrae and my naïve central nervous

system had occupied that very space. There is no doubt killer DNA in this dress, the kind of biological evidence that appeals to those good-looking people on “Criminal Minds” and “NCIS.” Somehow, just wearing this thing that Creepy Woman had worn made me feel complicit. “But I don’t really *like* the rick-rack!” I moaned aloud to the closet, as though that absolved me of any guilt.

Owning the gown of an assassin presented certain ethical dilemmas, if haute (or just hateful) couture can possess ethics. Should one keep a murderer’s dress? Attempt to return it to the family? If so, which family – the murderer’s or the murderee’s? Burn it on the front lawn? Conduct an exorcism in the closet?

What precisely had the provenance of this dress been? After the murder trial, had her stepchildren bundled up their evil stepmother’s belongings, including the offending wedding dress, and packed them off to an unsuspecting thrift shop? Or had the murderess herself left it in some church doorway right after she dispatched her poor husband?

There is this odd, ripped section down by the hem. It has been clumsily patched with more white chiffon that is clearly the original fabric, so it must have been repaired by the original seamstress. Oh, Lord, what if she killed the guy while wearing this thing, and in some kind of athletic move related to poisoning which apparently involved deep knee bends, tore the darn hem out? And what kind of cold-bloodedness is required to calmly restitch and restore your wedding-and-murdering dress, after the corpus has been delictied?

I fix the dress with a gimlet eye. Does some blackened bit of the murderess’s aura cling to its polyester paisley and linger in its flouncy sleeves? Just where does the evil that men do reside, precisely, when it comes to laundry? Might fabric soak up malicious intent and redistribute it onto subsequent adopters?

This is more problematic than wearing your icky cousin’s hand-me-downs or inheriting a favorite baseball cap from a dead uncle. The person who invented this dress had colossally wretched taste plus a worldview in which killing another person made sense. I do not wish to share an aesthetic – even a mocking one – with such a reprobate. She may or may not have eventually felt remorse, but when it arrived, she sure wasn’t wearing this dress. When she wore this little number, she was planning the deed. Regret was no part of her thoughts as she pressed the Singer pedal to the floor and rounded the edges of those armholes.

It leers back at me ominously, this dress does. It seems to Know Things. The white chiffon has taken on a sinister, menacing look, and it goes without saying that I will never again see tie-dyed paramercia without blanching.

I wonder if she might want her dress back. I can’t remember the title of that TV show, or I might be tempted to track her down. Once, I Googled “Killer in Ugly Orange Dress,” but the results were about what you would expect. It seems somehow irresponsible to just toss it into the garbage. Like a twisted phoenix, it might arise again and, oh, I don’t know, poison the raspberry bushes out by the recycling.

I guess I’ll keep the thing. I hang it between my children’s christening gown and my daughter’s first dance dress, figuring that being sandwiched between innocence might nullify the evil.

I shove it into the back of the closet, where I see it only rarely.

But I know it's in there. ◆

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