

The Coat

The couple wandered up Sutter and then down to Union Square, stopping at Williams Sonoma to poke around and buy a souvenir potholder. The one they got in Ireland last year was already stained and shabby. He wanted to buy some fall-colored candles, but she thought the little holders that came with them looked cheap.

They went out of the store into the brilliant day, with temperatures in the 70s more like mid-summer than mid-October. Refugees from rainy Seattle for a few days, they were reveling in the San Francisco sunshine. As they passed through throngs of tourists and shoppers, they came to Saks Fifth Avenue.

She had recently taken up writing as a creative exercise at a meditation retreat, and was astounded to find stories come pouring out. The first was about Susannah, a widow of a certain age, whose lover sends her an evening coat from Saks.

“Let’s go in and see if we can find Susannah’s coat! Wouldn’t that be fun?”

“Sure,” he said with a smile, humoring her. “Let’s see what they’ve got.”

The main floor was mainly cosmetics and perfume, with many lovely young things dressed in black waiting to show potential customers lotions, potions and paint to make them beautiful. She tried on a couple of fur hats in accessories - fortunately for her checkbook, nothing she liked.

They went up the escalator to the second floor where the great fashion houses displayed their couture - Yves Saint Laurent, Dior, Oscar de la Renta, Gucci, Prada. Meandering around, they stopped to admire a prominently-displayed garment. “I really like this coat,” he said, fingering its heavy, tightly-woven dark brown wool. “How do they get it to look like a woman with nobody in it?”

“It’s the weight of the fabric and the way they cut it and put it together. See, it isn’t lined, that’s really unusual, and you can see the interlining that gives it body. Look how it’s totally finished off, all the seams bound, which also gives it shape. Not a thread hanging out - beautifully made!”

“\$3,500,” he read on the price tag. “My God, \$3,500 for a coat?”

“And it doesn’t even have buttons!” They chuckled at this ridiculousness.

“May I help you?” asked a friendly clerk dressed in slacks, tie and plaid sport coat, with an earring in each of his ears.

“I’m looking for a long black evening coat, you know, something I could wear to the opera.”

“Humm, let me think,” he said, arms crossed, one hand under his chin. “I think maybe Valentino.” They walked over to Valentino, to be met by another man of indeterminate age, wearing slacks and a black bomber-type jacket. He looked more like a customer than a sales person. “I can’t think of anything off the bat, but let me look around.”

Earrings said, “Let’s go over to Dior and see what they have.” He told the attractive 30-something clerk with blonde hair what they were looking for. “I have a black evening coat lined in sable, would that interest you? And here’s a stunning coat for evening wear.” She showed them an ankle length coat in a red patterned fabric with fluffy sheepskin trim around the neck and hem, vaguely Mongolian-looking.

“No, I don’t think that would work, do you, Honey,” she said, turning to her husband and grinning.”

“No, I don’t really think that’s you,” he agreed.

Just then Bomber Jacket arrived and handed Earrings a black satin coat, knee length, with an eight-inch collar that could be worn flat or high around the neck. It had one large button, encircled with tiny rhinestones. Very elegant.

“Oh, it’s Susannah’s coat!” she exclaimed.

“Would you like to try it on?”

“Sure,” she said, “why not?”

He held it for her and she slipped it on, fastening the one pretty button. Earrings adjusted the collar so it stood up dramatically. She turned this way and that in front of the mirror. They all agreed it was a beautiful coat. She asked how much it was.

“It’s \$1500, Ralph Lauren,” Earrings replied.

“It’s too small, I’m afraid,” she said, struggling to unbutton the coat

“I’m sure we could order your size,” he volunteered, helping her with the fastening.

“No, that’s all right, I don’t think I’m quite ready to make a decision yet. But thank you so much for finding this for me. It’s the coat I’ve been imagining for a long time. It’s fun to know it’s out there. You’ve all been very helpful. Thanks again.” The couple ambled off toward the down escalator.

At the bottom of the escalator was Guerlain. She was asked by a pretty young woman with an accent, not French, if she could spare five minutes to try Guerlain’s makeup. “I have just the thing for your beautiful blue eyes,” Ms. Makeup said persuasively.

She looked at her husband, questioningly. “I haven’t had my makeup done by a professional for years.”

“Go for it, I’ll amuse myself for a few minutes.” He smiled indulgently, and wandered off, nodding repeatedly as one perfectly made-up young woman after another made eye-contact. He came to Polo. A handsome young man, dressed in black with long sideburns and just the right amount of five o’clock shadow at eleven in the morning, was eager to have someone to talk to, and began describing his products. There was after-shave that would alleviate razor burn, various moisturizers, a product for ingrown hairs, et cetera. He looked closely at his potential customer. “But you don’t look like you really need any of this, do you?” he asked, completing forgetting his sales training. They chatted amicably for a few minutes.

Meanwhile she had been told that her slight case of rosacea could be easily addressed with this cream, how important moisturizing is, and that just a touch of these two eye shadow colors would be perfect for her beautiful blue eyes. “Look right here,” Ms. Makeup directed, pointing to her shoulder, so that she could apply mascara. “Now, see how lovely you look,” she said, holding the mirror up. “Come back and see me if you decide later that you’re interested in any of these fine Guerlain products.” No pressure to purchase.

They met outside on the sidewalk, where he was watching the cable car loaded with tourists labor up Powell Street. “I’ve reached my shopping limit, Darling. I’m ready for lunch.”

“Let’s try that alley we passed with all the tables set out in the street. I think I saw a French restaurant where we could find happiness.” They strolled toward lunch, arm in arm.