

ALWAYS TRUE TO THEE, IN MY FASHION

Nancy Kress

eBook scanned & proofed by binwiped 11-10-02 [v1.0]

minor update to text and conversion to html by Dajala 2007

Relationships for the autumn season were casual and unconstructed, following a summer where fashion had been unusually colorful and intense. Suzanne liked wearing the new feelings. They were light and cool, allowing her a lot of freedom of movement. The off-hand affection made her feel unencumbered, graceful.

Cade wasn't so sure.

"It sounds bloody boring," he said to Suzanne, holding the pills in his hand. "Love isn't supposed to be so boring. At least the summer fashions offered a few surprises."

Boxes from the couture houses spilled around their bed-room. Suzanne, of course, had done the ordering. Karl Lagerfeld, Galliano, Enkia for Christian LaCroix, and of course Suzanne's own special designer and friend, Sendil. Cade stood in the middle of an explosion of slouchy tweeds and off-white linen, wearing his underwear and his stubborn look.

"But the summer feelings were so heavy," Suzanne said. She dropped a casual kiss on the top of Cade's head. "Come on, Cadie, at least give it a try. You have the body for casual emotions, you know. They look so good on you."

This was true. Cade was lean and loose-jointed, with a small head on a long neck: a body made for easy carelessness. Backlit by their wide bedroom windows, he already looked coolly nonchalant: an Edwardian aristocrat, perhaps, or one of those marvelously blase American riverboat gamblers who couldn't be bothered to sweat.

The environment helped, of course. Suzanne always did their V-R, and for autumn she'd programmed unlined curtains, cool terra cotta tiles, oyster-white walls. All very informal and composed, nothing trying very hard. But she'd left the windows natural. That, too, was perfect: too nonchalant about the view of London to bother reprogramming its ugliness. Only Suzanne would have thought of this touch. Their friends would be so jealous.

"Come on, Cade, try the feelings on." But he only went on looking troubled, holding the pills in his long-fingered hand.

Suzanne began to feel impatient. Cade was wonderful, of course, but he could be so conservative. He really hadn't liked the summer fashions—and they had been so much fun! Suzanne knew she looked good in those kinds of dramatic, highly colored feelings. They went well with her voluptuous body and small, sharp teeth. People had noticed. She'd had two passionate adulteries, one knife-fight with Kittery, one duel fought over her, two midnight reconciliations, and one weepy parting from Cade at sunset on the edge of a sea, which had been V-R'd into wine-dark roils for the occasion. Very satisfying.

But the summer was over. Really, Cade should be more willing to vary his emotional wardrobe. Sometimes she even wondered if she might be better off with another lover... Mikhail, maybe, or even Jastinder... but no, of course not. She loved Cade. They belonged to each other forever. Cade was the bedrock of her life. If only he weren't so stubborn!

"Have you ever thought," he said, not looking at her, "that we might skip a fashion season? Just let it go by and wear something old, off alone together? Or even go naked?"

"What an idea," she said lightly.

"We could try it, Suzanne."

"We could also move out of the towers and live down there along the Thames among the starving and dirty-mattressed thugs. Equally appealing."

Wrong, wrong. Cade turned away from her. In another minute he would put the pills back in their little bottle. Suzanne decided to try

playfulness. She twined her arms around his neck, and flashed her eyes at him. “You are vast, Cade. You contain multitudes. Do you really think it’s fair, mmmm, that you deny me all your multitudes, when I’m so ready to love them all?”

Reluctantly, he smiled. “Multitudes,’ is it?”

“And I *want* them all. All the Cades. I’m greedy, you know.” She rubbed against him.

“Well...”

“Come on, Cade. For me.” Another rub, and after it she danced away, laughing.

He could never resist her. He swallowed the pills, then reached out his arms. Suzanne eluded them.

“Not yet. After they take effect.”

“Suzanne...”

“Tomorrow.” Casually, she blew him an affectionate kiss and sauntered toward the door, leaving him gazing after her. Cade wanting her, and she off-hand and insouciant.

It was going to be a wonderful autumn.

The next day was unbelievably exciting, more arousing even than when she’d walked in on Cade and Kittery in the summer bedroom and they’d had the shouting and pleading and knife fight. This was arousing in a different way. Suzanne had strolled into the apartment in mid-morning, half an hour late. “There you are, then,” she’d said casually to Cade.

He looked up from his reader, his long-limbed body sprawled across the chair. “Oh, hallo.”

“How are you?”

He shrugged, then made a negligent gesture with one graceful slim-fingered hand.

Suzanne draped herself across his lap, gazing abstract-edly out the window. Today London looked even uglier than usual: cold, gray, dirty.

“Do you mind awfully?” Cade said. “I’m in the middle of this

article.”

“And so absorbed that you don’t notice me, mmmmm?” Suzanne moved against him.

Cade smiled, pecked her cheek, and gave her a careless nudge. “Off you go, then.” He returned to his reader. Suzanne stood and stretched.

The rush of blood to her nipples and thighs startled her. He really was indifferent to her! She would have to actually work at getting him interested, winning him from his casual reading... God, it was exciting!

She would succeed, of course. She always did. But why hadn’t she ever realized before how much more interesting the victory was when she’d have to struggle for it? She hadn’t been this aroused in years.

“Cade...” She leaned over him and nibbled on his ear. “Sweet Cade...”

He tilted his head to look up at her, eyebrows raised. The drugs had done something to his eyes, or to her perception of them; they looked lighter, more opaque. Suzanne laughed softly. “Come on, it will be so good...”

“Oh, all right. If you insist.”

He rose from his chair, turned to pick up the dropped reader. He nudged an antique vase a quarter inch to the right on one of Sendil’s occasional tables. He rubbed his left elbow, gazing out the window. Suzanne took his hand, and they ambled toward the bedroom.

And it was wonderful. The most interesting show in years. Really, the fashion designers were geniuses.

“Cade, Flavia and Mikhail have invited us to a water fete on Saturday. Do you want to go?”

He looked up from his screen, where he was checking his portfolio on the New York Stock Exchange. He didn’t even look annoyed that she’d interrupted. “Do you want to go?”

“I asked *you*.”

“I don’t care.”

Suzanne bit her lip. “Well, what shall I tell Flavia?”

“Whatever you like, love.”

“Well, then... I thought I might fly to Paris this week-end.” She paused. “To see Guillaume.”

He didn’t even twitch. “Whatever you like, love.”

“Cade—do you care if I visit Guillaume? For an entire weekend?” In the summer, a threat to visit Guillaume, a former lover who still adored Suzanne, had produced drama that went on for sixteen straight hours.

“Oh, Suzanne, don’t be tiresome. Of course you can visit Guillaume if you want.” Cade blew her a casual kiss.

She charged across the room, seized his hand, and dragged him away from the terminal. His eyebrows rose slightly.

But afterward, as Cade lay deeply asleep, Suzanne wondered. Maybe he’d actually been right, after all, about the current fashions. Not that it hadn’t been exciting to work at arousing him, but... she wasn’t supposed to be working. She was supposed to feel just as detached and casual as Cade. That was the bloody trouble with fashion—no matter what the designers said, one size never did fit all. The individual drug responses were too different. Well, no matter. Tomorrow she’d just increase her dosage. Until she, and not Cade, was the more casual. The sought after, rather than the seeker.

The way it was supposed to be.

“Cade... Cade?”

“Oh, Suzanne. Do come in.”

He sat up in bed, unselfconscious, unruffled. Beside him, Flavia emerged languidly from the off-white sheets. She said, “Suzanne, darling. I *am* sorry. We didn’t expect you so soon. Shall I leave?”

Suzanne crossed the room to the dresser. This was more like it. A little movement, for a change—a little *action*. Really, casual was all very well, but how many evenings could one spend in off-hand conversation? Almost she was grateful to Flavia. Not that she

would show it, of course. But Flavia was giving her the perfect excuse to put on an entirely different demeanor. She had rather missed changing for dinner.

From the dresser top she picked up a string of pearls and toyed with them, a careful appearance of anger suppressed under a facade of sophisticated control. “Cade... how could you?”

Flavia said, “Perhaps I *had* better leave, hadn’t I? See you later, darlings.” She activated a V-R dress from her neck-lace—easy unrestricting lines in a subtle taupe, Suzanne noted—and left.

Cade said, “Suzanne—”

“I trusted you, Cade!”

“Oh, rot,” he said. “You’re making a fuss over nothing.”

“Nothing! You call—”

“Really, Suzanne. Flavia hardly matters.”

“Hardly’? And just what does that mean?”

“Oh, Suzanne, you know what it means. Really, don’t make yourself ridiculous over trifles.” And Cade yawned, stretched, and went to sleep.

To *sleep*.

Suzanne thought of waking him. She thought of pound-ing on him with her small fists, of dumping him on the floor, of packing her bags and leaving a note. But, really, all those things *would* look rather ridiculous. People would hear about it, snicker... and even if they didn’t, even if Cade kept her bad taste to himself, there was still the fact that the two of them would know it had happened. Suzanne had lost her cool poise. She had been as embarrassing as Kittery, the season Kittery showed up at a geisha party dressed in the crude emo-tions of a political revolutionary. Even if Cade were to keep this incident private, Suzanne winced at the idea of his thinking her as gauche as Kittery, as capable of such a major fashion faux pas. No, no. Better to let it pass.

Cade snored softly, Suzanne lay beside him, fists clenched, waiting for winter.

Finally, the new fashions were out! Suzanne went to Paris for the

preseason shows, sitting in the first row at each important couture house, exultant. She saw, and was seen, and was happy.

The designers had outdone themselves, especially Suwela for Karl Lagerfeld. The feeling was tremulous, ingenué, all the tentative sharp sweetness of virgin love. Pink, pale blue, white—lots of white—with indrawn gasps and wide-eyed sexual exploration. Ruffles and flowers and heart flutterings at a lingering look. Gianfranco Ferré showed a marvelous silk, flowing biocloth abloom with living forget-me-nots, accessorized with innocence barely daring to touch the male model's hand. At Galliano, the jackets were matched with flounced bonnets and a blushing fear that a too-passionate kiss would lead... where? The models' knees trembled with nervous anticipation. And the ever-faithful Sendil showed an empire-waist ballgown in muslin—muslin!—that, he whispered to Suzanne, had been inspired solely by her.

Suzanne wanted everything. She spent more money than ever before at a preview. She could hardly wait for the official opening of the season. Cade and she, once more thirteen years old, with love new and sparkling and fraught with sweet tension... While she waited for opening day she had her hair grown long, her hips slimmed, and her eyes widened and colored, to huge blue orbs.

Maybe they could give a party. Everyone tremulous with anticipation and virgin hopes... wasn't there something called "spin the bottle"? She could ask the computer.

It was going to be a wonderful winter.

* * *

"No," Cade said.

"No?"

"Oh, don't look so crushed, love. Well, maybe, then. I mean, what does it matter, really?"

"What does it *matter*?" Suzanne cried. "Cade, it's the start of the season!"

He eyed her with amusement. But under the amusement was something else, the now-familiar feeling that he found her faintly ridiculous, casually distasteful. God, she couldn't wait to get him

out of this wretched understated nonchalance.

Suzanne made an effort to speak lightly. “Well, if it doesn’t matter, then there’s no reason not to go for a bit of a change, is there?”

He flicked at a speck of dust on his sleeve. “I suppose not. But, then, love, no reason to go for change either, is there? This suits us well enough, don’t you think?”

Suzanne tried not to bite her lip clear through. It was too close to opening day for tissue repair. “Well, perhaps, but one wants some variety, all the same...”

He shrugged. “I don’t, actually.”

She cried, “But, Cade—!”

“Oh, Suzanne, don’t get so worked up, it’s quite tire-some. Can’t we discuss it later?”

“But—”

“I have lunch with Jastinder. Or Kittery. Or somebody. Care to come? No? Well, suit yourself, love.”

He waved to her and sauntered out.

She couldn’t budge him. He didn’t resist her; he just wasn’t interested. Careless. Indifferent.

Opening day came. Suzanne stood in the bedroom, biting her bottom lip. What to do? Everything was ready. She’d pro-grammed the room for pale pink walls with white wood molding, filmy curtains fluttering in the breeze, a view of gar-dens filled with lavender and June roses and wisteria and any-thing else the computer said was old-fashioned. The scent simulator was running overtime. Around Suzanne were the half-unpacked boxes of flouncy silks and sweet girlish slip-dresses and little kid slippers. Plus, of course, the white jack-ets and copper-toed boots for Cade. Who had glanced at the entire thing with amused negligence, and then gone out some-where for a stroll.

“But you can’t!” Suzanne had cried. “It’s opening day! And you’re still dressed in... *that*.”

“Oh, love, what does it matter?” Cade had said. “I’m comfortable.

And isn't all this stuff just a bit... twee? Isn't it, now?"

"But Cade—"

"I rather like what I'm used to."

"You're not used to it!" Suzanne had cried in anguish. "You can't be! You've only had it for a season!"

"Really? I guess so. Seems longer," Cade said. "See you later, love. Or not."

Now Suzanne scowled at the pills in her hand. There was a real problem here. If she took them, she would be garbed in the gentle sweet tremulousness of youth. Gentle, sweet, tremulous—and ineffective. That was the whole point. Ingenués were acted upon, not actors. But without the whole force of her will, could she persuade Cade to stop being such an ass?

On the other hand, if she didn't take the pills, she would be dressed wrong for the occasion. She pictured showing up at the Donnison lunch in the Alliani Towers, at the afternoon reception in the Artificial Islands, at Kittery's party tonight, dressed badly, shabbily, in last season's worn-out feelings... no, *no*. She couldn't. She had a reputation to maintain. And everyone would think that she couldn't afford new feelings, that she had lost all her money in data-atoll speculation or some other ghastly nouveau thing ... damn Cade!

He came back from his stroll a few hours later, whistling carelessly. The vid was already crammed with "Where are you?" messages from their friends at the Donnison lunch. Breathless, ingénue messages, from people having a wonderful youthful time. And there was Cade, cool and off-hand in those detestable boring tweeds, daring to *whistle*...

"Where have you *been*?" Suzanne said. "Don't you know how late we are? Come on, get dressed!"

"Don't whine, Suzanne, it's terribly unattractive."

"I never whine!" she cried, stung.

"Well, then, don't do whatever you're doing. Come lie down beside me instead."

It was the most assertive thing he'd said in months. Encouraged, Suzanne lay with him on the bed, trying to control her panic. Maybe if she were sweet enough to him...

"You haven't dressed yet, either, have you, love?" Cade said. He was smiling. "That isn't the tentative embrace of an ingenue."

"Would you like that?" Suzanne said hopefully. "I can just change..."

"Actually, no. I've been thinking, Suzanne. I don't want to get all tricked out as some sort of ersatz boy-child, and you don't want to go on wearing these casual emotions. So what about what I suggested at the end of last summer? Let's just go naked for a while. See what it's like."

"No!" Suzanne shrieked.

She hadn't known she was going to do it. She never shrieked like that—not she, Suzanne! Except, of course, when fashion decreed it, and that didn't really count... What was she thinking? Of course it counted, it was the only thing that kept them all safe. To go *naked* in front of each other! Good God, what was Cade *thinking*? Civilized people didn't parade around naked, everything personal on display for any passing observer to pick over and chortle at, nude and helplessly exposed in their deepest feelings!

Or lack of them.

She struggled to sound casual. And she succeeded—or last season's pills did. "Cade... I don't want to go naked. Really, I don't think you're being very fair. We had it your way for a season. Now it should be my turn."

A long silence. For a moment Suzanne thought he'd actually fallen asleep. If he had *dared*...

"Suzanne," he said finally, "it's my detached impression that you always have it your way."

It hurt so much that Suzanne's legs trembled as she climbed off the bed. How could he say that? She always thought in terms of the two of them! Always! She went into the bathroom and closed the door. Shaky, she leaned against the wall, and caught sight of herself in the mirror. She looked lovely. Blue eyes wide with

surprised hurt, pale lip trembling, like a young girl suddenly cut to her vulnerable heart...

And she hadn't even yet taken the season's pills!

Cade would have to come around. He would simply *have* to.

He didn't. Suzanne argued. She stormed. She begged. Finally, after missing three days of wonderful parties—irre-placeable parties, a season only opened once, after all—she dressed herself in the pills and a white cotton frock, and pleaded with him tremulously, weeping delicate sweet tears. Cade only laughed affectionately, and hugged her casually, and went off to do something else off-hand and detestable.

She dissolved the pills in his burgundy.

It bothered her, a little. They had always been honest with each other. And besides, it was such a scary thing for a young girl to do, her fingers shook the whole time as she broke open the capsules and a single shining crystalline tear dropped into the glass (how much salt would one tear add? Cade had a keen palate). But she did it. And, wide-eyed, she handed him the glass, her girlish bosom heaving with silent emotion. Then she excused herself and went to take a scented bath in pink bubbles and to do her hair in long drooping ringlets.

By the time she came out, Cade was waiting for her. He held a single pink rose, and his eyes met hers shyly, for just a moment, as he handed it to her. They went for a walk before dinner along a beach, and the stars came out one by one, and when he took her hand, Suzanne thought, her heart would burst. At the thought that he might kiss her, the V-R waves blurred a little, and her breath came faster.

It was going to be a wonderful winter.

“Suzanne,” Cade said, very low. “Sweet Suzanne...”

“Yes, Cade?”

“I have something to tell you.”

“Yes?” Emotion thrilled through her.

“I don't like burgundy.”

“What... but you...”

“At least not that burgundy. I didn’t drink it. But I did run it through the molecular analyzer.”

She pulled away from his hand. Suddenly, she was very afraid.

“I’m so disappointed in you, Suzanne. I rather hoped that whatever fashion said, we at least trusted each other.”

“What...” she had trouble getting the words out, damn this tremulous high-pitched voice—“What are you going to do?”

“Do?” He laughed carelessly. “Why do anything? It’s not really worth making a fuss over, is it?”

Relief washed over her. It was last season’s fashion. He was still wearing it, and it was keeping him casual about her betrayal. Nonchalant, off-hand. Oh, thank heavens...

“But I think maybe we should live apart for a bit. Till things sort themselves out. Don’t you think that would be best?”

“Oh no! No!” Girlish protest, in a high sweet girlish voice. When what she wanted was to grab him and force her body against his and convince him to change his mind by sheer brute sexuality... but she couldn’t. Not dressed like this. It would be ludicrous.

“Cade...”

“Oh, don’t take it so hard, love. I mean, it’s not the end of the world, is it? You’re still you, and I’m still me. Be good, now.” And he loped off down the beach and out the apartment door.

Suzanne turned off the V-R. She sat in the bare-walled apartment and cried. She loved Cade, she really did. Maybe if she agreed to go naked for a season... but, no. That wasn’t how she loved Cade, or how he loved her, either. They loved each other for their multiplicity of selves, their basic and true complexity, expressed outwardly and so well through the art of change. That was what kept love fresh and romantic, wasn’t it? Change. Growth. Variety.

Suzanne cried until she had no tears left, until she was completely drained. (It felt rather good, actually. Ingenues were allowed so much wild sorrow.) Then she called Sendil, at home, on a shielded frequency.

“Sendil? Suzanne.”

“Suzanne? What is it? I can’t see you, my dear.”

“The vid’s malfunctioning, I have audio only. Sendil, I’ve got some rather awful news.”

“What? Oh, are you all right?”

“I’m... oh, please understand! I’m so alone! I need you!” Her voice trembled. She had his complete attention.

“Anything, love. Anything at all!”

“I’m...” Her girlish voice dropped to a whisper drenched in shame. “I’m... *enceinte*. And Cade... Cade won’t marry me!”

“Suzanne!” Sendil cried. “Oh my God! What a master stroke! Are you going to keep it going all season?”

“I’m... I’m going away. I can’t... face anyone.”

“No, of course not. Oh my God, darling, this will just *make* your reputation!”

Suzanne said acidly, “I was under the impression it was already made,” realized her mistake, and dropped back into ingenué. It wasn’t hard, really; all she had to do was take a deep breath and give herself up to the drugs. She said gasp-ingly, “But I can’t... I can’t face it completely by myself. I’m just not strong enough. So you’re the only person I’m telling. Will you come see me in my shame?”

“Oh, Suzanne, of course I’ll stand by you.” Sendil said, boyish emotion making his voice husky. Sendil always took a dose and a half of fashion.

“I leave tomorrow,” Suzanne gasped. “I’ll write you, dear faithful Sendil, to tell you where to visit me...” She’d get a holo of her body looking pregnant custom-made. “Oh, he just threw me away! I feel so wretched!”

“Of course you do,” Sendil breathed. “Poor innocent! Seduced and abandoned! What can I do to cheer you up?”

“Nothing. Oh, wait... maybe if I know my shame won’t go on forever... but, oh, Sendil, I couldn’t ask you what follows this

season! I know you'd never let out a peep in advance!"

"Well, not ordinarily, of course, but in this case, for you ..."

"You're the *only* one I'm going to let visit me, to hear about everything that happens. Everyone else will simply have to play along with you."

"Ahh." Sendil's voice thickened with emotion. "I'd do any-thing to cheer you up, darling. And believe me, you'll love the next season. After a whole season away, everyone will be pant-ing to see how you look, every eye will be trained on you... and the look is going to be a return to military! You're just made for it, darling, and it for you!"

"Military," Suzanne breathed. Sendil was right. It was perfect. Uniforms' and swords and guns and stern, disci-plined command breaking into bawdy barracks-room physi-cality at night... Officers pulling rank in the bedroom... *That's an order, soldier—Yes, sir!...* The sexual and social possibilities were tremendous. And Cade would never skip two seasons of fashion. She would come back from the win-ter's exile with everyone buzzing about her, and then Cade in the uniform of, say, the old Royal Guards... and herself outranking him (she'd find out somehow what rank he'd chosen, bribery or something), able to command his alle-giance, keeping a military bearing and so having to give away nothing of herself...

It was going to be a wonderful spring.

-end-

About the author:

Nancy Kress is well known for her deeply complex medical SF stories, and for her biological and evolutionary extrapolations in such classics as "Beggars in Spain," *Beggars and Choosers*, and *Beggars Ride*. Her stories are rich in texture and in the details of the inner life of character, and like only a few others, such as Bruce Sterling and James Patrick Kelly, she manages often to satisfy both the readers of hard SF and the self-styled Humanists. She is in fact one of the few writers to incorporate much of the aesthetic of Modernist fiction into SF. This story, however, from *Asimov's*, is another side of Nancy Kress, the feminine juggernaut, uproarious

and unstoppable—who would want to? The more you think about it, the funnier it gets, rather like vintage Connie Willis. This is first-rate satire, extending that tradition that flowered in the 1950s, that was perhaps the center of 50s SF, into the late 90s. My ideal SF convention would have both Connie Willis and Nancy Kress as co-guests of honor, always speaking at the same time and picking up on each other's lines.