

Like my dress

by Kit Reed

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Oh God, to have style and money in those days, to take my place up there on the stage with hot Stud Ridley, the magnetic emcee with the neon eyes, my love. Bliss to be in the studio - but to be a contestant! Who wouldn't kill for the thrill? Imagine starring in the global sensation, the absolutely only TV show that keeps dogs away from their dinners, kids home from the malls, and lovers out of each other's arms, everybody too mesmerized to turn it off, and, yes! - all eyes on me in my most death-dealing costume; now that is power.

Imagine being the all-time winner in the grand playoffs at the end of the season, taking the trophy in front of the biggest TV audience in the history of competition. Feel the drumroll, hear the shouts as Stud Ridley - Stud Ridley crowns you all-time universal winner on LIKE MY DRESS.

Listen. I almost made it. And if the show went down in flames right afterward, so be it. Fine.

With a loss like that, the skies should weep.

There was another winner that season, but there was never another season. All the heart and fire had gone out. Am I sorry? There's a hole in my heart that pills won't reach. Glad? Okay. Yes.

But if you want to blame somebody, blame Lola. Lola Garner did it, my putative best friend. Lola, that I trusted; we used to wear each other's clothes! It was Lola with the baby-blue sweetie-pie stare and her raunchy little ass and all her treachery that brought me down. And I thought she was my friend.

If you want to know the truth, I got into it because of her; I flew so high - before I fell. But I am getting ahead of myself.

We worked in the same office, and I ran into her in Labels for Less one day at lunch. She was trying on an orange sequined catsuit that made her ass look like a pumpkin, going away. She was preening in front of the three-way mirror as if it didn't even show the back of her, and I had to intervene.

"Hi, you may not know me; my name is Gaby, from the office?"

Well, the smile she gave me was flattering, to say the least. "Everybody knows who you are. You're that terribly chic girl."

"Oh, do you really think so?"

"This is such an honor. Everybody wants to look like you." She twirled in the jumpsuit. "What do you think?"

I did it without even hurting her feelings. “I’ve seen you in better colors.”

“Oh, thank you.” She took my word for it.

By the time we left, I had talked her into a mauve number that was very slenderizing and looked good with my gray suede boots, and she thought I was God. We were bonded from then on.

Or she let me think we were. To think I trusted her! But that was before we even dreamed of LIKE MY DRESS.

Now let me explain a few things to you about costume, so you can see what made that show take off and fly. Now I’m not just talking about us women in the work force, this holds for every guy I know; just look at the ads for man makeup and the eye tucks for men and the hair plugs and the fluorescent shirts, the ass-hugging trousers and natty ties and the two-toned shoes - you think that’s for fun? It’s for survival. When all about you are losing theirs, at least you know you look good. Shopping is nature’s way of telling you you’re not dead.

Plus, the pressure is intense. Look at any magazine and you can see it. Look at TV. This world we live in could care less about what’s going on inside a person; it’s the wrappings that count. So everybody goes to work, we all do our jobs, and no matter how good we are at what we’re doing, the world is judging us according to something else.

And you wonder why the whole world fell for LIKE MY DRESS?

Maybe you’re too young to remember the show in its heyday, the brocades and sequined jobs designed to stun, the ermine trim that could take out entire battalions, jewels that killed instantly.

And the great thing was, you didn’t have to be rich. On the best nights, the judges overlooked your elaborate hand-sewn one-of-a kind evening gowns and your rich people’s Issy Miyakes and Christian LaCroixes to give first prize to the Army Surplus coverall with the gold belt or the simple sack dress, while a studio audience that numbered in the thousands rose as one person and cheered. It was about how you put things together, whether you had an eye.

In the world of LIKE MY DRESS, money wasn’t everything; sometimes money wasn’t anything. Style was. That imponderable: chic. You either have it or you don’t. Which is what provided the suspense. There would be Ms. Keypunch Operator of Dallas, facing off with one of the crowned heads and some big star who’d dropped a bundle on Rodeo Drive. At the end of the evening she would parade, as good as anybody, and the applause meter would do the rest. She could win! The judges and the audience went for a certain totality of look that surpasseth understanding. How else could you account for the excitement, the surprise, the harmony of tension that made an international cult around a television show? I mean, the Golden Calf had nothing on LIKE MY DRESS, Those were the days, If you

were old enough to shop, you could not help but hope.

And now I'm going to tell you something interesting, and if it splits the difference between men and women, fine. In the first thirteen weeks, there were also men contestants, but the producers dropped them for two reasons.

One, men's clothes are not nearly as good, so except for the one transvestite, in thirteen weeks there was not one male winner.

And, two, the bottom line. It was that when push came to shove with those guys, they were born losers. They. Did. Not. Know how to accessorize. Men don't know squat about style. They think they're competitive, but when the going gets tough, they just can't handle it. Give me a woman every time.

What had Lola said the first time we met? "You're that terribly chic girl." My heart rose up.

If only I could bring back that first night. We were on our way out to a Singles Fondue Party when Lola flipped on my set and Stud Ridley came up on the screen and I fell in love. He just sauntered into a pool of light, whistling the theme ... the most hypnotically sexy man in the world, with the wavy hair and the sweet, sweet grin that made amazing promises. I died. Is it enough to say that since that night I've never wanted another man?

And this is what hummed along under the theme music, and radiated in his smile: If you won, Stud Ridley was part of the prize. Magnetic, gorgeous. Mine. Who wouldn't fall in love with him? Who wouldn't tune in week after week after week? Lola and I could barely tear ourselves away. There were women just like us wearing these beautiful clothes in front of all those people with the music playing; there was Stud Ridley with the neon eyes; there was the applause! The applause

The show was broadcast live from Los Angeles and relayed by Telstar, so that in certain foreign capitals, even though it would be repeated later, people struggled out of bed at 3 a.m. just so they could see it live. Broadway producers buckled to the pressure and provided hour-long intermissions between acts of their new hits, with sets provided in the lobbies and the restrooms. At the opera, everybody went to the special second-act TV lounge. In factories, management found the hour LIKE MY DRESS break increased productivity. Is it any wonder Lola and I refused dates and shuffled exercise classes to be home Wednesday nights?

Friends like to be with friends in times like that. Lola and I were close in those days. We used to do each other's hair!

We shopped together on lunch hours, and on Wednesday nights we went over to each other's houses for the show. At 6 we would sit down with our notebooks and tomato soup and Brownies on TV trays, trying on clothes until showtime. We made sketches of the winners, so we could sew copies for ourselves.

I did the machine work and Lola put in the hems - the innocence! The joy! Would it be better to be forever the winner, or to be forever young?

I'll tell you what is worse. Not being either.

Ah, but at the time, I thought I was going to have it all.

All right, all right, it was Lola's idea for one of us to go on the show. But I was the bankroll. Didn't that give me rights?

It was the second Wednesday in the first season; we were going to a party, but only after the end credits rolled on LIKE MY DRESS.

I saw Stud Ridley walking off through the circles of light and I wanted to melt into the TV and go after him.

This frumpy rock star won; her hair was a mess and the idea of her out on the town in the limo with my beautiful Stud was killing me. And then just like that, Lola turned to me and said innocently, "Listen, we could do better than that. You could."

"Right. Me and Lady Di."

She looked so sincere: "Listen, Gaby, you have style. You look better than that winner in what you have on right now."

It was my new black outfit, with the neat boots. I'll admit I blushed, but it made me walk a little taller. "Maybe you're right."

"By the way, can I borrow your lizard sandals?"

Longing like fire smoldered in my joints and went flickering along my bones. I even loaned her the matching shoulder bag. And when we went out that night, we took large steps.

Lola led me along, "So, listen. We look as good as they do. We could win."

Do you wonder why the show was such a hit?

Lola and I spent the whole night talking about weight training and jazzercise, just in case. When push comes to shove, a person has to look good in something tight. Not our fault that we got so far into it that our guys felt left out. We didn't say it right out, but even then Lola knew where this was heading, and I knew.

Still we didn't watch every week, or we tried not to. At least not that season. We still had lives. But in the second season we were pulled in tight. Lola was over at my house; we had two really sweet computer programmers from Mobil coming over - she was trying to bring in MTV so we would have dance music, but she got the season premiere and there he was back in my living room: Stud. Oh yes, I was in love.

Plus, there was a new feature. Listen. They showed movies of contestants in training. Including everyday people, just like us. LIKE MY DRESS sent a camera crew to follow you around for two weeks before the show. We saw this sweet woman getting breakfast for her family, knitting her own dressy tank tops, going out to shop. ... Then we saw this rich lady exec: she had staked her corporation and her reputation on winning, so most of the pictures were of this woman shopping. shopping; she was so rich, the stores sent models over to her office! Then they showed us the girl from design school - at class, in the dorms gluing bottle caps to the hem of her velvet evening dress so it would shine and clatter when she turned. Who wouldn't love her? Who wouldn't envy them?!

And one of those women was going to be the first winner of the year. She would get the crown, the night with Stud Ridley. She would get the week in Acapulco; the evenings in London, Paris, Rome; the lifetime purchase card backed up by American Express and honored in every major store around the world. As it turned out, the lady exec won it that night, but it could have been one of the common people.

It could have been us.

Lola looked at me. "TV," she said. Her lips were wet. "We could be on TV"

"On our bankroll?"

"If we pool our talents." Her eyelashes were like flocked velvet. She was wearing my little red thing. "With our chic."

I said, "We could," but even then a little bell was sounding somewhere inside. I would find out too late what it was jingling about: One of us could.

When the guys rang we were too hypnotized to buzz them in. That was the season my ficus died of neglect. It was the season Lola and I moonlighted at a Bagel Nosh to help support our wardrobes, working every night of the week except during the show. It was the year we bought the Polaroid to take pictures for the nationwide talent search and the camcorder to shoot videos of us in our pretty clothes, and the year we gave up men because there wasn't time for that and weight training too. When we won, there would be plenty of new men and they would all be rich, and handsome, and elegantly dressed.

And I would have Stud.

If I could just win, I knew I could make him mine for good. And Lola - when I confided, she was so generous. The bitch. "You want him? You should have him. All I care about is the glory." She was so cool; she made me think she didn't even care which one of us went first.

That year we sent three dozen sets of snapshots and videos and all we had were rejection slips. By that time, the cheerleader from Temple Texas had been

declared the winner for October and Lloyd's of London was covering wagers that put Lady Di out in front in the end-of-the-year finals, although Sheik Ahmed Fouad's entire harem was considered the dark horse because their ensemble breakfast costumes stopped the show.

Lola said, "Maybe next week."

We had just gotten rejected again. I was so depressed, I groaned, "Maybe not."

Was she looking at me sideways? Stupid, I never saw. Her eyes got all slitted - strange. "Maybe if we spent more on photographs. ..."

"Maybe if we had a million bucks."

"I'm not kidding, Gaby." God, the woman was quick. She slipped it in like a needle full of Novocaine. "If only we could afford to get Venuto to take our photographs."

Now that sounded innocent. Of course it turned out we could only afford one set of photographs, so on the way to Venuto's studio we had this heart-to-heart, and Lola said, "Which one of us gets photographed first?"

"I don't know," I said.

"It doesn't matter who goes first," she said, "Whoever wins, we'll use the money to get the other one on the show." Then, boy, you should have heard her, that voice clear and empty as a glass of water, Lola beginning the lie of all lies: "Tell you what, why don't we let him choose?"

It sounded fine to me. Oh sure, I thought I was going to win, and why? Because all these months Lola had been telling me so.

So we went to his studio. I have spent two decades on the couch trying to get over this one....

This Venuto was an artist, right? Well he decided Lola's cheekbones (which I happen to know she'd sucked in her cheeks to get the effect) made her the one. Plus she had stuffed herself into my best white thing so she looked better than me. The bitch.

Those photos got her the show. Okay, I tried to be glad for her.

"Oh don't worry," she said, "when the DRESS crew comes to make the audition video, you can be on the video, too. Stud can choose."

Sure.

All our money for the one set of photographs. But it got her the show. Not three weeks later, my best friend was coiled on my chaise like Cleopatra waiting for

the asp, all dolled up in honor of the DRESS audition video crew. We were going to be on the show.

I mean, she was. I tried to be glad. I even promised to sew her a new dress. Gaby, the brave little tailor. Gaby, the tool.

I tried to be glad for her. She didn't make it easy. Once I had fallen into the sidekick role, she started using me like toilet paper, you know? If I said maybe it wasn't fair, her going first, Lola would string me along with promises: "Oh, Gaby, just think of the two weeks in Acapulco, think of the perpetual charge account, think of the shopping we could do."

Lola, with her everlasting WE, when what she meant was I.

But I ended up letting her take the pick of my closet, and after we pooled our savings for her wardrobe, I carried all the damn packages. I even altered her rotten evening clothes.

Well I showed her.

It was kind of an accident. I mean, she was trying on costumes at my place (which I had kindly agreed she could use for the audition shoot because her dump was not presentable and mine was, even with the sewing mess and the ficus dead) and she was still going: "Prizewinner's date with Prince Albert" this, and "Year-end championship date with Prince Edward" that, worse and worse, and then, "Imagine, Stud Ridley," the other thing.

I just couldn't help it; I said, "Listen, Lola; friends are friends and you can go first on the show and no hard feelings, but there is this one very important thing."

She was so busy looking in the hand mirror that she hardly heard. "Sure, Gabes, anything."

Can I help it if everything in me boiled up and popped? "Keep your damn hands off of Stud Ridley. He's mine."

Then she said as cool as cool, so off-hand that I wanted to murder her, "Oh, him; I wouldn't touch him with a stick."

After which my best friend did this awful thing to me. The words just fell out, like garbage on the rug. "I bought something for you."

I was doing up her hem. I tried to smile. "Oh Lola, how nice." To think I was ashamed for what I was feeling right then.

She was all pink and big-hearted and smiling. "Here it is."

You can imagine my emotions as I opened the box - the thud when I saw what it was! "A maid's uniform!"

“Don’t you like it? Now you can be with me on the show.”

“In this?”

“Better than nothing.” She was wearing my best rhinestone clips on her shoes.

“Don’t do me any favors, Lola. After you win the everlasting charge account, I will get on the show in my own right. After all,” - dumb thing to say, bad timing - “I am the one with chic.”

She choked.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

She was trying to swallow the words; she knew they were garbage. I yelled at her to speak up. She couldn’t help herself. She said, “You’ll never make it, you’re too fat. Your clothes all look better on me.”

“Fat!” So much for her flattery. All lies. All these years and the bitch had been using me so she could wear my clothes.

I lunged for her throat, but she stopped me in midflight, squeaking, “Gaby, the doorbell. The camera crew! Gaby, my hair!”

“In hell.”

So much for Lola. I bopped her and locked her in the closet. Right, my mistake. I should have murdered her. Little did I know.

The first thing was I couldn’t get at my best shoes. Instead I had to wear her rotten narrow dress-up pumps, but when the crew came, they didn’t seem to notice that I limped. She ruined my aqua sweater the last time she wore it, so what if I did stretch her rotten shoes? After the crew knocked off for the day, I went to the closet and revived Lola, but before I did, I took precautions. I got out my toenail scissors and cut off all her hair.

I will not describe the scene that ensued when she saw herself in the mirror, but I will say this for Lola: She is a practical girl. I reasoned with her. Since she couldn’t do the show with no hair, it was only right for me to do it - after all, I had put up half the jack. Besides, they already had me on the video. Plus, after I promised to split the prize money and the everlasting charge account - in fact, everything except the night with Stud Ridley, which I swapped her for the date with Prince Edward - she agreed to go along. By the time she had access to the winner’s credit cards, which I signed in blood that I would share, her hair would be back. After I promised to throw in a free sitting with Venuto, she was positively philosophical. Her time would come. She would get her chance to be on the show.

What I would never forgive her for was the garbage she had spewed on the

rug between us; that would not go away. All these years the two-faced bitch had been wearing my clothes when she secretly thought I was fat.

In the next weeks I was so happy I forgot. There was no way I was going to take Lola along to Hollywood as my maid or my secretary or any other thing. Not now that I knew she was a liar and a sneak. She wasn't about to be seen in public anyway, because of the hair. In fact, she took a leave of absence from work to grow her hair back, so she was out of my hair. Sorry. Instead of her being the queen, I was going to be the queen.

Los Angeles!

You should have seen it. You should have seen me, going around in the studio car. Unfortunately, even the last pirate tapes have been destroyed. Nobody wants to remember because nobody cares. Sic transit. You know.

They got me there a whole week early, which I spent in hair salons and nail parlors and makeup clinics which the funny-looking short woman with the clip-board sent me to twice - I suppose because even though Lola and I bear a passing likeness, she couldn't make the Venuto photo match my face. But I was in heaven, stashed in the Beverly Wilshire. I didn't mind.

Before the show, we waited in the Green Room, me and the Japanese manufacturer's wife, who had taken anabolic steroids to make herself tall enough by American standards of beauty, along with the ex-wife of the chairman of the board at Lord and Taylor, who had divorced her husband so she could compete in spite of the conflict-of-interests clause. Nobody wanted us to rumple our opening-round costumes, so we were leaning against tilted ironing boards. As we were in competition, it seemed best for us not to talk. Instead, I eyed them, and they eyed me.

I know I looked fine. Even before Stud Ridley kissed me - kissed me in the winner's circle and gave me the crown for that night, I knew I looked fine. And that kiss. I have lived a lifetime on that kiss. You can have your Prince Edward and your Prince Albert of Monaco. Listen, Stud Ridley kissed me. Once.

I was leaning against my tilted ironing board with my simple cashmere spread out around me and the amazing find I'd made on Rodeo Drive carefully draped, touching my deceptively simple jewels. Then the music came up and I thought I would asphyxiate as the manufacturer's wife tottered out on her platform sandals into the light and the show began. The light! The applause was only a prelude to mine. I could tell you a thing or two about applause.

I can't tell you much about the rest because all I remember are the lights and the applause - the applause! The clapping whisper of the billions out there watching, via satellite relay.

What can I say about Stud Ridley in person, the eyes, that seductive touch?

And the betrayal. Terrible.

How can I describe what he and Lola did to me? in the first round they show your clips - hard to watch because it brought it all back: the ugly scene with Lola, the closet, how I cut off all her hair. I couldn't nurse the guilt because I had to look happy for the second round, where the contestants reverence the all-time winners while dressed for afternoon. The hall-of-famers make little speeches about how hard it was for them, how great we look; I remember thinking, Every one of these women has been with my Stud.

Then I looked into his very special eyes and jealousy disappeared. I triumphed in the third round. I had designed and made the evening dress. I'd only had to let it out in a couple of little places to make it fit me as well as it fitted Lola.

After the commercials, we were called back to tell the studio audience, in our own words, where we got our clothes.

I was halting. I was eloquent. I was wonderful. I was so good, I won. I could hear a little murmur that began way back in the enormous studio, gathered force and broke like surf over me, wave after wave of applause. Stud Ridley put the crown on me - I could feel his fingers trailing promises across my bare back - and then I got what I had always wanted - I got to show off in my party dress in front of everybody; I headed onto the Mylar runway to the music and the applause. Behind me was my picture on this giant monitor above the stage. It was wonderful. I will never forget the feeling as I started out ... I never should have turned my back on that monitor.

But I am forgetting Lola. No. I had forgotten about Lola then, the bitch. What she might be up to that night. I don't know how she managed it; I don't know what she promised Stud Ridley or what they did to make it work.

All I do know is that at the beginning of the prizewinner's promenade, just as I was heading down the runway and out over the heads of the audience, the runway lights went out. Like that. I was there but nobody saw.

Never mind, I thought, trying to make the best of it. They can see me on the monitor.

So I was on the runway, looking, I thought, double gorgeous in Lola's dress, and if only the people sitting nearest could see, no matter, because I was backed up by the giant monitor, I thought, Gaby Fayerweather in the prizewinning costume and thirty feet tall, beamed out to every TV screen all over the civilized world.

It was what I had been working for all these years. It was better than anything; it was better than sex; it was like being queen of the world.

And something was wrong.

I was lost in the wild blue waiting for applause. First there was nothing. Then

this awful sound started somewhere down deep and ripped through the air; it was - it was this hideous rattle, a whip of scorn, followed by a guttural, angry rumble, followed by something I had never heard before, so final and terrible that I gave up the promenade and for the first time I looked at the giant television screen. ...

It was horrible.

It was me and it wasn't me.

There I was, thirty feet tall in front of thousands and being beamed to the entire civilized world, and what did they see?

My golden dress was gone and the crown was gone and the cape was gone; the me that was up there on the screen was not me in my moment of triumph, being broadcast live.

It was me on tape. There I was, smiling for Lola's camcorder on a sunny afternoon back home. I tried yelling, Look everybody, I'm still here, and I'm still all dressed up, REALLY but nobody heard; they were all looking up there at the me on the screen. And they hated what they saw.

The bitch. Who did she sleep with to make this happen, who did she have to bribe?

Up there on the screen: Gaby Fayerweather in her shame, with a pink string of words trailing across the screen underneath: LIKE HER DRESS?

Then Stud Ridley, Stud Ridley said into the microphone: "Okay, people, like her dress?"

It came from a hundred thousand throats in the studio and out there all over the globe; it was enormous: "Nooooooooooooooooo. ..."

I died.

Then it disappeared. TRANSMISSION INTERRUPTED TEMPORARILY, the screen said, DO NOT ADJUST YOUR SET. It was all over for me.

Then transmission resumed. There was a winner on the stage and on the giant screen, but it wasn't me. Stud had put Lola in my place. Lola - in a wig, I suppose, since there wasn't time for her to grow her hair back after what I did to her; Lola was up there in a copy of my evening gown - I looked from her to Stud Ridley and back again and all I could see was treachery. That duplicitous, heartbreaking, lying bastard Stud Ridley wrapped his arm around her waist and said, "Look everybody, this is the real queen," and then my God he said, "After the finals we're going to be married; let's all greet Lola Garner, my winner and my fiancée." You know, it didn't matter how I waved my arms there in the dark at the end of the runway in the dark, Gaby Fayerweather in the prizewinning golden dress, poor Gaby shouting, I'm still heere; nobody saw.

Instead they all looked at Lola and cheered.

And me? They threw me out. Just as my best friend accepted the prizewinning kiss from Stud Ridley, studio guards on orders from that same Stud Ridley lifted me like a log and carried me off.

If that had been all, I might have handled it, but I am ruined for life. No matter how I disguise myself, people know me for a failure; they follow me in the street like dogs, laughing and pointing at poor Gaby the pretender, Gaby Fayerweather, who thought she was so cute.

See, in addition to cheating me of my triumph, Lola and Stud Ridley ruined my life. What they did was, they exposed me to the final unspeakable horror, the hell from which nobody returns and which nobody survives, which is why I firebombed the studio the following Wednesday, causing Stud Ridley extensive plastic surgery that took him off the air and effectively eviscerated the show.

What it was, was, that video that started them howling at me? it didn't look half bad. I mean, in that particular video, I had on my best purple thing, with my rhinestone earrings and my hair done special, with the pretty little poufs over the ears? I even had on my favorite orange shoes. That wasn't one of your embarrassing home videos, it was the real me, okay? And the rotten hateful final insult, that sent me over the edge in a barrel?

They hated me anyway.

So if I am not much to look at these days, if my teeth are long gone and my hair is going, if my figure went first, a casualty to despair, if dogs bark at me in the street and children cover their eyes and run, there is a reason. Failure makes you ugly, and this was the worst.

I went on LIKE MY DRESS, all right? I had to lie and cheat to do it; I locked my best friend in the closet and I cut off all her hair and took her place; I went on LIKE MY DRESS and it was the end of everything.

They didn't like my dress.