

## **Identities Reclaimed** **by Dawn Stofer**

The white scarf slithers across the counter.

“That’ll be fifty cents.” The check-out girl coils it, like toilet paper, around her hand. She is without expression, though her make-up has been crafted for feline cunning, or perhaps to convey the magical thoughts of a wood sprite. Fraternization is not in her Value Village job description. Her green and black hair, nose ring and glitter nails do the talking. I understand that. And I’m not going to say anything, because today I’m Chinese, and can barely understand English. I’m wearing a red Mandarin Jacket, Chairman Mao trousers and people’s republic Mary-Janes. Ni hao!

I frequent this store and she knows me, but never lets on. Perhaps she affords us thrifters the dignity of silence, in case there is shame associated with used goods. Not for me. Some people go to the movies to lose themselves in cinematic landscapes. I shop. But not as you might imagine.

I am a fantasist of human detritus, a connoisseur of the second hand aisles, hunting essences under the squeal of coat-hangers. My eyes play a jittery nystagmus in rapid assessment of colour and texture under the wave of my discerning hand.

Did you know that vintage clothing protests when exposed to the light of the present era? Now you do. Anachronistic, it has to adjust, being isolated and vulnerable. Imagine flannel pyjamas and plaid corduroy slippers appearing on a space ship. Clothing absorbs past lives and I am sensitive to their unique vibrations.

I collect human fancy. Old clothing carries ideas about how we saw ourselves – seeds of a sensibility which need replanting. They want a second chance at a stroll on Front Street, or a coy picnic in Primrose Park.

I harvest the energy imbued in people's cast-offs. Time travel, actually, is real. Ever heard of metempsychosis? I often exit the Salvation Army, dizzy from my travels, not only around the world, but through the decades. I never run out of people I can become. You might say I've found my niche as spiritual rag picker. I know there is life in there. I can feel it. My name is Jane Tilby. But not always. Today I am May Ling.

I pass an actual Chinese guy in the parking lot, so I drop my eyes demurely, lest he try to engage in conversation. I only mastered a couple of phrases this morning and am already losing my power, so I must get home. He wears grey trousers and a Calgary Flames jacket by the way. You'd barely know he was Chinese except by his restrained hip locomotion.

The Mary-Janes have no support for walking. They're only suitable for dolls, plus, they get wet in the rain. At least my apartment is warm and dry. I'll cook some rice and sip tea till old Shanghai day is over.

Working from home has its perks. Ever since I got a 1-900 number, I make enough to keep me going. They only want someone to talk dirty to them. It's pretty innocent stuff. To tell the truth, I never know what to say. It's not like there's a manual. It got tedious talking about big dicks and spankings so I came up with something new. I speak in a totally invented language, depending on what I am wearing, with titillating inflections, groans and throaty laughs. The unintelligibility gives the caller a blanket of anonymity and their own imaginations take over. It works.

I have a dedicated, foreigner-fetish fan club which keeps me in donuts. Some of my best performances are done while imagining a deathbed scene. I struggle, gasping imaginary last words – which are often recipe titles from an Estonian cookbook. Sexy! I throw in a few Lolita giggles and it's all they need. They can do what they want on the other end of the line, it doesn't touch me and the money pours in.

It doesn't pour in, exactly. I'm lazy in my chosen profession. I'm not greedy enough, which I think is a good thing. I make enough for rent and thrift shopping and my phone is off the rest of the time. Otherwise you'd go crazy. I save my sense of adventure for clothing.

Thriftling! That is my passion. Yes, I've made the noun into a verb. Everyone does it now – journaling, brainstorming etc. Scoff, and I will remind you that *cycling* falls into the same category. No grammarians wince if you say you are cycling.

I feel strong emotions, handling clothing from the past. Fashion time flies by more quickly than regular time. I reckon it's a four-to-one ratio based on seasons. I grow faint with anticipation while on the hunt.

Today, while I was Chinese, I saw a nineteen-sixties 'shift'. Why didn't I buy it? That's the thing with thrifting. It requires impulsivity. You have to be ready to S.I.G. – spot, identify and grab. Once I find the main piece, my mission is to accessorize with shoes, jewelry, perhaps a hat. You could say it's a calling.

The shift was sleeveless, an A-line mini in a large black and white check. Essentially, it's a wearable drag race flag. I'd have to find some ivory sling-backs and a pill-box hat. Maybe some plastic bobble earrings in hot pink. Yellow hoops would work. Knee high plastic boots!

One thing I notice is that most vintage stuff is from the summer. People are more carefree and experimental in the summer. I know, I know, there are plenty of vintage ski sweaters with a Nordic pattern and mock turtle neck. But most have been shrunk irretrievably. Plus, they need just the right stirrup pants in a flammable stretch fabric with a raised seam running up the front. Now, those are hard to find. Then there's the seal skin boots. Say no more, Paul McCartney. I love baby seals too. But I do have my eyes open for an Ookpik. Ookpiks are rare, a little owl effigy which used to be standard fare in Canadian corner drug stores, along with those split

plastic change purses which open like a pea pod when you squish them in your hand. Something satisfying about that. Great candy colours too.

The Nordic fantasy is tricky. For one, I'm not sure it changes much. I would have to spend extra money at the deli for pickled herring, meat salad and old socks cheese. I would be obliged to exude, for that day, a healthy optimism and wholesome physical regime, plus, sensibly re-arrange my house and declutter. I do have a spindly- legged teak chair. I could make a futuristic mobile out of some white plastic spoons, light some tiny candles and carve an elf man face on the end of a stick. Nordic is a lot of work. They're industrious, probably because they're cold most the time and have to keep moving. I'd take the long walk uphill in Gooseman Park carrying nothing but an apple and a practical outlook. I would reward myself with a Copenhagen and some strong coffee when I got home.

So, as you can see, the checkered shift would be less demanding. I could basically watch T.V. in that outfit and eat Shake-a-Puddin' or Whip 'n Chill if they still make it. I could smoke, slurp macaroni and cheese and green jello. I could swing down the street all fancy-free humming a *Hey There* song. I'll need a vinyl purse for the crook of my arm, with Kleenex, Kotex and bubblegum lipstick inside. I'll have a bubble bath with multicoloured balls of gel, put my hair up in big rollers, or cardboard Minute Maid cans and worry about my skin. I'll look for a Coty compact with face powder.... but, stop it, that is for tomorrow. I get ahead of myself. I am still Chinese.

Tonight, I'll order chow mein. I don't know what the Chinese do in the evening. I have nothing exotic in the fridge except soy sauce and a half jar of maraschino cherries from when I was a cocktail waitress making Manhattans at home. That outfit was a bomb, but impractical. I was glad when Twila Vance, cocktail waitress, shed her identity.

I expect there will be a lot of calls tonight, being Friday. They start coming in around eleven, after most saddos have been turned down by their fantasy dates at the local bar. They'll call, burping from dark man-caves with a single lazy-boy in front of a T.V. I always hear a T.V. in the background. I keep the volume down on mine and watch the flickering images as I whisper, groan and giggle in a made up language to the thrill of lonely men. These guys are my bread and butter. The phone rings. Wow, they're starting early tonight.

"Hey, Lila?" a sneaky sounding voice asks. "What's going on, Lila-girl?" I know I told you my name is Jane. Lala is my working name. Easy for anyone to say, and foreign sounding.

"Lala" I correct. "Laaaaaaa La! Moo ma waaaa so! Hoofa hoofa!" I hear a shuffling sound on his end of the line. A zip? He is confident he has reached the intended number. "What you wearin' tonight Lala?" The standard. This will be easy.

"Weeeeeee! Ooocha!" I squeal a little. "Muh weeba toooooo!" I giggle naughtily. His voice on the other end is a little forced and breathless. Long silences. I am going to have to keep talking.

"Lala von leaky! Moomy nina? Nina? Oh nina!" I grip my own throat and squeak. He hangs up. Easiest thirty bucks I ever made. I must write a list of nonsense words. Some nights I'm not so inspired.

The buzzer rings. My Chinese food is here. That was quick. I uncurl from my oversized beanbag chair and hobble over to the door as if foot bound, one leg asleep. The delivery boy is – Chinese. He does a double take, not knowing whether to be insulted. Perhaps the black wig and eye makeup was a step too far. But he nods and smiles when I offer a large tip. Xie Xie! Zaijian!

The shift was gone the next day. Damn. S.I.G.-fail. But the consolation was a yellow gingham blouse with ruffles. Summer sleeveless, of course. I could go a lot of directions with this one. I decide on a denim skirt with its own hem ruffle and metal concha belt. Ah, red

cowboy boots, just my size. Why not? Not sure who I am yet. I bring a gunny sack with me to the thrift. As I find new items to wear, I stash my old clothes in the bag and walk out, a new person, unnamed till I am in the parking lot.

I rummage around for a percussion band of silver bangles. How many teenagers have driven everyone crazy with the constant treble of bangles? I wonder if Yardley makes lemon talcum powder? It's trashy-matchy but who cares? I might need a corn dog. Or some candy floss. I add a jean jacket, and blue eyeshadow.

Now I am a complete person from somewhere else in time for twelve dollars and ninety-five cents. I grab a fuzzy bear and slip into the photo booth of the Hollywell Mall. I'm just the type to go mysteriously missing after a day at the fair.

I know these things. There would be interviews with my tearful mother on a modest front porch, pleading for any leads what-so-ever.

I pin the photos, with a notice, on the mall bulletin board. *Candy McGuire, missing person since 1951, our gingham girl*, it said. No contact info, nothing. It will give people something to think about and a reminder to cherish their loved ones. By the time they see it, I'll be someone else.