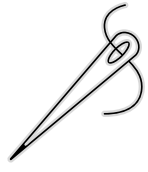


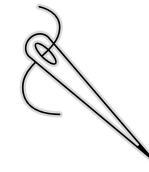


The Dress

By J.H. Jones



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Gerta melted into the dark arch of a doorway, keeping her eye on the dressmaker's shop on the opposite side of Orchard Street. Shadows danced against the building's façade as a chill gust sent the flames from the gas streetlights shifting and pulsing.

She took a deep breath and caught the sulfur-scented gas wafting on the night air, then edged out of the doorway a few inches, hoping to glimpse the workroom window at the back of the shop's main floor. Livvie and she plied their sewing trade there, day after day, and Livvie worked at night, too. But pushcarts and wagons, which the owners left along the narrow way until dawn, obscured her view. She had to get across the street to make sure.

The cathedral bell tolled midnight, and as the final gong reverberated through the darkness, Gerta knew it was now or never.

With a shiver, she pulled her shawl close around her shoulders, keeping her precious cargo, a glass bottle, tucked in the crook of her arm. She padded across the cobblestones and then shimmied between the carts, but her long skirts caught on the rough wood, trapping her in a pool of amber light and a cloud of rotted cabbage and spoiled apples. Her mouth went dry, realizing a late-night passerby could spot her.

How can I explain what I'm doing here?

Grabbing a fold of her skirt, she yanked as hard as she could. Free, she slipped down the alleyway that ran alongside the dressmaker's shop and stopped short of the back window.

The grimy window glowed with lamplight, which meant Livvie was still in the workroom. Gerta swallowed hard, hugged the bottle to her chest, and ducked under the window sash to head for the back entrance. The lock had never been fixed properly and gave way easily under the pressure of her shoulder.

Inside, the dark was as black as the velvet Livvie used to trim her dress.

She's working on her dress now. She's always working on it. Perfecting it. The one I sketched. The one she made for herself to steal away my Burt.

Gerta blinked back sudden tears, then her eyes flicked to the only light that relieved the darkness—a silver sliver that shone under the door to the workroom on her right. Moving quickly, she uncorked the bottle, splashed liquid against the oak panels and pooled more onto the floor below. A foul odor, like burned garlic, choked her nose and throat, but she braced herself against the wall, dug into her pocket and pulled out a little box.

In an instant, a match trembled between her fingers. Without thinking, she heard the scratch, saw the flame, and felt the whoosh as the wood caught fire faster than she expected.

With her arm protecting her face, she reeled into the alley and heard an urgent tapping from behind the window. As she crept close, she could make out the flashes of orange and red leaping inside, but in the foreground Livvie's face pressed against the filthy glass and her fingers tapped, tapped, tapped.

Their eyes met.

Does she know?

For a split second, Gerta fought an impulse to run back to the workroom, but her knees buckled, then Livvie's face contorted with a screech of agony as scarlet flames roared upward, exploding through the glass.

Too late.

The young woman flung herself onto the street and screamed.

"Gerta? What are you doing here?" Burt grabbed her by the shoulders, his voice cutting through the noise. The fire roared, horses' hooves rang against the cobbles, and people shouted instructions, shoving past them.

Does he suspect?

"I...I..." She tipped her head back and could see his thick red hair hanging about his face. Sweat glistened on his brow, and soot streaked his cheeks. At that moment, she didn't care about the fire or Livvie. She wanted to melt against his broad chest, feel

the comfort of his brawny arms around her, put into plain words the wrongs that had been done to her.

He shook her off, sending her back onto her heels. “I’ve got to help the firefighters. There’s nothing you can do here. Go home!”

A wave of young men wearing large leather hats embossed with brass eagles swept him into a bucket line that stretched along the length of the street. Another group, their thick wool coats steaming in the heat, hauled a hand pumper into position. Water met the blaze, and a gray haze reeking of wet ash surged. Yet there was another smell, too. A sweet scent of charred meat.

Her heart slammed against her ribs.

I had no choice. She deserved it. It had to be done.

Gerta turned away and pushed through the crowd, heading east to Kleindeutschland, where she shared rooms with Livvie.

*

Pounding threatened to burst down the door, as a pale ray of morning sun snaked between Gerta’s threadbare curtains. She rose from her bed, where she had lain awake for hours, and pulled a thin wrapper around her.

It’s him. Does he suspect? What will I say?

She opened the door.

“She’s gone. Livvie’s dead.”

Burt stood on the threshold, his face ravaged and his eyes red. As he sagged against the doorjamb, a brown paper bundle wedged under one arm came loose and slid to the floor. He snatched it up and then stumbled into the little sitting room, gabbling about the fire and the dangers of unattended flames and cheap lamp oil. At last, he sagged into a shabby armchair and held his head in his hands. “What am I going to do, Gerta?” His voice dissolved into sobs that sent his powerful shoulders shuddering.

Gerta knelt beside him, and her hand stole across his back. “There, there. I hoped...but when she didn’t come home...”

He sat up. “Is that what you were doing at the shop?”

Her arm stiffened, and she pulled her hand away. “What?”

“Last night. Is that why you were there? Did you go there to bring her home?”

Gerta’s tongue darted over her dry lips. “Yes. That’s it. I went to bring her home. You know how she was. She loved the dress and worked on it all night long if she could.”

“That dress.” Burt stroked the bundle resting on his lap. “Fires are funny things. They don’t always burn like you’d expect.”

“What do you mean?”

Did I leave a clue behind? Does he know what I did?

“Everything was burned to a crisp, except for a table in the corner. When the smoke cleared, the dress was in a neat pile on the table as if Livvie had put it there for safekeeping.” He shook his head. “I don’t know why, but I took it. Since it was hers, I thought I’d keep it to remember. She worked so hard to make it pretty.”

“It was pretty. I designed it, and then Livvie took my design. I’ll get the drawings. You’ll see.”

His hand closed around her wrist, keeping her on her knees beside him. “After that, I walked and walked. I don’t know where or when, but somehow I got to my bed and fell asleep, then I had this, um, dream.” His voice softened with a kind of reverence. “Livvie came to me. I swear she was right there, next to me, and she was wearing white, like an angel, and she was so bright. She said... she said she wanted you to have it. The dress. She said you’d understand.”

His fingers undid the package string, and the dress spilled across Gerta’s lap.

My dress!

She caught her breath, running her hands across the rich folds of fabric. Livvie had always commanded her to stay away from it, but now there was no one to stop her looking. For the first time, she studied it up close—the perfect tiny stitches, the yards of delicate sapphire blue silk, the elegant trimming of black velvet embedded with jet

beads, the silvery roses climbing the bodice. It was even more exquisite than she remembered.

“Wait. I’ll only be a minute.” She moved behind the screen in the corner, then slipped the dress over her chemise, the silk whispering against her skin—cool and smooth. With a hitch of her shoulders and arms, the neckline and sleeves caressed her—soft as a breath, so light she barely felt its weight.

“I’ve delivered it. Done what I set out to do,” Burt called. The floor creaked, and Gerta sensed he had stood up.

“Don’t go. Let me show you.” She stepped to the center of the room, and the dress seemed to float around her, rippling through the air, the hem whispering against the worn floorboards.

He froze, eyes wide. “Gerta, I...You...You’ve changed. You’re...beautiful. Funny, I never noticed before.” A dazed look stole over his face. “Why, in that dress I swear you’re more beautiful than—” As if losing track of his thoughts, he blinked.

Gerta felt a thrum of triumph run through her veins.

Without Livvie around, he sees me. At last! I did the right thing.

“I’m the same Gerta Schmidt I’ve always been. It was Livvie. She kind of confused you.”

He gave a slow nod, as if he understood her logic. She continued, “I don’t mean to speak ill of the...anyway, you remember you and I liked each other, before she came along.” Her fingers played across the silver-threaded roses twining up her sides, rose petals nodding along the full curve of her breasts, the low neckline topped with shiny beads exposing her bare skin. “I was sad when you chose her and said you were engaged, but of course, a man knows his own mind.”

“Knows his own mind,” Burt echoed.

“It’s all past now, isn’t it? I mean,” Gerta wet her lips. “You’re not engaged now, are you?”

“Engaged? To her? I was a fool,” Burt said, edging closer, his voice low and intimate. “I don’t know what I was thinking. You were—you are—I want—” He reached for her.

Rat-a-tat-tat. The door banged open, and a wizened woman, muttering in German, shuffled inside, bringing in puffs of sauerkraut and camphor. She folded her thin arms across the bombazine top of her old-fashioned dress and clucked her tongue.

“What’s going on here? Yah, I thought I heard a man voice. Ach! No men callers!” She shook a gnarled finger at Gerta. “You know the rules.” She glared at Burt. “Take yourself out of here. You men are all alike.”

Burt’s face turned bright crimson. “Mrs. Sofie, what kind of landlady are you? You’ve seen me before, and you barge in here, accusing me, as we, um...” He trailed off, scratching his head, looking confused.

Gerta jumped in. “We’re mourning our friend who died.”

“Yah?” Mrs. Sofie cocked her head to one side, and with her scraggly hair and black dress, Gerta pictured a cowbird perched and twitching, ready to attack. But the old woman’s hazel eyes were more like an eagle’s—predator sharp—and they fixed on her.

Gerta twisted her fingers together. “Yes, something terrible happened. A tragic accident. You remember the dressmaker on Orchard, where my roommate and I worked? There was a fire last night, and Livvie Helrune,” she swallowed, “didn’t make it out alive.”

Mrs. Sofie grunted. “*Ich habe es gewusst*. I knew it. Yah, I heard about a fire and a girl dead. I wondered if it was your roommate.” She put her hands on her hips. “Makes no difference. You man, you get out.”

“I will not, you interfering old—”

Gerta rested her hand on Burt’s arm. “Maybe it’s for the best. We’ve both been through so much and you need to work.” She gave him a coy sidelong look. “After all, we have a lot to talk about. Like, the future. Maybe even our future?”

“You mean, our...” His eyes widened and his voice rose with excitement. “Promise me you’ll wear the dress and meet me tonight by the Castle on the Battery. I want to talk to you about something important. I think you know what I’m going to say.”

As Burt dashed out, Mrs. Sofie's cunning eyes rested on the young woman. "Rent? Gerta Schmidt pay half. Livvie Helrune pay half. Now Livvie gone, yah? How you pay full rent on seamstress wages?"

"Hmm? Maybe I'll have a husband soon to take care of me," Gerta said, twirling away from the old woman's gaze.

Mrs. Sofie knows nothing.

She paused in front of the vanity mirror she and her friend had shared and caught her breath.

No wonder Burt pays attention to me. I am beautiful.

The color of the dress brought out her skin's tender blush, and her hair, once mousey brown, now shone with highlights of old gold.

Mrs. Sofie squinted at the dress. "*Die Schöne!* Beautiful. Such a dress. Your roommate's dress, yah?"

"Livvie's? Maybe she sewed it, but I designed it."

The lines etched in the old woman's face softened with something that looked like pity. "Fire. Fire drives away evil spirits, in the old country we know this. But here? In this new world, evil spirits like it here, they cling to things. Cling to..." She frowned at the dress.

"What are you talking about? Evil spirits? You're crazy," Gerta said sharply.

Mrs. Sofie sucked in her breath. "Rent?"

"You'll get whatever you're owed, old woman. But I don't know how long I'll stay, after tonight. My plans may change."

Mrs. Sofie chuckled as she counted on her fingers, "Your roommate's dress *und* your roommate's man."

"What are you saying? Are you accusing me of something—" The words tumbled from Gerta's mouth before she could stop them. She clamped her lips shut. "I mean, what happened to Livvie was an accident. It was very tragic, but it brought Burt and I back together again. That's all."

“*Das ist nicht richtig.*” Mrs. Sofie sighed. “This is not right. Think, Gerta. Think hard.”

Gerta slammed the door shut on the landlady’s retreating back, then turned and threw back the curtains.

If the dress shimmers like this in the sunshine, I can’t wait to see it by moonlight.

*

Poised under a tree along the Battery Green, Gerta swayed to the accordion music that drifted from a nighttime celebration at Castle Garden. She hummed the familiar tune, catching the aroma of the restaurant’s spiced sausages and mustard and the sour tang of beer.

Time for food and dancing later. First, Burt. My Burt.

With a laugh of delight, she pirouetted in excitement, catching the glow of the moon with her dress. The silver embroidery gleamed, and the jet beads sparkled, and every head in the milling crowd turned. Men stopped mid-conversation. Women whispered behind their hands.

Gerta felt her blood sing with the music and the power of her beauty. Even better, Burt stood before her, with a look on his face as if he’d never seen her before, as if she were everything he wanted in his entire life.

“Gerta, my love, my true—”

The young woman placed her gloved finger against his lips and whispered, “Not here, Burt dear. Let’s walk in the park, under the trees. Where we can be alone.” She flashed a shy smile, then lowered her eyes.

They turned away from the bustling crowd to follow the pathway along the Green. He took her arm in his, and she felt his muscles bunch beneath his rough jacket. She imagined his arms would soon wrap around her, crushing her in an embrace.

He said, “Sometimes your heart surprises you.”

Gerta gripped his arm.

Does he know? Does he guess that my heart would not let me rest until Livvie was gone?

He seemed to struggle with something inside. “It’s so hard to tell you this. What I’m trying to say is, sometimes you think you want one thing, but then you realize you were wrong.” Eying Gerta with an uncertain expression, he added, “You might think I’m flighty. I’m not. I mean, Livvie was sweet, but she wasn’t the, um, real thing. Can you understand the difference? I felt affection for her, sure. But when I saw you in the dress, something came over me, and I knew—”

“Shh.” Gerta pulled him under the nearby trees. “Show me your feelings. You don’t have to use words.”

“But I do! Because I want you to understand. What happened to Livvie—a terrible accident, God rest her soul—but it made me see things clear. She was nice, but you? What I feel for you is real, and life’s too short to wait. I mean why wait when you might lose everything in a moment?”

His eyes sought Gerta’s as his hands covered hers. “I can’t lose you, Gerta. I won’t! You’ve got to...”

She inched backwards, drawing him deeper into the shadows. “Got to what, Burt? What have I got to do?”

A single moon ray cut through a break in the canopy overhead, and Burt stopped, cradling her head between his thumbs and tipping her face up into the light. “Marry me, Gerta. Tomorrow. I’ll get a ring for you, and we’ll find new rooms, far from the prying eyes of the old lady Sofie. You’ll be Mrs. Burt O’Byrne, a proper married woman. The dressmaker plans to rebuild the shop—a good job for me, with good wages, too, and I’ll take care of you. The way you deserve.”

Gerta sensed a wild tattoo pulsating behind her breastbone, and her breathing became ragged and uneven. His warm hands were strong, and the aroma of tobacco and leather surrounded him. “Yes, Burt. I’ll marry you. Oh, kiss me, Burt. Hold me.”

She heard titters somewhere in the dark—another couple, no doubt—just as he bent his head to claim her lips. He stopped a hair’s breadth from her mouth and dropped his hands from her face.

“No. Not here, love. I can’t kiss you here. This is for people who have to hide in the dark. We’re going to be married! Proper! No, I don’t want to kiss you here.”

A raw feeling of need surged along Gerta’s limbs. She wanted to kiss him. Taste him. Feel his arms encircling her. Now. With closed eyes, she hissed, “You must, dearest. One kiss as a token of our love. Just one. Then, we’ll go, I swear to you, but do it now.” Suddenly, she giggled. “How strong you are. Not so tight! Let go of me a little!” She fluttered her eyes open. “I said—”

“What?” Burt stared at her from a few paces away and hitched his head in the direction they had come. “Let’s head back to the Castle.”

“Burt?” Gerta gasped as her eyelids peeled back.

“What’s wrong?”

Looking down at the front, she could have sworn the embroidered rose thorns swelled and lengthened. Along her sides, a million pins seemed to prick her, and she scratched her nails at the thread to ease the stays underneath. She panted, “The dress. It’s...it’s like it has hands. It’s squeezing...me.”

“I’m so glad you wore the dress. You are beautiful, Gerta.”

“Listen to me! It’s too tight!”

Burt edged closer to the main path, muttering, “Ladies and their corsets!” He tilted his ear toward the music and laughter, then called over his shoulder, “There’s still time for a dance.”

She flailed her arms and fought against the silk. With each attempt to take a step, the skirt tangled tighter around her legs, and the hem clutched at her ankles. She couldn’t move.

“Aren’t you coming?” His tone sounded bewildered.

“Like a...clothes press...against my legs...cutting my skin.” She writhed and then screamed as the neckline’s jet beads sliced into her soft flesh, sending blood dripping between her breasts and staining the bodice.

Burt’s eyes grew round.

“Get it off!” She shrieked.

As if he were in a dream, he moved toward the young woman. He fumbled with the fasteners and pulled at the sleeves, but the dress remained taut, fitted to her body.

Gerta gulped at the air but couldn’t fill her lungs, and she wanted to with all her heart. If she could get her lungs to work, she could tell Burt about what Mrs. Sofie said, about evil spirits clinging to things and about everything being Livvie’s fault, but no sound came from her mouth.

She heard only a creaking noise, as if something was bending in a direction it wasn’t designed for, until there was a crack like a pistol shot and she felt hot blinding pain shooting through her torso.

My rib!

She collapsed onto the ground.

“Gerta! My Gerta!” Burt wailed, reaching for her.

Hot. It’s so hot.

She opened and closed her lips, concentrating as hard as she could, but nothing came out. She fixed him with a final desperate stare, willing him to understand her, when she saw wisps of smoke twisting up from her chest.

Buuuuuuuurt!

Gerta burst into flame, sending Burt careening onto his backside and screaming for help. Dozens of people poured from the beer garden, rushing to find out what the commotion was, only to see him pointing at the blue and red flames dancing as high as the treetops and licking the night sky.

But in a matter of moments, the inferno died away. Also gone were the dress and Gerta. The blaze had consumed everything. Only a patch of charred ground remained, smoking with a whiff of burned flesh.

Burt swayed, his face gray with what looked like shock. An onlooker thrust a mug of beer into his trembling fingers. He drank deep, then wiped his mouth with the back of his knuckles.

“I needed that. We were walking, my girl, Livvie, and...no, I mean, Gerta, no, I mean...” He ran his trembling hands through his red hair. “I can’t remember what happened.”

Mrs. Sofie jostled his elbow and shrugged. “*Das Kleid erinnerte sich*. The dress remembered.” She glanced at the scorched ground, nodded with satisfaction, then disappeared into the crowd.

THE END

