

Book Info

"A Very Special Dress and other stories".

Published and Distributed by:
194 Rodney Press

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ISBN: [978-1-945211-06-5](#) PRINT

A Very Special Dress

Evelyn Zaleson was the youngest of eight children. Like most parents in America during the 1930s, for Evelyn's father, the newly naturalized citizen Jacob Zaleson, the overriding objective was to provide a dry roof over his family's heads, plenty of food for the table, and the very best for his children. Unfortunately, Jacob was limited in what he could provide by his meager earnings from a slaughterhouse as an assembly line butcher.

His American born wife, Marsha, many years his junior, was a stay-at-home mom. Together, they prioritized the needs of their four sons, because sons could always be expected to support and care for their parents in their old age. By comparison, they believed that their only responsibility to their four daughters was to actively search out rich husbands for them.

One by one, Evelyn watched her older siblings be introduced and married off to their life partners and begin raising families of their own. "When will it be my turn?" she kept asking.

Then she met Benjamin.

Evelyn began spending her afternoons at the small soda fountain-luncheonette newspaper stand on the street where she lived. Benjamin worked there with his father and mother. Evelyn had a crush on Benjamin the minute she saw him, and he really liked the attention he was getting from this spirited young girl.

The store opened, like clockwork, every morning at 5 o'clock, seven days a week, rain or shine and everything in between. Benjamin's father usually opened the store by 7 a.m. and closed it around 11 p.m.; his wife and son Benjamin joined him at 8 a.m. After the last morning rush, Benjamin took over so that his parents could go home and rest.

That was until that girl, which was how Benjamin's mother referred to Evelyn, began stalking her beloved son, Benny. As soon as Benjamin's mother became aware of Evelyn's daily visits, she made sure she was sitting by the window, in front of the cash register whenever he was working. Her glares and harsh mumblings either didn't register with Evelyn or just fed Evelyn's hopes that one day the dislike would turn to love in her favor. However, with or without the maternal acceptance, as she told her sisters, "nothing ... no one ... was going to keep me from my man!"

One evening, as Benjamin's father was locking up, two young toughs grabbed the brown paper bag with the day's cash and began beating the old man. The father did what he could to resist, but in the struggle, was savagely beaten and died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. From that point on, Benjamin and his mother ran the store. The mother left around 4 p.m. each day to go home and make supper, which she brought to Benjamin by 6 p.m. sharp. Evelyn became a fixture on the third stool of the long fountain during those two glorious hours.

Eventually, a romance bloomed and Benjamin proposed. He twisted a piece of wire into the shape of a ring and gently placed it around her finger. Evelyn accepted before the words had even left his lips. He asked her to keep it a secret for a while but she couldn't wait to tell her sisters; within minutes word spread throughout the neighborhood.

Evelyn began working on her parents to give their permission and Benjamin did the same with his mother. The Zalesons warmly welcomed their soon to be son-in-law into their family. Benjamin's mother was upset when she first heard the news, but eventually she too accepted the inevitable. With a heavy sigh, she gave her approval and with the look of one who had just consumed the juice of a dozen lemons, air-kissed her soon to be daughter-in-law somewhere in the general area of her cheek.

A wedding date could now be set.

There was very, very, very little money available from either side and so it was understood that there would be a very small wedding, followed by a luncheon. Only the immediate family members would be invited. One of Evelyn's brothers knew someone who knew someone who worked in Gluckstern's Kosher Restaurant on the lower east side of New York City. Somehow, the owner of Gluckstern's was persuaded to

drastically cut the cost of the luncheon and Evelyn's four brothers chipped in to pay for it.

Evelyn's dream was to have a new wedding dress and a separate dress for the reception luncheon, but that was not to be. A relative offered to provide a wedding dress that was either taken in or let out many different times in the past. The most important two facts about this dress was that every bride who wore it enjoyed long and possibly happy marriages, and each of those marriages produced multiple babies. Other than hopeless Annie, the black sheep of the family, none had been widowed at an early age. A neighbor reshaped the dress to fit this bride-to-be. The shoes came from one of Evelyn's older sisters.

Another sister advised Evelyn that it was just bad luck to start a marriage without something new and so together they decided that there must be — at the very least — a new dress for the luncheon. Evelyn worked several jobs and ultimately saved enough for — as she called it — a fancy, shmancy, knock them-dead dress for the post-ceremony luncheon.

The search for a dress began at Macy's, then Gimble Brothers, then John Wanamaker's but there was absolutely no doubt that the ultimate purchase would be made at Lord & Taylor. Although there were a few nice dresses at the other stores, Evelyn just knew that she would find the dress of her dreams at Lord & Taylor ... and she did.

She brought one of her sisters to the store to see the dress and her sister agreed, "This dress is worth living on bread and water for a month — if you have to." They talked to the sales clerk; Evelyn was positioned on a small platform and stood erect as a friendly seamstress pinned and chalk-marked the dress to accent Evelyn's curves. A small deposit was left and Evelyn agreed to return later that week with the money. Three days later, in the subway on their way back to the store, someone stole Evelyn's purse. She broke down in tears, reflecting on all she had done just to make this purchase possible.

Realizing that she would never be able to come up with more money, she went back to the store to tell the sales clerk that she would not be able to finalize the purchase. Typical of better department stores of that day, the sales clerk expressed more concern for Evelyn's broken spirit than for losing this sale. Within minutes, Evelyn was surrounded by the store manager and several other clerks. The manager offered to accept the small down payment for the dress, but Evelyn refused. That would be charity, and charity was no way to begin a new life with her wonderful Benjamin. Ultimately, it was agreed that she would be allowed to work off the full price of the dress as a part

timer ... which she did. The manager threw in a pair of shoes and the clerks chipped in to pay for a pair of nylons — which in pre-war America was more valuable than gold — especially to a young woman about to be married.

Although she never wore the dress out of her apartment ever again, whenever she felt down or sad, she would sit in front of her closet and look at it. The dress hung in her clothes closet on a cloth trimmed padded hanger, in a heavy see-through plastic garment bag along with her wedding flower bouquet, until the day she died.

Author's note: My mother told me this story a few days before my own wedding. It helped me to understand why Lord & Taylor always held such a special place in her heart.

For several weeks before the wedding day, my mother continually suggested that I purchase a new dress from Lord & Taylor for my wife-to-be to take on our honeymoon. At first, I told her that my wife-to-be prefers to pick out her own clothes. Then I told her that she had her own tastes in clothing. Finally, I just ignored the suggestion. As the hour grew closer, her comments became louder. When it was clear that she needed to help me understand her motives, she sat me down and began to tell me the story, as she remembered it, of her very special dress.