

Robin broke in eagerly: "Yeah, at the country club, no less."

Cathy resumed quick control by saying loudly: "They have to know about reservations. It's May 17. So will we go? Daddy and my date can come later—you know, for the dancing."

"Is it important, honey? Is everybody going? What about you girls?"

"I'd sure like to. I'm going to try to persuade my mom. She doesn't have a formal, though." Donna's voice trailed off.

"A formal, huh!" Doris said.

"Hope Daddy'll let me get a new one, Mom. You know, something real snaky."

Robin clapped noisily and said, "What you ought to do, Mrs. Healy, is get dresses alike, you and Cathy. You'd be so cute. Why," she pronounced with the breathless air of a discoverer, "you'd look just like sisters—honest!"

Next day Mrs. Healy and her daughter went into the city to look at dresses. The Village Square shops carried nice enough things, of course, but nothing really swishy. And if they wanted dresses alike, they would have to find them in a style equally becoming to both.

Luckily, Doris caught sight of a pet saleslady almost the minute they stepped into the handsome interior of Chez Gallice. While Doris explained what they wanted, Cathy peered around curiously. Finally, she asked impatiently: "Where is everything, Mom? Where are all the clothes?"

Doris and the saleslady laughed together. Doris explained gently: "Oh, sweetie, they don't have their things out on racks. People paw so. Miss Anderson will show us what they have."

There were two superbly simple blacks that would have turned the fair-skinned Doris into a glittering column of ebony and ice but, of course, they were far too sophisticated for Cathy. And there were the standard bouffant pink and blue tulle that would have made Cathy a fairy princess. But there was absolutely nothing Miss Anderson showed that was remotely possible for both of them.

Then, just as Doris began gathering bag, gloves, and coat together, Miss Anderson said dubiously: "I don't know . . . there just might be this one gown. It's a beautiful thing—but the color. It's a sort of electric blue. Do you think it might be what you're looking for?"

They shivered together at the thought of nearly having missed it! It was that right, that sumptuous, that special! Cathy breathed delight at its unabashed bareness. Doris judiciously admired the sculptured sleekness of its lines, the newness of its swept-back hem.

THEY FOLLOWED Miss Anderson into the fitting rooms. Like a small, churning windmill, Cathy vigorously moved arms and legs and, within seconds, presented herself for inspection. She looked, Doris thought happily, absolutely breath-taking. How on earth, she chided herself, could she ever have thought the girl might turn into an ambling bullock.

Cathy was, beyond doubt, an authentic young beauty!

The dress seemed to float about her. The deep décolletage displayed her white-gold skin, the slender column of her neck, the delicacy of fine bones covered by fragile flesh. And the color—harsh, indeed, as Miss Anderson had promised—served only to circle the slim young figure in a flattering shimmer.

Doris brushed a spontaneous kiss across the girl's soft, flushed cheek, and breathed proudly: "That is absolutely perfect on you, honey. They'll all flip when they see you at the dance!"

There was a tussle with the zipper in Doris' dress. She stood patiently while Miss Anderson adjusted it. Cathy stood silent, watching, suddenly subdued. A frown creased her forehead in a mocking, adult look of worry. Doris said, "Don't wrinkle up your face, Cathy. It makes you look ugly."

Finally, Doris was able to step away from Miss Anderson. She twirled lightly, loving the majestic feel of the dress. Slowly, she stopped, smiled fondly at herself in the great mirrors that stood ceiling-high before and behind her. But the smile froze on her face while disappointment seeped slowly into her mind and heart.

For Doris, the dress was awful! The straight lines poked out at hipbones and knees. The bare top revealed scrawny hollows below her throat. And the color—acid, bitter, gaudy—turned her pampered, delicate skin into a jaundiced, fading parchment.

Doris didn't say anything: she didn't have to. Cathy and Miss Anderson stood still, staring silently at her. As Doris put a trembling hand behind her, Miss Anderson leaped to help her from the dress. She said in a low tone of apology, "I'm sorry, Mrs. Healy. I didn't think . . ."

"It's all right, really it is," Doris spoke crisply. "We'll just have to look a bit more, won't we Ca . . ."

The girl stood, poised in the place her mother had just left. She examined herself in the mirror wistfully, dreamily. Doris saw her pat the dress lovingly.

A million years ago, she thought yearning, when I was 16, what wouldn't I have given for an arrogant, peacocky dress just like that one. But, she reminded herself mockingly, you're not 16 any more, but your daughter Cathy is!

She looked slowly down at the drift of electric blue at the girl's feet. How right it was on Cathy! How wrong it was on her! Vain frivolous woman that she was! Blindly holding on to the frayed cord of youth that no longer belongs to you.

Doris made herself step across to Cathy. She smiled at the girl proudly.

Gently, she said, "Honey, that dress was made for you—but not for me. For me," she pivoted swiftly to Miss Anderson, blinking back the foolish flicker of tears, "for me—well, let's start with those two black cocktail things you showed me first. You know, Miss Anderson, those smart . . . matronly . . . things."

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