

I Bought Your Wedding Dress at Goodwill and I Dyed it Black
Kelly Chastain - Sierra Nevada Review May 2022

We weren't even in the market for a wedding dress until we saw yours. With its lace bodice and full skirt of layered, satin-trimmed ruffles, it probably cost you a small fortune in the early 90s. The tags had been ripped out, as had the stitching along the zipper, leaving it flapping open in the back. I couldn't help but wonder if it had happened on your wedding night and if you had laughed about it.

I held it against my body so my cousin, Kate, could get a better view. "The skirt is the best part."

"Definitely," she agreed, with a smile on her face.

Kate has built her fine art photography portfolio around a goddess concept, using statement gowns from used clothing stores, and setting women deep in the forest or in a sea of tombstones or in fields of waist-high grass. The models' hair and makeup has spanned every epoch: the long flowing locks of a dewy hippie, a fierce tribal queen in a golden headdress, and a green-haired, alt-glam nymph with white triangles traced onto her forehead.

Styling photoshoots was not for the faint of finances, especially when creating the elaborate images Kate envisioned. Not only was thrift store scouting essential, it had become a sacred event. Where else could we find an array of unique and vintage gowns at rock bottom prices? When we spotted yours, we were looking to style a shoot with Sarah, a Facebook friend, who lived in the countryside east of Portland. Kate planned to photograph her on her black and white drum horse, Gideon. He was a fiery stallion with a long mane and tail, and eyes as blue as the Adriatic. He looked otherworldly.

Ideally, the skirt would drape over Gideon's back and haunches. Something frilly that would catch on the wind as Sarah galloped him over the field. Your dress was the perfect fit.

"Maybe we won't use the top. We can just use the skirt with a corset instead. That would be cool," Kate mused. As we examined the gown, I imagined chopping the bodice off with kitchen shears and wondered how the skirt would stay on afterward. Our combined sewing knowledge consisted of threading a few needles and reaffixing an odd button here and there. Kate owned a sewing machine, but she hadn't used it in almost two decades. But for twenty dollars, your dress was a steal and exactly what we'd been looking for.

Kate pulled the train back, spreading it over the floor to see its full size. "And we'll dye it black," she said. "That'll be hot."

Your dress was a nightmare to dye. If we had a pot large enough to fit a dress constructed of roughly ten yards of fabric and that weighed as many pounds, we'd have just cooked it on the stovetop like civilized people. Instead we put it in the washing machine on the hottest setting and added kettles of boiling water to get it up to temperature. Per the directions on their website, we estimated that eight boxes of black powdered RIT dye would cover your dress, and if it didn't end up black, perhaps it would be a soft charcoal color. I dissolved the packets into a stockpot half full of boiling water.

As the washing machine filled, Kate turned your dress inside out so the lace wouldn't get caught on the center agitator. Even though we weren't going to use the bodice in the shoot, she couldn't bear the thought of actually chopping it off. After all, your dress was vintage and she didn't have it in her to destroy vintage clothing. Never mind the fact that you already annihilated

the zipper. Surprisingly, one tag remained sewn into a seam about halfway down the skirt and it read: Dry Clean Only. I thought about Kate's plea to save the whole gown as she stuffed it into the machine anyway. The pot of boiling dye became heavy in my hands.

Clad in a pair of yellow dishwashing gloves, I poured the dye over your dress and hand-mixed the colorant, swirling it through the folds of fabric. The snaking streams of black quickly dispersed in the water, turning it a dirty gray. With the timer set and the agitator turning, I left the lid open and watched your dress transform as it jostled in the water with a hypnotizing rhythm.

I wondered what it looked like when it was brand new. Did you know it was the one immediately? Or was it one of those frocks that was terribly ugly on the hanger? The type that you try on just for laughs only to find that it fits your body like it was made for you. Or was this wedding dress like mine? One that was handed down to you and not something you'd have chosen in a million years. The dirty gray water sloshed over the fabric, pulling it under completely.

I have a complicated history with wedding dresses, and if I'm honest, most traditions. Maybe it's because I've found that I'm not all that good at marriage. I'm not all that good at living up to expectations either. They just chafe, and perhaps we had that in common. That we thought we knew what we were getting ourselves into, but in the end it was just another custom that we couldn't mold ourselves around, and one we certainly couldn't uphold. Perhaps that was the romantic in me talking, longing for a kindred spirit out in the world who also felt defeated by what we'd been told was essential. Even so, as I imagined you on your big day I couldn't help but smile. The ruffles eddied under the dull surface of the water. I bet you looked amazing in this dress.

Halfway through, Kate peered into the machine.

“I think we set the water level too high,” she said. “It looks pretty diluted.”

“Maybe it will come out a soft gray.”

When we took the dress out of the machine, it weighed enough to sink a ship. We wrestled with it as we turned it right side out.

“Hmm,” we said in unison as we hung it from the garage door rail to dry. The color was barely a whisper.

“Paint always dries darker. Maybe this will too,” I offered.

The next morning we stood before the dress, each of us with one eyebrow cocked and our mouths screwed shut. The lace on the bodice was made from a cotton blend, and it had only absorbed about half of the color, leaving it with a bluish-gray hypothermic pallor. The lace band at the waist, however, was 100% cotton and had sucked up the color like a Hoover. A solid black line cut straight across the dress. The ruffles, constructed of a nylon mesh-like material, and trimmed in satin fared the worst. The ruffles remained white. The trim had turned purple.

“We’ll do it again,” Kate said.

Even after finding a 40% off coupon at JoAnn Fabrics for the four bottles of liquid dye, the cost to color your dress climbed to forty-five dollars, more than twice its original price. In round two we were savvier. Less water, more dye, and this time, I agitated the dress by hand so I could watch the process and see if it needed to soak longer. We had also read somewhere online that in order for dye to adhere to nylon, you had to add vinegar to the mix.

Off I trotted to the garage with a two-cup Pyrex measuring cup full of vinegar and a determination to see your dress turn the shade of the devil's soul. I bent over the washing machine with my trusty yellow gloves, hand-churning your dress through the new batch of dye. As it turned progressively darker, I wondered what happened to you. How did your wedding dress end up at Goodwill?

I had thirty minutes to kill sloshing your gown, so of course I had theories. Like most matrimonial fodder, it was a victim of divorce. Discarded in the box of memories that neither side wanted to commemorate. There's the dress in the same Hefty garbage sack as the worn out Ann Taylor blazer and the ugly placemats that your Aunt Edna gave you for Christmas that one year. Perhaps dropping it at the donation center was the first sign of healing when you cast off an old life that never fit you in the first place. The pressure of your own expectations had become a noose. Perhaps that's the real reason the zipper was busted; your wings had caught the seam when they unfurled.

It also didn't have to be that complicated. You might be like me in another way: You're just not that sentimental about material things. Perhaps a baby was coming and you needed room in the closet and who on earth would want a wedding dress with a blown out zipper? Well. As it turns out, Kate. It could very well be that dropping it at Goodwill was an act of environmental integrity, and you figured someone could salvage the lace before it hit the landfill. No matter your reason, I wanted you to be happy with the decision. And more than that, I wanted you to be happy with how your life had turned out.

The ding of the timer interrupted my musing and I restarted the washing machine. Your dress was notably darker. Call us skeptics, but neither Kate nor I were optimistic that it would be black when it dried.

The next morning we resumed our position in the garage. The entire dress, with a few exceptions, had turned a soft purplish gray. Somehow the black band at the waist had faded to charcoal. I blamed the vinegar. Aside from the funky lace, it was gorgeous. Something even my tradition-shirking, divorcee's heart could get behind. "Wow," Kate said.

I hoped that you said the same thing when you saw this dress for the first time. I hoped that you were saying it still.