

## **If The Chanel Suit Doesn't Fit...**

by Jill Dalton

I had promised myself I'd never do extra work again. Unfortunately, my unemployment claim is running out, and I have no new job prospects on the horizon. So when extra casting calls—"Hi, Jill, we'd love to book you on the movie *Trainwreck*, written by and starring Amy Schumer. You'll be a lady who lunches"—chirps the woman on the phone. I'm left confronting my promises. Tying to entice me, the woman from casting continues, "You'll have two very long days (meaning I'll make money) at the Plaza Hotel (meaning I'll be inside)." Against my better judgment, like a battered wife returning to her abusive husband, I blurt out, "Yes. I'm available."

*Only two days; how bad can it be?*

I show up at my wardrobe fitting with my mother-of-the-bride lavender silk suit along with a simple, black sheath dress. The wardrobe mistress isn't impressed. She appraises my clothing choices, scrunches up her nose in disdain, scurries away like a squirrel searching for nuts, and returns with a cream-colored Chanel skirt suit.

"Put this on," she demands, thrusting the suit at me.

"Um—this is a size six. On a good day, I'm an eight."

"Put it on," she demands again.

I was raised in the military, so I do as I'm told.

"This is extremely snug," I say, sucking in my belly to pull up the zipper on the straight skirt. "I can barely breathe."

"Jacket," she says, dismissing me.

I cram myself into and button up the jacket.

"Shoes?"

I pull my sensible black pumps out of my bag.

"Those won't do," she scoffs. "What size?"

“Ten.”

Again, she rushes out of the dressing room and returns with four-inch, cream-colored stilettos—size 9 1/2. I wear a size ten.

“Put these on,” she commands.

They’re beautiful, but I have to squeeze my feet into these contraptions like one of the wicked stepsisters in *Cinderella*.

“I can’t possibly walk in these,” I say. “I broke my foot a couple of years ago.”

“Marvelous,” she coos, oblivious to my distress and misery. “Let’s take your photo.”

I smile, suck it in, and pose.

*Only two days; how bad can it be?*

The following morning, I arrive at the Plaza Hotel but, unlike Eloise, enter through the side entrance because extras aren’t allowed to use the front entry on Fifth Avenue. Once inside, I follow the signs to holding that lead me to an enormous room filled to overflowing with extras, hair and makeup stations, changing rooms, and a production assistant screaming at the top of his lungs, “SIGN IN. SIGN IN. GO DIRECTLY TO HAIR AND MAKEUP. GO DIRECTLY TO HAIR AND MAKEUP.” I sign in, claim a seat, and line up behind an endless string of extras. Once in the chair, the woman blows my hair bone-straight with enough heat to start a forest fire. Then I’m ordered to stand in yet another long line and wait. Eventually, I reach the next torture chair. The overworked, frazzled makeup woman slaps foundation on my face as she berates me, “Your eyelashes are too thin. What kind of mascara are you using?”

“Um—I’m not sure. I—”

“Whatever it is—it’s crap. Don’t use that junk again. Buy some eyelash-thickening serum.”

*I want to say, Really, lady? For your information, I’ve been cast alongside Academy Award-winning actors, and all you see are my sparse eyelashes!*

Humiliated, I slink back to my tiny chair in a massive room filled to overflowing with long rows of these childlike chairs. When I sit, the skirt of my Chanel suit hikes up, the waistband pinches my skin, and the jacket pulls tight against my chest like I’m an

overgrown Alice.

Digging through my bag, I pull out my copy of *The Death of the Liberal Class: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle*. I try to distract myself by reading but find the material too difficult to focus on in this environment. The book argues that the American people have been deceived by liberals, and the institutions put into place to serve and protect us have been replaced by corporations and the ruling oligarchs. The only thing more depressing than sitting in a child's chair while in a too-tight suit for a poverty wage is reading this book, so I stuff it back into my bag.

The expansive room crammed full of extras fills me with dread. I close my eyes. Not long ago, I was working with William Hurt on *Too Big to Fail*. He liked me, respected me, and hired me to assist him on several other projects. Now I'm a pathetic nobody surrounded by nobodies. The din in the room hums like a soft roar. *Relax*, I tell myself. *You're lying on the beach. The sun caresses your face. The waves softly lap at your feet. Imagine—*

I'm startled back to reality by the person behind me vigorously tapping me on the shoulder. "Jill! They called your name."

"Thanks," I say, pulling down my too-tight skirt and too-snug jacket. I grab my too-small, cream stilettos and head to the front door to be inspected by yet another wardrobe fanatic as the production assistant screams, "LINE UP! LINE UP! IF YOUR NAME WAS CALLED, LINE UP!" I join the other extras also waiting to be approved. The disgruntled wardrobe mistress goes down the line. "Um-hm. Um-hm. Um-hm." Until she gets to me. "Put those shoes on!" she scolds me like I'm in grammar school.

Holding on to the arm of the gentleman standing next to me, I cram my feet into the shoes, which shrink each time I put them on. Finally, the scowling wardrobe lady, who obviously missed her calling as a correction officer at Rikers, gives us one final once-over before begrudgingly nodding her disdainful approval.

The production assistant leads us out into the wide hallway with me limping behind the gaggle of extras until we finally reach set. Massive, white double doors open to reveal a vast, elegant dining room with enormous crystal chandeliers dripping from the ceiling and archways with columns lining the perimeter of the room. This opulent

space is otherwise known as the Grand Ballroom. This is old-world New York glamour at its best. Truman Capote held his famous Black and White Ball in this room.

Another production assistant motions for me to sit at a table with three other “ladies who lunch.” We exchange pleasantries. The table is covered with a white tablecloth that hangs almost to the floor. Relieved, I slip my toes out of those 9 1/2s, but I’m immediately reprimanded by another wardrobe Nazi who appears out of nowhere and snaps, “Put zie shoes on. Mach schnell!”

“The tablecloth covers my feet,” I say, trying to reason with her.

“MACH SCHNELL!”

I squish my feet back inside these instruments of torture like a masochist with a shoe fetish. *Where do they find these sadists?*

At some point after lunch, I notice my friend Susan has disappeared. I ask around and find out from a mutual friend—she couldn’t take the abuse, so she made up an excuse and left. *What? You mean you can do that?* As an army brat, I’d never dream of going AWOL. I’m tempted to join her, but I need the money. So I soldier on, and after fifteen hours, the production assistant screams, “THAT’S A WRAP.”

*One day down. One more to go. How bad can it be?*

The following morning, I report to set. Nothing has changed. The production assistant screams like a recording on a continuous loop, “SIGN IN. GO DIRECTLY TO HAIR AND MAKEUP. GET DRESSED NOW! LINE UP! LINE UP!” Only today, instead of sitting, we’re walking back and forth, back and forth, down a long, expansive hallway. I’m walking the best I can, trying to look like a normal person in these agonizing shoes, when my back seizes up.

“Oh, no. Oh, no. Oh, shit,” I whisper. Pain shoots down my legs as my back muscles go into agonizing spasms. Unable to straighten up, let alone walk up and down an airline hangar of a hallway, I somehow manage to limp over and commandeer the production assistant in charge of us and eke out, “Hi, I’m so sorry to bother you—my back went out. I can’t walk. These shoes—they’re too small. I’m in horrible pain. Please, can you help me?”

I’m old enough to be his mother. He’s young—not jaded yet, so he takes pity on

me.

“Take your shoes off. Hide them under here,” the production assistant whispers like we’re spies working behind enemy lines. “Stand in back of this table, next to the wall.”

“Thank you. Thank you so much.” I remove my too-tight contraptions, stash them underneath one of the tables, lean against the wall, close my eyes, and breathe into the pain. *You’ll be fine, Jill*, I say, comforting myself. *The day’s almost over. You can do it. Think of the enormous paycheck.*

If clothes make the woman, the Chanel suit no longer fits. I can’t do this work anymore. All the signs are here. The universe has been trying to commandeer my attention for a few years now. I was once hospitalized with a brain syncope because I was left outside in the boiling sun while working on a commercial. Not too long after that, I broke my foot when stepping off the #10 bus coming home from a long day of working on the TV show *Criminal Intent*. Did I listen? Now, finding myself unable to walk and in excruciating pain, it’s evident beyond any shadow of any doubt, I can’t do this anymore.

After another fifteen-hour day, I am beyond grateful when the production assistant screams, “THAT’S A WRAP!”. I limp back to holding, peel myself out of that corset they call a Chanel suit and place it back on its designated hanger. *Auf Nimmerwiedersehen, amigo!* I say to the dreaded suit and stilettos as I toss them into the garment bag. Then, I fall in line behind the rest of the extras, eager to return their clothes to wardrobe because when you wear their clothes, they hold your payment voucher as ransom.

Ten days later, the check arrives in the mail. I rip open the envelope and scan the check. The gross amount is a little over seven hundred dollars. *Not bad*. I run my finger down to find the net amount. Three-hundred and fifty dollars? *Wait? What?* There must be some mistake. Three-hundred and fifty dollars? *Are you kidding me?* They took out almost fifty percent, and I claimed nine dependents. I storm around my living room, muttering to no one in particular. *This is outrageous. How dare they? Fifty percent! This pittance for two days of torture? I am so beyond over this.*

I open my computer, purchase a shredder off eBay. As soon as it arrives, I begin shredding fifteen years of movie call sheets and pay vouchers. The shredder jams regularly. I clean all the debris out of the blades using pliers and tweezers and let it sit for several hours before continuing. God may have created the heavens and the earth in six days, but it takes me seven to complete this mammoth task. I make several trips to haul twelve plastic Fairway bags filled with the shredded remains of my former life down to the basement so the super can dispose of them.

I open my packed-to-overflowing bedroom closet. It is stuffed with clothes collected over the years for background work that I wouldn't be caught dead wearing in my real life. I begin pulling out business suits: brown, camel, olive, gray silk, eggplant, navy, two black. I pull out all the jackets and blazers: the navy wool, beige linen, houndstooth, and glen plaid. Next, I gather all those Perry Ellis high heels (navy, taupe, black, black suede, dove gray) I paid a fortune for that pinch and bind my feet like I'm a geisha in training. I stuff them into garbage bags along with all the confining, nondescript, uptight clothes, all the detective outfits I wore to solve all those fake cases, all the upscale party clothes I wore to pretend galas with my faux husbands in tow. Finally, I call the Salvation Army to come pick them up. My heart races. I'm exhilarated and free but nauseous like...like I've been released from prison with no money, no job, and no place to go.

At first, this commitment to my dignity, like severing any abusive relationship, is hard. My phone rings, and I jump. "No, I can't do extra work. Stop calling me. Lose my number." My ego, like the Wicked Witch of the West, rages: *You need the money. You're gonna be homeless. Your unemployment won't last forever.* I think of what my 300-pound, chain-smoking therapist said to me in her raspy, New York accent, "You know, Jill, if you'll eat shit, why would anyone bother to feed you steak? (That'll be ninety-five dollars.)" Despite the panic accompanying each ring of the phone, I stop, close my eyes, and ask myself, "Will this bring me joy?" The answer always comes back, "Hell, no!"

The truth is today, I'm fine. I have everything I need. My job is to trust, remain open to new possibilities, and allow the universe to provide. Looking back, I realize that

when my dance card was filled with extra jobs, nothing else could come in. It took a while, but eventually, I began booking principal acting jobs.

True to my promise, I never did extra work again.



**Jill Dalton** is an award-winning playwright whose plays *Whistle-blower* (2015) and *Collateral Damage* (2014) were both semi-finalists in the Eugene O'Neill National Playwrights Conference. Her book *My Life in the Trenches of Show Business: Escape to New York - Act 1* is available on Amazon, and Act 2 is coming soon. She has also been published in *Auntie Bellum Magazine*, *Delmarva Review*, *Evening Street Review*, *The MacGuffin*, *Pine Hills Review*, and *Progressive Activists Voice*. Jill is an accomplished actress and has performed on television, in film, and both on and off Broadway. Her acting credits include *Saturday Night Live*, *Law & Order*, and Oliver Stone's *Wall Street*. She enjoys walking in Central Park and taking care of her bossy cat, Magpie.