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Labels

Written by H. C. Carlton

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LABELS

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One



The loudspeakers at Pierre Balmain hummed with a Piaf medley – it was corny even for Paris. The band of fashion artists, always treated as second-class citizens at the showings, had been banished to a cramped row of gilt chairs at the foot of a stairway. Colin Beaumont was in a center seat. The first Paris collection for Spring, 1962 was about to be presented. But because Balmain had not exactly blazed a fashion trail for some time, the occasion was more social than professional. American buyers and press waved to each other across the crowded salon; it was too soon to pretend they had scooped each other – this was the collection presentation at which they could still be friendly.

The animated face of the directrice, Ginette Spanier, greeted the more celebrated fashion-magazine editors. Kisses were pecked into the perfumed air. A German journalist pretended to faint, hoping for a better seat. Four Japanese buyers were politely escorted out, giggling, their impersonation as ‘press’ seen through immediately by Madame Spanier’s sharp eyes. Suddenly everyone was hushed, like an audience at a children’s school play.

A woman’s voice over the address system said, ‘Welcome to the Pierre Balmain Spring, 1962 “Jolie Madame” Collection. May we remind you that shoes in today’s collection are by Pierre Balmain. Stockings and panty hose by Balmain. Wigs by Balmain. Parfum de Balmain. Jewelry and furs by Pierre Balmain. And make-up by—’

As a grotesquely over-made-up model stalked down the runway, an American artist called out, ‘Make-up by Walt

Disney!’ The artists all laughed while continuing to sketch every buttonhole, seam, and pocket that the Pierre Balmain team had come up with. It was, after all, what they were paid to do, and there were many more collections to attend. Balmain was usually the first to show in a crowded Paris week where the big stars showed at the very end, like proud beauties making a late entrance to a party, knowing everyone awaited them.

Colin’s neighbor, an American who, judging from his features, was half Chinese, said ‘These little gilt chairs give me a little gilt ass!’

Colin nodded, shifting. The armchairs of honor, called *fau-teuilles*, went to influential American fashion editors, encouraging them to stay awake. Top editors lapped up this special treatment, including Jessica Cowles, ‘grand old lady of American fashion,’ and her fashion editor, Coral Stanton. Both ruled *Divine*, the ultraglossy monthly that made *Vogue* and *Bazaar* look like supermarket checkout magazines. *Divine* was always at least one season ahead: *Women’s Wear Daily* dubbed it the ‘fashion intellectual’s magazine.’ It was the book in which a designer most craved to be featured, where an artist or photographer or model dreamed of appearing. Its reputation was now wholly due to the amazing fashion antennae of Coral Stanton, ‘Her Fashionness’ as *WWD* called her. She obviously operated in spite of her boss Jessica Cowles, privately known as ‘Her Boringness.’

Relishing her reputation, Coral opened the *New York Herald Tribune* to read Hebe Dorsay’s column, blocking the view of several people behind her. The Balmain models paraded by to her supreme indifference. Balmain advertised its perfume in *Divine*’s expensive pages, so this was a protocol visit. *Divine* would feature one photograph of a Balmain creation, just to keep them happy.

A tiny cup of espresso was sent down the row to Jessica Cowles, who was drowsing. Important editors received these little shots of caffeine toward the end of the showing to revive them from the perfumed stuffiness and prompt their memories of the clothes they wished to photograph. At the finale – a bridal gown by tradition – they would ask to see certain models again, perhaps

for sketching by their artist. This was to the intense fury of the *vendeuses* – elegant, older sales ladies in black, who had smuggled private clients into the press showing and were pawing the ground in their impatience to take orders. The *vendeuses* believed the press to be a waste of time. Private clients were where the money was, they believed, upfront where you could see it. A ballgown, worn with family jewels, photographed at the Opéra, paid for with a check drawn on some old family bank: That’s what haute couture meant to the *vendeuses*, and God help anyone who interrupted its smooth passage.

‘*Cette Americaine!*’ a *vendeuse* spat, as Jessica Cowles suddenly reached out to feel the fabric of a satin-tulle concoction sailing past. There was no love lost between the French and the Americans, that was for sure. It allowed for all sorts of subtle digs and snubs, including that of ill-mannered New York buyers demanding to see dresses modeled again after the collection, as they snacked on canapés and champagne in full view of starving, half-fainting models. It didn’t matter; the French needed the dollars, and the Americans needed the chic; this very resentful exchange kept the French couture going.

There was a burst of applause as the bride sailed to the end of the runway, and a flurry of movement as journalists got ready to race across Paris to the next showing. Colin Beaumont closed his sketchbook with a flourish.

‘Fuck Jolie Madame!’ he muttered, and his neighbor automatically replied, ‘She should be so lucky.’

The next showing was at Patou, near the Place de la Concorde. Colin would share a taxi with someone, but for the moment he remained seated, gazing around at the passing parade of people. He watched Catherine Deneuve, a young actress he had recently sketched for French *Vogue*. Near her, a British *Vogue* girl glistened in Vaseline – her reaction to the made-up look. She looks like a buttered, boiled potato, Colin thought. He watched as a dowdy group of British journalists followed Ginette Spanier to the press office, where she distributed handouts, black-and-white glossies which could be used in their columns. In the main salon a press assistant fanned Jessica Cowles with handouts while Coral

Stanton impatiently fingered the peplum of a black dress, the best thing in the collection. The model, pale and tired, was doing her best to smile at the important American editor.

Suddenly Coral noticed Colin watching her and waved. His heart skipped a beat as he glanced behind him to see whom she was waving to. She signaled to him again, mouthing ‘I want to see you!’ Glancing at the groups of clients, buyers, and *vendeuses* between them, she shrugged, scribbled something on a pad, tore off the leaf and gave it to a young salon assistant, with a nod toward Colin. He watched as the girl carried the scrap of paper around the room; a little angel bringing him a message that would forever change his life . . .

‘The chic bitch left for Paris this morning,’ Mia Stanton wrote in her diary that night. She had invented this new name for her mother – the chic bitch – and enjoyed using it as often as possible. ‘Last night the chic bitch and Daddy called me into the living room. They said they had an important announcement. Then they totally ruined my life. I blame the chic bitch entirely for this . . .’

Mia was seventeen, and the announcement was that her parents had decided to live apart.

‘Your father’s had a very good job offer,’ her mother told her. ‘His company wants to build up investment opportunities out in California, and he’d be a fool not to grab it. *I have no intention of living out there—*’

‘Why not?’ Mia had asked her. ‘You’re his wife.’

‘My work is in New York,’ Coral answered quickly. ‘I haven’t worked this long and hard to throw it all up and become a Californian housewife. Your father and I haven’t got on for some while, Mia. You’re not a child – you must have noticed. Rather than continue to make three people unhappy, we have this wonderful chance to change our lives *now!* It’s bound to be for the better!’

‘Not for me!’ Mia cried. She stared unbelievably at her father. Surely he would tell her this was all a joke? He looked away, his face flushed. He was a handsome blond man with a rugged,

outdoors complexion and a thick moustache. He cleared his throat and glanced up at Mia with regretful eyes.

‘Your mother’s right,’ he finally said. There was an awkward silence. Mia willed him to invite her to leave with him. But he said nothing.

Finally, she blurted, ‘Can’t I go with you?’ She knew, from the expressions on both their faces, that it had been the wrong question. He had no intention of taking her, and now her mother would know – as if she didn’t already – that she did not relish the idea of living alone with her.

‘Mia, honey—’ He moved to put his arm around her, but she shook it off. She wanted that arm around her so much, but it would have reduced her to tears, and it was very important at this critical moment in her young life that she keep some semblance of pride.

‘I don’t want you to think I don’t love you very, very much!’ her father said gruffly. ‘But—’

‘Oh, *please!*’ Mia cut him off, starting to sob in spite of herself. She stared from one to the other, helplessly. ‘You *married* each other! You married each other for better or worse! It’s your *duty* to—’ She broke off, unable to continue.

‘Mia, for God’s sake, don’t turn this into a soap opera!’ Coral snapped. She reached for her purse and withdrew a wallet. ‘I’m going to Paris tomorrow, and I really don’t have time for a lecture on marriage. We’ll survive, you and I. You’ll keep in touch with Daddy, maybe spend vacations with him.’ Her father nodded. ‘Don’t attempt to make me feel guilty. We kept this home together for you. Here’s some money for while I’m away. I’ll call you from Paris. I’ll be at the Crillon, as usual – the number is by the phone if you need me.’ Coral continued to talk of practical matters. Of forwarding various pieces of furniture to Los Angeles. Of insurance policies. Of lawyers.

Mia confided to her diary: ‘It was as if I didn’t matter, didn’t exist. I don’t know how I’ll cope without Daddy. He never says or does much, but at least he was *there*, between the bitch and me.’

*

That night, trying to sleep, she thought about her childhood.

‘Why doesn’t Mommy love me?’ she remembered once asking her father.

‘We have to remember Mommy has very important work to do,’ her father had explained.

Throughout her childhood she had always been told to ‘be quiet for Mommy, she’s been working hard. Don’t talk too long on the phone, Mommy’s expecting an important call. Walk on tippy-toe, Mommy’s sleeping. She’s had a terrible day. Mommy has a big day tomorrow.’ The magazine was what it was all about, of course. The magazine was surely why her mother couldn’t really be a wife to her father, couldn’t really be a mother like the other mothers. The dummy issues and proof copies lying about the house were a constant reminder of what ruled their lives. Flung in despair against a wall if Coral was unhappy with it, cradled like a baby in her arms if it pleased her, the source of laughter, tears, treats, or punishments; *Divine* was the ruler of the mood at home.

‘I’ve never felt close to the chic bitch,’ Mia wrote. ‘The only time we ever got together was in her precious closet. If only she had lavished *half* the love and attention she gave her clothes on *me*.’

As a child she had spent afternoons in the immaculate confines of Coral’s closets. Touching the clothes, inhaling the perfume that clung to them, she came nearer to her mother’s essence. She loved the Dior brocade opera coat, the Grès draped white jersey, light as a feather. The Chanel cardigan suit with chains sewn around its edges. She would finger the fabrics, looking inside at the silk linings and labels. Once a year the has-beens were weeded out and sold, or banished to the ‘museum’ in the attic. The names themselves were fascinating to Mia – Mainbocher, Dior, Bill Blass, Norman Norell – some of them people she had met at Coral’s annual cocktail party in the offices of *Divine*. For these parties Mia’s hair was done by a famous stylist and she wore her best dress, handing around canapés, enjoying the stylish crowd fussing over her.

After looking at Coral’s clothes, she would move to the shoes.

Sometimes her mother had found her in the closet and smiled her approval. ‘Look at them, *feel* them . . .’ she urged. ‘See these? Made for me by a Paris magician, Roger Vivier. He invented this little square heel.’ Mia would stare at the shoes, perfect satin almonds in their stiff wire trees, the luxury, the perfection, filling her head with wonder. Other kids had toys to play with; she had her mother’s shoes.

‘They cost over a hundred dollars,’ Coral had whispered. ‘Don’t tell Daddy – he wouldn’t understand.’ It was an unbelievable amount of money! How highly her mother must rate herself to shod her feet so expensively.

‘How much do these dresses cost, Mommy?’ Mia would whisper. Coral laughed deep in her throat. ‘More than a thousand dollars, darling! But Mommy gets a special price from her designer friends. They sometimes give her these clothes for nothing so Mommy will wear them and everyone will see and admire them. If Mommy wears something, everyone else wants to wear it too.’

Later in life her mother’s great style would be a source of embarrassment to Mia. But while she was still a child it added to the glamour and wonder of her mother, spinning a fairy-tale aura around her, placing her out of reach. That mixture of wonderment and disappointment, of yearning, craving, and resentment at not being cherished, would numb this beautiful child’s feelings, confuse her, make life difficult. But as a child all she knew was that her mother did not have the time to play with her. Stacks of papers and photographs prevented access to her lap, and little affection or warmth came from her.

What warmth there had been in childhood had come from her father or from Wayland Garrity, her mother’s best friend, who was a sort of honorary uncle. He had held her on his lap, taken her for outings and walks, played games with her. He had a gentle way with her, and she loved him even though she’d once heard her father tell her mother, ‘He’s not a real man!’ That had puzzled her, but from an early age she had been assured by Wayland that they would only tell the truth to each other, and she trusted him. ‘No bullshit,’ he had promised, the first time an adult had used an

adult word to her; and she had respected him for it. Her father and Wayland had always been there to explain things to her, to explain her mother to her. Coral, on the other hand, treated her as if she were one of her readers, to be lectured on clothes and style.

‘When you buy clothes, buy just a few but make sure they’re the best!’ Coral would advise. ‘Buy *one* wonderful dress, *one* superb suit! You’ll always look great in it, and you’ll always love wearing it.’

‘But I want *lots* of clothes, Mommy,’ Mia had said, and Coral laughed her throaty laugh, closing the closet, locking up the treasures.

Fashion fascinated Mia – it was the key to her mother, to her attention, to her interest. She loved her visits to the magazine’s offices where crazy, colorful people wearing fantastic clothes and painted faces, laughed, kissed, cried, and made a comic opera out of life. *Divine* was a world of fantasy, unlike any other world because it created dreams.

‘We’re years ahead of our rivals!’ Coral would crow, leafing through a new issue of *Vogue* or *Bazaar*. ‘Years ahead!’ These were magic words for a child. Mia drank it in, picturing her mother living in some future age, ahead of ordinary mortals. When Coral arrived home at night, Mia imagined her speeding back through time to the present, stepping off a time machine to land in Scarsdale; ‘the last place in the universe I wanted to live!’ Coral often said. But Harry Stanton had put his foot down, insisting his daughter live in a safe, secure neighborhood, and not in the Manhattan that Coral longed for.

The morning after the divorce announcement, Coral came to her room, perfectly made-up, ready to step into the limousine that *Divine* had sent to whisk her to the airport.

‘Bye, darling. See you in a week. Be good!’

‘Have a safe trip, Mother,’ Mia said sleepily. *I hope her plane crashes*, she thought, unable to accept the idea of living alone with her. She envisioned herself as a motherless teenager, knowing her father would then be forced to send for her. *Nobody* wants me –

that's the truth, she thought. She turned over in the warm bed and fell into an unhappy sleep.

Colin Beaumont met Coral Stanton in her suite at the Crillon the day after the Balmain showing. The woman who had the power to make careers happen overnight wanted to see *him!* He wore his starving-in-a-garret outfit, not so far from the truth: blue jeans and black turtleneck.

'Colin!' Coral hailed him as he was ushered into the crowded suite, smiling across the photographer and his helpers, the models, stylists, hairdressers, and make-up artists. She was using her own suite as background to the Paris coverage. *Brilliant*, Colin thought. He recognized the photographer – Helmut Newton – who was gaining a reputation for erotic photography which made fashion sexy for the first time in magazine history.

The magazines were in deadly combat at Collections time to see who could be the most original. *Bazaar* had rented a circus tent and performers, their models balancing precariously on elephants and on tightropes. Avedon had models running along the Pont Neuf at dead of night while spotlights flashed summer lightning. Couture clothes were only allowed out of the showrooms at night – they were needed in the daytime for the continuous showings to store buyers and clients.

In Coral's suite models applied lipstick, leaned against rococo gilt mirrors, posed against the art deco bathroom walls, or lolled on unmade beds which stylists kept rumpling artistically. A tall, glorious creature dipped a croissant into a cup of chocolate as Helmut Newton clicked away, murmuring encouragement, and stylists tossed fresh red roses and copies of *Le Figaro* and the *Herald Tribune* onto the bed.

'Isn't it a madhouse?' Coral called out happily.

Colin had sat in an unobtrusive chair, but Coral beckoned 'Over here!' and he had to get to his feet and walk across the room in front of everyone. He would never get over feeling freakish. He held his head high and thought of Toulouse-Lautrec.

Coral was already in conversation with a hairstylist by the time he reached her. She was pencil slim. Rather a mean little face, he

decided, but she certainly made the most of what she had: white skin, an uptilted nose, and intelligent, almost cunning, blue eyes. Hair that was tinted red and cut intricately high and tousled. Throwaway chic, Colin thought. Her scarlet lips were a little ungenerous. He'd heard she was getting divorced.

Coral looked across at the model who had been posed with her skirt pulled up to the thigh.

'The news of that skirt is in the fullness, Helmut,' she told the photographer. 'I'm all for the risqué, but let's see the clothes, darling.' She pulled the skirt down to calf level. 'Now!' she led Colin into a small dressing room, clipboard in hand.

'You're an angel to have come at such short notice,' she told him.

He smiled. As if she didn't know full well that anyone in the business wouldn't drop whatever they were doing to rush to her side – the opportunity to be published in *Divine* overcame all obstacles.

'I love what you did for French *Vogue*,' she said as they sat down opposite each other. 'The portraits of Deneuve were exquisite. I would have bled them across two pages. I don't know whether you'll appreciate my suggestions, but I happen to think a rougher style could add a whole lot more pizzazz.'

'Rougher?' He had heard she was a creative meddler.

She leaned toward him. 'Balenciaga and Givenchy don't show to the press until a month after the other houses. They don't *need* press. They *are* fashion, and their clientele knows it.'

'I agree.'

'This time Hubert has agreed to show me some unfinished outfits. They're only tacked, so I'd like them sketched. But in a rough, unfinished way, as if they were pages torn from a sketch-book.'

'How many pages will this run?'

'How many outfits can you charm out of him?'

'I don't know. Maybe he'll be sorry for this little runt of an artist and throw me a few more crumbs from the fashion table?'

'*Colin!*' Coral sat bolt upright. 'I don't want to *ever* hear you refer to yourself in that way again, but *never!* Do you hear?'

He smiled, touched. They stared at each other, feeling a moment of closeness. An assistant poked her head into the room. ‘Mrs Stanton? Dorothy doesn’t like the Patou!’

‘Doesn’t she indeed!’ Coral jumped to her feet. ‘Call Monsieur de Givenchy tomorrow, Colin. I’ll need the sketches to take to New York with me on Friday. Good luck!’

As he left the suite, he heard her commanding voice: ‘Now, what is this, Dorothy? Would you prefer to run up and down the Paris boulevards the way *Bazaar* makes their models work? Or will you put on the goddamned Patou and lie on the bed?’

He walked through the streets to the metro station, dazzled by Coral. Am I in love with her? he wondered. But why would she ever notice *me*? A midget-sized runt of a fashion artist. Don’t do that, he lectured himself. *Use your height* – make it an asset, not a liability. Coral would notice him only if he became the best artist or the best friend she had ever had. He vowed to be both those things.

The next day he sketched eight outfits at Givenchy. Coral’s name had opened all doors. Hubert de Givenchy himself came out to meet him, wearing a tailor’s smock, behaving with the perfect politeness one expected of a count. Colin’s drawings were ultimately splashed over four pages of the magazine’s Paris issue, and together Colin and Coral began a new direction in *Divine*’s layout.

Colin understood the direction, the quintessence, of fashion. He sometimes saw much more in an outfit than the designer intended. In his own way he would influence the sixties as much as a Quant or a Courrèges. When the issue of *Divine* launched his career in America, calls came from advertising agencies and publications. Coral wanted more drawings too. Colin packed up his few belongings and left Paris with a one-way ticket to New York. Coral had changed his life; one day he would change hers.