

closet case



MY OUTFITS WERE ALL MISTAKES. IF I WENT BACK TO THE STORES, I'D ONLY MAKE MORE. BUT THEN I HIRED A PRO—AND LEARNED WHAT IT TAKES TO BUILD A WARDROBE THAT WORKS
BY MARCIA MENTER

I make no excuses for this, but one day last summer I realized I had been wearing the same few outfits over and over for months. And that these outfits were faded and threadbare. And that I cared very much that my clothes looked awful, but still couldn't face the thought of shopping for new ones. It was like waking up in an alley wearing a filthy trench coat and nothing else, clutching an empty bottle of peach schnapps and wondering how I'd fallen so low. Or, if you want a loftier analogy, like being the poet Dante, lost in a sartorial Dark Wood with no Muse to guide me out of it. Except that a Muse did show up—and to my credit, I knew her when I saw her.

I need to confess that I'm in the fashion business, sort of: I've written about fashion for years, working in offices where women actually wear fur boas and Prada stilettos. I'm the one who comes up with clever things to say about little dresses that wouldn't fit me on the thinnest day of my life. For years I managed to dress pretty well—well enough to pass for someone who dressed well.

Then, three years ago, I quit my job to write a book. Now that I was living a literary life, I thought, old chinos and turtlenecks were wardrobe



Can a size-12 woman find happiness in a fitting room? Oh, yes.

enough. They weren't. I looked awful, and once the book was done, I *felt* awful: aimless and useless. I had nobody to play with, and nobody to dress for. (It never occurred to me to dress for myself, or for my husband, who seems to like me any old way.)

So I went back to work, for this magazine. My depression lifted, but my closet was a disaster area. The only things I actually wore were two pairs of black pants, shiny from too many dry cleanings; some matronly knit-jersey tops, and . . . no, that was it.

Why didn't I just go shopping? Because I hate shopping. The stores

are full of clothes that don't fit me. I'm a size 12, and (apart from a few size-10 interludes) have been ever since puberty. This, I'm told, is the size of the average American woman. I have hips, breasts and thighs that create unseemly disturbances in the clean lines of pants and dresses. Cute little cardigans gap if I try to button them. Turtlenecks that fit in the chest are too long for my short waist and make my stomach—did I mention that I have a stomach?—look like a football. And everything I don't like about my

PHOTOS: ADAM OLSZEWSKI. HAIR AND MAKEUP: GREGG TESLER AT ROSANNE RENFROW. COTTON BROCADE JACKET: AKRIS PUNTO. SUEDE SKIRT: BILL BLASS. STYLIST: ANNE BRUNBAUGH. LOCATION: THE 5TH AVENUE CLUB, SAKS 5TH AVENUE NEW YORK.



body is magnified a hundredfold in the dressing-room mirror.

I met my shopping muse, Annie Brumbaugh, last summer. She came to our offices to tell us about her work as a personal stylist and wardrobe consultant. “I change women’s lives,” she said. “When my clients reach into their closets, every piece looks great on them, and it all works together.” I couldn’t begin to imagine a closet like that.

I looked her up and down. She was a woman in her fifties, full-breasted and short-waisted like me, but her outfit—flowing pants, a little silk top—fit her perfectly and, what’s more, suited her perfectly. She had a kind of Mary Poppins quality, a take-charge serenity.

When Annie had finished her presentation, I dragged her over to

average out. And, well, a reasonably successful working woman ought to look like one, and if she can’t do it on her own, she needs help.

The \$1,500 consultation felt like about six months of therapy. Annie came to my house one very warm September morning, refused my offer of coffee but said yes to ice water, and then, with ice in her veins, proceeded to make me try on everything in my closet. We had barely met and here I was, sweating in my underwear (which wasn’t in great shape, either). I’d weighed myself beforehand. Eight pounds had crept on without my realizing it—menopause firing a shot across my bow—and I was the heaviest I had ever been, jiggling in the clammy morning light.

Annie gave me a benignly clinical

look. “You won’t be hard to dress,” she said. “You’re symmetrical—not top- or bottom-heavy. You’re really lucky.”

“Uh-huh,” I said, feeling like Jabba the Hutt. Under Annie’s gaze, everything I put on looked like it belonged to somebody else. I had several classic blazers, purchased at a factory outlet. I tried on my favorite, in thick brown cashmere. Annie’s smile

tightened slightly. “This jacket is not your friend,” she said gently, touching the shoulder, the hem, the back. “It’s too broad in the shoulders. And see how far below your fingertips the hem falls? It’s too . . .”

“Too mannish,” I said, suddenly realizing why I’d put it on and taken it off so many mornings. The jacket

dwarfed me, though it technically fit me fine; it was all shoulders and lapels. What had I been thinking?

It took us most of the day to work our way through my wardrobe, and I wasn’t surprised that so much of it ended up on the discard pile. The pantsuits were ancient and overlarge. The skirtsuits had either been worn to death or not worn at all. No garment went with any other garment, and my shoes—I didn’t have any shoes. Just an ancient pair of Gucci loafers and some sandals.

“You know, in most cases when people tell me they have nothing to wear, they actually have some pieces that work,” Annie said mildly. “You really *don’t* have anything!”

Annie did like my little cashmere sweaters, once we took them out of their dry-cleaning bags, where I couldn’t see them and had forgotten I owned them. There was also a cropped lavender jacket that she said was my friend. That was about it.

“I’m such an idiot at this,” I said.

“You’re not an idiot, and you’re not alone,” Annie said earnestly. “There’s a ton of merchandise out there, but hardly any information. Our mothers had fitters and dressmakers. What we have are clothes that don’t fit, and nobody to help us shop. That’s where I come in.” I nodded dumbly.

Annie took my measurements. Then she went off to shop, leaving me to consider my wardrobe mistakes: buying on sale, buying clothes that didn’t suit me because the salespeople were nice to me, buying clothes that fit but didn’t flatter. But my biggest error was hating my body—a perfectly shapely, healthy and serviceable body—and throwing clothes over it in an effort to make it go away. I finally saw this



X ANNIE BRUMBAUGH (RIGHT) AND I. WHAT DID I BUY? EVERYTHING.

my cubicle (very aware that my Gap blouse was gapping at the chest) and hissed, “I have to hire you.” I didn’t blink when she told me she charged \$1,500 for a consultation and \$250 an hour to go shopping. Yes, it was a lot of money. But considering that I hadn’t done any serious shopping in at least five years, I figured it would



ANNIE BRUMBAUGH'S TOP 10 WARDROBING TIPS

1 Define your style, and continue to refine it over time. This is your fashion DNA: What you love, what makes you comfortable, what you feel expresses you. Stay true to this, and the wardrobe will follow.

2 Understand your body type, proportions, best silhouettes and colors, textures and scale. Whatever your shape, know that there are clothes out there that can really flatter you, and you should never settle for less.

3 Don't go on fishing expeditions. Know what you are shopping for. Be specific but not rigid.

4 Go to the right store—not necessarily where the sales are, but where they have clothes in your style. Go rested and alone. Bring shoes and hose.

5 Look for color and fabric first, then silhouette, then size.

6 Think outfit, not item. Put each piece in the context of your wardrobe. If you fall in love with a piece that can't be worn with other pieces you own, or that you'll probably never have an occasion to wear, pass it up.

7 Get help. Make your wishes known to the salesperson. Get her (or him) to check back with you. A store with unresponsive sales help is not your store.

8 Love it or leave it! If you're not absolutely in love with a garment, don't commit.

9 Insist on fit. Get alterations then and there if possible. If not, get thee to a fitter. The most wonderful garment ever created won't look good if it doesn't fit.

10 Buy the best you can bring yourself to afford, especially in core items. You don't need a lot of stuff when you have the right stuff. Concentrate on fewer, better pieces.

The Association of Image Consultants International lists certified image consultants at their Web site, AICI.org. Annie Brumbaugh can be reached at ABWardrobeWorks.com.

for the nonsense it was. "Here I am, 51 years old," I thought, "I'm going to dress the body I have and dress it well."

One week later, I met Annie at Saks—she works with all the major stores, but this is where she felt my tastes and budget fit best. She conducted me to a large dressing room with a view of Rockefeller Center, where I found a rack full of clothes, *all of which fit me*. They were mostly browns and greens and a bit of black. It looked like a wardrobe, not a collection of garments.

Then I got really scared. I prepared myself to hate everything, in case it all looked terrible on me. When I tried on the first pair of pants—why did we have to start with pants?—I panicked when I saw my hips and thighs. Great new clothes, same old body.

Then I got over it. The clothes were gorgeous, and I hadn't been the center of so much attention since I was a bride. I was fascinated by how well Annie seemed to know my tastes, and by the range of sizes she'd assembled—12s and 14s and even 10s, some regular, some petite. Some of the pants were too snug in a 12 and too loose in a 14. "You buy the bigger size and cut it down," said Annie. "Alterations are the rule, not the exception." Oh. Of course when you shop like a grown-up, in stores with tailors, instead of hitting sales by night and hoping nobody sees you, alterations are no big deal.

What did I buy? Oh, God, everything: jackets, skirts, pants, cardigans. A leather jacket, cropped and fitted at the waist. A buttery suede skirt (on sale!). A reversible coat, tweed on one side, twill on the

other. Beautifully made clothes that begged to be worn to death.

We ran across the street to Cole Haan, where I bought three pairs of boots. We went to Façonnable for button-down shirts and Banana Republic for tees—Annie had pre-shopped both stores—then back to Saks for the final fitting. Sleeves and pant legs needed to be shortened, belt loops removed.

In six hours, I spent enough cash (including Annie's fee) to buy a small car, and wound up with a complete wardrobe, which arrived on my doorstep a week later. I thought I'd be too intimidated to wear any of it. But the first day I put on the brown leather jacket, a beige cashmere shell, a flared bias-cut tweed skirt, knee-high brown boots, the tweed topcoat and a scarf I'd found in a drawer, I felt something I'd never felt before: really, truly well-dressed.

Thanks to Annie, I now know a lot more about how to pull an outfit together. I've also developed a serious boot-buying habit. (Hey—I had nothing!) But I'm not ready to go solo. I don't have Annie's wardrobing genius, or her encyclopedic knowledge of what's in the stores. And—this is going to sound weird—I don't respect my body as much as she does. I've taken off those extra pounds, but I'm still me, curvy and short-waisted; and at least for now, I need a champion. Or a guru. Some women get face-lifts at midlife; some go trekking in the Himalayas. I'm following my bliss to Saks, where, for a price, I can be instructed by a Master in the ways of looking like the grown-up I am. **M**

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