

In Sofia Coppola's cinematic portrait of *Marie Antoinette*, a baby-faced Kirsten Dunst discovers—on her first morning in Versailles—the court's tedious process for the simple task of getting dressed. As she stands shivering in her birthday suit, the young royal's various layers of garments are passed down a long line of ladies-in-waiting before she can finally wear them. "This is ridiculous!" exclaims the frustrated and freezing Dauphine.

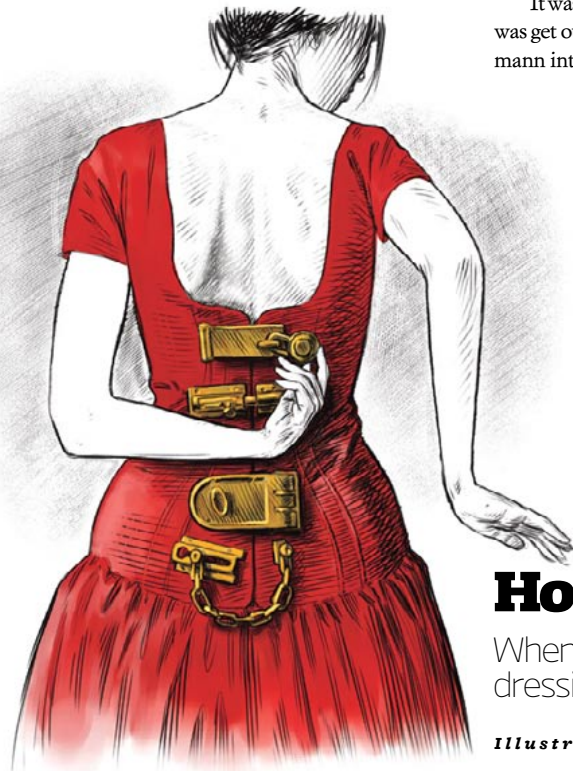
Comically complicated it may be, but many a modern-day fashionable woman probably wishes she could nab one of Dunst's ladies for her personal use, because even without the crinolines and petticoats, getting dolled up on your own isn't easy. From zippers that stick to tiny hooks and eyes, evening gowns are often a battle for stylish single girls (and some married ones too). In fact, unless you opt for simple jersey or slip dresses, donning a high-fashion look sans assistance can prove a veritable minefield of potential disasters.

Cecilia Dean, who often favors intricately constructed pieces from Christian Lacroix and Rodarte, has made her share of trips down to her doormen to be zipped up or corseted. "They're always accommodating, and I think they get a real kick out of it," she says. "I'm sure it's a lot more exciting than what normally happens to you as a doorman." But even this extra set of hands is not enough for some of Dean's more extravagant choices. "Alexander McQueen is supertricky," she notes. "I would actually never attempt getting into one of his gowns without at least two other people there."

Other women have chosen to eschew inexperienced fingers altogether. "Some dresses are just way too complicated for a doorman," says Jennifer Williams, PR manager for Carolina Herrera. Case in point: a poppy-print cocktail dress from Herrera's fall 2007 collection. With a back full of bows, zippers, hooks and eyes, and snaps, the seemingly innocent-looking frock takes such mastery to put on and remove that Williams's coworker Phoebe Gubelmann was trapped in it one evening. Luckily for her, the two women live a mere half block away from each other.

"It was the end of a crazy Fashion Week, and all she wanted to do was get out of the dress," recalls Williams, who had helped Gubelmann into it at the office before she left. "I was in bed when she

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Home Alone

When faced with exceptionally tricky ensembles, dressing sans handmaid is no easy feat.

Illustration by MATT COLLINS

Home Alone

called and asked, “Will you meet me halfway?” So Williams got out of bed and met Gubelmann on the street to undo the back. “It was the saddest thing. She was like, ‘Can you please get me out? I just want to go home and go to bed. My doorman can’t do it.’” The incident sealed their fates; ever since, the two make plans to rendezvous outside midway between their apartments (with a coat or other cover-up to provide sufficient camouflage for partially undone ensembles) whenever they have a big event.

Even celebrities, whose entourages constitute the closest approximation to a contemporary cavalry of handlers, can find themselves in a sartorial pinch. Cher Coulter, stylist to Emily Mortimer and Kate Bosworth, remembers a particularly frantic last-minute call she received from the latter. Coulter was in Los Angeles when Bosworth rang from New York. The stylist had requested a dress from a shall-remain-nameless designer, a seriously complicated number “with an arm coming out of one side and not the other. I had it sent over presuming from looking at style.com that you’d just put it on. And [Kate] was on the phone going, ‘I really want to wear it, but I can’t figure out how.’” Needless to say, Bosworth chose another look.

Coulter herself has been known to go to great lengths just to get out the door. As a student at Central Saint Martins in London, she once stitched herself into a garment. “We used to be really competitive to see what you would wear to this nightclub. And I made this dress and didn’t have time to finish it,” she explains. “I sewed myself into the side of it...so that when I got home, I just had to tear it off. I was that desperate to wear it.”

While Coulter was able to rip off her dress before bed, Blaine Trump didn’t have the same luxury when it came to the aftereffects of a certain couture gown. “I was chairing a dinner. Mr. Lacroix had made a dress for me, and it had a million buttons down the back. My husband was out of town, and I had a lady who works for me button me up. And I really didn’t think about the fact that when I got home that night, there would be no one there to get me out of it,” Trump says, laughing. “I thought, Well, I’ve got two ways to go here: I’m either going to sleep in this dress or I’m going to take a pair of scissors and destroy it.” She clearly went with the former plan, causing her housekeeper some next-day consternation: “I woke up the next morning, and Annie came in, and she’s like, ‘Are you okay?’”

From the litany of such tales, it would seem that any stylish woman must resign herself to herculean struggles—and mortification—in the name of a special night out. But Sarah Easley and Beth Buccini, whose boutique, Kirna Zabête, is known for its fashion-forward offerings including those from Rick Owens, Balenciaga, Giambattista Valli and Lanvin, insist that need not be the case. They both agree that a woman could easily put on any garment in their store without a handmaid. “Part of our philosophy in dressing ourselves and our clients is you don’t want to look like you’re trying too hard,” says Easley. “There are other ways to look interesting and different without the ready-to-wear discomfort.”



Sometimes, dressing aid isn’t limited to the boudoir, as Tiffany Dubin learned when she recently flirted with a Christopher Kane dress at Barneys New York. “I started trying it on, and after stepping into it, I went through several twists and turns before I was able to identify one arm and then another,” she says of the perplexing velvet, tulle and leather confection. After 10 more minutes with still no clear idea of how it worked, she sought professional assistance—or so she thought. Instead, even her salesman was clueless. “I asked him if he knew how the dress was supposed to be worn,” she recalls. “He shrugged and said that everyone came and tried it and left frustrated.” Dubin wisely left the dress on the rack too.

Not all designers challenge their clientele with such gyrations. Elise Overland makes a concerted effort to keep her rock ’n’ roll-edged looks user-friendly. “I think if you’re a female designer, you have to figure out for yourself how to get in and out of stuff,” she explains. “If something’s not functional to me, and I feel awkward and weird in it, I wouldn’t design it for anybody else.” Although Overland has had clients with emergency moments, those incidences are few and far between. “It’s very unmodern to need help to get into your gowns,” she says.

Indeed, even the wealthiest woman, attached or otherwise, is unlikely to have a lady-in-waiting on hand. One has to wonder, then: Are the buddy systems, doorman assistance and sleeping in dresses really worth it?

“It all seemed a bit dramatic for a dress,” admits Coulter of Bosworth’s frock-gone-awry efforts.

Dean, however, has no problem putting in the time and occasional pain in her quest for the ultimate fashion moment. “I never question it. I always enjoy the whole process,” she says. “I have such respect for designers and the intricate construction underneath a very sort of easy-looking gown.”

“If I have my mind set on a dress, it *has* to work. And it will work. I will find a way,” declares Williams. She didn’t even let Gubelmann’s poppy-print Herrera struggle deter her from a stint in it herself. “I love that dress. I think I’m going to wear it Wednesday night,” she says, before issuing a caveat. “But I’m going to have help. Phoebe has to go home with me.”

—VANESSA LAWRENCE

Clockwise from far left: Tricky Christopher Kane and Carolina Herrera frocks; Cecilia Dean in Rodarte.



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