Every time I go to the dress boutique at Hunter Ridge, the sales clerk thinks I'm trying to steal something. I can't blame her. I look suspicious—but I can't help it. I like to window shop after I get off from Franklin's Barbecue, and I always smell like chicken and pork grease and stale coffee mixed with a hint of dampness. Seems like there's always a ketchup stain running down my sleeve or bit of barbecue sauce on my collar. Or maybe it's A-1. Looks like I'm slowly oozing blood. Death by condiments.

I have an hour to kill before Jim picks me up, and he's always late. Always. I don't like waiting on a dark corner for an hour like some washed-up, middle-aged whore. So I cross the street to the boutique and watch for him out the window.

Every time Jim arrives he reeks of cigarettes and stale beer, wearing that gritty odor like a badge of honor. Ever since we had to sell my Toyota, Jim acts like he's part of some invisible underground revolution that only he can see and hear, and I have to nod my head and play along and pretend I see what he sees, just like I did when my three-year-old niece had that imaginary dog named Duke. I try not to give Jim a hard time about it, but all I can think about when I'm placing take-out orders is how many of my overtime hours he's been drinking away.

I shouldn't let him drive me home, but I'm afraid to take the wheel. You never know what men are made of—I mean psychologically—until you try to take the wheel. Some of them just can't handle it; they feel like they've lost control of everything in life except their truck and damn if they're going to let someone take that from them. I'm afraid Jim will just break into pieces and float away on the wind to join his imaginary revolution.

Of course, I never buy anything when I go in the dress shop, and maybe that's why the clerk hates me. As I enter the shop, she glares at me, convinced I'm going to cram the latest Liz Claiborne into my pocketbook and bolt. She watches me the entire time; I know because I feel a sharp tinge at the bottom edge of my shoulder blade like she's drilling a hole through my skin. I call her Bea, although I'm sure that's not her name. It's probably something more like Beatrice or Belinda or something that has at least three syllables. Bea's makeup is always perfect, and her deep coffee complexion looks like she was sculpted from dark marble. Her nails are perfectly manicured the way I used to have mine done every other Thursday. I stuff my stubby nails into my pocket—they won't allow us to have long nails since that guy in Conetoe found a fake fingernail in his fried chicken livers and sued. The policy came down from corporate, and if it came down from corporate, it might as well have come down from Mount Sinai.

I have $40 in tips crammed into a wad in my pocket. I nervously pass my stubby fingers over the dollars because I'm afraid if I stop touching them, I'll forget where I put them.

I used to hate Bea for her pulverizing stares, but now I realize I can't blame her. I would feel the same way if I had to walk a mile in her $85 heels.

Before I realize, I'm in the hat section. All kinds of hats. Black women know their hats; at least, that's what Mamma always told me. Every Sunday when I drive by the Mount Zion AME church, I see the ladies cascade out of the sanctuary wearing these beautiful, elaborate hats—hats with lace, hats with feathers, hats with beads, hats with sparkles, hats with pins, hats without pins, hats that match dresses, hats that don't match dresses, hats that cascade down from heaven like Jacob's ladder. The hats remind me of the head scarves featured in the line drawings of biblical matriarchs plastered all over our Sunday school walls. Ruth. Deborah. Sarah. I swear the Technicolor glory makes me hear music.

I always wanted a bright pink hat with a fake stargazer lily on the crown and one of those velvet, forty-dollar hatboxes to store it in, the same kind of hatboxes you see folks carrying for the Queen of England whenever she goes on diplomatic visits and has to keep all of her hats looking perfectly fresh.

"Can I help you?" Bea slithers silently beside me.

"Yeah, you can help me."

She tries to hide her surprise, but her overly mascaraed eyelashes clap together awkwardly. Today I'm getting a hat.

"Is there something you'd like to try on?" Bea is a good foot taller than me, like an ebony Amazon daring me to put any of the crisp, silk creations on my sweaty, $5.99-buffet hair.

“Do you have one of those pink hats with the stargazer lilies on it?”

“If it’s not on the floor, we don’t have it.”

“Do you have any plain pink hats?”

“If it’s not on the floor, we don’t have it.”

I pick up a bright yellow hat with a daisy and black lace. I want to put it on my head, but then I catch a glimpse in the mirror of my greasy, blond strings falling out of their braids. I want to gently pull the strands behind my ear with my stubby, plain fingernails and settle the hat onto my head like a crown and see how it looks against my pasty, pale skin. Instead, I hold it up to my cheek, seeing if the yellow was so bright it would suck out what little blush was left in my tired cheeks. I can feel Bea exhale with relief when I place the hat back on its stand. There’s a black pillbox hat that makes me think of Jackie Kennedy, and for a moment I picture myself sitting in the convertible in Dallas, holding on to my husband while the world erupts in madness.

“Try this one.” Bea hands me a light green bucket hat with a subtle and shy yellow ribbon. “It would bring out your eyes.”

Maybe Bea isn’t afraid of me. Maybe she’s afraid of becoming me. I can’t blame her. I don’t want to become me, either.

I put on the hat and look in the mirror. It does bring out the gray and green flecks in my eyes—flecks that, to be quite honest, I’m surprised are still there. It’s $55 but is 40 percent off.

“I can return it, right? I mean, if it doesn’t fit or it doesn’t go with my outfit.”

“Of course you can return it if it doesn’t fit.” She nods and plays along. She knows I don’t have any intention of wearing it at all. She knows I’m going to take it home, feel guilty, and return it the next day. But for a few seconds in the boutique mirror, I am one of the biblical matriarchs … Mary. Lydia. Rebecca.

I pull the wadded-up $40 from my pocket—two tens and four fives.

I hear the croupy cough of Jim’s pickup. I hand Bea the hat, which she returns to the display. I leave the store and settle into the passenger seat beside Jim.

“I almost bought a hat today.”

“You don’t need one. You don’t look good in hats,” he says.

“I don’t think so either.”

We take a shortcut through an unfinished housing development budding with naked plywood. The muffler hacks again.

“Jim, we need a new muffler.”

“We need a lot of things.” He laughs the way people laugh when nothing is funny anymore.

I shove my fingers into my pocket and rub the cash again.

When we get home, I do the dishes from last night while he checks out the sports scores.

I take a shower. He brushes his teeth. We crawl into bed.

We start to make obligatory love, but we both lose interest about a third of the way through.

Tomorrow, I will do the same thing.