

PERSONAL STYLE

"I bought a wool cape by Costume National in Rome," says Cecilia Morelli, who works for Primary Productions, a New York film-production company. Her personal style tends toward the feminine and wearable: Marc Jacobs, Marni. The cloak she bought was dark and edgy and—blame it on the grappa—offered the potential of a life far moodier. "It cost me a fortune," she says. "But I didn't wear it for two years because, for the life of me, I couldn't figure out how."

It's also easy to be seduced by a sale. I have bought lilac satin Christian Louboutin pumps a half size too big simply because they were on final markdown. (I have a new mantra when I shop: "Sale is not free," I chant. "Sale is not free.") I have bought jeans in the "I'll always be this skinny, right?" daze of recovering from the flu. I have convinced myself that it's not so important to actually move in a dress, as long as it's sexy; I own a Proenza Schouler leather pencil skirt that has inspired some serious blushing-in-my-own-apartment remorse. And so the pumps, the jeans, the dress, the ostensibly fabulous skirt all sit, perhaps wishing, in their inanimate way, for the exciting life of a more suitable owner.

It happens even when we know better. Take the case of advertising copywriter and brand strategist Amy Swift. More of a Grace Kelly than a Sophia Loren, Swift says her most shameful error is forgetting what she looks like. "I have a suede Gucci jacket that I have never worn," she explains. "When I think back to what made me buy it rather than just admire it, I realize that it was having seen a particularly steamy and suggestive ad." (The irony for Swift, of course, is that she concocts such fantasies for a living.) "If you're buxom, which I'm not, or olive-skinned, which I'm not, the jacket looks really sexy. It's like you have this idea of yourself as one thing, but there's always this flirtation with the person you're not."

For a while I would tally my mistakes and exchange them in my head for airfare: a weekend in Miami, a trip to L.A.—and recently, since I redid my apartment, the cost of home renovations. There's a Lanvin top that made it off its hanger several times, but never once out the front door. It's a lovely thing, but not right for me, and its high price could've wallpapered my bedroom.

Elizabeth Pearce, a lawyer in the fashion industry, has the occasional unexplainable compulsion for heels. "I buy them because they are beautiful

objects," she says. "But I don't wear heels. Never have, never will. Yet I see them and think, Wow, those Balenciaga shoes would be gorgeous on my wall." (She hasn't, to date, figured out an appropriate installation.)

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"It's all so emotionally charged," relates chic retailer Linda Dresner, who has witnessed her customers make shopping blunders and admits to making some herself. "In Paris I saw this young girl in four-inch Yves Saint Laurent heels. I went straight to the store and bought them. I got them home, and I couldn't even walk out of the closet. I can't return them because they're from Paris. But the truth is, I wouldn't want to, because it would mean giving up the fantasy."

Dresner has seen her customers in the same position. "We try to gently say, 'It doesn't fit' or 'I don't think you'll be happy,' but that's not always what it's about."

So what to do with all that too big, too little, maybe-in-a-different-lifetime loot? (I don't think I'm alone in failing to notice, or acknowledge, my errors within the safety of the return time frame.) Wilcox waits two months, then sells her pieces on eBay. (Handy that highly sellable classics are her Achilles' heel.) One can always try a tailor, as Morelli did with that mysterious cape, which unfortunately came home resembling a throw. And although Pearce slips up with shoes, she doesn't allow herself to do the same with clothes. "If you have something you're not sure of and mix it with the things you're most comfortable wearing, you'll come up with a look that works for you," she says. Unlike

Morelli, she's also had great success taking matters into her own hands—chopping off sleeves, even. Making the effort to have something tailored, though time-consuming, is almost always worth it. Also, if you're doubtful about your purchase after a week, two weeks isn't going to make it better (check the sales receipt and return the item while you still have the chance).

I take my unworn clothes to the Manhattan consignment store Tokio 7. But mostly, I give them to friends who are taller, shorter, fatter, skinnier (and, in several Empire-waisted cases, pregnant). They are expensive gifts, sure, but it is a relief to see clothes on *somebody's* body, as they were meant to be. And I've been on the receiving end just as much: Some of my favorite pieces are my friends' mistakes.

"If you really love clothes," says Dresner, "you'll just be happy to see them worn." ■

WASTE NOT...

- **Know your style.** Are you a jeans-and-sweater girl? Maybe a full-skirted dress isn't the best choice.
- **Don't be seduced by a sale.** Just because something is reduced in price doesn't mean it will look right on you.
- **Check the receipt.** Know the return policy like the back of your hand.
- **Have it altered.** Don't be intimidated. It's better to take a chance on a new length or a tighter sleeve than to not wear a garment at all.
- **Sell it on eBay.** With more than 181 million users worldwide, somebody will like your too-small designer shoes.
- **Take it to a consignment store.** You'll be surprised at the price you might get.
- **Hand it down.** Give the dress to a lucky friend or sister whose style it suits.
- **Give it to charity.** Enough said.