

ON PRESENTATION

What is worn, by both of them, and why it is part of the standard

A companion to the Protocols of the Public Theatre — for adults 18 and over

I. THE THING NOBODY SAYS OUT LOUD

Two nights, identical in every other respect.

On the first she comes to bed in a pyjama set bought in a hurry, cotton, printed with something small and pink, the elastic gone at one cuff. On the second she comes in a long nightgown she chose deliberately, in a colour she knows, and she takes a moment at the door before she crosses the room.

She is the same woman. The marriage is the same marriage. And the two evenings will not go the same way, and both of them know it, and almost nobody says so — because saying so sounds like a criticism of the pyjamas, and it is not. It is an observation about signal.

The pyjamas say: tonight is over, I am off duty, nothing is going to be asked of either of us. That is a perfectly good thing to say, and there are weeks when it is the truest and kindest thing in the house. The trouble is only ever this — that it gets said by accident, on a night when nobody meant it, and then both of them wonder quietly why the evening went flat.

This page is not about looking better. It is about not sending a signal you did not intend to send.

II. WHAT CLOTHING ACTUALLY DOES

Clothing is not decoration in a house like this. It is instruction.

It tells the other person what kind of evening this is before a word is spoken, which saves the awkward business of asking. It tells them how much trouble was taken, and trouble taken is legible — everyone can tell the difference between what was chosen and what was to hand. And it does something to the wearer, which is the part most often missed: a person dressed deliberately carries themselves differently, and they feel it before anyone else sees it.

Latex, leather, silk, cotton, a nightgown, a shirt — none of these has meaning on its own. This library takes no view on what a house should own. What matters is that the choice was made rather than defaulted into, and that both of them can read what it means.

Which is why a house that runs on written agreement should write this down too. Not a dress code. A short, honest understanding: what says tonight is an evening, what says tonight is a rest night, and what says come and find me.

III. IT RUNS BOTH WAYS

A page that told only the wife what to wear would be a page about a man's preferences with a covenant drawn around it, and this library does not do that anywhere else.

He is under the same rule and arguably under more of it. He is the one who leaves the house, and the Protocols of the Public Theatre are already explicit: his discretion is his skill, and being visibly ill-prepared in company is a failure of preparation, and preparation is obedience. What he wears is not his own business — it is the standard of the house wearing shoes.

So: clean, pressed, fitted, and chosen. Shaved as she requires or not at all as she requires. Nails, shoes, collar. The same effort at home on a Wednesday as at a dinner on a Saturday, because a man who is immaculate for strangers and shapeless for his wife has told her exactly where she ranks and did not mean to.

If she is being asked to take trouble, he takes it first and takes more of it.

IV. THE STRONGEST INSTRUCTION SHE HAS

Everything above is about signal. This section is about the plainest signal there is, and it deserves saying without coyness because coyness has never helped anybody in a marriage.

She can walk into the room wearing nothing at all, sit down, and call him over. No garment competes with it. Whatever the room was about ten seconds earlier, it is now about her, and he will come across that floor more eager to please her than any instruction in this library could make him.

Lingerie does much the same work and does it differently — chosen, arranged, obviously deliberate. The nakedness says I am here. The lingerie says I decided you would see this tonight, and the deciding is the part that reaches him.

And here is the mechanism, because it is not simply that men like looking at women.

He is caged. He has been caged since Sunday. Every ordinary hour of his week has been quietly answered by steel, and every response his body has tried to make has been met and refused. Then she walks in with nothing on, and he responds exactly as he always would — and there is nowhere for it to go. The

wanting arrives with full force and immediately hits a wall she is wearing the key to.

That is what makes it land as it does. Not her body alone; her body plus the arrangement. A free man looking at his wife undressed has an appetite and a route to satisfy it. A caged man has an appetite and one person who decides. She has not just shown him something. She has demonstrated, without a word, the exact shape of the thing he agreed to.

He does not merely comply after that. He takes whatever she gives him and is grateful for it.

By contrast: beige pyjamas, the old dressing gown, curlers still in. She may want the same evening. She will not get it, or she will get a slower and more effortful version of it, and she may conclude that something is wrong with him. Nothing is wrong with him. She sent one instruction and expected another to be received.

V. WHICH MEANS SHE STARTS WITH HERSELF

This is the part that has to be said plainly, and it is the natural end of everything in The Corner.

If she is raising him — if she is holding him to a standard, putting him in a suit and tie, expecting him sharp and fed and trained and answerable — then she cannot exempt herself from the principle she is applying to him. A coach who has let herself go entirely while demanding discipline of her athlete has a credibility problem, and everyone in the gym can see it.

This is not a demand that she be beautiful. It is not a comment on her body, her age, or what has happened to either. It is the ordinary requirement of anyone who holds a standard: that they are visibly under one themselves.

And there is a second reason, which matters more. Her appearance is the single most effective instrument she owns for moving him. Not the ledger, not the paddle, not the steel — those govern him. This moves him. A woman who understands that and neglects it has put down the most powerful thing in her hands and picked up something slower.

It is also, unlike almost everything else in this library, a matter for discussion rather than instruction. He does not get to set this standard. She does. But he is entitled to say, once, plainly and without sulking, that it matters to him — and she is entitled to hear it as information about the man she is building rather than as a criticism of the woman she is.

A charity shop can hold a very good dress; that is not the point and never was. The point is whether it was chosen for the evening, or whether it was simply what was nearest to hand.

VI. WHAT THIS IS NOT

It is not a comment on anybody's body. Nothing on this page is about size, age, weight, scars, a body after children, or a body after illness. Bodies That Change exists for precisely this, and it outranks this page wherever the two might seem to touch. Presentation is about intention, and intention is available to every body there is.

It is not a standard she must meet to be wanted. A wife who reads this and concludes that his regard is conditional on effort has read it exactly backwards. He does not want her more in the nightgown. He is more certain, in the nightgown, that she wanted him to.

It is not a rule that can be enforced by disappointment. If a house wants a standard here, it is written down and agreed like every other standard in this library, and it is answered through the ledger like every other. It is never enforced by sulking, by a face at the bedroom door, or by comment. A quietly disappointed husband is not holding a standard; he is applying pressure while keeping his hands clean, and this library has a name for that and does not permit it.

And it is not a permanent condition. Nobody dresses for an evening every evening. The point of naming the signal is that the ordinary nights become ordinary on purpose rather than by drift.

VII. THE PRACTICE

What one house does, offered as a shape rather than an instruction.

Three states, named plainly and known by both: the rest night, when the comfortable thing is worn and means what it says; the ordinary evening, which asks a little of both of them; and the appointed evening, which is prepared for — and preparing for it is most of what makes it work.

The appointed evening is put in the diary. That sounds unromantic and it is the opposite: a date in a diary is a week of anticipation instead of an hour of hoping, and the preparing is where the anticipation lives.

She chooses what she wears and he does not ask. He is told what to wear, and does not choose. That asymmetry is the house's, arrived at deliberately; another house would arrange it differently and be no worse for it.

And when either of them has taken trouble, it is said out loud. Not a compliment about a garment — a specific line about the trouble taken. Noticed is the whole currency. Nobody keeps doing this for someone who does not notice, and nobody should be asked to.

VIII. THE POINT OF IT

None of this is about clothes.

It is about a house where nothing important is left to be guessed at, and where a thing as simple as what a person put on before coming to bed is not left to accident. Everywhere else in this library, two people take something that most marriages leave vague, and they say it out loud, and they write it down.

This is the smallest version of that, and one of the most useful — because it costs almost nothing, it can start tonight, and it is a very good place for a nervous couple to begin.

A guide only. For consenting adults, 18 and over. Nothing on this page overrides the Articles or the Schedule of Limits. Nothing here is a comment on any body, at any size or age. A house that uses this page to make either of them feel unwelcome in their own skin has misread every line of it.