

I really miss her, but I had missed her for years before her death. I think about her every time I see a beautiful flower, tree, sunset, ocean . . . or a special piece of clothing. When I see something I think she'd like, I still have the impulse to buy it for her. Then I remember she's gone.

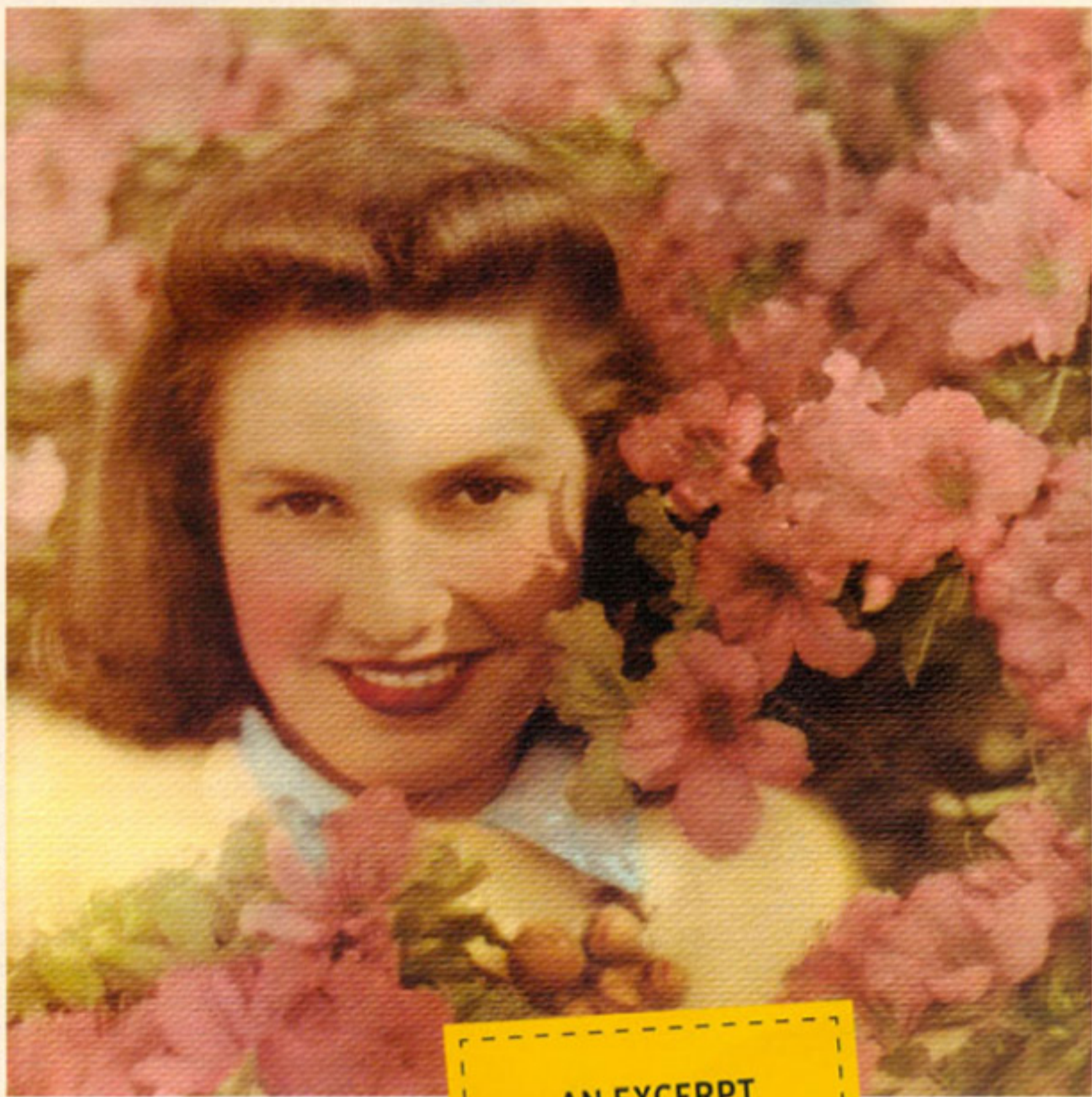


BILL BLASS DRESS

ELEANOR AS AZALEA QUEEN CIRCA 1936

My Mother's Clothes

ELEANOR AS AZALEA QUEEN CIRCA 1936



AN EXCERPT
FROM JEANNETTE
MONTGOMERY
BARRON'S NEW
BOOK, A LOVING
TRIBUTE TO ONE
OF ATLANTA'S
ORIGINAL
FASHIONISTAS

E

ELEANOR MORGAN MONTGOMERY ATUK

knew how to dress. After this small-town Georgia belle married her college sweetheart, Coca-Cola Bottling Company heir Arthur L. Montgomery, she moved to Atlanta and became one of legendary fashion director Sol Kent's top clients at the Rich's Downtown. Her generous closets filled with designs by the likes of Bill Blass, Oscar de la Renta, and Norman Norell—several of whom became personal friends. Blass used to tease the Montgomerys, calling them "Beverly Hillbillies," because their Peachtree Battle estate had a "cement pond" where Ellie would host elaborate parties when Blass was in town for a trunk show.

But toward the end of her life, Ellie's memories began to fade. She forgot her decades of service to the Atlanta Speech School, Egleston Hospital, the Forward Arts Foundation, the American Cancer Society, the Cherokee Garden Club. She forgot the Latin names of flowers she once rattled off with ease and authority. Eventually—her mind ravaged by Alzheimer's—she even forgot her family's faces.

Ellie's daughter Jeannette Montgomery Barron is a photographer whose work has appeared in museum collections and magazines such as *Vogue*, the *New Yorker*, and *Vanity Fair*. When Barron moved Ellie into an assisted-living facility, she was especially concerned about her mother's wardrobe. "Going into her closets was her ritual every morning," says Barron. "She would go in and visit her clothes. I thought, what is she going to do without that?" So Barron snapped a few photographs and gave the portfolio to her mom. Astonishingly, the fog abruptly cleared. Ellie began telling stories—of wearing one gown to the debutante club's Bal de Salut, or dancing in another at the Piedmont Driving Club. Barron went back to shoot more.

A minimalist by nature, Barron began to experiment with patterned backgrounds to evoke her mother's more flamboyant taste. Barron, who lives in Italy, discovered a blue toile in Rome that was identical to one from her childhood bedroom. She experimented with her mother's paper drawer liners and a bright red tablecloth from the "21" Club, Ellie's favorite restaurant in New York (see page 70). There were more visits back to the States, where Ellie would explain each article's history. "This is the really good one," she whispered of the gold Yves Saint Laurent coat.

In Ellie's last days, the nurses would pull out the scrapbook late at night when Ellie couldn't sleep. "Sometimes she thought it was a magazine," says Barron. "She would turn down the page, saying, 'I want that one' or 'That would be good for you, Jeannette.'"

After Ellie passed away at age eighty-four in 2007, Barron showed the series in venues from Saks Fifth Avenue and Kate Spade stores to SCAD Atlanta to Jackson Fine Art, where the images will go on display July 29. But Barron also knew that they needed to be a book, accompanied by Ellie's words. So the project became *My Mother's Clothes* (Welcome Books, \$24.95).

"Making the book kind of kept [my mother] alive," says Barron softly. Only when the project was complete did Barron comprehend that Ellie was gone. "Then it was really final." —BETSY RILEY

Images and captions reproduced with permission from *My Mother's Clothes*, ©2010 Jeannette Montgomery Barron (welcomebooks.com/mymothersclothes). Also courtesy of Jackson Fine Art, 3115 East Shadowlawn Avenue, 404-233-3778, jacksonfineart.com.



A typical week in my mother's life, circa 1979: pay taxes, check face blemishes, call Ted Turner, call Robert Woodruff (the president of the Coca-Cola Company at the time), fly to New York and leave clothes at my apartment. I'm exhausted just thinking about all of this.



RICH'S DEPARTMENT STORE COAT

My mother decided to move from Atlanta to Charlottesville, Virginia, in 1980. She bought a farm and some cows and lived life in the small college town that Charlottesville was in those days. In case she needed an emergency fix of glamour and entertainment, Washington, D.C., was only two hours away by car, faster if you drove like she sometimes did. She met her second husband in Charlottesville, a physician at the University of Virginia Hospital. Nuzhet was from Istanbul, Turkey, and extremely charming. They died one month apart. He called her Ellie-babe.



PUCCI SNEAKERS

If my mother liked a shoe, she would buy it in several colors each season. I used to stare into the walk-in closet she claimed after my father left her for the Playboy Bunny (yes, that's right), wondering why she needed all of those shoes. I remember the look on her face one day when a salesman at Gucci pronounced, "Madame, you obviously do not have a Gucci foot." Boy, was she pissed!

Mama always told me, "Take some 'mad money' with you on a date. If you get mad, you can just leave."



MAUD FRIZON HANDBAG

page 74

My mother really loved this Yves Saint Laurent jacket. It is as light as a feather—you could wear it as a spacesuit and also get a tan from its reflection. She took such good care of her clothes: The sleeves were always stuffed with tissue paper, nothing was put away without being covered in plastic. I know she must have been keeping them in good shape for me to have someday.



YVES SAINT LAURENT COAT



OSCAR DE LA RENTA GOWN

I suppose the designers know that when a gown is going down South, they have to dress it up a bit. I can just hear them in their offices on Seventh Avenue: "This one's going to Atlanta—throw on a few more ruffles."

page 75



LANVIN SCARF

My brother and I witnessed our mother take her last breath. After six days of anticipating this moment, no matter how prepared I thought I had been, it was cinematic, like a preview of my own death. People say we look a lot alike . . . That night I slept on the floor beside her bed and held her arm after the nurse administered morphine. I wrapped my neck in one of her old scarves; I was freezing. Early the next morning, my brother saw her last smile, something I am jealous to have missed. It was a beautiful sunny day in the south of Georgia, about a hundred miles from where she was born, and she was four days shy of her eighty-fifth birthday. True to form with all matters of her vanity, Mama preferred to go out at eighty-four. The nurses dressed her in a favorite Oscar de la Renta gown to go to the funeral home—it matched the beautiful burgundy hearse they sent.