

I am inspired hearing her wax poetic about a hue I had heretofore deemed adjectiveless. “Fresh.” “Feminine.” “Whimsical.” Who knew black could be these things? We agree that the best way to tackle this is for me to go shopping exclusively for black clothing and send her dressing room selfies. Having a professionally fashionable stranger judge me from 3,000 miles away? Sounds fun! My goal, for the sake of the experiment, is a head-to-toe black look. Normally I would incorporate a new hue slowly, but Andrea and I quickly realize that if left to my own devices, I will get myself off on a technicality by throwing a skinny black belt over a floral dress and calling it a day.

The truth is that I didn’t think any of this was going to be difficult. Obviously it’s enough of a problem for me to confess it, but I secretly thought it would be easily solved—that I’d select a few decent-looking black pieces and my quest would become more of an errand. But it turned out the incorporation of black was a legitimate challenge.

When I arrive at Barneys New York, I run my hands over all the bright, interesting choices. I feel like a kid playing with puppies—only to have Mom tell me I’m not allowed to take any of them home. I meander from floor to floor, finally skulking to the dressing room with one pair of inky crepe pants, one sparkly black jacket, a few black shirts and a skirt that is, upon closer examination, navy. Apparently even my subconscious is in active revolt against black. I have to solicit the help of a salesman to pull ebony items that I had skipped over on my own.

Now what? I think, shifting hangers along the crowded dressing room bar. Everything looks identical to me. Then I remember Andrea’s first rule: Treat texture like color.

“Go for black lace, quilted leather, black cashmere,” she had said on the phone.

During that chat, I explained to her that, try as I might, I am rarely comfortable in black. I feel, at best, like Jennifer Garner in an action movie and, at worst, like a theater stagehand, invisibly transporting furniture between acts. Andrea, like a doctor pressing for symptoms, wanted to know exactly what black pieces I had been putting on my body. I told her: one of my black T-shirts, my black jeans and the motorcycle boots. Because I don’t know how to wear black, my method has always been to throw what little black I have on my body and hope the results registered as “fashion.”

“No wonder you feel like Jennifer Garner! It’s not just about covering yourself in black for black’s sake. You have to look at black as a new classic. For our generation, a black motorcycle jacket is a classic piece. A sleeveless button-up shirt is a classic piece. We have a more punk take on things. Black has just as much personality as color.”

With her advice in mind, I send her my first attempt, a snap of me in black gauchos and a black T-shirt with thick silver binding at the waist and arms. I think I look like a death robot, but what do I know? Apparently I am more right than not.

“I applaud you for embracing the metallic,” Andrea delicately texts back, “but I could see this being tricky to style ...” Next.

She approves of my choice of dresses—“simple and elevated” sheaths with angular collars or black fringe frocks with “great shape.” But we both know dresses have never really been my problem. It’s the practical, stylish, day-to-night outfits I can’t swing. Luckily, after a few noir-challenged hours in the dressing room I am getting accustomed to the idea. I find it easier to ignore the temptation of gold cardigans and magenta pants and I no longer need the help of a sales associate. It ultimately takes a full day of jumping and pulling and buckling and turning sweaters inside out, but finally I select a pair of fancy textured black shorts and a black henley with quilted leather patches on the elbows.

“I so love the silhouette on you!” she texts. “I might also pair the shorts with a crisp white button-up shirt and an aggressive shoe. I am a big proponent of a leather jacket as well—it’s a gateway piece that you can pair with anything. The black-on-black elbow patch ranks high as far as classic details. And a good black V-neck is a wardrobe essential!”

Of course, having the desire to supplement my closet and having the funds are two separate things. The black motorcycle jacket can wait. In the end, I purchase the black henley. As I hang it in my closet between a sequined jacket and a rose-colored halter dress, I feel like a bad clothing parent: I just don’t get the same rush of excitement about it as I would if it were, say, cerulean. But I do like having it there. I like the promise of future ease, of future chic-ness. My closet is beginning to become a reflection of who I am as well as who I want to be. And maybe those two selves aren’t so black and white after all.

Women in Clothes

SHEILA HETI, HEIDI JULAVITS,
LEANNE SHAPTON & 639 OTHERS

Women in Clothes,
Sheila Heti, Heidi
Julavits and
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Style & Substance

Last summer, authors Sheila Heti, Heidi Julavits and Leanne Shapton sent over 600 women, some famous (Lena Dunham, Cindy Sherman, Miranda July) but most not, a complex series of questions about what role clothes play in their lives. Their answers revealed that fashion is so much more than a woman’s taste—it represents her personal history, struggles and ambitions. *Women in Clothes* presents these findings as a literary-anthropological hybrid—from an interview with a Betsey Johnson-dress-wearing farmer to still-life photographs of a jean jacket collection to a vignette on the thrill of winning a vintage piece on eBay. Rich with detail, the must-read anthology shows how daily sartorial decisions speak volumes. —Leigh Belz Ray

