

The Sugar Shack Dress Company

Hi, my name is Gertie McDowell. I was born in Butler County, Kentucky, and I suppose I'll spend my life here. I live on the family farm Ma gave me when she went into a nursing home. That happened last year after Pa took off for Branson, Missouri. He went there to join a country band and he's busy getting famous. I don't hardly hear from Pa no more.

I live near a town called Turkey Roost, and it really ain't nothing too special. It's got half a dozen streets, a whole bunch of bars, and a McDonald's whose arches used to be powdered with coal dust. Just a typical strip-mining town is all. On Saturday night, a girl can't do much except stroll up and down the main drag. Or maybe gather her girlfriends up for a slumber party and watch movies on the Turner channel. I watch a lot of movies, and I

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like the old musicals best. My favorite is *West Side Story*—Natalie Wood sure could sing. But I'm kinda gettin' off the subject.

Turkey Roost is pretty depressing 'cause the mines have all closed down. Donald Trump said he would keep the mines open, so the whole town voted for him. But I don't see a whole lot of evidence that that's ever gonna happen. The union headquarters are all boarded up and most everyone's on the dole. Of course, that ain't the Donald's fault—the man is a living saint. 'Cept for maybe his pussy grabbing and all them Twitter rants. Anyway, the air's a whole lot cleaner and that's gotta count for something.

I got married straight outta high school, and that weren't such a good idea. I got wed to Benny Pearman who was in my graduating class. Benny he got a job at a Sam's Club down in Nashville. He don't work there no more though 'cause he broke his hip moving boxes. So what he does now is play Fantasy Baseball and draw a disability pension. I ain't exactly sure why I married Benny—he just kinda proposed a year ago, and I didn't see much reason to say no. But I kinda wish I'd held out for a dude named Tommy Lee Weaver. Tommy Lee starred alongside me when I was in our high school production of *Annie*. He played Daddy Warbucks and he hadda wear a swimming cap so he could look like he was bald. His hair is thick and redder 'an a chestnut, and I saw it peeking out of his swimming cap when we were singin' together on stage. Tommy Lee also wrote a poem that got published in the school newspaper. And he gave me a buncha black-eyed Susans after the final performance of *Annie*. I don't hear from Tommy Lee no more 'cause he went to Eastern Kentucky University in Richmond. He said he was gonna further his education so he can be a pharmacist.

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Well, after Benny and I got married, I went to work at a Walmart in Bowling Green. My job was to stand at the entrance and greet folks comin' in. I'm real good at that 'cause I got a nice smile and my hair is dyed platinum blonde. I don't work there no more though 'cause Walmart shut itself down. That happened after the United Auto Workers tried to start up a union there. So what I do now is buy lottery tickets and find reasons to get out of the house. I kinda wish I had never married Benny—he just parks himself in our Barcalounger, sips beer, and plays made-up baseball. I kinda wish I had gone to Richmond and moved in with Tommy Lee.

Well, you can only buy so many lottery tickets and you can only do so much pining. So I decided that maybe it was time that I started up my own business. I'm real good at making dresses—I sewed all the costumes for *Annie*. So I set up a shop in this ol' barn that sits behind our house. I bought a dozen bolts of fabric and a Singer sewing machine and one of them torso dummies to fit the dresses on. After I made me a buncha dresses, I took pictures of 'em with my iPhone. And I put the pictures on a website that read *Frocks by Gertie McDowell*.

Well, even though I'm a real good dressmaker, I only got one dress order. Patty Bill Willis, who runs an egg farm near Coon Creek, asked me to make an Easter dress for her ten-year-old granddaughter. I ain't never made no Easter Dress so I went on the internet, checked a few of 'em out, and printed out one of the pictures. Easter dresses have real high waists and they don't have no bust at all and they got so many ruffles that they're practically Christmas tree shaped. Well, I made a cute little Easter dress, and it fit Patty Bill's granddaughter perfect. Patty Bill said her granddaughter was gonna be the best-dressed girl at the egg hunt.

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I charged Patty Bill forty dollars, which I thought was pretty reasonable, but Patty Bill just looked at me like I was trying to pick her pocket. She didn't pay me no money, but she gave me about six dozen eggs. So every night for a week, I fixed omelets with hominy grits.

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There ain't much point in having a business if it don't bring you no money. Heck, I checked my website every day for a month, but I didn't get no more dress orders. Benny Pearman said it's probably 'cause I ain't found my demographic. He said I ain't gonna get no orders unless I do more reachin' out. So I put together an email pitch and linked it to my website, and I sent it to all the women's wear distributors I could find on the internet. I didn't get no replies 'cept one from Coldwater Creek. All they wanted to do was send me a catalogue.

Well, a coupla months later, I'd pretty much decided to close my business down. That's when opportunity came knockin' like a sinner at heaven's door. This email popped up in my mailbox from a retailer called Sugar Shack Trends. I ain't never heard of that company, but I think it has foreign roots. It was sent by a gentleman named Jean Valjean who musta been a Frenchman.

Dear Miss McDowell, the letter read. Your daring hemlines and use of lace have come to our attention. Would you consider joining our distributorship and enhancing the Sugar Shack Brand? We are a rapidly growing company with outlets all over the world, and we would be honored it if you would consider becoming one of our designers. Congratulations on being invited to join the Sugar Shack family.

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Well, I read the email a coupla times and my heart started to pound like a mallet. Shucks, I ain't never been invited to join no family. The only family I got now is Ma, and she's in a nursing home. And she don't do nothing but sit in her room and watch *Frazier* reruns on TV. So I sent an email to Jean Valjean and I thanked him for the offer. And I said that as long as it didn't cost me no money, I'd be proud to promote his brand.

It weren't but fifteen minutes before that gentleman emailed me back. He said I had made a wise move that was going to change my life. He said his company only hires the most promising designers, and then he went on to explain to me how things were going to work. He said I would be responsible for making the dresses and taking them to the customers, and his company would be responsible for quality control. He also said my work was so beautiful that I needed to keep a low profile. He said there were plenty of imitators out there that would steal my designs if they could.

There was a contract attached to the email, which was kinda hard to read, so I showed the contract to Benny Pearman 'cause I wanted a second opinion. Benny said he knows nothin' 'bout contracts, but I oughta proceed with caution. He suggested I test the waters before dipping in my toes.

Well, I emailed that fella named Jean Valjean and asked if I could have a trial run. He said that would be no problem and he admired my business savvy. He instructed me to make a red cocktail dress for a woman in Beaver Creek, and he sent me the woman's measurements and told me to do my best work.

Since I wanted to make a good impression, I ordered this real neat fabric. The fabric was stretch satin and it shimmered like a ruby and the feel was so soft and silky that it electrified my palm. Well, I made a cocktail dress using an example I found on the internet.

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'Cept I gave it a plunging neckline and I kept the hemline low and I put a slit in the side of the dress that rode up past the knee. When I was done, it was all I could do not to bawl like a week-old calf. The dress was so beautiful it looked like an angel oughta wear it.

I mailed the dress to Jean Valjean's post office box for its quality inspection. A few days later the dress came back looking more beautiful than ever. The company had added some lace to the neck and put in some fancy pleats, and the Sugar Shack label, featuring a picture of a cottage, was sewn into the neckline. A note was pinned to the dress, and it said that I did a wonderful job. The note also listed the address of the woman who was gonna buy my dress.

Well, I put the dress in a garment bag and I hung it in the back of my Jeep and I drove an hour to Beaver Creek to make my delivery. Beaver Creek is a gutted farm town that only has one street, so it took me only a minute to find my customer's house.

The woman who answered my knock on the door was kinda dried-up and old, so I ain't sure what she wanted with a brand new cocktail dress. But I gave her the dress in the garment bag, and she gave me a weary smile and she handed me an envelope and told me to count the money.

I counted out five hundred dollars in fifty-dollar bills, and I told the woman I wasn't expectin' to get paid quite so much. She told me she'd seen my site on the internet and admired the work I'd done. She said she didn't mind paying top dollar for such beautiful designs.

Before she went back into the house, the woman patted my cheek. She told me to have a wonderful day and it was an honor to make my acquaintance. And she assured me it wouldn't be long until I became a famous dress designer.

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Well, with all that cash in my wallet, I felt richer 'an Bill Gates. And that woman, she sure made my day when she said I was gonna be famous. But it seemed sorta odd that she paid for the dress without even trying it on.

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When I got home and checked my email, there was another message from Jean Valjean. He said the customer who bought my dress had told all her friends about me. He said my reputation was spreading and he had another dress order. He said a woman from Rocky Mound—a town in Tennessee—wanted me to make her a black maxi dress with a split. He also said it was the thrill of his life to be representing me, and that he was gonna reduce his commission to only forty percent.

Well, I sent an email to Jean Valjean, telling him what the cocktail dress fetched, and he told me to put two hundred dollars in an envelope and send it to his post office box. He said the rest of the money was mine 'cause I'd done such a marvelous job. He also advised me to keep things hush-hush—at least until he secured a patent for everything I designed.

Shucks, I felt kinda sad that I couldn't go out and celebrate my success. But if you're gonna *stay* successful, you can't be slacking off. So I went online and found a picture of a real cool maxi dress, and I ordered a bolt of duchess satin 'cause I wanted the dress to shine. When the satin arrived, I gasped like a faucet—it practically blinded me. I couldn't believe how light hit the fabric and bounced right offa it.

I followed the basic design of the dress then I made a couple of changes. I cut the back away and I left one shoulder bare then I shortened the hemline a bit so the customer could show off her ankles. I worked all through the night on the dress 'cause I completely lost track of time. By the time I was done, the fingers of dawn were creepin' through the

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window. The way the fabric glowed in the first light of day made me feel kinda weak in the knees. It truly looked like the dress had been touched by the hand of God.

Well, I mailed the dress to that Sugar Shack company for its quality inspection, and a few days later the dress came back with a note from Jean Valjean. He wrote that the dress was a masterpiece—a garment fit for a queen—and that an angel musta guided my hands when I put the dress together. He also said that inspecting my work was like worshipping at a shrine, so he was gonna cut his commission down to just thirty percent.

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I kinda wish the hand of God would do something 'bout Benny Pearman. 'Cause Benny, he started lecturing me about all the time I spent makin' dresses. He said a marriage is gonna suffer if a couple don't spend time together. Well, since Benny has nothing to offer me but beer and Fantasy Baseball, I told him our marriage was already suffering as much as it needed to. I said if I gave up making dresses it would suffer a whole lot worse. So I bought Benny a super-wide Flat-Screen TV, and I got him a case of Budweiser and I told him to enjoy himself 'cause I had a delivery to make.

I drove two hours to Rocky Mound, another boarded-up mining town, and I delivered the dress to a square-jawed woman who mighta been a transvestite. Her arms were kinda muscular and her chest was kinda sunken, so for a moment I was worried that I made the bust too large. But the woman she just smiled at me and called me a lovely child. And she handed me an envelope fulla hundred dollar bills.

The woman she asked me to count the money before she accepted the dress, so I counted the hundred dollar bills and there was ten of them. I felt my knees start to buckle and I felt real light in the head, and if the woman hadn't caught me I'd have toppled off her

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porch. When I told her she'd paid too much for the dress, she winked and shook her head. She said my reputation precedes me and not to sell myself short.

As I drove back to Kentucky, I was shaking like a drunk; it was all I could do to keep the Jeep from driftin' off the highway. So I parked the Jeep in Opryland, which is just outside of Nashville, and I treated myself to a fancy dinner of pork chops and collard greens. By the time I got back to Turkey Roost, it was ten o'clock at night, but I stopped at the post office anyhow and I stretched 'til I heard my neck crack. After that, I mailed three of them hundred dollar bills to that Sugar Shack company.

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Well, I signed that Sugar Shack contract and dress orders kept pourin' in, and I spent every waking minute making dresses and delivering them. I didn't deliver the dresses 'til I first sent 'em to Jean Valjean 'cause he told me he was havin' 'em professionally photographed to show in a catalogue. I never saw the catalogue, but he said it looked real great.

Benny he got in my face one day and gave me an ultimatum. He told me I hadda choose—it was either them dresses or him. I told him that weren't no contest at all and to not let the door hit his ass when he left. So Benny moved in with his mother and sent me some divorce papers, and after I had a good cry I sent a text message to Tommy Lee Weaver. I asked Tommy Lee how he was doin' and I asked if he still wrote poems and I told him he looked really silly when he was wearin' that bathing cap. Tommy Lee he called me back on my iPhone and said he was doin' fine. He said he was in a relationship now and a baby was on the way, and he said he remembered the fun we had when both of us starred

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in *Annie*. I wished Tommy Lee the best of luck, and I'm sure I meant it too. You can't begrudge no happiness to a man who played Daddy Warbucks.

Well, I kept on making dresses and I banked almost all of my profits, and it weren't too long before I had thirty thousand dollars stashed away. But makin' dresses is lonely work so I phoned Ma every night. Ma she told me not to fret 'cause you just can't hurry love. She said one day my prince will come and I gotta be patient 'til then.

I thanked Ma for her advice even though even though it was pretty corny. Just 'cause a fella's a prince don't mean that I'll wanna take up with him. What if he's as bald as a billiard ball or has ears like England's Prince Charles? But maybe he'll be like Jean Valjean who sounds real suave in his emails. Mr. Valjean sounds like a Latin gentleman with frost around his temples, and I'll bet he's been all over the world and made love to a whole lotta women. So I send an email to Jean Valjean and I thanked him for all his support. And I said he oughta give me a knock if he's ever in Turkey Roost. I said maybe we could go to a Cracker Barrel and have us some chicken and dumplings.

Well, Jean Valjean he emailed me back. He said he'd be honored to meet me, but we can't be seen dining together. He said there's fashion spies everywhere and we gotta watch out for them. 'Cause one of them moles might follow me home and steal all my designs. But he promised to send me a bracelet with the Sugar Shack logo on it. And he said when he got all my patents secured, we might have us a meal together. He said he's real fond of chicken and dumplings and likes to eat collard greens too.

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Months went by and I never got no visit from Jean Valjean. But I made and delivered a whole lotta dresses, and the money kept rollin' in. I made dirndl dresses and tunic dresses

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and baby doll dresses with lace. I made slip-on dresses and granny dresses and even a coupla kaftans. And I delivered them dresses all over Kentucky and most of Tennessee. I delivered 'em to quaint little towns that looked like they seen better days. Places with names like Possum Hollow, Goose Valley, and Gopher Hill. Places with shutdown union halls and stores with empty window fronts. But although the towns weren't that inviting, my clients all welcomed me. A lot of 'em gave me a hug and called me a lovely child. The way they looked at me, you have thought all their Christmases had come.

Well, my partnership with that Sugar Shack company ended a little abruptly. But you probably already guessed that this was gonna happen. One day, I was making a corset dress—a dress with tight lace around the middle—when I heard this knockin' on the barn door. The knocking was kinda rapid, like a woodpecker was makin' a nest, so I was kinda surprised when I opened the door and saw a gentleman standing there. The gentleman was dressed in a business suit and his hair was brown with white flecks in it, and he looked so dapper and sexy that my heart leapt like a frog.

“Would you like some supper?” I said to him. “I could make you some chicken and dumplings.”

The gentleman blushed redder 'an a cherry tomato—he seemed to be kinda embarrassed. But he manners were so elegant that he reminded me of George Clooney. He said “please” when he told me to turn around and place my hands behind my back, and he put the handcuffs on me so careful it felt like he was slipping on bracelets. He even asked me to watch my step when he walked me to his car, and he said that he hoped them cuffs weren't gripping my wrists too tight.

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The gentleman drove me to Bowling Green where they got a federal courthouse, and all the way there we chatted like we were a couple of old friends. I asked him if he was married, and he told me he was divorced—he said that being a DEA agent was kind of hard on a marriage. I asked him if he had children, and he said he had two girls, and he saw them every weekend and took them to their soccer games. He asked me how come I got involved in dealing powdered meth, and when I said I didn't know nothin' 'bout that, he patted me on the shoulder. He told me I shoulda checked the hems before I delivered them dresses.

When he dropped me off at the Warren County Jail, we were as close as two pups in a litter. He shook my hand after removing the cuffs, and he said he hoped things worked out for me. So I asked him to look me up once I was out of jail. I told him I'd never fault him for being a federal agent. I told him I thought I would make him a real devoted wife.

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Well, I'm stuck in the Federal Prison Camp in Alderson, West Virginia. The trial it didn't go too well so I'm gonna be here awhile. When I told the judge what happened, he thought I was pulling his leg. He said Jean Valjean is a character in a Victor Hugo novel. He said Sugar Shack ain't no company, it's the name of a popular song. He also told me that court ain't no place to be telling whoppers that bad, and if I thought I was getting away with them I was dumber than broccoli. So he gave me five years for trafficking drugs and he sent me to Alderson, and he said he hoped I'd use the time to ponder my crooked ways.

They call this place Camp Cupcake 'cause Martha Stewart once stayed here. And I gotta admit the inmates are nice and the guards are real polite. I'm sharing a two-bunk cell with a woman named Bertha Jean, and she let me join a gang of woman that she calls her family. My job is in the sewing shop where they make clothes for federal inmates. I kinda

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like this assignment 'cause it helps me pass the time. I also like strolling the grounds 'cause the place looks like a college campus.

On Christmas, I got a card from that agent that busted me. He said he hopes I'm doing well, and we'll have coffee when I get out. He said he thinks I'm a really nice girl that just got led astray. I also got a letter from Pa who's still in Branson, Missouri. Pa said I'm real trustin' of strangers, and that ain't always a good thing. He said he was gonna hire a lawyer to help me with an appeal.

Well, I thanked Pa for his concern, but I ain't sure I got duped all that bad. I shoulda known that Sugar Shack ain't no name for a dress company. I shoulda known that Frenchmen eat frog legs and don't like chicken and dumplings. And I shoulda known there's no market for satin in towns named Beaver Creek. Maybe I'm dumber than broccoli, but dern it I shoulda known.

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