

pussy footing on the catwalk

If you happened to catch the Bradley Bayou show at New York's last 7th on Sixth, you may have noticed one particularly petrified model whose ankles quaked with every timid stiletto clad step. From my perspective, I imagined all onlookers bracing themselves for the inevitable trip and tumble of this pathetic girl. I would have braced myself too, had the runway come equipped with a railing for weeble-wobble-and-they-do-fall-down models like myself. Unfortunately there was nothing to grab onto, but flash infested thin air above a pit of hungry photographers. One slip of my tenacious toes and my spiked heels could take out an eyeball. How on earth did I end up in this perilous position, tiptoeing on the brink of complete humiliation and possible bodily disfigurement?

Well, my visit to New York began as a harmless venture to hang out with my best friend (rising star model, Sophie Patitz) who had flown in from Paris to do the shows. I had been in Miami Beach killing time at cattle-call castings (I'm a model, but flip-flopping down Ocean Drive is a far cry from gliding along the catwalk). It didn't take much for Sophie to convince me to hang up my bikini, and come for a week of backstage with the big girls in Bryant Park. It was fascinating! Comparing pre-make up plain Janes to larger than life runway goddesses, watching the press work themselves into a frenzy over fashion stars, and analyzing the prevailing star attitude, (which I call the "Brat Charm" oxymoron) like Molly Ringwald who sucked nonchalantly on a lollipop throughout the Christian Francis Roth show. Sort of like Uma Thurman sucking down her shake in Pulp Fiction, silly, sweet, and way coooool.

So by the fourth day of flashing my "designer" backstage passes, I felt quite cool myself, and toyed with the brat charm thing. Backstage at Bradley Bayou, I sipped cappuccino and popped miniature muffins into my mouth with an air of owning the entire breakfast buffet. No one noticed, or cared, only thirty minutes 'till curtain, and a cloak of chaos wrapped the room. That's about when the rumors of Mary, the missing model, erupted. As eyes turned tentatively towards me, my cool dissolved into a stream of churning caffeine and hot flashes of fright. One of the assistants asked a stupefying question, "would you be terrified to do the show?"

"N-n-no," I stammered, while trying to keep a calm countenance as my gut dropped to my quaking knees, and boomeranged back up into my throat. Earlier, as people armed with curling irons and lipstick mistook me for one of the models, I had laughed. Now this was no joke!

The assistant rushed back through the scurry of primpers doing last minute touch-ups. "Never mind sweetie, you're off the hook," she said with a shrug.

"Phew! well you woke me up anyway," I feigned nonchalance, relieved but dismayed over the fleeting fantasy. That morning I had seen the runway from a model's eye view. Even without a thousand riveted stares, and the swarm of cameras with zooming lenses and dancing flashes, the catwalk had sent a chill down it's shiny surface and up my spine. Gradually, that looming image faded back to it's safe place outside of my reality.

"First look!" I snapped out of my daydream as I heard the models' cue to dress, meaning mere minutes before showtime. I was about to join the audience and find a good seat from which to scrutinize today's fashion prey, when suddenly, a pack of frenzied faces surrounded me. The model had not arrived after all. A debate ensued, and someone demanded a decision, "Pronto!" Pronto seemed long over due to me, but I tried to keep my mouth shut, which was already agape in shock. The show coordinator gave the go-ahead, "Okay, let's use her. Hustle people!"

Everyone moved in instantly, multiple make-up artists dove in with foundation sponges, blush brushes, shadow palettes, brow and lip liners; an octopus of hairdressers' hands descended in a discombobulation of brushes, rollers and bobby pins (the idea of 'too many cooks in the kitchen' hung in the harried air); and another arm reached down, tugged off my Puma, and slipped my unsuspecting foot into the torture chamber of a black, high, high-heel. At least it was Cinderella-ish in size, and so was the finale gown which the designer fit me into amidst the frenzy. A ring of reporters joined in, snapping shots and interviewing me in my speechless state. I was trying to listen to the choreographer who was coaching me on where, when, and how to turn and walk. I thought, "turn and walk, out the back door now, fast!"

Too late. I was shuffled off to my spot just below the stage steps where a dozen girls were already lined up. Within seconds, my dressers had me in a plastic skirt and pastel jacket, which I would unbutton to reveal the black bra beneath. I pulled that off, (I mean the unbuttoning, not the bra). The show itself seemed surreal. A blur of faces, blinding spotlights, the whirr of clicking cameras, and the pounding of music barely audible, as my own heartbeat filled the room. Time seemed to stop. I couldn't tell if I was moving forward, like one of those dreams where you can't get to the door at the end of that bright white hall. But then backstage, where panty hose were stripped off and slapped on faster than paint, time and models sped by. I slipped out of the pastel/plastic getup, and into a chic suit in seconds. As I slid back into the line-up, I felt like a race car pulling out of a pit stop. However, my novice maneuvering in a new pair of horrendous heels seemed like driving with the emergency brake on. When my dressers presented my next and last pair of shoes, a pair of low heels, I could have kissed their feet. I "worked that runway" and started to really enjoy myself. Of course, just as the chill turned into a thrill, which I did not want to end, the show was over.

Backstage, I was bombarded with hugs and congratulations for "saving the show!" I shrugged off the attention, trying to stay cool despite my knocking knees and spinning insides. I felt like a little kid, fresh off my first roller-coaster ride, and yearning to jump back on.

The next show was Richard Tyler, and the dinner buffet was great. But I only made it on to one more runway, it was called LaGuardia.

by Jill Johnson



Illustration: April A.