

WOMEN

SEPTEMBER 2006

At Madame Paulette, the couture cleaners of Manhattan's Upper East Side, John Mahdessian treats some of the industry's most demanding garments. His cleaning factory in Long Island City has a small army of specialists and three dry-cleaning machines—two perc, one petroleum based that tackle most everything. For the superfine and fragile, though, Mahdessian created a PH-balanced, water-based bath—a giant stainless steel vat filled with a cold and mild combination of water, bleach, and a sodium percarbonate detergent. "Pieces might sit in here for up to one week," Mahdessian says, "It's slow but effective. And gentle. All that unnecessary mechanical cleaning action, like spinning, tumbling and handling is eliminated."

Floating in the liquid, like eerie Ophelias, are two wedding dresses. It's startling to see these grand garments looking so soaked and vulnerable. They're beyond recognition:

The fabric's turned slightly gray from water; the tulle's heavy mess; and the proportions all seem oddly distorted. One look at these wrecked dresses and their brides would be heartbroken.

Mahdessian doesn't flinch. "Whose responsibility is it to care for these amazing things once the designers are done with them?" he asks. It's mine. You may take the best care of your clothes, but you have to wear them, and they have to be cleaned." He pauses, glancing back at the water bath.

Those dresses are going to be perfectly restored, like new, when we're done with them.

They'll be just fine!"

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