



THE TALK OF THE TOWN

DEPT. OF HOOPLA STAIN GANG



The custom cleaning company Madame Paulette—removers of all kinds of stains, but especially very expensive ones—turned fifty this year, and its owner, John Mahdessian, threw a party in the foyer of the company's new flagship location, at Second Avenue and Sixty-sixth Street, to celebrate. A problem came up in the planning stages: Madame Paulette's foyer is not huge, and Mahdessian was worried about crowding. "These are V.I.P.s," said Mahdessian, who has dry-cleaned items for Meryl Streep, Anna Wintour, James Gandolfini, Barbara Walters, Naomi Campbell, Billy Crystal's mother, and David Copperfield (he sent in his collectible dolls). "They wouldn't enjoy being at the kind of party where you can't even walk through the place." He decided to host three parties, on consecutive nights, each with a different guest list.

The last celebration was on a Wednesday. A black carpet, velvet ropes, and a gaggle of paparazzi greeted guests as they arrived. A display window showed off a little TV, which played footage of Madame Paulette workers cleaning Princess Diana's dresses and vacuuming the interior of Donald Trump's airplane. Inside, people exchanged dry-cleaning horror stories over thumping disco music.

"It was about five years ago," the designer Dennis Basso, a large man in a gray suit, said. "I was having lunch at San Lorenzo in London with our dear friend Joan Collins, and as I was telling a story in a most explicit manner she was raising her hand, to drink from a glass of red wine." The climax is often the same in these stories: Basso accidentally whacked the glass; the wine went all over Collins. "She was in cream suede," he went on. "She handled it like a pro. She got up, took her shawl, and went to the ladies' room, and her husband followed with a full bottle of Pellegrino. They returned ten minutes later, and she had the shawl wrapped around her."

The real-estate broker Faith Hope Consolo, who wore pink, had a red-wine story, too: white Valentino dress; interior-decorating awards ceremony in Los Angeles. "The spill happened while I was going up to the stage," she said. "So I grabbed a tablecloth, wrapped it around me, and that is how I accepted the award." Donna Spinillo, a HUB International broker, was talking ink: "I was at Cipriani's at a benefit, and the Jets were there. I had a hat that I wanted them to autograph. And at the end of the night, of course, the pen I used opened up." Matthew Schuster, a vice-president of investments at U.B.S. and a Madame Paulette customer, said, "Bankers tend to get tie stains. They like to eat a lot."

For all the silks and pima cottons in the room, the things that marred them—blood, grease, hot sauce—were relatively ordinary. One of the lessons of the eve-

ning was that stains are a great leveller. Gregory Lefian, who handles Madame Paulette's interior cleaning service (there is a twenty-four-hour hotline) had just returned from an Upper East Side town house ("Baby poop all over a beautiful silk headboard"). He said that most of his visits are prompted by two culprits: "dogs and vomit." Maggie Norris, who designed the white shirt that Michelle Obama wore on the President's hundredth day in office, mentioned her Yorkshire terrier, Master Tim, who'd just soiled a beloved silk riding jacket. The P.R. man R. Couri Hay talked about a pair of Cavalier King Charles spaniels, Cornelia and Brook, and "a Versace blanket that I got at an auction at the Whitney Museum."

Michelle Pizzurro, who works for the designer Norma Kamali, brought up self-tanner. "People don't tan anymore," she said. "We get bathing suits returned covered in makeup and fake bronzer."

Mahdessian was outside, having a cigarette. He wore a pin-striped suit, and his shirt was open to reveal chest hair. He was dispensing stain wisdom. For instance, your party-survival tricks are useless: "Seltzer water is just carbonation; it doesn't do too much. Salt just acts as an abrasive." He went on, "There's two types of ways to remove a stain: mechanical action and chemical reaction." For these, you need either an emergency stain-removal kit (Madame Paulette happens to sell one), or, of course, a good dry cleaner.

—Lizzie Widdicombe