HEAD TURNERS INSPIRED BY THE EDGAR DEGAS PAINTING *AT THE MILLINER'S*, THIS 1945 *VOGUE* SHOOT FEATURED MANY OF LILLY DACHÉ'S CREATIONS.

crowning glory

Min Jin Lee enrolls in millinery school and discovers the allure of this season's most-wanted item.

In 1976, we were living in a furnished one-bedroom apartment in Elmhurst, Queens. My sisters and I slept on bunk beds in the corner of the living room, and our parents had the bedroom with the dirty window at the rear of the building. My parents worked at a candy store back then—this was before they bought the tiny wholesale jewelry store they would end up running for 20 years. At dinner each night, my North Korean father talked to us about his family. Centuries ago, the Lees had descended from the likes of a Manchurian warlord and a poet of significance. A war refugee and the last child of a wealthy merchant, my father told my sisters and me that we were special. My mother—a piano teacher in Seoul and the daughter of a minister—didn't contradict him. As a third-grader with a lofty mind, I adored the idea of nobility in my blood. While wearing my cousin's hand-me-downs and Fayva sneakers, I imagined princesses in silk *hanbok* being ferried on jeweled palanquins and the king's gold headdress from the Silla dynasty—pictures from Korean storybooks—all of this somehow being related to our family.

Of course, real life didn't match up. My mother went to work at the candy store dressed like a missionary: white blouses and dark A-line skirts with nun shoes. In Seoul, my father had been a marketing executive at a cosmetics company. In New York, in the seventies, he was selling the *Daily News* for fifteen cents wearing a coat and tie. He was never seen on the city streets without his trilby. You couldn't miss him walking up Broadway in a beige trench coat, his hat cocked like a crown.

Of their three daughters, I'm the one who wears a hat each day: fedora, porkpie, baseball, cloche. I wear one despite the fact that I've been five feet eight since I was thirteen—tall for America but conspicuous for a Korean girl. In my face, I take after my father: the broad forehead, sparse eyebrows, and thin eyes that disappear in a smile. I console myself with the notion that I have style. Which might explain the hat thing.

Of the three daughters, I'm also the studious one, and when I got into a fancy college, I *view >248*

IN PURSUIT OF A DREAM THE FRENCH-BORN DACHÉ, IN *VOGUE* IN 1946, EMIGRATED TO AMERICA IN 1924 AND BECAME A CELEBRATED HATTER.

From top: ERWIN BLUMENFELD/Condé Nast Archive, photographed by CHRISTOPHER COPPOLA; RAWLINGS/Condé Nast Archive.

left Queens for good. Yale pleased my parents, and it was, for me, a fabled place—the alma mater of my favorite writer, Sinclair Lewis. Always, I was lovesick with books; I wanted to be a writer, but that was impractical. "Get a real job first. Write when you're older," my father said. I studied history but would've preferred to be an English major with long hair scented by patchouli.

If I wasn't going to be a writer, I decided, I would strive for respectability. I got into law school at Georgetown. Then, in my second year, my studies were diverted by a shy young man who lived in New York who'd bring me gifts when he visited: Lucite candlesticks, handmade papers, a silver belt buckle from Arizona. The romance progressed quietly, but I decided to marry Christopher the day he gave me a brown felt hat encircled by a blue ribbon. After graduation, I returned to New York as a lawyer and a wife. For two years, I worked unhappily in a firm—easily seven days a week. Christopher said, "You've always wanted to write. We could live on less." I bought a computer, and he packed lunch to work. My parents were disappointed. But this is America: It's your life, right? Chapeaus switched.

My father wasn't wrong. I wrote a novel, and it was rejected everywhere. He didn't offer any consolation. I was grateful that he didn't tell me "I told you so." Not that it mattered—those words pounded in my heart anyway and also, Who did I think I was? Christopher and I had a baby. I began two other novels but couldn't finish them. Then, seven years after I quit lawyering, I started my fourth novel manuscript, *Free Food for Millionaires.* My protagonist, Casey Han, has an interest in millinery. The daughter of immigrants who worked in a dry-cleaning shop, Casey is a spendthrift Princeton graduate who works as a sales assistant at an investment bank. To offset her credit-card debts, she has a second job selling hats on her days off. While I was familiar with wearing hats, I knew nothing about selling them, let alone making them. I hadn't researched much for my first three novel attempts. This time would be different.

I decided to marry Christopher the day he gave me a brown felt hat encircled by a blue ribbon

I stumbled into a millinery-trimming store on Thirty-eighth Street and met Linda Ashton, a bespoke milliner who lent me a memoir by Lilly Daché, one of the preeminent hatters of the twentieth century. I was able to find a photograph of her in *Vogue* from 1946, the year her book *Talking Through My Hats* came out: Daché's posture is pure Cleopatra, and she wears a braided turban above her exquisite coiffure. Who would've believed she was a homely immigrant girl from the sticks of France? French by birth, she nevertheless embodied an American can-do spirit, believing that beauty could be earned through hard work and fine accessories. All my life I had been well mannered and competent. But inwardly I believed in the magic of clothes and hats. I wanted to be pretty, to stand out. I signed up for a course at the Fashion Institute of Technology.

ML 113, Foundations in Headwear Design, was where I learned that being a good student bears little relationship to artistry. For one assignment, I bought a $40 hat *view >250*

cats in hats 2007

UNDERCOVER RIGHT: BACKSTAGE AT THE THAKOON SPRING 2008 SHOW, MODEL DENISA DVORAKOVA SPORTS THE DESIGNER'S LAMPSHADE-LIKE HAT. BELOW: SIENNA MILLER (LEFT) AND KATE MOSS KEEP LOW PROFILES IN FEDORAS.

HIGH DRAMA ABOVE: MODEL NATALIA VODIANOVA AT ROYAL ASCOT IN A FEATHER HAT BY PHILIP TREACY AND DRESS BY GIAMBATTISTA VALLI. RIGHT: A RED-WRAPPED ELIZABETH JAGGER.

From top: ROBERT FAIRER; Richard Young/Rex USA; Rex USA; JAMES CURLEY/Rex USA.

body and mangled it in eight seconds in the millinery sewing machine, and I wept when I pulled out my uneven stitches for the third time for my gathered beret. On the first day, the instructor had kindly warned us that millinery was dead. There were about 25 enrolled students—most of us grown-ups with day jobs and lives elsewhere. Millinery would not support us. My father had tried to warn me about the uncertainty of becoming a writer. He and my mother had sent my sisters and me through college and law school by toiling in a 400-square-foot wholesale-jewelry shop, which was basically a corridor with a double-length glass cabinet that remained dingy no matter how much Windex my mother applied each day. And there I was, 35 years old, in my ninth year post-law, threading a millinery needle.

That gray worktable—the paint worn down to its base metal—in our classroom must have been a sight. Grown women sewing, laughing, and swearing—all of us laboring for days for things to put on our heads when hardly anyone wanted to cover her head anymore. Why become a milliner? Maybe for the same reason my father wore his trilby anyway. It was foolishness, that was certain, but it felt inevitable, too. Just like my turn as a novelist. My father and I shared a historical DNA—a double ladder of conceit and audacity—our memory of better times.

I bought a $40 hat body and mangled it in eight seconds in the sewing machine

I finished ML 113 but didn't take any more millinery classes. I was a lousy hatter. My research notes gathered, I returned to the manuscript. Unlike me, my character went on to get her millinery certificate. Casey is a stubborn girl—independent to a fault. In fact, she is my heart's match.

The epigram of my novel comes from James Baldwin: "Our crowns have been bought and paid for—all we have to do is wear them." A dozen years have passed since my lawyer days, and with my chubby book lying hopeful on the table of a bookshop, I am beginning to understand Baldwin's meaning. We are all marked for something finer, and it is for us to take it on. My father had told me all this when I was a girl—I just had to remember its truth. □

fashion newsflash

SNOW QUEEN THE DESIGNER IN HER MANHATTAN STUDIO. HER OWN PRADA DRESS. MONIQUE PÉAN NECKLACE AND BRACELETS.

northern exposure

Alaska's native art traditions and ancient ivories surface in a new jewelry line.

Jewelry designer Monique Péan's bracelets almost look like they're made of sliced agates. But the bluish-gray pieces rimmed in gold are something much more special: ivory from fossilized walrus, caribou, and even woolly mammoth that has been colored by minerals in the Alaskan ice over centuries. How, one wonders, did Péan obtain such treasures?

"I packed up my warmest clothing, which for me was a Marc Jacobs scarf and a Dolce & Gabbana coat," she says, laughing, "and traveled up to the Arctic Circle." There, Péan met native-Alaskan artisans, who shared with her their crafts, as well as the ivory (some of it more than 20,000 years old) that they find while hunting and gathering on the ice, which is melting because of global warming. She purchased and brought back more than 150 of these artifacts to her New York studio to incorporate into her work (10 percent of profits go to the Alaska Native Arts Foundation, which educates and trains indigenous craftspeople). Péan also integrates raw diamonds, aquamarine, and quartz into her sustainable, conflict- and devastation-free collection (the gold she uses is recycled) to echo the glaciers. "They are wearable sculptures," Péan says. "But each piece is more than that: It's art, history, nature, and fashion all in one."—**FLORENCE KANE**

STONE COLD MONIQUE PÉAN ICEBERG RING ($3,000) AND OLANNA WALRUS IVORY BRACELET ($5,800); KAVIAR AND KIND, L.A.

Péan: KEVIN STURMAN; hair, Katy Young; makeup, Brenna Scarrott; still lifes: CHRISTOPHER COPPOLA. Details, see In This Issue.