PROFILES

NOBODY'S LOOKING AT YOU

Eileen Fisher and the art of understatement.

BY JANET MALCOLM

Fisher says she stopped designing twenty years ago: "I've been leading from behind."

MARK MAHANEY/COURTESY EILEEN FISHER

There is a wish shared by women who consider themselves serious that the clothes they wear look as if they were heedlessly flung on rather than anxiously selected. The clothes of Eileen Fisher seem to have been designed with the fulfillment of that wish in mind. Words like "simple" and "tasteful" and colors like black and gray come to mind along with images of women of a certain age and class—professors, editors, psychotherapists, lawyers, administrators—for whom the hiding of vanity is an inner necessity.

The first Eileen Fisher shop opened in 1987, on Ninth Street in the East Village. Today, Eileen Fisher is an enterprise with nearly a thousand employees. The clothes sell in department stores and catalogues as well as in six Eileen Fisher shops in Manhattan and fifty-five throughout the country. Over the years, the clothes have become less plain and more like the clothes in fashion. Some of the older Eileen Fisher customers grouse about these changes. They want the clothes to remain the same, as if anything can. Surely not clothes.

I remember going into the Eileen Fisher shops that were opening around the city in the late nineteen-eighties and never buying anything. I was attracted by the austere beauty of the clothes. They were loose and long and interesting. There was an atmosphere of early modernism in their geometric shapes and murky muted colors. You could see Alma Mahler wearing them around the Bauhaus. But you could not wear them yourself if you weren't fairly stately. After a few years, the clothes changed and began to suit small thin women as well as tall substantial ones. But their original atmosphere remained. I joined a growing cadre of women who regularly shop at Eileen Fisher and form a kind of cult of the interestingly plain.

One day in February, I went to talk with Eileen Fisher at her house, in Irvington, New York, and was immediately struck by her beauty. She does not look like a woman who is uninterested in her appearance. She looks glamorous and stylish. She is slender and fine-boned. Her straight, completely white hair is cut in a geometric chin-length bob. She wears dark-rimmed glasses. Her features are delicate, and there is a certain fragility about her, an atmosphere of someone who needs protection. And she came to the interview protected, by two executives in her company: Hilary Old, the vice-president for communications, and Monica Rowe, the director of public relations. I was received in a large light room that looks out on the Hudson River and its distant shore (the river is magnificently wide here) through a picture window. A lunch of choice dishes—crab cakes, rice salad, a salad of winter squash and goat cheese—had been laid out on a long table. Eileen (as I will call her, as one calls Hillary Hillary) presented herself as someone who is still trying to overcome an innate awkwardness and shyness and verbal tentativeness. "Speaking and writing have always been hard for me," she said as her colleagues looked on fondly and encouragingly, as if at a relative with an endearing quirk.

She apologized for the lunch that clearly needed no apology. But she had planned to serve sushi prepared by her Japanese cook, who had been called away at the last minute. That Eileen Fisher had a Japanese cook did not surprise me; nor did the story she told a few minutes later about a fateful chance encounter with a Japanese designer who became her employer and lover. A sense of Japan hovers over Eileen Fisher's modernism (as it does, when you think about it, over modernism itself).

When the encounter with the Japanese designer took place, in the mid-nineteen-

seventies, she was a young woman from the Chicago suburb of Des Plaines ("Home of McDonald's, Anywhere, U.S.A.," in her description) who had recently graduated from the University of Illinois as a home-ec major and had come to New York to become an interior designer. But she wasn't succeeding. "I wasn't good with words," she said. "I wasn't that good with people, either. I couldn't explain my ideas to clients." To support herself, she waited on tables and also took small graphic-design jobs. One day, while at a printing shop to which she had brought a design for stationery, "this Japanese guy was also printing something, and he looked at my design and liked it and said, 'I'm a graphic designer, and I need an assistant. Would you apply for the job?' I applied and he hired me and we ended up getting into a relationship. I moved in with him—that was kind of a mistake—but the working part of it was a great experience. His name was Rei. We went to Japan to work on advertising projects for clients like Kirin beer and a large stationery company and a big chemical company. We needed to present a lot of ideas, to throw in a lot of stuff, so he had me throw in my designs. Then weird things would happen, like they would pick my design. And he would get upset. I think he thought I was this little assistant, I was nice and cute or whatever I was. When they picked my design, it created a problem in our relationship." The relationship did not survive the problem (of her talent), but the lesson of Japan stayed with Eileen: "I got inspired. I saw the kimono. I saw it worn different ways. I saw all those little cotton kimonos and those kimono things they wear in the rice paddies and tie back and little flood pants. I was intrigued by the aesthetic of Japan. The simplicity of it. I was already interested in simplicity from interior design. And Rei was really minimal. But it was the kimono that inspired me. The piece you're wearing is an extension of the kimono."

The piece I was wearing was a heavy, charcoal-gray wool cardigan sweater that I bought at an Eileen Fisher shop six or seven years ago and rarely wear because it is rarely cold enough to wear it. But the day was bitterly cold and raw and windy, and it was not too warm inside to be wearing it. The sweater is a remarkable garment. On the hanger it looks like nothing—it is buttonless and ribbed and boxy—but when worn it becomes almost uncannily flattering. Everyone who wears it looks good in it. Eileen then said something surprising, namely that she had not designed my sweater. Twenty years earlier, she had stopped designing; she had turned this work over to a design team that has been doing it ever since, at first under her supervision and now under that of a lead designer.

"I stored that idea about the kimono," Eileen went on. "After Rei and I split up, I went about my business. I tried to make a living. I did apartments, stationery, small things. I designed a tofu package. But this idea kept haunting me, this clothing thing, the kimono. I was living in Tribeca and had artist friends and designer friends. I was dating a guy who was a sculptor. He was designing jewelry, and he had taken a booth at a boutique show where owners of small clothing stores from around the country come to New York to buy clothes and accessories from small designers. He took me to the show, and I remember looking around and going, 'I could do this.' I had never designed any clothes, but I could picture it, I could see clothes I had designed on the walls."

At the next boutique show, a few months later, Eileen took over the boyfriend's booth. (He had stopped making jewelry but had committed himself to the booth.) She shared it with two other designers, since she couldn't afford the rent for the whole booth. "It was three weeks before the show, and I had no clothes. I had to figure out what to do. I ended up hiring someone to sew for me and make the first patterns."

"You drew the designs?"

"No. I never learned how to draw. I found other garments that were similar, that kind of got me close."

"What do you mean other garments?"

"Things that were in stores. That were similar to what I was thinking."

"You bought these clothes?"

"Yes, and I said to Gail, the woman who was making the patterns, it's kind of like this, but the neck is more like that, and it's a little longer, or it's a little shorter, it's a little wider, it's got a long sleeve or a shorter sleeve or something like that. It was going off of something that existed. Gail sewed the clothes—there were four garments made of linen—and I took them to the boutique

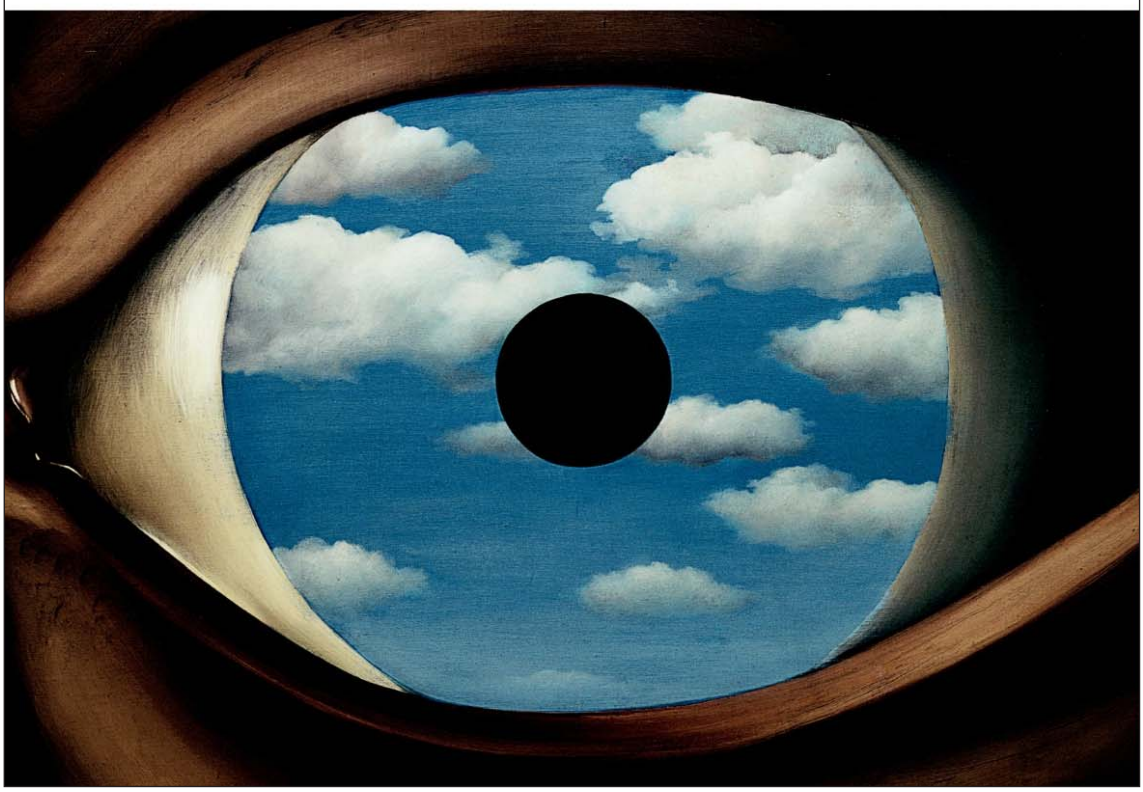
show and hung them up. I remember being terrified standing there and waiting for what people would say. But everyone was kind, maybe because I was quiet and shy. I wanted to know what the buyers thought, and they would tell me and I would listen."

Gail had been unimpressed with the designs. " 'You have to have an idea, Eileen,' she told me. 'This is a little boring. Put some piping on it or something.' " The psychotherapist Eileen was then seeing was not encouraging, either. "She felt I was making progress with my interior-design business. I was learning to communicate and to express my needs and ask for payment and other things that were hard for me to ask for. She thought that my taking a divergent path was some kind of sabotaging behavior." But several buyers liked Eileen's unadorned garments and ordered them, and at the next boutique show buyers stood in line and wrote orders amounting to forty thousand dollars. This was more than Gail could manage, and a small factory in Queens was found to do the sewing. "We cut the pieces and carried them in garbage bags on the subway to Queens."

Hilary Old and Monica Rowe had been listening quietly while Eileen told this history in answer to my questions. She had not touched her lunch, and, so that she might do so, I questioned her companions about what they did in the company. Rowe, a handsome African-American woman of forty-five with an air of friendly reserve, had only recently joined the company. "I've spent most of my career in corporate communications," she said, mentioning Sephora and Bath and Body Works as companies she had worked for, and speaking admiringly of the "woman-friendly" ethos of Eileen Fisher. Old, who is also forty-five, with a fresh open face and a manner that is at once confident and modest, has been in the company for eighteen years and rose through the ranks from a job as a saleswoman in the White Plains store. She had majored in women's studies at the University of Colorado and came to the attention of higher-ups in the company when she sent a letter to Eileen in which she expressed her sense of the Eileen Fisher aesthetic as a "totally radical feminist project" and proposed that the company connect itself with women's groups. She was steered toward a job in public relations, working on a newsletter written in Eileen's voice. A year later, she became Eileen's assistant. "I was lucky enough to have that role when the company was going through hard times and had to reimagine and reorganize itself in some profound ways," Old said.

When I asked about the hard times, and how they were surmounted, she and Eileen spoke about the almost magical intervention of a woman named Susan Schor, who arrived as if from Mt. Olympus, though she actually only came from Pace University.

"It began as an effort to give more structure to this almost feminine way of doing things—I didn't know how to run



a business," Eileen said. "You're looking at me as if I'm weird or something."

I said I was surprised to hear her say she didn't know how to run a business, since her enterprise was such a manifestly successful one. "Weren't you making a lot of money?"

"Yes. Absolutely."

"That isn't something associated with the feminine."

"To me it was very intuitive. I was always good with numbers. I was good in math."

"So if the company was doing well, why were you dissatisfied? What was lacking?"

Eileen struggled to explain. Evidently, there was both a "need for more structure" and insufficient "joy and well-being." She told the story—now a kind of legendary tale in the company annals—of the male C.E.O. who had been hired during the period of wobbliness and discontent. "It was clear after a few months that this was the wrong path. He was a lovely guy. He would have been the right C.E.O. for our company if a C.E.O. was the right role for our company. But it was the old paradigm of somebody directing the action. I remember after a meeting going, 'I don't think this is going to work.' People would ask me, 'Do we have to listen to him when he tells us what to do?' "

"You yourself don't like to tell people what to do," I said.

"Right, right," Eileen said, and added, "I think it comes out of a family model or something." Earlier, Eileen had spoken of her family with a kind of withering rue. She is the second oldest of seven children, six of them girls. "We sort of raised ourselves," she said. "My mother—I shouldn't describe it like this—but she was a little crazy. My father was an accountant at Allstate Insurance. He was a quiet guy, kind of disengaged."

"So the model for the company was a family without parents."

"Yes. My parents weren't in charge. With my six siblings, we ran the show. We did what we did. My mother put food on the table and cleaned the house, but she never told us what to do. She yelled at us more than anything, but didn't teach us things and didn't really take charge."

The incomparable Susan arrived a few years after the C.E.O. left. "What did Susan actually do?" I asked.

Eileen tried to say, but her reply was like a hermetic text by Judith Butler. She spoke of a "core concept team" and "the leadership forum" and "this kind of concept of facilitating leaders, which is that they're actually doing the work, they're not leading the work, but sort of like the way I've been leading from behind, in a way leading by, you know, letting the group find what's coming up and facilitating that to happen." Once again, she read my face and stopped herself: "You're looking at me like I'm crazy."

I admitted that I had no idea what she was talking about.

Old stepped in but was equally powerless to explain the inexplicable: "What we're trying to do with this different kind of leadership is to have the leader facilitate the process, so you get the

team or the craft team in the room together, to ideate together, to generate the ideas together, and then figure out who's going to hold what, who's going to move what forward, so it's less of, it's more about kind of again the holding the space for the team to find."

The talk gradually grew less opaque. But I noticed that whenever the workings of the company came under discussion the language became peculiar and contorted, as if something were being hidden. In fact, the company has nothing to hide. It is remarkably benign and well intentioned. It has a profit-sharing plan for its employees, whereby twenty-nine per cent of the profits are given to them. The plan includes the salespeople, who do not work on commission. (2012 was an exceptionally profitable year, and every employee received the equivalent of an extra eleven weeks of salary.) The salespeople are expected to wear Eileen Fisher clothes to work, and are given five free garments a month so that they may do so. (The clothes are not cheap; they are priced in the "luxury" category, to which brands such as Ralph Lauren and DKNY belong.)

Along with being generous to its own employees, the company tries to help the workers in the Chinese factories where most of the Eileen Fisher clothes are now made; there is a director of social consciousness, who oversees the inspection of those factories. In addition, there is a director of sustainability, who is in charge of environmental exemplariness. The company tries to be as green as it can without losing its shirt. For example, fifty per cent of the cotton it uses comes from organic farms that do not use pesticides, and dyes that are not toxic are preferred if not always insisted on. Eileen takes justifiable pride in her company's good works and good intentions, and its esprit.

However, when Susan Schor arrived at the company, in 1999, it was slipping away from Eileen. In 1988, she had married David Zwiebel, who owned two dress shops in upstate New York and was one of the early buyers of Eileen Fisher designs. After they married, Zwiebel joined Eileen at the company. She credits him with a "watershed moment": the opening of an Eileen Fisher shop on Madison Avenue at Fifty-fourth Street. "David found that location and really pushed for it," she said. Before the opening of the Madison Avenue shop, department stores had hesitated to take Eileen Fisher designs; now they saw the point of doing so. Today, department stores represent seventy per cent of the company's business. In the late nineties, the marriage ended, and Zwiebel left the company. "That was a hard time," Eileen recalled. "Everything was mixed up. It sort of reminded me of that situation with the Japanese boyfriend. Why do we repeat the same things?" After the separation, Eileen spent less time at the company in order to be with her children, Zack and Sasha, then eight and four.

"Switching to drones has made having to be everywhere at once much more manageable."

On her return to the office full time, a few years later, "Eileen no longer felt at home in her own company," Susan Schor said when I spoke with her at the company's headquarters, at 111 Fifth Avenue. "It had become more corporate, more hierarchical, less collaborative, less caring. There was more unhappiness, I'd say. People weren't kind enough to each other. Deadlines were more important than the process that led to the deadlines."

Schor is a handsome, vivacious, articulate woman of sixty-seven. She was teaching courses on "leadership skills" and "interpersonal skills" at the Pace business school when she and Eileen met, at a birthday party, and felt an immediate rapport. (Schor was wearing Eileen Fisher clothes.) Eileen confided her worries about the company and "some questions she had about her own leadership." She invited Schor to visit the company and observe its workings. Schor immediately recognized the power vacuum created by Eileen's inability to say a cross word to anyone. "It became clear to me that the company needed someone with my background," Schor said, "though it wasn't going to be me, because I loved being a tenured faculty member at Pace." In the end, Schor overcame her reluctance and took on the task she was so well equipped to perform, of getting a C.E.O.'s grip on the company while appearing to be doing nothing of the sort. Where the male C.E.O. had failed, the female professor of the legerdemain of leadership succeeded. Although Schor spoke regular English, and gave the air of being completely forthcoming, she was almost as elusive as Eileen and Old and Rowe had been when I tried to find out what, exactly, she had done to "bring in a very caring, feminine style of leadership that valued people working together, that valued coöperation rather than competition, that made room for having a full life." All that Schor could tell me was that "it was not a happy place when I came," and now it is "a pretty happy organization that keeps getting happier and happier."

At the end of the Irvington lunch, which had been scheduled to dovetail with another appointment, Eileen looked at her watch and proposed that I stay a few minutes longer so I wouldn't

have to wait for my train on the chilly outdoor platform—the train was due in fifteen minutes and the station was only five minutes away. "Do you want to see the living room?" she asked. Old, Rowe, and I followed her into a spacious room with a kitchen at one end and beige sofas and armchairs and side tables with books and magazines and attractive objects on them at the other. Two cats curled up on cushions completed the picture of pleasing domestic comfort.

I noticed a third cat on the outside of one of the French doors that lined a wall—standing on its hind legs, its paws eagerly pressed against the glass—and asked if I should let him in. "Oh, no, please don't do that!" Eileen said. She explained that this cat was never let into the house. He was the bad cat. He had once lived in the house with the other cats, but he had fought with the second male cat and peed all over the floor and when the housekeeper threatened to quit he was expelled from the house and now lived outdoors. He was begging not to come in from the cold, Eileen said, but to be fed. When I asked how he survived the bitter winter weather, she said, "He goes under the house. He's fine. The vet said he's the healthiest of my cats."

When I returned to Eileen's house a few weeks later—this time after lunch—Old and Rowe were on handmaiden duty again, but the interview took place in a different room. A meeting was going on in the room where we had eaten, and I was led to an upstairs room, lined with racks of Eileen Fisher clothes, all in gray, black, and white. Eileen, again, looked beautiful and elegant in a black ensemble of trousers and scoop-neck sweater. "This is what I call my studio," she said of the room, explaining that it had once been her office but now served as an extra meeting room and as a place where she tried on clothes. The racks of gray and black and white clothes—Eileen wears no other palette—were "the things I'm playing with," candidates for "my little closet where I keep the clothes I wear every day." They were also the source of clothes for the public appearances that she now makes more frequently and with less dread. She has gone to China and to meetings of the Clinton Global Initiative. But she is still, she says, "finding my voice."

In the studio, she spoke of another influence on her design that had almost the significance of the Japanese one: her Catholic-school uniform. "When I came to New York and had to get dressed to look like a designer—whatever that meant—I felt troubled by finding things to wear. So when I started designing clothes I drew on the uniform experience, on the idea that you can just throw that thing on every morning and don't have to think about it."

The school experience itself had been less edifying. "I was fairly traumatized by the Catholic schools I went to," she said. "I think it is part of my silence thing, of just always feeling it is safer to say nothing than to figure out what you think and what you want to say. It was always risky to speak at school."

"Was there punishment?" I asked.

"There was criticism. There was yelling. They would humiliate you and embarrass you."

Eileen asked if I would like to drop in on the meeting downstairs. I would have preferred to continue the conversation about Catholic schools, but with uncharacteristic firmness she said, "I know this will interest you," and led the way down the stairs.

In the lunchroom, the long table had been pushed against a wall, and ten or twelve women wearing Eileen Fisher clothes were sitting on chairs arranged in a circle. They spoke in the same coded language that Eileen and Old fell into when they talked about the company. I recognized some of the terms ("facilitating leaders") and noted some new ones ("delegation with transparency," "agenda-building"), feeling the same impatient incomprehension. What were they talking about? The meeting ended when an elegant older woman held up two bronze bells connected by a cord and rang them. "I ring a bell to remind us of timelessness," she said. Then an object, a sort of gilded gourd, was passed from hand to hand. Each woman said something as she received it. "I feel lighter," one woman said. "I feel humbled and

honored," the woman who had rung the bell said. Her name, I later learned, was Ann Linnea, and she is the author, with Christina Baldwin, of a book called "The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair" (2010). The book proposes that organizations conduct their business in circles. You sit around in a circle. This eliminates hierarchies. Everyone is equal. To focus the mind, there is a three-part ritual of a "start point," "check in," and "check out." When the book came out, the Eileen Fisher company was already conducting its meetings in circles, with its own specially designed bells to mark the beginning and the end. "It was in the air," Eileen said of the ritual. "But 'The Circle Way' helped us to refine and more deeply integrate it."

Back upstairs, I asked two questions I had been somewhat nervously planning to ask. The first—yes, you guessed it—was about the cat. In the weeks between my visits to Irvington, there had been a spell of exceptionally icy, windy weather, and I had thought of him miserably huddled under the house in the low temperatures. Had she relented and let him in? No, there had been no reason to do so. "He has been outside for three years now. He is the healthiest of my cats," she said again, and added, "The first year he was outside was really hard. It was painful. Every time it would snow or rain I would feel terrible. One freezing-cold day, I thought, Oh, my poor cat, and picked him up. I was going to hug him a little and warm him up—but he was so warm, I couldn't believe it. On another freezing day, I let him into a stone entryway. I thought I would just let him be there, and he kind of walked around a bit and then he stood by the door so that I would let him back out."

I asked my second question: Why were Old and Rowe present during my interviews with Eileen? Eileen promptly answered, "I assume that the reason you are interested in interviewing me goes beyond me. I sort of stand for a whole company, and I want to make sure that people are honored and that I don't say anything that offends anyone or that hurts anyone."

"But the piece is about you," I said.

"I know the idea for the company came through me in some way, but it's beyond me. I planted the first seed, and now I look around and there's this amazing garden. But I'm just an ordinary person. It's only because I created this company and these clothes that I'm interesting."

Old said smoothly, "Monica and I figure that a lot of conversation will come up about other aspects of the company and other people you may want to meet, and, being ears in the room, we can help make that happen in an easy kind of way. So that's partly our motivation. It's wanting to support whatever your process might be."

"My story is about Eileen," I said. "That Eileen Fisher is a real person—"

"—who puts her cat outside," Eileen cut in, as we all laughed, perhaps a little too loudly and heartily. I found myself babbling about the ethical dilemmas of journalism, about the risk subjects take when they let journalists into their houses and the pangs journalists feel when they write their betraying narratives, and saw Eileen and her colleagues looking at me—as I had looked at them when they talked about their company—as if I were saying something weird. We were in different businesses with different vocabularies.

I turned to Eileen. "When you say 'It's not about me' and that you're not interesting, that's a very modest way of talking about yourself."

"I grew up Catholic," she said. "You know, the 'Nobody's looking at you' thing."

"That's part of Catholicism?"

"That's what my mother said all the time. 'Nobody's looking at you.' So for me—in Catholic school, around my mother—it was just safer to be invisible."

Old, with her characteristic accommodating intelligence, said, "Would it be helpful to you, to both of you maybe, to have some time without other people in the room?" I was not surprised when Eileen told me a few weeks later that Old had been promoted and was now one of the four highest-ranking executives of this company of a thousand employees that soft-pedals its hierarchy and doesn't use the word "executive."

I met with Eileen a few more times: once at my apartment, without Old and Rowe, and with no appreciable difference in the character of our conversation; then at the company's corporate headquarters, on Fifth Avenue; and, finally, in Irvington, at a celebration in an Eileen Fisher store at the river's edge, called the Lab Store, which was reopening after being flooded by Sandy. At the celebration, Eileen was waiting for me at the door in an especially fetching outfit of black harem pants, boots, a charcoal-gray cardigan over a gray asymmetrical top, and a light-gray scarf. (Eileen knows how to wear scarves the way women in Paris know how to wear them and American women almost touchingly don't.) The

SHOULDA, WOULDA, COULDA

The mood made him tense—
How she sharpened conditional futures
On strops of might-have-beens,
The butchered present in sutures.

He cursed in the fricative,
The way she could not act,
Or live in the indicative,
Only contrary to fact.

Tomorrow should have been vast,
Bud-packed, grenade-gravid,
Not just a die miscast.

It made him sad, it made him livid:
How she construed from the imperfect past
A future less vivid.

—A. E. Stallings

store was full of people, some sifting through racks of clothes or waiting in line for a dressing room and others conversing, with glasses of champagne in their hands. It was a nice occasion. Eileen made a gracious speech of greeting and introduced a dance performance by students and teachers from a local dance studio. After the performance, people came up to tell her how much they loved her clothes and admired her. A woman with a cane who said she had just turned eighty-five was among them. She was wearing Eileen Fisher clothes from another time, which suited her well—an unobtrusive outfit of slacks, shell top, and jacket of an easy fit. The younger women in the room wearing today's less self-effacing asymmetrical designs didn't always carry them off. It occurred to me that Eileen looks better in her clothes than anyone else. What she selects from her little closet and puts on for the day is a work of design itself. In Manhattan, there are small enclaves where almost every woman looks chic—Madison Avenue in the Seventies and Eighties, for example. Almost everywhere else, if you walk along the street and look at what women are wearing, you have to laugh at the disparity between the effort that goes into shopping for clothes and the effect this effort achieves.

During the dance performance, Eileen pointed out an attractive bearded man standing across the room. This was "the new man in my life," Bill Kegg, who is a leadership coach, a profession that is "sort of like therapy, but he's not a therapist. It's more about moving forward." Eileen has herself been in therapy for more than thirty years. "It changed my life," she said. "Without the therapist I had many years ago, there's no way I could have started this business. She didn't say, 'Don't do that,' like my mother did. 'What are you thinking—you can't even sew.' But she questioned. 'What is motivating you? What is it about?' She saved my life. Without her I would be a totally different person." In recent years, Eileen has added yoga, meditation, and what she calls "bodywork stuff" to her repertoire of soul maintenance. She described "this thing called breath work": "You lie on the floor breathing in a specific way, a kind of heavy breathing in that gets you into a sort of dream state. You go through all this stuff and let it go. It's like thirty years of therapy in one hour."

Eileen left the Catholic Church during college, and now attends weekly meetings of the Westchester Buddhist Center (the meetings are held at her offices in Irvington). Four years ago, she went on a weeklong meditation retreat in Colorado with her children, now twenty and twenty-four. When I said I was surprised that she took the children, she said, "The kids loved it. They don't like to talk. They're like me."

Eileen has always been good with money—she says it comes out of her early affinity for math—but she doesn't care about it for its own sake, and she isn't a big spender. "My accountant always says 'Spend more money.' I love my home. I'm comfortable there. But I don't have a lot of needs. Maybe because I grew up the way I did. I like what I like. I travel a little bit. But I had to be talked into travelling first class. I just see myself as ordinary, one of the group. Being treated as special feels a little weird to me. It's something I guess I have to get over at some point." (It could be argued that Eileen has got over it. She tore down the perfectly good house that was on the site of the present one to build a house she liked better, and in many other respects enjoys the privileges of the one per cent. It should be added that she is a political liberal.)

At the Eileen Fisher headquarters, she and I and Old and Rowe sat in a circle with five other women who had been assembled to talk with me about their functions and had titles such

as Facilitating Leader of Design Process and People and Creative, Inspiration, and Research Director. The meeting started with the obligatory ringing of a bell (this one was a flat metal thing encased in wood, and was struck like a gong) and a moment of silence, with eyes closed, like the moment of silent prayer in a Protestant church service. The bell was struck again to end the silence. The women were likable and interesting. Helen Oji had been a painter before she joined the company, Candice Reffe a poet, Rebecca Perrin a dancer. The feeling of camaraderie that often arises when women gather in a group arose from this gathering. At one point, I asked a question: "Eileen said there was a ratio of eighty per cent women to twenty per cent men in the company. But I don't see any men around here. Where is the twenty per cent?" "In Secaucus," someone exclaimed, to hoots of laughter from the rest. There is a warehouse in Secaucus where the men apparently are kept.

Eileen talked about a conference from which she had just returned, of heads of what she called like-minded companies, such as Whole Foods and the Container Store, held at the Esalen retreat, in California. Fifteen men and seven women had been invited, and on the second day one of the men observed that only one woman had spoken during the entire proceedings. "It wasn't me," Eileen said, as the group laughed. She went on, "I thanked him for saying that and said that I had felt frozen and incapable of speech. I know that some of this is me and comes from the way I was brought up. But I also think that men and women talk differently. I don't understand it exactly. Men talk faster. There's more like a debate style. I felt I wouldn't think fast enough."

Eileen took me to the tenth floor of the building, where designers and merchandisers do their work, a vast loft space of calm, complex activity. As we walked through the "amazing garden" that had arisen from the seeds she planted twenty-eight years earlier with her four linen pieces, Eileen would pause before a rack of clothes to touch a sleeve or take the fabric between her fingers, making appreciative murmurs, as someone on a garden tour might make standing before an especially handsome specimen. There was nothing in her manner to suggest that she was anything but a pleased tourist.

A few weeks later, I returned to 111 Fifth Avenue to take a closer look at the tenth floor. My guide this time was Monica Rowe, who took me down a long central corridor lined with racks of sample garments and flanked on both

sides by large partitioned spaces with windows, where designers sat at computers or drafting tables or in discussion groups around conference tables. These spaces—with one conspicuous exception—were in keeping with what one thinks of as the Eileen Fisher aesthetic of elegant plainness. The exception, called the "trend and color studio," was like a mocking rebuttal of this aesthetic. The room was full of brightly colored images and objects, among them reproductions of master paintings (Bruegel's "Harvesters" was one, and Vermeer's "Girl with a Pearl Earring" another), a mobile of pictures of birds of brilliant plumage, bins of jumbled fabrics such as you might rifle through in a thrift shop, innumerable small things you might find in the home of a hoarder of small things, baskets overflowing with sparkling ribbons and lace, and a huge ball made of orange cotton strips wound around each other that Chris Costan, the ruler of this domain of color and excess, had found in a market in India.

Costan is a small, pretty woman who is also a painter, and who repudiates the Eileen Fisher aesthetic as decisively in her person as in her surrounding. Her outfit on the day of my visit—a short puffily pleated beige cotton skirt worn with a horizontally striped pinkish-beige-and-black jersey top and black tights—was clearly not of Eileen Fisher provenance, and her jet-black hair was arranged in one of the most complicated hair styles I have ever seen, involving a long braid over one shoulder, a high pompadour rising from the forehead, and an assortment of fancy combs and clips appended at irregular intervals to the braid and to the back of the head.

Costan's title is color designer, and her job is to create a palette for the clothing line for each season. She draws inspiration, she says, from the fabrics and pictures and tchotchkes she collects, as well as, though to a lesser degree, from books that forecast color trends in fashion. Her palettes are represented on "swatch charts"—sheets of paper on which tiny squares of colored fabric are pasted—that are presented to the designers and merchandisers, who may or may not accept them in their entirety.

When I asked Costan if she thought of herself as a rebellious force in the company, she said, "Yes, I totally see myself that way. I like what's unusual and unexpected and different. I look for colors I find cool at the moment. I'm interested in trends. I create a story. I come from a discipline where everything means something. I'm not sure everyone around here cares. But I'm also a good girl. I fit in with the culture of the company. They've allowed me a lot of latitude because they like what I do. I feel appreciated—though sometimes I get annoyed." A recent source of annoyance was the rejection of one of the colors she proposed—the "wildly trendy" color called cosmetic or skin tone—which happened to be the color that in my ignorance I called pinkish-beige when describing her striped jersey. "I wear Eileen Fisher designs sometimes, and I really like them," she said. "But my style is quirkier. I always want to be different. It's my rebelliousness."

As Rowe led me to another part of the floor, I recalled a passage in an Eileen Fisher brochure entitled "Simply—to Be Ourselves":

> The underlying philosophy of our design—no constraints, freedom of expression—extends to the company itself, which is run in a loosely structured manner that allows for an open exchange of ideas. Every employee is encouraged to give input to any area, no matter their position or expertise. The individual is valued for the total picture of who they are and what they can contribute.

I also thought of something Eileen had said about today's company and its leadership: "I don't feel like I need to be there anymore. I feel like they're my full-grown adult children and they do an amazing job and they don't need me." Rowe, who was wearing Kelly-green trousers ("No, they're from my own clothes," she said when I asked if they were of Eileen Fisher design), paused before a short rack of garments with a sign on it reading:

EILEEN'S SAMPLES
DO NOT TOUCH

These were the clothes for Mom's closet, in the obligatory black and gray and white, and as we stood before them the image of Eileen, in all her delicacy and beauty, wafted out of them like an old, expensive scent. ♦