

Saves Nine

By Helen McLaughlin

He had eyes like button holes. Slices with finished inside edges so nothing would fray. Lashes like threads always weaved together and caught on one another. Black thread looped over and under the lid like stitching. They never looked sleepy or sore, or stinging as if the pins had been left in to hold the skin of his lids before running them through the eyelash machine. They weren't puffy because nothing got jammed; no fancy needlework or thick skin to stop the hum and buzz of swift sewing.

It was more than just his eyes. Everything about him had a polished look or clean edges. He had no linen in him. Nothing that wrinkled or creased or pleated. No puckering or pinching, gathering, darting, or riveting. He was smooth. He was seamless.

Her mother was good with fabric. She could feel anything and identify it. Cotton/Poly. Rayon. Silk. Her mother knew he was spandex without feeling him or even seeing him. She knew it from the get-go. She could feel him described over the telephone. She could tell her daughter he was a "good steal," because he was so versatile and stretchy. Her daughter had good taste. She had an eye for quality. She had a gift. Her mother told her so.

And he was spandex. One hundred percent. He moved with her moves. He hugged her curves. He fit within an inch of her life. He could do that successfully and still have button hole eyes because he was lenient and moved leniently and there was nothing to rip. No emergency needle and thread stashed in a pocket or locked in a glove box. Because nothing about him had lost its elasticity. Nothing required mending or hemming or tailoring. No loose threads.

He was so easy to travel with. He wasn't like a silk blouse or a wool skirt that begged for an individual hanger and a plastic sheath and had to be hung on the hook above the backseat window of the car. He wasn't like the sensitive tuxedo that demanded a personal suitcase and tissue paper blankets in between its folded layers. His back wouldn't hurt from being balled up in a rucksack, and he wouldn't get tired and faded from stretching like second skin over a body that wasn't his.

He was spandex. One hundred percent.

So she should've known when her coat ripped. She should've known there was something significant about the lining of her winter coat; the seams under her armpits where she was most ticklish. Her best friend, who hated men, said it was as if her insides were tearing themselves up when she leaned onto him and hugged tightly. She should've known when her coat ripped that it was a protest, her best friend told her. Because it made them both stop, frozen in their hug.

He said, Should you fix that?

She said, Never mind. It doesn't matter, completely denying that something inside her coat was torn because she hugged him when she shouldn't have. Because the hug was uncivilized—a kind of lunge forward and a squeeze without restraint. A kind of impetuous and carnal motion, performed like she felt passion, when she didn't really. It proved too much exertion—like she was a dancer who fell into a split without executing a routine warm-up to get everything, all the muscles and connections, thinking the same way. Warning them. Saying, Brace yourself.

Her coat had never ripped there, under the armpits, before. She always knew those seams were stressed, though. They always limited her movement, forced her to move gently, gracefully. Never on a whim or under an explosion of feeling. But only with controlled, fixed affection.

So when she hugged him, she should've known. She should've thought, If I do this, something inside that he can't see will pull so hard that it will come apart. She should've pictured the aftermath of such a wild gesture—the blasted acetate under the armpits, where she was most ticklish, looking all wounded and open. Looking like thin skin, the scalp of the jacket, forced into a compromising position until it could hold itself together no more. And with a gasp, a yelp, a ripping scream, the skin split where it was most sensitive and all the insides were exposed.

So when she whispered, Goodnight, and turned her face to the door and he cried like his flesh, his spandex, had torn apart; like there were stitches under his seamless armpits that held his skin together; imaginary stitches that had ripped almost as violently as the parts of her coat—so when she whispered, Goodnight, she could only hug him again with the smallest of her energy, with the smallest of what made her laugh when her armpits were tickled so bad she thought they might blast open and leave her wounded.

She never really learned to sew. She let it be one of the things her mother could do better than well, not trying to surpass her mother's ability and skill. She made a few attempts; a 4-H project to construct an apron out of wrinkly cotton with an angry pink rose pattern. The trick was to make the stitching fancy so no one could tell where the unevenness was or where the hem was crooked or the fabric cheap. She pricked her fingers and lost control of the sewing machine.

But she never really learned how to fix herself. The etiquette of wearing slips or nude-colored camisoles. The art of repairing snagged pantyhose with clear nail polish. She still gave her mother articles like the sleek, black dress pants with the hole in the crotch, to mend with stronger, reinforced thread.

And her mother didn't mind. That was what she was good at. She could handle these kinds of repairs. She had the patience to fix her daughter's carelessness with a thick needle and a spool of affection. And certainly her daughter was not embarrassed to bring the alterations and broken bits to her mother. A tear. A worn spot in need of a patch. Awkward sheerness. An unhappy zipper. It could be remedied without shame, and made to look better.

But when the hug got the best of the young woman and things ripped and pulled apart while she pulled into him and he into her, she was unprepared. She nevermind-ed it into some recess between them, mostly mad that he was like spandex and never needed someone to fix him when he came apart. Because he didn't come apart.

She didn't bring the winter coat to her mother. Didn't ask her to reunite the lining of the sleeves with that of the back. Didn't ask her to close the tear and make like it never happened. The young woman let the gaping rips stay as they were—or get larger—each time she slid into the coat and her knuckles and fingertips got caught and pulled, and pulled, and pulled again. She didn't imagine her mother had to fix everything. One day, she would need to learn how to handle too-long trousers or a faulty dress strap, and even the lining of a winter coat. She needed to learn how to bolster the weak seams without safety pins or double-sided tape. She knew this. She kept the injured coat to herself. And kept it injured.