

## AN OLD DRESS

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We are a shopping family. From as early as I can remember, I have loved the smell of the department store, the bright cases of notions, lipsticks and lotions, walking through canyons of dresses, between rack on rack of wools and silks. I grew up in department stores. I knew their topographies, their geographies, the difference between quality and imitation, what made one sweater a better buy than another. I could scan a rack of garments and in three seconds locate the one outfit that was worth trying on.

Shopping can be many things; it can be a chore, a necessity, a sport, a social event, a pastime, a balm. For me, shopping was all those things, but most importantly, it was an act of love. My father worked in a department store, Kaufmanns, Pittsburgh's retail pride, made of weathered stone with a massive clock over its main entrance under which generations of Pittsburghers would rendezvous. Kaufmann's was a big store, with departments for every floor of your house and member of your family. My father's office was on the eleventh floor, above the bustle of the retail floors below, an oasis of quiet, with the triumphs of his career displayed on his shelves: Christopher Candycane, Time of the Roses, the Thanksgiving Parade, Gems of the World. After a morning of shopping, my mother always brought us to my father's office, and we would go together for lunch at Kaufmann's best tearoom. As a teenager, I would stop in by myself after art and music lessons, bounce into the leather chair facing my father's desk, and offer him a treat from the bag of sweets I picked up along the way.

Of course, my brothers and I had to be dressed as a department store executive's children should be dressed, and our guide in all things sartorial, armed with a 20% discount, was my mother. From her I learned the essential lessons of quality over quantity, of simplicity over dazzle, of timelessness over style. Although I didn't know it at the time, I was also absorbing another lesson: that clothes reflect identity and identity creates opportunity.

In my father's closet was a neat row of Hickey Freeman suits. Six mornings a week my father dressed in one of those suits and, trim and immaculate, took the bus to work. With an eye out for bargains, my mother also dressed her children well. The day after Christmas was Kaufmann's biggest sale day, and each year my mother and I would carefully purchase a cashmere sweater with a smartly matching skirt. My mother's special occasion dresses were from the Vendome, the hushed and gilded emporium of Kaufmann's wealthiest women shoppers. There forty years ago she purchased a black chiffon Seal Chapman dress that I wear to this day.

We knew as children that such clothes were a privilege. One set of immigrant grandparents still lived in a tenement at the end of an alley reached by a metal fire escape, their discarded oak icebox standing outside the door. The other set lived in an ancient apartment building in the Bronx that was redolent of generations of roasting briskets. We grew up on stories of how my

mother as a child washed out her only pair of panties each evening, and how my father dropped out of high school and slept on park benches, stuffing his shirt and pants with wadded newspaper to insulate himself from the cold. Without a high school degree, he completed college at night.

Hickey Freeman suits, Seal Chapman dresses, good trousers for my brothers and cashmere sweater sets for me helped shape our understanding that we had moved beyond that immigrant identity. We were now successful Americans, people of quality moving up in the world. We children were destined to study hard, play musical instruments, go to fine colleges, and move beyond material success into professions of value and prestige.

My beloved father is long gone now, and my mother has buried a second husband as well. Although she's ninety years old and frail, she carries a smart little purse in her walker basket, and wears snappy scarves around her neck. She is in full critical power as the judge of her daughter's wardrobe. Mom's own once fastidious wardrobe, however, through the double curse of accumulation and forgetfulness, is a mess.

In the bedroom closet blouses and sweaters fight and crowd, hangers poke out of shoulders, hems droop on one side and hike on the other, little heaps of nylon and silk lie on the closet floor under tilted hangers, victims of gravity. Amid the blouses, polyester pants, a concession to practicality and arthritic fingers, drape and crumple against each other, stained, pilled and pulled beneath stretched-out elastic waistbands. Belts in bunches hang limply from buckles impaled on hanger hooks. In the den closet ancient outfits patiently await the right occasion to be worn again. Many have waited forty years. Too good to give to Goodwill, Mom gained weight and couldn't wear them, then lost weight and had no place to wear them to.

Mom says unconvincingly that maybe we should spend a day in her closets going through everything. If I were a really good daughter, I reason, I would help her make the hard decisions about what to keep, what to throw away, what to put in the Goodwill box, and what to mend and keep on wearing. What a terrible idea. Each old dress would be a reminder of a living husband, of lunches in Kaufmann's Tea Room, of a happier time when friends lived as couples and invited each other to dinner parties. There are shoes that my mother hiked in, pumps that she wore to her children's weddings, misshapen straw hats that warded off vacation sunshine. Every article is a reminder of something; an archeology of memories, best left undisturbed.

So. We go shopping. Mom called last week to let me know that a bus would be bringing residents from her retirement community to the Chestnut Hill Mall, then bring them back after three hours. Could I meet her there? Of course.

Shopping with a ninety year old is a challenge. Mom's wheelchair has to be pushed among tightly spaced clothes racks crammed with goods. Mom is low, the racks are high. Her vision out of her good eye is iffy. Her taste is exacting. Clutching her purse in one hand, she reaches into masses of garments to finger the fabric, examine the pattern, assess the cut, and check the size. She sends me off to find the shirt in a "medium," the same style slacks in taupe, a sweater set in this shade of blue that is "cropped," not long. I return from my errands to find Mom gone. With a strength that can only be summoned for shopping, she has propelled herself with her feet

in her wheelchair through the masses of clothes. Like a small boy in a cornfield, she is invisible. I find her by something akin to echolocation.

“Mom? Where are you?”

“I’m over here.”

“Over where?”

“Over here.”

“Where?”

“Over here.”

Everything has something wrong with it. The fabric has to be washable. How is Mom going to get clothes to the cleaners, much less spend her grandchildren’s inheritance, just to get them dirty again? It has to come out of the washing machine wrinkle free. Ninety year olds with walkers and wheelchairs can’t exactly stand at the ironing board. I don’t even need to mention that it has to be a bargain.

Most important, it has to be “zippy.”

I once asked Mom how old she feels inside. She asked, “How old do you feel?”

“About twenty,” I replied.

“Well, I feel as old as you feel inside. I’m still twenty, too. It’s the mirror that has my age wrong.”

“Zippy” clothes are my mother’s way once again of creating her identity, of talking back to the mirror, and to the rest of us who see the wrinkles and not the girl inside. Zippy clothes say, “My face may look wrinkled, but this blouse is the real me.” So bring on the flowered prints, the fancy buttons, and the little embroidered design that dances around the hem of my mother’s new cardigan. I’ll spend my time pushing her wheelchair through Filenes, and we’ll leave the cluttered closet for another day.