

NINA PAYNE

Two Stories

OLD CLOTHES

ABOUT A MONTH AFTER JACK DIED, Marty Klein called me. He's a blacksmith. He makes andirons, fireplace tools, latches and hinges, ironwork of all kinds. Jack had taken a class with him one winter, and he'd loved everything about the work—heat, darkness, and flame. Marty asked if I would mind coming up to his shop, he had something to give me. I walked over. It's an old factory building that's been converted into rough studios and a large exhibition room. Marty was standing at the forge when I opened the door, and as soon as he saw me, he put aside whatever he was working on and came to meet me. I could feel his big arms around my back, without hands, so as not to smudge my dress. He stood away and went to the rear of the shop where he keeps his tools. Then he was there in front of me again, holding a sledgehammer as if it were a baby someone had just handed over. He said, "Jack liked this hammer a lot. He liked to use it when he worked here. I thought you should have it." I instinctively reached out to catch the hammer before it dropped. I held it until it grew heavy in my arms, then handed it back. "It's a beaut, Marty. But it's meant to be used." We stood facing each other. He leaned the hammer up against a low bench, and we hugged again, hands and all. I said good-bye, I'd see him soon.

The next morning, I started sorting out clothes. It was almost easy, as if a current had been turned off for repairs. I threw away underwear, worn socks, a pair of flannel pajamas I had reluctantly mended four or five times. Jack wouldn't give up on them despite my objections. "But I'll pin them for you, I'll get them all ready," he would argue. "You'll only have to thread the machine." I held them up by a small string that had come through its binding and dropped in uneven scallops around the edge of the collar. I thought how amused Jack would be at this fish that was finally getting away. After a while, I went downstairs to make breakfast even though the children were still asleep. I mixed up pancake batter, put syrup on to warm, made coffee and sat down to drink it.

Everything to be saved was stored in an upstairs closet, jackets and trousers that Eric or Adam might eventually use, sweaters, ties, three

shirts made of soft-checked cotton, blue-gray, brick red, and yellow ochre. I saw that the gray one had been worn once after ironing, then replaced on its hanger to be worn again. If I pressed my head into the clothes, I could smell him.

Jack was one of those people who could walk into an overloaded rummage sale and find the one good tweed jacket in the place. He'd darn the holes or mend the lining, whatever was necessary, and wear it for another ten years. He liked to remake old objects and finish new ones so that their essential quality was raised to the surface and they became themselves. One birthday, he gave me five old pewter buttons he'd hammered into shape. He'd attached them invisibly to a piece of blue cloth, and when I opened up the wrapping, they looked up at me and blinked.

THE CHECKERED SHIRTS REAPPEARED two years later. Jessie and Emily started putting them on over turtlenecks, tucking in the shirt-tails, rolling up the bottom of the sleeves, the way a woman will wear a man's garment and expand, playfully, upon the shape of their difference. My daughters made outfits out of a scattered assortment of clothing in which their father's shirts became an emblem and a sign.

Eric was working nights at a restaurant that year, following his graduation from high school. His schedule made it possible for him to avoid everyone in the family most of the time, but we generally ate supper together on Sunday evenings.

Once, when we were sitting around the table, he told the girls how ridiculous it was for them to be wearing shirts that were much too big for them. He said that he himself planned to wear the shirts, and he didn't want them all worn out before he could fit into them. His sisters responded indignantly. The argument gathered undertow. I heard anger, accusation, and an exasperation bordering on despair. Under ordinary circumstances, I might have been called upon to give an opinion, but no one dared ask for one. The phone rang. Adam got up to clear his plate and we all scattered for cover.

The shirts continued to be worn. When he left home, Eric took the gray one with him. The next time I saw it, I recognized the fatal pink of red dye that has seeped into a load of wash. For a moment, I felt as though everything would lose its original color, bleach out, disintegrate. But Eric smiled at my stricken look. "The same thing happened to my underwear in sixth grade, do you remember?" and he opened the door to the cellar to bring up more wood.

TWO GRANDMOTHERS

for Andrew Salkey

SUCH WAS THE ILLUSION of independence in my family that I visited my grandmother only by prior arrangement. We'd have lunch together, or tea and cookies. When she prepared an evening meal, the whole family was invited, but these meetings were just for me, and they took place in the light of day.

On one occasion, I don't know why, I came to her apartment early in the morning. I was about ten or eleven years old. She answered the doorbell completely hidden from view, and when I walked inside, I saw she was wearing only a bathrobe. She had not yet put on any clothes! I was thrilled. She left her bedroom door open a few inches. I saw a corset hanging over a chair, stiff and snarling. I watched while she hooked the fasteners, arranged her flesh with a little shiver, a settling in. She carefully rolled up a stocking with four wiggling fingers until only a small pocket remained; she placed her pale foot inside it and the silky stuff slid up her legs. They, in turn, were covered by translucent underpants that reached down to her knees and fluttered there. In the end, and all at once, everything was hidden by a narrow pink tube that she pulled over her head with a thrashing of arms. I can still see them up there, fighting for air.

When she came out of the bedroom, she was my grandmother. She wore a maroon wool dress that buttoned down the front and held her outline as surely as if she'd been traced on a piece of construction paper. But when she leaned down to embrace me, I wanted to touch her, to put my fingers on the bare skin, to find more and more flesh. I was vaguely aware of wanting something I could neither ask for nor name.

All of this returned to me, nearly intact, when you told me about your grandmother, your Gong-Gong, and how you slept in her bed, your nine-year-old arms wrapped around her frail body, your head turned into the curve of her back, one leg thrown over both of hers. When she died in her sleep, you told me, you had to be unwrapped and peeled from her body, so tightly were you holding on.

When we tell each other stories, we exchange lives and take them back again. "Gong-Gong," you say, and I want to go there to that place where the door is open a few inches and I can watch my Grandma making the daily sculpture of her own bones.