Twelve-inch Zippers

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There’s nothing here,” Mom called from my closet, waking me. What was she rummaging for? I turned my face, hiding one ear in the pillow. “There’s nothing here,” she repeated, her voice muffled in racks of clothes. I watched through my eyelashes as she burrowed out of the closet and stood before my bed. A minute passed, but when I offered no solution she turned for the door.

Mumbling about REM cycles and the need for sleep, I threw back the covers and kicked my feet free. She was throwing dresses out of her own closet when I settled on the edge of her bed, pulling my legs under me and yawning. “There’s nothing to wear,” she told me, “and the dance is tonight.”

“What about the black one?” I asked. “Velvet always looks nice, and black is semi-formal.”

Mom stepped out of the closet, looking like I’d hit her. “Mark gave me that dress,” she countered. Mark the ex-fiancé.

“We have to have something else that’d work,” I tried again, thinking through each closet in the house. But nothing formal was the right size. My attention turned back to Mom and I saw she was still in her bathrobe.
“You can’t buy a new one,” I told her. She just couldn’t, no matter how she hinted, no matter how bare her eyes looked without liner. She evaded my gaze, confirming my suspicion. “We’ll find something here—you know we don’t have money for party dresses.” It’s a single adult dance, I wanted to add, not the prom.

She paused, then moved with a new idea. “I could make one,” she said, and she paced the length of the bed. “I have enough time, if I’m fast, and I could make it short enough to dance in, full enough to twirl . . .”

“That could work.” I grasped the compromise—she was a good seamstress, and it would cut the price in half. “If you think you’ll have time.”

An hour later, we were on our way to the fabric store. With me driving, she was free to paint her nails, two coats of purple.

A few minutes from the store, I braved the topic of Allen. “You know I don’t like him, don’t you?” I hoped my careful tone balanced out the mutiny. “You can do so much better, you’ve thought so yourself—”

“You don’t know him,” she put in. “He’s so deep and ambitious—”

“He works in a potato plant.”

“But you don’t know his hobbies. He goes caving all the time, and takes pictures of bats—”

“And how many times has he actually gone since you’ve known him?”

The moment hung between us, long enough to count a dozen telephone poles in the window. Mom fanned her fingernails in front of the heat vent. “You don’t know him,” she said again.

I pretended to watch the road. Allen will be just like the rest, I wanted to tell her. I’m so tired of screening all your boyfriends. At a red light, I slowed the car and glanced out the left window. I never like your boyfriends.

The light turned green and my foot switched from the brake to the gas. I went out with Ryan again last night, I wanted to tell her. That’s three times, and he’s still interested. We watched a movie, after his parents fell asleep, and he rested his arm on the couch above my head. I didn’t know he wanted to put his arm around me at first—I just left him waiting, shifting his arm on the back of the couch. With my eyes scanning left to right, I tried to choose the best lane.

“I went out with Ryan again last night,” I began.

“Did you have a good time?”
“Yeah, we watched a movie.” I looked toward the passenger seat, hopeful.

“Do you think this polish needs a topcoat?”

The turn signal flashed green from the dash and I counted the pulses—one, two, three. Exhaling, I followed the light into the parking lot. “No, Mom, just leave it as it is.”

Familiar aisles of rayon and rickrack eased the tension from the drive. The store reminded me of Mom’s years as a seamstress when the money was better and Dad still lived at home. I’d never learned to sew—somehow I couldn’t follow my mother’s hobbies—but I’d learned the width of a good hem and the right material for a dress.

“What we need is something classy,” I said, flanking my mom down the first few aisles. “You love the way rayon drapes, and we could find something dark enough to be formal . . .” She was going to the dance with Allen whether I liked it or not, but I still wanted her to feel beautiful. We avoided anything floral and discussed the extra time it would take to line a thin fabric. Despite her expertise, she fingered several cloths without making a decision.

“Ohh.” I pulled the bolt from the rack and traced the silver threads between my thumb and finger. The base was gray rayon, rich and heavy, embroidered with silver roses. It managed feminine and formal at the same time, with the feeling of grace my mom deserved. I looked up and caught her eye, and we both grinned. “This is you,” I told her. “It’s perfect.”

After Mom approved the weight, price, and cotton content, I loaded the bolt into the curve of my elbow, snuggling it against my waist for easy carrying. Mom checked off the details as she shopped, switching into seamstress gear. “We already have the pattern, so all we need is a zipper, and thread and . . .” She opted for the invisible zipper, worth the price because of its quality, she assured me, and spent five minutes matching a spool of gray thread.

Once home I avoided the sewing room. *I’d done my part, hadn’t I?* Despite my efforts in the store, I resented the project. I wanted her to have a dress, sure, but not a date. Still, my conscience pricked me as I threw dirty clothes in a bucket and pounded downstairs to the laundry. I felt guilty, but why should I help her date Allen?
I threw the washing machine lid open, but it crashed down. The bucket teetered against my hip, held by one hand while the other whipped through the air to cool my pinched thumb. Why did she have to date at all? The bucket toppled, and I dropped to my knees to pick it up.

Lumping the fallen clothes together, I sighed, tired of the old debate, tired of the men who came and went and moved their clothes into the closet, only to leave again. They never brought what they promised, and I hated them all, hated when they left me to mend the pieces. It’s okay, Mom, we’ll be okay—I remember kneeling with her when Dad left, rocking her in the space between the bed and wall. My arms remembered wrapping across her shoulders, thin arms, barely reaching past her neck to cradle her head. When he left, when we rocked, she turned her cheek into my small frame and loosed her tears between us, sharing the pain of a divorced woman.

Kneeling in my pile of dirty socks and jeans, rocking slightly, I shut my eyes to remember. When she slept, I would climb into her bed, offering an excuse for the king-sized mattress. Somehow I hoped my body between the sheets would convince her that she wasn’t alone, even though she was. Her shoulders shook, and I pulled my knees toward my chin, sleepless.

After Dad, she married Gary, but two protection orders and a broken wrist forced her into an empty bed again. Do I just attract the wrong type? she asked me, Do I deserve this?

No, I told her, No, you get to learn and choose. You’ll get it right. But, as I helped her button shirts around her sling, I wondered if it would heal straight.

She tried to marry Mark, but he called from Pittsburg the week before the wedding. Cancel the flowers, he told me, it’s better this way, forgive me, and don’t forget to return my car. I cursed at him, words I didn’t know I knew and never felt sorry for. Hanging up the phone, I turned to her again. Only now, my arms were longer and her shoulders were smaller, thin like eggshells boiled too long. When they called me about her overdose—Zoloft and Excedrin, downed with Nyquil to double the effect—the receiver seemed strange in my hands. Why had I left her alone, even for a night? I slid against the wall to the floor, crumpling both knees to my chest and rocking by myself.

Mark had not been the latest, but Mom’s suicide attempt had killed my hope for the right man. Couldn’t she stay alone? Wasn’t alone better than wrong? For both of us?
The way my fingers shook, lifting to my wet face, startled me. I thought of Ryan, waiting with his arm on the back of the couch. I sighed, still rocking, tired of the old debate.

She'd marry Allen, settling for him because that's all she thought she deserved. They'd spend a few months finding out why it wouldn't work, then he'd move his clothes out of the closet. No, I didn't want to mend it all again. I couldn't cut or pin or fold her dress, knowing each step brought her closer to the dance.

_Then why did you help her buy the fabric?_ I shoved the thought aside, throwing it like the laundry in the bucket. But as I climbed from my knees, hoisted the bucket, and pulled the washer knobs, I knew. She'd feel beautiful again in that dress; she'd remember, for a night, that she's worth silver thread and invisible zippers. One scoop of soap churned in the rising pool, and I lowered the lid, carefully.

“Jessica?”

Carrying the empty bucket past the sewing room, I leaned my head into the doorway. “Yeah?”

“Jess, the zipper’s too short.”

I stared at her. Behind the sewing table, fabric clung to an old dress model. The skirt and bodice were cut, but the hem had not been rolled and the jacket was missing. And the back hung open.

“Are you sure?”

“We bought a twelve inch, but we need at least a sixteen.”

I glanced at my watch, already knowing she would send me. Six thirty, and the dance was at eight. Half an hour there, half an hour back—we'd never make it.

“Jess, could you go back for one? Would it be out of your way?”

“Yeah, it would”—I regretted the response as I dug for my keys—“but I'll go anyway.”

“You’ll find a sixteen inch, right? And come straight home?”

“Yeah, and I’ll be home in time.” I smiled, meaning it as an apology. My fists jammed through the arms of my coat. “Before eight, right?”

My watch read seven twenty when I pulled back into the drive, thanks to a little speeding. “Mom?” The sewing room was dark. I flipped on the work lights, but my hand hesitated on the switch—I saw the dress model.
“Mom?” The mannequin stood as tall as a woman, limbless, headless, shaped with knobs to adjust its waist, hips, and bust. Her skin stretched over an hourglass frame, skin thin enough to stick pins through, but more disturbing were the clothes—instead of silvered rayon, my mom’s floral sundress hung from the form, pinned over a white T-shirt.

My gaze dropped to the floor where gray folds lay fallen around the base of the stand. “Mom? I’m home.”

When I found her, she was sitting on the edge of her bed winding Velcro curlers into her hair. She looked up at me, her face still bare from the morning.

“I brought the zipper. Sixteen inches.”

“Would you help me with my hair tonight? I never know what to do with it.”

“Mom, what about your dress? Did you pick a new one?”

“You could pull up the sides with a barrette, couldn’t you, so they won’t fall out when I dance?” She paused mid-curler, afraid I’d say no.

“Yeah, I’ll pull the sides up.”

I watched as she finished the curlers, waited while she moved through each piece of her make-up bag. She offered no explanation for the dress, and I knew better than to ask again—she wouldn’t have answered.

When she was ready, she sat on a chair in front of me, placing her head at my shoulders, letting my hands unwrap the curlers, flip through the ends. “You’ve always had beautiful hair,” I told her.

As I combed, she breathed a deep sigh that trembled as it fell back to her lungs. “I didn’t have enough time.” She spoke softly, making me witness to a confession. I shifted two strands between my hands, straining to hear. “I wanted to finish, but the time ran out. It wasn’t enough.”

I wasn’t enough, I heard between her words.

From her tone, so soft, I knew she felt very young, very small. For her, I regretted the zipper falling short, the time falling short, the hope of a life falling short every time. “You tried, you did your best,” I assured her, catching her eye in the mirror. “Mom, no one could have finished. You did your best.” My hands moved back and forth, smoothing her hair between them. I loved her for trying—I’d always love her for trying.

With each strand, I held the curling iron away from her ears. We’d settle without the dress tonight, I decided, but I wouldn’t let her feel less than beautiful. With care, I tucked each curl into a crown, pinning it with swift fingers and setting it with spray.
“He’ll be speechless when he sees you tonight, no matter what you wear.”

She brightened at my support. “He’s such a dancer, Jess, he makes me feel like I’m flying—but what can I wear? I tried the sundress, but . . .” Her smile folded at the eyebrows, suddenly distressed. I imagined my mother dancing in a T-shirt.

“No, wear the black velvet,” I told her, “It’s the best dress you have.” She moved to argue but wavered, knowing I was right. “Give it a new memory.”

When Allen knocked, I considered leaving him on the step. Instead, I let him in and offered small talk, but what could I ask a man with no children and an affinity for bats?

Mom lifted into the room, melting into her girlfriend smile. In her heels and knee-length black, she looked too fine to be paired with his Levis and ponytail. But despite the contrast, I smiled—she was beautiful. And his jeans were black, she mentioned later, and the gray tail tucked under his collar. Such compromise. She slipped up next to him and kissed him hello.

They paused in the doorframe, linking fingers, turning to say goodbye. I felt suddenly like a parent, hoping he’d drive safely and get her home on time. I ignored the impulse to give her a curfew or tell her not to make out.

“You look fantastic,” I said instead, loud enough to prick Allen’s manners.

“Yeah, hon, you look great.” Part of me was glad he took his cue.

She turned to him, beaming in the compliment, and tilted her chin to kiss him again.

I’m sure they found their coats and made it to the door, but I said my goodbye and retreated to the sewing room. Allen’s headlights flashed through the window when they pulled from the drive. Would Ryan, I wondered, ever work in a potato plant? Would he call from Pittsburg?

I pulled the new zipper from its sack and edged my thumbnail across its ridges. Three times, I thought, three times, and he’s still interested. Last night, when he walked me to the door, we paused in the porch light. “Jess?” To make up for the movie, he slid his arm behind me. A breath stalled my lungs and jittered against my pulse.
His eyes caught mine then dropped to his shoes. “It’s cold out,” he managed, and I wondered at the smile tugging his lips, the slight shaking of his head. “Colder than last night—they say it’ll snow.” Through my eyelashes, I watched the boy who was trying to kiss me, the boy who was talking about the weather. I let my fingers reach his hand.

He looked up and the moment hung between us, long enough for me to wonder if he would ever grow a ponytail. The porch light buzzed. I counted pulses—one, two, three—and considered the weight of his arm around my waist.

Now, stretching the zipper to full length, my fingers were steady. Twelve inches, I thought, plus four. Invisible. Closing my hand around the zipper, I turned to the dress model. Feeling bad for her pins, I knelt in the space by the wall to remove the sundress and T-shirt. Still kneeling, I lifted the gray folds from the floor and rested them on the form’s shoulders, tracing silver threads between my thumb and finger.