The Sewing Room

by M.L. Tracy

Sewing is in Grammie’s blood- she can sew anything. She told me how she hand-made her own prom dress and her wedding dress. She made amazing costumes for my mother, my aunt, and my uncles when they were kids- I’ve seen them in photos. I was always angry at Mama for not taking Grammie’s offer to make my Halloween costumes, but I can’t completely blame her- Grammie is a real piece of work.

As a punishment, Grammie had chopped off my mother’s hair when she was really little and since then, Mama’s never been able to grow out her hair past her chin. (It’s one of the reasons why Mama never cut my hair, only trimmed it the tiniest bit.) They’ve always had a bad relationship- mostly because Grammie can be emotionally/verbally abusive in unpredictable ways. After marrying Daddy, Mama practically cut herself off from Grammie, and Grammie practically cut the entire family from Mama. We were happy even though we didn’t have a lot of money.

But after Daddy died and it became obvious that Grammie and Gramps were alone- my uncles and aunt never calling or visiting- Mama moved us back, close to Grammie’s–

But not too close.

Mama would go to Grammie’s almost every day to help her. She only brought me to Grammie’s for Christmas.

Mama says she wanted me to have grandparents- and I guess my grandparents wanted to have a granddaughter, because despite all the bad blood, we’d spend the holiday together.

A cocktail of fun, dysfunction, happy gifts, and screaming matches. When things got too intense for me I’d slip away to the attic and lay low.

The attic was almost like a third floor, large enough to store Grammie’s rich people stuff- so about the size of a big bedroom. There was a diamond-shaped, stained-glass window on the far side that was about as tall as I was. From the window, friendly, honey sunbeams or cool silver moonlight would drizzle over the claw-footed bathtub, the dozens of colorful hatboxes, funny old phones- loads of things. I would run my hands along the rim of the old bathtub, turn the dials on the phones- peeking into the strange world of the wealthy- it was oddly fascinating.
I didn’t like staying too long, though.

Despite the warm appearance of the attic, something about it would eventually give me the creeps. The sheet of light would seem to turn into slivers of shivering glow drowning in its large surroundings. It was like everything was suddenly covered tightly with saran wrap and I was a fly trapped underneath. And the change always happened so steadily that all the sudden I’d be shocked by the feeling- like the attic had severed from the rest of the house to float away into darkness.

But I had a really vivid imagination.

After Mama died when I was fifteen, I went to live with Grammie. At first I was terrified- Mama’s stories about her childhood and all. But after a few weeks, I found a balance- I learned when to lay low in the attic during Grammie’s mean-spells, and when to bond with her as she taught me how to sew. She told me about how she made her prom dress and her wedding dress, how she chose my mother’s name, stuff like that.

Mama broke my heart. She broke my heart and it wasn’t her fault so I didn’t like thinking about her after she died.

Mama always had what the family called, “a sadness sickness”.

I’m not stupid- I knew Mama committed suicide.

It was just after Christmas.

The police found her body under the ice of Willard Lake- wrapped tightly in ice. Tight like saran wrap.

She had left a suicide note in the attic, and since I was practically the only one who ever went up there- I found it.

“You always asked me why, Mom. I think I figured it out now. I just wanted to be part of something you love. Charlotte, I’m sorry. I kept chasing my own mother’s love when I should have been giving motherly love to you, my daughter.

(ineligible scratchings)

I have to go
because sewing- it's in my blood and this is the only way out for me.

I love you,
—Lucinda Anne Burrens”

Then added at the bottom in a rushed scrawl:

“Just don’t turn on the light, Lottie.”

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"Lottie” was her nickname for me. One birthday when I was a little girl, the only kind of presents I asked for were candles.

"Lah's- lottie candles!” Mama recalls me throwing up my arms in excitement.

After that day, I was "Lottie", an adorable, mispronounced and scrambled word.

Every birthday after that, I would get at least one fancy candle. I still have dozens.

"Lottie".

Only Mama called me that.

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The suicide note was rambling madness.

I didn’t take it all too literally. Mama had a sickness, and it was her sickness writing that note. That sickness which always scrambled our relationship and finally the sickness that had killed her.

So while she broke my heart and shattered everything in ways I still can’t really comprehend– it’s like I can’t blame her because it was the “sickness”.

I did always wonder why she pursued Grammie’s love- as madly as a dog chasing a big rig truck onto the highway. I would’ve just sealed Grammie off like a bad well- all that comes from her is poison.
But now that I have to live with her, I have to tread in poisonous water.

Every day.

Because of Mama. Mama’s “sickness”.

But like I said, I found a balance. I had a nice roof over my head, meals, and clothing.

No right to complain.

After Mama died, I didn’t couldn’t feel much for a while. My mind was processing trauma, I guess, and sewing somehow helped me with it. It made me feel closer to my mother even though she seemed to have hated sewing…so I guess I pursued Mama’s love the same way she had tried to capture Grammie’s.

Embroidery was my favorite- so relaxing, so steady- even though as a teenager and a beginner, I used up a lot of thread. But Grammie would just send me to her sewing room for more. The room was up in the attic and she couldn’t do the stairs so well anymore. I gladly went though, since the sewing room was my favorite room in her mansion of a house.

I never knew the sewing room was there until Grammie told me. It was on the opposite side of the attic, behind a large, locked wardrobe that always seemed to frown down at me. I had to press flat against the plywood wall to pass it and reach the door. There was no electricity in the attic, but I figured the sewing room had light, or at least another window-

<Just don’t turn on the light, Lottie>

The first time I went in, I blindly patted the walls-

<Just don’t turn on the light, Lottie>

-I could feel the muscles in my hand tighten- nearly convulse with anxiety as I felt along, searching for the light switch. That horrible prickling of my skin, waiting for the

SCRATCH!
Grab—
Teeear
of some unseen monster, taking my hand to drag me away into the saran-wrapped, drowning darkness—

<Just don’t turn on the light, Lottie>
But of course, the monster’s touch never came. Besides, here was the magical part of the attic— I just didn’t know it yet.

That first sojourn to the sewing room, I felt around for a light switch or a cord, heart steel in my chest, skin prickled like iron spikes— that surreal, tight feeling clutched me— and then I felt a soft trailing touch on my shoulder.

I frantically danced away from it, my body on fire with panic, mind reeling from the numerous possibilities—

Spider?
Cobwebs?
Something even worse?
I tried not to run from the room— I was fifteen years old, I wasn’t a baby anymore, I wouldn’t be afraid of the dark— but as I forced myself to slow to a hurry, my legs felt like lead, growing heavier and heavier until I wouldn’t be able to run even if I had to—.

Grammie was not the type of person who would tolerate any kind of failure or irrational fear. So I was at a loss as I hurried down the attic stairs to return empty-handed, no viable excuse— but on the steps, Gramps caught me by the shoulders.
“Whoa, hun, you okay?”

Gramps was a good guy with a bad temper and an equally bad habit to cater to Grammie’s whims. You’d be stupid to expect him to stand up for you, but there was always the kind glint in his golden brown eyes that reminded me of the Gramps who’d dress as Santa for Christmas and later would take me hiking in the summer.

“Didn’t see a ghostie, there, did ya, hun?” He laughed a little in his comforting way.

I was too upset to pretend that I was okay. I was in his arms, sobbing as I told him Grammie had asked me to get more thread from the sewing room, but I hadn’t been able to find the light switch, and I had gotten turned around when I felt something touch me—

“Grammie sent you to the sewing room?”

His voice was shockingly stern— I started to worry he was dropping into his sudden (but brief) tempers.

He was quiet for a moment.
“…Well, hun, there’s nothing to fear in there,” Gramps finally smiled, giving my cheek an affectionate rub with his thumb. “You just felt the thread touch ya, that’s all.”

Apparently Grammie organized her thread by spools hanging from a rack on the ceiling. She was a very short woman who had been living with a handicap all her life (R.A.), so hanging the threads from the ceiling made it easier for her to reach.

Gramps took me downstairs and drew a square on a napkin.

“You see, from the doorway, the colors start on the left. Farthest on the left is white, farthest on right is black. All the other colors are in between, and they all have numbers. Did Grammie tell ya what number she wanted?”

I shook my head.

Gramps’s cheeks burned red and again I held my breath, waiting for his anger to rear its ugly head-

But it didn’t.

“Wasn’t very nice of ya to send the girl in blind,” He chuckled awkwardly, putting an arm around me as we entered the living room where Grammie was sitting on the couch.

“What are you talking about, Harry?” She snapped.

“The sewing room, Aveline.”

Something tense hung in the air between them, but I was too young to interpret it correctly. I thought they were mad at me for not getting the thread. I blushed so hard my cheeks hurt.

“You’re only just learning to sew, Charlotte,” Grammie waved away my fumbled attempt. “Soon it will come naturally.”

Then she asked me to get her an L-37 line of thread.

“That would be the 37th thread from the left,” Gramps explained, walking me back to the attic stairs. “Just tug on it real tight and that’ll be enough.”

I hesitated on the steps as I realized he wasn’t coming with me- he had turned away, explaining he needed to go back to the garden. (Their property was vast- dark green lawns, pine trees, and huge roses.)
“Oh and hun-,” Gramps glanced over his shoulder. “-if you do find the switch in the sewing room- promise me you won’t ever turn on the light.”
I stared after him in disbelief, my mother’s sickness chanting in my ears:

*Don’t turn on the light.*

2/07, 9:09 pm

I don’t have the luxury of a proper narrative anymore. I’m sitting by my bedroom door with the lights off.

Grammie- she’s obsessed with cutting my hair short- short like Mama’s. She had started bugging me about my hair last fall.

I kept telling her “No, I like my hair long.”
“No, I don’t want to change.”
*No. No. No.*

But I guess that wasn’t an acceptable answer.

I was napping in the living room one day- I don’t know- maybe a month ago- when I woke up, Grammie was standing over me with a sewing needle and scissors.

That’s when I started sleeping with the door locked.

I don’t feel safe.

I’m trapped in this house the same way Mama trapped herself under the icy lake.

My hair- cutting my hair- at first I thought Grammie just hated blonde hair- or just my long blonde hair but--

I keep having nightmares- my head is shaved- Grammie pulling hairs from my head- chasing me with long shears, saying she needs thread, she needs thread--
I’ll tell you now, sewing is in my blood. I’ve been living here for a little over a year now. Grammie has been making me clothes that fit better than even the nicest ones she could buy me. Within a month of learning how to sew, I was making clothes, costumes, and quilts-

But I don’t sew anymore.

I won’t sew anymore.

Yeah, okay- the sewing room became nice, even magical once I knew the only touch was from the threads.

When Grammie sent me or gave me permission, I’d eagerly hop up the stairs, pass the wardrobe, and slip into the darkness of the sewing room.

I loved to close my eyes and slowly twirl around the room, feeling the gentle, drizzle-kiss touch of the threads-
thousands, it seemed as I twirled in imaginary, magic rain in an imaginary princess dress of silk and satin ribbons.

A princess twirling in the rain.

I loved that picture.

I got used to the darkness, grew comfortable in it- kind of even thriving in it.

With its calm black slate and no distracting light, the sewing room ignited my creativity and gave me a refuge from Grammie’s harsh words, Gramps’s brief fits of temper.

Gramps died of a stroke last week.

But I found him in the sewing room tonight.

Grammie was in the living room as usual, watching Dancing with the Stars.

Maybe she’s still there.

I don’t know.
I hope she’s gone to bed- but I think she knows I’m awake- and she’s waiting for me. Waiting, with giant scissors in one hand and pins in the other–

<Don’t turn on the light>
No, don’t sound crazy.

I’m not crazy.

Shut up! Relax, calm down-

_Breathe._

So Grammie and I were sewing earlier tonight. I had started a project to memorialize Gramps.

Good man, bad temper.

Grammie was stitching me a black dress for his funeral.

And she asked me to get her more thread.

R-4, black.

I needed more anyway.

L-1, white.

I went upstairs, passed the wardrobe, through the door into the sewing room.

I got Grammie’s black first, then crossed over to get mine.

I held my hands up like I usually did, trailing my fingers through the soft lines of thread and twirling slowly in a circle.

There was a deep ache, a coldness where I missed Gramps.

I tried to comfort myself with meaningless detail: he was old, it was natural, he had been losing his sight- and he had told me if he went blind, he didn’t want to live.

So at least he died when he could still see. And he had passed away in his favorite place, the big garden in the backyard. He had just sat down in one of the lounge chairs and then he must have just…left.
He was old, it was natural—natural—
But it still seemed unnatural—

—and that’s when I found him in the sewing room.

As I grazed my hands through the strings, his hand met mine.

At first I jerked back, but remembering how Gramps had comforted me all those months ago- I reached out to show myself it was just thread.

Just thread.

But instead, my skin touched a hand- I found fingers, a wrist, a palm—

That’s when I pulled out my phone.

Turned on the lock screen.

<Just don’t turn on the light, Lottie>
And looked up.

<Don’t turn on the light!>

It was only a shadow- an outline of a shadow- but it was enough.

Gramps hung from the ceiling, his white, thin hair hanging down.

The white, thin thread I was about to pluck for my project.
Some type of bolts or nails with ropes held him in place on the ceiling- was that dark, dried blood?- it was only his upper torso, his head hanging upside down- but his arm had slipped from the ropes, his fingers hanging down to trail a cold, foreign touch on my cheek.

And from the temporary white light I could make out shadow lines of other torsos, heads, and hair. All hair.

All hair hanging from the ceiling.
Now, somehow, I find myself here in my dark bedroom with the door locked.

I don’t remember coming down from the attic or coming to my room.

I guess it’s shock.

All I can think about is how often I twirled and danced in my imaginary rain—what I thought was thread, what I thought was thread—how I’d almost plucked hair from Gramps’s bloated corpse—hair to sew into a memorial mini-tapestry to hang in the garden—what the fuck was already sewn in? Had I already used his hair or—

NO NO NO NO NO NO

That’s a vortex, that’s a black hole I can’t come out of so stop, stop.

Calm down, breathe.

Breathe, breathe, breathe.
NO NO NO NO NO

Breathe, dammit- just breathe-

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9:17pm

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Okay, I’ve been thinking.

Grammie knows something is wrong because I didn’t come back with her thread.
I’ve been hearing her call for me.

I just need to go to the sewing room one last time.

One last time to get my phone.

I’ll call the cops, I’ll run away and call the cops-

I just need my phone.

The house is dark, but I have my candles.

If I use my Lottie candles, maybe she won’t notice, maybe she won’t find me.

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…This– a recipe for a ghost story, for a horror movie.

Now everything is wrapped in surreality, wrapped tight like leftovers in saran wrap.
Or ice from a lake.
I didn’t listen.

I didn’t listen!

<Don’t turn on the light, Lottie>

Instead of just the attic, the whole house has severed into bloody, black pieces- floating away into some foreign darkness–

Because I’m not safe-

STOP IT.

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This isn’t a horror movie, the house is still the house-

I’m taking my candle and going to get my phone from the sewing room.

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10:41pm

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Things are all mixed up.

My memories are all shuffled.

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I had returned from the sewing room, my phone back in my hand.

Grammie was still in the living room. She was watching the news.

I told her I was leaving. Leaving for good.
“Sounds like you’ve seen the collection,” She sighed. Then, in a lightly reprimanding tone: “There’s a reason why we don’t have electricity in the attic. There’s a reason why we don’t turn on the light in the sewing room… I told Harry a thousand times to cut the the cords, but he just—.”

I wasn’t listening.
I couldn’t listen.
_Please don’t turn on the light, Lottie._

I asked Grammie if she killed and hanged all the people in there- torsos and heads- tight, dead skin peeling back, decomposing, toothless frowns upside down in demented smiles- all of it hanging upside down for their hair to trail low enough for Grammie–

For _me_ to get more hair.
Gramps never went in the sewing room. Not when he was alive, not until he was bolted and bound there. Grammie had always made _me_ get the thread.
But it was _never_ thread.

I demanded to know if she had killed him- Gramps- Gramps and the people in the attic, all just spools of thread for _us_–

“Charlotte, it’s a borrowed collection,” Grammie sounded exasperated. “I merely maintain it-.”

I still couldn’t listen.
Again, I told Grammie I was leaving but she tutted and called after me,

_“Sewing is in your blood, Charlotte.”_  
She didn’t look up. She didn’t stand or move or even shift in her seat on the couch.

When I left, I pulled the living room doors closed and locked her in.

Just until I could call the police.

I didn’t know how many bodies were up there.
...The attic.

Suddenly I was ultra-conscious of my clothes- my clothes stitched and sewn together with—Grammie’s threads.

“Threads.”

Then I started to smell the smoke.

The candle— I had my phone but what had happened to the candle I used to light my way to the sewing room—?

I must have dropped it like I had dropped my phone when I found Gramps. I must have-

Scrambled, scrambled, scrambled-

—but I had put enough together.

I ran up to the attic but it seemed too late.

Flames flickered like magic rubies over the claw-footed bathtub, the phones, the boxes- the angry wardrobe was purged of its furious expression- the whole thing was knocked over, slowly being devoured by fiery fangs.

I had to leave- I had to warn-

But that was when I made out one last thing from the sewing room.

By the light of the angry fire, fire fueled by the dead- by the threads of the dead- I could make out a carving on the sewing room’s door.

Written in child-like script:

“Lucinda’s Sewing Room”
A borrowed collection.

-just wanted to be part of something you love-
“I merely maintain it,” she had said.

A part of me and my work-
in every stitch
that you make-

A borrowed collection.

Next I was hearing the slap, slap, slap of my bare feet running on the wooden floor.
I could hear Grammie’s screams ripping out from the living room, screams tearing through the air as the fire started to hang down from the attic, hang down low enough for her to reach.

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My mind couldn’t keep up with my body.

I was running away, and I guess I couldn’t change that.

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11:23pm
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It’s cold now.

Really cold.
Cold is burning my skin.

Utah winters are fierce.

My clothes are gone.

That’s good.

I don’t want to feel Grammie’s “work”, or my mother’s “work” against my skin.

“in every stitch that you make,” “in every stitch that you make”

A little over a year of living with Grammie and Gramps.

Wearing the clothes she made me.

The clothes I made for me.
Clothes stitched with–

STOP IT.

There’s only snow now.

Only snow.

Nice and calm, wrapping tightly around me.

Only the snow and the huge glinting, splaying fire on the horizon- taking their house, taking the sewing room.
The “borrowed” collection.

And Grammie.

Wrapping it up, severing it, sending it away into that darkness.

I called 911 at some point—because of Grammie, because of Mama, because of the fire.

But it’s too late.

So I guess this diary will speak for me.

For Grammie, for Gramps, for Mama.

It’s my own collection.

What I’ve really been sewing.

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…Police.

Maybe they’ll find me, maybe they won’t.

Maybe I don’t want to be found.

Because sewing-
Sewing is in my blood.