Seam Allowance



When Mara brought the coat back, I put the pins where they had been twenty-three years before.

I still had her card. Left shoulder low. Right sleeve shortened. Pocket mouth raised two fingers, because she hated bending for her keys. The pencil was faint, but I could read my own hand.

“It's for her,” Mara said.

Her daughter stood by the door, holding a bicycle helmet. She had kept the helmet on through the introductions, then taken it off as if she had decided to stay.

“Put it on, then,” I said.

Nell pushed her arms into the sleeves. The coat was green in the middle and almost grey along the shoulders. Mara had worn it to work for most of my working life. I remembered a winter when she paid me in three instalments. I remembered telling her it would last.

Nell buttoned it. There was a shallow crease across her back.

I reached for the collar.

“Could you lift your arms?”

She did. The whole coat rose with them.

“That always happened,” Mara said. “You get used to it.”

Nell lowered her arms. “I'm on the bike every day.”

I said I could let out the back. There was cloth inside; I had left it there myself. But the hidden wool would be darker. Two long strips would show where the old seams had been.

Mara rubbed a cuff between her finger and thumb.

“Could you just take the crease out?”

I smoothed it with my palm. It disappeared while Nell stood still.

“Like that,” Mara said.

Nell reached forward for imaginary handlebars. The crease returned, harder.

“I don't stand like that very often,” she said.

I took out the pins.

They left the coat with me. On the pavement, Mara said something I couldn't hear. Nell put her helmet on before she answered.

All afternoon I unpicked my own stitches. They were smaller than I make them now. Once or twice the scissors missed the thread and I had to bring the work nearer the lamp.

The hidden cloth was not merely darker. It was green in a way I had forgotten green could be. Beside it, the rest of the coat looked tired.

I tried brushing the difference away. Then I laid the brush down.

At the right pocket I found a second line of stitches, a little ladder inside the lining. I had raised that pocket twice. The card only mentioned once.

I almost put it back at Mara's height.

Instead I left it pinned and asked Nell to come in again.

She came without her mother. Rain stood in the vents of her helmet. I held the coat open and she put it on without looking at the back.

“Your keys,” I said.

She reached down. Her fingers met wool below the pocket.

“There?”

“A bit higher.”

I moved the pin. She tried it again.

Outside, a bus pressed water against the window. Nell looked at the two dark bands in the mirror.

“Mum won't like those.”

“I can't make them the same.”

“Doesn't matter.” Then, after a moment: “It does a bit.”

I gave her the coat on Friday. Mara came too. She put her hand on one of the dark strips, smoothing downward, though there was no crease there now.

Nell went outside to unlock the bicycle. Through the glass we watched her settle onto the saddle and lean forward. The hem lifted slightly. The shoulders stayed where they were.

Mara watched until the bicycle had passed the end of the window.

“You kept the buttons,” she said.

“They were good buttons.”

She nodded. After she left, I put Nell's card in front of her mother's. The staple went through the old hole.