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An Ephemeral Quality

My earliest memories are of thread. For hours I would sit on the floor of my mother's atelier collecting the cuttings that lay discarded throughout the workshop, picking up each one and inspecting it carefully in my pudgy little fingers. Purple ones were my favourite. Whenever I found one I would put it in my pocket for safe keeping. It didn't matter that she would have given me all the purple thread I wanted, if I'd asked; it was a treasure hunt of my very own, and I collected tiny victories like pebbles on a beach.

Even then I understood that my mother's work was very special. The busiest times were near Hallowe'en, of course, and just before the Winter Solstice Parade. I watched as she transformed boring old grownups into sorcerers, mermaids, tree spirits, jungle queens. Under my mother's touch her clients grew tall and proud and wise. They *became*, until the costume wasn't a costume at all. It was them.

I remember our last day in that town, the one in the south of England where I was born. The workshop floor was covered in threads the colour of autumn leaves—vivid reds and golds and dusty browns. It was just before the Solstice Parade. The woman who stood in the center of the fitting platform was dark-skinned and gold-edged, and my mother had dressed her in the gown and matching headdress of a firebird. The headdress was made up of golden feathers and it came down over her face in swirls of red and gold leather. I could only just see her eyes. They looked like deep pools of hot chocolate. When she moved, the feathers rustled like

the crackling of a campfire.

The firebird woman looked so powerful and brave that I was a little afraid of her. Not my mother, though—she wasn't afraid of anything, not even when smoke started to rise from the fabric where she touched the dress. I picked up the delicate threads from the floor, all the different reds and oranges and golds together, and then hid while my mother finished.

The costume shop was always cold because the heating was always broken, but that day it got too hot too quickly. I thought my mother started to look a little worried, but I knew that couldn't be right. She was probably just excited to go see the parade with me.

The woman handed my mother some money. Her hand left charred black streaks on the wooden door on her way out. After she was gone my mother played with the rings on her fingers and said maybe we should stay home that night.

Later there was a fire at the parade, a big one. It was in the papers the next morning; three people were killed, including a little girl only a little older than me. Mother told me we needed to pack quickly. I could still smell smoke on the air as the bus took us away.

The phone rings. I stare at it warily before taking it from its cradle on the overcrowded desk.

"Harlan Atelier," I say.

"Hello, is this Eleanor?"

"No Madam, this is—"

"I'm looking for Eleanor Harlan Atelier."

I take a breath. "This is Eleanor Harlan's Atelier, Madam, but—"

"Great. Put me on the phone with her."

My fingers tighten against the bakelite phone. "I'm afraid she's not here, Mrs..." The voice sounds vaguely familiar, but it could be any one of several malnourished Louboutin-wearing housewives.

"When do you expect her? It's very important."

There's a clock ticking on the wall. When this place was alive with movement I never noticed it, but now each passing second rings out like a gavel.

"She won't be coming back," I say. "She's dead."

The first time I said those words out loud I felt dirty inside, like

I'd made a racist comment or made fun of someone for being in a wheelchair. Now, though, I've said them so many times that they've lost all meaning. Sorry, my mum's not here. She's gone out for lunch. She's having a cigarette. She's dead.

"Oh." The phone is silent. "Who are you?"

"Ezrabet. Her daughter."

"The scrappy one?"

"There's just the one, Madam."

The woman sighs with all the restraint of a southern screen starlet. "She was letting out the waist on a dress for me. I need it by Friday."

I remember what my therapist said about controlling my anger, and I imagine a soft curtain coming down as I breathe deeply.

"Your name, please?"

"Dawn Woodruff."

I put the receiver down on the desk. My arm aches from holding it. I locate Dawn Woodruff's heinously sequined cry for help on the rack of completed alterations.

"Your dress is ready, Madam. You can come pick it up any time this week."

After I hang up I go back to my scattered piles of forms, notes, and administrative jobs-in-progress, shoving down my annoyance and my jet lag. I'm numb and exhausted but I keep signing, printing, scanning, and tallying numbers because watching one column of figures flicker by after another is easier than what I'll have to do next: go through her things. Unpack her life.

The bell over the door jingles. I tell myself again that I'll take it down, knowing that I won't until the entire place is in boxes. I stifle a groan, nearly, and look up.

A man is standing in the doorway—my mum's age, maybe, maybe a little younger. I can't tell. He looks like one of those cliché fantasies of a sexy librarian, gold-rimmed glasses and messy mousey hair touched with grey and smelling of coffee and vanilla aftershave. I glare at him suspiciously.

"Hi. Sorry, hello. I was hoping you could help me with something."

"I'm sorry, Sir, we're not taking any new clients at the moment. In fact, we're going to be closing permanently." But he's already digging into his ridiculous leather man-purse. His glasses slip down his nose

and he pushes them up with one hand.

“Yes of course, sorry, I’ll only be a moment.” Before I can say anything else he pulls something black and compact out of his bag. He holds it out to me.

It’s not what I expected.

The fabric is so dark that at first I think it’s velvet, but it turns out to be soft-brushed leather. The shape is simple, but elegant—sweeping lines around almond-shaped cutouts for the eyes, tilted up at the corners. A slight pull in the fabric at each side suggests laughter. A thick satin ribbon extends from one side of the mask.

“I have the other one,” he says, as I take the mask from him. He digs around in his man-purse again and pulls out a matching satin ribbon. “It came apart a while ago. I’ve had it a long time though, it held up pretty well.”

I hold the mask carefully and run my thumb over the soft leather. There’s something startlingly intimate about the motion. The piece is well crafted, the stitching strong but unobtrusive. I turn it over in my hands and whatever Sexy Librarian is yammering about dies in my ears.

It’s one of hers.

My mother’s signature is in the corner along the bottom seam, glistening in silver ink. It doesn’t seem like her style—unadorned, almost utilitarian—but it’s the same signature as the one on the dance costume she made me when I was five. She stopped making costumes not long after that, directing her talent instead to hemming tattered Levis and graduation dresses.

“Sure. I’ll fix it,” I hear myself say. My voice sounds like it’s coming from underwater.

“Great!” The man beams like a puppy. He looks around the workshop. “I heard about Eleanor.”

The world comes back with a roar.

“There will be a funeral. I don’t know when yet. There’s a mailing list.” I point to the clipboard hanging from a hook beside the door. Then I toss the mask onto the table. The man winces.

“Right. So can I come pick up the mask tomorrow, maybe?”

“Sure. Tomorrow’s fine.” My words are all hard edges and right angles. I go back to the pile of papers and scan the top one. I read it

three times and still have no idea what it says.

“Thanks.” He shifts awkwardly. “I guess I’ll see you, Ezrabet.”

He pulls open the door and disappears into the street. The bell has fallen silent by the time it occurs to me to wonder how he knew my name.

That evening I let myself into my mother’s apartment, where I’m staying while in town. I try not to spend a lot of time there; it feels like one of those reconstructionist museums, or a moment frozen in time. My mum’s antique sewing machine is still there, the one she learned on before buying a more efficient one for the costume shop. Its black curves and gold motifs make it look like a vintage Cadillac among tractors. The walls smell like cigarettes and there’s food in the kitchen slowly sailing past its use-by date, and a strip of police tape still clinging to the door frame. I can’t handle sleeping in either my mum’s room or my old one, so I sleep on the sofa in the living room. It’s more threadbare than I remembered. The mirror against the wall is the same though, a great gilded baroque thing that she picked up at a rubbish market when I was twelve. I remember thinking that the mirror and the sewing machine should run off together, leaving behind the rest of this trailer trash hole.

I know I should eat something but I haven’t had any appetite since I arrived, so instead I make a pot of tea and empty my bag onto the kitchen counter. The black mask tumbles out of the debris. It looks even darker here in the dim lighting. I find some stray needles and thread in a kitchen drawer and begin reattaching the ribbon to the little lining strip. My mother could have done it better, but when I’m done it doesn’t look too bad and holds securely. I run my finger over the silver signature. It feels like something left behind from another life—a time when she was an artist who saw so much beauty in the world, before she started drinking, before she started running from something deep inside herself. A time when we were happy.

The leather is cool against my fingers and again I’m struck by that inviting sense of intimacy, that warm seductive promise. I remember, for the first time in years, the flutter of a firebird’s dress. Sooty streaks on the doorframe. The smell of ashes in the air.

I go to the mirror and hold the mask up against my face. My straw-coloured hair escapes around the edges and stubborn freckles spill across my nose. When I was young I was convinced that one day I'd grow into a great beauty like her. It never happened.

The satin ribbons are smooth and weightless. I pull them behind my head and knot them together. The mask slips a little and I tug it back so that I can see properly.

The world looks the same. In the mirror, my head tilts curiously to one side and the creases at the eyes suggest an amusing secret. My hair looks darker, somehow, and healthier, and as I step up to the mirror I realize that I can't see my freckles anymore. I lift a hand to my face and it's only when I see the slender seamstress' fingers that I realize I'm looking at my mother.

I rip off the mask. It catches on my hair, washed out and cracking at the ends, and my stupid freckles are stark against the sudden flush. Maybe I need a proper meal after all.

The mask sits in my hand—simple, unadorned leather kissed in silver ink. I glance uneasily at the mirror once more before shoving the mask back into my handbag.

Being in the workshop is easier than being in the apartment. The street outside hums reassuringly and the tension in my chest settles down patiently into the waiting room of my brain.

Dawn Woodruff picks up her dress and gets snippy when I don't fold it properly. She makes me glad I left this suffocating country behind. I long for my bright apartment in Chicago—it's an absolute matchbox with only a double hot plate to cook on, but the windows are tall and look out over Millennium Park. It made the world seem so full of possibility. Once.

The bell over the door chimes.

The man with the purse walks in, glancing around the chaotic atelier. It's taking on the feel of a gutted animal; thin white clothes racks stand empty amidst raw bare patches and the carnage of stray cuttings. He steps around a half-full cardboard box and picks his way to the desk.

"Hey Ezrabet," he says, and my eyes narrow. Yesterday I'd never seen this man before in my life.

"I didn't tell you my name," I say.

"Right." He tugs awkwardly on his bag. "Sorry, I should have... I'm Brady. I was friends with your mum."

I'm not convinced. "My mother doesn't have friends." Not for a long time. If she did she wouldn't have died alone on a bathroom floor. The thought hits me so hard that I gasp for breath. I cover it with a cough.

"It's been a while," he admits. He studies my face for a moment, and it makes me want to slap him. "Do you have the... is it ready?"

"What?"

"The mask."

It's sitting in my bag under the desk. I want to throw it at him and tell him to get out of my shop. I want to tell him that he's a liar, because if he was really my mother's friend he would have been there. I want him to leave and never come back.

But I also want to see her again.

"Not yet. Tomorrow." I wonder if he knows I'm lying. "I've been busy."

"Of course." He pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Are you busy now?"

I look at him questioningly. The truth is I'd kill to get out of this room, but I'm not going to tell him that.

"I hear the place across the street has good coffee. Do you want to go sit down for a while and talk?"

"We don't have anything to talk about." I can hear the bitterness in my voice and I hate myself for it. I wonder how long I've been like this.

He sighs. "Oh Ezrabet..."

"What do you want?" I spit the words out like chicken bones. "What are you doing here?"

"I miss her." He says it in a rush. Then he shrugs and pushes his glasses up again. "I never got to say goodbye."

This time I study his face. His temples are going grey and there are lines around his eyes, but he looks like a lost little boy. He tugs on his bag strap and begins to turn away.

I sigh long and hard and force my teeth to unclench.

"I never got to say goodbye either."

The café across the road is typical of the upscale trash I see all over Chicago—exposed Edison bulbs shedding watery light on empty shipping crates that probably cost a fortune on Etsy. I maneuver between university students to a table while Brady waits in line. The chairs are mismatched skeletons of wood and flannel upholstery. I settle into one and before long he returns with a black coffee for me and something with cream and sprinkles for himself.

I look at the concoction distastefully. “What in the nine hells is that?”

“It’s a... caramel soy mochachino.” He bites down a grin.

“That’s disgusting.”

“Hush and drink your tar.”

I take a sip. It’s hot and violently bitter. I hope he goes to the bathroom soon so I can put some sugar in it.

“So,” he says. “How long are you staying?”

I shrug noncommittally and drink my tar. “Don’t know. Not long. I have to get back to work.”

“Oh? What are you doing?”

“I work for a dance company.”

“You’re dancing?” His eyes light up with excitement, and something almost like pride. I want to ask him what on earth he has to be so happy about.

“No, I’m an admin assistant.”

“Oh.” He looks down at his drink.

The familiar rush of shame digs into my spine. No, I didn’t make it.

No, I wasn’t good enough. “It’s fine, though. I get free tickets and stuff.” I shrug again. The other shoulder this time. It’s hot in here.

“Well, that’s good.” He sips his drink. It leaves a line of cream on his lip and he wipes it off with the back of his hand.

“Were you really friends with my mum?”

A little smile flickers across his face. “For a long time. We met when we were six and she... she... punched a bully in the face for me.” He flushes and hides behind his obnoxious drink.

I take another sip of my coffee. It’s horrible. “Do you need to go to the bathroom or anything?”

“Huh?”

“Never mind. So what happened?”

“We got into a fight. After the, um, the Solstice Parade.” He doesn’t meet my eyes. “I kept track of her over the years, made sure both of you were OK. I thought about reaching out after you went to Chicago, but it didn’t seem like the right time. Then, well...” He pushes back his glasses. “I guess there’s never really a right time.”

“Maybe if you had she’d be alive right now.” The words come out before I can stop them. His face cracks just before he turns away.

“You think I don’t know that?” he says quietly.

I want to say I’m sorry. I want to say I didn’t mean it, that I’m the one who should have been there. I don’t say any of those things. I stand and pick up my bag, the one with the mask at the bottom.

“Thanks for the coffee,” I say, and push my way through the tables, hoping that if I run fast enough I can outrun myself.

When I get back to the apartment, the cardboard boxes I ordered are leaning up against the doorframe. I haul them inside in two armfuls and set them against the wall in the living room. They stare at me accusingly.

I stall by making a cup of tea. Then I go to the hall closet, where she left some boxes of old junk, and pull them down. The closet smells like her.

There’s a clunky black Polaroid camera, the kind that was big in the 80s and 90s. Some design template books, and a newspaper cutout from the town we lived in when I was a kid. I’m in it—a grainy, pudgy baby in my mother’s arms. She’s smiling. Her dark hair goes down past her waist.

Behind us is the shopfront of her first place, the one that sold the beautiful costumes. The article’s headline is *Unlikely Artisan Finds Niche Market in Small Town*.

I set the article aside. Underneath is a tattered flyer in burgundy and gold.

UNMASKED

Samhain Night Masquerade Ball

Come as you truly are!

Sophia Loren Cultural Centre, 31st October, 1989, 7pm

Below the words is a drawing of a masquerade mask made of oak leaves. Roses heavy with thorns climb up the edges.

Come as you truly are. I wonder how many people danced in my mother's creations that night. There's a photo, too, faded and scuffed with time and neglect. My mum's in it, maybe my age, wearing a white masquerade mask. Someone's got their arm around her. I peer closer and realize that it's Brady—except this version of Brady is a stone-cold fox. His mask is black. They look happy.

I dig around in the boxes some more. There's a surprising amount of shoes, T-straps and button-up Victorian boots and Marilyn pumps. An elaborate fur coat, and guiltily I think of the harsh winters in Chicago. While rummaging around, I get stabbed by a stray sewing needle more than once. My finger leaves a smear of blood on the cardboard.

A ribbon pokes out of the chaos. It's thick satin and snowy white. I pull on it, but it's caught on something deeper in the box. I tug gently, shifting the refuse around with my other hand until it comes loose.

Dangling at the end of the ribbon is a white mask.

I stare at it for a moment, watching it spin, then carefully free the ribbon on the other side. At first glance it looks like a twin to the black, but they're not quite the same. This leather is slick, rather than the soft brushed fabric of the black one, and the corners of the eyes are smooth. Instead the leather pulls gently in between them, contrasting the amusement of the black mask with its own faint hint of tragedy. I turn it over and see the familiar signature in silver ink. For a moment I'm tempted to lift it to my face, but a sudden, inexplicable fear catches at me, like a bramble thorn. I set it aside instead.

Standing over the mess of junk, the mirror glitters from the second-hand sun off the building next door. The gold around the edges takes on a melted, ephemeral quality. I take the black mask out of my bag and another guilty flush creeps up as I remember Brady's face, the pain in his eyes. Then I step over to the mirror.

What I see is wholly uninspiring: eyes red from exhaustion, unwashed clothes that have long since lost any prestige, their labels scuffed by time and abuse. They look too big for me, like I've shrunk

inside of them since arriving. The mask hums in my fingers.

I lift it to my eyes.

Seeing her isn't jarring, like I thought it might be. It's like stepping into sunlight. The mother in the mirror appraises me curiously. She looks healthier than I've seen her in a long time. I wonder what she must think of me, her arrogant wayward failure of a daughter.

"I tried," I whisper. "I tried to become someone you could be proud of." As I say it I realize that's part of the story, but not all of it. I went to Chicago because I was running away from what we'd become, from the silence that clung like something rotting and long forgotten. From looking into her eyes and never knowing how much of her was truly awake.

This version of her is different, though. She looks like the strong, confident woman from the costume shop, the one I'd watched pin scarlet feathers to a golden gown so long ago.

I reach out and meet her fingertips in the mirror—long, elegant fingers that always seemed to hold so much poetry. Only the thinnest membrane of glass lies in between.

"Why did you leave me?"

You left. For a heartstopping moment, the words seem to be coming from her. Then I realize they came from my own thoughts, the ones I try so hard to push down. *You left. You went to Chicago and left her all alone when you knew she was sick.*

I stare at my mother's wide eyes in the mirror. I see fear in them, and a buried memory bubbles up: making a flippant comment at nine years old; being shoved hard against a wall so fast that I didn't realize it was happening until my head smacked against the plaster. It's one of the memories I fought to keep buried, but this time I notice something different, something new—the shock in her eyes, and the fear. She was as surprised as I was. I remember, now, her releasing me quickly and running away. I remember wondering what on earth she was running from.

"You should have told me. You should have asked for help. I would have come back." But even as I say it, I wonder if it's true.

My mother says nothing.

"You pushed me away. You push everyone away." The familiar anger flares up. Its claws reach for my throat, equal parts painful and

seductive. “You could have tried to get better. You could have gotten real help instead of finding it at the bottom of a bottle.” The venom in my voice startles me.

Still she says nothing, just watches with that half-smile around her eyes. I step closer. Our noses are almost touching.

“You took the coward’s way out.”

You left. You weren’t there. You abandoned her.

The anger is roaring like a hungry dragon and I try to imagine the curtain coming down, like my therapist says, but it’s timid and insubstantial. The dragon waves it away like mist.

“Why don’t you say something?” I ask. My mother lifts her chin proudly and defiance flickers behind the mask. “What does it matter now, anyway? You’re gone and you’re never coming back, you’ll never have to look at the screwed up waste of space you left behind...” I am horrified to find that I’m crying. My voice breaks and the leather grows sticky against my skin.

“Say something!” I slam my hand against the glass. Her hand meets mine, like a high five. Like she thinks it’s all a joke. “Tell me how much I disappointed you.” I’m so angry that my vision is turning white. “Tell me that I wasn’t able to save you.” *You should have been there.* I’m having trouble forming words now, and I don’t know whether it’s from the lump in my throat or the fury or both. I can’t see straight. I slam my hand against the glass again. It rattles violently.

“You left me all alone!”

Once more and, in the space between one heartbeat and another, the mirror shatters. I tear off the mask and sink to the ground, sobbing in shame and terror amidst the broken glass.

Brady and I sit in the coffee house. It was my idea, this time. He has one of those absurd candy bar drinks and I’ve ordered a mocha. I glare at him with steely eyes, daring him to say anything.

“Thank you for fixing this,” he says, when I hand him the mask. “It’s nice to... to have something of her.”

“Sure,” I say. The white one’s in between us on the table. I’m not sure why I brought it. Because of that photo, I guess, that one of him and my mum. “The masks...” I hesitate, uncertain how to phrase my

question. But he understands.

“The black one,” he says, “makes others see you as you want to be seen.”

I stare at him. “No it doesn’t.”

He shrugs wearily. “It wasn’t intentional. I don’t think it ever was, really. It’s something that just sort of... came out of her. I was having a hard time with... I didn’t have a lot of confidence back then, and she was trying to help.”

“But—” I stop, fighting the truth, trying not to look at it too closely.

“Why? What did you see?”

I meet his eyes, and his expression softens. He knows. This doesn’t aggravate me the way I expected it to.

“And the white?”

“The white shows you as you truly are.” He smiles self-consciously. “I was never brave enough to wear it.”

I sip my mocha. It’s not bad. We sit in silence for a minute.

“I’m going back to Chicago at the end of the week.” I don’t know what that’s supposed to mean to him. We just met.

After a moment he says, “OK.”

“The coffee’s better there.”

He doesn’t say anything.

“I could give you my email. If you want. I mean, if you ever need to talk or something.”

He looks up and a moment of joy flashes in his eyes, like the sun peeking out from behind the clouds. He looks like the guy in the photo then, the one who was so happy just to be near her. I want to ask what happened between them but I figure maybe he’ll tell me one day, in his own time.

I pick up the white mask. Once again I’m pricked by that bramble thorn of trepidation, but I shrug it off. I lift it to my face and tie the ribbons behind my head.

Brady searches my face. Looking for her, maybe. I lean forward onto my hand and tilt my chin up, vowing to hide my nerves. Putting on the mask feels like taking something off, like stripping down a layer of skin. I’m about to remove it when he nods, once, in satisfaction.

“You’re stronger than her,” he says. “You’ll be OK.”

I smile and undo the ribbon. “You too, you know.” I put the mask down on the table and notice, at the join where the ribbon meets the leather, a loose white thread. It slips out from underneath a stitch, just a short stray piece. I tuck it into my pocket—a tiny victory, like a pebble on a beach.