**What Not to Wear**

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In the beginning, she undressed. Breasts high, nipples pebbling in the breeze from the small fan that scanned the room. She ran fingers through her long curls, then his. She believed he would love her forever. And that they would change the world.

The next year, she bought a robe. The apartment was a glorified closet where dirty dishes shared space with her toothbrush. Faded curtains rustled with the draft and the heater only worked every other Wednesday. On her way home from work, she found an old school desk discarded on the sidewalk down the street. She enrolled in classes. All kinds of classes: philosophy and marketing and religions and psychology and environment and comparative literature and accounting. She spent hours at that desk: poring over textbooks, shifting through the images in her head, staring at walls full of taped quotes pulled from magazines or scribbled on napkins.

Five years later, when he daydreamed of a promotion, she bought high heels. Her graduation would have been that night, but instead she stood at his side, a continent away, in a room full of the type of people who were quoted in the magazines she once read. The walls echoed with their words and her head throbbed in synch with her cramped toes.

Later that night she slipped into one of his old hoodies and they held hands in the dark and whispered promises of being different. Of being better. They would never be so empty, so pompous, so dull. He expounded on his plans to save the world neither of them realizing, then, that the world would always be held hostage. The cost was high. Their efforts would never be enough.

Through decades, she poured herself into the green dress, the red, the black, the blue. These dresses that dipped and hugged a body she’d taken such good care of for most of her life. She wore a practiced smile as he held court. He always had something to say. She told herself it didn’t matter that her hand went unheld, no fingers rested on her lower back, and his eyes rarely met hers. She murmured agreements and platitudes even as she tried, in vain, to remember the last time he’d asked her a question or listened to anything beyond his own voice.

They argued the night of his nephew’s wedding. Her dress had been sunshine yellow and expertly cut, but to judge by his attention, she’d been as noticeable as a ghost. Later, in their hotel room, she slowly pulled the pins out of her hair and untangled locks that had been confined for far too long. She raged. She expected nothing from him. Less than nothing. But she had expected more of herself. She hardly recognized—or even liked—the woman she had become. With him. For him.

The next day, she went home and packed boxes and boxes of perfectly tailored garments, custom-made to fit a woman she no longer wanted to be. She gave them away, hoping the new owners would wear them with more wisdom and purpose than she had.

Night came. A sliver of moon rose in the sky. A promise that tugged at her as she walked, barefoot, from her deck to the beach beyond. She stood, toes burrowing in the freezing wet sand. She pulled off her robe and let the salt air lick her skin and fondle her hair.

It was the beginning.