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Sewing Kit

Abstract

Kit said to herself, *I will not seek him out. But if he finds me, or if I run into him, it can't be helped.* Then one day, as she was reading a magazine and waiting for the bus, he sat beside her on the bench. For a moment she didn't see him. The morning's coffee had not kicked in. She was reading the same sentence about the benefits of stevia over and over. Then his scent like Ivory soap and cloves or the low sound of his breathing made her look up to see him smiling at her. His lips curved until it seemed they might split, but they didn't open. She breathed him. She was glad she was wearing her taupe jacket and neutral knee-length skirt. Drab, asexual work clothes should have been a keen defense. But then he was staring at her little ankles, his green eyes running over her tights. The tights were soft pink. Her heels were a bit higher than necessary.

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Sewing Kit

Fiction by Ann Stewart McBee

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"They hurt my feet," Kit said to him.

"Do they now?"

Down the street she heard the roar and rumble of the bus. She stuffed her magazine into the side pocket of her briefcase.

"My bus is here," she said.

"Then you'd better run along."

On her desk there was a small rectangular package from her fiancé. A tiny card read, “For a beautiful lady who works too hard.” She untied the silk ribbon and took the lid off to find a gold necklace with a pendant shaped like an angel. Holding it to the light, she thought of how “necklace” sounded like “neckless.” She called Chris to thank him, but he was in a meeting, so she e-mailed him a greeting with a dancing alligator instead. Even as she sent the message, a different set of lips took shape in her mind like images on a movie screen when the lights dim. *I won't call him. But if he calls me, I can't help it.*

*

She worked all day without a break and went home at seven. Chris called, wanting to get together for dinner, but Kit made an excuse.

“I just want to get a lot done this week so I don't have too much work next week, that's all,” she said. Kit made doll clothes as a hobby and sold them online. She wanted to sort through her sewing patterns and start her new designs over the weekend, and Chris would just distract her. He never allowed her to work when he was there—one arm or the other was always strapped across her like a loose seatbelt.

“You never get caught up,” Chris said. “Next week you'll be just as busy.”

“I know,” Kit said. Chris was good for her, and she was wrong. She offered to make him his favorite dinner, lasagna, over the weekend. He was pleased by the simplest, most mindless of efforts.

After they hung up, Kit eased her guilt by sipping a glass of Merlot. On her dining-room table and floor, she spread her new fabric: four square feet of smoky blue velvet, a two-by-three sheet of gauzy white cotton, another four-by-four of golden pink damask, another square of velvet in crimson, and a pile of beige chiffon. She removed and carefully folded the velveteen cover that protected her sewing machine. She pulled her patterns, scissors, assorted thread, and needles out of the closet and laid them on the table on top of the blue velvet. A knock at the door made her jump. She was conscious of the balls of her feet on the hardwood as she walked to the door. She imagined herself tiny and light as a mayfly.

In the peephole she saw his profile, the shadows of his cheekbones in the harshly lit hallway. She knew she should not open the door. *But he will come in no matter what. There is nothing I can do.*

She unlatched the chain, twisted the bolt, and swung the door open.

“Will,” she said.

He smiled his reptilian smile, looking her up and down. Kit’s smart suit had been replaced by linen pajama bottoms and a white undershirt with no bra. She felt nude.

“Is it bedtime already?” he asked.

He pushed Kit inside with his fingers and thumb and then shut the door and locked it after him. She took his leather jacket with the worn elbows that smelled of cloves and rum and hung it in her front closet.

“I’m just...getting ready to do some sewing,” Kit said.

He laughed, and Kit felt her nipples ossify. His laugh was like shavings of steel. Without asking, he made his way into the dining room and surveyed the fabric. His shoulder blades poked through his t-shirt like pistols.

Kit thought of all the work she wanted to get done and all the important phone calls she had to make. She needed to go shopping for lasagna ingredients. It was very important that she get these patterns and fabrics at least picked out in order to be on schedule for the Christmas shopping season. She looked a shambles, her hair unstyled and still crimped in places from the combs she had worn to work. The apartment was not clean. *If he will not leave it will happen. If he stays there is nothing I can do.*

He was stroking a corner of the red velvet, staring out the storm windows onto the balcony, appearing to be in deep thought. Finally, he put the cloth down and closed the vertical blinds with a snap. He shoved all the sewing equipment to the far end of the table and ran his hand over the blue velvet.

“This is nice,” he said. “I like this.”

He turned around and made a beckoning motion at Kit with his finger.

“Are you going to hurt me?”

He didn't answer but gently untied her drawstring, pulled her pajamas down, and hoisted her onto the table. While it was happening he asked again and again, *What do you want, Kit? What do you want?* Kit shook her head weakly, unable to speak. Her cheeks were hot, but her eyelids and temples were cool with sweat. He felt like melted wax. He felt like hot iron. He felt like a stone floor. The lower half of her body sizzled and popped. When he came, he did it crying *God... God... God...* while Kit slipped away into a dark hiding place she remembered from childhood.

*

When she awoke on the tabletop, he was sitting naked in a chair, a cigarette dangling from his flushed lips. He held one arm out on the table, as if to inject a drug, and poked at it steadily with a tiny threaded sewing needle. He had already made five jagged half-centimeter stitches in black thread on his flesh. Between each stitch, two little balls of blood.

She shook her head and grabbed his hand. He looked at her with half-open eyes.

“Your stitches are too big,” she said. “Let me show you.”

Taking the needle, she pulled the thread through his flesh slowly, all the way, until the knot met his skin. He shut his eyes and sucked in air, letting out a groan in the end. Silently, Kit stabbed the needle just under the skin of her breast that was soft and papery thin. The first stitch brought tears, the second burned like hot metal, the third was sweet and the fourth and fifth were like sharp breaths of cold air. When she finished, his blood trickling down his arm onto her thigh, hers rising in dots between each perfect stitch, they stared at each other all over, naked and without shame, attached like a pair of mittens that keep getting lost.

Ann Stewart McBee was born in Kalamazoo, Michigan. She earned her PhD in creative writing from the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, where she still teaches undergraduate composition and creative writing, and served as an editor for *cream city review*. Her work has appeared in *Ellipsis*, *Untamed Ink*, *So to Speak*, and *At Length* among others. She lives in Milwaukee with her husband and a mischievous terrier. Her novel *Veiled Men*, is looking for a home.