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Heirloom

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‘We’re going out tonight — get changed,’ said Cathy.

‘I didn’t bring anything to wear.’

All she had were her pyjamas and some daggy clothes she’d brought for wearing around the house the next day. She should have known her cousin had something other planned than a movie night in.

‘Come on, it’ll be great,’ said Cathy. ‘My friend Sam’s playing at a gig. He’s the supporting band for the main act at ten.’

‘Well I’m not going in my tracksuit.’

‘Hang on — I’ve got an idea. Have a look in there.’

The clothing sat unsorted in a bag in the cupboard in the spare room. On top balanced a piece of cloth folded over and over. She unwrapped it and discovered a braid of her grandmother’s auburn hair.

‘There are some super-cool things in that bag,’ said Cathy.

‘No kidding,’ said Remi, reaching for the second piece of cloth.

Inside was an antique baby dress with pale yellow ribbon woven through unusual fabric.

‘I don’t think this will fit,’ she said.

‘Keep digging,’ said Cathy.

‘Ooh, I remember this,’ said Remi, bringing out a Dutch girl’s hat with two plaits made from yellow wool. She put it on her head and the elastic stretched under her chin to hold it in place.

‘This is from the dress-up box we used to have as kids at Grandma’s.’

‘Yep, I had to keep it,’ said Cathy. ‘Keep looking, you’re nearly there.’

Remi’s hand touched the sleeve of a glittery jacket. Pulling it free, she saw golden clasps and heavy black ribbon that tied at the front. The jacket fitted across her shoulders as if it had been made for her.

‘Perfect,’ said Cathy, ‘we’re going. But take off the Dutch girl’s hat with the fake plaits.’

‘I can’t do crowds. You know that.’

‘Don’t worry, I know the band members. I can get you a spot behind the merch stand. It’s quieter there.’

Remi didn’t speak.

‘It’s what we’re meant to be doing, getting you out of the house. You’ve got to conquer your anxiety,’ said Cathy.

‘You’ve been talking to Mum, haven’t you? Is this why she dropped me off here? So you could throw me in the deep end? I knew it.’

‘It’ll be fine, you’ll meet some people at the gig, and then next time you want to go out, it won’t be such a big deal.’

Remi looked at her hands. Already she could feel her heart beating faster at the thought of so many people in such a confined space.

‘There’s no way you are getting me to go outside,’ she said.

‘You can keep the jacket if you go with me,’ said Cathy.

Remi sighed.



They walked down streets to the sound of men heckling buskers.

‘You think I’m crazy,’ said one, his voice a drunken lilt. ‘I don’t like it when you think I’m crazy, man.’

She moved closer to Cathy and they crossed the road to the strip of restaurants decked out in fairy lights. Heaters warmed them as they passed.

‘Through here,’ said Cathy.

They ducked inside a small hole-in-the-wall entrance. Remi glimpsed the bar as they made their way to the back where a more open space with comfy couches lined the walls. A guy in dreads took their five-dollar entry fee, stamped their hands with a shooting star and they were in. A woman in purple boots stood behind a low table stacked with CDs.

‘Hey Sal, this is Remi.’

‘Nice jacket,’ said Sal.

‘Thanks.’

Remi watched as Sal brought more CDs out of cardboard boxes and lined them up in piles of seven. She shifted her feet and had to wrench free one of her shoes that had stuck to the floor, sticky with spilt alcohol from hundreds of gigs. That was when Remi realised Cathy had disappeared from her side. She looked around but couldn’t see her. She stood up, her shoes sticking and unsticking from the floor.

‘Cathy?’

‘I’m right here. Just got you a lemon lime and bitters.’

‘Thanks.’

Cathy pushed the glass into her hands, the beads of water soaked into her palm and she took a sip of the fizzy drink.

‘Uh, Remi? I’m not going to sit behind the merch stand all night. I’m going right up the front so I can see, okay?’

‘But Cathy ...’

‘Sal’s here, you’ll be fine. See you soon.’

The background music pumped as the band started to warm up over the top of the track. Remi took another nervous sip of her drink while Sal watched her with curiosity.

‘Don’t get out much, hey?’

‘Nah.’

‘Should be a good night,’

‘Yeah,’ she said, her throat feeling tight.

‘How old are you?’

'Nineteen.'

'Hey, there's someone I want you to meet.'

Fortunately, the band started so there was no more time to talk. They were already through the third song before she realised someone else was sitting next to her on the couch. She looked over and saw a guy in bottle-green jeans and a blue jumper; fingers laced together, head bowed as though concentrating on every lyric and riff. He caught her eye and smiled and she tried to smile back, although it was probably more of a grimace, her mouth warping into shapes that she couldn't control. Her eyes darted back to the front, even though she couldn't see over the people dancing. She watched them grooving to the beat, wishing she could be so carefree. Finally, the music roared to a stop and everyone cheered and whistled. She clapped her hands, feeling them shake, and then clasped them together so no one would notice.

'I'm Eddie,' said the guy sitting next to her in the break.

'Remi.'

'I like your jacket.'

'Thanks, it's a family heirloom.'

'Wow.'

'Yeah, it belonged to my grandma.'

She stopped herself mentioning the braid of auburn hair she'd also found in the bag.

'Do you go to many gigs?' she asked instead.

'No,' he said. 'Sal made me come tonight. My sister says I need to do some exposure therapy to conquer my anxiety,' he said.

'You don't seem anxious.'

'I'm good at hiding it. I get this really calm look on my face and everyone thinks I'm fine,' he said.

'Wish that happened to me,' she said.

He laughed. Remi watched Sal sell the merchandise as people handed over twenty-dollar notes. Cathy should've been here by now. She liked talking to Eddie but knew she couldn't sustain it for long.

‘Want to dance?’ he said.

She felt her face flush.

‘Oh, I can’t, I . . . I just have to find my cousin, sorry.’

‘Sure, no worries. It was nice to meet you, Remi.’

‘You too.’

She unglued her shoes from the floor and made her way quickly to the bar so she didn’t have to see his concerned face anymore. People, people everywhere. She couldn’t breathe, couldn’t see. Then she saw the arrow for the toilets and slammed herself into a cubicle, sitting down on the closed seat. She just needed to regroup, that was all. Just needed time to recharge. No, she needed to get out of there. Cathy didn’t understand. No one did — except maybe Eddie, but she couldn’t go back.

She walked outside and breathed in the fresh air, then sat down at a café opposite the bar.

‘What would you like honey?’ said the waitress.

‘Just some tea thanks.’

‘Sure thing.’

Outside, away from the closed in space and noise, she felt better. She waited out the adrenalin, claspng her hands again to stop them from trembling. Her ears rang. She was so sick of feeling like this every time she went out and now she’d messed up everything. Then she saw Eddie outside, looking for her. She waved and he came over.

‘Thought I’d find you here, you okay?’ said Eddie.

‘It’s hard for me to explain.’

‘You don’t have to, I understand.’

The tea arrived and she poured a cup for each of them. She didn’t bother with the sugar spoon, knowing she wouldn’t be able to keep it steady. Holding the cup with both hands she took a sip.

‘You know, this is the first time I’ve been outside the house in two weeks,’ he said.

‘It’s been eight days for me.’

'Don't let it get to two weeks. It's a killer.'

'I'll bet. But sometimes it gets so bad, that even going outside to get the mail is a huge deal for me,' she said.

'Well, I don't go in raffles, just in case I win and have to walk on stage,' he said, trying to outdo her.

She smiled and her jacket sparkled in the candle flame, sending out little lights that spiraled across the walls.

'Let's dance,' she said.

'You want to go back to the gig?'

'No, I want to dance here, on the footpath.'

Eddie stood up and took her hand, then spun her around. The people at the café, the buskers, and the lights all blurred into one, smudged out with a single twirl.



Anna Jacobson is a young writer from Brisbane, Queensland.