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The Three Dresses

Jess Richards

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JESS RICHARDS

The Three Dresses

The First Dress

I am snow on a mountain, catching the thoughts and dreams of people as they rise through the air from the valleys below. Whiter than anything else, I am almost silver when the light changes. But when night falls all the light on this mountain comes from the moon. It glints on the dreams and thoughts as they arrive here, before they rise away farther, into the night sky.

One young woman in the valley below has a sharp clarity to her dreams, and they show me she is discontented and neglected. While a full moon moves over me, I glisten and examine her dreams.

This young woman sleeps in warm ashes. She dreams of a phoenix and a golden egg. She dreams of a peacock and hen. She dreams of having a mother who loves her. She dreams of dancing and flying and singing. She dreams of leaving her stepmother. She dreams of swimming and painting and reading. She dreams of other families she's seen in her town. She dreams of siblings who never deliberately hurt each other. She dreams of feeling something more than numbness.

She dreams of ice cubes and frozen peas and vanilla cream in cones.

She dreams of a dress made of snow.

She dreams the same dress again.

She wakes, wishing for it.

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And I am snow on a mountain. If I am to be made into clothing for her bruised body, she would stain me, and the warm air from her lungs would turn me to slush.

I predict my own future because I've seen it coming in this young woman's rising dreams, though for now, I remain snow on a mountain, clumping together my own slow wishes:

That winter at this height will last an eternity.

That I'll lie here forever under these clouds which kiss my exposed surfaces.

That I can remain soft, but with a core strong as ice.

That more of me will fall and the more volume I have, the stronger I will become.

That the sky will remain open and the dreams and thoughts of people will continue to arrive one at a time in the form of compacted ice crystals filled with strange images.

That nothing will ever caress me but the clouds, and the light of the sun will never cut into me.

But people do not hear the wishes of anything which can't speak them aloud.

A seamstress is coming to steal me. Every thought, hope, and dream in the world rises in shapes and colors and echoes to the distant places where sky and land meet, because people invent heavens and send all prayers upward.

The seamstress's thoughts are getting closer.

She is sorry for the young woman. She's watched her for years, and is her only friend.

The young woman has finally voiced one of her wishes instead of remaining silent. She must have what she's wished for.

A dress as white as snow.

The seamstress's footfall is near, and nearer. So soon, she is here.

She is covered in frost as she presses me under fur boots. Her hands are frozen gloves. Stealing scoops of me, she flattens me onto rough blankets she has brought for the purpose of transforming snow into fabric. Using her knuckles, she crunches me into the warp and weft and compacts me.

As blankets, I am folded. She bends double to lift me in rolls as she belts me to her body. I slump across her back as she wheezes back down the mountain.

Parts of me freeze and parts of me melt and the temperature rises as she carries me into a small town in the valley and through night-silent streets. She takes me into her home, and downstairs to a workroom.

The seamstress is clever. She understands snow. She unrolls me in the blankets gently, almost tenderly onto plastic table tops. Silent and respectful, she leaves all the doors and windows open, and turns on fans to shift cold air. Three freezers line the walls, and all their doors are open.

Under her blue hands, I am transformed. I will have a waist to be pinched, a bodice to be tightened, a skirt to be pleated and arranged. She uses no knife, though she has one. She uses no sewing machine, though she has two. She uses no threads or needles, though she has hundreds. The seamstress works me into shapes using her palms, cold water and breath. I am becoming the wish of the young woman because the wish of the seamstress is to grant wishes.

There is a mannequin that has the shape of the young woman I am to decorate.

I rest on it, being watched and observed from every angle. Eventually, the seamstress nods. A smile is warm to her lips, and warmth makes me afraid.

I am complete.

Tonight, I will melt. The seamstress takes me to the young woman and warns her that she may only wear me for four hours.

She tells the young woman this is because of some spell and the young woman believes everything she says, because she is not used to being treated kindly. But the seamstress knows that four hours with a warm body inside me is the exact amount of time it will take me, to melt.

The seamstress instructs the young woman to strip.

She removes her clothing, and the bruises on her belly and arms are livid.

The seamstress touches them gently with her chilblained fingers. She tells the young woman she should leave this house tonight and never return.

The young woman shakes her head and can't take her eyes off me. "I can't ever be free."

The seamstress frowns. "Who told you that?"

"Everyone I've met, and everything I've seen, my whole life."

Though her eyes redden with uncried tears, the seamstress inserts the young woman's body inside my cold form.

Her body burns me. I drip down her legs as she goes to a party and all eyes look at her as she dances with a man she's never met before.

He presses himself against me and it is almost unbearable, being melted between two hot bodies.

Her four hours are nearly over and they are still dancing, stepping around the drips I leave on the floor. I am barely here.

The young woman doesn't feel that her arms are covered in goosebumps or that her lips are flaking or her buttocks are tinged blue. She doesn't notice her nipples pierce through me and I am thinning into holes against her thighs.

The man she is dancing with grips her hand, steps back and looks at her.
She looks at his lips.

He looks at her body.

As he grips us too tightly again, she notices the clock on the wall and breaks away from him. She runs. Her feet skid on the puddles I've left on the floor.

He calls after her, "come back!"

He calls after her, "I love you!"

He calls after her, "wherever you go, I'll find you!"

The young woman doesn't want to come back. She doesn't want to be loved or pursued by someone she doesn't know. She runs outside into the cold night air and runs fast, and faster.

As she reaches her home her lungs ache from gasping, her body is burning and she can feel every soft hair on her arms and legs.

She has spent years lying by a fireside trying not to feel numb. And tonight, for the first time, she ran away from something she didn't want, and escaped. Her heartbeat pounds.

She is full of blood. She has forgotten me already because she no longer needs me.

But I have only moments left.

She goes into the kitchen. Lying at the fireside, her thoughts drift through her hair. They float on my steam, out of the window, past the seamstress who lingers outside in the cold.

I trickle through the ashes that coat the young woman's sweating skin.

Falling asleep by the fireside, she dreams.

And I am gone, completely.

The Second Dress

I am darkness, summoned toward a vortex in the eye of a needle. As shadows torn from the things I belong to, I am pulled away so fast I don't have any sense of my direction or route. As the feathers of crows, magpies, and ravens, I am ripped out at the shaft. Bald birds drop from the sky. I am the ground layer of oil paintings in art galleries, and as I strip from their surfaces, the remaining pigments become vulgar and clashing. As the dilated pupils of cats, lovers, and owls, I leave nocturnal creatures blind. As coal, I leave gashes in landscapes.

I am drawn through the eye of a needle. Under angled lamplight, a seamstress's glasses reflect light. She squints as her fingertips embroider me into a heavy fabric she's woven from a moonless sky.

She whispers as she stitches. "You'll soon be a dress, darker than night."

With her hands, she measures and stretches. As she pierces me with pins, she closes her eyes and puts her palms over her eyelids. “Not dark enough,” she says.

Unthreading her needle, she examines its eye. “I summon more darkness.”

She switches off the lights in her workroom and expands her notion of darkness beyond blackness and deep colors. She thinks of violence.

As war, I pass through the eye of her needle. As the stench of death, burning. As the grease from inside the barrels of guns. I am melanin and eumelanin and my extraction creates nations of blonde ghosts. Abandoning the ocean bed, I am the silence of the drowned.

She stabs me through the fabric of the bodice.

I creep, crawl, and grope my way toward the slit in her needle as the lies in the throat of a man who lures children into his home with false kindnesses.

She stitches me into the throat of the dress and elasticates me. As she sews darts into the waist, I am the scream in the gut of a bull who is about to be slaughtered. And as the seamstress removes her pins, I become her unspoken desire for revenge against an ex-lover who hurt her so deeply she believes she won't ever love again.

Now I am complete, the seamstress rolls me in tissue paper, slings me over her arms and goes outside into the streets.

I am absence of color and absence of light.

Streetlamps cast no shadows.

The moon floats in a pale brown sky.

The whole world has lost color, without me.

Inside a young woman's gray and white kitchen, a sepia fire burns in the grate. The seamstress is conflicted about this young woman—her emotions are a patchwork of heaviness and depth.

The young woman has salt-colored skin, white eyelashes and eyebrows. Removing a stained dressing gown, she steps inside me. I am zipped into place and my hood is pulled over her frazzled silver hair.

She closes her eyes and imagines she is somewhere colorful, lit with bright chandeliers. She dreams she is on the edge of something new—and that in this room she will find an escape route from all of the things which make her unhappy.

Her imagination decorates the walls in shades of red and gold, olive and brown—she realizes she has not always been this pale and exhausted. In these colors, she seeks something of herself that she doesn't quite remember.

Extending bone-colored hands, she wants to fill this room with movement or music or color. She wants to dance, but she can't yet move. She's

finally noticed that I, a dress-which-is-darker-than-night am not the entirely beautiful thing she's wished for.

I swirl around her as coal dust and lumps of tooth decay, as thunderclouds and eagle talons. As smoke from a million fires and the legs of tarantulas.

I make the parts of her body I touch, invisible.

She is determined to go somewhere else in her mind for a few hours while her family are out, though her body remains in the kitchen. She's spoken only a little to the seamstress and the words she can't speak choke her. So she invites other people into this room in her mind, imaginary people who might listen.

As the arched doorway opens and a clatter of footfall approaches, she is too shy to watch her guests arriving en masse.

She bows her head and waits to greet them.

She has desires:

That at least one of these imaginary people will trust her.

Another will truly love her.

Yet another of them will help her leave home.

One of them will provide her with a job or some income.

And one of them will help by making her strong enough to stay away from her family, no matter how they attempt to force her to return.

When her imaginary guests have all entered the room and the arched doors creak shut, the young woman wishes for rescue.

A solitary violin plays in a minor key as she finally raises her eyes.

She is surrounded by people dressed in pastel velvet suits and murky-colored lace. Candles cast a sheen of pallor on their skin. She whispers, "I'm dreaming up ghosts."

Bleached people circle her, staring at the mask of her face, her floating hands, her bare feet.

They must think she is a game, a puppet or sideshow, as they're waiting impatiently for her to perform. A man lurches toward her, examining her face as if it's something repellent.

She asks him, "don't you recognize me?"

He steps back.

Her face hangs in the air.

She says, "last time I met you, or dreamed you, whatever that was. . . . Last time, we danced together."

He backs farther away.

She realizes he doesn't recognize her because he can't see her body.

Her body feels dark and stained. It is made invisible by me, and she wills it to stay that way. Her body is a thing which only knows hurt. Hating these thoughts, she pinches at her fingers, trying to change herself.

Beside the fire in the kitchen, the seamstress sits on a wooden chair, watching the young woman to check she is safe in her trance.

But I am a dress made of darkness. I am not safe at all.

Inside the wide scoop of my hood, I whisper into the young woman's ears. I echo all the dark voices which speak deep inside her skull.

One voice says she has to sacrifice herself to help others.

Another tells her she should be silent rather than offend people who are cruel to her.

Yet another voice reminds her she is physically weak.

Another makes snide remarks about her appearance.

Another shouts at her "you're stupid!"

Another tells her she is nothing unless someone loves her.

Another tells her, "No matter how badly you are treated at home, you should never abandon anyone who needs you. Every woman knows that."

These voices have been her constant companions for as long as she can remember.

And I also echo a quieter voice which she tries hard to ignore. This voice speaks and wheedles about despair. It makes her frightened of the cave her mind could become if all these familiar thoughts turn out to be lies.

Because what would be left, if the lies which fill her mind are discovered and banished?

And in her trance, the young woman is surrounded by ghosts who examine the parts of her body they can see.

Face. Hands. Feet.

The ghosts speak about her. "Is she some collection of tricks . . ."

"a puzzle,"

"a toy?"

The ghost man comes back through the crowd toward her. He demands that she either dances or runs, because he wants to watch her feet move. "Such delicate feet," he says, looking down at them. "So tiny and feminine."

He breaks a glass on the floor, grips her hands and pulls her toward him.

Her feet are cut, and bleed. Her blood transforms into a cluster of black flies. They swarm through my fabric, grow sharp teeth and gnaw holes.

The young woman crouches, and covers her face with my hood.

I could consume her.

But I am being watched by the seamstress. Flames from the sepia fire reflect in her eyes. Brightness bores into me.

The young woman trembles inside me, here in this kitchen, crouched on the floor. Her own darkness expands and I hear another of her dark voices say, *I'm not even safe in my own mind.*

But she opens her eyes and sees the tiny holes in my fabric.

She sees them as stars.

She sees them as holes in darkness.

She sees them as stars again.

The firelight reflected in the seamstress's eyes glows brighter.

Do all young women seek hope wherever they can find it?

I do not care for hope.

So, I dismantle myself, piece by piece.

I am shadows ripped from the seams of sleeves, returning to the things I belong to. Feathers flurry away from my skirt hem, and reattach themselves to dead crows, magpies, and ravens. Peeling my lining away, I return to oil paintings and repaint the canvases. As I tear dilated pupils off my bias binding, the eyes of cats, lovers, and owls blink open. The wide panels of my skirt split away and the young woman rises to her feet, head bowed under the weight of what remains of me. My bodice disappears as the young woman thinks of the unfired bullets which are left at the end of a war, and wonders what happens to them.

Colors return to her skin and hair as my hood echoes her dark voices inside the barrels of guns.

She rubs her palm against her breastbone.

As my net underskirt rolls away, I return to the ocean bed, and the drowned sink into my silence.

The young woman thinks about being a child. She imagines being very old, and close to death. She thinks about the life she has now, somewhere in the middle. She thinks about the darkness in the world around her, and the darkness in herself.

She imagines shadows inside the chambers of her heart. How strong it beats, with no help from anyone at all.

Why would anyone need to be rescued from that?

Biting her lip, she feels the sharpness of her teeth.

Looking at the seamstress, she says, "I can taste blood. Something has changed which I don't yet understand. Blood is . . . delicious."

The seamstress, who feels something close to love, examines her with shining eyes.

My final stitch is a piece of coal she throws into the fire.

The Third Dress

"Mirrors mirrors," she says. "Mirrors mirrors, can you be as bright as the moon she has wished for?"

We can be bright. We can see and reflect and dazzle.

We are only blind when covered by something dark and thick.

We reflect this woman at herself as she paces around the room she's brought us to. We lean wherever she's rested us. We have questions for her, but unless she looks into us and meets her own eyes, we won't find answers.

This woman has collected many of us; framed ones from second-hand markets, a wall-length set from a beautician's shop which is being refitted, one of us—the age-freckled one—is from this woman's own wardrobe door. We catch each other's reflections of light.

The woman is still pacing, and passes each of us in turn. We reflect her sewing machines, chairs, tables. We reflect her worn shoes and the wrinkles in her tights. One of us reflects a weathered desk with a pile of addressed envelopes which have stamps but no postmarks. There are bolts of fabrics in a hundred colors and yet she wears thick gray overalls. She has passion, without vanity.

She covers her hands with thick leather gloves and switches on every lightbulb in the room.

Brightness fills us.

Approaching the worktop, she picks one of us up and lays it flat.

Wielding a small hammer, she cracks the mirror into shards.

The mirror shrieks.

We shriek in unison but she can't hear us.

Though perhaps she can. She puts on a pair of headphones which tunnel noise into her ears. Music or words, we can't tell what distracts her. She doesn't want to hear what we curse her with as we smash.

As she shatters all of us, one at a time, we scream and want to hurt her. But she is wise, this woman who protects herself from our scratches and cuts and curses.

Cursing and cutting and scratching each other, our broken pieces are stacked into crates. Some of us make the smallest stinging sounds we can bear to make as we shift against the weight of the fragments we lie beneath. The crates have wooden sides and there is nothing to reflect but the overhead lights which glitter on our top layers.

This woman is a seamstress. She places us carefully onto a dress she's sewn from blood red fabric, choosing the position of each of our shards. We are a mosaic. Her expression is that of a child's as she glues each of us into place with a drop of superglue.

We shine the excitement in her face back at her, and will her eyes to look into us. But they remain focused on the gaps between our edges.

We are fragments, becoming a whole thing with many parts.

If we could sing, we'd be a glorious opera. A timpani concert. Rain on a tin roof.

So many reflections—reflections many, so optical illusions, distortions and transformations all become possible.

Magic to the eye—eye to the magic.

She glances into her own eyes and looks away.

And now we know this: the seamstress loves her craft, her wish-granting, the challenge of making a dress like a moon which is not the moon . . . and with many pieces of us to reflect every piece of light around us, to reflect each other and shine for ourselves all at once, yes.

Oh yes, she believes we can dazzle.

I am one thing, now. A dress as bright as the moon. Sharply clinking as I am carried, splinters fracture and fall from my edges. I reflect streetlamps and stars.

At a door, I reflect the seamstress's gloved hand. It knocks a knock.

Three times a knock.

A young woman opens the door and electric light floods over me. I reflect the fingertip she places over her lips as she steps outside. Her face is coated in ash to disguise a bruise on her jaw.

"My stepmother changed her mind about going out," she whispers. "She's upstairs. You can't come in tonight."

I reflect the seamstress's frown as she notices the young woman's bruise. She says, "are you going to tell me what happened to your jaw?"

The woman lowers her eyes and they reflect in me. She speaks truthfully. "We argued."

"Who argued?"

She half closes the door behind her. "Her fist and my face."

"Please let me write to your father."

"He knows where he left me." The young woman looks confused as I pull her gaze deeper into me.

As she reaches for me, I reflect one hundred fingertips.

The seamstress says, "it's razor sharp. Don't touch—"

The young woman interrupts, "it's beautiful." I reflect her smile as she returns her gaze to the seamstress.

"I made it for you. As requested."

The young woman lowers her eyes to me again. "I asked you to because you're bored. Otherwise why would you be interested in me?"

"Why *wouldn't* I be interested in you?"

"It's easier to look away from trouble. How many identical wedding dresses have you made?"

“In the past year, eleven. No, twelve.” The seamstress sighs. “Lace, silk, satin. Off-white, off the shoulder, and taken off at bedtime. Never worn again.”

I clink as she holds me up in her gloved hands. “If I can’t come in, will you at least take it from me? It’s heavy. I don’t want to carry it all the way home again.”

The young woman looks at me, with regret and desire in her eyes. She says, “I don’t have any gloves—”

The seamstress says, “then you’ll have to carry it in by wearing it. The lining’s made of the thickest velvet.”

The young woman still looks at me, wondering why the seamstress isn’t offering to lend her the gloves she is wearing herself, but only for a moment because I am dazzling her with lamplight and stars and oh, she wants me . . .

The seamstress undoes my hooks and the young woman steps into me.

As the seamstress steps back, she nods at me. “Beautiful. As cold and sharp as moonlight.”

All along my sleeves, sharp edges scrape. The young woman examines my textures and cracks. She says, “have you ever noticed the face which craters make on the full moon?”

The seamstress replies, “it looks as bruised as yours.”

As the young woman opens the door, my skirt scrapes like knives. She whispers to the seamstress as she steps inside. “I used to pray to that moon-face, asking for protection. Prayers don’t work.”

She closes the door.

A sharp female voice shouts, “I’ve been calling for you!”

The young woman’s body tenses inside me as footfall approaches. Inside a kitchen, I catch the edges of fireflames and reflect them on the brick walls as silver. I clink and scrape as the young woman steps backwards, crushing pieces of my chipped glass into her hiding place between the fridge and a tall cupboard.

The hem of my skirt reflects a thin pink nightdress and the towel which wraps the hair of the woman who comes into the kitchen.

Beneath a mud-mask her expression is cold and she raises one eyebrow. Her thin lips speak, “I know you’re in here.”

She looks at the fragmented shapes I’m shimmering along the edges of the ceiling.

The young woman says, “stepmother, I have to leave home.”

My hem reflects the stepmother’s smirk. “That again. Leave and do what?”
“Anything.”

The stepmother laughs. “You’re warm and fed. I need you. Your sisters need you. You know how sick we all get.”

“There’s nothing wrong with you.”

“It’s up and down. You know that.”

She says again, “but there’s nothing wrong.”

“And so now you’re a doctor? So tell me, doctor. With your bare eyes, can you see the cracked bone inside the leg it’s broken in?”

I reflect the glint of her teeth as she smiles a false smile.

The young woman’s heartbeat thuds against my bodice and sharp edges of glass grind against each other. I pull all the light in the room toward me. The lightbulbs, the gleaming cooker hob, the shining tiles on the floor, the fire . . .

Magic to the eye—eye to the magic.

The stepmother gasps. “What’s that unearthly light?”

Stepping out from her hiding place, the young woman shields her eyes as I shine from every part of myself. I fill the kitchen with the lightbulbs which shone in the seamstress’s workroom, the lamplight reflections I caught outside in the street, the starlight I caught on the pavements, and the flames and electric light I’ve caught in this kitchen.

The stepmother’s eyes fill with desire as she sees herself reflected in me.

Magnified, shrunk, multiplied. Doubles and triplets and generations of herself.

Without blinking, she reaches her hands out to me.

“Don’t touch.” The young woman steps back. “It’ll slice you to shreds.”

“It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

“How important is beauty?”

“More important than anything.”

“More important than love, or violence, or the darkness in the mind?”

“Of course.”

The young woman sighs as she opens her arms. “So, claim it and let me go.”

The stepmother rushes forward to strip me from her.

The young woman encloses her stepmother in a hungry embrace.

Now, I am blind.