

Barys Paulau

The Winter I Kept a Coat That Wasn't Mine

(or a Short Study of the Difference Between Waiting and Wanting)

THE COAT APPEARED IN MY CLOSET on a Tuesday in December. Not my coat. A woman's coat. Camel hair. Expensive. The kind you buy when you still believe in things like dry cleaning and tax brackets.

I don't remember whose it was. That's the problem with being fifty-one and single and not particularly careful about the women who leave things behind. They leave books. Earrings. A toothbrush in a cup that slowly becomes the toothbrush in the cup until one day you realize you've been brushing your teeth with someone else's oral hygiene for six weeks and she's been gone for five.

But the coat was different. The coat was a statement. The coat said: I planned to stay. I brought my best wool.

I hung it next to my jackets. My jackets were thin and shapeless and smelled like the bar on Seventh Avenue where the jukebox still plays Tom Waits whether you put money in or not. The camel hair glowed. Like a foreign language I couldn't read.

I tried to remember her. The woman of the coat. She was tall. Or short. I don't know. She had hair. Probably. She laughed at something I said. I made a joke about the Mets. She didn't correct me when I said the Mets played in Queens. That's how I knew she wasn't from here. Anyone from here would have said, "Flushing. They play in Flushing. Queens is a borough, not a neighborhood. You want coffee?"

I never called her. I don't have her number. I never had her number. She came over from a bar. That's how things happen when you're fifty-one and not careful. The math is simple: bourbon—loneliness—a woman who finds your bad jokes charming—a coat in your closet you don't recognize.

I could have thrown it away. I didn't.

I could have donated it to the thrift store on Broadway. The one with the dinosaur tattoo. The one where I returned Leonard's hat. The hat that belonged to a dead man who once asked me to feed his cat. The cat is also dead now. Probably. Cats don't live forever. Neither do hats.

But I kept the coat. Not because I'm sentimental. Because I'm lazy. And because every time I opened the closet, I thought: She might come back for it.

That's the thing about winter coats. They outlast the women who wear them.

I wore it once. On a Sunday. The temperature dropped to fourteen degrees. My jacket was at the dry cleaner. The dry cleaner was on Eighth. The dry cleaner was run by a man named Mr. Kim who once asked me if I was "famous or just sad." I said, "Both." He nodded. That's the benefit of dry cleaners. They've seen everything.

The coat was too big. The sleeves hung past my wrists. The shoulders slouched. I looked like a man wearing a dead woman's ambitions. I

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walked to the corner. Bought a bagel. The man behind the counter said, "Nice coat." I said, "Thanks. It's not mine." He said, "That's what everyone says."

I wore it home. Hung it back in the closet. Next to my jackets. Next to the dent from Karen's head. Next to the wine glasses that hadn't broken.

The coat stayed there for six months. Through the thaw. Through the first green. Through the day I finally cleaned out the drawer with the dead batteries and the single cuff link and the key that didn't fit anything.

I found a receipt in the pocket. Not from the coat. From a diner in Astoria. The receipt was dated November 14th. Two eggs. Bacon. Toast. Coffee. Total: \$9.47. The tip was written in pen: "Thanks for the bad jokes.—J."



J. That's all I had. A letter. The first letter of a name I'd never know.

I kept the receipt. I put it in the book in French. The one the woman left at the airport. The one I never read.

Sometimes I open the book. I look at the receipt. I think about J.

About her eggs. Her bacon. Her toast.

About the bad jokes she thanked me for.

I don't know who she was. I don't know where she went.

But I know she ate breakfast in Astoria on a Tuesday in November.

And I know she laughed.

That's enough.

That's more than enough.

I donated the coat last week. To the thrift store on Broadway. The man with the dinosaur tattoo wasn't there. A woman was. She had purple hair and a nose ring shaped like a crescent moon. She said, "This is nice." I said, "It belonged to someone." She said, "Everything does."

I watched her hang it on a rack. Next to a leather jacket from the '80s. Next to a pair of skis. Next to a wedding dress that someone had probably worn once and then stored in a box for twenty years while they figured out what went wrong.



I walked home. The sky was gray. The kind of gray that makes you want to call someone you haven't spoken to in years. I didn't. I went inside. Made coffee. Sat on the couch.

The dent from Karen's head was still there. So was the crack that looked like the Mississippi. So was the book in French—with the receipt inside, with the letter J.

The coat is gone. But the woman isn't. Not really. She's in the pocket of my memory. In the tip she left. In the bad jokes she thanked me for.