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STITCHED

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I am a festival of feminine contradictions: I wear makeup to the gym, where I jump on the indoor track and run laps around the men. Talk of blood and needles nauseates me, but I have five piercings, three tattoos, and big plans for more. I straighten my hair daily, but I can't be bothered to color my grays or even wash it on a regular basis. I learned to bake when I was three, but at thirty, I can't so much as sew a button on a coat. The latter is more of a problem than the others.

Case in point: I ordered a pair of pricey, lacey, black knee socks from Etsy. They arrived yesterday, I wore them to work today, and at 9:15, my boot buckle ripped a hole in one, right across my shin. Son of a bitch, I thought. I'm always doing that. I'm always ruining nice things. I rummaged through my desk for something to stop the snag. After deciding against a staple, I opted for scotch tape, which stood out against the black like a disco ball in a cabin. I tried to keep my legs as still as possible and made a mental list of friends who knew how to sew.

Trygg, my ex-fiancé, did. He said he would teach me, but then he left me for a twenty-year-old, and that put the kibosh on sewing lessons and, well, everything else. I should've known he'd drop me for a child. "Trygg" is not a grown-up name. "It's Scandinavian," he once told me. "It means faithful." I should've thrown that in his face when he confessed that he'd been cheating, but I was too busy throwing plums—a dozen perfect red ones, which I'd bought to make a cobbler. Instead, I made a mess all over my carpet, though I hit Trygg with every one. I can't catch to save my soul, but I pitch like a major leaguer.

I think of that day now, standing in the household supplies aisle at Fred Meyer, where I'm examining the two mini sewing kits I have to choose from. Each comes with sixteen colors of thread, and neither gives the option of grey-scale only, which would better suit my monochromatic wardrobe. The only difference is the price. I grab the more expensive one and turn to leave, when something jolts inside me, and I stop short—there she is. My replacement.

This is the second time I've seen her. The first was when Trygg and I exchanged boxes of our stuff. I met him on my porch and saw her in the driver's seat of his car, like an accomplice ready to hit the gas as soon as the robbery was complete. I didn't get a good look then, but today, I know it's her. She's wearing a pink polka dot smock with a sweater and tights to match. It's almost too much, and then she shifts so I can see her face. She's not pretty. I'd feel better if she were pretty. That would mean Trygg dumped me because he's shallow and not because of my personality, which isn't exactly something I can fix.

She's perusing vacuums, oblivious to my presence, and I can't pull my gaze away. I don't want to think about the home she'll bring the vacuum to, the strands of Trygg's red hair she'll clean off of her (their?) carpet, how he probably told her he'd buy the vacuum, and she said, No, I'm happy to do it. That's the kind of guy he is, and these are the kind of women he finds. Here's another contradiction: I'm meticulous about sanitizing the bathroom, but I only vacuum twice a year. Whenever Trygg and I made out on the floor, he'd leave with hair, dust, and pine needles stuck to his sweater. He never seemed to mind. Or maybe he did, and he just never said it.

My replacement is side-stepping down the aisle, back and forth, as though this is the most important decision she'll ever make. I'm still staring, and right as I realize that, she looks over. I freeze, squeeze the sewing kit, don't even blink. She smiles and lifts a hand to the vacuums, like Vanna White turning an illuminated vowel.

She says, "Do you know anything about these?" As though I'm just another woman shopping after work, buying a household item to fix the snag, the mess my man has made.

"No," I say. "I'm sorry," and I am, though I'm not sure for what.

She shrugs. “That’s okay. I mean, it’s a vacuum. As long as it does the job, right?”

I manage a smile that strains every muscle in my face, then back out of the aisle and speed-walk to the checkout.

At home, I Google “how to mend a sock” and find a YouTube video that’s easy to follow. But then I have to Google “how to thread a needle,” and by the time I figure that out, I’ve forgotten where I found the YouTube video. I think, Screw it, and start looping the needle in and out of the fabric, pulling the hole back together. I have to go over each stitch four times to make it hold.

I tie the knot, snip off the excess thread, and examine my handiwork. I’m less than impressed. It looks like a keloid scar, the kind I have on my chest from when I wiped out on my bike—a preteen riding in a purple bikini—and hit the gravel so hard an ER surgeon had to give me six stitches. I flaunt that scar like a badge of honor. It will not be the same with the socks. I’ll be self-conscious every time I put them on, until I decide to only wear them around the house. Whenever I do, I won’t look down, taking small comfort in the fact that, this time, no disaster will erupt from what I’m choosing not to see.

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