

THE DRESS

LEE CHWI LYNN

She could tell from the stunned expression on her daughter's face that she hadn't expected this reaction, that she could appreciate neither the sentiment nor its ferocity. Why should she? The dress was, especially by Sara's usual standards, demure. No nipple-hugging Lycra, no thigh-skimming silk, no skin-revealing lace. When Sara had come down the stairs, her expression had been anticipatory, waiting for the pleased smile, the quiet, acquiescent approval women give one another. The gentle, loving agreement to a truce she was initiating. What she'd actually gotten was clipped, baiting comments, empty but aimed to hurt, aimed for escalation.

It is not long before her mother realises with mixed dismay and pleasure that they are at their familiar positions, the ones that warn the rest of the family that they are not to interfere, that the fact that they are of the same blood and live under the same roof is of no importance in this. This is between her and Sara. Sara stands behind one of the armchairs, hands on its back, pale with anger, her knuckles bright red. First, there is an attempt at being reasonable. She wants to know why her mother feels the need to comment on everything, what's wrong with what she's wearing; she wants reasons.

This is what children think they deserve, justification and explanation. She already knows that this is something she cannot give Sara. And because she can't say what she should, she says what she can. She has, after all, the arsenal of her generation and the right of age to deploy it, to use beautiful keywords and catchphrases, words like moral decay, ingratitude, cheap, slutty, cheap slut. She is a master of illogic.

Sara takes a deep breath, the red knuckles turning white, her hands now clenched tightly against the worn rayon skirt. Her mother remembers when other hands had grasped that skirt, sometimes where her daughter's hands now rested, rough palms skimming her thigh, making her skin whisper to the fabric; sometimes the fingers would be at the hem, gently lifting it, and at other times, urgently grabbing. She remembers when she would tell her friends that this was her lucky dress, and giggling jealously, they'd always say, "You mean it's your 'get lucky' dress."

She remembers lying in that dress to her parents, lying in that dress on vinyl seats, sticky with old grease and candy, on damp grass, smelling sweat and generic cologne and tasting it on his neck. She remembers taking off that dress after every night out, when she returned home in the euphorically dirty early hours of the day, and how she always smelled it one last time before she threw it in the wash, taking in the faded final scent of whoever she had tangled with, whoever her flesh had rubbed against. There was a mad, sick joy in those days, one she wishes Sara will never experience.

Sara, in turn, has started saying what she always says. She doesn't know what she's responding to, and this is something they both understand and have knowledge of, the fact that they are having different conversations, exchanges that will never be clarified. She talks about how she's a good girl, all her friends know that, and she's never done anything her parents needed to worry about. Her voice is too high and too loud, but she is barely heard. All that she is saying her mother already knows to be true, and knows it doesn't matter. Then before either one of them are aware of it or have time to understand why, they are both screaming at each other. Sara has already grabbed her keys, her bag, and

pointlessly throws the plastic bag that the wretched dress had been in on the floor, the translucent bag whirling around her hands and wrist, trapping them momentarily before fluttering harmlessly to the ground, as harmless as the swirl of the hem around Sara's knees as she turns to leave.

She sits, then, in the crisp silence after the slam of the door, as her husband and their younger son peer into the room and decide it's not safe yet. She marvels at the damage that 3 dollars can do, wonders at the cosmic coincidence of that dress happening to jut out at an awkward angle on a cheap hanger in a dusty vintage shop. She can almost see Sara cocking her head to the left in that way she had, see the small smile and the way her daughter's luminous eyes would gleam at the thought of a bargain. She can see Sara dropping it at the counter, wallet out, triumphant with the sureness of a great discovery. She herself had dropped the dress into a collection bin at the thrift shop the day she'd smelt it and realised that she could find nothing of herself in it, just the honest, intimate smell of others' saliva and sweat. She'd thought it was done with.

Sara wears it better than she ever did; the red suits her clear skin and dark hair better, and the dress moulds itself well to her. This she will never tell her daughter, because she loves her.

She wonders if Sara will ever know how much of love is held in the things you don't say, how much of parenthood is a study in necessary hypocrisy, in preservation not of yourself, but of your child from you. And most of all, sitting in her quiet, neat living room, she wonders if Sara will notice if the dress goes missing. She can smell the gasoline, see the match.