

FABRIC

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“When I was little,” Elaine Gimbal is saying, “my grandmother had a dress. It was an old dress which she had brought with her from the old country. And when the families got together for a wedding or some other occasion, my mother and grandmother would take that dress down from the closet where it was kept, all neatly folded and wrapped in the tissue paper in which it had come from the old country - paper so dry and brittle you handled it like the flesh of a loved one. Stitch by stitch they would separate the skirt from the bodice and then they would wear the dress, my mother the top because she was young and she could, and my grandmother, because she was not young, the skirt. She would wear it with a sash around her middle, to cover the unfinished waist. And as the family celebrated they would move about the room like the two parts of a Russian doll, searching for their other half, to be stacked up and made whole once again. And after, when the families had gone and the leftover food had been packed away as carefully as my grandmother’s hungry past demanded, when the furniture had been returned to its everyday arrangement, my grandmother and my mother would stitch the two halves together again, and fold the dress into its paper, to be lifted once more to the top of the closet.”

I was given this story in a dream. It does not belong to me.

On the evening before the dream, I was reading the memoir of a woman, a survivor of incest, who needed to be made whole with her mother but could not, because of the fabric of untruth between them. She tells the world her story, and when she holds up the shabby fabric and

stands exposed before them, is asked, “but where is your evidence?”.

And on the day I was reading that memoir, I worked on a story. In that story, Elaine is telling a younger woman how it feels to look in a mirror. To see a face looking back, which is not the face of You, which does not fit the person you know inside. She is telling this to the younger woman for a reason; to give her a reason to live.

In the week in which I was given this story, a woman wanted a new front door for her house. She wanted this new door to look old. And for this new old door she had given the builder a photograph. Of a door. On her grandmother’s house. It was not a great house, nor a lovely door. To look at it you would say it was old, and worn, and dried out. And she would say, “but it was my grandmother’s door”. And because the woman was Jewish, and because the grandmother’s house was in Poland, you would say that was sufficient evidence, for the century in which she had lived.

And in the month before I was given this story, I read to my children from a book in which a girl describes her life. How her mother takes down a dress from the shelf. A dress she wore so rarely that it had a name. She takes it down for an evening when the settlers gather, at her mother’s house, the girl’s grandmother’s house, to cook and eat and dance to her father’s fiddle, playing tunes which had come from the old country.

In the room where my children sleep there is a dress, high on a closet shelf. It is their mother’s wedding dress and it is not wrapped in paper, but placed in a box. It has not been worn since her wedding day, but it is still there. Their mother sewed it herself. Sewed it and fit it and, sitting with her best friend, beaded the front to match her dreams. The children choose to share that room. Though they could each sleep in their own, they share that one.

Pushing off the growing solitude, just as they nightly push off the covers I pull over them.

In the dream, the dress is a silvery kind of ivory white. Satiny gloss but not smooth. Stiff. And noisy when the fabric is moved. It should be creased from being folded, but it is not. Elaine's mother and grandmother work on the dress, sitting side by side in ladder-back chairs, their laps and legs covered by the fabric, like a sleigh blanket. I have been in a sleigh, under a sleigh blanket. With a friend and her father and her father's new wife. He drank from a flask and made jokes, to impress his new wife and embarrass his daughter. It was cold in that sleigh.

In the dream it is warm. The mother and the grandmother are talking as they work on the dress. I do not hear what they are talking about. I do not know if they are taking the stitches out, or putting them back in. I know that it is warm, and that they are sharing the dress and the dream. In the memoir the two women are forced to share their father/husband and the sharing robs the warmth which should be theirs.

I wondered, as I read, what right I had to hear their story. To share their memory. The writer speaks of dreams, which expose what the mind wills not to remember. And as I read I recalled, "I do not remember my dreams".

The dream ends when I awaken. It is the middle of the night. I reach out and write a note on the pad beside my bed, taking the dream from my head, depositing it safely, so I can sleep. But that is not enough, so I go to my table and begin to write.

I am scratching this story on paper, with a lead too hard for the purpose. It holds a sharp

edge and if I do not take care in the writing, if I do not hold the pencil just so, will tear the paper, like ancient tissue. The table I am writing on is old, bought from a neighbor. It was her husband's table; he died, and now it is mine. I am scratching this story into the paper because I must not keep it.

In my dream, the women sit and work, by the light of dim lamps, surrounded by dark silence. Watching, I wonder that they can work so, that their backs do not ache from curling over to see the tiny stitches. In the story I was writing on the day before, the women sit in sunlight and they do not work. In the memoir the women do not sit together at all. In the room, my son and my daughter sleep, their beds and their dreams within arms' length.

Fabric, tissue; sufficient evidence.

I was given this story in a dream.