

THE CLOTHES I WEAR

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I stand in the master bathroom of my house. The mirror is out of focus. But still, I look. I look at my body. My face, my eyes, too withdrawn to abide. My body is wearing black cotton pants with stitched knee and a navy blue camisole, worn to holey. A cardigan with two pockets. In one pocket, I carry my phone around the house in case he needs to call me from our bed when I'm in the kitchen making dinner or upstairs tucking my girls in. In the other pocket, a packet of tissues. I wear the same clothes every day. Clothes that lack a life beyond the halls of this enormous house. To gain momentum, I slide across the hardwood floors in wool socks.

I take the package of morphine from the Fed-Ex guy at my front door. Since I was told the cancer had spread to his brain, since I was told he would feel no pain, would die in his sleep, since I was told his world would become small, since I started to hear him slur his speech and forget what day it is, since he became unable to walk without my help to the bathroom, since all of this, I have started, in the secret places inside of me, to imagine what life without him would be like. I push the thoughts away. They taunt me. And yet, they also make me able to cope. To imagine my own future,

just a sliver of it, helps me to bear the unbearable.

The mirror reports nothing I dare to see. I manage to look up into my eyes and quickly look back to my clothes. I know that I will have to get rid of every piece of clothing I've worn in his presence. I know that I will box up a few sentimental things: the dress I married him in, the dress I tried on for him ("you look like a little fairy") and bought in Denmark, the cream-colored silk dress with tiny red roses, a birthday present from him. It's not an intellectual thought. It's not a plan. It's just what I know. I know that I will take the rest of my clothes, every single article to Goodwill, even though many of my things are too ragged to be recycled into someone else's closet. Will sadness follow my jeans and sweaters into another woman's house? Will her chest heave with sorrow as she pulls the red turtleneck over her head? Will she see my beloved's face staring from the navy camisole as I have seen him all these days, his cheeks sunken, his eyes distant? How many losses and grieving women's hearts stand in my closet now--things I bought at thrift stores myself?

Sometimes, when everyone's asleep, I lie beside him with a flashlight in hand and circle clothes from a catalog. Dresses or tops I will buy when I'm no longer standing, tired eyes, looking into the bathroom mirror while he sleeps, restless, calmed by morphine, fast-acting and calmed again by morphine, slow-acting.

I circle seven dresses, five cardigans, one pair of pants, three tops and five camisoles, the same one in different colors: pomegranate, aspara-

gus, wildflower blue, blazing red and sunflower gold. The next night, I circle a metallic silver messenger bag and a pair of ostrich blue glittery sandals. The third night, my flashlight battery dead, I bring the catalog into the bathroom and sit on the turquoise-colored ceramic tiled floor. I cross out the poppy crinkle dress and change the wide-legged trousers to one size smaller. The next morning I wake up early and sit with my coffee in bed as I always do. I reach for the catalog, midnight markings scrawled, sizes written in, crossed out and rewritten, colors circled, notes to myself, “wear on a hot day,” “at a café,” “for a day by the sea,” “with oysters and beer,” “on the plane.” My future being drawn out in the margins of the clothing catalog. I rip the pages out and set each one side by side, as though there is a movement forward. As if the dress I will wear “on the plane,” placed before the dress “at the café,” makes the café far away. As if I will sit in a café far away. As if the day I will go to the café is part of a group of days that belong to the world outside this house. A world I can only pretend to imagine. I look away from the mirror. I whisper out loud.

Who will I be when I'm not with you?