

Emily Cavanagh

The Dress

The dress had been her mother's idea. Knee length with a fitted bodice in pale pink cotton the color of strawberry sherbet, it tied around Tippy's neck with thin strings. Her thighs had seen better days, as had her butt and, the cruelest change of all, her waistline, with its pudgy roll that hung over the elastic on her underwear. Yet her shoulders and arms still looked pretty good.

Her mother found the dress while shopping with Tippy's aunt, and she could picture the two older women, growing excited as they stumbled upon the dress on the rack of TJ MAX, becoming shocked when they glanced at the price tag, then forging on optimistically and buying the dress as a gift. Even if it hadn't fit perfectly, Tippy would have worn it for her mother's sake.

It was her mother who'd said it was time. Despite the break-up, despite the almost-baby that had withered away in her womb, unexpected and unplanned, but only a month shy of delivery, despite the weeks and months that Tippy had thought about dying, or if not dying, ceasing to exist. It was time to rejoin the world, her mother said, like it or not.

It wasn't a date. Her mother had been clear about that, more like a practice date, the son of a friend of a friend who'd recently moved back to the area. How she became this poor man's consolation prize, she wasn't sure, but she did know that he'd be disappointed.

But still, there was something about the dress. Tippy felt its power as she tugged up the zipper, noticing the way it hung gracefully around her hips. Was there any better diet than grief?

This morning she'd pulled the shades up, surprised to notice purple crocuses pushing their sturdy heads through the dark earth of her backyard. The weak April sunlight cast the room in a pale gold glow, the fiery sunset descending quickly, though they'd passed Daylight Savings, and the days were longer now. Spring had arrived without her noticing.

Downstairs her mother waited to see the dress. She'd swung by with the shopping bag as Tippy was selecting a pair of black slacks and a formless grey blouse. Assessing her reflection, Tippy added the dress to one more item on the long list of things her mother was right about.

Outside the street lamps flickered on. The sky had turned the deep purple of dusk. Soon the lilacs would bloom, their sweet clean scent filling the evening air.

Nothing had changed. The loss was still in bones, a wound that would never heal, an invisible branding on her skin. But somewhere deep in her body, in the soft space of her heart, she felt something crack, a splintering open of something bright and sharp. A hundred pieces shot through her skin, hot and electric, glimmering in the dark like stars.

She turned from the mirror and headed downstairs to show her mother the dress's imperfect yet remarkable transformation.