

## An Inheritance

Roman bought the dress in a vintage shop in downtown Savannah. The college kid working the cash register wore a neutral expression as she folded it and slipped it into a paper bag. Careful to avoid his eye. Careful not to touch his hand, where his fingernails were painted a peeling black. He told her he was buying it for his mother. *Her birthday is next week*, he said. He didn't know his mother's birthday. Didn't know the sound of her voice. His own voice was scratchy and deeper than most people seemed to expect. *My mom's is like that too*, he told acquaintances when they commented on it.

The dress was the softest silk. \$300 for a slip of fabric. Back in his bathroom at home, Roman struggled to get it over his shoulders, twisting. He experienced a brief moment of panic—why was it so hot in the middle of February anyway?—before it fell into place. Spaghetti straps and a slit that ran up his thigh. The midnight blue of the dress made his leg hair look wild, indelicate. He didn't mind it so much this way.

The recliner in the living room creaked, which meant his dad was home from work. He scrambled to get the dress off again. Fathers were made for leaving, that's what TV shows and songs were always saying, but not Roman's. His dad stayed. He liked to tell Roman his mother wasn't a bad person, but she wasn't the type he could talk about either. At least not passed the superficial. When he was little, his dad would say, *You look just like your mother*. He'd smile and shake his head as he said it, like a dog trying to shake off water. *Got better curls though*.

What else? What else? Did she wear sundresses in the winter—dappled sunlight warming her bare shoulders? Did she go to the grocery store every Monday because the coupons came in the Sunday newspaper or did she go whenever she got a craving for peaches drizzled in melted cheddar or a peanut butter and pickle sandwich? Was she allergic to peanut butter? Did she like the taste of pickles? Did she believe, like Roman did, that things tasted better when they were unexpected? Did her crying sound like laughter? Did her laughter sound like crying? Why did she leave? Where did she go?

His father never responded to these questions. The answers were his secrets.

This was Roman's secret: His bedroom in the middle of the night. Dim light, yellow walls, a cheap yard sale mirror. The dress slipped onto him more easily this time, muscle-memory. He tugged on one of his curls that fell into his eyes, the same freckled gray-blue as his mother's. Allegedly. He spun and the end of the dress fanned out.

*Thank you so much*. He practiced in front of the mirror.

*Thanks.* He pressed his hand to his chest and tried on a modest smile. He needed to get good at accepting compliments in case he ever got up the nerve to leave his bedroom.

*Thank you. It was my mother's.*