

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

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What's A Housecoat?

When Kathy's mom finally died after a brutal six-week hospitalization for a staph infection she incurred after successful heart surgery, Kathy, and her sister, Tina were there encouraging her to let go, promising her they would miss her, but manage to move on. All the beeps, blips and other computerized sounds that they'd been hearing for weeks just stopped and she was gone.

During those last weeks, Kathy had woven a suit of emotional armor for herself, attempting to be the strong one, the reliable family anchor. She kept all the fear, anger, despair and tears inside and felt like she'd gained fifty pounds. She knew that now was not the time to exhale.

It came as a surprise to all of them when within a half an hour of her mother's death, Kathy was asked by a hospital administrator if they could please pack up the personal affects that had accumulated in her mom's room. They would provide someone to help them carry it all to their cars. Her mother's body had yet to be removed and she thought it somewhat thoughtless that they were expected to stuff thing into boxes and plastic bags while she laid there, mouth slightly ajar, lifeless in their midst.

Tina had to be sedated when she kept pointing out to any one who would listen, "Yes, her hands are cold, but her arms and her shoulders are still warm!" Trying to convince herself that her mother wasn't really and truly dead.

After Tina's husband led her from the room, Kathy began to sort through her mother's belongings. Things like scented lotions which Tina and Kathy had spent hours massaging into her hands.

"Listen Mom," Kathy said, "I have been in every room in this hospital and checked every single patient's hands even the babies and yours are, without question, the smoothest, softest hands on all fourteen floors."

Anything to earn even the slightest smile in those pain-filled days. There were unused soaps, shampoo and face creams and various shawls and hand-knit throws thoughtful friends had brought when visiting. Underwear and nightgowns unworn in favor of dedicated hospital attire. The clothes she wore the day she was admitted. Books and magazines never read, and at least a hundred Get Well Soon cards. All of this in three drawers and a closet.

They had a family thing about looking around three times before you left a room to which you will not be returning. A ritual to ensure nothing was ever left behind. As she rechecked the bedside table, Kathy leaned over her mother and gave her cold forehead one last kiss. Then on to the bathroom and one more glance in the closet.

She was caught off guard by the sight of a zippered housecoat hanging way in the back of the long space. Pulling it from the hanger, Kathy wondering how she'd missed it. A beautiful impressionist floral pattern on soft cotton with kimono style sleeves. The creases in the back told her it had been worn, probably during the first week or two of her mother's hospital-

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ization when she could still get out of bed. She folded it and placed it in one of the boxes.

That night when the family gathered at Tina's house for pizza, salad and wine, Kathy asked her about the housecoat.

"Oh, I think I bought that for her right after she went in," Tina said. "It was so unusual and I thought wearing it might cheer her up."

Kathy told her she would get it from the packing box tomorrow and leave it on her bed.

"No, I'd rather you take it. I'm not sure I can bear to have it here in the house," Tina insisted.

After the funeral when Kathy and her sister were getting their mom's things together to send off to a church clothing drive, she asked Tina again if she was sure about the housecoat. Tina was adamant about Kathy taking it so she did.

She arrived home exhausted after a long flight and so many days of working hard to keep it together. She opened a bottle of wine and started to sob after the first glass. It seemed to Kathy that she wept for hours. She remembered going upstairs and taking the housecoat from her suitcase. She put her clothes in the bathroom hamper and put the housecoat on. Crawling into her bed, she cried herself to sleep. If she heard the phone ring during the next few days she picked it up, said "Sleeping" and hung up. Whenever Kathy woke and remembered her mother was dead, she smoothed some part of the housecoat over and over until she drifted back to sleep.

At some point during the afternoon of what might have been her fourth day in bed, she heard her daughter Becca's voice close by.

"Mom? Mom. Listen, I'm here and you have to get up now, take a shower and have something to eat."

Kathy pulled the covers over her head. Becca pulled them down.

"Mom, I know how hard this is for you but this room smells bad, you smell bad and you have to eat something. C'mon, I'll help you."

She started to unzip the housecoat. Kathy pushed her hand away.

"Mom, was this Grandma's?"

She nodded yes.

"Okay, here's the thing. It's so pretty, but we need to keep it clean. I'll get the water just right for you and while you're in the shower I'll wash and dry it so you can put it back on when you get out. Will that work?"

"Yes." She began to cry because her daughter's tenderness was killing her.

Becca helped her to a chair in the sitting area of her room. She got clean sheets from the linen closet and remade the bed. Then she started the water in the shower and helped her mom in and took the housecoat from her.

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“Good, you’re doing fine. Now I’m going downstairs and put this in the washer. Just yell if you need me?” Kathy nodded again.

She stood in the shower letting the warm water and her tears wash over her. She shampooed her hair, soaped her body and just stood there under the water as she started to feel better.

Her daughter tapped on the door with an armful of clean towels,

“I thought you might need these.” She handed Kathy a terry cloth bathrobe as she stepped from the shower.

“Grandma’s thingy isn’t quite dry yet, so I thought you could wear this while we have something to eat.

“Housecoat,” Kathy said. “It’s called a housecoat. No one wears them anymore. I can’t imagine where your Aunt Tina found such a nice one.”

“Do you feel like you can come downstairs, Mom? I’ve made us some lunch.”

Kathy hugged Becca hard and told her how much she loved her. They went to the kitchen and ate Cream of Tomato Bisque soup and grilled cheese sandwiches. She was starving. When the buzzer for the dryer went off Becca looked at her. Kathy told her she was okay for now and she was.