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THE PLEATED SKIRT

I SHOULD ASK my mom if the blue-plaid, pleated skirt I wore for a few years in my childhood was an off-the-rack item or if she made it in her sewing class. When I first got it, I would reserve it for special occasions, but as the novelty wore off I started using it as a daily garment under the school uniform, a white smock worn by every elementary-age public school student in Argentina. The heavy pleats of the skirt would create small dark bumps on the smock's thin fabric.

Handmade or not, clothes back then lasted a long time because of the high quality of the materials, although I can't tell if they were made locally by the once-booming Argentine textile industry or if the military dictatorship, which ravaged so much, did away with that too. We called them Scottish skirts—kilt would be the right term in English—but I don't think that meant the fabric came from Scotland.

My mom would know because she walked to the fabric store in search of supplies at least once a week back in those days, my sister and me trailing behind her up the busy avenue perpendicular to our street. The store was called *El hilo dorado*, "The Golden Thread," and although sewing didn't interest me, I thought this place contained marvels. Two long rows of counters, one on each side of the large shop, separated the all-female clerks from the all-female customers who stood at the center hallway pointing at a bolt of rayon, studying colors on a wall lined in spools of threads, or asking for any of the staples—hand basting thread, a box of pins, the flour and sugar of the tailor shop. The clerks whooshed past each other in the narrow space between the wall and the counters, their expert hands armed with scissors, sorting through nacre buttons, scribbling figures on a notepad, stabbing paper numbers on pointy metal tines so they could move on to the next customer.

My mom taught my sister and me how to sew. She showed us the proper way to thread a needle—move the thread to the needle, not the other way around. She explained the difference between a ladder and a baste stitch. She showed us how to sew a button. My sister made dresses for her dolls, and a grey teddy-she-bear that I decided was to marry the teddy-he-bear I got when I was six, which would later emigrate to the U.S. with me. My hands understood the basic principles of stitching,

but I lacked the patience and ended up adopting a messy, all-purpose whip stitch that I could pull off quickly. One time I took a pair of scissors twice the size of my hand and cut a big hole on the sweatshirt I was wearing. I couldn't explain to my mom or myself what came over me.

Today my hands still know how to move like they're sewing. Armed with the patience I've gathered over the years, I can mend a seam, patch a hole, sew a button, and do a hem in a pinch. I'm also skilled enough that I can teach my son what I know. Whenever something needs fixing, I sit him next to me and let him do part of the job. My mom never taught my brother how to sew. I wonder if his wife replaces the buttons on his shirts or if, when he loses one, he just goes without.

I should also ask my mom if the brooch that held together the folds of the skirt was silver or gold. But asking her would mean lying about my reasons to do so—not telling her that knowing those details may help me conjure up the full memory of what happened on a particular day of my childhood when I was wearing that skirt.

ACROSS THE STREET from our apartment, there was a shop that sold candy, ice cream bars, one-liter bottles of Coca-Cola, and less interesting things such as cigarettes, milk, and aspirin. I remember vividly when my mom first let me cross the street and get a few pieces of candy on my own. My memory has me holding a bill, the bust of the Liberator of the Americas crumpled inside my palm, its many inflated digits only good enough for candy.

Over my lifetime the Argentine currency changed several times, so my memories of dealing with money include a wide array of names, colors, and faces of dignitaries. I know that two years after the return of democracy, the currency switched from pesos to australes, and with the busts of subsequent founding fathers they also brought in coins that held enough purchasing value to get a small chocolate bar or a couple of lollipops. This knowledge leads me to assume that by the time I reached the age of nine, I wouldn't have crossed to the shop with a crumpled bill in my hand, as I did on my first solo adventure, but with a couple of coins.

What was I holding that particular day when I crossed to the candy shop—a day I've been replaying in my head for most of my life? A sticky, dirty piece of rectangular paper smelling of mold, or the cold, smooth rounds that would leave a metallic scent in my hands? I have asked myself this question many times over the years, closing my eyes,

telling my mind to dig deep and my body to feel, to no avail. This knowing would help me approximate how old I was that day, and I don't know what good that will do, but I've lived enough now to know that knowledge is power.

I do recall that when I returned to our apartment building and the man stepped into the elevator with me, my hands tensed into fists around the pieces of hard candy I had bought. Two or three pieces inside each palm, the little wings of the wrappers scratching my sweaty palms.

THE ACT OF CROSSING the street entailed considerable danger but it wasn't more than my mom thought I could handle. Our apartment was on the second floor of a six-story building midblock. Cars didn't stop for pedestrians until they reached the red light at the intersection of my street and the avenue. Bus number 64 had a stop on that corner, and it wouldn't slow down until it went past our building, so I had to watch out for it too.

For a short period of time, this was the bus I'd take on weekends to go to a sports club in a nearby neighborhood named after the creator of the flag. My mom signed us all up because she knew, in theory, that exercise led to a healthier life. But both of my parents were ill-disposed to athletics. They had an odd attitude towards sports, a mix of fear and contempt that didn't help the cause of getting us kids signed up for any teams at the new club. I did love the club's swimming pool, though, and spent many hours of heavily chlorinated fun in it.

What I hated was that before you could swim you had to do a "medical checkup," which meant standing in a line next to the locker rooms and waiting for what seemed like forever. Inside a small office, a male nurse would check for lice in your hair and behind your ears, his fingers smelling of nicotine, and then had you separate your toes to show you didn't have fungus. Sometimes he'd pull back the side of your bathing suit and check your crotch. It all went by very fast. After a couple of seasons, we stopped going to that club because the yearly membership was too expensive to justify my family's summer-only visits. I felt relieved.

THERE'S NO END goal in trying to recall the exact colors of the skirt or if my mom made it. Rather, there's hope for a process that may help peel back the layers, as if by remembering more details I could conjure up the rest of what happened that day. As if these small

revelations could prepare me for a bigger disclosure. I'm convinced that all of the memories exist in my mind and it's just a matter of accessing them, but I don't know how. It doesn't help that when I visit my parents at the apartment where they live now and I look at the family albums, I see photos of me wearing the pleated skirt at seven, and then again at nine. My mom keeps the albums ordered by year at the bottom of the same bookcase where she keeps her foreign language books—Saramago, Tabucchi, Hesse, Camus, Kingsolver. She's a polyglot.

I keep going back to the photos every year I visit my family, hoping the passing of time will unveil something new in them, a secret message like the one my son wrote the other day with lemon juice on a sheet of paper. "This message is written with an invisible ink," he told me in Spanish. Then he had me hold up the paper to a light bulb. "I'm a genius at soccer," the message said, and I had to agree with him. But the invisible ink in those old photos must have dried out, for nothing but the obvious is revealed when I hold them up in front of a lamp. One of my sister and I sitting on a park bench. The sun is in my eyes and I make a visor with my hand. The hem of the skirt falls just below my knees and meets the edges of my white socks. One of my paternal grandmothers and I on a brown leather couch at her home. The edge of the skirt touches my legs a couple of inches above my knees. My grandmother passed away that year, alone in her bedroom while my great uncle listened to opera in the living room.

Instead of asking her about the skirt, I ask my mom the name of her sewing class instructor. "I can't remember her, but I remember how sad I was a few years ago when I found out she died," she writes me on WhatsApp, "Why do you ask?" "No reason," I lie, "the time you used to attend her sewing classes randomly came to mind." I'm shocked that she can't remember the name of the person who taught her how to make clothes. She visited her shop for years and made dozens of pieces there: pants, sweatshirts and summer dresses for my sister and me; blouses and skirts for herself. It hasn't been that long, a few years maybe, since the name of her instructor last came up in conversation, but my mom can't recollect and doesn't seem too bothered by this. My mom, who can remember conjugations and vocabulary from at least five languages besides her own. Is she starting to lose her memory? What makes us remember some things and forget others? What will my son ask me decades from now that I will have forgotten?

My sister and I exchange voice messages on WhatsApp. According to her, my mom's slip isn't something to worry about. "It's one of those random things that come and go," she says, "it might return to her in a few days." I argue that this piece of information is too much of a well-cemented memory to qualify as one of those things that come and go, but my sister insists it's no big deal, although she thinks there are plenty of other instances in which my mom's memory is showing signs of decline. We don't always agree on what's alarming and what isn't when it comes to our parents' aging brains. She lives a few blocks away from them and I thousands of miles.

Her last message before my phone screen goes dark answers my initial question. The instructor's name was Coca. Of course. Like the plant and the soda.

I don't ask my sister about the skirt.

AFTER I FINISHED fourth grade, I moved to a new elementary school in my neighborhood. The two close friends I had at the old school had gone to other places. I didn't see any prospects of making new friends unless I started over somewhere else, so I made the case to my parents and they let me switch. The new school had a larger patio for recess and slightly less decrepit walls. The main hall didn't smell disgusting like the one at my old school. There, the crates filled with milk containers would arrive with the foil lids broken and leave white puddles on the floor that the janitor's mop, instead of wiping, would spread and turn into sour patches. The principal at the new school was said to be reactionary. Back then, "reactionary" brought with it the heavy load of having been sympathetic to the dictatorial regime that left 30,000 people disappeared. But the vice principal, who ran the show during the morning shift, was supposed to be open and progressive. It didn't take long for me to find my place and my soulmate there.

Alejandra and I hit it off immediately. Ten months my senior, she was long-legged and a bit taller than me. Her nose was snub, while mine was shaping out to be the straight Roman-nose I have today. Her hair was straight and reliable, while mine was a frizzy mix of curls and waves. She was beautiful, candid, and flirtatious. A few months before, Alejandra and her family had returned from Venezuela, where her father worked as a choreographer and her mom sang opera. I'm pretty sure they had left Argentina because her parents couldn't work as artists during the dictatorship. After months attending school in Buenos Aires,

Alejandra still spoke with the hints of a Caribbean accent that brought butterflies to my stomach.

They lived in a tiny apartment four blocks away from ours. On my first visit there, Alejandra and I sat cross-legged on her desk facing the wall where hung a large world map. We started talking about history, about the defeated military dictatorships in the region, about the capitalist economy of most countries in Latin America and the fact that large parts of the continent's population lived in poverty. I was ten and Alejandra eleven, and while I doubt those were the terms we used in our conversation, I know exactly the direction in which our spirits were moving us. At some point in the exchange, one of us posed a question: "What is the one country that has done the most damage to our countries?" I can't remember who said it—by then it seemed as if our mouths were synchronized to the beat of each other's hearts and we spoke as one. But I remember feeling we had come up against something important.

If there was ever a moment when I became politically conscious, that was the one. I returned home that day having vowed not to drink Coca-Cola ever again so as to honor the anti-imperialist ideology Alejandra and I had just discovered while staring at the map in her room. It was hard at first. My family and I had Coca-Cola once a week and on special occasions. One liter was enough to fill five glasses to the top, and my siblings and I often argued over which glass had more. After my pledge, there was an extra glass for everyone to split once they were done drinking their first. I watched my family from my place at the table while I sipped tap water from my glass.

My pledge didn't include other beverages in the Coca brand, so on the rare occasion that my family went out to eat, I would allow myself a Sprite. When my brother pointed out the inconsistency of giving myself permission to drink another beverage from the same imperialist brand, I argued that my gesture was symbolic. I was just trying to make a point, not turn into a martyr. Drinking Pepsi never presented a dilemma because I always hated Pepsi. Over time, I got used to life without Coca-Cola, and the dark sugary brew never again entered my body simply because once I lost the acquired taste, I realized how foul the liquid really was.

I never would have kept up the pledge I made that day if Alejandra and I hadn't become so close. Our closeness was all-encompassing: we were united by the rebel streak that made us pledge no Coke on

one day, and chop off the hair of our barbies on another; we sang and danced to the same Argentine rock bands whose music was charging back after all those dark years; we awoke together to a budding sexuality that still knew neither shame nor guile. For years I have wondered why, if we were that close, I didn't share with her the story of the day I was returning home from the candy shop. One of the many days during that phase of my childhood when I wore the pleated skirt.

I DECIDE TO ask my sister about the skirt. Does she still have it? Unlike my brother and me, my sister didn't move her life abroad. She lives in the same neighborhood where we grew up. She sits on the same couch whose arm one of our dogs nibbled on as a puppy. The bookcase in her living room is the same one she and I had in our childhood bedroom, a three-module art deco piece that used to be my mom's and passed on to us after my maternal grandmother died, one year before my dad's mom left us. She still keeps clothes from when she was in high school, and when she visits me in the States she returns home with a few of the items I keep in the bag meant for the Goodwill—sometimes these are items she and I bought at the Goodwill on one of her previous visits.

But no. She doesn't have the skirt. Have I lost my mind? We were really little when we had those.

Little, she says, and I nod to myself because yes, we were little then. Both of us. Painfully so.

Skirts, she says, plural. "I had a blue one with white and yours was mostly green. They had a safety pin on the side. I altered mine into a very short miniskirt when I started high school, but by the time you started high school that was no longer the fashion, so yours must have stayed unaltered." I don't dispute her older-sister recollection of a large safety pin rather than a brooch. She's right. I Google plaid skirts and all the images show a simple safety pin on the side. But the color? A return to the shelf with the albums next time I visit my family will have to determine who's right. If my sister is correct again, what else am I wrong about? What else am I misremembering or forgetting about that time?

The time I entered our building and a man held the door and trailed in behind me. When he closed the door of the elevator and we were alone in it. When he pressed the button marked with a six and I blamed myself for not letting him know right away that I was getting off on the second floor. When his hands slid under my skirt and I heard his voice

say something about him being a doctor who needed to check on some parts of me. When the elevator got to the sixth floor and his hands kept moving and creeping and touching, and I said that this was still the wrong floor. When some time went by but I'll never know how long because I only seem to have the skirt as witness and skirts don't speak. The skirt as observer. As anchor. As a companion to some parts of me.

IF I COULD have a superpower, my son asked me the other day, what would that be? I thought for a moment and asked if time travel qualified as a superpower. He said yes, so I stayed quiet, imagining what it would have been like to have saved myself that day, to have pressed the button to the second floor before the man could take us up to the sixth. To have told my younger self, the girl in the blue or green plaid pleated skirt, not to buy candy that day. To have shared with Alejandra what had happened some time before we met—a year or three. Or to have entered our apartment, sunk in my mom's arms and told her everything.

"Is that your choice," my son brought me back. "Time travel?"

"No," I said. "Flying. I'd love to be able to fly."