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Dad's Sweater

Part of growing up is that your favorite sweater no longer fits. You've worn it so many times that it's unraveling in parts, its oddly mismatched vertical stripes extending past their bounds with loose threads dangling all over. It's hideous and it's itchy. Who thought of putting emerald green together with off-white and navy and maroon? You can't imagine why anyone would buy a sweater like this one, but you're glad they did. You've worn it obsessively since your grandmother gave it to you when you were ten.

You've worn it to class even after other students teased you about it. You've worn it in the middle of the summer despite nearly developing heatstroke. You wore it to your dad's funeral after they pronounced him dead. Your mom begged you to wear a black suit and tie like the rest of the family, but it only made sense to wear the sweater. After all, at some time in his youth, it belonged to him.

In all honesty, you have never really understood why they pronounced him dead, anyway. He's only missing. Yeah, a few years had gone by since his sudden disappearance, and your mom just wanted the closure, but to you, saying he died still feels premature.

At any moment, he could come back home. He'd see you wearing his old sweater, and he'd smile at you, saying, "You're wearing that old thing? I couldn't stand it when I was your age." You'd smile back at him, wearing it with pride and feeling connected to him somehow. The more you itch your neck because of the rough wool at the collar or snip off loose threads, the closer you feel to him. At one time, he had done the same things. Felt the same way.

But now, four years after receiving the sweater, it no longer fits. Your grandmother will no longer remark about how you were a spitting image of your father, making her feel like she was transported back to a time when her son wasn't pronounced dead. But you can't help it. When you try to put it on, it is quite literally splitting at the seams. The bottom of the sweater only extends to a couple of inches past your navel, not quite making it to your hips. The sleeves are also too short and barely stretch to your forearm, about an inch from reaching your wrists.

You hate the way your body has changed so much since the last time you saw him. How could you have grown up in the absence of someone so important? You can't shake the feeling that if you give up on the sweater, you give up on seeing him again, but your mom seems glad to see it go. She wants to donate it to a thrift shop or throw it away. To her, it's just another reminder of your dad, one she wants to bury along with the possibility of his existence. However, you can't bear the thought of anyone else wearing the sweater.

It takes you a long time to decide what to do with it, gazing at the ugly thing as it hangs on the doorknob of your room. You ponder your options the same way someone ponders the fate of a priceless family heirloom. It takes you weeks—months even—to make a decision. But suddenly, inspiration hits you.

You pull out the scissors from your desk and cut the sweater up into small squares of fabric, placing them all besides one inside a small bag. This one will be yours to keep. Then, you ride your bike to a local lookout in the hills, and you stand on the edge of a cliff, waiting for a strong wind. When one comes, you empty the bag into the breeze and watch the treasured pieces of fabric fly out into the sky. You hope the pieces of fabric will find your dad wherever he is and lead him back home.