Andrea White

Armour

As soon as I set eyes on the silver knit, I know he won't be able to do it. With his big-knuckled hands, Dad can fell a tree in three strokes, but he can't squeeze even his little finger into Mum's silver thimble. I'd imagined a costume of armour, heavy and muscled, joints creaking across the stage. As I stretch the material – what did Miss say, lamé[1]? – between my fingers, I think of catsuits and disco skirts.

It's dark by the time the school bus pulls into my lane, and as I pick my way across the muddy path, I'm surprised to see a light blinking from Dad's workshop at the edge of the wood. He's not usually home for another hour. Something must be up.

Inside, the cottage is cold and dank; there's no fire in the grate, and it smells of his cigarettes and the black mould creeping up the kitchen wall. I stash the lamé in a shoebox under my bed and change into jeans and a jumper. When I take off my shirt, I see my name tag, which has been chafing my neck all day, is hanging by a single thread. It's barely lasted three months – that's how I know he can't do it. Mum's tags used to last all year. I remember the afternoon he spent unpicking her tiny stitches with the rusty kitchen scissors. She had reels of cotton for her patchwork quilts, but when I selected navy to match my pullover, he swatted my hand away: red's easier to see. His big, looping stitches show through to the outside but no one's said anything. It's there in Sam's eyes when he offers me his crisps at break though; and in Miss' reluctance to ask me questions, like I won't have done the homework because I'm too busy crying or something.

Once changed, I scrunch up paper for the wood-burner, pile on some sticks and two small logs. A woodlouse crawls out as the sticks begin to crackle. I watch him scuttle across the hearth and disappear down a crack in the floorboards and wish I could follow him. The wood is damp and wet smoke billows into the room. Realising I've forgotten to open the chimney, I shut the doors and twist the flue, then blow through the flaps to get it going.

At six, I open the back door and yell, 'Teeaaa'. He taps the corrugated-iron roof with his hammer, which means yes. I scoop some beans into a pan. He hasn't been to town for ages so we're down to beans, bread, pasta, cheese, plus the buckets of potatoes and onions in the shed, and the tray of apples – all with soft brown patches I have to spit out.

He sniffs when he comes in. I wait for him to say something about the smoke, but he just places another log on top and gives it all a poke. Though I'm tall for nine I can't reach the top cupboard, so Dad gets the plates down and puts them on the table. When he removes his fleece and cap and stretches out his long back, I see that he has a gash above his right temple. So that's it. I hesitate for a moment, my hunger turning queer and soupy. I take the beans off the heat and bring them to

[1] a type of shiny fabric

the table. He collects the toast from under the grill.

'How did you do that?' I say, sitting down.

He presses his fingertips to the wound, crumbling off dried blood as if it were sawdust. 'A joist fell from the rafters.'

'Does it hurt?'

He says no, but he's pale and I don't believe him. I ask why he wasn't wearing a hard hat.

'You think it was my fault?'

I feel the slap of his tongue and shake my head quickly. We eat in silence – he's never been much of a talker. Mum would tell stories about her customers: the old man who set his false teeth on the table before drinking his tea; the Americans who sandwiched their scone halves together, so the cream and jam spilled out the sides. Dad just chews, locked in his own thoughts, and then, as soon as he's done, lights a cigarette and checks his watch. He's happiest in his workshop.

He leaves me to rinse the plates, and I try not to use all the hot water in case he wants some for his head. When I get into bed, it's freezing. I tiptoe into their room. It looks the same as before, just as I remembered, though it smells less like her and more like him. I open their wardrobe and pull out the heavy orange blanket we use outside in the summer. It's flecked with dirt and twigs.

I dream of the last picnics we had in the garden, my head in her lap, eyes tracing aeroplane tails in the blue sky. For a few weeks she was like herself again, in her pretty dresses, arms freckled from the sun. She cut sandwiches into triangles and made butterfly cakes with lemon icing. I thought all the pain, the sweating and vomiting, had been worth it. But as the summer wore on, she slept for longer each day, and cried hot tears when she couldn't get out of bed any more.

Next morning, I hear him hacking up phlegm. The days he forgets to flush, I rush out of bed when I hear the door bang. Black is bad, but that's just the cigarettes. With her, the water would swirl red, as if she'd been washing out paintbrushes in the basin. I dress quickly, make my bed, lay out clothes for later, grab the brown apple he's left for me and dollop some peanut butter between slices of bread for the journey to school.

Outside, the wind blows through the trees, unsettling mounds of soggy yellow leaves on the ground. The fields opposite are empty, and I miss the cows and sheep, and wonder why I didn't notice them disappear last year. She used to wait with me for the bus, and then watched from the window after I told her I wasn't a baby – though it might have been a trick of the light, because when I look now, I see a shadow even though the cottage is empty.

I wait until Saturday to explain about the costume. He ignores me at first and keeps on brushing out ash from the fire grate. When his bucket is full, he gets up, wipes his hands on his jeans and clears his throat. 'Let's have a look then.'

I give him the lamé and stand with my arms out wide. A smile creaks at the corners of his mouth,

and he tells me to fetch an old pair of pyjamas and her machine from the cupboard. As I watch him lay out the fabric on the kitchen table, tracing round the arms and legs, allowing an extra inch for the seams, I feel a glimmer of hope.

'Have you done this before?'

'Watched your mother long enough.' His eyes drift towards her machine, wary of unlocking the memory. 'Can't be too hard, eh?'

He reaches for the black cotton (at least it's not red) and talks me through threading the hooks and levers. When we're ready, he clamps a cigarette between his lips and presses the pedal with his boot. I hold my breath as the machine whirrs and the material begins to move through. After a few seconds I smell burning. The needle jumps up and down, skipping stitches. He's going too fast. There's a clunk as the machine jams, and the material bunches – snared in a tangle of black and silver thread. He curses, letting his cigarette fall to the floor. I crush it beneath my slipper. He backs away from the table and plucks a shard of needle from his hand with his teeth.

Neither of us says a word. I lift the sewing foot and pick at the knots. His breath is hot on the back of my neck, a sign his patience has run out. As he rips the material from the jaws of the machine, I feel the sick tug of despair. His eyes bore into mine, daring me to cry. I push the machine off the table and onto the floor where it shatters.

The days pass, and we don't say much to each other. We're like trains, passing on opposite tracks. I hide the wretched fabric under my bed. He puts the sewing machine out with the rubbish. I try not to think what she would say – her machine thrown away with our tissues and potato peelings. Another piece of her in the ground.

The dress rehearsal is a disaster. I wear grey joggers and a faded T-shirt. Dorothy[2] clicks her red shoes and looks at me like I'm dirt. As soon as the bell rings, I sneak out the side entrance and run down the hill into town. It's raining and I walk quickly past her café, the hairdresser she liked, the newsagent where she'd buy me sweets, and am out of breath when I reach the charity shop. It's musty, like armpits on a hot day. I hope if I concentrate something will emerge from the racks. But the eyes of the lady behind the counter trail me.

'Can I help you?'

'Do you have anything silver?'

Her eyes flit to the jewellery beside the till.

I lower my hood, so she can see me properly. 'I mean clothes, like a silver suit or something.'

Her shoulders drop an inch, but she answers quickly, without thinking. 'We don't have anything like that.'

[2] the main character from the 1939 musical fantasy film *The Wizard of Oz*

'I have money,' I say, unzipping my bag so she can see the coins I raided from my piggybank.

'Is your mum around?' the lady asks, softening now she's seen the money. 'I could call her if something comes in?'

I shrug and look at my shoes. She offers to have a quick rummage in the stockroom. I linger for a minute, then leg it in case she's calling school.

The cold bites on the walk home. It's gone four, but I figure I can get back before him. I stick to the fields and hedgerows once I've left the brightly lit windows of town, knowing how fast cars come round the bends. As the wind tears through the leafless boughs, I hear crows and foxes calling to each other. I tuck my frozen fingers into my pockets. At last, I turn into our lane, but my relief sours when I see the cottage lights on.

He's standing by the fire, whisky in hand. 'Where were you?'

I stamp my feet on the mat to remove the mud from my shoes and mutter something about wanting to walk home, knowing he won't buy it.

'You went to see her, didn't you?'

It takes a second to realise he means Mum. I lift my chin. 'So what?'

He rubs his temples, and I see he's leaning against the mantelpiece, too tired or drunk to hold

himself up. I go to my room and slam the door.

Later he brings me a sandwich and tells me he's put the immersion[3] on. It's the closest I'll get to an apology. I sit in the bath and lather the shampoo, the softness of her fingertips dancing along my scalp. I remember holding her hand at the end, the rain hammering against the roof, as if she'd chosen then, the end of summer, to leave. He said not to cry or talk to her, just to stay close. I thought if I held on tight, she might stay. Dad pulled up a wooden chair, his head bowed as if in prayer. After she'd taken her last rasping breath, we sat on the back step drinking hot Ribena[4] until it was pitch black.

It's warm when I wake and there's toast on the table. On the chair she used to sit on there's a silver suit – made from squares of thin, bendy plywood, each one punched with a hole and linked together with grey thread. I touch one of the pieces; there must be hundreds.

He lifts it over my uniform, shuffling the plates onto my shoulders. 'Is it a bit big?'

'No, it fits.' I take a step and it sounds like trees rustling in the wind.

He carries it out for me but stops at the gate. I turn to face him. His eyes are on the icy ground. I wrap my arms around his middle and squeeze. He smells like sawdust and tarps. I feel the thump of his heart against my ear and wait for him to say something, but he just places a large hand on the crown of my head. When we hear the bus roaring up the hill, I take the suit from him, not daring to look up in case tears spill down my cheeks. I gulp the cold air and walk to the end of the lane.

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[3] Water heater

[4] A brand of soft drink