

WHAT'S IN A COAT

I am listening to the podcast *It's the Pictures that Got Small* when the host recounts how the style of the '40s adorned the films of the '70s, and I am reminded of the winter coat of my dreams.

For my thirteenth birthday
my mom took me inside Lerner's Fine Apparel
where we had only ever window-shopped,
and on the mannequin in the middle of the store
was a white, double-breasted wool coat with large
square shoulder pads, satin lining, pearl buttons,
and a tailored waist to show off the hourglass silhouette
I had not yet developed—
a coat fit for Joan Crawford
or any other of the majestic women of the big screen
I liked to watch in black and white
in the middle of the night after sneaking downstairs
to catch *The Great Entertainment* with Frank Avruch.

My mom put the coat on layaway and estimated
it would take six weeks of the tips she earned
at the Chinese restaurant to pay it off
while I prayed to God it would still be cold by then.

But before she could make another payment,
my dad came home after a day at the bar
and a stop at Spags General Merchandise—
that fire-trap warehouse with no carts or bags, only boxes
and free tomato seeds with each purchase—



and handed me a coat with a tag that read \$10.00
in black marker hanging from its sleeve, saying
“Your mother told me you need one of these.
Go try it on.” My mom raised her hand to her mouth
before looking down at the floor
as I walked by and tried not to cry
on my way to the bathroom mirror to view myself
in the dark brown, fake fur coat
with its tiger-striped hem, pleather wide belt
and three wood button and rope toggle fasteners.

As the podcast's host continues his review of *Eyes of Laura Mars*,
he mentions Faye Dunaway's later performance
as Joan Crawford in *Mommie Dearest*.

At this, I walk to my closet
pull out one of five vintage '40s coats
and try it on in front of the bathroom mirror.
This one is olive green boiled wool
with real mink running round the collar
and down the center to the hem.
It has broad, padded shoulders and three-quarter sleeves
to allow it to be worn with long satin gloves.

I pull the coat closed over my chest
fasten the hidden hooks
then smooth my bare hands down the fur
and contemplate the power of a coat
to cover who we really are.

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