



CASHMERE BY THE GENERATION

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WE FOUND THE ROBIN'S-egg-blue, cashmere sweater neatly folded in Mom's closet when we were cleaning out the house after she died. It was too small for me, not the right style for the granddaughters.

When I was a kid, Mom helped keep the world going round by fulfilling her civic duty. At different times, she chaired the County Democratic Party, wrote grants for the War on Poverty, organized citizens to work for better schools for all. Educated middle-class ladies like her mostly didn't work for pay in the 1950s. During the day, she was home with the kids, doing the ironing, baking bread. But after our 5:30 dinner, she'd change out of the jeans she wore to do her housework and come down the stairs in one of the pleated skirts she'd sewn herself, the waistband showing off her waist, still slender after three children. She'd grab

her car keys, kiss my dad on the cheek and go off to do her important work. If it was wintertime, she'd be wearing one of her cashmere sweaters.

My grandfather's parents had immigrated to America right before he was born at the turn of the twentieth century, fleeing Russian pogroms, settling in the tenements of New York's lower East Side. Grandpa quit school in the eighth grade and somehow joined the Army. By the time his oldest daughter, my mother, was born in 1924, he was building a career on Wall Street and became one of the first Jews to build a home in the newly growing suburb of Scarsdale, New York. Mother was raised in relative comfort, went to college, and in due time, married a nice Jewish boy, about to work on his Ph.D. at Harvard. Grandpa, with true Jewish immigrant sensibilities, admired and loved my dad. But grad students were poor.

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Even when Dad got his first teaching job, a full-fledged assistant professor of philosophy in Oregon, we had no income for luxuries.

Grandpa helped out. When he visited our house in Eugene, he was annoyed to walk through the two-car garage on a rainy day and see the family's laundry strung up on clotheslines overhead. I was only six years old then, but I still remember the whirr of the clothes dryer he bought us, the comforting warmth and fresh smell of the clothes piled in a laundry basket, ready for ironing. On his next visit, he bought us a television set for the den so we children could watch *Mighty Mouse Playhouse* on Saturday morning cartoons, and Mom could watch her favorite *Gunsmoke* after we went to bed on Saturday nights. As the first born, sometimes she'd let me stay up with her to watch the handsome Marshall Dillon save the day.

It was also Grandpa who kept Mom in cashmere sweaters, various muted shades—dusty red, dark blue, a beige sweater set. I thank him for that. How else would I still have the memory of the soft brush of the fine knit on my cheek as I cuddled next to Mom on the couch, breathing in the faint, dark, carnationy smell of the perfume she wore?

By the early 1960s, when I was

a young teen, Dad gave me the responsibility of buying Mom's holiday gift. We were in Seattle by then, and Dad was a full professor. I took the bus downtown to the elegant seven-floor department store, Frederick and Nelson, by myself. I proudly walked in through the revolving door, past the perfume counter selling Chanel #5 and Arpege, past the fine leather purses and silk scarves on the main floor. At Christmas time, the store glittered with lights and garland. I went up the escalator to the third-floor woman's sweater department where I found the robin's-egg-blue cashmere. It was kitten soft, with a gentle turtleneck, a bit more modern than the older cashmeres Grandpa had bought. Mom wore it with a blue and green rough tweed pleated skirt she had stitched herself from Pendleton wool and aqua glass beads given to her by an artist friend. I know Dad was proud he could pay for that sweater.

Now, so many years later, both parents long gone, I own one cashmere myself. It's a ribbed, baby pink turtleneck, also kitten soft. Mom picked it up on one of those big tables in Costco. I'm sure she didn't get the irony; it was still a luxury gift to her. Years ago, I dribbled coffee down the

front when drinking from a travel mug while driving to work. Even a good dry cleaner couldn't get the stains out. I can afford to buy a replacement, and I see pretty ones each time I look through the Lands' End catalogue, but cashmere

in my Goodwill bag. But I can't. It sits folded in my closet, along with my more practical winter tops. I'll leave it to my own daughter to figure out what to do with it when I'm gone. It would be baggy on her, and she doesn't wear



would be a bit much for meetings of my book club or with writer friends. In the wintertime, I wear cable knit sweaters, synthetic or cotton, which I do buy from Lands' End.

I should stuff the pink cashmere

pink; she doesn't even wear sweaters. And she won't know its story. She will have other fond memories of me, I'm sure, but it won't be hard for her to drop the soft, stained sweater in some charity box. ♡

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