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THE NEW JACKET

By Mary J. Daley

It was a beautiful store. The front was encased in pink carnival glass; the interior walls a simulated red brick. A spiraling chandelier consisting of hundreds of grape size bulbs hung from the ceiling, shining spots of light over the black porcelain floor.

Donna, who had promised Chris she would come nowhere near this store today, peered through the cotton candy mist trying to spot the new jacket that everyone was talking about. Seven black jackets, entangled in silver locks and zippers, hung from wired frames along the back wall but the new one wasn't with them, so she lingered, waiting for a glimpse.

Sharon, the store's long time clerk, glanced over at Donna, unsmiling. Donna pretended not to see her and instead turned her head to search up and down the wide ill-maintained aisles of the Outskirt Mall.

It wasn't like Sharon could tell her to leave. Donna had every right to stand where she was, but still she didn't want to witness Sharon's pinched features go through a series of facial

expressions, including apprehension, pity, and disgust. Sharon knew things about Donna that Donna wished she didn't.

Seven years ago Sharon was all smiles and business when she sold Donna on the jacket, now she was discouraging and cold.

During the lengthy trip across the Sky Rail as it spiraled through the city to the Outskirts she kept convincing herself that she didn't want to wear the new jacket, only to look at it. However, now old feelings were beginning to surface and the mistake of coming out here was growing more and more apparent.

She glanced to see if Sharon was still looking but Sharon was busy helping a customer that just arrived back.

Donna placed one hand on the pink glass and raised her heels in an attempt to get a better look at the jacket. The man who was wearing it was an older man, with wisps of white hair on a reddened scalp. His cheeks were a bloom also and his expression joyful as he talked to Sharon. Sharon only nodded and helped him off with the jacket. Donna let out a low whimper then.

The new one was similar to the other models, except it wasn't as heavy looking, less zippers, a more skull fitting hood. She ached to try it on. But all she had in her purse was the three ten-dollar coins that Chris handed her that morning. It was the maximum he would give her at one time, and even then, when she returned home she would have to produce for him, receipts and change. It was ridiculous. They were husband and wife, not father and child and she resented that he didn't trust her anymore.

The man left the shop and Donna entered, breathing in the scent that the jacket left on him as he passed her. The smell belonged to the bottom half of a ship's hull.

"What do you want, Donna?" Sharon asked as she hung up the jacket, taking care to straighten the sleeves and arrange the chains.

"Just to look,"

"Can't stop you," Sharon returned to her spot behind the ivory-coloured cashier's desk.

Donna walked to the wall and touched a sleeve of an older model; the texture was like the bark of a living evergreen tree. A sense of life scampered across her fingertips. She proceeded to the newer one, touching its sleeve. The sensation was stronger still.

"It's more powerful?" Donna mumbled.

"Yes, it gives an additional seven minutes." Sharon said looking over at her.

Donna gasped. She ached to try it on. "How much?"

"A thousand dollars."

"That's twice as much as the older ones?"

"Twice as many minutes," Sharon said with a frown. "Donna, you should go home."

"I didn't come here to wear the jacket," Donna said and left the store.

With determination she headed to the escalators. A flyer from Bottom Feeder's fish shop caught her attention and she picked it up. I'll buy some shrimp and make a casserole for Chris tonight. I shouldn't go back again, anyway, she convinced herself.

Her heart began to slow slightly, and she tried to focus only on the casserole. She stood in a neat row of people as they rode the descending escalator. A glance from a man who was coming up the other escalator reminded her that she was still an attractive woman. He wore a chocolate brown tracksuit and had a prominent chin. Donna often got glances. They were nothing new to her, but she also learned that glances were just glances until you tracked them down and cornered them. However, she wasn't going to do that anymore. She was going to go home and make her husband a casserole.

Bottom Feeders with its rows of aquarium grown seafood was a busy spot and she reached for a number. She walked between the tanks with their shellfish and currents of bubbling air, waiting for her number to be called. I could get five hundred from him, she thought as her fingers cramped from holding the paper. If I get two customers, I can afford the jacket.

The server yelled, "Seventeen," but she didn't hear it as she let her slip of paper fall and left the store.

By the time she caught up, he was almost at the spiral sky rail that would take him back into the heart of the city.

"Sir." She called to him.

He turned and recognizing her from the stairs gave an odd smile.

They exchanged a few words before he followed her discreetly to the closest men's washroom and down its too bright aisle to a back stall.

The new jacket was gone again when she stepped into the store. Sharon walked through the spots of light towards her, her high heels echoing in the bare room.

“Donna,” she said, shaking her head, “what now?”

“I have enough,” Donna said, placing ten shiny hundred-dollar coins in Sharon’s hand. Sharon frowned and looked at her watch, “You have to move a little. You’re standing in the return zone.”

Donna stepped back and waited with anticipation. Her hands began to shake. Tears were starting. She tried to blink them away as she awkwardly took in a large gulp of air.

Sharon ran her hand down the length of her blazer sleeve, grabbing her own wrist. “Donna, I don’t feel right anymore taking your money.”

A woman materialized between them. Her eyes looked animated for a second as her pinpoint pupils slowly widened. She reached up and pulled down the hood exposing a mane of red curls. “That was amazing,” she exclaimed, quickly examining herself, paying particular attention to her fingers and the tips of her shoes. “This is by far the best jacket yet.”

“So, I take it everything went fine,” Sharon smiled as she helped the young woman off with it.

“Oh yes, and if I may, I like to sign up for your six trip deal.”

“Excellent. Payment is up front, we recommend a period of four weeks between each trip and time and point of place should be varied.”

“That’s fine.”

“And you’ll need to sign another waiver, but it will cover all six trips.”

The red haired woman nodded and said, “I can’t tell you how often I watched the video but it doesn’t compare at all. That was incredible. Thank you.”

Sharon grinned and hung up the jacket. “If you follow me, we can sort out the paperwork.”

Donna waited, watching the jacket. Fourteen whole minutes, almost a fourth of an hour, 840 seconds. She touched the bottom off her wedding band with her thumb and thought about Chris. He would find out and wonder where she got the money. He would yell at her and then weeks of silence would follow with not so much as a knee touching in the night. He might really leave her this time. But she knew if she had a whole fourteen minutes then that might satisfy her and she could put things to rest.

“I’m absolutely nuts for letting you do this,” Sharon came back to stand beside Donna. “I mean it; this is absolutely the final time.

“Thank you.”

“No, don’t thank me, Donna. I am not doing you any favors here. And what you have to notice is the risk this puts me in. You have traveled that string to its breaking point. You might not come back and if you don’t come back, the jacket doesn’t come back and it will take me four life times to pay for that damn thing. So, you need to appreciate what I’m doing for you and make a promise to me that you won’t ever come into this store again.”

Donna nodded.

“I mean it. I’m sick of seeing you.’

Donna continued to nod and reached for the jacket. Sharon sighed and helped Donna put it on. It was lightweight and comfortable. As she slid her arm into the sleeve she immediately felt the tingling. She zippered it up to her chin, and pulled the hood up over her head.

“Ready?” Sharon asked.

Donna nodded and disappeared along the time string she desired.

When she arrived she pressed her hands against the doorframe of her son’s bedroom and looked in. He was piling his books into his blue backpack. His head and body bent over his bed during the task. She could smell the toast she was making for him down stairs.

“Hurry, William, your bus will be here any minute.” She called up at him. He left the room, but not before reaching over to pat, Butter, his stuffed dog. She smiled at this quick action of his. As he passed her, she stepped out of his way although she knew by experience it wasn’t necessary. She stood in the fabric of time, not in the actual moment. An actual moment was found to be a protected state that could not be re-entered. However, she followed closely, smelling that little boy smell, studying the thick brown hair and how it took unruly shapes in the form of flattened curls. When he yawned, she listened for the little click at the end that melted her heart. She went down into the kitchen with him, watched him take the toast from her. Their fingers tips touched during the exchange. She always hated that she was so quick turning away from him just to place a knife into the dishwasher. Why couldn’t she have lingered a little with their fingers touching like that? Or why didn’t she sit beside him on the other stool and ask him

what he dreamt about, or what he was thinking, or wished for. Instead, after depositing the knife she made a phone call to her business partner, Cheryl, to gripe about a client she was dealing with.

She faced the window, her back to her boy, cradling the phone in the nook between ear and shoulder, while William ate his toast alone.

However, she sat beside him. It was probably close to the three hundredth time that she did so. He ate the entire piece of toast in eleven bites; two huge bites followed by nine smaller ones. He chewed each piece between twenty-two and thirty-five times. Each time he opened his mouth she searched for that small nub of a new white tooth breaking through the gum in his bottom front. He swung his legs as he ate; he swung them a total of thirty times, seven of which hit the base of the stool lightly. He looked at his mother's back, he looked at his toast, he looked up at the ceiling and over at the sink as he chewed. He only drank from his glass of milk once, swallowing four times before putting the glass back down on the countertop and forgetting about it. A mark of white lay at the edge of his upper lip. What was he thinking about? He didn't appear sad. She liked that he didn't appear sad. That he was enjoying his toast and was not showing any sign of wishing his mother would speak to him. But she should have. Instead she went on talking away to Cheryl for another minute and six seconds until she gestured towards the window with an outstretched arm.

"Your bus, William, hurry," she said, "have to go, Cheryl, see you at work." Finally hanging up the phone she turned back to her son, who was sliding off the stool, landing solidly on his blue socks.

She knelt beside him, while he tried to squish his foot into his sneaker without loosening the laces.

She snatched it from him and pulled at the tongue, widening the opening, while he obediently held the foot in the air waiting for her to slide it on. He balanced himself by putting a flat out palm on the top of her head. She stood over the two, and studied the pattern his fingers made in her blonde hair. How his middle finger so small and white lined up perfectly with her part.

“Mommy, I don’t want to play soccer anymore. I don’t like it.”

“Yes, you do and you’ll go cause Daddy can’t pick you up until after practice.”

“But Mommy.”

“Stop it, William, The bus is out there.” She got up and opened the door for him.

“Go, quickly.”

It was the approach of the seven-minute mark when her heart would slide up into her throat, just as William trotted out the door, just before the tingling would tell her that she was returning. She would cry into her own ear, “Stop him. Go get him. Keep him home today. Keep him home.” And she would then proceed to push and punch at herself until she returned to the store.

But now it was different. She wore the new jacket and she was able to watch William step down onto the pathway. The remaining scream died in her throat. He looked so small. His backpack blocked off most of him as it hung from his small shoulders. She hesitantly stepped away from herself and the open door and followed. The sun was lovely, yellowing the sidewalk

through the canopy of mature trees. The bus idled, its doors open, laughter and young voices pouring out of its interior.

“William,” she pleaded as she ran in front of him, turning and grabbing his shoulders, feeling the small balls of his shoulder blades beneath his shirt. “Don’t go on the bus, go tell mommy you’re going to throw up, tell mommy your stomach hurts. Go, back and tell mommy.”

But William walked on, stepping up with care into the bus, using one hand on the door’s frame to steady himself.

“Hi,” he said to Mr. Doyle, the bus driver.

“Take a seat,” Mr. Doyle returned without smiling. William walked towards the back and Donna would have followed but she was overcome by a seething anger for the driver, who hadn’t offered her son something as small as a smile that morning.

She struck him in the face with a clenched hand. He pushed the button that automatically closed the doors and called, “everybody better be seated back there,” before pulling away from the curb. She kept hitting him until the first stop sign. He swatted back at her only once, as if she was a small fly. The brochure at the store had said that was about the extent someone would ever feel your presence. As the bus idled at the sign, he scratched at his temple, looking both left and right before proceeding.

What was she doing? It wasn’t the driver’s fault. He too had died instantly when the Hover bus struck them. With a building panic, she searched over the tops of the seats trying to spot her son. She did it again. Left his side. Why hadn’t she followed him?

“William,” she called as she walked down the narrow aisle, stepping through legs and arms that jutted out into the aisle. She smiled when she finally located her six-year-old boy, sitting quietly in the back row, looking out the side window, his hands folded in his lap. She sat down beside him and placed a hand over his hands, squeezing them lightly. The bus rattled along. He raised his head to keep in sight a black and white cat as it trotted across the roof of a small silver garage. He was such a quiet boy, sitting alone in a sea of loud young voices. Then the tingling started and she tried to hold onto his hands harder, tried to stay but she was soon traveling back along the string and to the store.

Shaking, she waited till Sharon unlocked the small zippers, before pulling down the hood.

Sharon looked concerned, “That string is pretty well severed.”

Donna slowly removed the jacket and handed it to Sharon. “It’s a nice jacket. I barely felt the pull this time. I only wish it would have taken me to those final minutes. So I could hold him.”

Sharon held the jacket close to her body, wrapping both arms around it and said in a low voice, “I have a list of places with good staff that can help you.”

Donna reddened slightly and looked out through the pink glass at the emptying mall.

”You aren’t alone with this problem.” Sharon added, stepping away from Donna to hang up the jacket. “Think on this. I need to lock up now and you need to get home. Chris will be worried sick.”

Donna rubbed the underside of her wedding ring and started towards the exit. Sharon switched off the ceiling light, distinguishing all the spots.

Donna stopped just outside the store and without turning around, asked, “When did a mother wanting to be with her child ever become a problem?”

Sharon pulled the iron-gate across the storefront with a clang and locked it. “When these time jackets went commercial”