And Then She Wore the Jacket
by Derrick Brown

We are going out, Melanie and I, to have our first mother-son shopping day in months. It’s Black Friday, and we need to escape family. Outside, the wind blows the chimes over the patio, producing frozen drops of metallic sound. Before we leave, she approaches the upright coat rack by the front entrance and grabs one of the coats hanging there without another thought or care. Upstairs, I slip on my jacket; it’s black leather, without any fur, and it gets the job done. Melanie wears a red turtleneck and a slightly worn pair of denim pants with rhinestones down the seams. Her hair is up behind her face, still wet from the shower half an hour ago. And then she wore the jacket.

There was a party that night. One of many. Each was a requirement for business, attendance was both expected and an honor, and invitations were signed with India ink. My father gabbled about snow and limousines, Strauss, beautiful sopranos, and free tickets from fellow bowties. He wore black with a shawl-collar and satin lapels, anticipating cigars. There was a thin shine stripe down the side of his leg, and his buttons were replaced with jet studs which, when he stood next to my mother, looked like black widows reflecting her hourglass frame wrapped in a crimson gown. Her fingers blossomed like ivy around the stem of a crystal champagne flute which she occasionally lifted to her lips, sipped, and set back at her side like an unnecessary accessory. Her gold rings echoed gold earrings and gold hair that lifted from her face and cascaded blonde waves like lace linens onto her shoulders. And then she wore the jacket.

Fitted at the waist and sewn from glossy white leather; around the collar and behind her neck a pillow of fox fur, grayed slightly like ashes on a bed of snow, framing my mother and her diamonds on either side like bold parentheses across her chest; sleeves, playing a burlesque game with her watch like effortlessly flowing window drapes. Wearing the jacket, she was Norma Desmond, she was Nu Descendant un Escalier. The look, the fit, her posture—slightly

Nu Descendant un Escalier [Nude Descending a Staircase] (1912) by Marcel Duchamp.
curved inward—all dancing together to music from silent films. Soon she would vanish through the door, always smiling, waving goodnight, and insisting she bring her champagne.

Whenever she wore the jacket I knew I’d receive money for delivery pizza. They were going to be out late, and I’d be in charge of the house, my sister, our bedtimes, and the television channels. She and my father would leave, laughing with anticipation and agreeing upon acceptable conversation topics for guests, usually with champagne still in her hand.

Both mom and dad had left for the day and my younger sister was still at dance practice, or perhaps staying late at an after-school program. I was left at home with my curiosity. I knew the jacket hung in the hallway closet behind a white door near the entranceway in the foyer, across from the staircase and next to the old candelabra hat rack, in sight from anywhere in the living room and slightly visible from my room at the top of the stairs, where I stood. The house was quiet, save for the background hum of cartoon soundtracks in the den, like music for Blanche Dubois. I slowly opened the closet door and saw the coat hanging among other jackets like a street-lamp alone in a birch forest, a snow-white moth resting on dead leaves, Apparition of a Face and a Fruit Dish on a Beach. Just out of reach, it was easy to grab with some footing from a kitchen stool. All I wanted was to see it, or maybe only to touch it. At first I merely caressed its enticing fur, gently weaving my fingers through the chaste fox hair. Then, carefully withdrawing it, I took the jacket down and carried it like a veteran flag to the mirror on my mother’s bedroom armoire. And then I wore the jacket.

The leather, almost oily like chilled butter, slipped onto and around my shoulders and sat larger than it should, especially around my hips. It was too big for me to wear and yet just right for the mirror. Childishly twirling; the collar and lining perfumed with old cinnamon and the rust of candlesticks stored on the shelves just above the hangers; sleeves falling past my fingers; fur coming nearly over my ears, brushing into my hair; fitted at my thighs and almost to my knees; leather struggling to retain its old beauty, as though rendered on loosened canvas. The zipper was scored slightly and difficult to maneuver, and it wouldn’t go any higher than my chest, catching the fur in its teeth. I didn’t have champagne or heels, and I wasn’t Norma Desmond. I was me, in a coat that didn’t fit, standing defeated at my mother’s mirror.

The jacket was around my shoulders and zipped slightly more than halfway up my waist. The days of Mom waltzing into limousines, smiling with her champagne fireflies, had passed, and all that was left was this ill-fitting memento. I’d wanted nothing more than to wear that jacket, but in the end I think I just wanted her.

I came home from college to an empty house, save for a new dog out back. My sister was away at school and my father was at work, no longer interested in Strauss or any business with Knights and Roses, nor snow and sopranos. My mother was out with her dad, moving him into another home with people who treated him like another patient. I entered from the back door, through the sun room, across the living room and foyer. Looking around, the walls were covered in the shadows of overgrown plants outside, weaving variations of Pinturas Negras. Antique pieces of furniture had been replaced with imitation commodities. Old trinkets and collectables I remember from my grandparents’ houses rested on bookshelves, burrowed under blankets of dust. There was no noise, no music. As I unpacked for my stay, the smell of spiced candles reminded me of my time in this house and how brilliant it once was, how wonderful and aristocratic everything had once appeared to be. I noticed on the floor, across from the staircase and next to the old candelabra hat rack, there was an old lump of leather and fur. I picked it up, shook out the dust, and
placed it on a hook. And then the hat rack wore the jacket.

The fur, wilting from age, resembles dust on silk peonies. Buttery leather, fading and crackling like mosaic eggshells; fitting losing shape, wrinkled into jagged crow’s feet; the lining, frayed into shreds of unwoven crimson fabric, exposes the untreated hide from the inside like bone; the flimsy zipper moving in a dysgraphic contour; unruly and overgrown fox hair surrounds the collar like shih tzus shaking dry; the pockets gape open like starved koi; the jacket whimpers and sighs, naked and unnoticed.

Like the house, the jacket became less cared for with age. The thought never occurred to me to try it on now. Instead, I stood there somewhat saddened and repulsed. I was the only one in the house that would acknowledge the jacket on the floor, and I don’t think anyone noticed it had been picked back up, either. The old white jacket hung near the front doorway for almost a week, motionless as strange fruit, until today;

Melanie clutches the jacket between her fingers and forces herself into its over-worn sleeves, gripping the zipper and tugging it up her chest.

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There are days when I wonder just how the world changes from childhood, and how things that seemed so perfect before are actually only ordinary. There’s nothing truly special about my mother’s old jacket—as it would turn out, she replaced it a little over a year ago with a similar model that she keeps stashed behind the hallway closet door. Between uses, the jacket became just another part of the aging house, and only it seems worth remembering when she was wearing it. The jacket alone was just an elaborate frame without a painting. In the end, the leather and fur never mattered in the first place.

We are going out, Melanie and I, to spend time together, because we never did that often enough. Before leaving, she approaches the upright coat rack by the front entrance and grabs one of the coats hanging there without another thought or care,

and then she wore the jacket.

Asmodia [aka Vision Fantástica] (1820-23) by Francisco Goya, from the artist’s Pinturas Negras (Black Paintings) series.