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Personal Effects

Marjorie Pryse

I came East to make some changes in my life, and Gerald Warren was the first person I met.

“I’m just now getting over my divorce,” he said.

“It takes longer than you might think before you’re free from it. How long has yours been?” I asked.

It came out when he invited me to spend New Year’s with him that Gerald considered himself divorced, but in fact he was still married.

“Dear Mom,” I wrote. “You won’t believe this, but I didn’t go to Cambridge after all. If you examine the postmark on this letter, you will see that I am mailing it from Vermont, where, in effect, I have been living all week. For once in my life, I’ve decided not to weigh the consequences of my action.

“The interviews went as well as we expected.

“I won’t include Gerald’s address, because I know you won’t approve of writing me here anyway.”

What began as an affair continued, after I took a job in the East, into the spring. Out of the impulse of a moment, we had done something to change Gerald’s situation. If we were going to carry on in this fashion, somebody had to clear away the remains of Gerald’s marriage. It was as if a person had died, in that apartment filled with effects. Gerald couldn’t do it. Baby couldn’t do it. I had to do it.

Baby always called late at night. After she found out that I had moved in, she called even later than before. If the phone rang while we were making love, it required a super human feat for Gerald to continue afterwards. Sometimes, he cried.

“She’s just a child,” he said. “Are you offended?”

"I cried myself," I said, "the day I packed my husband's favorite bread after I had asked him to leave me. I felt like his mother."

"Then you do understand. That's it. I feel like her father. Like she's my own daughter."

She wanted her summer clothes. Gerald said he'd pack a trunk and send it down on the bus. But in the end, he couldn't tell what was hers and what was mine, or couldn't bear to, or wouldn't try. So I had to do it.

I began by hauling out the trunk and two suitcases from under the bed where they had collected dust for months. I thought I was packing doll clothes. That was the first thing I noticed about her. She was small, but more than that, she was faceless. Her summer dresses were all of a kind, flowered cotton t-shirt tanks, last summer's New York fashion, purchased in shopping centers all over New England. She bought cheap puffed sleeves and boat neck shifts, girly styles that suited her size. I couldn't help examining each one before I folded it.

For every dress I removed from a hanger, I found two more stuffed like fists on shelves. The walk-in closet gave off the peculiar odor of old perfume and stale cosmetics. Each blouse I unwadded, in order to fold, carried the traces of liquid make-up and base.

I threw myself into the task, industriously and methodically separating my own clothes from hers, which was easy (mine huddled together in one group); then hers from Gerald's, not so easy, since she'd worn some of her father's discarded clothes. Remnants of curtains and bits of lace I followed deeper into the jungle of Gerald's broken umbrellas and winter coats until I came upon an old battle jacket, remnant of some man's war. I was used to work like this. As part of the arrival of summer in my mother's house, we had sorted our clothes into piles: those that fit, and those which needed repair. The rest we would donate to the Salvation Army, for the people in Appalachia.

The battle jacket I almost kept. It was the only thing that fit me. I tried it on and lifted the fur on its lapels under my chin. I tried to imagine what Baby looked like, my own features a counterfeit inside this stranger's coat. I remembered the first summer I outgrew my mother's clothes. We had considered ourselves sisters for two years, and then, one by one, I couldn't wear this dress, that blouse. My arms grew longer, and when we stood together in front of the mirror, I looked down on her for the first time.

Now that I was looking for them, Baby's belongings seemed more than ever to fill the apartment. When I paused for a moment, I saw the rooms in a new light. When I packed something away, it left a surfeit of dust in its place.

I filled the trunk completely. It swelled as I struggled to contain, in it, all the pieces I would have disdained, myself, to own. At what sacrifice of space Baby had kept, year to year, the discarded garments of the year

before, I could not understand. Her wardrobe was filled with useless, torn and stained, cast-off and made-over Creations by Irene. When I finished, my few dresses hung with space between each one.

I had been living out of one bureau drawer for the month of my stay. After I had swept the closet and moved the trunk into the hall, dragging it on one end, I attempted the dresser. In the bottom drawer, where I had stuffed them upon my arrival, I found the intimate apparel of my predecessor. I think I could have packed away old letters, had I discovered any, without reading them. Shielded by their envelopes, they would have protected themselves and me. But Baby's underwear, what she had never come back to claim, withered in the corners of the drawer. I found an old stocking, one fraying scarf strayed from the closet, an old-fashioned strapless with thick pads, one black lace bra with a broken strap: she had small breasts, like my mother.

I lifted my own in front of the mirror. My body seemed Amazonian, and I wondered whether Gerald, as consciously as I, noted the difference in our sizes. Baby's black lace bra wouldn't begin to fit me. I felt powerful. Her slips were pitiful. Slips from ten years ago, with stained straps: she'd made up her throat as well as her face. My mother's slips had looked the same, modestly tucked away in her drawer like pressed flowers in a photo album, their lace bosoms meant to be displayed under transparent chiffon.

I felt sorry for Baby. I thought with much uneasiness and guilt how she would feel as she opened these careful trunks and cases, seeing only a woman's touch; then I unpacked the underwear, crumpled it up the way I had found it, and stuffed it back inside, as if, to her eyes, someone might have simply and randomly transferred the contents of the drawer into the suitcase without first exposing them to the afternoon sunlight. How could she have left this for me to do? Or did she think Gerald, mustering the will she could not, would ease her final departure with such care?

The contents of the bathroom medicine cabinet I couldn't bear to save: caking facial in a bottle without a top, eyebrow pencil with no point, two lipsticks, and an empty prescription bottle. In my fanaticism, I ran a sponge over the shelf, only to smear the stale powder of some past year's evening's accidental spill, and then to collect the hairs, black and long (Gerald's would be light).

That was when I found the picture. Curled face downward, as if it had slipped behind the mirror to wait for my sponge to catch its corner, a photograph dated September, 1967, stuck to the bottom of the cotton box. I looked at it with particular interest.

She reminded me of the roommate I had lived with that same year. Gretchen had hollow cheeks and a high brow and Keane eyes. Her father had called her home at the end of March for her mother's funeral; for a month after she returned, carrying with her a box which contained as much of her

mother as she could—an antique necklace with an amethyst stone, and all the love letters she had received in her life—Gretchen sat in the window and silently stared. Then one afternoon she turned around and I could see that while I had been struggling with my calculus, Gretchen had stopped crying to herself.

“I’m going to lose my virginity,” she said.

I tucked the photo under my underwear and carried the last of the suitcases into the hall. Gerald had not yet returned. He often worked late, took a client for drinks. I began a letter home, then put it down. How could I explain? Not responsible, not even implicated, I had met Gerald weeks after Baby had left him.

Ought I write a letter to *her*? But I was the consequence of her action. She created me, regretted me, cast me in her own image. “Who is this?” she demanded, when I answered the phone late at night.

The closet seemed larger without the clothes she’d shed like skin, but her scent still hung in the air. I opened the window and sat on the ledge, mourning.