

Coin prefers to be called a dressmaker. If you ever make the mistake of referring to her as a “seamstress,” she will pull you aside and give you a piece of her mind. Seamstresses, she will say, are people who only know how to *sew seams*. They have no consideration for color or style—they are paid to stitch pieces of fabric together, and as far as Coin is concerned, that's all they're good for. They are people without any artistic knowledge of textiles—people who probably don't know knitting needles exist.

Coin, on the other hand, knits as often as she can get away with it. She crochets, too, and she quilts—in fact, she's made so many quilts that she was able to exhibit them in a local art gallery, and once in a while she displays some at a specialty quilting store. She adds bits of personalized embroidery to everything she makes—flowers, lollipops, songbirds—whatever she thinks is needed.

She throws herself into her sewing heart and soul—she thirsts for the colors and patterns of the cloth, for the shine of embroidery floss, for the satisfaction that comes from running her hand down a perfectly stitched seam. She'll sit in front of her sewing machine for hours on end, until the up-down-up-down motion of the needle blurs under her gaze and she realizes that her back is cramping up and she's neglected to eat lunch. At that point she'll get up and stretch, and go through her daily yoga workout, and fix herself something all-organic to eat, preferably something that includes whole grains and red cabbage. Then, once she has finished washing the dishes—by hand, of course—she'll return to her sewing and sit for a while longer, guiding her fabric through the machine.

Her boyfriend, Ethan, is starting to worry about her.

“Coin,” he says today, “do you want to go out to lunch or something?”

Coin just holds up one finger and shakes her head, her white-blond hair swinging over the measuring tape that hangs around her shoulders. Her mouth is too full of pins for her to answer, and she can't take them out until she finishes this seam.

Ethan sighs and turns back to the windows that line one wall of Coin's apartment, watching the gray-white storm clouds float past overhead. He waits as she feeds the fabric through the machine, under the needle, completely focused on keeping the seam straight. After a minute, she lifts her foot from the floor pedal and takes the pins out of her mouth, and looks up.

“Lunch,” she repeats, and bites her lip in thought. Her gaze slides sideways to take in the floorboards. “I'd love to, honey, but I have a new client coming over in about an hour, and I

really should be here to meet her. I just don't think there's time for it today.”

“Oh,” Ethan replies, not moving. “What are you doing for her?”

“Altering a jacket.” Coin pivots the length of fabric so she can start on a new seam, and the cloth spills across her lap in waves of blue.

He sighs and comes around to stand beside her, and leans over to drape his arms around her shoulders. “I worry about you,” he mumbles into her hair. “It seems like all you ever do is work.”

She sighs and reaches back to touch his hand. “You don't need to be so concerned, Ethan. I have things under control.”

“Yes, but I want you to get out a little more. I just...” He sighs again. “Give yourself a break from time to time, all right? Pace yourself. For my sake.”

Coin pulls a pencil down from behind her ear. “All right,” she says, marking something on the fabric. As Ethan straightens up and crosses to the door, she adds, “Where are you going?”

“Walking the dog. I should be back within an hour.” He grabs his coat out of the closet, then turns back to look at her, hunched over her sewing table. Two of her quilts hang on the walls, flanking her, their blue and purple tessellations bright against the gloom of the day. A shelf of fabric and yarn and thread takes up one corner of the room, and a dress dummy stands in another, sporting a half-finished denim jacket that Coin is making out of an old pair of jeans.

“You haven't forgotten about my mom's potluck tonight, have you?” he asks.

“I'll be there. And I'll bring my famous low-fat macaroni.”

“Yum.” He pauses. “And—well—you're sure you're all right here?”

“I'm fine.” She puts her foot down on the floor pedal, and the sewing machine whirs to life. Ethan watches for a minute, then sighs and slips out, pulling the door closed.

And Coin sews. The blue fabric slithers through her hands, and the machine vibrates like a purring cat, and the needle darts up and down, up and down, eating up the cloth until it comes to the end of the cloth. Then Coin lifts her foot and pivots the fabric, and continues sewing.

Rain begins to beat against the windows, first just a few drops, and then a sheeting downpour that turns the glass to water. It is a good day to be inside, Coin decides. A good day to sew. And for a time she is alone with her sewing machine, guiding the fabric, stopping, pivoting, starting again, losing herself to the calm monotony of her work. Then there is a knock, and she stands and goes to the door.

She finds a brunette woman waiting in the hall, wearing a black overcoat and holding a white paper bag in her arms. Her coat is spattered with mud-stains, and the sides of her garment bag glisten with greasy black smears.

The woman gives Coin an apologetic smile, and wipes her bangs out of her eyes with a black-gloved hand, leaving a smear of mud on her cheek. "I—hello. You're Coin, right? Hi. I'm Marian. Your ten o' clock fitting appointment?"

Coin nods and smiles, extending her hand. "I'm Coin," she says, trying not to grimace as Marian's muddy glove meets her fingers. "Please, come in." She steps aside, inviting Marian into the warmth of the apartment.

But Marian takes a step back, and clutches at her stained bag, smearing mud across her sleeves with the motion. "Oh—well—thank you. But I—when I was crossing the street just now, I—I don't know—I managed to drop my bag into the mud." She gives a nervous laugh. "And I'm so, *so* sorry, but I—well..." She looks down at her shoes, which are oozing a puddle of muck onto the carpet. And she sighs and slowly shakes her head, her short hair swinging back and forth in front of her face. "I just don't know what to do," she whispers.

Coin shifts her weight to her other foot and bites her lip. "I—I'm sorry," she manages after a minute. "I'd wash it for you—"

"You would?" Marian jerks her head up with a flash of hair, now all smiles. "Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you!" She starts to press the garment bag into Coin's arms, but Coin raises her hands, fending it off. "No—I'm sorry," she repeats. "I don't think you understand—I don't own a washing machine. It's—well, all that soap and laundry detergent—and the water! It's bad for the environment—I'd much rather invest in yarn."

Marian just stares at her for a moment, clutching her garment bag, eyes wide and uncertain. "Oh," she says after a minute. "All right, then. I...I understand." She takes a step back. "I'll go, then."

"Would you like to reschedule?" Coin asks, making a last desperate attempt to come across as hospitable.

"No, thank you." Marian turns and walks down the hall, leaving a trail of muddy footprints in her wake. Coin watches until she enters the stairwell, then sighs and slips back into the apartment, trying to swallow the rigid lump of guilt that has formed in her throat.

She goes back to her sewing, and time passes, slow and solemn. Coin is alone with her

work, alone in the shadows of the raindrops falling past her windows. She keeps herself focused on her sewing machine, on the seam. There is no room for contemplation now—there is only space for the needle and the thread, and the hum of the machine.

The phone rings, and she sits up and grabs the cordless on her sewing table. “Hello?”

“Hey,” Ethan's voice replies, somewhat breathless from his walk. “Just wanted to let you know I'm home now.”

“Thanks for calling. How was it out there?”

Ethan recounts the rain and wind he and the dog faced at the park, and tells Coin how wet they were when they returned home. She can't help but laugh at the image of Ethan's black lab shaking and splattering mud all over the apartment carpeting, and Ethan laughs with her. They chat for a few more minutes, and before Coin hangs up, Ethan reminds her about the potluck later that day.

“Oh, that's right!” Coin has already managed to forget about it.

“So, you've started on the macaroni, then?”

“Yes, yes, of course I have. In fact, I should get back to it right now.”

“I'll call you when I'm getting ready to leave, okay?”

“Okay, bye. Love you.” Coin hangs up and turns back to her sewing machine, fully intending to get to the casserole as soon as she finishes this seam. And, before she can slip back into that place of quiet focus, the seam is done. And it is time to take a break from sewing.

So she gets up and goes into the kitchenette, and begins pulling measuring cups and mixing bowls and dry ingredients out of the cupboards. She opens the miniature refrigerator and grabs a stick of butter and a block of cheddar cheese, and then pauses and looks again.

It takes her a moment to realize that the milk is gone.

There is some grapefruit juice, and a pint of half-and-half, and even a little bit of lemonade. But none of those can be used in the casserole. So Coin puts the butter and cheese back in the fridge, and grabs her coat and her favorite lavender scarf. She'll just have run out and buy some milk, then. That's fine. She has time. She snatches her purse and checks to make sure all of the burners are off before she leaves.

Outside, the rain beats against her face in little spurts of cold, and she is glad that she decided to wear the scarf. The world is gray and brown and black, and all of the corner streetlights are on, throwing darts of gold across the mud pooling in the gutters. Coin quickens

her pace, eager to be out of the wind.

When she finally arrives at the grocery store, she is red-faced and cold and wet from the walk. She goes right to the freezers and grabs a carton of milk, and once she has paid for it, she steps back out into the storm. The wind is stronger now, and scrapes at her face and teases tears from the corners of her eyes. She leans against it and keeps walking, both hands wrapped around the carton of milk. She will prevail—she is stronger than the storm, and home is only a few blocks away.

Then the wind reaches down and tugs her scarf from around her neck, and before she can grab it, the length of lavender slips off of her shoulders with a sigh. It flutters through the air and dances out over the street, and sinks into the sludge. The muck oozes between each knitted link, turning the bright purple into brown, eating up the yarn until the scarf is gone, just a wet rag floating on the surface of the puddle.

And Coin is left standing on the sidewalk, braced against the wind, not knowing what to do. Should she pull the scarf out of the mud, and shake it off, and take it home and try to wash it? She can't just leave it there—she knitted it herself, and it's one of her favorites, and she's had it for such a long time. So she bends down and takes one hand off of the milk, and, with a grimace, reaches out and closes her fingers around the yarn. When she straightens up, a length of brown drips from her hand, infused with mud and car exhaust, no longer identifiable as hers.

For a minute, Coin just stands there, clutching the carton of milk to her chest and staring at the remnants of her scarf. She winces as the mud seeps through her gloves and touches her fingers—there is no way she will be able to clean the scarf without a washing machine and some proper laundry detergent.

She glances down at her milk, then back at the scarf. A car splashes past, sending up fountains of brown and white spray from its wheels. Coin steps away from the curb and glances at her wristwatch, and makes a decision. She still has some time before the potluck begins—she will put it to good use, and take the scarf to the nearest laundromat. After some searching, she finds one a couple of blocks away, and ducks inside.

The interior is all but empty, with just a few washing machines giving off muffled thumps and bangs. Coin finds a washing machine of her own, and inserts a handful of quarters that are swallowed with a series of echoing metallic clunks. And then it is time for the wash cycle to begin, and she is left struggling to pour in the right amount of soap. She has not used a washing

machine in years, and this one has more options than she knows what to do with. After a few minutes of twisting a knob back and forth, she manages to make the water come on, and figures that that will have to be good enough. She drops her scarf into the machine, and the brown is covered up by the writhing foam of soap bubbles. For a minute she stays there, holding the lid of the washer open, watching as it fills with water. Then she closes the lid and steps away, and goes to sit down near one of the windows.

As she waits there, listening to the incessant whir of the machines, Marian comes to mind—Marian, with her stained white garment bag, and the little smear of mud on her cheek, and no one to go to when Coin turned her away. And in that moment, Coin realizes what an awful thing she did, in saying no. She bites her lip and turns her eyes to the floor, and the washing machines that are in use continue to spin and thump, heedless of her emotions, not caring whether she is happy or sad.

Her sorrow grows, mingling with something larger—a melancholy that permeates the very air. There is always a sort of melancholy to laundromats, she sees now—a combination of the sounds, and the quarters vanishing into the machines, and the dark gray color of the walls. And Coin hopes that Marian did not have to endure that melancholy—that, after having descended the stairs with hunched shoulders and arms wrapped around her bag, she ended up somewhere, anywhere, other than a laundromat. And, with nothing else to do, Coin begins to imagine a quilt design that will evoke this feeling, of being shunned and ignored even by the machines that she has come here to use.

Halfway through her quilt plan, her washer, the one with her scarf in it, stops. Coin gets up and pulls the scarf out, and finds that it has regained some of its color, though it is still spotted with splotches of brown. She frowns, and glances at her wristwatch, and looks back at the scarf. There is no time to wash it again—there is not even time for a rinse. She has to get home. She throws the scarf into a dryer and feeds the last of her quarters to the hungry machine, and presses start, and steps back to wait and watch. The scarf swirls around and around behind the dryer door, elongating into one continuous loop of lavender. And her mind loops back to Marian, and once again she feels terrible for what she has done. The rumble of the machine takes root in her mind, and turns into two words—the words she would say to Marian now, if she could.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

When the scarf is done, she takes it in her hands, and finds that it is still smeared with

lines of brown. They are no more than stains, but they are dark and ugly, overwhelming the bright color of the lavender. She sighs in disappointment, and her motion causes the milk to slosh in its carton, reminding her that she needs to get home, that she has only an hour or so left before the start of the potluck. So she ties the scarf around her neck in a hasty knot and ducks back out into the storm, leaving the laundromat as quickly as she can without running.

Her apartment is warm when she steps inside, and it is a welcome change from the spitting rain and clawing wind outside. Coin pulls off her coat and steps out of her rain boots, and slowly takes the scarf from around her neck. She looks at it for a minute, tracing the stains with her eyes. Then she turns and heads into the kitchen, and the scarf falls from her fingers and is forgotten on the floor.

Coin pulls down her cookbook, and lets it fall open to the macaroni recipe. This recipe will be the pattern from which she cuts her fabric—a fabric composed of pasta and cheese, the fundamental pieces of her dish. Her stirring spoon is the needle, pulling everything together as it mixes in milk and cheese and butter and flour, turning them into a savory sauce. Little touches—salt in the water, oregano in the glass baking dish—are like deciding to sew by hand, adding something special that only she is aware of. She pours the pasta into the baking dish and layers on the cheese sauce, and the sauce is like the thread, uniting the dish, completing her pattern, making everything one. After sprinkling on black pepper and breadcrumbs—little bits of embroidery, the finishing touch—Coin places the dish gently in the oven, and leaves it to bubble and bake.

As she goes about cleaning up, the half-twilight outside begins to fade to dusk. It is after six o' clock, and evening is approaching, and sunlight and shadows alike are melting into blue. Coin switches on a table lamp and sits down at her sewing machine, and smiles at the familiar clatter of the gears. She sews for a while, not thinking, just working, until the timer on the oven beeps. Then she gets up and goes into the kitchen and, picking up a hot pad, opens the oven door and pulls out the casserole. It is bubbling and steaming, bright orange in the blue of the evening, warm against her chapped and tired hands. She takes a deep breath, and sighs with pleasure at the scent of the cheese. Then she sets it on the counter, and calls Ethan to let him know she's almost ready.

As she pulls on her coat, she steps on something soft and glances down to see what it is. A length of brown-streaked purple peeps out from under her rain boot, and a pang of guilt darts

through her as she realizes that it's her scarf, and that it ended up on the floor. She picks it up and shakes it off, and carefully drapes it over a chair before going to grab the macaroni. As she's heading out the door, she snatches her latest knitting project so her hands will have something to do.

The potluck is busy, which is a relief to Coin, as it gives her the opportunity to slip away and find a private corner. She grabs a plate of macaroni, then goes to sit on the couch, where she pulls out the knitting project she brought along. She stares at it for a couple of minutes, scrutinizing the needle size, trying to figure out what to do with it. It was going to be a hat, that much she knows—but now she thinks that perhaps the bright blue is not the right color for a hat. Perhaps the yarn could be put to better use making something else.

She slips the knitting off of the needles and begins unraveling her work, pulling out a tumble of twisted blue yarn, winding it into a ball as she goes. When she is done unwinding her knitting, she starts again, carefully counting out the number of stitches she needs to cast on.

Ethan comes over and sits down next to her, putting an arm around her shoulders. “Have you tasted your casserole yet?” he asks, holding up his own plate of low-fat cheesy goodness.

“I have. It turned out well, don't you think?”

“It's excellent,” he agrees. They sit in silence for a moment, then he asks, “So what are you making?”

Coin smiles to herself. “It's going to be a scarf.”