

The Red Raincoat

Jerry was a small boy for his age, but he had a big heart. He could feel the size of it in his little chest. He could feel it beating there like thunder, knocking on the door, asking to come out and see the light.

Jerry's mother was a seamstress. Her hands were accustomed to weaving and unweaving broken seams. She kept a large pile of clothes from her customers on the floor beside her sewing machine and the pile was taller than Jerry.

One day Jerry asked his mother to let him take his bath early. She was working on an expensive tuxedo at the time, letting out the waist for a customer whose belly had gotten bigger since buying the outfit.

Jerry's mother eyed her son with great curiosity about his request, which was certainly unusual. Jerry didn't like water. He frequently cried when his mother told him it was bath time, and only singing to him made him happy again.

She said, "Jerry, you hate taking a bath. You always start to cry. Then I sing you a song and you remember life is happy."

"I know," Jerry said, "but today my heart is singing the song for you, and the song is about water, so I want to take a bath."

This explanation made Jerry's mother smile, but also frown. Adults always have too much work to do, and she was right in the middle of an important job. She did not want to stop. She did not believe she could afford to.

"Can you draw the bath yourself?" she asked.

Jerry nodded his head yes.

"Okay," his mother said, and continued her sewing. But several minutes later, having reached a good place for a break, she put the tuxedo pants onto her sewing table very carefully, smoothing away a few wrinkles with her hands, and walked to the bathroom, where Jerry could be heard splashing and singing.

"This is highly unexpected," she thought, pausing at the door. She fixed her hair and knocked on the wood. "Jerry, can I come in?"

Jerry sang the words, "Yes yes yes!"

When Jerry's mother opened the door, she found him standing naked in the tub, which was only full to his ankles. He pushed the water around the tub with his feet and marched back and forth, singing.

“Jerry, what are you doing?” asked his mother.

“Look, ma,” he said, “I have a seam.” He pointed to an area on his small chest where a big red line had appeared. It ran all the way across him, from his left shoulder to his right. A loose thread hung from the center. “I’m opening,” Jerry said, pulling lightly on the thread.

Owing to her profession, Jerry’s mother could never let a seam go unexamined, so she approached her son and tickled at the loose thread with her finger. “That’s peculiar,” she said, speaking mostly to herself, a bit concerned.

“It’s always been here,” Jerry said.

“No, Jerry,” his mother disagreed. She pressed her eyes against it to have a closer look.

“The thread is yellow,” Jerry said, speaking into the top of his mother’s head. Her thick red hair smelled like fabric.

“Yes, it is yellow,” she agreed. “I think I should fix it.”

But Jerry marched to the other end of the tub and folded his arms across his chest. They were very thin arms, hardly covering anything. They covered only the seam.

“I don’t want you to,” he said. “I want you to take it out.” He explained he was taking the bath because he wanted to be especially clean before she did it. “I ought to be as clean as possible for its removal,” he stated.

“Removal?” Jerry’s mother repeated, deeply worried.

“Yes,” Jerry said. He repeated the word removal. He sang it. Then he turned up the tap and the tub filled slowly with water.

Jerry’s mother sat on the toilet and watched her son kick around in the bath. He took a bar of soap from the holder and scrubbed near his heart, all up and down his chest, covering the seam with thick white bubbles.

“If I remove the thread,” his mother said, “you’ll be wide open like a torn dress coat. I’ll have to sew you back up.”

“No, momma,” Jerry said.

The conversation ended. In its place, Jerry resumed singing, and soon his mother sang too, but all the time she was thinking to herself also. When Jerry finished washing, he flipped the drain in the bathtub and the water began to run down. He stood up and asked

his mother for a towel and together they dried him, especially careful not to tear the seam with too much rubbing.

After the bath, wearing the large towel around his waist in several loops, Jerry led his mother to her sewing table and sat in a chair. He leaned back so that his chest extended forward, and asked his mother to take out the thread. "All of it," he said.

She hesitated, but Jerry promised her it would be okay. He told her the seam was always there, waiting to appear, so she shouldn't be afraid. It was small consolation. Jerry also said seams are meant to be opened, not closed. He said people had it backwards, except for his mother, who opened them daily.

Jerry's mother asked him how come she had never seen the seam before. She was talking to herself again, hesitating. Jerry answered, "I was hiding it, mamma." But he never explained how it was possible to hide it from her, since she always gave him his bath. He simply spread his arms open as if to give his mother a big hug. The seam curved into a smile with a few clumsy stitches like stray teeth.

Jerry's mother decided if the seam had to be opened and the thread had to come out, it was best for her to do it, since she was an excellent seamstress. "A job like this is a tricky one," she said. "A job like this one, on a little boy, on my little boy, on Jerry," she wavered, slightly trembling. "Yes," she persisted, "if someone has to do it, I'm certainly glad it's me, a trained seamstress."

She repeated these ideas to herself several times as she gathered her tiny tools to do the work. She was not completely convinced by what she told herself, but somehow it helped her get on with it, which is how adults do many difficult things. She lifted the seam splitter in her fingers and looked at it more closely than ever before in her life. It was an important implement suddenly.

"Don't look there," Jerry said. "Look here!" And he pointed at his chest, where the seam was now very clear as his body cooled off after the hot bath. The entire thing was purple and very red at the edges, with thin yellow threading. It ran across his chest like a train track.

"Okay, dear," his mother said, pressing her free hand against his shoulder. "I'm going to cut the thread now."

The seam splitter worked through the yellow thread very easily, without any resistance at all, unlike the seams in the tuxedo that morning. Jerry's mother was relieved by its cooperation, but also afraid because now the seam would definitely open, and who knew what would happen to Jerry in that state?

"I'll be all right," Jerry said, gazing down at the seam growing wider beneath his eyes. "It was always meant to open," he explained. "I won't be able to tell you that afterwards, but you'll know it was true."

These final words increased his mother's concern and she finished the work in a hurry, not wanting to think too much about them. When the seam was completely open, the sliced yellow thread dotted both sides of it like caterpillar legs. It seemed to Jerry's mother the legs were actually crawling.

Jerry's mother put the seam splitter back on the table and sat on the floor at a short distance from her son. Beads of perspiration collected on her forehead and she rubbed her hands together nervously.

Jerry smiled at her for a moment. He hiccupped twice. Then a torrent of bath water poured out from the open seam onto the carpet, soaking them both.

Jerry laughed. He raised both his arms, but they remained above his head for only a second. Then the upper half of his body, above the open seam, fell backwards behind him like a big empty hood. Then his legs fell away.

For a moment Jerry's enormous heart hung in the air, completely free of his body. It had eyes and a mouth. It smiled and said, "Well, hello!" It shook its shoulders and the last drops of water flew off it.

Jerry's mother expected it to open a pair of hidden wings and fly around the room, and maybe out the window, never to return. She was worried about this possibility. The corners of her mouth tightened and she started to cry.

She was not entirely wrong. There was a rustling sound, like wind through a tree branch. Then a pair of orange winds spread out behind the heart and fluttered twice without lifting it. The heart hovered in the center of the room.

Jerry's mother raised her hand to her mouth and watched, astonished. The odd sequence of events began to sink in more deeply. She shook her head a few times to make sure she wasn't dreaming. "Jerry?" she said.

"I'm here, mamma," she heard Jerry say. But the sound didn't come from the heart. It arose from her chest. It was her heart that said them, not Jerry's. She lowered her hand to her chest and held onto her heart softly.

"I'm here, mamma," her heart said. "I'm here, inside your heart. I went back where I started, where I came from. I never left."

"Jerry," his mother said, beginning to cry, cradling her heart. She hunched over in her chair and wept very deeply.

"It's okay, momma," he said. "Things are never how they seem." It was a surprising time for a pun, and it snapped Jerry's mother out of her sadness. She lifted her eyes and

looked at the heart floating in the center of the room, testing its new wings. It continued to flap them without moving anywhere.

“That’s my favorite look,” the heart said, speaking from within Jerry’s mother. “I love it most when you look at me that way, with your eyes wide open, amazed. You look like you’re staring at an angel.”

“I am,” Jerry’s mother responded. “What else could you be? You were an angel from the moment you were born.”

“I was lost,” Jerry said. “I fell out of the sky, mamma, and I thought I was a boy. I wanted to be a boy for you, mamma, because you wanted a boy. I wanted to make you happy, mamma. I knew you weren’t happy.”

Jerry’s mother picked up the tuxedo pants and squeezed them in her fists. “How did you know I wasn’t happy?” she asked, sniffing and wiping her nose on the long dangling leg of the empty pants.

“Because,” Jerry said, “your heart speaks through my heart too. I hear every word, as if they’re all mine. They are mine, mamma,” Jerry said.

“But I love you,” Jerry’s mother pleaded. She knew where the conversation was going. Her heart was speaking loud and clear in Jerry’s voice.

“Then I have to let you go,” she admitted. “I have to let you go so you can touch all the hearts in the world that need you, not only mine.”

“Yes, mamma,” said her heart.

“I’ll be okay,” her heart said. “I’ll be okay.”

Jerry’s mother put down the tuxedo pants and stood up. She walked forward to be closer to the heart of her son, fluttering in the center of the room. The heart smiled and she gave it a kiss, which set its wings right. They flapped easily and carried the heart across the room and out the open window, where it paused to look back. “I love you, momma,” it said, hesitating outside the window. Then it shot straight up into the sky like a rocket and the room became totally silent.

After a period of silence a lone sound filled the room, the sound of Jerry’s mother crying. She hung her head on her chest and sobbed terribly about losing her son, until a remarkable thing happened and she realized she was happy. She realized her heart was light inside her after crying and she felt like a little girl again. She told her heart how much she loved it, addressing it as Jerry. Then she spoke special words into it that no one can say unless they let go of everything for the benefit of someone else.

Those words cannot be repeated here, reader. They can never be recorded because they are only true when they happen and afterwards, if you try to write them down or use them again at another time, they fold up their wings and refuse to communicate. But that day they flew circles around the room and filled a woman's broken heart to overflowing and she learned to revisit them without asking them for anything.

They told her to go to the window. They told her to lean on the window sill and see the whole sky as her son. They told her to watch him dance in the form of clouds and smile in the shape of sunlight and occasionally to cry when the rain came because crying was a good thing when you remember a sacrifice for love.

But last of all the words that can't be repeated directed Jerry's mother to the center of the room and urged her to pick up Jerry's skin and sew it back together where the great seam had appeared. It was a difficult task because the skin felt so hollow and empty, and Jerry's mother pushed through a lot of grief to complete it. She tried very hard not to look at Jerry's face, afraid it would contain no expression, not recognize her anymore. That would be too much to bear.

She stitched for a very long time without looking at the resulting garment, completely focused on the work to insure she got through it. At the last stitch she paused, sad to be finished. She felt like crying again, but held back the tears. When she pulled the last stitch, she cut the thread and tied the ends with her fingers, which were shaking, but she got the job done. She put her thin needle down on the sewing table and stretched the garment open to examine it.

Jerry's mother did not know how it happened, but the garment was no longer the skin of her son. She opened it in front of her eyes and sat perfectly still, staring at a bright red raincoat with a beautiful red hood with green leaves on branches embroidered around it. The raincoat had elegant brown buttons and deep pockets in front for keeping your hands dry while you walked. But strangest of all, stitched into the inner lining directly over the place where your heart would be when you wore it, the raincoat bore a name tag with Jerry's mother's name on it.

Jerry's mother stared at the name tag for a long time, fascinated. She did not remember putting those stitches there or making a raincoat at all. She studied the letters carefully, as if they could somehow remind her who she was, snap her awake from a dream in some way. That was their purpose, because they were not only letters. Each one, when looked at up close, was composed of extremely fine stitches that formed a single command, repeated in each letter: "Go out in the rain, mamma! Go out in the rain." Jerry's mother's name was the repetition of these words.

She shook her head in disbelief. She stood up from her chair and wrapped the red raincoat around her, putting her arms through the sleeves, and tucked her hands into the deep pockets. The raincoat fit perfectly. It was warm. She walked over to the window, wondering when she would be able to use it in the rain, and the sky changed before her

eyes, becoming brighter for a moment, and then offering a spring shower. “Oh,” she decided, “right now then,” she said.

Jerry’s mother left the apartment without an umbrella. She pulled the hood up around her head so her face was surrounded by green leaves. When she stepped from the lobby, she noticed that raindrops stuck to her without running off. How they shined, reader! How those lovely raindrops shined!