

Dolomite

Stylish for an army-wife, sewing her own clothes from Simplicity patterns, wearing pedal-pusher pants and ironing while watching soap operas and *I Love Lucy* on the little black-and-white, our mother decided after we were transferred to Italy that we would sell the television and go out to see the sights. She led our tours of Lombardy's towns and valleys in the family station wagon shipped over in our wake. She sat up front with a map opened in her lap, her scarf knotted softly against her Eve's apple, her telling our father which roads to take and where to stop. She held her sunglasses in the hand she used for pointing out the attractions and she practiced her brand-new Italian on billboards along the roads and on shop signs in the towns.

We stopped in ancient places. She cleaned her sunglasses on her blouse, led us out of the car, pointed this way and that, told us what it was her tour book had told her of where we were. These were strange places we followed our mother into, with buildings whose aged bricks and stones were infused with an otherness even children as young as ourselves could sense.

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Our father called away on special duty, our mother walked the lower regions of the Dolomites in the brown pedal-pushers and gold lamé shoes she had sewn herself. We followed along as best we could, distracted by flowers, by bugs, by mud puddles and rocks. She was always in the lead, her scarf keeping branches from nabbing strands of her curling red hair, her sunglasses scratched from brambles that poked at her eyes while she blazed ways for us through attractions that don't pull at every tourist.

At night, after we had come home to the army post where we lived, after we had been washed and fed and sent up the stairs of our government quarters to bed, she would sit downstairs in her stuffed turquoise rocker, close by the floor lamp, and repair with needle and thread, hand and eye, whatever damage the mountains and forests had done to the clothes she made. If we were too wound-up to sleep, we would sneak partway down in our one-piece homemade bunny suits and sit on the wooden stairs and watch. She held her work lifted slightly from her lap and just to one side, closer to the lamp. She bowed her head and rocked her chair gently, stopping the rocking from time to time to concentrate at the more difficult or tedious parts. She sang lowly to herself while she sewed, singing "I Will Follow Him," "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree," "Where the Boys Are," and songs we didn't recognize. Once we giggled and were caught.

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Her Simplicity patterns were made of thin, stiff tissue paper that crackled with delicate sharpness whenever touched. The paper was translucent brown. She pinned it down over swatches of whole cloth as per the instructions that came with the patterns in their thick, white envelopes. The envelopes had pictures on their fronts, color drawings of mannequinish models in their simple styles.

She used her ironing board as the place to lay out her yards of cloth. She lay the patterns flat on the cloth in the most efficient manner, so that only scraps fit for patching would be left over once the clothes were made. She took pins from a pincushion she had fashioned of red and green flannel scraps to look like a tomato and put a few in her mouth, points first and clenched in her teeth, her lips drawn back while she concentrated and squinted in a way that always intimidated us. She bent over her ironing board, pulling the pins from her teeth one-by-one by their heads to pin the patterns to the flannel or the linen or the cotton or to something more man-made. She would lift the pinned-together patterns and cloth off the ironing board and hold them up with her fingertips along the top edge, squinting and frowning and turning her project this way and that, then set the assemblage back on the waist-high board, bend over it again, and work at her pinning until she got it right. When it suited her, she took up her black-handled pinking shears and cut the cloth.

She sewed the pieces together on the Singer she'd received as a present a few weeks after she married our father, before he was sent away to his first war, in the years before we were born. She slept almost as much as most people but not always at the usual times, and we could hear at any time of night or day the muted start-stopping sounds of her machine at play as she sat in a metal folding chair and worked the Singer's electric pedal with her foot, her careful fingers pushing the fabric along its path under the needle in the spot of light from the machine's lamp. She hunched over and paid attention to her work. When her stitch was done, she sat up straight and reached for a small pair of steel-silver scissors she used to snip the thread.

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One Life to Live, Days of Our Lives, As the World Turns, Edge of Night and Ethel Mae Mertz, we shipped out to Italy and the television was sold. Our mother brought along adapter plugs so her Singer and her iron, her toaster and her red Armed Forces radio all would work. The adapter plugs were round and black, with strange round prongs to slip into the sockets of the Italian grid. At night when we had returned to our beds from sitting on the stairs to listen to our mother sing at her sewing, we would slip our fingers between the sockets and the adapter plugs. We pressed the plugs against our fingers until we felt the thrill of electrocution. On days when we were home from school, we strung together scraps of wire from our mother's toolbox and sat in our bunny suits on our upstairs bedroom floor, poking bared ends of frayed wires into foreign sockets until the sparks popped meaner than snakes, the circuit-breakers broke, and our mother's Singer went dead in mid-pedal-push.

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Our father returned from his special assignment and we took more drives, him with both hands on the wheel and our mother with the map. We drove to Arena Verona, where the lions had eaten the chosen few; to Venezia, where we plowed the Grand Canal in a vaporetto and bought slides of St. Mark's; we drove the full circumference of Lago di Garda, counting in Italian the seventy-seven tunnels of its encircling mountain road.

We drove all day and fell asleep, waking up sweating and leaning all which ways against each other in the back seat of the family wagon. The sun shone in through the windows. We were in an open place in the Dolomites. Our car was pulled off the road, parked on a shelf of khaki-colored dirt. The black-topped road came out of the mountains behind us, wrapped itself around the side of the mountain across the road from where we were, and snaked away once more into mountains ahead. Old houses of stone with red-tiled roofs encrusted the face of the mountain rising across the road. The windows of the houses were black, glassless, unshuttered but closed in a darkness deep as any dark need be. The walls of the houses looked as though they'd been scrubbed. The road looked brand-new. Opposite the mountain with houses, the place where we were parked ended in an edge. Beyond this edge stretched a plain of dried mud. This plain was utterly flat, with nothing on it other than its color in the sunlight. It ended at the foot of a range of hazy, aqua peaks.

Off to one side of the place where we were parked, near where the edge met the road that remained ahead, a church bell stood in a large, timbered frame. Flowers and wreaths were lain about its base. A breeze blew, moving some of the flowers. A few men in black were gathered about. Some of them were old; others, fewer, were younger, stout, with dark brown hair.

Our mother stood by the edge of the road, her back to the car. She wore her new green coat, the one she made with the four big green buttons down the center of its front, and her brown pedal-pushers and second pair of gold lamé shoes. We went to her. The breeze was cool, drying our sweat, catching a strand of our mother's hair straying out from under her scarf, blowing it across her face. She had her sunglasses on. She said something in Italian, then switched to English. She said this was a place where the mountains walked; that they had walked away from a dam in the middle of the night, releasing all the water; that a town had washed away while everyone slept. She said only one man had survived, and he lived up there. She pointed up at the houses with their open, empty windows. We looked, trying to find which was his, wondering if he would be sitting at his window and would see us and wave.