

Julia Corbett

## Fashion Stories

**I** GREW UP WITH FASHION STORIES.

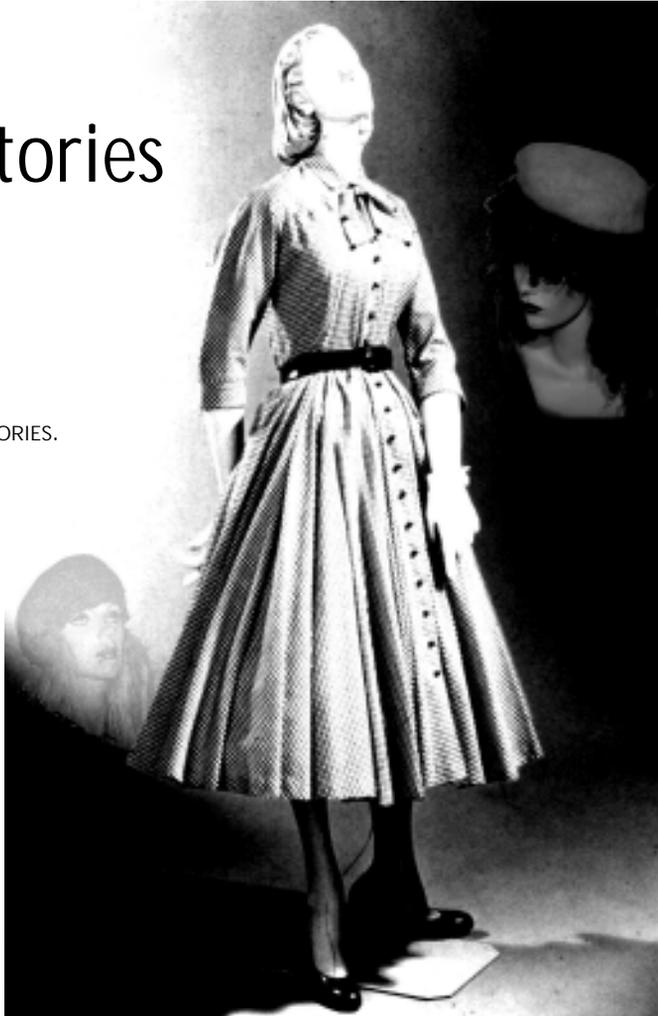
While I have trouble remembering what I wore yesterday (unless it's lying on the floor) Mom remembered what she wore forty years ago and what she did while wearing it. Clothes guided her from one era to another like magic carpets, woven and stitched markers of time, circumstance, and wealth. The stories were first woven for me at the dinner table, where Mom and I would linger after the others had dispersed.

Dishes were stacked on the pass-through near the dark kitchen that smelled of onions and potatoes, and we talked softly so as not wake Dad from his after-dinner nap in the living room. When she told me about her childhood in the Yakima valley of Washington, clothes were threaded through every story.

Her one-room country school

burned to the ground when she was in first grade and her favorite sweater with gold trim burned on the hook where it hung. An older boy quietly told the teacher about the fire and helped usher the young children outside, who escaped unharmed but with no time to collect wraps or books.

But as much as clothes transported you to a one-room school like it was



Lori Lundell

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yesterday, clothes could give you away, too, particularly if you grew up in a Depression-era family moving from job to job and town to town.

“My dad knew from the beginning that he could never make the payments on it,” she told me, “but Mom needed a sewing machine to make us winter coats. So every time Ann and I saw the re-po man coming up the driveway, we hid in the closet with Mom. He pounded on the door and yelled, ‘I know you’re in there!’ And we were all very quiet—not a peep—until we heard him drive away. My coat was a lovely brown wool with big brass buttons.”

By high school, fashion, for Mom, had become her ticket and her salvation. Again and again, she told me of her first date with Dad to the spring Sweetheart Dance her junior year and the dress she made—navy taffeta with white lace—that Dad thought was really something. In college she took textile classes, and while Dad was in graduate school in Seattle, she did alterations for the Seattle Bon Marche and custom sewing for “pear-shaped ladies with money.”

When I was little, Mom used those sewing skills on me. School dresses with built-in petticoats and matching babushkas. A velvet Easter dress with white gloves and a straw bonnet with ribbons down the back. One outfit turned

heads: matching mother-daughter dresses in white cotton organdy with oversized red and yellow flowers, their big skirts flowing from the tiny belted waists a la 1960. We looked like we were right out of the pattern books at the fabric store.

My favorite fashion story of all was how Mom made her own wedding dress, sewing hundreds of tiny pearl buttons on the cuffs and veil, right up until the ceremony.

“Weren’t you nervous that you wouldn’t get it done in time?” I would ask.

“No,” she would laugh, “I knew they wouldn’t start without the bride!”

I can still picture the dress, circa 1948, just like in a fashion magazine:

A low-cut diamond-shaped bodice accents this wedding gown of cream satin in a delicate floral pattern. Cap sleeves taper into beguiling diamond points just below the wrists, surrounded by hundreds of diminutive white pearl buttons. A graceful train sweeps behind in an arc of elegance. A veil of Belgian lace cascades to the waist with timeless femininity.

HER FASHION STORIES CHANGED dramatically in 1981 when I was in my mid-20s, having left the Midwest of my childhood for the Pacific Northwest of hers. The desired outcome of fashion remained the same, of course—to highlight your best features, to catch a glance, or “feel like a million bucks,” as she would

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say. But what changed in the fashions and in the stories that accompanied them was her overall intent: to cover up, to camouflage cancer.

LONG, LEAN LINES ACCENT THIS delicate silk-crepe evening dress by hot new designer Carole Little. A sensuous palette of smoky teal, plum, and lime and delicate gold-drop buttons highlight this stunning number, as perfect for dinner on the River Seine as it is for a Sunday patio brunch. A plunging neckline and frilly cuff-ends make this the season's ultra-feminine choice.

"Honey, would you like to have this one?"

Mom walked into the family room carrying an evening dress on a hanger, gently sliding it on the couch beside me.

"But Mom," I protested, fingering the buttons, "you wore this in Europe with Dad."

"I know, but the neck is just too low for me now."

It was the first "cancer fashion" I received from my mother. I don't think I ever actually wore it, but it hung in my closet for years out-classing its closet-mates. She was threatening to put it in the Salvation Army box if I didn't take it, and for years I couldn't face putting it there myself. It was joined that Christmas by a dozen other cancer fashions, mainly blouses and a couple of dresses with just a little too much cling or cleavage.

Just five months before on a hot, cloudless July day Dad had called and said,

"I've got some bad news about Mom." Cancer. Mastectomy, non-radical. Lymph nodes clear. No radiation at this time. I walked for hours along the irrigation canal behind my house, sobbing. The magpies squawked in oblivious accompaniment, and when I blew my nose, it was filled with the summer perfume of Russian olives that lined the canal. Mom kept using the word "maimed" to describe her body, a malicious label she reserved for the taking of a breast.

THE SHAPE OF THE SEASON IS FORM-fitting sweaters in rich hues of saffron, chocolate, and

claret. Cashmere and lambswool sleekly define the modern silhouette in classic lines. Luxurious without being ostentatious.

"It feels fairly normal, but it isn't quite the same shape as the right breast, and it doesn't hang the same. I can see the difference in close-fitting things, so I'm sure other people can, too," she confided as she laid out several elegant sweaters on the bed for me to choose from.

Like most reproductions, the reconstructed breast wasn't as good as the original. By spring, the doctors had declared her cancer-free, or at least cured enough to risk reconstruction. The first implant, saline-filled, had to be replaced when Dad popped it with a passionate bear-hug. They opened her chest back up and inserted a silicone-filled one.

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YOU'LL FLIP OVER ANNE KLEIN'S tailored jacket-pants combos. Sharp shoulders with exaggerated shoulder-pads give the jacket sophisticated structure. Slouchy bias-cut pants in cherry-red and coral swirls complete the ensemble on a delightfully playful note.

"Wow, where did you get this, Mom? It's very cool. The pants are wild."

"From Younkers in the mall. But it doesn't fit that well; I didn't try it on at the store. So you take it. Just call it an early birthday present."

It took me a week to realize why she began to take clothes home to try on: department store dressing rooms have security cameras and nosy clerks. They might see the scars that my mother never showed to anyone except her husband and doctor.

In the locker room at the Y, it's hard not to stare at scars, histories worn by women on their bodies. Proud flesh. C-sections, appendix incisions, heart surgery, knee injuries, sometimes severe burns. But I have never seen a mastectomy scar in the locker room or anywhere else, only in that photography

exhibit by Matuska where I stood in front of her self-portraits and cried quietly.

THIS MATCHING ONE-PIECE SWIMSUIT and cotton crinkle gauze cover-up sends you to the beach with plenty of sunshine. Glittery

suns and moons adorn an azure swirled background. Brought to you by St. Johns Beachwear.

"I like that bathing suit, Mom. It looks really good on you." We lounged in deck chairs on the white sand, a family Christmas rendezvous on a warm, southern beach.

She grinned across the top of her sunglasses. "Thanks. I got it from this special catalog, one for women with problems, problems with their bawdies," she said, twisting up her mouth and feigning a British

accent.

We howled. "Bawdies! Bloody hell, problems with their bawdies!"

For seven years, Mom tried to take Betty Ford's advice to heart: "Once it's done, put it behind you and go on with your life." She trusted that her maimed breast was the price for her survival, and she had paid it. A few of her closest



Photograph courtesy of Julia Corbett.

Mom in her wedding dress.

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friends found out through the grapevine, but when they'd ask Mom how she was doing, voices dripping with compassion and pity, she'd reply cheerfully, "Oh, just fine! And how's that grandson of yours?"

Despite the outwardly optimistic persona seen by friends and acquaintances, she allowed her family to see a fearful one. When we made plans for vacations or holidays, her typical response was, "Well, if I'm around that

long." She refused to have anything to do with support groups or counselors; she may have been a founder of the Iowa Mental Health Center, but she found her own pain too private to share, even acknowledge. Instead, she jetted around the world on Dad's business trips, studied French and German, and learned to weave on a four-harness loom. Her clothing purchases shifted almost entirely to mail-order catalogs.

TEXTURE IS ALL-IMPORTANT THIS SEASON. In this number by Evan Picone, the wooly nap of the black and grey tweed cropped jacket provides a superlative contrast with the soft black velvet collar and covered buttons, found double-breasted at the front and in a five-some at the cuffs. A simple white silk blouse and classic black wool stovepipe slacks make this a versatile, go-anywhere wardrobe staple.

"I've always loved this on you, Mom."

"Yeah, well, I can't wear anything now that binds my waist, so you take it."

Somewhere in her body, one cancer

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"Somewhere in her body, one cancer cell or a hundred or a thousand, it didn't really matter how many, had been traveling. For seven years, the rogues had been sloughing off and slipping away undetected through their own self-generated network of blood vessels. And when they relocated and took up residence, they began to do what cancer cells do best: multiply and create havoc."

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cell or a hundred or a thousand, it didn't really matter how many, had been traveling. For seven years, the rogues had been sloughing off and slipping away undetected through their own self-generated network of

blood vessels. And when they relocated and took up residence, they began to do what cancer cells do best: multiply and create havoc. Metastasis. "Such a charming word, isn't it," she said.

The new residence in 1988 was on the outside of her lung. The doctors punched a hole in her back and chopped and scraped at the metastasized rind, managing to remove very little of it but leaving lacy holes in one lung. For weeks, a tube protruded from her back slightly above her waist to drain the fluids. Between all the damaged nerves and the location, fashions featuring the waist were out of the question. And that was a lot of fashions. I was in graduate school in Minnesota then, and after every trip home, I tucked another pair of tailored silk slacks or corduroy leggings or a fitted dress into my suitcase.

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Knowing that the majority of the pesky rind was still in her body, the doctors prescribed tamoxifen, a drug designed to slow tumor growth by modifying a woman's "hormonal environment." Mom diligently took it, even though it gradually made her eyes extremely sensitive to light. The hardest part for her to accept was that despite all their efforts, cancer remained in her and likely always would. "It's like they've lit the fuse," she said; "I just don't know how long it is."

A SOFT, OPEN NECKLINE FRAMES THIS multi-colored silk float, sensuous and supple as spring itself. A sumptuously simple coral jacket complements the dress' wide bands of coral, peach, and pearl. Relaxed elegance by Ralph Lauren.

"I don't know if you want this one—I spilled something, wine I think, down the front, and the dry cleaner can't quite get it out. I'd still wear it, but the neckline is too low."

"I bet if you keep the jacket on, you can't see the spill—or the port," I tried. The porta-catheter protruding from under her right collarbone was her latest fashion challenge.

"Ha, I tried that—you can still see it!" We laughed, and I took the fashion.

The fuse this time was five years long. The second metastasis was to her ureter, that little conveyer of urine from the kidneys to the bladder. Surgeons

replaced the ureter with a tube, but from day-one the tube was a magnet for infections. Because the rind on her lung remained and there were now suspicious masses around her uterus, the doctors

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opted for more broad-based attack methods: chemotherapy and radiation. "First they slashed me and now it's poison and burn," she grumbled. They were the treatments she said she'd never endure, having

witnessed two friends undergo them. She had watched fifteen years ago as her friend Mary lost her hair, lost weight, got puffy, got weak, and died. Neighbors of her friend Kathryn told Mom they could hear her moan and cry as she writhed in pain next door. But Dad and the doctor were optimistic about it. So she did it.

But the immediate fashion problem was the port. To bypass arm and hand veins that were increasingly problematic to hit, the doctors inserted—permanently—a porta-catheter under the depression of her right collarbone. Antibiotics, fluids, chemo cocktails, everything went in through the port; blood samples were drawn out through it as well. It was much less painful and anxiety-invoking than poking needles into veins, but the port was simply god-awful ugly. Hard to mince words about it. It was the diameter of a quarter and stretched her skin up about an inch-and-a-half from her chest wall, skin stretched taut like hide over a drum.

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My idea of a fashion challenge, one that looms immense and insurmountable and makes me really cranky, is the search for plain black slacks that make me look slim. That sounds ridiculous and petty when I think of Mom searching for clothes suitable for a sticky Iowa summer with necklines up past her collarbone. She succeeded, of course. In her library of catalogs, she found cool cotton sleeveless tops with mock-tee collars. She found in the pages of Saks Fifth Avenue elastic-waist pants with matching tailored rayon short-sleeved shirts with formal collars that she could button up a little higher. She ordered from Talbots a loose-fitting rayon jumper whose wide shoulder straps covered the port exactly. Brushed suede. Linen. Lots of silk. Still, the cancer cells traveled.

THE HAT IS returning as the vital fashion accessory of the well-dressed woman. Whether it's a frumpy denim canvas pulled low to the eyes with a scarf or a fire-engine-red turban for no-fuss days, hats put an exclamation point on any fashion statement. This Christmas, a jeweled and sequined cap with an exaggerated brim is perfect for dressing up casual-wear.

"You have any use for these?" Mom handed me a grocery sack with knit turbans. "I'm not wearing them anymore, they're going in the garbage. They're cancer hats," she hissed.

I smiled but knew she was dead serious. For the last few months, she'd kept a floppy hat with a row of fake curly bangs by the door to grab in the event of unexpected visitors or for trips to the doctor or grocery store. Not the "cancer

hats" and not one of her various wigs—not the wig that matched her former salt-and-pepper color and cut, and not the red or platinum wigs she bought for fun. When she first modeled the platinum one for us, she

said, "Well, why the hell not? They stare anyway, why not go all out?" But she doesn't wear any of them anymore. Wigs are too hot, too scratchy, too uncomfortable. No sensation, no pleasure. "Wind doesn't blow through a wig," she said.

There weren't many people Mom let see her bald head, just family I think. And it wasn't totally bald; it had these wispy white hairs that were visible only close-up or when light shone from behind. From the front I thought she looked like a kindly Yoda from the Star Wars movie, from the side, like an unadorned mannequin. When I see women on the bus with scarves and hats pulled down low, I smile empathetically. I know the give-away: no eyebrows or eyelashes. No hair anywhere. Like Mom said, it's a menopausal time-warp back to pre-pubic hair. The bus women don't always smile back at me, the confederate who's seen through their cancer camouflage. They look down or away. Mom said that her friends, even

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some who have known her thirty years, have a hard time seeing past the cancer, particularly when she lost her hair. "They don't see Irene anymore," she grumbled, "they just see Cancer." She always hisses that word and gives it a capital "C."

I come from a family of touchers. I liked massaging Mom's bald head; it had a smoothness that felt young, like skin kept protected from sun and wind and elements. And from people. Shy

skin. I made a smooth glide with my thumbs from the crown down toward her forehead, dipping over the tops of her ears.

"Does my not having hair make you feel differently about me?" she asked while I massaged.

"Of course not, don't be silly. I see exactly the same person. Your smile's the same, your eyes are the same, inside you're the same. The rest doesn't matter."

I rubbed more lotion through my palms and began on her hands. The various assaults—surgeries, chemo, radiation—had damaged nerve endings in her hands and feet, leaving them numb and tingly.

"You know what I miss?" she said, her eyes closed now. "I miss the wind in my hair, when it blows it around. And even washing it. I'll never forget that day in the shower when it fell out in handfuls."

"Since you lost your hair, Mom, I've never, ever again complained about a bad-hair-day."

She cracked open one eye and grinned appreciatively.

A CHIC WHITE BASKET-WEAVE RAYON jacket with gold buttons highlights this ensemble by Halston. A Nehru collar and

sides slit from thigh to waist add an Eastern flair, as do the black and white harem-style pants that swish luxuriously. A matching floppy hat is perfect for strolling down the avenue on a

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sunny day.

"You look great, Mom. Where'd you get this?"

She looked like she was waiting for an optometrist or a specialist in ear, nose, and throat and had stumbled into the oncology waiting room by mistake. I expected that at any moment a kindly nurse would come over and ask, "Are you in the right place? This is oncology." Her rouge and lipstick gave a warmth to her face not seen in others waiting here.

"This is ridiculous," she snarled through a tightly clenched jaw. "What on earth is taking them so long? We've been here," she checked her watch again, "over forty minutes."

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She came to the clinic to get blood drawn, a frequent—almost routine—activity of someone with cancer, and was told to wait for the results, wait to see if her white count had plummeted once again to precipitous levels. Chemo kills both good and bad. She was hospitalized twice in the last month with rigors, uncontrollable spikes of fever followed by uncontrollable shaking and chills. The cancer had metastasized a third time, year fourteen, now in her colon.

New fashions were needed when she dipped to just over 100 pounds and her normal size 10s and 12s hung on her like empty flour sacks.

I showed her a cartoon I found in a waiting room magazine: a little girl furtively hiding a bouquet of flowers behind her back, with the caption: “Georgia O’Keefe caught with pornography at a young age.” She chuckled with mom-politeness. My latest attempt at distraction, my best one so far I think, has little lasting effect. She looked at her watch again and peered down the long corridor behind the waiting room receptionist, hoping to spot some action.

THIS SIMPLE BLUE AND WHITE STRIPED gown makes a minimalist fashion statement. Practical with easy back access, it’s what all the women are wearing this season.

Dr. Duffman knocked once and

entered the room, his nose buried in the opened chart.

“Good morning, ah, ah...” he began, looking at Mom sitting on the exam table in her blue and white striped hospital

gown. He started to swing the bulging chart up to his face.

“No, don’t look,” she interrupted him.

“What’s my name?”

Duffman, the man who had been treating her cancer for over seven years, couldn’t remember her name. To him, she was just a chart-full of MRIs and antigen

counts and doses of 5-FU, representing expanding or contracting, stationary or traveling cancer cells. These cells were to be tracked and monitored, and if possible, destroyed. The solutions to be employed on this battlefield, according to the medical model, were procedures like mastectomy, chemotherapy, and radiation; a pharmacy the likes of which can only be imagined; and as a last-ditch effort, cell and marrow transplants. The patient’s body was the battlefield, yet the medical general of this daunting arsenal issued the commands.

I imagine that getting cancer makes a person feel as powerless as you can possibly feel. This thing, this out-of-control mass of cells, doing what they will, where they will, when they will, in your body—uninvited. The doctors are slow in finding them multiplying in their outrageous party, and only mildly successful in calling the cops.

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THE SIMPLE BLUE AND WHITE STRIPED gown. It's what all the women are wearing again this season.

The poison regime of chemotherapy is like playing Black Jack: you must get close to 21, but beware of going over it. Wham, overboard again. The IV tubes dangling from the stand next to her hospital bed sent a mixture of red and clear, blood and antibiotics, in through her port. She called it prison.

She was chained to the IV stand by these tubes and therefore limited to the porta-potty next to the bed. Her bladder was unpredictable, the result of metastasis number two and the artificial pee tube. Dad and I turned our heads as she lowered herself onto the potty chair. A nurse barged in unannounced while Mom was bare-ass to the world.

GO ON SAFARI THIS SUMMER IN THIS comfy rayon jumpsuit. Abstract and asymmetrical hand-painted renditions of lions, tigers, and monkeys walk down the wide pant legs and up the high collar. Pair with a creme tee for cool jungle nights.

"So, what do you think of Dr. Kevorkian?" she asked. It was 1996 and he was a hot news topic.

Mom was lying on the family room couch, sipping a glass of white wine, TV news on mute. The remote control was perched on her distended belly, far above her matchstick limbs. The fashion focus was now on comfort, first and foremost. I

was in the kitchen mincing garlic. The halibut was marinading, ready for the grill. Mom was having a good month for food. The metastasis in the colon was behaving for now, and she was relishing my cooking as a switch from Dad's.

"Oh, I'll miss that smell," she said, changing the subject. "Onions and garlic sauteeing. Your dad always likes it when my hands smell like onions and garlic... Oh, so, what do you think

of him?" She returned to task.

Mom was queen of the loaded question, her not completely tactful way of broaching major, weighty topics.

"Why do you ask?"

"Well, I think about it a lot. About ending it." She was sounding uncharacteristically brave. We paused and left it there. Garlic sizzled in the pan. I checked the pasta water.

"I can't say that in your shoes I wouldn't contemplate the same thing," I ventured. "I just don't know what it feels like to be that ready to die."

"Well, I'm ready. I got a book and read all about the Hemlock Society and what they recommend." She took another sip of wine. "But your dad isn't ready, and neither is Dr. Duffman. Dad wants me to see this through, to keep trying."

"You don't sound convinced."

"Well, I'm not. I don't like living like this. I'm always in pain. And it's going to get much worse. You know that, don't you?"

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"Mom, it's your body. You're the one going through hell—not Dad, not me. It hurts so much to see you suffer, but we can't tell you what to endure or how long to suffer. We just don't know what it's like."

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"Mom, it's your body. You're the one going through hell—not Dad, not me. It hurts so much to see you suffer, but we can't tell you what to endure or how long to suffer. We just don't know what it's like."

"I know. But your father has been so amazing. He never complains. He works so hard, and then he has to cook and take care of me."

"He loves you; he adores you; of course he's taking care of you. But Mom, it's still your body and your decision."

"Well, not really..." She hit the mute button and Peter Jennings returned.

ALL THE RAGE THIS FALL IS VELOUR, top to bottom. A loose chocolate brown caftan with wide cuffs and a high draped cowl neckline, paired with matching leggings, spell cozy comfort all season long.

"I don't want your dad to have to do this," she said.

The end of the sentence is "when I'm dead."

She sat in her wheelchair, gently folding a lightweight cabled cardigan with embroidered leaves and clusters of grapes. Occasionally, she shifted her weight with a grimace.

"Guess I won't get to wear this again." She handed me the sweater, eyes brimming.

Emptied onto their bed was the contents of two dresser drawers, spring and summer clothes. It was October, nine Octobers since that first metastasis and fifteen Octobers since her mastec-

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tomy and the first cancer fashion give-away. She had reconfigured her wardrobe as often as she had rewritten the medical community's survivability estimates for metastasized breast cancer.

This fashion give-away, unlike previous ones, wasn't based on a specific body limitation but the most general one: Duffman said she had four months at the outside, perhaps just one.

Dad arrived for lunch, gave Mom a peck on the lips and handed her some cards, newly arrived in the day's mail.

"There's one from Ellen in there," he said.

"Ellen McDermott?" Mom asked, puzzled. She read it silently, then handed it to me.

"Dearest Irene, I just saw Diane who told me you had recently been in the hospital. Oh Irene, I had no idea you had cancer. I'm just so stunned and overwhelmed I don't know what to say. You've always looked so stylish and fit when I see you at church, I just never would have guessed. Please let me know what I can do for you. You are in our prayers. Ellen."

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The McDermotts and my parents have attended the same church for thirty years, half of which Mom has had cancer. Cancer camouflage works.

Dad returned to the bedroom. "Oh, honey, the hospice nurses will be here at two."

We know the routine and have mastered much of it ourselves: take BP, change the IV bags, check hydration. Still, we await their visits eagerly, these uniformed angels, amazing combinations

of good cheer and compassion amidst the smell of urine and constant complaints. They give us time to regain composure, patience, and compassion.

STRIKE A GENTLE NOTE OF THE MOST tender pink, hushed to a pianissimo, with this chenille robe. The wide cuffs, generous collar, and wide tie belt cuddle you with comfort. A delicate lace pocket perched on the chest provides a perfect spot for a petal-embroidered hankie.



Julia Corbett is an associate professor at the University of Utah where she teaches and researches environmental communication. Recent literary essays appeared in *Orion* and *Snowy Egret*. Her inherited fashion sense favors cashmere and silk, but her fashion budget is decidedly cotton. This essay is dedicated to women everywhere who battle breast cancer with courage, tenacity, and fashion.