

What Skin Lacks

by Rachel Escott, 2007

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The end was coming. Mr Levensohn could smell brown death mingled with antiseptic in the overheated bedroom. He went for a walk.

His neighbour, Mrs Schapper, waited for him behind drawn shades. It was her turn to sit with Petra while the old man took his daily, halting exercise. Comfortably round and already in black, she relished suffering. Yet for an hour now, she had pestered the carriage clock on the mantelpiece and paced to the window to search for him. She could not have known that on this October day, when the palm branches of Succoth were still seen in homes around them, Mr Levensohn would alter his decades-old routine.

'Probably she has already telephoned to Petra's relatives in all the corners of America to come add a new layer of black to their fading grey,' he thought bitterly as he swayed with the rhythm of the bus.

He stood in front of a tailor's store on Fifth Avenue. The large door beside the display window was of polished oak and brass, a curving, flowing motif whose brass handles emerged like branches from the wood. As he pushed, the weight of the door's swing reassured him. Inside, a studded leather sofa in deep brown was placed behind an occasional table, piled with drawings for suits and coats. At the side waited the rolls of material he remembered.

He closed the door with care, and hesitated on the rectangle of matting. Outside, the afternoon sky was already dull far above the city, but here the low, shaded lamps of the room spread consoling pools of yellow in the rich browns of the interior. A man took shape from a curtained doorway in the far corner and moved towards Mr Levensohn. He could have been on skates, so smoothly and silently did he approach, while the smile he wore combined welcome and enquiry with a careful blindness to Mr Levensohn's shabbiness.

"Sir, good day to you."

The assistant swept his arm towards the interior, drawing the old man a step or two into the light. His faded blond hair rose in a thick wave from his forehead, and his precise gestures were in contrast to the little man with his cane and wilted black hat.

"How may I help you today?"

“Oh yes, good afternoon,” Mr Levensohn touched his lips with an uncertain tongue. “An overcoat, that’s what I’ve come for. An overcoat to be made especially for me.” His eyes wandered back to the rolls of cloth on the wall, eager already to bury himself in their textures.

“An overcoat, yes, before the real cold sets in? Well, you’re just in time to have something ready for the first frost.” In his years as a salesman, Joe Waring had learned not to make judgements on outward poverty.

“Thank you ...?”

“I’m Mr Waring. Why don’t you have a seat here on the couch while we talk your ideas through, Mr ...?”

“Levensohn.” They shook hands, stiffly on Mr Levensohn’s part but with a professional ease from the assistant that warmed with confidence the innocent older man. Mr Waring guided his customer to one end of the couch. He himself took the chair set at an angle to it, so he both faced the old man and was on his side. He guessed that Mr Levensohn was a newcomer to custom tailoring.

“OK. There are three things we need to sort out before you place your order: the style of coat, the type of cloth it’s to be made in, and your measurements. Then I’ll be able to give you an idea of the cost, and I’ll need a down payment from you before we can go any further. One third of the price is usual.” He watched from behind pale eyelashes the frown that crossed Mr Levensohn’s face: this briskness was unexpected.

“The cloth ... I know what I’m looking for ...”

“A man who knows his own mind? Good. Well, you know, sometimes it pays to keep your options open at the outset. Some fabrics just don’t go with certain styles, and you never know what ideas we’ll come up with as we talk this thing through. I suggest we take your measurements first and get an idea of your build, so we can talk about what style will suit.”

“Yes, but you see it’s very important. It’s a cashmere coat I’m looking for. Black cashmere.” Mr Levensohn’s voice was obsessive; Mr Waring hid his laughter.

“Black cashmere, eh? The best there is. Well, that shouldn’t be a problem with most designs. Now, let’s get those measurements noted.”

As he stood and removed his outer garments, Mr Levensohn’s elation lent him an unaccustomed fluency. He obeyed automatically the clipped instructions to bend his elbow or hold his arm out straight as he put into words the images that still ran through his head after all these years.

“You see, when I was a boy I read that cashmere is the best fabric. A man will never feel cold in a cashmere coat. Did you know that it takes seven or more ounces of the wool to make a sweater in cashmere, yet each goat – it is the wool of goats, you know – gives less than one ounce a year? Can you imagine how much work it must be to gather enough wool? It is like panning for gold, they say, how the herders must comb each goat and save every single hair.”

Mr Waring's murmurs oiled the old man's words. The assistant wondered at the knowledge and passion stored in the drab figure. He took a step back. His first impression had been of a small man, but that was not true: meekness, a bowed submission to life, had rendered Mr Levensohn smaller than he really was. He was of average height, not extraordinary, and had wide enough shoulders, though they were bowed, and the left dipped lower than the right. The waistline had thickened, like in most men his age. Still, it was enough to work with. A mass of black cashmere need not overwhelm the skeleton.

“... and it is a harsh country as well, you know. Those goat herders have to contend with the highest mountains, and snow and ice.”

“That's it Mr Levensohn, sir. I have all I need in the way of measurements. Take a seat again, won't you?”

Mr Levensohn was dismayed to be finished so fast. He hoped the rest of the business would proceed more slowly. He had waited too many years for this day not to prolong the moments.

“All right, the style. We can take it for granted the article will be in black cashmere, can't we?” Mr Waring yielded to a gleam of enjoyment. “I'll fetch out the different samples we have in a moment.”

Again Mr Levensohn had his ideas. “For a start I'm not keen on these sloping shoulders that the young men today are wearing. They might think it looks elegant but to me it looks weak. Dandified somehow. I hope that doesn't offend you?”

“Oh no, don't you worry. I like a man who knows his tastes. Everyone is built differently, after all. I think I agree with you. Sharp inset sleeves would suit you best.” Mr Waring thought of those bowed shoulders. A cleverly cut coat could ride upon them, lend them a determined profile. An unorthodox solution, but he had glimpsed the self-esteem Mr Levensohn hoped to assume with his new overcoat. A disguise.

“I had thought a single-breasted coat, with a narrow collar ...,” Mr Levensohn proposed.

“You might want to consider double-breasted. It’s a little extra fabric, I know, and some people find it too bulky, but it gives a smoother outline.” ‘... and would allow for any further weight gain,’ he added to himself.

“Well, if you think so...” The old man retreated into his habitual timidity. The assistant fought back.

“But you’re exactly right on the collar and revers. A narrow frame there would give you an imposing shoulder from the front. We could use an interface of cotton and horsehair....”

“Interface?” Mr Levensohn questioned hungrily.

“That’s the stiffer fabric between the cashmere and the lining. The lining itself will be of silk, of course. A rich, old gold colour, I picture. The horsehair gives an extra crispness just in the breast area. Elsewhere I would advise a goat hair mix, which is softer. Here, I’ll show you the difference.” Mr Waring turned from salesman to teacher as he fetched some swatches from behind the curtain.

“This stiffness and the double breast will allow us to tailor a little at the waist, rather than use a simple straight cut. Like this,” he explained as he sketched a few lines on his pad.

“Do you know how we keep the shoulder sharp? A double roll of twisted goat hair sewn into the seam all round.”

“Is that so? Well, I never knew that.”

“Will you be ordering a suit to go along with this, sir? We should make sure they lie well together.”

Mr Levensohn was diminished. His ambition did not stretch beyond a coat. His wife lay dying in their bedroom even as he sat here. In the depths of the Depression, it was she who had bought the title to the apartment building where they lived and worked. Outsiders’ money came into the store, but Petra and her friends had clung to their old-fashioned ways. Between them, they had kept their own language alive, kept the rituals of their religion to measure out the years, and had kept the wider world just beyond reach. The knowledge of the wealth she would bequeath him even now fought with the shadow of her hand on the moneybox.

“Oh, I have suits at home, and this black hat. Thank you.”

“No problem. Now, let’s have a look at these fabrics. We’ll need three yards,” Mr Waring did a quick calculation, “and two and a half yards of lining, plus the

interface and extras.” As he rose to fetch the rolls of cloth, Mr Waring was totalling the final bill. He brought a fourth bolt to the low table. Mr Levensohn was fingering the other three, passing from one to another and gently rubbing the cloth between thumb and forefinger. He moved to the newest arrival.

“Saving the best for last, is it? This one.” He laid his hand on the piled material and gazed lovingly at it, reluctant to end the caress. If he had had the courage to visit this tailor’s earlier in his marriage, he thought, how different might his life have been? This cloth, it was as soft and dense as the night-time’s sky of childhood, unpierced by stars. It was as soft as touching air to his roughened fingers. He smiled wistfully through his thick spectacles.

“You know how to chose!” Mr Waring congratulated him. “I might say this is the finest cashmere I have come across in my time. One hundred per cent cashmere wool, used in the weft as well as the warp. It was gathered in Kashmir itself, you know. A lot of fibres really come from Mongolia or China.” Kashmir! Together they worshipped the cloth in silence.

Mr Levensohn kissed the mezuzah by the door as he entered the apartment. The old ritual, long ignored, seemed necessary now for such a consequential moment.

Mrs Schapper rose to meet him at the door. She was in tears but her first words were those traditional joyous ones: “Your wife has been freed.”

“*Where* have you been until now?” she continued, “with your wife dead, praise God, and not one of us knowing how to find you. I sent little Peter out along the streets to seek you, but nothing. Your poor wife, alone in her last moments, but so still. She never once woke up, thank God. And where were you?”

“*Magnified and sanctified be the name of the Lord....*,” the widowed husband chanted the mourning prayer in the blackened room, next to a body which he could not recognise as his wife. The leaving of life had relaxed her face into a gentle gape, a cordiality that he had never surprised there in life. By this he knew that her spirit had indeed gone, far more than the absence of her laboured breath. “*Blessed Judge!*” he had dutifully replied to Mrs Schapper’s greeting that evening, but it was himself who was freed by this death. He reached and touched the cheek. He had always imagined that a plucked chicken waiting for the cooking pot resembled the texture of human death, but this skin had the chill warmth of a silk handkerchief on the back of a hand. He strove for some emotion. It was impossible even to direct the resentments

of his life at something so inanimate. How had it happened that this woman controlled him all these years?

Yet, sitting here he felt the painful wrench of a new birth.

“Please God there is time for me to live a life, before I too lie absent in a darkened room.”

In front of the long, gilt-framed mirror at the rear of the shop, he looked for a last time on the old coat that had covered his meagre outings these years. This self-vanity of looking at a mirror broke yet another rule of mourning. His old blue-grey coat drooped dispiritedly like his aged skin, its hem scooping unevenly around his shins and slopping loosely at the front where he stooped over his cane. Was the droop simply a reflection of his uneven shoulders, or had the old tweed absorbed the very meekness of his spirit? His hand that grasped the cane had long, slender fingers, but the skin was thin and blue veins were traced on the surface where he gripped.

“Here it is. It’s just perfect.” The old man’s eyes left the mirror as Mr Waring reappeared cradling with both arms the soft drapes of the new coat.

“You don’t know how I have looked forward to this.”

“Let me help you off with that old one.”

Mr Levensohn accepted the help. In the past month, the cold of winter had drawn closer and his aging shoulders had surrendered their remaining flex to the November wind; and his skin, like the skin of death, was too thin to warm him. His tweed was discarded on the back of the sofa. Mr Levensohn licked his soft lips. Could it be that he was nervous, now, of accepting his new disguise?

“There, let the shoulders rest straight across yours,” Mr Waring smoothed the cloth with quick slicks as he spoke. “Does that feel right? Not wrinkling your jacket? Now, turn round and I’ll fasten the buttons. Don’t look at the final picture until you’re all ready! Try this button here. Not too stiff is it? We can always ease the hole ... Straighten your arm. Now for the unveiling.”

The assistant turned him gently towards the mirror. The old man was trembling. His gaze met the surface of the glass and for a second refused to sink deeper. It did not belong there, for his mind could not recognise the image reflected. In place of the old faded colour was a forceful rectangle of black, the black of authority that loomed at him, closer than the mirror’s surface. The bottom hemline was straight and smart. Mr Levensohn’s eyes raised in wonder from their usual meek height. ‘Look how my shoulders are

level and confident,' he thought, 'the body holds me snugly yet it doesn't appear tight.' The solidity of the cloth was a soft armour, making him stand a little straighter. He squared his shoulders. 'It makes no difference to the look. In this I am straight-backed already.' He welcomed the coat into him as a friend to help him face the world with determination.

"You are a fine tailor, Mr Waring, and you use tricks I have not seen before."

"I don't know that I like you to call them tricks, Mr Levensohn. The coat's built around you, we merely gave it an inkling of your character."

Mr Levensohn chuckled. He had seen transformations like that before, he remembered suddenly. Old Mr Lipman – younger then than he himself was now – had performed such magic before his childish eyes, turning the weary Jews into hopeful new Americans. The sound of his own laugh surprised Mr Levensohn and he let his eyes wander higher, to the mirrored face. The man he saw had a gleam of happiness for the first time in years. His white hair with its underlay of steel was thick still, receding into a square frame for the high forehead. No great laughter or deep sorrow in his life had left their calling cards as wrinkles around his eyes. Only the pinched disappointment in his mouth and disillusion in the stillness of his eyes. Yet into those eyes came anticipation now when he imagined the reactions awaiting him and his new coat. Mr Waring kept pace with his thoughts.

"Anyone will see the quality of this coat, Mr Levensohn. Not many people dare to chose such a fabric in these austere days, and I think between us we've come up with a design that corresponds to you perfectly."

"It is necessary to know the person you are designing for, you know. To understand them," Mr Levensohn informed him confidently. But the person looking back at him from the mirror was not one any of his neighbours would recognise, however many decades they may have watched him. He liked to think it was his true self Mr Waring had seen and responded to.

"I do look different, don't I?"

Mr Waring regarded him shrewdly. "Yes. You look happier."

It was dark when Mr Levensohn approached his front door. A scrabbling sound on the stairs above greeted him.

"Stop! What are you doing there? Who are you?" The voice aimed for bravery in the darkness.

“Don't worry, Mrs Schapper. It is I.”

“Mr Levensohn? Well, do you have to shock me like that? I didn't recognise you. Do you want me to follow the way of your wife so quickly? Come here into the light. It is no wonder! What in Heaven have you got on, you stupid old man? Where can you have stolen that costume from?”

“Stolen, Mrs Schapper, I beg you! What do you think I have become?”

“As to that, I couldn't say. I never know where you are these days. You disappear for hours, who knows where? At your age, I have to worry you might find yourself underneath an automobile. Each time I tell myself, ‘the grief weighs so heavily on the poor man, he is distracted.’ “

“So, now you know. I have been visiting the tailor's to have this coat made.”

“At the tailor's each time! And with your wife not cold. Shame on you! Let me look. Huh, it is not at all in your style. I hope you at least gave a good price for it?” Without asking, the neighbour reached out and pinched the coat between her fingers. “So soft. Mr Levensohn you really are just a child without your wife. You have let yourself be tricked by thieves. What need do you have for these fine clothes, eh?”

Mr Levensohn shut the door against her and reverently hung up his coat. He settled the shoulders on the hanger and patted the sleeves flat. His pleasure in this small absorption was complete. But moving from the coat stand towards the kitchen, he passed in front of the old mirror on the living room wall and once more the sight of his reflection brought him to a standstill.

“How small is that man now. Faded and frail now the black armour is put away.”

He was dismayed. The artefacts from seventy years of his life fitted equally into the space contained within the mirror's edge, crowding him out. Watching, he saw himself shrink further and dissolve, while the pictures Petra had brought to the marriage grew correspondingly behind him and her cushions covered with flowers grew bright. He turned for the coat again and stood defiantly in front of the mirror. Like a magician's trick, he saw again the self-respect enter his eyes.

“There it is. My coat must be the thick skin I never had, to protect me from the old life and the ghost of Petra.”

The End

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