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A Dangerous Dress

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Extract

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1

This is the story of a dress. A dangerous dress. A magical dress, I think. My Grandma's dress. And it is a true story.

Essentially.

I know, just because I went and qualified *true* with *essentially,* now you're going to think this story is *not* essentially true. But it is. For example, here are some of the things that are one hundred percent true.

I go to the glamour capitals of the world, Paris and New York, where I do incredible (but true) things. Like selling the most exclusive designer clothes on the planet to the most radiant human beings on the planet. And attending an ultra elite private fashion show on a yacht, surrounded by the most gorgeous partygoers in the universe. And debuting on live TV as the fresh new voice of a major network news program. But in spite of all that fabulousness, this story starts—and may even end—in a town that everybody under the age of forty whose opinion I value, including me, more often than not calls Bumfuck. Even though its real name is Kirland, Indiana. If I were making this up, I wouldn't start—and I certainly wouldn't end—in Bumfuck.

The town is named for Hap Kirland, who was an engineer. The railroad type. Probably nobody would've ever named anything for him, except that in 1887 he was driving a train out of Chicago, and right after he crossed the state line into Indiana, he ran off the tracks. The place he derailed, people started calling Kirland Siding. Which over time got shortened to Kirland. That's what they taught

us in school. Although why anybody would name a town after a guy who couldn't keep his train on the tracks is beyond me. And what kind of a name is Hap, anyway?

A sign at the town line says, WELCOME TO KIRLAND, INDIANA, POPULATION 5,120. The number is wrong. Nobody's sure which way it's wrong, but everybody agrees it's not wrong by much, so it's just easier to leave it the way it is. What matters, and what we can all agree on, is that Kirland is a small town.

If you only talked to people from Paris and New York, you'd never guess that genuinely dramatic things happen in small towns. Because those big cities are made up of two kinds of people: those who never lived in a small town, and those who fled small towns to move to more exciting places like Paris and New York. And now I am about to perpetuate this problem. Because even though I'm from a small town, most of this story happens in Paris and New York. But I don't want you to think that nothing of interest has ever happened in Kirland, Indiana.

The interesting events began in 1986. I did not actually observe those events, as I was only five at the time. But everybody in Kirland knows what happened. Every last detail. Not a day passes without somebody telling the story like it happened yesterday. Each time somebody tells it, everybody stops and listens to what Nick Timko did to Mary Kovach.

Back in 1986, everybody in Kirland loved Nick Timko. My mom insists I loved him just like everybody else did, even though I was five. Nick was a huge baseball star at Roger Wells Kent High School, which is the public high school. Nick was a senior, and he went steady with my cousin Mary, who was a junior. Mary's mom, Rose, my mom's sister, died about eight years ago. Mary's dad, my Uncle John, is president of the Independence Savings and Loan Association of Northwest Indiana.

Nick couldn't decide between a baseball scholarship at Purdue and an offer to play single-A ball for the Cleveland Indians organization, even though Mary wanted him to go to Purdue so he could

come home on weekends. But Nick couldn't decide, and they had a fight about it at the senior prom at Reinhardt's restaurant, and Mary ran off crying. Only before he could run after her, the prom committee announced the selection of the Prom King and Prom Queen. Of course Nick was crowned King, and of course Tina Kaminski, who everybody says was hot enough to peel paint off a Pontiac, was crowned Queen. So Nick and Tina had to dance together. Even though Tina was dating Greg Deegan, I guess she was always a little hot for Nick just like everybody else was, and for all I know maybe he was a little hot for her too. Or maybe it was just that night. But the consensus is that when they danced the ceremonial first dance, they danced very very close. And I guess they didn't stick around for the second dance, because they ended up in the back seat of Nick's old Dodge Dart in the parking lot. Which is where Mary found them.

Before the sun was up the next day, Nick beat it out of town and started playing minor league baseball. He eventually made it to the major leagues for about twenty minutes. He never showed his face in Kirland again. We have an expression—when other people say *It'll be a cold day in Hell* or *When pigs fly,* folks in Kirland say *That'll be the day Nick Timko comes home.* And to this day, unless you ask her point blank, my cousin Mary never even mentions his name. Other people do, but not Mary. Which I think is entirely understandable, given what he did.

Incidentally, I do not want to suggest that every small-town romance is as dramatic as Nick and Mary's. My point is simply that interesting things do happen in small towns—not that they happen all the time. They do not.

Anyway, enough about Nick, because the part where he's relevant is done. But Mary is very relevant. With Nick gone, she had to figure out what she was going to do next. Uncle John always wanted her to go to work at Independence Savings. A lot of people assumed he would want Mary's younger brother Johnny to work there, what with Johnny being a boy and all. But Uncle John figured

that since Mary was born first, she should work at the bank, and maybe even take it over someday. I think if Nick had behaved and not gotten all sticky with Tina, he and Mary would've gotten married, and even though Mary wouldn't have loved it, I think she'd have been willing to go to work at Independence the way Uncle John always hoped.

As things worked out, though, Mary decided that if she was going to be unhappy about love, she sure wasn't willing to be unhappy about work, too. So after high school she went off to Indiana University in Bloomington, where she drank way too much but still graduated with a teaching credential. Then she moved back to Kirland and started teaching third grade, which she still does. She also convinced herself she was in love with George Boba, whose sole redeeming quality was that he wasn't Nick Timko, and they got married. Only George turned out to be a shit. Six years ago Mary and George had a baby girl who had Down syndrome. George must've done or said something awful about that, because two weeks after the baby was born, Mary broke his nose and she and Paris moved back in with Uncle John that same day. Paris is Mary's daughter. She is the most amazing cute *smart* adorable six-year-old child ever, and since that day, George Boba has never seen her, doesn't want to, and I hope he dies.

As I said, Mary named her baby Paris. I always thought that was the best name I ever heard for a girl. So one day I asked Mary why she picked that name. First she said because nobody in Kirland ever named their baby Paris, which is true but not relevant. So I kept asking her, until finally Mary told me that she and Nick always talked about going to Paris together. Paris, France. Which I guess is maybe a little relevant. Or at least very romantic.

Even though Mary never wanted to work at the bank, my cousin Johnny was happy to. Johnny had his whole life figured out. The day he turned eighteen he enlisted in the Army, just like Uncle John had done. But Johnny had seen his dad limp around with a cane on account of the shrapnel in his hip from the Korean War. So

he joined the Quartermaster Corps, which he figured would be about as safe as an Army job could be. Plus he might learn some accounting that'd come in handy when he finished his tour and went to work at Independence.

Only a year after he enlisted, along came Desert Storm, and Johnny got shipped out. I mention that not because now it's topical to talk about Iraq. I mention it because Johnny died in an Iraqi Scud missile attack. He and twenty-seven other soldiers in the Quartermaster Corps. After Johnny's funeral, my Uncle John stopped flying the American flag in front of the bank, even though he is the most patriotic man I know. But that's really not the point. The point is that Uncle John was never the easiest-going man. Johnny's dying made him even more difficult. And on top of everything, now there was nobody to go to work at Independence and follow in his footsteps.

I knew he wouldn't ask Mary again. She'd have said no anyway. But he knew she'd made up her mind, and even if he didn't agree with her decision, he respected her, and he wasn't going to use Johnny to pressure her into taking the job.

He did not, however, have any such qualms about *me.*

So when I graduated from high school, Uncle John paid for me to go to Purdue. Where I had an inordinate amount of fun. (Stupid Nick. Stupid stupid stupid.) And where I also earned a BS in Management. Which, I'm sorry, was not the fun part. It was the Uncle John part. It was all this accounting. And statistics and probabilities and economics and policy and—

Ohmygod, somebody please pour me another beer.

Wait. That's not entirely fair. If I hadn't studied Management at Purdue, I never would have gotten sick of all the Management courses. I never would have browsed the course catalog looking for something, *anything* else to take as an elective, to keep my brain from turning into an Excel spreadsheet. I never would have found the Consumer Sciences and Retailing department.

Maybe you cannot tell from the name, but the Consumer Sciences and Retailing department is all courses about, well, clothes

and shopping. I am not kidding. Did you know such a thing existed in college? I didn't. If I had known when I started, I'm not sure I ever would have made it to that job at Independence.

Not that I was any kind of a fashion expert when I went to college. Frankly I don't know how anyone could grow up in Kirland, Indiana and be one. Except for Susie Anderson, whose mom used to take her to Paris twice a year just to shop for clothes. What such people were doing living in Kirland, I don't know. Needless to say I hated Susie Anderson. And wanted to be her. Desperately.

On the other hand, I bet Susie never met Mister Giorgio Armani in Paris, the way I did.

But I am getting ahead.

The point is that while I was growing up, I was not Susie Anderson. I did not shop in Paris, or anyplace else glamorous, or even fun. I shopped in JC Penney at River Oaks Mall. At best. When it came to fashion, all I could do was watch Cindy Crawford and Elsa Klensch on cable after my parents finally got cable, read the occasional *Vogue* or *Elle,* and dream about someday shopping in glamorous, fun places and wearing glamorous, fun clothes.

Then second semester of my junior year, just to give my brain a break, I took CSR 327. History of Fashion. Which was great fun, not too hard, and there was no accounting involved.

Then came the week we covered the 1920s. And here we are getting *extremely* relevant.

Because that was the week I saw my Grandma's dress projected on the big screen at the front of the lecture hall.

2

My Grandma's dress is, quite simply, the most amazing dress I have ever seen.

I am not saying that because I am biased, but because it is true. And that is no small statement coming from me. I have personally visited every vintage clothing store in the entire city of Paris. Which, as you probably know, is a place where they make some pretty nice dresses. So when I say Grandma's dress is special, I know what I am talking about.

Before I tell you about the dress, I need to say just a little about my Grandma. First, and forgive me I know this sounds like an acceptance speech, but without her none of this would have been possible. And second, because the more you know about my Grandma, the more amazing the dress becomes.

Grandma used to give me neck rubs, and even when she got very old, she had very strong hands. She did WordFinder puzzles using a magnifying glass that looked like a tiny telescope, which she needed because by the end she was legally blind. Legally blind, sure, I guess, but you never saw anybody clean a house like that. Don't ask me how she knew where the dirt was. She passed away in 1998, just two weeks shy of her ninetieth birthday.

Why do people say *passed away*? She died. She weighed eighty-five pounds at the end, and she died. And I still miss her.

Grandma did not always weigh eighty-five pounds. When I was born she weighed a hundred and ninety-four. That's what she told me. For all I know it was more. But she was big. She told me

she got to where she wore a size twenty-two. Maybe the hundred and ninety-four pounds is true, because she told the truth about the size twenty-two. When she died she left me her clothes, and even though there wasn't much, there were several of these huge old size twenty-two housecoats.

If you didn't grow up in a small town, or in the Midwest, or you just don't know, a housecoat is like a robe, only made of a much thinner fabric. Which makes no sense, because in a place like Kirland, which is not a mile off Lake Michigan and that wind, what good it does to wear a robe made of such thin fabric, I don't know. But there they were. Housecoats. Size twenty-two.

I could speculate about how Grandma got to be so big, but I don't have to, because she told me. Before I tell you, first you need to know about people in Kirland. There are mostly two kinds: Steel people and Oil people. Historically, those were the only industries in town: the U.S. Steel steel mill, and the Standard Oil oil refinery. Since most folks worked for one or the other, you came from either a Steel family or an Oil family, I guess because they were different unions, but partly it seemed to be a personality thing, too. At least, that's how it struck me, based on my own family.

When I was born I had all four grandparents alive. My dad's family was a Steel family, and my dad's parents were Steel people. They were tall and skinny and kind of cold, and they didn't give you a lot of hugs, even when you were at that really cute age. So my grandmother on my father's side was always just a grandmother.

My mother's family was an Oil family. They were short and round and loud, and I always wanted to go to Grandma's house, where there were always great old songs playing on the cabinet phonograph. Even if I went there every day, I got more hugs than you can imagine, even when I reached an age we can all agree is not terribly adorable. At Grandma's, everybody was always in the kitchen, and somebody was always frying up pierogies, or baking nut roll, or kneading the dough for amazing homemade bread.

Incidentally, Kirland is a very high-cholesterol environment.

I have seen Grandma's wedding pictures, and she was a slender young thing. So I just assumed she got to be so big eating all the pierogies and nut roll and amazing bread. But one day, I guess when she figured I was old enough to handle it, she told me the truth. She said all that weight came from the Boilermakers.

A Boilermaker is a drink. It comes from a time before fruity drinks, when mixed drinks meant things like Manhattans and Stingers, which are now fashionable again. Boilermakers are not fashionable again. They were probably never fashionable. A Boilermaker is:

One shot of whiskey. And one mug of beer. That's it.

Some people shoot the whiskey straight and drink the beer as a chaser. Other people pour the whiskey into the beer and drink them together. Still other people drop the shot glass of whiskey *into* the beer mug, then drink it like that. The first method is certainly the most efficient. The second is kind of putrid. The third is putrid and also inefficient, because if your beer mug starts out full, dropping the shot glass in makes you lose some of the beer. Personally I went for shooting the whiskey and then chugging the beer.

I have a little experience of my own with Boilermakers. You know how at Notre Dame the football team is the Fighting Irish, and if you play football at USC you're the Trojans? At Purdue, you're a Boilermaker. So, at least at Purdue, Boilermakers never really went out of style. Which on occasion led to certain events that are none of your business.

Anyway, according to Grandma, that was where all her weight came from—Boilermakers. She told me that one day she just got tired of being a size twenty-two, so she gave up the Boilermakers, cold. I was about ten at the time. Let me tell you, she must have been drinking an awful lot of boilermakers. Because when she gave them up, she started to drop those pounds. Until she weighed eighty-five pounds, and then she died.

She made my Grandpa give them up, too. Maybe he shouldn't have quit the Boilermakers, because about six weeks after he did, he

had a stroke and died. It probably had nothing to do with the Boilermakers, but you never know. I haven't said much about Grandpa, which really isn't fair. He was short and round and loud and huggy. He always gave me the spare change from his pockets. I loved him a whole lot. I hope wherever he is—and yes, I believe in that kind of stuff—wherever he is I hope Grandpa won't be mad, but he's just not all that important. Not to this story.

Because, as far as I could learn in my research, Grandma got the dangerous dress when she was nineteen years old, but she only started dating Grandpa when they were twenty-one and married him when they were twenty-two. So you see, the dress came from somebody else. Which made it even more dangerous. And far more mysterious.

Just like her house was perfectly clean even when she couldn't see, Grandma was perfectly organized when she was dying. She didn't have a will. I suspect most people in Kirland don't have a will. That may cause problems for people who are not as organized as Grandma was. It did not create any problems for Grandma. Two weeks before she died, she went around her house Scotch-taping little tags to everything, saying who got what. She didn't have a lot of things. But she made sure everybody she cared about got something.

After the funeral, I didn't want to go look right away. Grandma had just died, and I was very upset. Because she was extremely special to me. I was very sad, and I didn't think looking through her empty house would be much fun. But my mom said that if Grandma could be so organized for everybody, at least we could all go see what she gave us. So I went.

Mom got Grandma's framed picture of the Pope. Cousin Mary got a lamp I always thought looked like an old-fashioned hair dryer. Mary's daughter Paris got Grandma's collection of WordFinder puzzle books. Like I said, I got her clothes. Which, I must admit, initially I wasn't too excited about. Because there were all those housecoats. Size twenty-two. Size sixteen. Size ten. Down

and down, the housecoats documented Grandma's slow disappearing act.

There were other things, too. Skirts, blouses, and a few dresses. Church clothes. Shoes. None of which fit me and—sorry, Grandma—none of which I would even consider wearing.

Then there was Grandma's wedding dress. Which was a pretty dress in Grandma's wedding picture. Unfortunately the silk had turned all yellow and brittle with age. So even if I ever have the occasion to wear a wedding dress, and even if I want to wear a traditional one, and even if for sentimental reasons I want to wear my Grandma's dress—I can't. It's all stained and mildewed and cracked, so it smells . . . well, not good enough to wear to your wedding.

I finished going through the closets, and that was pretty much it. Because after all, where else would you keep clothes? Just for the heck of it, I wandered down to the basement. For most people, a basement is like a grease trap. Things accumulate there, and unless it gets so clogged that you absolutely have to clean it, you don't. Not Grandma, though. Her basement was this big empty room. Besides the furnace and some plumbing, there was mostly a lot of nothing there. Except a table with a lamp, a couple of pieces of Depression glass, and a bunch of rosaries with the beads worn down to almost nothing. All the Scotch-taped tags on those things had other people's names on them. Next to the table was an old suitcase.

A suitcase? Grandma never went anywhere that I knew of. Or that anyone else in the family knew of. I mean anywhere. Ever.

It was a very old suitcase. The frame was made of wood, and the side and top and end panels were rattan. The handle was crumbly old leather. If it had been new, the suitcase would have looked at home in a Fred Astaire–Ginger Rogers movie. Which made me wonder a couple of things.

First, what was Grandma doing with it?

And second, where had she been hiding it all these years? Because let me tell you, I spent a lot of time in Grandma's house. It's not very big. And I've been through all of it, including the basement.

At least, I thought I'd been through all of it. Only here was this suitcase that I'd never seen.

The suitcase had a name tag on it—not an old luggage tag, but one of Grandma's Scotch-taped bequests. She had been really careful with this one, though. She had doubled up the tape, sticky side to sticky side, and made a loop, so the adhesive wouldn't touch the bag. Which made it seem extremely important. I was very excited when I looked at the tag.

Only it said, *Suitcase for Uncle Joe.* Not for me. In just a few seconds I'd decided this was something special, and it must've been for me. Now it wasn't. I was so disappointed.

I don't know what made me turn the tag over. None of the other tags had writing on both sides. But I did. And the other side said, *Contents for Jane.*

Which was how I found the dress.