

Holly Hunt

Poly-Webbous

My Uncle Will came in the fabric store today, where I work as a fabric cutter. He was wheezing away, taking in shorter and shorter gasps, with his face growing deeper shades of scarlet until I thought his head was turning into a purple beet. I can see that the emphysema which definitely killed him 25 years ago is almost getting him down again.

It was either his spirit returning to the flesh, or an old crusty much like him, in his late seventies, leaning over my counter where I measure and whack.

He needed exactly eight yards of three-inch wide polyester webbing and had to pause to catch more breath to tell me what for. Sometimes they don't say much, but I can figure it out.

Sometimes they need silk shantung for a bridal train that is already going down the drain after the short trip down the aisle. You can see it in the bride's mother's face as she attempts to hide her regret, because her beautiful, post-adolescent darling girl has fallen for a borderline personality cracked from non-reversible childhood trauma. I cannot help but see how the mother cannot help but see. Even as she buys yards of spendy stuff rustling in her daughter's hands, the mother can already read the divorce papers. She casts about one of those nearly hopeful glances. She's pretending not to know, while swallowing something terrible, pretending it doesn't taste like penicillin.

My Uncle Will type says, "I got a brand new old Chrysler. A classic. I need some wide polyester webbing to hold on the mountain bikes!" I nearly dropped my shears. Chrysler? Of course. Uncle Will never drove any other make. For a second I remember that even the disciples didn't recognize Jesus when he first appeared to them after the cross. It's always up to us believers to connect the dots.

Sure enough, in six days, the old guy will head out toward the Grand Tetons. This stranger (not?) will strap on the bicycles with his fourteen-year-old grandson riding shotgun.

When I get home at 6:30 p.m., the front door is unlocked. How weird. It saves me the usual struggle to pull the key from the nether-regions of my handbag. But before I step over the threshold, I have a feeling that my entering on this evening is coming too easily.

And that is when I spot him, my clever darling, lounging out there, through the patio French doors, sprawled in his terry bathrobe. Might he be sick? He is smoking a Kool and toying with a half-empty glass of wine. What happened to his work day? Tooth-ache? Car trouble?

I manage to walk through an invisible river, a current that rushes me toward the patio door faster than I'd rather be carried. I glide across the carpet that feels about a thousand years thick with invisible, stupid cockleburrs, the kind of stupid that might bring genius, the kind that once caught proverbially in the dog's fur and thus brought about the invention of life-saving Velcro to the Western World.

And when I cross that interior terrain, I reach the ocean of misconceptions which this man has traveled over to become himself. This one, who sings in the shower and barks joyfully while cooking, is suddenly too quiet.

He says, in barely audible, songless words: "Sit down. I have something I need to say."

I feel the universe tilt in a slightly peculiar direction.

And so he begins, then, to kind of walk on glass, careful not to spill all of his guts too fast, confessing that he snorted cocaine earlier, thus breaking his promise long kept to himself and to me, and that he partied with other users. He coughs out words, merely cryptic, of his fresh betrayal and deception, and I perceive that it is followed by a scant one-quarter yard of guilty silence. He cuts the hushed moment short with a plushy thought about what I might wish for, the life I want, and how he so deeply regrets his failure, blah-blah-blah.

I don't know what to say to this fiberfill. Am I the mouse before the open-mouthed snake? But then I realize the man has maybe one-quarter of an inch of an idea about what I wish for, even from him. And just like that, the invisible snake backs away from me. It is much too full, anyhow, of some big something it has already eaten. If its belly would pop open right now from having gobbled so much, why would I not be able to grieve? For I certainly would not.

Instead, I think of the old man like Uncle Will, his purchase, eight yards of webbing. Him strapping on two mountain bikes to his brand new vintage Chrysler tuna boat. My disappointment vanishes. I thank God for polyester webbing.

I do not really care how my enrobed patio potato has slipped. Or how it is that my moderately guilt-ridden partner will always be recovering from his old addiction, with his totally smoked down cigarette and dab of merlot.

Certainly we are not as chipper as we were this morning. But not yet casualties of that nearsightedness that fails to see a bridge is missing straight ahead. So I look at where the bridge should be, just a few feet away. I am secure and bound not to go there because of a stranger or a ghost and his practical need for eight yards of polyester webbing.

I also realize it may not work for anybody but Uncle Will and me. I can't possibly make myself care more. I try to care more, but I amaze myself with a sudden inability. My partner is sulking three feet away from me, dangling from a precipice, or on the colder side of Pluto, and I am relieved by that distance.