

Nat Buchbinder

## Sebastian's Suit

Sebastian's nicer suit had stayed in his closet for six months. It had not been worn to work, or to parent-teacher conferences, or to family counseling, or to any of the investigation proceedings, or even to Liam's funeral. His blue tie, the one with the little golden hawk on it, that had stayed in the closet, too. And the white shirt, the black leather belt and shoes, even the black socks and white undergarments, everything he had worn that day in August had not left the closet.

Whenever Sebastian tried to pick up any of them, a ghost reached out and touched his hand. Something else had woven itself through the fibers of those clothes, something evil. He could not bring himself to touch them.

It also took him some time to be able to drive again, and even longer for him to do it with Ciara in the car, but that seemed more reasonable, at least on the surface.

But his other suit, the less nice one, was starting to get a little rough at the knees and elbows. After wearing it every single day, for every single event, the left cuff was beginning to fray. And it was difficult, every week, to plan for a time to clean it when he wouldn't need it.

Juliette stopped him when he was carrying it, the less nice suit, on his way to mail a check and pick up a

prescription one Friday.

“Why are you taking that suit?”

“Oh.” He looked down at the pants and jacket draped over his arm. “I was just going to get it cleaned, since I’m going out anyway.”

“Why didn’t you give it to me yesterday when I took all that stuff to the cleaners?”

Sebastian shrugged. “I needed it yesterday.”

“For what?”

“For work.”

Juliette crossed her arms over her chest. “What’s wrong with the other one?”

Sebastian knew exactly what was wrong with it. It was that ghost, its tiny black hands, its rotting odor, but he could not say that out loud. That would make him crazy. “I just didn’t really think of it.”

Juliette rolled her eyes but put down her arms. “Okay. I’m planning to have dinner on the table in about thirty minutes so try not to be out too long.”

He nodded. “No problem, it’s just a few short errands.”

Sebastian opened the garage door and got into the car as it slid upwards. Before putting in the key he recited, inside of his mind, *I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry*. Because the ghost lived in the car, too, but he couldn’t completely give up driving, so he had to try to appease it some other way. He turned on the car and apologized again before shifting into reverse and backing out.

When he stopped at a stop sign he glanced at the back seat and apologized. It was empty, of course, but he did it every time he stopped for a light or a sign. Even when he wasn't stopped but he had to slow down a bit, he looked quickly at the brown leather and Ciara's empty blue car seat, *I'm sorry*. The ghost was a silent one, so Sebastian had no way of knowing if this was what it wanted. But he had been checking that back seat and apologizing for six months and nothing terrible had happened in those six months, so he knew that at least it did not hurt.

After he pulled into a parking spot at the horseshoe shopping center he got out and opened the back seat door, bending slightly to look in, and apologized again. He shut the door, but it didn't feel right, so he shut it again. *It's good enough, I'm sorry, It's good enough*, he repeated again and again as he locked the car with the click of a button, dropped the letter into the mailbox and carried the suit to the cleaner's.

The woman behind the register looked up at him, nodding. "Another rush?"

Sebastian also nodded. "Please. I need it Monday."

"Alright, you'll have it." She took the suit and the money which Sebastian already had counted out. "See you Monday."

"Have a good weekend." Sebastian winced at the sound of the bell when he went into the drugstore. The car door was still on his mind. Walking past the candy bars and scented soaped, he apologized with each step until he got to the counter.

"Hi, I called in a prescription?"

"What's the name?" The pharmacist turned, looking through the bags.

"It's under Segal."

The pharmacist lifted the bag. “Date of birth?”

“Four, Sixteen, Seventy-Nine.”

“Please sign.” The pharmacist pointed to the glowing pad on the counter. Sebastian checked that he did not need to know more about the drug, then signed with the plastic stylus. “Have a nice day, Mr. Segal.”

“You, too.” Sebastian took the paper bag and went back to the car. He unlocked it with two clicks, then opened the door to the back seat. It was empty, except for Ciara’s seat. It was always empty.

He took a deep breath, then got into the driver’s seat. Apologizing to the ghost, he turned the car on and carefully inched backwards into the parking lot. He breathed heavily, trying to hold each inhale and exhale as long as he could.

When he made it back to the house Juliette and Ciara were already at the dining room table.

“Sorry I took so long.” Sebastian took his seat, where there was already a plate. Peas and broccoli, bowtie pasta with a creamy sauce, chicken pieces. The smell hit his stomach like a rock dropped into water, but he put a little of each onto his plate, anyway. He noticed his bony wrist as he held the serving spoon. Ciara was rolling peas around on her plate. “Don’t play with your food, sweetie.”

The little girl looked at him. “How was your day, Daddy?”

“My day was fine. How was yours?”

“Evan and I got to play with the dinosaurs.” Ciara smiled.

Sebastian remembered that the preschool teacher had started a dinosaur rotation because Ciara and her friend

monopolized them. “That’s good. Did you let anyone else play?”

“No.” Ciara shook her head. “It’s a game that’s just for us. No one else can play.”

“Seb, did you have any problems getting the anxiety stuff?” Juliette speared some pasta with her fork.

“No, no trouble.” Sebastian took a bite of the pasta, and it felt like glue in his mouth. But he chewed it quickly, then swallowed.

Juliette scraped her knife with her fingernail. “That’s good, because I’ve almost had it up to here with those people. Oh, we got that cartoon in the mail, so I thought maybe the three of us would watch it after the doctor.”

The doctor? Sebastian wanted to kick himself. Family therapy. They’d moved the appointment to Friday that week because on Wednesday Juliette had her bowling thing. “Right, that sounds nice. What’s the movie?”

“The Japanese one? Tototo?”

“Totoro!” Ciara cried, dropping her fork. Sebastian picked it up and went to get her a clean one. When he was in the kitchen he remembered the suit. He’d just given the less nice suit to the cleaner’s.

Sebastian gave Ciara the new fork and took his seat. He could just not wear a suit. Show up in some black jeans and a nice shirt.

No, that would be ridiculous. Even if the therapist didn’t notice, Juliette would. It would have to be the other one. *I’m sorry*. Sebastian looked at his plate. He’d thought of mixing the food around, like a child, to make it look like he’d eaten. But instead he tore off a small piece of chicken skin and put it on his tongue. Greasy and crunchy when he chewed, it made his stomach turn. He leaned back in the chair. Juliette and Ciara were talking about

something, but he wasn't sure what.

“Then he turns around and she was gone!” Ciara held up her napkin like she was showing it.

“Juliette.” Sebastian rubbed his eyes. “I’m so sorry, but I think I’ve got some kind of stomach bug. Why don’t you and Ciara go to see Dr. Keil and I’ll just rest?”

Juliette shook her head. “Since when do you not feel well? You were fine a little while ago.”

“It came on suddenly. I’m sorry.” He stared at his plate. His stomach felt heavy but he didn’t have that nauseous feeling in his mouth.

“There’s no point in going if you don’t go, too. It’s *family* therapy.”

Sebastian looked at her. “You two aren’t related to each other? I’m sure there’s plenty that would be easier for the both of you to discuss without me.”

“That’s why we have the individual sessions to start, Seb.”

“I mean, the two of you together without me. Look, I don’t feel well. Do you want me to vomit all over the table or will you take my word for it?”

She crossed her arms. “Don’t be hostile just because you don’t want to do this. After all, we do it for you. You need it more than either of us. For God’s sake, look at you.” Juliette pointed to his plate. “You hardly eat, you never sleep, you’re always zoning out.”

Sebastian took a deep breath. “It’s been an extremely trying time for everyone.”

“For months I’ve held this household together while you’re going off the deep end, and now you don’t even

want to try anymore. What's the point?"

"Alright!" He slammed his hand on the table. "Alright, alright, alright. I'll go. I'm sick but I'll go."

Juliette's eyes widened. "Don't do it out of spite."

"This is the last time." Sebastian got up. "It's clearly not working or helping anyone to go down there every damn week, and we drop so much money on it, and then we have to find a place to park the car—it's not worth it. This is the last session."

"Fine." Juliette put up her hands. "Fine. If that's what you want. Last session." She glanced at the clock on the wall. "Well, if we're going to go, we have to get ready now."

"Fine." Sebastian brought his plate to the kitchen, scraping the food into the trashcan before leaving it in the sink. Then he went to the bedroom closet and opened the door.

*It's only a suit. It's just a bunch of fabric. There's nothing different about it than any other suit.* He closed his eyes and pulled the hanger from the bar, then opened his eyes slowly. The thing was in his hand and nothing bad was happening. He almost laid it on the bed, but he didn't want it to touch his sheets. Instead he hung it from the closet doorknob.

Sebastian undressed quickly, apologizing with every article of clothing he dropped into the laundry basket. Then he took the black pants and put them on one leg at a time, holding his breath, *I'm so sorry*. The jacket was a little easier, falling on top of his shoulders.

He went to the bedroom door and shouted into the hall, "Ciara!"

“Daddy!” The girl toddled into the hall and over to Sebastian. “Are you ready?”

Sebastian looked down at himself. He was wearing the suit. He was wearing the suit. He wasn't wearing any shoes. “I need to get my shoes on, sweetie, but then I will be.”

“Okay.” She went back down the hall and Sebastian returned to the closet. As he laced his shoes he apologized. But he was still wearing the suit, and Ciara was alright. He put on his coat and went out to the garage, where Juliette was strapping Ciara into her seat. Juliette got into the car just as he took his spot in the passenger's seat. He closed his eyes as they backed out of the driveway, but opened them once they were on the road.

It wasn't like the last time he'd worn it. The last time he wore the nicer suit, it was hot, and he'd been the one driving. Now it was February, and he could feel that little ghost sitting heavy on his lap, crushing his legs as Juliette turned at the stop sign. It had been so hot. He remembered lowering the volume on the car radio during a news report about how hot it was.

But this was not that time. They were going to the doctor's, the three of them. They were going to talk about their feelings, about how they miss Liam, about how no one should feel guilty because it wasn't anyone's fault. It was cold outside and had been six months.

“Sebastian, are you alright?”

He looked at Juliette, who did not take her eyes off the road. “Fine.”

“How's your stomach?”

“It's feeling better.” It was twisting into knots.

A loud exhale. “I’m sorry I was short with you before. That was unfair.”

“It’s alright, Jules.” Sebastian turned to look out the window. It was dark out, a dark, cold evening, and the last time he’d worn the suit it was hot, bright morning. It was morning, and he had driven to work, then driven back home in the sweltering afternoon. He remembered the sweat, and he felt the sweat as Juliette pulled into a parking spot. Leaping out of the car, he opened the door to the back seat, unbuckled Ciara, picked her up in his arms and kissed her forehead. She was alright. He’d gotten into the car, wearing the suit, and she was just fine.

When Juliette locked the car, he realized Ciara was touching the suit. The ghost’s grimy hands might be all over her fragile little body. But if he put her down, she might run into the street, or a car could come out of nowhere, so he carried her into the doctor’s office, apologizing, gripping her with both arms. He only set her down once they got to the waiting room, while Juliette signed them in.

Then he sat in the hard blue chair and watched Ciara play with the blocks in the corner of the room. The ghost hadn’t done anything to her, and he relaxed a little. But that ghost was still on his lap, laying on its back, with big wide eyes that used to shine with delight at his face, until the last time he’d worn that suit.

Juliette sat down next to him and took a book from her purse. She had stayed home that day, six months ago, because Ciara had a cold and was running a fever. Usually Juliette dropped Ciara and Liam off at daycare and went to work, but since Ciara was so sick, she wanted to stay home with her. She asked Sebastian to drop Liam off. He remembered her asking him while he was pulling up the pants of his nicer suit.

Sebastian looked at his knees. There was nothing on them. *It’s just a suit.* Liam was sleeping when Juliette had put him in the back of the car, right behind the driver’s seat. Liam didn’t make a sound, and as Sebastian was

driving on that hot, hot morning he thought about Ciara being sick, and what might make her better sooner, and what would happen if he caught what she had, and then he remembered the last time he'd been really sick, and how he'd been worried about getting fired if he missed any more work, and he thought about what he would do now if he actually did get fired, how much worse it would be now with a toddler and a baby to take care of, but maybe if he had a good enough severance check he could start up his own business, but still it was better to do everything he could to keep that job, and then he remembered being interviewed for the job and how sweaty and nervous he'd been, and by the time he parked the car in front of his office and went into the building he'd forgotten that he was supposed to stop at Liam's daycare. The heat was record-breaking the last time Sebastian had worn that nicer suit, and when he came back to the car after work Liam was still inside.

END