Seam Allowance

Sarah Hafen d'Evegnée

> *And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse* (Mal. 4:6).
>
> *A transitional person is one who rejects the unhealthy or evil family patterns of previous generations and sets a new course for future generations by adopting healthy and godly patterns. Transitional persons are gifts to themselves and potentially to thousands of progeny, with effects rippling across time and social networks. The transitional person exemplifies Christlike love by becoming a participant with the Lord in helping to redeem others.*[1]

The shirts hang like a battalion of cotton soldiers on the large metal rack sticking out of the wall. I remove them from the hangers one by one, letting my fingers linger over the stripes, checks, and plaids. Some of them still feel new. The laundry room mingles the freshness of laundry soap with the odor of aging linoleum and tangy, rusty overtones—the same way it has for the past twenty-five years. My children's younger faces, their grins all gaps and crowded teeth, peer out at me from an assortment of paper flowers glued to a frame on the wall.

The colors and patterns in his shirts are consistent, controlled, and somehow sweet and boyish. They are all shades of blue and one of the shirts seems to have cloned itself at least three times. There's not a single stain.

1. Allen E. Bergin, *Eternal Values and Personal Growth: A Guide on Your Journey to Spiritual, Emotional, and Social Wellness* (BYU Studies, 2002), 229.

I think I might be stealing. A two-bit Gen-X criminal in leggings and Birkenstocks, I'm making off with nearly every dress shirt and some of his jeans. I abandon the white shirts. I stuff the button-down shirts that are his daily staple in a Barbie pink duffle bag, checking to make sure my sister-in-law isn't looking; I only pause when I see the navy gingham shirt. "Wow! That shirt looks so good on you!" I had bubbled, noting the way the compliment both pained and pleased him. He muttered a grumpy "thank you," sucking air skeptically through the gap between his front teeth, his blended New York and French accent peeking out of the vowels; he wore the shirt more often after that.

When we finally arrive home after the long flight from JFK, I babysit the bag into the house before I fall into bed and sleep and sleep and sleep.

I can't face the shirts for six days.

They keep calling to me from the bag. And I ignore them because I'm not ready.

And even though I'm still not ready, I march my sewing machine to the dining room table and place my cutting mat and rotary cutter nearby like the good friends that they are. I pull the zipper on the bag and release arms and torsos, collars and cuffs. I smooth the 200-thread-count cotton.

I half-expect him to burst into the room, seething the way he did more often in his younger days, "Those are mine! My shirts! I still wanted to wear those!"

But I am determined. He won't come into the room. He won't be angry. He won't be anything.

I breathe in through my nose and puff air out of my mouth, Lamaze style. I am a feminine Sweeny Todd poised above her Jos. A. Bank wrinkle-resistant victims. I start to cut, recklessly removing sleeves, slashing seams. The shirts are plucked chickens, and I am breaking down their bodies, snapping off appendages, separating flesh and bone, ripping away skin, their buttonhole mouths gaping.

I cackle. My dining room table turned violent craft-fair-slaughterhouse makes me laugh out loud—not because I'm hysterical but because the process of breaking down a chicken carcass is called fabrication. *Fabrication.* I am fabricating fabric to create something beautiful out of something dead.

To *fabricate* also means to lie or to make up a story. I am fabricating fabric to create something beautiful out of something ugly.

Holding one of my catalogue-worthy specimens by its collar, I notice new tear stains on the arms. I'm wearing my heart on his sleeves. I started the project too soon. I drop the sewing scissors, letting them sloppily slide across the table. The words Baby Daddy pop up on my phone, and I'm relieved to have an excuse to leave the cloth-laden operating table, desperate for a break from my craft trauma. I try and sound cheery and breezy, like I hadn't just been dismantling half of my husband's dead father's wardrobe.

"How are you," he asks, his tone answering the twin question I might have asked. I fabricate a response, as I brush a rogue piece of white thread off my pants, "I'm fine."

"Today is the anniversary of my mom's death," I hear him say as if he's describing the weather forecast.

I accidentally started sewing the quilt for our missionary daughter on the anniversary of the day my husband watched his mom die in a car crash when he was ten. The two of them were on their way home from getting dinner when the father of one of his classmates swerved drunkenly into their lane, scarring my husband's face and killing his mother.

"Did you realize that I'm an orphan now?"

Yes. I did. And I know that a whole truckload of quilts can't cover that coldness.

When we were newlyweds and I was still becoming familiar with the family tree I had grafted myself into, my husband and his sister often laughed in sibling synchronicity, handing the conversational baton back and forth as they shared details about their childhood trauma. The violent divorce. The constant fighting. Ironically, I was somehow missing the punchline in their stories about being hit. They were speaking a foreign tongue, and I searched my catalogue of familial experiences for a suitable translation guide to understand the joke, but I couldn't find one. The worst thing about my childhood was that my mother forced me to practice both the piano and the violin before I could play with my friends.

My father-in-law was born in Belgium in 1942. He remembers leaving the church building after Primary one afternoon and seeing a dead German solider hanging from a nearby tree. His father lost an eye and most of the fingers on his right hand when he picked up a grenade as a child, thinking it was a toy. My childhood was full of apricot trees and popcorn blossoms.

It was impossible to tell if anything you had done was acceptable to Fran. He was a gourmand. He loved to eat. I love to cook. You'd think

we would fit together seamlessly. But during his visits from Connecticut, I could never seem to make anything he enjoyed, no matter how much I researched his preferences and used my children as guinea pigs to perfect one of his favorite recipes. If I made meatballs, he'd say mid-bite, "Do you know who makes the best meatballs? Debbie. Ah. Her meatballs are delicious." Someone always was better than I was at making whatever dinner graced our plates.

I knew what would happen if the menu wasn't erudite enough to excite his European tastebuds. For dinner one night, I dared to create something as mundane as pasta and tomato sauce. Fran entered the kitchen at dinner time and asked what we were having for dinner. I told him we were having spaghetti and instead of grabbing a fork, he grabbed his jacket and said, "I'm going out" and unceremoniously left the house.

After we had completed our eleven-step bedtime ritual and our flock of children had been read to and prayed with and brushed and scrubbed and pajamaed, my husband couldn't find me anywhere in the house. I was hiding in our rickety Suburban in the garage with all the lights off. I was crying and eating a Peanut Buster Parfait in the driver's seat, staring ahead into the dark windshield and wishing I were going to a place that was far, far away. I hadn't had any sugar for months. I crunched on the stale peanuts and slurped up the melting ice-milk, the dregs of the chocolate forming pools of shame in the plastic cup. My husband leaned in the door and tried not to laugh as he asked me what I was doing. "I can't please him. I can't make him happy." I inhaled another huge bite of lukewarm hot fudge.

My husband picked up a napkin from the paper bag on my lap and wiped a splatter of rogue chocolate off my shirt. "When are you going to stop caring what he thinks? You can never make him happy. But you make me happy." He kissed me on the forehead.

At the airport, my kids encircled their grandpa like a flock of hungry geese, each of them taking their turn engaging him in an awkward hug, their easy "I love yous" both sincere and well-practiced, the way they squeezed him tight full of unquestioning admiration. An annoyed traveler honked their horn as they drove by our bustling farewell party, and Fran stopped mid-goodbye and yelled, "Go to hell!" The kids laughed with simultaneous respect and horror and admiration.

There's a long list of grievances I would like to share with my father-in-law. I want to be angry at him for making my husband come home to a dark and empty house night after night all through the years after he lost his mother. I want to be angry at him for not ever saying he was

proud of his children. I want to be angry at him for being distant and cold and unapproachable. I want to be angry at him for refusing to make a will for his motherless children, for making them pay for all of the funeral expenses because he feared his own mortality. I want to be angry at him for forcing his only daughter to have a conversation with his only son on the day he passed away that included her speaking out loud the phrase, "Can you bring a checkbook with you to help pay for your half of the cremation?" I want to be angry at him for not being a better father, but what good will it do to be angry at someone who is an exceptional grandfather to my children?

I don't have to fabricate any of the ways he made my children feel loved. Even though he lived 2,292 miles away from us, he made himself a near and present presence in my children's lives. He never forgot a birthday or an interest or a hobby. He greeted each grandchild with "Hey! It's the Ballerina!" or "Look out for Peter the Great!" or "How's the Artist?" to demonstrate not only his interest in their interests but his ability to connect with them in ways that only a really good grandpa could. When he visited his grandkids, he was right there in the middle of the action, whether it was selling lemonade, watching cartoons, or fishing. He was still himself with them—still so very Fran—cracking absurd jokes, teasing anyone who wasn't at the table with photos of whatever delicious food he was enjoying that they weren't, grumbling about politics, swearing expertly at bad drivers—but he was softer with them too. He'd rave about his love for folk music and show us video after video of Rhiannon Giddens, closing his eyes, leaning into the sound, and asking us if we liked it too. He sent temple cards, hundreds of them, so they could do the work for ancestors whose names he had lovingly discovered himself after long hours of searching with professional-grade skill. He bought us authentic New York Pepe's Pizza and Mike's Ice Cream and Egg Sandwiches and French Onion Soup and with a mischievous smile, he'd suggest we send a photo to whichever family member wasn't right there with us at the restaurant. He prayed with us, his voice cracking just slightly as he thanked God for his family.

What more do I want from him? An apology wouldn't erase the neglect while my husband was healing from the car accident that killed his mother. But good grandparenting should probably qualify as some kind of repentance for bad parenting.

Maybe grief tells you what is still left to forgive and what has already been repaired through the "process of time." My grief reports that my brain is holding on to grudges that my heart has long ago abandoned.

In the end, my grief tells me that there just isn't that much left to forgive.

So I help myself to his shirts. I take apart one thing and I make it into something else. I reconstruct practical, lived-in shirts of the past and make them into a present-day comforter. And maybe that's all you can do with the past, especially if the past is as perplexing and war-torn and scarred as it is absurd and hilarious and unifying.

I examine the pieces of the butchered shirts after my meatless fabrication is complete. Now I will make the limp and lifeless limbs of fabric into perfect squares. My end goal is to create eight-inch squares out of sleeves and backs and fronts and then to create two-inch by ten-inch strips out of the jeans. I lean in close, my glasses slipping down my nose as I measure each piece, keeping my fingers clear from the blade as I zip the rotary cutter through the fabric. One of my friends—a talented seamstress and quilter—became distracted as she was fabricating fabric and she fabricated the tip right off her left forefinger at an exacting ninety-degree angle, her blood staining her project, her finger rendered permanently disfigured. Her scarred hand is now a part of my creative process; the memory of her finger points at me every time I use my rotary cutter. Keep your fingers out of the way lest you lose them.

I organize the quilt squares into rows and patterns, creating a storyline out of the shirts. The buzz of my sewing machine is satisfying. We careen through seams as a team, and I want to pat her on the head and say, "Good job," as she wags her bobbin thread tail at me.

Once I finish a row of the quilt, I set it on the carpet in the living room right next to the scorch mark caused by our Christmas-tree lights sixteen years ago, our first Christmas in our new house. We didn't leave the lights on overnight after that, but we haven't been able to afford to replace the carpet. I think the singed carpet fibers give our living room character.

Once the quilt is finished, I find a box to mail it to our missionary daughter. But I can't bear to put it in the box, to bury it there. I text my best friends and ask them if they'll come and give the quilt a hug; it's a strange request, but they gladly take turns coming to my house or letting me stop by theirs. They speak words of comfort and squeeze me as much as the quilt. I've created an accidental wake, a viewing for a blanket.

At the post office, I'm jittery as I stand in line fifteen minutes before the doors open. Once my daughter sees the quilt, the fact that her grandpa is

dead will be real, his departure represented by a tangible arts and crafts project. As soft as the batting between the quilted layers might be, this object is the bearer of bad news, and I know it will prick her heart as much as it will help to heal it.

Christmas morning, we're on Facetime watching our nametag-bedecked daughter happily open her Christmas package. She uncovers the top layer and joyfully oohs and aahs at the homemade stocking dressed in sister missionary garb right down to the missionary nametag with her own name on it, the peter-pan collar and jaunty plaid belt completing the stocking's ensemble. I feel sick knowing that the quilt sits at the bottom of the box. After a new sweater and some socks are opened, I know the quilt is next.

"Oh. What's this?" Her eyes take in pockets and buttons on some of the fabric squares and she pieces together what the quilt is made from. "Is it . . . ? Is this . . . ?" She can't finish the seam of her sentence, the threads of thought pulling her in two directions as her voice and my resolve not to cry both break. We create a duet of sniffles, and I say, "Yes. It is."

"I miss him too," I whisper.

"Mom, I can't believe you sewed this. I love it so much. It's beautiful." We're both still crying, sharing nearly identical smiles. But the slight gap between her front teeth comes from her grandpa.

This essay by Sarah Hafen d'Evegnée won third place in the 2024 BYU Studies personal essay contest.