

# A NEW DRESS

Drama Monologue

by  
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*(Lights come up on TONI lying on a psychiatrist's couch. SHE wears no makeup and has on loose clothes. Her hair is not styled—perhaps in a pony tail. SHE speaks with a slightly Southern accent.)*

TONI: *(rising to one elbow)* You want me to tell you what / think it means? That doesn't seem entirely fair, Doc. *(slightly indignant)* If I'm to do all the talking and theorizing, why don't you pay *me* by the hour? *(pauses in resignation)* Okay. Well, I guess I'll start by telling you what it *doesn't* mean, and we can go from there. I'm not crazy enough to believe that this is a message from my father's ghost. I don't buy any of that. Since he's dead, it can't be some kind of premonition. *(adamantly)* And it sure as blazes isn't some buried memory resurfacing. There was never any experience like that to bury.

So what does that leave? It has to be coming from *me*. But what am I trying to tell myself? On the surface, that's easy enough—*(mockingly)* "Be happy with who you are." There. I can go home now. *(sitting up)* But that's not the real question. I mean, why did my subconscious make *him* the messenger? Why am I even thinking about him after all this time? Wouldn't it have to mean there's something *wrong* with me if I'm getting all sentimental about a man I despised? He was just a bully, an overgrown child, picking on people who had no power. I used to fantasize all the time about being big enough to stand up to him.

*(stands up, pacing slowly)* I remember the time I spilt a few drops of nail polish remover on the arm of his Naugahyde recliner. I must have been about eleven. After giving me grief for even *sitting* in his chair, he said, "I ought to take something of *yours* and ruin it." Goodness, that scared me. He was the kind of person who would do it, too. I came home from school every day for the next two weeks and went straight to the closet to see if he'd found any of the notebooks I'd tried to hide. There were lots of things he could have destroyed that would have hurt me, but the notebooks *were* me—poems and ideas for stories, playing with words. But it was all a false alarm. *(bitterly)* He probably didn't even realize that they were important to me—or worse, he'd forgotten his threat entirely after he'd had his tantrum.

He hated books, too – the only thing I loved better than writing. One summer, I was reading a book on the sofa, and he came in and made me stop and do the dishes. So I did and went back to the book. And he came in again and yelled at me to do the dishes! When I said I had already finished, he told me that he'd find something else for me to do—*anything* to keep me from reading. And don't try to tell me that he was worried I wasn't getting enough exercise or fresh air. It wasn't like that. He used to say that books would make me crazy. *(gives a rueful laugh)* Maybe he was right. *(sitting)* Here I am on a shrink's couch. No offense, Doc.

*(reflectively)* You know, he couldn't read that well himself. . . never finished high school. He was shipped off to fight, and got what education he could from the army. I don't think he ever read any kind of book for pleasure. And I do pity him for that. No wonder his interests were so narrow! He only liked TV westerns and country music. I think he believed everything else was somehow pretentious. Just like he believed most people who didn't talk with a twang or who used three-syllable words, thought they were better than the rest of us. Maybe in his twisted way, he was trying to save me from becoming one of them. *(angrily)* More likely, he was just trying to keep me in my place.

My brother and sister look like my mother, but I alone got to look like *him*. Being told you look like your father is not an ego trip for a girl—not when the father in question has weather-reddened skin, a receding hairline, and a double-chin. Think of Archie Bunker crossed with Walter Brennan. Of course, nobody meant that I was ugly. It was just their way of explaining politely why I was round-faced and mousy, next to my dark-haired, elfin younger sister. But don't get me started about that. *(resentfully)* She was born on his birthday, let us never be allowed to forget, and she had developed no distasteful interest in books. He called her his "sweet pea." And he called me "green onion." Putting aside the question of why he chose vegetable metaphors for his children, what does that *say*? Sweet pea is the name of a flower. Onions make people cry.

My mom tells me that he referred to me as a little "angel face" one winter day when he came to meet me in the pickup as I was walking home from school. It always surprises me to hear that. He never told me I was pretty or that he was proud of me. He was on my case about a thousand little things from not eating everything on my plate to being "smart aleck" if I pointed out a logical inconsistency in something he did not want to see dissected. He made me feel unimportant. He scared me. He made me so unhappy. . . *(sits quietly a moment)*

Maybe it was masochistic, but I used to watch re-runs of *Father Knows Best* with tears in my eyes. I thought that show was the way things were supposed to be. The episode that really shattered me was one in which Kathy had been chosen to read aloud a poem she had written for school. The father was so excited and proud that he could hardly contain

himself, but when he read the poem, he was disappointed because it seemed so small and simple. Kathy overheard him talking about it to her mother, and when the time came, she was too upset to read the poem until the father apologized and told her he was proud of her. I sobbed and sobbed, more jealous of that little girl than I knew how to express. My father didn't even want to *read* what I wrote. I can't remember a single word of praise or a single sign of interest on his part. My teachers told me I was wonderful, but *he* didn't even care.

When I was close to thirteen, I found him going through a box of photographs, removing pictures of himself or cutting himself out of family pictures. There was a kind of weird righteousness in his manner, so I was cautious when I asked him what he was doing. He stood there in our dining room and said—I swear to you, I am not making this up—he said, “Your mother wants to divorce me, and it's your fault.” (**manic glee**) Write that one down for the textbooks, Doc. Emotional scars, lane two, no waiting! (**more calmly**) He said it was because I was always “tattling” on him, telling my mother of his petty cruelties. I was supposed to have been too loyal or too intimidated to do that, I suppose. (**remembering**) But his crazy attempt to blame me actually gave me courage. It was just too ridiculous! I hadn't grown big enough to face the bully, but I had grown in other ways--too smart to fall for that. I don't remember exactly what I said then—something about divorce being more complicated, I think. But I do remember exactly how I *felt*. I knew that he was desperate-- he was playing his last card, and there was nothing more he could do to me. (**spreading arms triumphantly**) I just felt so free!

(**quietly**) I dreamed about him back then—even before he died. We were having a slumber party, and a soft knock came on the door. He was a pitiful, silent figure standing on our front porch wanting to be allowed back in. My sister wanted to open the door, but I wouldn't let her. (**pause**) It wasn't long afterward that the question became moot. He'd had a heart condition for years, and that's what finally claimed him. It's been more than twenty years now, and I put it all behind me, long ago.

But in this new dream, everything was different. And I won't lie to you—it made me feel good.

(**standing, acting out the dream**) I'm standing there, obviously in charge of some kind of program or reception, delegating tasks and shuffling papers. I'm wearing this soft, full-skirted beige dress. It's one I really used to own, a kind of all-purpose dress that could be accessorized up or down. He's standing off to the side and behind me so that I don't notice him, but I can also see the whole scene, as if I'm someone else watching it on a screen. He's wearing a dark suit that flatters his gray hair, and he's lost his double-chin and slimmed up nicely. He just stands watching patiently a few minutes until I'm alone. Then he comes up to me and says, very politely, “Excuse me. I don't want to interrupt, but I just wanted to tell you how nice you look in that dress.” And I stammer a pleased “thank you,” and the dream is done. That's all there is to it. The “me” in the dress maybe didn't know that it was him, but the “me” watching did. And I *feel* it so strongly, as if it is something that really happened. It has all the sharpness of a memory. And it matters.

(**puzzled**) Why does it matter to me, Doc? It's not an everyday occurrence for people to tell me I look good. I know that I don't try very hard, really. I don't have classic features, let's say, and I think make-up is mostly a waste of time. But that's beside the point, isn't it? (**standing, mildly angry**) He's long gone, and I have no reason, after all these years, to dream of him as a kinder, gentler father than he really was! And this (**indicating the office**) is all a colossal waste of time! (**takes a few steps as if to leave**) Unless . . . (**returning, sitting, leaning forward, looking hard at the “doctor”**) This is really about *me*, isn't it? It was *my* dream, *my* subconscious sending its little telegraph.

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