



## The Coat

Author: Daniela Cortés del Castillo

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Facultad de Letras, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

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# THE COAT

DANIELA CORTÉS DEL CASTILLO<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Daniela Cortés del Castillo (Cochabamba, Bolivia). BA in Journalism (Universidad de Chile), diploma in Editing (Pontificia Universidad Católica), diploma in Children's and Young Adult Literature (Universidad de Santiago de Chile) and Masters in Creative Writing, Publishing and Editing (University of Melbourne). She is the Editor-in-Chief at Loba Ediciones, an independent Chilean publishing house dedicated to the publication of books for teenagers and young adults from an intersectional feminism perspective. In 2017 she wrote *Chaski*, her first YA novel, with the help of a Chilean National Book Fund. In 2022 she published *The Wolf Who Cried Girl*, a poetry collection in English. She has published stories, poems and essays in Chile, Australia and the United States

He brought her a coat.

It was bulgy and purple and too large for Laura's hummingbird bones. The buttons were the colour of old carrots, and whenever she tried to tie the sash around her waist she felt like a tacky curtain, bunched up in the middle.

Still, she had not seen her son in sixteen years, and the possibility of telling everyone that Benjamín brought her the coat from *The United States* filled her with smug pleasure.

While Laura had never left Chile, every piece of clothing that she owned had been brought to her from another country by one of her sisters or her nieces. Each item was tagged with a place and a person, and the only way her family knew to love her was to add to the collection. It allowed her to devise a scaling system: the farther away the origin of the gift, the more the giver loved her.

On the day that Benjamín strolled insouciantly into the bar where she worked, Laura was wearing a black on white lace dress (Maria Paz: Australia) and a white cardigan (Julia: Argentina). She had finished off the outfit with a pair of black and white earrings (Mina: France) and a black and white Jimmy-Choo-imitation purse with matching heels (Constanza: Indonesia).

The coat was the first item she got from her son. In sixteen years, he had never once sent a letter or a package, but he called her every Sunday to tell her about his brilliant life. He told her about the fabulous house he and wife—one—two—and—three—had bought. He told her about his new car and Felipe's new car. Laura's grandson had been four years old the last time she saw him, and she had a hard time imagining him driving anything other than a tricycle. She tried to memorise the car brands and models, in case she needed to mention them to someone later. Benjamín promised that he would come to visit for Christmas. He promised this every year.

After a decade, she had started to believe that her son was a figment of her imagination, something she would brag about to her friends, like the fictitious boyfriends that had abounded

when she was young. She added Benjamín to her other collection: the collection of cherished memories that could or could not be real.

The day Benjamín showed up at the bar Laura thought, “That man looks a bit like my son.”

When she realised it was really him, she let out a scream of untenable terror.

Benjamín interpreted it as happiness.

Wife number three, Corina, was blonde and chiselled and tried to be kind. She told Laura interesting stories about a fashion show she had gone to in New York City and about the cocktail parties she attended every weekend. Benjamín proudly announced that his wife only wore designer clothes like Marc Jacobs and Dior. This impressed his mother greatly. When the coat emerged from a suitcase on the second day of her son’s visit, Laura concluded it was a designer item and chose to overlook its faults. She figured that cabbage purple was in that season.

That night they took her out to dinner at the Yacht Club. The restaurant was not as elegant as Laura had hoped, despite the crystal lamps which hung like gallant octopuses from the ceiling. The floor was covered in a fawn carpet that—she noted with disapproval—was splotted with dubious stains. Three walls of the restaurant were panelled wood. The fourth was made of glass. She imagined that during the day one could see the ocean outside, but now it was all dark, a piscine smell floating in through the air conditioning vents.

She was particularly disappointed by the people. They seemed to her to be ordinary and under-dressed.

Near their table a group of young women laughed loudly. One of them was wearing a green dress and black tights, but the rest of them were in jeans and wool sweaters. Even worse: their jeans were tucked into long boots, so that they looked like a table-full of jockeys. It was an ugly trend that she was glad had gone out-of-fashion three years before.

She murmured her thoughts to her daughter-in-law, but Corina just smiled. Laura thought that maybe it had been a vulgar thing to say and tried to rectify it by being extra-demure. She straightened her back, picturing a broomstick wedged into her shirt. It was a trick she had read in a magazine once, when she was just a teen. Then she took her hands from her lap and placed her long fingers on either side of the plate. She noted that her hands were ruined by work and old age, and for a moment she wanted to hide them again.

Laura tried to take strength from the perfection of the ensemble she was wearing: black silk shirt (Maria Paz: China); purple satin pants (Andrea: Brazil); purple Prada-imitation heels (Constanza: Indonesia); black sequined clutch (Nora: Argentina); gold earrings (Julia: Ecuador); purple Designer coat (Benjamín: United States).

The original coat tag—the scratchy beige tag with black letters that read *Fashion Park. Hecho en Chile*—had been cut out that morning. She had hidden it inside a pair of ugly pink socks and pushed them to the bottom of her third drawer.