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The Embrace

A Seattle sidewalk sets the scene for a hug felt across the years.

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Lunch time, and it's a special date. Our mother is taking her three young children downtown to lunch with their grandfather. I'm three years old, small for my age, wearing a couture dress, handmade by my French-trained seamstress grandmother, Bee. My older brother and sister are wearing coordinating outfits.

Bee only dresses her family; nothing professional. Inside each glorious creation is sewn a label: "Handmade by Bee Green." In her coats, the label is sewn upside down, á la the fashion of John Doyle Bishop, Seattle's iconic fashion designer.

Challenging my zeal for perpetual motion, every outfit requires several stand-still fittings; first sewn in muslin, the prototype of what splendid garment results, then the minimum two fittings in the genuine article. Not counting school uniforms, we wore no store-bought clothing before our teenage years. Even then, Bee, and later, our mother, created the important pieces in our wardrobes. Lush, enviable prom dresses, impeccable Easter, Thanksgiving and Christmas couture; complete wardrobes for each season of each year.

This balmy spring morning, we four fashion plates stroll along a sparkling clean sidewalk in the city's financial district, looking forward to meeting our Grandfather Alan, the distinguished English gentleman who always wears a red poppy in his lapel. Now a bigtime U.S. businessman, his office is situated in the Smith Tower (tallest building west of the Mississippi back then).

Through a three-year-old's eyes, I see the sidewalk is not exactly congested, but thickly dotted with pedestrians. Occasionally, a passerby will glance in our direction, smiling at the darling children in matching outfits

with their beautiful young mother. I detect more than a few of the men focusing in on our mother's Betty Grable legs; she isn't oblivious either.

My hand in its white glove fights my mother's grip. Nobody, even Betty Grable, can hold me at bay. I'm an incorrigible escape artist, and I believe Bee's bespoke dresses afford a source of aerial lift to my gait, a bit like Mary Poppins' umbrella. My mother's grip tightens.

I am beside myself with excitement. The sidewalk is level and seems to go on forever. I keep a sharp eye on the pavement stretching into infinity, feeling alternately like a tortoise, then roadrunner, all while anticipating Grandfather Alan's embrace. My heart pumps; my breath stirs.

Here he comes! In his distinctive dark business suit and gray fedora, he's heading our way. I wriggle out of my white glove, free from my mother's grasp, and bolt.

As he advances on the sidewalk, I run to him, my white ankle-length oxfords scuffing as I detour around pedestrians, making a beeline for Grandfather Alan. Here he is! I raise my arms and leap up onto his chest like a wild monkey to a coconut palm, planting a fervid kiss on his cheek. He hugs me and rocks me gently, just long enough for my mother to rush up on her Betty Grable sticks, her Revlon lips forming mortified apologies.

Apologies for what? I'm in heaven in my grandfather's arms, joy pulsing through me, the warmth of his embrace exuding love and security.

Then, very gently, he sets me on my feet on the sidewalk. He stoops down and peers into my wide green eyes.

He says, "I wish I were your grandfather, honey." ♦