

That Ole' Yellow Shirt

The yellow shirt had short sleeves, an extra-large pocket on the front and snapped at the neck line—from the side. It was faded from years of wear, but still in decent shape. I found it in 1963 when I was home from college on Christmas break, rummaging through bags of clothes Mom intended to give away.

“You’re not taking that old thing, are you? Mom asked when she saw me packing the yellow shirt. “I wore that when I was pregnant with your brother in 1954!”

“It’s kind cool,” I told her. “Anyway, it’s the type of thing everyone will think looks cool when I wear it under my clothes in art class.” I slipped it into my suitcase before she could object.

The yellow shirt became a part of my college wardrobe. I loved it. After graduation I wore the shirt the day I moved into my new apartment and on Saturday mornings when I cleaned. I got married the year after I graduated. When I became pregnant, I wore the yellow shirt during my early “big belly days.” I missed Mom and the rest of my family, since my husband and I were in Colorado and my family in Illinois. But, the shirt helped. I smiled, remembering that Mom had worn it when she was pregnant 15 years earlier.

That Christmas, mindful of the warm feelings the shirt had given me, I sewed up the raveling hem, wrapped it in holiday paper and sent it to Mom. When Mom wrote to thank me for her “real” gifts, she said the yellow shirt was lovely. She never mentioned it again.

The next year, my husband, daughter and I went to Mom and Dad’s to pick up some furniture. Days later, when we uncrated the kitchen table, I noticed something yellow taped to its bottom. *The shirt!* And so, the pattern was set.

On our next visit home, I secretly placed the shirt under Mom and Dad’s mattress. I don’t know how long it took for her to find it, but almost two years passed before I discovered it under the base of our living room floor lamp. The yellow shirt was just what I needed now, while refinishing furniture. The walnut stains added character.

In 1975, my husband and I divorced. With my three children, I prepared to move back to Illinois and as I packed, a deep depression over took me. I wondered if I could make it on my own. I wondered if I would find a job. I paged through the Bible, looking for comfort. In Ephesians, I read, “So use every piece of God’s armor to resist the enemy whenever he attacks, and when it is all over, you will be standing up.” I tried to picture myself wearing God’s armor, but the image that came to mind was the stained yellow shirt. It occurred to me that my mother’s love was a piece of God’s armor? My courage was renewed.

Unpacking in our new home, I knew I had to get the shirt back to Mother. The next time I visited her, I tucked it in her bottom dresser drawer. Meanwhile, I found a good job at a radio station. A year later I discovered the yellow shirt hidden in a rag bag in my cleaning closet. Something new had been added. Embroidered in bright green across the breast pocket were the words “I belong to Pat.” Not to be outdone, I got out my own embroidery materials and added an apostrophe and seven more letters. But, I didn’t stop there. I zig-zagged the words “mind-



body-spirit” up and down the frayed seams. Then I had a girlfriend mail the shirt in a fancy box to Mother from Arlington, Virginia. We enclosed an official-looking letter from “The Institute for the Destitute,” announcing that she was the recipient of an award for good deeds. I would have given anything to see Mother’s face when she opened the box. But, of course, she never mentioned it.

Two years later in 1978, I remarried. The day of our wedding, Harold and I put our car in a friend’s garage to avoid practical jokers. After the wedding, while my husband drove us to our honeymoon location, I reached for a pillow in the car to rest my head. It felt lumpy. I unzipped the case and found, wrapped in wedding paper, the yellow shirt. Inside a pocket was a note: “Read John 14:27-29. I love you both. Mother.”

That night I looked in the Bible in our hotel room and found John 14:27-29. It read:

(vs. 27) Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. (vs. 28) You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I will come to you.’ If you love me, you would have rejoiced, because I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. (vs. 29) And now I have told you before it takes place, so that when it does take place you may believe.

The shirt was Mother’s final gift. She had known for three months that she had terminal cancer. Mother died the following year at age 59.

I was tempted to send the yellow shirt with her to her grave. But I’m glad I didn’t because it is a vivid reminder of the love-filled game she and I played for 16 years. Besides, my oldest daughter is in college now, and majoring in art. And it’s still true—every art student needs a baggy yellow shirt with big pockets.

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