

FIRST PERSON

REINVENTING MOM'S VINTAGE MINK



ILLUSTRATION BY DREW SHANNON

At her funeral, the coat kept the cold at bay. But when I put it on throughout that winter, I found it unwearable, **Yona Krum Eichenbaum** writes

On a frigid January day, I arrived at my parents' apartment in Montreal. I was visiting, wearing my favourite down coat. As I flung it on a chair, my mother smiled, noting how warm it looked.

She had always obsessed about keeping me warm. As a young child, she wrapped me like an overstuffed burrito: stiff snow pants, thick jacket, hood pulled over my hat.

For a kid with a chubby silhouette, the extra padding was not a good look. Worse – I couldn't bend my arms or knees. I shuffled along in heavy snow boots, the swish-swish of snow pants audible through my hood. And I struggled to climb up the school-bus steps, an embarrassing memory even now.

Eventually, I outgrew chubbiness and rebelled against clothes that constrained me. Blessed with a metabolism that ran hot, I strolled about, coat unzipped, hatless, happily defying the elements and my mother.

I wasn't surprised by her reaction to my coat until she asked to try it on and revealed her plan, "I need something light and warm. You have other coats like this. Give me this one and I'll give you my mink coat. It's winter. You'll wear it home on the plane."

She had offered that coat numerous times in the last few years, explaining she didn't go out much, didn't need a fancy coat. It would make her happy to know it was keeping me warm. Each time, I resisted. I couldn't see how a mink coat, circa 1972, was compatible with my life. I told her to keep it, "You never know when you might need it."

I didn't object to fur. I knew how warm and luxurious it could be. Fur was entwined with the fashion culture of Montreal, a way to survive the endless winter of this icy, beautiful city. In our small community of Holocaust survivors, everyone had a friend who was a furrier – sometimes a skill brought from the "old country," sometimes learned here, a way to make a living in the New World. A warm fur coat, like a table groaning with food, was a way to ensure and celebrate survival.

My mother had a mink coat made by a furrier our family knew. She selected the style, the fur and lining. When my parents brought the coat home, she modelled it for me, thrilled, "So light, look how it hangs, how it shines." She stroked the fur and showed me her name embroidered into the silk lining.

But on that January day, her request felt different. She had been sick. We didn't know when her cancer would return. I knew what she really meant: Take it now while I can enjoy you having it. This time I said yes.

Excited, she retrieved the coat from the closet and helped guide my arms into the sleeves. When I turned around, she beamed, pronouncing it, "perfect." It wasn't. I was four inches taller and slimmer than she. The coat was too short to cover the longish skirts I liked to wear. The vibe was vintage, but not in a good way. It felt more costume than coat, like playing dress-up.

Back home, I put it on every few weeks, looked in the mirror, and hung it back in the closet. As spring approached, the coat was placed in a storage facility owned by a local furrier. My mother had protected her treasured coat from dust and heat and humidity.

Even if I didn't wear it, I would do the same. It remained in storage for the next two years. I cheerfully lied whenever she asked if it was keeping me warm.

In the early fall, as the coat's second year in exile approached, my mother's health deteriorated. I retrieved the coat and told the furrier I wanted to give it a new life. My vision: a reversible jacket ending above my knees. This would solve the "too-short" problem. I could wear it fur-out or in. I hoped that fur-in, a sleek nylon outer layer, would feel more me, less mom's mink.

He was enthusiastic. The fur was in excellent condition. I selected a rich, earth-toned nylon that complemented the fur. He suggested making a hood with fur left over from cutting the coat to jacket length. I agreed – but only if it was detachable, able to vanish at whim. He promised the coat by the end of November.

I returned to Montreal multiple times that fall as my mother grew weaker. She died on Dec. 1. As I prepared to return, my friend, familiar with the coat saga, asked if I would wear it to the funeral, "It's so cold there. It would be what your mother wanted." All true, but the coat wasn't ready. She called the furrier herself. It was almost done. He would have it ready the next day.

When I stood graveside on that freezing December day, I was wearing that coat, probably fur-out, I can't remember. But I do remember it kept the wind and cold at bay. It kept me warm like nothing else could. I hoped my mother knew.

That winter, I tried hard to wear it. But fur-out, it still whispered mom's mink. Fur-in was better but unwearable. Now I understood why animals had evolved with outer, not inner fur. The mink, smooth and soft when patted, poked through my clothes – prickly and itchy – impossible.

I remembered the sheared beaver coats, popular when I was growing up. Shearing made fur plush and velvety, the lush softness worth the small sacrifice in warmth. I called the furrier and asked about sheared mink. Would it solve my problem? He said people loved it, that he did it all the time. The coat went in for a shearing.

But soft as it now was, when I looked in the mirror, it still wasn't me. Friends advised me to give up. The coat was a money pit. I would never make peace with it. But I had to make it work. Sorry, Marie Kondo, not everything that doesn't spark joy is disposable. Memories and promises and guilt make some things impossible to shed.

Bringing the coat in for storage that spring, I saw a fur vest hanging in the showroom. I wore vests all the time – nylon, fleece, wool – why not fur? I imagined my coat minus sleeves, luxuriously layered over a sweater, jacket, anything. "Can we do this?" I asked the furrier. He smiled, "Don't worry, you'll love it."

Well, almost. It wasn't quite love. But I had only hoped to like it and I really did. I totally loved the mink headband he created from the leftover sleeve fur – a sweet surprise.

Now, when the days grow shorter and colder, I often reach for this vest, grateful to feel its softness wrapped around me like a warm hug.

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