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On Getting Dressed

Abstract

I lean against the chalkboard and wait for the young woman to speak. I feel especially put together because I am wearing an outfit; I bought all three pieces at the same time, indicating my financial stability and dedication to appearance.

It is a Friday, and this introductory physics student is casual in her sorority letter jersey, jeans and sneakers. Her hair is long, her skin porcelain; these traits do not distinguish her from her sorority sisters. She is exceptional, however, in her habit of obsessively leaning forward in her front-row desk, as if preparing to dive over the top. Perhaps she is an equestrian, so accustomed to having only her legs and hands in contact with her horse that she does the position whenever she is eager. She grips the desktop, her feet swept back, athletic, energized, in the two-point position of an event jumper.

“Professor Stephenson, you must need to do laundry.”

I laugh a little at my own expense, inspect my skirt for chalk.

“You wore that same outfit last class.”

I am relieved. This sorority woman, this possible equestrian, is only commenting on my absent-mindedness. She keeps leaning forward, waiting for my response. Her ponytail fans down the back of her soft cotton jersey. I smile at her. She is so very pretty. I also register the surprised faces of the other students and how they pause; I see with full clarity the sorority girl’s strong white fingers, her confident hands, that same confidence in her voice as she addresses a professor as if we were peers. Still smiling, I turn towards the ever-forgiving slate board. I pick up the chalk and write Ohm’s Law on the cool, flat, forgiving gray surface. Class begins. [*excerpt*]

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On Getting Dressed by Sharon Stephenson

December 1, 2014



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* * *

After my third lecture, near noon, I slouch home. My black-velvet dachshund Bart stares as I manhandle the front door over the carpeted threshold. I leash him, sulkily follow him around the block, and then he sulkily follows me back towards the apartment, our walk too short.

I eat an unremarkable lunch while Bart sprawls on the futon. The gall of the sorority girl makes me put my sandwich plate in the sink and find the phone. My mother will not only help me relive my morning’s shame but we will bond by burning permanent neural pathways in our collective mind of injustices done to each other.

I warm her up in the usual way, describing the walk to work, the fine spring weather, my personage prepared in every way for lecturing. I then describe the cheek of the sorority girl. I expect my mother to be horrified on my behalf.

“Oh honey. You’ve never known how to dress yourself.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, don’t get upset, but you don’t know how to dress. What does it matter? You’re smart. You have a Ph.D. in physics. Who cares what you look like?”

I make light of her comment and steer the conversation to a convivial close. I stand abruptly, Bart’s cue for a departure.

We walk the stately neighborhood of Belhaven, huge hardwoods reaching far beyond the pale sidewalks in an effort to touch branches above the wide street below. Belhaven houses Jackson, Mississippi’s old-school elite: lawyers, doctors, professors, clergy. I trudge past Eudora Welty’s Tudor, past all the familiar homes I have longed to live in since childhood.

* * *

My inability to dress myself is not due to years spent trying.

1. Toddler to age 7: My stepmother designs and sews my clothes. Batik, paisleys, denim jackets with hand-embroidery; these are my coverings. Cantering about in my custom-made palazzo pants, I am barely containable beauty.
2. Ages 7 to 11: My first stepmother is replaced by another stepmother who already has three kids of her own. The palazzo pants are now too tight. I wear hand-me-downs. As a fourth grader, I idolize my teacher, the calmly gorgeous Miss Barbara Quick. By my sixth-grade year I am ashamed to be anywhere near her. My stepfather teaches at the same elementary school. His tireless leering at her makes me dirty by association.
3. Ages 12 to 14: I attend three different schools in as many years. At school #2 I inquire about the oxford-cloth button-down shirts every white girl and boy seem to own in every color, shirts sporting a tiny embroidered horseman swinging a wee mallet. The white girls and boys brief me about Rene Lacoste and Ralph Lauren and once done, summarily shun me.
4. Ages 15 to 17: It is not cool to wear hand-me-downs when the source of these clothes, my cousin, built like Farrah Fawcett, is in most of my classes at my latest school and comments loudly on what a sad job I do of filling out her old things. I work many hours after school and weekends in a department store. I buy clothes, even *outfits*, capitalizing on the employee discount.

My department store competes with Gayfer's, home of the Gayfer Girls, an entourage of high school women sporting large silver block metal "Gs" on their navy blue sailor hats. Its radio spots so full of energy you'll drive off the road: "THIS IS GG CANDEE DONAHOE INVITING YOU TO OUR FALL FASHION SHOW THIS SATURDAY FROM 1 TO 3 AT THE METROCENTER GAYFER'S!"

The GG's have been a source of Mississippi pride since Faulkner was a lad. Someone like me—who lives in a trailer and thinks it stylistically interesting to take scissors to a garage-sale, mustard-yellow sweatshirt sporting Snoopy on the front in an effort to make a "Flashdance" style one-of-a-kind creation—is by all counts ineligible for membership.

5. Ages 18 to 21: Oxford Street hires me to sell and alter very expensive Italian suits. The shop is managed by two gorgeous Syrian brothers whose wealthy family used retail as a means to avoid their sons' conscription. I often find myself on my knees with a sliver of white soap asking, "Which side?" and sometimes explaining, my face upturned, a geisha at their feet, my need to know which side of my customer's midline his genitalia naturally rested in order to measure his inseam.

I am a student at a small, liberal arts college, surrounded by old-money maidens. I see what is truly possible with enough capital—clothes sing on the body, even boyish bodies like mine, and what songs they sing! Not tight-jeaned lusty hard rock or a hillbilly's impoverished bluegrass, but sublime music communicating charm, polish, taste, security. I want these clothes, but I know not where to find them.

Fortunately, in 1948 Harold G. Powell opened a clothing store in Norman, Oklahoma. When you first enter the Jackson, Mississippi, Harold's, as I did in the late 1980s, you might well be surprised by the antique merry-go-round horse: wood-worn smooth, void of any childish paint, curvy and proud. Another surprise: a stable door, the bottom half closed and the top half open the day I first turn the oval knob and enter. The first floor has what appear to be antique bar tops, or perhaps they are meant to represent workbenches, made of brownest wood, set against vanilla carpet underfoot. These dark wood tables would be ideal for resting a glass of wine while out with your best shopping friend. Lo and behold as you lean in towards her you realize there are sumptuous blouses rubbing your well-toned legs! Along the walls

torso-only mannequins give ideas—this print blouse can look astonishing with argyle. See for yourself! The message is plain: this is a woman’s haberdashery.

At the back of the first floor is the cream-on-cream business center, not simply a place to hand over your cash, but a place of honor and celebration. Blouses will be wrapped individually in tissue, dresses hung, phone calls made to hunt down that pair of flats in your size from another store, shipped directly to you. The world behind the counter easily accommodates five or six women who are, in themselves, statements in class, women who know Paris, vacation in Tuscany. These beings nod approvingly at your purchases. No one rushes. Please, enjoy the ceremony.

I have found my promised land, but I cannot afford the milk and honey.

6. Ages 22 to 28: Any female pursuing a Ph.D. in experimental nuclear physics has two choices for a fashion muse: auto mechanic or computer programmer. As the smallest person in my research group, I often crawl underneath beampipes to get to the vacuum pump leaking oil. Some days we shut off our truck-sized accelerator and slide the main tank back to check the innards. I don the coveralls and sticky mitts and crawl around inside the tank like a gecko, use my tacky paws to pick up any specks of unwanted dirt. (Dirt and metal flakes cause the accelerator, once on, to develop a tendency to “spark” or discharge from within—a lightning strike, with jump-out-of-your-computer-chair thunderclaps.) In graduate school, no wristwatch, not even a Swatch, lasts long: faces scratched beyond usability or broken outright, bands caught and torn on some bolt or stack of radiation shielding.

* * *

And now today, on this particular Friday, I walk under the shade of live oaks and magnolias. Bart continues his careful marking.

I consider my three-piece outfit, bought when I still needed clothes for Sunday church and Thursday night sorority meetings. I am the Methodist Reverend John Wesley, “As for apparel, I buy the most lasting and, in general, the plainest I can.” The sturdy cotton plaid skirt in kelly green, black, and white falls almost to my ankles and is very full. Despite that it is after Labor Day and before Easter, my shoes are white lace-up oxfords, soft leather peppered with cutout

daisies, worn with bright white tights. The blouse: also white, with a Puritan collar and billowing three-quarter sleeves. The novelty sweater vest does not meet John Wesley's "plain" criteria, although it is well made and still colorfast over these eight years, also in kelly green, edged with black and white stripes. A black Scottish terrier romps on this sweater; his head points towards my ribs, his long dark torso wraps around my own torso, his sweet furry bottom on my low back.

As Bart roots under azaleas, I stare at my pale feet, distorting the shape of my white flat oxfords, handmade by Italian men, men who imagined delicate arches sliding into them. That morning I told myself that the pony-tailed, lotioned-legged, small-pored young woman thought *you are an absent-minded professor, brilliant and absorbed in your thoughts*. And I laughed a little, mumbled, then snapped to and delivered three back-to-back lectures.

Even though I had been trained to mark alterations, the two Syrian brothers had never let me dress the mannequins in the window displays. One morning, I had trotted into Oxford Street wearing a tunic emblazoned with a sequined tiger's face. After silently sipping their espressos, the two Syrian brothers told me the story of Richard Gere in "American Gigolo." The costume director had put Gere in a fabulous Giorgio Armani blazer, and the cast was awestruck by the transformation. Gere became self-conscious and asked, "Who's acting this scene, me or the jacket?"

On other days those Syrian boys would lean against the glass counters filled with ostrich wallets and softly talk of Adele Simpson, the designer who created entire wardrobes for Barbara Bush, Pat Nixon, Lady Bird Johnson. These great women, these women of means, still needed someone with an eye for fashion.

My hobbit-feet flap the sidewalk, my ridiculous skirt swishes about my ankles. The decision seems to make itself—go to Harold's, the promised land.

* * *

On this warm Friday afternoon in Jackson, I drive my red Saab up I-55 North towards Harold's, my tiny black purse on the passenger seat holding my red wallet like a heart, a heart that might not recover from the charges to come.

Today the signature carousel horse looks past me, but the top half of the barn door is yet again open. I turn the oval knob and enter, my now-ridiculous white shoes silent on the soft clean carpet. Once inside, I realize I have no plan. My hands again start to betray—already cold, they tremble when I reach in to pull a colorful blouse from its tribe of blouse sisters. For years I had turned a deaf ear to the Syrian brothers. Now an overpriced blouse will be my salvation?

A retail worker frowns when a patron enters her shop and too soon departs. Therefore, I shuffle my hobbit feet and keep my head down, pretending to hunt for some particular item of clothing that this store will not have. I plan to then shrug a little and perhaps sigh, politely open and close the half-door, and walk briskly to my parked car. Once in the warm privacy of the Saab, hot tears will finally stream down my face as I speed home to take a pity-nap, my cheek pressing against Bart's accepting flank.

My shuffle and fake search complete, I turn to depart. A woman of Harold's stands in my way.

"May I help you?" As she addresses me, her head tilts, her brow furrows. She recognizes me, and I her. She is still a beautiful creature.

She tells me she doesn't go by "Quick" anymore. Her marriage means she no longer needs to teach elementary school and can work part time, for fun, in Harold's. I am secretly glad that she is in a place where she does not have to be constantly harassed by my stepfather. People like him do not frequent stores like Harold's.

She regards me openly, with a warm heart, and her voice carries respect even though she knows from whence I come. She asks again, lightly, happily, what brings me into her lovely store on this particular Friday afternoon.

I try to wedge myself between those blouses hanging near my hip, try to stuff those god-forsaken white shoes out of her view. My mouth is too moist and thick, and a fourth-grader's voice bursts forth. I think I manage to look her in the eye.

"Well, this afternoon.... Well, I just found out today... from my own mother..... that I am unable to dress myself. And so... And so I came in here... to get some help. I need some help."

Miss Barbara Quick, who no longer goes by "Quick" and should be addressed as a "Mrs.," looks past me, embarrassed by my sniveling confession. But no, I am mistaken. She is only

getting the attention of another employee. She is asking the approaching woman a question that I cannot hear because the fact that Miss Barbara Quick is not embarrassed by me causes me to lose my sense of hearing. Miss Barbara Quick could hear—she heard my statement, analyzed my request, and is now doing her job.

The older woman does not seem to notice that I am 28 years old and wearing a Scotty dog sweater vest. This, I will soon find out, is against the rules of personal appearance. But at this moment I am trying to understand what is being asked of me. My body has been poised for a prolonged sobbing session in the car, followed by a nap. My physical self, now resentful over having to remain cordial, decides to request that all my blood be pulled from my extremities and collected in my core. But my hearing, thankfully, returns. The older woman is asking if I would like a cold drink, a Fresca or a Coke. I am hypothermic, shivering, but she cannot see my tremors. I respectfully decline.

Miss Barbara Quick and her stately co-worker walk me to the grand coronation center, where they proceed to leaf through a calendar. The other employees, the women of Harold's, are mildly interested. They press in and listen. The older woman points the eraser end of a pencil at me and asks when I am available for five consecutive hours. It cannot be on a Saturday or Sunday; the shop will be too busy.

I can come next Friday. In soft tones Miss Quick spells my name while the older woman writes in the calendar. This older woman, she runs the show, she is the spokesperson, she looks me straight in the eye and tells me that one week from today I am to bring my entire wardrobe—every sandal, every sweater, every sock. She then smiles and pats the part of my arm not covered by the puffy-sleeved, Puritan-collared blouse. Miss Barbara Quick joins the chorus of Harold's women, benevolently smiling from behind the massive counter, a choir loft. Their silence is my cue to thank them, leave their presence, and prepare.

* * *

One week later the women of Harold's again offer me a cold Fresca. I will accept the bubbly drink and their kind-but-accurate appraisal of my wardrobe. That day I will stop fighting reality and embrace my personal truth. I am a physicist. I am a woman. And I am capable of great things, but like Barbara Bush, Pat Nixon, and Lady Bird Johnson, I will need to depend on those who actually have an eye for fashion.

Hours later, I will drive my Saab home to Bart knowing my base color (black) and rules for my body type. On the passenger seat, tidy notes will be anchored by my red wallet. In the back seat my old clothes that made the cut will be joined by just two new pieces—pinstriped black slacks and a vest the color of ripe peaches. I will wear them both on the day I interview for the faculty position I currently hold.

* * *

For the next eleven years the women of Harold's, especially the gorgeous and imaginative Elly at the Harold's in Washington D.C., will help me get dressed. But the financial crisis will, on November 7, 2008, force Harold's to declare bankruptcy, removing any chance of that institution's artistic decline.

Now once or twice a year my fashion ineptitude and I stalk other retailers, searching for an ageless magnificence, an elegant confidence, some equivalent to the vanilla carpet, Fresca, and stable door. One day we might find success. If we do, I will start the conversation with a calm heart and an honest smile.

“Hi. My name is Sharon, and I'm going to need your help in putting some outfits together.”

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