



Dressed to the Nines

FOR NINTH GRADE

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The clothes we select for ourselves are a better indicator of who we think we are than our faces or our bodies, which we didn't choose. Clothes are our one chance to right whatever physical wrongs God has imposed on us. They can be a mirror of what's inside, a veneer of camouflage, or a map of your aspirations. -Amy M. Spindler, *New York Times Magazine*

When I first read the above words as printed in the “Points to Ponder” section of *Readers' Digest*, I tore the page out, folded it and tucked into my journal for keeps. It was a profound truth—one that rocked my fifteen year-old unsure and yet emerging confidence. There were countless things I stewed over that I couldn't do to alter my exterior. No matter how many crunches I did, I would never have the iron-board Demi Moore stomach I hungered after. No matter how many Pilates classes I completed faithfully, I simply would not grow to the lanky height of the video instructor and her skinny side-kicks. But, I could choose the outward expression of my interior. I could, I *can* always choose my clothes.

When it comes to attire, I've long been vocally pro-choice. I've always known what I've liked, period. I still hear about the stifling August afternoon that I refused to disrobe from my cupcake-appliqué Joggle sweat suit. Even at the age of three, I had an unwavering sense of style.

Before I was sixteen, I was ever-devising plans to coerce my mother into shopping trips. I'd bait her with promises to clean the house from top to bottom. Nevermind the fact that I didn't have the (or any) income to support my borderline-shopaholic tendencies. I pored over *Vogue* pages, vying to reproduce the fashions with my own middle school interpretations. The desire to dress well only magnified with age. When I emerged on high school, my quest for couture had reached its zenith.

A pocket-sized purple notebook, nestled in my top dresser drawer, recorded my weekly schedule of outfits. Between its two worn covers is recorded every ensemble I wore during my four years at Chattahoochee High School. It still lies there, untouched since the last day of my senior year: the day I wore my white linen capris, blue and white wide-striped polo shirt, white backless topsiders with a navy blue ribbon in my hair.

Every day, every week, for four whole years, I set aside Sunday afternoons for choosing the entire weeks' picks. I reveled in those afternoons in which my closet would explode onto the surface of my bedspread, as I mixed and matched my way into the week's fashion forecast.

I made my way in and out of countless items of clothing, identifying the precise accessories to be worn with each decided outfit, right down to the earrings. When the weeks' menu was perfected, I'd pencil it all into the book, checking with previous pages for any premature repetitions. I adhered strictly to a “six week, no repeat policy.” A girl in the runnings for the “Best Dressed” Senior Superlative had to be fastidious.

I was so serious about the statement I was making, in fact, that I took care to name and appropriately theme each year of my wardrobe. Each preceding summer, I mulled around with ideas for the fall. *What do I want to be about?* I'd ask

myself. *Who do I want to emulate?* My junior year, coming off the heels of an intense infatuation with all things Olsen twins, I was headed towards a throwback to the sixties. I loved the big Jackie-O glasses, the high-waist shirtdress, the argyle sweater vest. And so, “retro preppy” was born. I adhered strictly to the motif until May. Pairing Mary Janes with big-buttoned shift dresses, I fancied myself a real classroom class act.

The following year was my entrée into what I termed “business casual.” I bought my premier pair of black pumps and spent the entire year shopping at The Limited. Front-creased slacks, V-neck cashmere sweaters and crisp button-ups were my bread and butter. I even bought a pair of camel-colored stiletto boots to boost my small stature to match the pant length of my new power suits. You wouldn't believe how I managed to run to class in three-inch heels. Never mind how I ruined the fine leather with one slip of the hand in art class. Italian leather has no place in a high school art studio. I know that now, but back then, my resolve was not to be reckoned with.

You see, I was bent on becoming a fashion designer. I spent weekend evenings hunched over a sketchbook etching out my original ideas. I blended colors a la Crayola and made notes about the fabrics to be used on each piece. I was also a budding (and an extremely frustrated) seamstress. I executed two of my handmade designs with the help of a family friend, whose patience and expertise far outweighed my own. One of my creations made it all the way to my baccalaureate ceremony. The white eyelet number, in all its glory, is historically recorded, thanks to photographs that will never allow me to sugarcoat the horrific mistake that it was. It put quite an unbecoming cap on my senior year.

Alas, my love affair with the working-woman's wardrobe started and ended that year. Even now, as a young professional, my closet is devoid of the age-appropriate items worn by recent grads. I just can't stand the stodginess of slacks and stockings. I had my business woman phase, and strangely enough, it was as a never-worked-an-office-job-a-day-in-my-life seventeen year-old. To my disappointment, my efforts didn't win me the Best Dressed title. Instead, I was named “Class Saint.” Behind the angel wings I donned in my picture, I wore a thrifted BCBG baby blue sweater. If I couldn't wear the fashion crown, you better believe I was going to the best-dressed saint in the year book.

It was years later, after having wrapped my insecurities under belted dresses, and concealed them under demure sweater sets, that I realized fashion was a futile fix. My timorous attempt to stand out in the crowd was the inner me quietly screaming, “Here I am...look at me!” But, my subtle appetite for approval was only partially sated by the *ohs* and *ahs* my clothing earned me.

The first fig leaf was a blanket for Eve's shame. How little has changed since she first made her debut on Earth's earliest runway? Thoreau warns: “Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes, and not rather a new wearer of clothes.” It took me learning that for my flimsy sense of self esteem to slowly shed its own cotton coverings.

So, dear Amy Spindler, if I could take the liberty to reexamine your aphorism, I'd like to add a prefix. When the wearer of clothes comes clean from self-loathing, from guilt and deprecation, only then should she use fashion to capitalize on her realized beauty. She who is clothed in unapologetic confidence is the true Best Dressed.