



Dress ~ Up

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Amy Mercer

Tonight while my husband and I were eating dinner, my five-year-old son walked into the dining room dressed in his underwear, and a pair of my favorite black high heels. With a sly smile on his face, Will asked to borrow my black dress and some jewelry. I could feel my husband’s shoulders tense across the table.

“Come on,” I said to Will. “I know the perfect thing.” I jumped up from the table as if I’d been waiting for this moment and pulling things from my closet, dressed my boy up in my clothes and jewelry, and stood back to

admire him. This was different than when they played in their Spiderman or Buzz Lightyear costumes, this was “dress-up.”

“Go look in the mirror and I’ll get the camera,” I said. Then I had to stop and repeat the process for my younger son. My boys looked so pleased with themselves, clomping around on the hardwood floors in my high heels. Will held his arm carefully, so my bracelet wouldn’t slip off his wrist to the floor. I hurried around to find my camera while my husband sat at the table, looking glum, mumbling about using the photos as blackmail in the future.

Dressing up was one of my favorite activities when I was a child.

“Let’s play dress up,” I’d say to my sister. “You can wear the silver heels,” I might have added to convince her. My dad has movies of my younger sister and me dressed in fur hats, polka dotted scarves, and silver high heels, dancing around the living room. There is a photo of the two of us in wedding dresses; me in our mom’s, and my sister in our aunt’s dress in the living room at our grandparent’s house. We were encouraged, laughed at, given old clothes from our grandmothers to use for the purpose of play. In the long dresses and scarves of my youth, I held my chin high and felt like a woman.

Dress up was a family ritual. Every summer, on the Fourth of July, my dad’s side of the family gathers at our lake in Maine. There are seven cottages that have been in the family for generations, all with different names: “Aloha, Nirvana, Stonywood and Tacozie.” There is a worn path of soft pine needles that connects the cottages that I traveled in bare feet with my eyes closed. Windchimes blow and motor boats hum, there are hammocks and decks overlooking the lake for reading, there is a tennis and shuffleboard court and a beach with shovels and buckets for the little ones. There are open doors and cousins that wander in and out of cottages, looking for a tennis partner or something to drink.

I’ve tried to describe the family Fourth of July parade to my husband. He’s been to the lake, but never in July, and never during the parade. In my memory, the parade was proof that my family was crazy, a magical, awe inspiring, embarrassing kind of crazy. At the family parade, everyone dresses up in costume. Even if you are just a friend, a boyfriend, if you are young or old, you still have to be in costume, any kind of costume. One year, I remember my dad wrapped in toilet paper with a toilet lid around his neck for a costume, an older male cousin was a Playboy Bunny, and an uncle was the upside down man with a fake head, wig and all, hanging between his legs. Women dressed as men, men dressed as women and my grandfather marched around in his bathing suit and a top hat.

The morning of the parade everyone rushed around, secretly grabbing strange items from different cottages and shouting manically, “Don’t tell!” as they ran out the door. *How did they come up with the ideas?* I wondered as I searched through the costume box in the basement of our cottage, pulling out and discarding items. I never won Most Creative, Most Original, or Most Hilarious; once they gave me Cutest just to be nice. As a teenager, I rolled my eyes at the parade, putting on a pair of sunglasses and painting whiskers on my cheeks, dragging my feet around the compound while everyone sang *When The Saints Come Marching In*. But even as I rolled my eyes, I was sucked into the fun. I relaxed my jaw and was transformed by my whiskers and the leopard skin coat I’d slung over my shoulders at the last minute. As we neared the end of the parade, I almost growled.

My dress-up clothes are long gone, lost in the mix between houses with my parent’s divorce and my move out West for college. I haven’t been to a family Fourth of July parade in a long time. When Will walked into the dining room wearing my high heel shoes, I realized that he is now the same age I was in the home movies of dress-up dancing. I realized that I miss playing dress-up.

I was never sure about bringing my husband, my conservative, golfer husband to the family parade and for the last several years we’ve gone to Maine in August, when things are quiet. Until this year. This year we’ll be there in July. This year I hope to play dress-up with my boys.

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