ON DRESSING

THE MOM COAT

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I’m a stay-at-home mom, so I don’t dress for any other milieu. I dress in what I think of as my mom clothes, for my mom job.

I have created a uniform for myself. I wear cotton because it’s easy to clean, pants because they are easier to move in. I have a few T-shirts in my drawer and I wear them until they are full of holes and then I get new ones. If Jackson Pollock were a mom, he would wear my clothes.

I don’t like any kind of language or insignia on my clothes, yet for a while I wore a pink T-shirt emblazoned with the logo of a New York theater company I very much admire. It was light pink with a small black unicorn head and NYC Players in small lettering. No one ever asked me about it, but I liked having that connection to this theater company in my uniform, especially because so much of mothering involves dealing with children’s playing in a way that is like being a stagehand or a director to their ongoing improv. So I was a New York City Player, in my way, in that shirt.

I also have a Mom Coat. The Mom Coat seems
unavoidable here in New York City. I wear it as part of my uniform from November till March. I have very mixed feelings about the Mom Coat, which is a down coat that has a hood, completely covers your ass, and is black, gray, or gray-black.

The Mom Coat is a sleeping bag you walk around in. It turns you into a pod. I almost cease to be human when I wear it: I am just a shroud with pockets. And of course, because I have kids, my pockets are always stuffed with Kleenex, hair clips, Goldfish, et cetera. The Mom Coat is like a minivan in that way. You are inside and piloting a receptacle for your kids’ stuff.

I wore my Mom Coat every weekday morning this winter during the fifty-block commute I did with my kids on the subway. My kids are eleven, nine, and four, and for the first four months, from September through December, my daughter (the four-year-old) would start asking me to pick her up after we had walked a mere half block. (It’s a block and a half from our apartment building to the subway.) In the beginning, a lot of the journey was about not picking up my daughter, then it was about not buying the children candy, even though our commute included a waiting period near an underground newsstand with an enticing display. I was toeing the no-carrying and no-candy lines (although we occasionally bought cough drops because of their medicinal properties), and that was hard enough. Then you throw in the wind, cold, rain, snow, and finally the other things you couldn’t prepare for—like the week when a giant, candy-eating homeless man started
occupying “our” bench. He would sit there like Jabba the Hutt, eating noisily from a jumbo bag of M&M’s. (Did he know our no-candy rule? Was he taunting us?!) I had to keep my daughter from eating the stray pieces he was spilling on the platform. Then there was the man we walked past daintily as he squatted by a garbage can and defecated.

We had many adventures, let’s leave it at that.

Climbing into my gray Mom Coat every morning felt like hunkering down to get through this journey. This part of my day, from 7:45 to 8:45 a.m., was always gray, black, or gray-black, and I needed all the Kleenex, Altoids, and Squinkies I had floating around in every one of my Mom Coat pockets to get through it.

I was even jealous, some days, of moms above me, on the street, driving minivans, because I imagined that the minivan freed them from the Mom Coat. The minivan itself served the Mom Coat purpose. Those moms could step out of their minivan in some little Chanel jacket because they had twenty-two cupholders full of crap nearby, double-parked.

All of which is to say that I think of this uniform—the chinos, the Mom Coat—as temporary. There will be a day when I no longer wear this, and I have started collecting pieces for that time. When I am older, I am going to wear only Comme des Garçons. I will have a correction for this time when I was lost in a lollipop-and-tissue tornado. I will wear clothing that makes people’s heads hurt with difficult questions: Why must a pair of pants have two legs? Is a lumpy-sculptural
shirt beautiful? Are two halves of two different shirts stuck together a whole shirt?

Writing this makes me realize that I am a bit like someone who is on a very strict diet, who is craving things that are off the diet, and I wonder if that’s not a sign to ease up. I am not really sure who is being helped by my uniform. It’s not my kids, I don’t think. I wore a cocktail dress one evening recently, and my younger son saw me and declared, “You should wear that every day!” My kids are in on the severity of my uniform, and really, how does severity ever help anyone? Yes, cotton is easy to clean, but who cares? Why don’t I wear my shirt that is two half-shirts stuck together and ask my kids difficult fashion questions on our way to school? Didn’t I come to New York in the first place so I could be around freaks—people dressed in plastic bags directing traffic? Didn’t I come here so I could have the freedom and courage to be the freak that I am? So how is it that I now find myself so deep inside my Mom Coat?

I think this is something that happens as you get older—you begin to think that fashion, like so much else in life, is only for young people. I am from Ohio, and one thing I love about the Midwest is how the middle-aged moms there bedazzle themselves. The holiday season, in particular, is a time to bring out a whole range of sweaters and sweatshirts adorned with rhinestones and other sparkly gems. Sweatshirts and sweaters with football or hockey team logos on them—also with gems, where possible—are accepted as casual
and even semiformal wear anytime of year. This is a very different approach from my mom-community in New York, where women wear a lot of black, and gems are not fun or fake or splattered all over your Pittsburgh Steelers sweatshirt. Gems are on your fingers or in your ears, and they are real and serious.

I think what I am facing now is the fact that I need to get the “Player” off my mom uniform and into my life. I need to get back to bedazzling—not because a bedazzled Pittsburgh Steelers sweatshirt looks better than a black cashmere sweater, but because bedazzling is itself a beautiful activity.

I’m reminded of Emily Dickinson’s words, “Beauty—be not caused—It is.” I think this speaks to the trickiest thing to embrace about fashion and style, which is that the product of all the effort is ultimately not that important. This is hard to accept because it’s absurd. But I think it’s the truth: you can’t actually make yourself beautiful.

It’s similar to writing: what’s beautiful about writing is not the words. The words are a recording of the beautiful thing. The words are a recording of the beautiful thing in the person, the thing that becomes beautified only by action, and ultimately becomes most beautified only by the most beautiful action of all—love. This thing, this transmitter of beauty, is ultimately unadornable and undecoratable. It is invisible and it bedazzles. That we can’t see or touch it should not stop us from paying homage to it, and we do this by imitating it. We do this by sincerely and wholeheartedly
beautifying to no end. ×