

## It Could Look Good on You

My sister and I stared at the wispy models in the Simplicity pattern books while our mother thumbed bolts of cloth in Huggins's store, a block from the railroad tracks, in our tiny north Florida town. Buying clothes off the rack, she said, was foolishness when you had an electric Singer. Not to mention that one pattern made two sizes, just right for girls—one born in November and one the next October—"not far apart."

After some wrangling, we selected a pattern that neither of us loved but both didn't hate. Our mother asked Mrs. Huggins—squinting at us through the dust that swirled when she thumped the bolts onto the cutting table—to cut material for two dresses. My sister and I chose one detail—collar style or decorative edging—that would make the dress "mine." Or in my case, being the younger, mine and ours since I wore my dress and then her hand-me-down a year later.

We stopped being an almost-matched set when my sister enjoyed a prepubescent growth spurt that required women's size clothing and a size 8 shoe. I didn't. Our mother abandoned Simplicity (yes, we were grateful) and drove us to the closest Sears, 45 miles away.

Our instructions: Pick two dresses for church (to rotate between Sundays and Wednesdays). Hem below the knee, nothing tight or show offish. Pick two "school outfits." We knew this meant (1) less nice than clothes for church; (2) easy to wash; (3) matched clothes we hadn't outgrown. Our mother then departed for a cup of coffee and a moment of peace at the Sears lunch counter.

Half an hour later, my sister and I emerged from our respective dressing rooms. I modeled stiff jeans and a straight-cut, button-down shirt. I didn't yet know that I was a lesbian,

but I did know that boyish clothes were much less bother than girlish clothes. My sister sported an animal-print miniskirt and snug-as-a-bug tank top. She was decidedly not a lesbian and had detailed plans to bother a lot of boys.

Our mother snapped, “Put that mess back.”

I don’t recall what we chose that day, but I’m pretty sure no one was happy.

My sister yearned for curvy hips and an ample bust, not only to perfect her Mae West impression (“ooh, ooh”) but also to dominate the competition with her middle-school best frenemy who possessed both and used them to steal my sister’s boyfriends. My sister’s waist and hips, however, were the same size, a much-bemoaned tragedy until she discovered they were the perfect proportions for store-bought clothes. By this time, she had some babysitting money, which allowed her to begin a clandestine clothes collection that would not pass the good Christian woman modesty test. My sister boarded the school bus each morning wearing a modest, simple dress, but as soon as the groaning Blue Bird arrived at school, she shot into the bathroom and put on *her* outfit: skin-tight, peg-leg britches so hip-huggy there was barely enough crotch to zip. Hot red pants. Lime green. Sun glare yellow. Although the much-desired bustline never materialized, she advertised what she had with deep-V necklines, big ruffles, tight tapers, and bold patterns. There was makeup, and everything matched. Everything.

Me? I had none of my sister’s ambitions for hips, but I got some anyway. To work with that, I like my britches baggy and in my two favorite colors—dark blue and darker blue. For my (happily) modest bust, I prefer oversized shirts in earth tones. Though I do love me some variety:

rolled up sleeves in the summer and rolled down in winter. My wild side speaks through clever black t-shirts: “Irony, the Opposite of Wrinkly”; “In my defense, I was left unsupervised.”

Over time, I’ve learned a lot more about being a lesbian. As far as clothes go, my progress may be less obvious. I do have a dress (basic black for weddings, funerals, and social miscellany). I don’t have a purse. I do find excuses to buy multiple pairs of blue or black cargo pants. Those pockets. Oh my god.

After we became adults, every so often my sister UPS’d something she “just knew” that I needed: A macrame tablecloth. Bedsheets. A concrete chicken. I said, “Thank you,” then regifted most to Goodwill. But I did call to ask: “A concrete chicken?”

“In case someone breaks into your house.” [pause] “Or it’s a doorstep.”

Some packages contained an item of clothing, always something uber-girly, either pastel or ruffled.

“Just try it,” she’d insist. “It could look good on you.”

It never did. And yes, I noted the conditional tense.

The last summer I spent at my sister’s house, we always stopped at “Two-for-One Tuesdays” at the Last Chance Thrift Store after she’d finished radiation treatments. One Tuesday, as we walked back to the car (our agreement: never check out together), she thrust a bundle into my hand: a sundress, plunging neckline, white background, yellow-and-orange flowers the size of dinner plates splashed across front and back.

My sister said, “It’s you!” She looked at my face, my clothes, the dress, then began laughing.

“Well, it could look good on you,” she said. [long pause] “But maybe in another life.”

When I sort my sister’s clothes after her memorial service, I pack the bright blouses, lacy camisoles, and skinny jeans that had become too big months before, and I take them to Goodwill since the Last Chance—living up to its name—has closed. I keep two things: a black knit cap she wore in the hospital that I wear when I hike in the cold and a pair of cotton pants that tuck in slightly at the waist and widen through the hips. The dark background is alive with tiny red, blue, and yellow flowers.

I slide them on, make a deep curtsy to the concrete chicken guarding my front door.

They do look kind of good on me.