

LIFE WITHOUT GO-GO BOOTS Barbara Kingsolver

Fashion nearly wrecked my life. I grew up beyond its pale, convinced that this would stunt me in some irreparable way. I don't think it has, but for a long time it was touch and go.

We lived in the country, in the middle of an alfalfa field; we had no immediate access to Bobbie Brooks sweaters. I went to school in the hand-me-downs of a cousin three years older. She had excellent fashion sense, but during the three-year lag her every sleek outfit turned to a pumpkin. In fifth grade, when girls were wearing straight shifts with buttons down the front, I wore pastel shirtwaists with cap sleeves and a multitude of built-in petticoats. My black lace-up oxfords, which my parents perceived to have orthopedic value, carried their own weight in the spectacle. I suspected people noticed, and I knew it for sure on the day Billy Stamps announced to the lunch line: "Make way for the Bride of Frankenstein."

I suffered quietly, casting an ever-hopeful eye on my eighth-grade cousin whose button-front shifts someday would be mine. But by the time I was an eighth grader, everyone with an iota of social position wore polka-dot shirts and miniskirts. For Christmas, I begged for go-go boots. The rest of my life would be endurable if I had a pair of those white, calf-high confections with the little black heels. My mother, though always inscrutable near Christmas, seemed sympathetic; there was hope. Never mind that those little black heels are like skate blades in inclement weather. I would walk on air.

On Christmas morning I received white rubber boots with treads like a pair of Michelins. My mother loved me, but had missed the point. In high school I took matters into my own hands. I learned to sew. I contrived to make an apple-green polyester jumpsuit that was supremely fashionable for about two months. Since it took me forty days and forty nights to make the thing, my moment of glory was brief. I learned what my mother had been trying to tell me all along: high fashion has the shelf life of potato salad. And when past its prime, it is similarly deadly.

Once I left home and went to college I was on my own, fashion-wise, having By-passed my cousin in stature and capped the arrangement off by moving to another state. But I found I still had to reckon with life's limited choices. After classes I worked variously as a house cleaner, typesetter, and artists' model. I could spend my wages on trendy apparel (which would be useless to me in any of

my jobs, particularly the latter), or on the lesser gratifications of food and textbooks. It was a tough call, but I opted for education. This was Indiana and it was cold; when it wasn't cold, it was rainy. I bought an army surplus overcoat, with zip-out lining, that reached my ankles, and I found in my parents' attic a green pith helmet. I became a known figure on campus.

Fortunately, this was the era in which army boots were a fashion option for coeds. And besides, who knew? Maybe under all that all-weather olive drab was a Bobbie Brooks sweater. My social life picked right up.

As an adult, I made two hugely fortuitous choices in the women's-wear department: first, I moved out West, where the buffalo roam and hardly anyone is ever arrested for being unstylish. Second, I became a novelist. Artists (also mathematicians and geniuses) are greatly indulged by society when it comes to matters of grooming. If we happen to look like an unmade bed, it's presumed we're preoccupied with plot devices or unifying theories or things of that ilk.

Even so, when I was invited to attend an important author event on the East Coast, a friend took me in hand.

"Writers are supposed to be eccentric," I wailed.

My friend, one of the people who loves me best in the world, replied: "Barbara, you're not eccentric, you're an anachronism," and marched me down to an exclusive clothing shop.

It was a very small store; I nearly hyperventilated. "You could liquidate the stock here and feed an African nation for a year," I whispered. But under pressure I bought a suit, and wore it to the important author function. For three hours of my life I was precisely in vogue.

Since then it has reigned over my closet from its dry-cleaner bag, feeling unhappy and out of place, I am sure, a silk ambassador assigned to a flannel republic. Even if I go to a chichi restaurant, the suit stays home. I'm always afraid I'll spill something on it; I'd be too nervous to enjoy myself. It turns out I would rather converse than make a statement.

Now, there is fashion, and there is style. The latter, I've found, will serve, and costs less. Style is mostly a matter of acting as if you know very well what you look like, thanks, and are just delighted about it. It also requires consistency. A friend of mine wears buckskin moccasins every day of her life. She has daytime and evening moccasins. This works fine in Arizona, but when my friend fell in love with a Tasmanian geologist and prepared to move to a rain forest, I worried. Moccasins

instantaneously decompose in wet weather. But I should have known, my friend has sense. She bought clear plastic galoshes to button over her moccasins, and writes me that she's happy.

I favor cowboy boots. I don't do high heels, because you never know when you might actually have to get somewhere, and most other entries in the ladies-shoes category look to me like Ol' Dixie and Ol' Dobbin trying to sneak into the Derby, trailing their plow. Cowboy boots aren't trying. They say, "I'm no pump, and furthermore, so what?" That characterizes my whole uniform, in fact: oversized flannel shirts, jeans or cotton leggings, and cowboy boots when weather permits. In summer I lean toward dresses that make contact with the body (if at all) only on the shiatsu acupressure points; maybe also a Panama hat; and sneakers. I am happy.

I'm also a parent, which of course calls into question every decision one ever believes one has made for the last time. Can I raise my daughter as a raiment renegade? At present she couldn't care less. Maybe obsessions skip a generation.

She was blessed with two older cousins whose sturdy hand-me-downs she has worn from birth, with relish. If she wasn't entirely a fashion plate, she also escaped being typecast. For her first two years she had no appreciable hair, to which parents can clamp those plastic barrettes that are gender dead giveaways. So when I took her to the park in cousin Ashley's dresses, strangers commented on her blue eyes and lovely complexion; when she wore Andrew's playsuits emblazoned with trucks and airplanes (why is it we only decorate our boys with modes of transportation?), people always commented on how strong and alert my child was—and what's his name?

This interests me. I also know it can't last. She's in school now, and I'm very quickly remembering what school is about: two parts ABCs to fifty parts Where Do I Stand in the Great Pecking Order of Humankind? She still rejects stereotypes, with extraordinary good humor. She has a dress-up collection to die for, gleaned from Goodwill and her grandparents' world travels, and likely as not will show up to dinner wearing harem pants, bunny ears, a glitter-bra over her T-shirt, wooden shoes, and a fez. But underneath it all, she's only human. I have a feeling the day might come when my daughter will beg to be a slave of conventional fashion.

I'm inclined to resist, if it happens. To press on her the larger truths I finally absorbed from my own wise parents: that she can find her own path. That she will be more valued for inward individuality than outward conformity. That a world plagued by poverty can ill afford the planned obsolescence of haute couture.

But a small corner of my heart still harbors the Bride of Frankenstein,
eleven years of age, haunting me in her brogues and petticoats. Always and
forever, the ghosts of past anguish compel us to live through our children. If my
daughter ever asks for the nineties equivalent of go-go boots, I'll cave in.

Maybe I'll also buy her some of those clear plastic galoshes to button over them on
inclement days.