

Getting Your Groove Back

One woman loses — and finds — herself through fashion. | BY ALECIA STEVENS

In 1966, when I was 12, my family moved to a new town. What a nightmare! Should any prepubescent child have to live with the anguish of finding acceptance and respect in junior high? I was not at my best and needed to find a way to be seen. Fashion proved to be my muse.

My parents knew the “not-at-my-best” part. One evening, I threw a preteen tantrum in front of K&D Bootery in Spencer, Iowa. I *had* to have white go-go boots. Dancers were wearing them on *Shindig!*, Steve McQueen’s wife had a pair, Twiggy wore them and I had to have them, too. My beleaguered parents stood there, immobilized by their tyrant of a daughter, gave in and bought me the boots.

The following Saturday I began to sew a jumper I’d seen in a catalog. I adapted a pattern so it would look exactly like the catalog version and began to stitch the pieces together in the basement of our tiny ranch home. I begrudged having to surface for meals. On Sunday, while I was still laboring away, a thunderstorm ripped through the town, and we lost electricity. Oh, nature’s timing is so harsh! I lit a candle and patiently turned the wheel of the sewing machine by hand, stitch by stitch, applying the navy-blue binding that decorated the deep U-shaped neckline of the white wool jumper. I wore this outfit on Monday with my new go-go boots and felt like I had modestly redefined who I was in seventh grade out here on the prairie, which gave my delicate confidence a boost.

In my twenties, I worked as a costume designer for the theater. In this context, I realized the strength of fashion’s voice. The curtain is pulled and the costumes begin to communicate who the characters are, all without a word. Offstage, we introduce ourselves to the world through fashion, our costume. We hide behind it, and we seduce with it. It can be a kind of armor, protecting us. It reveals our status and our confidence. Often, it is a collective shout — remember the ’60s?

My enthusiasm for fashion is, admittedly, a shallow quality, but also a lifelong passion. I have discovered more recently that my relationship with fashion fundamentally mimics my relationship with myself and, believe it or not, it can be a stand-in for a good therapist.

When Lee, my husband, moved to Los Angeles almost seven years ago to go to graduate school and teach, I traveled there monthly to spend time with him. I was in my early fifties at the time and learned

in short order that I was not an L.A. kind of gal, and it almost undid me. I wasn’t blonde. I didn’t have my blowout every morning. I didn’t wear a rock the size of Gibraltar on my ring finger nor had I had any work done (if you know what I mean — wink wink). I didn’t wear aqua, coral and white, and I didn’t place the back of my thong strap just above the top of my skirt for all the people standing in line at Peet’s to see.

At this time of life, my children had pirated my fashion budget in the form of school tuition. How many years did I wear Gap jeans, a black J. Crew perfect-fit tee and brown Frye boots (for dressing up) or Dansko clogs (for every day)? At one point, I owned eight black J. Crew long-sleeved T-shirts. The only cool thing in my wardrobe was a 5-year-old Prada bag, a gift from a client with taste.

I actually had some kind of cosmic meltdown one afternoon,

sobbing at how out of place I felt. I didn’t know how to dress in L.A. I tried the bleached jeans, the orange sandals, a choker necklace from the shop on Montana Avenue and looked like I was choking. I bought tie-dye on Main Street in Venice Beach. Who was I kidding? I never, ever learned to do L.A. I had to confront a gaping insecurity. My husband (who I impartially think is quite cute) was working with Jim Morrison’s “L.A. women,” some form of the sex kitten, and I couldn’t compete. Bottom line: it wasn’t my style. So, instead, and with much ado, I made L.A. wrong. Who’d want to live in that cultural desert, anyway?

Two years ago, Lee took a job in New York. I thought, Oh, here we go again. But, I quickly learned that if you just wear black, no one will notice. Of course, in New York,

no one will notice you much anyway. That’s the great thing, however: there is remarkable sartorial freedom — you get to write your script and design your own costume. There are so many remarkable people and styles in an international city like New York; you can be whoever you want to be. In New York, I wear things I would never wear anywhere else just because I can play with who I want to be next.

Sometimes I return from a day in the city, pass the mirror in our apartment and wonder, What was I thinking wearing a miniskirt at 57 years old?! On another day, I try the John Lennon Beatles hat and the strappy shoes with an old pair of jeans, and it works! I feel, once again, like I did in my new jumper and go-go boots at 12 years old: a little more confident, a little more comfortable in my own skin. Like I got my mojo back. Take that, L.A. **AL**





TWIGGY, VOGUE, 1967. © BERT STERN. PAINTING BY ROY LICHTENSTEIN: BLACK & WHITE 1961 - 1968

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