**Eight Days In A Corset – Siri Hustvedt**

Last summer, I worked as an extra in the film version of Henry James’s novel *Washington Square*. I am not an actress. Agnieszka Holland, the director, is a friend of my husband’s and mine, and the person she was really interested in was our daughter, Sophie, who was cast as one of Mrs. Almond’s children. Under a blasting June sun, Sophie and I arrived in Baltimore for a fitting. Sophie was dressed first, and she looked as pretty as a young heroine in any book. One of the two wardrobe women handed me a corset, a hoopskirt, and a petticoat, which I put on, and then she tightened my stays. They searched for a dress long enough to fit me, and I climbed into it in front of a long, wide mirror in the changing room.

Within a few minutes, I felt faint. I began to suffer from the feeling I always have when I am faint – acute embarrassment. This time there was the added burden on fear: that I would crash to the floor in front of my eight-year-old daughter. I began to sway, dropped, but did not black out. I wish I could say that they cried, “Loosen her stays!” hurried out for smelling salts, and waved my ashen face with a fan. But they didn’t. They kindly brought me water and grapes as I recovered. I joked about filling the role too well, about becoming in a matter of minutes the classic image of a swooning nineteenth-century lady, and yet I don’t believe it was the corset. I has almost fainted in front of a mirror once before – in a yoga class. That time I was wearing dance tights and a sweatshirt. My teacher was correcting my posture, and without warning I collapsed and found myself breathing deeply with my head between my knees.

Mirrors are where I check myself – for parsley stuck in my teeth, for blemishes and dirty hair – where I ponder which shoes go with which dress. But every once in a while, they become something more than that – the site of a body I know will eventually give up the ghost. As in fairy tales and folklore, the mirror displays for an instant my ghost double, and I don’t like seeing her. It is a moment when I am a stranger to myself. But a foreign reflection in a mirror is not always a shock. There is something appealing about transformations, and clothes are the fastest route to leaping out of your own life and into someone else’s. The whalebone corset I wore for eight days catapulted me into another time and aesthetic, and I liked it.

The corset is a vilified article of clothing. It was and is blamed for a host of feminine miseries, both physical and spiritual, for ruining women’s bodies and for closing their minds. It is interesting to note, however, that while women wore them, it was male doctors who led the campaign against the corset. Most women were for it. In the twentieth century, feminists joined physicians and attacked the garment as crippling. No doubt there were women who, in the heat of the summer or in the front of a parlor fire in winter, lost consciousness in corsets too tightly laced for their own good. But wearing mine day in and day out, I fell prey to its charms. Wearing a corset is a little like finding oneself in a permanent embrace, a hug around the middle that goes on and on. This is pleasant and vaguely erotic – a squeeze that lasts.

But the feeling of a corset is only part of its effect. Like all clothing, more than anything else, it is an idea. In this case it promotes an idea of a woman’s body as radically different from a man’s. In the summer of 1986, I traveled in Asia with my three sisters and we visited both a Buddhist monastery and a Buddhist nunnery in the mountains of Taiwan. Those monks and nuns looked *exactly* alike – small, trim, hairless bodies with shaved heads. The monks had orange robes, the nuns white. Had they all stripped naked and stood together, the difference between them would have been ridiculously small, would have been no more nor less than what the difference truly is – genital variation and a few secondary sexual characteristics in the chest and hips. The truth about clothes, hairdos, and makeup had never hit me so hard. The cultural trappings of sex are overwhelming. We make them and live them and are them.

The corset takes the difference between men and women and runs wild with it. The inward slope of a woman’s waist becomes extreme, and the tension of lacing the waist pushes the breasts upward. Suddenly, I had new breasts. I did not now how much my body had changed until I saw a photograph of myself in costume and marveled at this addition to my anatomy. The corset leaves most of the breasts free and does not cover the genitals. By lodging itself firmly between the upper and lower body parts, its effect is to articulate them more sharply and define them as separate erotic zones. The corset helped to create a notion of femininity, and the lines it produced have gone in and out of fashion ever since. If I had never seen a corset before or had never imagined myself in one, it probably wouldn’t have had much power, but I grew up on nineteenth-century novels and studied the illustrations in Dickens and Thackeray very closely. Snug in my corset, with a body I had never seen before, I became an illustration to myself of a world I had only read about.

The corset did not live alone, however. In the 1860s, the time during which James set his novel, it was joined by other garments essential to the American bourgeois woman: the hoopskirt and the petticoat padded at the hips. The padding exaggerated the tiny waist created by the corset, and the hoop turns a woman into a kind of walking bell. The hoop’s threat is real. You sit, and if you are not careful, it flies up over your head. No one can scrub floors in a hoop. If you’re wearing one, it’s a sign that during the day you are *never* on your knees. It is possible to arrange flowers in a hoop, lift a teacup, read a book, and point out tasks to your servants. The hoop was a sign of class; its restriction meant luxury. Like the Chinese aristocrat with fingernails a yard long, it tells a story: “I do not work for money.” And I did notice among some of the extras a touch of envy among those who were cast as maids in sad, gray dresses for those of us who swished along in our private balloons. Our movements might have been hampered, but we took up a lot of space, and that space, I realized, was a matter of pride.

And then, they did my hair. I liked the corset. I was amused by my petticoats and laughed at the hoop, except when I had to back slowly into a bathroom stall wearing the crazy thing. (Women of the period did not back into stalls. Their underwear was open, and they could pee standing up. Yes, like a man.) The hairdo was another matter. I am six feet tall. I was forty-one years old. When they had finished with me, I looked like a giraffe in ringlets. The only people in the world who come by ringlets naturally are babies. During that period every woman who could afford to be curled was – young, old, and in between. It was baby fashion, and to my mind it made every woman over twenty look ridiculous. Like the hourglass figure, the longing for infancy through garments or hairdos comes and goes. The short shifts of the sixties were a movement back to childhood, as were the big eyes and ringlets of the same period. Only a few years ago I read about the fashion among teenagers and young club-goers to drape pacifiers around their necks after they had squeezed themselves into baby clothes. Female Peter Pans.

In other words, the idea is what matters. Clothes give us insight into culture and its wishes, and into individuals and their desires. More than who you are, clothes articulate what you want to be. Ringlets were hard for me, because I like to think of myself as a grown-up, because I strive for a certain dignity in my apparel, but that dignity is no more than a message I want to communicate, and who knows if it is successful? I love clothes and have often pined for them – the beautiful dress or coat in the window. My desire is for the transformation I imagine will take place, a kind of enchantment of my own body.

Children are closer to fantastic transformation than adults, closer to the spell of costume and the change that comes from illusion, but we all are prone to it, and hiding behind the silk nightgown or the stockings or the pin-striped suit is a story we have heard and repeated to ourselves. These stories are often clichés, worn narratives we hold close to our hearts. I am changing into the silk nightgown, have brushed my hair an pinched my cheeks. I walk into the bedroom and there he is – the hero, Clark Gable or William Powell, depending on my mood. He turns, gasps, “You look…” Fill in the blank. Whatever the words are, it is never: “You look like yourself.”

Any meaningful piece of clothing is part of a broader cultural story. Years ago I went to a Halloween party as a man. In a borrowed suit, my face wiped clean of all makeup, and my hair hidden under a hat, I looked at myself in a mirror and was unprepared for the change. Women flirt with men’s clothing all the time, but when you go all the way, the result is striking. I felt manly. My stride lengthened. My manner changed. It was easy to play at being a man, as easy as playing at being a woman. The suit unleashed a fantasy of maleness I heartily enjoyed. Another time, I was walking down a dark street in New York on my way to a large party. I was in my early twenties then and experimented occasionally with wild attire. In a red jumpsuit and heels, which added several inches to my already towering frame, I passed a man who began spewing insults at me. I kept walking. It took several seconds for me to digest what was happening. The man had mistaken me for a transvestite. The experience, both comic and sad, gave me sudden insight into the venom that appearances can produce, not to speak of the often hazy line between femininity and its parodic double.

Every once in a while, a piece of clothing jumps out of one culture and into another. I spent three months in Thailand in 1975 as a student, and I vividly remember seeing a gang of motorcycle toughs roaring through the streets of Chiang Mai in the rain, wearing shower caps. Several of those caps were decorated with flowers and other beacons of feminine adornment. I was amazed, but nobody else was. My cultural associations didn’t apply. The shower cap had been born again somewhere else with a totally different signification.

While it is true that certain individuals are fixed on an idea that rigidly determines them – whether it be “I do not care about clothes at all” or “I am a sex goddess” – most of us have or have had over time many different dreams. I own a black dress that reminds me of Audrey Hepburn. I do not suffer from the delusion that I look like Audrey Hepburn in that dress, but her exquisite form wrapped in Givenchy has bewitched it nevertheless, and her magic is part of my pleasure in wearing it. Movies and books are strong drugs to clothes lovers. Katharine Hepburn striding along in trousers, Lara Turner in a towel, Claudette Colbert in a man’s pajama top, Marilyn Monroe in anything. Tolstoy lavished his attention on the details of a woman’s clothes and bodies, on Natasha at her first ball and Ellen’s white shoulders above her low-cut gown. Jane Eyre’s plain dress is a tonic against the frippery of the silly females who visit Rochester. And all these images are taken from moments in larger stories that captivate us, stories about people who are living out their lives and their romantic entanglements, both comic and tragic.

My daughter dresses up. She is a rich woman, then a poor one, starving on the streets. She is an old peasant woman selling apples. She is on the phone saying, “Let’s have lunch,” in an English accent. She sashays down the stairs snapping her gum and practicing her Brooklyn voice. She is wearing my shoes and singing “Adelaide’s Lament.” She is always somebody else. My husband and I say I have two personas at least, the stooped four-eyed scholar and the elegant lady. One lives more at home. The other goes out. Thinking collapses my body, and I forget what I look like anyway. In a good dress, I stand up straight and never slump. I live up to the dress I am wearing even though I do not see myself wearing it. Others see me more often than I see myself. My family knows what I look like better than I do. I offer the mirror a placid face like an inanimate statue, and from time to time that frozen image may frighten me. But I also laugh a lot and smile. I wrinkle my face in concern, and I wave my hands when I talk, and this I never see.

In the end, wearing clothes is an act of the imagination, an invention of self, a fiction. Several years ago, I was sitting in the Carlyle Hotel with my husband having a drink. I was wearing a beautiful dress. I remember that he looked across he table at me with pleasure and said, “When you were a little girl growing up in the sticks of Minnesota, did you ever imagine you would be sitting in this elegant hotel wearing that extraordinary dress?”

And I said, “Yes.” Because of course, I did.

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