The Dress-Up Box

We had a situation here today I thought you should know about before you come to pick up Harry,” said Jodi, one of the bubbly preschool teachers at Milestones.

Harry had started at the year-round preschool and kindergarten near our house a few weeks before his nanny Heidi moved back to Germany. The school only called me at the office if Harry was sick. But today Jodi’s tone was all business.

“Is Harry in some kind of trouble?” I asked.

“Well, after naptime, when the kids put their socks and shoes back on, Sara’s tights were missing. We couldn’t find them anywhere, and she became hysterical.”

A small knot began forming in my stomach.

“We got her calmed down enough to go with everyone to the gym, and then searched the room again. Her tights were stuffed in the back of Harry’s cubbyhole in the hallway.”

“Did you ask him about it?”
The knot in my stomach loosened. My little Harry wore lavender Minnie Mouse knee-highs, but what he really wanted was tights.

My car was getting a tune-up, so at the end of the day Ken picked me up at the marketing agency, which was just three blocks from his eponymous downtown design studio. We drove together to get Harry, and I told him about The Case of the Missing Tights.

“So what do you think we should do?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Asking Harry why he stole Sara’s tights doesn’t really seem like the point.”

“I think that’s a good call, but we have to say something. He did take a friend’s personal property without asking and made her very upset.”

“Yes, that’s it, Ken!”

I was happy to be married to a man who didn’t think that hitting his child was the answer, and I sure wasn’t going to be the mother who egged him on and then stood by watching it happen. I flashed on the single sheet of paper I kept under my desk pad at work. A national client whose CEO hired a leadership training firm had shared the basic principles of the program with me. As head of the agency’s fast-growing public relations division, it became my go-to guide for managing people. Focusing on the issue and not the person was Principle Uno. Next on the list was maintaining the self-esteem and self-confidence of others. I knew Ken and I had to do both with Harry.

“We just focus on the situation and the bad behaviors,” I continued, “not on Harry the kid who just wanted . . . Jesus . . . a pair of tights.”
That night the three of us had a family meeting. And without ever mentioning tights, Harry understood that he could never, ever take something from someone without asking first. The next day, on my morning drive along the Lake Michigan shoreline, I continued to muddle over Harry’s preoccupation with all things girl. More than anything, I wanted to understand him and do what was best for him.

For Christmas that year Harry asked Santa for a Mermaid Barbie. Not only was her blond hair the longest of any Barbie ever, but it changed to a rainbow of colors underwater. Santa delivered on Mermaid Barbie, because after surviving my Dream House guilt trip that’s what Santa was going to do. No way was I going to keep Harry from experiencing Wendy’s coveted visit to Mermaid Island with Peter Pan.

After a big family Christmas dinner, Ken’s brother Larry, who’d driven down from Appleton with his wife Pam and daughters Vicki and Amanda, ages eleven and eight, spent the night at our house. The morning after Christmas, Harry and the girls opened Harry’s new giant set of colored markers and were busy making art at the end of our dining room table that had been extended past the front door in the entryway to accommodate Ken’s family and mine.

“Harry, what do you want to be when you grow up?” Vicki asked.

“A girl,” he replied casually, without lifting his eyes from the sheet of paper he was coloring.

I stopped clearing breakfast dishes from the other end of the table. Harry’s confidence in his answer made me want to hug him.
Ken, who was putting away CDs in the living room with his back to the trio of cousins, pivoted to me at the same time my niece Vicki turned her questioning face my way.

*Oh, shit. Now what?*

I raised both eyebrows and shoulders for the nonverbal combo that I hoped would signal, “You asked, he answered, and I don’t know what to tell you.”

“Okay . . .,” she said to Harry.

I looked at the little boy swinging his legs and happily coloring across the table from her. This was the first time he’d mentioned anything since his comment almost a year and a half before. Of course Harry would think he could grow up to be a girl. Ken and I had told him many times that he could be anything he wanted to be when he grew up. We wanted him to dream big and know that whatever he became, we wouldn’t be disappointed. Ken’s dad had hoped he’d be a salesman, like he was. My mother had wanted me to go to college for the sole purpose of finding a husband like she did so I could become a baby machine for her grandmother fantasy. We didn’t want Harry to think his life was supposed to be about satisfying us.

Still, as I carried a stack of plates to the kitchen counter, I felt an overwhelming anxiety not knowing how this would play out. I was desperate to believe that the Wendy costume and tights situation were just Harry engaging in pretend play and nothing more. I wished it were that simple.

I opened the cupboard under the sink and reached for the sponge I’d marked “floor” with a black Sharpie and wiped up a sticky spot of apple juice from under my foot. But what if that’s
what he really wanted? Then what would I do? As I rinsed off plates and loaded them into the dishwasher in order by size, I couldn’t believe Christine Jorgensen was the only person I had as a role model for this. There was no one else I could look to. She’d gone to Europe for surgery in the fifties. I supposed grown-up Harry could just as easily become Harriet overseas. But grown-up Harry was two decades away. I realized I wasn’t breathing and forced myself to inhale.

A couple of weeks later, still stuck on his answer to Vicki, I wanted to see if he was holding true to his future aspirations. When he rattled off that he wanted to be “a dentist, policeman, firefighter, or doctor,” I smiled and wondered if he was learning about service professions in preschool.

“You’d be good at any of those jobs, Harry,” I said, handing him a small bowl of fish crackers. Then I flipped on the TV to his favorite Nickelodeon show, Rugrats. Of course Harry doesn’t know what he wants to be yet. How could he? He’s three.

I had to stop freaking out over Harry’s answers about what he wanted to be when he grows up. But what if he says “a girl” next time? I tried to imagine myself saying, “You’d be great at that, Harry.” As I adjusted the window blinds to all slant at the same angle, I prayed I’d be able to come up with a reply that would make him feel good about himself.

For his fourth birthday in March, Harry wanted a Hot Wheels Race Track and some Power Rangers. He got both. His favorite Power Ranger was the pink one, but still, I thought the toys signaled a good balance. Maybe Spock was right. Maybe Harry would be in the majority of hetero males and I wouldn’t have to worry about
him fitting in with other boys or being picked on for his choice of
clothes or toys. I felt some relief that maybe my tendency to want
to control everything wasn’t fueling any probability that I was
creating a gay kid. And that meant Harry was going to be safe. He
wouldn’t ever have to plan a last party and kill himself at the end
of it.

I felt that safety valve loosen in sunny open air a couple of
times that summer. Ken’s dad came to visit from Florida for a week.
Gramps woke up from the nap Harry no longer took, and was
surprised that Ken and I were home, but Harry wasn’t. He wanted
to take him for a walk to the playground at Lake Park.

“He’s across the street at Allison’s,” I said, grabbing my camera.
“Let’s all go get him and we can head to the park from there.”

I helped Gramps up the porch with no railing while Ken rang
the doorbell. Then he put his hands on either side of his eyes to
peer through the screen door.

“Gramps is here looking for Harry,” Ken called.
“Be right down,” Allison’s mom Laurie yelled.

The bounce of little footsteps followed her voice down the
stairs. She opened the screen door and Harry appeared from behind
her legs. He walked outside wearing one of Allison’s skirts, a pair of
lace-trimmed white anklets, and a rumpled black velvet hat. The
gold chain strap of a child’s embroidered denim purse rested on his
shoulder. Ken and I exchanged nervous glances.

“Now what’s this?” Gramps asked with a flustered laugh.
“Harry likes to play dress-up,” Laurie said cheerfully.
I looked at Allison clinging to her mom’s knee. She was dressed
in plain shorts and a t-shirt.
“Okay, Harry,” said Ken. “Let’s give Allison her stuff back. We’re going to the park!”

I felt embarrassed in front of Gramps and was grateful he didn’t say anything negative in front of Harry. He hadn’t relished Barbie being in the picture I snapped of Harry and him the day before, and now his namesake grandson was across the street wearing his little girlfriend’s clothes. But dress-up was just play. That’s what I wanted to believe anyway. And I wanted Gramps to believe it, too.

My father-in-law was eighty-two. He’d raised his family of seven during the decades that homosexuality was considered a mental illness. I didn’t want him to think I was allowing certain behaviors or mothering in a way that would predetermine Harry’s sexuality. I put my guard up for the rest of the day, but Gramps never said a word about Harry dressed in Allison’s clothes. Maybe he remembered Ken carrying around one of his mom’s purses when he was little, and regretted scolding his wife in front of Ken for allowing it.

Harry would be ready for four-year-old kindergarten in September. After researching the local public schools, I learned they only offered half-day K4 and K5 programs. But we needed Harry to be in school full time. There were afternoons I had trouble making it to Milestones by the 6:15 p.m. pick-up time. And Ken didn’t get home until after seven most nights. Harry liked Milestones and had a lot of friends there who were staying for the combined K4-K5 class. Some parent friends said we’d have a better chance of getting Harry into the grade school we wanted if he attended kindergarten there. But neither Ken nor I could manage a part-time work schedule; he ran his own company, and I’d just
been named president of the PR division I’d started ten years earlier. So Harry moved into Milestones’ full-day kindergarten, and we didn’t have to think about schools again for another two years.

Harry learned to write, kept a journal, and drew a weekly, personal news item with a caption for the kindergarten room’s large display board. Most days I picked him up he was in the drama corner wearing a long skirt, flowered dress, or satin gown from the costume box. He wasn’t the only boy playing dress-up, but he was clearly the one having the most fun. He made up characters, voices, and even jokes.

“Why did the lady trade in her black bra for a black-and-white bra?” he asked me one afternoon at kindergarten wearing a lemon yellow taffeta skirt covered in tulle.

“I don’t know, why?”
“Because she wanted a zee-bra!”

I chuckled. Other kids still in the classroom giggled nearby.

“He’s been telling that joke all afternoon,” the head teacher Denise told me. “You know he’s funny, right?”

“Oh, yes, I know,” I said. “And so does he.”

Ever since Harry premiered his Stinky Feet Variety Show in the living room, he looked for more ways to draw laughs. When a friend pretended her age was six and three-quarters, Harry piped in that he was six and four pennies. And recently he’d told Ken and me that when he grew up he wanted to be a scientist comedian who made rocket fuel out of chips and dip.

Before going home that afternoon I drove back downtown with Harry to the Boston Store in Grand Avenue Mall. I’d left work late and didn’t have time to stop and pick up the black pantyhose I
needed for a major new-business presentation the next morning. I told Harry to stay where I could see him and began thumbing through the Hanes control-top section. A minute later, Harry was nowhere in sight.

“Harry?”
I waited. Nothing.
“Harry?”
My heart thumped rapidly as I imagined him being dragged off by a kidnapper when he came running over to me, his eyes wide.

“Harry, where were you? I was worried when I couldn’t see you.”
“I was over there,” he said, pointing one aisle over to the next department.

I leaned in the direction of his finger and stretched my neck to get a good look at the area. I saw a three-mirrored vanity table with a display of wigs on white Styrofoam heads.

I looked around to make sure the area was clear of shoppers.

“It’s okay, if you promise to stay right there. And don’t touch anything!”

He walked away. “Just call me if you need me,” he said looking back over his shoulder.

Soon after, I felt a tug on my jacket. I looked down to see Harry wearing a short, layered gray wig.

“Grandma wants to go to the park today,” he told me in a high, cracking voice.

I burst out laughing, and he ran off. I looked around, expecting to be chastised by a sales clerk for not keeping my four-year-old in check.
In a few minutes, there was a tap on my back.
“Excuse me, lady?”
I turned to see little Harry, this time in a brown collar-length wig topped by a teal blue bowler derby with netting.
“Can you please help me find the escalator?”
Again, I cracked up. Where did he come up with this stuff?
“Okay, Harry, put everything back exactly where it was. It’s time to go.”

A few weeks later Harry brought home a laminated smudged-pencil drawing of a stick-figure girl with a bow in her hair, titled “The Girl in the Fog.” The caption, like the title, was in a teacher’s handwriting: “Harry feels happy in his dress-up clothes.” When I asked Harry about it, he told me the teacher had asked him when he was most happy at school. I imagined him spinning with delight in the drama corner at school while his dad and I sat in meetings at work. I wondered if the fog in his picture represented a safe cover for his fantasy or if it was where the real Harry came alive in his dream to be that girl. I looked down at his blameless face and gave him a big hug.

Later I showed the drawing to Ken and said I wanted Harry to have a dress-up box in his room. Ken looked at me with his head in a spaniel-puppy tilt.

“Isn’t that just encouraging him to wear girl clothes? Are you sure you want to do that?”

“Yes, I’m sure. If the Marinos and the Smiths across the street have one, and the kindergarten classroom has one, and dress-up is what makes Harry the happiest at school, then he should have one at home, too.”
Harry jumped up and down the night I put a cardboard box in his room filled with a pink-and-white-striped dress, patchwork peasant skirt, and short red silk nightgown I no longer wore. I also threw in my strappy satin wedding pumps, a few polka dot scarves that once belonged to my Great-Aunt Mitzie, a medallion necklace, and a white summer hat with a large black ribbon band.

He immediately put on the red nightgown, the satin heels, the hat and the jewelry. Then he ran to his toy box, dug out his lip balm necklace and wanted help slipping it over the hat.

“You look fantastic, Harry!” I said. “Go look in the mirror in our room.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” Ken said, scratching his head.

“But Harry’s so happy! And, really, this is just imaginative play,” I said, not really sure at all if what I was doing was the right thing.

I’d gone back and forth about the decision. But seeing how Harry beamed wearing the tulle and sequined garments in the kindergarten’s dress-up area made up my mind for me. I knew it meant I was now, more than ever, an active and conscious contributor to his preference for pretty and sparkly. I just couldn’t deny him that same joy at home. At least here I knew no one would be laughing at him.

The dress-up box became Harry’s favorite pastime. He and his babysitter Amy decorated it with stickers. Our housekeeper Angela donated some clothes her granddaughters had outgrown. And Harry squealed with excitement when I brought up a wig from the Halloween bin in the basement.
The Dress-Up Box

On a warm fall weekend, Ken’s brother Larry and family arrived at our house for a family barbecue with the local clan. We were all in the backyard when Harry burst through the door wearing a skirt, t-shirt, wig, and heels. My face flushed, and I saw Ken’s do the same. Larry was the first to break out laughing. The other relatives followed his lead.

Oh, no . . . is their laughter making fun of Harry?

Harry clomped down the wooden deck stairs and sauntered past us. “Am I terribly late for the party?” he asked, in a voice that sounded remarkably close to Sunset Boulevard’s Norma Desmond. Then he ran past us and back into the house. He returned with a different female get-up and drew more chuckles from his backyard audience.

“Nice wig, Harry!” Larry said, trying to control himself.

As I looked at Harry, smiling as wide as his face, bowing to his adoring fans, I couldn’t bring myself to cheer along. Harry was still so young. He didn’t know what cross-dressing was. Sure, it seemed funny to everyone now. But if he continued to prefer skirts and dresses, I was certain that beyond his own backyard the applause would turn into teasing and then quickly into bullying. I couldn’t stand the idea of Harry being called a “sissy” or “fairy” or, even worse, getting shoved to the ground and kicked by older kids on the playground. But I had to be cautious about that, too. I was well aware of another mainstream theory that said an overprotective mother could turn her son into a “mama’s boy.” I loved my son who wore heels more than anything. I just didn’t want him to be so different from other boys that he ended up feeling dejected, alienated, and alone.
Calm down, Julie. Bugs Bunny, Dustin Hoffman, and Dana Carvey all got big laughs wearing a dress. This is Harry, the star being born.

Then I remembered Harry’s babysitter, the talented dancer. So who was I to balk at the idea of my son becoming a professional actor or comedian? Who wouldn’t want that?

I unfurrowed my brow and clapped hard.

When Harry turned five and wanted to go to school in girl clothes, I had to do something. I came up with some house rules that weren’t just about putting the right cap back on the corresponding colored marker or, after a crackled plastic Red Power Ranger, not using the microwave unsupervised. All costumes were to be worn inside. I thought that was a good balance between letting him be his happy, confident self and keeping him safe in the outside world. Still, I wasn’t so sure and decided to call my cousin Elaine, a PhD in child psychology, for advice.

“Are there any men’s clothes in his dress-up box?” she asked.

“Men’s clothes? No.”

“So put in some bright ties, a couple of old sport jackets from Ken’s closet and some hats. See if he doesn’t play with those clothes, too.”

I thought it was a brilliant idea and added the items to Harry’s dress-up box. Billy and Allison chose those clothes, but not Harry. I didn’t understand why not.

As Harry passed me in the upstairs hallway wearing low heels, the pink-and-white dress and a light brown wig, I stopped him.

“So, Harry, let me ask you something. How come you never wear any of the boy clothes that are in the dress-up box?”

He scrunched his eyebrows as if to ask me if I were kidding.
“I already am a boy, so why would I want to dress up as one?”

*Good answer, Harry.*

“Well, okay then. Carry on.”

*And you’re right, I am a stupid idiot.*

As he walked back to his room, I couldn’t help but think that maybe Harry knew more about who he was than I knew about who I was. And six months later he seemed to know a lot more about his cousin Tyler, too.

On a Saturday morning in November, a month before his cousin in Arizona would also turn five, I asked Harry what he thought Tyler might like for his birthday.

“Tyler’s like me, Mom. He likes girl stuff.”

“Oh . . . okay. Thanks.”

It was true. Tyler had bonded with one of Harry’s blond Barbie dolls during my sister’s family’s visit from Tucson a few months earlier. Tyler even took Barbie to bed with him each night. In return, he let Harry wear the black ballet slippers he’d packed for the trip. I winced remembering how an incident with the ballet slippers became the sequel to The Case of the Missing Tights when the shoes disappeared mysteriously the afternoon my sister was leaving for the airport. Luckily, June thought to search the bottom of Harry’s toy box and the slippers were recovered.

The two boys had discovered their shared loves that weekend. Harry was right about that. So I decided Tyler’s birthday present from us should be a Barbie of his own. I navigated through the Barbies, Power Rangers, and Beanie Babies minefield of Harry’s room to the phone in the upstairs TV room. I figured I should check
with my sister first. She was very particular about toys. I didn’t know how a Barbie would fly with her. She answered on the first ring.

“Hey, June, I asked Harry if he had any ideas for Tyler’s birthday, and he said—”

“Do not get him a Barbie, Julie,” she said, cutting me off.

“Really? Because that’s what I was thinking of sending.”

“Greg would not appreciate it.”

“Greg? Why not?” My brother-in-law hadn’t impressed me on their stay that summer. Most of the time, he was either glued to a television tennis tournament or hiding behind the newspaper. Hearing he was anti-Barbie had just pushed him below the 100 mark on my hit parade of father figures.

“I didn’t tell you this,” June said, “but Greg was not happy that Tyler was taking ballet. He said it was too feminine of an activity and didn’t want me to sign him up for any more lessons.”

I took a deep breath and a seat on the couch. “That jerk.”

“I wanted to follow Tyler’s lead. He was into dance, but Greg was against that.”

My sister proceeded to tell me how the disagreement prompted her to write to the advice columnist at the local newspaper.

“She didn’t print the letter, but she sent a personal reply.”

“What did it say?”

“She recommended we see a family therapist right away. Greg and I, that is. She sent the name of someone, and we went. It was horrible.”

I felt my throat tighten. “Tell me.”

“He was old school, very traditional. Bottom line, he said Tyler was into ballet, tap, and leotards because I was too domineering.”
There it was, the dreaded word from a family therapist that described my mother, and perhaps her legacy for June and me, being amplified into my ear.

“What did you say?”

“I was furious he blamed me and told him I disagreed. But I had to compromise with Greg. So I said I wouldn’t suggest dance classes anymore, but if Tyler asked I wouldn’t say no.”

I imagined confused, sad eyes on Tyler’s face, but I felt more sorry for my sister. I didn’t know what I’d do if Harry’s interests caused a rift between Ken and me. I wasn’t sure I’d be able to stay with a man who couldn’t accept his child’s spirit and imagination.

I flashed on a friend at work who’d told me recently her deer-hunting husband had insisted she take away all of their son’s stuffed animals when he turned three. I just knew that her husband, like my sister’s husband, didn’t want their sons to be gay, like there was something wrong with it.

“June, do you think Harry and Tyler are going to be gay cousins?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Maybe. You told me we have gay cousins on Dad’s side of the family.”

That was true. We had two second-cousin brothers who were gay.

“I’m inclined to think being gay is hereditary,” she continued. “To think that it’s the mother’s fault is so ridiculous. As if it’s even a fault!”

She was right, of course. Being gay wasn’t a flaw. And I, too, felt fury. This wasn’t just reading about mothers being the cause; a therapist had accused my sister of doing something wrong. Still,
hearing the word “domineering” made panic flags wave in my brain. I couldn’t wrap my head around why I continued to believe that Harry’s behavior could be the result of my mothering when my sister was so sure hers wasn’t. Perhaps it was our age difference. I was six years older, so maybe our mother’s claws of control had relaxed their grip by the time she got to her youngest prey. I figured, too, that June hadn’t been as exposed as I was to the cultural brain-washing that said a mother could damage her son’s developing masculinity.

June felt no self-blame. There wasn’t a doubt in her mind that the therapist was dead wrong. I wished I could just shake off the “domineering” label the way she did. I still worried I had unwittingly influenced Harry to develop certain behaviors. I wanted to ask my sister if she thought there might be the slightest chance we were enough alike to have set our sons’ development along a similar path. Even though she wiped Tyler’s face more than I did Harry’s on their last visit and kept his nap schedule on Arizona time, I didn’t think she’d ever describe herself as controlling. I had no desire to go down that road with her, so I kept my “what ifs” to myself and we said our goodbyes.

I scratched a pre-hives itch on the back of my neck and realized I couldn’t share the questions with my sister that still swirled in my head. And I knew Ken didn’t want to hear me talk about my fears or being worried about our son either. Ken was supportive of Harry, but I still felt alone as a parent. I twisted the curlicue of telephone cord around my finger. I just didn’t know how to guide Harry. I wanted to figure out how to do right by him, because I had a feeling things were only going to get more complicated.
Harry’s portrait of me, Mother’s Day, 1997