My Son Wears Heels

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Harry pulled out a chair opposite me at Shinju Sushi and took off his gray faux-fur coat.

“Honey, your resurrected Jesus last night was amazing!” I gushed. “The white lace robe over the floor-length lace gown was perfect. It looked like an outfit Prince would wear.”

I knew I was speaking in superlatives, but Harry’s performance at the “Immaculate Contraception” fundraiser for Planned Parenthood was the first drag appearance he’d invited me to attend.

“Thanks, Mom, I was pretty happy with how it all turned out.”

“You were absolutely shining. And not just because of the blinking white lights in your gold crown of thorns, which also looked great, by the way.”

Our waitress brought the pot of jasmine tea I had ordered and Harry poured out two cups full.

“I didn’t realize that Amber Alert had such a following. So many people cheered when Nicole introduced you.”
Harry closed his menu and laughed. “Mom, a lot of my friends from Wesleyan were there.”

“Oh. Well, still, all eyes were on you. No one was even texting during your lip sync performance. And I loved the applause you got when your medley segued from ‘Mercy’ to ‘Born to Die.’”

I looked at the handsome twenty-two-year-old across from me with the wavy reddish-brown hair, close-cropped beard, and tortoise-shell glasses. He appeared as confident and self-assured as he did when he was a boy. I felt flush with pride.

“All I can say is you’ve come a long way from the vampire geisha you were for Halloween when you were nine.”

“I do love Halloween.”

As I slid wooden chopsticks from a red paper wrapper, I thought about how clueless I was when I was trying to deal with my son’s desire growing up to wear so-called girl clothes. I had definitely made some mistakes along the way. But looking back over my life as a parent, I felt like I’d made more right choices as Harry’s mom than wrong ones. He’d reminded me of that while helping me pack up my personal files for the move to New York. He came across some instructions I had typed up for a new babysitter when he was just a year old.

“Listen to this,” he’d said. “I don’t tell him ‘no’ unless something isn’t safe. If he’s just getting into something, I usually try to distract him.”

I told Harry I’d read somewhere that saying “no” all the time prevented toddlers from developing a sense of power over their own lives. When he asked if he could keep the eighteen-year-old
document, I’d felt his appreciation of me ratchet up a notch. Still, there were the unfortunate decisions I had made, especially at Halloween. A twinge of bad-mother anxiety tightened in the back of my throat. I swallowed to relax.

“I know you don’t remember me talking you into being Peter Pan instead of Wendy when you were two, but what about when you were four and wanted to be the Pink Power Ranger? Do you remember how you felt when I would only buy you the Blue Power Ranger costume?”

Harry was about to speak when the waitress returned with two miso soups.

_Good. Give the boy some time to think._

“I just understood that I identified with the yellow and pink Power Rangers,” Harry said, picking up his spoon. “There were three reasons. A, they had the best colors. B, they were girls. And C, the Pink Power Ranger was the only one with a skirt. That made her outfit better than anyone else’s, which were pants. It wasn’t as much about being a girl as it was about the clothes.”

_Of course . . . the clothes._

“And Kimberly,“ he continued, “that was the Pink Power Ranger, also had the best attitude.”

“She did?”

“Yeah,” Harry said, smiling. “I remember that the Power Rangers movie came out when I was in kindergarten, and she had the sassiest lines.”

I grinned back at him. “So do you think Amber Alert has a little bit of Kimberly in her?”
“Definitely,” Harry laughed. “Absolutely. She does, for sure.”

“Thanks for filling me in about the skirt, Harry. You have no idea how bad I felt at the block party that night when your dad walked out in the pink and yellow satin caterpillar costume he rented on the way home from work.”

“Mom, I didn’t blame you for not letting me be the Pink Power Ranger. I didn’t think you had the authority to override gender restrictions. I just figured you were enforcing the rules, end of discussion.”

The word “rules” made me cringe. Was he saying I had been like my mother after all? Here, I thought I had come so far, that I had done such a good job with Harry. I knew I was a better mother than my mother, but maybe I had unwittingly modeled some aspects of her parenting.

“Oh, great,” I said. “I fought my whole life not to be overbearing with you.”

“I didn’t think they were your rules, Mom. I thought they were rules the world imposed on us.”

My shoulders relaxed along with a deep sigh. Leave it to perceptive little Harry to know more about life at four years old than I did as his mother.

“So, no emotional scarring?”

“No, none at all. I just believed what a lot of kids were led to believe: that girl costumes were for girls and boy costumes were for boys. There wasn’t a lot out there that led kids to question that, except me.”

Harry’s pink and purple rhinestone-encrusted cell phone case began to vibrate on the table. He excused himself to take the call. I
Epilogue: The Night Jesus Wore Lace

looked out the front window at a string of colored holiday lights. A rush of endorphins tickled my fingers and toes. I felt the euphoria that comes with a great Zumba workout and wanted to jump up dancing. Harry had just given me the best Christmas gift ever. He didn’t blame me, or hold any grudge about my most ill-advised decision. And he didn’t grow up believing he was bad or that there was something wrong with him or me.

When Harry put down the phone, I leaned across the table. “I want to tell you something.”

He stared straight into my eyes.

“I think I learned more from you than you ever learned from me. When I wasn’t sure how to help you find your place in the world, you taught me all I had to do was love you enough to get out of your way and let you be. You were my teacher, Harry.”

He blushed and moved his right hand up to his chest, over his heart. “Oh, Mom, that’s so sweet.”

“It’s true. And tonight was a reminder that I’m still learning.”

Harry smiled at me with such love.

“Speaking of my education,” I said, “I wanted to tell you I saw an interesting article last week about personal pronouns. Did you know about zie and zir?”

“Yeah, sure,” Harry replied. “There’s a whole Wikipedia page about them you can read if you want.”

“I will check that out. Thanks.”

“And I have to say I’m glad the conversation about gender pronouns is finally extending beyond college campuses.”

“Me, too, honey,” I said. I winced thinking how I’d tried to pigeonhole Harry before he even had an inkling of his sexuality. I
had been so confused about gender identity and gender expression and what it all meant, so afraid I was going to screw up my only child, when clearly, looking at him now from across the table, he was a rock star.

“You’re great, Mom."
“So are you,” I said.

Harry felt I had done right by him and appreciated all of my efforts, and in the end, that’s all any of us can do.

We said our goodbyes with a hug on the corner of Flatbush and Saint Marks Avenues. When I got back to my Brooklyn apartment, the home Harry had moved out of just two weeks before, I opened the door and noticed a speck of green glitter on the living room rug. It was an aspect of Harry’s drag eye makeup that used to annoy me for making a complete mess of the bathroom sink. The neat freak in me would normally rush to pick it up and check for more, but tonight it made me smile, and I just let it be.
Harry and Ken at Clearwater Beach, Florida