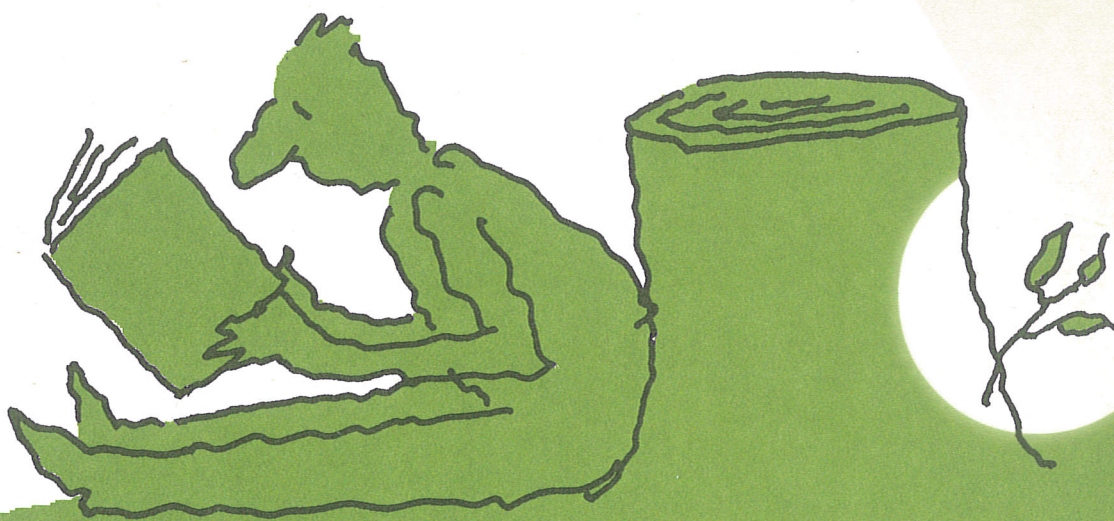


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SPRING 1999

# STORY



Wrechman

# What I Wore

I left Jerry the same day I auditioned for the role of a boysenberry in a yogurt commercial. I had never seen a boysenberry, so I wasn't very convincing. But I had left men before, and I nearly even convinced myself.

For the leaving part, I teased my hair to look like a coed from the '50s caught in a tornado. I named the hairstyle, "What *Really* Happened to the Feminine Mystique." I wore a gray turtleneck with a miniskirt, and a green corduroy jacket with those leather patches at the elbows. Wool tights and snakeskin cowboy boots. I was trying for sexy, distraught, and pathetic.

Jerry and I packed my truck with all the breakable objects. Only the solid, clunky things were left in the apartment—wood chairs, sofa, crocheted afghan, tool set. I dumped everything from ceramic bowls into plastic bags and paper sacks, to be picked through later. We went to a bar for dinner, my last meal with him. I ate a squeaky chicken sandwich with a tomato slice that kept sliding around until I gave up.

As we were leaving, I asked Jerry for a quarter and slipped it into the toy machine in the lobby. When I turned the handle, out dropped a rubber ball, red and yellow like a Technicolor globe. I bounced it on the icy street and then put it in the pocket of my coat. Which is where I would find it months later, surrounded by hard, crumpled Kleenex that had once been wet with sobbing as I gunned the truck through the dark, icy roads.

At my new apartment, I pulled the truck over and cut the engine. I watched the hazard lights beat against the snow in perfect time with the words to "New York, New York," which were sounding in my head although I lived in Denver. By the time I left the truck and walked up to my new front door, my hands were so clenched with cold, I could barely hold the key.

I did temp work those days and left the office early for acting auditions. I wore my respective audition outfits to the office. Even when I worked in the same place for a week or so, the office personnel thought I was a different temp in each new outfit. For the part of a mom in a commercial for bedroom furniture, I wore a light-blue linen dress. For the bitch role in an action-adventure movie, stilettos and a gun.

When there was no audition, I played the role of office girl. There were closets that only I could enter. Staples and staplers that only I could dispense. This is no time for a woman of adventure, I would tell myself and begin a mail merge.

But nighttimes were different. I was rehearsing as Anita, a drug addict and slut in a play called *But What about Me*, a production in a small theater. The drug addiction made the character complex. Anita came from Vidalia, Georgia, the onion capital of the world, and I would practice my accent during the day at work until I felt like I, too, had lived in Georgia.

Sometimes when I went to a party, I'd slip into Anita's accent, her memories even. At one bash, I started making up a story about a time when I woke up after a night of multicolored drugs. How I didn't remember how I got there, didn't know where I was. "What state, even," I said. In the rented hotel room of an architect from Kentucky, next to some train tracks. "Two broken, yes, *broken* condoms on the floor, no note, no train fare. Clothes gone, I'm naked except for one sock. I'm thinking, How did I get here? I'm thinking, Where is Bruce? Not his real name."

Someone interrupted. "What *was* his real name?"

"What's *your* name?" I asked him.

Someone laughed, and the story was over. Thank God, I thought. But it didn't stop me from doing it again, later, at another party, then at a dinner. Then to my friends, who were as pleased as I was at my suddenly wild life.

"You know what you are? You're a *cowboy*."

"No, like this: 'Y'know whatdy'are? Yurra cowboy,'" said Kevin, the director.

I frowned. "Don't tell me how to speak."

"But you're supposed to be wasted."

"I know, but don't tell me how to *talk*. Give me *direction*."

"Okay. Act wasted. Directly."

"This is how wasted people act. They try to act sober."

"Well, do something." He crossed his arms. "Do something that indicates you're stoned. Do something stupid."

"You're a great guy," I said and took a drink of water. My shoulders ached and my head hurt.

"Did it ever occur to you that what's wrong here is sexual tension?"

"Between us?" I asked, surprised.

"No. Between you and yourself. There just isn't any."

"In my role?"

"In your role."

“So I’m supposed to want myself?”

“It would help,” he said.

So I tried it. “You know what y’are? You’re a cowboy.” I put my hands on my hips, then lower, then higher. My fingernails scraped the fabric and tugged on the front of my gray dress.

“Much better,” Kevin said.

After rehearsal, he took me out to a late dinner. A raw oyster slipped from its shell and landed flush on the right breast of my dress. He stared, then said, “I feel like a zoom lens. Sorry. Let me help you.”

He offered his napkin. Instead of taking it from his hand, I poked out my chest. He refolded the napkin so that his fingers wouldn’t touch the fabric, and wiped off my dress.

I didn’t say anything but ate another oyster, sucking at the shell while Kevin wondered if he had acted like a prude. When a cracked piece of calcium slid onto my tongue, I swallowed it whole so he wouldn’t hear the crunch on my teeth. I felt the little shell travel all the way down my throat until it hit the place where there are no more nerves.

I had seen love in the surrender scenes in movies, the women swooning in their red dresses and the men catching them. The truth is, you can confuse the two, you can think it’s love but it’s only surrender. Actually, most people wet their pants when they swoon. Most people swoon when they’re wearing anything but a red dress. The last time I swooned, I didn’t—I passed out. I was wearing a T-shirt ripped from the argument I had gotten into with my then-boyfriend, and cotton underwear with purple flowers scattered over it like a rash. I had woken up on the bathroom floor, stood, and walked back to my bedroom, all by myself.

I looked at Kevin, an average man, then poured the dregs of my martini out of the shaker. I pulled at a run in my stocking and watched it shoot up my thigh like a hand. Kevin smiled because I was a sure thing. Or at least, a thing. We were leaving. I gathered my jacket around my shoulders before I remembered my stain. I made sure that it showed, wet and gleaming on the fabric like a mother’s brooch.

A week later, I went on a date with a man I met at a temp job. I said yes because when I coughed, he held his own fist to his chest and said, “Excuse me.” He continued on with a story about his dog, and I was fascinated that he couldn’t tell the difference between us.

He decided to take me to a movie. He said, “You’ll like a movie, because you’re an actress.”

I said, “I’ll like a movie, because I’m a human being.”

“That, too,” he said.

It was a story about a woman and a man. The man blew up many things and shot people. The woman had a drinking problem that was suddenly cured when she was taken hostage.

The day before, I had auditioned for a similar role in an independent film. Actually, the role was completely different, more along the lines of *La Femme Nikita*. But the clothes were the same.

I was trying out for everything those days, squeezing auditions between commercials, temp jobs, and rehearsals for *But What about Me*. The director for this film was staying downtown in the Brown Palace. When I asked at the front desk for the director’s room, I’m sure they thought I was a prostitute, with my shiny black shoestring dress and false eyelashes.

During the audition, I played three scenes on camera. For one of them, I had to pretend to shoot eleven people. For another, I had to confess to a nun. For the last one, I had to sit on a toilet, white panties lacing my ankles, softly singing “Tainted Love.”

I told my date about the audition as we left the movie theater and walked into a bar next door. “I didn’t get the part, I’m sure.”

“How do you know?”

“They kept commenting about my nose. How it’s not a brutal nose, it’s more of a sweet nose.”

“Well, you look so innocent.” I made a face and he amended, “Perhaps you do.”

“I hate when people say that. Because then if you don’t act innocent, it’s a big surprise. Like you’re always supposed to be the ingenue or something.”

“What parts do you get cast for?”

“Well, the ingenue. No, really, teddy bears and pieces of fruit. Usually commercials. Sometimes a college kid in an after-school special, because I look so young.”

“And this is satisfying to you?”

“You have to look at the bigger picture.”

He was an actuary. Apparently, he was the youngest actuary at his level in the United States. There are different levels. He testifies in court a lot.

He talked about his ex-wife. “I should have known that we had boundary problems when we started wearing each other’s socks.”

“I left my boyfriend because he called me his girlfriend so much, I nearly forgot my own name. Jerry’s girlfriend.”

“Been there. Ann’s husband.”

“And then you dress the way they want you to.”

“Let them cut your hair.”

“I said ‘we’ all the time, instead of ‘I.’ ”

“How about when you go to the grocery store and then look down at the cart and think, I don’t even *like* cornflakes. I don’t like most of this stuff. But you don’t put it back on the shelves,” he said.

“Yeah.”

It should have been intimate and friendly, but I started to see myself in everything he did—the way he lifted his glass, smiled at me after he swallowed. The way he dug his fingernails into his palm. I realized that all evening he had never given me a differing opinion, never said anything I wouldn’t have said myself.

I told him that I was tired, but I wasn’t. I was having a lot of trouble breathing. When I got out of my chair, I felt like I was walking on sand.

As soon as I got home, I called my friend with the strongest opinions on everything, and asked her if she thought John F. Kennedy was a great president in spite of the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Bay of Pigs. I slumped against the wall while she talked. As her voice rose in conviction, the one in my head grew more quiet until I could breathe easily again.

On opening night for *But What about Me*, I took speed and Valium. I had never done hard drugs before, but I thought it might help with my character. I hit all my lines right on. Oh yeah, I thought. This is it. This is really her. She’s me. We’re each other.

The audience loved the sex scenes, the drug scenes, and especially the sex and drug scenes. At intermission, the leading man pulled me behind a curtain. He said, “You’re on fire.”

I let him press against me in my black coat, already saturated with sweat from the hot lights. He whispered, “What are you like? Really? Who are you like?”

In the second act, during the scene where I was supposed to hit the couch with a baseball bat, I missed and hit the TV instead. The glass broke and the plastic dented. So I figured what the hell and kept going at it. It wasn’t very satisfying after the first crash, not as good as I thought it would be. Mostly because it wasn’t really breaking, just denting and leaning and cracking. I hit it each time as if it was the first, as if you could get that feeling back again.

When I had finished, when there wasn’t one bit of glass or tubing or plastic that wasn’t altered, I looked up. Kevin, the director, had his face in his hands. It was his television set. The leading man just stared at me. We were supposed to kiss next, or something. I forgot what I was doing. I forgot who I was supposed to be. Dizzy, I stared at Kevin in the wings. “Line,” I said. “Line, motherfucker.”

• • •

After the play had been running for three weeks, Jerry called and asked me when I would be through with this foolishness. “Come on home,” he said.

“I am home.” I looked around my studio apartment. Clothes were scattered on the floor and there were piles of makeup by the full-length mirror.

“How’s work?” he asked.

I talked about my temp jobs, because I knew that was what he meant—not acting. It made him feel better if he could feel sorry for me. So I told him about my last supervisor, who taught me how to count. “The first one is *one*, the second one is *two*, the third one is *three* . . .” I told him about the job where I had to wear a name tag that said, simply, “Temp.”

Jerry talked about his father’s business and how everyone missed me. He said that when people asked what I was doing, he always said, “Making the biggest mistake of her life.”

I heard a rustling sound on the phone and asked him what he was doing. “Hanging pants,” he said. The thought of Jerry’s slack pants on their hangers made me feel a sudden vast tenderness for him. But then he said, “After you’re done being the spokesmodel for the monster-truck bash at Five Points, you’re going to come back for me and I’ll have moved on.”

“I’m trying to do something real here.”

“What’s real about media?”

Before I hung up he said “Come home” once more. I heard it all the time in my head. Sometimes when I was alone in the bathroom, I sat on the fuzzy toilet seat cover and silently justified myself to him. Often I spoke aloud, complete with gestures, enumerating my accomplishments to the mirror until it seemed like I was talking about someone else. Occasionally I improvised and made up feats of talent and bravery until I really was describing someone else. That felt a little better.

“I’m not an actor,” I said to my acting coach. “I can barely do a convincing impression of myself.”

“Who’s asking you to be yourself? Nobody.”

“Maybe that’s the problem,” I said dramatically. I was hung over and didn’t care what she thought of me that day.

“This is a business,” she said. “You’re a product. If you want to be a person, go do something else.”

“Like what?”

“Exactly.” I glared at her. “This isn’t Hollywood,” she said. “This is Denver. These are JCPenney commercials and one-act plays we’re talking

about. Think of what's at stake here. You're doing this because you have nothing else."

"I can type like a sonofabitch."

"Then go type." She picked up her coffee cup and stood.

"No, I'm sorry. I'm tired."

"Get out of here."

That night, I had a few drinks and took speed that someone handed me in the bathroom.

I walked up to an attractive, slightly balding man at the bar. I tapped him on the arm until he turned around. His face was polite and intelligent above his Armani suit. I said clearly and distinctly, "You know what you are? You're a *cowboy*."

Then I started feeling sick, like my heart was about to gallop down the bar, drop off the edge, and thump on the ground until someone stepped on it. I don't remember what else happened there, but for a while I thought I was doing the cha-cha with Jeff Goldblum. I remember asking the bartender, "If Picasso painted a flounder, what would it look like?" Then I was mad at myself because I had been saving that line for a more educated audience.

My friend Katya grabbed my forearm. "What did you take?"

I said, "I can take it. I can take it all." She rolled her eyes.

My skirt had tiny bells all along the waistband, so every step I took created a sleigh of jingles. By the time I found myself home in my apartment, the little jingles sounded like the telephone. I couldn't tell the difference, so I kept pulling myself off the mattress and crawling across the carpet to my own jingling, muttering, "I'm coming, I'm coming."

After I picked up the telephone for the third time and listened to the dial tone, I made my way to the couch. Someone was calling but didn't want to talk to me, I was sure. Then I wasn't so sure. That's when I realized for the first time, head lolling against the woven couch covers, that I had absolutely no idea what I was doing.

Katya called the next morning and reconstructed the night for me.

"I finally found you in a bathroom stall. Between your crying and the jingling noises, you sounded like Tinkerbell dying. After I told you that, you kept saying, 'Clap if you believe!'"

I remembered that she had crawled under the stall and pulled me home, talking about drinks of water and a good long rest from this craziness. She said, "You can't do this again." The whole way back, I kept tripping over the hem of my skirt and thinking that the world was getting too short for me to walk on anymore.

I stopped at a red light on Market and 15th, waiting to turn left. The steam was blowing out of the potholes as usual, and I looked great in a black miniskirt, tights, and a soft cream-colored blouse, tucked in. I was a modern girl, lipstick still stuck to my lips from a botched audition.

Next to me in the double-turn lane was a familiar dented Nissan. Jerry was there, looking at my face in the glare of the window. His hair was long and in ringlets just like it was when I first met him. He rolled down the window, and I reached over to roll mine down on the passenger side, the seat belt cutting at my hip. He said, "Hi, baby," the way he did when he first loved me. His voice was low, cutting through the traffic sounds and smog. The one place where I could be sure of myself, lodged in another person's voice.

He said, "I missed your play."

I said, "So did I."

But *What about Me* closed two weeks early because ticket sales weren't meeting costs. I tried harder, but nobody was very interested no matter what I did, how I played it. Once I imitated Jodie Foster in my delivery style. Then I tried Kristy McNichol, Susan Sarandan, even Dianne Wiest. Sissy Spacek was slightly better, but not much. I blamed the script.

For the first couple of weeks of the show, I had started doing speed regularly to make the character authentic. It helped at first. Then I took it just so I could drag myself onstage. I didn't sleep at all the last three days of the show.

On closing night the assistant director said, "Here, some guy left these for you." He handed me an armful of white tulips. There was a small card with a scribbled *I love you*. Unsigned. I was exhausted. I smiled and thanked him, accidentally stumbled into the curtain, then toward the dressing room. I looked at my reflection in the brightly lit mirror and sank into my Naugahyde chair. I was still in costume, which was a gigantic black overcoat with nothing underneath. I floated inside like a child in a parachute. I thought, Oh yes, please love me, whoever we are.

The plaster walls suddenly bent, the way a mermaid bends at the waist to change direction. I laid my head on the dressing table. The paramedics came, after the entire cast took turns trying to shake me awake.

Two days later, in the psych ward of the hospital, Kevin sat next to me for a long time. I picked at the sheet.

I said, "Don't feel responsible."

"I don't. You have problems."

"I know. You think you have to tell me? I'm in a hospital."

"Were you doing drugs when I cast you in this role?"

I was interested. "Did you think I was?"

"I thought maybe."

I took this as a sign of my talent until he reconsidered and said, "No, not really."

I put my hand on his arm. "I just thought the drugs might help. With the role. With my life. Maybe the role would help me with my life."

"It's not as easy as that. You are *not* what you eat."

It's been three years since I quit acting, and when I tell my new kind lover about those times, he is good-natured with me, as if I used to be a hooker, or a lawyer.

"But that's all a part of what you're trying to be now," he says.

"A part of what?" I ask.

"You."

"Me? What? What part?" I ask him. "Who?"

The title of my very first play was *Animals at the Zoo*. I was in first grade, and I played a chameleon. My costume had a long, white tail. The teacher had instructed the sixth-grade lighting crew to change the color of the spotlight from green to blue to red as I spoke my one line.

My line was difficult, all the more so because it was short and difficult: "I am a chameleon—I change my identity to match my environment."

This sentence made little sense to me, even when my sister said, "It means you change colors depending on where you stand." To me, there were three big words and two *mys*, and I had to remember what went where. At night I practiced the sentence by the glow of the nightlight. "I change my identity to match my environment."

The day of the pageant, I was hysterical. "What if I forget? What if I forget?" I was almost crying as my sister rolled her eyes and put on her costume. She was a princess, with lipstick cheeks and a satin hair band. I was jealous—she got to be royalty while I had to be some weird animal. My mother made hot milk and honey to soothe me, but it only made me sleepy and anxious.

Finally, my mother pulled a felt-tip marker from a drawer in the kitchen and wrote the words on my right palm, spelling them phonetically:

Ka me le on

I den ti te

En vi ro ment

If I forgot, she said, I could just sound out the words on my hand.

I can't remember the details of how I got to school, how I stepped into my pilly costume or pulled the cotton mask over my head. But I'll always remember the stage lights like warm fingers on my small shoulders and

arms. I walked to the center of the stage and shouted (our teacher had told us to speak loudly):

"I am a chameleon. I change . . ."

Then I forgot everything. I looked at my teacher, who was quickly mouthing the words in a silent babble. I turned to look at my hand, but the mask had suddenly slipped and the eyeholes were roaming around my forehead and sweaty hair.

Now my memory shifts so that I see myself from behind, staring at the black hole of an audience. My costume was pajamas with feet. My mask, a pillowcase with rubber bands securing little knobs in a chameleon-like ridge down the back.

I pulled the mask off. It dangled from my fingers and then dropped to the stage floor. The green spotlight shone on the straight part dividing my hair into two braids as I looked out at the people in the auditorium. I saw nothing on their faces.

"Identity," I said, palm out in supplication.

It's a word I still wear on my hand.