

He has an eye for the snazzy,
the flashy, the beautiful.
And lately, he's turned this eye
to his wardrobe. What's a
liberal mother to do?

Beautiful

BY KATE HAAS

WHEN MY SON started preschool, he was a bit like a young monk newly released into the world. It wasn't the excited discussions of cartoon heroes that baffled my TV-less boy. It wasn't the temptations of packaged treats foreign to his admittedly over-wholesome diet. It wasn't even the introduction of the word "blaster" to his previously weapon-free vocabulary.

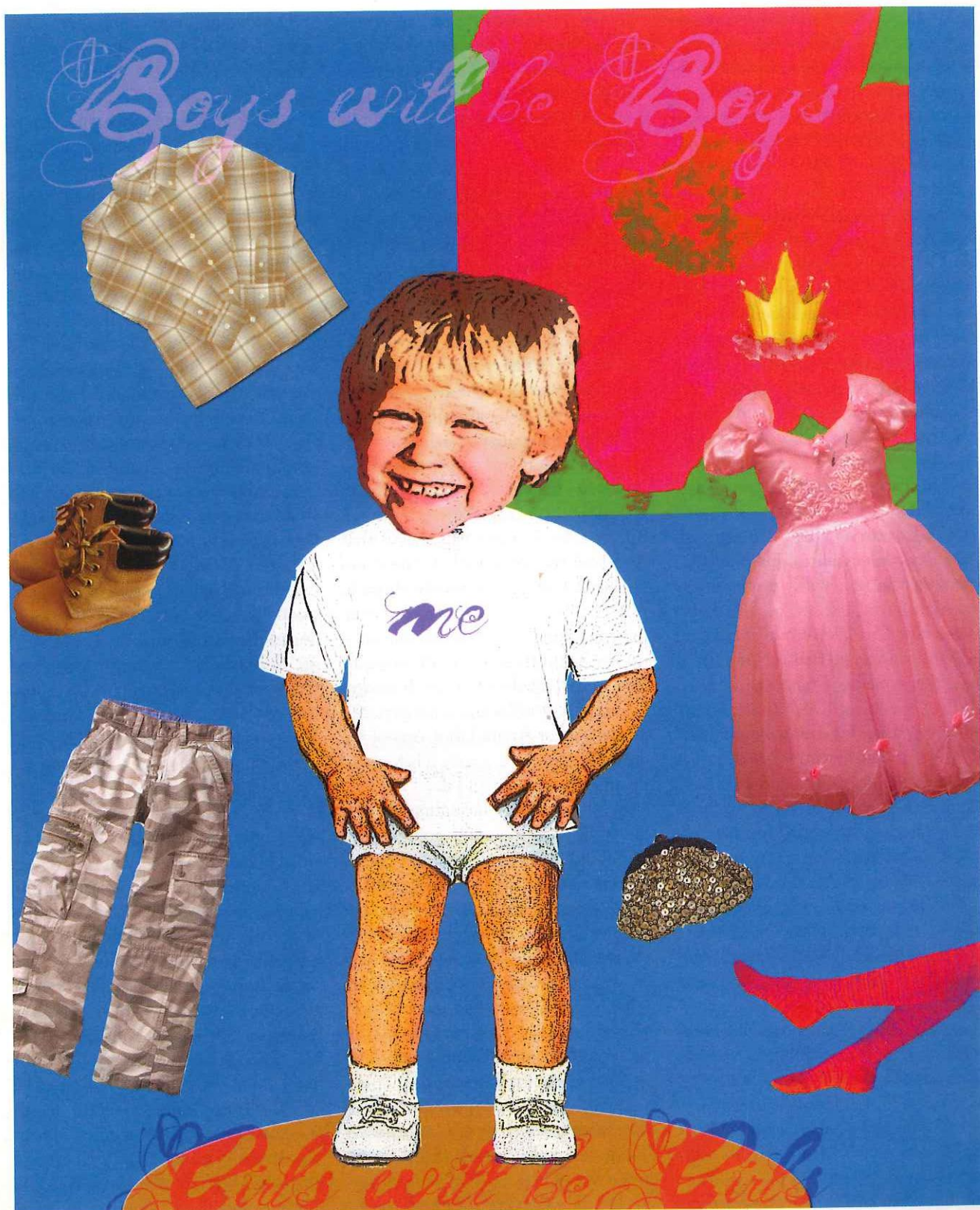
It was the girls.

Simón hadn't really been living in a cloister, of course, and naturally he'd seen girls in his nearly four years. But although our street is alive with kids, every last one of them is a boy. Simon was the sixth to be born since we moved in, and when I gave birth to his brother (number eleven), it was hard to avoid the conclusion that something in our neighborhood (the water? cosmic rays?) was suppressing the X chromosome. I'd always hoped for a girl—and still felt wistful at the sight of a mother and daughter—but until that first day of preschool, I hadn't fully considered the ramifications of our all-boy social scene.

Excited families gathered outside the school that morning, cameras at the ready. And there they were. Girls *en masse*. Girls wearing bright pinks, purples, and teals. Their clothes—even their blue jeans—were adorned with ruffles, appliquéd animals, and rainbows. Ribbons cascaded from their barrettes. Flowers twined up tights. Their shoes were sparkly, and their sneakers featured dangling charms and flashing pink lights. Anything that could be embellished was. Anxious about our first, formal separation, I wasn't thinking about what might be going through the mind of my quiet, observant son.

Those first few weeks, Simon had plenty to say about preschool. He shared the Woody Guthrie songs he'd learned, he explained the workings of obscure wooden Montessori devices, he brought home scribbled drawings for me to affix to the refrigerator.

But mostly, he talked about the girls. We learned that Shelby was expecting a sibling, that Ottilia's papa was from Holland, that Molly had ladybug boots. The word *beautiful* took up a place of prominence in his vocabulary. Simon had always been fond of pretty things, but now flowers, my clothes, random trees, paintings, and anything pink was enthusiastically admired as *beautiful*. Of all the new experiences preschool offered, the girls were clearly the most compelling.



I admit I was intrigued by them too. Indeed, for the first few months, I barely noticed the boys at school; they provided a drab background to the butterfly cloud of little girls. I had come to terms with being the mother of sons, but I couldn't help watching those girls with wistful fascination, like an anthropologist studying a foreign culture.

I took note of their outfits, their whispered confidences, the way their hair streamed behind them as they raced down the leaf-strewn sidewalk on the chilly mornings before school. My favorites were twins, Margot and Camille. Hair ribbons fluttered from their identical dark braids and their extensive wardrobes consisted of matching sets of frilly dresses—the sort I'd sworn no daughter of mine would be forced into. Anticipating each day's delectable outfits (the kitty-cat raincoats! The ruffly umbrellas!) I wondered why, exactly, I had been so determined to keep my hypothetical daughter free of frills. Not that it would ever be an issue now.

"Mama, I want some tights." This was my first hint that frills were in my future after all. That I hadn't been alone in my scrutiny of those fetching little girls' outfits. My son had been making a few observations of his own.

"Tights, huh? Why is that?" I asked, unpacking Simon's lunchbox.

"Because they're beautiful! And they keep your legs all warm and cozy."

"Hmm, yes, they are nice and warm," I agreed. "But you already have lots of pants to keep you cozy, you know."

Simon just looked at me. "But tights are more beautiful," he said, simply.

Up till then, I had dressed my son

the way a feminist with a long-standing aversion to organized sports might be expected to: He wore bright, gender-neutral clothing (no "Lil' Slugger" tees in this kid's wardrobe), sturdy corduroys for outdoor play, shirts with pictures of seashells and diggers, and whatever other colorful, offbeat finds I could unearth at the local kids' resale store. He had his favorite items, but he'd never shown much of an interest in clothes. Until now.

Now he wanted beauty. And tights were, undeniably, more beautiful than pants.

I looked at my son, more taken aback than I wanted to admit. It was an established certainty—established by me—in Simon's worldview that men and women could do the same things. I had been casually slipping this fact into conversations for years, just as I regularly changed the pronouns in the books I read aloud to him, gender-balancing the bunnies, firefighters, gorillas and dinosaurs. My kid took it for granted that, except for growing up to be a mama, a boy could do anything a girl could do.

Yet here I was, hesitating to walk the walk. Was I actually going to tell Simon that he couldn't have tights because he was a boy? On the other hand, was I going to set him up for teasing if he showed up at school with chartreuse spandex daisies dappling his legs? His preschool was run by Quakers, whose skillful and compassionate handling of conflict among the "Mine!" "No, *mine*!" set continually impressed me. Still, I wavered.

"We'll see," I said finally, opting for the classic parental equivocation. I felt like a wimp. But maybe he'd forget about the tights.

He didn't. Every couple of weeks,

Simon would come home from preschool and ask hopefully if I'd gotten them yet. "I want them to be green," he'd remind me.

What the heck? I thought one day, looking at a rack of new, fancy, European cotton tights at the consignment store. They were thick and warm with colorful geometric and floral patterns. They were the kind of tights I would have bought my daughter if I'd had one. I picked out a pair of green ones with yellow and pink flowers up to the knee.

"They're so beautiful!" Simon exclaimed when I handed them to him after school that day. I helped him slide them on and he ran to the mirror. "Look how beautiful I am!" he shouted. "Look how high they make me jump!" He capered around the room like a lithe little forest elf, dancing in the moonlight.

Simon wore the tights to school the next day, under a pair of shorts. No one said a word. I congratulated myself on being the kind of hip and open-minded mother I'd always planned to be.

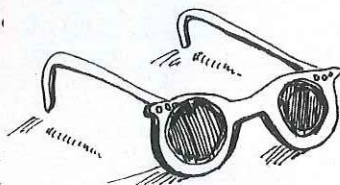
"Mama, can I have a dress to wear?"

I swiveled around in the office chair to look at my son. It was the first week of summer vacation, and we were enjoying a rare hour together while his baby brother napped. I knew what the answer would be, but I asked anyway. "Why do you want one?"

"I just do. And dresses are beautiful."

This time I simply smiled.

I led the way to the basement, to the boxes marked, "Kate's childhood dresses." My mother, an incorrigible packrat and sentimentalist, had sent



them when I was pregnant in the hope that a child of mine would wear them one day. It looked like Grandma was about to get her wish.

After rooting through a box of fashions circa 1971, Simon selected a dropped-waist sleeveless blue-and-white-checked dress with a floppy lace collar. We took it upstairs and I zipped him up in front of the mirror.

"A dress! A dress for me," he rejoiced. "Don't I look beautiful, Mama?"

The blue of the dress matched his eyes and set off his blond hair, cut bowl-style. I'd always thought my son was an adorable child, but in the dress I was suddenly more aware of the delicacy of his arms and legs, the still babyish roundness of his cheeks, and the physical vulnerability that boys' clothes can camouflage. He did look beautiful. He looked like a beautiful four-and-a-half-year-old girl. *This is what she would have looked like*, I thought, with a pang of surprise. It was like a sudden glimpse into an alternate universe.

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"My, don't you look charming!" exclaimed my husband that evening when Simon ran to meet him at the door. *Our son the maverick*, said his smile.

Simon wore the dress the next day on an expedition to the grocery store. I pushed his brother in the stroller while Simon pedaled ahead on his bike. The dress fluttered in the breeze and the sun reflected off his pink helmet. People smiled at us as we passed—me and my energetic young daughter. The illusion was startling.

"What a helper she is!" said an old woman at the store as Simon located

our brand of toothpaste.

"Such a good big sister," approved another as he carefully pulled up baby Nate's blanket.

These comments sailed over Simon's head, but I felt an odd sense of displacement, as though I had actually stepped into that alternate universe. There was my familiar, firefighter-obsessed little boy—who, in that summer dress, was at the same time a completely plausible little girl. It was like the sudden mental shift that occurs when one of those optical illusion drawings snaps into focus, and both the vases and the women's profiles are there in plain sight, as they have been all along.

Simon wore the dress all summer. "It's nice and cool so I can do all my work," he explained importantly as he and his friend, Max, took a break from extinguishing the innumerable imaginary fires plaguing their backyard construction site.

After the initial doubletakes and raised eyebrows, people on our street got accustomed to seeing Simon in his

dress. Still, after laughing and shaking their heads over "kids and their crazy ideas," almost every neighbor and friend asked, voices lowered in concern, "But what does his dad think?"

The subtext, of course, was, *Does a man whose son wears a dress worry that maybe his boy is gay?*

"He thinks Simon looks charming," I always answered. Left to his own devices, my husband probably would not have provided Simon with a dress. Still, once the deed was done, I was impressed by his nonchalance about it.

When preschool started again that fall, Simon stopped picking out the dress in the mornings. He was almost five, and I wondered if it had finally occurred to him that only girls wore dresses. I got my answer the afternoon I returned from a shopping expedition.

"Why didn't you get me anything beautiful?" Simon asked, as I was putting his new striped shirts and corduroys away.

I knew what he meant. Once a kid is out of the toddler stage, most stores don't offer much in the way of beauty for little boys. Still, I tried to make the best of things. "Look at all these bright colors! Red, blue, yellow... don't you like them? And see, these carpenter pants are just like Papa's."

"Yes ... but they're not really beautiful," Simon said, staring mournfully at the floor.

I sighed. "Okay, then. What kind of clothes would *you* say are beautiful?"

Simon looked up eagerly. "Well, a pink shirt with rainbows on it, and some pants with rainbows that are pink too, to match it. And some green

pants that have all kinds of colors of flowers like pink and purple. *Those* kinds of clothes."

When I was in the seventh grade, every girl in my class except me sported a velour pullover with a ribbed V-neck. My mother, oblivious to fashion trends, never noticed that I looked any different from my more stylish classmates. I understood the longing for "those kinds of clothes." I had been fully prepared to recognize it in a daughter, yet for all my feminist talk, and for all Simon's hints, I was slow to understand how deeply rooted

this desire was in my son. And even now, I wasn't sure what to do about it.

The next morning, just before school, I found Simon sitting disconsolately on the stairs. "Mama," he said, looking up at me wistfully, "Girls are the prettiest, aren't they?"

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Prettiest in what way?"

"Well, girls wear beautiful clothes in beautiful colors, and boys wear clothes that are just ... not very beautiful."

Something fierce rose up inside me, the same protective instinct that had instantly replaced my fatigue when I first held my son as a newborn. No one was going to keep my little boy boxed in by khaki and navy if his soul craved pink rainbows. No one was going to make him think he couldn't be beautiful because he was a boy. I knew exactly what to do. If Simon wanted girly clothes, he was going to have them, by God, and pronto.

"You'll always be beautiful to me, no matter what you wear," I said, sitting down next to him. "But anyone can wear pretty colors, and I'm going to get some for you."

That morning I set off for the consignment store, a mother on a mission. *Rainbows and flowers*, here I come. I had shopped for Simon on the girls' side of the store before; it had yielded many a solid-color, football-free shirt. But I had never consciously sought out the frou-frou. Now, as I flipped through the size fives, pulling anything with flowers or rainbow stripes, I felt a giddy thrill I'd never experienced while browsing the boys' side. Everything here was so over the top. Big flowers, pink hearts, scalloped edges on everything, embroidery, fringe. Compared to the boys' clothing, this stuff was from a different planet. A very beautiful planet. Who wouldn't want to live there?

"Beautiful clothes! Hooray!" Simon exclaimed, when I showed him my haul that afternoon. His face was alight with pleasure as he looked at the green pants with multicolored flowers, the rainbow-striped sweater with a pink heart-shaped zipper pull, and the dark pink vest embroidered with flowers.

"I'm going to wear them to school tomorrow and all the girls will think I'm a girl! Even though I'm a plain old boy!" He chortled at the thought of this hilarious scenario as he helped me put the clothes away.

"What a beautiful sweater, Simon!" said his preschool teacher the next day. Beaming, he showed her the plastic heart that zipped it up. "My baby brother really likes to pull on this," he confided.

And that was that. In another environment—some small, rural town, perhaps—a preschooler like Simon might have had to learn early some hard truths about gender and conformity. But we live in a particularly groovy corner of the Pacific Northwest, and although Simon is the only boy at school who wears pink hearts and flowers on a regular basis, that seems to be just fine with everyone. Strangers still mistake him for a girl on occasion, and he remains oblivious. He's already talking about the pink suede shoes he wants when kindergarten starts in the fall.

Although I've refused to steer Simon toward navy and army green over the years, it's abundantly clear to me that my son's love of beauty—defined by him and by kid culture as anything pink, flowered, and sparkly—is as much a part of his personality as his determination to be a firefighter when he grows up. (Maybe they'll have pink helmets by then).

Simon doesn't know society will diss his love of pink, an innocence that

can be laid directly at my door. I've failed to inform him that he's supposed to gravitate toward khaki. I know I'll have to clue him in soon enough. But now, before he's surrounded by older boys at elementary school, before he understands the sartorial expectations the world has of him, he's still free to indulge his love of beauty. This is the one time in his life that he can wear whatever he chooses, without facing anyone's disapproval.

Except mine, that is. Hip and open-minded I may be, but I have my limits. When Simon paired the flowered pants with the rainbow-striped sweater, I finally felt the need to exert some parental authority.

"But Mama, of *course* two beautiful clothes together are more beautiful than just one," Simon protested, unmoved by my lecture on stripe/print non-compatibility. It was difficult to counter this logic, but I stood firm.

Sort of. He can wear the outfit on the weekends.

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During the summer before kindergarten, Simon lost interest in dresses, and his color allegiance shifted to blue. He still likes tights and wears them to school occasionally, although he's aware by now that they're considered girls' clothes. "I don't care about that," he told me impatiently when I finally broached the subject. "People can wear whatever they want." And those pink suede shoes? I did end up buying them after all—for my three-year-old, who seems to be developing a taste for beauty himself.