



My daughter has reached that delightful age when American girls begin to obsess – and obsess and obsess and obsess – over clothes, shoes, makeup, hair, accessories, home décor... the whole girly shebang. For many girls, it's the beginning of a journey that never ends. (Perhaps "journey" is too dignified a term; "trivial pursuit," maybe?) While I realize this fixation is perfectly normal for an American girl – of any age – I find myself watching with a mix of guilt and dread as it flowers before my eyes, looking all too familiar.

It's Sunday evening, and Jeff and I are watching *60 Minutes*. They're doing a segment on Africa Mercy, the world's largest civilian hospital ship. Scott Pelley is interviewing the doctors and nurses, many of whom have been on board for years – several even raising families there – and these people are simply extraordinary. They seem happy, too. Truly happy – as if they'd found the secret to the good life, and it's not what you think. Amelia comes in halfway through the segment and sits down at the computer to look at "cute tops and cool earrings" online. I gamely try to interest her in this inspiring story unfolding on TV. ("Look at these kids, growing up on this boat! Traveling all the over the world, helping people! Wouldn't that be something? That girl looks about your age!") She gives me distracted lip service. ("Yeah, Mom... that's nice.") She's not listening. There are cute tops and cool earrings to be considered.

Amelia's Friend A has just moved to the DC area, where her parents bought a three-story house! Meanwhile, Friend B's parents have a towel warmer in their bathroom! And Friend C got five different kinds of perfume for Christmas! My daughter relates these tidbits with enthusiasm, if a little wistfully. Being who she is – a basically sweet kid – she's not trying to make me feel guilty. But being who I am – need I elaborate? – my guilt is acute.

Here's the confusing thing: I don't know if I feel guilty because I can't provide my child with the bottomless pit of things she suddenly thinks she needs... or because I wish I *could*. What I *know*

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feel guilty about is that I'm raising her in a culture that tells her Stuff equals Happiness. On my best days, I am confident in my conviction that less is more and simpler is better – good thing, since my chosen profession, the same as her father's, imposes that lifestyle – but so much about American culture conspires to send the opposite message. And if I am weak and susceptible to that message, how can I expect my 11-year-old to resist it?

It's Thursday after school, we're strolling around downtown, following a yogurt break at YoYo's – where we finally bought a tee-shirt, because "everybody's got one" – and we enter one of Bay Street's wonderful boutiques. Amelia begins fingering purses and phone cases, telling me how much she "loves Vera Bradley" (she knows from Vera Bradley?), and that she's "kinda into Lilly Pulitzer now" (since when?). And then, she's off to the races, regaling me with a long list of expensive brands she admires and *must* acquire ASAP. I look down at my old jeans and worn-out clogs and slouchy bag, and I wonder... whose kid IS this?

But that's not fair. She's my kid, and she's exactly like I was at her age. Heck, she's exactly like I would be *now*, if I didn't keep myself hopped up on a daily cocktail of psycho-religio-spiritual wisdom. Or if I could afford more stuff. That's the God's honest truth, and it pains me to admit it. Despite my lofty ideals – and I believe in them, I really do! – I am all too often just an insecure preteen girl trapped in the body of an enlightened middle-aged woman. *I need those boots in that window, and my life will be but a sad, empty shadow-existence until I have them.*

Take the other night, for instance. I'm out with my husband and some good friends at a downtown restaurant, and we're having a grand time. Hugs have been exchanged and drinks have been served and everything's just perfect... until a gang of the best-dressed, best-shod, best-coiffed women you're likely to see in these parts arrives. In they float, sleek and shiny, trailing fairy dust in their wake, settling themselves into a corner table, whence they radiate light. These aren't strangers, these glowing creatures. They're women I know. They're even women I *like*

. So what is this feeling rising in my throat? A feeling as shabby as this sweater I'm wearing – the one I liked just fine two minutes ago? Why am I suddenly a 12-year-old girl sitting on the wrong side of the school cafeteria? And why did I bring this stupid purse?

The moment passes, but the memory is painful, even now. I hate feeling that way. I hate the idea that *stuff*, or the lack of it, can make me feel that way... or, that I allow it to. It shames me, because I know better. Despite what American consumer culture tells me, I know that clothes – and shoes and purses and jewelry – do *not* make the woman. There is, in reality,

no scientific connection between being a good dresser and being a good person. A big house does not necessarily signal a big heart.

I know all that, but my inner preteen isn't convinced. I work hard to silence her whining, but she can raise her ugly voice at any time. How I wish I could save my daughter from "growing up" to be just like her mother... could somehow smooth her path through these fleeting years, preparing her to leave her inner preteen behind one day. But first I have to dump *mine*. How does one do that in the dear ol' US of A, where the inner preteen – in all her vain, grasping insecurity – is coddled, encouraged, and even glorified by the relentless marketing forces that shape our very identities? (And, yes, I know I am one of those forces; I'm aware of the irony. By the way, thank you for supporting our advertisers!)

It seems like the odds are stacked against me. Sometimes, I just feel like packing it all in, grabbing my family, and stowing away on the Africa Mercy. I wonder if they need an editor? "Will write for food."

Forgive me if I sound a bit melodramatic. I'm just in a mood. I have a preteen in the house. Two, actually. It's exhausting.

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