



By Margaret Evans, Editor

This Halloween, there was a strange role reversal at our house. For the first time in ages, I found myself in need of a costume while my daughter was *not*. Jeff and I were invited to a costume party, while Amelia was – for the first time in her life – *not* trick-or-treating.

“Just hanging out with some friends, Mom. We’re not dressing up.”

Okay. It had to happen. Not emotional over here. Moving on . . .

I am not a costume person. Not since I was a young child have I truly relished dressing up. I have friends who bring great joy and passion to the challenge – stitching and glue-gunning and glittering with abandon! – and others who always manage to come up with something simple but clever. Take Matt, for instance, who once greeted us at Outback wearing a white tee-shirt that read “Go Ceilings.” All the other employees were in full Halloween regalia, so I asked, “Is that your costume?”

“Yes,” he deadpanned. “I’m a ceiling fan.” Brilliant.

In similar fashion, for last weekend's party my husband wore jeans and a plain black tee-shirt featuring one word: "Clone."

I admire those who excel at costuming, but I have never had the creative skill set or the right brand of wit to pull it off. Or maybe I just lack the bravado? In any case, I decided to trot out one of my old standards this year – something easily pieced together from my closet. I toyed with the perennial Gypsy or Hippie... but realized I'd done them both to death. (I also worried they might not be PC. You never know anymore.) In the end, I went with Mother Nature – the same costume I wore about 15 years ago, the last time I attended a costume party. Mother Nature wasn't quite as spritely this time around. She was decidedly more... autumnal. I picked up some fake fall leaves and flowers – half price at Rite Aid since I waited 'til the last minute! – and pinned them in my hair. It was a decent get-up, I suppose, but as always, I felt somewhat silly.

Have you noticed that kids stop playing dress-up right around the time they start putting on their *real* disguises – those invisible layers of protection we all don in early adolescence to hide our vulnerability and our deep, roiling oceans of insecurity? It takes a certain innocent confidence, a buoyant naiveté, to dress up in a costume and boldly stride forth into the world, expecting nothing but affirmation and candy. Little children have that confidence – they don't know any better – and it's a beautiful thing to behold. It's also a terrible thing to watch it drain away slowly, year after year, from your own child . . . no matter how natural the process. It's sad to see older kids ditch their Halloween garb, while putting on the armor of cool insouciance or blank indifference, the common costumes of adolescence.

Our hope, for our own children, is that they will shed these protective layers as they grow older and more comfortable in their skin, but some of us never quite do. Or we do, but only to put on new disguises that keep us similarly isolated and lonely. The Cool Professional. The Together Parent. The Fabulous Socialite. The Disdainful Intellectual. The Combative Partisan. These roles we play for the world help us function *in* the world, but if we inhabit them too entirely, wrap them too fiercely around us, we can lose ourselves in them . . . and estrange ourselves from others who play different roles. Better to wear these roles – these costumes – lightly, with humor and grace, able to shed them at a moment's notice when the circumstances arise . . . when it's time to be just plain human.

If you took off your "costume," would your friends still recognize you? Would you recognize yourself? If so, you're probably okay. But what do I know? I cling to my Writer's costume, which – paradoxically – is a costume that exposes more than it disguises. As a result, I often feel like an awkward, alienated freak when I'm anywhere *but* at my keyboard. You've

seen me naked . . . but not entirely. As E.B. White so perfectly put it, “Writing is both mask and unveiling.” I wonder how he did at parties.

As for my daughter and her friends and playing dress-up . . . They will undoubtedly wear costumes “just for fun” again one day – as I did last weekend – but it will never be quite as *much* fun as it was. Because now, they’ll be wearing them self-consciously, and probably ironically, with a wink and a smile and a cheek full of tongue. And if they’re anything like me, they’ll feel slightly embarrassed and uncomfortable, even if they don’t show it.

But hopefully – again, if they’re anything like me – they’ll get over themselves, and out of their heads, long enough to enjoy it anyway. And they’ll delight in remembering, if only for a while, what it was like – what *we* were like – before we all grew up, got too cool for costumes, and put on the masks we wear to face the world.