

## The Mom Costume

Lisa Harris

I WAS SUPPOSED to be happy. My daughter was healthy *and* beautiful. But there were downsides to birthing: exhaustion, pain, disquietude. The tiredness and soreness would pass but I wasn't sure about the unsettledness. It was as if I had pulled on this pudgy postpartum flesh by mistake, a mom costume I tried on at the Halloween store and the zipper had stuck while some other woman walked off wearing my professional slacks.

It was as though my whole persona swooshed out of me with the final push, bringing forth my daughter as well as a new identity, the old one carted off in the tray with the placenta. People called me by a new moniker: Mom. What had happened to Dr. Harris?

Working from home, I advised the Department of Defense: Army, Navy, and Air Force on environmental regulations. This allowed me the flexibility to take care of Lyda but complicated my identity crisis. Who was I when I spoke to clients on the phone while nursing: a consultant with secret clearance status or an in-over-my-head new mom? My confusion grew when a colonel asked, "Is that a baby in the background?" as if I had hoodwinked him, the outrageously expensive advice given not by a professional but by a diaper changer.

To sort through my dilemma I joined a playgroup of women like myself, women with careers: two engineers, a veterinarian, and a marketing professional. At our first meeting I learned all had taken lengthy maternity leaves. "I'm going back to work when my baby starts school," Engineer One said. Engineer Two nodded. "I'm planning to have another child and go back when *that* baby starts kindergarten." Marketing Professional had quit her job. Veterinarian filled in for other vets on vacation and had no intention of working full-time. These women were not wrestling with identities. They were moms.

I changed identities several times a day. Dressed in trousers and a polo, I talked to officers while Lyda played on the other side of my desk. Hanging up, I reclaimed mom clothes—shorts and a t-shirt. Some client phone calls, which either engaged more of my skills or were with high-up brass, required a different uniform: a silk

pinstripe jacket and navy-blue skirt. Somehow, the words that poured from my mouth while I wore a tank top didn't seem important. At the end of the day I determined who I had been by the laundry hamper's contents.

The playgroup moms wore shorts and t-shirts all day. They didn't talk about work or current events or housing prices. Or talk in acronyms. They discussed their babies' latest accomplishments or foibles. They talked bargain-hunting and Target deals.

"I bought five." Marketing Manager Leslie recounted how she had driven across town to snap up diapers at ten cents off a package.

"Call me next time," Veterinarian Mary Kay said.

"You don't think Josh'll grow out of the diapers before he uses them, do you?" Leslie added. "I had to get out of the house. I was going nuts."

Engineers One and Two did the math and nodded, as if to say, 'You bet it was a good deal. Wish I'd known.'

Every time I broached my wishy-washy identity, my conundrum was met with silence. By the time our children crawled, my friends had dropped their first names altogether and labelled themselves: Alex's Mom, Brian's Mom, Josh's Mom and McKinsey's Mom. I gave up correcting them when they called me Lyda's Mom, as they gave me a "what's your problem?" look.

My alias followed me to school—Lyda's teachers and friends called me Lyda's Mom. This etiquette snafu never would have occurred during my mother's era. Back then I would have been addressed as Mrs. Harris. No one would have thought of calling me by another name.

After the birth of my second daughter, I worried who I would be: Ava's Mom, Lyda's Mom, Dr. Harris, or simply me—and was "me" an amalgamation of all three?

I joined another playgroup, knowing Ava would benefit from interacting with peers. I lowered my expectations for identity-related discussions. Made sure I didn't slip into government-speak: "Developed an EIS for AFCEC with a FONSI within the POP," and resigned myself to listening to bargain-hunting stories.

During one meeting at a community pool, my cell phone rang: a contract officer from The Boeing Company (yes, that company). "Can I call you back?" I asked. He replied, "If you hang up I'm moving

on to the next name on my list.” No opportunity to change into my silk pinstripe, I had to wing it. Padding barefoot out of earshot of squealing kids, dressed in my Speedo two-piece, I discussed my bandwidth and how I could support Boeing’s project.

Twenty minutes later I returned to the Jacuzzi having snagged a multi-year contract—in my mom costume. This time, without an inkling of inferiority, I felt my advice was worth the money I would charge. Soaking with the other moms—a pediatrician and a neurologist—I realized I no longer had to deny one persona for the other. I was both Mom and consultant. As we splashed with our toddlers, we called each other by the names printed on our graduate school diplomas: Nancy, Jane and Lisa, as well as Margaret’s Mom, Voth’s Mom and Ava’s Mom.

# **(M)OTHERING**

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