

excerpt

Anne van Gessel



From a very early age, I've always been uneasy with who I am.

And anyone could have seen that walking into my college dorm room. From the edge of the floor to the rim of the ceiling, my dorm room walls were full of magazine cut-outs, pictures of women that I wish I looked like.

They were often displayed wearing revealing clothes at best and very little at worst. Deep down, I knew that I didn't want to wear clothes like that or portray myself in that way; nonetheless, they were pinned to my wall like statues of goddesses. They represented what I could never be.

I can remember one spring day. The trees outside my window had just begun to bud, and the birds were singing. Despite the beautiful weather and the soft comfort of birdsong, I remember spring as a stressful time in college. Spring meant the end of the year, which meant intensive studying and hours and hours of struggling to write just one paragraph of an essay.

Instead of writing or reading, I was just lying there on my soft homemade quilt and staring up at those pictures, dreaming of becoming something or someone else.

Then suddenly, I heard a very familiar rattle on my door. A friendly male face popped in. It was Charles, my best friend, whom I had met in my freshman year at college.

"Anne! Let's get out of here! It's beautiful outside!" I looked out the window and couldn't disagree.

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“Don’t you have some studying to do?”

“Meh, I’ll study later! Come on!” He talks like studying is so easy....

“Alright. But, only for a few hours.”

A few hours flew by with Charles. His light-hearted and easy-going manner turned everyday experiences into adventures and could make me forget my gloomy self-loathing air in just minutes.

“So, what are we going to do?” I asked as we made our way down an open-air corridor that leads to the college green.

“I think we should go shopping.”

“Shopping?” I’m not much of a shopper, Charles!

“Yes, shopping! Look at you!” I looked down at my outfit and was immediately confused. What’s wrong with it? I was wearing what I almost always wore: sweatpants, a workout tank top and a matching sweater. I was confused, and it showed.

“You’re always in sweats, Anne! You need to branch out!”

“Alright, what did you have in mind, Mr. Fashionista?”

“You’ll see!” He answered with a glistening smirk on his face. What could that mean?

I asked myself as he led the way to his car parked in the parking lot. I hopped into his car, and we headed to our typical stores – Ross and Nordstrom Rack.

“Here’s our first stop!” Charles announced as he held open the door to a women’s fashion store. The outside window had three very thin women-mannequins wearing low-cut belly tops and short shorts. Even though, of course, they weren’t real, everything about them said, “Look at me! I’m desirable.” I can remember looking at them, still confused by what I wanted to be.

“Charles, I don’t know about....”



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“Oh, come on! It will be fun.” He easily persuaded me with a rough shove into the store.

Normally, I would have gone right to the athletic wear section but, Charles had other plans.

He led me straight to the women's fashion section. You know, the section with all of the short shorts and belly tops. I bet those women in the pictures skip the athletic section and go for the belly tops! Did I want to be like them or not? It was hard to say. All I knew was that I didn't want to be like me. Charles was right, and I needed a new look. He immediately started to walk up and down the two aisles and sort through clothes. He lifted top after top to show me what he liked.

I can say I was honestly very surprised by what he picked out: tight and stretchy belly tops with buttons running down the middle and a short jean skirt that barely attempted to cover the intended body parts. The most surprising find was a pair of what can only be called ,'booty boots- knee-high black leather boots with an obnoxious heel that I knew would kill me if I wore them.

By the end of our visit in that store, I had tried on about four tight and short revealing dresses, two short shorts and three or four tops that, in my mind, didn't do the work that a shirt was meant to, i.e., cover body-parts.

As I was trying on these clothes, I continued to think about who I am and who I want to be. I thought about who I want other people to think I am. I know, complicated, right? I couldn't just look at these clothes and not wonder at my identity. I walked into that store not wanting to be me and not accepting my strengths and weaknesses. I came into that store hoping for a change.

“Alright, Anne, what are you getting?” Charles asked after I had finished my fashion show.



“I think I’m going to get this purple belly top and these shorts...” I said, holding up an outfit that reminded me of those beautiful and sexy women I wanted to emulate.

“You look amazing in those boots and that jean skirt!” Really? Wow, maybe I do!

“Ok, so I should get those too? What about this top?” I asked, holding up a mostly see-through flower pattern blouse.

“Yeah! That will totally show off your figure!” Charles looked excited at my transformation, and I was starting to be excited too. I could finally try on another image of myself. One that I might like. I went back into the change room and put on the entire ensemble for Charles, including the cripplingly high-heeled leather boots and studied myself in the mirror.

I didn’t see myself anymore; I just saw those women in the magazines that I had idolized.

Charles and I spent the rest of the day searching for more ensembles that would change my look. By the time I hobbled back onto campus wearing those leather boots and that revealing outfit, I had transformed into something else. I thought that transformation would excite me and make me happy. But as I felt the painful pulse in my feet and sensed the attention that the clothes were getting, I realized that I was just trying to be something that I could never be.

Just like I wanted to be beautiful, thin, and sexy, just like those women in the magazines, I also wanted to be outwardly intelligent. I wanted to be able to read out loud in class without hyperventilating. I wanted to be a straight-A student at the top of my class. But not everyone should wear short skirts and high heels.

My journey with dyslexia has taught me many things, one of which is the importance of finding self-acceptance. Finding the ability to accept yourself for exactly who you are and what you are achieving today is essential to any healing journey. It was essential for coming to grips with how dyslexia made me different from everyone else.

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