

Angela Pitrone
Paper 2

Ode to Plaid

A pair of orange and white plaid pants ruined my childhood. Ask my mother. She will turn crimson if you mention those pants in her presence. I have blamed those pants for every sadness, for every emotional breakdown I have ever suffered, my taste in terrible men and my inevitable divorce.

My family did not have money. We lived very sparingly on my Dad's \$3.85 per hour income in a poor suburb of Concord, NH. Somehow, my parents managed to pull enough money together to move us from my grandparents' house (and the little travel trailer we occasionally called home) to buy a ramshackle fixer-upper which previously boasted a series of nasty tenants that went as far back in history as the old still my dad found in the basement. The mortgage for that *Better Homes and Gardens* beauty ate right through the money Dad made so there wasn't a lot of room for extras. Extras for us were things like new clothing and shoes. Most of my clothes were second-hand donations from friendly neighbors and the occasional rummage sale. I never really noticed much. It felt like we were on vacation when we lived in our camper trailer for a while and I was never hungry or cold. I always felt safe even though I can imagine how hard it must have been for my parents sometimes, so young, with a child, trying to make it all work.

When I started elementary school, things began to change. An only child for the better part of my childhood, I was not accustomed to the physical and intellectual meanness of other kids so it was a shock to me when they were cruel and teased me about my clothing. I went to my mother about it but was dissatisfied with her admonition that I "should be grateful for what has been provided". This turned into a regular battle that became very embittered between us. I

would refuse to wear something. She would get furious with me for being ungrateful. My mother grew up poor but, instead of becoming bitter over what she couldn't have, she developed an obliviousness to it that could not be penetrated. Believe me, I tried! She honestly could not understand why I (literally) had my panties in a wad.

There was one article of clothing that we battled hard over. It was the early eighties... the time of peg-legged jeans and yoke-waisted pastel pants with ruffled hips and tapered legs. One morning, the fatal morning, she discovered *them* at the bottom of a Goodwill box. They were a rustic delight in white with an orange plaid design, an elastic waist for comfort and oh-so-not-stylish wide, bell-bottom legs.

"I'm not wearing those." I said

"You will wear what I tell you to wear." she replied.

"Nooo! I'll die! I'll puke! You can't make me wear those."

"Angela Marie Pitrone, you will put those pants on and you will be grateful that you have nice clothes to wear. There is nothing wrong with these. They are a perfectly good pair of pants.

When I was your age I never argued with my mother about such things. I was just happy to have something to keep me warm. Who cares what other people think?"

After further discussion involving tears and admonitions, she somehow finagled me into those pants and out the door to school. I dreaded the day I knew I would have. I was not to be disappointed.

It started right away. I heard the snickering and saw the girls cover their mouths with their hands as they whispered to each other. As though they needed to whisper! As though I couldn't tell what they were saying as they pointed their little fingers at me! Oh the humiliation! Then came the final blow. Everyone has a bully of some sort, right? Well mine was Rae-Ann.

This was the girl who made nasty comments behind me when I got a good grade, followed me home from school, taunting me, telling me I was ugly, fat, dressed funny that I was a teacher's pet suck-up, pushed me and conspired with other kids to torture me, to lift my dress and snap my training bra. She was the reason I stopped liking school despite a deep love for learning. She took one look at my pants and walked right up to me.

"What are you *wearing*?" she asked with a disgusted look on her face.

I tried ignoring her as all kids are told to do when it comes to bullies. It really doesn't work, so why do adults perpetuate this myth?

"Don't ignore me, ugly. Your momma *dressed* you funny today."

I couldn't argue with her. She was, in fact, right. I felt my face flush with warmth and a great bile-ball of stuttery anger toward her, the world and my mother started to rise in my stomach. If I had only had some direction in defending myself I might have hauled off and punched her, relieving myself of several years of torture. Instead, my anger morphed into another humiliation as it rose to the surface. I began to cry. I could see the glee of her triumph through my blurry vision.

"Oh baby's gonna cry. Momma dresses you and you cry like a baby."

Disgusted, she marched off leaving me alone at last. In that moment I hated school. I hated my pants, I hated my mother and I hated myself. I felt sick to my stomach and I just wanted to go home but somehow, I went through the rest of the day, feeling awkward and self-conscious. Less-than. As I stood in lunch line, I was subjected to more of the same kind of torture. Finally, when I got home, I stripped off the orange pants and sat on my bed in my underwear. I cried. I told my mom what Rae-Ann and the other kids had said. I told her I would never wear those pants again and there was nothing on earth she could do to make me. I

rolled them up in a ball to throw them away but my mother saved them at the last minute. She looked at them wonderingly. I realized that she truly did not understand what the fuss was all about. She neatly folded them and brought them to her room where I think she kept them for a long time.

Later, it became a joke between us. She riddled herself with guilt over inadvertently subjecting me to torture and I mercilessly reminded her of how much I hated those pants and how that experience maimed me for life. As dramatic as that sounds, there is an element of truth to this. I wasn't the same. Don't tell my mom but I guess it probably wasn't really the pants that did the damage but the fact that the contempt for my clothing—for me-- was a contempt I finally learned to have for myself. Over clothes. Over pants. Over my inability to fit in.

In later years, I envied the girls that seemed to have it all; the brand names, the expensive hair cuts and a mysterious sense of style that seemed to blossom from deep within them, making them into these beautiful swans. There was a glass wall between who I was and who they were that I never really learned to break. I struggled hard with the idea of being “good enough” and the desperate need to apologize for taking up space. It seems crazy in reflection that who I am to others and my self-identity was so dependent on the way I dressed; on something as fickle as fashion. The great irony is that, despite it all, Mom always insisted that bell-bottoms would be back in style. What do you know? She was right.