

# Learning to Wear Mother Clothes To Cover Woman Dreams

BY DIANA L. GUSTAFSON

*C'est l'histoire d'une femme qui apprend à reconnaître les modèles de maternage dans l'histoire de sa famille, modèles qui ont donné trois générations de femmes invisibles parce que drapées dans leur rôle de mère.*

Everyday, and in a hundred little ways I was taught to wear mother clothes. No one came right out and said, "Nice girls get married and have a family." Still I learned that getting married and having children were two things that were expected of me. I remember people telling me what a good mother I would be one day. I enjoyed the attention that came with learning how to care for my dolls, Ruthie and Baby. As a teen I was also praised for orchestrating the children's play activities at school and during family outings. Although no one seemed to notice what a great organizer I was, people did comment on how good I was with the little ones. How I "had a way" with children that just seemed to come "naturally." Most weekends I used my

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"natural" talent to earn spending money. I had to do a lot of babysitting (25¢ an hour with a 10¢ bonus after midnight) to make as much money as my brother did for mowing a lawn. I understood why, of course. Babysitting wasn't like a *real* job that demanded any skill or anything. A babysitter was just a mother stand-in and babysitting was what girls did because they were going to be mothers someday.

Getting married and having children were also two things I expected of myself. I wanted to be a *good* mother: like my mom was a good mother to me, and her mom was a good mother to her. Mom said that when she was growing up, she hoped she might have a daughter she could name Diana Lynne. Mom was 20 when she married my father and 21 when I was born. Diana Lynne was the name my mother gave to me. Diana Lynne. I like how my name looks when it's written. I like how my name sounds when it's spoken. My mother made me feel like I was a gift to her and my name was her gift to me.

By her example I learned from my mother that marriage and motherhood were the places a woman went. It was their destination. Graduating from college, camping around the continent, and getting a job were the things that a woman did on the way to her destination. I followed the woman's path. I graduated; I camped; I got a good job. I was 20 when I married. I was 23 when I gave birth to my daughter.

By the time I was 24 years old I was pregnant with my second child and moving into our fourth family home in as many years. Each move signalled another promotion for my

husband and another compromise for me. The compromise that year was giving up my nursing job in ICU in exchange for a safer, cleaner town in which to raise our family.

At that time jobs in nursing were scarce even for someone with specialized training. That, and being six-months pregnant, meant I couldn't find work in our new town. Although caring for my daughter consumed my entire day I missed going out to work. I missed using the knowledge and skills I had learned. I missed the paycheck that said my work was significant; that *I* was significant. "*I wish I could take a year off work,*" said my husband. He thought I should have been happy staying at home and *not working* but I wasn't. *Why?* I didn't know why.

Still, moving to a small farming community was a big improvement over living in the grimy industrial town where we'd spent the previous year. We had stepped up from a tiny cottage near a busy intersection into a three-bedroom brick bungalow on a quiet crescent. There were two cars in the driveway and a clump of birch trees on the front lawn. Instead of the roar of cars racing past our house, we heard crickets chirping in the late afternoon. The spicy odour from a Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet was replaced by the sweet smell of dung from a nearby pasture. It was a much better place to raise the children. Living in that setting reminded me of my childhood visits to the family homestead. I should have been happy in that home, but I wasn't. *Why?* I didn't know why.

My daughter was a year old and just learning to walk when my second child was born. My husband was thrilled. Our families told me how

lucky I was to have two beautiful, healthy children. Within a week everyone returned home to their private lives and their paid jobs leaving me alone to care for my two precious babies.

Mothering was an awesome responsibility. I was taxed by inexperience and drowning in a tide of emo-

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tional confusion. Caring for my babies demanded endless patience and resourcefulness. That, and blind faith that the cries of a colicky baby would soon end. Every morning I awoke knowing I would have to survive another day with only three hours of sleep. But I rose from my bed to feed and clothe them, to bathe and play with them, to cuddle and kiss them. There were days that I felt I had endless energy. Then there were days that just felt endless. Sometimes I wondered why I wasn't happy caring for my babies. *Why?* I didn't know why.

One day I turned to our minister for help understanding why I felt the way I did. Just a little older than me he, too, had a young family. He was easy to talk with, fun and funny. I was certain he would understand. Instead he was shocked and dismayed by my confession. Didn't I know that in raising my family I was doing God's work? And doing God's work wasn't always easy but it was its own reward.

Wasn't I thankful for all my blessings? Clearly I had lost sight of God's teachings, he said. I needed to spend more time reviewing scriptures. He said that I needed to pray for renewed faith, for strength, and guidance. He recommended counselling and promised to include me in his prayers.

That Sunday, just like every Sunday before, I attended the 9:00 a.m. church service. My husband sat with our daughter in a pew at the front of the church. I sat with my newborn and the other mothers in the back pew where breastfeeding babies didn't disturb the sensibilities of the other parishioners. But that Sunday I could only pretend to pray when everyone else bowed their heads. *Why?* I didn't know why.

Still searching for an answer to my questions I looked to the other young mothers in my neighbourhood. Their lives looked like my life. Each of us had a nice house and a fenced yard and aphids on our roses. Each of us had a good husband who would *babysit* while we did the weekly shopping. Each of us had one or two healthy babies who slept through the night except when they had the colic, or an ear infection, or a chest cold.

Three or four of us started meeting every Wednesday morning to share a week of stories over coffee and cake. As our little ones crawled around our ankles we strategized about toilet training and college education. We debated the merits of disposable versus cloth diapers all the while attending to intermittent sobs and squeals. We passed along toys, clothing, and nuggets of wisdom acquired during our months as mothers.

All of us were quick to recount stories of our child's little victories but none of us spoke of the losses in our own lives. No one spoke of resenting the ultimate responsibility that mothers shoulder for parenting. No one commented on how small her world had become since she became a mother. No one mentioned feeling conflicted about raising a daughter who would reproduce her life. Everyone talked about how much they loved their little one but no one

admitted how much they resented the invisibility of being a mother. We explained away our tears as being hormonally induced; our long contemplative silences, as not enough sleep. If anyone was unhappy no one ever spoke of it. And so, neither did I. If anyone expected more from their life, no one ever said so. And so, neither did I. But I knew I needed more.

So off I went in search of more. By the time my younger babe was a year old I had found a part-time job at a hospital. I worked the night shift. That way, I had my days *off* to be with my kids. Each year when my husband was transferred to another job in another town I re-established our family in a new home with new wallpaper, new friends, a new school, and a new church. And with each move I left my part-time job hoping I'd be able to find another.

Over the years I did many things. Almost everywhere I went I had a child in each hand. I helped establish a Block Parent Association in our neighbourhood. I volunteered with an agency that organized events welcoming new families to our community. As Christian Growth Chairman at our church, I organized and facilitated weekly Bible study classes for teens. One summer another couple and I established a youth baseball league in our community and I was assistant coach for our church team.

Over the years my kids learned from me how to shape meatballs for a spaghetti dinner, fly a home-made kite, have picnics under the kitchen table, create macaroni art, and bake cookies for a fundraiser. They learned from me that moms are cheerleaders at t-ball tournaments and swimming meets. They learned from me that moms will applaud a new dance step learned and a faster time skated. They learned from me that moms will share the excitement of getting their first period and the sorrow of losing a best friend. They learned that mothers don't protect them from the consequences of their actions but that mothers will always be there when you need them.

Every activity of my every day seemed focused on producing and reproducing my family. Sometimes I lay awake in the quiet hours before dawn and asked myself, "*Isn't there more to my life than being a mother?*"

When I tried to explain to my husband about how I felt, my complaints seemed so petty. Why was it I who had to stay home when my daughter had a fever? Why was it up to me to arrange for babysitters, plan visits to the dentist, and think about vitamin supplements? Why was the mother to blame when there was a "parenting" problem? I told him how I felt as if my contributions were trivialized or went unrecognized. I told my husband how I hated feeling as if I had no identity except that of being someone's mother. "*You don't like being a mother? How could you not love your own kids?*" he asked angrily. Is that what I had said? I loved my children! Why didn't he understand? *Why?* I didn't know why.

And so things went for years. The questions remained. I felt no closer to finding the answers but I continued to search. I simply gave up trying to explain myself to anyone but me.

One summer the children and I travelled alone by car to a family reunion nearly 2,000 miles from our home. It was the summer Grandma celebrated her eightieth birthday. It was the same summer that I met my grandmother and mother as if for the

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first time. Like me, both had learned to wear mother clothes to cover their woman dreams.

It was a scorching summer afternoon when we sat down to play a game of questions. The men were at the beer parlour and all the women: my mother, grandmother, sisters, aunts, and cousins sat on lawn chairs in the backyard, sipping white wine spritzers. As we went around the circle I had a chance to ask my grandmother to tell me about her greatest achievement. She said, without hesitation, that having her daughter, my mother, was the one thing of which she was most proud. I was stunned to hear Grandma refer to that moment as if it were a real event located in our family history. *What was my grandmother doing opening our family history book at this earlier page?*

No one, most especially my grandmother, talked about my mother's birth or the first nine years of my mother's life. For Grandma to speak of the obstacles or the triumphs of being a mother was to bring to the fore the circumstances leading up to her motherhood. These days we might refer to my grandmother as a single mom, and my mother as the child of a single-parent family. But in the 1930s in the Canadian midwest, the labels were anything but benign. Until that summer day the history of my grandmother's life as a mother began when she married the man I knew as my grandfather. That day Grandma reclaimed those lost years of mothering, making them visible, making them real again. Those words were like a gift Grandma gave to herself and to her daughter.

The game continued around the circle to my sister. "*Imagine another life,*" she said to Grandma, "*the one you did not live.*" Grandma offered her answer if it were a photograph she carried in her pocket: She was a police officer. She lived in a big city. She drove a red Mustang convertible. That simple but startling image was spoken by a person I'd only known to sit quietly in the passenger seat of her husband's old blue Chevrolet. How carefully she had worn her grand-

mother clothes to cover her woman dreams.

The grandmother I knew had spent 25 years criss-crossing the prairies in a cramped but immaculate mobile trailer as my grandfather's job with the railway took him from one little town to the next. To me, Grandma and Grandpa seemed like a unlikely match. Grandma smelled like Dove soap and Grandpa smelled like sour sweat and Aqua Velva. She was a private person always careful with her words and actions around strangers. Grandpa, on the other hand, would strike up a conversation with anyone who crossed his path. Any day you might find her rolling cookie dough or canning chokecherry preserves while he sat at the kitchen table smoking unfiltered Export "A" cigarettes. When company arrived Grandma served orange pekoe tea and home-baked goodies while Grandpa laughed at his own stories and drank too much Captain Morgan's dark rum. She loved to read but he was barely literate. That was my Grandma's life as I knew it. How different from the image of the life she might have liked to live.

As the sun melted into the horizon, I listened as my mother asked and answered questions about her life. For 25 years I knew my mother had criss-crossed Canada as my father's job took him from one military base to another. Fifteen times, Mom had re-established our family in a new home with new paint, new friends, and new schools. And with each move she left her part-time job as a teacher hoping she would be able to find another.

How I had tried to be like her, the perfect wife. And in so many ways I was not. I was tired of having to compromise my dreams for my husband's success. I was tired of uprooting my children and having to deal with their tears and tantrums as we prepared again to leave the familiar. I had felt like a failure for wanting to leave my marriage. And how I had tried to be like her, the perfect mother. And in so many big and little ways I was not. She had raised five kids

when two exhausted me. She had designed and tailored all our clothes and I was ashamed to admit that I didn't even own a needle and thread.

When it was my turn I asked Mom to talk about her greatest achievement. She said there were many things of which she was proud. One of those things was that she had raised a daughter who had the courage to do something she needed to do. Did she know I was planning to leave my marriage? A good mother didn't end a marriage just because *she* was unhappy, did she? Had I heard her correctly? Did she think that was a courageous act? For a moment I glimpsed the woman beneath the mother clothes.

As I was growing up I had nurtured the myth of my mother and grandmother as uncomplaining and self-sacrificing, blanketing everything with love and forgiveness. I did so without realizing that I was making them invisible to me as women. In trying to live up to that myth of mother, I reproduced for my daughter the same unachievable image of mother. And I did so without realizing that I was making my self invisible to her.

Since that hot summer day some things have changed but many things remain the same. The day we left the reunion, Grandma leaned into the car to hug and kiss me and my children goodbye—just one more time—just in case it was the last time. And it was. When I want to recall that moment, and that last touch, I touch my own cheek, or the face of my daughter and I feel her soft skin again. From time to time I imagine her making cookies or driving her red Mustang convertible.

My mother and I have tried, each in our own way, to make ourselves more visible to each other as women. I want to be a woman in my mother's eyes and I want to see her as the woman she is. Yet, my old ways of thinking and behaving are so resistant to my deep desire for those ways to be different. The urge to maintain the priority of the mother-daughter relationship over the woman-woman relationship is compelling. When I

am in pain, I turn to my mother, not as a woman in search of solace, but as her daughter in need of a mother's embrace. And she responds to me with her mother love and I feel healed.

This year my daughter turns 23. She has heard pieces of this story before and she will read this account too. I'm hoping it will make me ever more visible to her as a woman who is also her mother. I expect it will also initiate another of our dialogues about woman dreams.

That summer and still today, I am learning to recognize old patterns in my life and in the history of mothering in my family. A pattern of accepting the rules as sacred and unchangeable ... of learning to make the unacceptable invisible. A pattern of ques-

tions asked but seldom answered ... of woman dreams kept hidden from view. A pattern of being a woman subsumed by motherhood ... a destination that was expected of us and a destination we expect of ourselves.

That summer and still today, I am also learning to create new patterns in my life and in the history of mothering in my family—for my sake and for that of my daughter.

*Diana L. Gustafson is a Ph.D. student in Sociology and Equity Studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, and in the Collaborative Program for Women's Studies at the University of Toronto. Her current research interest is health care reform and its impact on women and families in Canada.*

## ROSLYN SCHWARTZ

### Lost

The last time I saw my grandmother whole  
we shared lunch across my mother's kitchen table  
She painted stories for me

childhood seven sisters in one bed  
teen years dancing on stage at summer  
camp

early days of marriage travelling with  
her two year old daughter, living in a  
tent

vague images now  
light and shadow in my memory

I wish I could remember what she said

I did not know this moment would not come  
again  
and so I watched the clock  
let the present pull me from the past  
left when it was time to meet a friend downtown

why did it ache so much to say goodbye

The next time that I saw her  
my grandmother could not remember who I was.

*Roslyn Schwartz lives in Kingston with her four children,  
one spouse, and countless memories of her family of origin.*