

Views: My Habit

Crow's feet, dog jowls, and turkey wattles: Despite my menagerie of aging signs, the inner me is still a kid—immature, impulsive and impertinent.

When I was little I couldn't wait for the freedom I expected would come with growing up. Once, at 16, I had adult power for a brief moment. It was my high school drama class final exam performance. I hoped to pass, even if just barely. Wearing an authentic nun's habit I'd borrowed from an authentic nun, I stepped onto the stage as Sister Felicity in a hastily-rehearsed scene from *Suddenly Last Summer*. All I had to do was stand there in that heavy habit with my hands clasped and deliver my lines. For a rambunctious cut-up like me, holding still required serious acting.

Miracle of miracles, my portrayal garnered me an instant A. Maybe I really had talent.

sally sheklow

on the subject. (Needless to say, I never got an A from Mr. Mendez.) He guarded the entrance in his typical authoritarian stance. What an opportunity! I walked up and looked him sternly in the eye.

"May I help you, Sister?" Courtesy dripped from his usually reprimanding tongue.

I stared, thrilled he didn't see past my wimple and recognize me – the smart aleck kid he'd busted passing notes

he could respond I rustled past him, glided into the auditorium, and slipped into the back row. Heads turned. The lights dimmed. Eventually the murmur subsided.

After assembly, I drove myself home. My brother had loaned me his 1940 Dodge coupe for the day. People in passing cars did double takes at the nun behind the wheel of a rusty old wreck. Just before I turned onto our street I lifted my berobed arm out the window, black gabardine flapping in the wind. When I was sure plenty of gawking drivers and passengers were looking my way, I held up my hand and raised my middle finger. The old car's tires squealed as I gunned it around the corner. God, that was fun!

I parked in our driveway, checked the mail box, and waved at our next-door neighbor as if it were any other after-school day. On my way to the front door, my reflection in the living room window startled me. How authentically nunly I looked. Not schoolkid-ish at all. Before I'd finished admiring myself the telephone rang and I ran inside. My mom's frantic voice boomed through the receiver, "What's going on there? Is everything all right?" Old Mrs. Vineberg, our strictly-kosher next door neighbor, had freaked and called my mom at work to report a nun on the premises.

"It's okay, Mom. I'm still wearing my habit costume." While I chatted with my mother I spotted our neighbor looking in from across the driveway. I smiled, waved, and remembering I still wore the habit, blessed Mrs. Vineberg with the sign of the cross.

Even now, in my mid-fifties, nothing's really changed. It's still the same wiseacre-me inside. Being middle-aged is like a costume – a disguise that confers an automatic status we don't have as young people. Getting older is fun, thrilling, actually. Like being a nun and flipping the bird from a speeding jalopy. ▼

Writer Sally Sheklow and her wife pretend to be grownups in Eugene, Oregon.

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Either that or our faggy drama teacher recognized my budding queerness and wanted to encourage me to get into theater where I'd find kindred spirits.

I was so stoked about getting the A, I stayed in costume after class. I felt invincible inside those massive folds of fabric. A voluminous veil and starched white headpiece hid my telltale high forehead and curly hair. Any hint of my Jewishness was pretty well concealed by the giant crucifix hanging solemnly against my black-draped teenage bosom. My robes rustled with purpose as I strode across campus to assembly. A sea of schoolmates hushed and parted to let me pass.

Mr. Mendez was on hall monitor duty outside the auditorium. I knew from his economics class that he considered himself a good Catholic and didn't tolerate any joking around

featuring my less-than-flattering likenesses of him.

All Mr. Mendez saw was a nun. A nun who apparently expected something from him. Had I thrown him into a Catholic School flashback? Sweat beaded onto his forehead and upper lip. My stringent economics teacher was at a loss. Did I have Mr. Mendez scared? What a potent feeling!

Poor Mr. Mendez shifted, fidgeted like one of his day-dreaming economics students suddenly called on to explain supply and demand. I must have broken character for a second, because a tentative recognition furrowed Mr. Mendez's already frown-creased brow. Was he seeing the real me behind the veneer? He wasn't totally sure. "Sheklow, is that you?"

I flashed a grin. Mr. Mendez's reverent look drooped into his standard scowl. Before

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