

WHAT I WORE THROUGH THE GOOD,
AND
THROUGH THE BAD

Written and Illustrated by
ARNORA BALIDEMAJ

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To my family,

Thank you for protecting, teaching and supporting me throughout my life and continuing to do so.

To my boyfriend and bestfriends,

Thank you for standing beside me while I experience the good and the bad life has to offer.

The Flower Girl

From a young age, I consider myself to be a perfectionist. I rehearsed walking down the aisle for my aunts wedding for weeks, with assistance from my mother. As each day passed, I became more and more anxious.

I grew up a girly girl. I loved gowns, high heels, jewelry and fragrance and makeup, so attending and being apart of a wedding was a dream.

I was seven years old when I wore my first obnoxious but adorable, puffy, eggshell princess ball gown, resembling a miniature bride. The gown was purchased at David's Bridal on Central Avenue in Yonkers, New York by my parents of course.

It consisted of long lace sleeves with embedded embroideries all along, covering the sleeve and torso area. The puffiness of the gown was overwhelming, I could not see my feet but I felt like a princess because of it. There was a satin ribbon tied around my waist, in a deep emerald shade, matching the color of the bridesmaid gowns.

My hair was done in a sock bun, red lipstick, my sandals that also consisted of a bow and pink nail polish to complete the look. I remember how exhilarated I was. I felt like a princess. I had awaited this day for what felt like forever, ecstatic to be able to dress up and be seen by many people. It was like playing dress up but going into the world and doing it.

Still to this day, I look forward to events and shopping for a new outfit to wear, getting ready with friends, and just feeling fabulous. The feeling of enthusiasm and eagerness I endured during my aunts wedding as a young girl, I still often feel today when awaiting a birthday, anniversary, wedding or party, knowing I get to dress up.



The Pink Socks

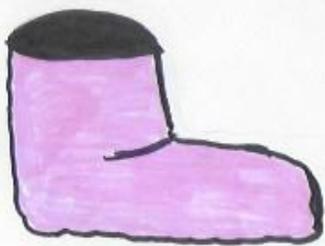
I have very limited memories with my maternal grandmother. She passed away due to the repercussions citizens in Kosovo faced after the Kosovo-Serbian war which took place back in 1998 to 1999.

The memories I have with my grandmother are almost non-existent. She passed away when I was almost three years old in early 2000. However, I have many photos with her when me and my family visited after the war ended. In every photo she has this big, bright, genuine smile. One that warms my heart every time I imagine her in my mind. My mother has shared with me all her qualities that everyone can agree were amazing. It saddens me that I did not get to know a woman my mother prides herself in calling her mother. The thought of her warms my heart.

The conditions in Kosovo were rough during the genocide for Albanian citizens. Locked up in their homes, to avoid any conflict out in the streets patrolled by Serbian police, my grandmother kept busy by knitting. She knitted a pair of socks for me and planned to give them to me the next time I visited Kosovo. Unfortunately, the next time I visited was years later after conditions in Kosovo simmered, but my grandmother was not there to give them to me herself.

The socks are a pair of thick knitted, ballerina pink socks that did not fit me by the time I had received them, despite that, I keep them as a sentimental object I can remember my grandmother by and hope to one day have my daughter wear them in place of me.

The socks still to this day sadden me, thinking of what could have been if she was still around. They make me feel unsettled and grief thinking of what could have been if she survived and lived longer.



The Beaded Bracelet

I had the pleasure of growing up knowing my paternal grandmother. For as long as I can remember, I have been visiting my grandparents home in Montenegro, the home which my father grew up in, every single summer.

Every year when I visit, before we left my grandmother gifted me and my two younger sisters, Anita and Laura, with handmade bracelets. She loved jewelry and had so many antiques that are very hard to be found now, especially since some of them were handmade by her. The bracelets are made from a thick elastic material that can stretch, and wrapped with beautiful beads that cover the entire elastic. They all vary in bright color and different designs. They are definitely what are known now as statement pieces.

My grandmother eventually passed away in January of 2013. I was devastated and was not able to attend the funeral service because her wish was to be buried back in her home town in Montenegro. What helped me slowly move on was the gorgeous sentimental handmade jewelry we had gifted from her, and what she had left us that she herself owned.

One bracelet that I had noticed she wore all the time, a emerald green, white and black bracelet with triangular designs, was one that she left me. This bracelet is so special to me and gives me a feeling of nostalgia. She wore this bracelet everyday towards the last few months of her life.

One day when sitting beside her at the hospital, she took it off and gave it to me. She did not say a word, mainly because she could not speak, but it is something I appreciate and think of very often.

The bracelet gives me some closure and wearing it makes me feel safe and secure. I felt blessed to have had this last moment with her and it meant the world, looking and wearing the bracelet now, the feelings are still there.



Saint Catharine's Uniform

For four, what at the time seemed like a very long four, years of my life I rotated between three different outfits.

Three white button up, collared, shirts with the school logo on the left hand side, two pleated baby blue skirts that wrapped around my waist and extended down to my knee, a long, boxy deep navy blue cardigan, three pairs of plain white nylon stockings, and a pair of boring black hush puppies, all purchased from *Flynn O'Hara* on the Tremont section of the Bronx. For five out of seven days, unless given other instruction, that is what I wore.

Attending school at *Saint Catharine Academy* on 2250 Williamsbridge Road in the Bronx quickly became very boring. An all girl, private, Roman Catholic school with a very strict uniform policy.

At the time, I hated it. I thought it was unfair. Why should what I wear be so thoroughly controlled? It made me feel controlled and tedious and I occasionally acted out with a terrible teenage attitude.

Looking back, I cannot help but feel a sense of nostalgia despite my feelings at the time. There was structure, discipline, and normality but I did not know how to appreciate that.



My Sweet Sixteen

I had my sweet sixteen at The Villa Barone Manor in the Throgs Neck area of the Bronx. A beautiful venue with amazing food and a great ambiance.

Between choosing the menu for the night, a DJ music, lighting, my court consisting of several of my closest friends, and of course, my gown, I was thrilled.

I can just remember acting like a total diva. I purchased my gown in NYC Fashion Boutique located in Astoria, Queens. After trying on numerous dresses I finally found the one. A strapless and shoulder less, mermaid cut gown in a deep emerald green shade, embellished with bright eye catching crystals. This dress made me feel and look mature, I could not wait to wear it.

The night of my party quickly arrived on January twenty fifth of 2014. I paired my gown with silver four inch high heels, also embellished with crystals of course purchased from Steve Madden, along with dangling silver earrings and a matching necklace with bracelet.

I can remember the feelings and thoughts running through my head. I was very on edge and super nervous, even feeling a little insecure knowing that all these people would be watching me! What if I fall? Does my hair look good? Is this gown even as gorgeous as I thought it was?

As the night proceeded, it all went as planned and perfect. I received many compliments about my gown which was very reassuring. I had the time of my life with my friends and family and this night became a memory that will stick with me for the rest of my life.



Louis Vuitton Obsessed

I was eighteen years old when I was gifted my first Louis Vuitton handbag. It was a gift from my parents for my birthday.

My love for handbags and shoes started at a very young age. I cannot remember when and how it developed but it has still stuck with me. I had watched *Gossip Girl* religiously as a teenager and my favorite character, Blair, owned the *Louis Vuitton 'Never Full MM'* purse in the *Damier Azur Canvas*. I fell in love and begged my parents for years for it, being that it is a pricey bag, and I was just a teenager, my parents wanted me to show them that I deserved it, my grades were what reflected that. I finished high school off on a great note, getting into my chosen colleges and making my parents proud, thus, 'deserving' the bag.

Walking into the Louis Vuitton boutique in the Westchester Mall was thrilling. The treatment you get by sales associates is not the same as walking into your local Forever 21 or H&M. It made me feel special and important.

I was dressed very casual. My high school branded sweatshirt in a deep navy blue, with my graduation year "2016" on it, a light wash pair of denim mom jeans and white tennis shoes from Adidas. I did not put much effort into what I was wearing because my main thought was finally getting the purse!

I chose the *Damier Ebene* finish. This bag made me feel special and different. The rich brown color and logo stamped all over the bag showed a sign of luxury. The bright red material on the inside peaked through as it bordered the top. I loved showing it off.

I am extremely thankful for my parents for continuously going above and beyond for me, especially since this was not a necessity, especially at that age. After owning this bag and maturing and growing, I realized that as much as I love the purse and the luxurious feeling of owning an item like that, it is not always worth it. My interest and desire for luxury goods is still present, however I know it is not a necessity.



Prom

My high school prom was something I had awaited since I had entered high school. I would constantly see gowns when shopping at the Westchester Mall, picturing and imagining myself in them.

Senior year was the year that it all began to happen. The search for colleges, senior trips, graduation, and one of the most exciting and my personal favorite, prom and the search for a gown. My mother took me to Nordstrom's in the Westchester Mall in White Plains, New York. The first gown I tried on, was the gown I purchased. I was obsessed! I found the perfect red gown, designed by Jovani. With an open back, a high neck, a frill detail on the lower back and a trumpet cut, I thought it was gorgeous.

Prom day had finally arrived. May 26th, 2016. My hair was put in a low bun, make up consisted of smokey eyeshadow and nude lip color done by a professional makeup artist and hair stylist for the first time ever.

The gown made me feel beautiful and confident. I had realized that the color red does that to me. I felt good about myself which made the night much more enjoyable.

I did not wear a bra with the gown since the entire back was open, and it felt pretty liberating to do so.

That day was one of the most exciting and memorable days of my life. I had arrived to Beckwith Pointe in New Rochelle, New York, with my girlfriends, all dateless, but we proceeded to have the time of our lives. It was just like we had imagined.



Graduation

The thought of finally being done with high school after four long years was exhilarating. As excited as I was to be done with high school, move on to college, start a new chapter of my life, get closer to achieving my dreams, I could not help but feel saddened.

This was the end of our journey at the same school with all my friends, we had all grown so much throughout the years and for most of us, this was our final goodbye.

Putting on my very white cap and gown brought different emotions upon me. Excitement, happiness, anticipation and pride but also, feeling loss and fear due to not knowing what to expect in the real world.

Wearing my graduation gown completely covered my peach short shift dress but that was okay. The gown represented something more important to me, and my body language said it all as I acted and stood tall and cheery waiting to receive my diploma.

After the commencement, walking out the Our Lady of Assumption Church on 1634 Mahan Ave in the Bronx and seeing my mother, tears running down her face, made me feel like it was all worth it.

My mother was also overwhelmed with emotions, having her first born being the first in the family to attend college. She describes her feelings as happy, proud and thrilled for me to start a new chapter of my life and do something she never got the opportunity to do. She says seeing me succeed and work towards my dreams makes moving to a foreign country and starting a brand new life worth it all.



Bieber Fever

For my best friend Besarta's twentieth birthday, I purchased two tickets to go see Justin Bieber perform during his *Purpose Tour* at Madison Square Garden in Manhattan, New York. The concert took place in mid July of 2016.

At the time, being huge fans of Justin Bieber, she was thrilled. The tickets costed me a ton, but for two teenagers having "Bieber Fever," this was going to be an unforgettable experience, in which it was.

At Madison Square Garden, we arrived two hours ahead of time to wait on the store line to purchase Purpose merchandise. After a long but exciting wait, I purchased an overpriced tee shirt for thirty dollars, in which I threw over my plain fuchsia Gap tank top to wear for the concert.

The shirt was a coal black tee shirt that spelled *Purpose Tour* in a chalky white gothic font. Totally worth it! The shirt made me feel complete, like I could then attend the concert like a true and supportive fan. This serves as a souvenir, brining back flashbacks of the eventful evening.

The *Purpose Tour* tee shirt complimented my outfit. I wore charcoal washed denim that had several tears throughout the leg area purchased from American Eagle, and an old pair of jet black converse with a Levi's denim jacket tied around my hips. Comfortable and ready to enjoy a memorable night.



Day One

My first day of college was a day of mixed emotions.

Joyed, accomplished, free, yet anxious and worried.

I did not know anyone else attending The New York City College of Technology. What if I got lost? Will it be hard to navigate? Make new friends? What if I cannot find my classroom? The thoughts scattered through my mind. The college being located on Jay Street of Downtown Brooklyn, New York, where there is so much going on, made my anxiety rise. Multiple schools within the neighborhood, a hotel, courts, a shopping mall and so much more. From growing up in one quiet neighborhood all my life and attending school with people I have grown up with, a lot was about to change. I was in a borough I was very unfamiliar with, taking busy and crowded public transportation alone, and suddenly in charge of my own choices.

August 25th of 2016, my first class was at ten in the morning. I woke up early to make sure to have enough time to get ready and dressed, grab breakfast and navigate my way through the school.

I wore a dark wash pair of denim jeans from H&M. I wanted to be casual, but not too casual. I paired it with a blouse purchased from Forever 21. It was an off the shoulder sleeve blouse, in a charcoal shade with an elastic band pulling in the bottom to tighten under my waist. The cotton material made it comfortable enough to wear for a long day of classes. I wore Stan Smith Adidas tennis shoes to complete my outfit. My book bag, a plain, jet black Longchamp purse carried all my notebooks, textbooks, and supplies.

I felt comfortable and equipped. However, I would say that my outfit was probably the least of my concerns. I was too caught up on the feelings of anxiety and anticipation.



Le Bilboquet

My first job was right after high school as a hostess at Le Bilboquet, an upscale French restaurant located on the Upper East Side.

My first day was on September 13th, 2017. The uniform, that I was unaware of until a day before when the manager emailed me, required a black cocktail dress and a minimum two inch heel. I was not too thrilled about this.

I wore a jet black dress, as was required, purchased last minute from the local Forever 21. It was a polyester stretchy dress which was bodycon cut and extended down to right above my knees. The chest area of the dress had a lower v neckline. My three inch heels were sandals with straps purchased from Steve Madden. They were of suede material and were detailed with silver rock studs throughout the strap of the sandal.

It was very typical for a midtown restaurant whose main clientele consisted of wealthy middle aged men to require younger females to prance around in short gowns and cater to them and I was not content with the idea of it.

The uniform made me feel belittled, uncomfortable and cheap. I felt like I was constantly being stared at, and not in a good way. I wondered how my colleagues did not mind it, or were they just used to it? Was I overreacting?

The idea of it all made me feel extremely uncomfortable and my body language could tell that. I could feel myself slouching and avoiding eye contact with anyone.

Needless to say, my time at Le Bilboquet did not last too long. I did not enjoy the feeling of being downgraded, objectified and talked down to for a minimum wage salary.



Farewell Grandpa

I have been fortunate enough to have had a happy and fulfilled childhood. The older I get, the more I realize that sometimes, life unexpectedly can present you with challenges, and not everything is always as ideal. The first time I have come to the realization of what sorrow and grief felt like is when my maternal grandfather passed away.

My grandfather had just come to America a few years prior. I was finally building a relationship with him here in the states, teaching him, showing him and my favorite part, learning from him.

Unfortunately, he lost the battle with pancreatic cancer on March twenty-sixth of 2017.

I remember the day of his funeral being frigid and rainy.

Arriving to Farenga Brother Inc funeral home on 920 Allerton Ave in the Bronx, I wore a turtleneck, jet black, shift dress, made of wool to keep warm on the cold day. I paired it with nylon sheer charcoal colored tights and jet black Tory Burch flats to match. My outfit was a way for me to express my feelings without having to verbally communicate.

Despaired, anguished, and desolate.

Saying goodbye forever was distressing. My parents had shielded me from having to experience emotions and situations of these kind which made it all harder to cope. However, with time and being surrounded with family to remember my grandfather during joyful times, it becomes easier to remember the joyful memories rather than the sad.



The Mickey Mouse Headband

Going to Walt Disney World was a dream I have always had. During the summer of 2017, on July fifteenth I finally got the opportunity to take a trip to Orlando, with my boyfriend Blenard. I was absolutely thrilled.

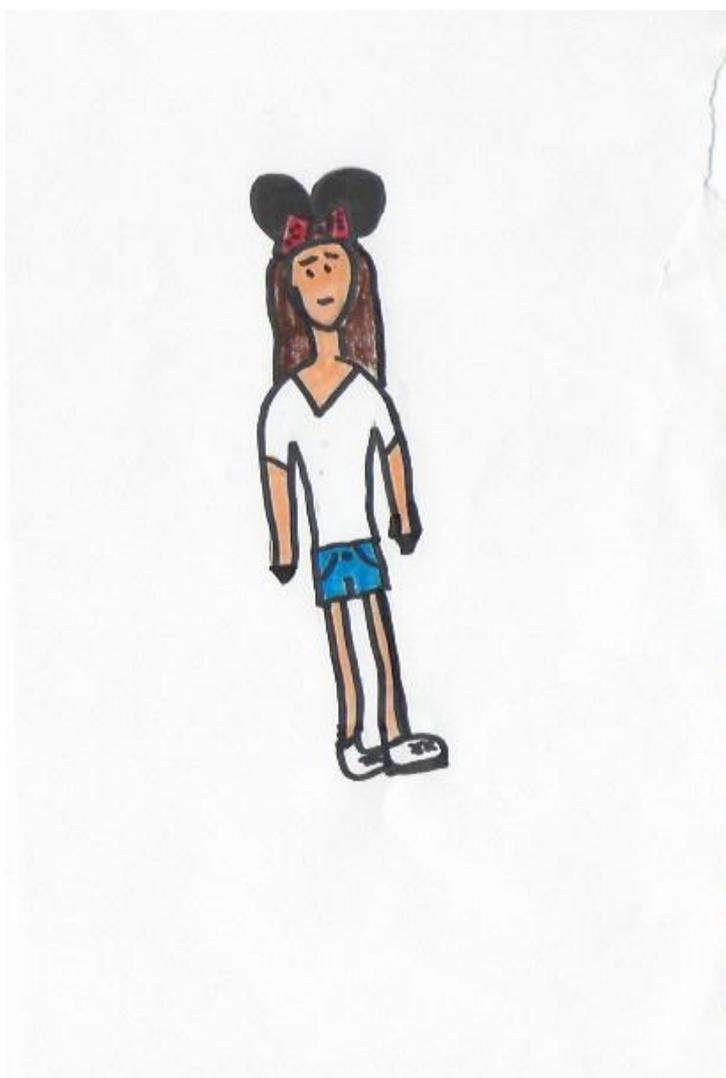
Once arriving at the theme park and being surrounded by Disney characters, I could not help but feel a sense of nostalgia. I felt like a child being consumed with joy and excitement to a point where I was not able to put it into words.

I dressed comfortably. I wore light wash Levis denim shorts, a white cotton tee shirt from H&M with a V-neck cut, and a pair of white converse sneakers. To complete my outfit, I purchased the Mickey Mouse ears headband for \$24.00 upon arriving at the theme park.

The headband consists of the two black circles which are supposed to be Mickey Mouse's' ears, and an obnoxious but adorable embellished with beads, ruby red bow right in between.

It made me feel and act as animated as a child would, but I was okay with that.

This headband not only completed my outfit and made me feel like I was fitting in with the crowd but also symbolizes and represents as a memory from my trip to Walt Disney World. At the time it made me feel complete, I felt that it was a necessity for me to purchase it since I was there, and now it reminds me of the time I got to live out a childhood dream and all the wonderful memories made there.



Valentine's Day

Blenard was my first first date, first love, and my first Valentine. For weeks I was so anxious but excited. Being the hopeless romantic that I am, I wanted it to be perfect and just how I had always envisioned it. For weeks I searched for the perfect outfit in hopes of everything going as I imaged.

He had planned a dinner at an Italian restaurant we both love and enjoy, Il Baccio, located in Bronxville, New York.

I wore a scarlet red bandage dress that was sleeveless and strapless and hugged my body tight in a body-con cut, going down to right above my knees.

This dress made me feel confident and empowered. The bright romantic shade of red made me feel like I was standing out and appealing to my significant other. The bandage fabric accentuated my curves and made me feel beautiful and assertive.

I acted in a confident manner by sitting up straight, standing tall, and not feeling uncomfortable with what I was wearing.

For the first time in a long time I felt great about myself.



My Twenty First Birthday

For my twenty first birthday I celebrated at Vandal, a restaurant and nightclub located on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, New York on the twenty-sixth of January in 2018.

Like any other major and significant occasion in my life, choosing the perfect outfit is a long process with my indecisiveness playing a huge part, except this time, a sense of liberation took over.

I purchased faux black leather pants from BlankNYC that contrary to popular belief were actually very comfortable. They sat right above my waist and had a tight fit. For my top, I wore a sheer long sleeve bodysuit, with gold and silver metallic thread giving the plain black top some detail which I purchased from Revolve. I paired it with black Christian Louboutin's that I had received as a birthday gift that I was also thrilled about.

My outfit was not something I would typically wear on a regular night out. I felt edgy, and that is typically not my sense of style, but for a night like my twenty first birthday, it was just what I was aiming for.

The leather pants made me feel confident and assertive. As my upper body was completely covered, my sheer top showed a hint of skin, just enough to make it appropriate yet trendy.

Both the occasion and my outfit gave me a sense of freedom that night that I had not felt before. I felt grown up and totally in control of myself.



The Bridesmaid

The first time I was a bridesmaid was for my cousins wedding during the summer of 2019. I was pleased to take part in such a beautiful day, filled with love, happiness and excitement. The wedding took place in the Surf Club of New Rochelle. A perfect venue for a perfect evening.

One of the most exciting moments leading up to the wedding was the gown choosing. The gown decided on was a floor length subtle mermaid cut gown in a deep lavender shade, made from a satin material. It had a sweetheart cutout at the chest area, and a ribbon tied around my ribcage. Typical, like many bridesmaid dresses, yet beautiful.

A bridesmaid gown is something one can only have the honor of wearing so many times in life, sort of like a costume. Although this gown is one I will never wear again, it meant a great deal to me. It symbolizes love and a good memory that I share with some of the people closest to me. I also felt important for being apart of the wedding.

Being a bridesmaid and wearing the gown, taking part in all of the little details included in planning a wedding, thrilled me. Giving me a sense of hope and anticipation that one day in the future, maybe I would be the one getting ready to walk down the aisle.



Coco Chanel Mademoiselle

This scent has been what most people consider my signature scent. It followed me through high school and now, nearly through college. It is a scent I have worn for every occasion, and throughout my everyday life. The fragrance makes me feel sophisticated, classy, and assertive. It completes any outfit I wear.

It was first gifted to me by my mother for Christmas years ago. My mother said it would be my first “woman” perfume.

There are many reasons why this perfume means so much to me, more than any others.

The scent brings back amazing memories, from special occasions throughout high school and throughout college. Prom, graduation, weddings, birthdays, anniversaries, vacations and concerts.

The scent to me is incredible. A sophisticated and rich, but subtle scent which follows you through a room as you pass. It is delicate but distinctive. The floral scent is a mix of orange and jasmine and vanilla giving the perfume a light peach shade and a touch of femininity. The intense scent lasts throughout a long day with a light splash of it going a long way.



COVID-19

Being twenty-two years old, I was too young to remember, experience or be affected by any many major historical issues that have taken place in the United States. However, the Corona Virus has changed that.

A deadly virus that has been overlooked by many, including our government for so long, which caused citizens to face depressing consequence, such as putting a pause on life.

Laid off by my job, stripped of a normal learning experience, putting my life on pause and living in fear of contracting the virus itself, thus being forced to stay in doors for weeks. Being a New Yorker, I was used to a fast paced environment, and suddenly the world slowed down.

With no work, no public interactions, outside responsibilities, or activities and a terrible economy my dress and attire suddenly began to reflect my mood, inactive and sluggish.

As days pass I rotate between athleisure wear and pajamas because I think, what is the point? With nowhere to go and no one to see, why get dressed up?

However, this quickly begins to become depressing. My current attire makes me feel lazy, disheartened and distressed.

The thought of absolutely nothing to look forward to, with a deadly pandemic going around, and worrying about loved ones being harmed.

