

Barbie Feet

By Becca Baisch

Scrubs. The word evoked dirt, and for Millennials like me, TLC's 1999 Billboard smash hit against dirtbag men.

So when my colleague, the director of our twenty-four-bed child psychiatry unit, included a new dress code in our 2020 pandemic battle plan, my brain snagged on one word.

Scrubs?

Scrubs would look terrible with my trademark high heels, the ones that traversed the parquet floors day in and day out. *Dr. K—we can always bear her coming!* was the unit's jovial slogan. Only during call weekends, when I managed the entire unit solo, would I trade them for my leopard print Danskos. But even then, I paired them with my favorite designer 7even jeans.

In medical school, when classmates asked me, "Why choose psychiatry?" I'd quip, "Because it's the well-dressed specialty." In medicine, the traditional dress code is white coats—a status symbol for doctors—an emotional barrier for psychiatric patients. White represents purity, sterility, authority—something no human feels in their worst moments.

I was gifted with a personalized knee-length white coat when I began my psychiatry residency. The length signified an MD. It was understood that first-year residents wore the coats during medical and neurology ward months. Second-year residents shed them, the year devoted to psychotherapy training. I packed mine away, and it was only unearthed a few years ago by my children for dress-up games. During that second year, I confessed to a fourth-year psychiatry resident my fear of sitting across from a patient for forty-five minutes analyzing their deepest pain, as if I had the faintest clue how to fix it. She told me, "Don't underestimate that you already possess your greatest tool for healing—you."

Nodding as if this were sage advice, inwardly, I resented such ambiguity.

Over the years, patients asked me, *Why do you wear high-heels in the hospital?*

"I have no choice," I'd deadpan, "I was born with Barbie feet." And together we'd laugh.

Scrubs. I was a willing, albeit begrudging team player, understanding this wasn't about mitigating infection transmission but uncertainty. I still had my leopard-print clogs, and I certainly didn't begrudge the extra half hour of sleep in the mornings. It took minutes to produce a ponytail and toss on my NorthFace fleece, which masked the days I'd forget deodorant.

Months passed, and the world faded into a new normal amongst the pandemic's wreckage. Our unit stopped lamenting the loss of my heels, the loss of the brightness we once collectively injected into our patients. There was a gutting familiarity in this new normal, one that sent me spiraling back to another time and place of loss. Diagnosed with clinical depression my senior year in high school, if I made it to school it was often in my pajamas. I'd throw a parka over them and pray the thick jacket concealed my body odor.

One evening, I surveyed my collection of pandemic-forsaken heels. The black suede Adrienne Vittadini booties. The Steve Madden heels in multiple colors and patterns, including my arch nemesis—the navy Mary Janes that annihilated my feet by the end of the day but were just *so cute*.

I rose early the next morning, curled my hair, and pondered which earrings would match my non-scrub outfit. Maybe I was vain, frivolous, or the victim of an oppressive patriarchal society objectifying women. Or maybe this was where I found myself, meticulously preparing for the day, reflecting on my patients, and empathizing that they were probably, like me, allergic to mornings.

I arrived at the treatment team meeting to review my caseload, earning curious smiles. "No more scrubs?"

With a rebellious shrug, I said, "I didn't go into psychiatry to wear pajamas every day."

Later, I went to meet my new patient, a fourteen-year-old girl admitted after a suicide attempt. I gently knocked on her hospital room door, stepping inside. She sat on her bed unseeing, dressed in hospital-issued scrubs, her bird arms hugging herself. Bending low at her bedside, I introduced myself, displaying my hospital badge.

"Want to come to my office?" I coaxed.

She spared me a disinterested glance.

"I have a super comfy chair. And a giraffe."

She perked a dubious brow at the *giraffe*. Years ago, I'd snuck into my office a health-code-violating, seven-foot-tall giraffe statue, an orphan from my mother's abandoned Safari home décor phase. She complied, shuffling in her grippy-socks, alongside my click-clacking heels down the hallway.

"I like your shoes," she said timidly.

I stopped and hiked the hem of my dress pant, proudly flexing a floral patterned Steve Madden. "Thanks," I said. "Believe it or not, I can only wear high heels." I paused dramatically. "Wanna know why?"

I captured a tiny spark in her eyes as she nodded, awaiting my answer.

Becca Baisch (a pen name) is a pediatric psychiatrist who quiets her busy days and mind by writing books, short stories, and essays. Her creative nonfiction has appeared in *Minnesota Women's Press*, *Months to Years*, *Pulse: Voices from the Heart of Medicine* and will be featured in *Evening Street Review* (2024). Connect with her at beccabaisch.com and Twitter [@beccabaisch](https://twitter.com/beccabaisch).

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