

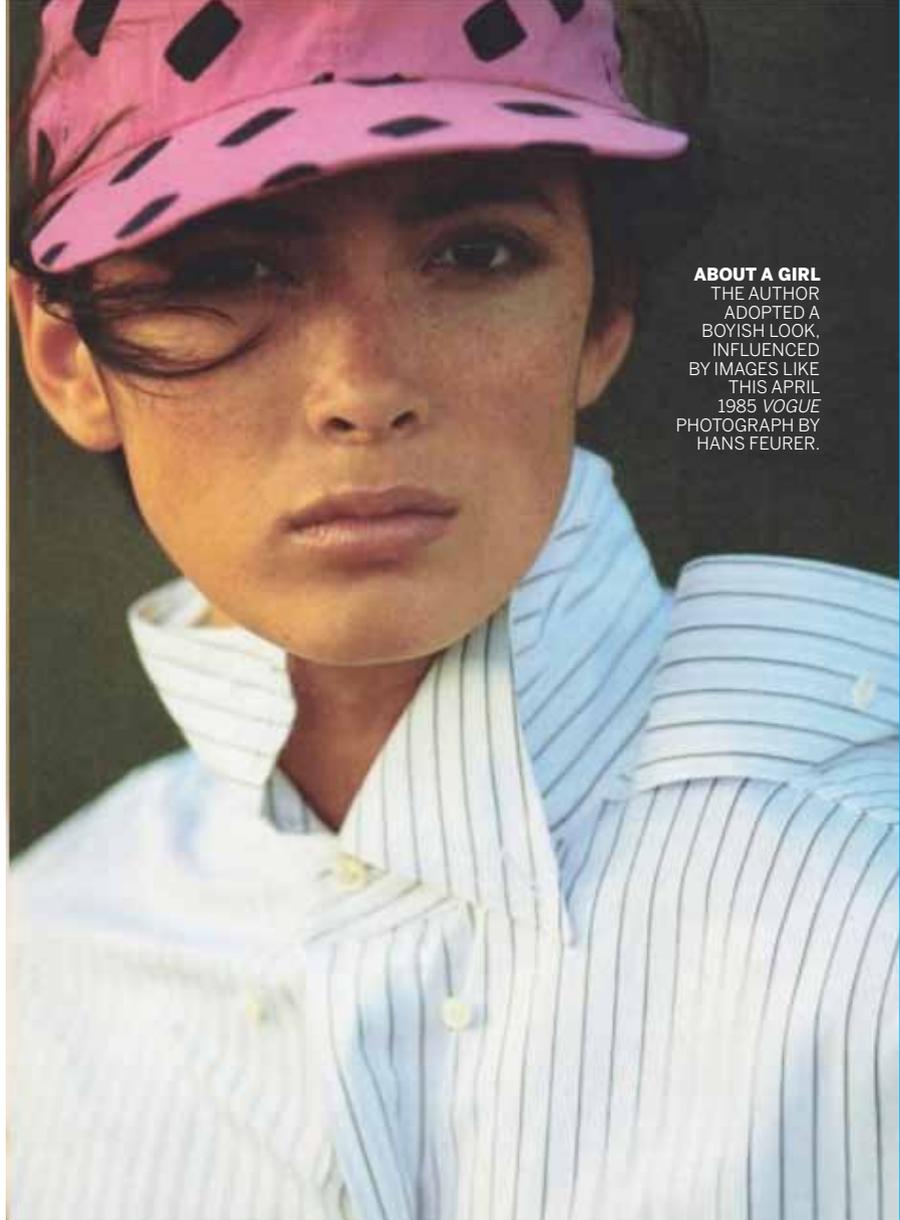
I can't think of my dad without thinking of his closet. There's his actual closet, where he stored the plaid flannels and leather motorcycle jacket that formed his daily uniform, an über-masculine style so ubiquitous in San Francisco's Castro neighborhood that those who adopted it were called Clones. Then there's his metaphorical closet. After my mother died in a car accident when I was three, Dad came out in full force, moving us from Atlanta to San Francisco, the Mecca for gay men in the seventies.

I hated that leather jacket. Growing up motherless with an openly gay father, I already felt conspicuous enough at the bilingual private school I attended. My father, a struggling poet, had enrolled me with the financial help of my grieving maternal grandparents. He hoped I'd one day be able to read his favorite French writers—Flaubert, Baudelaire, Rimbaud—in their native tongue. But first I had to fit into this new world, which seemed a considerably harder feat.

Students at French American were mostly the children of diplomats and bankers. Watching them, with their neatly parted pigtails, getting picked up in their parents' shiny sedans every afternoon, I prayed that my own father would arrive late, certain that the sight of him, with his handlebar mustache and black motorcycle jacket, would bring me the wrong kind of attention. When he finally did pull up in our dingy Volkswagen Bug, I'd rush over as quickly as I could. In his laid-back way, he would reach across the passenger seat and open the door while the engine was still running, a cigarette resting on his lower lip. Once inside, I couldn't help resenting the cracked leather upholstery that exposed crumbling yellow foam, the overflowing ashtray that wouldn't shut no matter how often I tried to close it.

What embarrassed me most inspired my father. In the fall of 1977, vandals broke into our car late one night, smashing the back window and stealing our radio. "It doesn't even work!" Dad exclaimed, as though we were the victors instead of the victims. Dad duct-taped the back window with a plastic bag, but weeks of storms ripped the bag to shreds, allowing rain to drench the backseat. Then one morning, while we were driving to school, I spotted a small gray mushroom sprouting out of the damp newspapers and muck. I was mortified, but Dad found my reaction worthy of a poem, which began, "*It's a strange day,*" *Alysia says. "A green bug in my room & now this mushroom growing in the car."*

In Dad's artistic circle, squalor was not only acceptable but honorable. While I was struggling to navigate the complicated social waters of private school, Dad was even more desperate to shake off the order-loving conformity of his middle-class Nebraska upbringing, where no child spoke unless spoken



ABOUT A GIRL
THE AUTHOR
ADOPTED A
BOYISH LOOK,
INFLUENCED
BY IMAGES LIKE
THIS APRIL
1985 *VOGUE*
PHOTOGRAPH BY
HANS FEURER.

IN-BETWEEN DAYS

As the daughter of a gay poet in 1970s San Francisco, **Alysia Abbott** found all kinds of inspiration in her father's closet.

to, no glass was served without a coaster, and spankings kept unruly boys in line. In the space he was trying to create, mushrooms were magical, fantastic, the stuff of lyric. But not for me. It would be years before I saw our life together under the desirable glow of bohemianism. As far as I was concerned, our ratty apartment and car, and my shabby, ill-fitting clothing, were a liability, another way I stood apart. *nostalgia >000*

My sense of otherness became more pronounced as I entered adolescence. Without a mother, I felt at sea in the world of femininity that my girlfriends were beginning to explore. I spent the summer of my twelfth year at my grandparents' ranch house in the humid Midwest, where every night before bed I'd turn toward the full-length bathroom mirror and pull my nightgown tight against my late-blooming body. Will I grow here or here? I tried all the lipsticks in my grandmother's bathroom drawer. They were round or square, shiny and smooth to the touch. Others looked like silver bullets. Each one I opened, examined, and rejected. Nothing felt right.

Then in the mid-eighties a remarkable thing happened: Androgyny became fashionable. I fell hard for the British bands—Duran Duran, the Cure, the Smiths—who blurred the gender line with their floppy bangs, snaky hips, and expertly applied eyeliner. In the pages of *Vogue*, models adopted a defiantly boyish look, wearing trilbys and oversize men's shirts with panache. Empowered by these images, I sheared my hair at the local Haight Street salon, leaving a peek-aboo bang covering one eye. Though I was still secretive about my father's sexuality, and even fabricated girlfriends for him to satisfy curious cousins, I started to dip into his closet for inspiration. I borrowed his button-down shirts, his skinny New Wave ties, and his forties gray fedora, which I wore everywhere, taking it off only to shower or to sleep.

The truth is, when I was at home, I enjoyed my father's company—and the extraordinary freedom that his choices had given me. I got a kick out of being the only child among adults, the only girl among men. He took me with him when he was invited to read at an international poetry festival in

I borrowed his button-down shirts, his skinny New Wave ties, and his forties gray fedora, which I took off only to shower or to sleep

Amsterdam. I found myself at thirteen having tea with William Burroughs. Through my father, I also befriended neighborhood writers and artists and boutique owners. There was our neighbor Robert, who'd performed as the fool in a 1969 Roundabout production of *King Lear* and now took pictures of *Pride* parades for the local gay papers. I had a terrible crush on a writer named Sam, an eighties Adonis who'd tried to convince me he was the son of one of Andy Warhol's male muses. Through him I met Jono, an abstract painter and photographer for whom I posed like the models in the fashion spreads I'd studied so carefully. Under the generous and artful gaze of

these men, I was no longer too skinny or too odd, as I'd been pegged at school; I could be attractive, original, even poetic.

As I felt more comfortable expressing my style through men's clothing, I also felt free to play with what it meant to look like a girl. One afternoon in 1984, I found a strapless prom dress at Aardvark's Odd Ark, at the corner of Haight and Ashbury. The fifties frock fit my waist perfectly and even had a reinforced bust, creating the illusion of a womanly figure. After posing for Robert across the hall, I ran into my father's room, where he was watching television. I canceled in front of the news, which made him erupt in his up-and-down laugh. In his journal he reported with wonder on my transformation: "... the surprise of seeing the milky smooth beauty of Alysia's back, and shoulders. ..."

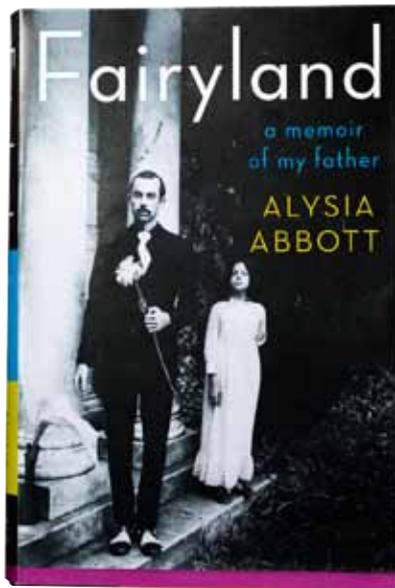
I began to feel more confident at school. Where before I'd preferred to lose myself in the lines of my art-class drawings, or hide behind my camera at school dances, I now paraded the halls wearing an anti-Reagan T-shirt Dad got for his fortieth birthday and his bright-blue nylon Fiorucci blazer. I tried out for one of the school plays, a Tennessee Williams one-act, and got the lead. The role earned me a respect that I'd never known before, a sense that I was carving a version of myself that was entirely my own. In my

yearbook, a senior boy I liked wrote that, like the heroine in Williams's *Glass Menagerie*, I should be careful because "beautiful glass unicorns have a tendency to lose their horns."

I didn't know then that we were all pretty fragile. By 1985, close to half of the gay men living in San Francisco would be infected with HIV, my father among them. As we lost friend after friend, including Robert and Sam, Haight Street was drained of its vivid colors, our favorite salons and shops changing hands, replaced by anonymous chain stores. By the time my father died, in 1992, AIDS had irrevocably altered the landscape of my childhood.

In this difficult time, I again turned to my father's closet as a place both familiar and comforting. I was 21 years old by then, officially an adult, but I felt unmoored, like there was very little keeping me together. The one-bedroom apartment we'd shared now seemed impossibly large. The only thing that grounded me was my father's wardrobe, especially that leather motorcycle jacket. I wore it everywhere, even to his funeral, which took place ten days before what would have been his forty-ninth birthday. The jacket was heavy on my frame, which had shrunk from the stress of those final months of his illness. But the leather on my shoulders, so thick and stiff that it squeaked each time I moved, made me feel safe and close to my father, as though I were wearing his skin. □

Adapted from Fairyland: A Memoir of My Father, by Alysia Abbott. Copyright © 2013 by Alysia Abbott. Published by W.W. Norton & Company.



DADDY AND ME
FAIRYLAND, ABBOTT'S LYRICAL NEW MEMOIR, IS BEING PUBLISHED THIS MONTH BY W.W. NORTON.