

Compartments

Jessica Jonas

Part 1:

To be a dancer is to be athlete and artist all in one. To fuse body and soul into pure elegance, grace, expression. Dancers are the ultimate in style; they float above everyday life, knowing they alone are not only human, but walking Art. The body is her perfect instrument. She is a sylph, a swan, a strangely desexualized object of desire. The mind is important only as a place to store combinations.

Who you would be: Hair pulled tight in a bun. Eyes feature eyeliner wings like Cleopatra's; lips are painted stage-red. Buy pink canvas dance bags, baggy sweatpants with "ARABESQUE" written in curly letters down the side and shirts cut low to show off sleek collarbones.

Remember: each scoop of spaghetti has 200 calories, peanut butter is 100 calories a spoonful and chocolate is 75 per bite, so act accordingly. Dance is the beautiful illusion, and you have an image to maintain.

Part 2:

To be academic is to recognize that only the jealous say 'nerd.' It is the quintessential paradox: to be forced to the bottom of one order for being on top in another. Intellect traps academics between ages: too smart for their peers, but unable to befriend their professors. The solution is to maintain a carefully cultivated attitude of obliviousness, established partly as protection from those who are jealous or scornful, partly as an excuse to ignore everything else in pursuit of the next sweet rush of discovery.

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Where to discover her: Read Wodehouse, Woolf, Dickens, Dickinson, Eliot, Shaw. Keep posters of Einstein and the periodic table over your bed, and play dumb if anyone mentions the latest blond starlet. Watch the Discovery channel and get good at Scrabble. Don't forget to show your work. Chat with the teacher after class so you won't have to have another awkward conversation with your classmates.

Part 3:

Being popular, preppy popular, is not the same as having a lot of friends. Preppy girls find their steadiness in the superficial details of the world. It is an almost Zen-like realization. Fashions may change every year, new issues of *GL* appear once a month and Tyra will send another model home each week, but there will always be another waiting to step into place. Accepting that everything changes is as free and fun as falling, as long as you can still trust that something will catch you.

How to be her: Shop Abercrombie, American Eagle, and Hollister. Make sure your tastes match the world around you. Be prepared to switch from "Lost" to "Grey's" to the latest in "American Idol" without missing a beat. Don't let yourself be seen being too serious; CosmoGirls are cheerful. Remember that even when the new trends begin to feel like the old ones, as long as you value your place you cannot afford to stop caring, or you will be discarded next.

Part 4:

It is less a style than a series of clues. She might wear a golden One Ring on a chain around her neck, stick a Hogwarts seal onto the corner of a notebook, or toy with a small pewter knight figurine. Magic is metaphor for creativity, adventure, passion, spark, wit, or whatever else is so

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lacking in this bland world. Fantasy is an escape. It is important that only the real seekers, the true believers, find it.

When in fantasy circles: Never admit that you liked the Lord of the Rings movies better than the books. Decide whether you love Harry, Ron or Draco the most, and be loyal to whomever you choose. Know the difference between wild magic, elemental magic, spell magic, and inborn magical Gift. Draw wyverns and griffins in your notebooks and, if you can, buy yourself a cloak. Be warned: this is like entering a Faerie ring; you may get out eventually, but you'll never feel quite at home in the world you find again.

Part 5:

There is something strangely appealing in the defeated stance of the emo kids. There is superiority in their melancholy. They join together to flaunt their pain, proud of it even as they beg to be free of it. They give sadness a concrete style, and this consensus makes it feel more secure and authentic. The streaks of eyeliner down their faces are sadder—more real—than your cheeks scrubbed red with cold water to hide any traces of tears.

Why you want to be them: You like the horn-rimmed glasses, the tight, dark denim pants and the perfectly haunted eyes. They send poems to each other without any regard for form or meter or the revision process and listen to bands that scream instead of sing, and there is freedom in committing so fully to a feeling. The danger is that if you get caught up in the style, you risk forgetting that what connects everyone here is that they feel lost.

Part 6:

To be a good girl is to get up early on Sundays to sing in the choir. It means youth group and

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soup kitchen hours and never saying anything more obscene than “crap.” Good girls own promise rings and can find 1 Thessalonians in less than twenty seconds (without looking in the table of contents first). Sometimes they wonder if they’re missing out on something, but they have learned to be patient. They know their time will come.

What to do: Cross your ankles. Don’t skip church. Don’t sneak into R-rated movies. Stay on good terms with your parents. Spend at least one Saturday a month picking trash off the road at 6 A.M. or stacking cans in the food pantry or wrapping presents for needy children. Trust that all of this is worth it.

Then, right when you thought you had everything sorted neatly, there was Becca. Becca is eleven years old, dressed half in American Eagle, half in Gap Kids. When Becca dances she doesn’t watch the mirrors. Her legs are wobbly and colt-like beneath her and her face lights up when she ties pointe shoe ribbons around her ankles. When she leaves the studio, she slouches and eats macaroni and cheese straight out of the pot with the serving spoon. You never see her without a crowd of people around her, all talking excitedly. She touches her friends’ arms and shoulders in natural, easy connection. Becca grins with her mouthful of braces, watches “Mythbusters” one day and “America’s Next Top Model” the next. On the last family vacation, she brought five books for one weekend. She is unabashedly obsessed with Harry Potter and reads her Bible before she goes to sleep. Becca doesn’t listen to the emo bands and when she cries there’s no mascara to streak black down her face, but no one would doubt her sincerity. When you ask her how she can balance it all without flying apart, she doesn’t understand what you mean.

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So where do you fit in? How do you understand where she is after you've come so far? Read your old diaries. Notice the moment when you first believed that differences had to be held separate, and that you had to choose between them. Stand in front of your bathroom mirror and try to imitate the effortless way your baby sister carries herself, and wonder why you can't do it anymore.

She will change—she can't help but change, and there is no way to prevent her from growing older. There's no way to warn her or show her how precious this time is. It's not that growing up is a bad thing, but it would be nice to know that she recognizes how lucky she is right now. So keep watching over her. Maybe she will be different. Maybe she will keep herself together in spite of everything.