

Most Likely To Secede



Think for instance of the unnecessary torments that people will inflict by sending a child back to school with clothes of the wrong pattern, and refusing to see that this matters!

Such, Such Were the Joys, George Orwell

The next half hour was the same old thing/My mother buying me clothes from 1963/And then she lost her mind and did the ultimate/I asked her for Adidas and she bought me Zips!

Parents Just Don't Understand, DJ Jazzy Jeff and The Fresh Prince

Nubile cherubs swathed in cotton-candy colors dancing in the pep-rally dreams of pedophilic casting directors are the harbingers of back-to-school shopping.

I dreaded the commercials which seemed to feature a demographically disproportionate amount of redheaded children. I dreaded thick catalogues from J.C. Penny and Sears filled with fall fashions riding the backs of carefree adolescents. The kids were culled from the collective imagination of marketers so removed from the bloom of youth they believed in chipper cheerleaders and teacher's pets. I dreaded school supplies lining the aisles of the drugstore: semi-edible paste, eye-poking protractors, and wild animal folders imprinted with heavy metalesque font screaming "Awesome!"

When I say "dreaded," I don't mean it was boring or annoying, I mean "dreaded" in the non-hyperbolic sense that racks of cheerful knits in pastel hues made me sick with nervous anticipation of an impending doom. I experienced a fight-or-flight adrenaline dump seeing rows of rulers and Trapper-Keepers that couldn't be used as swords and armor against the dark Chthonian unknown of junior high.

Each year as the summer nights shortened, I was seized by an acute fixative anxiety that to term it neurotic would diminish its overpowering hold on me. **BACK TO SCHOOL!**

Sitting on the porch, feet dangling in a blow-up baby pool, listening to crickets subdue the staticy music coming from my pre-boom box, pre-Walkman, pre-Ipod transistor radio, I could feel the first day of classes looming.

In fitful realistic dreams, there were lost locker combinations, lunches quietly eaten in lavatory stalls, and the ominous steam of the gym shower-room. There was also a skinless fanged beast sucking my blood as I gave a pantless book report because the subconscious has its own interpretation of teachers.

And then, a week before I heard the rumbling of the big yellow bus coming for' to carry me to hell, there was magical thinking.

Maybe I could find something nice and normal to wear that would help me disappear; something that matched the walls of the hallway or blended with the color of desks. I was looking for the fashion equivalent of Chameleon skin.

I picked through K-Mart bins searching for that neutral shirt so plain and unadorned that it would not reveal its humble origins. I rummaged through my Dad's sweaters looking for something oversized and familiar to hide in. I carefully studied regular-looking kids whose perfectly worn jeans seemed more advanced than my denim fabric elastic waist pull-ups sporting a satin roller-skating cat giving the "thumbs up" sign while wearing sunglasses on the back pocket.

Finally, I found the shirt that would alter my persona (that of a quiet, stuffed-animal-loving, pale, flat-chested Bucky Beaver who liked to read) into an elusive grown-up girl of summer.

It was a simple white T-shirt with a brilliant orange, pink, and lilac sunset fading into the rolling waves of a California ocean. The malls were crowded with kids wearing variations on this theme. Crystal blue seas, sandy beaches, and sailboats echoed a dreamy July day miles and miles from our remote Manhattan, Kansas outpost.

These shirts were worn by blond, tanned surfer girls with white wind-chapped lips who weren't even conceited. They were worn by feathered-hair boys who were good at photography. They hung loose and cool on kids who didn't get red welts on their forearms after volleyball. God had blessed them with the radiant dusky skin sturdy against life's little bumps and spikes.

Waiting for the bus in my new sun-n-fun shirt reading a sleazy V.C. Andrews book, I was almost excited for the first day of school (a feeling of hopeful anticipation that lasted between nine and seventeen minutes). Then I heard them. I imagine this is what peaceful peasants experienced as marauding Huns sacked their villages. The Ogden bus was coming!

Knife-wielding mustachioed kids from the Ogden trailer courts were three grades behind and eager to even the evolutionary scale by flexing their collective might. They mostly leveled threats with a light offering of shoves and knuckle jabs to the upper arms.

Their repertoire also consisted of Indian burns (I won't alter this to Native American burns as I am sure tribal communities don't want credit for this barbaric practice), wedgies, snapping neck-flicks, Wet Willies, and Dutch Rubs (the Midwestern equivalent of the Noogie).

The Ogden Bus Brigade's most powerful weapon was the ability to seize upon one's most noticeable flaw and routinely lampoon this defect until it left an indelible self-esteem stain. My nick-name was "The Hoe." While I wish it was a wink towards my sexual prowess, with my 85 pound frame and protruding front teeth, it was a cruel comparison to a gardening implement.

But there were palm trees swaying on my shirt.

"Check out The Hoe's fake OP!" yelled Gerald, a twice-divorced, hairy-shouldered, thirty-five year old still in the ninth grade.

There was a collective school bus sigh. *Someone* was wearing a generic seascape T-shirt impersonating a name-brand Ocean Pacific garment. *Someone* was masquerading as a happy-go-lucky Cali-girl when she was a sad-go-ill-fated Middle-American mouse. Indian burns and Dutch rubs ensued.

Twenty-five years later, I haven't attained much stylistic wisdom. If I were to sit on a stoop waxing philosophical about the perils of public school, I could only offer these pathetic realizations: When everything works out, you will be happy but maybe a little dull. You could be among the lucky ones who figure out brand names, corduroys without camel-toes, and French braids that don't look like they were plaited by a mental patient, but I'm not sure the world will unfold its miserable mysteries to you. Buck teeth and bad clothes help you decode Rosetta Stone scrawls on the bathroom walls.

TRIED: I sent a friend undercover to Urban Elements, an Oshkosh "green" studio practicing eco-friendly hairdressing. Not only did he return with a fabulous cut (imagine a Luftwaffe Zach Efron) but it only cost \$10.00 (one dollar benefiting local schools). Urban Elements offers economical environmentally-sound services with a humanitarian edge.

TRUE: To find the right shade of blush, drink two glasses of wine and pinch your cheeks. Whatever color appears is your signature shade.

TIRED: Tramp-stamp tattoos signaling sexual availability have hit the ten year mark. Now they signal that suburban moms have a few secrets.

TRENDY: Reading thick books decreases body fat.