

the  
*thoughtful*  
dresser

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virago

I

## In Which a Woman Buys a Pair of Shoes

One day last summer, at the moment of waking, I knew that I had to go out at once and buy new shoes. Shoes which fulfilled another function, apart from walking. I wanted high-heeled shoes. Ridiculous, sexy, I don't care how much they cost, I have to have them shoes.

It is my habit always to trust the thoughts that flood the mind as I rise up out of sleep. The closer you are to the dream state, the more likely you are to receive the correct messages. The unconscious knows what it's doing and what it's talking about. If it tells you to go out and buy high-heeled shoes you can't walk in, there has to be a reason. I never pay any attention to those deceptive lightning flashes of brilliance from the lurid world of tossing-and-turning

insomnia. They are worry thoughts, unlikely to enrich your existence.

As it happened, I had a hairdresser's appointment that morning. When it was over, I walked quickly down the street, full of the excitement and apprehension of the shopper who knows she is going to make a significant purchase. I was anxious because shoe-shopping is no great pleasure for me, not compared with dresses and bags. I have inherited from my Eastern European immigrant ancestors wide feet, thick ankles and heavy calves, legs developed in the womb to later hold up child-bearing hips and bread-kneading arms. They are not my best feature and no amount of exercise will ever fix the problem. A woman is born with good legs; if you don't have them, you can't get them however long you spend doing Pilates. There is no cure for dimpled knees. Growing up, finally, is about understanding that we are limited by our fate. There are unfulfillable dreams.

So shoe-buying is always for me work, an operation. You go into the shop and you see a pair of shoes you like, and you ask for them in your size and of course they do not have them, or if they do, they don't quite fit, or the heels are so high you can't stand up without wobbling.

After working my way down all the shoe shops of the street with no luck at last I came to a department store, which like all large shops feels to me when I enter as if I am pulling a building-sized fur coat around my shoulders, embracing and encompassing. A willowy Lithuanian sales girl approached me and, appraising my terrible legs, silently

handed me a shoe. She gazed in sorrow at my horrible ankles. Some time later, I descended the escalator carrying the shoe and its other half: high-heeled, black patent, peep-toe shoes by Dolce & Gabbana, with an oversized faux buckle. They lay swaddled in individual black cotton bags wrapped in black tissue paper, nestled in a lacquered black box, and I had paid £300 for them, which is not a sum of money I can afford, and certainly had not saved.

For a whole day they sat like a pair of queens, on a chair in my living room – burnished reflective leather monarchs. I couldn't take my eyes off them; did I even deserve to wear them? They were the most expensive shoes I had ever bought, but I was prepared to measure them by a different scale of value: the amount of pleasure which I anticipated they would bring me, knowing that they were the *right* shoes.

Several days followed in which I waited for their first outing when they would reveal their many secrets: such as whether they actually fitted (or I had deluded myself in the shop, as I had done with a pair of Marni shoes the previous year, which cruelly cut into the instep after five minutes) and how long I could stand in them, given the height of those four-inch heels?

I would learn that the absolute maximum amount of time I can stand in my D&G shoes is about two hours, after which I have to sit down. I can only walk two or three blocks in them, but that is hardly the point, is it? I did not buy them to go walking, I have other shoes that fulfil that particular function. The D&G shoes possess a spectacular

pointlessness. Aesthetically, they rise, *soar* above their mundane purpose of protecting the soles of the feet from dirt and stones. They give me the self-confidence to look tall people in the eye. The black patent gleams and winks. The high heel makes a sexy arc. My back is straighter, my clothes hang better. But above all I'm making a statement, and that statement says: look at me.

Because at my age, born in the 1950s, there is nothing that people would like better than to pretend you are invisible.

And perhaps this is what my subconscious was trying to tell me, when I woke that morning and knew that I *had to have* a pair of high-heeled, difficult, indeed impossible shoes. That the message was: *be seen*. Be a presence in the world. For there is nothing worse than being a beige person, leading a beige sort of life. I mean, nothing worse for me. Others do not mind blending into the background, they crave anonymity. It suits them down to the ground. I have another point of view.

My subconscious did not warn me that it was reckless to spend £300 on a pair of shoes in the coming recession. It did not advise me to pay off my debts. It did not lecture me about making do and mending. Although I don't follow the financial pages of the newspapers, and mentally switch off when I hear the words Dow Jones or FTSE, my unconscious pays close attention. It must be listening to the news on the sly because it knew that if there were dark times to come, at least I would have one pair of beautiful shoes to cheer myself up. For if you are poor, it's always best to give the appearance

of the opposite, to inspire confidence – in oneself, and others.

If we were heading into the Great Depression, I wanted to arrive there well dressed.

For a long time I have been trying to get to the bottom of this relationship we have with our clothes and why we love or hate them and what they mean to us and how we are linked to them in all their intimacy with our own bodies. I have been thinking these thoughts not as a fashion historian or as someone capable of making pronouncements about style, or who can explain how Alexander McQueen cuts a jacket, or how to put together a look. I once went to the Paris collections and gazed in incomprehension at the Dior show, the models lifting their feet like hoofs, galloping along the runway at top speed like racehorses, and had to wait until the next day to buy the *International Herald Tribune* and have it all explained to me by the fashion journalist Suzy Menkes. The *pleasure* of the Dior show – my own name in beautiful copperplate inscribed on a card actually glued to my numbered seat, the massed photographers with their lenses glittering under the lights, the intense beauty of the clothes – all suffused me with profound wonder, like a man who has been looking at the stars in his back garden through a pair of binoculars, and is suddenly allowed to gaze at the universe through the Hubble telescope. But I didn't actually understand anything. I am not a fashion writer, just an amateur enthusiast.

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I think about clothes and fashion in two ways. With the attention of the average person who simply wants to know what next to wear (no! not high-waisted pegged trousers!) but also with the interest of a writer who is curious about all our human dimensions, our comedy and our tragedy, our modest weaknesses and our occasional unexpected heroisms.

I consider it to be absolutely normal to care deeply about what we wear, and detest the puritan moralists who affect to despise fashion and those who love it. Who shrilly proclaim that only vain, foolish Barbie dolls, their brains addled by consumerism, would wear anything but sensible clothes made to last. As if appearances don't matter when, most of the time, they are all we have to go on. Or sometimes all that is left in the ruins of a life.

So I no longer take seriously those derisory accusations levelled against those who are interested in clothes. You might as well accuse Proust, Virginia Woolf, George Eliot – all of whom wrote about clothes and thought about clothes. I certainly won't take it from those men who judge and condemn us women for the various failures of our appearance while simultaneously barking that only feeble shallow creatures such as women would pay any attention to how they look.

That is the great misogynist trick.

There are no known societies who do not adorn the human body, whether with clothing or tattoos. It's a given, about the human race. You can even read the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, as an exercise in decoding the styles

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prevalent amongst Bronze Age men and women, the use of gold ornamentation and the frequent futile demands by the prophets to women to spend less time thinking about what they wore. The great experiments in Puritan dress, in seventeenth-century England, and its export to the new American colony, or China's utilitarian Mao suit, collapsed within years of their introduction. Doomed to failure. People like variety in their clothes. They want the latest fashions. This is to do with the twin desires for pleasure and for change.

Clothes have been a constant in our lives since we lost our fur. We are born naked and stay naked for only a few moments until we are wrapped in our first clothes. In our small shoes, our little trousers and tops and shorts, until we grow out of them in leaps and bounds, and begin to develop our own ideas about what to wear – we have always got something or other on. Though we may be in rags, no one is ever totally naked. Mother Teresa said she could manage with a bucket and two saris. But not without any saris.

Writing and thinking about clothes is generally relegated to the fashion pages of newspapers and magazines or to the scholarly works of the costume historians. You only have to say the words 'fashion pages' and you can see the mouth form a contemptuous expression. Fashion is lightweight, trivial, and obsession with appearance the sign of a second-rate mind.

So you might think that clothes were optional – marginal and irrelevant to the lives of most of us, something we can easily live without, as I can pass through my entire existence

untroubled by the desire to go rock-climbing, pot-holing, watching films starring the late Bruce Lee, making my own jam or playing whiz-bang kill-the-baddies games on a console. Or reading a book by Terry Pratchett.

But looking out of the window, I don't see anyone who is undressed. Not a soul; never have. There are only a few moments in the day when we are naked. We are naked in the shower, and (but not even necessarily) when we have sex. The rest of the time we are always wearing something or other. I could spend all morning looking out of this very window, onto a main road and bus route, and examine what people have on, and speculate on why they have chosen those specific garments. Because they are on their way to work? Because they are delivering my post? Because they are walking their children to school? Because they have a job interview or a hot date? Because they have absolutely no dress sense whatsoever?

Clothes matter: we care about what we wear, and not caring is usually a sign of depression, madness or the resignation to our imminent death.

I don't believe people who tell me that they are not interested in clothes or what they wear. I think they mean that they are not interested in fashion, and believe that following the trends is a waste of time. They look for comfort and a reasonable fit in the clothes they buy, and that will do. But such an attitude lies on the surface. There is something shallow about asserting you don't care what you look like. Because in your heart of hearts you know it isn't true. People

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want to look the best they can. They may not know how to find the clothes that fulfil this, they may regard the effort of doing so as too daunting, they might be frightened of the necessary expense, they might argue that they have no occasion to wear such garments, or that they don't go with their personalities. But it is simply untrue to say that if you take the average woman of average height and weight and income and wave a magic wand, fairy-godmother-style, and put her in a dress that makes her look beautiful, or a pair of jeans that fits perfectly, she will react with indifference. Only if she's clinically depressed. This average woman looks in the mirror and sees herself transformed. Sometimes it's hard to live up to this person: the divide between the inside of your head, with its private spaces, and how you are seen by others can be intimidating. But not because you don't care. You care. We care about what we wear.

In the worst circumstances of your life, if you are left with nothing, the last nothing you own are your clothes. 'I have nothing,' said a survivor of the Chinese earthquake in the ruins of what was once a place, a town, a whole society. 'I don't even have a rice bowl, just the clothes on my back.' And the perennial boast of the successful immigrant is how they arrived in a country with nothing but the clothes on their back.

Society will allow you to starve to death and not lift a finger, you can die for want of medical attention, but you will not be allowed to go about naked. Public nudity is only

one up from the incest taboo. You will even be dressed for the grave.

Clothes exist to keep us warm, to shield us from the wind, rain and low-hanging branches. They protect us from various forms of social and religious shame: shame that we are exposing our sexual places, and embarrassment that we are revealing the existence of low-lying stomachs, man-boobs, flabby buttocks and bingo wings, those waving appendages to the upper arms that attach themselves to middle-aged women.

Clothes are also adornment, they are pleasure, they signal our place in the world and send out highly important messages about ourselves. On the street, they are part of the aesthetic landscape. Trees, flowers, architecture, clothes. Waiting for the traffic lights to change is not an opportune time to uncover a person's inner beauty, hidden beneath a dishevelled, stained and ill-fitting tracksuit.

The purpose of this book is to advance no thesis, to break no ground in the history or theory of fashion, but rather to explore what is already known, but rarely thought about by the ordinary mass of humanity which is interested in fashion and might, quite wrongly, feel a little ashamed of this passion. Might fear that they are not going to be taken seriously. That in announcing this preoccupation they will have confessed that women are not really, fully, grown up. Unlike our male counterparts who have mature and adult preoccupations, without which the human race could not survive, such as moving balls from

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one end of a grassy field to the other, with the aid of the human foot.

There has never been a time in my life when I have not been interested in clothes. Even if I dressed badly or couldn't afford to buy what I wanted, I would still examine other people and think, I wish I could wear that, but you should not look to me for a lesson in style and taste. I don't have the eye, that immaculate eye that knows how to put together an outfit, which understands that this colour goes with that, or here's a combination which makes a fabulous clash. I am more interested in how clothes and fashion make us feel.

Yesterday I went to see a man about a dress. The man was a designer, and the dress was to be worn at one of the most important occasions of my life, the black-tie dinner at which the announcement would be made of the winner of the 2008 Man Booker Prize. For which I was shortlisted. The only woman. I took a sea-green dress and high heels to show him. The dress and shoes lay down and died under his derision, as if I had invited Saul Bellow to join a book club in which we were planning to discuss *Bridget Jones's Diary*. *Nothing* was right about the dress, including the haphazard stitching, he pointed out cruelly. He gave me a dress. This is what happens to movie stars at the Oscars.

I thought I knew what I liked and what suited me, but apparently I hadn't a clue, not when in the presence of one whose whole world this is. I am a total amateur, but it does not prevent me from taking an amateur's interest and recognising

that the people who bring us beautiful clothes are no less great artists than the people who bring us films and novels and paintings. They give us pleasure and transform us, even though we don't know how, and do not understand the concealed magic in the cut of a shoulder seam.

How I came about my own interest in clothes is deeply embedded in my family's history and my upbringing, it was as much a part of my world, growing up, as the flour that dusts the clothes of the miller's children.

I owe my superior private education entirely to the average woman's desire to have her hair shampooed, set, cut, permed and tinted. This was my father's business and the money he made from it paid for me to attend a bluestocking school established in the nineteenth century to provide an academic education for the daughters of gentlemen. Though by the 1960s they let anyone in who had the cash and whose offspring could pass the entrance exam.

I was a great reader, I did almost nothing else but lie stomach down on my bed, precociously attacking books not meant for my age range, because of my ambition to work my way through what I believed to be important (*Crime and Punishment* at age thirteen). I moved on to writing sensitive teenage poetry, all the while haunting the little shops in Matthew Street in Liverpool which sold A-line minidresses. Shops the size of parlours, some still with coal fires. Now utterly vanished and over their bones has been built the WAGs' Selfridges, Cricket.

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Or turning the pages of the Biba catalogue, desperate for an orange feather boa. Or unevenly applying Mary Quant eyeshadow, Max Factor pancake foundation, mask-like, and Rimmel mascara. Or studying photographs of Jean Shrimpton wearing Young Jaeger. Or considering how much less I would have to eat to have legs with a space between the thighs, like Twiggy.

Names clutter my recollection, shops and designers I never saw, only read about: Ossie Clark, Celia Birtwell, Alice Pollock, Jean Muir, Quorum, Mister Fish, John Stephen, Bus Stop, Hung on You, Granny Takes a Trip.

When I was a teenager, in the sixties, not to be interested in clothes was farcical, for to follow fashion was to know that you were alive in that decade of revolution and newness. Clothes were more than what you put on: they were the means by which you situated yourself in the present tense and, perhaps more important at the time, the way you could be guaranteed to annoy or even horrify your parents. For we understood that we were the generation that had been born young and would stay young for ever; growing old, as one's parents did, was a bizarre, mysterious lifestyle choice they had once fatally made – that it was their *intention* to have wrinkled skin and grey hair and spreading flesh, undiscussed illnesses and old-people's Crimplene skirts.

The first clothes I chose for myself, the first real outfit, was a brown polo-neck sweater, a denim skirt and round-toed green patent shoes. I wore this ensemble to lunchtime sessions of the Cavern Club a few months after the Beatles

had stopped performing there. I concealed the garments carefully in my school satchel when I left home in the morning, then I would make my dental-appointment excuses to the school secretary, get on the bus, go into town, get changed in a public lavatory and stand in the queue with other skiving twelve-year-olds, to enter a warehouse which smelt of damp, decay and extremely cheap scent.

I listened to bass guitars and echoey drums, the Hamburg Sound which came to us via the race records which black American merchant seamen sold in the pubs on the dock road and which were bought by the teenage John Lennon who sat in his bedroom, round the corner from my own, playing them over and over. The Mersey flowed hurriedly west, to join the Atlantic. You could smell and taste the salt air in the chords.

Then back to school in the middle of the afternoon to droop over *Ivanhoe*.

That was how it started. An expensive education paid for by the vanity of women, and a rebellious teenager who implicitly understood that clothes were the way she set herself up in opposition to her parents' wishes, the children of Eastern European immigrants. Content in the suburbs, they wanted nothing more for their two girls than that they should be dutiful daughters and wives. My mother was giving me an apprenticeship in shopping and dressing. I eagerly followed the instructions, then rewrote them. In jeans whose hems I had deliberately frayed, barefoot, I looked like a beggar, a ragamuffin. It's all the rage, I raged. But my parents didn't understand a thing.

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I would move on to even more incomprehensible choices: the Laura Ashley milkmaid look, which involved getting the train to Shrewsbury, to buy sprigged cotton dresses with piecrust collars and matching pinafores, designed to make you look as if you were churning butter in a late nineteenth-century Welsh farmhouse. I wore that look for years on end until its feyness dropped out of style and was replaced by the hairy black Moroccan cloak I found in the Lanes in Brighton, and the velvet embroidered Afghan dress with the little round mirrors that winked in the sunlight, and the round John Lennon glasses with the pink-tinted lenses. And then the endless 1930s and 1940s *crêpe de Chine* cocktail dresses bought at second-hand clothes markets, before they became known as vintage, and you really could buy beautiful bias-cut dresses from the decade which understood draping, for only three quid.

Yet despite my parents' utter dismay at what I wore, despite my mother's fruitless pleas to just take a look at Young Jaeger, where they had fawn trews put together with a crocodile skinny belt and a coffee-coloured polo-neck sweater (tending already, you see, towards beige), they had wittingly instilled in me an innate understanding of the importance of how you looked and dressed. For as every immigrant knows, with the opportunity for complete reinvention, without a past, a history, in a strange land, how you look is what matters.

But all I had done was to evaluate what a girl of my age, in that period, should be wearing, and to wear it. I wanted to be taken for what I was, an artistic bohemian who was as at home in the library as she was shopping in Carnaby Street.

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When I try to look back at my life, when I try, intensely, to remember and to understand who I once was, I find myself thinking about what I wore. Because these outer forms were a means of expressing something about what I wanted to be. I see years in which I dressed not to attract attention, because I was so absorbed by writing that I wanted to be in a neutral zone. I see years when clothes ceased to be any kind of pleasure because of the fruitless struggle to find anything to wear. I see years in which I was a spendthrift, buying buying buying. I could write my autobiography in terms of analysing my clothes from birth to present.

But I am not just interested in myself. Thinking about clothes, what we wear and what other people wear, allows us to travel through time and space, to penetrate the ideas and feelings of those long dead, or whose lives seem so baffling that we can scarcely believe them to be the same species as ourselves. When we look at dummies in a costume museum on which have been fitted outfits carefully preserved from the eighteenth century, we can admire the lace, the beads, the embroidery, but seldom feel that this is the kind of dress we might wish to wear ourselves, though designers are always taking inspiration from the past, Vivienne Westwood kitting us out in mini-crinis.

Examining those bustles, whalebone corsets, hoop skirts and ruffs, I don't see myself in a cloche hat but I find myself thinking of the woman who once wore these garments, full of the passions I feel myself when it comes to trying on a new dress.

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The people of other centuries seem so different to us that I think we would scream and go mad if we were suddenly dropped from a great height into, say Silver Street in sixteenth-century London, where Shakespeare lodged for a few years with a family of tire-makers – not wheel-coverings but court head-dresses. The stench of the streets, of the open sewers, would kill us. But through descriptive language we can make common cause with the past.

For people have written and thought about clothes ever since they could write and think. The Old Testament begins its story with how we first got dressed, blaming, inevitably, the need for it on the duplicity of women and later laying down numerous rules and regulations on what God wants us to wear and how we are constantly aggravating him with our sartorial transgressions. Descriptions of the heathen peoples that the Jews must not resemble indicate that in biblical times there was a prevailing fashion for what would, several thousand years later, be revived as punk, with Mohawks, earrings and tattoos.

Voices dart like arrows across time and show us that there is nothing new about being interested in clothes.

A thousand years ago, Se Shonagan, lady of the Japanese imperial court wrote in her *Pillow Book*, ‘To wash one’s hair, make one’s toilet, and put on scented robes; even if not a soul sees one, these preparations still produce an inner pleasure.’

And she would observe, caustically, of an imperial gentleman’s wardrobe: ‘There are skilled dyers and weavers in Masahiro’s household, and when it comes to dress, whether it

be the colour of his under-robe or the style of his cloak, he is more elegant than most men; yet the only effect of his elegance is to make people say, "What a shame someone else isn't wearing those things."

Here is Samuel Pepys on the subject of shopping on credit: 'This morning came home my fine camlet cloak, with gold buttons, and a silk suit, which cost me much money, and I pray God to make me able to pay for it.' While writing nearly two thousand years ago, the Roman poet Juvenal observes, 'Here everyone dresses above his means.'

In late October 2007, I started a little fashion blog. I had experienced the guilty pleasure, every morning, of logging on to my two favourite sites. Manolo the Shoeblogger, the extremely witty and intriguingly erudite website of an anonymous American whose tortured experiments with English syntax were a satire on both the Spanish-born shoe designer Manolo Blahnik and the vacuous language of the fashion world. Manolo loves the shoes, he proclaimed! I took Manolo, correctly, to be a persona (I would later enter an email correspondence with its author in his non-fictional guise), but through his site I started to awaken a hitherto dormant appreciation of what shoes can do for the personality, for the happiness of the moment, which led to the eventual purchase of my D&G black patent four-inch heels.

My other morning read was the Bag Snob, in fact two Chinese-American women of apparently lavish incomes, whom I initially believed to be fifty-something social X-rays, as Tom

Wolfe puts it, Upper East Siders who sallied forth each morning to Bergdorf Goodman, followed by an extremely light lunch. It turned out one of them lived in a small town in Texas, the other in Boston and they were old college friends now at home with young children, vicariously living through their handbag purchases, partly financed by their site's online advertising. Wow, they really knew their bags. Eventually I would share and jointly consume two bottles of Veuve Clicquot with the Texan bag snob, in her suite at Claridge's on a visit to London. I held, for a few exciting moments, her latest Chanel bag.

On the internet were thousands, probably millions of women who were talking about clothes and about fashion. Some pored over photographs of celebrities, executing judgement on Paris Hilton's skirt and Victoria Beckham's shoes. Others scoured the shopping sites to put together whole outfits. Or they tried to give their readers the heads-up on the coming season's trends. Or, sweetly, they put up photos taken in their bedrooms of themselves modelling their latest purchase and, like a magic eye, you could see into the homes of complete strangers and watch them experiment with the shaky beginnings of an identity in formation.

Later, I added a third site, the uncompromising Sartorialist who simply took pictures of people on the street whom he considered to be particularly well dressed, and, usually without comment, allowed his readers to discuss what made their clothes work, or sometimes not.

And so, after some thought, I began my own blog. I began it as a way of thinking aloud, about this book, which I had

already planned to write. I put on it quotations I had found about clothes and fashion, items from the news that interested me, my own frustrating quest for a dress with sleeves which fell below the knee. In time I acquired a partner, a sidekick, 'Harry Fenton', a friend with a sharp eye for middle-aged menswear and an almost perfect recall for the Mod styles of the mid- to late sixties.

Over time, the readers of the blog became a small but quite devoted community whose comments and discussion were always intelligent, thoughtful and extremely funny. I solicited their help as I was going along, writing and thinking about this book. When I asked American readers to share their own recollections of fashion after 9/11, they obliged with moving recollections of the days and weeks after those cataclysmic events, proving my thesis: that what we wear affects *everything*.

So this book's modest intent is to liberate its readers from the doubts and uncertainties that beset them when they start thinking about clothes or, worse, talking about them, and someone pipes up that they should concern themselves with matters more significant, such as the fate of the planet. Or the war in Iraq.

We care about what we wear. If we don't, we are fools. Only babies don't worry about what they look like, and only because no one has yet shown them a mirror.