

But it isn't really fashion that has such a hold on me. It is (like the ultimate book in my head, which is storyless, characterless and perfect) an image, without any detail, of the perfect outfit, the one that slips over my frame and drapes itself around my contours in a way that finally defines me – look, this is what I am – just as my flesh defines the boundaries between myself and the world. And it's a private thing essentially, not primarily about being seen in or envied for a fashionable look: indeed, I generally imagine wearing these incomparable outfits in the privacy of my own home. It's stuff to sit on the sofa with that I'm after first of all; then it's OK to go out and flaunt the frocks. Fashion statements and identity statements are much of a muchness as far as I'm concerned. To look like, to feel like and to be like are as close as flesh and bone.

The crucial encounter with fashion occurred when I was 12. Until then I had put up with whatever my mother considered respectable, an accurate mirror of the life she wished to be perceived as having. I baulked loudly, it is true, at discomfort, which came mostly in the form of woollen vests that she told me were as soft as butter (meaning expensive and imported from Belgium) but which were actually as scratchy as barbed wire. But by the time I was 12 the family fortunes had taken such a severe downturn and swerve away from the Belgian imports that Social Services had issued her with a voucher to buy me a pair of shoes to wear at my new secondary school. This was a matter of desperate shame for my mother, returning her to a poverty she had devoted her life to escaping. The idea of handing over – in public – vouchers from the state instead of crisp currency agonised her. Worse, the vouchers were rejected with the disdain she feared at all the shops she usually went to – Daniel Neal did not X-ray any old child's feet. The only place that accepted them was a gloomy little cobbler's shop which, as I remember it, was hidden away under a near derelict railway arch in the fashion wasteland of King's Cross. The Dickensian and mawkish nature of the occasion as I recall it, the drab light and huddled aspect of the shoe shop, suggest that this may be one of those false memories you hear so much about, conjured up to match the dismal mood of the event. The old man who owned the place, unshaven, bent, gruff and wheezing – the Victorian workhouse vision just won't go back in its box – inspected the voucher, measured my feet, and without a word shuffled to the back of the shop. He returned with a single shoe box.

'See if these fit,' he said to my mother.

Taking off the lid, he brought out a pair of the grimmest black lace-up school shoes I had ever seen in my life. ‘Sturdy’ doesn’t even get close to describing their brute practicality. In today’s fashion-diverse world it is hard to imagine the despair I felt at the sight of what he expected me to put on my feet. And then greater despair yet as it occurred to me that I would be expected actually to wear them out in the world. They were so blankly, stylelessly sensible that they might have been orthopaedic appliances (poverty and disability perhaps being seen as equally reprehensible). Great clumping virtuous blocks of stiff leather with bulbous reinforced toecaps, designed (and I use the word loosely as a small bubble of ancient hysteria wells up) never to wear out. The best that could be hoped for was to grow out of them, after which they would still be sound enough to be passed down to generation after generation of the undeserving poor. Probably today they would be at the more moderate end of chunky footwear. I confess there have been times when I’ve rejoiced in wearing very similar things with an incongruously delicate little number in chiffon – though Doc Martens are ladylike in comparison. But back then – think 1959, the burgeoning of youth culture, rock and roll, multilayered net petticoats, ponytails – I only had to take one look at them, to see myself arriving at my new school with those on my feet, to know and feel, gut and spine, head and heart, the shame of becoming an instant fashion (and therefore everything else) pariah in the cruel girls’ world of T-bars, flatties and slip-ons. The shoes would stand for my entire character, my class, my race, my lack of nous, and for ever after my almond-toed peers would deem me a sad case to be avoided and sniggered at as I clunked my solitary way around the playground. But it wasn’t just the social disaster of such unfashionability that froze my heart: it was the fear that appearing to be the kind of person who wore such shoes might mean that that was the person I actually was. It wasn’t just that my peers would despise me: I would despise myself. I didn’t even dare risk seeing my reflection in the mirror in the empty shop.

I said, politely, that I didn’t like them, thinking he had mistaken me for someone who might be happy to help him get rid of his unsaleable items and that he must have kept back his stock of fashion footwear. He showed no sign of having heard me. He was not impressed, he wasn’t interested in an opinion: he just wanted to know if he needed to bother to get another size. These, it was made clear, were the shoes you got in return for vouchers. Take them or leave them, he told my mother, not so much as glancing at me. Though I sensed that the world was about to end (in the way it often did when things went wrong for my mother) I shook my head firmly. I refused even to try them on. I would simply not have them on my feet. His lip curled at my bad character. My mother’s embarrassment redoubled at having to be embarrassed in front of

this miserable old man. It was bad enough having to be on the receiving end of charity without having to suffer the charity-giver's contempt. But I shook my head steadily from side to side and kept my toes curled tightly so that even if they used force they would never get those clodhopping shoes on me. I ought to be grateful that taxpayers were providing me with any shoes at all, the shopkeeper rasped. (Was he really wearing a food-stained, cigarette-burned buff cardigan and checked felt slippers?) It was these, or it was nothing.

'Then it's nothing,' I said, quite prepared for whatever civic punishment befell ungrateful children who didn't know their place (though I looked forward less to the moment when my mother got me home). I would wear my present shoes down to a sliver. If necessary I would go to school barefoot. My mother didn't bother to wait – she shouted at me all the way home. I slunk along beside her in silence. How could I do this to her, she screamed. What did a pair of shoes matter? In fact, they mattered more than her wretchedness, even more than my loved, lost and delinquent father who had put us in this situation. They mattered like life itself. More, perhaps. Now, I am somewhat ashamed of having been obdurate when times were bad, but the truth is that even as I write I flush at the imagined ignominy of wearing those shoes. It was, as it were, my first fashion statement.

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