

PAUL DUFFICY

MY OWN SKIN

It all began with shoes, I suppose. The rule I knew from early on was ‘no shoes in the house.’ After school and on the weekends was always barefoot. What puzzled me was why I had to wear shoes to school when at least half my Kindergarten classmates came to school barefoot. That’s what I was confused about. I didn’t like shoes, they were never on at home, but I had to wear them to my small Catholic primary school in Kempsey, on the north coast of New South Wales. Before Grade 1 we moved to Sydney. We kept the same shoe rules at home, but everyone at my new school now wore shoes.

Apart from the shoe conundrum, clothes just meant things you put on to go somewhere. School had a uniform, but in my widening world it was a shirt and some shorts to explore parks, local bushland, storm water drains and canals. The weekend rule was to leave at breakfast and return at tea time. No questions asked.

Everything remained pretty much the same for me all through my primary school years. I didn’t think about clothes. Most, I think, were hand-me-downs from my big brother and all wore battle scars in the shape of my mother’s patching and darning. My school uniform (a navy blue suit – thank you, Christian Brothers Lewisham) served as my formal wear. It was what I wore to mass on Sundays and to the wedding of my sister.

I was sent to boarding school at the beginning of high school. That meant a uniform pretty much all the time. School uniform, swimmers, football jersey, or cricket whites. When I went home for holidays, it was back to the few clothes I had left behind. The jeans would have had been ‘let down’ by mum to fit my new body. My brother still supplied the tops. But now I was also seeing what some other boys were wearing away from school. They seemed pretty cool to me because they were wearing the clothes I also saw on Channel 10s *Uptight with Ross D. Wylie*. I was fascinated but had no idea where you would even go to get high-waisted, corduroy pants – the kind the band *Zoot* wore when singing their version of ‘Eleanor Rigby.’

By the time I was 16, I was working at something most holidays to make some money. If I was to be imprisoned until I was eighteen I was determined to have the means to make my way when I was released. Working in factories allowed me to wear what I had. But one weekend I was invited by a new friend to his house in Dee Why for the weekend. His brother had been the guy with the high-waisted pants. For the first time I was worried about what I could wear. I wanted to fit into the north side beach scene. But I’d never even been across the Harbour Bridge.

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Anyway, on our first trip to the beach I had on one of my brother's T-shirts which I can see now he'd scavenged from the set of *West Side Story*. I was on the beach about 5 minutes when some of the locals took exception to my Richard Beymer look – maybe it would have been easier if I'd had Natalie Wood with me. At the time, I was not scared, or angry, just puzzled. Anyway, a little way behind my friend and I was his cool, big brother who made it clear we were with him.

Two days after I left school I started working as a bus conductor in Sydney which gave me three months full-time income before I was to start University. Once again I was in uniform for most of the week. My life, it seemed, had been spent in uniform. I saw a lot of movies in my first year of University and failed Law. I also met a girl. By this stage, I had absorbed the fashion of what might pass for a left-wing, dope-smoking, failed law student and she seemed okay with that. This was 1972. But then my friend from Dee Why told me about a cracker of a party in Kensington. We turned up and the epiphany took place. Here were some very cool young men wearing what I soon found out were batik shirts. They had just come back from Bali. I was sold – that was me. A month later I was back on the buses and saving for Bali. Whatever I took to Denpasar in 1973 never returned. My return pack was full of clothes (along with just about anything else Balinese). I embraced batik, sarongs, and flour-sack pants. My 'me' appeared.

From that initial trip, I returned many times to the region. I met another girl. We travelled light over the months that turned into years. Our year in Pakistan saw us take on the Pashtun look; in our year in Tokyo, we moved more towards a Harajuku stance. For our wanderings across borders we were, I suppose, early adopters of the Khao San Road look.

By the time the kids came along I was working as an EAL teacher and pretty relaxed in my skin and my clothes. Kind of Graham Parker with a touch of Joe Camilleri and Stephen Cummings.

All the while, in the background was my dad. He was born in 1908 and came to Sydney from the farm up Lennox Head way around 1929 to pursue a career as a surveyor. The Depression put paid to that and he returned to the family farm. He made a few bob running professionally until he eventually got a job as a forester. His style was bush rugged until he got a desk job in Sydney just as I was moving into batik. He had a small lowboy in his and mum's bedroom where he had all his possessions (magic tricks included). Dad was the go-to person for wrestles, cuddles and the obligatory rub of the unshaven face. He saw the funny side of most things and demanded nothing of me beyond doing what I thought was right.

Once he retired from his city job, he remained a dapper dresser and he would arrive at our place dressed more formally than you would think necessary. On occasions he would turn up at one of the kids' birthdays in full regalia including suit jacket with lawn bowls pins.

In April 1991 our third child was born. In July that year dad died.

A HISTORY OF MEN'S SUITS: AN INTERLUDE

I was distraught. I helped mum empty the lowboy. I nicked a few trinkets (the magic tricks). Things went to Vinnies. But I kept two things: an old pair of shoes and a singlet. From then I started to wear both. Wore them out in fact. Not long after I ran into a mate whose dad had just died. We talked and I shared that I was wearing my dad's singlet. Some sort of space opened and he said "I am too."