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STYLE

‘Are You Talkin’ to Me?’

By SHALOM AUSLANDER

I live in a world of elderly children, of infantile adults, of Peter Pans with two mortgages and carpal tunnel syndrome. I live in a world of 45-year-olds in baggy shorts, baseball caps and garishly colored sneakers, of 50-year-olds in track suits and oversize white-framed sunglasses. In the mall near my home there is a store called Forever 21, where women long since 21 fill their desperate arms with clothing that would make an actual 21-year-old cringe.

This is my world, and of this world I am a faithful citizen.

I wear ripped jeans and T-shirts. I wear hoodies and Crocs. I wear Chuck Taylors.

“Look, Dad,” says my 3-year-old son, pointing to a classmate as we walk across the schoolyard. “Zachary is wearing the same thing as you!”

I wonder what Suit Me is doing right now. Perhaps he is at the opera, understanding Italian and shouting *Bravo!* as the curtain falls. Perhaps he is at dinner with other Suit People, swirling red wine around a glass as he discusses the past week’s lead article in *The Economist*. “They fundamentally misunderstand China’s relationship to the something something something,” he says. He mentions Turkey, and they all nod. Perhaps he is, if nothing else, feeling ever-so-slightly less lousy about himself than Jeans Me does in his Zachary knockoff. So when the phone rings later that afternoon and I am offered an assignment to dress like a Suit Person for a day — a *rich* Suit Person — I quickly agree.

“I’ll see you Monday,” I say.

Suit Me leans back in his Aeron chair, puts his feet up on his oak desk and, pressing his fingertips together, says, “Excellent.”

It’s only 9:30 in the morning, and I’m already having a bad day. There’s a good reason for that, and the reason for that is this: my socks are yellow. Not yellowed, not old, not worn — intentionally, garishly, brightly yellow, with a small pink argyle pattern stitched on the side. To make matters worse, my suit pants have been hemmed so short that they come to a lonely, abrupt end three inches above my shoes, as, I am told, is the style of the times.

“This can’t be right,” I say, looking at myself in the mirror.

I am standing in Bergdorf Goodman the Men’s Store, on the corner of Fifth Avenue and 58th Street. I have lived in New York my entire life and have never been in this store before. I haven’t worn a suit since my days

in an Orthodox yeshiva.

“It’s right,” says the man standing behind me. His name is Tommy, and he is the fashion director of Bergdorf Goodman the Men’s Store. Tommy tightens my tie and talks suit as I stare at my ankles. Tommy talks about the Italians who made the suit. He talks about the cut. He talks about the “silky hand of the wool.” Then it’s the suit’s turn to talk. This suit, Tommy explains, says, “I am young,” but it also says, “I have arrived.” It says, “I have money,” but it also says, “I still have a personal sense of style.” It is quite a talkative suit. My feeling has always been that if you need your clothing to speak for you, it might be best for everyone if you said nothing at all. Unfortunately, you can’t tell a suit to shut the hell up, which is what I want to tell the suit I am wearing.

It’s not Tommy’s fault. Let’s not get angry with Tommy. If you’ve seen certain young men walking around of late looking as if they tried to launder their suits at home and accidentally left them in the dryer for a few cycles too many — cuffs ending midforearm, pants ending midshin — then the person you want to blame is named Thom Browne. Not only did he start this trend, but on his label he also puts a period at the end of his name, so that even if I hadn’t put the name Thom Browne. at the end of the previous sentence, I would have had to use a period because that is the way Thom Browne. likes it, with a period after Thom Browne. It seems fitting — a sentence-fragment name for a man with too-short pants.

Tommy throws a coat over my shoulders, a black three-quarter-length rabbinical-looking coat with a wide mink collar. I look in the mirror. I look like an Orthodox Hamburglar. I look as if I need a slap.

“You look good,” says the man from Bergdorf’s.

“You look good,” says the assistant to the man from Bergdorf’s.

“You look really good,” says the tailor standing behind me.

This leaves me in a difficult spot, because if everyone here thinks I look good, then I’m going to have to kick my own butt. Suit Me tells me to relax. Jeans Me tells me to run.

“I’m not going out with yellow socks,” I say.

Twenty minutes later, I stroll out the door, gray socks on my feet, pants flapping around my shins.

“Do you want a handbag?” calls the man from Bergdorf’s, hurrying after me.

“Do I want a what?”

“Do you want a handbag?”

“No,” I say. “I do not want a handbag.”

My suit costs \$2,295. My shirt costs \$230. My shoes cost \$680. I am the Three Thousand, Two Hundred and Five Dollar Man, and I’m no longer certain I want rebuilding.

“I am a man who commands respect,” says my suit.

“I demand a certain refinement,” says my shirt.

“I have an appreciation for the finer things,” say my shoes.

I have agreed to spend the day in this suit, and every minute feels like an eternity. I turn right toward Madison Avenue, step in urine and smile.

“Hey!” say my shoes.

Things are looking up.

Madison Avenue between 57th and 71st Streets is home to some of the finest clothing shops in the city. Suit Me calls it Luxury Row. Jeans Me calls it Poseur Parkway.

“I could walk around here all day,” says Gene.

Gene Pressman is a former C.E.O. of Barneys and co-author of the recent marketing book “Chasing Cool.” A book on marketing — is there a subtitle encapsulating the theme of the book? Yes, there is: “Standing Out in Today’s Cluttered Marketplace.” My editor has arranged for him to give me a crash course on the “cultural signifiers of luxury men’s wear.”

Gene takes me to Hermès.

“It’s not pronounced HER-meez,” says Gene. “It’s pronounced er-MEZ.”

I write that down.

From Er-MEZ we go to [Tom Ford](#); from Tom Ford we go to Loro Piana.

“This suit,” explains Gene, grabbing the sleeve of a shiny pinstripe suit in one store, “says you’re a greaseball.”

I write that down.

“This suit,” he says, grabbing the sleeve of a wide pinstripe jacket in another store, “says you’re a gangster.”

I write that down.

Monkeys, it seems, have it easy. From what I can tell, you want respect in Monkeytown, you beat up some other males, impregnate a few women, climb a tree and waddle out to the end of a branch where everyone can gaze up with awe at your magnificent genitals. Humans, having only partially evolved, still communicate the same messages, but are forced to do so by employing the clumsy metaphor of fashion. Thus, yellow socks. And shrunken suits. And designers whose names carry periods at the end.

Gene talks about the cut of a jacket the way most men talk about sportscars and baseball. He talks about the way it is tailored, the material, the craft. Gene loves clothing, and clothing loves Gene. I feel like a third

wheel. The \$680 shoes, still angry about the whole urine thing, are cutting into my ankles. The tie is choking me, and the shirt feels like an iron corset around my chest. But as I walk down Madison Avenue, a strange thing begins to happen: I'm beginning to enjoy this suit. It's like a pod in "Invasion of the Body Snatchers": I feel older; I feel refined. I feel as if little Zachary could never pull this look off. I feel as if I listen to classical music. I feel as if every night I have a glass of sherry on the veranda before going to bed, and I feel as if I call going to bed "retiring." I'm turning into a Northeast Caucasian Upper Middle Class "Scarface." First you get the money; then you get the Church's shoes; then you get the Thom Browne suit; then you get the convertible European sportscar; then you get the place in Southampton; then you start wearing your polo shirt collar up; then you give your house a name like "Serenity" or "Breezy Point" or "Twin Gables."

Another strange thing begins to happen: Outside the clothing boutiques, my newfound feelings for classic refinement turn into newfound feelings of classic classism.

"I'm average," says one man's non-Bergdorf's suit.

"I summer where I winter," says another man's tie.

"I can't make it here," says the plaid sportcoat of a third. "Can I make it anywhere?"

"No," says my shirt. My pants laugh. My tie says: "Looking like that? I don't think so, honey," and my shoes agree.

This reminds me of the bedtime story I have been reading my son. The story is called "Spider-Man's New Suit":

Peter Parker started wearing the new black suit under his clothes all the time. It made him feel cool. He had attitude. He was tough. But he wasn't feeling quite like himself. He wondered if it was because of the suit.

"I've got to get out of this suit," I say to Gene.

I thank Gene for his time and help and head for my office in Midtown. By the time I get there, I am tired and hungry and feeling worse than I did when little Zachary showed up to school in my clothing. I stop off at my usual breakfast place, a small deli on Third Avenue, and step up to the counter.

"What can I get for you, sir?" the counter man asks. Yesterday, I was "buddy."

"Egg salad on rye," I say.

"Yes, sir."

A man in a Con Ed hard hat pushes up beside me. He is wearing dust-covered jeans and a dirty T-shirt.

"What can I get you, buddy?" the counter man asks.

Con Ed places his order, crosses his arms and waits. A man in a suit like mine orders a spinach-feta panini. A woman in a suit like mine orders a goat cheese-arugula-veggie wrap. He's a sir. She's a ma'am. Con Ed

scowls.

“I live paycheck to paycheck,” say his jeans.

“You should see my genitals,” says my suit.

Con Ed gets his sandwich before me, grabs some napkins and pushes past, bumping me with his shoulder. Our clothes speak different languages, so we don’t speak at all.

Outside, the streets are packed, and traffic is at a standstill. The [U.N. General Assembly](#) is in session; the leaders of the sort-of-free world are generally assembling and illegally parking and making it impossible to get around. Yeshiva students fill the streets, heading over to the U.N. to protest Ahmadinejad’s policies.

“I’m a devout believer in God,” says a young man’s yarmulke.

“I take the Old Testament very literally,” says his rabbinical beard.

“[Hitler](#) Lives,” says the placard in his hand. There is a large black swastika on the placard and a picture of Ahmadinejad beside it.

“The last American TV show I watched,” says Ahmadinejad’s sportcoat, “was ‘Miami Vice.’ ”

Back in my office, I change back into my jeans and sweatshirt. Suit Me shakes his head with disappointment and goes back to reading *The Wall Street Journal*. Later he will embezzle some funds, sell the last few barrels of oil that [Saddam Hussein](#) gave him and cheat on his wife with the young secretary in Accounting. Clothes make the man, the saying goes. In this case they made me an insufferable one.

It was hard for Peter to get rid of the black suit. It clung to him with an evil power. But he knew he could do it.

I sit down at my desk, take out my sandwich and think about the folks over at the U.N., the guys ruining traffic — not to mention the world — and wonder if their suits are making them insufferable, too. Maybe if they all showed up in jeans they could get something accomplished now and then. Bush? Suit. Sarkozy? Suit. King Abdullah? Suit. Ahmadinejad? Suit. Whoever is running England now? Suit. What do you say, guys — Casual 2008? As for me, I’ll just phone Zachary’s parents every night, find out what he’s wearing to school the next day and wear something else.

Shalom Auslander is the author of “Foreskin’s Lament” and “Beware of God.”

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