

The Red-Blooded Boys' Guide to Fashion Week

by Con Chapman

When I was growing up—I know that begs the question—if I wasn't giggling frogs or shooting marbles I used to wile away my idle hours by hanging out at my dad's store. What boy doesn't want to grow up to be like his dad and own a women's clothing store?



"I'd rather be reading Women's Wear Daily."

When school was let out I'd hurry over to his little shop across from the county courthouse. "Where you goin'?" guys named Darrell and Duane would ask, a slender piece of wheat straw dangling from their lips. "The new *Mademoiselle* arrives today," I'd shout breathlessly. "I'm going to check out the Fashion Do's and Don'ts!"

"Gawsh," Duane would say to Darrell, or vice versa. "I wish my poppa-daddy had him a job where he got glossy fashion rags with explicit foundation undergarment ads every month."



Foundation undergarment ad

And so I'm overcome by a wave of nostalgia this time of year because—as every red-blooded boy knows—it's fashion week in New York.

“Fashion week” is a period of time lasting approximately one week (hence, the unusual name), during which designers, brands or fashion “houses” display their latest collections in runway shows, allowing buyers to take a look at the latest trends. By the end of the week, if you pay attention, you'll know what's going to be “in” and “out” for the coming season.



My dad's buyer was a heavily-rouged woman who struck me as the very antithesis of fashion. How could she possibly know what was going to be *au courant*? She wore looks that time had forgotten, if it ever knew them. Fur stoles with little animal heads dangling off her shoulders, hats with veils that hung down over her eyes that she wore in a misbegotten attempt to appear alluring. I had more fashion sense in my little finger! How come she gets to go and I don't?



I'd been to New York to buy inventory with my mom and dad before, staying at the old Governor Clinton Hotel near Penn Station. ("Mom, why are the sheets so sticky?") If you behaved yourself while sportswear designers like Cos Cob paraded their wares before you in hot warehouses in Queens, you might get to take in a Mets game at brand-spanking-new Shea Stadium.



Shea Stadium, former home of the Mets

I returned to my small town after these trips to the big city with a grim determination that someday I too would design a collection that would cause the fashion writers' jaws to drop onto their little notebooks. I'd sketch away at my desk at night, trying to come up with looks that said "come hither" or "drop dead." No wait, the look is come hither if it's drop-dead gorgeous. I was always getting them mixed up.



My dad would check in on me late at night, looking over my shoulder. “Whadda ya think, pop?” I’d ask him, with eyes bright and coat shiny. He’d hem and haw a bit—“Not unflattering” was one backhanded compliment—until finally one night I asked him to tell me the truth.

“Son,” he said, leveling with me. “You couldn’t sell that stuff to the chubby girls department at Montgomery Ward.”

I was crushed, but I wasn’t giving up. “Is it something Dr. Lowd can fix?” I asked, hot tears streaming down my face.

“We’ll see, kiddo,” he said, chucking me under the chin. “I’m not asking you to give up your dream, I just want you to be realistic.”

The three of us, mom, dad and me, went to the doctor for a complete physical examination. We all went, but I was the only one who was checked for undescended testicles by coughing while my private parts rested in the doctor’s cold hand. Apparently he didn’t need to check my mom.



When the doctor was done, he told me to put my clothes back on and sit down. "So," he said to me with an avuncular smile on his face, "I hear you want to be a fashion designer."

"You betcha!" I exclaimed. It was the mid-60's.

"Well, you know there's lots of things a boy can do besides being a fashion designer."

I knew what was coming. On the basis of a few crummy tests he was going to crush my dreams like the aluminum soda cans that were just beginning to appear in grocery stores, filled with Tab, the low-cal offshoot of Coca-Cola, and Squirt, the Sassy One, from Canada Dry.

"Why don't you go outside and play football without a helmet for a while," my mom said. "Or take your BB gun and shoot a blue jay for me."

"Okay," I said. Mom always hated blue jays.

Many years later, mom and dad told me what the doctor said. There was no hope, absent corrective shoes and many years of treatment in an iron lung, that I would ever overcome what appeared to be a crippling impediment that stood in the way of my ambition.

I was a heterosexual male, and there was nothing that could be done about it.

