

## The Muskrat Man

When I was young, I spent a lot of time perusing my father's closet. As befitted an ex-Army officer, everything hung neatly in place. Rows of handmade worsted suits from Jacob Reeds lined up in ever-darkening colors. Countess Mara was the tie of choice, in generous widths of rich fabric and vivid colors. The mahogany dresser contained rows of shirts from Sulka, their perfection a testament to my mother's skill with a hot iron. Neatly creased Borsolino hats rested in oval nests. On the floor were aligned the finest offerings from French Shriner & Urner, their shape maintained by wooden shoetrees.

Do not think my father was a dandy. His personal history was the stuff of Horatio Alger stories: child immigrant who delivered tubs of beer to the Irish railroad workers in New England, sometime Montana cowboy, World War I officer decorated with the Croix de Guerre, sales manager for a trucking company, successful small-town businessman. He was a three-goal polo player and an avid hunter and fisherman.

But the image I have is of him leaving the house for the Tuesday meeting of the Kiwanis Club, smelling of Old Spice and talc, wearing one of Jimmy the Tailor's hand-cut suits and a complementary Burberry overcoat. He looked good. He looked like Somebody. And he must have felt as far from the drafty, rented stone cottage in Shanaho, Ireland, as he possibly could.

Anyhow, that is where I learned to love clothes. My preference was more Bill Blass than Adolph Monjeu, and I quickly shed any lingering influences of the latter after my freshman year at Williams, where, during rushing week, a jaded senior eyed my neat linen double-breasted suit and observed, "That's a nice suit. Did you buy it in Panama?" I hastily repaired to the House of Walsh

and embraced the Ivy League look with a fervor that still burns, the only evolutionary change being the acceptance of the two-button jacket, courtesy of John Kennedy.

My generation of businessmen dressed up. Coat and tie every day, pants creased, shoes shined, no worn heels. Everyone wanted to look like Gregory Peck in *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. Then came retirement, and the uniform code changed dramatically: Goodbye Brooks Brothers, hello, L.L. Bean. My chapeau of choice became a baseball cap with a Ford logo, worn with the brim to the front like God intended. Cargo pants and flannel shirt. Rubber-soled mocs. The tweed sport coats and twill trousers languished in the closet with the Robert Talbott ties.

But one incident made me think I had shed my old skin too quickly. I was making a run to the recycling center in my pickup and had stopped at my insurance agent's. An elderly man sitting in a parked vehicle nearby rolled down his window and yelled, "Hey! Over here!" Clearly he was addressing me. "You got any muskrat?"

"Pardon me?"

"Is it muskrat season yet?"

I had to confess, I did not know. He peered at me intently, taking in the cap, the cargo pants, the olive jacket. "Ain't you the Muskrat Man?"

Sorry, I said, not me. Having no further use for me, he abruptly rolled up his window.

For those of you who do not know about muskrat, it flourishes on the tidal marshes of the Eastern Shore of Maryland, living in mounds it builds of reeds and mud. It is hunted for its pelt and meat, which some claim is a delicacy and others disdain as grossly inedible. Trappers haul their catches to roadside markets, where they are skinned and hung on a line, accompanied by crudely lettered signs proclaiming, "Muskrats for Sale." Aficionados haul away their prizes to

long-suffering wives who grind the meat, bones and all, into a sort of unrestrained sausage, heavily flavored with mysterious herbs. Muskrat is served at all political meetings on the shore, and woe is to the poor aspiring politician who cannot cheerfully eat at least three plates of 'rat, grinning vacuously at the ladies of the Auxiliary.

And so it was that my friend in the parking lot mistook me for one of these intrepid hunters, hoping that one of the boxes in the back of my truck held his culinary prize. I was not the Muskrat Man, but maybe, God forbid, I looked like one! My mind flashed back to class elections, 1954, when, to my dismay, I placed first in two categories: 1) Best Dressed and 2) Biggest Grind. Beau Brummell had become the Muskrat Man!

I told my wife and family the story, looking for sympathy, and got only gales of laughter. I was reminded of my newfound habit of rising early and dressing in the clothes closest to hand—usually the ones I had on the night before—and the fact that I showered and shaved less frequently. There was mention of my belief that you don't need to comb your hair if you're going to cover it with a cap. The phrase "pretty is as pretty does" was thrown around.

After some thought, I made a decision. Henceforth, I would wear my Muskrat Man outfit to destinations like the County Dump, Southern States and chicken sexing exhibitions. When I ventured forth to see anyone with a diploma on the wall or to borrow money or to go to a really nice party, I would revert to the Slightly Threadbare English Gentry look. When in doubt I would wear a blue blazer over faded jeans, black penny loafers with no socks, and would be mistaken for a recent transplant from Cape Cod.

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