

Tonight Is What It Means To Be Dumb

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I was eight years old when The Reagan Era began. The older I got, the less I liked what I was seeing. By the time Reagan kicked Mondale's ass, I was downright disenchanted. Not about politics, but something much more powerful and insidious: fashion. I knew something about me being a boy wasn't right, but being a girl didn't look much better.

The word for the decade was *excess*. What was the point of consuming if you weren't going to be conspicuous about it? Heavy makeup. Big hair. Big jewelry. Big floppy bow ties made from scarves. **Shoulder. Pads.** Shoulder pads were confusing and frightening, making me want to run deeper into the closet like a spooked tabby cat. I couldn't figure out why a girl would wear something that made her look like a football player. I *still* don't get it. Kids at school laughed at the bell bottoms of our parents, and I was teased mercilessly because I folded up the cuffs of my jeans. And yet, they were oblivious to the genuine horrors all around them.

In her essay "Power Dressing: 1980s Fashion History," Pauline Weston Thomas writes,

QUOTE Lavish use of both fine and costume jewelry was worn day and night on the tvee show *Dynasty*, and it drifted into mainstream fashion. Big, almost huge gilt fashion earrings several centimeters across drew attention to faces drowning in shoulder pads. Stones could be fake or real. Dee-uh-mon-tay, pearls and gold chains were intended to tell the rest of the world you had arrived. **UNQUOTE**

Dynasty didn't go away until I was sixteen, and I never watched it once. If it was up to me I never would have even seen pictures, but that's not possible in our culture, regardless of the decade. Even now, I wish I didn't know what Paris Hilton looks like.

Its influence was inescapable. No, not everybody dressed like that all the time. But the show's female stars were the decade's most prominent icons of femininity, and there was a definite trickle-down effect. Had I been a budding drag queen with a taste for the ostentatious, it would have been terribly inspirational. Instead, it was just terrifying. My slowly developing aesthetics were not reflected in the world around me. I didn't want to wear shoulder pads. I didn't want to be Linda Evans when I grew up.

What I couldn't have known was that fashion would not intersect with my own tastes until the mid-nineties. We're all products of our environments, and I often suspect that if I'd been born ten years later, I would have come out at an earlier age because I would have seen girls around me who looked the way I wanted to look.

Now, like most socially challenged boys, I was heavily into *Star Trek*. This being the dark ages before the World Wide Web, I kept an eye on the magazine rack at Bullard Village Drug in Fresno. One of my favorite magazines was called *Enterprise Incidents*. It wasn't just about *Star Trek*, but sci-fi, fantasy and horror, the sort of thing my lonely demographic ate up.

The cover of the August 1984 issue was puzzling. Alongside the expected stuff like *The Last Starfighter* and *Star Trek III* was a picture of an actress named Diane Lane in a movie called *Streets of Fire*. From what I could tell, *Streets of Fire* had no spaceships, special effects, or monsters. It wasn't even set in the future--at least, not any future that looked like, you know, the *future*. Almost every picture, even on the back cover of the magazine, was of Diane Lane singing. For Pete's sake, was it a musical? What the hell was a musical doing in *Enterprise Incidents*?

The indignation I may have initially felt at this genre-blurring was evened out by the aforementioned pictures of Diane Lane, in clothes which were nothing like *Dynasty*. Sexy but not gaudy, feminine without being a caricature.

I knew deep down that I wanted to be her, but I also knew closer to the surface that I wasn't supposed to want to, and that it was something I had to keep to myself. Going to my mom with the magazine and saying "Can I get my hair to look like that?" was not an option.

The next year I came across a magazine which was an even more transparent attempt to sell sex in the guise of sci-fi. I don't recall the name, but the cover story was about Sybil Danning playing the villain in *Terminator 2*. It was completely fake, of course, nothing more than an excuse to show her tits. I don't like Sybil Danning or gratuitous boobage, then or now, but I bought it anyway.

There was also an article about a teevee movie called *A Bunny's Tale*, in which Kirstie Alley plays Gloria Steinem going undercover at the Playboy Club. Like the Sybil Danning story, it mostly existed for the T&A. The centerpiece was a full page picture of Kirstie in costume as a Playboy Bunny.

She was already cool because she'd played a Vulcan in a *Star Trek* movie, but even if she hadn't, the picture still would have struck me. I didn't care for the cleavage, but the shape of the rest of her body, the look of the fabric, the angle of her eyebrows, the fact that instead of a smile, the expression on her face said "What the hell are YOU looking at?"...it was glorious, a revelation. I didn't have the first clue about the political ramifications of what she was wearing, and I wouldn't be capable of physical arousal for at least another year. What it stirred in me was something more basic, not about sex but about who I really was.

Unaware that this sort of picture was in fact called a "pin-up," I was very tempted to pin it up on my bedroom wall. But I didn't. I was afraid to. My fear? That my mom would think I was gay.

Seriously. Why else would a boy put a picture of a girl on his wall? To admire how she looked, to imagine being her, which meant he was gay. Obviously, I had no idea what the

word "gay" even meant. All I knew was that it was bad. Ironically, my mom probably would have been thrilled that I was showing an interest in girls. I suspect she breathed a sigh of relief when I eventually got a real live girlfriend, since that meant I was a normal boy. That relief would last for less than a decade.

In all fairness, however she may or may not have reacted at the time, my mother is very proud and supportive of me, and introduces me as her daughter. So we're good.

Like comedy, nostalgia is tragedy plus time. It's been fifteen years since Joan Collins assumed her rightful cultural position as has-been, Diane Lane is the only star from *Streets of Fire* to still have a career, Kirstie Alley probably won't be dressing as a Playboy bunny again anytime soon, and I can dress like "Borderline"-era Madonna if I want. Ladies and gentlemen, tonight *is* what it means to be young.



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