



OFF THE CUFF

THE ESSENTIAL STYLE GUIDE FOR MEN
AND THE WOMEN WHO LOVE THEM

CARSON KRESSLEY

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and the Women Who Love Them*

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DUTTON

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INTRODUCTION

SINCE THE DAWN OF TIME, MEN HAVE HAD TROUBLE FIGURING OUT WHAT TO WEAR. IT BEGAN, WELL, IT BEGAN IN THE VERY BEGINNING.

SETTING: Garden of Eden

We hear Eve shouting from stage left.

EVE

Adam, you're wearing that fig leaf ... *again*? Are you kidding me? That is so tired!

And so, fashion was born.

And here we are, all these years later, and straight men still have no idea what to wear. Over the last couple of years, I've spent a lot of time in the closets of straight America. Now I've been in the closet myself for a while, but it was never *that* scary, people.

I'm serious. It's a mad, mad world out there. There are more athletic jerseys than there are men. Polyester is threatening to take over the world. Men actually think they look good in mock turtleneck and pleated khakis. So while someone else is looking out for the rain forests, I've got to look out for wardrobes across the land.

How did we get into this tragic situation? Well, it wasn't always like this. Not that long ago, the world was a much simpler place because fashion was very regimented.

There was specific clothing for certain things. Most men had uniforms for work, whether it was an actual uniform or a suit and tie, and sportswear for things like hunting and skiing. Like cavemen teaching their sons to hunt bison and make fire, it was a rite of passage for fathers to take their sons to Brooks Brothers to buy their first blue blazer. Fathers taught sons how to tie ties and pick suits and shoes.

And then somewhere along the line—when those pesky cellphones and the Internet became popular?—we became a very mobile society and all those conformities fell by the wayside. Suddenly you could work from your home in your pajamas and fuzzy slippers and nobody knew. (If they did they probably wouldn't be giving you their money to invest in pork bellies and cultured diamonds.) You could get on a plane in a tank top, ripped shorts, and flip-flops and nobody would look twice at you. Fathers stopped teaching their sons the rules because there *were* no rules anymore.

So we have a whole generation of guys who have absolutely no idea how to dress. And to make matters worse, at the same time there's been an explosion in the number of clothing choices out there from outlet malls to the Internet. It would be like if you were trying to learn to make a cheese omelet and the only guidance you were given is, "Okay, here are 90 million ingredients. Make something tasty and delicious, but we're not going to tell you how." You'd get frustrated and overwhelmed. You'd experiment and make a lot of mistakes. Like when you thought you were totally cool and bought those acid-washed jeans in the eighties, but it was actually the nineties?

That's where I come in. I'm here, I'm queer, and I can help you. I was going to rescue abused teacup yorkies, but then I realized there weren't any, so straight men it is! I think they're cute and adorable and lovable, like abandoned puppies at the animal shelter. A straight guy is kind of like a little bird who's fallen out of a tree, until a straight woman or a gay man picks him up and says "Look at you! You're the cutest little thing! You have a broken wing, but we'll take you to Gucci and you'll be just fine."

So think of me as your very own fashion fairy godstylist, here to take you on the magical journey to build a better you, starting with an improved wardrobe. I want to demystify the process, because there's nothing to be afraid of. Absolutely everyone can dress well. And it doesn't have to be scary. It's not like you're doing a home pregnancy test here, people. I want to show you that looking great is easy and fun—just like NASCAR and televised bass fishing. Okay, well, maybe not that much fun.

Frank Lloyd Wright said,

"Give me the luxuries of life and I will willingly do without the necessities."

I've always been like that. Hmmm. Phone bill or new cashmere sweater? Well, I can survive without a phone. Health insurance or fur? Well, if I have the fur than I won't get sick and I won't need the health insurance. Problem solved!

Now, some of you may have seen me wearing some pretty out there things on TV, and you're thinking "Why should I listen to *him*??" Fear not. This is all about "Do as I say, not as I do." I wear clothes that are appropriate for my life as a gay reality makeover TV celebutante. I've been known to take my shirt off and go dancing at the Roxy till three in the morning on Saturdays. Most straight guys don't, so my personal style is going to be different from yours. I hope. Or you're going to be in for a big surprise next time you go to San Francisco. I'm going to recommend things that will help you get in touch with your own personal style and make *you* look great.

But before I tell you just how fabulous I can make you, you might want to know just how fabulous I am. Just kidding! But you might want to know where I come from and why I can help you: I was born a poor black child in the parking lot of a Kmart in Decatur, Alabama . . . Actually, I was born and raised in *Allentown*, Pennsylvania. I was practically Amish. Can you believe this much style came from Allentown? Which just goes to prove my theory that it doesn't matter where you come from; it only matters where you're going. Just because you're from a certain place, or you're black or white c

straight or gay doesn't mean you can't become who you want to be. Don't dream it, be it, people! Life isn't about finding yourself, it's about creating yourself!

But growing up gay in a blue-collar town like Allentown—and here's where I get serious for a moment—you realize that you're different, but you don't really know why or how. I mean, when you grow up poor, odds are your parents and siblings are poor, too, so you can go home and commiserate and fight over some government cheese or whatever. But when you grow up gay, you're like “Why do I have a crush on Lee Majors and nobody else in the first grade does? Why is my copy of *Dynamite!* magazine stuck together?” You're an outsider in many ways, so you turn a little more inward and focus on your self a little more. Because you don't have any friends. Ha, ha, ha! (Good times! Good times!) And that gives you a little perspective.

So I know what it's like not to feel good about yourself, and I also know how great it can feel to finally embrace who you really are. That's what I want to help people do—be confident and enjoy who you are. (Are you a jean or a khaki? Maybe you're a Jackie. But that's another book.)

Anyway, I was definitely not born wrapped in a Prada blanket. My dad's in the car business and my mom is the child of dairy farmers in rural Pennsylvania. But the other big influences on my life were my paternal grandparents, who were in the horse business. As we got older, my sister and I got more and more involved in equestrian sports. The horse world is a very, very glamorous one, and one filled with fabulous clothes and rich heritage. By the time I was fifteen, I was traveling all over the United States showing horses at national competitions. I met sophisticated people who lived in big cities. I met movie stars and the heads of major corporations. I met gay people. I was seeing all these amazing clothes that they didn't have at the Chess King at the Lehigh Valley mall. I was like, “Wow, there's something else out there.”

After I graduated from Gettysburg College in 1991, I took a job with the Equestrian Federation of the United States so I could move to New York. But after a few years there I learned that man cannot live on nonprofit wages alone. One day when I was working out at the gym in some super preppy outfit, carrying a Ralph Lauren plaid basketball from the holiday '94 gift catalog—I bought something like ninety gallons of fragrance to get it for free—I was approached by a headhunter who told me I was “a Ralph Lauren.”

Two days later I had an interview, and in a few weeks I was a gopher for the top executives at Ralph Lauren. (Forever in the back of my brain I'll know that Ralph's brother Jerry Lauren likes his coffee black with two Sweet'n Lows at 6:45 in the morning.)

For the next seven years, I worked for Ralph Lauren and got to see every side of the company, from design and manufacturing to merchandising and advertising. I learned about the nuts and bolts of men's clothing: the gauge of a sweater and the thread count of a dress shirt. I visited fashion shows and fabric vendors and design houses. I got really great hands-on teaching from the masters, people like Ralph and Jerry Lauren and John Varvatos. It was such an education, better than I could have gotten in any design school.

The Art of the Tszuj

When I worked at Ralph Lauren, whenever we were styling looks for runway shows or on models, Ralph and Jerry Lauren would turn to me and say, “Carson give that a little tszuj.” “Tszuj it” just means tweak it, finesse it, make it better, make it personal. It might mean paying attention to the details: a little roll of the cuff, a tweak of the collar or pushing up sleeves. It might be as simple as halfway tucking in a sweater, opening a button or two on your shirt, or tweaking the angle of your ballcap.

The whole reason for tszujing is to take your look over the top. It brings an outfit to life and makes it look like it’s not on a mannequin. Tszujing is being alive. I tszuj, therefore I am.

(Tszuj not, lest ye be tszujed!) So just tszuj it, people!

Ultimately, I became a stylist in the advertising division. That meant that when Ralph Lauren clothing was advertised in a catalog, I was the fashion police officer styling the clothes, selecting the models, helping with the locations. A stylist is not a designer, and that’s what I love about it—it’s all about tweaking. It’s mixing up the pieces and putting them on a real person to bring them to life. I got really in tune with how you customize looks for different people and different settings. I started doing freelance styling for celebrities. I worked with department stores, helping them lay out their catalogs and style their clothes, putting it all together so it was fresh and fun and inventive.

I still don’t claim to be the world’s foremost expert on fashion—shocking, I know. But I have had a unique opportunity to get a real education in clothes. I have an inherent ability to say, “That won’t look good on you” and “This will look great on you.” You may be a software engineer or a waiter or an insurance salesman. There are tax accountants who know every single law and loophole, God bless them. I know all the tricks of the fashion trade. That’s my job.

One day in 2002, I was doing a catalog shoot in the Florida Keys, when one of the photo producers said she’d heard something on the radio about this new TV show that was looking for all these gay professionals with different areas of expertise. The only thing I knew was that it was being done by Bravo. At that point, I thought Bravo was a nonstick cooking spray. I was like, “Hmmm. I think I have some Bravo from when I made muffins last . . .” Fast forward two years, and now I’ve made a new career of helping clueless straight men dress better.

Which brings me to this book. This book is an easy, step-by-step guide to help you know what to wear and when, what to get rid of, and how you can shop—whether it’s at Neiman Marcus or T.J.Maxx—with the confidence to know what you’re looking for. Men’s style books tend to be dry and stuffy and serious. I won’t go there. You don’t need to know who the Glen in Glen plaid is and why he’s so fond of this plaid of his. You don’t need to know the history of tweed. You just need to know what looks good on you, what makes you feel good, and what helps you get from point A to point B.

I wrote this book for straight men who need it and for the women who love them, but, lest we not

forget, also for my gay brethren. Because we all know that bad taste does not discriminate. I don't care if you're gay, straight, or bi, just get some good clothes for God's sake.

Let's get one thing out of the way, shall we? There's nothing wrong with caring about how you look and dress. It's not at all superficial. To me, that's like saying it's superficial to care about having clean underwear. Or taking care of your teeth. Or going to the doctor. It's just what you should do.

A lot of straight men have been afraid to care too much about how they looked, for fear that they'd be perceived as being gay. But now everyone wants to be a metrosexual. Gay is good! We live at a time when the average straight guy has permission to ask questions that he normally felt uncomfortable asking, like, "Does my butt look big in these pants?" and "Are these pleats okay?" (No, by the way) and "Should I get a manicure or highlights?" Questions that guys never would have uttered, they're now asking me at the TGI Friday's in LAX airport. In front of their wives, no less! Times have changed. And I am personally writing you a permission slip to your principal or supervisor or whomever to look good and feel good.

You do have to tread that fine line, though. It *is* superficial to think that if your teeth are whiter and your shirt fits better, you'll be happier. Those things might give you that extra little bit of confidence that will inspire you to achieve. A little taste of looking good can be very inspirational. Suddenly you want to be better the next day, and the next, for the rest of your life. Looking good is just the first step in empowering yourself. And further down the line, everything comes together in a package where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. It's like my career in math in elementary school: $2 + 2 = 5$. Oh my God, I feel *just* like Tony Robbins.

By the way, looking good has nothing to do with how much money you spend or what designer labels you wear. It's not someone coming up to you and saying, "Oh my God! That's a really expensive shirt!" or "Oh my God! Are those Gucci loafers?" It's people coming up to you and saying, "You look fantastic. Did you trim your ear hair?"

Looking good is also not about being "fashionable." When I'm told I'm so "fashionable," it means, "You're so trendy and of the moment." Wrong answer. It shouldn't be about what's hot now and what the newest thing is. It's about feeling confident, and for you, that might mean disregarding what's trendy and "in." Classic personal style is building a wardrobe that suits you and your life and sets you apart from the crowd. It doesn't have to be edgy or wild or look like it comes off a runway. And it shouldn't be dictated by what looks good on models, or what a certain designer says, or even, to a degree, what I say, because it's so very personal. I'm really just a guide, an educator, a medium.

So why *should* straight men take fashion advice from a gay man? Because gay men are generally just a little more sensitive to aesthetics. We pay attention to details. We have all this free time when we're not watching *SportsCenter* or having sex with women. I think that improves our clarity. Just kidding!

Seriously, though, all those years on the playground when all the other boys were making fun of me, I thought, "Oh my God! If only we had something in common!" And now here I am, building bridges, one manicure or trip to Barneys at a time. This book is just my way of reaching out and saying, "This

comes from a place of love.” Or maybe it’s severe adolescent rejection. We’re going to get through this just fine if you just hold my hand, and step away from the pleated khakis.

The Ten Fashion Commandments According to Carson Kressley

As we proceed on our magical journey to fabulousness, there are some rules for you to follow. Keep your hands inside the tram car at all times and don’t feed the animals.

- 1. Disregard trends. You shouldn’t wear something just because it’s of the fashion moment. You have to be yourself, find what looks good on you, and embrace it, even if it’s not “in.” Be one with the penny loafer. The biggest fashion faux pas is trying to look like somebody else.**
- 2. Never underestimate the power of details. The last thing on is the first thing noticed. Food stains don’t count.**
- 3. Keep it simple, sassy! For the average guy, it’s about building a personal wardrobe that looks great on you. Don’t make it complicated. When you have a choice between two items, choose the simpler one.**
- 4. A garment should never be made of more than 25 percent of an unnatural fiber. A little bit of polyester isn’t going to kill you. A lot of polyester? That’s a different story.**
- 5. Experiment with style. If you make mistakes, life goes on.**
- 6. Never go shopping alone. You’ve got the store trying to sell you items and you’re not sure you look right. But if you have a friend along, you can always get an objective opinion from someone *who knows you*.**
- 7. Don’t overdo it. You want to be noticed for a look that’s yours, and not because you look clownish and inspire the Barnum and Bailey theme song. Overdoing it is like crying, “Oh, look at me!!” I bet you never thought you’d hear me of all people saying that. (“Hi, pot? It’s the kettle calling!”) I think it’s far better to be noticed for subtlety than for garishness.**
- 8. Never wear anything sheer. Let’s leave the exposed nipples to Janet Jackson, shall we? Thanks for the mammaries, Janet.**
- 9. Spend within reason. I encourage many trips to the mall or to your favorite fashion retailer. However, when shopping becomes an addiction and you have to move every two weeks to flee creditors, you officially have a problem. There are two important things to hold on to in this world: your dignity and your personal credit rating. You don’t want to become American Express’ bee-atch.**
- 10. Cashmere is seasonless. Wear it in winter. Wear it in summer. Wear it to bed and to garden in for all I care, but cashmere is never, ever the wrong answer.**

***Shoes* BAD SHOES, YOU LOSE, OR A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CLOG**

WHEN IT COMES TO SHOES, IT'S PRETTY SIMPLE: BAD SHOES, YOU LOSE. AND WE'RE TALKING MORE THAN SELF-ESTEEM, PEOPLE!

We're talking jobs, girlfriends, respect. What you have on your feet can make or break any look ... and break your toes. Spend some money and get the best shoes you can afford. And for Gucci's sake, make sure that they're comfortable.

Because as much as I love sassy shoes, bunions are a real bee-atch, people. Ending up in the podiatric emergency room can ruin Kwanzaa for everyone.

With shoes, it's all about quality, quality, quality. It's better to have two or three pairs of good shoes that will last a long time than to have twenty-five pairs of generic-looking bargain brands. That's especially true of your dress shoes, but you can slide a little on casual shoes and sneakers.

Why does quality matter? Because your shoes are the first thing that women look at, and women (and gay men) know good footwear. You might be wearing the most amazing suit in the universe, but if you're wearing bad shoes, you might as well be wearing a sticker on your forehead that says "LOSER."

High-quality shoes are all about construction, and there are a few basic things to look for. Your shoes should be made of real leather and have leather soles as well.

The Fashion Intervention

If you've bought this book for a significant other who thinks he looks fabulous, but his fashion sense is actually stuck in the *Miami Vice* era, you might be nervous about broaching the subject. I subscribe to the Mary Poppins theory: A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down. Doing a fashion intervention is a matter of tough love, and as long as you make clear that you come with good intentions, you should be okay. (If that fails, try slipping him a Roofie.)

And if you are that guy who thinks you look super cool in parachute pants and Members Only jackets, you need to listen to what your spouse or best friend is trying to tell you. They care about you and love you, and they want to help. You need to be willing to accept their honesty and candor in the kind, loving way it's being offered. Sometimes you think you look great, but you just don't, and only someone else can tell you that for sure. You need a second opinion. Even I, on rare occasion, think something I'm wearing is amazing and then some good Samaritan—or evil arch enemy—will show me a picture of myself and I'll say, "Oh, dear!"



If you buy quality leather shoes, they can be refurbished a number of times and will last forever, which is ultimately going to be less expensive than having to replace crappy, poorly made shoes every few months. For those of you animal lovers out there who won't wear leather, I admire your principles, I just don't admire your shoes. Vegetarian leather is like nonfat ice cream. Why bother?

The soles of well-made shoes will be **stitched**, not glued, to the bottom of the shoe. Also, the lining in better shoes is made of high-quality calfskin or natural leather, not synthetic materials. Finally, check out the stitching. It should be neat and should be barely noticeable.

Okay, so now that you know what quality shoes look like, I bet you want to know what *styles* of shoes you should have. The good news is that there really aren't too many options. (Yes, occasionally that can be a *good* thing.) For women, shoes are more of an accessory, like jewelry, that comes in 95 million different shapes, colors, varieties, and textures. But good-looking, **stylish**, conservative shoes are an absolute necessity for any man's wardrobe, and there are really just a few basic options for you to choose from.



cowboy boots

samba

loafer

tuxedo slipper



black oxford lace-up



loafer



velvet tuxedo slipper



wingtip



driving moc



patent leather



samba



Birkenstock



cowboy boot



Chelsea boot



military boot



snow boot

My Favorite Pair of Shoes

My favorite pair of shoes are brown suede Chelsea boots with a side gore that get better every time I wear them. They were hand sewn and bench made in England. I just absolutely love them and they look great with a gray flannel suit or jeans. If I ever get scared or lonely I hold them next to me, breathing in their leathery scent, and all is soon right with the world.

Shoes are an acquired taste. I'm just going to walk you through the basics (so all you good little straight bunnies need not get overwhelmed on me), because if I unravel the whole world of shoes, you could become obsessive-compulsively addicted to shoe shopping. And the next thing you know you'll be hanging out with "gender illusionists" and collecting Cher memorabilia.

I'm not going to bother getting into specifics about the vast sea of casual shoes out there—from mon strap shoes and Chukka Boots to the whole slew of slip-ons. All I can say is keep it **simple**, sassy. You can really get in trouble with "fashion" shoes for men.

So here is my list of the ten pairs of shoes that I promise you will take to your grave. (Notice I said that you will take *them*, not that they will send *you* to your grave. Important distinction, people!)

1. **The Black Oxford Lace-up, aka the blucher.** This is the classic lace-up dress shoe (à la Beatles). And while we're at it, there is no such thing as a dress shoe that is not a lace-up. The black oxford is the perfect complement to all of your dark suits. Just don't wear them with a black suit, because you'll look like a lost Mormon missionary or Bible salesman. Black bluchers with jeans are not bad as long as the shoe's not too fancy. I hate to see someone with an overdone dress shoe and a pair of jeans. It just looks stupid.

2. **The Brown Wing Tip.** The brown wing tip—also sometimes called a “brogue”—is the ultimate classic shoe. It's a lot like an oxford, except wing tips have little holes punched into the leather in a pattern. Doesn't sound familiar? Think of the opening of *My Three Sons*. Those snappy little tapping toes were wearing wing tips, kids. The brown wing tip looks great with a gray pinstripe suit, as it does with a pair of jeans and an oxford shirt. And who doesn't love versatility?

3. **The Loafer.** As the Judds sang in their country chart topper, love can build a bridge. And a nice brown loafer (penny or tassel—your choice) builds the bridge from sportswear to more dressy clothes. You can wear loafers with a sports coat (but not with a suit) or with casual sportswear—even jeans—and they still look cool and sophisticated in that Marlon Brando kind of way. Do I have to say more than Marlon and Brando? I don't think so. Loafers are also very Italian. In Milan, even the cabdrivers are cool. Why? Because they've got great loafers. And cute little Mercedes-Benz cabs! Who knew?

A word of caution about loafers: Beware the low vamp. No, this is not a trashy woman. The vamp refers to how far the shoe comes up the top of your foot. I hate to see shoes with a low vamp. They are *très* cheesy and they show way too much of your sock. Leave them in the *GoodFellas* wardrobe trailer, where they belong.

The Great Cordovan Mystery

There a lot of men walking around thinking that cordovan shoes—you know, that mahogany, winey-dark color—are okay to wear with a suit. Well let's talk about that, because it's *not* okay.

It might help to take a step back and explain where cordovan comes from. Originally, cordovan was sinewy leather made from a horse's rump. I think you can probably guess how I feel about wearing a horse's ass on your feet. Back in the day when people used horses for farming and work and transportation, there were so many horses around that when they got old and they died, they would use horsehide to make things. Luckily, this is not so popular anymore. Most “cordovan” shoes today are not true cordovan; they're calfskin or leather that's been tanned to achieve what we like to call “cordovanosity.” It's a lovely color, but not for your suits.

4. **The Flip- Flop.** For five dollars, flip-flops are more fun than an Asian hooker—at ha

the cost! They're a must have. Get them in black and brown. Then again, they're inexpensive, why not get them in every color available? I'm not talking about Teva here or any other nylon "tech sandal." A technical sandal is about as stupid-looking as it sounds. I'm talking about a plain old flip-flop from J.Crew, Old Navy, or the little Brazilian beauty known as the Havaiana.

In the summer, flip-flops are chic with absolutely everything—shorts and a linen shirt, denim and a blue blazer, khakis and a white cotton oxford. But feel free to wear them right into the fall, as long as snow has not yet fallen and the temperature is still mild. I once wore a brown Jil Sander suit (that's a fancy lady designer from my homeland) with brown Old Navy flip-flops. But this look is not for amateurs. I'll admit that flip-flops are hard to wear in the city and hard to drive in (see *Driving Moccasins*, below, for those occasions), but that's part of the cachet.

5. **The Cowboy Boot.** The cowboy boot is a classic American icon, right up there with baseball, apple pie, and show tunes. Okay, maybe not so much the show tunes for you. But cowboy boots made America great, and they'll look great on your feet, trust me. Go out and get a pair or I'll kick your ass. Wear them everywhere: in your living room, at a game, to the Emmys, to the opera. They can go everywhere except weddings and funerals, unless a rodeo clown is getting married or has died. Then you're in luck!

6. **The Chelsea Boot.** They're called Chelsea boots because everyone in New York City lives in the Chelsea neighborhood, where nearly everyone is gay, owns a pair, and gay men know shoes, people. Chelsea boots are compact boots with a side gore, which is a stretch little elastic panel that allows the boot to fit snugly even though it doesn't have laces. I prefer them in black, but brown suede is yummy, too. Chelsea boots are classics that go well with absolutely everything—they're sexy and a little more rugged than your average dress shoe. And because they were invented for riding, they add just a little equestrian flair to your wardrobe. Trust me, horse people know clothes. It's never a bad idea to copy them.

The Glories of Shoe Shopping

Here are some little shopping tricks For treats for your tootsies. First of all, you should try on shoes later in the day, because your feet tend to expand as the day goes on. And make sure you're wearing the socks you're really going to wear—no trying on dress shoes with big white tube socks. Most importantly, don't get suckered by the cute salesgirl who tells you, "Don't worry if they're not comfortable now! They'll break in." Let me tell you a secret. "Break in" is a code word for "Not gonna happen." Shoes should feel comfortable when you try them on. If they're not comfortable when you buy them, they're probably not just going to magically morph into comfortable shoes later on.

Finally, if while on your shopping journey you find a pair of comfortable shoes that you absolutely, absolutely love, and they are so "you," and so

great looking—go back and buy a second pair of the exact same shoe. Just like condoms, it's always good to have a backup. Trust me, you'll thank me later.

7. **The Classic Tennis Shoe.** I'm not talking about white Reeboks here. And I'm not talking about all these exotic colored sneakers that make you look like a refugee from the Namibian national soccer team. I'm talking about black, navy or natural cotton Converse Chuck Taylors, which look great with jeans or a suit. They're always timeless and cool. Think James Dean. If Chucks don't tickle your fancy, try the classic black and-white Adidas sambas or a chic pair of suede Pumas.

Going Sockless

Going sockless can add a WASP-ish, care-free joie de vivre to your look. It's so cool and has a trendy kind of sophistication. I often like to wear shoes without socks from Memorial Day through Labor Day, for the perfect summer chic casual look. But this is only acceptable in casual situations—for those easy breezy summer weekends when you're on vacation or at the beach and it's fun to wear a pair of jeans, a blue blazer and a white shirt with loafers and no socks. Seeing the tanned tops of your feet can give you all the sexy allure of a Kennedy, without those pesky DUIs.

But going sockless is not for dinner at the White House or for a meeting with your loan officer. In fact, you should never go sockless if you're wearing a suit. This is one of those “Do as Carson says, not as Carson does” times, though, because I confess I have gone sockless with a suit (like on the cover of this book!). But I don't recommend it. At least not for amateurs. Leave this one to the pros.

There is one caveat. If you do choose to take the sockless plunge, you need to use powder in your shoes to avoid your sweaty feet smelling like a cheese factory. Not appealing, people.



TIP

Fairy Carson Explains All About Taps

Please, my straight friends, do not put taps on your shoes. They're devised to prevent wear and tear on the toe and the heel, but it's really not that expensive to have shoes resoled, and most leather will wear more evenly without them. Not to mention that you're going to sound like some out of work chorus line member from 42nd Street. I only like taps on Liza.

8. The Athletic Sneaker. The athletic shoe is where you can knock yourself out. This shoe can be as ugly as you want it to be. (I can't believe I just said that!) It just needs to provide support and protect against bunions and corns. Good times, good times.

It pains me to have to remind you that athletic shoes are for the gym and for the gym *only*. We're in the midst of a raging sneaker epidemic in this great nation of ours, which has been propagated by the freakishly huge—and growing!—selection of sneakers available. I fear that the number of sneaker styles out there will soon exceed the national population. True athletic shoes, meaning any sneaker that is predominantly white, should be saved for the gym. You can't even wear them to get coffee in the morning. And one thing I really hate to see is men on their morning commute wearing sneakers with a suit. That's a one-way ticket to Tragikestan. It saddens me more than global deforestation. Don't ever, ever do that or, Prada help me, I will personally come and rip those shoes off your feet.

9. The Driving Moccasin. A moccasin made for exactly what it says: driving your car. And even if you don't build your wardrobe around driving, you should still have a pair of these, because they're comfortable, they're just plain cool, and they look great with everything. They're especially yummy in chocolate brown and, for the more daring, baby blue. Okay, I confess that driving mocs may not be for amateurs or the average Joe, but who wants to be average?

10. The Tuxedo Shoe. If you've made it this far, consider yourself among the lucky. If you already own tuxedo shoes, you probably own a tuxedo. Good for you! I'm beginning to like you already. If you don't, keep it simple on this one and go with a black patent leather lace-up, which is always timeless and classic.

What Color Shoes with Suits?

I wouldn't be so worried about rules. It's case by case and you just have to see what looks good. I love a navy suit with a brown shoe. It's very rich and very, very English. I like black shoes with navy as well. Brown goes with pretty much everything but black. If someone tells you brown is the new black, I have news for you, people: They're lying.

For those who are firmly in touch with their masculine side, most men's fashion books will tell you that the dark velvet slipper is appropriate with a tuxedo. I personally love the formal slipper embroidered with your monogram (or Gucci's or Ralph Lauren's,) a family crest, or a sartorial nod to a favorite hobby—perhaps martini glasses or a skull and crossbones. (Corporate logos do not count.) Just keep the vamp high so as not to look like an out-of-work ballet dancer.

A word of caution: The velvet slipper is for real pros. In all honesty, I think velvet slippers can be far too gay sometimes, even for me. That's saying a lot, people. Let's just leave it there and move on.



~~10a. I know, I know, I said ten, but if you live someplace where inclement weather is a factor, you might want some snow boots. Unless you live in Alaska, you're not going to wear them every day, so you can invest in a pair that will last for a number of years. Make sure they look good and they do their job.~~

All About Suede Shoes

Whilst I was a student at Ralph Lauren “University,” many of my fellow “classmates” seemed to feel that suede shoes were only for fall and winter. I disagree. Many designers are making shoes out of fine, beautiful suede these days. It’s so soft, luxurious, and rich that suede has become the cashmere of leathers. And just as cashmere is seasonless, I believe suede—which is inside-out calfskin, in case you were wondering—is, too.

There’s also a misconception out there that if suede gets dirty, you have to get rid of it. Caring for your suede is actually really, really easy. All you have to do is get a suede brush, which you can find at any shoe repair store, and give the shoes a good brushing—just like that great My Little Pony you had as a child. Or maybe it was the one you coveted from your little sister. Or was it Pound Puppies? But I digress. Anyway, brush your suede shoes just once or twice a season, and it will extend their life considerably. Snow boots are necessary because there is no better way to ruin your leather shoes than to walk around in the snow. The salt on the sidewalk will migrate up to the sole of your shoe and cause it to detach. Salt also causes white crystallization on your shoes that you’ll have to work hard to get out. (Should you find yourself in that unfortunate situation, try a soft cloth and a shoe cream with mink oil.) If it’s snowy out, wear boots of a different kind when you get to the office or wherever you’re going, then change into your dress shoes. Mind you, this is the *one and only* time I will allow you to change your shoes for your commute. Otherwise, it’s ridiculous.

Taking Care of Your Friends, Your Shoes

So now that you’ve amassed this great library of shoes, how are you going to take care of them? It really doesn’t take much. You can just literally spit shine them with a soft cloth every once and a while, in between occasional polishings, which need to be done with real, live shoe polish. You don’t want to be a slave to your shoes and feel like you have to spit shine and polish them every day. This isn’t the Army, people or *An Officer and a Gentleman*. Oh, don’t get me started on Richard Gere. Dreamsville! Sigh.

Your shoes should be kept clean and dry. It’s also a good idea not to wear the same pair of shoes every day. Just give them a day to breathe in between wearings and they’ll stay with you a long, long time. I’m also a big fan of the shoe tree. Shoe trees are good; plastic ficus trees are bad. If you buy an

expensive pair of shoes, I'm going to be very upset if you don't also invest in a pair of \$8 shoe trees. When you're not wearing your shoes, trees help them keep their shape and stay fresh and dry.

Keeping shoes in the boxes is always the wrong answer. Your shoes are like trophies. Keep them out so you can see them. I know it's fun to hold on to the memory of that glorious day of shoe shopping, when they all came in their fresh little boxes, but keeping them cooped up doesn't allow circulation, which is really important. Everything in your closet should be able to get some air, as all natural fibers and materials need. I recommend you invest in a canvas shoe holder that just slips over your closet door. That way you can keep all of your shoes out where you can see them. If they are in the boxes, you wind up forgetting what you have and not wearing some. And that would make us both sad clowns.

Shoes

Thick chunky sandals, also known as "mandals." They look good on no one. Never worn with socks, by the way. It's way too lesbian hootenanny.

Wearing socks with flip-flops. Ask yourself "What would Jesus do?" He wouldn't wear socks.

Anything orthopedic-looking. If your shoe makes it seem that you have polio, it's probably not the right look, unless you do have polio, in which case you should be getting better medical care, as polio has gone the way of the gaucho, people. It's virtually nonexistent.

Backless shoes, otherwise known as the man mule. Always the wrong answer. If you wear mules, you'll look like a jackass. Mules = jackass.

Clogs. One letter away from "clod." Need I say more?

Anything in patent leather unless it's black tie. Or you're a cop. In that case, it's hot. But don't get me started.

Doc Martens. Sorry, all you hipsters, but they're just not polished-looking or classic. They're big and clunky and look like they're meant for working in a coal mine. Attention all ravers: Put down the glow sticks and step away from the Doc Martens. Repeat. Step away from the Doc Martens.

Shoes in bright, crazy hues. You'll look like an ass. Or an elf.

Save it for Vegas or the Christmas pageant.

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