

By Katherine Mosby

style in a suitcase

Compelled to condense her wardrobe into a single carry-on case, Katherine Mosby found her sense of fashion expanded.



TOTE WITH THE MOST THE WELL-TRAVELED TRAVELER HAS HER OWN BRAND OF CHIC, AS SHOWN IN A 1956 VOGUE PHOTOGRAPH BY KAREN RADKAI (AR LEFT, THE AUTHOR AT AGE TWO).

Born at the end of the fifties, I fused in my mind that decade and the notion of high style. As a young girl, I had chafed under the tyranny of its rules. Patent leather only after dusk; white shoes after Memorial Day—the length of glove or coat required at any given time seemed as arbitrary and onerous as the irregular verbs in a foreign language. Glamour was, however, spoken fluently by the women in my family. It was through luggage that I finally came to terms with fashion.

My aunt Barbara was legendary. She appeared in photographs in fashion magazines, luminous in couture by Balmain or Balenciaga or Worth. Every detail—the evening clutch and long gloves, hat and muff, fan or jeweled tiara—evoked a life of such exacting

refinement as to seem otherworldly. I saw her as a cross between a movie star and a princess, impeccably elegant and almost imaginary. She lived in Paris, naturally.

My aunt Geraldine drove a green Jaguar and was so glamorous my mother (who had herself modeled briefly) said it was exhausting to be around her. Geraldine was always brilliantly jeweled by Buccellati and dramatically hatted by Lilly Daché; she favored ostrich for her handbags, and her capes were trimmed with fox and lined with fuchsia satin. Her luggage would arrive at European hotels in its own taxi, with steamer trunks and train cases, stacks of hatboxes piled precariously. These were women who never left the house without looking polished and poised and ready to be admired.

I loved all the accoutrements of that world. *nostalgia* 59

nostalgia

IN THE BAG

the cocktail dresses that shimmered, and the blouses of silk gauze, spun thin as a dragonfly's wing. I liked to sit at my great-aunt's vanity, marveling at the cut-glass perfume bottles, jeweled hat pins, enameled compacts, or ivory hair clips. But from earliest childhood it was clear to me that while it was a world I loved, it was also one in which I would always be more comfortable as a visitor than a resident.

Knowing this about myself in no way diminished my appreciation of the gilded world in which my aunts reigned. If anything, it only heightened it. I had been raised as an acolyte at the altar of female beauty; I was well aware of the rigors of its service. I knew that what others made look effortless remained for me elusive. As a child I was always the first at a gathering to get chocolate ice cream on the pink sash of my party dress or to lose a button or bow.

Once I ripped out the stiff tulle netting from the underskirt of a dress I was wearing because it scratched my legs like nettles and its poufiness got in the way of play. That was a dress my mother had chosen specifically for me to wear the summer we spent in the South of France, when I was six. "You'll need it at the châteaux, when we visit the grandes dames," my mother said when it was being fitted. The grandes dames, I was disappointed to discover, were very old ladies who didn't like noise or children, no matter how much starch was involved.

I was hopelessly skinny, and even when dressed for royalty I always looked part ragamuffin. My ankle socks sagged or the lace at my sleeves snagged or my hair sparked wildly with static electricity, some detail always refusing to obey beauty's command. My clothes wrinkled instantly and were a magnet for cat hair. I was not one of the chosen, bathed in perfection, who never blinked as the shutter clicks or got a mosquito bite on their eyelid the morning of a party.

I was relieved to attend an elementary school that had a uniform, and when I left behind the navy pleats and Peter Pan collar to go to boarding school, it was a welcome reprieve to find that blue jeans were the unspoken but universally acknowledged dress code of my peers. I was not a true hippie, however; my attire was not dictated only by conscience or politics—comfort and laziness were also compelling reasons. I liked being barefoot not because of the statement it made but because it felt good to be in contact with the earth, to feel the cool of grass, to be able to run whenever I wanted. It was only on holidays that I temporarily returned to the world of spectator pumps and Kelly bags and cotton gloves.

I was also uneasy with the concept of variety fashion demand-

ed. Once I fell in love with an article of clothing, my inclination was to wear it repeatedly, until the seams gave way or it was replaced in my affection. Favorite items were impossible not to lose, and then I'd be devastated, mourning the loss of a chiffon scarf or suede gloves or a straw hat for weeks. I can still get a pang thinking of a velvet muff I left on a train more than a decade ago or the mother-of-pearl opera glasses with a red calfskin case taken from me by someone I thought of as a friend.

Glamour, it seemed, was something I could have briefly but not hold on to permanently. Like water, it slipped through my fingers, allowing me enough of a taste to recognize its intoxicating power before returning me to the familiar comforts of an ancient unraveling cashmere sweater or the slippers so well worn a boyfriend once suggested that I change my thesis topic to "Dickens and the Sartorial Aspect of the Waif." Unable to commit to either world, I was always wistful for the other.

By fourteen I'd been down the Amazon and up the Alps, but it was only later, when I married, that I made my liberating discovery about luggage. It was a small leather valise covered with customs stickers and hotel tags that finally taught me how to reconcile a desire for high style with an inclination for comfort clothing. Unlike my family, famous for their exuberant packing—including for ocean crossings not only formal-wear but "fancy dress"—my then husband insisted we tour the world with only what we could each fit in a carry-on case.

I discovered that a suitcase, properly approached, becomes a form of philosophy. It is a world in microcosm, reduced to its essence. The act of selection required a Zen-like rigor I found exhilarating; the paring down was cathartic and self-defining. The act of assemblage required creativity and flexibility and, occasionally, reversibility. It was for travel, when others would dress down, that I rose to the occasion, like a chef whipping together a feast from an almost bare pantry or a workman who is able with only the most rudimentary tools to craft something skillful. I reveled in the challenge.

That suitcase became for me a symbol for glamour as mysterious and seductive as cover-the-elbow evening gloves. Just to see it perched on the bed, waiting to shape an adventure, made my heart race. Its very presence created instant excitement and sense of escape from the quotidian. That, I finally understood, was the key to style. It was about the ability to stir the imagination, to suggest more than met the eye with a handful of carefully selected items that caught the eye. It didn't matter whether the lipstick I applied at dawn before going out to track tigers in the wilds of Rajasthan was crimson or peach: It was that I chose to wear it at all that would have made my aunts proud. □



LOOK OF A LEGEND
THE AUTHOR'S AUNT BARBARA SAT FOR RICHARD AVEEDON IN PARIS IN 1954 FOR HER PORTFOLIO.

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