

JANUARY

The beginning

Style actually isn't as easy as it's sold to be, but it's profitable to sell the idea that looking good is simply a combination of the right items.

Waking up on 1 January 2023 on day one of my commitment to not buy any clothes for the year felt ... well, in all honesty, I didn't really feel any kind of way about it yet. I could sit here and tell you I felt all kinds of personal development-adjacent words about starting a year-long journey of self-discovery, but I'll spare you the overinflated self-improvement speak. Frankly, at this point, I didn't really know what I was in for. In fact, I was simply sitting with the fact that it was time to live out the year I'd been planning.

There's something so interesting about how much we, as humans, love to plan for change more than we love to execute change. If I had a dollar for the number of times in my life I've flirted with who I'd be if I did yoga every day, or if I got up at 5 am, or if I decided to study some fancy-schmancy degree at night school ... Let me tell you, I love inserting myself into inspirational movie montage sequences, speeding up the effort it takes to follow through on your promises and adding an upbeat soundtrack. Damn, it feels good. I've lost count of the number of times I've watched the Elle Woods law school montage in *Legally Blonde* and immediately felt like applying to Harvard or

climbing Mount Kilimanjaro. Reading textbooks on a Stairmaster? Sign me up.

The reason these give us all the feels is that they romanticise the work that goes into getting an outcome you want. They skip over all the hard bits, the painful alarms, the Stairmaster thigh burn, the things you miss when you've got your nose in a textbook. Most importantly, they skip over the self-doubt and the wobbles and the backslides and the almost giving up. You don't see the self-doubt in the montage because the outcome has already arrived.

For the months prior to 1 January, I'd been in montage mode. Excited. Ready to meet the person at the end of the sequence. But that first day of 2023 was the day it actually started to mean something. It was the day where all the exciting stuff dissolved into accountability. Alright bitch, you've started. You're on day one of 365, and you're not gonna get that 'new outfit' feeling for one whole year.

I had to start thinking seriously about how I was going to approach this, and what I'd need to do to actually make it through the year without thinking I had to have something. If I'm honest with you, writing that sentence feels quite vulnerable, because I know so many people could easily go a year without buying clothes, easily see nice things and know they don't need them. People who maybe haven't bought clothes in years because they're simply not ruled by their appearance in the same way I had been for so long. But, in all seriousness, it really felt like I was going cold turkey on some kind of addiction. There was a sense of fear there that the pull of wanting something would be so strong I wouldn't be able to say 'no' to it. I knew that feeling so, so well. The feeling of seeing something great and feeling compelled to get it. Feeling like I'd be missing out on something if I didn't get it. Grappling with the price or the stock levels or chasing it halfway around the country on stock checks if it wasn't available at my local store.

Being so early in the year, the one major thing I lacked at this point was momentum. I needed to focus on making progress through the first month so that I had something to lose. If I got tempted too early,

I'd find myself in the danger zone of thinking I could just get this one thing and then start fresh in February. Knowing this about myself, my first strategy was to minimise my exposure to things that would likely put me in that state of temptation. I combed my social media and cleaned up my feeds with the unfollow and mute functions. *Unfollow* for the ones I felt made me feel worse about myself, and *mute* for the ones I knew I enjoyed taking inspiration from and would want to return to one day. Then I checked my email inbox for any marketing emails and unsubscribed from any I thought might get me to click.

With my digital environment primed for savvy spending, I made it my mission to avoid the shops. At the time, I lived near one of Australia's largest shopping centres, which made it all too easy to find myself popping into a clothes shop while I was over there running an innocent errand, like going to the chemist or grabbing something from Aldi.

Tip: Committing to a calendar year was additionally helpful for scaffolding that all-important 'something to lose' mindset. While I knew I needed to start making headway so I wasn't tempted to start again next month, the idea that this was my one shot to have a clean full year to complete the challenge did, in part, help me stay the course in those early days. While I could always start again in February, my brain was very keen on the calendar year approach, which in itself gave me something to lose if I slipped up. You can definitely do the challenge at any time, and for any length of time, but using date containers like a calendar year or a calendar quarter, or your birthday to birthday year, can help hold yourself accountable and build early momentum.

To embrace or withdraw?

I knew a big part of making it through the year without buying clothes was going to be wearing what I already had. The way I saw it, there were two ways of doing this: I could either embrace the challenge of finding satisfaction with my existing wardrobe by getting creative, building new combinations and trying new things, or I could withdraw from trying to look good, and just wear jeans and a T-shirt

on repeat. Both have their benefits, so I tried a bit of both. In fact, both became part of my toolkit.

I made sure I had my go-to outfits locked in my mind for days when I didn't have the energy to try and look good, or perhaps when I didn't feel I wanted or needed to. Jeans and a jumper or T-shirt, wide-leg trousers with any manner of basic black top, and a simple stretchy midi-dress that wasn't exactly what I wanted it to be, but would absolutely do. I locked these in my mind so that when I felt rushed, overwhelmed or under pressure, I wouldn't tumble into a vortex of wanting to 'grab a few basics'. The withdrawal approach lays the foundation to not *need* any clothes.

The other side of the equation, the embracing it side, lays the foundation for not *wanting* any clothes by replacing the dopamine and creativity I got from new things with the things I already had.

To my surprise, being creative with my wardrobe was actually ... fun. I thought I knew what was in my wardrobe, and I realised that I had a belief that every time I wanted to buy something new it was because what I already had wasn't good enough. But, I can honestly say those first few weeks of digging in my wardrobe, pulling out things I hadn't worn for ages and trying new combinations to see if they worked were so much fun. I had absolutely no idea how much I was mentally writing off items in my wardrobe simply because the novelty had worn off.

I'd look at an item on a hanger and feel utterly uninspired by it, only to put it on and remember just how much fun it was to wear. I couldn't believe the disconnect between what I thought I owned, and what I just hadn't taken the time to properly wear. This was the first lightbulb moment of my year: *We don't try on our stuff enough.*

If you do one thing after you put down this book, open your wardrobe and treat it as though it's a whole shop personalised to you, and everything's free. Grab things off the hangers like you would in a real store, and try them on with the curiosity and excitement you would if you were shopping during a 30 per cent off sale.

You'll be surprised by how much fun you can have by getting creative with what you've got. You might find old things that hold memories, you might uncover things you'd forgotten you had, but you'll almost certainly realise that you can start to see your clothes differently—and this is where the change starts to happen.

You might remember me saying earlier that I was stuck putting all new things on a pedestal, always seeing newness as better than what I already had. The beauty of a commitment like the year-long Project is that you become willing to change your beliefs, and that's what happened when I was able to get curious and creative with my existing wardrobe.

As January wore on, I realised I'd need to use both the embrace strategy and the withdrawal strategy to make it through the year. It wasn't a case of one or the other, though I dare say you could probably struggle through simply wearing the same few items over and over again. That said, I don't think you'd have as much fun, and knowing what I know now, I don't think I'd have learned as much about myself as I did. Leaning into the creativity aspect and really getting to know my clothes was the first step in a series of learnings about who I am and how clothes have been part of my identity.

Making it through the first month was exciting, but somewhat daunting. The month was enjoyable, and I was making headway on my Project, learning new things and wearing clothes I thought I hated. At the same time, I was aware that I'd only scratched the surface. I was one-twelfth of the way through, and the vastness of a year was starting to dawn on me. I was starting to realise this was going to be a Project about myself, just as much, maybe even more than about consumption.

The urge to purge

In the early weeks of the Project, I fought an urge to clear out my wardrobe. I don't know if it was a hunger to make rapid progress (classic me) or just a need to feel like I was *doing* something—most likely both.

I'm a product of modern self-improvement culture after all. The idea of settling into a challenge centred around abstaining from a behaviour for an entire year didn't exactly satisfy my dopamine-deprived existence.

I forced myself not to, because I suspected my overzealous clear outs played a role in my fractured relationship with clothes. I wasn't sure what yet, but I'd done one too many back-breaking trips to the donation bin to know that my wardrobe purges weren't always entirely innocent. In the past, I'd used a clear out as an excuse to add more to my wardrobe, masking my desire for newness with the illusion of being a ruthless minimalist. I'd got such a thrill from donating or selling things, proclaiming 'if I haven't worn it in a year, I won't wear it', only to eventually replace those poorly fabricated mistakes with near identical ones.

Cataloguing my clothes

Have you ever heard of the 80/20 rule? It's used in a lot of contexts, but the most relevant here is this one: you wear 20 per cent of your clothes 80 per cent of the time. To be honest, if you'd asked me if I thought that was true before I started this Project, I'd have said 'no'. I'd have been adamant that I wore more of my wardrobe than that. But, barely a month into the year and I'd already been slapped around the chops with just how flippant I'd been with my wardrobe.

I actually had no fucking idea what the hell was hanging in my wardrobe despite being able to rationalise that I needed another pair of black trousers like an absolute pro. I decided early in the Project to start cataloguing my clothes. I figured if I had a visual log of not just what I owned, but what I wore, I'd be more aware of what I had and could start to build that feeling of having enough without the need for new.

There are several apps you can use to catalogue your wardrobe, but I personally opted to simply take a photo of what I wore each day and add them to an album on my phone. I know the apps have fancy whizzy features like *Clueless*-style outfit creation and

cost-per-wear data, but here's the thing with me: I can tell you with absolute certainty that I'd have used the app for a week and then forgotten it existed. I need there to be as few steps as possible, as minimal friction as possible and as little chance of me losing any memory of starting it as possible in order to follow through on something like this.

With the photo approach, it was an action I was perfectly used to doing (whipping out my phone to snap something) and it only took a couple of seconds. As for adding the photos to the album, I usually did this while killing time on public transport or while waiting in a queue for something. God forbid I give myself *two* instructions to follow at once. Nonetheless, if you have a brain that's more capable of basic executive functioning than me, get stuck into the apps. The ones that have been recommended to me endlessly are:

- ∞ Whering
- ∞ Indyx
- ∞ Stylebook.

After a couple of weeks, I felt a distinct sense of satisfaction about my library of outfits I had banked up, and it spurred me on to fill it with more. It was immediately refreshing to be browsing images of outfits on *my* body, and with things I already had, having been so used to scrolling endless troves of influencer bodies and fashion-forward lookbooks as my way of engaging with the fashion industry and with style as a whole. It also exposed me to the fact that I so rarely reflected on the degree to which I liked my outfit, or how I felt in it, or which ones made me feel good about myself or bad about myself. I was quite binary with my view of my style. I either liked my outfit or I didn't. No real nuance, no understanding of why or where I was going wrong. Each day I got dressed was a roll of the dice rather than something I was doing with intention and knowledge about myself and who I was and what I was expressing in my outfits. Building out my own little inspo feed of outfits I could repeat or reimagine became the beginning of a new way of getting dressed, and I was hooked.

In the zone and splashing about with endless dopamine from discovering forgotten treasure in my wardrobe, I bounced into February hungry for more lessons about myself and my style. I guess, at this point, I kinda thought it was going to be easy ... but I'll let you be the judge of that later!

The stories hanging in our wardrobes

What I've come to learn through doing this work, with myself and with so many people in The Wardrobe Project, is that so many of the things hanging in our wardrobes have a story to tell. The path they took from hanging on a rack to hanging in your wardrobe says so much about your buying habits, from the way you were feeling when you bought them, to the expectations you have of how you want to look, to the comfort zones you've carved out in your self-image.

While each item we own has its own unique backstory, together they form our buying behaviour. As a result, patterns start to emerge that group together the things we own into categories that reflect these stories. I've listed some of the most common I come across below. You might recognise some of your wardrobe in this list.

- ∞ *The greatest hits*: The absolute cream of the crop, you wear these on high rotation and wish every item in your wardrobe was as spot on as this.
- ∞ *The almos*t: Pieces that were almost there but not quite. Maybe you loved the idea in your head but not in reality, maybe there's something not quite right about it, maybe you lust after similar versions of it because there's something missing.
- ∞ *The shots in the dark*: Things you bought as a complete guess that turned out to be better than expected. A dress you grabbed last minute for a funeral. A piece you picked up when you forgot something you needed that ended up being one of your most worn pieces.

- ∞ *The grabs*: The impulse purchases that you bought thinking they'd be great, but weren't.
- ∞ *The duplicates*: Things you own that are all remarkably similar, or the things you bought in another colour because you liked one you already had.
- ∞ *The fantasies*: The pieces you bought to be the person you wish you could be. That ultra-slick, polished, confident, unflappable you that only ever exists in your head.
- ∞ *The ghosts*: The pieces that haunt you, hanging unworn in your wardrobe despite once being something you loved. It might represent a past version of you, a previous iteration of your life or maybe even a size you wish you could get back to.
- ∞ *The postcards*: The pieces that evoke memories, happy or sad, that are hard to get rid of because letting them go would mean letting go of a part of yourself.
- ∞ *The guilties*: The pieces you spent too much on to get rid of, despite never actually wearing them or feeling good in them.
- ∞ *The workhorses*: Those rinse-and-repeat pieces that aren't anything special, but are always reliable.
- ∞ *The fixables*: Those things that will be perfect once you take them to the tailor to be fixed or fitted. Every clear out you promise yourself the same thing ... and yet, here we are.
- ∞ *The drama queens*: Those high-maintenance pieces that evoke instant nausea with their complicated care label demands. Handwash only? What is this, 1950?
- ∞ *The alter egos*: Those things you bought that just aren't you. Maybe they feel too bold, too youthful, too trendy. They differ slightly from your fantasies in that they don't follow that typical 'I wish I looked like this' pattern. Instead, they're wildcards that come out of left field.
- ∞ *The placeholders*: Those jeans that don't quite fit right. The work trousers you vow to one day update with the perfect pair. The coat you bought in a pinch that you hate having to wear on

every cold day. These are the things we buy while we wait for the right thing.

- ∞ *The strangers*: Those pieces that make you say ‘why do I even own this?’ They may hang unworn in your wardrobe with the tags still taunting you.
- ∞ *The one days*: Those pieces you save for ‘best’, that you reach for and eventually chicken out of actually wearing for fear of being too overdressed, or spilling something on it, or maybe even being seen. Yep, you’d be surprised how often we fear being seen looking diggity damn hot.

We have a tendency to view our clothes and our style as one homogenous ‘thing’. I don’t know about you, but I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve fantasised about overhauling my style, or dreamed of what it would be like to go on one of those makeover shows and get a whole new wardrobe, as though my style and confidence in myself would be easier if I could just find the right clothes. But the collection of clothes we own forms a complex tapestry of who we are. Our wardrobes hold insights to our insecurities, our self-perception, our lifestyle, changes we’ve undergone in our lives, and even our emotions.

We can learn a lot from the stories our clothes tell us, and being open to the granularity of why we’ve bought what we’ve bought, both in an emotional sense (I’m looking at you, fantasies, alter egos and ghosts) and in a logistical sense (I’m looking at you, duplicates, placeholders and workhorses), we can understand ourselves better, and learn to experience our clothes, our style and our self-image differently.

Because when we really think about it, style actually isn’t as easy as it’s sold to be. Stylists spend time curating the seemingly effortless looks we fawn over, and celebrities have experts helping them look good. For retailers and advertisers, though, it’s profitable to sell the idea that looking good is simply a combination of the right items. As though it’s like pulling the lever on a slot machine and getting the same symbol three times in a row for the jackpot. This idea is

what keeps us buying. On top of our obsession with trying to get the right combination to the padlock that's holding our style hostage, we seldom consider that maybe there's more to our style than just the clothes.

Okay, it's at this point of the book I start giving you homework. You can use these exercises to try and extract the learnings I've shared from my own experiences for your own wardrobe.

Tasks: Your wardrobe story

Task #1: Wardrobe story audit

To kick off our practical wardrobe work together, I want you to start thinking about the stories your clothes are telling. Which of those categories had you going 'OMG, that's me'? Follow that thread into your wardrobe, and spend some time getting curious with your clothes and exploring which categories they fit into. Can you find a duplicate? What about a greatest hit? Any *almosts* in there? See if you can categorise at least ten items using our categories list to get an idea of where you're indexing most.

Then, whenever you pick up an item of clothing you own, consider which category it might fit into based on its back story. You'll notice a major shift in your understanding of and connection to your clothes once you start viewing your clothes through these lenses.

Task #2: Purchase pathway mapping

Now we're going to really delve into the stories behind some of our items, and step ourselves back through the purchase process to see what was really going on.

I want you to take three items of clothing you own and plot out the journey they took to end up in your wardrobe. We want to

(continued)

really get into the depths of the thought processes, emotions, feelings and motivations for why you bought this item, what you intended it to add to your life, the purpose for which you bought it and the context surrounding the purchase itself.

Think about how you felt when you saw it, what your mind told you about this item, how you pictured it in your life (if you did at all) and whether any part of your self-image or identity came into play. Were you trying to be someone you're not? Were you trying to 'fix' any part of your image? Did you wish you'd look a certain way when you wore it?

Then think about the purchase process itself. Were you calm and mindful or urgent and anticipatory? How were you feeling when you bought this piece? Did that change as a result of the purchase? Were you soothing or avoiding? Think about how you feel about the item now. Which of our categories do you think it fits into, noting it may fit into more than one?

Complete this exploration for the three pieces you chose from your wardrobe, and then sit with the results. Are there any commonalities? Do you feel more aware of some of your buying patterns? Is there anything you could learn about your style or spending challenges from these pathways?

Chapter summary

- ∞ Style isn't as simple as it's sold to be. When you let go of the idea that the right items will equal style, you open yourself up to the deeper meaning.
- ∞ You may feel the urge to ruthlessly clear out your wardrobe when you feel overwhelmed by getting dressed. While it can provide temporary relief, it means you miss out on the learnings that are hiding on the hangers.
- ∞ Cataloguing your clothes can help you make sense of what you have and give you options to refer back to.
- ∞ Everything in your wardrobe tells a story about your relationship with clothes and how you buy. Using wardrobe categories to differentiate between items can give you a deeper understanding of why you have the clothes you do.
- ∞ Using pathway maps can help you understand how you buy and the route things took to end up in your wardrobe. Commonalities between these pathways help you form an understanding of your buying style and the emotions surrounding it.

