

Eric Seiley

Warnings We Do Not Heed

Sept 25, 2026

2, 353 Words

Clothes Make the Man

Deluxe Dry Cleaners on Fourth Street closed at nine, but the owner didn't leave before ten. Which meant Eli had to wait patiently, in the shadow of the broken awning of a boarded up Chinese restaurant across the street, as he'd done for the last four nights. Clocking the rhythms of the street, including who was up late (only the dry cleaner), how often the beat cops cruised by (not once after 10pm), and whether any footpads, yeggs or jackrollers were working the territory (none that Eli saw).

At ten on the dot, the neon sign in the window went dark, as did the lights inside, and the owner stepped out, locked the doors and headed around back. Where, a few minutes later, his fancy Cadillac Deville pulled out front and roared off. Presumably toward home. Only then did Eli step from the shadows and cross the street.

Eli was positive he could break into the dry cleaning business without much hassle. The owner hadn't installed any electronic security that he could see. And the front door lock was older than him. Which wasn't that old, but still. It was the first thing he'd noticed passing by days earlier. The second thing Eli'd noticed was the clothing inside – row upon row of dresses, coats, pants and shirts stretching deep into the back of the store. Some that even looked high class – well, maybe not high class, but more than good enough for his needs.

Eli needed a penguin suit. In fact, he'd been heading uptown to do just that – kite a suit for himself. Somewhat nervously too because most of those uptown stores,

especially Gimbels and Woolworths and JJ Bryant, paid for night security. Which made it difficult to slip in and out without getting noticed by those wanna-be coppers and their heavy metal flashlights. It could be tricky. Not impossible, just risky. But with the dry cleaning store, Eli saw little risk. He could get in and out well before anyone noticed. With not only a suit, but maybe a little extra swag to fence along the way -- a few dresses and furs he could unload for a nice chunk o' change over at the second hand clothing shops in the Potter district, or even down at Tunney's by the docks. Where not so many questions were asked as to where the outfits originated.

"Shoot," Eli laughed crossing the street, "all this for a piece of tail. What am I, a *nancy-tosser*!? I mean she's a fine piece of tail and all. But still, damn!"

His girl, Maya, had been all hot and bothered to attend the winter formal this year, their last in school, and wouldn't shut up about it. Eli understood. It would probably be her last chance to dress up and pretend she was some kinda Cinderella, and not just another Bowery slag who'd be knocked up and heading to the alter by this time next year. Course, Eli wasn't sure he wanted to be the sap riding shotgun down that particular aisle with her. But, *fer sure*, she was a fine piece of tail, and a fairly hot little number, so why not make her happy?

"A suit and tie, please, darling," Maya begged. "*Please oh please!* Can't you get one? I've got the prettiest little dress that you'll just love. And wouldn't it be wonderful for both of us to dress to the nines and look really swell? My pops even said he'd bust out his Leica and take some photos to remember the evening by. And I know all the other girls will be totally jealous seeing you all dressed up and handsome in a nice suit and tie. Can't we do it, please? Just this once. For me? I'd be ever so grateful."

The smile Maya gave him was as beguiling as it was dirty. Sending Eli practically tripping over himself to run uptown.

But breaking into the dry cleaner was the better plan. A piece of cake really. Old lock, simple trick -- insert a straight pin (something he'd learned from his older brother by the time he was ten), block the tumblers and use a small flathead screwdriver to turn the cylinder counter clockwise with enough force to pop the lock like a twig. Once in, use the screwdriver to wedge the door shut so there'd be no chance the *Fuzz* could sneak up behind and nab him in the act. And make sure a window or door out back was ajar so he wouldn't get trapped. Eli found a loose window in back to prop open.

"Oy, lookie lookie here!" Eli laughed, "Lots of choices, lots of choices." He was walking the aisles, running his fingers across dozens of plastic covered suits, jackets, shirts and pants, letting the colors call out to him. A denim jacket here, but it looked too small. A plaid polyester blazer there that looked way too lame and square. But then, lookie lookie! A black leather jacket! Real leather too! Yeah, he liked that one! It was the kind tough guys wore in those gangster flicks he'd seen down at the Bijou on Kaye St. And the idea of showing up on the corner looking like Dean, or Brando, seeing his buddies turn green with envy, would be worth the extra weight he'd have to carry out the store. Eli pulled the jacket from the rack and slipped it on. Good fit.

It took longer to find a penguin suit. About thirty minutes searching. He was about to settle for a dark grey seer sucker, when he spotted this crushed black velvet number with a cummerbund to match. Sure, it looked a bit like a mincer, but he also knew Maya would think it classy and adore it. Even more surprising, the suit fit pretty niftily. Not like it was custom made for him, but pretty close. So down off the rack it came and into his bag.

Eli grabbed a few more furs and a couple of sequined dresses he thought looked expensive, then slipped out the way he'd come with his haul. Making sure to double check for any wayward patrols before awkwardly lugging the haul four blocks east to one of his hideouts -- a rundown basement apartment building that'd been empty longer than he could remember.

The night of East Sall winter formal came and Maya wasn't kidding. Her dress was a hot little red number, all slinky and slutty and form fitting, with big slashes down the sides showing lots of leg and thigh. Enough that Eli's own pants went a little tighter goggling on her. Her father snapped a bunch of pictures, till both were satisfied, and they left for the dance. Only Eli thought Maya looked so good, he tried to get her to stop off in the park, or up on a rooftop, for a little nooky. But she was having none of it.

"Oh no darling, not yet. Be patient! I spent all day getting ready. Hair, make up, nails. I want to look perfect for you at the dance tonight. Later, okay?"

And Eli was right about her loving his crushed black velvet suit, too.

"You look *soooo* handsome, sweetheart! Like Bobby Darin. And I feel just like Tippi Hedren when Sean Connery escorted her down the red carpet to that big movie premiere in Hollywood. Remember? So glamorous, right?"

A few blocks away, they met up with his boys, The Guardians, and their dates outside the gymnasium -- which had been made up to look like "A Night under the Stars." Eli strolled up to some "*whoa daddio*" and "*get a load of dis beat king*" comments. But he could tell they were all jealous. Most of them were wearing either their father's ill-fitting hand-me-down jackets, or their ratty old fake leathers, and didn't look nowhere near as sharp. Not to mention, their girls raved for a solid ten minutes about how good he and Maya looked together.

After a few shots from Pauley's flask and some joshing, the group headed inside. Eli practically strutting like a king.

This could be the life, he was thinking. Till they ran into Mr. Embrey, their English teacher -- who doubled as the school's wrestling coach in the fall and boxing coach in the spring. But he tended to lecture too much -- about decency and civic morality and what the boys were doing with their lives if they weren't serving their fellow man. Do-gooder stuff like that. Which tended to bore them, and make them think he was way

too square and out of touch. Still, he was a decent enough guy from the neighborhood, and treated them respectfully, so they never gave him much beef.

“Nice suit there, Mr. Tomasino,” Mr. Embrey said. “Nice suit, indeed. You know, they say clothes make the man. I believe that might be true in your case. That suit definitely makes you.”

“Thanks, Mr. E.”

“You know, I have a suit just like that one. Well, had. Strangest coincidence. I sent my suit off to the dry cleaners last week to be cleaned and pressed, and do you know what happened?”

“Umm, it got cleaned and pressed?”

“No, it was stolen. The whole suit. Right out of the dry cleaners, along with some other folks clothes. Isn’t that terrible?”

“Oh, wow. Yeah, that’s, umm, that’s terrible. Some bad timing, huh Mr. E. I mean, bad luck and all.”

“Thing is, Mr. Tomasino, I always thought that suit of mine was one of a kind. I bought it right after the war, you see, after I discharged in San Francisco. I had a few hours to kill till my bus was scheduled to leave, and I happened to notice this tailor shop right across the street from the bus station on the Embarcadero. So I decided to check it out. What the hell, right? I had some time to kill and a little cash saved. Well, there was this old tailor there that sold me that velvet suit, after tailoring it for me of course, for a more than decent price. Said it was the least he could do for a man who’d served his country and fought to preserve freedom and democracy and all. A nice welcome home gift, he said. He had this unusual name, too. Wells Manning. Which he was very proud of. He even liked to stitch his name into the lining of every jacket he sold. Isn’t that interesting? The details you remember after all these years.”

“Yeah, wow, Mr. E. That’s, umm, some story, I guess,” Eli gulped. What were the odds he’d stolen Mr. Embrey’s crushed, black velvet suit? Pretty good it seemed.

Was he about to get busted and pay the piper? Thing was, Eli and his friends didn't think stealing was so wrong – as long as it wasn't from the people in their neighborhood. Who were poor and hardworking, just like their own parents. Grinding out their existence in gruesome, hardscrabble 9-to-5's. So when they stole, it was always from the rich, or from places in the city that had plenty to spare. Never from their own neighbors or friends. They had a code -- sorta -- like Robin Hood. Only, if he was wearing Mr. Embrey's suit, which Eli was pretty sure he was, he'd stolen it from a good guy right there in the neighborhood. Someone he knew and respected. What did that make him?

"Ah, well," Mr. Embrey sighed, catching Eli in mid-thought. "These things do happen from time to time and I shouldn't get too upset. After all, the good Lord does say we shouldn't get caught up in material things, right? That there are more important things in life, like grace and stewardship and the Golden Rule. Forgiveness, right? Don't you think so, Mr. Tomasino? "

"Sure, Mr. E. Yeah, of course." Eli's throat had dried up.

"Well, you certainly do look good, Mr. Tomasino. Clothes do make the man. And that suit does make you. Still, have a good night. Enjoy yourself. But try not to drink too much, okay. Wouldn't want you getting into any fights in that great suit of yours and ruining it. I have to make the rounds now, since I'm one of the dance chaperons and all, so I'll see you later."

"Alright, Mr. E. See you later." Eli wasn't feeling so much like a king anymore. More like a lowdown, dirty skunk. If clothes made the man then what did that make him for wearing a stolen suit – a poser, that's what.

"Oh, hey, before I go," Mr. Embrey added, turning back. "Why don't you stop by my office at school on Monday. I haven't seen you around the boxing gym in a while and I thought maybe we could talk about you taking it up again. Maybe even helping out with some of the younger boys. They sure could use someone like you to set a good

example. Help keep them stay on the straight and narrow and all. What do you think about that, Mr. Tomasino? Can I count on seeing you?"

"Uhm, sure, Mr. E. Sure, I'll come see you Monday. I figure we have a few things to talk about. You know, set the record straight and all."

"Good. I agree. I look forward to seeing you then. In the meantime, have a good evening."

He tried. Eli really tried. But all he could think about was the suit and Mr. Embrey and wondering how many other people he'd stolen from who mighta' also been good, hard working people. And what that made him. Maybe it wasn't too late though. Not to start boxing again, but definitely return the suit and explain about it and ask Mr. Embrey to, you know, understand. Eli thought he just might. He was a forgiving guy.

And maybe, just maybe, Eli could buy himself a legit suit one day and be a good man. Maybe not as square as Mr. Embrey, but still good, you know.

The End.