

PERSONAL HISTORY

SHOPPING FOR CLOTHES IN TOKYO

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By David Sedaris

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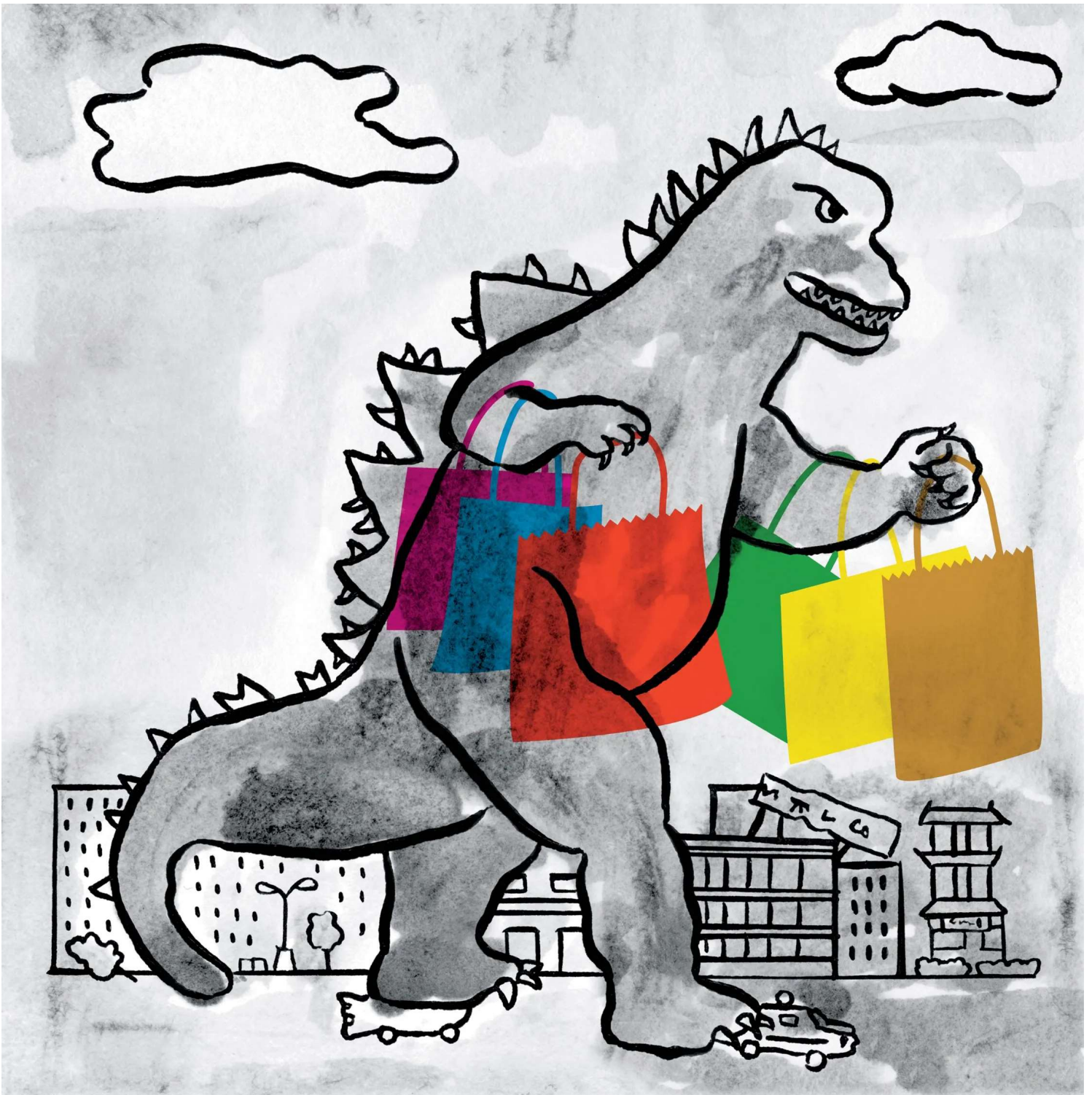


Illustration by Tamara Shopsin

I'm not sure how it is in small families, but in large ones relationships tend to shift over time. You might be best friends with one brother or sister, then two years later it might be someone else. Then it's likely to change again, and again after that. It doesn't mean that you've fallen out with the person you used to be closest to but that you've merged into someone else's lane, or had him or her

merge into yours. Trios form, then morph into quartets before splitting into teams of two. The beauty of it is that it's always changing.

Twice in 2014, I went to Tokyo with my sister Amy. I'd been seven times already, so was able to lead her to all the best places, by which I mean stores. When we returned in January of 2016, it made sense to bring our sister Gretchen with us. Hugh was there as well, and while he's a definite presence, he didn't figure into the family dynamic. Mates, to my sisters and me, are seen mainly as shadows of the people they're involved with. They move. They're visible in direct sunlight. But because they don't have access to our emotional buttons—because they can't make us twelve again, or five, and screaming—they don't really count as players.

Normally in Tokyo we rent an apartment and stay for a week. This time, though, we got a whole house. The neighborhood it was in—Ebisu—is home to one of our favorite shops, Kapital. The clothes they sell are new but appear to have been previously worn, perhaps by someone who was shot or stabbed and then thrown off a boat. Everything looks as if it had been pulled from the evidence rack at a murder trial. I don't know how they do it. Most distressed clothing looks fake, but not theirs, for some reason. Do they put it in a dryer with broken glass and rusty steak knives? Do they drag it behind a tank over a still-smoldering battlefield? How do they get the cuts and stains so . . . right?

If I had to use one word to describe Kapital's clothing, I'd be torn between "wrong" and "tragic." A shirt might look normal enough until you try it on, and discover that the armholes have been moved, and are no longer level with your shoulders, like a capital "T," but farther down your torso, like a lowercase one.

Jackets with patches on them might senselessly bunch at your left hip, or maybe they poof out at the small of your back, where for no good reason there's a pocket. I've yet to see a pair of Kapital trousers with a single leg hole, but that doesn't mean the designers haven't already done it. Their motto seems to be "Why not?"

Most people would answer, "I'll tell you why not!" But I like Kapital's philosophy. I like their clothing as well, though I can't say that it always likes me in return. I'm not narrow enough in the chest for most of their jackets, but what was to stop me, on this most recent trip, from buying a flannel shirt made of five differently patterned flannel shirts ripped apart and then stitched together into a kind of doleful Frankentop? I got hats as well, three of them, which I like to wear stacked up, all at the same time, partly just to get it over with but mainly because I think they look good as a tower.

I draw the line at clothing with writing on it, but numbers don't bother me, so I also bought a tattered long-sleeved T-shirt with "99" cut from white fabric and stitched onto the front before being half burned off. It's as though a football team's plane had gone down and this was all that was left. Finally, I bought what might be called a tunic, made of denim and patched at the neck with defeated scraps of corduroy. When buttoned, the front flares out, making me look like I have a potbelly. These are clothes that absolutely refuse to flatter you, that go out of their way to insult you, really, and still my sisters and I can't get enough.

There are three Kapital stores in Ebisu, and their interior design is as off-putting as their merchandise. Most clothing hangs from the ceiling, though there are a few beaten-up racks and horizontal surfaces that items are strewn across. At one of the shops, the window display consisted of three carved penises arranged from small to large. The most modest was on a par with a Coleman thermos, while the king-size one was as long and thick as a wrestler's forearm. Amy's eyes popped out of her head, and before I could stop her she hoisted the middle one out of the window, crying, "Oh, my goodness, it's teak! I thought from out on the sidewalk that it was mahogany!" As if she were a wood expert, and saw nothing beyond the grain.

The salesman blinked as Amy turned the dildo upside down. Then she positioned her right hand at the base of the testicles, and pretended she was a waitress: "Would anyone care for some freshly ground pepper?"

There are three other branches of Kapital in Tokyo, and we visited them all, staying in each one until our fingerprints were on everything. “My God,” Gretchen said, trying on a hat that seemed to have been modelled on a used toilet brush, before adding it to her pile. “This place is amazing. I had no idea!”

The main reason we asked Gretchen to join us is that she understands shopping. That is to say, she understands there is nothing *but* shopping—unlike our brother Paul, or our sister Lisa, whose disinterest in buying things is downright masculine. She and her husband, Bob, don’t exchange Christmas gifts but will, rather, “go in” on something: a new set of shelves for the laundry room, for instance, or a dehumidifier. They usually buy whatever it is in midsummer, so by December it’s been forgotten. It’s the same with their anniversary and birthdays: nothing. “But you can change that,” I often tell her.

“Right,” she says, the way I do when someone suggests I learn how to drive.



“Here you are—two house Martinis, humanely poured!”



And it’s not just big-ticket items. She and I were at O’Hare Airport one afternoon, and passed a place that sold nuts. “Why don’t you get some for Bob?” I asked. “They would be a nice little something to bring him as a gift.”

She looked at the stand, a cart, really, and frowned. “I would, but his dentist told him he has brittle teeth.”

“He doesn’t have to crack them open in his mouth,” I said. “Everything here is pre-shelled.”

“That’s O.K.”

I would never leave town and not bring Hugh back a gift. Nor would he do that to me, though in truth I had to train him. He’s normally not that much of a shopper, but Tokyo seems to knock something loose in him. Perhaps it’s because it’s so far away. The difference is that he’s ashamed of it. I think it’s something he gets from his mother, who considers shopping to be wasteful, or, worse still in her book, “unserious.”

“Why go to a store when you could go to a museum?” she might ask.

“Um, because the museum doesn’t sell shit?”

My sisters and I refuse to feel bad about shopping. And why should we? Obviously we have some hole we’re trying to fill, but doesn’t everyone? And isn’t filling it with berets the size of toilet-seat covers, if not more practical, then at least *healthier* than filling it with frosting or heroin or unsafe sex with strangers?

“Besides,” Amy said at the dinner table, on the first night of our vacation, “it’s not like everything we buy is for ourselves. I’ll be getting birthday presents for friends, and all sorts of things for my godson.”

“You don’t have to convince me,” I told her, as we’re cut from the same cloth. Shopping has nothing to do with money. If you have it, you go to stores and galleries, and if not you haunt flea markets or thrift shops. Never, though, do you not do it, choosing instead to visit a park or a temple or some cultural institution where they don’t sell things. Our sister-in-law Kathy swears by eBay, but I like the

social aspect of shopping, the getting out. The touching things and talking to people. I work at home, so most days, except for Hugh, the only contact I have is with salespeople and cashiers.

My problem is that if someone really engages me, or goes the slightest bit out of his way, I feel I have to buy whatever it is he's selling. Especially if it involves a ladder or a set of keys. That explains the small painting of a forsaken shack I bought on the fourth day of our vacation, at a place I like called On Sundays. It's on an odd-shaped scrap of plywood, and though it's by a contemporary artist I've always got a kick out of, an American named Barry McGee, and was probably a very fair price, I bought it mainly because the store manager unlocked the case that it was in.

"I would have got it if you hadn't," Amy, my enabler, said, as I left with the painting in a recently purchased, very pricey tote bag that had cowboys on it.

Then it was on to another one of our favorite places, the Tokyo outpost of the Dover Street Market. The original store, in London, sells both clothing and the kind of objects you might find in a natural-history museum. I got the inner ear of a whale there a few years back, and a four-horned antelope skull that was found in India in 1890.

The Ginza branch sticks to clothing and accessories. I'd gone with Amy on our first trip, in 2014, and left with a pair of wide-legged Paul Harnden trousers that come up to my nipples. The button-down fly is a foot long, and when rooting around in my pockets for change my forearms disappear all the way to the elbows. You can't belt something that reaches that high up your torso, thus the suspenders, which came with the trousers and are beautiful, but, still, suspenders! Clown pants is what they are, artfully hand-stitched. Lined all the way to the ankle, but clown pants all the same. They cost as much as a MacBook Air, and I'd have walked

away from them were it not for Amy saying, “Are you kidding? You *have* to get those.”

This time I bought a pair of blue-and-white polka-dotted culottes.

Hugh hates this sort of thing, and accuses me of transitioning.

“They’re just shorts,” I tell him. “Bell-bottom shorts, but shorts all the same. How is that *womanly*?”

A year and a half earlier, at this same Dover Street Market, I bought a pair of heavy black culottes. Dress culottes, you could call them, made by Comme des Garçons, and also beautifully lined. They made a pleasant whooshing sound as I ran up the stairs of my house, searching in vain for whatever shoes a grown man might wear with them. Hugh disapproved, but again I thought I looked great, much better than I do in regular trousers. “My calves are my one good feature,” I reminded him as he gritted his teeth. “Why can’t I highlight them every now and then?”

The dress culottes weren’t as expensive as the pants that come up to my nipples, but, still, they were extravagant. I buy a lot of what I think of as “at-home clothes,” things I’d wear at my desk, or when lying around at night after a bath, but never outdoors. These troubling, Jiminy Cricket-style trousers, for instance, I bought at another of my favorite Japanese stores, 45rpm. They have horizontal stripes and make my ass look like half a dozen coins collected in a sack made from an old prison uniform.

I’d have felt like a fool paying all that money and limiting my nipple-high pants and black dress culottes to home, so I started wearing them onstage, which still left me feeling like a fool, but a different kind of one.

“I hate to tell you,” a woman said after a show one night, “but those culottes look terrible on you.”

I was shattered. “Really?”

“They’re way too long,” she told me.

And so I had them shortened. Then shortened again, at which point they no longer made the pleasant whooshing sound, and were ruined.

“Are these too long for me?” I asked the saleswoman on our most recent trip.

“Not at all,” I’m pretty sure she told me.

A few days later, at the big Comme des Garçons shop in Omotesandō, I bought yet another pair of culottes, a fancier pair that are cerulean blue.

“What are you *doing*?” Hugh moaned, as I stepped out of the dressing room.

“That’s *three pairs* of culottes you’ll own now.”

All I could say in my defense was “Maybe I have a busy life.”

I then tried on a button-down shirt that was made to be worn backward. The front is plain, and almost suggests a straitjacket. You’d have to have someone close you into it, and, of course, knot your tie, if you were going for a more formal look. I’d have bought it were it not too tight at the neck.

“Maybe it’ll fit after you have your Adam’s apple shaved off,” Hugh said, returning to milk his transitioning joke.

Amy loaded up at Comme des Garçons as well, buying, among other things, a skirt that looks to have been made from the insides of suit pockets.

“What just happened?” she asked as we left the store, considerably broker, and went up a few doors to Yohji Yamamoto, where I bought what Hugh calls a dress but what is most certainly a smock. A denim one that has side pockets. The front closes with snaps and, for whatever reason, the back does as well.

“Maybe it’s for when you sit down,” I said, following the salesman to the register. “So you don’t get it all, you know, wrinkled.”

Most days, we returned to our rental house groaning beneath the weight of our purchases, things I’d often wind up regretting the moment I pulled them out of their bags: a pair of drawstring jeans two sizes too large, for instance—drawstring jeans!—or a wool shirt that was relatively sober, and would have been great were I able to wear wool. As it is, it causes me to itch and sweat something awful. “Then why did you get it?” Hugh asked.

“Because everyone else got something,” I told him, adding that it was on sale and that I could always send it to my father, who might not wear it but would undoubtedly appreciate the gesture.

Shopping with my sisters in Japan was like being in a pie-eating contest, only with stuff. We often felt sick. Dazed. Bloated. Vulgar. Yet never quite ashamed. “I think I need to lie down,” I said one evening. “Maybe with that brand-new eighty-dollar washcloth on my forehead.”

Nothing was a total waste, I reasoned, as paying for it gave me a chance to practice my Japanese.

“I am buying something now,” I’d say as I approached the register. “I have money! I have coins, too!”

As if he or she had been handed a script, the cashier would ask where I was from, and what I was doing in Tokyo.

“I am American.” I said. “But now I live in England. I am on vacation with my sisters.”

“Oh, your sisters!”

Then I started saying, “I am a doctor.”

“What kind?” asked a woman who sold me a bandanna with pictures of fruit and people having sex on it.

“A . . . children’s doctor,” I said.

I didn’t set out to misrepresent myself, but I didn’t know the words for “author” or “trash collector.” “Doctor,” though, was in one of the ninety Teach Yourself Japanese lessons I’d reviewed before leaving England.

I loved the respect that being a pediatrician brought me in Japan, even when I wore a smock and had a tower of three hats on my head. You could see it in people’s faces. I grew before their very eyes.

“Did you just tell that lady you’re a doctor?” Amy would ask.

“A little,” I’d say.

A week after leaving Tokyo, I was on a flight from Hobart, Tasmania, to Melbourne, and, when a passenger got sick and the flight attendant asked if there was a physician on board, my hand was halfway to the call button before I remembered that I am not, in fact, a doctor. That I just play one in Japan.

Though it cut into our shopping time, one thing we all looked forward to in Tokyo was lunch, which was always eaten out, usually at some place we'd just chanced on. One afternoon toward the end of our vacation, settling into our seats at a tempura restaurant in Shibuya, I looked across the table at Amy, who was wearing a varsity sweater from Kapital that looked to have bloodstains and bits of brain on it, and at Gretchen, with her toilet-brush hat on. I was debuting a shirt that fell three inches below my knees. It was black and made me look like a hand puppet. We don't have the same eyes or noses, my sisters and I. Our hairlines are different, and so are the shapes of our faces, but on this particular afternoon the family resemblance was striking. Anyone could tell that we were related, even someone from another planet who believed that humans were as indistinguishable from one another as acorns. At this particular moment in our lives, no one belonged together more than us.

Who would have thought, when we were children, that the three of us would wind up here, in Japan of all places, dressed so expensively like mental patients, and getting along so well together? It's a thought we all had several times a day: Look how our lives turned out! What a surprise!

When the menus came, Gretchen examined hers upside down. She had never used chopsticks before coming to Tokyo, and for the first few days she employed them separately, one in each hand, like daggers. Amy was a little better, but when it came to things like rice she tended to give up and just stare at her bowl helplessly. Always, when the food was delivered, we'd take a moment to admire it, so beautifully presented, all this whatever it was: The little box with a round thing in it. The shredded bit. The flat part. Once, we ate in what I'm pretty sure was someone's garage. The owner served only one thing, and we had it seated around a folding table, just us and a space heater. The food was unfailingly good, but what made lunch such a consistent pleasure was the anticipation, knowing that we had the entire afternoon ahead of us, and that it might result in anything: Styrofoam

boots; a suit made of tape—whatever we could imagine was out there, waiting to be discovered. All we Sedarises had to do was venture forth and claim it. ♦

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