

New Nonfiction from Joan Stack Kovach: “What He Wore”



He was always a very sharp dresser. Firstborn child, he toddled around in a merino wool coat from Lord&Taylor and a short pants suit from B Altman that would be handed down to his younger brothers. At seventeen he looked “collegiate” in madras plaid shorts and a pastel button-down shirt. He hated to be called “preppy”, but he was. Handsome and preppy.

Years later, after the war, when he worked his way into an office in a high rise down in Boston’s Post Office Square he wore gorgeous suits he’d purchased at a men’s store called Zara.

But for two years of the time between the madras shorts and Zara suits, he wore jungle camouflage, just like all the other draftees. And when he finally flew back home, exactly 365 days from when he’d landed in Vietnam, he wore the requisite Dress Greens with combat patch and overseas bars on his right sleeve.

He asked that no one meet him at Oakland Air Force base when he landed, didn’t want to be seen in uniform. He stashed the gabardine greens and the cotton camouflage in the attic, gave his little brothers his medals to play with, and created a new narrative, one in which the combat never happened. He didn’t speak of what he endured on the commercial flight cross country either.

Back in the states he tried hard to resume a life in civilian clothes. He married, started a family, bought a boat. On weekends in his khaki shorts, polo shirts with embroidered alligators on the chest, and topsiders, he was surrounded by those who dressed the same and colluded in his denial. It

wasn't hard. Most of America had little to say about Vietnam beyond the horrors of Kent State, and then the tragic beauty of the memorial in DC. When he applied for jobs, there were no Veteran boxes to check, or if there were, nobody smart would check them.

During the week he sat at a desk wearing button-down shirts and Brooks Brothers suits, until he discovered even better suits at Zaras. There he chose ties that were silk and dreamy, even his socks soft and stylish, and Italian wingtip shoes. He bought his underwear, boxer shorts, for full price at Mr. Sid's, the men's store in Newton Centre.

It was thirty years in these lovely suits before the force he'd used to push it all away gave out, before memories from the days of jungle fatigues blindsided him, kept him awake, immobile, defeated. It's always hard to know for sure what is really the precipitant for a powerful change. For him was it his sons becoming the age he was when the draft found him? Or the TV flooded with news of a new war, young kids like he was, but in desert not jungle cammo? Maybe simply the loss of the intense and rigid structure of his job that had held him together. But once he left that job, moved abroad for a family adventure overseas, an elective plan to live differently for a while, there were no more desks in a high rise piled high with work to do, no more suits, no more daily conversations with engaging colleagues, or pressing deadlines. But there was plenty of late night TV coverage of men at war. Is that what made his wall crumble?

When he finally went for help at the Vet Center, he dressed down in khakis and loafers, a sweater, and a windbreaker for his intake appointment. Bearded men in bandana headbands, fellow Vets ahead of him on their journeys, sat in the waiting room. They wore jeans and work boots. Tattoos peeked out from their open leather jackets, flannel shirts.

"I'm not like them," he said when he got back home. "They're

alcoholics or recovered druggies. They're on maybe their third wives. They smoke like chimneys. They seem like good guys, but I can't relate to them. I'm just not one of them."

"Welcome soldier. You know, you're one of us, bro," they repeated, patiently, gently when he joined them in the group. "It's okay. We get you. You're one of us."

He kept showing up to the appointments. He swallowed the meds. There was a six-week rehabilitation program at White River Junction; another two weeks up at North Hampton. Then weekends. A weekend on grief. Another on guilt. He met one guy who wore tassel loafers and worked on Cape Cod in real estate. "Mark seems more like me," he said, but Mark didn't stay with the program.

He brought out those Zara suits for family events, celebrations, or funerals where he had to show up. He looked dreadfully handsome in them, handsome, calm and in control. Being in a crowd demanded a new kind of courage, especially that one crowded wedding reception in that arts gallery with the low ceilings and unmarked exits. "I can't stay" he said, quietly. It was impossible to hang out in a building with no clear way out. It was too much like a clusterfuck, an ambush ready to happen. He waited two hours in the safety of the parking lot until the rest of his family was ready to go. That's the kind of guy he was.

He wasn't working in a high rise anymore, so he worked in the driveway. In work boots, flannel shirts and jeans, he scraped and painted the shutters for the house. On Thursdays he showed up at those group meetings in his boots and jeans, sat and shared thoughts, feelings even with the tattooed men in leather jackets.

On one of those Thursdays in May, a man dressed up in aviator sunglasses and a flight suit landed on an aircraft carrier for a nationally televised press conference. Surrounded by Secret

Service, he stood before a banner that said "Mission Accomplished." As if some sanitary business deal was completed. As if a photo shoot reinforcing a stylized image of warfare would tie things up neatly. In fact most of the casualties in Iraq came after that speech by a president who, though dressed for the part, had never flown a combat mission.

The President and most of the country were oblivious to the tattooed men in flannel shirts, men with Purple Hearts and Bronze Stars sitting in a circle at the Vet Center that day. They sat and talked about what they'd experienced, maybe wondered what it all had accomplished beyond their disabilities.

Twenty years on, more Veterans, those lucky enough to survive, will follow these men, sit in a circle, maybe wonder the same. This next crew, men and women, might wear tee shirts and desert camo, sweatpants and flip flops, as they talk about what most of us in our busy lives and busy attire don't know, about what really happens in war.