

## The Hogmanay Coat

You would have thought I'd planned it. Although if I had, I wouldn't have made such a good job of it and the last thing I would have come up with as an excuse for not going out late on Hogmanay evening and driving twenty miles through a blizzard into town would have been temporary disfigurement. It's not the first thing that crosses your mind, but I think it crossed my wife's, she'd bought a new coat and was desperate for it to be launched into society. The word she used was 'christened' so maybe that's where I subconsciously got the idea. Anyway the Radox bath was definitely my wife's idea so I can't really take the credit for it. If you ever have a Radox bath remember not to splash it over your face, or at least over my face.

In my defence I had shampoo in my eyes and never gave it a second thought, until about half an hour later when I was clearing up the bathroom and I wiped the mirror only to discover I had turned into a boozy chipmunk. This is not as exciting as it sounds and it's certainly not a sexy look if you're planning on going out and disporting yourself in public on the one night of the year you are likely to be kissed by strangers.

"You could just say it's sunburn," suggested my wife, as I tried to catch my brosie profile in the mirror, "lots of people go abroad for Christmas."

I wasn't so sure. Although it did look as if I'd been wearing sunglasses while sunbathing for a month, or maybe even ski-ing. Could have been mountain climbing, or flying a light aircraft with an open cockpit across the Alps. It was time for another inspection in this new, more interesting light.

On either side of my nose my face was bright red, blotchy and swollen enough to make me look as if I'd been too fond of the mincemeat pies and the sherry rather than out being daring and adventurous. It certainly wasn't the kind of thing you could hide, although it crossed my mind. Apart from anything else it was slightly painful.

"What about covering it up with a spot of make-up?" I asked my wife, who still refused to admit there was a problem.

"What about cosmetic surgery?" she replied, "or you could go out in drag and I could make you up and then no one would notice a thing."

Unfortunately this sort of Hogmanay haplessness runs in the family. My father once liberally powdered himself down after a Hogmanay bath with Vim because it was in a fancy container and he assumed it was talc. After his umpteenth wash he was extremely clean yet still strangely restless. At least I could wear underpants.

"Anyway it's dark," announced my wife, "nobody will see you, even if you are wearing make-up."

"What if I meet some mates, they'll think I'm on the turn," I bleated, trying different faces in the mirror.

"The turn of what?" asked my wife, "anyway, just tell them it's a New Year resolution."

And that did it. Somehow, even if I had to handcuff myself to the radiator I was staying in. I kept quiet though. There was no point in making bold announcements before I had a proper escape plan in place. After ruminating or rather boiling for a while I eventually rose to the challenge and convinced myself it was actually a good idea to go out with a face like a proverbial slapped backside. Who cares, I said to myself, I'm too old to be vain.

There was also the coat.

My wife had been looking for this coat for what seemed a whole year. I was only too willing to help her find it, point out anything I happened to pass in shop windows,

unfortunately I had nothing to go on because she couldn't describe it to me, but apparently she would know it when she saw it.

"Is this it?" I would ask, holding up what I reckoned was a perfectly nice looking coat. And then several months and several dozen coats later, "surely this is it?"

But it never was. Not until Hogmanay when it appeared as if by Fairy Godmother magic in Markies. It was strangely quiet in town, and the whole day had a special, other-worldly atmosphere that made you think anything could happen, even the impossible, like for instance my wife finding that legendary coat and not only buying it, but actually keeping it.

It was short, navy blue and double breasted. Who would have thought? It also had an unusually large dark green button on one of the cuffs.

"I like that big button feature," I said as my wife modelled the coat in our bedroom, "its quite unusual but I think it kind of makes it."

Since I had managed to pretend I didn't have a big red skelped face the possibility of the coat making a public appearance was back on the cards.

"What big button?" asked my wife looking down at her coat.

"That big button," I said pointing at it, "the one on the end of your right cuff."

My wife saw it, screamed, then collapsed on the bed.

"It's not that bad," I said, "I think its a unique design element. In fact its just the kind of thing I would have come up with if I was a coat designer."

"It's the flipping security tag!" shouted my wife as she wrestled off the coat.

"Oh my God, how did we get it out of the shop without setting off the alarm, they'll think we've nicked it!" I shouted grabbing the coat, and as if we were about to be raided at any moment I gave the big green button a big serious tug. To my amazement it stayed put and instead, rather spookily it began to bleed menacing dark blue ink all over my hands, the coat, and our lovingly hand painted off-white authentic 18<sup>th</sup> century floorboards. It just missed my new Christmas jumper so it had another go and spat ink everywhere like a menacing squid.

This time it covered our bedspread which naturally was an heirloom minding its own business. The ink started off dark blue matching the coat, but then almost out of sheer nastiness out spewed some vile green bile. Much wailing and weeping ensued, during which all Hogmanay festivities were cancelled for the next decade – or at least diminished and a plot hatched to bring the M&S empire to its knees pleading for mercy.

While my wife tried to salvage the bedspread I scrubbed my dark bluish green hands under scalding water until they looked as if they were covered in slightly faded very bad tattoos. I suppose a lot of shoplifters must walk about quite happily like this, and in a strange way I thought my blue-green mottled hands sort of complemented my cheeks which were now scarlet and pulsating like a pair of giant Christmas lights.

It was a strange, if highly eventful and memorable Hogmanay, spent mainly trying to text and call for help through a network that had obviously collapsed under pressure. My wife meanwhile held onto the revenge theme by shouting the word 'Ruined!' every ten minutes.

The manageress from Markies was horrified when she heard our scary tale.

"Please don't tell me you tried to pull the ink tag off!" she declared. Which was exactly the same thing everyone else said. When it happened to one of my wife's aunts the shop in question sent round a manager in a taxi to remove the tag. There was to be no indelible ink splattering around that pristine household, no ruined heirlooms no camouflaged bedroom floorboards.

Still, we were amply compensated, my wife has a new coat and I have hands to match. The nickname 'Radox Face' I'm sure is only a temporary hitch.