

# NEW CLOTHES

by Paul Foster

The children are seated at their desks. The desks have been arranged in groups of four, which the boy does not like. It brings three other students closer to him, close enough to hear the sounds his body makes after lunch. It is quiet time, reading time, time to finish the book they were to start over the summer: *Rumble Fish*. The boy has finished it already, on break at his first summer job, so he is re-reading the parts about Patty. He can hear the summer insects faintly buzzing outside the open windows. He wishes they were louder.

The boy slides his chair back and gets up. As his body straightens in his clothes, he can smell his Speed Stick deodorant. It is a new smell and it reminds him of his father. He glances at Mr. Harrington, who is behind his desk and also reading. The boy feels sure Mr. Harrington has finished the book also, maybe more than once. Maybe he is re-reading the parts about Patty. The boy walks to the door, still not quite believing that the students are allowed to visit the bathroom without asking (a privilege they “had better not abuse”). He steps out into the hall.

Afternoon sun streams into the far lobby, silhouetting two figures near the principal’s office. A student and teacher. He cannot hear what they are saying, but the student is looking at the floor. A gentle breeze is blowing through the hall and he thinks of his older brothers, who passed in and out of these halls two years before. He pushes open the door to the bathroom and is glad to find no one inside. Someone has turned off the lights, but the frosted glass window on the back wall lets in enough light from the courtyard. The boy prefers it dim. He stands before the crackled mirror, and he likes what he sees. Not the face, which is the same as always, but the clothes.

He is fourteen now and has spent the summer making milkshakes and soft-serve cones (and reading about Patty) at the amusement park the next town over. For the first time, he has money. For the first time, he has bought his own clothes. And, finally, he is wearing genuine, authentic Ocean Pacific, for which he paid a price his mother would not. A white, short-sleeved button down with that glorious ‘Op’ on the left breast, a sun setting over the ocean waves within the ‘O’. He cannot see it now, but he knows a larger version of the graphic is on the back, for all to see as he passes. Beneath this, he is wearing a turquoise Izod, carefully selected for the way the color looks with the Op on top. Again, *genuine*: an alligator on the label, not a tiger or a giraffe like the fourth graders wear. And again, more than his mother was willing to pay. But he had paid. He had worked and earned and paid. And today is the debut.

While he is standing there, proud and even relieved by what he sees, the door swings open and Frazier strides in. The boy is self-conscious, having been caught admiring himself. And by Frazier: the one kid in school known only by his last name. Frazier, whose closet is filled with Op and Izod. Frazier, whose Levi’s feature a regal red label with the word “Husky.”

Frazier, whose winter coat is decorated with the ski tags of the many mountains he has conquered. It is 1984 and the boy’s brothers are trying to look like Don Johnson from *Miami Vice*. But the boy half-believes that Don Johnson gets his style from Frazier. Frazier, who always has an Atomic Fireball in his mouth and whose hair falls perfectly with no gel and with no effort. That is what the boy wants most from what Frazier is: the no effort.

Without a word, Frazier steps up to the boy and looks first into his plain face and then down at his shirts. On this day, Frazier himself is wearing double Izods, deep green beneath a royal blue. Perfection. When he raises his arms, the boy flinches, unsure of what Frazier might do to him. But he only grabs the collars of the boy’s shirts and firmly snaps them up, first the Izod, then the Op over it.

The collars of Frazier’s shirts are never folded, and the boy knows it was an error to leave his down. He liked the idea of wearing the collars up, imagined it might protect him the way the collar of a sailor’s wool coat shields his neck from icy winds at sea. But he hadn’t been brave enough. To wear the collars up would have been a declaration to others that he was cool, not just trying hard enough to be left alone.

As he makes a final adjustment to the collars, Frazier shifts the Fireball from one side of his mouth to the other. The boy can smell his cinnamon breath. Frazier raises his eyes to the boy’s and the look on his face is strange. He isn’t bullying or even judging him. This isn’t an initiation or an acceptance. His face is open. Here on the dank, green tiles of an institutional bathroom, the coolest kid in school has a question in his eyes. He nods slowly at the boy, wants to be sure the boy understands. But the boy does not understand.

Frazier turns and walks to the door with that confident ease of his. And with something else the boy has not seen before. Frazier grabs hold of the door’s handle and pauses. The boy sees the back of the double Izods expand with a deep breath. He goes, leaving the boy again alone. The door swings shut and the boy sees the word *BOYS’* in reverse on the glass. That apostrophe. It means possession. It means the boys own something within this room. But there’s nothing in this room but toilets and sinks and mirrors and that metal, trough urinal where he’s seen as many as eight boys packed shoulder-to-shoulder after gym class. From within the stall, the sound of it always reminds him of the summer rain on the tin roof of his family’s rented summer camp. But it’s just boys and their pee.

Frazier has not spoken a word to the boy, and the boy knows that he probably never will. He looks again into the mirror. A soft, unfamiliar smile comes over the face he sees there. He folds his collars back down and wishes that Frazier hadn’t gone. There are so many things he needs to ask him.

*Paul Foster is a writer whose work has appeared in Revolver, McSweeney’s Internet Tendency, Cold Mountain Review and elsewhere. Read more of his work at [www.fosterpaul.com](http://www.fosterpaul.com).*