

FULL STOP

Can you even imagine not buying any new clothes for a whole year? TEXT: ANNA SHEPARD



I found a gorgeous crocheted cardigan—bought from a second-hand store years ago—at the back of my wardrobe the other day. I forgot that I owned it and could barely contain my excitement at finding it. Within seconds, I was tearing it up with various other items, and I've barely taken it off since.

There was a time when this sort of discovery would have inspired nothing more than a shrug; that was before I launched the “wardrobe challenge.” Earlier this year, I gave up buying new clothes and decided to survive on what I already had. When you haven't seen the inside of a clothing store for six months—let alone gone home with a new outfit—the joy of stumbling on fresh blood is not to be underestimated.

Before I explain why I've taken up a year of fashion rationing, let me get one thing straight: clothes have always been an important part of my identity, and my wardrobe is probably as cluttered and overstuffed as yours.

But on a wet afternoon earlier this year, when a splurge on clothes seemed like the only reasonable way to lift my spirits, I decided I'd had enough. It wasn't one single thing that pushed me over the edge but rather a growing sense of dissatisfaction. Shopping wasn't fun anymore. The stores were rammed, and the clothes were often badly made—they didn't last long, and neither did the buying buzz.

I was also worried about the link between poor human rights and cheap clothes. A series of reports by charities like Labour Behind the Label point out that they come at a price. Garment workers in the developing world work long hours for low pay with few rights to produce some of the clothes in our shops.

Less admirably, I was also shamed into action by the size of my wardrobe: I have enough in there to keep me clothed for a decade, and I only wear a fraction of what I own. If I spent time organizing my clothes and trying out different combinations, I rationalized, I'd be less tempted to make a beeline for the shops every time an invitation lands in my email.

And so began the wardrobe challenge. In terms of rules, I decided not to be too hard on myself. While I can't buy anything new, I can—on rare occasions—take

advantage of stuff that is already in circulation by shopping at second-hand boutiques and raiding the wardrobes of friends, although I'm trying to keep this to a minimum.

For the first few months, my strategy revolved around staying at home, away from temptation. Now that I'm not rushing off to the malls at every opportunity, I'm amazed at how much time I have on my hands. I've caught up with old friends, visited museums and galleries and taken up some wholesome new hobbies. Buying less enables you to do more.

It's also worth mentioning how liberating it is to establish yourself beyond your consumer choices. It may be a cliché, but saying no is empowering: it makes you appreciate what you've got and take control of your spending. And did I mention how much I've saved? Given that I was spending roughly \$150 a month on clothes, so far I have an extra \$1,500 in my pocket.

As for how I look, it's hard to tell. Friends probably know my favourite outfits backwards, but I receive no fewer compliments. It's a misconception that a new top or dress makes you feel and look good; most often, it's your mood. I've noticed that people tell me they like my clothes when I'm feeling happy and confident—it has nothing to do with what I'm wearing. I've also learned some new tricks, like clothes-swapping parties with friends to help replenish a tired wardrobe and trips to a seamstress to breathe new life into old garments.

I'm not saying that I won't be hitting the shops when my year is up, but I'd like to think that I'll be a more discerning consumer—like when you give up wine for a few weeks and then only need a glass to get a buzz. After another six months, I'm hoping that my shopping appetite will have shrunk. Until then, I'll be flexing my creative muscle and finding new ways to wear that crocheted cardigan. □