

The Wrong Trousers

New Year's Eve 1992 was meant to be David Cohen's night. It was not meant to involve law enforcement.

As the poet Tennyson put it, "In the summer, a young man's fancy turns lightly to thoughts of corduroy."

Or something like that.

The year was 1992. The city was Perth. I was driving to a New Year's Eve party, wearing a pair of green corduroy pants that I'd bought at Myer that very afternoon. They looked great and, what's more, they were a perfect fit. As I drove, I thought, *If these pants are anything to go by, 1993 promises to be an excellent year.*

On the way to the party, I stopped at a Shell service station to get petrol. Standing at the bowser, I looked around wondering if everyone else admired my new pants as much as I did. Nobody was paying any attention – except for a uniformed police officer filling the tank of a police car parked at the adjacent bowser. He appeared to be giving me the once-over, but not in a manner indicative of pants-appreciation.

Slightly rattled, I concentrated on pumping. When I looked over again, he was staring right at me. I quickly looked away, squeezing the pump trigger tighter in an attempt to get the procedure over with as fast as possible. Of course, I could have stopped at any time, but I'd selected the "fill" option and now felt committed to seeing it through.

I glanced over at the policeman once more. He was returning his petrol pump to the bowser. What a relief! But then he turned to look at me again.

Now I could feel my legs beginning to sweat into the fabric of my new pants – although that may have been due to the balminess of the evening. It occurred to me that corduroy was a rather stupid fabric to be wearing in the Australian summer. Why hadn't I opted for cotton or linen? Or perhaps rayon?

I gave the officer a nod and a friendly smile. He returned the nod, but not the smile, and continued to observe me curiously, as if trying to match my face with some identikit image in his mind.

I began to wonder: was it possible that I'd perpetrated a crime of which I was somehow

unaware? Had I committed some despicable act in a Mr Hyde-like state of disassociation? Or, even more disturbing, did my face resemble that of a wanted killer, for whom this policeman was at that very moment in the process of mistaking me? They say that everyone has a doppelgänger somewhere; unfortunately, mine just happened to be a homicidal maniac. This was worse than the time someone later mistook me for Ed Sheeran. Well, maybe not worse... but equally as bad.

Lost in these speculations, I looked up to see the officer standing before me.

"Evening," he said.

"Evening," I also said.

Before I could insist that I wasn't a homicidal maniac, he said, "Not sure if you realise, but there's a security tag attached to the back of your pants."

I felt around the waistband and, sure enough, my hand located a hard chunk of plastic. It was an ink tag – one of those devices that renders stolen garments unusable, either by staining them with ink if you forcibly remove it, or by making you look like a bit of a prat if you don't. The sales assistant, who should have disengaged the tag in a non-pants-ruining way, had somehow neglected to do so. Caught up in the jubilation of a successful purchase, I hadn't even noticed.

"I didn't steal these," I told the policeman, my sweat-moistened legs getting moister by the second.

He nodded. "Still, you might want to take them back and get the tag removed."

Clearly the WA Police had more important things to do on New Year's Eve than arrest me for alleged shoplifting. But I couldn't return to Myer – the store had been closed for hours. (And there was no internet back then, so I didn't have access to 500 YouTube videos providing step-by-step instructions on how to remove a tag without getting ink on your pants.)

So, I saw in the New Year with the ink tag still attached. Even though I'd concealed it by untucking my shirt, that didn't really help. I still knew it was there, silently mocking me and generally cramping my style. The year 1993 got off to a particularly bad start. ■

David Cohen is a Brisbane-based writer. His new short-story collection, The Terrible Event, will be published in 2023.