

DD was reading a newspaper when I said 'I nearly bought a leather jacket today.' There was a pause, which got longer. Long enough to start counting beats – 1 and 2 and 3 and

'How much?'

I ignored the question. It was stylish, good quality, nothing about it costing a week's earnings. It was a proper, working biker jacket with sensible pockets. It would last. It was a good pitch, I thought.

Beat, beat. You could feel the celestial conductor carving time with his stick: 3 and 4 and 'Robert,,', beat, beat, 'we're too old for biker jackets.' It was a statement of fact. And like all facts it was unarguable.

I never thought it could happen – not to me- even though the signs have been there for some time: liking jazz, fancying women news readers. Worst of all I caught myself admiring a Volvo the other day. It sneaks up on you this thing called middle age. Sure, if I look I can find a liver spot or two on my hands and my trousers have gone up a size over the years but I've still got all my own hair. Generally, I reckon I'm in pretty good nick and so far as I know I haven't started saying 'when I was young' or taken to hectoring my daughter's friends about how much better pop was thirty years ago.

Then from out of the shadows emerges R17, the ghost of my 17 year old self saying: 'You're closing the gap on numbers only relevant to maths geeks and you're still trying to convince yourself you can hack it. It would be thigh-slapping funny it wasn't tragic.' Tough. Really tough, but to both our surprise I have an answer. It goes like this: 'I'm not angry anymore – not much. And since you don't ask I'll tell you. I did get the bike and the girl. It's a pity that she no longer does minis or leather jeans but she's still cool. And something else: I got wherever it is I am today without the total and absolute capitulation to everything you despised. I don't tell R17 about how dependent I was on other people. That's something he wouldn't understand but given half a chance I will tell him that while I may not have beaten the system I like to think I learned to play it, to risk and bluff and call as the occasion demanded.

None of which stops DD and R17 being right about being too old for biker jackets, the uniform of wild ones or rebels without causes. And even if I'm not, there is still the issue of spending shed loads of money in a Hugo Boss store on the upper reaches of the King's Road

for something that used to be street, but has somehow become high end men's fashion. What kind of sell out would that be?

So I tell DD that the other day I did see something that might be more appropriate. It was a kind of knitted jacket. Not the kind of thing my old headmaster and domesticated men in the Lucile Ball Show wore. It was really...

'No.'

Sometimes the silences are as important as the sounds. On this occasion the sound of that 'No' was all that mattered. It sent shivers down my spine. What came next was even worse. Roughly speaking the message was come home with a leather jacket if you must – but something knitted with buttons up the front and, until such time as it goes back to the shop or the moths get it, all married man's rights and privileges are suspended. That would be a real, eye watering tragedy. R17 and I were as one on that.

By R.17.54