



PHOTOGRAPHY BY DANIEL WU



HOW TO TALK TO YOUR TEEN

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1. The idea of Europe; loose ties and prep attire shrunk to erotic proportions; Radiohead and Depeche Mode; neglected places in small, depressed cities—empty tree-lined streets, concrete mid-century structures; impossible longing; the last days of innocence, passing by in slow motion: these are the elements of Raf Simons' Spring/Summer 1997 collection, *How to Talk to Your Teen*.

2. The video released for this season is your biography. You're 16 and thin, you're off of school and the sun is shining, you're running through the woods in tight tanks and skinny pants, you're smoking cigarettes in a greenhouse, you race through a small city. It'll take you forever to get through the day. The sun will not set tonight. You're running through the brick courtyard of a Belgian high school.

3. Raf Simons has had an extraordinarily successful career in the more than 25 years since then, bending the zeitgeist in his own strange, particular image. He's been the creative director of Jil Sander, Calvin Klein, Dior, and, along with Miuccia Prada, Prada. He's as famous as a fashion designer could hope to be. Like Prince, he needs only one name, one syllable, and there's an A\$AP Rocky song, "Raf," to prove it. You can google him if you want the rest of the story; more has been written about Raf Simons than almost any other living designer.

4. This collection, *How to Talk to Your Teen*, came at the start of an era of astonishing, deeply personal creativity for Raf Simons, working at a small, independent fashion label, mining his own memories, his obsession with youth, and his clear-eyed observation of developments in the culture around him. The shows are about subcultures, typically. There's "Summa cum laude," in 2000, inspired by ravers in Belgium known as gabbers: black nylon bomber jackets, slim tank tops with modernist-looking geometric prints, graphics referencing 80s horror movies. Clothes held in a tense balance between fluidity and constriction, high-art and street fashion.

There was the now-famous show, a year later, for autumn/winter 2001, called *Riot! Riot! Riot!*, an angry, beautiful outcry, models walking through a scaffolded, half-finished runway in layers and layers of keffiyehs and enormous coats and baggy pants and nylon jackets and shredded sweatshirts, many of the clothes emblazoned with images of the singer Richey Edwards of the Manic Street Preachers, who'd disappeared, presumably by suicide, a few years earlier.

Many interpreted the follow up to *Riot!*, *Woe Unto Those Who Spit on the Fear Generation... The Wind Will Blow it Back* as an eerie anticipation of 9/11, which took place later that year. Models in semi-jihadist headdresses and bare feet walked along a shadowy runway, holding flares aloft. Clothes were imprinted with esoteric expressions of far-reaching dissatisfaction with contemporary life. One shirt reads "We Are Ready and Willing to Ignite, Only Born Too Late." The clothes look like austere, elegant costumes for urban guerillas.

Though much has been made of Simons somehow foreseeing the events of September 11th, the collection was more than just a canny understanding of the times. It was another elaboration on his great theme, the beautiful collision of languor and desperation in the lives of the young. Simons pilfered not just the references, the styles, and the ways of getting dressed of the young, but the sensibility of the teenager.

5. Among the materials produced for *How to Talk to Your Teen*, somewhere between a therapeutic instruction manual, a conceptual art piece, and a fashion advertisement, is a brief leaflet also entitled *How to Talk to Your Teen*, offering six points of guidance to parents to help them better understand their children. The sixth and last point states: "Never imply that your teenager's feelings don't matter or that they will change. Teens live in the present. It doesn't help them to know that they'll soon feel differently." Simons has always been interested in taking on the heightened drama of teenage life.

6. Printed on slim short-sleeved button ups in the Spring/Summer 97 Collection is the phrase "Teenage Summercamp." Summer camps are places of leisure and disinhibition, confinement and freedom. As a young child you're sent to summer camp to relieve your parents of child care duties. As a teen, summer camp is an enclave away from the eyes of parents, teachers, neighbors. At summer camp, days are long and in forests and by lakesides there are spaces to avoid detection. A society of children and teenagers is formed, governed by its own rules. Summer camp is where children are sent and where children make their first attempts to be adults. Summer camp is the joy and the glory and the brief realization of youth's promise. Summer camp is over in two weeks or six. Summer camp is where you sleep in bunk beds with your friends and you won't be separated by the school bell ringing or by your meddlesome family. First crushes and first loves blossom and expire at summer camp. Maybe you smoked your first joint at summer camp, or confided a secret to a bunkmate, or kissed a boy in a shady grove, or threw up into a lake after drinking too much of someone's swindled liquor.



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Raf Simons didn't make clothes for our real American summer camps in New York and California, Vermont and Michigan. There are no gym shorts and swim shorts. Summer camp is a confederation of young people not yet burdened by responsibility, temporarily freed from the walls of schoolhouses, and dedicated to enjoyment, only. The invitation for *How to Talk to Your Teen* says "Now, you can start to go to your summer camp anywhere in the world!" It could be summer camp in a parking lot or in the woods just out of town or your house when your parents go away, and the uniform may be punk-skinny and black and white. The uniform may be baggy and covered in patches for old rock bands. The uniform may be desperate or angry or melancholic but it will be beautiful and belong exclusively and in spirit to the young.