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**A Special Occasion**

By John Bukowski

I’m a salesman from a long line of salesmen. My grandfather sold Studebaker’s before he moved up to Cadillacs. At various times, my father sold jewelry, cosmetics, and eventually printing supplies. I sell menswear. Not as lucrative as in decades past, when suits and ties were a fact of day-to-day life, but still a living. My salesman’s smile is always ready, needing only a door chime to bring it forth. Today that patented smile widened into a look of surprise.

I’d worked at the Fashionable Male for twenty years, ten as owner. I thought I knew all the types; had learned how to handle them. The young guys looking for prom attire usually arrived in groups amidst horseplay and crude language. A firm hand and exclamations of “That looks hot” worked well with them. The nervous, slightly older fellows sought wedding apparel, typically accompanied by a bride-to-be. In those cases, defer to the decision maker not the living male mannequin. Older businessmen had a well-fed look; they bought quickly and in volume: Fratello ties, Brooks Brother suits, Daniel and Ellissa shirts. Service and kiss ass. Cha-ching! But men near the century mark were a rarity. Rarer still was one coming in under his own power–alone.

“May I help you, sir?”

“I don’t know, young fella. But I’d appreciate it if you tried.”

There was sadness in his smile, weariness as well. Perhaps he recently lost a friend or relative. Or maybe this was just how you looked after a lifetime of fatigue and pain, woes and worries, loss and grief. A frayed sport jacket draped loosely over slumped shoulders and bent spine. A yellowed-white shirt rising and falling rapidly under an old bow tie; the breath barely able to find its way in before it needed to escape. Sweat beading on a broad forehead with a feverish look, as if the skin tags and wisps of white hair might smolder at any moment. Maybe this was how I’d look if I lived long enough.

“I’ll certainly do my best. What are we looking for today?”

“Well, son, *we* are looking for a chair and some clothes, in that order.”

“I think I can help with both. Please, have a seat.”

I ushered him to a straight-backed chair, holding one frail arm as his shiny pants lit lightly on the cushion. Then I shook the withered claw protruding from a ragged tweed cuff. “Welcome to The Fashionable Male. I’m Robert Crown, but please call me Bob.”

“Thank you kindly, Bob. Jack Mayhew.” He mopped his head with a balled up red hankie. “Whew. That’s a long walk.”

I looked outside for a companion parking the car. “Will someone be joining us today? Your son or daughter perhaps?”

“My son died nine, no make that ten years ago. Just two years after his mama. Heart attack. Never had a daughter. Would have been nice, though.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Jack.”

As the old man waved off my condolences, my eyes scanned the lot for a senior’s shuttle or maybe a caregiver parking a Buick or shiny black Lincoln. But nothing moved outside. The three handicapped spaces remained empty.

“May I ask, ah, how you got here today?”

“Bus,” Jack said. “Got my senior’s card.” He patted his breast pocket, eliciting a cough. “That and six bits gets me where I need to go.”

“You walked *all* the way from the bus stop?”

He nodded, again mopping his brow before repocketing the balled hankie. “Long way.”

“Can I get you some water? Coffee?”

His smile lit up a bit. “Water’d be nice.”

I reached into the mini fridge hidden under the haberdashery shelves. Unscrewing the cap from a cold bottle, I said, “Cup?”

He shook his head and winked. “Not so old yet I can’t drink from the bottle.”

“Of course not.” I smiled. “What can I show you today, Jack? Sport jacket? Slacks? We have some nice Joseph Abboud sweaters on sale.”

“I’m in the market for a dark suit, Bob. Nothing fancy. Nice black suit. Maybe gray.”

“Is this for a funeral?”

My grandmother once told me that the saddest thing about growing old was watching your friends and family die off, one by one. I figured Jack must be near the end of the line in that regard.

He nodded. “You could say that.”

“Close friend?”

His sad smile returned. “Yeah. Most of the time, anyway.”

“Well, I’m sorry for your loss. You just rest a moment and I’ll bring out some selections.”

I eyeballed him as a size thirty-four-short but brought out thirty-sixes. A bit of a bag hides a multitude of stoops, crooks, and sags. I shied away from names like Brioni and Armani; they looked to be out of his price range, judging by appearances. And I didn’t think he was looking for a continental flair. I kept it moderately priced. And I kept it American.

For the next hour and fifteen minutes, Jack Mayhew and I danced the clothier’s tango. He took his time, touching material, slowly and carefully rising to try on jackets before slowly and carefully sitting again to recover and sip water. I didn’t mind. I had nothing better to do at ten on a Wednesday morning. Maybe sell a pair of sox here or there. Besides, how often do you get to hear the life story of someone who voted for Thomas Dewey – more than once. And something more. I think we both found it therapeutic, at least I did.

My dad passed away just one year ago this month. For the two years previous, I spent every Wednesday (my day off) and Sunday afternoon with him. At first it was a chore, a duty I’d promised my mother when she passed. Then it became a habit. Finally, it was a familiar ritual that brought pleasure to us both. My dad enjoyed the company, although he never said so. I came to enjoy getting to know the man who’d sired me but with whom I’d never really connected. Not until those last two years. Now that it was over, I missed it. Or maybe I just missed him.

“You were actually a door-to-door salesman during the depression?”

Bob’s grey wisps bobbed. “Hammond’s Illustrated Bibles.”

“Bibles? Door to door?”

He sipped water and smiled. “Yep. Gilt edged. Hand-painted flyleaf and book headings.”

“And you were able to make a living doing … What I mean is, I can’t imagine that expensive bibles went with twenty-percent unemployment.”

He winked. “You’d be surprised. But you had to know how to sell. Whose doors to knock on.”

I draped a dark Brooks Brothers over his sunken chest, shook my head and exchanged it for a Kenneth Cole. “And how did you know that?’

“Did my homework. Got to know the neighborhoods.” He coughed, a hollow rattle that shook his skinny frame. “I was just a pup myself, barely sixteen. But I learned fast. Found out where the rich Presbyterians lived; Catholics were likely to slam the door in your face.” He chuckled at an old memory. “Sometimes it paid to grease the wheels a bit, too.”

I nodded at the Kenneth Cole, then helped him put it on over the new white shirt I’d selected for him. “Grease the wheels?”

Jack rubbed thumb and fore finger together. “Payola. Lettuce. Moola. Buck slipped to a doorman could get you into a posh apartment house. Get you the names of a few likely prospects too.”

The jacket was a bit loose, but as I say, covered a multitude of sins. “Where was that, Jack? What city, I mean.”

“Chicago,” he replied. “Before the war.” His eyes took on a far-away cast. “Just a year before I met Evelynn.”

“Was that your wife?”

He nodded; gaze focused on visions from eighty years ago.

“You must have been married a long time.”

He kept nodding. “Yep. Long time.”

I gave him a few moments then cleared my throat. “How about we try on these trousers?” I helped him up and stumble-stepped him to the dressing room. “You going to need help in there, Jack?”

“Guess I can still change my own pants,” he said. “As long as there’s a place to sit.”

“There’s a bench in there, at the back,” I said. “Take your time.” I stood at the door, listening for sounds of trouble. “Were you in World War II, Jack?”

“Yep.” The reply sounded strained with effort. “Eighth Air Force. Ball turret gunner.”

I whistled. “I understand that was quite a dangerous job.”

“So they tell me. But I guess they was all dangerous. Tail gunner was probably worse…dratted zipper.”

“Need a hand?”

“No, I got it.”

The fitting-room door clicked open and Jack shuffled out, his stockinged feet gliding over dark material.

“Hold on,” I said. “Let me turn up those cuffs before you trip. We’ll hem them later.” I folded material around one bony ankle, then started on the second. “So, the tail gunner was most dangerous. Why was that?”

“You see, if they could take him out, that left the whole back of the plane open. Just sit in the six o’clock and lob cannon shells into us. Lost my best friend to a Kraut twenty millimeter. Tommy Wheelan. Hell of a guy.” He swayed on his feet.

“Here, let me help you.” I sat him back down. “Would you like more water? Or maybe coffee? I was just going to pour myself a cup.”

His smile brightened. “Mighty kind of you. I like coffee. Black. Yes, mighty kind. Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. Thank *you* for your service.”

I returned from the back room with two cups. “Why don’t I put this down to cool?”

He nodded.

“I guess you probably lost a lot of friends in the war.”

His eyes lost focus again, as if staring through me to the past. “Yep. Yes indeed. War. Heart attacks. Cancer. Car accidents. Even a boat accident.” His voice took on the huskiness of strained emotion. “I lost a lot of friends. Lost em lots of ways. That’s the hardest part of growing old.”

“Yes,” I said, not knowing what else to say. “So I understand.” I smiled to change the mood. “But I guess it beats the alternative.”

He looked directly at me without a trace of humor. “Not really.”

“Well, um, … let me see.” I appraised him sitting in his black suit. “That looks sharp. Would you like to look in the mirror?”

“I’ll take your word, son.” His voice sounded distant, as if it came from wherever his unfocused eyes were gazing. “Not really.” I could barely hear him now. “Not this long. Too damn long.” His eyes glistened.

“Ah, well, Jack. Um, can I show you some dress socks? Belts? We’re having a special on Tommy John briefs.”

“No,” he whispered. “I guess I won’t be needing socks or underwear. Why piss money on something that don’t show.”

“Well, ah, … how about a new tie? Perhaps something in grey?”

He nodded, still staring far away or within himself, a smile rising to the corners of his mouth. “That’d be fine. Pick me out a nice one.” As I left, I heard him add, “Thank you for your kindness.”

I selected a Saks printed silk, grey with a white stripe. “How about this,” I said, returning from the tie rack. “It’ll break up the solid colors without breaking your wallet.” I held the tie next to his dark jacket. “What do you think?”

His eyes had closed. His right hand was clutching something.

“Jack?” I touched the hand, which had gone from feverish to cool. “Jack?” I tapped his arm. The hand opened, a money clip plopping to the carpet next to the stub of a number-two pencil.

I hesitantly picked up the clip. A business card sat beside a wad of hundred-dollar bills. Printed on one side of the card was Mangione Funeral Home. There was writing on the other side. I read the words that had been penned by a less than steady hand.

‘All arrangements have been made. Keep the extra for your trouble.’

Below this, five words were scribbled in pencil.

‘Don’t bother hemming the cuffs.’

It was only then I noticed that Jack Mayhew had stopped breathing. The smile on his face looked peaceful.