

Featured story:

## **AN ADVENTURE IN MY TUXEDO**

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*Sometimes it's hard to find the gumption to follow the straight and true, even when it's to our benefit. We have good intentions to maintain those paths and look for ways to keep us there. Yet on those occasions when you deviate a touch, you can stray away even further into unknown territory.*

When I was still living in residence I was looking for ways to clean up my act, none the least were my study habits. Apart from clearer setting of priorities and applied discipline I came across the phenomenon of circle studying. And there was another curious approach that appeared. While it didn't directly deal with studying, it involved the final stage: the actual doing the exam. One thing was the preparation and the other was to access the information and put it together in a comprehensive way at the critical moment. What I discovered was by dressing up a little for an exam, it somehow placed me in a better position.

You wouldn't think changing the shirt I had worn that afternoon would make any difference to my performance in an evening exam. Yet, there it was. I felt more confident, sat with better posture and inadvertently or not, reacted to the exam questions in a more professional manner. As with the circle studying, this discovery was serendipitous. I suspected that the success I was experiencing was not so much due to any mystical powers behind them, but rather to the enhancement they added to an already determined set of behaviours and attitudes towards my studying and getting through the courses. Still, I didn't want to go against the gods of good fortune and if my belief in their effectivity was working to my benefit, then so be it. I needed all the help I could get.

For my last year of regular classes I found an apartment conveniently close to campus and added cooking and home upkeep to the always changing lists of things to learn and do. A little older than when I had first started university, I felt more able and confident to balance the domestic duties with my studying. Whenever an important exam came up, I prepared not only in my studying but I also set aside a clean fresh set of clothes to be worn on E-day. The level of formality rose over time and according to the importance of the exam. Finals were a serious affair and I treated them with the full respect they deserved. That last full year I completed all my degree requirements but one. It was also the year that I felt I could not go on any more and needed a time-out for twelve or more months, working to re-establish some financial ground and to collect my thoughts.

I returned the following year, enrolled in my final course and was doing well. It was in computer science where I not only learned how to program better in different computer languages, but I made a number of friends in class and got along well with the professor. After the final exam many of us were to meet in the university bar to celebrate and I was especially looking forward to it. It was to be my final final. No more studying. No more exams. And I would have finally completed that very difficult degree.

So, you guessed it. This affair required a very special form of attire, one that would be appropriate for the occasion. After some thought I came to the only conclusion possible – I would rent a tux.

I don't consider myself an eccentric person but I'm not afraid to try something new at times, particularly if it doesn't seem destructive in the doing or consequences. This attitude has occasionally led me to some very interesting situations that would not have ordinarily developed and my computer science exam was going to be one such interesting evening. Of course when I was putting on my tux just before leaving my home, I had no idea what was to occur.

I closed the door behind me, on the way to the exam, feeling confident, a little amused with myself and yes, a little foolish, too, but I wasn't going to let that interfere. I didn't mention this earlier but I also got into the habit of entering the exam room a little late. Not too late to be prejudicial, but it helped me be less nervous than if I had been

waiting with the others in the hallway. This slight tardiness was reserved for those exams which required no prior oral explanations – everything was explained on the exam paper.

I was very well-prepared for this three-hour exam and came in much later than normal, perhaps 15 or 20 minutes into it. It was a lot, but well within the 30-minute time limit, after which I would be prevented from taking it. It was quite an entrance, with everyone stopping their exam to look up at me pass by. This added attention wasn't my intention and I felt a little self-conscious but I played the role and didn't break stride until I found a vacant seat with a test paper waiting on the table.

A brief cursory look at the questions washed away those background doubts that are always wishing to make themselves known. I felt very good about this exam, and reminding myself not to be overconfident, proceeded to answer the questions as fully and as concisely as the situation warranted. I gave them my complete attention and dedication until the last problem was solved. I read it all again, and then once more to make sure I had done everything expected of me. Feeling there was nothing else to add or modify, I stood up and walked to the exam invigilator.

I was surprised to see no-one else near to finishing, their exam booklets still doubled with a pending page or two to be done. This put a dent into my confidence, thinking I must have missed something, but I had already handed in my papers.

I walked to the bar, well over a half hour earlier than the others, thinking I must have messed something up. I was the last to enter and the first to leave the exam hall. I had so many misgivings. I would be content with any kind of passing mark but also prepared myself for the possibility of having to repeat the course. And so it went, back and forth. Sure that I had done well, but acutely aware that I might have missed or misinterpreted something important.

I entered the bar and looked around. It was nearly empty and I chose a place to wait for my friends. A minute or few passed and before the waiter came over to take my order a woman approached me to ask if I had just been at a wedding. I smiled. I had been so caught up about what I might have done wrong in the exam I had completely forgot how I was dressed.

She liked my story of dressing up for my final exam and offered to buy me a drink while I waited for the others to join us. Soon we were chatting away like old friends. She noticed I had brought along my camera for this special occasion and asked if I wanted my picture taken. It seemed like the thing to do at the time and we stood up, me posing and her adjusting the settings.

The waiter came hurriedly over to interrupt this new development, saying we could not take pictures in a bar in Manitoba. We were quite taken back by this and asked why. He explained it had something to do with past scandals, maybe some politician was having too much fun in a bar and photos would appear in the newspaper. We assured him that neither of us was a politician nor any other kind of upstanding citizen or leader. We merely wanted to take a picture of me in my tux. He took our reluctance to comply as a challenge and immediately banned us from the bar. We still hadn't taken any pictures and since we were being punished for a crime we hadn't committed, decided to take the picture anyway.

Then we left the bar.

I wasn't sure what to do. I wanted to wait for my classroom colleagues, but I doubted if they would want to go off campus in search of another bar. We got along well, but we weren't good friends.

The woman offered for us to go to another bar, and I decided to take her up on it. I put my camera in the back seat, sat on the passenger's side and off we went, driving up that long road leading to and from the university campus.

Before we had reached the main roads of the city, we discovered there was someone tailing us, honking the horn, flashing the lights, motioning for us to pull over. She noticed the driver in her rear-view mirror, swore and told me just to ignore him. Apparently it was a jealous man she knew, not her partner, nor had ever been her partner, but he had it in his mind that she was his.

Because she obviously wasn't complying, he drove on ahead past us, then cut her off, forcing her to park at the side of the road. She asked me to wait in the car, no, she wouldn't need any help, she was going to take care of this herself. She walked over to his car and soon the two of them were yelling, both sets of arms waving up in the air. This was definitely turning into a very unusual night.

A few minutes later she walked back, apologized and said she had to leave and straighten this out further with that man. She asked if she could drop me off anywhere first but as it turned out, my apartment was very near campus and would only be about a ten-minute walk from where we were currently parked. She apologized again and after I got out, I watched her drive away.

As I was walking home I was playing with the possibility of changing my clothes and joining my comrades at the university bar. They should be just finishing the exam by now. But then I ruled it out. It was too much of a long shot, I figured. True, I would be in different clothes, but the waiter would definitely remember my face. And I wasn't in the mood for any more emotional roller coasters. This night was turning into some kind of Fellini movie, becoming more surreal with every new turn. It would be best to call it a night and get re-orientated within the safe confines of my familiar home.

Just as I neared my apartment building it dawned on me that my camera was still in that woman's car. Oh, no. I realized I knew only her first name and nothing more. A flash of doubts and paranoia flooded in. Was this all a set-up to steal my Nikon camera? No, it was too elaborate. It was probably all a string of events unusually linking themselves along the way.

She did mention where she was staying, in a motel not too far away. I changed into my normal clothes and set off, determined to retrieve my camera. I wasn't sure what I'd find nor what I'd do once I was there, but I felt compelled to go. I would have to play it by ear.

I found the motel easily enough and her car was parked in front of one of the rooms. There was no sign of that other car. I peeked in the window of the backseat and saw my camera was still there. With that in place I calmly went to the door and knocked. She saw me, let me in, and we started talking.

She told me she was in Winnipeg for business but was returning to Alaska the following day. That man was somebody who had taken a liking to her while they were working temporarily together and overstepped his bounds. He had taken too much for granted but was not dangerous. She apologized for ruining my special day and I thought about it for a moment. I would have enjoyed sharing some moments together with my classmates but in all likelihood after an hour or so we would have gone our separate ways and that would have been the end of it. Instead, the night of my final exam became even more memorable through the experience of having something of an adventure.

So, I thanked her rather than merely accepting her apology. She got me my camera, we hugged and wished each other well, and I returned to my apartment with my camera and my new memories.

I'm not sure how many days or weeks later it was, but the time came to go to campus. This was when we students would look for our student number and corresponding course results on a wall plastered with sheets of paper. I approached the wall, looked for my name, ran my finger in a straight line to the right, and paused a second while the information before me registered into my brain.

It wasn't anything highly emotional. It was simply a sigh. A deep and slightly long sigh. A sigh of relief. And a sigh of something else. I passed. This meant that it was now the end of an era. There would be new and different things coming my way. New adventures. And ones not involving me wearing a tuxedo.

#### *AFTERWORD:*

*I have always found myself a round peg trying to fit into square exteriors, even though I often come across as linear myself. I have encountered greater success by balancing the two and adapting to the new blends. This means trying*

*to understand and appreciate better what's behind the images and paths presented to us, how I might fit into it all, and what options I might have before me. And, of course, the majority of the time I just muddle my way through.*