

## No Alterations

Many years ago I worked in public relations, first in the healthcare sector and later in private enterprise for a rapidly growing venture-capital interest whose president and chief executive officer had a penchant for asserting his success at what seemed any and every opportunity. His favorite tactic, however, was to do so through messaging that incorporated, both organically and through the inclusion of a carefully crafted and always evolving corporate boilerplate statement, references to the organization's gross annual revenues and nationwide presence. Gross revenues, of course, were not net earnings, and the figure always made the company sound much larger than it was. As for the nationwide presence, some of the organization's satellite offices were little more than broom closets. It was the addresses that counted.

Not long after landing this gig, one of the media placements I earned for the company compounded into a television opportunity. My boss was ecstatic, but he tried to conceal it. When I informed him of the upcoming airplay, he mentioned something about the company's gross revenues having increased again.

Keeping up such appearances was challenging, especially when they were always changing. But that was the job and I was the company man. At least this is what I kept telling myself.

I soon realized, quite reasonably, that if I was going to represent this organization, its president, its investors, both on and off the air, then I should look the part of a high roller myself, or at least the loyal lieutenant to the walking, talking bankrolls who signed my paychecks and who clamored for more media exposure, higher gross revenues, yet another new office in another new city.

Conveniently, there was a clothing store just downstairs from the spacious, high-rise corporate office where I worked in Oklahoma City. But this was no ordinary men's outlet. It was a bespoke shop and a purveyor of fine gentlemen's clothing. The window displays reminded me of those at

Macy's and Saks Fifth Avenue, in New York City, at Christmas. There were no ice-skating polar bears or glittery tributes to Britney Spears, though the displays were painstakingly crafted, intricate, and ornate nevertheless. They seemed at once exotic and yet classic. I recognized none of the clothing brands, although the mannequins were dressed so stylishly that I couldn't help but stare at them. They didn't have such clothes or stores in the small town where I'd grown up. Still a recent college graduate with the vast majority of my career and life yet ahead of me, I stood there dreaming of what could be or what might be, one hand in my pocket, one hand cradling that paper cup of coffee containing some beguiling blend and featuring that fashionable logo which I imagined linked me in some miniscule way to the other sharply dressed (and evidently, successful) workers now parading past me with briefcases and cell phones and their own paper cups of coffee, and smelling of delectable perfumes and heady colognes. But it didn't. In fact, while studying the clothes in the window that day, I had the sudden realization that the coffee cup in my hand was, despite the company's ubiquitous logo and immense popularity, just that: a paper coffee cup. Which meant that the coffee inside was, similarly, just coffee, despite that logo that was so in vogue, and in spite of the company's viral brand recognition. As such, this cup (and coffee) no more placed me in league with my sharply dressed (and evidently, successful) colleagues than did the type of bread I used to make the peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches I devoured for lunch each day at my desk. But, I reasoned, what *could* place me in their company, if not the same tax bracket, were the wonderfully fresh and sophisticated clothes in the window before me. I stood there like a boy about to crack open his piggy bank while the sounds of the ice-cream man's music grow steadily louder, clearer, more urgent. I was salivating, trying to imagine myself wearing these trousers and those shoes and this sport coat, intoxicated by such style and glamour, and yet struggling with the pair of epiphanies that had suddenly taken up tumultuous residence in my mind: one suggesting that if I were to dress with such elegance, I'd probably double the media placements I earned for the company, and maybe my salary. After all, fashion doyenne Edith Head once said that you can do anything you want in life if you dress for it. I was willing to take her at her word.

The other epiphany, of course, was the conflicting realization that if I were to walk through the open double doors and into the sweet-smelling store before me, I might as well saunter into the nearest opium den with

my paycheck pinned to my shirt sleeve. Utter addiction awaited me, that state of mind John McPhee once termed, “psychological Sing-Sing.” Already, I could hear the warden calling my name. Still, I tried to resist. I even mentally assembled a list of plausible excuses that I could offer my wife as to why my earnings had taken such a sudden and drastic nosedive. But to no avail. I made it as far as “austerity measures” before turning and marching through those open double doors and into the promised land of that delicious store where I soon found myself bedazzled to encounter not one proprietor, but two.

“Good morning,” said a tall and attractive middle-aged woman. She smiled as if she’d been expecting me. “How’s the weather outside?”

I don’t remember how I replied. Weather? I don’t recall there being any weather. I don’t think there was any weather that day. There were only clothes. Beautiful, classy, expensive clothes. I had availed myself of the fashion drug and now it was too late.

“Forty-four long!” came the voice of another tall, attractive woman on the opposite side of the store. “Forty-four long! Thirty-six sleeve. Athletic build! No alts!” As she said this, she cut the distance between us as quickly and easily as a tailor slicing through a bolt of silk.

“Oh, he’s not looking for a suit,” the first woman said to the other. She was stocking a table with leather gloves. Dozens of them. Soft, supple leather gloves. Then she stopped what she was doing and looked at me. “*Are you looking for a suit?*”

I shook my head. At this point I had no idea what I was looking for, but the thought occurred to me that maybe I needed a pair of those gloves. I could almost feel their buttery leather enveloping my hands. But they were *gloves*, and despite the appeal the woman had conferred on them in the way she carefully placed them on the table, they were still just gloves. I’d come in for what? A shirt? Some new shoes? I didn’t know. I was confused, mildly stunned even. Were these women twins? They looked almost identical, and yet each was distinct.

Now the first woman clicked her high heels toward me and extended her hand. “I’m Teena,” she said. Then she introduced the other woman, whose name I can no longer recall. I remember her as Teena’s sister.

“Nice to meet you,” I said, shaking Teena’s hand. “I’m John, and I’m not sure what I’m looking for. I was just admiring those beautiful shirts in your window.”

“Oh, the Duchamps,” Teena said, almost seductively. “Everyone loves them. There’s nothing like a Duchamp.”

The other woman said there was nothing like no alts. She then ripped a suit off the rack and thrust it toward me. “Forty-four long,” she said. “No alts! This is too good to be true!”

Teena smiled and explained that the suit had been made for a customer some time ago. But he hadn’t returned for it. It was a bespoke suit, made to measure. Made for him, but she was sure it would fit me.

“I don’t want to take someone else’s suit,” I said.

But it wasn’t yet this man’s suit. He hadn’t paid for it. He hadn’t claimed it. I couldn’t understand why. I told myself if I’d been fitted for such a snappy suit, I wouldn’t hesitate to claim it the moment it arrived. But then, at the time, I owned exactly zero snappy suits.

They felt it was doing no one any good hanging on the rack, and I saw no reason to disagree, especially once Teena’s sister held the suit beside me as if to gauge the fit.

“You two are the same size,” she said. “You’re a forty-four long, aren’t you?”

I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t even know what I was looking for. I’d just come into the store for, what? An edge? An opportunity? To see and experience my full potential?

Teena snatched a tailor’s measuring tape off a nearby table and began slipping it through her fingers. “What size suit do you wear?” Her voice was heavier than her sister’s. It was the voice you’d expect for evening cocktails and jazz. The other woman had the voice of an elementary school teacher who’d had her morning coffee and then some.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Large, maybe?”

The sister laughed. “He wears *this* size!” she said, again holding the suit beside me to gauge the fit. “And can you believe *no alts*? This never happens.”

“No alts,” Teena said as she pulled the tape from around my chest. In a matter of seconds, she’d measured my chest, neck, and sleeve, and my measurements, which even *I* didn’t know, were exactly those her sister had blurted out when I entered the store.

“How did you...?”

“It’s our business to know these things,” the sister said, smiling.

“What’s your business?” Teena asked.

“Bullshitting,” I said. “Or spin, I guess I should say. I’m in PR.”

Laughter.

Now the sister removed the suit jacket from the hanger and said they weren’t bull-hockeying me. This suit was *made* for me.

“It is uncanny,” Teena said, standing back and studying the fit. She had on a navy-blue pinstriped suit with shiny black stiletto-heeled shoes. Her sister was dressed in a maroon sweater and a heather skirt that kissed her legs just above the kneecaps. Both women had voluptuously styled brunette hairdos. I was the only customer in the store and, perhaps for this reason, they showered me with attention such as I’d not seen since my wedding day. I didn’t know what to make of it, so I just stood there and allowed the women to slip the jacket onto my arms and over my shoulders. Then Teena guided me to a mirror so I could take it all in. I hadn’t even bought anything and already I felt better about myself, my job, my future. I fastened the top button. When I moved for the bottom one the sister told me to leave it unbuttoned.

“When should I button it?” I asked.

“Never button the bottom button,” Teena said. “It stays unbuttoned.”

“See? I told you it’s a perfect fit,” the sister said. “It looks great on you.”

“Let’s get you into these trousers and see what they look like,” Teena said.

She handed me the pants and motioned toward the dressing room. A moment later I emerged in a brown pinstriped suit that, strangely, felt as comfortable as my old khakis and favorite sweatshirt. And to my great surprise, the pants, which had already been tailored and which featured cuffs on the legs, were a bit long—exactly as I liked them.

“How did you get the length so perfect?” I said, admiring the suit in the mirror. “I love how they’re a little long.”

“That’s called a full break,” Teena said.

“That’s called no alts!” the sister squeaked.

“You have a good sense of style, John,” Teena said in her relaxed, cocktails-at-seven voice.

When the sister told me that I wouldn’t have to bull-hockey anybody if I wore this suit, we all laughed.

That poor guy, I thought. But lucky me, I thought.

Then came a sudden jolt, as if I'd slipped on a banana peel. My senses quickened. My heart hammered. "How much is this going to cost me?" I asked.

It seems I'd come into the store at the perfect time, the perfect time to get a steal on this particular suit, or, if not a steal, exactly, then at least a good deal.

While waiting for the damage, I strolled over to the table of gloves and tried on one pair after the next. None of them fit. They were either too tight or too loose. I was disappointed, but my disappointment didn't last long, for when I glanced at myself in the mirror, in this incredible suit, which made me look, I don't know, like someone older and wiser and more successful and richer and luckier and better looking than I really was, I smiled.

A moment later Teena walked over, tapping her fingernail on the calculator's digital display, telling me I was going to save some money. I dropped my jaw when I saw the price. I dropped the pair of gloves I was holding. And yet, I dropped the money, anyway. I couldn't help myself. Besides, I was already wearing the suit.

It simply wasn't going to fit anyone else as well as it fit me, I heard over and over again. I loved hearing this. It made me feel good about myself, and the place I thought I stood in the world.

I also heard, over and over again, No alts! Can you believe, no alts?

Despite the credibility and polish it lent my public-relations persona whenever I slipped into it, I didn't wear my suit for very long. Shortly after buying it I took another job and left the posh corporate tower and its high-altitude views. After leaving, these views were what I missed most even though, whenever I used to stand in my old office, looking out at the cityscape shining and twinkling under the vast blue Oklahoma sky, things on the ground—the things that mattered, the details—were always so far beneath me that I could never fully appreciate them, could never see them with any real clarity. From my lofty office, they seemed like parts of another world to which I'd once belonged, to which I'd somehow lost touch.

I thought I might get reacquainted with some of them in my new job as a technical writer for an engineering company. The environment here

was far less pretentious. People didn't care how you dressed—which meant my still-new suit saw absolutely no use—but only what you delivered. For me, this amounted to any number of manuals and user guides on esoteric computer programs and engineering systems, which, with the proper coding, could move mountains of data. Though this excited my technically minded colleagues, it meant nothing to me. Nothing other than a big, fat paycheck, quarterly bonuses, stock options. I made more money than I'd ever earned in my life, but I soon realized that even this wasn't enough to overlook the fact that I was miserable. I felt like a thoroughbred horse hitched to a team of Clydesdales, pulling that famous beer wagon through the streets to much pomp and circumstance when what I wanted was simply to get out of the city and into the country and run, to gallop through verdant fields, cycle fresh air through my lungs and run.

With time came the realization that, for me, the corporate world was simply unfulfilling. And it always would be. So I made the decision to give it up and return to school to finish my graduate degree.

Today, I sit down at my desk each morning wearing shorts and T-shirt, knowing that, if ever I need to dress up, I still have my suit, which (mercifully) I can still wear, but which I almost never do. My colleagues are the best; they're my dogs. And though I'm no longer in front of the camera, my broadcaster's voice no longer resonating through the air waves, and though closed-circuit teams of engineers and spreadsheet-purveying project managers no longer high-five each other at the sight of my manuals and quick-reference guides delivered on budget and on time, I'm much more content with my own small place in the world. With age has come the realization that, for me, the quiet, casual life is a much better fit.

Voltaire famously observed that illusion is the first of all pleasures, and in light of this I sometimes wonder how I could ever have been content working the big job and striving to impress the boss, my colleagues, the business world. I don't know who that person was, but it wasn't me. Sometimes, sitting here at my desk and singing that old John Lennon song—*When I say that I'm o.k. they look at me kind of strange / Surely you're not happy now you no longer play the game*—I'm reminded that we can fool everyone except ourselves. Which is why, like Lennon, I just had to let it go.