

The Shirt Library

by Brent Powers

"I got it at the shirt library, is that OK with you?"

"No, it is not OK," my wife says. "This is your friend's wedding and you can't be wearing that shirt. Look. You see where they put the library mark? How big a tie you think can cover that? Now go and buy a shirt."

I hate buying shirts. There's no point. You need a shirt, you go to the library. Where do I wear shirts? I mean the kind that go with suits and all the rest? I hate all that shit, all that corporate shit. What's more, it's passé. Even Suits don't wear suits any more. Not in California. My last boss had a T shirt said "Don't Ask". I could wear such a shirt. Only kind of shirts I ever wear are things you can just pull over your body. You want starch and buttons, silk Hawaiian numbers, go to a shirt library.

Here's how it works.

You've got departments, right? Games, Media, Music, Book Annex, and Shirts. Right inside the door by the john. Big sign. Shirts. Racks and racks arranged by style, period, sizes for each. You go in and browse, pull one off the rack you like and try it on in the little changing cubicle. You like it, you check it out. Says "Please Do Not Wash" on the underside of the collar. Then usually the library stamp on the lower part of the shirt tail, but sometimes you get some dumbass who stamps it in a prominent place, but that's OK. It got to be hip for a time, in fact; guys would deliberately pick the ones with the stamp showing, or if they couldn't get one of those they'd leave their shirts hanging out. Got to a point where you had to stand in line. Some cat got the idea of selling phony library shirts so they had to jimmy in some quick legislation to make it illegal. Even so, all they could do is disallow a counterfeit stamp, meaning

any stamp duplicating that of an actual library, so the little companies had to come up with things like "Tombstone Library of Books in Slavic Languages", a phony address, State, zip code. Got to be a thing with kids for a while, remember? But that's over, so I figure, Look, Dizzy is getting married. BFD. Dizzy is *always* getting married. He doesn't make a big deal out of it. One time I was his best man, we go to the Santa Monica Justice of the Peace, they get sworn in, ring, kiss, Bingo. We were all dressed in jeans. Afterwards I chauffeured them in my Woody over to Jack In The Box to pick up the wedding feast. Burgers and fries and sodas. We sat out on the pier and watched the gulls. We let the wrappers go out to sea for good luck. Some cop said, "I could nail your asses for that, but I'm not because I'm through with the blue." He tossed his big old flashlight out there right along with the fast food wrappers. He got applause from all the guys fishing. They loved it. "Ah, hell, I'm sentimental, I guess. Couple brats getting married, thinking to benefit society. They'll learn soon enough what a motherfucker that old society is. Little married kids are seldom left alone for long. More often than not they encounter giants, flying wolves, weeping maidens by a stream. Sometimes they meet an old man with a scythe. For now, let them have their burgers. Maybe I'm through with the blue but I sure ain't through with a firm belief in marriage, family, things of this nature, true and gooey things. Hell." And with these words, he strode on down the pier, waving his hands like a conductor.

"Once enchanted by ogres, one's life is very dull," Dizzy's new bride said meaninglessly.

"Hey, dummy up!" Dizzy told her, already asserting his husbandly prerogative.

That was his second marriage, I think, which lasted for about a week. When it was over, I picked him up in my Plymouth. His wife sat in the porch swing, eating a hardboiled egg.

"You see this?" she said, holding up what remained of the egg.
"His death lives in here."

"Yeah, I heard that," I told her, and helped Dizzy with his bags. They'd been married only long enough for him to need one more bag than he had when he went in.

But never mind about her. Surprised I remember her at all, considering how many more he had. Hell, I don't know what number he was up to now. So, what difference does it make I wear a library shirt? I could come in a gorilla suit for all he cared. Guy was so punchy now from his life in the government he needed a goddamned attendant. Big mother name of Wendel. "He'll take care of all her ugly needs for me," Dizzy said.

"Lose the shirt," my wife commanded. "I'll buy you a shirt. I'll order it from Bean's right now."

Well, OK, what are you gonna do, your wife makes an offer like that? I took the shirt back to the library. She didn't even want it in the house. Such things brought poverty to mind; they reminded her of her impoverished childhood in what is now a Bummed Over District.

"You again, huh?" the librarian said.

"Yeah, it's me."

"Think you're gonna get your fee back?"

"Did I say that? Did I ask for my fee back?"

"Act like a low class chick about clothes, can't make up your mind about anything because you don't know the ads. You can't afford

payments on no TV cable so you don't know what you're 'sposed to wear. I know a lotta chicks like you. Even got hair like you, don't know what style it's in, don't know what year it is. I know chicks like you still driving Beemers they think that's not so fifteen minutes ago. What's your ride, a fifty-six channeled Merc all James Dean Navy blue and shit."

"I'm through with the blue, kiddo."

"Oh, yeah?"

She thrusts herself up to me, leaning against the counter so that her vast breasts flatten in a way that hurts me to behold. Even so, I just say, "Yeah," like you're supposed to when somebody else says, "Oh, yeah?"

"What a dork," she says, grabbing the shirt and tossing it in the large laundry bin behind her. There's a kid standing there getting ready to take it away.

"Ah, sheesh, Doris. Shirt that break the camel's back, huh? You'd do that to a working man?"

"I thought you was a camel."

"Ah, hey, that's cute. That's so cute."

"Geddouddahere!"

"Yes, sir," says the kid, squeaking the huge thing over to the elevator.

"Lemme see your card," she says to me now.

"You saw it," I told her. "You saw it before. You know what it looks like."

"Come on, don' fuck around, lemme see your card so I can update."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Means I'm waving the fee, asshole, now come on."

I watch her go about her work. It seems to take a lot of keypunching and looking deeply into the screen. Now and then she frowns and bites back her lips. Everything she does with her body looks painful to me but I guess she enjoys it somehow, or it's just an expression of her energy, which is a sort of angry, magma like broiling sort of business, yet magnetizing in a funny way. You want to put it all in a big urn and carry it across the room with your bared arms to prove your virtue as a True Human. Can't imagine what the sex must be like. Finally I had to say it.

"You wanna be my Kung Fu Mama?"

She sighed profoundly. "Don't say shit like that in the library," she told me. "You shouldn't say shit like that anywhere, but not here especially. You say shit like that it gets you worked over pretty good here, understand? You wanna say that at home, OK. Even at the mall, maybe. On the roof of one of them pink buildings. But here you talk turkey. You blend with the rest. I mean, I go for guys like you with all that edge and individuality and shit only here it's an assault on the prevailing value system. You can't be that kind of asshole here, I mean cute as it is, I agree it's cute and it's even known to make me wet, but I can lose my job I don't upbraid you for that shit. Besides, you wanna hit on me, I mean even me, you hit on me nice the first time. I mean maybe later we can get down, but I like it kind of Hallmark the first time. Is that cool with you, kangaroo?"

“Yeh. I think you could say that,” I told her. “Cool.”

“OK, so get the fuck outa here and when you come back ask me nice or get corny, I don't care, but ... Look, will you just go. OK? Just go from here.”

I left. I got in the car and headed for the mall with all the pink buildings and the real shirts and rehearsed various corny things to say when next I visited the shirt library. Then I went home and on the day of the wedding I blended right in and talked turkey. My wife was pleased with me. Dizzy was pleased, too. He's always pleased to get married.

