

Alteration

by Steve Almond

I was seeking nothing more than this: to have my suit altered. The task appeared to accommodate no great peril. I had purchased the suit a few days earlier, at a consignment shop called “The Fiddler’s Bill,” a name that somewhat puzzled me. The final price: twenty dollars, plus sales tax.

The suit was seersucker, a cotton blend of the expected light blue and white pattern, styled in the timeless fashion favored by the legendary film stars of whom mother is so fond. Padded shoulders to accentuate masculine girth, tapered at the waist and flared by means of thin pleats on the trousers.

Ah, the trousers. Here was the problem. They fell a bit long.

The sign out front of the consignment shop (“Alterations Also”) plainly implied that corrective hemming was included in the price of each suit. When I broached this matter with the gentleman at the counter, however, he informed me that such services would cost an additional ten dollars.

“But that is half what I paid for the suit,” I observed.

“Hey, pal, alterations don’t grow on trees. I can have the suit ready for you on Thursday.”

“Excuse me, sir,” I put in, “but do not think I am such a rube, such a bumpkin, that I will fall prey to your nefarious scheme. I did not tumble off the turnip truck just yesterday.”

“Your call,” he said.

His impudence was astonishing.

When I got home mother said, “Where have you been?”

“I purchased a suit,” I told her.

“You bought yourself a suit. Oh, dear, but that’s wonderful! Try it on. Try it on for mama.”

“I’m wearing the suit, mother. It is on my body this minute.”

“Oh, yes. Oh, Leonard, it is a beautiful suit,” she said. Then her mouth drooped a little, this charming half frown she wears

whenever trying gently to confront a difficult subject. "But Leonard - your legs. I can't see your legs. And your shoes. How ever do they remain on your feet?"

"The pants have fallen a bit long," I explained.

Mother sighed with relief. But then she leaned forward in her La-Z-Boy, eyes saucered. "Leonard -- whatever will you do?"

"I suppose I shall have to get the suit altered," I said.

"Why, yes, Leonard. That's exactly what you'll have to do. Get that suit altered." She said this as if the idea had fallen from on high that minute and struck her on the noggin. "But Leonard, where will you go?"

"They have shops. Shops where they do this sort of thing."

Mother looked at me, full of wonder.

The truth is I had an interview. A job interview, if you must know. RJ Pierce Associates, a public relations concern with offices in numerous major American cities, had requested that I come in so that we could discuss the possibilities of my rendering services. Actually, I had responded to a printed advertisement in one of the local papers, the Penny Press, which is distributed in various locations, such as the grocery store where I purchase food for mother and myself.

I had contacted a certain Ms. Penny Bridges by phone and she had inquired as to my qualifications. After learning of my extensive education she scheduled an interview. That very instant. Or perhaps after I called her back.

It was apparent from her tone that she bore none of the usual grudges against correspondence courses. She spoke enthusiastically of a certain special project, involving the generation of positive publicity for a local copper smelting operation. Without sounding narcissistic, I knew at once the assignment was ideally suited to my strengths. It is fair to say that I am a people person.

"How is this Tuesday at 11 a.m.?" Ms. Bridges inquired.

"Let me check my schedule," I said. I glanced up at the calendar push-pinned above the toaster oven and was pleased to

find that I did not have any previous engagements. "That sounds fine," I said.

"Okay, Mr. Pechiner, we'll see you then."

I was prepared to hang up. But just then I scanned my mental checklist -- as I am wont to do before terminating conversations, particularly those of obvious import -- and saw the problem.

"Ms. Bridges," I said, seizing the horns of the cow. "I should tell you right now that I shall need to purchase a suit."

There was a pause. "I see." She sighed, deeply. "Shall we reschedule?"

"No, no," I said, the words leaping from my mouth. "That will not be necessary. No. No, I shall simply make the necessary arrangements and present myself Tuesday. Good day."

On Wednesday, I purchased the suit. I honestly intended to have the suit altered the following day. But then mother had gone into one of her coughing spells, and I had to contend with that, as well as developing in my own left foot a painful bunion that recurs from time to time. In short, I was unable to have the suit altered on Thursday.

Fridays I generally reserve for administrative duties, including, but not limited to, seeing to any outstanding bills, ordering the herbal products that both mother and I require for a variety of congestive ailments, and ensuring that my comic books are in order. (I have rather a large collection of comic books, which I enjoy reading from time to time and which, according to several local authorities, is maturing into quite a little nest egg. Obviously, the business of making sure they are properly filed and sheathed in protective plastic envelopes requires no small investment of time.)

Saturday is always tricky, because the bus schedules are precarious, and I have found that many shops open and close at odd hours on the weekends. Our local pet store, for instance, operates from noon to six on Saturday, a circumstance that has caused our rabbits and turtles significant digestive trauma in the past.

Sunday, of course, is the Lord's day of rest, and mother and I generally like to reserve this time for spiritual consideration, a process which we find immeasurably aided by the thoughtful sermons broadcast on any number of the local television channels. The unpleasantness regarding my suit would have been wholly inappropriate to undertake.

So now it was Monday and, upon checking my calendar, I was distressed to find that my interview was set the next morning at 11 a.m. I momentarily regretted that I had allowed Ms. Bridges to cajole me into keeping my original appointment. But then, when the going gets difficult, as mother says, those coveting advancement must locomote.

Thus, I immediately set about locating our yellow pages. This was a protracted process, as mother is something of an amateur archivist. There were numerous places where the phone book could have been, given her storage and retrieval system. Coupons was certainly a possibility, since they, like the Yellow Pages, involved distinctly mercantile endeavors. News clippings was another false trail I chased for some time, as mother often likes to organize by stock of paper.

As it should turn out, the volume in question was directly beneath the phone, which follows its own kind of logic.

I was pleased to find a multiplicity of listings for alteration shops, several located in our very corner of the city.

Thus, donning appropriate attire, and with the suit carefully folded, I approached mother. She was busy with the day's mail, clipping away at a holiday flier in that festive manner she has.

"I am off, mother," I said.

She turned rather quickly, setting her wig askew. "Where in God's name are you off to, Leonard?"

"To have my suit altered."

She looked momentarily stunned. She had forgotten this errand, understandable as she is getting on in years. "My God," she said. "Must you go today?"

"I'm afraid I've no choice. The interview is tomorrow."

"What about Ricardo?"

Ricardo was our eldest sable rabbit, a noble beast named after the distinguished actor Ricardo Montalban. He had been beset by a sinus malady for some days, and mother had mentioned that it would be best to give him the boiling tea-kettle remedy, which we have found most effective in the past.

"I shall attend to him the moment I get home."

Mother nodded doubtfully.

"I am fairly certain this errand will require money," I added.

"Money?"

"Yes. It seems apparent alteration shops no longer accept money orders."

After a pause, mother dug around the La-Z-Boy for her purse, and held out several coins.

"I should think that insufficient."

"Indeed?"

"I had budgeted twenty dollars."

Mother blanched. "Twenty dollars? But that's ludicrous!"

I could hardly disagree. Nor could I fault mother her frugality. She is a war widow, after all. "Yes, well, I have secured some initial estimates. Twenty dollars seems to be the going rate. Inflation has made grandparents of us all, has it not?"

"It certainly has," mother snorted. She dipped delicately into her bosom and drew out a fragrant clump of bills. "Spend this wisely, Leonard. The world is an oyster full of shysters."

"Don't I know this," said I.

I will not even attempt to describe the ordeal I encountered with our local public transportation, which, like so much of the city's infrastructure, has been left to dullards.

Nonetheless, I made my way toward the city, a list of shops in hand. The first was called A Stitch In Time. I approached the counter and was met by a friendly young woman whose nametag designated her *Donna*.

"I need this suit altered," I told her.

"Great," she said. She had a lovely smile, and reminded me vaguely of Vanna White, co-host of the program *Wheel of Fortune*.
"How's Thursday?"

"In what sense?"

"For pickup."

I chuckled. "Donna, dear, I need the suit altered *today*."

She bit her lip. "Usually it takes a couple of days."

"I see. The problem is I have a major job interview." I leaned forward and whispered, "Government work."

Donna drew back with obvious concern.

"Ray!" she hollered. A round little man appeared from the back. "This guy says he needs his suit altered right today."

"Takes two days at least," Ray muttered. He was wearing a T-shirt embossed with the ruffled design typical of tuxedos, a tromp l'oeil I found rather affecting. "We gotta send the suit out to our subcontractor."

"But what about your own tailor?"

"Nah, the gooks downtown do the work cheaper."

"I see," I said. I searched in my pocket for a dollar bill and drew it out of my pocket conspicuously. "Perhaps I could compel you to change your policy," I said, sliding the bill across the counter toward him. I can be worldly in this way, when the occasion demands.

Ray looked at the bill, a smile of temptation lit across his whiskered muzzle. "Jeez, I wish I could help you, pal. I really do. But I got orders up to here." He held his finger against his chins.

I snatched the bill back. "Then I shall have to take my business elsewhere!"

"Sorry," Donna chirped.

Sorry indeed.

There was some ugliness on the bus relating to the propriety of a transfer I had obtained from the previous driver, a

man (I learned) named Leonard, like myself. I shant dwell on this, however. For mid-morning was rising toward noon.

The second shop I visited was in a large, enclosed mall which, I am pleased to say, was climate-controlled. Exertions tend to cause me to perspire, and the day thus far had been nothing but exertions. From the start, I sensed the enterprise was of an economic stature more appropriate to my patronage. The lettering on the oak plaque above the door read "The Stitchery."

The attendant was a spry fellow dressed, quite winningly I felt, in a camel's hair blazer and chinos. He stood next to a rack filled with bow ties and silk ascots. On the counter before him was shiny bell, of the sort that would allow a customer to summon him, should he be occupied in back.

"Hello, sir," he said, straightening his cuffs. "What can we do for you today?"

Will you think me overly sentimental should I confess that I felt a surge of relief, spiritual renewal even, at his crisp, officious greeting?

"Why, yes," I said, "I need a suit altered, altered at once."

"But of course," he responded. "Let's take a look-see."

He lifted the suit from my hands and gently unfolded it, scanning the fabric with the discerning eye native to the experienced haberdasher. "Hmmm, an excellent choice. But a tad long in the inseam, I should expect." His gaze flickered across my standing form. "And perhaps slightly cramped across the shoulders."

"Quite right," I said, realizing even as he spoke the words that the coat stretched taut across my back.

"I can have this ready by four, sir, if that is, excuse the pun, *suitable*." He tittered mischievously.

"Suitable, indeed, my good man. I have a most important interview tomorrow, with the RJ Pierce Associates. You have heard of them, perhaps? A public relations firm."

His brow furrowed. "Yes, I see. Quite impressive."

"You know what they say about first impressions," I put in. "First impressions last well beyond the conclusion of an initial tête-

à-tête.” (This was something, in point of fact, that mother often said.)

He drew a small calculator from his coat pocket. “Will that be cash or charge, sir?”

“Cash.”

“Yes, of course.” He tapped at a few buttons. “Of course.” He nodded to himself. “That should total thirty four dollars.”

My heart sank, and it is probably fair to say I physically sagged as well. “Thirty four dollars?”

“Plus tax, naturally. There is a fee associated with expedited orders.”

“Of course,” I hedged. “Hmmm.” I fumbled in my pocket. “You haven't the time by any chance,” I asked.

He inspected his watch. “12:15,” he said.

“12:15,” I gasped. “My gracious, but I'm already late for my next meeting.”

“You are welcome to leave the suit and return at your leisure, sir.”

“No, no. Actually, I need to bring the suit along, as the appointment involves dry-cleaning. Yes, it's a rather exclusive service. They have a waiting list. What say I just take the suit and bring it back this afternoon?”

The haberdasher nodded coolly. “Very well.”

“I'll see you soon enough, then.” I picked the suit up and walked briskly to the door.

Once outside, I found my heart beating at an elevated level, and, despite the favorable climate, sweat beaded my forehead.

It should come as no surprise that, in the wake of two traumatizing interactions, as well as more travel by foot and bus than I had undertaken in months, I was both piqued and unnaturally hungry.

Mother keeps to a relatively strict regimen when it comes to meals. “Playing with nutritional intake is playing with fire,” she tells me. I always bring her tray of soup and oyster crackers at noon

sharp, preparing my own lunch of corned beef hash and scrambled eggs directly thereafter.

Turning from the Stitchery, I was pleased to see the jaunty lettering of a Long John Silver outlet no more than a few shops away. I believe my eye was attracted to the sign because I had, for some time, been seeing commercials for this franchise, which featured a new product called "Popcorned Fish" which looked positively sumptuous.

While I was well aware of the need for budgetary constraints, I also knew that allowing my blood sugar to slump would surely impair my ability to negotiate the transaction that had, thus far, proved so trying.

I was pleased to find the restaurant clean and well lit. My server, Denise, took my order promptly and without question. The Popcorned Fish were a delightful treat, everything I could have hoped for, and even the relative flatness of my Mountain Dew was not enough to unbalance me. Replenished, I set off at a determined clip.

I have always prided myself on an ability to follow directions. Thus I am at a loss to describe how I could have boarded the wrong bus. Perhaps, owing to a mild form of dyslexia that plagued me as a child, I inverted the numbers. Perhaps (and I think this more likely, upon reflection) the signage was misleading.

In any case, I wound up riding the number 33 bus south, into a rather undesirable part of town where, I'm afraid, I could not help feeling that my presence as a solitary Caucasian was not entirely welcome.

Luckily, I was able to secure aid from an extremely friendly and courteous young woman who offered to give me a ride, though I saw no car in the area -- a fact she grudgingly admitted during our brief chat. Eventually, I agreed to float her a small loan, interest free, in exchange for information regarding local bus service, and quickly proceeded to my third destination. The shop, set upon a rather barren corner, was called, simply, Pauline's.

I must say that Pauline's storefront did not inspire confidence. The sign out front was hand-painted and peeling. The structure slanted visibly. The screen door that guarded the interior was flecked with the carcasses of insects, calling to mind the radiator grating of an automobile after a trip of considerable duration. Be all that as it may, I bore the place no grudge. As mother says, "You can't read a book just by looking at the cover."

I must concede to a bit of confusion though, for when I passed through the door it seemed to me I had actually entered a home, littered as the place was with old furniture, magazines, book cases, and the like. The scent of stubbed cigarettes mingled with that of pork fat left to sit. But then I espied a small sign on one wall which declared, in a folksy cross-stitch script, "You've come to the right place/If your drawers don't fit/Stitchins my biz/And I know my shit." This canto was signed by Pauline.

Though I was alone in the room, I could hear a television, and the familiar cadence of Oprah Winfrey, sensible woman that she is. Then a series of loud shouts.

Presently, an extremely large, pale woman in a housedress burst into the room. Her bushy hair, dyed blond some months back, sat on her head like a two-toned feather duster. "That'll be the day!" she bellowed, slamming the door behind her.

I coughed gently.

She looked up, her eyes lodged mistrustfully beneath a band of violet eye shadow. "What?"

"I was hoping to have this suit altered," I said, holding the seersucker, now sadly wrinkled, out for her inspection.

"Oh, yeah. Alright." She brightened a bit and withdrew a gold lame case from somewhere in her vast smock. There followed a slim cigarette, which she quickly lit. From this point on, her words were delivered in blue exhalations. "Bring it here."

"Yes, well." I cleared my throat. "The situation is thus: I need the alterations completed by the end of today."

"No problem. Just give me that monkey suit and we'll get started."

I took her to mean my seersucker. The sudden impulse to retreat, and quickly, suffused my mind. But the clock above her indicated the hour was nearing four. "Where might I change?"

"Just go ahead right there, bubkis. I need to get my stuff." She lumbered through the same door she had come out of, and I heard more shouting.

While I have always had trouble undressing in foreign environments of any sort, I figured it best to move quickly. I slipped out of my clothing, cloaked now only in boxer shorts and an undershirt.

The seamstress reentered, her pudgy hands replete with tape measure, bobby pins, and the other props of her trade.

"Get over here and step onto this," she said, gesturing with her chins toward an ottoman.

I assented, and she began folding the cuffs.

"Are you Pauline?" I inquired.

"Who wants to know, Bubkis?" The cigarette, clamped into her mouth, bobbed like a wand as she spoke.

"Oh, I'm sorry. My name is Leonard Pechiner."

"Oh yeah, like the actor?"

"I don't think we're related."

"Yeah, well, a cousin of mine knows Pia Zadora. He said she's a lousy lay."

I weighed the wisdom of responding to this comment and, while I was familiar with Pia Zadora's oeuvre, and quite taken by her exuberant charm, I decided a judicious silence would best serve the moment. It is sometimes not wise to get too chummy with the service industry.

"Yeah, I'm Pauline," Pauline said. She unrolled the tape measure. "Which side you dangle on, Lenny?"

"Dangle?" I could feel the tape measure being rolled up my leg and toward my midriff.

"Never mind. Figured it out."

I flushed; sweat gushing again from my pores.

"I'm gonna chalk you at a 34. I'll need to take a couple inches off. Also gonna taper the trousers. You've got such skinny ankles. I'd kill for those ankles, Lenny." She gave my ankles an affectionate pinch. "Aw, shit. Now where's my blue chalk? Okay Lenny, don't move. I'll get my blue chalk."

With an audible gasping noise, Pauline heaved up and flung open the door nearest her. The sounds of a Nine Lives Cat food commercial of which I was particularly fond became audible.

I was, obviously, in an awkward posture, but when I heard renewed shouting, I was compelled to turn my head so as to ascertain the source of the conflict. Through the doorway I saw an equally rotund figure, male in nature, in a terry cloth bathrobe. A blue glow played across his doughy face, indicating that he was facing the television. There was detritus of every sort on the floor, though hair curlers and pizza boxes stood out as paramount. Pauline was rooting around a closet, her back to the man.

The following contretemps ensued:

"Shut up, Wally. You're shit talking again."

"One more crack out of you and I'm gonna whack your fat ass into next week."

"Make my day, lard-o."

Having found her chalk, Pauline danced past Wally, showing surprising agility for a woman of her mass, and trundled back into the room.

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