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The Story of My Social Life

The weighty envelope was addressed to me, that was certain, and yet I thought there had to be some mistake. Engraved with almost excessive elegance, the invitation looked and felt like solidified cream.

I had good reason to be astonished. Out of the blue, the pleasure of my company at a dinner party was being solicited, and the host was no less than the man whom I had admired above all others from the instant I first beheld his magnificent Cranmer Building. He was not only an architect of the first rank; his achievements encompassed civic and charitable as well as professional undertakings. As I learned from the newspaper, he moved with easy grace in circles so exalted that the thought of sitting down to a dinner over which he presided made my knees tremble.

I read my name on the envelope once more, the magic syllables, and then plumped down on my desk chair. The invitation begged me to respond as soon as possible. A little card and stamped envelope, also engraved, had been inserted into the folded invitation for this purpose. Now there could be no doubt; above the boxes marked *will attend* and *will not attend*, beautifully written in peacock blue ink, once again was my own name, properly spelled.

Cold as it was that evening, I walked to Karlsholm's to get a drink, hoping to find Pym and Endicott there. The bar was fairly crowded with middle-aged men in business suits and ties askew, younger men in leather jackets with open collars. My friends were not there, though. I ordered a beer, took a booth to myself, and began to reflect.

Perhaps I really ought not to have been so overwhelmed by the invitation, unexpected and unmerited though I felt it to be. Maybe I had failed sufficiently to get over feeling myself an immigrant, with the outsider's conviction of ghostly invisibility, the stubborn sense of not belonging. After all, it had been nearly six years since I had arrived with my foreign degree and my ambition to build great houses, to make my name in stone and brick. Was it really so miraculous that my work, little though there was of it, should have attracted the attention of the great man? Since he was known to interest himself in everything, why not the efforts of a talented young colleague, one in whose work he was bound to find echoes of his own? Wasn't it natural that such a magnanimous man should grant some recognition, lend a hand, want to meet in person a youthful admirer whose emulation his sharp eye would have quickly discerned? These congenial thoughts cheered me.

A quarter hour later, Pym bustled in on a gust of icy air, his face all red under his ridiculous fur hat, his torso bent under the weight of his army surplus greatcoat, an extra-long scarf wrapped around his neck. He spotted me at once and came stiffly to the booth. "Jesus!" he managed to mouth. "It's damned near absolute zero out there."

"Yes. It's cold enough," I said. The truth was that I had barely noticed the cold myself.

Pym began to unwind his scarf. "I called Endicott but that old woman claims he's sick and doesn't dare come out in this weather."

"Really? Anything serious?"

"Serious? You know he's a hopeless hypochondriac. Says it's flu, but he's probably just frightened of frostbite. He claims an uncle of his lost all his toes in the war or climbing a mountain or something. You've heard the story often enough, haven't you?"

"Frostbite's no joke," I said.

"Well, I need a whisky," Pym declared and made straight for the bar.

Pym and Endicott were inseparable; they had been at college together. They befriended me not long after my arrival and it was to them I owed most of my immigrant's initiation. Quite a pair they were, a study in contrasts. Pym was intrepid and careless in his language, his opinions, in his willingness to risk money and dignity while Endicott was all prudence and circumspection: a grasshopper and an ant. As often happens, it was the tension between their approaches to life that formed the foundation of their fast friendship. They enjoyed nothing so much as upbraiding one another: Pym loved to accuse Endicott of cowardice and half-heartedness while Endicott was fond of forecasting ruination for his reckless friend. Toward women the two friends also held opposed attitudes. Pym flirted aggressively; Endicott blushed whenever a waitress so much as smiled at him. Long ago I determined that my best course lay in listening to the advice of both Pym and Endicott and then adopting a middle course.

I told Pym about the invitation. I would willingly have shown the card to him but hadn't dared to take it out of my room.

"Bravo! Fantastic!" he cried, his cheeks round and red. He hoisted his shot glass. "I see it all," he said gazing beatifically toward the ceiling. "Beautiful women with rich old husbands, rich old women with beautiful young husbands, caviar, champagne, rack of lamb, three dinner wines, a sauterne with the dessert, and everybody curious about *you*, my boy. You'll wear a tuxedo, of course."

"A tuxedo?"

"Naturally."

"But I have only the one suit."

"I've seen it." He clucked his tongue. "Don't worry. We'll rent you one."

"What?" I said. "Rent *clothing*?"

"People do it all the time. Don't worry about a thing. I'll give you an address."

I had never heard of leasing clothing. It seemed indecent. "Is it expensive?" I asked.

"Oh, not very. And how are you intending to arrive? That's important, you know."

"Arrive?"

"How are you going to *get* there. You really ought to lease a limousine, but a cab will do."

Pym's extravagance on my behalf somehow reassured me so that by the time I left the bar I had begun to accustom myself to the idea of the dinner party.

I slept complacently that night. But the next day Endicott phoned. Pym had told him about my good fortune. Superficially, his view was no different from Pym's. He too saw the dinner invitation as a triumph, a breakthrough; but even as he congratulated me he began warning me not to overestimate the significance of the invitation.

"Has it occurred to you that this party is being given for quite a number of young people like yourself?"

Well, of course it hadn't occurred to me. Prompted by vanity and Pym, I had assumed that I would be the center of attention in a large gathering of accomplished, established people, society's cream. I saw myself singled out as a rising star and, while Endicott may not have intended to throw cold water on my enthusiasm, he was a killjoy by nature and altered the way I pictured the party. I began to see myself standing silently in a corner of the great man's spacious living room or seated at a long table between young men and women all of whom were far more talented and articulate than myself. I imagined my face frozen in a horrid rictus as sallies of wit flew over my head like mortar shells.

For a moment, considering the shabbiness of my little apartment, my desk made out of a hollow door, my second-hand easy chair, my imitation Persian carpet, I even regretted my hastiness in returning the little card committing myself to attend the party. After all, I thought defensively, isn't it my work that really matters? What have I, with my poverty and my accent, to do with tuxedos and women and sauterne?

The party was to take place on the following Saturday night. The Wednesday before, I again met with Pym at Karlsholm's. I had phoned Endicott, but he begged off, insisting that he really did have the flu. Pym gave me the address of a place that rented evening clothes. Once again, his pleasure on my behalf raised my spirits. "Make sure they give you one that fits properly," he warned me with the sort of grin that says, "This is quite unnecessary, you old dog."

The following morning I went to the shop. To my surprise, after one appraising look the proprietor pulled out a jet black tuxedo and asked me to slip on the jacket. It fit perfectly, better than the jacket to my own suit, in fact better than any jacket I'd ever worn. I was staggered by the price of a one-night rental, but I agreed. It was arranged that I should pick the outfit up on Saturday afternoon. I left the shop and went directly to my bank to draw out some cash. Between the tuxedo and the cab I would need more money than I could spare. Not only would there be no more beers for the rest of the month, but I'd have to economize on food as well. My two part-time jobs—junior architect and hired draftsman—may have brought me to the attention of my idol, but they did not bring in much money.

I recollected Pym's advice. "It's always wise to invest in proper vestments, old chum."

At two o'clock on a leaden Saturday, I went to pick up the tuxedo. The proprietor was not there. Instead, a young woman sat reading a novel, chewing gum. She asked my name twice, frowned, checked the book on the counter, then looked at me suspiciously.

My stomach fell. "Is there some problem?"

"Could you just say that name again for me? I mean, really really *slow*?"

"Maybe I should spell it for you. Would that help? It's not very common."

But even correctly spelled my name did not appear in her ledger. I began to panic.

"Perhaps you could telephone the proprietor?"

"He's in the hospital," she reported without showing any sympathy for either him or me. "You know. Heart attack?"

As the young woman seemed to consider the matter now settled, she went back to her novel and her rumination. I asked if maybe my tuxedo might not be in one of the plastic bags hanging on the rack behind her. I beseeched her. "Could you just take a look?"

"Oh, all right," she whined and began yanking the suits along the rack so that they screeched. "Nope," she said. "These are all for other people."

Casting all restraint to the winds I pleaded with her. "But I *have* to have that tuxedo for tonight. You don't know what depends on it!"

She looked at me blankly. "You getting married or something?"

"Look," I said more reasonably, "have you got any tuxedos in the back that *aren't* reserved?"

"Look, mister, I just keep the cash register."

I implored her just to take one look, to indulge me.

She put her hands on her hips. "I can't just leave the register, can I? I mean I'm all alone here, aren't I?"

"Good Lord, then I'll *leave* for five minutes. Would that be all right? You can lock the door behind me."

"Oh sure. And what if another customer shows up?"

"I'll wait outside, all right? You lock the door. If somebody else comes to the shop I'll explain everything and make him wait."

To my surprise, she actually agreed to this absurd proposal and so I stood in the cold wind just outside the door until, chewing ferociously, she let me back in.

On the counter lay two tuxedos, neither in a plastic bag.

"Here," she said negligently. "I guess you can have either of these."

I looked at the suits. The jacket of one was soiled with food stains while the other appeared at least two sizes too large.

I took the large one, tossing my cash down on the counter in a fury, threw the suit over my shoulder and headed for the door.

"Hey, just a minute," she said and took a frilled shirt, bow tie, and a

little bag of studs from under the counter. "You're going to need these. And when you bring it back make sure the tie's in the jacket pocket. Monday, but not before twelve."

By now I was not only in a temper but convinced that the evening was certain to be a catastrophe. How could I get through it with any dignity swimming in a tuxedo large enough for the heavyweight champion? I thought how Pym would chuckle if he were to see me in this suit, then how he would hasten to reassure me that I looked decidedly debonair. "A real lady-killer, old chum," he'd have said, good old Pym. Not without envy, I pictured Endicott snug in his bed, nursing himself on bouillon, thanking his flu that *he* at least didn't have to go out to a dinner party in such weather.

I put the tuxedo on as soon as I got home. While not even Pym in his cups could have called it a good fit, at least I didn't look entirely grotesque. I was fortunate to have a pair of good black shoes. I had bought them at home, for funerals, and wore them only during the first week after my arrival. They were still reasonably presentable. I climbed up on my desk chair and, from what I was able to see in the mirror over my sink, I would appear neither to such advantage as I hoped, nor so ridiculous as I feared. But when it came time to call for the cab the dread returned. The sky had lowered to just above the rooftops. I worried that the cab would be late or that, like the tuxedo shop, the taxi company might accept my call and then simply forget about it. I didn't live in a neighborhood where people called for cabs.

So I was relieved when, at the precise time I had stipulated, a cab pulled up in the street outside and honked its horn. Being careful to place my invitation in the breast pocket of the tuxedo, I threw on my carefully brushed overcoat and ran down the stairs.

A sheet of heavy plastic separated me from the driver who wore a cap pulled low over his forehead and grunted when I read him the address from my invitation. It was not easy to extract it from my pocket, but I didn't dare trust memory.

We were off at once. The driver proceeded with such dispatch and assurance through the narrow streets that I finally stopped leaning forward, sank back into the seat, and gave myself up to the luxurious sensation of being driven.

"How long will it take to get there?" I asked almost nonchalantly.

When the driver didn't answer I assumed he couldn't hear me over the engine noise and through the protective shield. I smiled at myself, looked out the window, and tried to relax.

We made our way through the thickening dusk toward the river. The street lamps came on and in their yellow aura I could see that a light snow had begun to fall. As we shot across the bridge I started to worry that I might arrive too soon. How humiliating to be the first guest! The invitation said six-thirty, but maybe it would be unfashionable to show up before seven or even seven-thirty. I cursed myself for not having consulted Pym and Endicott on such an essential point.

By the time we were across the bridge night had fallen and I noticed that the driver now seemed less sure of where he was going. Not only did

we move more slowly, but from time to time he pulled up at corners, as though he were checking street signs. The snow began to fall in earnest and the cab's wipers could barely keep the windshield clear. No doubt the roads were slippery too.

So we drove slowly on, making many turns. Whenever we passed directly beneath a street lamp I checked my watch. It was growing late. It was past six-thirty already.

"Look, driver," I said loudly, leaning up against the plastic shield, "are you lost?"

A muffled sound came from the front and we pulled over to the curb. The driver turned around and I saw terror in his eyes.

"What is it?"

"No report," he pleaded in a high-pitched voice, a voice from some forsaken desert or mountain. "No report. Please. Wife. Two baby. No report, please. I lose job. *Two baby*. Please!"

I saw it all at once. An immigrant like myself, lost among the tended boulevards of the wealthy district, he hadn't dared to turn down a fare. No doubt he had tried to bluff it out, hoping for the best. Oh, I understood the poor fellow only too well.

"You're lost," I couldn't help saying a little angrily, not so much to reproach him as to make my doom more certain.

He quickly turned off the meter. "Look, look," he said with a depressing attempt at ingratiation. "No charge, no charge."

"Maybe we can get directions somewhere," I suggested, looking hopelessly around at the solid suburban mansions looming through snowflakes that were now falling like hunks of metal.

"I try again," he said desperately.

And so we pushed on through still streets. Twice I thought of asking him to take me back home but told myself that, after all, it was not so terribly late, especially not if it were fashionable to arrive a little later than requested. I might even still be early.

I ordered the driver to pull up in front of a well-lit house.

"I'm going to ask there," I said as slowly and clearly as I could, remembering how people used to substitute volume for distinctness when I had not understood them. "You wait. Understand? You *wait*."

He nodded and I clambered out.

It was while I was ringing the bell that I heard the cab pull away. He did it slowly, stealthily. Perhaps the poor man was too frightened to bear any more, or maybe he had misunderstood me and thought that this was where I had wanted to go.

According to the uniformed servant who answered the door, I was only a mile or two from my destination. I could hear people talking and laughing inside. The mistress of the house came to see what was the matter—a heavy, imposing woman in a green silk dress and long, flashing earrings. I was interrupting her party, it seemed. With some annoyance,

my tuxedo and my engraved invitation notwithstanding, she brusquely rattled off a complicated set of directions and told the servant to shut the door.

Twice I lost my way. My shoes were soon sodden, my hands numb; my nose ran like a melting icicle. My stomach growled, demanding to know what had become of the promised caviar and lamb. Mesmerized by the falling snow, I walked among the grand houses, wishing I had a hat. Careless of my being an architect, the houses did not put themselves out to be friendly; they stood firm and upright on either side of me like the inaccessible pillars of society who owned them.

At last I succeeded in finding the correct avenue. I halted under the street sign to check my watch and wipe my nose. How late it had gotten—far too late even to be fashionable! Shouldn't I just give up and make my way back to the river? A cab might be found, waiting by the bridge; it could whisk me home to my desk and my rug, to my dear narrow bed on which I could stretch out and forget everything. But then I remembered the honor done me by my host and all my admiration for him, and stiffened my resolve. Even if I should now be too late for dinner, I could not insult him by not at least putting in an appearance. I imagined myself greeted with cries of sympathy, installed by a fireplace, surrounded by well dressed people who were relieved to see me, who listened sympathetically to the story of my difficulties. Somehow I would contrive to make the dreary tale light and diverting and they would all laugh while my host, smiling at my triumph, personally fetched me a snifter of cognac.

It took me ten more minutes to locate the house, a tremendously dignified neo-classical villa in the French style complete with a balustrade on which the snow had formed little sugary arches. As there was no light over it, I found the number with difficulty. It matched the one on my invitation and yet the place was completely dark. I was puzzled. Warm, festive light should be pouring from all its windows over the new snow. No doubt, I thought, they've just pulled the blinds to make it all the cozier inside.

I marched up the front steps and crossed a small portico to the door. I listened for laughter and chamber music but could hear nothing at all. What solid construction, I thought appreciatively. Blowing on my frozen hand, I rang the bell. I had to wait quite a while and twice wiped my nose on my coat sleeve, fearful that the door might open in mid-wipe. They're having such a time in there that they haven't heard the bell, I reasoned, and gave another ring—a good long one this time.

The door opened. There stood my host himself, but—and this quite paralyzed me—in his pajamas, robe, and slippers. Just as he opened the door, before he had a chance to say a word, a woman's frightened voice called out from within, "Who *is* it, Alfred?"

"Just a minute," said my host with irritated dignity, though whether to me or the woman I couldn't tell. He disappeared for an instant and the portico light came on.

"Oh," he said, "it's *you*. Did you forget something?"

"Forget something?"

The great man rubbed his balding head and pulled his padded robe

tight against the cold. "Look, it's rather late. I don't know why you've come back, but you can see it's not convenient." His controlled fury left me as speechless as when I had first arrived in my good black shoes and hardly understood the language, before I had met Pym and Endicott and found my footing. "Please be so good as to go home now," he added and shut the door.

I walked through the snow not even wondering whether or not I was making for the river. Almost the worst of it was knowing that when I told Pym and Endicott about this fiasco—and I would have to tell them, they were my only friends—they would argue about it, elaborating complicated views that canceled each other out.