

The Harris Tweed Suit

by

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His name was Maurice Klein. His father was French, his mother Italian. He was born in Philadelphia, moved to Paris when he was three years old; and then moved again, to Northern Italy at the age of five. He was raised first by an Italian nurse from Belluno, then by an Irish nurse from New York, and lastly by a Swiss German *fräulein* from Winterthur.

He pronounced his first word in English: “Hat.” As a small child he spoke English, French, German and Italian. Abruptly, at the age of five, he forgot English and German and spoke Italian with his mother and French with his father. When he was twelve he started speaking English again.

Many years went by. He had an intense life; he had women, children, some success. He traveled. His taste stopped at his grandparents’ time. He liked the way they lived, how they dressed, their homes, their furniture. Living in London, he wanted to dress like his grandfather. But fabric had changed and it was almost impossible to find those milky grey flannels or heavy tweeds. Maurice Klein, now a professor at Cambridge, thought that the ideal uniform for a professor in England would be a Harris Tweed suit, but his tailor could not find him the cloth he was looking for.

Just before he was due to start lecturing, one morning in a thrift shop near Notting Hill Gate where he was hunting for some silver spoons, quite by chance he saw an old navy blue Harris Tweed suit hanging in the corner. The outfit was too large for him, but he decided to buy it anyway. Then he went to his tailor and persuaded him to alter it to his measure. He went to buy a pair of dark brown suede shoes that would perfectly match the threads.

A few days later, as he dressed for the inaugural dinner at his College, he felt proud of his outfit and felt that his old ensemble made him look rather posh. He went into the professors’ club for a drink before dinner; and the other professors looked at him as if he were some sort of clown. They were all

wearing dinner jackets and one of them said to Maurice:

“You cannot attend dinner like that! At least if you had black shoes!”

Humiliated by this development, Maurice apologised, left the club and went out to a pub. He urgently needed a drink and ordered a double vodka tonic. While he was drinking his second double vodka tonic a young man of quite handsome features came and stood next to him and asked if he could have a proper look at his Harris Tweed suit. Intrigued and amused, Maurice encouraged him to do so. Following an intense inspection, the young man told Maurice that he really envied him, not only for the uniqueness of the cloth, which was of a very unusual indigo blue, but also for its cut, which was tremendously elegant in its imperfection.

After this peculiar introduction the young man sat down next to Maurice and ordered a drink. They started what was at first a formal conversation and then they started giggling, more and more, and became lighthearted. At a certain point Maurice said:

“I could give you my suit, but it is much too big for you.”

“No, don’t do that, please. You are so handsome in it.”

They made an appointment to see each other again, in the same pub, at the same time.

Maurice left the student feeling quite confused. Absentmindedly he crossed the road; a big car hit him and he fell. His trousers had several cuts, as did one sleeve of his jacket. He was in terrible pain. An ambulance came and took him to the hospital, where they did surgery on one leg that was severely wounded. They had to put it in plaster, he was confined to a wheelchair and later had to walk with crutches.

As soon as he recovered a bit of energy he went to his tailor with his tweed suit and asked him to mend it. The tailor said it was not possible. But Maurice then went to one of those tailors who specialise in theatre and film costumes, John Row, who had his shop next to Covent Garden. After a long discussion John Row took up the challenge to mend this broken costume and after a few weeks the

result was remarkable.

Something odd had happened in Maurice's life. As we said before, as a child he could speak English, French, German and Italian. Then he lost the use of English and German; and then, suddenly, as if by chance, his English came back when he was 12 years old; and instead his German was gone, even though he loved the sound of German, especially when spoken by a woman or, even better, by a child. When he had recovered sufficiently he went to Tate Modern to visit a major Paul Klee exhibition. He had always liked the format of Klee's paintings and the fact that each painting or watercolour had a title written in German and that his titles were like short poems. He also admired the fact that Klee played the violin at a professional level. He went to visit the exhibition with Beatrice, a young English painter, and they very much liked one of Klee's latest paintings, *Le Rouge et le Noir*. When he was visiting the exhibition, Maurice realised that he understood the meaning of each title written in German and he felt that in an instant his German had returned.

Shortly after, and with his mended Harris Tweed suit back, he felt like meeting the young student again. During all this time he had kept on sending Maurice messages, and letters that were not just friendly but also quite passionate. Maurice was aware of the fact that to start a love affair with a student was not entirely prudent for a professor. But he was a professor of literature and the young student was studying medicine but wanted to become a composer; and he played the violin in his College orchestra. His mother was from Basel and his father was English but born in Frankfurt.

Maurice knew that he was on the verge of falling in love. He also knew that for their encounter it was prudent to wear his newly mended Harris Tweed suit. But Maurice had a very superstitious Italian mother and he was superstitious himself. His superstition was about the fact that you cannot defy destiny, otherwise you will be punished. He was rejected by the professors at the dinner in his College when he was wearing his Harris Tweed suit. And just after that he had his accident. So now he did not know what to do. Take the risk of wearing another outfit and disappoint the student? Or wear it and be sure to please him? Of course he wanted to please the student. But what was more powerful for him: superstition or love? He decided to go for love.

When he met the student again in the pub he was reassured by the Harris Tweed suit. They were both very pleased to see each other and they had a tender and joyful conversation. They spoke English,

into which they introduced some German words, and they discovered that this mixture of the two languages could become their own secret language. They caressed each other and later, when it was time to go, just outside the pub they found a narrow little road with scant lighting. They kissed each other, at first in a delicate way and then with mutual passion.

Maurice had made the right choice and felt that he was falling madly in love. A few minutes later, crossing the Cromwell Road, he didn't pay attention to the traffic and he was crushed by a large vehicle and died.

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