

A Black Tie Affair

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OUT OF THE BLUE, we received an invitation to the Opera Ball. It was to be a black tie affair, of course, so I elbowed my way to the back of the closet and retrieved my tuxedo. Awash in affectionate nostalgia, I opened the hanging bag and there it was, just as I had left it after the last time I'd worn it, which was some time ago. I put it on and paraded into the other room for Lillian's approval.

"Oh dear," she said, and I knew exactly what she meant. The tuxedo had shrunk! It was a very fine garment, which had cost an unseemly amount of money several years ago, and now it clung to me like a shrink-wrapping of some kind. "Could it be the humidity?" I wondered aloud, but Lillian's expression quickly convinced me to abandon my futile state of denial. Ever the positive one, she said, "You look wonderful in it. If you lost a few pounds it would fit perfectly."

And thus it came to pass that I resolved to diet my way back to the good old days, and regain the svelteness I had once possessed, so that I might wear my perfectly good tuxedo to the Opera Ball. I had about a month, which seemed like a reasonable amount of time. The trousers, interestingly enough, were not the problem. They were brilliantly designed, with an ingenious system for expanding the waistline at will. All I had to do was let out the little buckles and they fit like a glove. No, it was the jacket that was the challenge, and actually it looked quite passable until I tried to button it. Could I get away with not buttoning the jacket? Not according to my mother who, while looking at a photograph taken of me at some formal event many

years ago, informed me somewhat stiffly that one should never, *never* unbutton one's dinner jacket unless one was sitting down. "Not even when you're dancing!" It was one of those maternal reprimands I've never forgotten.

While gazing sadly at my tuxedo-wrapped reflection in the mirror (more bearable face on than in profile, but only just), I started wondering about this garment. I ran my fingers over the satin lapels, and admired the silk ribbon running down the outer seam of the trouser legs. Where did this all begin? And how?

As with many questions regarding classical men's fashions, the answers are to be found in nineteenth-century Europe, and in this case can be traced directly to Beau Brummell, the legendary man-about-town and arbiter of fashion in Regency England. Brummell, a consummate dandy, moved in aristocratic circles and is credited with popularizing the dinner jacket as a modern alternative to the traditional evening dress known as white tie and tails.

The dinner jacket, which was essentially a shortened version of the classic smoking jacket, was and is worn with matching black trousers with no cuffs or belt loops held up by braces (if you're British) or suspenders (if you're American), a white dress shirt with or without a pleated front, a black silk bow tie, a black cummerbund, and black shoes and socks. The cummerbund, borrowed from British military attire, is a pleated sash worn around the waist, which conveniently covers the area where the shirt is tucked into the trousers. The word is originally derived from the Persian for

"waist" (*kamar*) and "to close" or "encircle" (*band*), and was appropriated by the English language from the Hindi word *kamarband* meaning "loin band." It is traditionally worn with the pleats facing up as a place to hold things like coat check stubs and opera tickets, so one should be careful to avoid collecting crumbs and other detritus from the banquet table in the folds. It sometimes has a secret pocket on the inside for carrying items such as keys and money that would otherwise create unsightly bulges in one's pockets. I was pleased to see that my cummerbund could also be let out in case of shrinkage.

In the late eighteenth-hundreds the dinner jacket migrated to the United States, where it was adopted by members of the Tuxedo Club, an exclusive New York country club, from which it eventually took the name by which it is generally known in North American circles. Incidentally, the word "tuxedo" is phonetically derived from the Algonquin word for the region where the village of Tuxedo Park was settled. This New World version of the European dinner jacket soon became standard attire for celebrations of all kinds; it has been glamorized by the movies, and is an enduring icon of our society's vision of elegance for the male of the species.

The days passed and the diet accomplished its goal. Incredibly, my body released some of the pounds it had been storing up for a rainy day, and when I put on my dinner jacket and stood once again for Lillian's inspection, her flattering assessment was all the reward I needed for the privation I had suffered. I looked in the mirror, and seemed to stand a little taller, a little straighter. I think most men get in touch with their inner James Bond when they wear a tuxedo, don't you? I offered my lady my arm, and off we went to the Opera Ball. ★

