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TUXEDO NOT OPTIONAL

CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN DECIDES IT'S TIME TO BUY, NOT RENT

The first tuxedo I ever wore was rented for my senior prom. Although I went to an all-boys' Catholic school and had grown accustomed to an adolescence of strict dress codes that were enforced to keep unruly, dangerously hormonal bodies in check by a sort of divine sartorial dictate (apparently God has a predilection for winter-weight khakis, lace-up Topsiders, and blue poly-blend neckties), the tuxedo was special. It was, in my eighteen-year-old imagination, that magical Rolls Royce of masculine vestments, turning sullen, skinny teenagers into hybrids of James Bond, Steve Rubell, and every male lead on *Dynasty*.

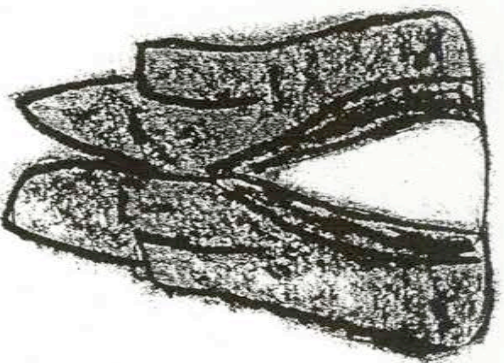
The tux was—as it still is—the outfit of a man who holds his life in his own hands. I remember standing in front of a full-length mirror at the rental shop at Cincinnati's finest mall, Kenwood Towne Centre, practically swimming in black polyester while the tailor did little more fitting than to assure that the suit came down to the ankle and met the bone of my wrist. I didn't know the first thing about knotting a bow tie, but that archaic lassoing was no longer needed. Pre-tied bows now left the mind free to worry over more complex issues: the color of the tie and matching cummerbund. There was the simple glossy black or, for more adventurous tastes, ostentatious patterns like pastel Monet water lilies, op-art checkerboards, or even a chorus line of Spuds McKenzie-like bull terriers. And I remember the tailor offered one bit of fashion advice that I have disregarded to this very day: "It's best to pick something conservative that won't clash with your date. It's more important what her dress looks like. Try not to upstage her."

The only surviving picture of my senior prom reveals that I chose a faded crimson, which did, in fact, clash jarringly with my date's eggshell blue gown and the yellow rose boutonniere she pinned to my lapel. The only other thing I can remember about that decidedly non-James Bondian tuxedo experience is that I lost the silver cufflinks in a friend's backyard late that prom night and had to pay a forty-dollar fee when I returned the suit the next afternoon (no

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small thing, as the rental charge was already a teen-daunting \$129.99).

Over the ensuing decade and a half, I have worn many tuxedos to many formal events, and the only constant has been that they have been rented or borrowed. At the age of thirty-four, I've eaten out and posed for pictures in many tuxedos, none of which I've actually owned. As with the cars I've driven and the apartments I've occupied, my status has always been that of renter: I even wore a rented tuxedo on a second occasion with my prom date: eight years later at her wedding—not to me—where I stood in as a last-minute sub for a missing groomsman.



Formalwear always revolves around a set of venerable customs and rules that are better broken defiantly rather than out of laziness or ignorance. It is often better not to attend a black-tie fête than to clumsily break sartorial ranks. I once was invited to a ball at the New York Public Library and, at the last minute, improvised a faux tuxedo out of

a plain white oxford shirt and a mismatched black jacket and pants. As a result, I spent most of the evening in corners, with my arms crossed at my chest, trying to hide the cheap plastic white buttons adrift in a sea of precious metal studs.

If the tuxedo stands as the ultimate status symbol in a man's wardrobe—that sartorial epitome of affluence, self-regard, taste, and devotion to a good time—then it would seem that the egalitarian pioneer spirit of America should instantly shun such an old-fashioned aristocratic indicator. But the tuxedo is partially an American invention, and there are historical reasons why, when we think of a quintessential American character like Jay Gatsby, we have a hard time extricating him from his waistcoat and dinner jacket. Fashion lore has it that after the Prince of Wales had Henry Poole & Co. of Savile Row create a short smoking jacket free of coat-tails to wear to dinner parties in 1860, the wealthy American industrialist James Potter copied the prince's invention and wore it to functions at his club in the New York suburbs where it caused a sensation. The French call this style the very chic sounding *le smoking*, but we Americans, thinking every trend really begins on our shores, named the dinner suit after Potter's country club, the Tuxedo Club in Tuxedo Park, New York.

Today the tuxedo is one socially acceptable way for a man to treat himself to a luxurious fetish object, where detail and polish are appraised and attention may be lavished on minutiae. From the 1960s to the 1990s, a tidal wave of casualness swept the country, breaking down the old formalities of fashion, threatening the hat, the necktie, and the business suit and pitching us into an endemic coffee-shop and college radio

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station slacker style. By the late 1990s, the last reserve of sophistication lay in the tux. Thankfully, due to 007 and other gun-toting Hollywood dreamboats concocted by vexed wardrobe teams tired of dressing their stars like they stumbled in from an off-campus keg party, the tuxedo retained its potent sense of masculine glamour.

And in the 21st century, the tux has managed to come out of the closet in full—not just for proms, weddings, or manning the door at the Four Seasons—expressing a sense of grand occasion. Hip hop stars started wearing them, and once that happened, so could the non-hip hop stars. I remember four years ago I modeled a standard black tuxedo for a designer friend's lookbook. The wool pants held a satin stripe, the white starched collar was wing-tipped, the coat's lapel was peaked. The only difference from the tux of yore was that the cummerbund had been excommunicated and the silhouette was leaner and sharper. I was no longer swimming in the suit: it clung to me as if I had just swum in it. The tux had clearly come into fashion.

The next season I was again asked to serve as mannequin, and this time the designer had rendered those classic touches in a thick, black utilitarian corduroy. Something Darwinistic was happening to men's formalwear—it was coming back to us, but not on an endless repeat cycle. There was something nostalgic here, but we weren't trying to relive the grim rentals of Kenwood Towne Centre. We were in new territory. I wore the corduroy tuxedo to a party, and no one confused me with the caterers passing the champagne. Around that time, a new James Bond movie hit the theaters and with it a new Bond, exchanging Savile Row or Milano tailoring for something unmistakably designed by Tom Ford—a bold American tux.

As a teenager, sex is abstract. The very vague idea of it is enough to get you going, but as an adult, the excitement lies in the details and particulars. The same can be said of the way designers today are rendering the tuxedo. What makes a tuxedo work is its similarity to its brethren, but what makes it sexy is what sets yours apart, making it specifically, idiosyncratically, yours—even if it's just borrowed for the night. Designers are playing with the conventions with nuances like shawl collars or shorter coat lengths for casual flair, or even reapplying the tails or exaggerating the shirt bibs for a dandyish effect. Maybe it's because of music's current love of mixing, mashing, and sampling, but even the iconic black penguin aesthetic is getting shuffled and shucked for velvet cocktail jackets in electric hues that don't match the pants, bright bow ties that flower like our pin-stuck boutonnieres once did, and the hardware of studs and cuff links rendered in blingy diamonds and opals, or covered in matching piqué shirt fabric. In one collection for fall, the renegade designer Stefano Pilati even dared to manufacture a tuxedo that would delight a Ferrari mechanic, a belted black one-piece jumpsuit worn under a satin-lapel dinner jacket sans shirt. It is difficult to know whether this is the beginning or the end of the tuxedo as we know it. But now when I ask if I can borrow a tuxedo for a night, the follow-up question isn't, "What's your suit and neck size?" but rather, which style, what cut, do you want the royal red silk velvet smoking jacket with tartan green pants or the peaked lapel blue coat with the jacquard pearl-buttoned waistcoat? But I think I'll take the black. I'm an old-fashioned guy, even on loan.

For a recent formal gala for the PEN writer's organization held at the Natural History

Museum, I borrowed a very basic Tom Ford tuxedo. It came with black-eyed gold studs and the soft thickness of the baratheia silk made me feel simultaneously secure and grounded in body yet light as air—something I imagined akin to how a knight in fine armor must feel on his horse. That night at the dinner my literary agent turned to me and said, "You know, you look too nice to be here. It's like you're at the wrong party. Writers don't wear suits that are so flawless and expensive. We're a fustier people." Of course, all of these writers owned their fusty jackets and pants, while all I had paid for were the black briefs and socks underneath the tux. I didn't say anything and smiled. After the event ended and all of the guests were heading home, I decided to stay out, and I went downtown to a party with a much younger, faster, if less Pulitzer-winning crowd. No one could understand why I was in a tuxedo, but I felt more popular with my friends as well as with the waiters handing out champagne. No one can really refuse a man wearing the right tuxedo. It does all the work for you.

Doing the math, not halfway toward seniority, I realize I've spent four figures on rentals, and if it weren't for the kindness of designers, I'd have probably racked up three or four grand in rentals. Maybe it's time I finally bought one. I'll have to pay, even if I can strike a deal with a friendly designer, but at least I'll have no worries that it won't fit. **BG**