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THE SPIFF BY MIKE LUBOW

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The Yamomamo Indians of the remote Rio Negro region of Amazonia have remained untouched by civilization as we know it, and have even been overlooked by missionaries who penetrated into much of the rain forest and influenced tribal customs. One interesting belief that this tribe holds, is that when an individual is born, a tree sprouts somewhere deep in the jungle. The fortunes of both are intertwined; if the tree is lucky enough to receive sun it thrives and so does its human counterpart, growing strong and successful at hunting and tribal politics. But if the tree is doomed to be overshadowed by covering canopy foliage, the tree and its human will be weak and unhealthy. But the parallels don't end there. It is believed that if the human behaves in a dishonorable way, the tree will suffer. For every bad act committed by the man or woman of the tribe, a leaf will drop from the tree. Amazon forest trees are lush and have many leaves to spare, but over time, if too many leaves drop, the tree will grow unhealthy. The Yamomamo know this and it forms a part of their rudimentary religious beliefs.

*--Tribal customs of Amazonia
By Dr. Nathan Davis
Atlantic Monthly Books, 1962*

A book read, in parts, by Norm when he was home with the flu, running a high fever, circa eighth grade. Only parts were read because the primary purpose of investigating this text was to search for photos of the naked Yamomamo women. Norm has forgotten this book, utterly.

Norm's in front of the TV with the remote on his chest, a bowl of nacho chips nearby and a rum and Diet Coke in his hand in a tall glass with clinking ice. He wants nothing more than some mindless escape when for no earthly reason he finds himself thinking of a leaf dropping. Just a wisp of green in a world of green. A falling leaf.

He was watching a low-grade low-life film, something about dropout slackers who worked in a diner. There was a scene in which the boss, a bald ball of anger in a white apron, a guy who represented everything ridiculous about the adult world, called the staff together and barked out, "Push the shrimp, it's turning."

This had little to do with the plot of the movie, a hard-R excuse to see twenty-somethings sticking it to the establishment in as many gross and gratifying ways as could be crammed into 90 minutes. A catharsis, with reasonable expectations of nudity. Norm's in his forties, a married father of grown kids, husband to a happy wife who's happily out somewhere in the malls, shopping, leaving the house, the dog, the big-screen and a contented Norm alone for an hour or two. A nice domestic moment. And a green light for the possibility of slacker girl nude scenes, tame and harmless, but somewhat of a kick for a guy at any age.

Then the shrimp thing in the film pushed a pause button in Norm's viewing pleasure, causing him to abandon interest in whatever stolen fun might lie ahead. He couldn't get past the badness of bad shrimp being fed to innocent customers. It made him squirm.

The word “spiff” floated back to him. He didn’t like this chunk of shoptalk from his past and squirmed some more. Good thing he had the rum and Diet Coke. He took a swig, willing its sweet mild alcohol to make him feel better.

The spiff was connected to the idea of a leaf falling. But how? Ah, that’s it, there it is, a long forgotten momentary image that he’d first imagined some twenty years ago after a long shift on the sales floor. It had been an inconsequential vision, coming to him, back then while he was wearing a dark blue suit and salesman’s power tie, coming out of nowhere, utterly. Why hadn’t it just blown from his memory? When a leaf falls it can’t be put back, and should be forgotten.

Spiff was a word Norm hadn’t heard until he’d started selling at the men’s store, a job he’d approached reluctantly for reasons of shyness. But this was during college and he needed the money. He worked downtown amid fuming traffic and spit-spotted sidewalks. There were lunch counters and news stands, everybody hustling, knowing the score while Norm wasn’t sure he knew the game. But he got by and in time got good. The store paid 5% commission on everything he sold, a generous salary since men’s wear ran high.

In a sales pep talk at the start of his shift, Norm was told to push the plaids, a batch of expensive suits that hadn’t been moving. Like the shrimp, perhaps, they were starting to spoil. The style boat was passing and these goods weren’t on it.

Norm wasn’t surprised. The suits were itchy and garish. Hound’s tooth, herringbones, glen plaids, checkerboards, whatever; Norm had only a superficial handle on fashion terminology.

The boss said, “There’s a spiff on any plaid sold.” Some had bigger spiffs than others. The glen plaid in green-on-green wool had the biggest, twenty-five bucks. (In those innocent pre-inflationary days when anyone, even a kid, would bend down to pick up a random coin on the ground and not pass it by, twenty-five bucks meant something.)

A spiff is an extra commission. Normally, the sales person gets the usual 5%, a good incentive. But if the item has a spiff the seller gets extra. And money’s the only reason Norm’s there wearing a dark suit, listening to canned music, standing on tired feet in shoe-shined shoes for hours under fluorescents, re-arranging stock, sweet-talking strangers, writing up sales, doing paperwork with carbon copies, the whole deal.

Every item in the men’s department dangled a tag displaying code, size, and price. Sometimes it had a letter in marker. “A” meant one kind of spiff, say a buck. “B” could mean five, “C” ten, and on like that. The sales staff would push the spiffed items to make more money. The store would move unsuccessful merchandise because guys like Norm were motivated.

One evening a hard-working sort of guy comes in with his wife. He’s got a family reunion to go to, they explain, and his wife wants him looking good. The guy seemed apologetic, out of place in the quietly carpeted store, among clothes racks, hangers, mannequins and mirrors, out of place in a place of fashion.

The couple looked to Norm for advice.

Norm’s thinking, “I might make me some money.”

He gets the guy to try on a jacket selected at random just to check size. The one Norm pulls off a nearby rack is 42 short, fitting the guy perfectly. Both the guy and his wife smile, giving Norm quiet admiration for having eyeballed the perfect size, knowing his job. Norm feels like a doctor offering wisdom and healing, a responsibility, but he can handle it; it feels good.

“Now that we know your size, let’s find a suit you’re really going to look good in,” Norm says.

The guy shrugs. At work this man probably moves boxes in a warehouse, drives a truck or lifts kegs of beer, but here he’s helpless. He looks at Norm and says, “I like what you’re wearing.”

The wife says, "You've got such good taste, could you suggest something?"

Norm selects a dark suit and helps the man into the coat. Norm buttons it for him, pulling the jacket together over the man's jutting stomach. One guy dressing another, buttoning the other's coat, is an odd, uncomfortable thing. Both Norm and his customer feel this, but it's an unavoidable part of the moment.

Norm comes around to the guy's back, grips a shoulder pad in each hand, lifts the jacket up and lets it drop, smoothing it, knowing what he's doing. The guy looks into the 3-way mirror. If it were a prostate exam he were enduring, he'd probably have the same stoic face. The wife is nodding. It's a dark blue suit like Norm's, and the guy looks good.

Norm knows he can sell this suit.

There's a method, a trick of the trade: Just get the customer to try on the pants. A shopper will try on jacket after jacket and keep moving, no commitment. But if the sales person says, "We can't tell anything without seeing how the pants look with this jacket. You've got jeans on! How can we know? Here, take these pants into that dressing room."

And while the salesman is saying this, he's holding the jacket's matching pants, making a show out of folding back the bottoms into flopping cuffs, an investment in time that must be honored. So the customer, the poor manipulated customer, will take the pants and dutifully try them on in the dressing room.

This means he will buy the suit.

No guy likes to go into a tiny dressing room, kick off shoes, take down comfortable old pants containing wallet, keys and money that could get stolen (he thinks about this). No guy wants to hang his old pants on a hook, looking ridiculous with bare legs in the full-length mirror that's crowding him. No guy wants to struggle into scratchy new pants with their salesman-folded cuffs, fasten, zip, then walk out to have his crotch and seat scrutinized.

The customer's companion, usually wife or girlfriend, and the hovering salesman will stare at the guy's fit, front and back. They'll talk about how the fabric hugs and drapes, bags and pulls. The scene is uncomfortable, confining, embarrassing. Then the tailor will be summoned. This man appears from somewhere in the back. Usually a short, foreign guy with pins in his mouth and a tape measure like a prayer shawl on dandruff-specked shoulders.

The customer wants to get past this moment, get going, get the suit, get the hell out of there, get home. No way is he going to do this more than once. The salesman knows: get the guy to try on the pants and you've sold the suit.

Norm is about to do this. It's a nice suit. It'll be a nice sale. But as he moves toward the rack to get the matching pants and start his "you gotta try on the pants" routine, he sees the garish green glen plaid with a tag that's got an "E" in red. A twenty-five dollar spiff.

Norm, true to the salesman's ethic, stops everything and says, "Wait a second, let's see how you look in this, it's special, one of a kind. Might be just what you need."

Norm quickly peels the dark blue suit coat from the guy and helps him into the green glen plaid jacket.

"Well?" he says. "This has got a smart pattern, a little more style, not so conservative. And just feel the fabric."

The guy says, "Yeah, I don't know."

The wife says, "He's right honey, it's nice."

The guy shrugs. He just wants to be out of there. Everyone waits. Norm knows when it's best to say nothing, not to push.

Then this hard-working, hard-handed, blue collar, low-level, unfashionable, uncomfortable,

unsophisticated ordinary guy, a guy who might once have been a tough neighborhood kid, a football hero and car lover, an army guy, probably, a simple young husband and father, a watcher of TV and non-reader of books, an ordinary straight shooting Joe Sixpack, says to Norm, "You know best."

Norm says, "Let's try on the pants."

The customer's off to the dressing room. Norm's thinking *an extra twenty-five bucks*. Ice-white light from the fluorescent ceiling overlays everything. Canned music plays something soft, just a presence, a white noise to go with the ceiling light.

The man's wife waits, smiling self-consciously at Norm when their eyes meet. She holds her husband's leather jacket, hugging it to herself as though it's a part of her husband, a guy she loves un-self-consciously. Norm's aware of the sweet simplicity of this workaday jacket in her arms.

The guy got up that morning, Norm thinks, got dressed and put on that jacket, zipped it up to protect himself against a cold wind. He took it off when he came home. Put it on when they went shopping to get him a suit, zipping it again for warmth. This became somewhat disturbing for reasons Norm couldn't fathom.

The wife smiled again as they waited for the man to come out of the dressing room with his green plaid pants on, the pants that matched the jacket, with Norm's four-inch, turned-back temporary cuffs. And he came, finally. A squat, square little green giant, smiling and shrugging, rejoining Norm and the wife at the mirror.

Norm said, "Here, move in close so you can see it from the sides."

Norm did the buttoning routine, lifting and dropping and settling shoulders, smoothing the back. He said, "Let's get you marked up."

And before the guy could answer, Norm jumped in with, "Do you like to have your pants cuffed or cut with straight bottoms?"

This was another trick of the trade. Bypass the implied question that should be: Do you want to buy this? And instead ask a question that presumes the purchase has been decided. Before the guy could answer, Norm said, "I recommend straight bottom."

There was no reason for this. It was based on no knowledge of fashion, just a way to move the sale forward, a verbal foot in the door. So, instead of "Yes I'll take it," or "No, I'd like the dark blue," or "Let me see something else," the guy was asked to make a choice about his pant bottoms. What could he do?

"I don't know, okay, straight."

Norm called for the tailor, who appeared quickly. In addition to the expected pins, chalk and tape, he had a shiny bald head. He spoke with an accent and was clearly from some country where the gene pool favored the small. The tailor did his thing and after this, Norm's customer fairly ran to the dressing room to re-dress and get back into his leather jacket.

He handed over the green glen plaid pants and jacket, chalked and pinned here and there. Norm put them on a hanger with tailor shop tickets attached. Then Norm led the man and his wife to the sales counter and wrote up the transaction. He took their name, address, phone, credit card and ID.

They arranged a date when the suit would be picked up, a week away, seven working days even though Norm knew the tailor could do the tailoring in an hour. But rules dictated a week for suit alteration. Norm handed the man a ticket stub to be used when picking up the suit, smiling and thinking, *5% plus an extra twenty-five because I'm thinking on my feet*.

As the man and his wife walked away, finished with the transaction, they turned around and waved a discrete goodbye to Norm. The man smiled and nodded while the wife mouthed the

words, "Thank you very much."

Then they were at the elevator waiting in the white light and white noise. The doors opened, the couple entered and were soon gone. Norm was alone on the quiet floor, hardly any customers in the store now. And none in the suit department.

That's when he first thought about the tree. When the elevator doors closed on the man who bought the green plaid suit, Norm thought of a green leaf dropping off a tree. Just a fleeting idea, and then it was gone, an unbidden and barely remarkable inkling. There was a tree somewhere, and it lost a leaf.

He must have been half asleep on his feet for a moment there. But who could blame him with the hypnotic music, humming ceiling lights, the quietness of the floor and the tiredness that always comes at the end of a shift.

This old event spun out of Norm's memory in a blink while he was in front of the TV, not watching the slacker movie, not even noticing a food fight in which there were wet T-shirts worth scrutinizing, missing all this while he relived the glen plaid suit spiff sale.

The whole thing bothered him, made him squirmy as did the shrimp comment earlier in the film, the bit of dialogue that triggered this replay from the men's department. And instead of refocusing his attention onto the salaciously improving film, Norm floated back to the time and place of that sale. And he imagined it differently. It would have been, could have been, so easy. Like this:

After the man and his wife left the men's floor, descending back to their world in the quiet, enclosed elevator, dropping out of Norm's life, Norm could have gone into the tailor shop and removed the garish green glen plaid from its rack. He could have unclipped the sales tickets, and placed them on the counter next to the suit.

Then he could have retrieved the nice, fashionable and dignified dark blue suit that the man had first tried on, and placed it next to the plaid one. He could have affixed all the tickets to the blue suit. He could have taken the handy tape measure that was in the sales department's drawer and matched the tailor's measurements from the green suit to the blue suit.

He could have pinned the cuffs perfectly, and pinned the under-arm drape just as the tailor had. He could have matched the whole fitting in minutes, then he could have replaced the green suit, putting it back onto the sales floor. And he could have put the blue suit in the tailor shop. It would have been easy. It would have been easy to duplicate the sales ticket, too, substituting the particulars of the blue suit into the paperwork. The spiff be damned; he'd forget about it.

It could have been done. And maybe he'd have felt better. He daydreamed this now in front of the TV with the ice melting in his glass, the rum and Diet Coke getting watery and flat. Now the girls on the screen were really going at it. The kitchen food fight had escalated to something beyond the wet T-shirt level, with some shirts actually coming apart and there were starlet breasts, naked, flouncing around with BBQ sauce and various other condiments sticking to them. Normally Norm would've perked up over such an entertainment, but he wasn't noticing.

He was imagining the guy and his wife returning to the store in a week to pick up the new suit. The guy would have had vague misgivings. How could he not? The glen plaid had been clearly garish.

And when the will-call clerk brought the suit out and asked the customer to try it on, the unexpected appearance of a tailored and pressed dark blue dignified and stately suit would cause confusion.

The man and his wife would say, "That's not the suit." But they would not be entirely unhappy about the seemingly erroneous mishap. The will-call clerk will point to the name on the ticket, and say, "It must be yours."

Maybe the man would figure it out, but probably it would be his wife who would understand

first. They'd both remember how the man had said to Norm, "I like what you're wearing." And they'd know. They'd know that Norm did the switch. They wouldn't know about the spiff, but they'd know something akin to spiff funny business must have been behind the sale, and that Norm did them a favor.

Well, Norm thought, there's no way, of course, that they'd know such a thing for sure. But, in any case, none of this happened. It was all in Norm's imagination while he missed the food fight, and had no pleasure whatever from the drink in his hand and the nacho chips. Soon his wife would be home and he'd rise from his comfortable spot and trod out to the car to help her into the house with whatever packages she'd be carrying. His private time in front of the TV would be over.

The fantasy made him feel both better and worse at the same time. This is a common condition of the world, getting both better and worse at the same time. Norm knew this without thinking about it.

But he clearly felt this itchy dichotomy for a moment, regarding his imaginary switching of the suit. On the one hand, it was a nice idea and made him feel good to think it up. But on the other, the thinking of it also made him feel bad because it never happened.

The guy had gotten his green glen plaid, Norm had gotten his spiff, and nothing could change that little fact. He thought again of a leaf fluttering through a green haze and wondered where the hell that picture came from. He'd never know the answer to that one, but of course it wouldn't matter.

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Mike Lubow's short stories have appeared in national magazines, including *Playboy*. Within the last year, ten of Mike's stories have been accepted for publication in American and European journals including *The Barcelona Review*, *Roanoke Review*, *Confluence*, *Writer's Muse (UK)*, *Carve Magazine*, *The Best of Carve 2006* print anthology, *3711 Atlantic*, *Porcupine Literary Arts Magazine*, *First Intensity* and *The Blue Moon Review*. Since 2004 Mike has been writing a regular column called "Got A Minute?" for *The Chicago Tribune's* Sunday editions. He has recently completed a novel, and is compiling a short story collection.