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Dress Code

Joe Maslanka

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DRESS CODE
By: Joe Maslanka
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Monday through Friday I work as a security officer from 6:30 am to 2:30 pm. Tuesday through Saturday I tend bar from 6 pm to 2 am. On nights the jobs collide, I'm fortunate to get three hours' sleep. After four years in the Marine Corps, coming home to run the family bar sounded great. My wife was pregnant. I took my Father at his word when he said he wanted to retire. But he's only in his early 50's and I should've known better.

Six months, and now with a small child, I'm am feeling childlike. Back in the situation I ran from only five years ago. Here I am, taking shit from the old man, "watch the glasses, not the faces." All the same BS that was so exhausting growing up. Part of me is grateful; I'm working two jobs to keep our daughter out of day care. Hourly jobs, a far cry from a career, and my father seems in no hurry to relinquish the reins of his beloved taproom.

I can't let go of the Corps. Somebody asked my mother one Friday night when they were going to "extract the stick from my ass." I'm wound tight after three-and-half years of infantry training and guard duty. Civilians look like slobs. Pasty-face college punks roll in, ordering the latest-fad shot concoction. The bums from the factory, hiding behind the union, sit in drunk stupors lamenting how tough the job is. Bragging about how they can feign illness to kill a few days off. It makes me sick. As Sergeant of the Guard, I was responsible for 145 Marines. I worked regular 24-hour shifts with no sleep.

The toughest customers to face are the vets, from WWII, Korea, and Vietnam, who drift in from time-to-time. Don't get me wrong, they're a breath of fresh air compared to the local yokels, the old hippies, and the yuppies. Men of honor, they're a stark reminder that I never did what a Marine is meant to do.

I joined to see the world. Lebanon had happened. Granada had just taken place when I enlisted. Plucked from Infantry Training School, I was sent to serve on Barracks Duty protecting Tomahawk Missiles. I would never leave my duty-station in Virginia. Married, with a baby on the way, after my stint in uniform I hesitantly returned home to the Philadelphia area. I was good at what I did in the Corps but hearing the tales of real combat Vets in the bar reinforces my disillusionment with my stateside service.

It's Monday, no bartending tonight. This is as close as I get to time off. Wrapping up a shift at my security site, I pull into the parking lot of the Marine Corps Recruiting Office in Norristown, PA. I sit in my car, staring at the door, remembering and imagining life back in the Corps. Thoughts of pride, duty, and rediscovery of true responsibility fill me with purpose. But what about my wife and child, awaiting their Marine's return from a tour, living in base housing? I had a glimpse of that life right after we were married.

I return home to get the only night of regular sleep I'll get all week.

"You still awake? God's sake, Joe, get some rest."

"Yeah, babe." I roll over, dreading my Tuesday back at the bar.

Tuesday night arrives. I count out the till to prepare for the night. The usual suspects elbow around the horseshoe bar, nursing their drinks. Smoke fills the wood paneled barroom, oldies flow from the juke box. I'm feeling the fog of fatigue. My Father walks in with his Masonic Lodge golfing buddies.

"Watch the glasses, not the faces. Got it?"

"You know, you tell me the same thing every night."

“Hey, Jo-Jo, look, all bullshit aside, the weather is getting warmer and I need you to watch the dress code.”

“Dress code? What the hell?”

“I don’t want any muscle shirts. The temperature goes up, those jagoffs are gonna roll in here in their tank tops. We don’t need that shit. Now, you don’t have to be an asshole about it. I got some old golf shirts in the kitchen you can offer them. They don’t want to wear’em, no drink. Got it?”

“I got it. No shirt, no shoes, no dice. No worries, Pop.”

“No shit, now give me and these lousy golfers one more round and I am out of here. Jo-Jo, before you do that, come here.” He pulls me back to the grill area. He grabs me behind the neck and places his forehead to mine. His big hands are like catchers’ mitts. His broken nose and scarred forehead tell the tale of a guy who had to fight his way out of a tough background. Almost losing his leg at an early age, he was 4F when he tried to join the Army in the 50’s. He would speak of it every so often. At my graduation from Parris Island, he was filled with pride, and his own regret from never having had the opportunity to serve.

With our foreheads pressed together he delivers his words of wisdom: “Listen, loosen the fuck up.”

“Whatcha mean?”

“I mean you been out of the Corps for months, but you still act like you’re in. Shit, have a good time. You’re making good tips, you’re raising your family, quit lookin’ like you’re gonna do 50 push-ups. Be loose with the crowd, people come here to have a good time. It’s your job to make sure they do. Come on now, I love you. Lose the stiff ass, tough guy shit, OK?”

“I guess, but I’m just bein’ me.”

“No, you’re bein’ the guy that guards a base. Become the guy that runs a bar.” He punches me in the arm, then returns to his favorite stool.

I love my Dad. He’s giving me a chance to get on my feet, but when he talks like this it still pisses me off. He means well, but I’m a man, I have a family. My lecture days should be over. I’m 27 years old.

I return to the bar, determined to be more conscious of the chip on my shoulder. The night starts off middling. A few of the regulars pop in. At 8 pm, the bar begins to pick up, unusual for a Tuesday night. A couple state cops who frequent our place on the weekends pop in.

“Joey the Marine. Give me a shot and beer.” State Trooper, Stanley “Weasel” Wisnewski is tall and thin, with a weather-beaten face. Just 45, he appears well into his 50’s, the result of alcohol, stress, and long nights in his state cruiser.

“Hey, Weeze, what you doin’ in here on a weeknight?”

“State Police Clam Bake was today, expect a few more.”

“I could use the company. Tuesdays usually suck, but this one’s been OK.”

Weasel has a few drinks. Like he said, a couple more troopers file in, but don’t hang out long. They begin pulling out around ten p.m. Just a few locals hang on.

As the bar thins, it happens.

In come two guys I’ve never seen before. One is short and stout with a beard and close-cropped hair. A bigger, paunchy, younger guy lumbers in behind him. This one sports a mustache and shaggy brown hair. He’s wearing a tank top.

The short guy says, “Barkeep, couple Buds down here for me and my brother.” Moving slowly to the far-right corner of the horseshoe, I lean across the bar between the two of them.

“Sir, we have a dress code. I can’t serve you with that tank top on, but I have a shirt you can wear, if you don’t mind changing?”

“Sure, no problem,” says the big guy. Pulling the shirt from the kitchen, I lay it in front of him. Returning to the top end of the bar, I watch TV and await the changing of the shirt.

The big man pulls away from the bar, but his stocky brother grabs his arm. “Where you going?” he asks the big man.

“To the restroom to change so we can get a beer.”

“Screw that. Damn shirt you got on is better than that piece of shit. Who the hell is he? Dress code? Get the hell outta here. Where’s the sign? Just sit down. This punk’s gonna serve you with your shirt on. Barkeep, get down here! Bring two Buds.”

An uncomfortable moment is upon me; part of me welcomes it. I will defuse this situation. How many times did I do this at the base? Squids would try to give me shit at the dock or get pissed off delaying their entry to the Limited Area. Oh yeah, this ain’t shit.

“Sir, there’s a dress code, which your friend is in violation of. Now, I have kindly offered you a replacement shirt. I’ll be more than happy to serve you once you’re in compliance with our policy.” I fill a few empty glasses. I return to the top of the bar and watch the TV, but I hear everything they say. The smaller guy does all the talking. It’s always the smaller guys.

“Screw that asshole. We ain’t leaving. That smartass can’t do shit. Don’t change that shirt.”

There it is, six months of frustration roll over me. A wave of hard feelings, bad blood, and the loss of significance. My composure has set sail for a far-off island. It’s go time.

“You don’t want to wear the fuckin’ shirt?” I move toward them from behind the bar. They look stunned. “You don’t want to wear the fuckin’ shirt?” I ask again as I grab the bar shirt

and throw it at the little guy. Hurling my body halfway over the bar, I send a flying punch at the big guy's chin. I connect, though it's mostly a graze, and he stumbles back. Short and stocky attempts to lay his weight on me as I sprawl across the bar. I shove him off and stand behind the bar. Holy shit, that felt good. A demented euphoria floods into my soul. I'm grinning. "Probably best you two leave."

"You're fucking crazy. We see pricks like you every day. We're prison guards. Hopped-up bastards like you end up with us, sooner or later. I can't wait to get you on my cell block. You're fucking crazy. I want the manager." The little guy is hyperventilating. The big guy stands there rubbing his chin. I go to the direct phone-line to the upstairs residence of my mother and father, my childhood home.

"Dad, better get down here. We had a little incident. Some guy is demanding to see you." I return within the horseshoe-bar. I lean on the cold box. The patrons are silent. A few bolted during the melee.

Shorty asks, "Did you get the manager?"

"He's coming."

The big guy chimes in: "We ought to drag you out from behind that bar and beat the shit out of you."

"No fence around me, pal. Whatcha waitin' for?"

"Fuck that," says the little man. "I want his ass fired."

The door to the upstairs opens. Here comes my father.

Dad, looking cool as a winter breeze, asks, "What's the problem?"

"This asshole just assaulted my friend for wearin' a damn tank top. I want him fired."

“Look, first, that’s no asshole, that’s my son. Second, I’m not gonna fire him. Third, we have a dress code.”

Short guy asks, “Dress code, huh? Where’s your sign?”

“The sign is the bartender telling you no tank top.” My dad just stares at him for brief silent seconds.

Shorty threatens: “Oh shit, I see what’s goin’ on here. Your son, sure. Alright, well hear me, and hear me good, dad, you’ll be hearin’ from my lawyer. How do you like that?”

“Call your fuckin’ lawyer. Go ahead, dipshit.” I enjoy the whole moment. My father shoots me a look that is not comforting. He turns back toward the two guys.

“Look, I got a dress code here. You do what you got to do. I think it’s best you leave now.”

They glare at me, at my Dad. The big guy leaves me with parting words. “I know we’ll see you at Greaterford Prison. All pumped up, huh? Out of the military? Yeah, you guys always fuckin’ blow it. I’ll have your ass on my block, you’ll be mine. You hear me?”

“Yeah, hey, why don’t you write it down in a letter and send it to me? Later, fuck-nuts.”

My father and I watch them leave. Dad goes to the window to confirm their departure.

“Jo-Jo, get everybody a drink on the house. Meet me in the kitchen.”

I set up the bar, dreading the meeting in the kitchen. My Dad’s eyes tell the story. They bead and pierce when he’s pissed. He grabs me as the kitchen door closes behind me, pushing me against the sink. With hurt and frustration, he rips into me.

“Listen to me, look at me, you ain’t in the Marine Corps no more. You hear me? Telling that shithead to call his lawyer? Are you crazy? News flash, Sarge, he can. Guess what? You

threw the first punch. You can't fuckin' do that, Joe. We can lose everything. You hear me. This ain't the damn Corps. You can't pull that shit and just laugh it off. You listening?"

I nod. My father stands back from me, arms folded.

"If you want to go back in, go. If you're gonna stay here, get your shit together. Learn the business. Focus, Joe. You got a family. So, what are you gonna do?" We stand looking at each other. He pulls me in for a bear hug, releases me and smiles. I smile, grab my bar towel, and walk back inside the horseshoe.