FICTION FROM 'BEST SHORT STORIES' BY AFRO-AMERICAN WRITERS

This Is Our Country

What do you suppose would happen if a 19-year-old lad told his draft board to go to h---? Well, here's what happened in just such a case.

By Albert Monn

The judge spoke kindly. "Sit down, son," he invited. The boy stood before him smiling in his queer, ice-cold way, and nodded in refusal.

The judge stared down at the square white booklet on his desk. The title across the top of it in thick, heavy print was: "Questionnaire: Selective Service Act." He read down the first page, then began to turn the pages slowly.

The boy had answered each question carefully, intelligently, in a fine, round hand until he had come to the caption: Employment.

There, in the middle of a word, the writing had broken off sharply and sprawled away into a long, curving, angry line that ran to the side of the paper, curled back and became a thick, artfully drawn arrow.

After the arrow followed a shocking vandalism that covered the width of the third page. "You can go to hell," it read.

* * *

HIS BEHAVIOR in court had been in keeping with that sentence: He'd been silently, almost contemptuously indifferent.

Yet, although the judge had been angry and annoyed, he could not bring himself to sentence him preemptorily as he so richly deserved.

Why? he wondered. Why had he shown the boy special consideration by asking him into his private chamber? He examined the youth intently.

He was an extraordinarily handsome lad, tall, well built, powerful looking in a lithe, controlled way; the face — dark olive with fine sensitive features. And his dress — astonishing. It was well worn but neat, conservative. There wasn't a false note anywhere.

Every colored man, he'd thought, had a streak of savage in him that betrayed itself in at least one gaudy fashion: a garish necktie, cream-yellow shoes, a monstrosity of a hat. But this fellow was immaculate.

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HE GLANCED through the section marked Education: high school, college, aeronautical engineering degree, postgraduate work on a scholarship. There was also something indefinable that he was sensitive to, in young men; a fresh, clean-cut look. That more than anything had made the judge hesitate.

The judge prided himself on his social-mindedness. He liked to be easy with youngsters who were before him for the first time. He liked to become paternal and send them out grateful and vowing they wouldn't return.

But he had never met any who had kept such a perverse, surly silence. He resolved to break through it and learn more about this boy and the strange thing he had done.

* * *

"WILLIAMS, you don't impress me as being the kind of boy who belongs in a jail," he said. "It's a year in jail and $5,000 fine. That's pretty stiff."

Williams looked as if he hadn't heard.

"I want to be fair with you, son, if you'll let me. I asked you in here because I wanted to make it easier for you."

The judge meant what he said and he was practiced in the saying of it, so that the words rolled out, smooth, warm and sincere.

The boy stirred uneasily, but didn't answer.

"You've got to help me. I don't like to put a lad like you away, a lad who obviously comes from a nice home, without giving him a chance."

He thought for a minute he had reached the boy, as their eyes steadily met for the first time since he had come into court. The judge noticed the youth's distressed look.

"Tell me what it's all about," the judge urged softly.

"It won't help," Williams replied.

* * *

WELL! Thank God. He had broken through the hard ice. He had reached him. Now if he could only get him to warm up and speak freely...

"It might," he answered quickly. "Frankly, Williams, I can't imagine a boy like you doing this sort of thing."

"Thank you, your honor. I don't want you to think I don't appreciate your kindness. It's just that there's nothing to say, that's all. I'm guilty and I'll take my punishment."

There! He was a nice sort. His speech was cultivated — although he noticed it in a slight trace of the softness of Southern dialect.

"A year in prison is no vacation, Williams."

"It can't be any worse than . . ."

For a moment his eyes had burned with a quick, bitter flame as if he had begun to talk. Then he had stopped abruptly and the light had faded.

"Go on, go on," the judge urged. "I'm here to listen to you."

"It's useless, sir."

"Why did you do this?" He lifted the questionnaire and pointed it to him.

The boy sighed and said resignedly:

"I don't know exactly, your honor. I was filling it out and suddenly I had an impulse I couldn't resist. I was sorry after I'd sent it. There's not much sense to it."

* * *

"I BELIEVE you. But you didn't answer three summonses from the board." The judge was smiling knowingly. "Were you ashamed, disgusted with yourself? Did you feel you'd queered yourself for good?"

The boy's answer was flat and disappointing.

"Don't misunderstand me. I never had any intension of reporting."

"No? That's different. Why?"

"Well, there's no point in telling you. I don't think you'll like my reason."

"Let me decide that. Would you report now? I might be able to fix it up with the board."

"No, sir. I've thought that out carefully."

The judge measured him and said chidingly, "A great, strapping fellow like you. You're not afraid, are you?"

Williams smiled with real amusement for the first time. There was a funny little undertone, perhaps of mockery, as he answered, "No, sir."

"What then? Is there some religious reason — some reason of conscience?"

"No."

"I didn't think so. You're not a political objector, Williams?"

"No."

* * *

THE JUDGE still smiled pleasantly. A talk of this kind, intimate, personal, with one of the people he was to judge always suffused him with a flow of kindliness and generosity that was hard to exhaust.

He went on benevolently.

"I suppose you have your private life — a job — a girl you want to marry and the military seems like a pretty barren prospect. I know how it feels. I was drafted in the last war. Kicked like a steer, too. But I never regretted it.

"We've got to answer a call like this, Williams. It's our country asking for us. And it's a good country. It's a democracy that offers us a free and a decent life. Isn't that worth fighting for?"

* * *

HE HAD said that before, he knew. But he had never been so deeply, so genuinely moved by it. There was something glorious in the thing — the sound of "our country" — he and this colored chap sitting together in a common bond of equality, of democracy.

If newspapermen were around, he knew the way they'd handle it, once he had convinced the boy. They'd take his picture with his arm around the boy's shoulders, smiling down on him. The next day it would appear, called something like, "Tableau for Democracy."

"Why, the army would be glad to receive a boy like you,

(Continued on Page 8)

"All right son," the judge said, "tell me what it's all about."

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HELPFUL HINTS TO REMEMBER

Before You Buy That New Suit

How do you know whether or not a suit fits—because the salesman says so? Here's a sure way to make sure, and a few helpful hints on how to get the most for your suit dollar.

When you go into a store to buy a suit, slow down. Think. After all, you spend time and effort and thought pricing and selecting electrical appliances, furniture, a car or any other article you expect to get a lot of use out of, don't you?

So, don't just dash in to buy a suit because you've been invited to a party. Or because your wife's sister's getting married. Or because you've been putting off buying a suit and this seems as good as any other time to get the chore over with.

Picking a suit calls for deliberation, unhurried choice and consideration of a number of different factors — such as where you're going to buy, fit, material and the manufacturer.

* * *

LATE JANUARY or early February is the best time to buy.

That's the time when most clothing stores hold their "stock reducing" seasonal sale, when they clear their racks of winter suits to make room for the upcoming spring and summer garments.

It's gonna take patience. You may have to trudge from rack to rack and from store to store, but chances are possible you'll get a 10, 15, 20 or even—with luck—25 per cent break on the price of a new suit.

That is, of course, if you wear a size a little under or above a size average, something outside the 38-42 size range. That's all that'll be left.

This sale and another held in late July or early August—when stores clear the racks of their summer suits—are the only two times a year when reputable men's clothing stores give the customer a break as far as price is concerned.

By all means, you shouldn't be sucked in by those big ads shrieking "manufacturer's special" or "mill end" sales. You're just lookin' for a rookin' if you think you'll get a bargain at one of these.

"Mill ends" are the last yards of a fabric a textile mill has been running but is discontinuing.

These are peddled at lower prices to cheaper-garment makers who run batchs of quickie, poorly-cut suits. These, in turn, are grabbed up by retail houses specializing in sensational, low-price sales.

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KNOWING your size isn't necessarily a help when you stroll into a clothing store and begin scanning the suit racks. Truth is the government does not set up or require a code of sizes. One manufacturer's 42 may be another's 44. You're better off forgetting your size.

Make the clerk measure you. Of course, if you wander into a reputable store with veteran clerks, one of them'll be able to judge your size by sight.

Of the two parts of a suit, the jacket is the more difficult to fit. The zones of trouble are around the shoulders where the sleeves are sewn on, across the chest and around the neck.

To be sure it fits around the shoulders, button it and then lift your arms and cross them as if you were wrapping them around a tree. If the coat binds in the armpits, it doesn't fit.

To test whether the jacket fits across the chest, button it, sit down and bend over. If the jacket gaps open in a wide V and the lapels bulge out, it doesn't fit.

If you're inclined to load the inside pockets with papers, your wallet, pencils, pens and so forth, the jacket must be somewhat more loose.

* * *

WHEN YOU'VE got the jacket on, turn and look in the mirror to see how the collar rides on the back of your neck. If it sets up over your shirt collar, you're in for trouble. It'll rub your skin, get greasy and stained and, of course, fray and wear out.

Much the same thing applies to sleeve length. It not only looks better to have your shirt cuffs show a half-inch or so below the jacket sleeves, but it's also practical.

Then, the shirt cuff gets the wear, absorbs the skin oil and becomes threadbare. The coat doesn't. And isn't it cheaper to buy shirts than to purchase jackets?

As for jacket length, it's also intelligent to have it long enough to cover the seat of your trousers. It's the seat that gets worn and shiny first, long before the rest of the outfit. Hide it and lengthen the time you can wear the suit.

* * *

WHEN IT'S TIME to think about the trousers, the matters to consider are crotch comfort, length, pocket linings (they should be heavy cotton) and belt loops (test 'em by tugging at 'em).

Around the crotch, the trousers should not bind, yet also shouldn't be so loose they bag in the seat.

The currently popular "Ivy League" style eliminates trouser pleats. But pleated pants are more comfortable. Get them if you possibly can. Particularly if you're thick around the waist.

They'll not only step up the comfort, they'll improve your appearance.

The trousers ought to be long at the shoe tops. Shorter, enough to break just slightly they'll give you that "high pockets" look. Longer, they'll fray in the back.

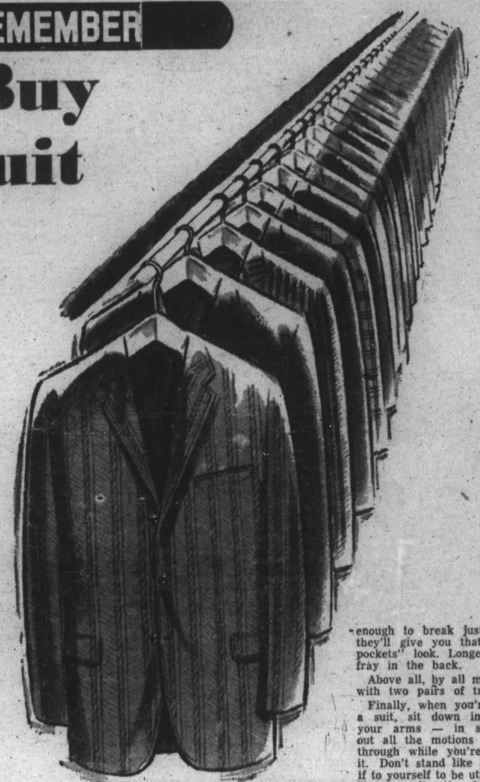
Above all, by all means, get with two pairs of trousers.

Finally, when you're buying a suit, sit down in it, flex your arms — in short, try out all the motions you'll go through while you're wearing it. Don't stand like a ramrod if to yourself to be utterly candid you ordinarily slump. The suit's got to fit your everyday posture.

In fact, as far as your body build is concerned, you owe it to yourself to be utiery candid while you're buying a suit. So you're not a Greek god. Who is? If you're thickset, don't buy double - breasted suits.

If you're narrow at the shoulders, get a jacket with some padding (conversely, if you've broad shoulders, get one with less padding). If one shoulder droops, have that jacket shoulder padded a little.

If you stick out behind, don't buy a jacket with a vent in the back.



Most Practical

A veteran tailor recommends an unfinished worsted as the most practical, all-around suit fabric for both appearance and durability.

Its nap will keep it from getting shiny soon, and its tight weave will insure its holding a press.

Tweeds aren't called "baggy" for no reason. Flannel's also difficult to keep pressed. Gabardine is probably the most attractive, but hardly the most durable.

Whatever material you choose, here are some steps you can take to lengthen your suit's life and keep up its appearance. Insist the store provide extra buttons. They may grumble, but they can do it.

Ask them to take strips left over when they make the cuffs and sew them on the inside of the cuffs to keep them from fraying where they rub your shoes.

Have them sew a silk shield inside the trousers around the knee area. Then the trousers will keep the press better and wear longer.

About Material

Wondering whether to buy a tweed suit? Or a gabardine? Or a sharkskin? Well, here's what to consider.

Nearly every fabric that's shown to you will have good points and bad. Some'll wear like iron, but not ho'd a press. Some'll have a nice sheen but get shiny quickly. Some'll look beautiful, but'll cost a king's ransom for repairs if you snag them.

Suits are made out of woven cloth, of course, and the weave is either loose or tight. Let's consider just the more common ones.

The loosest is tweed—you can push a pencil through it without hurting it. Next comes cheviot. Then worsted—either finished or unfinished. After that, sharkskins.

Finally, there are the closest weaves, serge and gabardine.

Fine weaves hold a press better, but they're the devil to repair if they get snagged. The looser the weave, the warmer the suit.

If you want a fabric with a design or pattern, tweeds, sharkskins and worsteds offer them. Gabardine comes only in solid colors.

Take Care Of It

You can keep a suit longer simply by not wearing it day after day.

Get yourself a sport coat and some slacks, so your suit can take a day off and air itself out. Remember, dry cleaning ages a suit almost as much as wearing it. Spots and stains have to be cleaned out, true. But otherwise, the less your suit's dry cleaned, the longer it'll last.

Cutting down on dry cleaning means you'll have to brush your suit frequently and hang it carefully. But don't use a whisk broom. Buy a soft clothing brush. A broom tears at the fabric.

When you hang up the suit, put it on a wooden hanger. That'll help hold the shoulder shape better. The trousers ought to be hung from clips that hold them by the cuffs, rather than draped over a rod.

Jest For Laffs

Women spend at least 75 per cent of their time sitting down, as figures show.

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After listening to news commentators all day you know that no matter what happens —you've been warned.

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Never waste household scraps — open the windows and let the neighbors hear them.

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The trouble with many glamor girls is that they let their bodies go to their heads.