

A Well-Groomed Man

By : Michael Cuthbertson

I had my dream life waiting for me: a beautiful German girl to move in with, a gorgeous mountain town to explore and write about, and now this job offer. But that's when they hit me with the news, "Now you're gonna have to cut that hair. We just don't allow that sort of thing around here."



Published on
Booksie

booksie.com/Michael Cuthbertson

Copyright © Michael Cuthbertson, 2015
Publish your writing on Booksie.com.

A Well-Groomed Man

I felt weird sitting in this preppy bakery for tourists with two girls I hardly knew, but one of whom I was mad about, sitting beside me eating their four dollar croissants and looking utterly carefree. Outside my window was the valley town of Jasper and the tall, menacing mountains looming overhead.

Nicole—the girl I wanted—looked at me, “Are you nervous?”

“Ehh—” I replied awkwardly.

“You look really nervous.” Nicole nodded her head and grinned smugly at me.

I took a deep breath, “Well, I am nervous because if I don’t get this job then I’ll probably have to move back to Saskatoon. But I’m not nervous because I’ve had 17 jobs in my life.” The girls raised their eyebrows at this and I smiled, “I’ve done my share of job interviews and I acted in high school so I can bullshit really well. I can make employers believe I actually care about their company, you know?”

“Okay.” Nicole kept her eyebrows raised at me. “Just don’t say that in the interview.” Her look warned me not to be myself at the interview but rather to be the man the Fairmont Hotel dreamed I would be.

I trusted Nicole because she worked at the spa out there—which I found strange. At heart Nicole was this freewheeling backpacker girl from Germany. A tall, thin and shapely girl who dyed her hair red and had a tattoo of Alice in Wonderland on her forearm. And in spite of all this she took a job pampering yuppies in some tight-ass, luxury hotel. The company even made her wear an armband over her tattoo all day, and that should have been the first sign that the Fairmont wasn’t going to like me or my hair.

Soon I left the girls at the bakery and rode my bike out to the Fairmont, pedaling through the woodlands. Light rays broke through the treetops, piercing down on the green and brown earth as I raced forward, hopping my bike over little dips and roots in the earth. I reached the lakefront and stopped to take it all in. The water was immaculately clean. It reflected the sky like blue glass. Across the lake stood the Fairmont Hotel.

I saw the prison-like structures—the rows of log-sided buildings with rooftops painted green. I also saw their golf course and parking lot, which were plopped right in the middle of a wild, coniferous forest. And right away I felt like this pastoral backdrop—far from making the Fairmont seem more wonderful—actually highlighted all that was profane and ugly about the people staying at this hotel and the hotel itself.

Around the lake, I wove my bike past the maze of “Guest Buildings” where middle-aged people drifted by me like the walking dead. I pushed my bike past the tennis court, golf course and parking lot. I saw many guests wearing the same resignation on their face. Sort of like, “Well, I guess we’re in paradise.”

Soon I reached a tall wooden fence guarding the “Staff Only Buildings.” The fence and the buildings behind it looked like something from a kid’s summer camp, only here the aesthetic of log cabins and of wilderness turned into a makeshift townsite felt more sinister than charming.

Entering the Staff Only grounds I saw joyous green space everywhere and noticed how eerily quiet the grounds were. As I pushed my bike along I passed the occasional twenty-something guy or girl—each girl

A Well-Groomed Man

looked in placid sedation (like the guests) and each guy looked stone cold seriousâ with his crew cut and subtle, scowling lips. It felt like I was in some Twilight Zone episode where there was an unseen malice lurking just beyond my perception.

I went into Nicoleâs apartment building, into the menâs bathroom and took out the hair elastic Nicole gave me. I tied my hair back as best I could, but a few strands kept falling over my face since my hair wasnât quite long enough for a solid ponytail yet. I pulled out a crumpled tie from my backpack (that my dad pre-tied back in Saskatoon) and I tightened it around my collar. I also wore my glasses because my eye was infected and bloodshot. The glasses made me appear less sloppy and as I stared at the bathroom mirror I told myself, â You look professional.â Then, heading out of the apartment, I practised my white-executive walk: with my back straight, my pace deliberate, and my head held just high enough that I couldnât smell the bullshit this place was swimming in.

My heart started racing while I searched for the Human Resources building. I saw a jaded looking girl smoking on the concrete steps of â Câ building. She gave me directions and I thanked her. I felt comforted to see smokers out here. I figured since smoking is greasy and the Fairmont still allowed it, maybe I could still get away with having long hippie hair.

I stepped into the Human Resources building. I was hungry and had been biking all day. My energy was low but my heart kept racing and my palms began sweating so that soon enough my nerves kicked my brain into overdriveâ giving me the vitality needed to wow my employers at the interview.

I walked up to the reception desk and in a white-executive voice I said, â Excuse me. My name is Michael Cuthbertson and Iâm here for a job interview. Is Katie available?â

The old-lady-receptionist looked a little stunned by me, â Uh yes, one moment.â She rushed to get Katie, a woman of 30 who quickly came strolling out of her office. Katie wore a starched, black, female suit with pinstripes, had the perfect hair length for a serious businesswoman (being neither too short nor too long to seem the slightest bit deviant) and she sported hipster glasses, which at first told me she wasnât simply trying to be the character the Fairmont wanted her to be. But I quickly sensed that her glasses, free-spirited as they looked, were just another piece of the calculated image that she projected and believed would help her make the most money and fewest waves during her tenure with the Fairmont.

â Youâre Michael?â She wore a beaming, fake smile that even she almost believed.

â Yes. And youâre Katie?â I shook her hand assertively, still acting like a white-executive.

â Yes!â She kept beaming. â Can I just get you to follow me this way, Michael.â She led me back through the creepy, empty lawns and into another building, past a kitchen full of busy cooks till we finally reached a large, empty banquet hall. She sat me down at one of its many roundtables covered in white cloth. I sat picturing the bullshit corporate events that were probably held here every night.

Katie sat down across from me with a fat stack of papers in her hands and daintily pulled out my resume, placing it on the white cloth between us. â So Michael,â she got down to business, â Tell me all that you know about the Fairmont?â She spoke peppily yet with authority and it occurred to me that the interview had begun. Unfortunately I knew nothing about the Fairmont. I didnât care to know either. But I said something clever and soon she asked, â Okay, now what work-related strengths do you have that you feel will make you a good asset to the Fairmont team?â Immediately I calmed down and was back in familiar interview-bullshitting-territory: telling tales of my exceptional people skills, and my being a â self-motivatedâ worker whose greatest weakness was liking to take charge and do all the work himself.

A Well-Groomed Man

My heart rate was calming down and as I talked out of my ass Katie kept her perfect posture (like a spoon was up her own ass) and continued smiling in her unfriendly and authoritative way. Soon she handed me paperwork to sign and it looked like I was going to get the job. Then she finally brought it up.

“Now this here is our Grooming Policy Form.”

Nicole had warned me and now I saw that indeed their policy was beyond obsessive-compulsive. It was even beyond military-fastidiousness. It was oppressive simply because the Fairmont had the power to make it oppressive. Girls could only wear conservatively-coloured nail polish. Make-up on girls was to be worn minimally, serving only to highlight the professionalism of the lady's appearance. As I read this, Katie put her finger over the subheading “Hair” and looked up at me. I looked back at her painted-on smile and bulging eyes magnified through her goofy hipster glasses. “Now you will of course have to get a haircut.” She said matter-of-factly.

I sank into myself. The jig was up. Even my best white-executive performance wasn't going to save me from the fact that I had hippie hair and was applying at the Fairmont which was about as fortuitous as being a disabled, homosexual Jew living in Nazi occupied Europe.

“Hmmm,” I started massaging my neck nervously, “Like how much of a haircut?” She smiled less, looking a little unsettled by my dissent. She looked like the spoon up her ass was starting to poke her insides awkwardly. “Well,” she ran her finger over the text and proceeded to mime using her own hair, “It needs to be clean on the sides, ears fully exposed. And on the back hair cannot touch the collar. And no bangs.”

I exhaled and looked around for an answer. I spoke, no longer able to keep my white-executive voice, as I slipped accidentally into my real voice, “Well, uhh, could we compromise? Like workplaces have made me put my hair in a ponytail before but never, I mean, could I just get a bit of a haircut?” Katie no longer smiled but kept running her finger over the subheading “Hair” while staring me down through her thick, hip glasses. “Well whatever it says in our grooming policy. As long as your hair abides by that, then it should be acceptable.”

“It's just.” I tried slipping back into my white-executive tone, “I guarantee you I am able to carry myself with professionalism while serving guests, even with this hair.”

“Oh no, I do believe you,” Katie said thoughtlessly, “It's just,” she smiled bigger than ever and started using loud, businessy hand gestures like people use in political debates, “You must understand that our guests expect certain things when they visit the Fairmont. We definitely do keep a fairly conservative grooming policy here, but that's what our guests come to expect. We have a certain brand image at the Fairmont and it's our responsibility to uphold that image.”

I struggled not to frown. I felt physically ill at picturing myself with a crew cut but also ill just from hearing a human being, the most sacred thing in the physical universe, reciting such bullshit, towing the fascist party-line so closely that she started espousing her rulers' false ideals with sincerity. The phrases she used—terms like “brand image” and “conservative grooming policy”—it all sounded like the Fairmont had jammed some computer program into her brain. It was like I was no longer speaking to a real human but rather a computer program the Fairmont designed and operated.

Somehow the interview continued, and I must have said “yes” to the haircut because next thing I knew Katie walked me to another building, right into the office of some man I'd never heard of—a guy named John who was the Manager of Housekeeping. I sat across his impressive oak desk. John had the typically stocky build of an affluent, middle-aged, businessman. He wasn't super obese but bore that unathletic look

A Well-Groomed Man

that one might attribute to too much paperwork and steak dinner and not enough exercise. He seemed like the kind of guy who would play golf, but only on the condition that a golf cart carry him around all day.

John told me I would have the job of a houseman. He told me I would be driving to different private "Guest cabins", then starting their fireplaces, bringing them extra furniture and generally pampering them just like Nicole did to rich people at the spa. John made a point of telling me he just fired three housemen because they fooled around on the job. He sounded very sorry for himself.

By now in life I had noticed a trend of service industry managers getting all self-pitying about how they had to get tough on workers who didn't perform their gruelling duties quite up to the company's expectations (even though these subordinates were paid a very generous minimum wage as stipulated by their local provincial government.)

I spoke up, "Well you don't have to worry about me sir," I somehow continued playing Mr. Good Employee, "I am a very self-motivated worker. I actually get bored if I am not working hard." John believed me and after telling me orientation started Monday and what my hours would be, he off-handedly remarked, "Now I am sure Katie already told you that hair has to go. We just don't allow that sort of thing here."

"About that," I went back to my real self, "I was wondering if we could compromise?" I saw John, with his muffin-top gut under his dress shirt, and his nice trim haircut. John looked at me sternly, "Well we've never made any exceptions before. I don't see why you'd be any different." My brain started battling itself. One side reminded me of the life I was promised if I just cut the damn hair.

The day before, Nicole told me that I should be roommates with her since the Fairmont hadn't found her one yet and she might get stuck with a stranger if I didn't move in soon. I couldn't tell what Nicole meant by her offer. It was probably a platonic suggestion. She most likely wanted me only as a friend. But I dreamed Nicole could be everything to me. And here I saw an impossibly perfect chance to make progress in getting her and making her my significant other.

"Alright," I said reluctantly. "I'll get my haircut." But as I said this my head also buzzed with thoughts of everything possibly blowing up in my face at the Fairmont. Of Nicole meeting some other dude and going out with him. Of me working fifty hours a week, starting fires with soot in my face while rich people sat on the sofa behind me bitching about their shitty lives. And me going back to Nicole late at night, entering the room with my short haircut, feeling like a sell-out douchebag only to find Nicole on our couch in the arms of some jackass who had the same haircut as me anyway.

I drifted back to reality. John told me to return to Katie's office. When I got there Katie said she just received a call from John that I had the job. "Well Michael, first of all, on behalf of the Fairmont let me congratulate you for receiving this job." She held out her hand so I shook it again more lacklustre than our first handshake. I thought maybe I accidentally signed up with a cult. As Katie gave me loads of paperwork to fill out she kept saying "Congratulations" like it was some big fucking deal that I, probably the lone applicant for the job, had been found worthy of their creepy little club. My hunger grew and I just wanted to leave the Fairmont and think things over.

Katie gave me a pen to sign the contract. I didn't take the pen, saying, "Actually I'll just finish signing the papers tonight and bring them back tomorrow."

"Okay, congratulations again."

A Well-Groomed Man

I walked back outdoors to my bike, loosening off my tie and taking the elastic out of my hair. My locks flopped down on my shoulders and I felt the wind brush gently over me and my hair. I untucked my dress shirt and rolled up the sleeves, feeling immediately more like myself. When I started biking back around the lake I noticed my handle bars were getting really loose. I had to do the whole bike ride with them moving up and down. As I pedaled, every bump in the terrain felt greatly exaggerated and my balance was thrown way out of wack. I was rolling cautiously down a gravel road when I saw, on the horizon, Nicole and the other girl Katelyn coming my way. I sped up to them and waved but they didn't respond. They seemed to be having a nice and peaceful conversation when I wobbled up to them and put my feet down to stop on my bike.

â Well,â I looked at Nicole, soaking up her distinctly European good-looks. I wanted her badly then and I was starting to believe I could actually get her.

â I got the job.â I winced, â But Iâ m not sure I can take it.â Nicole rolled her eyes at me, â What are you talking about?â

â They want me to cut my hair, like super short, like I was in the Army.â

â The Fairmont has a very conservative grooming policy.â Katelyn recited the creed.

â So just cut your hair,â Nicole sounded impatient with me, â Youâ ll have a place to live and a job. Just cut it.â I was still enchanted by her German accent and pretty face. I meditated on these fine features, trying to convince myself that seeing Nicole everyday would make my sell-out haircut seem a trivial concern.

â I just donâ t get it. How does short hair make me a more reliable worker? Like would guests actually think, oh dear that man has long hair, I refuse to be served by such a beast! If you ask me, itâ s just the Fairmontâ s way of breaking you down and saying â youâ re one of us nowâ . Itâ s just like the Army!â

The two girls listened calmly. Katelyn spoke up, â Well I just read in a magazine something about how most successful business people all have the same look. You know, with guys itâ s the suit and tie, short haircut, no facial hair, andâ l!â

â Oh.â I acted pleasantly surprised, â You mean they all look like douchebags whoâ d sell their soul to the devil just to make more money for their company?â

Katelyn stopped to reflect, â Yeah pretty much.â She sounded reluctant to agree. Nicole kept staring at me, looking pretty fed up with my stubbornness. I suspected she may have also been mad because, quite possibly, she thought I would look more attractive with short hair. I donâ t know a lot about girls, but I know that since Iâ ve had long hair Iâ ve had less luck with the ladies. And I myself believe that most heterosexual people find the opposite sex more attractive when they exhibit looks typical of that gender (broad shoulders on guys, curvy hips on women and maybe, now that I thought about it, short hair on guys.) But though I personally liked girls that looked, well, â girlyâ , I always thought both guys and girls were cooler with long hair. It wasnâ t a sex-appeal thing to me. Long-hair was more about freedom and rebellion, like the long-haired kids from the Sixties believed.

I thought about all this while I stared at the ground and Nicole still stared at me until Katelyn broke our silence, â I think the only way theyâ d let you keep your hair long is for a religious reason.â

â Hah!â I laughed strangely to myself, â Well Iâ m Christian, and Jesus Christ had long hair, so it might as well as be for a religious reason. Haha, yeah Iâ ll tell them I need it for my religion.â

A Well-Groomed Man

“That would be wrong, don’t do that.” Nicole scorned me.

“I wouldn’t actually.” I tried to recover. I twisted my handlebars nervously then bursted out, saying, “It’s funny. With all the progress certain groups have made today—like, employers aren’t allowed to not hire people on the basis of race or religion or sexual orientation or gender—I knew where I was going with this but I slowed down my rant, knowing I had to employ extreme caution while discussing minority rights, what with me being a white 22-year old male and all. Still I continued, “One of the forms I filled out asked me, “Are you a member of a visible minority?” Probably because the Fairmont has certain affirmative action policies and such. Whatever the case, I got thinking “Yeah. I am a minority.” Because I mean, if a company won’t hire me simply because of my hair that’s just like any other appearance-based discrimination.”

“Wait, you put you were a minority!” Nicole flipped.

“No, no, I just thought about putting it.” I decided it was too dangerous to pursue my argument any further with Nicole so I went back to staring at the ground. But inside I was still stewing over that form. Obviously I faced far less persecution than people who legitimately qualified as visible minorities. Still, I found it utterly absurd that we lived in a world that associated shorter hair-length with workplace competence. Because by that logic, bald people would make the most outstanding employees of all.

“Anyway,” I looked seriously at Nicole, “I gotta find a bike shop. These handlebars are getting super loose and I can’t make it back up the mountain to the hostel like this.”

“Okay see you,” Nicole said carelessly and kept walking with Katelyn.

I made it back to town where I had my bike fixed and ate a Subway sandwich. With my head and stomach feeling less upset, I decided to call my mom from my favourite payphone in town. It was right by a train station where trains rolled across a huge open valley. On the horizon stood mountains that soared above and looked far more impressive because of the flat, drab valley at their feet.

I called my mom and told her my situation. She simply told me, “Hair grows back.” And I thought yeah, think of this like a tour in the Army, it’s not permanent, I’m only under their authority for a couple of months. Still I explained to my mom that it was “the principle” that bothered me. That I wouldn’t have been so adamant about keeping my hair long if the powers that be didn’t want so badly for me to cut it.

My mom said she understood because people doubted her ability to be a great daycare operator simply because she was overweight. And I felt sad at that, because my mom was in fact a terrific daycare operator and far more active than many people who look athletic. I was stuck in the same boat as her. Clearly I was as professional, well-mannered and hard-working as any short-haired person out there. Only society judged people by appearance. My mom said she agreed and calmly reminded me, “Your hair will grow back.” So I told her I’d take the job—remembering her always telling me, “All your father and I want to see from you kids is that you become independent.” And I was hell-bent on becoming independent here in Jasper.

The next morning I came back to the Fairmont to sign my contract. Nicole met me and followed me to the Administration building. As we walked down the hall a 40-something lady in a black female suit with Katie’s exact hairstyle waved at us from afar.

“Hello ladies.” She said peppily but professionally, just like all authority figures at the Fairmont. Nicole started laughing under her breath, grinning at me.

A Well-Groomed Man

“ Oh dear,” the lady got closer and covered her mouth. “ Iâ€™m so sorry, ladies and gentlemen I suppose.” She kept walking and I couldnâ€™t tell if she felt embarrassed for herself or had intended to embarrass me.

Nicole smiled at me, “ Ho-ho, she just burnt you real bad.”

I wasnâ€™t smiling. I was pissed. And as we reached the receptionist and waited for Katie it occurred to me what probably just happened. From a distance that lady really did think I was a girl. Not because I looked like a girl, but because it was such a foreign concept hereâ€” for a guy to have long hairâ€” that this ladyâ€™s brain simply could not compute the idea. I started feeling again like this was a cult, or a creepy world from the Twilight Zone or just a really fucked up place to be and I began doubting my future here. As it happened Katie wasnâ€™t around her office to witness me signing the contract and I was told to come back in the afternoon.

I never came back.

The next day, I decided to contact the Fairmont and inform them that I couldnâ€™t take the job. I did this having been taught it was only proper etiquette. Also I wanted to rub in their faces that I chose self-respect over their shitty company. Whatever my motives, I wrote Katie a professional email of resignation, saying:

Hey Katie,

Unfortunately I will not be able to take the job at the Fairmont because I disagree with the companyâ€™s grooming policy. I wish you and the staff at the Fairmont the best.

Sincerely, Michael Cuthbertson

Of course I didnâ€™t honestly wish the best for Katie and the Fairmont. In fact, I hoped to cause a lot of trouble for Katie and John by backing out of this crappy job. I knew they were already short-staffed and counting on my immediate employment with them. But I felt like it was for their own good that they stop and think about how they did business with undesirables like me.

Still I appreciated that civil adults are supposed to tell polite lies in situations like this. Which is why I found it odd that as the days passed Katie didnâ€™t write me back with an equally phony emailâ€” wishing me luck, saying the Fairmont was sorry that things didnâ€™t work out or some such B.S. I wondered how such a rule-abiding businesswoman justified to herself not responding to my formal email. She probably quickly read what I wrote and, in a knee-jerk response, thought, “ Iâ€™m glad we didnâ€™t hire that little brat!”

Not like I was surprised to get the cold shoulder from this slick businesswoman. Unlike the Katies and Johns of this world, I have long understood that people do not necessarily possess integrity even if they give you a lot of bombastic “ Congratulations” or walk around with nice hair cuts.

And now as I sit here, reflecting on this rather small-minded company, I find it funny to think how little the world has changed since the first great long-haired hippie pointed out the hypocrisy of certain well-groomed people who, “ are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead menâ€™s bones and everything unclean.”

A Well-Groomed Man

But what else should we expect? Companies that tell us to make our insides beautiful and let our hair grow long and free? The very suggestion is preposterous.

Read more at www.themcpress.com and follow my magazine on Facebook at www.facebook.com/TheMcPress

A Well-Groomed Man

A Well-Groomed Man

Created from Booksie.com

Generated: 2015-01-31 08:24:30