

# The Measure of Morton Findlay

by Chuck Holmes

Morton Findlay wore his ordinariness like a badge of honor. For nearly all of his life he had determinedly stayed at the very center of any spectrum he encountered. He was neither tall nor short, light nor dark, slender nor heavy. When he was eight his teacher had asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up. He told her he would like to be an insurance salesman or maybe a bottled water truck driver.

It wasn't that he was descended from particularly ordinary people. In fact, his brother was a doctor well respected by his colleagues and most of his patients. His sister was a television anchorperson in the 28<sup>th</sup> largest market in the United States. His mother had won a ribbon — either green or gold — at a county fair when she was only eighteen. But, in the midst of all that accomplishment, some recessive gene injected into the pool by a distant, very ordinary ancestor claimed Morton at a very early age and guided his every decision until the present day, when he was a clerk in men's furnishings in a department store. He was known for the number of brown suits and solid dark brown ties he sold.

It was not a bad life, a flat line of contentment interrupted infrequently by questioning calls from his mother or sly criticism from his brother or sister. They always wanted to know when he was going to *do* something. But Morton knew that he was doing something: avoiding the abrasive world where people who tried to be extraordinary were worn down to shadows, just as one day his brother and sister would be.

All of that was true until September 9, 2005 at approximately three o'clock. Morton was refolding and stacking pants according to waist size when she came in, walking quickly, a blur of blond hair, very red lipstick, a royal blue scarf that wrapped around her neck and fell nearly to her knees. She looked around quickly, her gaze shooting from one rack of suits to another. Her gaze passed Morton, went to another rack of suits, and repassed him on the way back, never indicating that she had seen him. Nor that she had seen him staring at her with his mouth agape and his eyes much wider than usual, as a man stricken.

She started to turn to leave, but he summoned the strength to take the three steps required to reach her side.

"May I help you with something?" he said, amazed that the words came out with some hint of intelligence. His mouth seemed to be operating independently of his mind.

She turned and looked at him.

"I'm looking for a suit. You don't seem to have what I'm looking for."

"We do have an extensive inventory. Perhaps, if you'll tell me just what you want, I can help you find it."

Morton realized that he was reciting the salesperson's catechism even as he inventoried her. The striking blue eyes. The very clear complexion. The straight nose. Everything exactly as it should be for the greatest beauty.

"I want a really ugly suit in size 44 long." she said. "Maybe something in a loud plaid or a wide chalk stripe."

"I beg your pardon. Did you say 'ugly suit.'"

"Yes. The uglier the better. And I don't care how much it costs."

A sudden burst of loyalty for his employer almost caused Morton to declare that H.B. Tucker and Co. did not carry ugly suits, only beautifully crafted suits of the very best quality. But the idea of causing this image to disappear stopped him. Some part of him wanted to prolong this conversation for every possible minute.

He looked thoughtful.

"I see. There may be something in the back that will meet your needs." He pointed to a row of chairs in the shoe department. "Would you care to wait over there while I see what I can find?"

She nodded and walked away, her blue scarf swaying with each step. Tearing his eyes from her, he hurried to the back past the boxes waiting to be opened, past the partially dismembered mannequins to a seldom visited space where forgotten inventory laid or hung, a history of what would not sell even when marked down for the second, third, or fourth time. Digging into ancient history, Morton found what he thought he had remembered: a suit from the '70s. A pale blue and green plaid with lapels that reached almost to the edge of the shoulder pads.

Convinced that there was no uglier suit in the store, he pulled it from the rack. It was, he thought, the worst of an era of extremely bad fashion. He brushed the dust from the collar and shoulders and carried the suit to the front.

"I believe that this might meet your needs," he said.

She stood up, slightly squinting her eyes as she looked at the suit. She reached out and touched the lapels.

"Yes. I believe it just might."

The thought had been worming around in his mind since she had made such a point about needing an ugly suit. The counter thought was that it was none of his business, and the counter to that was that the longer he could engage her in this transaction, the longer he could be in the presence of this beautiful woman. This was a desire that Morton had never experienced before, and he didn't know that he liked it now, but it was there, like it or not.

"May I ask, why you specifically want ... as you say ... an ugly suit? Is this for a costume party or something?"

"Something like that. I'm going as a grieving widow. He's going as a dead man. This is my husband's burial suit."

"Oh, your husband. I'm sorry."

She shook her head. "Don't be. He was a pig. Thought it was fun to drag me around the room by my hair. I'll take the suit."

"I'm sorry."

"You say that a lot, don't you."

"I ... I just..."

"Don't worry about it.

Morton pulled a suit bag from the roll beside the counter.

"How did he die?"

"Pretty much the same way he lived. We were sitting at the dinner table, and he was shoveling food in his mouth, feeding like a pig. Then suddenly he was not making any noise, just jumping up and down and pointing to his throat. I think he was turning a little blue."

"My goodness. What did you do?"

"I went to the drug store. Bought a bottle of nail polish and a new lipstick."

Morton couldn't think of anything else to say except "that'll be a hundred and eighty dollars, plus tax."

She gave him her credit card, and Morton completed the transaction. It occurred to him that he could get her name from the credit card, and maybe he could call her after a decent time to see her again. Then it occurred to him that he didn't really want to do that.

She took her receipt and left. Morton turned back to the pants he was stacking. There was, he thought, something to be said for not throwing yourself against the abrasiveness of those who did something.