

TRENTON MAKES

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First published in the United States of America in 2018 by Doubleday, a division of Penguin Random House LLC.

First published in Great Britain in 2018 by Atlantic Books, an imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Hardback ISBN: 978 1 78649 406 1

EBook ISBN: 978 1 78649 408 5

Printed in Great Britain

Atlantic Books
An Imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd
Ormond House
26–27 Boswell Street
London
WC1N 3JZ

www.atlantic-books.co.uk

Although the characters and events described
in this work are fictional, they are neither without precedent
nor are they so rare as readers might believe.

Man is something that shall be overcome.
What have you done to overcome him?

—FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE,
THUS SPAKE ZARATHUSTRA

part one

1946–1952

“The new guy should come, too,” Jacks had said in his loud voice, flat as a hand clap, his barrel chest steeped and brimming with all his endless simplicity. Of course the plan had been there all along, but in a way it was Jacks who set the whole thing in motion, because Jacks had said Kunstler should come to the dance hall, and Kunstler had come. It was Jacks, too, who introduced Kunstler to the girl, the taxi dancer, the one called Inez Clay.

“I danced with her,” Jacks said, pointing out one girl after another as they swung by with their clients. “And her. And her, I danced with her lots.”

“That’s a lot of dimes, Jacks. It’s like you’ve danced with every girl in Trenton. No wonder you roll your own.” Kunstler’s little metallic rasp of a voice was hard to make out over the music, so Jacks had to bend to hear him ask, “What about that one?”

“Oh, that girl? Yeah, I danced with her. The guys say she’s got trouble. Kind of like a dipso, they said.”

Kunstler lit a cigarette and said, “Like a thing is a thing.”
“What?”

“Like a thing is a thing. Someone like a thief is a thief. Someone like a cutup is a cutup. And somebody like a dipso is definitely a dipso. Like just is, there’s no difference.”

“Yeah, well, she don’t go bitching around or anything, I don’t think. She just drinks a bit is all.” He lowered his voice and said, “Actually the other girls sometimes say that she’s kiki, because they figure maybe she don’t like men on account of she doesn’t like it when the guys get too, well . . . touchy. You know.”

“Oh, touchy. Sure, I know,” said Kunstler, who instead didn’t touch her, or at least not at first, except to shake her hand when Jacks introduced them, calling her “Miss Clay,” and later to put a hand on a place high on her back when they danced. Instead he bought her drinks and gave her tickets, which she would rip, turning away to tuck half in the top of her stocking, passing the other half seemingly without looking to a ticket-taker who simply appeared and vanished so quickly again into the crowd that he was little more ever than a reaching hand and a gesture, as if the beaverboard walls with their red-white-and-blue bunting had arms. Then during the band’s breaks Kunstler bought her a fresh drink every time and while she drank it they talked—about what, the others couldn’t imagine, but she laughed a lot, and when she danced with other clients it seemed that she and Abe Kunstler still found each other’s eyes.

The girl was small: that’s what caught Kunstler’s attention. He wouldn’t dance with a tall woman, wouldn’t be the little guy with his face buried in some bosom to be laughed at, so the sight of her, petite but not boyish, filling her rayon dress, was a relief. He watched her smile at a factory man still in his cheap war-time woolens and then draw him to the crowded floor, let him stand too close and reach gradually

down her back. He also noted the almost invisible retreat by which she baffled his hands when the song was done, no refusal but an evaporation that was also a barrier. She was watery, effortlessly variable, not to be grabbed with fingers. Their first time on the dance floor Kunstler had offered her his right hand and she laughed. He pulled it away.

“Don’t be angry,” she said.

He nodded. “Mind if we stand—” he started, and she waited and then nodded and whispered, “Away from your friends? Sure.” She led him a little way across the hall.

“Now, watch,” she demonstrated, moving around him as if he were a spindle, operating his arms. “Open position, here, and now closed position. See? This is how to move for an arm lead. And this is how you move for a body lead.”

“Oh, fine,” he said. “I won’t remember that.”

“Don’t worry, the names don’t mean anything, it’s what you do that matters. You’ll get it, it’s no big deal. This one’s not too fast, it will be easy,” she said as they started to move away towards the floor. Even then Kunstler was aware how good they looked together, that her softness suited his sharp bones. The girl Inez said, “A few more kisses.”

Abe pulled his head back and said, “Sorry, what?”

“The song. ‘A Few More Kisses.’ I like it. Don’t you like it?”

“Sure,” he said, “it’s swell,” but he was concentrating hard on the raised left arm and his right hand at her back, the mirror image, the inverted world, and then they were done, and when her body was gone he was left with a sense he couldn’t quite name.

At the end of the night Kunstler waited, ready to help the girl when she stumbled a little drunkenly on the stairs outside the entrance. She asked if he would stop with her in a bar. “The booze at the hall is watered, you know. And I want

to listen to some real music. That band's terrible. Everything in that place is terrible. Don't you just love music? I mean real music, good music. Not that stuff they play there." He bought her a gin and Italian, and watched her carry the short brimming glass cautiously to a booth, where she sat without her shoes and sculpting her arches with both hands, saying, "You're never off the clock in those dumps. If you want to even think, you'd better goddamn hop it. They run you sore. You know when we haven't got a fellow we're supposed to dance with each other? Like I'd spend a minute longer with one of those girls than I have to." They sat quietly for a minute, Kunstler neither moving nor speaking, just watching her through the bar darkness with his cast-iron expression. Inez finally said, "Hey, I noticed you work with mostly a lot of Micks. Are you a Catholic?"

"What, me? Oh, hell, I don't know. Maybe. I'm not what I am any more, whatever it is."

"Not a church person, you mean? Me neither." She nodded at that and took a drink before nodding again as if her head rested on the ocean, and said, "I'm Episcopalian. I guess I mean that my mother was."

Then she spoke almost unstoppably, a surge of memories about foster homes where she experienced some things too soon and in overabundance and others not enough. The girl had been fifteen when she accepted her first ticket to dance with a boyish enlisted man at one of the halls near Mountain Home. Both of them had been careful and shy. Back then she drank only Coke and bitters, but of course it was a dance hall, and really they sold two things: the one was illusion, the make-believe of intimacy and gaiety and carelessness. The other was alcohol, which dressed the stage where the illusion could perform. "The pop hurt my stomach after a while," she

told him. "Can you believe it, that I had my first cocktail for my health? I always crossed my ankles back then, too. Well, hey, that's life. I mean, what are you going to do?"

It was in Mountain Home that she met the young Brylcreemed piano player she had followed east. "He was called Boat," the girl said, "on account of he had huge feet, really big. I mean it. He could hardly find anything to fit them. This drummer once said Boat was wrong, he could buy any old shoes and it didn't matter what size, just to wear the box they come in. Isn't that funny?" she asked without laughing. She also described the girl singer they had met at a show in the taxi hall at Millville, a girl whose stockings weren't full of blisters, a girl Boat finally left with, taking with him all the money from the motel room, including all the hard-won nickels that were her fifty percent share of the dimes men paid to dance. "It was mine as much as his, you know. I had to start again, and I'll tell you, it's not easy to save up money at five cents a dance. Someone saw them get in a cab, that's all. That's how I knew they were gone." She looked up at Kunstler, and leaning against him, asked, "Do you think it's because I like spooning more than I like the other stuff? It's not that I don't want to be more like that, more like what it was he hoped for. More what I suppose all men hope for? But things are what they are, I guess. Ever have too much ice cream when you were a kid? A man who was friends with my mother, it was like that with him. The worst part was he made me call him Uncle Andrew."

When at last she relaxed into her gin haze and was quiet Kunstler led her gently to his rooming house, where he checked that the landlord wasn't awake to see him taking her up the stairs.

Jacks had said to them, “The new guy should come, too,” and at just that moment everyone, even the ones who might have wanted to argue with him, realized Kunstler was standing right there, the first dressed as usual, silent but at hand, one eye closed against the smoke of his cigarette. *Loitering*, they called it. He stood with his tie knotted tight, one shoulder against his locker door, and nodded his bony face at them as if accepting a compliment, perhaps unaware that they, still open collared or in their undershirts and with their boots next to them on the benches and their socks in their fists, would later agree among themselves that it had been the little man’s idea in the first place. “The mouth may be all the way up there where Jacks keeps his head,” said Blackie, “but the brain. That’s lots closer to the ground, if you know what I mean.”

“You’re just angry about how he stumps your stupid pranks,” Ahern said, and it was true that Kunstler had frustrated them with his imperviousness. Olive pits and sandwich ends and chicken bones and other detritus from their various lunches left in his coverall pockets had been tossed aside so

casually you might have thought he generally kept that kind of thing there himself. Blackie and two of the other die men had been especially furious at Kunstler for getting in the way of some practical jokes they played on Jacks, who was mocked for being cheap because he still rolled his own—although of course they knew without having to ask that he didn't make much being only the janitor—and for having not been sent farther than North Carolina during the war, as if he had asked for the posting, or indeed had ever asked in all his life for practically anything.

And yet it wasn't what Kunstler did but the way he had done it that left Blackie so sore. Everything with him went too far, somehow, and without ever being in any way a threat, still it was sinister, like a superstition you know is foolish but frightens you anyway: black cats or thirteen to dinner, an umbrella opened indoors. The first time had been the strangest, when around New Year Blackie, Simmons, and Breen had come back from a weekend skiing, still breathless and hectic, talking and joking, calling to one another over the rhythmic cry of the wire unspooling from coil to capstan to coil. At the lunch hour they had quieted suddenly to watch Jacks walk to the lockers and rummage in his jacket for cigarette papers. He thought to look before he started rolling only because of how they stood—clustered, alert—and having tumbled to them he held his paper up to the blunt electric light and saw someone had drawn a long and knotted penis, which he would then have put in his mouth.

"How do you like it?" one of them asked him. "Balls first or tip first?"

"Remember you have to lick it to make it sticky," said Blackie.

Jacks crumpled the thin strip into his coverall pocket straight away, nodding around with a half smile and saying, “Okay, okay,” in his flush monotone. He pulled out another paper—only that, too, was part of the gag, because he had almost shaken out his tobacco before he noticed it was the same. In fact, as he peeled away one after another he found all the papers were ruined: they had drawn the same thing on every one and placed them carefully back in the box. Blackie and the others laughed out loud now. “That took us all weekend,” Breen said. “You should appreciate the hard work.” The emphasized word *hard* made them laugh again.

“How am I going to smoke?”

“You’re just going to have to chew that over.”

“Har, har. Come on, give me a cig.”

“Sorry, Jackson. I think we’re all out.”

It was then that Kunstler had appeared suddenly from his leaning place against the wall, and taking the little cardboard envelope from Jacks stood for a moment looking at it, flipping through the papers with all the lack of interest or hurry of someone looking through a book in a foreign language. “That’s funny,” the little man said in his high, croaking metal wheeze, a voice that always sounded as if it were being cranked out on a rusty machine. Then, still holding the papers, he said with the same absolutely humorless manner, the same patina of calm, “Hey, here’s a funny one for you. These three guys, they go skiing, but they’re just factory slobs, like us, no money. So they share a room, the three of them. Then there’s just the one bed, but that’s no problem, they can share that, too. Fine. And in the morning, the one on the left says, ‘It’s crazy, I dreamed some guy was whacking me off,’ and the guy on the right says, ‘Hey, I had the

same dream.’” While Kunstler spoke he let the papers drop snow-like to the floor and offered Jacks a pre-rolled from his coverall pocket. He went on, Jacks leaning down expectantly, the others already gathering their anger. “So the guy in the middle, he says, ‘You two are nuts. I just dreamed I was skiing.’” Unsmiling, he lit a match against the wall, barely raising it to Jacks’ dipped cigarette.

“Jesus, that crazy bastard,” Blackie had said when it became clear Kunstler was going to let the thing burn right down to his fingernail. Jacks had been laughing too hard; he hadn’t noticed.

“Hey, tell us another one,” said Jacks, his cigarette still unlit in his hand.

“Maybe later,” Kunstler said. He dropped the burnt-out match and walked away.

When the whistle had gone, Kunstler, his thumbnail blistered a screaming painful black from the match, stood by the exit with his hands lost in his pockets, and didn’t move or even look around as the others passed him; he was waiting for Jacks the way a man waits for a bus, and waiting for Jacks to say, “Hey, do you want to go for a drink?” so that Kunstler, lighting a cigarette and handing one to Jacks, reaffirming their private currency, could say, “I guess so,” and follow to a bar. They went to a place not too far from the factory, a narrow alley of dark wood and tin panels that had been painted until their patterns were almost lost. The place had no stools. Men stood here and drank, and if they were too tired to stand, they went home. It was busy after the shift, and at the counter they waited a while for the bartender. Jacks strained his neck the whole time looking for whoever else they might know.

“‘I dreamed I was skiing,’” said Jacks. “That’s a good one.

It took me a minute. I guess maybe you know a lot of them like that.”

“I guess. All of them, some of them. I don’t know. A few.”

“I guess Blackie seemed pretty sore that you got the big laugh, when he thought it was him would be needling me.”

“Well, he was falling anyway. I just pushed because I could.”

“How do you mean?”

“Nothing, forget it.”

“Hey, order me a whiskey,” Jacks told Kunstler, and walked a few steps away to look around.

When the barman came Kunstler held up two fingers and said, “Whiskey.”

“Water, soda?” said the barman. Kunstler felt blank, but steadily looked at him across the counter. He took his hand out of his pocket and put it carefully on the bar’s scuffed wooden edge, dollar ready between forefinger and thumb, but the barman simply repeated himself, only louder, the words knuckled, “Mister, straight, water, or soda?” and waited. “Right,” Kunstler said without expression, but found the barman still didn’t move, and so added, “Soda.” The barman went away. When the drinks arrived Jacks returned to the bar, where he paid by tossing his dollar bill at the counter, and then Kunstler tossed his, too, so that it landed almost on the first and was immediately caught and taken by the barman and replaced with coins. Holding their glasses Kunstler and Jacks stood with their backs against the zinc-topped bar and looked at the grey winter light coming through the half-glass door. The big man’s flushed face shook and nodded to the sound of the radio but Kunstler barely moved his head at all; only his eyes turned as the other drank, their movement hard and hidden, and when Jacks had taken a sip and not complained

or made a face but simply kept up a gentle springing to the rhythm, Kunstler drank, and to himself repeated: *Soda. Whiskey and soda. Soda.* He bought the next two rounds. Jacks said, “Hey, you buying me all these drinks. Thanks,” and Kunstler answered, “Hell, it never hurts to be friends with the big guy.”

“I’m sure big,” Jacks said in his unmodulated yell, standing up and puffing out his chest. Kunstler laughed—a light tipsy fluting—but stopped right away.

It wasn’t the first time Kunstler had drunk too much, but it had been a long while—too long, he decided, since like everything it was a skill—and then it had been different before, when it wasn’t him yet, and someone else had been there to steer the blinded ship, then later share the pain. When he woke up the blurred clock read nearly five-fifteen. The way he felt, he wasn’t sure he’d wound it. The only way he even knew for sure he had gone to bed was because that’s where he woke up. He experienced a moment of terrible panic: he tried to remember what he had done. Had he said something he shouldn’t? He still had his shirt on. That reassured him, somehow. His thumb ached with burning.

In the bathroom on the landing the key was turned as carefully as ever in the lock, but otherwise it was all a rush: he dumped his razor and mug and brush in the yellowed bowl, and while he dressed he ran the tap so they all got good and wet. He lathered just enough cream out of the mug to tuck some with his fingertip behind his left ear. As he was about to turn the key again to leave he realized he had made a mistake. With his hands he wet the towel, too—in the middle, and taking care not to over-do it. Consistency and details: these were the things that kept him safe. A clean-shaven man must have his elements—a foamy brush, a wet razor; on the

peg he leaves a humid towel just as surely as a passing car leaves tracks in snow. Kunstler let the door slam behind him as he went down the stairs two at a time.

In his street he just walked—quickly but not too quickly, because to rush, he knew, was to invite attention, recollection, investigation—until he turned a corner and the boardinghouse was out of sight; then he ran through the hunched, aluminum-sided streets. He ran all the way to the grassy strip that edged the train tracks, and after looking to see that no one was there to observe him in the growing light, ran on and over the short hill. Stumbling up the embankment muddled his knees, and for a moment it felt as if the edge of the fence where he ducked under might have ripped his jacket. He didn't wait, though, as this was the only chance he had before work started, and in a moment it would arrive, and a moment later be gone, even if it felt like forever while the noise of it was in his chest, and he knew that consistency was everything, had learned once from a door heart-stoppingly ajar to a diner men's room that nothing could be forgotten, not for a day or an hour, not even for just a minute, because the world was an eye that never blinked. He must be the same in all things: unvaried in his voice, just as in his walk or his clothes. *Nothing can change.* The sound was coming already as he slid down to the tracks where the grass seemingly trembled in anticipation of the approaching wind. He bent with his hands on his knees to catch the breath he had spent on running. Then with all of a machine's thundering furious uniformity of sound and motion the Pennsy rushed past, drowning everything, and while it was there, the shattering storm of it all around him, he screamed as loud as he could, arms seized to his sides by effort, lost in the godly mechanical noise until the

muscles of his face and throat and chest burned and recoiled and refused to scream any more. Then the train was gone and the wind and passion with it; there was emptiness and silence in its place. He found his hat ten yards away. Later he threw up his first cup of coffee and it smelled like booze.

He had worked other jobs at first—menial, small, unskilled, and uninteresting. He had been testing, trying, but especially learning from the men, the Greek waiters and the colored bus-boys, the customers who ate every day sitting on vinyl stools at plastic counters without speaking or removing their hats, who told dirty jokes and drank their coffee while they chewed, who threw their ties over their shoulders when they had soup and carried the paper in their suit pockets. Their badges were crusts of dried shaving soap and hair oil and bluntness and the endless scratching between their legs. He watched them, cautiously but closely, especially the occasional ones who showed up still in uniform, making their way back from France or the Philippines or wherever the war had taken them, eating and drinking and dancing up their last few weeks of service pay ten cents at a time with the irrepressible cheer of men taken off guard at coming home alive.

Despite the fears that shook him, no one back then had ever asked him for anything except his name. Saying it the first time out loud drove an edgeless hole of panic through his chest. He had been repeating it to himself every waking

hour for days, said nothing else to anyone, a prayer to a lost god that he had begun reciting the minute he saw the handwritten advertisement in the diner window, *help Wanted*, and repeated endlessly, chant-like, in a frenzy of postponement. It was hunger that had driven him back to the diner as if at the point of a knife. He was almost disappointed to find the card still in the window: it meant he had been cursed with luck and would have to go ahead with his plan, see it through. He would not that easily escape the accident that defined him.

Eventually he added to the name, expanded on the abbreviated chronicle that was contained in the words *Abe Kunstler*. He gave only the barest bones, but they were enough over time to sketch the man's story. He told one boss that he had been in the service, and seen action. He told another that he had been a POW. One day with the anticipation of an inventor at last switching on a long-planned machine, he gave it the final embellishment, the portion that was his, that made him who he was, the truth setting him apart from what was otherwise just a name and the rest: the injury, the physical evidence of his person, testimony to his past and patent on his future—that he had been wounded in the war. He would say it just that way: *wounded. I was wounded in the war.*

In between there had been the man in the dirty white side cap and apron who said, "Kraut name, right? My grandmother's family was Kraut. I don't speak it or nothing," and let him work in the back in a cloud of steam and all-enveloping grease. There Kunstler washed the thick dishes in great galvanized tubs, handing them in stacks for drying to a colored boy a decade or more older than he was. The aproned man with the Kraut grandmother let him eat there, too, the special and a coffee, one meal a day. It wasn't the factory, but it was a good enough place to start, so he worked

hard, never asking for a day off or an advance on the week. He stayed until the afternoon someone told a dirty joke, and with the other men he had laughed. The light, tittering sound was a frightening call from the past. Hearing it, he did the only thing he could think of, which was just what he would have done if he had seen or imagined seeing struck in someone's face even the smallest spark of recognition, anything that risked burning down the still rough-timbered façade he was constructing: he walked straight for the door, letting fall his apron as he went, saying not a word to anyone, looking at nobody, and never going back.

Other, similar jobs followed, given to him by similar men in similarly soiled counter clothes, with similar voices and faces and lives, who offered him the same stiff, flat kindness, impersonal and uninflected. They employed similar short-order cooks who asked Kunstler in the same teasing tones why he didn't have a girl. One even paid for the driver's test so he could make deliveries. Each time he remained, with no plan to leave, until some panic took him, whether a fear of his own creeping sense of ease or comfort, or something more immediate like the laughing he should never have done. Then he would walk out, saying nothing, leaving his last pay uncollected, just as he had the first time, forgetting the places almost as soon as he left them, thinking only of the next.

There had been, too, the local teens who mocked his high voice and called him a flower, who once threw stones as he walked away from them down the road until he turned at last and for no reason he could ever name or understand but still knew somehow to be right took a fistful of dirt from the soft shoulder and threw it in his own face, and then another, screaming all the while, a long wordless choking scream, until the boys, scared and shocked, called him crazy and ran

away, leaving him frightened and hoarse, but knowing now the sound of his new voice.

He was always aware that he could never fight them, of course, not these boys or any others like them, whatever the provocation: for him there could be no police, no frisk, no night in the tank, no common toilet or shower, just as there could be no swimming pools, no hospitals, no examinations or confidences or unguarded laughter—a list too long of things kept in a room whose door hung ready at any moment to swing open in a disaster of exposure.

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Ten and a half miles away they were laying rope and drawing wire. It was too far for any of the factory men to eat where he worked, but sometimes when he got an afternoon off Kunstler took the bus out, then walked the unpeopled warehouse road and stood by the gate to watch them. It wasn't like the factory he knew. The floor wasn't as big, and it looked to him as if maybe they weren't making anything bigger than elevator cable, nothing that could hold a bridge certainly, but anyway that was fine: drawing wire was drawing wire. He told himself that soon enough he would be on the floor again. He would go to them when he was ready, and in his body he sensed now that he was very nearly ready, that the next time he walked out on a job, this is where he would go. He would be ready or he wouldn't: he couldn't wait forever.

But first there had been the day when one of the waitresses had asked him if he wouldn't like to take her out, maybe next weekend, maybe to see a picture, and for that reason there was the heavily spectacled salesclerk in dandruffed vest and shirtsleeves who said as Kunstler, his savings in his pocket,

stood hesitantly in the doorway of a flyblown shop: “Specials today. Part-worsted gabardine pinstripe suit thirteen ninety-five.” He told him how many pieces were in the sharkskin suit, because it came with extra trousers and was available in medium blue or medium brown, special at eleven ninety-five in English Terylene that wouldn’t fade or wrinkle, and about the casual corduroy sport coat and part-worsted gabardine hound’s-tooth slacks eleven fifty for the set. He kept going until Kunstler was lost in the words, unable to set them to images, as if they were just musical notes. “Now’s the time to shop,” the clerk said, “have the place to yourself,” and when Kunstler wavered, he added, “We don’t get a lot of business during the week, frankly. Buy a suit today and, well . . . what? I’ll throw in a tie.” The clerk’s thick glasses were split across the middle and his eyes, partitioned, looked like dark yolks loosed from black eggs, or fish slipping through a bowl. The lenses tossed the sun in Kunstler’s face so that he was briefly blind as he entered the woody dimness of the store. When the space at last ripened out of the feathered dark he was standing in the middle of a small carpet facing a mirror.

“Arms at your sides, please,” the clerk said. “Relaxed.” He pulled a tape measure from over his neck and passed it down Kunstler’s arm, and then pressed it across his back. Kunstler got tense. “First time fitted?” the clerk asked.

“I guess so.”

“It won’t hurt at all, I promise,” the man said. “I must have measured half the men in this town, I guess. Or at least half the ones now over thirty, to be specific. Times are changing; everything is changing. Department stores, you know. There’s Bamberger’s everywhere now, Epstein’s, too. Hard to compete. Their service isn’t like what you get here, of course, but it seems no one has time these days. Arms up, please.”

Kunstler lifted his arms and then started as the tape measure passed around his chest, but the clerk did no more than incline his head in a brief bow, and then proceed about his work, Kunstler aware but somehow not nervous, watching the man run his thick glasses close over the black and yellow measurements and then against the slip of paper where he wrote them down with a stub of pencil.

After measuring Kunstler's neck the man stopped and pursed his lips. "Well, fourteen," the clerk said, lifting his tortoiseshells and double-checking his thumbnail against the tape measure with a closely pressed bare eye. "Fourteen, fourteen. We don't stock fourteens much, frankly," he remarked. "No one around here does, I don't think. That is unless, unless. Unless . . ." He took the word away with him into the rear of the shop, leaving behind a pleasant, church-like quiet. Kunstler slowly put his arms down. He enjoyed this, he realized, enjoyed looking at the racks and the shelves, feeling a part of this place, this thing. Then the clerk reappeared with a small stack of folded shirts, mostly pale blue and yellow.

"We used to carry some boys' . . . well. Younger men's clothes. Sometimes people wanted something more formal for confirmations, weddings, that kind of thing, you know. Here's what we have left. The styles are a little dated, frankly, as we don't have much call any more, but I think we'll find something to fit you, and I can give you a good price on it. It's really just taking up shelf room, you see? The owner'll be just as glad to have the space as the merchandise." He piled them on the counter. "I brought some ties from back there, too. I worry these others would trail you like a noose." He put a set of ties in Kunstler's hand and asked, "Left or right?"

Kunstler looked briefly into the bottle-bottom specs with behind them the wheeling, impassive eye-fish and then at the

lines and loops of the ties before saying, with something less than conviction, "Right." The clerk with some effort got down on one knee. Kunstler jumped when the clerk pressed the tape to the inside of his left leg, but again the clerk ignored him, keeping up a hum of small talk about recent styles and changing clientele as he measured and then climbed his way upright, and while he talked Kunstler looked down at the oiled grey hair with its salting of white flakes as if seeing a mountain range from the cloud tops. The clerk said, "For the suit I think we can get away with a thirty-four. I don't have a lot of them, to tell you the truth, but more choice than you'll have for the shirts. Or you can go to a department store, maybe Atlantic Mills, but you'll be limited to what's in the boys', I should think, if you'll forgive me for saying so. Anyway, it's up to you. You want I should pull out the thirty-fours?"

Then after, in the pure, smooth mirror, with the cream shirt and the grey suit, the printed tie, the long tabs of collars, Kunstler found a presence unmistakable, stronger even than the evidence of a disloyal body—not mere mask, it seemed to him then, but substance. Gone would be the confining sense of materials inappropriate, cladding that would not embrace the structure, the cursed lack of rightness in the matter by which he was bound. Instead he saw a real man, with all of a man's despicable, admirable arrogance and strength of body—an image that would not remain merely an image.

The clerk was still talking, saying, "That fits pretty well, I'd say, wouldn't you? Cuff the leg, of course, shorten the sleeves a little bit, and it's just right, really. Want me to make the alterations?"

"I guess I'll do it . . . I mean, I'll ask my land-lady to take care of it for me."

"There's no charge for alterations, you know."

“No, but I guess she’ll be happy to do it and then I won’t have to find the time to come back.”

“As you like. Have far to go? I’ll box it. Oh, don’t worry about folds, you’ll see—that suit will barely wrinkle at all. Just hang it for a day. Everything will drape right out.”

Kunstler decided at the last minute to trade his soft cap for a felt Dunlap that wasn’t really the right color but happened to fit. “Trust me,” said the clerk. “Whatever the ads say, even a good hat will change plenty once the weather gets right in it a couple of times, and this one, well: maybe a little faster than that, even.” He handed over a deep cardboard box filled with tissue paper and cloth, tied with white and red twine.

Kunstler wore the hat, one fearful hand on the brim in case there should be any wind, and carried his cap in his jacket pocket. There was enough money left over to practice buying tickets to the picture show. None of the titles meant anything to him, so he took a seat for whatever was playing next. The first was a western, the second a musical, with between them the newsreels and cartoons; each seemed as remote and brittle as the other, a series of indistinguishable poses struck behind a silvered window, colored vapors noised by distant, undersea voices, echoes upon echoes. For nearly four hours he sat and stared at the nothingness, then went home to the lodging house, where he basted the suit’s cuffs and looked with wonder at its beauty, and thought how it would roll over him as close and as enduring as a shadow.

There was no hot water at the lodging house so before his date he knocked off work a little early and washed up in the restroom at the diner. Stripped to his shorts, barefoot and air cool in the tiled room, he observed in the mirror the prominent ribs, the waxy yellowed knobs of shoulder and

elbow, studied almost with the distant curiosity of a passing stranger the press and gear of muscle and bone and tendon as he scrubbed at his neck and underarms with fingernails foamed on the cracked cake of pink soap.

His bandages were only half on again when he noticed in the reflected room behind his own inverted face the open door—open just a little, hardly anything: but he knew that even a little was too much. There was no one there that he could see, but the door was open when it hadn't been, shouldn't have been; by that crack it swung open on his every fear, and in the grip of that fear he slammed it violently shut. Over the sounds of the kitchen being cleaned for the night it was impossible to hear if someone was there waiting, or walking away, but the door had not been closed. Had he never closed it? Could it have opened by itself? He felt sure it had been shut. Had it not been shut? *I have not been careful*, he thought. *I have not taken care*. It was not hard for him to imagine an eye, a shocked face. *Someone has seen me*, he thought next, *and everything is already done and lost*. He began to sweat. There was an image in his mind of police, of the lights flashing from their cars, and for a moment he wished his were a different name. While he finished his bandages, pulling tighter than ever as if there were protection to be found in them, he held the closed door in place by sitting on the toilet and pushing with one foot. Then he put on his new clothes, the suit that not so long ago had seemed a monument to his triumph and was now perhaps the cause of his absolute destruction. He pressed his back against the door while he kneeled to pack his old clothes in the suit's box. He was aware of his heart's rhythm.

After a deep breath he turned to the closed door that led from the restroom back to the place where the others—the cook and the counter girl, the busboy, the owner, the custom-

ers who sat on the vinyl stools or in the booths and waited now for something, food or revelation—either knew or didn't. He was safe or exposed, alive or dead. He stood with one hand on the door handle and the other holding tight to the package, stayed that way for a moment, thinking about what would come next, what might be on the other side, an image of police arriving, of a desperate attempt at escape. When his breath returned, he clenched his jaw tight and turned the knob.

Finding no one waiting for him in the hall, he made a decision. He would not walk towards the front, where expecting him there was either a waitress ready for an evening at the pictures or else a room full of anger and disgust and recrimination, bunched fists and possibly worse. Instead he made his way straight out the back, into the alley behind, where the garbage was kept. He deposited the suit box in the trash there. Then he walked, steadily but not fast, to the lodging house. He didn't look back or around or even really in front of him: he moved in a kind of daze that mingled gradually with the evening's dark. He had no bag so he put his shaving things and underclothes into one of the land-lady's pillowcases. He tied it tight, tucked it under his arm, and left.

He lay that night on a bench in the bus station, expecting that someone would appear with the annunciation of his fraudulence as spotted through the open bathroom door, tried to accept that he would soon be seized and destroyed; but it didn't happen. No one came in but some salesmen with their sample cases and a janitor who cleaned around him as if he weren't there. In the morning he took the bus out to the factory and with the same chanting focus as before he practiced again, this time the whole story, the encapsulation of who he was and always now would be: "My name is Abe Kunstler. I

was a soldier and a POW. I can draw wire, and I was wounded in the war.”

When they gave him the job he told himself, *Somehow despite all my mistakes I have made it here, and now at last I am home.* He felt certain then that his plan must be a kind of destiny.

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