

FIRST WILL COME THE COSTUMES. THE TAILOR WILL supply them all wholesale. He'll select the designs offhandedly and, with a few snips of the shears, will summon to life a predictable repertoire of gestures. See – scraps of fabric and thread in a circle of light, while all around is darkness. Out of the turmoil will emerge a fold of cloth, the germ of a tuck fastened with a pin. The tuck will create everything else. If it's sufficiently deep, it will call into existence a glittering watch chain on a protruding belly, labored breathing, and a bald head bedewed with perspiration. One thing leads to another. The outward appearance brings with it certain attributes: gluttony, pride, and a disagreeable matter-of-factness that douses every impulse of the heart like cold water poured from a bucket. For each three-piece suit there have to be at least two linen kitchen aprons, one for the lady of the house, one for the maid. But there should only be a single gown, in finest taffeta for example. A second one would spoil everything. The plot would be over before it began, brought to a close by a premature scandal.

As for the maid, a length of flower-patterned calico will suffice for her frock. Half a dozen needlework samplers proclaiming banal and dubious bourgeois truths, and a set of baby linen composed of diapers and clothing – these are too trivial for the tailor to bother with, and besides, they are bound to appear anyway at the appropriate moment, spontaneously, owing their existence to a domestic sewing kit kept in a tin. With them will come all sorts of hopes, expectations, and calculations, and in time, by the very nature of things they’ll start to acquire the leaden weight of disenchantment. Where school uniforms are concerned, the tailor’s expertise will prove indispensable. But even if the matter is spread out over time, it will still eventually roll to an edge beyond which there will be nothing but disorderly collapse and blasts of failure. The only hope for happy endings lies in shortening the tale – in snapping off the story lines early enough, before they fray and grow impossibly tangled. And above all in avoiding climaxes that, like fire, once started will reduce every hope to ashes.

Things could stop at the tailor if, in a sudden rush of sympathy, he were to decide to spare the world the frenzy of desires and disappointments. He would need only to refuse to collaborate, to decline his advance – to abandon the job and run away, shouting at the top of his voice that all that can be seen does not exist. And everything else? If it exists, it is invisible. It’s quite possible the world would still believe only its eyes and ears, believe in the weave of fabrics, in their rustle, in the gleam of buttons.

By night the soft rattle of the sewing machine is heard, and in the morning all will be ready. The tailor's shears impassively cut the cloth and the sateen for the lining. The needle pierces them over and again, drawing with it the thread without which the stitch would be useless. In the display window, next to an immaculate notary with a fur collar, there hangs a finished fraternity student – a shapely jacket with a disquieting emblem pinned to the collar. A rotund maid in a flower pattern, pressed for Sunday, a handful of brand-new airmen in a plausible shade of gray, a policeman in dark blue uniform cloth, a bridegroom black as pitch, and a snow white bride behind a chiffon veil. They are neither bad nor good; given their scant reserves of patience, they've been kept too long in abeyance, away from the scene of the action that is only now about to begin, living on dreams alone. They are strung on wooden hangers, with no ground beneath their feet, with no feet even, till the moment comes for them to take the first step. They are waiting for their time, unaware that their fate has been fulfilled in advance, in the tissue-paper sheets of the patterns.

In one place, for instance, the material has been slightly stretched, while in another it is a little wrinkled; the excess has been folded into the seam and more or less ironed flat, so that the whole, along with the facts, should match long-established conclusions about one or another of the characters. As the first costume at hand is examined, it's hard not to be disagreeably surprised that under the lining, nothing is the way it appears on

the surface. Various small defects in the cut will reveal incidentally that the materials have been apportioned unfairly and in short supply. It might be observed that matters of the highest importance are decided by prejudice and whim. But it's easier to be unobservant. Whoever is able, deliberately sticks with his initial impression, refusing to acknowledge anything new. The eye would rather ignore any troubling details. And with even greater providence, it prefers to ignore all details whatsoever. Whoever is able, in such a manner protects from doubt his hopeful notions of the whole – notions that may well be more valuable than the whole itself.

The work of the shears is irreversible, and no alterations can be made. The designs contain the entire truth, both that which it behooves everyone to believe and that which no one can be bothered to check. They offer support for any commonly accepted view. The design is a template for the mass production of opinions. Are not even the most dubious judgments lent credibility by the eloquent clarity of the cut? Each outfit is a sign and a suggestion; each revives antiquated associations and arouses expectations that are not coincidental. And at the same time, from top to bottom, or rather from the crown of the hat to the soles of the shoes, each one defines a posture that even in movement is in its own way unchanging, stubborn, incompatible with anything at all. The costumes do not match one another. Their neutral, muted tones are the best guarantee that on a crowded street they will at least not clash. But color

will not reconcile them. Especially overcoats – not when they are completely new, but when they’ve already been worn for some time and have been marked by their encounter with the rough surface of reality. Then they become the source of undying antagonisms, the cause of unseen tensions and excessive atmospheric pressure, ready to explode like compressed steam, and capable of setting in motion even the most sluggish chain of events. But why should the tailor care about all this as he sews stitch after stitch of gold braid onto a general’s collar, his tape measure slung around his neck, his gaze unseeing behind thick eyeglasses? If the plot is on a large scale, it’s hard offhand even to list all the items of clothing that will be needed.

And what if I’m the one who placed the order? What if I can barely afford the whole thing? The dozens of packets of buttons for underwear and suits, the countless reels of thread and bolts of cloth? Perhaps the advance paid to the tailor was too small, like an inadequate length of inferior plaid. He alone knows where that mountain of overcoats came from. It’s best not to ask. Either it’s an overdue job, or he took in additional work on the quiet, so as to come out even. The more perfect the items that sprang from his needle in the first burst of inspired diligence, before the cash was used up to pay the rent, the greater the subsequent shame when things began to descend into the mass production of cheap and poorly made garments. But shame decays; nothing turns to dust faster. It is wiped off with a clothes brush. Discarding his ambitions, the tailor will

from now on cut the cloth sparingly and unimaginatively, ever more skeptical, and in the end he'll become sarcastic and malicious, since he can already see that his labor was all in vain. It deserves to be spat upon, nothing more. Whoever pays and calls the shots purchases hours of drudgery over the needle but cannot buy a conscience. The tailor does not feel guilty if contempt soils the costumes. So what if it spatters greasy stains here and there from the oil of the sewing machine, or black drops of bad blood from pricked fingers? Spitting marks fates most painfully, even though saliva leaves no trace.

The needle hurtles unrestrainedly towards its only goal – the final calculation of materials and labor. As the stitches speed up, they'll begin to lose their rhythm and stray from the course indicated by a piece of soap on the dark tracts of fabric. The sleeves of shirts may come out tight; the legs of pants, when they are excessively broad, are always too short, whereas when they are the right width, out of pure mockery their lengths are unequal. Jackets will restrict freedom of movement by creaking at the seams. In time the tailor will come to realize that no item of clothing is returned for alteration. Whoever is paying does not even try the garments on. Whereas the figures for whom this kind of apparel is being made are not important enough here to be able to want or not want anything. Even the worst of the suits will be given to someone; nothing will be thrown away. Then why should the tailor ruin his eyesight over a running stitch when he knows it will never lie well? His angry

negligence gives rise to all sorts of problems of appearance, bringing ridicule and humiliation upon those to whom those problems are allotted.

Yet so long as no one knows or wants to know about the crucial significance of the cut, a misfortune befalling any of the characters can only seem an inevitable decree of fate, in its own way even just, consecrated by the obviousness with which it is manifest. It never engenders resistance. As can be seen from a certain distance, the victim of the most brutal events is always some insignificant item of clothing incapable of suffering – let’s say, a padded overcoat. Its appearance is hazy, its outline blurred. It can be perceived however one likes, in other words, somewhat inaccurately: as one of many details fixed, for instance, in the drab prospect of a city square. All around are rows of apartment buildings a few stories high, a landscape that seems created to be the backdrop for opaque goings-on. A hundred overcoats of this kind, or as many as several thousand, is an inconceivable number. A patch of swirling gray of every possible shade, ineluctably shot through with sadness, overcast as if by clouds, with a presentiment of a shared fate desired by no one.

AND HERE IS THE SQUARE, since it’s already been mentioned. With a flower bed in the middle, round as a clock face. Ornamental railings on the balconies and lace curtains in the windows. Small yellow blooms in the flower bed and a yellow sun

over the rooftops. The sun is unhurriedly crossing the sky. Though it could also be said that the sun is fixed in place, in a corona of yellow rays, and it's the square that is turning imperceptibly, along with the streets that lead off of it, and the small trees on each corner casting scant shadows on the basalt cobblestones. And while there is so little movement that it's as if there were none at all, it still makes one's head spin without cease. Streetcar tracks glisten beside the curb, and along with it they describe a circle that encloses the space in a double steel hoop whose glare dazzles the eyes.

The place may look like some quiet neighborhood of a large city, where squares of this sort are encountered at every step amid the dense network of streets. But the vast whole to which this fragment belongs is not accessible. On each of the several streets connecting to the square, the pavement comes to an end just beyond the corner. Anyone who unduly trusts the solid look of the basalt cobbles and wishes to go elsewhere will immediately be mired in sandy excavations, amid the blank walls of apartment buildings, under windows drawn in chalk directly onto the plaster. Distant steeples and indistinct towers rise over the roofs and suggest the dimensions of the entirety of which this square is supposedly a part. Yet the whole itself must remain conjecture, as imponderable as accomplished facts or as forecasts of the future. Maintaining its substance and its walls and rooftops multiplied in real space would be impossible for me, and also unnecessary. In the meantime, the streetcar is



already moving on its tracks. This will be the zero-line streetcar, the only line there is, and more than sufficient for the needs of a single square. Let the shape of the zero, unhurriedly described, accentuate the extraordinary qualities of the circle, a figure perfectly enclosed, whose whole is encompassed by a continuous line without losing a thing.

It goes without saying that all this carries a price – the pavement, the tracks, the streetcar. Every brick and every roof tile has to be paid for. The actual cost of materials and labor is unknown to the characters. Besides, not one of them would be capable of covering these expenses – not the one who can barely make ends meet, nor the well-to-do character wallowing in the illusion of financial comfort. The banknotes carried in wallets are real only in their own particular way and cannot be used to buy any of the truly meaningful things – costumes, landscapes, or interiors. That which is most important has to be imposed on the characters without any choice. They do not know, and do not wish to know, what it is that I arrange out of their sight. I provide work for painters, upholsterers, and decorators; for mechanics and lighting specialists; for swaggering types with cigarettes permanently stuck in the corners of their mouths; for master craftsmen and apprentices in crumpled overalls who value their pay and despise their work; for devout servants of all their own weaknesses. Were it not for the odious job it is their lot to perform, were it not for the rule in their pocket and the scuffed bandages on their fingers, they would have nothing

but the despair that wrenches them from sleep at dawn. They are bound to me as I am bound to them. I pay the advances and swallow without a murmur both smaller and larger chicaneries. I do not question the bills when they include props already long since paid for and used, or repainted backdrops in which a hole from a previous hook gives the game away at once.

How painful it is to see plainly all the shortcomings of this world, its shabbiness and its inability to actually exist. I turn a blind eye to the true state of things. I turn another blind eye and refuse to see anything at all. On principle I cannot abide bringing complaints; I prefer not to say a word if, for instance, all the roofs leak. The people in overalls already believe that they work too hard for such a laughable wage, which buys nothing more than a bare wall. They would greet naïve expectations of professional dedication with a shrug of the shoulders. Dissatisfaction is imprinted on everything they touch. Doing nothing beyond what is habitual and indifferent in their occupation, they award themselves compensation for some alleged wrong – calmly, without expecting anything to be docked from their pay. Whatever they neglect and whatever job they botch, they themselves will not suffer any loss.

Yet the success of the entire undertaking depends to a great extent on its external appearance. It depends on whether the designs will be developed with flair, and whether surfaces can be covered with a patina to suggest, convincingly and deceptively, that the world was not created yesterday – that since time

immemorial there have existed the same magnificent elevations, faced, let's say, with granite, and the same stained-glass panes have remained without a single crack in the windows of stairwells; that the same oak floors glisten with wax, and the same veined marble appears on café tabletops, while engraved brass plates proclaim the ancestral glory of institutions as indestructible as the workings of a gold watch. The crude power of the money expended on materials and labor will always have its effect, but it will not inspire passion. One can buy routine but not a love for detail. Cash will not guarantee a noble equilibrium of sheen and patina. And if this is not to be had, one must be satisfied with a cheap story that isn't worth the fortune sunk into the construction of its setting. It is no longer possible to count on something truly entrancing.

Inconveniences, like poorly made clothes, when allocated without discussion and without being tried on, become a public sign of disgrace too painful to accept and too intense to simply ignore. The wave of bitterness that rises from disillusion never recedes. And the bitterness, in the form of a chronic anger, circulates in a broad orbit, contaminating thoughts and deeds. There is no answer to the question of how a switchblade found its way into some pocket, or where a set of brass knuckles came from. Moreover, it can be seen at a glance that the knife and the brass knuckles are not fake. They are the real thing, unlike other props such as imitation rings or bouquets of artificial flowers, which are present in abundance. Unlike the cunningly

fashioned reproduction marble in different varieties, unlike the high-quality hardwoods made from common timber with the aid of stains and varnishes, these troubling objects are free of the stigma of hole-and-corner economies; the best materials were used in their manufacture.

It is not by chance that no one here, not even the policeman, is allowed to bear arms. I have not ordered any guns; they do not appear in the invoices and are not to be found in the warehouses. Yet revolvers are nevertheless in circulation, in most cases properly cleaned, loaded, and ready for use. They are hidden in dark drawers. Where have they come from? It's obvious they did not originate in the tailor's shop, or even at the carpenter's. And since they exist, they must have been brought by some route. Perhaps these guns have always circulated between stories, passed from hand to hand – smuggled goods, bought under the counter in forbidden regions at the juncture of various tales, in the place where stories interpenetrate, stirred up by their own feverishness. The price of the questionable profits sought by the overall-clad workmen is the despair and rage of the secondary characters. But for various reasons, for as long as possible all is consigned to oblivion, and no one insists on penalties.

I have many motives for yielding, surrendering, for humbling myself in the face of arrogance and unparalleled chicanery – for giving up any idea of scrutiny, quietly acquiescing, accepting false invoices as genuine and paying for fictitious labors and