

THIN SUIT

Travis went to the audition but he didn't feel good about it. He didn't feel good about many things these days - his apartment, his drinking, his landlord, his bowels – but this was a worse not-good feeling than usual. Travis used to think he was a good actor but he'd fucked up so many auditions and calls in the last six months that he was beginning to think it might not just be the booze and the drugs but also that he was no good as an actor.

The notion that he could act had kept him going for a long time. As another girlfriend left the apartment sobbing that he was a piece of shit, Travis had always consoled himself with the thought that, yes, she might have a point, but at least he could act. He wasn't sure how the two things – him being a piece of shit, and him being able to act – cancelled each other out, sometimes they felt more like a Moebius strip, meaning perhaps two sides of the same noose, but in his mind they did.

And when his father left messages on the machine, all *She's dying, you heartless fuck* and *She knows you took the money, that's what broke her*, he could just erase them, secure in the knowledge that, gold-standard shit-heel he might be, but he had a talent, and everything is forgiven when you have a talent. But lately, when he looked over at the snapshot that curled like a sail on his shelf, and peered at the letters on the stone in the picture, he began to suspect that the talent might be departing, might in fact have already departed and closed the door on its way out.

Each audition served to confirm this suspicion. The time he forgot what monologue he was supposed to be doing at the Everyman. The time he lapsed, for no reason whatsoever, into comic Uncle Tom dialect during his Othello piece at the Margrave. The time he pissed himself for real halfway through his Willy Lomax at the Fulmar. Travis wasn't so much losing it as leaving it on the fucking bus and getting off at the next stop without it. Time after time he found new ways to screw up the one thing he was good at. It was like whatever had found a reason to nest inside Travis and make him different, make him better, had one day just turned round, looked at the fleshy shithole it was inhabiting, and decided to just fuck off out there.

But Travis needed rent, and food, and booze, and so he kept going to the auditions, and the auditions kept getting worse, and so did he, and it was all becoming more and more futile, until he heard about the thin suit. Not that he actually *heard* about. Nobody ever sat him down and said, *hey man, I gotta tell you about this amazing thing, it's called the thin suit*. Nobody told him in so many words what the thin suit was or how he could get it.

It was like this.

Travis turned up at the Mortimer, which was holding an open call, and he was feeling particularly not ok. He'd been up until three trying to juggle learning his lines with drinking something that claimed to be Scotch whisky but was just as likely to have been lawnmower fuel. When he woke up the next day, he had been so violently sick that he'd actually checked his vomit for lung matter: but he hadn't puked up his lungs, just the burrito he'd eaten for dinner and an incredible amount of green bile.

He showered, shaved, ate some cereal without milk, and put on his cleanest clothes. Then he looked in the mirror. This was a mistake: either the mirror was in the pay of his worst enemies or he looked entirely like shit. Travis' face was the colour of week-old steak. His eyes looked like a bowl of yoghurt in which several thin-legged spiders had drowned. And his hair seemed to have been drawn on by an epileptic with a broken hand. His entire head, in fact, resembled a kind of carnival waxwork that had been pulled out of the furnace at the last minute. *At least I look how I feel*, Travis thought as he pulled a comb through his hair like it was a human sacrifice being dragged to the altar. He shrugged, pulled on a jacket with many of its buttons still present, and left his apartment.

Ten minutes later he was outside the Mortimer, looking at a cigarette and wondering if his need to smoke it would be offset by the strong chance that it might make him throw up again. He tossed a coin in his head, lit the cigarette, and managed to keep his breakfast down until someone with a clipboard came out of the building and said, "Hi everyone, um, we're seeing the first three people in line."

Before Travis could turn around and establish that he was, by some fluke of destiny, first in line, everyone else outside began to cram towards him.

"I was here first!" he shouted, and maybe it was the despair in his voice or the reek of bile on his breath, but everyone moved back and let Travis pass through the door.

Maybe I do still have it, he thought as he made his way into the auditorium.

Even though he was still feeling *not OK*, Travis was experiencing a mild adrenalin rush. Twenty years of failure had not completely eroded the excitement of going up for a part. Here he was, again, still, in a real theatre, auditioning for a real part in front of a real director and a real producer. It was happening, still, again, and it was real, and he was here.

Travis scoped the room. There were a table and a chair onstage. The seats in the middle of the front row were occupied by, presumably, the people whose show it was. And that was it. There was just him and the other two hopefuls, who were standing next to him now.

Travis scoped the competition. Like him, they were male, white, in their thirties, and giving off a faint aura of panic and hope. Unlike him, they were

clean-cut, better-shaved, and were clearly the first people to own the clothes they were wearing. Travis hated their guts.

“Hi!” he said, sticking out his hand, “Travis.”

The other two responded in kind, although Travis immediately forgot their stupid names. As it was clear that the director and producer or whoever weren’t ready yet, the three of them fell into desultory chat.

“This would be a great role for me,” one said.

“I have no chance,” said the other.

“Best man win,” said Travis.

“Look at me,” said one. “I got no chance.”

“You?” said the other, laughing like actors do, “You’re fine. You’ll get it, I know. Me? I’m screwed.”

Travis, who actually was screwed, narrowed his eyes. The other guy seemed normal to him. He was even fairly good-looking, bar a very slight potbelly.

“How do you mean?” he asked. “Screwed?”

“I’m too old, too messed-up, and too fat,” said the other, pointing at his almost invisible gut. “I need a –”

And he paused, as if he’d embarked on a sentence whose ending he didn’t know and was waiting for the end of it to arrive. It must have come, because then he said, oddly:

“I need a thin suit.”

There was a short silence.

“A what?” said the first guy.

“A thin suit,” the other one said, sounding a bit embarrassed. “Like a fat suit, you know, only in reverse.”

“Oh,” said the first guy. “Oh!” he added, and laughed.

Travis joined in, although he didn’t see what was especially funny. But people like it when you laugh, so it’s all good.

Travis’ audition did not go well. His stomach began to churn halfway through the speech – Loman again – and this made him conscious of his physicality in an unwelcome manner. It was like the noise in his gut woke up every unhappy fibre in his chaotic body. His head hurt, his joints ache, his ears itched, his eyes felt gritty, he wanted to piss, he wanted to sit down, he wanted to fart, he wanted to sleep... He felt ugly, and ill, and dumb, but most of all, he felt fat.

Travis had never felt fat before. He was just a man of slightly overweight build with a beer belly and, as he’d always gone up for parts where the person he was playing could conceivably be slightly overweight with a beer belly, his size had never been a problem. But now? As he stood onstage reciting lines with no more or less feeling than the scene required, Travis was suddenly aware of every single pound of flesh that he was carrying. In his mind he could see

every chunky limb, every neck roll and ring of belly fat, and he could feel the weight of it all.

He made it to the end of the piece, muttered his thanks, and headed out into the morning sunshine without even leaving his details. He walked straight down the road into the nearest coffee shop, bought a bottle of water, and sat down.

Travis' mind was racing. He was a blimp! How had he not noticed before? He was a barrel of pork on legs, a disgusting balloon of farts and blubber. No wonder he couldn't get work! No wonder his talent had abandoned him! He was just too gross to look at, too fat to fuck and too enormous to even contemplate. It all made sense now.

What I need, he thought, and it was if an idea had been waiting all his life for him to think it, *is a thin suit*.

Travis had no idea where to get a thin suit. It didn't seem like the kind of thing you could buy in a store. He put into the search engine on his computer but nothing came up; nothing useful anyway. Travis considered putting an ad in the paper, but that would probably just mean a lot of cranks would call him up. So he tried to forget about it and got on with what even the most optimistic of men would have had difficulty in calling his life.

The idea would not go away, though. Sometimes he imagined himself starring in a play or even a movie, with starlets cooing over him and awards coming at him like bricks, and he'd be saying to some chat show host or other, *All it took to get here was a lot of hard work, some talent – oh, and a thin suit*. And everybody would laugh, and only Travis would know the truth.

On other occasions he'd be cleaning the bathroom in a fast food restaurant – by now, Travis had passed the point where he could attend any auditions – and a gob of bile would rise in his throat as he watched himself poke turds back into a toilet bowl, and think *this wouldn't happen to a guy with a thin suit*.

But mostly he just lay on his bed and dreamed of the unattainable, the indescribable, the thin suit.

Some time later – a long while after that morning at the Mortimer - Travis was entering his second day in the temporary employ of his third boss of the week, a company who kept the public areas of bus stations free of piss, shit and syringes, when he heard a phone ring.

He looked around. Travis no longer had a cellphone, and the station was deserted. Then he realised the sound was coming from a payphone in a cubicle behind him. Travis had never seen this phone before, but that didn't mean anything; at this point in his decline, a mammoth in a silver bikini could have lain down in front of him and he wouldn't have noticed.

The phone continued to ring. Travis tried to get on with his work, but the ringing was getting to him, so he picked the receiver up from its cradle and put it back down again. The phone immediately started ringing again. Travis picked it up and set it back down. The third time this happened, Travis spoke into the receiver.

“Hello?” he said.

A voice replied:

“I have it.”

“Have what?” asked Travis.

“You know what,” said the voice.

“No, I don’t,” Travis said.

“The suit,” said the voice, “The thin suit.”

Travis felt a tingle run down his spine.

“How - ” he began, but the voice just said: “See you later.”

Travis put down his broom and walked out into the street. He continued to walk six or seven blocks, not thinking about where he was going, until he came to a small side street, the kind where every building is the back of somewhere else and the walls are crisscrossed with fire escapes.

One of the buildings had a door in it, propped open with a cinderblock. Travis went in and climbed the stairs to a room on the second floor.

“Come in,” said a voice. It was the same voice as the phone call.

Travis went in.

The room was sparsely furnished, to say the least. There was a plastic garden chair, faded and white, which Travis sat on. There was a large trestle table, covered in pins and random fabric shapes. And there was a dressmaker’s dummy, made of some unpleasant pink foam-like substance. Standing next to it was a man. He was, in Travis’ opinion, a weird-looking kind of a man but in what way weird, it was hard to say.

“It’s nearly ready,” said the man. And he lifted the thin suit, which Travis hadn’t even seen, from the dummy and held it up for Travis to look at. Travis didn’t know what to say, because he’d never seen a thin suit before and had nothing to compare it with, so he just nodded and grunted.

“Here, put it on,” said the man, and the next thing Travis knew, he was wearing the thin suit.

“How is it?” the man asked, the tone of his voice suggesting that he knew full well how it was.

“It’s great,” said Travis.

“I thought so,” said the man, and he sounded please.

“Can I - ” Travis said, then stopped. The thought was too much for a man who’d been through what he’d been through.

“Can you *keep* it?” said the man.

Travis felt foolish. Of course he couldn't keep it. When had Travis ever been allowed to keep anything good? And the thin suit was good, make no mistake. It was more than good. It made him feel like he could do anything. Be anything. Be anyone. Fuck anything and anyone. Say and do what he liked, and shit on the consequences. It was like being high, except it was real. And no way was Travis going to be allowed to keep something this amazing.

“Of course you can keep it,” said the man, “It was made for you.”

Travis almost cried with gratitude.

“Thank you,” he said. Then fear overcame him.

“I can't afford this,” he said. “It must be worth a fortune.”

The man shrugged.

“Pay me later,” he said. “You'll know when.”

For the last time in his life, Travis felt like a lunk. Not knowing what else to do, he stuck his hand out.

The man shook his head and made a face, as though Travis had taken his dick out instead. Then he smiled. It was the best smile Travis had ever seen.

“Enjoy it!” he said, and dismissed Travis with a wave.

And that's it, if you're asking - or even if you're not. You think things need your permission to happen? Travis walked out of there, and never looked back. What do you mean, what happened to him? You know what happened to him.

You saw him. You saw him everywhere.

You followed his career.

You watched his show.

You laughed at his stand-up special.

You jacked off to his picture.

You rooted for him.

You played his song on your phone.

You downloaded his movie.

You let him come in your mouth.

You voted for him.

You're going to die for him.

Maybe you should have got a thin suit, too.