



The Wonderful Ice Cream Suit, Ray Bradbury

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It was summer twilight in the city, and out front of the quiet-clicking pool hall three young Mexican-American men breathed the warm air and looked around at the world.

Sometimes they talked and sometimes they said nothing at all but watched the cars glide by like black panthers on the hot asphalt or saw trolleys loom up like thunderstorms, scatter lightning, and rumble away into silence.

‘Hey,’ sighed Martínez at last. He was the youngest, the most sweetly sad of the three. ‘It’s a swell night, huh? Swell.’

As he observed the world it moved very close and then drifted away and then came close again. People, brushing by, were suddenly across the street.

Buildings five miles away suddenly leaned over him. But most of the time everything—people, cars, and buildings—stayed way out on the edge of the world and could not be touched. On this quiet warm summer evening Martínez’s face was cold.

‘Nights like this you wish...lots of things.’

‘Wishing,’ said the second man, Villanazul, a man who shouted books out loud in his room but spoke only in whispers on the street. ‘Wishing is the useless pastime of the unemployed.’

‘Unemployed?’ cried Vamenos, the unshaven. ‘Listen to him! We got no jobs, no money!’

‘So,’ said Martínez, ‘we got no friends.’

‘True.’ Villanazul gazed off toward the green plaza where the palm trees swayed in the soft night wind. ‘Do you know what I wish?’

I wish to go into that plaza and speak among the businessmen who gather there nights to talk big talk. But dressed as I am, poor as I am,

who would listen? So, Martínez, we have each other. The friendship of the poor is real friendship. We—'

But now a handsome young Mexican with a fine thin mustache strolled by. And on each of his careless arms hung a laughing woman.

'Madre mía!' Martínez slapped his own brow. 'How does that one rate two friends?'

'It's his nice new white summer suit.' Vamenos chewed a black thumbnail. 'He looks sharp.'

Martínez leaned out to watch the three people moving away, and then looked at the tenement across the street, in one fourth-floor window of which, far above, a beautiful girl leaned out, her dark hair faintly stirred by the wind. She had been there forever, which was to say for six weeks.

He had nodded, he had raised a hand, he had smiled, he had blinked rapidly, he had even bowed to her, on the street, in the hall when visiting friends, in the park, downtown. Even now, he put his hand up from his waist and moved his fingers. But all the lovely girl did was let the summer wind stir her dark hair. He did not exist. He was nothing.

'Madre mía!' He looked away and down the street where the man walked his two friends around a corner. 'Oh, if just I had one suit, one! I wouldn't need money if I looked okay.'

'I hesitate to suggest,' said Villanazul, 'that you see Gómez. But he's been talking some crazy talk for a month now about clothes. I keep on saying I'll be in on it to make him go away. That Gómez.'

'Friend,' said a quiet voice.

'Gómez!' Everyone turned to stare.

Smiling strangely, Gómez pulled forth an endless thin yellow ribbon which fluttered and swirled on the summer air.

'Gómez,' said Martínez, 'what you doing with that tape measure?'

‘Gómez beamed. ‘Measuring people’s skeletons.’
‘Skeletons!’

‘Hold on.’ Gómez squinted at Martínez. ‘Caramba! Where you been all my life! Let’s try you!’

Martínez saw his arm seized and taped, his leg measured, his chest encircled.

‘Hold still!’ cried Gómez. ‘Arm—perfect. Leg—chest—perfecto! Now quick, the height! There! Yes! Five foot five! You’re in! Shake!’ Pumping Martínez’s hand, he stopped suddenly. ‘Wait. You got...ten bucks?’

‘I have!’ Vamenos waved some grimy bills. ‘Gómez, measure me!’
‘All I got left in the world is nine dollars and ninety-two cents.’ Martínez searched his pockets. ‘That’s enough for a new suit? Why?’
‘Why? Because you got the right skeleton, that’s why!’

‘Señor Gómez, I don’t hardly know you—’
‘Know me? You’re going to live with me! Come on!’

Gómez vanished into the poolroom, Martínez, escorted by the polite Villanazul, pushed by an eager Vamenos, found himself inside.
‘Domínguez!’ said Gómez.

Domínguez, at a wall telephone, winked at them. A woman’s voice squeaked on the receiver.
‘Manulo!’ said Gómez.

Manulo, a wine bottle tilted bubbling to his mouth, turned.
Gómez pointed at Martínez.
‘At last we found our fifth volunteer!’

Domínguez said, ‘I got a date, don’t bother me—’ and stopped. The receiver slipped from his fingers. His little black telephone book full of fine names and numbers went quickly back into his pocket. ‘Gómez, you—?’

‘Yes, yes! Your money, now! ¡Ándale!’

The woman’s voice sizzled on the dangling phone.

Domínguez glanced at it uneasily.

Manulo considered the empty wine bottle in his hand and the liquorstore sign across the street.

Then very reluctantly both men laid ten dollars each on the green velvet pool table.

Villanazul, amazed, did likewise, as did Gómez, nudging Martínez, Martínez counted out his wrinkled bills and change. Gómez flourished the money like a royal flush.

‘Fifty bucks! The suit costs sixty! All we need is ten bucks!’

‘Wait,’ said Martínez. ‘Gómez, are we talking about one suit? Uno?’

‘Uno!’ Gómez raised a finger. ‘One wonderful white ice cream summer suit! White, white as the August moon!’

‘But who will own this one suit?’

‘Me!’ said Manulo.

‘Me!’ said Domínguez.

‘Me!’ said Villanazul.

‘Me!’ cried Gómez. ‘And you, Martínez. Men, let’s show him. Line up!’ Villanazul, Manulo, Domínguez, and Gómez rushed to plant their backs against the poolroom wall.

‘Martínez, you too, the other end, line up! Now, Vamenos, lay that billiard cue across our heads!’

‘Sure, Gómez, sure!’

Martínez, in line, felt the cue tap his head and leaned out to see what was happening. ‘Ah!’ he gasped.

The cue lay flat on all their heads, with no rise or fall, as Vamenos slid it along, grinning.

‘We’re all the same height!’ said Martínez.

‘The same!’ Everyone laughed.

Gómez ran down the line, rustling the yellow tape measure here and there on the men so they laughed even more wildly.

‘Sure!’ he said. ‘It took a month, four weeks, mind you, to find four guys the same size and shape as me, a month of running around measuring. Sometimes I found guys with five-foot-five skeletons, sure, but all the meat on their bones was too much or not enough. Sometimes their bones were too long in the legs or too short in the arms. Boy, all the bones! I tell you! But now, five of us, same shoulders, chests, waists, arms, and as for weight? Men!’

Manulo, Domínguez, Villanazul, Gómez, and at last Martínez stepped onto the scales which flipped ink-stamped cards at them as Vamenos, still smiling wildly, fed pennies. Heart pounding, Martínez read the cards.

‘One hundred thirty-five pounds...one thirty-six...one thirty-three...one thirty-four...one thirty-seven...a miracle!’

‘No,’ said Villanazul simply, ‘Gómez.’

They all smiled upon that genius who now circled them with his arms.

‘Are we not fine?’ he wondered. ‘All the same size, all the same dream—the suit. So each of us will look beautiful at least one night each week, eh?’

‘I haven’t looked beautiful in years,’ said Martínez. ‘The girls run away.’

‘They will run no more, they will freeze,’ said Gómez, ‘when they see you in the cool white summer ice cream suit.’

‘Gómez,’ said Villanazul, ‘just let me ask one thing.’

‘Of course, compadre.’

‘When we get this nice new white ice cream summer suit, some night you’re not going to put it on and walk down to the Greyhound bus in it and go live in El Paso for a year in it, are you?’

‘Villanazul, Villanazul, how can you say that?’

‘My eye sees and my tongue moves,’ said Villanazul. ‘How about the Everybody Wins! Punchboard Lotteries you ran and you kept running when nobody won? How about the United Chili Con Carne and Frijole Company you were going to organize and all that ever happened was the rent ran out on a two-by-four office?’

‘The errors of a child now grown,’ said Gómez. ‘Enough! In this hot weather someone may buy the special suit that is made just for us that stands waiting in the window of Shumway’s Sunshine Suits! We have fifty dollars. Now we need just one more skeleton!’

Martínez saw the men peer around the pool hall. He looked where they looked. He felt his eyes hurry past Vamenos, then come reluctantly back to examine his dirty shirt, his huge nicotined fingers.

‘Me!’ Vamenos burst out at last. ‘My skeleton, measure it, it’s great! Sure, my hands are big, and my arms, from digging ditches! But—’ Just then Martínez heard passing on the sidewalk outside that same terrible man with his two girls, all laughing together.

He saw anguish move like the shadow of a summer cloud on the faces of the other men in this poolroom.

Slowly Vamenos stepped onto the scales and dropped his penny. Eyes closed, he breathed a prayer.

‘Madre mía, please...’

The machinery whirred; the card fell out. Vamenos opened his eyes.

‘Look! One thirty-five pounds! Another miracle!’

The men stared at his right hand and the card, at his left hand and a soiled ten-dollar bill.

Gómez swayed. Sweating, he licked his lips. Then his hand shot out, seized the money.

‘The clothing store! The suit! Vamos!’

Yelling, everyone ran from the poolroom.

The woman's voice was still squeaking on the abandoned telephone. Martínez, left behind, reached out and hung the voice up. In the silence he shook his head. 'Santos, what a dream! Six men,' he said, 'one suit. What will come of this? Madness? Debauchery? Murder? But I go with God. Gómez, wait for me!'

Martínez was young. He ran fast.

Mr Shumway, of Shumway's Sunshine Suits, paused while adjusting a tie rack, aware of some subtle atmospheric change outside his establishment.

'Leo,' he whispered to his assistant. 'Look...'

Outside, one man, Gómez, strolled by, looking in. Two men, Manulo and Domínguez, hurried by, staring in. Three men, Villanazul, Martínez, and Vamenos, jostling shoulders, did the same.

'Leo.' Mr Shumway swallowed. 'Call the police!'

Suddenly six men filled the doorway.

Martínez, crushed among them, his stomach slightly upset, his face feeling feverish, smiled so wildly at Leo that Leo let go the telephone.

'Hey,' breathed Martínez, eyes wide. 'There's a great suit over there!'

'No.' Manulo touched a lapel. 'This one!'

'There is only one suit in all the world!' said Gómez coldly. 'Mr Shumway, the ice cream white, size thirty-four, was in your window just an hour ago! It's gone! You didn't—'

'Sell it?' Mr Shumway exhaled. 'No, no. In the dressing room. It's still on the dummy.'

Martínez did not know if he moved and moved the crowd or if the crowd moved and moved him. Suddenly they were all in motion. Mr Shumway, running, tried to keep ahead of them.

'This way, gents. Now which of you...?'

'All for one, one for all!' Martínez heard himself say, and laughed. 'We'll all try it on!'

'All?' Mr Shumway clutched at the booth curtain as if his shop were a steamship that had suddenly tilted in a great swell. He stared. That's it, thought Martínez, look at our smiles. Now, look at the skeletons behind our smiles! Measure here, there, up, down, yes, do you see?

Mr Shumway saw. He nodded. He shrugged.

'All!' He jerked the curtain. 'There! Buy it, and I'll throw in the dummy free!'

Martínez peered quietly into the booth, his motion drawing the others to peer too.

The suit was there.

And it was white.

Martínez could not breathe. He did not want to. He did not need to. He was afraid his breath would melt the suit. It was enough, just looking. But at last he took a great trembling breath and exhaled, whispering.

'Ay, Ay, caramba!'

'It puts out my eyes,' murmured Gómez.

'Mr Shumway,' Martínez heard Leo hissing. 'Ain't it dangerous precedent, to sell it? I mean, what if everybody bought one suit for six people?'

'Leo,' said Mr Shumway, 'you ever hear one single fifty-nine-dollar suit make so many people happy at the same time before?'

'Angels' wings,' murmured Martínez. 'The wings of white angels.'

Martínez felt Mr Shumway peering over his shoulder into the booth.

The pale glow filled his eyes.

'You know something, Leo?' he said in awe. 'That's a suit!'

Gómez, shouting, whistling, ran up to the third-floor landing and turned to wave to the others, who staggered, laughed, stopped, and had to sit down on the steps below.

'Tonight!' cried Gómez. 'Tonight you move in with me, eh? Save rent as well as clothes, eh? Sure! Martínez, you got the suit?'

‘Have I?’ Martínez lifted the white gift-wrapped box high. ‘From us to us! Ay-hah!’

‘Vamenos, you got the dummy?’

‘Here!’

Vamenos, chewing an old cigar, scattering sparks, slipped. The dummy, falling, toppled, turned over twice, and banged down the stairs.

‘Vamenos! Dumb! Clumsy!’

They seized the dummy from him. Stricken, Vamenos looked about as if he’d lost something.

Manulo snapped his fingers. ‘Hey, Vamenos, we got to celebrate! Go borrow some wine!’

Vamenos plunged downstairs in a whirl of sparks.

The others moved into the room with the suit, leaving Martínez in the hall to study Gómez’s face.

‘Gómez, you look sick.’

‘I am,’ said Gómez. ‘For what have I done?’ He nodded to the shadows in the room working about the dummy. ‘I pick Domínguez a devil with the women. All right. I pick Manulo, who drinks, yes, but who sings as sweet as a girl, eh? Okay.’

Villanazul reads books. You, you wash behind your ears. But then what do I do? Can I wait? No! I got to buy that suit! So the last guy I pick is a clumsy slob who has the right to wear my suit—’ He stopped, confused. ‘Who gets to wear our suit one night a week, fall down in it, or not come in out of the rain in it! Why, why, why did I do it!’

‘Gómez,’ whispered Villanazul from the room. ‘The suit is ready. Come see if it looks as good using your light bulb.’

Gómez and Martínez entered.

And there on the dummy in the center of the room was the phosphorescent, the miraculously white-fired ghost with the incredible lapels, the precise stitching, the neat buttonholes.

Standing with the white illumination of the suit upon his cheeks, Martínez suddenly felt he was in church. White! White! It was white as the whitest vanilla ice cream, as the bottled milk in tenement halls at dawn. White as a winter cloud all alone in the moonlit sky late at night. Seeing it here in the warm summer-night room made their breath almost show on the air.

Shutting his eyes, he could see it printed on his lids. He knew what color his dreams would be this night.

'White...' murmured Villanazul. 'White as the snow on that mountain near our town in Mexico, which is called the Sleeping Woman.'

'Say that again,' said Gómez.

Villanazul, proud yet humble, was glad to repeat his tribute.

'...white as the snow on the mountain called—'

'I'm back!'

Shocked, the men whirled to see Vamenos in the door, wine bottles in each hand.

'A party! Here! Now tell us, who wears the suit first tonight? Me?'

'It's too late!' said Gómez.

'Late! It's only nine-fifteen!'

'Late?' said everyone, bristling. 'Late?'

Gómez edged away from these men who glared from him to the suit to the open window.

Outside and below it was, after all, thought Martínez, a fine Saturday night in a summer month and through the calm warm darkness the women drifted like flowers on a quiet stream. The men made a mournful sound.

‘Gómez, a suggestion.’ Villanazul licked his pencil and drew a chart on a pad. ‘You wear the suit from nine-thirty to ten. Manulo till ten-thirty, Domínguez till eleven, myself till eleven-thirty, Martínez till midnight, and—’

‘Why me last?’ demanded Vamenos, scowling.

Martínez thought quickly and smiled. ‘After midnight is the best time, friend.’

‘Hey,’ said Vamenos, ‘that’s right. I never thought of that. Okay.’

Gómez sighed. ‘All right. A half hour each. But from now on, remember, we each wear the suit just one night a week. Sundays we draw straws for who wears the suit the extra night.’

‘Me!’ laughed Vamenos. ‘I’m lucky!’

Gómez held on to Martínez, tight.

‘Gómez,’ urged Martínez, ‘you first. Dress.’

Gómez could not tear his eyes from that disreputable Vamenos. At last, impulsively, he yanked his shirt off over his head. ‘Ay-yeah!’ he howled. ‘Ay-yeee!’

Whisper rustle...the clean shirt.

‘Ah...!’

How clean the new clothes feel, thought Martínez, holding the coat ready. How clean they sound, how clean they smell!

Whisper...the pants...the tie, rustle...the suspenders. Whisper...now Martínez let loose the coat, which fell in place on flexing shoulders.

‘Ole!’

Gómez turned like a matador in his wondrous suit-of-lights.

‘Ole, Gómez, ole!’

Gómez bowed and went out the door.

Martínez fixed his eyes to his watch. At ten sharp he heard someone wandering about in the hall as if they had forgotten where to go. Martínez pulled the door open and looked out. Gómez was there, heading for nowhere.

He looks sick, thought Martínez. No, stunned, shook up, surprised, many things.
'Gómez! This is the place!'

Gómez turned around and found his way through the door.
'Oh, friends, friends,' he said. 'Friends, what an experience! This suit! This suit!'
'Tell us, Gómez!' said Martínez.

'I can't, how can I say it!' He gazed at the heavens, arms spread, palms up.
'Tell us, Gómez!'

'I have no words, no words. You must see, yourself. Yes, you must see—' And here he lapsed into silence, shaking his head until at last he remembered they all stood watching him. 'Who's next? Manulo?'

Manulo, stripped to his shorts, leapt forward.
'Ready!'
All laughed, shouted, whistled.

Manulo, ready, went out the door. He was gone twenty-nine minutes and thirty seconds. He came back holding to doorknobs, touching the wall, feeling his own elbows, putting the flat of his hand to his face.

'Oh, let me tell you,' he said. 'Compadres, I went to the bar, eh, to have a drink? But no, I did not go in the bar, do you hear? I did not drink. For as I walked I began to laugh and sing. Why, why? I listened to myself and asked this.

Because. The suit made me feel better than wine ever did. The suit made me drunk, drunk! So I went to the Guadalajara Refritería instead

and played the guitar and sang four songs, very high! The suit, ah, the suit!’

Domínguez, next to be dressed, moved out through the world, came back from the world.

The black telephone book! thought Martínez. He had it in his hands when he left! Now, he returns, hands empty! What? What?

‘On the street,’ said Domínguez, seeing it all again, eyes wide, ‘on the street I walked, a woman cried. “Domínguez, is that you?” Another said, “Domínguez? No, Quetzalcoatl, the Great White God come from the East,” do you hear?’

And suddenly I didn’t want to go with six women or eight, no. One, I thought. One! And to this one, who knows what I would say? “Be mine!” Or “Marry me!” Caramba! This suit is dangerous! But I did not care! I live. I live! Gómez, did it happen this way with you?’

Gómez, still dazed by the events of the evening, shook his head. ‘No, no talk. It’s too much. Later, Villanazul...?’

Villanazul moved shyly forward.

Villanazul went shyly out.

Villanazul came shyly home.

‘Picture it,’ he said, not looking at them, looking at the floor, talking to the floor. ‘The green plaza, a group of elderly businessmen gathered under the stars and they are talking, nodding, talking. Now one of them whispers. All turn to stare.

They move aside, they make a channel through which a white-hot light burns its way as through ice. At the center of the great light is this person. I take a deep breath. My stomach is jelly. My voice is very small, but it grows louder. And what do I say? I say, “Friends. Do you know Carlyle’s Sartor Resartus? In that book we find his Philosophy of Suits...””

And at last it was time for Martínez to let the suit float him out to haunt the darkness.

Four times he walked around the block. Four times he paused beneath the tenement porches, looking up at the window where the light was lit: a shadow moved, the beautiful girl was there, not there, away and gone, and on the fifth time there she was on the porch above, driven out by the summer heat, taking the cooler air.

She glanced down. She made a gesture.

At first he thought she was waving to him. He felt like a white explosion that had riveted her attention. But she was not waving. Her hand gestured and the next moment a pair of dark-framed glasses sat upon her nose. She gazed at him.

Ah, ah, he thought, so that's it. So! Even the blind may see this suit! He smiled up at her. He did not have to wave. And at last she smiled back. She did not have to wave either. Then, because he did not know what else to do and he could not get rid of this smile that had fastened itself to his cheeks, he hurried, almost ran, around the corner, feeling her stare after him.

When he looked back she had taken off her glasses and gazed now with the look of the nearsighted at what, at most, must be a moving blob of light in the great darkness here. Then for good measure he went around the block again, through a city so suddenly beautiful he wanted to yell, then laugh, then yell again.

Returning, he drifted, oblivious, eyes half closed, and seeing him in the door, the others saw not Martínez but themselves come home. In that moment, they sensed that something had happened to them all.

'You're late!' cried Vamenos, but stopped. The spell could not be broken.

'Somebody tell me,' said Martínez. 'Who am I?'

He moved in a slow circle through the room.

Yes, he thought, yes, it's the suit, yes, it had to do with the suit and them all together in that store on this fine Saturday night and then here, laughing and feeling more drunk without drinking as Manulo said himself, as the night ran and each slipped on the pants and held, toppling, to the others and, balanced, let the feeling get bigger and warmer and finer as each man departed and the next took his place in the suit until now here stood Martínez all splendid and white as one who gives orders and the world grows quiet and moves aside.

'Martínez, we borrowed three mirrors while you were gone. Look!'

The mirrors, set up as in the store, angled to reflect three Martínézes and the echoes and memories of those who had occupied this suit with him and known the bright world inside this thread and cloth. Now, in the shimmering mirror, Martínez saw the enormity of this thing they were living together and his eyes grew wet. The others blinked. Martínez touched the mirrors.

They shifted. He saw a thousand, a million white-armored Martínézes march off into eternity, reflected, re-reflected, forever, indomitable, and unending.

He held the white coat out on the air. In a trance, the others did not at first recognize the dirty hand that reached to take the coat. Then: 'Vamenos!'

'Pig!'

'You didn't wash!' cried Gómez. 'Or even shave, while you waited! Compadres, the bath!'

'The bath!' said everyone.

'No!' Vamenos flailed. 'The night air! I'm dead!'

They hustled him yelling out and down the hall.

Now here stood Vamenos, unbelievable in white suit, beard shaved, hair combed, nails scrubbed.

His friends scowled darkly at him.

For was it not true, thought Martínez, that when Vamenos passed by, avalanches itched on mountaintops? If he walked under windows, people spat, dumped garbage, or worse. Tonight now, this night, he would stroll beneath ten thousand wide-opened windows, near balconies, past alleys. Suddenly the world absolutely sizzled with flies. And here was Vamenos, a fresh-frosted cake.

‘You sure look keen in that suit, Vamenos,’ said Manulo sadly.

‘Thanks.’ Vamenos twitched, trying to make his skeleton comfortable where all their skeletons had so recently been. In a small voice Vamenos said. ‘Can I go now?’

‘Villanazul!’ said Gómez. ‘Copy down these rules.’

Villanazul licked his pencil.

‘First,’ said Gómez, ‘don’t fall down in that suit, Vamenos!’

‘I won’t.’

‘Don’t lean against buildings in that suit.’

‘No buildings.’

‘Don’t walk under trees with birds in them in that suit. Don’t smoke. Don’t drink—’

‘Please,’ said Vamenos, ‘can I sit down in this suit?’

‘When in doubt, take the pants off, fold them over a chair.’

‘Wish me luck,’ said Vamenos.

‘Go with God, Vamenos.’

He went out. He shut the door.

There was a ripping sound.

‘Vamenos!’ cried Martínez.

He whipped the door open.

Vamenos stood with two halves of a handkerchief torn in his hands, laughing.

‘Rrrrip! Look at your faces! Rrrrip!’ He tore the cloth again. ‘Oh, oh, your faces, your faces! Ha!’
Roaring, Vamenos slammed the door, leaving them stunned and alone.

Gómez put both hands on top of his head and turned away. ‘Stone me. Kill me. I have sold our souls to a demon!’
Villanazul dug in his pockets, took out a silver coin, and studied it for a long while.
‘This is my last fifty cents. Who else will help me buy back Vamenos’ share of the suit?’

‘It’s no use.’ Manulo showed them ten cents. ‘We got only enough to buy the lapels and the buttonholes.’
Gómez, at the open window, suddenly leaned out and yelled.
‘Vamenos! No!’

Below on the street, Vamenos, shocked, blew out a match and threw away an old cigar butt he had found somewhere. He made a strange gesture to all the men in the window above, then waved airily and sauntered on.

Somehow, the five men could not move away from the window. They were crushed together there.
‘I bet he eats a hamburger in that suit,’ mused Villanazul. ‘I’m thinking of the mustard.’

‘Don’t!’ cried Gómez. ‘No, no!’
Manulo was suddenly at the door.
‘I need a drink, bad.’

‘Manulo, there’s wine here, that bottle on the floor—’
Manulo went out and shut the door.

A moment later Villanazul stretched with great exaggeration and strolled about the room.
‘I think I’ll walk down to the plaza, friends.’

He was not gone a minute when Domínguez, waving his black book at the others, winked and turned the doorknob.

‘Domínguez,’ said Gómez.

‘Yes?’

‘If you see Vamenos, by accident,’ said Gómez, ‘warn him away from Mickey Murrillo’s Red Rooster Café. They got fights not only on TV but out front of the TV too.’

‘He wouldn’t go into Murrillo’s,’ said Domínguez. ‘That suit means too much to Vamenos. He wouldn’t do anything to hurt it.’

‘He’d shoot his mother first,’ said Martínez.

‘Sure he would.’

Martínez and Gómez, alone, listened to Domínguez’s footsteps hurry away down the stairs. They circled the undressed window dummy. For a long while, biting his lips, Gómez stood at the window, looking out. He touched his shirt pocket twice, pulled his hand away, and then at last pulled something from the pocket.

Without looking at it, he handed it to Martínez.

‘Martínez, take this.’

‘What is it?’

Martínez looked at the piece of folded pink paper with print on it, with names and numbers. His eyes widened.

‘A ticket on the bus to El Paso three weeks from now!’

Gómez nodded. He couldn’t look at Martínez. He stared out into the summer night.

‘Turn it in. Get the money,’ he said. ‘Buy us a nice white panama hat and a pale blue tie to go with the white ice cream suit, Martínez. Do that.’

‘Gómez—’

‘Shut up. Boy, is it hot in here! I need air.’

‘Gómez. I am touched. Gómez—’

But the door stood open. Gómez was gone.

Mickey Murrillo's Red Rooster Café and Cocktail Lounge was squashed between two big brick buildings and, being narrow, had to be deep. Outside, serpents of red and sulphur-green neon fizzed and snapped. Inside, dim shapes loomed and swam away to lose themselves in a swarming night sea.

Martínez, on tiptoe, peeked through a flaked place on the red-painted front window.

He felt a presence on his left, heard breathing on his right. He glanced in both directions.

'Manulo! Villanazul!'

'I decided I wasn't thirsty,' said Manulo. 'So I took a walk.'

'I was just on my way to the plaza,' said Villanazul, 'and decided to go the long way around.'

As if by agreement, the three men shut up now and turned together to peer on tiptoe through various flaked spots on the window.

A moment later, all three felt a new very warm presence behind them and heard still faster breathing.

'Is our white suit in there?' asked Gómez's voice.

'Gómez!' said everybody, surprised. 'Hi!'

'Yes!' cried Domínguez, having just arrived to find his own peephole.

'There's the suit! And, praise God, Vamenos is still in it!'

'I can't see!' Gómez squinted, shielding his eyes. 'What's he doing?'

Martínez peered. Yes! There, way back in the shadows, was a big chunk of snow and the idiot smile of Vamenos winking above it, wreathed in smoke.

'He's smoking!' said Martínez.

'He's drinking!' said Domínguez.

'He's eating a taco!' reported Villanazul.

'A juicy taco,' added Manulo.
'No,' said Gómez. 'No, no, no...'
'Ruby Escuadrillo's with him!
'Let me see that!' Gómez pushed Martínez aside.

Yes, there was Ruby! Two hundred pounds of glittering sequins and tight black satin on the hoof, her scarlet fingernails clutching Vamenos' shoulder. Her cowl-like face, floured with powder, greasy with lipstick, hung over him!

'That hippo!' said Domínguez. 'She's crushing the shoulder pads. Look, she's going to sit on his lap!'
'No, no, not with all that powder and lipstick!' said Gómez. 'Manulo, inside! Grab that drink! Villanazul, the cigar, the taco! Domínguez, date Ruby Escuadrillo, get her away. Ándale, men!'

The three vanished, leaving Gómez and Martínez to stare, gasping, through the peephole.

'Manulo, he's got the drink, he's drinking it!'
'Ay! There's Villanazul, he's got the cigar, he's eating the taco!'
'Hey, Domínguez, he's got Ruby! What a brave one!'
A shadow bulked through Murrillo's front door, traveling fast.

'Gómez!' Martínez clutched Gómez's arm. 'That was Ruby Escuadrillo's boyfriend, Toro Ruíz. If he finds her with Vamenos, the ice cream suit will be covered with blood, covered with blood—'
'Don't make me nervous,' said Gómez. 'Quickly!'

Both ran. Inside they reached Vamenos just as Toro Ruíz grabbed about two feet of the lapels of that wonderful ice cream suit.

'Let go of Vamenos!' said Martínez.
'Let go that suit!' corrected Gómez.

Toro Ruíz, tap-dancing Vamenos, leered at these intruders.
Villanazul stepped up shyly.
Villanazul smiled. 'Don't hit him. Hit me.'
toro Ruíz hit Villanazul smack on the nose.

Villanazul, holding his nose, tears stinging his eyes, wandered off. Gómez grabbed one of Toro Ruíz's arms, Martínez the other. 'Drop him, let go, cabrón, coyote, vaca!'

Toro Ruíz twisted the ice cream suit material until all six men screamed in mortal agony. Grunting, sweating, Toro Ruíz dislodged as many as climbed on. He was winding up to hit Vamenos when Villanazul wandered back, eyes streaming.

'Don't hit him. Hit me!'

As Toro Ruíz hit Villanazul on the nose, a chair crashed on Toro's head. 'Ay!' said Gómez.

Toro Ruíz swayed, blinking, debating whether to fall. He began to drag Vamenos with him.

'Let go!' cried Gómez. 'Let go!'

One by one, with great care, Toro Ruíz's bananalike fingers let loose of the suit. A moment later he was ruins at their feet.

'Compadres, this way!'

They ran Vamenos outside and set him down where he freed himself of their hands with injured dignity.

'Okay, okay. My time ain't up. I still got two minutes and, let's see—ten seconds.'

'What!' said everybody.

'Vamenos,' said Gómez, 'you let a Guadalajara cow climb on you, you pick fights, you smoke, you drink, you eat tacos, and now you have the nerve to say your time ain't up?'

'I got two minutes and one second left!'

'Hey, Vamenos, you sure look sharp!' Distantly, a woman's voice called from across the street.

Vamenos smiled and buttoned the coat.

‘It’s Ramona Álvarez! Ramona, wait!’ Vamenos stepped off the curb. ‘Vamenos,’ pleaded Gómez. ‘What can you do in one minute and’—he checked his watch—‘forty seconds!’ ‘Watch! Hey, Ramona!’

Vamenos loped.

‘Vamenos, look out!’

Vamenos, surprised, whirled, saw a car, heard the shriek of brakes.

‘No,’ said all five men on the sidewalk.

Martínez heard the impact and flinched. His head moved up. It looks like white laundry, he thought, flying through the air. His head came down.

Now he heard himself and each of the men make a different sound. Some swallowed too much air. Some let it out. Some choked. Some groaned. Some cried aloud for justice. Some covered their faces. Martínez felt his own fist pounding his heart in agony. He could not move his feet.

‘I don’t want to live,’ said Gómez quietly. ‘Kill me, someone.’

Then, shuffling, Martínez looked down and told his feet to walk, stagger, follow one after the other. He collided with other men. Now they were trying to run. They ran at last and somehow crossed a street like a deep river through which they could only wade, to look down at Vamenos.

‘Vamenos!’ said Martínez. ‘You’re alive!’

Strewn on his back, mouth open, eyes squeezed tight, tight, Vamenos motioned his head back and forth, back and forth, moaning.

‘Tell me, tell me, oh, tell me, tell me.’

‘Tell you what, Vamenos?’

Vamenos clenched his fists, ground his teeth.

‘The suit, what have I done to the suit, the suit, the suit!’

The men crouched lower.

‘Vamenos, it’s...why, it’s okay!’

‘You lie!’ said Vamenos. ‘It’s torn, it must be, it must be, it’s torn, all around, underneath?’

‘No.’ Martínez knelt and touched here and there. ‘Vamenos, all around, underneath even, it’s okay!’

Vamenos opened his eyes to let the tears run free at last. ‘A miracle,’ he sobbed. ‘Praise the saints!’ He quieted at last, ‘The car?’

‘Hit and run.’ Gómez suddenly remembered and glared at the empty street. ‘It’s good he didn’t stop. We’d have—’

Everyone listened.

Distantly a siren wailed.

‘Someone phoned for an ambulance.’

‘Quick!’ said Vamenos, eyes rolling. ‘Set me up! Take off our coat!’

‘Vamenos—’

‘Shut up, idiots!’ cried Vamenos. ‘The coat, that’s it! Now, the pants, the pants, quick, quick peones! Those doctors! You seen movies? They rip the pants with razors to get them off! They don’t care! They’re maniacs! Ah, God, quick, quick!’

The siren screamed.

The men, panicking, all handled Vamenos at once.

‘Right leg, easy, hurry, cows! Good! Left leg, now, left, you hear, there, easy, easy! Ow. God! Quick! Martínez, your pants, take them off!’

‘What?’ Martínez froze.

The siren shrieked.

‘Fool!’ wailed Vamenos. ‘All is lost! Your pants! Give me!’

Martínez jerked at his belt buckle.

‘Close in, make a circle!’

Dark pants, light pants flourished on the air.

‘Quick, here come the maniacs with the razors! Right leg on, left leg, there!’

'The zipper, cows, zip my zipper!' babbled Vamenos.
The siren died.

'Madre mía, yes, just in time! They arrive.' Vamenos lay back down and shut his eyes. 'Gracias.'

Martínez turned, nonchalantly buckling on the white pants as the interns brushed past.

'Broken leg,' said one intern as they moved Vamenos onto a stretcher.
'Compadres,' said Vamenos, 'don't be mad with me.'
Gómez snorted. 'Who's mad?'

In the ambulance, head tilted back, looking out at them upside down.
Vamenos faltered.

'Compadres, when...when I come from the hospital...am I still in the bunch? You won't kick me out? Look, I'll give up smoking, keep away from Murrillo's, swear off women—'

'Vamenos,' said Martínez gently, 'don't promise nothing.'

Vamenos, upside down, eyes brimming wet, saw Martínez there, all white now against the stars.

'Oh, Martínez, you sure look great in that suit. Compadres, don't he look beautiful?'

Villanazul climbed in beside Vamenos. The door slammed. The four remaining men watched the ambulance drive away.
Then, surrounded by his friends, inside the white suit, Martínez was carefully escorted back to the curb.

In the tenement, Martínez got out the cleaning fluid and the others stood around, telling him how to clean the suit and, later, how not to have the iron too hot and how to work the lapels and the crease and all. When the suit was cleaned and pressed so it looked like a fresh gardenia just opened, they fitted it to the dummy.

‘Two o’clock,’ murmured Villanazul. ‘I hope Vamenos sleeps well. When I left him at the hospital, he looked good.’

Manulo cleared his throat. ‘Nobody else is going out with that suit tonight, huh?’

The others glared at him.

Manulo flushed. ‘I mean...it’s late. We’re tired. Maybe no one will use the suit for forty-eight hours, huh? Give it a rest. Sure. Well, Where do we sleep?’

The night being still hot and the room unbearable, they carried the suit on its dummy out and down the hall. They brought with them also some pillows and blankets. They climbed the stairs toward the roof of the tenement. There, thought Martínez, is the cooler wind, and sleep.

On the way, they passed a dozen doors that stood open, people still perspiring and awake, playing cards, drinking pop, fanning themselves with movie magazines.

I wonder, thought Martínez. I wonder if—Yes!

On the fourth floor, a certain door stood open.

The beautiful girl looked up as the men passed. She wore glasses and when she saw Martínez she snatched them off and hid them under her book.

The others went on, not knowing they had lost Martínez, who seemed stuck fast in the open door.

For a long moment he could say nothing. Then he said:

‘José Martínez.’

And she said:

‘Celia Obregón.’

And then both said nothing.

He heard the men moving up on the tenement roof. He moved to follow.

She said quickly, ‘I saw you tonight!’

He came back.

'The suit,' he said.

'The suit,' she said, and paused. 'But not the suit.'

'Eh?' he said.

She lifted the book to show the glasses lying in her lap. She touched the glasses.

'I do not see well. You would think I would wear my glasses, but no. I walk around for years now, hiding them, seeing nothing. But tonight, even without the glasses, I see. A great whiteness passes below in the dark. So white! And I put on my glasses quickly!'

'The suit, as I said,' said Martínez.

'The suit for a little moment, yes, but there is another whiteness above the suit.'

'Another?'

'Your teeth! Oh, such white teeth, and so many!'

Martínez put his hand over his mouth.

'So happy, Mr Martínez,' she said. 'I have not often seen such a happy face and such a smile.'

'Ah,' he said, not able to look at her, his face flushing now.

'So, you see,' she said quietly, 'the suit caught my eye, yes, the whiteness filled the night below. But the teeth were much whiter. Now, I have forgotten the suit.'

Martínez flushed again. She, too, was overcome with what she had said. She put her glasses on her nose, and then took them off, nervously, and hid them again. She looked at her hands and at the door above his head.

'May I—' he said, at last.

'May you—'

'May I call for you,' he asked, 'when next the suit is mine to wear?'

‘Why must you wait for the suit?’ she said.

‘I thought—’

‘You do not need the suit,’ she said.

‘But—’

‘If it were just the suit,’ she said, ‘anyone would be fine in it. But no, I watched, I saw many men in that suit, all different, this night. So again I say, you do not need to wait for the suit.’

‘Madre mía, madre mía!’ he cried happily. And then, quieter. ‘I will need the suit for a little while. A month, six months, a year. I am uncertain. I am fearful of many things. I am young.’

‘That is as it should be,’ she said.

‘Good night, Miss—’

‘Celia Obregón.’

‘Celia Obregón,’ he said, and was gone from the door.

The others were waiting on the roof of the tenement. Coming up through the trap door. Martínez saw they had placed the dummy and the suit in the center of the roof and put their blankets and pillows in a circle around it. Now they were lying down. Now a cooler night wind was blowing here, up in the sky.

Martínez stood alone by the white suit, smoothing the lapels, talking half to himself.

‘Ay, caramba, what a night! Seems ten years since seven o’clock, when it all started and I had no friends. Two in the morning, I got all kinds of friends...’ He paused and thought. Celia Obregón, Celia Obregón. ‘...All kinds of friends,’ he went on. ‘I got a room, I got clothes. You tell me. You know what?’

He looked around at the men lying on the rooftop, surrounding the dummy and himself. ‘It’s funny. When I wear this suit, I know I will win at pool, like Gómez. A woman will look at me like Domínguez. I will be

able to sing like Manulo, sweetly. I will talk fine politics like Villanazul. I'm strong as Vamenos.

So? So, tonight, I am more than Martínez. I am Gómez, Manulo, Domínguez, Villanazul, Vamenos. I am everyone. Ay...ay...' He stood a moment longer by this suit which could save all the ways they sat or stood or walked.

This suit which could move fast and nervous like Gómez or slow and thoughtfully like Villanazul or drift like Domínguez, who never touched ground, who always found a wind to take him somewhere. This suit which belonged to them but which also owned them all. This suit that was—what? A parade.

'Martínez,' said Gómez. 'You going to sleep?'

'Sure. I'm just thinking.'

'What?'

'If we ever get rich,' said Martínez softly, 'it'll be kind of sad. Then we'll all have suits. And there won't be no more nights like tonight. It'll break up the old gang. It'll never be the same after that.'

The men lay thinking of what had just been said.

Gómez nodded gently.

'Yeah...it'll never be the same...after that.'

Martínez lay down on his blanket. In darkness, with the others, he faced the middle of the roof and the dummy, which was the center of their lives.

And their eyes were bright, shining, and good to see in the dark as the neon lights from nearby buildings flicked on, flicked off, flicked on, flicked off, revealing and then vanishing, revealing and then vanishing, their wonderful white vanilla ice cream summer suit.

The end