

Desire: Vintage Minis

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The Second Bakery Attack

I'm still not sure I made the right choice when I told my wife about the bakery attack. But then, it might not have been a question of right and wrong. Which is to say that wrong choices can produce right results, and vice versa. I myself have adopted the position that, in fact, we never choose anything at all. Things happen. Or not.

If you look at it this way, it just so happens that I told my wife about the bakery attack. I hadn't been planning to bring it up—I had forgotten all about it—but it wasn't one of those now-that-you-mention-it kind of things, either.

What reminded me of the bakery attack was an unbearable hunger. It hit just before two o'clock in the morning. We had eaten a light supper at six, crawled into bed at nine-thirty, and gone to sleep. For some reason, we woke up at exactly the same moment. A few minutes later, the pangs struck with the force of the tornado in *The Wizard of Oz*. These were tremendous, overpowering hunger pangs.

Our refrigerator contained not a single item that could be technically categorized as food. We had a bottle of French dressing, six cans of beer, two shrivelled onions, a stick of butter, and a box of refrigerator deodorizer. With only two weeks of married life behind us, we had yet to establish a precise conjugal understanding with regard to the rules of dietary behaviour. Let alone anything else.

I had a job in a law firm at the time, and she was doing secretarial work at a design school. I was either twenty-eight or twenty-nine—why can't I remember the exact year we married?—and she was two years and eight months younger. Groceries were the last things on our minds.

We both felt too hungry to go back to sleep, but it hurt just to lie there. On the other hand, we were also too hungry to do anything useful. We got out of bed and drifted into the kitchen, ending up across the table from each other. What could have caused such violent hunger pangs?

We took turns opening the refrigerator door and hoping, but no matter how many times we looked inside, the contents never changed. Beer and onions and butter and dressing and deodorizer. It might have been possible to sauté the onions in the butter, but there was no chance those two shrivelled onions could fill our empty stomachs. Onions are meant to be eaten with other things. They are not the kind of food you use to satisfy an appetite.

“Would madame care for some French dressing sautéed in deodorizer?”

I expected her to ignore my attempt at humor, and she did. "Let's get in the car and look for an all-night restaurant," I said. "There must be one on the highway."

She rejected that suggestion. "We can't. You're not supposed to go out to eat after midnight." She was old-fashioned that way.

I breathed once and said, "I guess not."

Whenever my wife expressed such an opinion (or thesis) back then, it reverberated in my ears with the authority of a revelation. Maybe that's what happens with newlyweds, I don't know. But when she said this to me, I began to think that this was a special hunger, not one that could be satisfied through the mere expedient of taking it to an all-night restaurant on the highway.

A special kind of hunger. And what might that be?

I can present it here in the form of a cinematic image.

One, I am in a little boat, floating on a quiet sea. Two, I look down, and in the water I see the peak of a volcano thrusting up from the ocean floor. Three, the peak seems pretty close to the water's surface, but just how close I cannot tell. Four, this is because the hyper transparency of the water interferes with the perception of distance.

This is a fairly accurate description of the image that arose in my mind during the two or three seconds between the time my wife said she refused to go to an all-night restaurant and I agreed with my "I guess not." Not being Sigmund Freud, I was, of course, unable to analyse with any precision what this image signified, but I knew intuitively that it was a revelation. Which is why—the almost grotesque intensity of my hunger notwithstanding—I all but automatically agreed with her thesis (or declaration).

We did the only thing we could do: opened the beer. It was a lot better than eating those onions. She didn't like beer much, so we divided the cans, two for her, four for me. While I was drinking the first one, she searched the kitchen shelves like a squirrel in November. Eventually, she turned up a package that had four butter cookies in the bottom. They were leftovers, soft and soggy, but we each ate two, savoring every crumb.

It was no use. Upon this hunger of ours, as vast and boundless as the Sinai Peninsula, the butter cookies and beer left not a trace.

Time oozed through the dark like a lead weight in a fish's gut. I read the print on the aluminum beer cans. I stared at my watch. I looked at the refrigerator door. I turned the pages of yesterday's paper. I used the edge of a postcard to scrape together the cookie crumbs on the tabletop.

"I've never been this hungry in my whole life," she said. "I wonder if it has anything to do with being married."

"Maybe," I said. "Or maybe not."

While she hunted for more fragments of food, I leaned over the edge of my boat and looked down at the peak of the underwater volcano. The clarity of the ocean water all around the boat gave me an unsettled feeling, as if a hollow had opened somewhere behind my solar plexus—a hermetically sealed cavern that had neither entrance nor exit. Something about this weird sense of absence—this sense of the existential reality of non-existence—resembled the paralyzing fear you might feel when you climb to the very top of a high steeple. This connection between hunger and acrophobia was a new discovery for me.

Which is when it occurred to me that I had once before had this same kind of experience. My stomach had been just as empty then....When?...Oh, sure, that was—

"The time of the bakery attack," I heard myself saying.

"The bakery attack? What are you talking about?"

And so it started.

"I once attached a bakery. Long time ago. Not a big bakery. Not famous. The bread was nothing special. Not bad, either. One of those ordinary little neighborhood bakeries right in the middle of a block of shops. Some old guy ran it who did everything himself. Baked in the morning, and when he sold out, he closed up for the day."

“If you were going to attack a bakery, why that one?”

“Well, there was no point in attacking a big bakery. All we wanted was bread, not money. We were attackers, not robbers.”

“We? Who’s we?”

“My best friend back then. Ten years ago. We were so broke we couldn’t buy toothpaste. Never had enough food. We did some pretty awful things to get our hands on food. The bakery attack was one.”

“I don’t get it.” She looked hard at me. Her eyes could have been searching for a faded star in the morning sky. “Why didn’t you get a job? You could have worked after school. That would have been easier than attacking bakeries.”

“We didn’t want to work. We were absolutely clear on that.”

“Well, you’re working now, aren’t you?”

I nodded and sucked some more beer. Then I rubbed my eyes. A kind of beery mud had oozed into my brain and was struggling with my hunger pangs.

“Times change. People change,” I said. “Let’s go back to bed. We’ve got to get up early.”

“I’m not sleepy. I want you to tell me about the bakery attack.”

“There’s nothing to tell. No action. No excitement.”

“Was it a success?”

I gave up on sleep and ripped open another beer. Once she gets interested in a story, she has to hear it all the way through. That's just the way she is.

"Well, it was kind of a success. And kind of not. We got what we wanted. But as a holdup, it didn't work. The baker gave us the bread before we could take it from him."

"Free?"

"Not exactly, no. That's the hard part." I shook my head. "The baker was a classical-music freak, and when we got there, he was listening to an album of Wagner overtures. So he made us a deal. If we would listen to the record all the way through, we could take as much bread as we liked. I talked it over with my buddy and we figured, Okay. It wouldn't be work in the purest sense of the word, and it wouldn't hurt anybody. So we put our knives back in our bag, pulled up a couple of chairs, and listened to the overtures to Tannhäuser and The Flying Dutchman."

"And after that, you got your bread?"

"Right. Most of what he had in the shop. Stuffed it in our bag and took it home. Kept us fed for maybe four or five days." I took another sip. Like soundless waves from an undersea earthquake, my sleepiness gave my boat a long, slow rocking.

"Of course, we accomplished our mission. We got the bread. But you couldn't say we had committed a crime. It was more of an exchange. We listened to Wagner with him, and in return, we got our bread. Legally speaking, it was more like a commercial transaction."

"But listening to Wagner is not work," she said.

"Oh, no, absolutely not. If the baker had insisted that we wash his dishes or clean his windows or something, we would have turned him down. But he didn't. All he wanted from us was to listen to his Wagner LP from beginning to end. Nobody could have anticipated that. I mean—Wagner? It was like the baker put a curse on us. Now that I think of it, we should have refused. We should have threatened him with our knives and taken the damn bread. Then there wouldn't have been any problem."

"You had a problem?"

I rubbed my eyes again.

“Sort of. Nothing you could put your finger on. But things started to change after that. It was kind of a turning point. Like, I went back to the university, and I graduated, and I started working for the firm and studying for the bar exam, and I met you and got married. I never did anything like that again. No more bakery attacks.”

“That’s it?”

“Yup, that’s all there was to it.” I drank the last of the beer. Now all six cans were gone. Six pull-tabs lay in the ashtray like scales from a mermaid.

Of course, it wasn’t true that nothing had happened as a result of the bakery attack. There were plenty of things that you could easily have put your finger on, but I didn’t want to talk about them with her.

“So, this friend of yours, what’s he doing now?”

“I have no idea. Something happened, some nothing kind of thing, and we stopped hanging around together. I haven’t seen him since. I don’t know what he’s doing.”

For a while, she didn’t speak. She probably sensed that I wasn’t telling her the whole story. But she wasn’t ready to press me on it.

“Still,” she said, “that’s why you two broke up, isn’t it? The bakery attack was the direct cause.”

“Maybe so. I guess it was more intense than either of us realized. We talked about the relationship of bread to Wagner for days after that. We kept asking ourselves if we had made the right choice. We couldn’t decide. Of course, if you look at it sensibly, we did make the right choice. Nobody got hurt. Everybody got what he wanted. The baker—I still can’t figure out why he did what he did—but anyway, he succeeded with his Wagner propaganda. And we succeeded in stuffing our faces with bread.

“But even so, we had this feeling that we had made a terrible mistake. And somehow, this mistake has just stayed there, unresolved, casting a dark shadow on our lives. That’s why I used the word ‘curse.’ It’s true. It was like a curse.”

“Do you think you still have it?”

I took the six pull-tabs from the ashtray and arranged them into an aluminium ring the size of a bracelet.

“Who knows? I don’t know. I bet the world is full of curses. It’s hard to tell which curse makes any one thing go wrong.”

“That’s not true.” She looked right at me. “You can tell, if you think about it. And unless you, yourself, personally break the curse, it’ll stick with you like a toothache. It’ll torture you till you die. And not just you. Me, too.”

“You?”

“Well, I’m your best friend now, aren’t I? Why do you think we’re both so hungry? I never, ever, once in my life felt a hunger like this until I married you. Don’t you think it’s abnormal? Your curse is working on me, too.”

I nodded. Then I broke up the ring of pull-tabs and put them back in the ashtray. I didn’t know if she was right, but I did feel she was onto something.

The feeling of starvation was back, stronger than ever, and it was giving me a deep headache. Every twinge of my stomach was being transmitted to the core of my head by a clutch cable, as if my insides were equipped with all kinds of complicated machinery.

I took another look at my undersea volcano. The water was even clearer than before—much clearer. Unless you looked closely, you might not even notice it was there. It felt as though the boat were floating in mid-air, with absolutely nothing to support it. I could see every little pebble on the bottom. All I had to do was reach out and touch them.

“We’ve only been living together for two weeks,” she said, “but all this time I’ve been feeling some kind of weird presence.” She looked directly into my eyes and brought her hands together on the tabletop, her fingers interlocking. “Of course, I didn’t know it was a curse until now. This explains everything. You’re under a curse.”

“What kind of presence?”

“Like there’s this heavy, dusty curtain that hasn’t been washed for years, hanging down from the ceiling.”

“Maybe it’s not a curse. Maybe it’s just me,” I said, and smiled.

She did not smile.

“No, it’s not you,” she said.

“Okay, suppose you’re right. Suppose it is a curse. What can I do about it?”

“Attack another bakery. Right away. Now. It’s the only way.”

“Now?”

“Yes. Now. While you’re still hungry. You have to finish what you left unfinished.”

“But it’s the middle of the night. Would a bakery be open now?”

“We’ll find one. Tokyo’s a big city. There must be at least one all-night bakery.”

We got into my old Corolla and started drifting around the streets of Tokyo at 2:30 a.m., looking for a bakery. There we were, me clutching the steering wheel, she in the navigator’s seat, the two of us scanning the street like hungry eagles in search of prey. Stretched out on the backseat, long and stiff as

a dead fish, was a Remington automatic shotgun. Its shells rustled dryly in the pocket of my wife's windbreaker. We had two black ski masks in the glove compartment. Why my wife owned a shotgun, I had no idea. Or ski masks. Neither of us had ever skied. But she didn't explain and I didn't ask. Married life is weird, I felt.

Impeccably equipped, we were nevertheless unable to find an all-night bakery. I drove through the empty streets, from Yoyogi to Shinjuku, on to Yotsuya and Akasaka, Aoyama, Hiroo, Roppongi, Daikanyama, and Shibuya. Late-night Tokyo had all kinds of people and shops, but no bakeries.

Twice we encountered patrol cars. One was huddled at the side of the road, trying to look inconspicuous. The other slowly overtook us and crept past, finally moving off into the distance. Both times I grew damp under the arms, but my wife's concentration never faltered. She was looking for that bakery. Every time she shifted the angle of her body, the shotgun shells in her pocket rustled like buckwheat husks in an old-fashioned pillow.

"Let's forget it," I said. "There aren't any bakeries open at this time of night. You've got to plan for this kind of thing or else—"

"Stop the car!"

I slammed on the brakes.

"This is the place," she said.

The shops along the street had their shutters rolled down, forming dark, silent walls on either side. A barbershop sign hung in the dark like a twisted, chilling glass eye. There was a bright McDonald's hamburger sign some two hundred yards ahead, but nothing else.

"I don't see any bakery," I said.

Without a word, she opened the glove compartment and pulled out a roll of cloth-backed tape. Holding this, she stepped out of the car. I got out my side. Kneeling at the front end, she tore off a length of tape and covered the numbers on the license plate. Then she went around to the back and did the same. There was a practiced efficiency to her movements. I stood on the curb staring at her.

"We're going to take that McDonald's," she said, as coolly as if she were announcing what we would have for dinner.

"McDonald's is not a bakery," I pointed out to her.

"It's like a bakery," she said. "Sometimes you have to compromise. Let's go."

I drove to the McDonald's and parked in the lot. She handed me the blanket-wrapped shotgun.

"I've never fired a gun in my life," I protested.

"You don't have to fire it. Just hold it. Okay? Do as I say. We walk right in, and as soon as they say 'Welcome to McDonald's,' we slip on our masks. Got that?"

"Sure, but—"

"Then you shove the gun in their faces and make all the workers and customers get together. Fast. I'll do the rest."

"But—"

"How many hamburgers do you think we'll need? Thirty?"

"I guess so." With a sigh, I took the shotgun and rolled back the blanket a little. The thing was as heavy as a sandbag and as black as a dark night.

"Do we really have to do this?" I asked, half to her and half to myself.

"Of course we do."

Wearing a McDonald's hat, the girl behind the counter flashed me a McDonald's smile and said, "Welcome to McDonald's." I hadn't thought that girls would work at McDonald's late at night, so the sight of her confused me for a second. But only for a second. I caught myself and pulled on the mask. Confronted with this suddenly masked duo, the girl gaped at us.

Obviously, the McDonald's hospitality manual said nothing about how to deal with a situation like this. She had been starting to form the phrase that comes after "Welcome to McDonald's," but her mouth seemed to stiffen and the words wouldn't come out. Even so, like a crescent moon in the dawn sky, the hint of a professional smile lingered at the edges of her lips.

As quickly as I could manage, I unwrapped the shotgun and aimed it in the direction of the tables, but the only customers there were a young couple—students, probably—and they were facedown on the plastic table, sound asleep. Their two heads and two strawberry-milk-shake cups were aligned on the table like an avant-garde sculpture. They slept the sleep of the dead. They didn't look likely to obstruct our operation, so I swung my shotgun back toward the counter.

All together, there were three McDonald's workers. The girl at the counter, the manager—a guy with a pale, egg-shaped face, probably in his late twenties—and a student type in the kitchen—a thin shadow of a guy with nothing on his face that you could read as an expression. They stood together behind the register, staring into the muzzle of my shotgun like tourists peering down an Incan well. No one screamed, and no one made a threatening move. The gun was so heavy I had to rest the barrel on top of the cash register, my finger on the trigger.

"I'll give you the money," said the manager, his voice hoarse. "They collected it at eleven, so we don't have too much, but you can have everything. We're insured."

"Lower the front shutter and turn off the sign," said my wife.

"Wait a minute," said the manager. "I can't do that. I'll be held responsible if I close up without permission."

My wife repeated her order, slowly. He seemed torn.

"You'd better do what she says," I warned him.

He looked at the muzzle of the gun stop the register, then at my wife, and then back at the gun. He finally resigned himself to the inevitable. He turned off the sign and hit a switch on an electrical panel that lowered the shutter. I kept my eye on him, worried that he might hit a burglar alarm, but apparently McDonald's don't have burglar alarms. Maybe it had never occurred to anybody to attack one.

The front shutter made a huge racket when it closed, like an empty bucket being smashed with a baseball bat, but the couple sleeping at their table was still out cold. Talk about a sound sleep: I hadn't seen anything like that in years.

"Thirty Big Macs. For takeout," said my wife.

"Let me just give you the money," pleaded the manager. "I'll give you more than you need. You can go buy food somewhere else. This is going to mess up my accounts and—"

"You'd better do what she says," I said again.

The three of them went into the kitchen area together and started making the thirty Big Macs. The student grilled the burgers, the manager put them in buns, and the girl wrapped them up. Nobody said a word.

I leaned against a big refrigerator, aiming the gun toward the griddle. The meat patties were lined up on the griddle like brown polka dots, sizzling. The sweat smell of grilling meat burrowed into every pore of my body like a swarm of microscopic bugs, dissolving into my blood and circulating to the farthest corners, then massing together inside my hermetically sealed hunger cavern, clinging to its pink walls.

A pile of white-wrapped burgers was growing nearby. I wanted to grab and tear into them, but I could not be certain that such an act would be consistent with our objective. I had to wait. In the hot kitchen area, I started sweating under my ski mask.

The McDonald's people sneaked glances at the muzzle of the shotgun. I scratched my ears with the little finger of my left hand. My ears always get itchy when I'm nervous. Jabbing my finger into an ear through the wool, I was making the gun barrel wobble up and down, which seemed to bother them. It couldn't

have gone off accidentally, because I had the safety on, but they didn't know that and I wasn't about to tell them.

My wife counted the finished hamburgers and put them into two shopping bags, fifteen burgers to a bag.

"Why do you have to do this?" the girl asked me. "Why don't you just take the money and buy something you like? What's the good of eating thirty Big Macs?"

I shook my head.

My wife explained, "We're sorry, really. But there weren't any bakeries open. If there had been, we would have attacked a bakery."

That seemed to satisfy them. At least they didn't ask any more questions. Then my wife ordered two large Cokes from the girl and paid for them.

"We're stealing bread, nothing else," she said. The girl responded with a complicated head movement, sort of like nodding and sort of like shaking. She was probably trying to do both at the same time. I thought I had some idea how she felt.

My wife then pulled a ball of twine from her pocket—she came equipped—and tied the three to a post as expertly as if she were sewing on buttons. She asked if the cord hurt, or if anyone wanted to go to the toilet, but no one said a word. I wrapped the gun in the blanket, she picked up the shopping bags, and out we went. The customers at the table were still asleep, like a couple of deep-sea fish. What would it have taken to rouse them from a sleep so deep?

We drove for a half hour, found an empty parking lot by a building, and pulled in. There we ate hamburgers and drank our Cokes. I sent six Big Macs down to the cavern of my stomach, and she ate four. That left twenty Big Macs in the back seat. Our hunger—that hunger that had felt as if it could go on forever—vanished as the dawn was breaking. The first light of the sun dyed the building's filthy walls purple and made a giant SONY BETA ad tower glow with painful intensity. Soon the whine of highway truck tires was joined by the chirping of birds. The American Armed Forces radio was playing cowboy music. We shared a cigarette. Afterward, she rested her head on my shoulder.

“Still, was it really necessary for us to do this?” I asked.

“Of course it was!” With one deep sigh, she fell asleep against me. She felt as soft and as light as a kitten.

Alone now, I leaned over the edge of my boat and looked down to the bottom of the sea. The volcano was gone. The water’s calm surface reflected the blue of the sky. Little waves—like silk pajamas fluttering in a breeze—lapped against the side of the boat. There was nothing else.

I stretched out in the bottom of the boat and closed my eyes, waiting for the rising tide to carry me where I belonged.

On Seeing the 100% Perfect Girl One Beautiful April Morning

One beautiful April morning, on a narrow side street in Tokyo's fashionable Harujuku neighbourhood, I walked past the 100% perfect girl.

Tell you the truth, she's not that good-looking. She doesn't stand out in any way. Her clothes are nothing special. The back of her hair is still bent out of shape from sleep. She isn't young, either – must be near thirty, not even close to a "girl," properly speaking. But still, I know from fifty yards away: She's the 100% perfect girl for me. The moment I see her, there's a rumbling in my chest, and my mouth is as dry as a desert.

Maybe you have your own particular favorite type of girl – one with slim ankles, say, or big eyes, or graceful fingers, or you're drawn for no good reason to girls who take their time with every meal. I have my own preferences, of course. Sometimes in a restaurant I'll catch myself staring at the girl at the next table to mine because I like the shape of her nose.

But no one can insist that his 100% perfect girl correspond to some preconceived type. Much as I like noses, I can't recall the shape of hers – or even if she had one. All I can remember for sure is that she was no great beauty. It's weird.

"Yesterday on the street I passed the 100% girl," I tell someone.

"Yeah?" he says. "Good-looking?"

"Not really."

"Your favourite type, then?"

"I don't know. I can't seem to remember anything about her – the shape of her eyes or the size of her breasts."

“Strange.”

“Yeah. Strange.”

“So anyhow,” he says, already bored, “what did you do? Talk to her? Follow her?”

“Nah. Just passed her on the street.”

She’s walking east to west, and I west to east. It’s a really nice April morning.

Wish I could talk to her. Half an hour would be plenty: just ask her about herself, tell her about myself, and – what I’d really like to do – explain to her the complexities of fate that have led to our passing each other on a side street in Harajuku on a beautiful April morning in 1981. This was something sure to be crammed full of warm secrets, like an antique clock build when peace filled the world.

After talking, we’d have lunch somewhere, maybe see a Woody Allen movie, stop by a hotel bar for cocktails. With any kind of luck, we might end up in bed.

Potentiality knocks on the door of my heart.

Now the distance between us has narrowed to fifteen yards.

How can I approach her? What should I say?

“Good morning, miss. Do you think you could spare half an hour for a little conversation?”

Ridiculous. I’d sound like an insurance salesman.

“Pardon me, but would you happen to know if there is an all-night cleaners in the neighbourhood?”

No, this is just as ridiculous. I'm not carrying any laundry, for one thing. Who's going to buy a line like that?

Maybe the simple truth would do. "Good morning. You are the 100% perfect girl for me."

No, she wouldn't believe it. Or even if she did, she might not want to talk to me. Sorry, she could say, I might be the 100% perfect girl for you, but you're not the 100% boy for me. It could happen. And if I found myself in that situation, I'd probably go to pieces. I'd never recover from the shock. I'm thirty-two, and that's what growing older is all about.

We pass in front of a flower shop. A small, warm air mass touches my skin. The asphalt is damp, and I catch the scent of roses. I can't bring myself to speak to her. She wears a white sweater, and in her right hand she holds a crisp white envelope lacking only a stamp. So: She's written somebody a letter, maybe spent the whole night writing, to judge from the sleepy look in her eyes. The envelope could contain every secret she's ever had.

I take a few more strides and turn: She's lost in the crowd.

Now, of course, I know exactly what I should have said to her. It would have been a long speech, though, far too long for me to have delivered it properly. The ideas I come up with are never very practical.

Oh, well. It would have started "Once upon a time" and ended "A sad story, don't you think?"

Once upon a time, there lived a boy and a girl. The boy was eighteen and the girl sixteen. He was not unusually handsome, and she was not especially beautiful. They were just an ordinary lonely boy and an ordinary lonely girl, like all the others. But they believed with their whole hearts that somewhere in the world there lived the 100% perfect boy and the 100% perfect girl for them. Yes, they believed in a miracle. And that miracle actually happened.

One day the two came upon each other on the corner of a street.

"This is amazing," he said. "I've been looking for you all my life. You may not believe this, but you're the 100% perfect girl for me."

“And you,” she said to him, “are the 100% perfect boy for me, exactly as I’d pictured you in every detail. It’s like a dream.”

They sat on a park bench, held hands, and told each other their stories hour after hour. They were not lonely anymore. They had found and been found by their 100% perfect other. What a wonderful thing it is to find and be found by your 100% perfect other. It’s a miracle, a cosmic miracle.

As they sat and talked, however, a tiny, tiny sliver of doubt took root in their hearts: Was it really all right for one’s dreams to come true so easily?

And so, when there came a momentary lull in their conversation, the boy said to the girl, “Let’s test ourselves – just once. If we really are each other’s 100% perfect lovers, then sometime, somewhere, we will meet again without fail. And when that happens, and we know that we are the 100% perfect ones, we’ll marry then and there. What do you think?”

“Yes,” she said, “that is exactly what we should do.”

And so they parted, she to the east, and he to the west.

The test they had agreed upon, however, was utterly unnecessary. They should never have undertaken it, because they really and truly were each other’s 100% perfect lovers, and it was a miracle that they had ever met. But it was impossible for them to know this, young as they were. The cold, indifferent waves of fate proceeded to toss them unmercifully.

One winter, both the boy and the girl came down with the season’s terrible influenza, and after drifting for weeks between life and death they lost all memory of their earlier years. When they awoke, their heads were as empty as the young D. H. Lawrence’s piggy bank.

They were two bright, determined young people, however, and through their unremitting efforts they were able to acquire once again the knowledge and feeling that qualified them to return as full-fledged members of society. Heaven be praised, they became truly upstanding citizens who knew how to transfer from one subway line to another, who were fully capable of sending a special-delivery letter at the post office. Indeed, they even experienced love again, sometimes as much as 75% or even 85% love.

Time passed with shocking swiftness, and soon the boy was thirty-two, the girl thirty.

One beautiful April morning, in search of a cup of coffee to start the day, the boy was walking from west to east, while the girl, intending to send a special-delivery letter, was walking from east to west, but along the same narrow street in the Harajuku neighbourhood of Tokyo. They passed each other in the very center of the street. The faintest gleam of their lost memories glimmered for the briefest moment in their hearts. Each felt a rumbling in their chest. And they knew:

She is the 100% perfect girl for me.

He is the 100% perfect boy for me.

But the glow of their memories was far too weak, and their thoughts no longer had the clarity of fourteen years earlier. Without a word, they passed each other, disappearing into the crowd. Forever.

A sad story, don't you think?

Yes, that's it, that is what I should have said to her.

Samsa In Love

He lay flat on his back on the bed, looking at the ceiling. It took time for his eyes to adjust to the lack of light. The ceiling seemed to be a common, everyday ceiling of the sort one might find anywhere. Once, it had been painted white, or possibly a pale cream. Years of dust and dirt, however, had given it the color of spoiled milk. It had no ornament, no defining characteristic. No argument, no message. It fulfilled its structural role but aspired to nothing further.

There was a tall window on one side of the room, to his left, but its curtain had been removed and thick boards nailed across the frame. An inch or so of space had been left between the horizontal boards, whether on purpose or not wasn't clear; rays of morning sun shone through, casting a row of bright parallel lines on the floor. Why was the window barricaded in such a rough fashion? Was a major storm or tornado in the offing? Or was it to keep someone from getting in? Or to prevent someone (him, perhaps?) from leaving?

Still on his back, he slowly turned his head and examined the rest of the room. He could see no furniture, apart from the bed on which he lay. No chest of drawers, no desk, no chair. No painting, clock, or mirror on the walls. No lamp or light. Nor could he make out any rug or carpet on the floor. Just bare wood. The walls were covered with wallpaper of a complex design, but it was so old and faded that in the weak light it was next to impossible to make out what the design was.

The room had perhaps once served as a normal bedroom. Yet now all vestiges of human life had been stripped away. The only thing that remained was his solitary bed in the center. And it had no bedding. No sheets, no coverlet, no pillow. Just an ancient mattress.

Samsa had no idea where he was, or what he should do. All he knew was that he was now a human whose name was Gregor Samsa. And how did he know that? Perhaps someone had whispered it in his ear while he lay sleeping? But who had he been before he became Gregor Samsa? What had he been?

The moment he began contemplating that question, however, something like a black column of mosquitoes swirled up in his head. The column grew thicker and denser as it moved to a softer part of his brain, buzzing all the way. Samsa decided to stop thinking. Trying to think anything through at this point was too great a burden.

In any case, he had to learn how to move his body. He couldn't lie there staring up at the ceiling forever. The posture left him much too vulnerable. He had no chance of surviving an attack—by predatory birds,

for example. As a first step, he tried to move his fingers. There were ten of them, long things affixed to his two hands. Each was equipped with a number of joints, which made synchronizing their movements very complicated. To make matters worse, his body felt numb, as though it were immersed in a sticky, heavy liquid, so that it was difficult to send strength to his extremities.

Nevertheless, after repeated attempts and failures, by closing his eyes and focussing his mind he was able to bring his fingers more under control. Little by little, he was learning how to make them work together. As his fingers became operational, the numbness that had enveloped his body withdrew. In its place—like a dark and sinister reef revealed by a retreating tide—came an excruciating pain.

It took Samsa some time to realize that the pain was hunger. This ravenous desire for food was new to him, or at least he had no memory of experiencing anything like it. It was as if he had not had a bite to eat for a week. As if the center of his body were now a cavernous void. His bones creaked; his muscles clenched; his organs twitched.

Unable to withstand the pain any longer, Samsa put his elbows on the mattress and, bit by bit, pushed himself up. His spine emitted several low and sickening cracks in the process. My God, Samsa thought, how long have I been lying here? His body protested each move. But he struggled through, marshalling his strength, until, at last, he managed to sit up.

Samsa looked down in dismay at his naked body. How ill-formed it was! Worse than ill-formed. It possessed no means of self-defense. Smooth white skin (covered by only a perfunctory amount of hair) with fragile blue blood vessels visible through it; a soft, unprotected belly; ludicrous, impossibly shaped genitals; gangly arms and legs (just two of each!); a scrawny, breakable neck; an enormous, misshapen head with a tangle of stiff hair on its crown; two absurd ears, jutting out like a pair of seashells. Was this thing really him? Could a body so preposterous, so easy to destroy (no shell for protection, no weapons for attack), survive in the world? Why hadn't he been turned into a fish? Or a sunflower? A fish or a sunflower made sense. More sense, anyway, than this human being, Gregor Samsa.

Steeling himself, he lowered his legs over the edge of the bed until the soles of his feet touched the floor. The unexpected cold of the bare wood made him gasp. After several failed attempts that sent him crashing to the floor, at last he was able to balance on his two feet. He stood there, bruised and sore, one hand clutching the frame of the bed for support. His head was inordinately heavy and hard to hold

up. Sweat streamed from his armpits, and his genitals shrank from the stress. He had to take several deep breaths before his constricted muscles began to relax.

Once he was used to standing, he had to learn to walk. Walking on two legs amounted to a kind of torture, each movement an exercise in pain. No matter how he looked at it, advancing his right and left legs one after the other was a bizarre proposition that flouted all natural laws, while the precarious distance from his eyes to the ground made him cringe in fear. He had to learn how to coordinate his hip and knee joints. Each time he took a step forward, his knees shook, and he steadied himself against the wall with both hands.

But he knew that he could not remain in this room forever. If he didn't find food, and quickly, his starving belly would consume his own flesh, and he would cease to exist.

He tottered toward the door, pawing at the wall as he went. The journey seemed to take hours, although he had no way of measuring the time, except by the pain. His movements were awkward, his pace snail-like. He couldn't advance without leaning on something for support. On the street, his best hope would be that people saw him as disabled.

He grasped the doorknob and pulled. It didn't budge. A push yielded the same result. Next, he turned the knob to the right and pulled. The door opened partway with a slight squeak. He poked his head through the opening and looked out. The hallway was deserted. It was as quiet as the bottom of the ocean. He extended his left leg through the doorway, swung the upper half of his body out, with one hand on the doorframe, and followed with his right leg. He moved slowly down the corridor, hands on the wall.

There were four doors in the hallway, including the one he had just used. All were identical, fashioned of the same dark wood. What, or who, lay beyond them? He longed to open them and find out. Perhaps then he might begin to understand the mysterious circumstances in which he found himself. Or at least discover a clue of some sort. Nevertheless, he passed by each of the doors, making as little noise as possible. The need to fill his belly trumped his curiosity. He had to find something substantial to eat.

And now he knew where to find it.

Just follow the smell, he thought, sniffing. It was the aroma of cooked food, tiny particles that wafted to him through the air. The information gathered by olfactory receptors in his nose was being transmitted to his brain, producing an anticipation so vivid, a craving so violent, that he could feel his innards being slowly twisted, as if by an experienced torturer. Saliva flooded his mouth.

To reach the source of the aroma, however, he would have to go down a steep flight of stairs, seventeen of them. He was having a hard enough time walking on level ground—navigating those steps would be a true nightmare. He grabbed the bannister with both hands and began his descent. His skinny ankles felt ready to collapse under his weight, and he almost went tumbling down the steps.

And what was on Samsa's mind as he made his way down the staircase? Fish and sunflowers, for the most part. Had I been transformed into a fish or a sunflower, he thought, I could have lived out my life in peace, without struggling up and down steps like these.

When Samsa reached the bottom of the seventeen steps, he pulled himself upright, summoned his remaining strength, and hobbled in the direction of the enticing smell. He crossed the high-ceilinged entrance hall and stepped through the dining room's open doorway. The food was laid out on a large oval table. There were five chairs, but no sign of people. White wisps of steam rose from the serving plates. A glass vase bearing a dozen lilies occupied the center of the table. Four places were set with napkins and cutlery, untouched, by the look of it. It seemed as though people had been sitting down to eat their breakfast a few minutes earlier, when some sudden and unforeseen event sent them all running off. What had happened? Where had they gone? Or where had they been taken? Would they return to eat their breakfast?

But Samsa had no time to ponder such questions. Falling into the nearest chair, he grabbed whatever food he could reach with his bare hands and stuffed it into his mouth, quite ignoring the knives, spoons, forks, and napkins. He tore bread into pieces and downed it without jam or butter, gobbled fat boiled sausages whole, devoured hard-boiled eggs with such speed that he almost forgot to peel them, scooped up handfuls of still warm mashed potatoes, and plucked pickles with his fingers. He chewed it all together, and washed the remnants down with water from a jug. Taste was of no consequence. Bland or delicious, spicy or sour—it was all the same to him. All that mattered was filling that empty cavern inside him. He ate with total concentration, as if racing against time. He was so fixated on eating that once, as he was licking his fingers, he sank his teeth into them by mistake. Scraps of food flew everywhere, and when a platter fell to the floor and smashed he paid no attention whatsoever.

By the time Samsa had eaten his fill and sat back to catch his breath, almost nothing was left, and the dining table was an awful sight. It looked as if a flock of quarrelsome crows had flown in through an open window, gorged themselves, and flown away again. The only thing untouched was the vase of lilies; had there been less food, he might have devoured them as well.

He sat, dazed, in his chair for a long while. Hands on the table, he gazed at the lilies through half-closed eyes and took long, slow breaths, while the food he had eaten worked its way through his digestive system, from his esophagus to his intestines. A sense of satiety came over him like a rising tide. He picked up a metal pot and poured coffee into a white ceramic cup. The pungent fragrance recalled something to him. It did not come directly, however; it arrived in stages. It was a strange feeling, as if he were recollecting the present from the future. As if time had somehow been split in two, so that memory and experience revolved within a closed cycle, each following the other. He poured a liberal amount of cream into his coffee, stirred it with his finger, and drank. Although the coffee had cooled, a slight warmth remained. He held it in his mouth before warily allowing it to trickle down his throat. He found that it calmed him to a degree.

All of a sudden, he felt cold. The intensity of his hunger had blotted out his other senses. Now that he was sated, the morning chill on his skin made him tremble. The fire had gone out. None of the heaters seemed to be turned on. On top of that, he was stark naked—even his feet were bare.

He knew ___ that he had to find something to wear. He was too cold like this. Moreover, his lack of clothes was bound to be an issue should someone appear. There might be a knock at the door. Or the people who had been about to sit down to breakfast a short while before might return. Who knew how they would react if they found him in this state?

He understood all this. He did not surmise it, or perceive it in an intellectual way; he knew it, pure and simple. Samsa had no idea where such knowledge came from. Perhaps it was related to those revolving memories he was having.

He stood up from his chair and walked out to the front hall. He was still awkward, but now, at least, he could stand and walk on two legs without clinging to something. There was a wrought-iron umbrella stand in the hall that held several walking sticks. He pulled out a black one made of oak to help him move around; just grasping its sturdy handle relaxed and encouraged him. And now he would have a weapon to fight back with should birds attack. He went to the window and looked out through the crack in the lace curtains.

The house faced onto a street. It was not a very big street. Nor were many people on it. Nevertheless, he noted that every person who passed was fully clothed. The clothes were of various colors and styles. Men and women wore different garments. Shoes of stiff leather covered their feet. A few sported brightly polished boots. He could hear the soles of their footwear clack on the cobblestones. Many of the men and women wore hats. They seemed to think nothing of walking on two legs and keeping their genitals covered. Samsa compared his reflection in the hall's full-length mirror with the people walking

outside. The man he saw in the mirror was a shabby, frail-looking creature. His belly was smeared with gravy, and bread crumbs clung to his pubic hair like bits of cotton. He swept the filth away with his hand.

Yes, he thought again, I must find something to cover my body.

He looked out at the street once more, checking for birds. But there were no birds in sight.

The ground floor of the house consisted of the hallway, the dining room, a kitchen, and a living room. As far as he could tell, however, none of those rooms held anything resembling clothes. Which meant that the putting on and taking off of clothing must occur somewhere else. Perhaps in a room on the second floor.

Samsa returned to the staircase and began to climb. He was surprised to discover how much easier it was to go up than to go down. Clutching the railing, he was able to make his way up the seventeen steps at a much faster rate and without undue pain or fear, stopping several times along the way (though never for long) to catch his breath.

One might say that luck was with him, for none of the doors on the second floor were locked. All he had to do was turn the knob and push, and each door swung open. There were four rooms in total, and, apart from the freezing room with the bare floor in which he had woken, all were comfortably furnished. Each had a bed with clean bedding, a dresser, a writing desk, a lamp affixed to the ceiling or the wall, and a rug or a carpet with an intricate pattern. Books were neatly lined up in their cases, and framed oil paintings of landscapes adorned the walls. Each room had a glass vase filled with bright flowers. None had rough boards nailed across the windows. Their windows had lace curtains, through which sunlight poured like a blessing from above. The beds all showed signs of someone's having slept in them. He could see the imprint of heads on pillows.

Don't look a gift horse in the ass either.

"Don't look a gift horse in the ass, either."

Samsa found a dressing gown his size in the closet of the largest room. It looked like something he might be able to manage. He hadn't a clue what to do with the other clothes—how to put them on, how to wear them. They were just too complicated: too many buttons, for one thing, and he was unsure how to tell front from back, or top from bottom. Which was supposed to go on the outside, and which underneath? The dressing gown, on the other hand, was simple, practical, and quite free of ornament. Its light, soft cloth felt good against his skin, and its color was dark blue. He even turned up a matching pair of slippers.

He pulled the dressing gown over his naked body and, after much trial and error, succeeded in fastening the belt around his waist. He looked at himself in the mirror, clad now in gown and slippers. This was certainly better than walking around naked. It wasn't as warm as it might have been, to be sure, but as long as he remained indoors it would stave off the cold. Best of all, he no longer had to worry that his soft skin would be exposed to vicious birds.

When the doorbell rang, Samsa was dozing in the biggest room (and in the biggest bed) in the house. It was warm under the feather quilts, as cozy as if he were sleeping in an egg. He woke from a dream. He couldn't remember it in detail, but it had been pleasant and cheerful. The bell echoing through the house, however, yanked him back to cold reality.

He dragged himself from the bed, fastened his gown, put on his dark-blue slippers, grabbed his black walking stick, and, hand on railing, tottered down the stairs. It was far easier than it had been on the first occasion. Still, the danger of falling was ever present. He could not afford to let down his guard. Keeping a close eye on his feet, he picked his way down the stairs one step at a time, as the doorbell continued to ring. Whoever was pushing the buzzer had to be a most impatient and stubborn person.

Walking stick in his left hand, Samsa approached the front door. He twisted the knob to the right and pulled, and the door swung in.

A little woman was standing outside. A very little woman. It was a wonder she was able to reach the buzzer. When he looked more closely, however, he realized that the issue wasn't her size. It was her back, which was bent forward in a perpetual stoop. This made her appear small, though, in fact, her frame was of normal dimensions. She had fastened her hair with a rubber band to prevent it from spilling over her face. The hair was a deep chestnut and very abundant. She was dressed in a battered tweed jacket and a full, loose-fitting skirt that covered her ankles. A striped cotton scarf was wrapped around her neck. She wore no hat. Her shoes were of the tall lace-up variety, and she appeared to be in her early twenties. There was still something of the girl about her. Her eyes were big, her nose small, and her lips twisted a little to one side, like a skinny moon. Her dark eyebrows formed two straight lines across her forehead, giving her a skeptical look.

"Is this the Samsa residence?" the woman said, craning her head up to look at him. Then she twisted her body all over. Much the way the earth twists during a violent earthquake.

He was taken aback at first, but pulled himself together. "Yes," he said. Since he was Gregor Samsa, this was likely the Samsa residence. At any rate, there could be no harm in saying so.

Yet the woman seemed to find his answer less than satisfying. A slight frown creased her brow. Perhaps she had picked up a note of confusion in his voice.

"So this is really the Samsa residence?" she said in a sharp voice. Like an experienced gatekeeper grilling a shabby visitor.

"I am Gregor Samsa," Samsa said, in as relaxed a tone as possible. Of this, at least, he was sure.

"I hope you're right," she said, reaching down for a cloth bag at her feet. It was black, and seemed very heavy. Worn through in places, it had doubtless had a number of owners. "So let's get started."

She strode into the house without waiting for a reply. Samsa closed the door behind her. She stood there, looking him up and down. It seemed that his gown and slippers had aroused her suspicions.

"I appear to have woken you," she said, her voice cold.

"That's perfectly all right," Samsa replied. He could tell by her dark expression that his clothes were a poor fit for the occasion. "I must apologize for my appearance," he went on. "There are reasons. . . ."

The woman ignored this. "So, then?" she said through pursed lips.

"So, then?" Samsa echoed.

"So, then, where is the lock that's causing the problem?" the woman said.

"The lock?"

"The lock that's broken," she said. "You asked us to come and repair it."

“Ah,” Samsa said. “The broken lock.”

Samsa ransacked his mind. No sooner had he managed to focus on one thing, however, than that black column of mosquitoes rose up again.

“I haven’t heard anything in particular about a lock,” he said. “My guess is it belongs to one of the doors on the second floor.”

The woman glowered at him. “Your guess?” she said, peering up at his face. Her voice had grown even icier. An eyebrow arched in disbelief. “One of the doors?” she went on.

Samsa could feel his face flush. His ignorance regarding the lock struck him as most embarrassing. He cleared his throat to speak, but the words did not come.

“Mr. Samsa, are your parents in? I think it’s better if I talk to them.”

“They seem to have gone out on an errand,” Samsa said.

“An errand?” she said, appalled. “In the midst of these troubles?”

“I really have no idea. When I woke up this morning, everyone was gone,” Samsa said.

“Good grief,” the young woman said. She heaved a long sigh. “We did tell them that someone would come at this time today.”

“I’m terribly sorry.”

The woman stood there for a moment. Then, slowly, her arched eyebrow descended, and she looked at the black walking stick in Samsa’s left hand. “Are your legs bothering you, Gregor Samsa?”

“Yes, a little,” he prevaricated.

Once again, the woman writhed suddenly. Samsa had no idea what this action meant or what its purpose was. Yet he was drawn by instinct to the complex sequence of movements.

“Well, what’s to be done,” the woman said in a tone of resignation. “Let’s take a look at those doors on the second floor. I came over the bridge and all the way across town through this terrible upheaval to get here. Risked my life, in fact. So it wouldn’t make much sense to say, ‘Oh, really, no one is here? I’ll come back later,’ would it?”

This terrible upheaval? Samsa couldn’t grasp what she was talking about. What awful change was taking place? But he decided not to ask for details. Better to avoid exposing his ignorance even further.

Back bent, the young woman took the heavy black bag in her right hand and toiled up the stairs, much like a crawling insect. Samsa labored after her, his hand on the railing. Her creeping gait aroused his sympathy—it reminded him of something.

The woman stood at the top of the steps and surveyed the hallway. “So,” she said, “one of these four doors probably has a broken lock, right?”

Samsa’s face reddened. “Yes,” he said. “One of these. It could be the one at the end of the hall on the left, possibly,” he said, faltering. This was the door to the bare room in which he had woken that morning.

“It could be,” the woman said in a voice as lifeless as an extinguished bonfire. “Possibly.” She turned around to examine Samsa’s face.

“Somehow or other,” Samsa said.

The woman sighed again. “Gregor Samsa,” she said dryly. “You are a true joy to talk to. Such a rich vocabulary, and you always get to the point.” Then her tone changed. “But no matter. Let’s check the door on the left at the end of the hall first.”

The woman went to the door. She turned the knob back and forth and pushed, and it opened inward. The room was as it had been before: only a bed with a bare mattress that was less than clean. The floor bare as well. Boards nailed across the window. The woman must have noticed all this, but she showed no sign of surprise. Her demeanor suggested that similar rooms could be found all over the city.

She squatted down, opened the black bag, pulled out a white flannel cloth, and spread it on the floor. Then she took out a number of tools, which she lined up carefully on the cloth, like a hardened torturer displaying the sinister instruments of his trade before some poor martyr.

Selecting a wire of medium thickness, she inserted it into the lock and, with a practiced hand, manipulated it from a variety of angles. Her eyes were narrowed in concentration, her ears alert for the slightest sound. Next, she chose a thinner wire and repeated the process. Her face grew sombre, and her mouth twisted into a ruthless shape, like a Chinese sword. She took a large flashlight and, with a black look in her eyes, began to examine the lock in detail.

“Do you have the key for this lock?” she asked Samsa.

“I haven’t the slightest idea where the key is,” he answered honestly.

“Ah, Gregor Samsa, sometimes you make me want to die,” she said.

After that, she quite ignored him. She selected a screwdriver from the tools lined up on the cloth and proceeded to remove the lock from the door. Her movements were slow and cautious. She paused from time to time to twist and writhe about as she had before.

While he stood behind her, watching her move in that fashion, Samsa’s own body began to respond in a strange way. He was growing hot all over, and his nostrils were flaring. His mouth was so dry that he produced a loud gulp whenever he swallowed. His earlobes itched. And his sexual organ, which had dangled in such a sloppy way until that point, began to stiffen and expand. As it rose, a bulge developed at the front of his gown. He was in the dark, however, as to what that might signify.

Having extracted the lock, the young woman took it to the window to inspect in the sunlight that shone between the boards. She poked it with a thin wire and gave it a hard shake to see how it sounded, her face glum and her lips pursed. Finally, she sighed again and turned to face Samsa.

“The insides are shot,” the woman said. “It’s kaput. This is the one, just like you said.”

“That’s good,” Samsa said.

“No, it’s not,” the woman said. “There’s no way I can repair it here on the spot. It’s a special kind of lock. I’ll have to take it back and let my father or one of my older brothers work on it. They may be able to fix it. I’m just an apprentice—I can only handle regular locks.”

“I see,” Samsa said. So this young woman had a father and several brothers. A whole family of locksmiths.

“Actually, one of my brothers was supposed to come today, but because of the commotion going on out there they sent me instead. The city is riddled with checkpoints.” She looked back down at the lock in her hands. “But how did the lock get broken like this? It’s weird. Someone must have gouged out the insides with a special kind of tool. There’s no other way to explain it.”

Again she writhed. Her arms rotated as if she were a swimmer practicing a new stroke. He found the action mesmerizing and very exciting.

Samsa made up his mind. “May I ask you a question?” he said.

“A question?” she said, casting him a dubious glance. “I can’t imagine what, but go ahead.”

“Why do you twist about like that every so often?”

She looked at Samsa with her lips slightly parted. “Twist about?” She thought for a moment. “You mean like this?” She demonstrated the motion for him.

“Yes, that’s it.”

“My brassiere doesn’t fit,” she said dourly. “That’s all.”

“Brassiere?” Samsa said in a dull voice. It was a word he couldn’t call up from his memory.

“A brassiere. You know what that is, don’t you?” the woman said. “Or do you find it strange that hunchback women wear brassieres? Do you think it’s presumptuous of us?”

“Hunchback?” Samsa said. Yet another word that was sucked into that vast emptiness he carried within. He had no idea what she was talking about. Still, he knew that he should say something.

“No, I don’t think so at all,” he mumbled.

“Listen up. We hunchbacks have two breasts, just like other women, and we have to use a brassiere to support them. We can’t walk around like cows with our udders swinging.”

“Of course not.” Samsa was lost.

“But brassieres aren’t designed for us—they get loose. We’re built differently from regular women, right? So we have to twist around every so often to put them back in place. Hunchbacks have more problems than you can imagine. Is that why you’ve been staring at me from behind? Is that how you get your kicks?”

“No, not at all. I was just curious why you were doing that.”

So, he inferred, a brassiere was an apparatus designed to hold the breasts in place, and a hunchback was a person with this woman’s particular build. There was so much in this world that he had to learn.

“Are you sure you’re not making fun of me?” the woman asked.

“I’m not making fun of you.”

The woman cocked her head and looked up at Samsa. She could tell that he was speaking the truth—there didn’t seem to be any malice in him. He was just a little weak in the head, that was all. He was probably a few years older than she was. As well as being lame, he seemed to be intellectually

challenged. But he was from a good family, and his manners were impeccable. He was nice-looking, too, though a little scrawny and pasty-faced.

It was then that she noticed the protuberance pushing out the lower part of his gown.

“What the hell is that?” she said stonily. “What’s that bulge doing there?”

Samsa looked down at the front of his gown. His organ was really very swollen. He could surmise from her tone that its condition was somehow inappropriate.

“I get it,” she spat out. “You’re wondering what it would be like to fuck a hunchback, aren’t you?”

“Fuck?” he said. One more word he couldn’t place.

“You imagine that, since a hunchback is bent at the waist, you can just take her from the rear with no problem, right?” the woman said. “Believe me, there are lots of perverts like you around, who seem to think that we’ll let you do what you want because we’re hunchbacks. Well, think again, buster. We’re not that easy!”

“I’m very confused,” Samsa said. “If I have displeased you in some way, I am truly sorry. I apologize. Please forgive me. I meant no harm. I’ve been unwell, and there are so many things I don’t understand.”

“All right, I get the picture.” She sighed. “You’re a little slow, right? But your wiener is in great shape. Those are the breaks, I guess.”

“I’m sorry,” Samsa said again.

“Forget it.” She relented. “I’ve got four no-good brothers at home, and since I was a little girl they’ve shown me everything. They treat it like a big joke. Mean buggers, all of them. So I’m not kidding when I say I know the score.”

She squatted to put her tools back in the bag, wrapping the broken lock in the flannel and gently placing it alongside.

“I’m taking the lock home with me,” she said, standing up. “Tell your parents. We’ll either fix it or replace it. If we have to get a new one, though, it may take some time, things being the way they are. Don’t forget to tell them, O.K.? Do you follow me? Will you remember?”

“I’ll tell them,” Samsa said.

She walked slowly down the staircase, Samsa trailing behind. They made quite a study in contrasts: she looked as if she were crawling on all fours, while he tilted backward in a most unnatural way. Yet their pace was identical. Samsa was trying hard to quell his “bulge,” but the thing just wouldn’t return to its former state. Watching her movements from behind as she descended the stairs made his heart pound. Hot, fresh blood coursed through his veins. The stubborn bulge persisted.

“As I told you before, one of my brothers was supposed to come today,” the woman said when they reached the front door. “But the streets are crawling with soldiers and tanks. People are being rounded up. That’s why the men in my family can’t go out. Once you get arrested, there’s no telling when you’ll return. That’s why I was sent. All the way across Prague, alone. ‘No one will notice a hunchback girl,’ they said.”

“Tanks?” Samsa murmured.

“Yeah, lots of them. Tanks with cannons and machine guns. Your cannon is impressive,” she said, pointing at the bulge beneath his gown, “but these cannons are bigger and harder, and a lot more lethal. Let’s hope everyone in your family makes it back safely.”

Samsa decided to take the bull by the horns. “Would it be possible to meet again?” he said.

I have the new list of approved tweets.

“I have the new list of approved tweets.”

The young woman craned her head at Samsa. “Are you saying you want to see me again?”

“Yes. I want to see you one more time.”

“With your thing sticking out like that?”

Samsa looked down again at the bulge. “I don’t know how to explain it, but that has nothing to do with my feelings. It must be some kind of heart problem.”

“No kidding,” she said, impressed. “A heart problem, you say. That’s an interesting way to look at it. Never heard that one before.”

“You see, it’s out of my control.”

“And it has nothing to do with fucking?”

“Fucking isn’t on my mind. Really.”

“So let me get this straight. When your thing grows big and hard like that, it’s not your mind but your heart that’s causing it?”

Samsa nodded in assent.

“Swear to God?” the woman said.

“God,” Samsa echoed. Another word he couldn’t remember having heard before. He fell silent.

The woman gave a weary shake of her head. She twisted and turned again to adjust her brassiere. “Forget it. It seems God left Prague a few days ago. Let’s forget about him.”

“So can I see you again?” Samsa asked.

A new look came over the girl's face—her eyes seemed fixed on some distant and misty landscape. "You really want to see me again?"

Samsa nodded.

"What would we do?"

"We could talk together."

"About what?" the woman asked.

"About lots of things."

"Just talk?"

"There is so much I want to ask you," Samsa said.

"About what?"

"About this world. About you. About me. I feel like there are so many things we need to talk about. Tanks, for example. And God. And brassieres. And locks."

Another silence fell over the two of them.

"I don't know," the woman said at last. She shook her head slowly, but the chill in her voice was less noticeable. "You're better brought up than me. And I doubt your parents would be thrilled to see their precious son involved with a hunchback from the wrong side of town. Even if that son is lame and a little slow. On top of that, our city is overflowing with foreign tanks and troops. Who knows what lies ahead."

Samsa certainly had no idea what lay ahead. He was in the dark about everything: the future, of course, but the present and the past as well. What was right, and what was wrong? Just learning how to dress was a riddle.

“At any rate, I’ll come back this way in a few days,” the hunchbacked young woman said. “If we can fix it, I’ll bring the lock, and if we can’t I’ll return it to you anyway. You’ll be charged for the service call, of course. If you’re here, then we can see each other. Whether we’ll be able to have that long talk or not I don’t know. But if I were you I’d keep that bulge hidden from your parents. In the real world, you don’t get compliments for exposing that kind of thing.”

Samsa nodded. He wasn’t at all clear, though, how that kind of thing could be kept out of sight.

“It’s strange, isn’t it?” the woman said in a pensive voice. “Everything is blowing up around us, but there are still those who care about a broken lock, and others who are dutiful enough to try to fix it. . . . But maybe that’s the way it should be. Maybe working on the little things as dutifully and honestly as we can is how we stay sane when the world is falling apart.”

The woman looked up at Samsa’s face. “I don’t mean to pry, but what was going on in that room on the second floor? Why did your parents need such a big lock for a room that held nothing but a bed, and why did it bother them so much when the lock got broken? And what about those boards nailed across the window? Was something locked up in there—is that it?”

Samsa shook his head. If someone or something had been shut up in there, it must have been him. But why had that been necessary? He hadn’t a clue.

“I guess there’s no point in asking you,” the woman said. “Well, I’ve got to go. They’ll worry about me if I’m late. Pray that I make it across town in one piece. That the soldiers will overlook a poor little hunchback girl. That none of them is perverted. We’re being fucked over enough as it is.”

“I will pray,” Samsa said. But he had no idea what “perverted” meant. Or “pray,” for that matter.

The woman picked up her black bag and, still bent over, headed for the door.

“Will I see you again?” Samsa asked one last time.

“If you think of someone enough, you’re sure to meet them again,” she said in parting. This time there was real warmth in her voice.

“Look out for birds,” he called after her. She turned and nodded. Then she walked out to the street.

Samsa watched through the crack in the curtains as her hunched form set off across the cobblestones. She moved awkwardly but with surprising speed. He found her every gesture charming. She reminded him of a water strider that had left the water to scamper about on dry land. As far as he could tell, walking the way she did made a lot more sense than wobbling around upright on two legs.

She had not been out of sight long when he noticed that his genitals had returned to their soft and shrunken state. That brief and violent bulge had, at some point, vanished. Now his organ dangled between his legs like an innocent fruit, peaceful and defenseless. His balls rested comfortably in their sac. Readjusting the belt of his gown, he sat down at the dining-room table and drank what remained of his cold coffee.

The people who lived here had gone somewhere else. He didn’t know who they were, but he imagined that they were his family. Something had happened all of a sudden, and they had left. Perhaps they would never return. What did “the world is falling apart” mean? Gregor Samsa had no idea. Foreign troops, checkpoints, tanks—everything was wrapped in mystery.

The only thing he knew for certain was that he wanted to see that hunchback girl again. To sit face to face and talk to his heart’s content. To unravel the riddles of the world with her. He wanted to watch from every angle the way she twisted and writhed when she adjusted her brassiere. If possible, he wanted to run his hands over her body. To touch her soft skin and feel her warmth with his fingertips. To walk side by side with her up and down the staircases of the world.

Just thinking about her made him warm inside. No longer did he wish to be a fish or a sunflower—or anything else, for that matter. He was glad to be human. For sure, it was a great inconvenience to have to walk on two legs and wear clothes. There were so many things he didn’t know. Yet had he been a fish or a sunflower, and not a human being, he might never have experienced this emotion. So he felt.

Samsa sat there for a long time with his eyes closed. Then, making up his mind, he stood, grabbed his black walking stick, and headed for the stairs. He would return to the second floor and figure out the proper way to dress. For now, at least, that would be his mission. The world was waiting for him to learn.

A Folklore for My Generation: A Prehistory of Late-Stage Capitalism

I was born in 1949. I started high school in 1963 and went to college in 1967. And so it was amid the crazy, confused uproar of 1968 that I saw in my otherwise auspicious twentieth year. Which, I guess, makes me a typical child of the sixties. It was the most vulnerable, most formative, and therefore most important period in my life, and there I was, breathing in deep lungfuls of abandon and quite naturally getting high on it all. I kicked in a few deserving doors—and what a thrill it was whenever a door that deserved kicking in presented itself before me, as Jim Morrison, the Beatles, and Bob Dylan played in the background. The whole shebang.

Even now, looking back on it all, I think that those years were special. I'm sure that if you were to examine the attributes of the time one by one, you wouldn't discover anything all that noteworthy. Just the heat generated by the engine of history, that limited gleam that certain things give off in certain places at certain times—that and a kind of inexplicable antsiness, as if we were viewing everything through the wrong end of a telescope. Heroics and villainy, rapture and disillusionment, martyrdom and revisionism, silence and eloquence, et cetera, et cetera . . . the stuff of any age. Only, in our day—if you'll forgive the overblown expression—it was all so colorful somehow, so very reach-out-and-grab-it palpable. There were no gimmicks, no discount coupons, no hidden advertising, no keep-'em-coming point-card schemes, no insidious, loop holing paper trails. Cause and effect shook hands; theory and reality embraced with aplomb. A prehistory to high capitalism: that's what I personally call those years.

But as to whether the era brought us—my generation, that is—any special radiance, well, I'm not so sure. In the final analysis, perhaps we simply passed through it as if we were watching an exciting movie: we experienced it as real—our hearts pounded, our palms sweated—but when the lights came on we just walked out of the cinema and picked up where we'd left off. For whatever reason, we neglected to learn any truly valuable lesson from it all. Don't ask me why. I am much too deeply bound up in those years to answer the question. There's just one thing I'd like you to understand: I'm not the least bit proud that I came of age then; I'm simply reporting the facts.

Now let me tell you about the girls. About the mixed-up sexual relations between us boys, with our brand-new genitals, and the girls, who at the time were, well, still girls.

But, first, about virginity. In the sixties, virginity held a greater significance than it does today. As I see it—not that I've ever conducted a survey—about fifty per cent of the girls of my generation were no longer virgins by the age of twenty. Or, at least, that seemed to be the ratio in my general vicinity. Which means that, consciously or not, about half the girls around still revered this thing called virginity.

Looking back now, I'd say that a large portion of the girls of my generation, whether virgins or not, had their share of inner conflicts about sex. It all depended on the circumstances, on the partner. Sandwiching this relatively silent majority were the liberals, who thought of sex as a kind of sport, and the conservatives, who were adamant that girls should stay virgins until they were married.

Among the boys, there were also those who thought that the girl they married should be a virgin.

People differ, values differ. That much is constant, no matter what the period. But the thing about the sixties that was totally unlike any other time is that we believed that those differences could be resolved.

This is the story of someone I knew. He was in my class during my senior year of high school in Kobe, and, frankly, he was the kind of guy who could do it all. His grades were good, he was athletic, he was considerate, he had leadership qualities. He wasn't outstandingly handsome, but he was good-looking in a clean-cut sort of way. He could even sing. A forceful speaker, he was always the one to mobilize opinion in our classroom discussions. This didn't mean that he was much of an original thinker—but who expects originality in a classroom discussion? All we ever wanted was for it to be over as quickly as possible, and if he opened his mouth we were sure to be done on time. In that sense, you could say that he was a real friend.

There was no faulting him. But then again I could never begin to imagine what went on in his mind. Sometimes I felt like unscrewing his head and shaking it, just to see what kind of sound it would make. Still, he was very popular with the girls. Whenever he stood up to say something in class, all the girls would gaze at him admiringly. Any math problem they didn't understand they'd take to him. He must have been twenty-seven times more popular than I was. He was just that kind of guy.

We all learn our share of lessons from the textbook of life, and one piece of wisdom I've picked up along the way is that you just have to accept that in any collective body there will be such types. Needless to say, though, I personally wasn't too keen on his type. I guess I preferred, I don't know, someone more flawed, someone with a more unusual presence. So in the course of an entire year in the same class I never once hung out with the guy. I doubt that I even spoke to him. The first time I ever had a proper conversation with him was during the summer vacation after my freshman year of college. We happened to be attending the same driving school, and we'd chat now and then, or have coffee together during the breaks. That driving school was such a bore that I'd have been happy to kill time

with any acquaintance I ran into. I don't remember much about our conversations; whatever we talked about, it left no impression, good or bad.

The other thing I remember about him is that he had a girlfriend. She was in a different class, and she was hands down the prettiest girl in the school. She got good grades, but she was also an athlete, and she was a leader—like him, she had the last word in every class discussion. The two of them were simply made for each other: Mr. and Miss Clean, like something out of a toothpaste commercial.

I'd see them around. Every lunch hour, they sat in a corner of the schoolyard, talking. After school, they rode the train home together, getting off at different stations. He was on the soccer team, and she was in the English-conversation club. When their extracurricular activities weren't over at the same time, the one who finished first would go and study in the library. Any free time they had they spent together.

None of us—in my crowd—had anything against them. We didn't make fun of them, we never gave them a hard time; in fact, we hardly paid any attention to them at all. They really didn't give us much to speculate about. They were like the weather—just there, a physical fact. Inevitably, we spent our time talking about the things that interested us more: sex and rock and roll and Jean-Luc Godard films, political movements and Kenzaburo Oe novels, things like that. But especially sex.

O.K., we were ignorant and full of ourselves. We didn't have a clue about life. But, for us, Mr. and Miss Clean existed only in their Clean world. Which probably means that the illusions we entertained back then and the illusions they embraced were, to some extent, interchangeable.

This is their story. It's not a particularly happy story, nor, by this point in time, is it one with much of a moral. But no matter: it's our story as much as theirs. Which, I guess, makes it a form of cultural history. Suitable material for me to collect and relate here—me, the insensitive folklorist.

He and I ran into each other in the Italian town of Lucca, in the Tuscan foothills. My wife and I were renting an apartment in Rome at the time, but she was back in Japan for a few weeks, and I was travelling around by train. From Venice to Verona to Mantua to Modena, then a short stopover in Lucca, a peaceful little town, with a restaurant on the outskirts that served wonderful mushroom dishes. By coincidence, he was staying at the same hotel I was.

Small world.

That evening, we dined together at the restaurant. Both of us were travelling alone; both of us were bored. The older you get, the less fun it is to travel by yourself. The scenery starts to seem less scenic; other people's endless conversations are grating to your ears. You don't bother to try out new restaurants, and the waits for trains seem endless. You look at your watch again and again, and you don't even attempt to speak the language of the country you are travelling in. You close your eyes, and all that comes to mind are the mistakes of the past.

Perhaps that's why he and I felt somehow relieved to see each other, just as we had at driving school. We took a table by the fireplace, ordered a quality rosso, and proceeded to eat our way through an antipasto of funghi trifolati, followed by fettuccine ai porcini and arrosto di tartufo bianco.

He had come to Lucca to buy furniture, he told me. He ran a trading firm that specialized in European furniture, and, of course, he was successful. He didn't brag or anything, but I could tell at a glance that this man had the world in his hands. It was in the clothes he wore, in the way he talked, the way he carried himself. Success looked good on him, and, in a way, it was pleasing to see.

Initially, we talked about Italy. The unreliable train schedules, the inordinate amount of time devoted to meals. Then, I don't remember what led up to it, but by the time the waiter brought a second bottle of wine he was already telling me his story, and I was commenting on it at appropriate intervals. I guess he'd been wanting to tell someone for a long time, but hadn't been able to bring himself to do it. If it hadn't been for the cozy restaurant and the bouquet of the '83 Coltibuono, he might never have broached the subject. But talk he did.

"I always thought I was a boring person," he said. "Even when I was little, I was boxed in. I saw fences all around me, and I was careful never to go beyond them. There were guidelines, like on a highway: take the right lane only for this exit, merge ahead, no passing. You just had to follow the signs and you'd get there. So that was how I did everything—I did it the right way—and, as a result, all the adults fussed over me and praised me. When I was young, I thought that everyone saw things the same way. But, sooner or later, I learned that that wasn't the case."

I held my wineglass toward the fire and gazed at it for a while.

"My whole life—or, at least, the first part of it—things went smoothly for me. I had no problems to speak of, but, on the other hand, did I have any notion of what it meant to be alive? I had no idea what I was doing, what I was after. I mean, I was good at math, I was good at English, I was good at sports. Straight flush. My folks patted me on the back, my teachers told me I had nothing to worry about. But what was it that I was really cut out for? What did I want to do with myself? Should I study law?"

Engineering? Should I go to medical school? Any of the above would have been fine. So I did what my parents and teachers told me to do and I majored in law at Tokyo University.”

He took another sip of wine. “Do you remember my girlfriend in high school?”

“Fujisawa something, wasn’t it?” I dredged my memory for her name. I wasn’t at all sure, but it came up correct.

He nodded. “That’s right, Yoshiko Fujisawa. Well, the same went for her. I could tell her everything I was feeling, and she understood. We could have gone on talking forever. It was . . . I mean, until I met her, I’d never had a friend I could really talk to.”

He and Yoshiko Fujisawa were such spiritual twins it was creepy. They were leaders. School superstars. They came from good homes, where their parents nevertheless didn’t really get along. The fathers had other women and didn’t always come home at night. The only thing that kept the parents from divorcing was what other people would think. The mothers ruled the households, and the children were pushed to be the best at whatever they did. Neither child could get close to anyone. They were both popular, but essentially friendless, and they didn’t understand why. Perhaps normal imperfect human beings simply preferred the company of other normal imperfect human beings.

They were always lonely, always on edge. But then, out of the blue, they met each other. They accepted each other. They fell in love. They felt completely at ease with each other, especially when they were alone together. They had so many secrets to share; they never tired of talking about their isolation, their insecurities, their dreams.

When it came to physical contact, they had their rules: never to take off their clothes, to touch each other only with their hands. Once a week, they’d spend the afternoon in one or the other’s bedroom. Both houses were quiet—absent father, mother out on errands. They allowed themselves ten or fifteen minutes of hectic groping before returning to their studies, chairs side by side at the desk. “O.K., enough of this, huh? Back to the books,” she’d say, straightening her skirt.

They both got good grades. Studying, for them, was no hardship at all, just second nature. They’d even race each other to solve math problems. “That was fun,” he’d say. Yes, it sounds stupid, but to them it was fun. Such fun as we flawed humans will likely never understand.

Yet somehow these relations didn't entirely satisfy him. He felt as though something was missing. He wanted to sleep with her. He wanted to have sex. "Physical union" were the words he used. "I thought it would give us a more intimate understanding of each other," he told me. "It just seemed like the most natural next step."

She, however, didn't agree. She pinched her lips together and gave a little shake of her head. "I like you and all, but I want to stay a virgin until I'm married," she said. No matter how hard he tried to persuade her, she wouldn't change her mind. "You know I like you," she'd say. "Really and truly, I do. But that's that, and this is different. I'm sorry, but just bear with me. Please. If you truly love me, can't you let it go?"

"If that was how she wanted it," he told me, "I had to respect her wishes. It wasn't like she was asking for the impossible. I personally didn't think virginity was such a big deal. I doubt I'd have cared whether the girl I married was a virgin or not. I'm no radical thinker, but that doesn't make me a fundamentalist. I'm simply a realist. The important thing is for a man and a woman to know where they're coming from, mutually. That's what I thought. But she had an image of the life she wanted to live. And I put up with it. We went on petting, hands under our clothes—you know the kind of thing."

"I believe so," I said.

He blushed, then smiled. "It wasn't so bad, as far as it went, but I couldn't stop thinking about sex. To me, we were only halfway there. I wanted to be one with her. I wanted nothing covered up, nothing hidden. It was a matter of staking a claim. I needed some kind of sign. Sure, my sex drive was part of it, but it wasn't just that. Never once in my life had I felt completely united with anything or anyone. I was always alone. Always cramped up inside that box. I wanted to free myself. I wanted to discover the real me. By sleeping with her, I thought I might be able to break out."

He approached her with a plan. As soon as they finished college, he said, they could get married. If she wanted to get engaged, they could do that even sooner. It was no problem at all. She looked straight at him for a second. Then a smile floated across her face. A really lovely smile. She was clearly happy to hear those words from him. But, at the same time, it was a smile hedged with forbearance, with a faint hint of sadness. Not condescending, exactly, but not encouraging, either—at least, that's what he sensed.

"It's impossible," she said. "You and I will never get married. I'm going to marry someone a little older than me, and you're going to marry someone a little younger. That's just how it goes. Women mature earlier than men, and they age faster, too. Even if we did get married right after college, it wouldn't last. Anyway, we can't keep going like this. You know I like you, more than I've ever liked anyone else. But

that's that, and this is this"—a pet phrase of hers, apparently. "We're still in high school. We lead protected lives. The real world is a lot bigger and a lot more difficult. We have to prepare ourselves."

He knew what she was trying to say. He was much more of a realist in his thinking, after all, than most boys of his generation. If he'd been told the same thing as a general proposition, he might well have agreed. But this was no general proposition; this concerned him very specifically.

"I don't buy that," he told her. "I love you and I want to be with you. I'm very clear on this. It's very important to me. I don't care if some things don't hold up in the real world—honestly, this will. I love you that much. I'm crazy about you."

She shook her head, as if to say, "It can't be helped." Then, stroking his hair, she asked, "Do you really think we know the first thing about love? Our love has never been tested. We're still children, you and I."

He was too disheartened to respond. Once again, he hadn't been able to break down the walls that surrounded him, and he was only too aware of how powerless he was. I can't do a damn thing, he thought. If things keep going like this, I'll probably live out my whole life inside this box, year after pointless year.

The two of them stayed together until they graduated from high school. Rendezvousing in the library, studying together, petting under their clothes. She didn't seem to think that there was anything wrong with this arrangement; in fact, she seemed almost to relish the incompleteness of it. While everyone else imagined that they—Mr. and Miss Clean—were enjoying an ideal youth, he alone was unconsolated.

Finally, in the spring **** of 1967, he left for Tokyo University. She stayed in Kobe, where she enrolled at a very proper women's college. It was a top-rated school among such institutions, but hardly a challenge for her. She could easily have got into Tokyo University, but she didn't even sit for the entrance exams. To her mind, that kind of education was unnecessary. "I'm not looking for a career in the Ministry of Finance. I'm a girl—it's different for me. You, you're going to go far, but I'm just going to take it easy for these four years. An interlude, you know, a kind of rest stop. Because once I get married I won't be having a career, now, will I?"

Her attitude disappointed him. He'd been hoping that the two of them would go to Tokyo together and reshape their relationship into something new. He urged her to rethink it, but she just shook her head.

The summer after his first year in college (the same summer that he and I met up at the driving school), he went home to Kobe, and they saw each other almost every day. She took him on long drives, and they petted, just like old times. But he couldn't help noticing that something had begun to change between them. The change wasn't drastic. In a way, things were a little too much the same. The way she talked, the way she dressed, her opinions—almost everything about her was as it had been before. But he no longer wanted to blend back into his old life. It was the law of dynamics: little by little, repetition after repetition, the two of them had fallen out of synch. And it wouldn't have been so bad, if only he knew what direction he was veering in.

He had been lonely in Tokyo, still unable to make friends. The city was crowded and dirty, the food tasteless. He thought about her all the time. At night, he'd hole up in his room and write to her. She wrote back (albeit much less frequently), letters detailing her daily activities, which he read over and over; if it hadn't been for those letters, he was sure he'd have gone mad. He took up smoking; he started drinking. Sometimes he even cut class.

How he had longed for the summer break, so that he could go home to Kobe! But now that he was there he was even more depressed. The funny thing was that he had been away for only three months. Why did everything suddenly seem so dusty, so lacklustre? The city he'd missed so much now looked run-down to him, just another self-absorbed provincial town. Making conversation with his mother was an ordeal. Going to the barbershop where he'd had his hair cut since he was a boy was a gloomy prospect. The waterfront where he walked the dog every day was a derelict tract of rubbish.

Even seeing her failed to boost his spirits. What the hell was wrong with him? Of course he still loved her, but that wasn't enough. Passion can't sustain itself forever. He had to play his hand, somehow, or the relationship would be suffocated into extinction.

He decided that he had to take the sex question out of the freezer and serve it up again. It was his last chance.

"These three months alone in Tokyo, I've thought of nothing but you. I really must be in love with you. No matter how far apart we are, my feelings are still the same. But while we're apart I get so insecure. I have dark moods. You may not understand this, but I've never felt so alone in my life. I need to have a real bond with you, an assurance that no matter how far we are from each other we will always be solidly connected."

She took a deep breath and kissed him. Ever so gently. "I'm sorry," she said. "I just can't give you my virginity. This is this, and that is that. I would do anything for you, anything but that. If you truly love me, please don't bring it up again."

Once more, he tried the subject of marriage.

“There are two girls in my class who are engaged,” she told him, “but their fiancés already have real jobs. Marriage means responsibility.”

“I can take responsibility,” he said firmly. “I got into a good school, and I promise you I’ll get good grades. Any company, any government office would take me on. I’ll get a job anyplace you name. I can do anything if I put my mind to it. What on earth is the problem?”

She closed her eyes and rested her head against her seat and fell silent. “I’m scared,” she said after a while, then buried her face in her hands, sobbing. “Really scared. So scared I can’t help myself. I’m scared of living, of having to make a life. In a few years, I’ll have to go out into the real world, and it frightens me sick. Why can’t you understand that? Why must you torture me like this?”

He put his arms around her. “There’s nothing to be afraid of,” he said. “I’m here. Look at me, I’m scared, too, as scared as you are. But if you and I are together I know that we can make it. If we pool our strengths, there’s nothing to be scared of, nothing at all.”

She shook her head. “You just don’t understand. I’m a woman. I’m not like you. You don’t know a thing about it. Not a thing.”

Nothing he could say did any good. She just kept on crying. And then she said the strangest thing. “Listen, even if I break up with you, I’ll still remember you forever. Honestly. I’ll never forget. You know how much I like you. You’re the first person I’ve ever cared for, and it’s made me so happy just to be with you. Please understand. If it’s some kind of promise you want, I promise. I’ll sleep with you. But not now. After I’m married I’ll sleep with you. I promise.”

“What the hell was she saying? It boggled my mind,” he said, gazing at the glowing hearth. The waiter brought our primi piatti and added another log to the fire, sending out crackling sparks. The middle-aged couple at the next table were deliberating over the dessert menu. “I just couldn’t figure it out. I went home and her words kept playing over and over in my mind, but I simply could not follow her reasoning. Does it make any sense to you?”

"I guess she meant that she was going to stay a virgin until her wedding night, but once she was married and her virginity wasn't an issue she'd be able to have an affair with you. Something like that."

"Yeah, something along those lines. That's the only way I could read it."

"Unique, I'll give her that. And logical, in a way."

A mild smile played over his lips. "True enough. There was some logic to it."

"A virgin bride, an adulterous wife. It's like a classic French novel. But with no ballrooms or foot servants."

"And yet to her that was the only realistic solution," he said.

"Sad," I said.

He shot me a penetrating look, then nodded slowly. "Yeah, sad. Pathetic, really. You hit the nail on the head," he said. "By now I think so, too. I've done my share of growing older. But at the time, no, I couldn't see it that way. I was still a kid, and totally in the dark about the little tremors that unsettle people's minds. The whole thing came as such a surprise—it threw me for a loop."

"I imagine it would," I concurred.

Then, by tacit agreement, we both ate our tartufi.

"I guess you can see what's coming," he said after a while. "She and I broke up. Neither one of us came out and said anything. It just came to a natural end. Very peacefully. We just got tired of trying to keep the relationship going. As I saw it, her notions about life weren't . . . How can I put it? Well, she didn't come off as very sincere. No, that's not right. What I mean is I knew she could do better. I was disappointed in her. Virginity, marriage—instead of agonizing over such conventional issues, she should have been trying for more out of life."

“But that was beyond her,” I said.

He nodded. “I suppose,” he said, forking a meaty slice of mushroom to his mouth. “It happens. You lose resilience. There comes a point where you’re stretched to the limit, and you can’t go any further. The same thing could’ve happened to me. From childhood on, both of us had been herded along. Pushed and prodded—go forward, get ahead. It gets to where you’re so well trained, so conditioned, you can do only what you’re told to do. Until, one day, you just snap.”

“But you, how is it that you didn’t end up that way?” I asked.

“I got over it somehow,” he said after a moment’s thought. Then he set down his knife and fork, and wiped his mouth with his napkin. “After she and I broke up, I got a girlfriend in Tokyo. A nice girl. We lived together for a while. And, to tell the truth, there were none of the rumblings and jitters I’d had with Yoshiko Fujisawa. It was an honest relationship, and I really liked her. She taught me a lot about real human beings, and I also began to make friends. I took an interest in politics. I learned that realism can come in all shapes and sizes. The world is big enough for different values to coexist. There’s no universal need to be an honors student. And that’s how I found my footing in society.”

“And became successful.”

“Successful enough,” he said, with a slightly disgruntled sigh. Then, looking at me as he might at a co-conspirator, he said, “Compared with other people our age, I admit, my income level is higher, objectively speaking.” That’s all he would say.

But I knew that that wasn’t the end of the story, so I didn’t say anything. I just waited for him to go on.

“I didn’t see Yoshiko Fujisawa for a long time,” he resumed. “A really long time. I graduated from university and got a job at a trading firm. And I worked there for five years, part of it at an overseas posting. Every day was filled with work. I was incredibly busy. Two years after college, I heard, through her mother, that she’d got married, but I didn’t ask to whom. My first thought when I heard was, I wonder if she actually stayed a virgin until her wedding night. But then I felt a little sad. And a little sadder the next day. It was as if an era had come to an end, a door was closing behind me forever. Well, naturally. This was a girl I’d really and truly loved. We’d been sweethearts for four years, and I’d even thought about marriage. She was someone who figured that largely in my youth, so of course it made me sad. But, O.K., I really just hoped that she’d be happy. I wished her the best. I was—well, a little worried about her. She had her fragile side.”

The waiter cleared our plates, and we ordered coffee.

“I married relatively late, when I was thirty-two. So I was still single when I got a phone call from Yoshiko. I was twenty-eight. Which makes it just over ten years ago now. In the meantime, I’d quit the company I was working for and had gone independent. My father lent me the capital, and I formed my own little company. I saw astronomical market-growth potential for imported furniture, and I stepped right in. But, as with any startup, nothing went smoothly at first. Delivery delays, depleted stock, warehouse charges piling up, the bank breathing down my neck—to be honest, I ran myself down and I nearly lost hope. It was probably the most difficult time in my life. And right in the middle of it she calls. I have no idea how she got my number. It was eight at night when the phone rang. I recognized her voice immediately. That’s something you never forget. I felt a tinge of nostalgia—you bet I did. It just felt so good to hear an old girlfriend’s voice at a time like that.”

He looked long and hard at the fireplace, as if remembering. The restaurant had filled to capacity. People were talking and laughing at every table, utensils clattering, glasses tinkling.

“I don’t know who her informants were, but she was up to date on everything about me. I mean everything. She knew that I was still single and had been based overseas, that I’d quit my company and struck out on my own. She knew it all. ‘You’ll come through it, you’re the can-do guy. Just have confidence,’ she told me. I can’t tell you how happy it made me to hear such kind words. So then I asked about her. What sort of guy she’d married, whether they had kids, where they were living. Well, she didn’t have any children. Her husband was four years older than she, and worked in television. A director, she tells me. I say, ‘Sounds like he keeps busy.’ ‘He’s busy, all right, too busy to have kids,’ she says, then laughs. They lived in Tokyo, in a condo near Shinagawa. I was living in Shiroganedai. Not exactly neighbors, but close enough. ‘Strange how things work out, isn’t it?’ I say—you know, whatever. Well, we talked about all the usual things that former high-school sweethearts talk about under the circumstances. It felt a little strained and awkward, but nice over all. Like two old friends catching up on everything. We talked for what seemed like hours. Then, when there was nothing more for either of us to say, this silence comes over the line. A real . . . How to put it? A really dense silence. The kind that invites all sorts of thoughts.” He was focussing on his hands, folded on the tablecloth; then he looked up to meet my eyes. “I should have hung up then and there. ‘Thanks for calling, it’s been nice talking to you’—click, end of story. You see what I’m saying?”

“That would have been the most realistic thing to do,” I agreed.

“But she stays on the line. She invites me to her place. Like, ‘Why don’t you drop by? My husband’s away on business, and I’m bored all by myself.’ Well, I don’t know what to say, so I don’t say anything.

So she doesn't say anything. More silence. And then, do you know what she says? She says, 'You know, I still remember the promise I made to you.' "

"You know, I still remember the promise I made to you." At first, he claimed, he hadn't known what she was talking about—he'd never once considered it a real promise. But when it did come back to him he had to think that it was just a slip of the tongue, that she must have been confused.

No, she wasn't confused. To her, a promise was a promise.

For a moment, he lost sight of where all this was heading. What was the right thing to do? He looked around in desperation, but there were no walls around him, nothing to guide him anymore. Of course he wanted to sleep with her, that went without saying. Since their breakup, he'd imagined sleeping with her plenty of times. Even when he was seeing other women, his thoughts had found their way to her in the dark. Though he'd never seen her naked, he knew her body from the feel of it under her clothes.

He knew how risky it would be to sleep with her at this stage. He didn't want to go stirring up what he'd so calmly left behind in the shadows of his past. Intuition told him that this was not something he should do. But of course he couldn't refuse. Why should he refuse? It was a perfect fairy tale, a wish granted only once in a lifetime. She lived nearby, and she wanted to fulfil a promise made in the forests of the distant past.

He closed his eyes and couldn't say anything. He'd lost the power of speech.

"Hello?" she said. "You there?"

"I'll come right over," he said. "Can you tell me your address?"

"What would you have done?" he asked me.

I shook my head. I never know how to answer such questions.

He laughed, and looked down at the coffee cup on the table. "I went to her place. I knocked on her door. In a way, I was hoping that she wouldn't be at home. But she was there, all right, and as beautiful as

ever. She poured us drinks, and we talked about the old days. We even listened to old records. Then what do you think happened?"

I had no idea. I told him I had no idea.

"When I was a kid, I read a children's story." He seemed to be addressing the far wall of the restaurant. "I forget the plot, but I still remember the last line. It went, 'And, when it was all over, the King and his courtiers roared with laughter.' Kind of a strange way to end a story, wouldn't you say?"

"I would," I said.

"I wish I could remember what the story was about. God knows I've tried. All I remember is that crazy last line: 'And, when it was all over, the King and his courtiers roared with laughter.' What the hell kind of story ends like that?"

By then we'd finished our coffee.

"We embraced," he said, "but I didn't sleep with her. She didn't undress. We used our hands, just like old times. I thought it would be for the best. And she seemed to think so, too. We petted for a long, long time, without saying anything. What was there for us to say? That was the only way that we could really recognize each other after all those years. Back when we were in school, of course, it would have been different. Plain, ordinary, natural sex might have brought us to some kind of mutual understanding. And, just maybe, we could have been happy together. But we were long past that now. Those days were locked away, and no one could break the seal."

He twirled his empty cup around on its saucer. He kept at it so long that the waiter came over to check on us. But that merely prompted him to return the cup to its original position and order another espresso.

"I stayed there maybe an hour, all told. Any more than that and I'd probably have gone out of my mind," he said with a sly smile. "I said goodbye to her and left. She said goodbye, too, and this time it really was goodbye, once and for all. I knew it, and she knew it. The last I saw of her, she was standing in the doorway with her arms crossed. She looked as if she were about to say something, but she didn't. I knew what she would have said, in any case. I was exhausted . . . hollowed out, empty. I walked around

aimlessly, feeling as if I'd wasted my whole life. I wished I could go back to her place and just screw her, long and hard. But I couldn't bring myself to, nor would it have made anything any better."

He shook his head. He drank his second espresso.

"It embarrasses me to say this, but I went straight out and got myself a hooker. First time in my life. And very likely the last."

I looked at my own coffee cup and thought about what a standoffish jerk I must have been in the old days. I wanted to let him in on what I was thinking, but I doubted that I'd be able to find the right words.

"Telling the story like this, I feel like I'm talking about someone else," he said with a chuckle, then fell silent.

" 'And, when it was all over, the King and his courtiers roared with laughter,' " he said, finally. "I always think of that sentence whenever I remember that time. Conditioned reflex, I guess. I don't know what it is, but sadness always seems to contain some strange little joke."

As I said at the beginning, there isn't much here that you could call a moral. Nonetheless, it's the story of his life, and it's the story of all our lives. Which is why I couldn't laugh when I heard it and why I still can't.