**PINBALL, 1973**

I enjoyed listening to stories about faraway places so much that it became a kind of sickness.

Back then, a good ten years ago now, I went around asking everyone to tell me about where they were born and raised. In those days there must have been a real shortage of good listeners, because everyone I approached talked to me with great enthusiasm. When rumor got out about what I was doing, people I'd never laid eyes on started showing up just to tell me their stories.

They rambled on and on about anything and everything, as if tossing stones into a dry well, then left feeling satisfied. Some told their stories in high spirits, others in anger. There were stories that felt clear and direct, and other stories that seemed pointless from start to finish. There were boring stories, sob stories, and tongue-in-cheek, off-the-wall stories. Always, though, I listened to what they had to say as attentively as I could.

For whatever reason, they all seemed compelled to get their story out—if not to a specific person, then to the world at large. It made me think of a cardboard box packed with monkeys. I would extract one monkey after another, carefully dust it off, slap it on the bum, and release it into the fields. I had no idea what happened to the monkeys after that. Probably they spent their lives gnawing on acorns somewhere, then died off. Such was their fate.

Truth be told, it was a laborious task, with little reward. Had a contest been held that year to determine the World's Best Listener, I would have won hands down. My prize? Probably a box of kitchen matches.

One of the people who talked to me came from Saturn, while another was from Venus. Their stories were especially memorable. I'll quote the guy from Saturn first.

"It's f-freezing cold…up there," he groaned. "Just thinking about it drives me n-nuts."

He belonged to the radical group occupying Building Nine on our

campus. Their motto was “Action determines ideology, not vice versa.” What determined action was never made clear to me, though I asked. Building Nine was equipped with a water cooler, a telephone, a hot-water heater, and, on the second floor, a really cool music room with two thousand records and Altec A5 speakers. Compared to other occupied buildings on campus (like Building Eight, which stank like a bicycle racetrack toilet), it was paradise. The group shaved with hot water every morning, made all the long-distance phone calls they wanted in the afternoon, and gathered to listen to records in the evening. By the time autumn came around they were all classical music aficionados.

Is it true that they were blissing out to Vivaldi’s “Il cimento dell’armonia e dell’invenzione” at full blast when the riot police’s third division came crashing into Building Nine that perfect cloudless November day? Whether fact or fiction, it endures as one of the more heartwarming legends revolving around the year that was 1969.

It was thus to the accompaniment of the distant strains of Haydn’s Piano Sonata in G minor that I picked my way under and through the tottering pile of benches that served as a barricade for Building Nine. For some reason it felt nostalgic, as if I were making my way up a camellia-covered slope to visit my girlfriend’s home in one of the nicer parts of the city. The guy from Saturn pushed their most comfortable chair in my direction, handed me a beaker filched from the science labs, and filled it with lukewarm beer.

“Gravity is a lot stronger up there,” he said, continuing his story. “I know a guy whose foot got crushed when he spat out a wad of chewing gum. It’s h-hell!”

“You don’t say,” I answered. By that time, I had mastered a repertoire of three hundred stock responses that I could draw on to keep my respondents talking.

“The s-sun is tiny, too. Like an orange on home plate seen from center field. So it’s always dark,” he sighed.

“Then why doesn’t everyone leave?” I asked. “There must be nicer planets to live on.”

“Beats me. Maybe ’cause they were born there. It’s like that. Take me, for example. I’m going home to Saturn when I graduate. To make it a b-better place. It’s the r-r-revolution.”

Anyway, I just love stories about faraway towns. I stash some of them away in my mind, like a bear preparing for hibernation. If I close my eyes, I can picture the streets, line them with dwellings, hear the voices of the residents. I can even feel the gentle yet unmistakable rhythms of their lives, distant people whose paths I may never cross as long as I live.

On occasion, Naoko would tell me her stories. I can still remember every word.

“I don’t know what to call the place,” she said in a bored voice, her cheek resting on her hand in the bright sunlight of the student lounge. Then she gave a little laugh. I waited for her to continue. She was a girl who spoke slowly and chose her words with care.

We sat at a red plastic table, a paper cup stuffed with cigarette butts between us. The light streamed through the tall windows like in a Rubens painting, neatly dividing our table down the middle so that my right hand was illuminated and my left was in shade.

It was the spring of 1969, and we were both twenty. New students wearing new shoes, carrying new course catalogs, their heads crammed with new brains, packed the lounge. Throughout our conversation we heard complaints and apologies as people bumped into each other.

“I mean,” she continued, “you can’t even call it a real town. There’s just a railroad track and a station. A pathetic two-bit station the engineer could zip right past in the rain.”

I nodded. For a full thirty seconds we sat there in silence, watching the cigarette smoke curl in the sunlight.

“And there’s always a dog walking the platform from one end to the other. That kind of station. Got the picture?”

I nodded again.

“When you step out of the station there’s a little roundabout and a bus stop. And a few shops…Really sleepy-looking places. Go straight from there and you bump into a park. There’s a slide and three sets of swings.”

“Is there a sandbox?”

“A sandbox?” She thought for a moment before nodding, as if to confirm her recollection. “Yes, there’s one of those too.”

We fell silent again. I gingerly extinguished my cigarette, which I had smoked down to the butt, in the paper cup.

“It’s a nowhere kind of town. Why any place so boring was put on this earth is beyond me.”

“God reveals Himself in many forms,” I said.

Naoko shook her head and laughed. It was a regular sort of laugh, the kind you’d expect from a girl who had received straight A’s in school; yet for some strange reason it lingered long after she had left, like the grin of the Cheshire Cat in *Alice in Wonderland*.

But what excited me most was the thought of meeting the dog that walked up and down the platform.

Four years later, in May 1973, I did go alone to that station. I wanted to see that dog. In preparation, I shaved, donned a necktie for the first time in six months, and put on a new pair of cordovan shoes.

I stepped down from the sorry old suburban local train, whose two rusted passenger cars looked ready to disintegrate at any moment, and inhaled the smell of fresh grass. It was a fragrance from picnics long past; even the May breeze seemed to be reaching me from some distant time. When I listened carefully, I could hear skylarks singing overhead.

I let out a long yawn, sat down on a platform bench, and lit up a cigarette in disgust. The energy I had felt when I left my apartment early that morning had vanished. It was the same old thing over and over again. An endless déjà vu that got worse each time around.

At one time in my life I had gone to sleep each night sprawled on the floor with a group of friends. In the morning some guy would step on my head. Sorry, he'd say. Then I'd hear the sound of pissing. The same old thing.

With my cigarette hanging from the corner of my mouth, I loosened my tie and began rubbing the soles of my new shoes back and forth on the concrete platform. I was trying to lessen the pain in my feet. They weren't killing me, but the soreness was making me feel disjointed, as if my body were out of whack.

The dog was nowhere to be seen.

Out of whack…

It's a feeling I get a lot. As if I'm trying to put the jumbled pieces of two different puzzles together at the same time. When I get that way my solution is to drink whiskey and go to bed. The next morning, though, I feel even worse. The same old thing.

When I opened my eyes this time, there were two girls, twins, in bed with me, one on each side. I had awakened to a girl beside me many times before, but needless to say, this was the first time I had found myself next to twins. They were fast asleep, their noses touching my shoulders. It was a cloudless Sunday morning.

A short while later, they woke up at almost the same time, shimmied into the T-shirts and jeans they had dropped beside the bed, trooped into the kitchen without a word, brewed coffee, made toast, took butter out of the fridge, and spread everything out on the table. Not a move was wasted—it looked as if they'd been doing this for years. Outside my window, some kind of bird was perched on the chain-link fence that encircled the golf course, rattling away like a machine gun.

“So what are your names?” I asked the girls. I was in rough shape—my head was splitting.

“They’re not much, as names go,” said the one sitting on my right.

“That’s a fact,” said the one on my left. “Just about useless. Know what I mean?”

“Sure,” I said.

We sat there at the table, them on one side, me on the other, nibbling our toast and sipping our coffee. Terrific coffee, too.

“Will it be a hassle, us not having names?” one of them asked.

“I don’t know.”

They thought about it for a while.

“If we need names,” the other suggested, “why don’t you choose them for us?”

“Call us what you like.”

First one would speak, then the other. Like a sound check for a stereo broadcast. My headache was getting worse.

“For example?” I asked.

“Right and left,” said one.

“Horizontal and vertical,” said the other.

“Up and down.”

“Front and back.”

“East and west.”

“Entrance and exit,” I managed to interject, not to be outdone. They looked at each other and burst into satisfied laughter.

Where there is an entrance, there is usually an exit. That’s the way things are made. Mailboxes, vacuum cleaners, zoos, salt shakers. Of course there are exceptions. Mousetraps, for instance.

I put out a mousetrap once, under the sink in my apartment. For bait I used peppermint gum. I tried to locate something better, but that was the closest thing to food I came across. The gum was in one of the pockets of my winter coat, along with a movie ticket stub.

On the third morning I found a small mouse caught by its leg in the trap. It was still young, the color of the cashmere sweaters you see piled in London's duty-free shops. Probably fifteen or sixteen in human years. A tender age. Beneath its feet lay a shred of gum.

The mouse had been snared, but I was clueless about what to do with it. By the morning of the fourth day it was dead, its hind leg still pinned. As I looked at its body, I realized one of life's important lessons.

All things should have both an entrance and an exit. That's just the way it is.

The tracks followed a row of hills in a line so straight it looked as if it had been drawn with a ruler. In the distance, like a crumpled piece of paper, I could make out a dark green thicket of trees. The rails gleamed dully in the sun all the way out to that point, then disappeared into the green. It seemed as though the landscape would continue like that for eternity, however far one went. The idea depressed me. If that's how it was, give me the subway any day.

I finished my cigarette, stretched, and gazed up at the sky. I hadn't looked at the sky for some time. In fact, it had been a long while since my eyes had rested on anything.

Not a cloud was visible. A veil of mist hovered in the air, as often happens in the spring, an elusive membrane waiting to be infiltrated from above by the blue sky. Particles of sunlight fell like fine dust, gathering unnoticed on the ground.

In the warm breeze, the light wavered. The air flowed at a leisurely pace, like a flock of birds flying from tree to tree. It skimmed the wooded slopes along the railroad line, crossed the tracks, and passed

through the grove without so much as ruffling a leaf. A cuckoo's sharp cry cut through the gentle light like an arrow and disappeared over the distant ridge. The undulating hills resembled a giant sleeping cat, curled up in a warm pool of time.

The pain in my feet was growing worse.

Now let me tell you about the wells.

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Naoko had moved to the area when she was twelve. That was 1961, by the Western calendar. The year Ricky Nelson sang "Hello Mary Lou." At the time there was nothing whatsoever to draw anyone's attention to this peaceful green valley. A few farmhouses, some scattered fields, streams full of crayfish, the single-track train line with a yawn-inducing station, and that was it. Most of the farmhouses had persimmon trees growing in their yards, and off in a corner you could usually find a tottering, weather-beaten shed. Nailed to the side of the shed facing the train tracks were sheets of tin with garish painted advertisements for things like toilet paper and soap. That was the kind of place it was, said Naoko. No one even had a dog.

Naoko's family lived in a Western-style two-story house built at the time of the Korean War. Though modestly sized, its pillars were massive and its wood had been chosen with care, so that it looked solid, even dignified. The exterior had been painted three shades of green: exposed to the sun, rain, and wind, the three greens had faded until they matched the color of the surrounding landscape. The grounds were spacious, with several groves of trees and a small pond. Tucked away amid the trees was a snug little structure, an octagonal studio with faded curtains hanging in its bay windows—their original

color was anyone's guess. A riotous profusion of narcissus bloomed by the pond, where little birds gathered to splash about in the mornings.

The house had been designed by an old man, an oil painter who had lived there until his lungs gave out the winter before Naoko moved in. That was 1960, the year Bobby Vee sang "Rubber Ball." It rained like crazy that winter. Snow was rare in the area, but the rains were freezing cold. They covered the ground like a chilly blanket and soaked into the soil. All the while, a huge reservoir of sweet mineral water was forming beneath the surface.

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The well digger's house was a five-minute walk down the track from the station. It was in a swampy spot close by the river, besieged by mosquitoes and frogs in the summertime. The well digger was a man of about fifty, obstinate and ill-tempered, but a true genius when it came to his craft. He would spend days walking the properties that he had been hired to survey, grumbling to himself and occasionally scooping up a handful of earth and sniffing it. Then, when he was sure he had found the right spot, he would call a couple of his buddies and they would dig straight down until they hit water.

Thus it was that everyone from the area had all the delicious well water they could drink. It was icy cold and so clear you felt you could see through not only the glass but your hand as well. They called it "Fuji snow water," but that was a joke. No way it had come that far.

The fall Naoko turned seventeen, the well digger was killed by a train. The causes of the accident were a driving rain, chilled sake, and partial deafness. The policemen who retrieved the well digger's shredded body—five buckets' worth, in thousands of pieces—from the field had to use long poles with hooks on the end to fend off the wild dogs who descended on the scene. The river swept another bucketful of remains off to various ponds, to become fish food.

Neither of the well digger's two sons wanted to follow in their father's footsteps; both moved out of the area soon after the accident. Nor did anyone else wish to take over the abandoned house, which

crumbled bit by bit as the years passed. And so wells which produced that delicious water became harder and harder to find.

I love wells. Whenever I come across one I toss in a pebble. Nothing is more soothing than hearing that small splash rise from the bottom of a deep well.

It was Naoko's father who decided that they would move to the area in 1961. Not only had the dead painter been his close friend; her father was taken by the place itself.

Naoko's father seems to have been a French literary scholar of some note, but around the time she reached school age, without warning, he tossed away his university post to live a life of leisure and indulge his passion: translating enigmatic old French texts, tales of fallen angels and dissolute priests, exorcists and vampires. I don't know all the details. I saw his picture once in a magazine, but that was it. According to Naoko, he had been a real bohemian in his youth. I could get a sense of that by looking at the photo, in which he wore dark glasses and a cap, and was glaring at a spot about a yard above the camera lens. Maybe he had seen something.

There were a number of cultured eccentrics like him in the area when Naoko and her family moved in, a kind of free-floating colony. Like the Siberian penal camps for thought criminals they had back in imperial Russia.

Speaking of penal camps, I remember reading about one of them in a biography of Leon Trotsky. Can't remember much, just the parts about the cockroaches and the reindeer. So let me tell you about the reindeer…

Trotsky had stolen a sleigh and a team of four reindeer under cover of darkness and escaped from the penal colony where he had been

imprisoned. The reindeer sped madly across the silvery waste. Their breath froze solid in the frigid air; their hooves scattered the virgin snow. When they reached the train station two days later, the exhausted reindeer collapsed, never to rise again. The weeping Trotsky threw his arms around the dead animals and vowed, I will bring justice, truth, and revolution to my country, whatever it takes! Even today, a statue of the four reindeer can be found in Red Square. One is facing east, one north, one west, and one south. Stalin himself couldn't destroy them. If you visit Moscow, go to the square early Saturday morning and watch the junior high school students clean the reindeer with mops. Their red cheeks and white breath are a most refreshing sight.

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Back to the other colony.

Its members shunned the flat land near the station, choosing instead to build their wildly idiosyncratic homes on the hillside. Each boasted a garden of preposterous size, preserving the original trees, ponds, and hills. One even had a pretty stream filled with small and tasty sweetfish.

The colony members woke each morning to the turtledove's song and strolled about their gardens over fallen beechnuts, often lifting their eyes to the morning light filtering through the leaves.

But Japan was changing—the Tokyo Olympics were held around this time—and an inexorable wave of urban development was moving toward them. Their homes had overlooked a rich sea of mulberry trees, but now bulldozers were crushing the trees and turning the land black, and a monotonous townscape was taking shape around the train station.

The new residents were by and large mid-level office workers, the ubiquitous salarymen. They leapt out of bed at five o'clock in the morning, splashed water on their faces, and crammed themselves into commuter trains, returning half dead late at night.

And so it was only on Sunday afternoons that they were able to look

around at their homes and their community. At the same time, as if by mutual agreement, they all took to raising dogs. The dogs started mating with each other, producing puppies that, in turn, went wild. When Naoko had said there were no dogs back in the old days, this is what she meant.

I spent a full hour waiting for the dog to show up. I smoked ten cigarettes in the process, crushing each butt with my foot. I walked to the middle of the platform to drink from the spigot; the icy water was delicious. Still no dog.

A large pond sat next to the station. It snaked like a winding river that had been dammed, with tall grass growing in the shallows. Every so often I saw a fish jump. A handful of fishermen were sitting at intervals along the bank, glumly watching the dark water. Their motionless lines pierced the surface like silver needles. A big white dog, apparently brought along by one of the fishermen, frisked about in the hazy spring sunshine, sniffing the clover.

When the dog reached within ten meters of where I was standing, I leaned over the fence and called out to it. The dog looked up at me with pitiful washed-out brown eyes and wagged its tail two or three times. When I snapped my fingers it came over, pushed its nose through the slats, and licked my hand with its long tongue.

“Come on, boy,” I said, stepping back. The dog hesitated and looked back over its shoulder, its tail still wagging.

“Come on now—I’ve waited long enough.”

I pulled a stick of gum from my pocket, unwrapped it, and showed it to the dog. He stared at it for a minute before making up his mind and squeezing under the fence. I patted him on the head a few times, rolled the gum into a ball, and threw it as far as I could toward the far end of the platform. The dog made a beeline in that direction.

I went home satisfied.

It’s all over, I kept telling myself on the train. You can forget her now. That’s why you made this trip. But I couldn’t forget. That I loved Naoko. That she was dead and gone. That not a single damn thing was over and done with.

The clouds that cover Venus turn its surface into a furnace. That and the humidity mean that most Venusians die young—reaching thirty brings one almost legendary status. It also means that everyone’s heart is overflowing with love. Venusians all love each other; there are no exceptions. Nor is there any hatred, envy, or contempt. No one badmouths anyone else. There are no murders or fights. Love and caring reign.

“Suppose someone were to die today—we wouldn’t feel sad,” the quiet young Venusian said. “We loved them with all our hearts while they were alive, so there’s no need for regrets.”

“So you love in anticipation of death?”

“Earthling words like that escape me,” he said, shaking his head.

“Do things really work out that way?” I asked.

“If they didn’t,” he replied, “Venus would be buried in sadness.”

When I got back to my apartment, the twins were squeezed together in bed like sardines in a can.

“Welcome home,” one of them said, giggling.

“Where have you been?” said the other, giggling too.

“At the station,” I said, loosening my tie and squeezing in between them. I closed my eyes. I was dead tired.

“Which station?”

“Why did you go there?”

“A station far from here. To see a dog.”

“What sort of dog?”

“You like dogs?”

“A big white dog. But no, I’m not crazy about dogs.” The two kept quiet while I smoked a cigarette.

“Sad?” one of them asked.

I nodded.

“Then sleep,” said the other.

So I slept.

This story is about “me,” but it’s also about a guy they call “Rat.” That autumn the two of us were living four hundred miles apart.

My novel begins in September 1973. That’s the entrance. Sure hope there’s an exit. Not much point in writing all this if there isn’t.

# ON THE BIRTH OF PINBALL

No one has a clue who Raymond Moloney was.

All we can say for sure is that a man by that name once lived and died—that's about it. Our knowledge ends there. He is as much a mystery as a water bug at the bottom of a deep well.

Yet it is a historical fact that in 1934, thanks to him, the very first pinball machine steered its way though the golden clouds of technology to safely touch down on the corrupt world below. That same year, on the other side of the big puddle of the Atlantic Ocean, Adolf Hitler grabbed the first rung of the ladder of the Weimar Republic.

Raymond Moloney's life has none of the mythical aura surrounding the lives of figures like the Wright brothers or Alexander Graham Bell. There are no heartwarming stories of childhood exploits, no dramatic eureka moments. Just one slight mention on the first page of a book written for trivia geeks: 1934—the first pinball machine, invented by Raymond Moloney. No photograph appears in the book. Needless to say, no portraits or statues were made in his honor.

I know what you're thinking. If this guy Moloney hadn't been around, the pinball machine as we know it would be totally different. Perhaps it wouldn't even exist. Therefore our failure to appreciate him and his work smacks of ingratitude. If you could see what his invention, the Ballyhoo, looked like, however, those doubts would disappear in a flash. Nothing about it could be said to stimulate the imagination.

The pinball machine and Hitler's rise share one common trait. Greeted warily when they surfaced at that particular moment in history, their mythic aura stemmed more from the rapid pace of

evolution than from any inherent quality. Evolution of the sort that moves forward on three wheels, namely Technology, Capital Investment, and Human Desire.

With terrifying speed, people seized on the crude clay doll Moloney had created and added a whole string of innovations. “Let there be light!” “Let there be electricity!” “Let there be flippers!” they cried, one after another. And so the field was illuminated, and the balls were propelled with electrically induced magnetism and directed by two armlike flippers.

A player’s skill was translated into numbers and decimals, and a tilt light added to penalize anyone who nudged the table with too much enthusiasm. The metaphysical concept of “sequence” was born, which in turn spawned a host of schools: the bonus light, the extra ball, and the replay. By that time, the pinball machine had acquired an occult-like power.

This is a novel about pinball.

*Bonus Light*, a book-length study of pinball, says the following in its introduction:

> Almost nothing can be gained from pinball. The only payoff is a numerical substitution for pride. The losses, however, are considerable. You could probably erect bronze statues of every American president (assuming you are willing to include Richard Nixon) with the coins you will lose, while your lost time is irreplaceable.
>
> When you are standing before the machine engaged in your solitary act of consumption, another guy is plowing through Proust, while still another guy is doing some heavy petting with his girlfriend while watching *True Grit* at the

local drive-in. They're the ones who may wind up becoming groundbreaking novelists or happily married men.

No, pinball leads nowhere. The only result is a glowing replay light. Replay, replay, replay—it makes you think the whole aim of the game is to achieve a form of eternity.

We know very little about eternity, although we can infer its existence.

The goal of pinball is self-transformation, not self-expression. It involves not the expansion of the ego but its diminution. Not analysis but all-embracing acceptance.

If it's self-expression, ego expansion, or analysis you're after, the tilt light will exact its unsparing revenge.

Have a nice game!

## ▸ 1

There must have been ways to tell the twin sisters apart, but I'm sad to say I never found any. Not only were their faces, voices, and hairstyles identical, they had no moles or birthmarks that might have helped me out. They were perfect copies—all I could do was throw up my hands in defeat. They responded to stimuli in precisely the same way, ate and drank the same things, sang the same songs, slept the same number of hours, had their periods at the same time.

Now, I don't know what it's like to be a twin—my powers of imagination don't extend that far. But I bet if I had a twin identical to me in every respect, it would drive me nuts. Maybe I'm a little weird that way.

The two girls, however, lived a happy and tranquil life together. They were shocked, even angry, whenever they discovered that I couldn't tell them apart.

"But we're totally different!"

“Not alike at all!”

I just shrugged.

How long had it been since they moved in? My internal clock had been off-kilter since the day we started living together. Looking back, it strikes me that my sense of time during that period had regressed to that of an organism that reproduced by cellular division.

My friend and I rented a modest apartment on the street that runs up the slope from Shibuya to Nampeidai, where we opened a small translation company. We used the start-up money he got from his father, far from a princely sum, to pay the security deposit, hook up the telephone, and buy three steel desks, ten dictionaries, and half a dozen bottles of bourbon. With what was left over, we ordered a metallic signboard engraved with the company name we’d concocted, hoisted the sign out front, and placed an ad in the papers. Then we cracked open a bottle of bourbon, put our feet up on one of the desks, and waited for the customers to show up. It was the spring of 1972.

It took only a few months to realize that we had struck the mother lode. Requests poured into our humble office at an amazing clip. With the profits we bought an air conditioner, a refrigerator, and a home bar set.

“We pulled it off,” said my friend. “We’re successes, you and I.”

That just blew me away. It was the nicest thing anyone had ever said to me.

For jobs that needed printed copies, my friend worked out an agreement with a printer he knew, even scoring a kickback on the deal. I contacted the Student Office of the University of Foreign Languages to recruit a number of bright kids to turn out rough drafts of translations, so I wouldn’t get swamped. We hired a young woman to look after the books, handle the correspondence, and cover any other odd jobs that popped up. Just out of business school, she had long legs and a sharp mind. Apart from her habit of humming the melody to

“Penny Lane” (minus the chorus) twenty times a day, she was perfect. We sure hit the jackpot with her, my friend said. We paid her fifty percent above the usual rate, an annual bonus equal to five months’ salary, and offered a ten-day holiday in summer and then again in winter. As a result, ours was a satisfied and harmonious workplace.

Our office consisted of two rooms and an eat-in kitchen that—unusual for Tokyo—sat between the two rooms. We drew straws: I ended up with the inner room, my friend got the room next to the entranceway, and the girl sat in the kitchen, taking care of the books, fixing bourbon on the rocks, and setting out traps for the cockroaches, all to the unrelenting accompaniment of “Penny Lane.”

I tapped into our expense account and bought two filing cabinets that I placed on either side of my desk, the one on the left for unfinished translations, the one on the right for those I had completed.

The manuscripts our customers brought us were a mixed bag. From an *American Science* article on ball bearings’ resistance to pressure, the 1972 edition of the *All-American Book of Cocktails,* and an essay by William Styron, to a manual on the proper use and maintenance of safety razors, every item was marked “by such-and-such date” and stacked on the tray to the left, then, in due course, moved to the tray on the right. When a job was done we each drained a finger (well, a thumb, actually) of whiskey.

The great thing about doing translations at our level was that it didn’t require any extra thought. You simply took a coin (the original text) in your left hand, plunked it on your right palm, whisked your left hand away, and there it was. Simple.

We arrived at the office at ten and left at four. On Saturdays the three of us went to a nearby disco, where we drank J&B and danced to a Santana cover band.

The money wasn’t bad. From our monthly earnings we subtracted the rent, a small amount for office expenses, pay for our secretary and the part-timers, and taxes, then divided the remainder into ten parts, of which one part went to our business savings account, five parts to him, and four parts to me. To divvy up the money we piled it all on the

table in cash and worked from there, like the poker scene between Steve McQueen and Edward G. Robinson in *The Cincinnati Kid*. Primitive, for sure, but a heck of a lot of fun.

I think it made sense that my friend got five parts to my four. Not only did I foist the entire business side of our operation onto him, he endured the times I overdid the whiskey without complaint. On top of that, he had a sick wife, a three-year-old son, a Volkswagen Beetle with a wonky radiator, and, as if all that weren't enough, a compulsion to take on even more headaches.

"I'm looking after twin girls myself," I told him once, but of course he didn't buy it. So he kept on getting five to my four.

I spent my mid-twenties like this. Days as peaceful as a pool of afternoon sunlight.

The company slogan we stuck on our tri-colored promotional brochure read, "What the human hand can write, we can translate."

When, every six months or so, our business went into a rare slump, the three of us killed time handing those brochures out in front of Shibuya Station.

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How long did things go on like that? I walked on and on through a boundless silence. I went home every day after work to read the *Critique of Pure Reason* yet again and drink the twins' delicious coffee.

Sometimes things that happened the day before felt like they had occurred a year earlier; at other times last year's events seemed to have happened yesterday. When it got really bad, next year's events seemed to have taken place the previous day. Sometimes I found myself ruminating on ball bearings while translating Kenneth Tynan's article on Roman Polanski from the September 1971 issue of *Esquire*.

Month after month, year after year, I sat alone at the bottom of a deep swimming pool. Warm water, gentle light, and silence. Then, more silence…

There was just one way for me to tell the twins apart. That was by their sweatshirts. Each wore a faded navy-blue sweatshirt with white numerals printed on the chest. One read “208,” the other “209.” The “2” fit squarely on top of the right nipple, the “8” (or “9”) atop the left nipple. The “0” was plunked smack in the middle.

The very first day I had asked them what the numbers meant. Nothing at all, came the response.

“They look like serial numbers,” I said, using the English word.

“What are those?” one asked.

“Like if a whole bunch of you were manufactured at the same time, and you were each given a number.”

“No way,” said 208.

“Yeah,” said 209. “There’ve been just the two of us from the start. And somebody gave us these shirts, anyway.”

“Who?”

“We got them at the supermarket. It was their opening day, and a whole bunch of us got them for free.”

“I was the 209th customer,” said 209.

“And I was the 208th,” said 208.

“We bought three boxes of tissues.”

“Okay, so let’s do it this way: I’ll call you 208. And you 209,” I said, pointing to each of them in turn. “That way I can tell you apart.”

“Won’t work,” said one.

“Why not?”

They pulled off their sweatshirts, exchanged them, and pulled them on again.

“Now I’m 208,” said 209.

“And I’m 209,” said 208.

I let out a sigh.

Still, whenever I had to distinguish between the two of them, I relied

on the numbers on their sweatshirts. There was just no other way to tell who was who.

They had arrived with only the clothes on their backs. It was as if they had been taking a stroll, seen a promising place, and moved in. Well, I guess that's about how it happened. I gave them some money at the beginning of each week to buy what they needed, but apart from food for our meals, the only thing they ever purchased was an occasional box of coffee cream cookies.

"Isn't it a problem, not having more clothes?" I asked.

"No problem at all," replied 208.

"We don't care about clothes," answered 209.

They tenderly laundered their sweatshirts once a week in the bath. Lying in bed reading the *Critique of Pure Reason*, I would glance up and see them kneeling side by side, naked on the tile floor, scrubbing away. Times like that made me feel as if I'd arrived at some faraway place. Why, I don't know. I'd been experiencing the same feeling from time to time since the previous summer, when I had lost the crown from my front tooth under the diving board at the pool.

Many times I came home after work to see the sweatshirts with the numbers 208 and 209 fluttering in my south-facing window. Occasionally it brought tears to my eyes.

There were so many questions I could have asked. Why did you choose my place? How long will you stay? Most of all, what are you? How old are you? Where were you born? But I never asked, and they never said.

We spent our mornings drinking coffee, our evenings trolling the golf course for lost balls, and our nights fooling around in bed. The highlight was the hour or so I spent each day explaining items in the newspaper. They knew so little about the world. I mean, they couldn't tell the difference between Burma and Australia. It took three days to get across the fact that Vietnam had been divided into two sides that were now at war, and four to explain why Nixon had decided to bomb

Hanoi.

"So which are you rooting for?" asked 208.

"Which?"

"The north or the south?" said 209.

"I don't know. That's a hard one."

"Why is it so hard?" That was 208.

"Because I don't live in Vietnam."

That didn't convince them. It didn't convince me either.

"So why are they fighting? Political differences, right?" 208 grilled me.

"I guess you could say that."

"So their ideas are in conflict?" continued 208.

"Yes. But then you could say that there are 1.2 million conflicting ideas in the world. Probably more."

"So then it's almost impossible to be friends with anyone?" That was 209.

"That's true," I said. "It's just about impossible to be friends."

This was my lifestyle in the 1970s. Prophesied by Dostoevsky, consolidated by yours truly.

## ▸ 2

In the autumn of 1973, we could sense something nasty lurking just out of sight. The Rat felt it like a pebble in his shoe.

The brief summer had been sent on its way by the shifting winds of early September; yet the Rat seemed lost in what few traces remained. Still wearing his old T-shirt, cutoff jeans, and sandals, he made the daily commute to J's Bar, where he sat at the counter talking to J the bartender and drinking over-chilled beer. He had quit cigarettes five years before, but now he was smoking again and checking his watch every fifteen minutes.

It appeared as though time had stopped for the Rat, as if all of a sudden its flow had been severed. The Rat had no idea why things had changed. Nor did he know how to search for the severed end. He could only wander through the autumn gloom with a limp piece of rope in his hand. He crossed meadows, forded rivers, pushed open doors. But the rope led him nowhere. He was as powerless and lonely as a winter fly stripped of its wings, or a river confronting the sea. An ill wind had arisen somewhere, and it was blowing the warm, familiar air that had embraced him to the other side of the planet.

One season had opened the door and left, while another had entered through a second door. You might run to the open door and call out, Wait, there's something I forgot to tell you! But no one is there. When you close the door, you turn around to see the new season sitting in a chair, lighting up a cigarette. If you forgot to tell him something, he says, then why not tell me? I might pass the message along if I get the chance. No, that's all right, you say. It's no big deal. The sound of wind fills the room. No big deal. Just another season dead and gone.

The rich university dropout and the solitary Chinese bartender sat shoulder to shoulder, like an old married couple, as autumn once again gave way to the chill of winter.

Autumn was always a real downer. The few friends who had returned to town during summer vacation had already said their quick goodbyes and headed back to their distant new homes without waiting for September's arrival. As if crossing an invisible watershed, the summer light began its imperceptible change and the brilliant aura that had filled the Rat's world during that brief span vanished. Like a creek flowing onto autumn's sandy soil, the remnants of his warm summer dreams were sucked away without a trace.

Autumn was no fun for J either. When mid-September came, the number of his customers plummeted. It was like that every year, but this time around the drop-off was shocking. Neither J nor the Rat could understand what was behind the change. All they could know

was that the bucket of potatoes J had peeled for frying was still half full when closing time came.

“Just wait,” the Rat consoled him. “Pretty soon you’ll be bitching about how busy it is.”

“I wonder,” J said, looking unconvinced. He sat down on the stool behind the counter and started chipping burned butterfat off the toaster oven with an ice pick.

No one knew what might be waiting around the corner.

While the Rat leafed through a book, J ran a dry cloth over the bottles on the shelves, pausing to drag on the unfiltered cigarette clamped between his callused fingers.

The Rat’s sense of time had begun to go haywire three years earlier. The same spring that he quit the university.

There were, of course, a number of reasons why he had left school. These were all entangled with each other, and when they heated up, the fuse blew with a bang. Some things were left unchanged, some were blown away to parts unknown, some died.

The Rat did not try to explain why he had quit. A proper explanation could have taken a good five hours. Besides, if he explained himself to one person, soon everyone else he knew might demand to hear his story. From there it was a small step to having to explain himself to the whole world. Just imagining that made the Rat sick to his stomach.

“I didn’t like the way they cut the grass in the school quad,” he would say when pressed.

One girl actually went to the quad to check. “Didn’t look that bad to me,” she said. “Though there was some trash strewn around…”

“It’s a matter of taste,” the Rat replied.

When the Rat was in a better mood, he let on a bit more. “We just didn’t get along,” he would say, “me and school.” Then he would clam up.

This was three years ago.

But everything had passed with the flow of time. At an almost unbelievable pace. What had once been a violent, panting flood of emotion had suddenly withdrawn, leaving behind a heap of what felt like meaningless old dreams.

—

The Rat had left home the year he entered university and moved into an apartment his father had once used as a study. His parents voiced no objections to the move. They had planned to give the place to their son at some point anyway, and figured it wouldn't be a bad thing for him to experience the hardship of living on his own for a while.

Whatever way one looked at it, though, his life there could hardly be seen as difficult. No more than a melon could be mistaken for a vegetable. The apartment was beautifully designed and boasted three comfortable rooms, an air conditioner and a phone, a seventeen-inch color television set, a bath and a shower, a Mercedes Triumph in the underground parking lot, and, to top it all off, a fancy balcony perfect for sunbathing. The southeast-facing window of the penthouse afforded a panoramic view of town and ocean. When the Rat opened both windows, the chirping of birds and the heady fragrance of trees wafted in on the wind.

The Rat spent many tranquil afternoons settled in his rattan chair. When he began to drift off, he could feel time pass through his body like gently flowing water. As he sat, hours, days, weeks went by.

Occasionally, ripples of emotion would lap against his heart as if to remind him of something. When that happened, he closed his eyes, clamped his heart shut, and waited for the emotions to recede. It was only a brief sensation, like the shadows that signal the coming of night. Once the ripples had passed, the quiet calm returned as if nothing untoward had ever taken place.

Unless you count people peddling newspaper subscriptions, no one ever knocks at my door. So it stays shut, and I never have to answer to anyone.

That Sunday morning, though, whoever it was knocked thirty-five times. What could I do? With my eyes half closed, I dragged myself out of bed and stumbled to the door. A man of about forty in a gray workman's uniform was standing there in the hall, cradling his helmet like a small puppy.

"I'm from the phone company," he said. "I've come to replace your switch panel."

I nodded, leaning against the door frame. The guy's face was black with stubble, the kind of beard you could shave over and over without ever getting rid of it all. He even had hair growing under his eyes. I felt sorry for him, but I was zonked out. The twins and I had been playing backgammon until four in the morning.

"Can't we make it this afternoon?"

"No, I'm afraid it has to be now."

"Why?"

The man fumbled in the outside pocket of his work pants before extracting a black notebook. "Look," he said, showing it to me. "This is my schedule for today. After I finish here, I have to head to another part of the city. See?"

I looked at the notebook from where I stood. It was upside down, but I was able to see that, sure enough, my apartment was his last call in this neighborhood.

"What do you have to do?"

"It's simple. I pull out the old switch panel, cut the wires, and hook up the new one. That's all. The whole thing takes about ten minutes."

I thought for a moment before shaking my head no.

"I'm happy with the one I've got," I said.

"But it's an old model."

"The old model's fine with me."

He thought for a moment. "It's like this," he said at last. "This isn't

just about you. It affects everyone."

"How so?"

"The switch panels are all hooked up to the central computer at headquarters. So if yours is sending out a different signal than the rest, we've got a big problem. Got it?"

"Yes, I get it. You're talking about matching up hardware and software."

"Then can't you see your way to letting me in?"

What could I do? I opened the door and ushered him inside.

"But why would my apartment have the switch panel?" I asked. "Wouldn't it go in the super's apartment, or someplace like that?"

*"Normally,"* he said, scanning the walls of my kitchen. "But switch panels are just big nuisances to most people. They take up a lot of space, after all, and they're hardly ever used."

I nodded. Now the guy had climbed up on one of my kitchen chairs in his socks and was checking the ceiling. Nothing there, either.

"It's like a treasure hunt. People cram switch panels into the weirdest places. It's a real pity. Then they decorate their apartments with bulky doll cases and monster pianos. Go figure."

I agreed. Giving up on the kitchen, he opened the bedroom door, still shaking his head.

"Let me tell you about a switch panel I came across the other day. Where do you think they tossed the poor thing? Couldn't believe my eyes…"

He caught his breath. With the covers pulled to their chins, the twins lay side by side—with space for me in the middle—in a huge bed in a corner of the room. For fifteen seconds the repairman stood there dumbfounded. The twins were silent too. I had no choice but to break the ice.

"Uh, this gentleman is here with the phone company."

"Hi," said the one on the right.

"Welcome," said the one on the left.

"How…how do you do," said the repairman.

“He’s come to replace the switch panel,” I said.

“The switch panel?”

“What’s that?”

“It’s a machine to control the circuits.”

Neither of them understood. So I stepped back and let the repairman take over.

“Hmm…You see, it’s where all the telephone circuits gather together. Kind of like a mother dog with lots of puppies. Get it?”

“?”

“Nope.”

“Okay, so let’s say this mother dog is raising her puppies…But if she dies, then her puppies will all die too. So when her time comes, we go around replacing her with a new mother.”

“Cool.”

“Amazing.”

I had to hand it to him.

“So that’s why I’m here. Awful sorry to come at such a bad time.”

“No problem.”

“I want to watch.”

The relieved repairman mopped his brow with his handkerchief.

“Now if I can find the panel,” he said, scanning the room.

“No need to search,” said the one on the right.

“It’s in the closet,” said the one on the left. “Just remove the boards.”

I was blown away. “How come you guys know? Even *I* didn’t know that.”

“It’s the switch panel, right?”

“It’s famous.”

“I’m floored,” said the repairman.

The job took ten minutes, and the whole time the twins had their

heads together, giggling about something. As a result, the repairman kept botching the hookup. When he finally finished, the twins wriggled into their jeans and sweatshirts under the sheets and bounced into the kitchen to make coffee for everyone.

I offered the repairman a leftover Danish to go with his coffee. He jumped at the chance.

"Thanks so much. I missed breakfast."

"Don't you have a wife?" asked 208.

"Sure I do. But she sleeps in on Sundays."

"Poor guy," said 209.

"It's not like I choose to work Sundays, either."

I felt sorry for him. "How about a boiled egg?" I asked.

"That would be an imposition."

"No problem," I said. "We're all having some."

"Well, in that case. Not too runny, though…"

"I've been making house calls for twenty-one years," the repairman said as he peeled his egg, "but I've never seen anything like this before."

"Anything like what?" I asked.

"Well, uh…you're sleeping with twins, right? Doesn't that wear you out?"

"No," I said, sipping my coffee.

"Really?"

"Really."

"He's something else," said 208.

"Yeah," said 209. "A real animal."

"I'm floored," said the man.

I think he really was floored. The giveaway was that he forgot to take the old switch panel when he departed. Or maybe he left it behind to thank us for the breakfast. At any rate, the twins played with it all day, one acting as the mother dog, the other as the puppies. I couldn't make heads or tails of what they were talking about.

So I put them out of my mind and spent the afternoon focused on the translation I had brought home. The student part-timers who did the rough drafts were taking their exams, so my work had piled up. I was flying along until about three o'clock, when my battery began to run down and my pace slowed; by four the battery was dead. I couldn't write another line.

I planted my elbows on the glass desktop, lit up a cigarette, and gazed at the ceiling. The smoke looked like ectoplasm as it wandered through the quiet afternoon light. September 1973—it felt like a dream. Did 1973 *really* exist? I had never thought about it before. Somehow the idea struck me as hilarious.

"Are you okay?" asked 208.

"Just tired. Feel like some coffee?"

They trooped off to the kitchen, where one ground the beans and the other boiled the water and warmed the cups. Then we plopped down in a row on the floor next to the window and drank our coffee.

"Not going so great?" asked 209.

"I've had better days," I answered.

"It's in bad shape," said 208.

"What is?"

"The switch panel."

"The mother dog."

I let out a very deep sigh. "You think so?"

They both nodded.

"It's dying."

"For real."

"So what should we do?"

"We don't know," they said, shaking their heads.

I puffed on my cigarette. “How about if we take a stroll around the golf course?” I said a little while later. “It’s Sunday, so there could be tons of lost balls.”

After about an hour of backgammon, we scaled the chain-link fence and walked the deserted course in the twilight. I whistled the tune to Mildred Bailey’s “It’s So Peaceful in the Country” twice. The twins said they liked the song a lot. But we didn’t find a single golf ball. Sometimes it’s like that. Every low-handicap golfer in Tokyo must have played there that day. Or maybe they had brought in a specially trained beagle to retrieve lost balls. Feeling low, we trudged back to the apartment.

## ▸ 4

The unmanned beacon sat alone at the end of a long, meandering pier. It was not particularly big, a little less than ten feet tall. Fishing boats had relied on its light in the days before pollution drove the fish from the coast. There was nothing resembling a harbor in the area. Instead, the fishermen had rigged a set of wooden tracks with a winch and a rope to pull their boats up from the beach. Three of their huts had stood nearby; in the mornings you would have seen wooden boxes of small fish drying inside the breakwater. At a certain point, however, the fishermen had left, driven away by a combination of three factors: the disappearance of the fish, the commuters’ irrational aversion to having a fishing village near their town, and the township’s declaration that the huts along the beach were illegal. That was 1962. Where the fishermen had gone was anyone’s guess. The three houses were summarily demolished, while the rotting boats, with no further function and no place to be discarded, were left high and dry among the trees along the shore, where they served as a playground for children.

Once the fishing boats were gone, private yachts wandering the coast and freighters moored outside the port seeking shelter from

typhoons and heavy fogs were the only vessels left that might have found the beacon helpful. But most likely it no longer served a purpose.

The beacon was a squat black thing shaped like a bell set down on its rim or a man hunched in thought seen from the back. When the sun began to set and the evening glow became tinged with blue, an orange light glowed from its top—the handle of the bell—and it slowly began to revolve. In that instant, when day turned to night, it came to life: whether evening brought a beautiful sunset or a cloak of mist, the beam began to rotate at the precise moment when the balance between light and dark shifted, and darkness reigned supreme.

As a child, the Rat had often gone down to the beach in the evenings just to witness that sudden flash in the dark. If the waves were not too high he would walk to the end of the twisting pier, counting its worn flagstones as he went. In the early fall he could see schools of tiny fish darting about in the surprisingly clear water. They would swim circles along the sides of the pier, as if searching for something, before heading out to sea.

When at last he reached the beacon, the Rat sat down on the end of the pier and studied the sky. It was dark blue as far as the eye could see, with streaks of cloud that looked painted by an artist's brush. The blue seemed bottomless; its depth made the Rat's legs tremble in awe. Everything was so vivid, the smell of the ocean, the color of the wind. Taking his time, the Rat drank in the scene that lay before him, then turned around. Now he was looking at his own world, so separate from the deep sea. The white beach and the breakwater, the flattened row of green pines, and, behind them, ranged against the sky, the sharp outline of the bluish-black mountains.

Far to his left was the great port, with its cranes, floating docks, boxlike warehouses, freighters, and tall buildings. To his right, facing the ocean and running along the curved coastline, were the quiet residential district, the yacht harbor, some old sake warehouses, and, a suitable distance beyond, the industrial zone's row of spherical tanks and towering smokestacks, which covered the sky with a white haze. That marked the end of the world as the ten-year-old Rat knew it.

Throughout his childhood, from spring to early autumn, the Rat paid regular visits to the beacon. When the waves were high, the spray washed his feet, the wind howled, and he slipped time and again on the mossy flagstones. Yet the path to the beacon was dearer to him than anywhere else. He would sit there at the end of the pier listening to the waves, gazing at the clouds, the sky, and the schools of small fish, and tossing the pebbles he carried in his pocket into the water.

When the sky darkened he would take the same path back to his own world. This return, though, was always accompanied by an ineffable sadness. The world awaiting him out there was just too big, too powerful; there seemed to be no place where he could burrow into it.

—

The woman's apartment was not far from the pier. Vague memories of his childhood and the smell of those evenings came back to the Rat each time he visited her. He would park on the coastal road and cut through the sparse stand of pine trees planted to block the sand blowing in from the beach. The sand made a dry sound under his feet.

The apartment building was located where the fishermen's huts had once stood. If you dug down a few meters, reddish-brown seawater came bubbling up. South American canna lilies drooped in the front garden, as if someone had trampled them. The woman lived on the second floor—when the wind blew it brushed her window with fine sand. Her neat little apartment faced south, but it was strangely gloomy. It's the ocean, she said. It's too damn close—the smell of the tide, the wind, the sound of the waves, the stink of fish…everything.

"You can't smell fish here," the Rat said.

Sure I can, she said. She pulled a cord and the Venetian blinds closed with a snap. So would you if you lived here.

Sand swept against the window.

When I was in college, no one in my apartment building had a phone. Hell, I doubt any of us had an eraser. There was, though, one pink pay phone, which sat outside the caretaker's office on a low table that had been tossed out by the local elementary school. It was the only phone in the whole place. Telephone switch panels were the last thing on our minds. Ours was a peaceful world in a peaceful time.

Since the caretaker was never in his office, one of us had to answer the phone when it rang and dash off to inform the recipient of their call. Of course there were times (like when a call came in at 2 a.m.) when no one picked up. Like an elephant aware of its approaching death, the phone would ring like mad (the most I counted was thirty-two times) and then die. I use the word die literally. The moment the last ring had sailed down the long corridor and off into the black night, a hush settled over the building. It was an eerie silence. We all lay there in our beds, holding our breath, as we contemplated the dead call.

Late-night calls were always depressing. Someone would pick up the receiver and start talking in a low voice:

"Let's drop it…No, you've got it wrong…What's done is done, right?…It's the truth. Why would I lie?…No, I'm just tired…Of course it bothers me…But you see…Yeah, I get the picture. But I need time, okay?…I can't explain over the phone…"

Each of us had all the troubles we could carry. They rained down on us from the sky, and we raced around in a frenzy to pick them up and stuff them in our pockets. Why we did that stumps me, even now. Maybe we thought they were something else.

There were telegrams, too. A motorbike would roar up to the front door around four in the morning, followed by loud footsteps in the hallway. Then a fist would pound on someone's door. That noise always reminded me of the Grim Reaper. Boom, boom. We were prone to so many disasters—lives lost to suicide, minds wrecked, hearts marooned in the backwaters of time, bodies burning with pointless obsessions—and we gave each other a hell of a lot of trouble. Nineteen seventy was that kind of year. Yet if you cling to the belief that the human organism is made to improve itself through some sort of

dialectical process, a year as awful as 1970 can teach you something.

My room was on the first floor next to the caretaker's office, while the girl with the long hair lived on the second floor, next to the stairs. Since she was the clear winner when it came to the number of calls received, I was stuck trotting up and down those fifteen slippery steps thousands of times to summon her to the phone. Her callers were all sorts of people. Their voices were courteous or officious, sad or arrogant. In all cases they asked for her by name. Yet I have no memory of what that name was. My only recollection is that it was heartbreakingly common.

Her voice on the phone was an almost inaudible, exhausted-sounding whisper. Her face was attractive enough, but kind of gloomy. Although we passed each other on the street from time to time, I never spoke to her. Her expression as she walked along was like that of someone riding a white elephant down a narrow jungle path.

She lived in our apartment building for six months. From the beginning of autumn to the end of winter.

I would answer the phone, climb the stairs, knock on her door, say, "Phone for you," and a moment later she would say, "Thanks." "Thanks" was all she ever said to me. Then again, "Phone for you" was all I ever said to her.

It was a lonely season for me as well. When I returned to my room and undressed at the end of the day, my bones threatened to burst through my skin and fly away. As if some mysterious internal force were propelling me in the wrong direction, leading me toward another world.

The phone calls made me think. Someone was trying to get through to someone else. Yet almost no one ever called me. Not a single person

was trying to reach me, and even if they had been, they wouldn't have said what I wanted to hear.

Each of us had, to a greater or lesser degree, resolved to live according to his or her own system. If another person's way of thinking was too different from mine, it made me mad; too close, and I got sad. That's all there was to it.

It was the end of winter when I fielded her last phone call. A clear Saturday morning in early March. Mid-morning anyway, ten o'clock, with bright winter sunlight probing every corner of my small room. When I became aware of the ringing, I was sitting on my bed looking out the window at the cabbage field next door. Glistening patches of snow were scattered across the black soil like puddles of water—all that remained of the last snow of the final cold snap of the year.

The phone rang ten times without anyone picking up. Then five minutes later it started again. That ticked me off, but I threw a cardigan over my pajamas and went to get it.

"Is Miss…there?" asked a man. His voice was flat, elusive. Mumbling something noncommittal, I trudged up the stairs and knocked on her door.

"Phone for you."

"Thanks."

I went back to my room, lay down on the bed, and studied the ceiling. I could hear her coming down the steps, and then that whispery voice. It was an unusually short conversation for her. Maybe fifteen seconds. I heard her hang up and then there was a protracted silence, no footsteps, nothing. A moment later, I heard footsteps slowly approaching my door, followed by two knocks. There was a pause for as long as a deep breath, then another two raps.

When I opened the door she was standing there in a bulky white sweater and jeans. I thought for a moment I had made a mistake, that the call had been for someone else, but she said nothing, just stood

there shivering with her arms folded and her eyes fixed on me. She looked like someone in a lifeboat watching the ship go down. Or maybe the other way around.

“Can I come in? It’s freezing out here.”

I was taken off guard, but I let her in and closed the door. She sat down in front of my gas heater to warm her hands and looked around.

“This room is awfully bare, isn’t it?”

I nodded. There really was nothing. Just a bed next to a window, and that was it. A bed too big for one, and too small for two. I hadn’t bought it. Rather, an acquaintance had given it to me. Why he had given it to a virtual stranger was beyond me. We seldom talked. A rich kid from the middle of nowhere, he had quit school after he was beaten by members of an opposing political group who kicked him in the head with their construction boots, damaging his eyesight. It had happened in the quad, and he had sobbed all the way from there to the school infirmary, to my great disgust. A few days later he told me he was leaving school. And gave me the bed.

“Is there anything warm to drink?” she said. No, I answered, shaking my head. No coffee, no tea, not even a proper kettle. Just a saucepan to boil water in the morning when I shaved. Wait here, she said with a sigh. She stood up and left the room, returning five minutes later with a cardboard box in her hands. Inside was a good six months’ supply of tea bags and green tea, two bags of cookies, granulated sugar, a basic set of pots and plates, and two Snoopy glasses. Setting the box down on the bed, she pulled out a pot and began to boil water.

“How do you get by? You live like Robinson Crusoe!”

“It’s not that much fun.”

“I guess not.”

We drank our black tea in silence.

“You can have all this,” she said.

I choked on my tea. “Why would you do that?”

“It’s my way of saying thanks. For all the times you answered the phone.”

“But won’t you need it?”

She shook her head. “I’m moving out tomorrow. It’s of no use to me anymore.”

There must have been something to explain this new train of events, but I couldn’t imagine what.

“Did something good happen? Or was it something bad?”

“Not too good, I guess. I mean I’m dropping out of school and going home.”

The winter sunlight that filled the room dimmed for a moment, then brightened again.

“But you don’t want to hear about it, do you? I sure wouldn’t. Who’d want to use the dishes of someone who’d bummed them out!”

—

The next morning, a cold rain began to fall. It was a fine rain that managed to seep through my raincoat and soak the sweater beneath. Everything—the big trunk I was lugging and the suitcase and shoulder bag she carried—was dark with moisture. The taxi driver snapped at us not to put any of it on the seat. The cab was hot and stuffy with stale tobacco smoke, and a traditional ballad was blaring from the car radio, a tune as old-fashioned as a semaphore indicator. The dripping branches of the leafless trees lining both sides of the road looked like underwater coral.

“I didn’t like Tokyo the first time I laid eyes on it,” she said, “and I still don’t.”

“Really?”

“Yes. The soil is too black, the rivers are filthy, there aren’t any mountains…How about you?”

“I’ve never thought about the scenery.”

She sighed. “That’s why you’re going to survive this place,” she said with a smile.

We reached the platform and put down the bags.

“Thanks for everything,” she said. “I can take it from here.”

“Where’s home?”

“Way up north.”

“I bet it’s cold.”

“That’s okay. I’m used to it.”

When the train started moving she waved to me from the window. I raised my hand to the level of my ear, but when the train went out of sight, I felt awkward all of a sudden and stuffed it in the pocket of my raincoat.

It rained all day and on into the night. I bought two bottles of beer at the local liquor store and drank them in one of the glasses she had given me. I was freezing cold. The glass had a picture of Snoopy and Woodstock playing on top of Snoopy’s doghouse with a balloon that read, “Happiness is a warm friend.”

The twins were fast asleep when I opened my eyes. Three a.m. The autumn moonlight outside the bathroom window was unnaturally bright. I sat on the edge of the kitchen counter next to the sink, drank two glasses of water, and lit a cigarette on the gas burner. The layered voices of thousands upon thousands of insects rose from the moonlit golf course.

I picked up the switch panel leaning against the counter and examined it with care, turning it this way and that. It was just a meaningless board, grimy and old, no matter how you looked at it. Giving up, I put it back where it had been, wiped the dirt from my hands, and took another puff on my cigarette. Everything looked pale in the moonlight. Devoid of value, meaning, or direction. Even the shadows were indistinct. I stubbed out my cigarette in the sink and lit another.

Would I ever find a place that was truly mine? Where might it be? I thought and thought, yet all that came to me was the cockpit of a twin-seater torpedo plane. But that was sheer idiocy. I mean, those things went out of date thirty years ago, right?

I went back to bed and squeezed in between the twins. They lay curled with their heads angled toward the outer edges of the bed, breathing peacefully. I pulled the blanket to my chin and studied the ceiling.

## ▸ 6

The woman stepped into the bathroom and closed the door behind her. The sound of the shower followed soon after.

The Rat struggled to control his feelings. He raised himself on the sheets, grabbed a cigarette, and put it between his lips. But his lighter wasn't on the table or in the pocket of his trousers. He didn't even have a match. He poked around in the woman's bag, but no luck there either. Giving up, he switched on the light and rifled through his desk drawers until he turned up an old book of matches with the name of some restaurant on it. He lit his cigarette.

Her stockings and underwear were folded with care and piled on one of his rattan chairs, her tailored mustard-colored dress draped over its back. On the bedside table lay her tiny watch and her La Bagagerie bag, no longer new but well maintained.

The Rat sank down in the opposite chair and stared out the window.

From his mountainside perch, the Rat could see the signs of human activity scattered across the hillside below. Sometimes he stood there for hours, hands on hips, focusing on the scene below like a golfer at the top of a downhill course. The slope descended at a gentle angle, gathering in the scattered lights of the houses. There were dark groves of trees, small hills, and, here and there, private swimming pools glaring white under mercury lamps. Where the slope began to level off, the highway snaked across the landscape like an illuminated waistband; from the base of the mountain to the shore half a mile away, the town sprawled flat and monotonous. The ocean beyond melted into the dark sky, while the orange light from the small beacon flashed, disappeared, and flashed again. And cutting through all these

layers of terrain, dividing them neatly in two, ran the dark fairway.

The river.

The Rat had first met the woman in early September, when the sky still retained a trace of summer radiance.

He had found an electric typewriter listed in the Used Goods section of his local newspaper among ads for playpens, Linguaphones, tricycles, and whatnot. The young woman who answered the phone sounded very businesslike: the typewriter had been used for a year with a year left on its warranty; cash up front (no monthly payments); he had to come get it himself. They struck a deal, and he drove to her apartment, paid, and picked up the typewriter. It cost nearly as much as what he had earned from his part-time summer job.

She was small and slender and wore an attractive sleeveless dress. Leafy plants of various shapes and colors were lined up in pots at the apartment's entranceway. She had pleasant features, and her hair was tied up at the back. The Rat couldn't tell her age. He would have found anything between twenty-two and twenty-eight believable.

Three days later, she phoned to say that she had half a dozen typewriter ribbons she would be happy to give him for free. When the Rat picked them up, he asked her out to J's Bar, where he treated her to cocktails to thank her for the ribbons. They didn't click right off the bat, though.

The third time they met was four days later, at the local indoor pool. He drove her back to his apartment and they made love. Why did it turn out that way? The Rat had no idea. Did he make the first move or did she? They had simply gone with the flow.

After a few days, the Rat could feel the tangible reality of their relationship swelling within him, as if a soft wedge were being driven into his everyday life. Little by little, something was getting through. His long-forgotten gentler, sweeter side seemed to expand each time he thought of her slender arms wrapped around his body.

The Rat could see that she was trying to establish a kind of perfection in her small world. He was well aware that required an extraordinary degree of determination. She wore only the most modest yet tasteful dresses over fresh, clean undergarments, applied an eau de cologne with the fragrance of a morning vineyard to her body, took great care in choosing her words, asked no pointless questions, and appeared to have practiced smiling in the mirror. Yet these things only added to the Rat's sadness. After a number of meetings he guessed her age to be twenty-seven. That turned out to be spot on.

Her breasts were small, and though her trim body was beautifully tanned, it was a reluctant rather than a boastful tan, as if it had been acquired without her approval. Her angular cheekbones and thin lips spoke of her good upbringing and resolute core, but there was something naive and vulnerable beneath the surface, which showed in her subtle shifts of expression.

She had studied architecture in an art college, she said, and now worked in an architect's office. Her birthplace? Nowhere near here, she replied. I came to this area after I graduated. She went to the pool once a week and took the train to her viola lesson every Sunday night.

The two of them got together once a week, on Saturday night. Then the Rat spent Sunday in a haze while she practiced playing Mozart.

## ▸ 7

I missed three whole days of work with a cold, and when I got back, I was swamped. My mouth was gritty, and my body felt as if it had been scrubbed with sandpaper. Piles of documents—pamphlets, manuscripts, booklets, magazines, etc.—rose like anthills around my desk. My business partner stopped by to mumble a few words of what sounded like sympathy and went back to his room. The girl left the usual coffee and two rolls on my desk, then she disappeared as well. I had forgotten to buy cigarettes, so I bummed a pack of Seven Stars from my partner, popped the filter off one, turned it around, and lit it.

The sky outside was gray and hazy—you couldn't tell where the air ended and the clouds began. The smell of smoke was in the air, as if someone were trying to burn wet leaves. But that may have been my fever.

I took a deep breath and set to work on the anthill closest to me. Everything in it was stamped Urgent, with the deadline written below in red felt pen. Luckily, it was the only anthill marked Urgent. Even luckier, none of the documents was so urgent it had to be completed in the next two or three days. All the deadlines were one or two weeks away, so chances were I could get everything done in time if I sent half out to our part-timers for rough translation. I picked up the documents one by one and arranged them in the order I would work on them. This made the anthill much less stable than before: now it was shaped like a newspaper graph indicating the Cabinet's approval rating by gender and age. The mix of topics, though, really turned me on.

① **AUTHOR:** CHARLES RANKIN
**TITLE:** *Readers' Questions on Science (Animals)*
**LENGTH:** *From p.* 68 *("Why does a cat wash its face?") to p.* 89 *("How does a bear catch fish?")*
**DUE:** *October* 12

② **AUTHOR:** THE AMERICAN NURSING ASSOCIATION
**TITLE:** *Conversing with the Terminally Ill*
**LENGTH:** 16 *pages*
**DUE:** *October* 19

③ **AUTHOR:** FRANK DESITO JR.
**TITLE:** *A Study of Writers' Pathology, Chapter Three: "Writers on Hay Fever"*
**LENGTH:** 23 *pages*

**DUE:** *October* 23

④ **AUTHOR:** RENÉ CLAIR

**TITLE:** *The Italian Straw Hat (English translation of the film script)*

**LENGTH:** 39 *pages*

**DUE:** *October* 26

Too bad the clients' names weren't included! Who had commissioned these translations (and "urgently," no less), and for what reasons? I hadn't a clue. Was there a bear patiently standing beside a river somewhere waiting for my translation to arrive? Or a tongue-tied nurse unable to speak a word to her dying patient?

Tossing the photograph of a cat washing its face with one paw on the desk, I drank my coffee and ate one of the rolls, which tasted like plaster of Paris. My head was starting to clear, but the fever was causing some numbness in my fingertips and toes. I reached into my desk drawer for my Swiss Army knife, selected six HB pencils, and took my time sharpening them to a fine point as I eased into work.

My cassette tape of an old Stan Getz album was the musical background for my efforts that morning. It was a dynamite band featuring Getz, Al Haig, Jimmy Raney, Teddy Kotick, and Tiny Kahn. Whistling Getz's solo to "Jumpin' with Symphony Sid" from start to finish along with the tape really picked me up.

I broke at noon for a lunch of fried fish at a crowded restaurant five minutes' walk down the slope and followed that with two quick shots of orange juice at a hamburger stand. From there I continued on to a pet shop, where I spent ten minutes playing with an Abyssinian cat, poking my finger through an opening in the front window. A typical lunch break.

I went back to my office and leafed through the morning paper until the hands on the clock pointed to one. I sharpened six more pencils for my afternoon's work and pinched the filters off the rest of the pack of

Seven Stars, lining the cigarettes up on my desk. The girl brought in a hot cup of green tea.

"How do you feel?"

"Not so bad."

"How's the work going?"

"Couldn't be better."

Outside it was still overcast. In fact the gray seemed only to have deepened since morning. When I stuck my head out the window I thought I sniffed rain. A few autumn birds cut across the sky. The drone of the city was everywhere, a mix of countless sounds: subway trains, sizzling hamburgers, cars on elevated highways, automatic doors opening and closing.

Shutting the window, I put on a tape of Charlie Parker's "Just Friends" and dug into the next translation, "When Do Migrating Birds Sleep?"

I wrapped up work at four, gave what I had translated to the girl, and headed out. Instead of lugging an umbrella, I wore the thin raincoat I kept in the office for times like this. I bought an evening paper at the station and spent the next hour being tossed around in the packed train. I could smell rain there too, although a single drop had yet to fall.

I had just finished shopping for dinner at the supermarket in front of the station when the rain began. The drops were too fine to see, but the sidewalk at my feet was turning a darker shade of gray. I checked the bus schedule, then made my way to a crowded café nearby for a cup of coffee. Now the smell of rain was unmistakable, on the waitress's blouse, even in my coffee.

I watched the streetlights flicker on one by one around the terminal as the buses came and went like giant trout cruising a mountain stream. Long lines of office workers, students, and housewives stepped up to disappear into their dark interiors. A middle-aged woman leading a black German shepherd passed in front of my window, followed by a bunch of schoolkids bouncing a rubber ball. I stubbed out my fifth cigarette and gulped the last dregs of my coffee.

I took a long look at my reflection in the window. My eyes were a bit hollow with fever. I could live with that. And my jaw was dark with five o'clock (five thirty, actually) shadow. I could live with that too. The problem was that the face I saw wasn't my face at all. It was the face of the twenty-four-year-old guy you sometimes sit across from on the train. My face and my soul were lifeless shells, of no significance to anyone. My soul passes someone else's on the street. Hey, it says. Hey, the other responds. Nothing more. Neither waves. Neither looks back.

If I stuck gardenias in my ears and flippers on my hands some people might stop and turn around. But that would be it. Three steps more and they would already have forgotten me. Their eyes saw nothing, not a damn thing. And mine were no different. I felt empty. Maybe I had nothing left to give.

The twins were waiting for me.

I handed my brown shopping bag to one of them and headed for the shower. Not bothering to soap or even remove the cigarette from my mouth, I stood there under the spray and stared at the tiled wall. The bulb had been out for some time, but I could see something wander across the dark wall and disappear. It was the shadow of something I could no longer touch or summon back.

I stepped out of the shower, toweled off, and fell into bed. The coral-blue sheets were fresh and wrinkle-free. I lay there puffing on my cigarette and looking at the ceiling as the events of the day came back to me. Meanwhile, the twins were cutting vegetables, grilling meat, and boiling rice.

"Want a beer?" one of them asked.

"Yeah."

208 came to the bed with a beer and a glass.

"Music?"

"That would help."

She walked to my shelf of LPs, pulled out Handel's recorder sonatas,

placed it on the turntable, and lowered the needle. My girlfriend had given it to me for Valentine's Day some years earlier. Beneath the recorder, viola, and harpsichord I could hear the sizzle of grilling meat like a basso continuo. My girlfriend and I had made love over and over while this record was playing, grinding away without a word to each other even after the music had ended and the needle crackled.

Outside the window, a silent rain fell on the golf course. I had just finished my beer and Hans-Martin Linde had just played the last note of the Sonata in F Major when dinner was ready. We had little to say to each other during the meal, which was rare for us. With no record playing, the only sounds were those of rain on the eaves and three people chewing meat. When we had finished, the twins cleared the table and made coffee. Then we sat together drinking it. The coffee smelled so good it seemed to have a life of its own. One of the girls got up to put a record on the turntable: *Rubber Soul*.

"I don't remember buying that," I called in surprise.

"We bought it!"

"We put a little money aside from what you gave us."

I shook my head in dismay.

"You don't like the Beatles?"

I bit my tongue.

"That's too bad. We thought you'd be happy."

"We're really sorry."

A twin got up to take the record off the turntable, dusting it carefully before sticking it back in its jacket. We sat there in silence. I let out a sigh.

"I didn't mean it," I apologized. "I'm just a little tired and on edge. Put it back on."

The girls gave each other a glance and giggled.

"There's no need to be polite. After all, this is your house."

"Don't worry about us."

"Please, play it again."

In the end, we listened to both sides of *Rubber Soul* with our coffee.

I could feel myself calming down. The twins seemed happier too.

When we had finished the girls took my temperature. They stared long and hard at the thermometer. Ninety-nine point five, one degree higher than that morning. My head was woozy.

"That's 'cause you took a shower."

"You should go to bed."

No argument there.

I undressed and got under the covers with the *Critique of Pure Reason* and a pack of smokes. The blanket smelled of the sun and Kant was impressive as always, but the cigarette tasted like soggy newspaper on a gas burner. Shutting my book and closing my eyes, I was half tuned in to the twins' voices when the darkness dragged me down.

## ▸ 8

The cemetery stretched across a broad plateau near the crest of the mountain. Pathways of fine gravel crisscrossed the rows of graves, with trimmed azalea bushes scattered here and there like grazing sheep. Tall mercury lamps, curved like royal ferns, stood along the paths, casting their unnatural white light into every corner of the vast site.

The Rat had parked his car in the woods at the southeast corner of the cemetery and was sitting with his arm around the woman, gazing down at the town. At night it looked like a viscous mass of light that had been poured into a flat mold. Or a shower of gold dust deposited by some giant moth.

With her eyes closed as though she were fast asleep, the woman leaned on the Rat; he could feel her pressing against his shoulder and side. It was a strange weight. In it he could sense the fullness of a woman's existence: loving a man, bearing children, growing old and dying. The Rat pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket with his free

hand and lit one. Now and then, an ocean breeze mounted the slope to ruffle the needles of the pines. It appeared that the woman might really have fallen asleep. The Rat brought his hand to her cheek and touched a finger to her thin lips. He could feel the moist warmth of her breath.

The cemetery looked more like an abandoned town than a graveyard. Over half the site was vacant. That was because the people who planned to be laid to rest there were still alive. Sometimes they would come with their families on Sunday afternoons to check out the grave sites they would one day occupy. Yes, a fine view, they would say, looking down at the cemetery from higher on the mountainside, flowers for every season, nice fresh air, a well-tended lawn with sprinklers—how about that!—and no stray dogs to steal the offerings. Best of all, they would think, it's a bright and wholesome place. Satisfied, they would sit on a bench and eat their box lunches before returning to their busy lives.

The caretaker smoothed the gravel paths every morning and evening using a long pole with a plank on the end. He also chased away any children who might be after the carp in the central pond. Finally, three times a day—at nine, twelve, and six—he would play a music box version of "Old Black Joe" through the cemetery speakers. Why play music there at all? It blew the Rat's mind. Still, the darkening cemetery at six o'clock in the evening with the strains of "Old Black Joe" wafting across it was quite a trip.

The caretaker took the bus back to the world below at half past six, leaving the graveyard in total silence. Then the cars started to arrive, each bearing a couple come to make love. In summer, cars were lined up among the trees.

The cemetery held special significance for the Rat in his youth. Back in his high school days when he was still too young to drive an automobile, he had whisked up and down the riverside road time and again, always with a different girl on the back of his 250cc motorbike. He had embraced each while looking down on the same lights of town. Many sweet scents filled his nostrils, only to vanish. Many dreams, many sorrows, many promises. Yet in the end nothing remained.

You could see, if you cared to look, that death had spread its roots throughout the sprawling site. Every once in a while, the Rat would take a girl by the hand and wander along the gravel paths of the overly manicured grounds, past the graves. The names and dates of those buried beneath were written on the stones. They were the bearers of past lives, in evenly spaced rows that went on forever, like shrubs in a botanical garden. For the dead there was no murmuring wind, no fragrance, no feelers they could extend to find their way in the dark. They were like trees cut off from time. The dead had entrusted feelings, and the words to convey them, to flesh-and-blood people. He and the girl would return to the trees and hold each other tight. The pathos of the world of the living filled everything around them, the scent of the ocean on the wind, the fragrance of leaves, the chirping of crickets in the grass.

—

"Did I sleep long?" the woman asked.

"No," said the Rat. "Not long at all."

## ▸ 9

Each day was a carbon copy of the last. You needed a bookmark to tell one from the other.

That particular day was filled with the smell of autumn. I wrapped up work at the usual time, but when I got back to my apartment the twins were nowhere to be seen. I flopped into bed with my socks on, lit a cigarette, and let my mind wander. There were so many things I wanted to think about, but none took shape. Sighing, I sat up and glared at the white wall opposite the bed. I was stymied. Come on, man, I told myself, you can't stare at this damn wall forever. But that didn't help, either. It was what the professor who oversaw my graduation thesis told me. Good style, clear argument, but you're not

saying anything. That was my problem. Now I had a rare moment alone, and I still couldn't get a handle on how to deal with myself.

It was weird. I had been on my own for years and had assumed I was getting by pretty well. Yet now I couldn't remember any of it. Twenty-four years couldn't disappear in a flash. I felt like someone who realizes in the midst of looking for something that they have forgotten what it was. What was the object of my search? A bottle opener? An old letter? A receipt? An earpick?

I gave up and grabbed my Kant from beside the bed, when a note fell from between its pages. It was written in the twins' hand. "Gone to the golf course" was all it said. This worried me. I had warned them never to go there without me. The golf course at night was not for neophytes. You never knew when a ball might come flying out of nowhere.

I put on my tennis shoes, wrapped a sweatshirt around my neck, and left the apartment. Scaling the chain-link fence, I crossed the gentle rise, skirted the twelfth hole, passed the small arbor that served as a rest stop, and cut through the woods. The setting sun split the trees on the west side of the course, splashing the fairway with light. In the dumbbell-shaped bunker near the tenth hole, I found an empty box of coffee cream cookies the twins must have left in the sand. I rolled it into a ball, stuffed it in my pocket, and stepped back to erase our footprints with my toe. Then I walked across the small wooden bridge that spanned the stream, climbed the hill, and there they were, sitting halfway up the outdoor escalator on the other side of the slope, playing backgammon.

"Didn't I tell you not to come here alone?"

"But the sunset was so pretty," one of them replied.

We descended the outdoor escalator to the field of pampas grass and sat down to enjoy the view. She had it right—the sunset was amazing.

"You shouldn't throw your garbage in the bunkers," I scolded.

"We're sorry," they chimed together.

"I got hurt once playing in the sand. Back in grade school," I said, showing them the tip of my left index finger. A tiny scar like a piece of white thread ran across it. "Someone buried a broken soda bottle in

the sand."

They both nodded.

"Of course, you can't cut your hand on an empty box of cookies. But you still shouldn't throw stuff in the sand like that. It's a pure and sacred place."

"We understand," one of them said.

"We'll be careful," said the second one. "Do you have any other scars?"

"Sure I do." I showed them the whole lot. A veritable catalog of injuries. The place where a soccer ball had damaged my left eye. (The retina was still affected.) A scar near the base of my nose, also from soccer. I was heading the ball when an opponent's tooth clipped me. The seven stitches on my lower lip, from when I fell off my bike. Dodging a truck. Then there was my broken tooth…

We stretched out together on the cool grass, as the plumes of pampas grass rustled in the breeze.

—

When the last rays were gone, we headed back to the apartment for dinner. I had finished my bath and downed the last of my beer when they finished grilling the trout. There was one for each of us, with canned asparagus and a huge bunch of watercress on the side. The trout tasted like something from the good old days—a mountain path in summer. We took our time picking every last morsel from the fish with our chopsticks. All that was left on the plate was white bones and a pencil-sized watercress stalk. The twins washed the dishes right away and made coffee.

"Let's talk about the switch panel," I said. "It's been bothering me."

They nodded.

"I wonder why it's dying."

"I think it sucked in more than it could handle."

"Yeah, it just burst."

I thought for a moment, coffee cup in my left hand, cigarette in my

right.

"Is there anything we can do?"

They looked at each other and shook their heads. "No, it's too late."

"It's returning to dust."

"Have you ever seen a cat die of blood poisoning?"

"No," I answered.

"At the beginning its paws and tail get hard as a rock. At the end its heart stops. It takes a long time."

I sighed. "But I hate to let it die."

"We know how you feel," one of them replied. "But it's been too hard on you."

There was nothing sentimental in their words—they could have been telling me there wasn't enough snow, so forget about skiing this winter. I gave up and drank my coffee.

## ▸ 10

On Wednesday, the Rat went to bed at 9 p.m. but woke at 11. He couldn't go back to sleep. Something was squeezing his head, as if he were wearing a hat two sizes too small. An awful sensation. Giving up, he went to the kitchen in his pajamas and gulped a glass of ice water. The woman was on his mind. He stood at his window and looked down at the flashing beacon, tracing the black pier back to where her apartment stood. He remembered the pounding of the waves in the darkness, and the sound of sand whipping against her window. He was fed up with himself, and his failure to make the slightest progress, no matter how hard he tried to think things through.

Since they had begun seeing each other, the Rat's life had turned into an endless repetition—each week was identical to the last. He had lost his sense of time. What was the date? The month? October, perhaps? He had no idea…He and the woman got together every Saturday, and he passed the next three days, from Sunday through

Tuesday, mooning over that meeting. Thursday, Friday, and half of Saturday were devoted to planning their upcoming weekend. Only Wednesday didn't fit in; it was lost in space. Unable to move forward or backward. Wednesday…

Ten minutes and a cigarette later, the Rat stripped off his pajamas, put on a shirt, flung a windbreaker over it, and headed down to the parking garage. It was past midnight and the town was virtually deserted, the road pitch black except for an occasional streetlight. J's Bar was already closed, but the Rat pulled the shutters up halfway, slipped underneath, and made his way down the stairs.

J had just finished hanging a dozen washed towels over the chairs to dry, and was sitting by himself at the bar, smoking a cigarette.

"Mind if I grab a beer?"

"Go ahead," J said. He sounded in a good mood.

This was the first time the Rat had visited J's Bar after hours. All the lights were off except those above the bar, and the fan and air conditioner were silent. The odor absorbed by the walls and floor hovered over the dark room.

The Rat cracked open a can of beer from the fridge behind the counter and poured half in a glass. The air felt stagnant, as if divided into several distinct layers. It was tepid and moist.

"Sorry," the Rat apologized. "I didn't plan to come tonight. But I woke up all of a sudden and really felt like a beer. I'll just drink it and split."

"Take your time," J said, folding his newspaper and brushing cigarette ash from his trousers. "If you're hungry, I'll fix you something."

"No thanks, don't bother. Beer is fine."

The beer really hit the spot. The Rat drained the glass in a single gulp and sighed. Then he poured the rest, watching the bubbles until they settled down.

"Care to join me?"

"Thanks, but I can't drink," J said, with a somewhat embarrassed smile.

“I didn’t know that.”

“My body can’t handle alcohol. That’s the way I’m built.”

The Rat nodded several times, then turned his attention to his beer. It always amazed him how little he knew about this Chinese bartender. But then, J was a mystery to everyone. He never talked about himself, and when someone asked he gave only the most noncommittal answers, as if cautiously opening a desk drawer.

Everybody knew that J was a Chinese national who had been born in China, hardly unusual in a town with so many foreigners. The Rat’s high school soccer team had two Chinese students on the starting squad, one forward and one defenseman. No one gave a damn.

“Some music will cheer things up,” J said, tossing him the key to the jukebox. The Rat chose five tunes and came back to the counter and his beer. An old Wayne Newton song filled the room.

“Sure I’m not keeping you?” the Rat asked.

“No problem. It’s not like anyone’s waiting for me.”

“You live alone?”

“Yeah.”

The Rat pulled a smoke from his pocket, smoothed the wrinkles, and lit it.

“I do have a cat, though,” J added. “She’s getting on, but she’s still someone to talk to.”

“You talk to it?”

J nodded several times. “Yeah, we’ve been together so long we know each other pretty well. I can tell what she’s feeling, and she’s the same with me.”

Cigarette between his lips, the Rat grunted, impressed. The jukebox clicked, and Wayne Newton gave way to “MacArthur Park.”

“Hey, what do cats think about, anyway?”

“Lots of stuff. Just like you and me.”

“Poor things,” the Rat said, laughing.

J laughed too. “She’s one-armed,” J added after a long pause, rubbing the countertop with his fingertips.

“One-armed?” the Rat asked.

“The cat. She’s a cripple. Four winters ago she came back one day all covered in blood. Her paw was smashed so bad it looked like strawberry jam.”

The Rat set his beer down on the counter and looked square at J. “What happened?”

“Beats me. I thought maybe she’d been run over. But it was worse than that. A car tire can’t do that to a paw. It looked as if it had been crushed with a vise. Flat as a pancake. Must have been a prank.”

“No way!” The Rat shook his head several times. “Who in hell would do that to a cat?”

J tapped his unfiltered cigarette on the counter and lit it.

“You’re right,” he said. “No point smashing a cat’s paw like that. She’s a sweet cat, too, no trouble to anyone. So what’s to be gained from mangling her paw? It was a senseless, evil thing to do. Still, evil like that is everywhere in this world, mountains of it. I can’t understand it, you can’t understand it. But it’s there, no question. You could say we’re surrounded by it.”

With his eyes on his beer glass, the Rat shook his head one more time. “Well, it doesn’t make sense to me.”

“That’s the best way to handle it. Admit that you don’t understand and leave it at that.”

J blew a cloud of white smoke into the empty room. He watched it swirl until it disappeared.

The two were quiet for a long time. The Rat studied his glass and thought his muddled thoughts, while J went on rubbing the countertop with his fingers. The last song came on the jukebox. A soul ballad, sung in falsetto.

“You know, J,” the Rat said, still looking at his glass, “I’ve lived twenty-five years, and I don’t feel like I’ve learned a damn thing.”

J studied his fingertips for a minute. “I’ve been around for forty-five,” he said, “and all I know is this. We can learn from anything if we put in the effort. Right down to the most everyday, commonplace

thing. I read somewhere that how we shave in the morning has its own philosophy, too. Otherwise, we couldn't survive."

The Rat nodded and drained the final inch of beer from his glass. The jukebox clicked off as the last record came to an end, returning the room to silence.

"I think I get what you mean," said the Rat. He was about to say, "But," then swallowed the word. It wouldn't do any good anyway. The Rat smiled and stood up. "Thanks for the beer," he said. "Can I give you a lift home?"

"No, that's okay. I live nearby, and anyway, I like walking."

"Well, good night, then. Give my best to your cat."

"Thanks."

—

The Rat walked up the steps. The fragrance of cold autumn air greeted him. He tapped each of the trees lining the street with his fist as he made his way to the parking lot, where he stared for a while at the meter before getting into the car. After a moment's hesitation, he turned the car toward the ocean, stopping at a spot on the seaside road that gave him a view of the building where the woman lived. Lights were still burning in half of the apartments. He could see shadows moving behind some of the curtains.

The woman's windows were dark. Not even her bedside light was on. She must have fallen asleep already. A terrible loneliness assailed the Rat.

The sound of the waves seemed to be growing stronger. He felt as though they might overwhelm the breakwater at any moment and sweep him away, car and all, to some faraway place. He switched on the radio, clasped his hands behind his head, closed his eyes, and listened to the disc jockey's chatter. His body was so tired that those unnameable feelings had left him, having found no place to take hold. Relieved, the Rat rolled his now empty head to the side and half-listened to the waves and the DJ's voice as sleep slowly overtook him.

## 11

The twins woke me up on Thursday morning. Fifteen minutes earlier than usual, but what the heck. I shaved, drank my coffee, and pored over the morning paper, so fresh from the press that its ink looked ready to smear my hands.

"We have a favor to ask," said one of the twins.

"Think you can borrow a car on Sunday?" said the other.

"I guess so," I said. "Where do you want to go?"

"The reservoir."

"The reservoir?"

They nodded.

"What are you planning to do at the reservoir?"

"Hold a funeral."

"Who for?"

"The switch panel, of course."

"I see," I said. And went back to my paper.

—

Unfortunately, a fine rain was falling Sunday morning. Not that I knew what sort of weather befitted a switch panel's funeral. The twins never mentioned the rain, so neither did I.

I had borrowed my business partner's sky-blue Volkswagen Beetle. "Got a girl now, huh?" he asked. "Mm," I answered. His son had smeared milk chocolate or something all over the backseat, leaving what looked like bloodstains from a gunfight. Not a single one of his cassette tapes was any good, so we spent the entire hour-and-a-half trip in silence. The rain grew stronger, then weaker, then stronger, then weaker again, at regular intervals. A yawn-inducing sort of rain. The only constant was the steady whoosh of oncoming traffic speeding by on the paved road.

One twin sat in the front passenger seat, the other in the backseat, her arms around a thermos bottle and the shopping bag that held the switch panel. Their faces were grave, appropriate for a funeral. I matched my mood to theirs. We maintained that solemnity even when we stopped to eat roasted corn. All that broke the silence was the sound of kernels popping off the cob. We gnawed the cobs bare, tossed them away, and resumed our drive.

The area turned out to be populated by hordes of dogs, who milled around in the rain like a school of yellowtail in an aquarium. As a result, I spent a lot of time leaning on the horn. The dogs showed no interest whatsoever in either the rain or our car. In fact, they looked downright pissed off by my honking, although they scampered out of the way. It was impossible, of course, for them to avoid the rain. They were all soaked right down to their butt holes—some resembled the otter in Balzac's story, others reminded me of meditating Buddhist priests.

One of the twins inserted a cigarette between my lips and lit it. Then she placed her little hand on the inner thigh of my cotton trousers and moved it up and down a few times. It seemed less a caress than an attempt to verify something.

The rain looked as if it would continue forever. October rains are like that—they just go on and on until every last thing is soaked. The ground was a swamp. It was a chilly, unforgiving world: the trees, the highway, the fields, the cars, the houses, and the dogs, all were drenched.

We climbed a stretch of mountain road, drove through a thick stand of trees, and there was the reservoir. Because of the rain there wasn't a soul around. Raindrops rippled the water's surface as far as the eye could see. The sight of the reservoir in the rain moved me in a way I hadn't expected. We pulled up next to the water and sat there in the car, drinking coffee from the thermos and munching the cookies the twins had bought. There were three kinds—buttercream, coffee cream, and maple—that we divided up into equal groups to give everyone a fair share.

All the while the rain continued to fall on the reservoir. It made very

little noise. About as much as if you dropped shredded newspaper on a thick carpet. The kind of rain you find in a Claude Lelouch film.

We ate the cookies, drank two cups of coffee each, and brushed the crumbs off our laps at exactly the same moment. No one spoke.

"Shall we?" one of the twins said at last.

The other nodded.

I put out my cigarette.

Leaving our umbrellas behind, we picked up the switch panel and marched to the end of the dead-end bridge that jutted out into the water. The reservoir had been created by damming a river: its banks followed an unnatural curve, the water lapping halfway up the mountainside. The color of the water suggested an eerie depth. Falling drops made fine ripples on the surface.

One of the twins took the switch panel from the paper bag and handed it to me. In the rain it looked even more pathetic than usual.

"Now say a prayer," one of the twins said.

"A prayer?" I cried in surprise.

"It's a funeral. There's got to be a prayer."

"But I'm not ready," I said. "I don't know any prayers by heart."

"Any old prayer is all right," one said.

"It's just a formality," added the other.

I stood there, soaked from head to toenails, searching for something appropriate to say. The twins' eyes traveled back and forth between the switch panel and me. They were obviously worried.

"The obligation of philosophy," I began, quoting Kant, "is to dispel all illusions borne of misunderstanding…Rest in peace, ye switch panel, at the bottom of this reservoir."

"Now throw it in."

"Huh?"

"The switch panel!"

I drew my right arm all the way back and hurled the switch panel at a forty-five-degree angle into the air as hard as I could. It described a perfect arc as it flew through the rain, landing with a splash on the

water's surface. The ripples spread slowly until they reached our feet.

"What a beautiful prayer!"

"Did you make it up yourself?"

"You bet," I said.

The three of us huddled together like dripping dogs, looking out over the reservoir.

"How deep is it?" one asked.

"Really, really deep," I answered.

"Do you think there are fish?" asked the other.

"Ponds always have fish."

Seen from a distance, the three of us must have looked like an elegant memorial.

## ▸ 12

That Thursday morning, I wore my first sweater of the fall. It was your everyday gray Shetland fraying under the arms, but it felt great. I shaved with more care than usual and put on thick cotton pants and a pair of scuffed desert boots from my shoe cabinet. On my feet, the boots looked like a couple of trained puppies sitting at attention. The twins scoured the apartment to gather my cigarettes, my lighter, my wallet, and my commuter pass.

At the office, I sat at my desk drinking the coffee the girl had brought and sharpening my six pencils. The room was filled with the smell of wool and pencil shavings.

I ate lunch out, and then went back to the pet shop to play with the Abyssinian cats. There were two now—when I stuck the tip of my little finger through the tiny crack in the window they competed with each other to jump up and bite it.

This time, the guy running the shop let me hold them. Their fur was as soft as the finest cashmere, and the tips of their noses against my

lips were cold.

"They really like people," the clerk explained.

Returning the cats to their cage, I thanked him and purchased a useless box of cat food, which he wrapped for me. As I left the shop, cat food in hand, the two cats stared at me, as if I were a fragment from their dreams.

Back at the office, the girl picked the hair off my sweater.

"I was playing with cats," I explained. I felt some sort of excuse was called for.

"Your sweater's coming apart under the arm."

"I know. It happened last year. I was holding up an armored car and caught it on the rearview mirror."

"Take it off," she said, not amused.

I took it off, and she began to mend the armpit with black yarn, her long legs crossed over the side of the chair. In the meantime I returned to my desk, sharpened that afternoon's quota of pencils, and set back to work. When all was said and done, at least no one could fault my work. I was the kind of guy who finished a set amount in a set amount of time, in as conscientious a way as possible. I bet they would have loved me at Auschwitz. The problem, as I saw it, was that the places I fit in were all out of date. Not much I could do about that, though. I mean, it wasn't necessary to go back as far as Auschwitz and twin-seater torpedo planes. When was the last time you heard a Jan and Dean song, or saw a miniskirt? Or a woman in garters and a girdle, for that matter?

When the hands on the clock pointed to three, the girl reappeared and set my regular hot tea and three cookies on my desk. She had done a fabulous job darning my sweater.

"I'd like to ask your advice about something, if you have time."

"Sure," I said, biting into a cookie.

"It's about our trip in November," she said. "What do you think of Hokkaido?"

From the beginning, the three of us had set November as the month

for our annual office trip.

“Sounds good to me,” I said.

“Then it’s decided. Do you think there’ll be bears?”

“Bears?” I said. “No, I think they’re hibernating by then.”

She seemed relieved. “By the way, are you free for dinner? I know a great lobster restaurant near here.”

“Sounds good to me,” I said.

—

The restaurant was on a quiet residential street a five-minute cab ride away. No sooner had we taken our seats than a black-garbed waiter glided across the palm mat carpet to lay menus the size of paddleboards on our table. We ordered two beers to start.

“The lobster here is delicious. They boil them alive.”

I grunted and sipped my beer.

Her slender fingers were fiddling with the star-shaped pendant around her neck.

“If you’ve got something to say, you’d better say it before the food comes,” I said, then regretted it right away. It’s always like that.

She smiled a very small smile. Her lips had shifted maybe a tenth of an inch and stopped, as if returning to their original position were too big a hassle. The empty restaurant was so quiet we could almost hear the lobsters’ antennae moving.

“Do you like your work?” she asked.

“Like? I’ve never thought about my work that way, not once. No complaints, though.”

“I’ve got no complaints either,” she said, taking a swallow of beer. “The pay is good, the two of you are nice, I get regular vacations…”

I was all ears. I hadn’t listened this closely to someone for ages.

“But I’m only twenty,” she went on. “I don’t want to end up this way.”

We were quiet as the waiter laid out the food.

“You’re still young,” I said after he had left. “You’ll fall in love, get married. Things will change one after another.”

“No, nothing will change,” she whispered, deftly removing her lobster’s shell with her knife and fork. “No one will fall in love with me. I’ll be darning sweaters and setting out crummy cockroach traps until I die.”

I sighed. I felt, all of a sudden, that I’d aged several years.

“Look, you’re cute and charming, and you’ve got long legs and a sharp mind. You can even shell lobsters. Things will go fine.”

She fell silent and went on eating her lobster. So did I. As I ate I pictured the switch panel sitting at the bottom of the reservoir.

“What were you doing when you were twenty?”

“I was stuck on a girl.” Nineteen sixty-nine—the time of our life.

“What happened?”

“We split up.”

“Were you happy?”

“Looking back, I guess I was,” I said, swallowing another mouthful. “Just about anything looks better from a distance.”

The restaurant had filled up by the time we finished our lobster, the clatter of forks and knives and the squeak of chairs making a lively racket. I ordered coffee, while she ordered coffee and lemon soufflé.

“How about now?” she asked. “Is there anyone special?”

I thought for a moment before deciding to leave out the twins. “No,” I answered.

“Aren’t you lonely?”

“I’m used to it. I trained myself.”

“Training? What sort?”

I lit a cigarette and aimed the smoke at a spot two feet above her head. “I was born under a strange star. Like I’ve always been able to get whatever I want. But each time something new comes into my hands, I trample something else. Follow me?”

“A little.”

“No one believes me, but it’s the truth. It hit me about three years ago. So I decided. Not to want anything anymore.”

She shook her head. “And do you plan to live like that forever?”

“Probably. Then I won’t hurt anyone.”

“In that case,” she said, “you ought to live in a shoe box.”

A pretty cool way to look at it, if you ask me.

—

We walked to the station side by side. My sweater was perfect for the evening air.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll try to figure things out.”

“Sorry I couldn’t be more help.”

“Just talking about it takes a load off my mind.”

Our trains were leaving from the same platform, heading in opposite directions.

“Sure you’re not lonely?” she asked one more time. I was still trying to come up with a good answer when the train arrived.

## ▸ 13

On any given day, something can come along and steal our hearts. It may be any old thing: a rosebud, a lost cap, a favorite sweater from childhood, an old Gene Pitney record. A miscellany of trivia with no home to call their own. Lingering for two or three days, that something soon disappears, returning to the darkness. There are wells, deep wells, dug in our hearts. Birds fly over them.

—

What grabbed me that Sunday evening in October was pinball. The twins and I were sitting on the eighth green of the golf course,

watching the sunset. The eighth hole is a par five, with no obstacles to speak of. Just a long fairway straight as an elementary school hallway. We were watching the evening sun sink behind the hills, while in the background a student who lived nearby was practicing scales on his flute, a heartrending sound. Why did pinball snatch my heart at that particular moment? I have no idea.

As time went on, my mental image of pinball grew and grew. If I closed my eyes I could hear the sounds of balls striking bumpers, scoreboards churning out numbers.

I wasn't that into pinball back in 1970, when the Rat and I were spending all our time drinking beer in J's Bar. The bar had one machine, a model called Spaceship, unusual for its time in that it had three flippers. The lower cabinet was divided into two playfields, with one flipper on the upper half and two below. It was a model from a peaceful era, before the world of pinball was inflated by solid-state technology. The Rat, however, was a true fanatic; he got me to snap a commemorative photo of him and the pinball machine on the day he reached his all-time high score of 92,500. It shows him leaning against the machine, grinning from ear to ear, while beside him the machine is grinning too, proud of the score on its display. The one and only heartwarming snapshot I took with my Kodak pocket camera. The Rat looks like a Second World War flying ace, the pinball machine like an old fighter plane. The sort of plane that started when a mechanic spun its propeller, and whose windscreen was snapped down by the pilot after takeoff. The number 92,500 linked the Rat and the machine, making them look almost like blood brothers.

The pinball company sent someone to J's Bar once a week to collect the money and service the machine. He was about thirty, a gaunt man of few words. Avoiding J's eyes, he would move straight to the Spaceship, remove the panel underneath with his key, and direct the jangling stream of coins into a canvas utility bag. Having completed that task, he would insert one of the coins to start the machine, snap

the plunger a few times, and then shoot a ball out onto the playfield in a bored sort of way. With that single ball he checked the magnets on all the bumpers, tested all the lanes, and knocked down the targets one by one. The drop target, the kick-out hole, the rotating target. Next, he set off all the bonus lights and then wrapped up the job by dispatching the ball into the exit drain with a look of complete disinterest. Then he left, nodding at J on his way out the door to let him know everything was in order. All in less time than it takes to smoke half a cigarette.

It was a dazzling display that left the Rat and me gaping: ash was hanging from the tip of my cigarette, while the Rat's beer was entirely forgotten.

"It's like a dream," said the Rat. "If I had technique like that I could hit 150,000 easy. No, 200,000 is more like it."

"Don't beat yourself up," I consoled him. "He's a pro." But the pride of the ace pilot was gone, never to return.

"Compared to him I've gotten about as far as holding a woman's pinky," the Rat said, before clamming up. Yet I could see he was still lost in pointless dreams of six-digit scores.

"That's his job," I tried to persuade him. "It might be fun at first. But try doing it from morning till night, day after day. Anybody would get sick of it."

"No," said the Rat, shaking his head. "I wouldn't."

## ▸ 14

J's Bar was packed for the first time in ages. Most were new faces, but J had no problem with that—a customer was a customer. It felt as if the summer rush had come round again: the sound of the ice pick, the tinkle of ice against glass, the laughter, the Jackson 5 on the jukebox, clouds of white smoke billowing against the ceiling like comic-strip balloons.

For the Rat, though, something had changed. He sat alone at the

corner of the bar with an open book in front of him, reading the same page over and over again until he gave up and closed the cover. What he really wanted to do was gulp down the rest of his beer and head back to his apartment to sleep. That is, if *true* sleep was in the cards.

For a week, the Rat had felt forsaken, abandoned by everything, including luck itself. He was living on beer, cigarettes, and catnaps. Even the weather was crappy. Rain had washed soil from the mountainside into the river, turning the ocean into a patchwork of brown and gray. A depressing sight. He felt as if his head were stuffed with balled-up old newspapers. Sleep, when it came, was brief and shallow. It was like being in an overheated dentist's waiting room: every time the door opened, he woke up and looked at the clock.

Midway through the week, during a bout of solitary whiskey drinking, the Rat decided to shut down his thought processes for a while. One by one, he packed each rift in his consciousness with ice thick enough to hold the weight of a polar bear. Convinced that would get him through the rest of the week, he rolled over and went to sleep. When he woke up, though, everything was the same. Except that now his head hurt a little.

The Rat stared at the six empty bottles lined up before him with bleary eyes. J's back was visible between the cracks.

Maybe it's time to retire, the Rat thought. I was eighteen when I had my first beer in this bar. Since then there have been thousands of beers, thousands of orders of French fries, thousands of records on the jukebox. Like waves lapping the sides of a barge, they've all come and gone. Haven't I already drunk enough beer? Of course, I can drink buckets' worth in my thirties and forties too. But still, he continued, the beer I drink *here* is different…Twenty-five, not a bad age to call it quits. A sensible person would have finished college and be employed as a loan officer in a bank.

The Rat added another empty bottle to the lineup and drained half of his too-full glass in a single swallow. By reflex, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Then he wiped his wet hand on the seat of his cotton pants.

Okay, he said to himself, let's go through this again, no copping out

halfway this time. Twenty-five…a time to crack down and do some serious thinking. Add two twelve-year-old kids together and you get the same age. Are you worth as much as they are? Hell, one of them counts more than you. A pickle jar full of ants counts more than you… Screw these stupid metaphors! They don't help a damn bit. Think: you slipped up somewhere. Where? Try to remember…How the hell can I?

The Rat gave up and drained his glass. He signaled for a new bottle.

"You're hitting it too hard," J said. But bottle number eight showed up anyway.

His head was sore. His body was rising and falling like a boat on the waves. He could feel a weight behind his eyes. Time to throw up, said a voice inside his head. Puke first, then you can think. Okay, then, let's head to the restroom…Shit! I can't even make it to first base… Nevertheless, the Rat pulled himself together enough to walk to the restroom, kick out the girl who was reapplying her eyeliner in the mirror, and crouch over the toilet.

How many years since I last threw up? How do I do it? Do I take off my pants?…Enough with the crummy jokes. Shut up and puke. Puke your guts out.

The Rat puked his guts out, sat down on the toilet, and lit up a smoke. When he finished, he washed his face and hands with soap and straightened his hair in the mirror with his wet hands. His face was a little morose, but his features weren't all that bad. Probably good enough to catch the eye of a junior high school teacher.

When he left the restroom, the Rat made a beeline for the girl with the half-penciled-in eyebrows and apologized. Back in his seat at the counter, he drank half a glass of beer and drained the ice water J set before him in a single gulp. Then he shook his head two or three times and lit a cigarette, at which point his mind began to work again.

Okay, let's get it in gear, he said aloud. The night is long—enough time to figure it all out.

I entered the occult world of pinball for real in the winter of 1970. Looking back, it was as if I spent the next six months living at the bottom of a dark hole. I dug a hole just my size in the middle of a meadow, squeezed myself in, and blocked my ears to all sound. Nothing outside held the slightest appeal. When evening rolled around I woke up, slipped on my coat, and headed for the game arcade.

It took a while, but I finally located a three-flipper Spaceship identical to the one at J's Bar. When I slipped in my coins and pushed Play, a string of notes sounded, as if the machine were quivering with anticipation. Ten targets popped up, the bonus light went off, the score flipped back to six zeroes, and the first ball hopped into the chute. For exactly one month, I poured buckets of coins into the slot. Then one cold and rainy early-winter evening, like a hot air balloon jettisoning its last sandbag, I cracked the six-figure barrier.

Tearing my trembling fingers from the flipper buttons, I leaned against the wall, sipped my freezing can of beer, and stared for a long time at the six numbers on the scoreboard—105,220.

That moment marked the beginning of my brief love affair. I more or less gave up on school and spent the bulk of the money from my part-time job on pinball. I mastered the techniques—hugging, passing, trapping, the stop shot—so well that before long spectators gathered when I played. At times high school girls in bright red lipstick would rub their soft breasts against my arm as I pressed the buttons.

The worst of winter had just arrived when I passed the 150,000-point mark. Almost no one was left in the freezing game arcade, but I continued to soldier on in a heavy duffel coat with a scarf hiked up to my ears. I was glued to the machine. The face I saw in the restroom mirror every so often was skeletal, the skin dry and flaky. I would take a break every three games to lean my shivering body against the wall and drink a beer. The last swallow always tasted like lead. Cigarette butts scattered around my feet, I would pull a hot dog from my pocket and gnaw on it.

But she was marvelous. The three-flipper Spaceship…only I understood her, and only she truly understood me. Each time I pressed Play, she sang that gratifying melody, flipped her board to six

zeroes, and smiled at me. I coolly pulled the plunger back to the perfect spot, not a millimeter off, and launched the gleaming silver ball up the chute and out into her playfield. Watching it bounce around, I felt as free as if I had smoked a pipe of the finest hashish.

Many thoughts flitted in and out of my head, like disconnected fragments. People appeared in the glass atop her field, then disappeared. Like a magic mirror of dreams, the glass reflected my mind, growing brighter and darker in tandem with the flashing bumpers and bonus lights.

*It's not your fault,* she said to me. She shook her head several times. *Not your fault at all. You did what you could.*

*You're wrong,* I said. Left flipper, tap transfer, Target 9. *All wrong. I didn't do a damn thing. Didn't lift a finger. I could have done something if I'd set my mind to it.*

*You humans can only do so much,* she said.

*Maybe so,* I said. *But it's not over. It'll be like this forever.* Return channel, trap, kick-out ball, rebound, hugging, Target 6…bonus light. 121,150. *It is over,* she said. *Over and done with.*

She disappeared in February. The game arcade was razed, and by the following month an all-night doughnut shop stood in its place. The kind of joint where girls in gingham uniforms serve dry doughnuts on plates with a similar pattern, and patrons—the high school kids whose motorbikes are lined up outside, the night cabbies, the die-hard hippies, the bar girls—all look bored as they drink their tasteless coffee. I ordered a cup of that hideous concoction and a cinnamon doughnut and tried to find out if my waitress knew anything about the game arcade.

She looked at me with suspicious eyes. The way she would regard a doughnut that had fallen on the floor.

"Game arcade?"

"Yeah, the one that was here until a little while ago."

“No idea,” she said with a sleepy shake of her head. Whose memory went back a month? It was that kind of neighborhood.

I walked the streets, my mood black. No one knew what had become of the three-flipper Spaceship.

So I gave up pinball. Everybody does when the time comes. That’s all there is to it.

## 16

On Friday evening the rain that had been falling for days lifted without warning. The town had absorbed so much water that, from the Rat’s balcony window, it appeared bloated. The setting sun had broken through the clouds, turning them a strange color and dyeing the inside of his apartment.

The Rat slipped a windbreaker over his T-shirt and headed down the slope. The black pavement was dotted with puddles as far as the eye could see, the air heavy with the odor that follows an evening rain. Droplets showered from the green needles of the waterlogged pines that lined the river. Brown runoff poured down the river’s banks and slid along its concrete bottom toward the sea.

The evening glow soon gave way to a spreading, sodden cloak of darkness. Then, in an instant, the moisture turned to fog.

With his elbow hanging from his car window, the Rat slowly cruised through town. The white fog was moving west, through the hilly residential district. In the end he turned down the river road to the ocean. He pulled in beside the breakwater and lit a cigarette. Everything was black and wet: the beach, the massive concrete blocks protecting the shore, the trees that blocked the sand. An inviting yellow light was filtering through the blinds of the woman’s apartment. The Rat checked his watch. Seven fifteen. A time when people were finishing their meals and melting into the snug warmth of their homes.

The Rat put his hands behind his head, closed his eyes, and tried to picture the woman's apartment. He had been there just twice, so his memory was shaky. When you first came in the door there was a kitchen, about ten feet square…an orange tablecloth, pots of leafy plants, four chairs, orange juice, a newspaper on the table, a stainless steel teapot—all in its place, all spotless…Farther in was a room that had once been two small rooms, the divider having been removed. It contained a long, narrow desk with a glass top, and on that…three ceramic beer mugs. They were stuffed with all sorts of things—pencils, rulers, drafting pens. On a tray were erasers, a paperweight, ink remover, old receipts, adhesive tape, paper clips of many colors…a pencil sharpener and postage stamps.

To the side of the desk were a well-used drawing board and a desk lamp with a very long neck. The lamp shade was…green. The bed was straight ahead, against the far wall. A small Scandinavian model made of unpainted wood. It creaked like a rented rowboat when they were on it.

The fog was getting thicker with each passing moment, a milky darkness creeping across the beach. Now and then a car crawled past the Rat, its yellow fog lamps illuminating the road in front of him. The fine mist from the open window had soaked everything inside: the seats, the windshield, the Rat's windbreaker, the pack of cigarettes in his pocket. The foghorns on the ships anchored at sea were emitting sharp, plaintive wails, like calves that had strayed from the herd. Some of the wails were brief, others long, but each had its own distinct pitch as it cut through the darkness on its way toward the mountains.

And on the wall on the left? The Rat continued to remember. A bookcase, a portable stereo, and records. A chest for clothes. Two prints by Ben Shahn. A modest array of books in the bookcase. Most had to do with architecture. Then there were travel books, guidebooks, travelogues, maps, a few best-selling novels, a biography of Mozart, sheet music, several dictionaries…a French dictionary with an inscription of some kind written inside the front cover. Most of the records were either Bach, Haydn, or Mozart. Also a few relics from her girlhood…Pat Boone, Bobby Darin, the Platters.

After that the Rat was stymied. Something was missing. Something important. Without it the room would remain floating in space, detached from reality. What was it? Okay, hold on a sec…I remember. The lighting and…the carpet. What sort of lights? What color carpet?… For the life of him he couldn't remember.

The Rat was seized by the impulse to jump out of his car, cut through the trees, and knock on her door just to find out. Idiot! He sat back again and looked at the ocean. Nothing was visible except the white fog covering the dark sea. Deep within the fog, the beacon's orange light flashed on and off, as repetitive and reliable as a beating heart.

The woman's apartment floated in the dark for a while, minus its ceiling and floor. Then, one by one, its details faded until it had disappeared completely.

The Rat looked up at the roof of the car and slowly closed his eyes. As if flipping off a switch, he extinguished the remaining lights in his head and descended into a new sort of darkness.

## ▸ 17

The three-flipper Spaceship…her voice was calling me from somewhere. It went on like that day after day.

I sped through the work piled on my desk at a tremendous clip. I gave up my lunch breaks and stopped playing with the Abyssinian cats. I spoke to no one. The girl came to check on me every so often, then left shaking her head, appalled. I completed my day's work by two o'clock and hightailed it out of there, tossing the completed manuscripts on her desk as I passed. My destination was the game arcades of Tokyo, my purpose the quest for the three-flipper Spaceship. But the quest proved fruitless. No one I met had seen or even heard of the machine.

"Wouldn't the four-flipper Journey to the Center of the Earth do?"

asked one arcade owner. “We just got one in.”

“No, it wouldn’t. Sorry.”

He appeared a little disappointed.

“Then how about the three-flipper Southpaw? Hit for the cycle and you get a bonus ball.”

“Sorry. I’m just interested in the Spaceship.”

Still, he was kind enough to give me the name and telephone number of a pinball enthusiast he knew.

“This guy may know something about what you’re looking for,” he said. “He’s what they call a catalog junkie. Knows more about pinball machines than anyone. Bit of a weirdo, though.”

“I owe you one,” I said.

“No sweat. Hope you find it.”

—

I went into a quiet coffee shop and dialed the number. A man picked up after five rings. He spoke softly. I could hear NHK’s seven o’clock news and a crying baby in the background.

I told him my name. “It’s about *a certain machine*,” I said, getting right to the point.

His end of the line went silent for a few moments.

“What machine might that be?” he said. The television sound had been lowered.

“The three-flipper Spaceship.”

I could hear him thinking.

“There’s a planet and a spaceship on the back cabinet—”

“I’m familiar with it,” he cut me off. He cleared his throat. “That model was launched by the Chicago company Gilbert and Sands in 1968.” His tone was that of a university lecturer fresh out of graduate school. “Some call it the machine of misfortune.”

“Machine of misfortune?”

“How about it?” he said. “Let’s get together—maybe we can work

something out."

Our meeting was set for the following evening.

We exchanged business cards and ordered coffee from the waitress. I was amazed to discover he was in fact a university lecturer. He looked a bit past thirty and his hair was thinning, but he was tan and well built.

"I teach Spanish," he said. "It's like sprinkling water in the desert."

I nodded, dutifully impressed.

"Does your translation agency handle Spanish?"

"I look after the English and another guy takes care of French. That's all we can handle."

"How disappointing," he said, arms still folded. He didn't look disappointed, though. He fiddled with the knot of his tie for a few moments.

"Ever been to Spain?" he asked.

"No such luck," I said.

The coffee came. We drank it in silence, with no more talk of Spain.

"The firm Gilbert and Sands came late to the world of pinball," he said, breaking into his lecture. "From the Second World War right through the Korean War, their primary business was manufacturing bomb-delivery systems, but when the fighting stopped they took the opportunity to embark on a new path, what we call the peace industries. Pinball machines, bingo machines, slot machines, jukeboxes, popcorn vending machines—you name it, they made it. Their first pinball machine was completed in 1952. Not a bad job, either. It was very durable and cheap. But it didn't spark people's interest. To quote the review in *Billboard* magazine, it had all the sex appeal of a Soviet Women's Corps government-issue brassiere. Still, from a business point of view it was a success. The machine was exported to Mexico, then to other Central American nations. Countries short on specialized technical know-how. They were happy to get

sturdy machines that didn't need the servicing more complicated models required."

He took a sip of water. I could tell he regretted not having an overhead projector and a long pointer.

"Nevertheless, as you know, the pinball business in the United States, and by extension the world, was dominated by the companies known as the Big Four—Gottlieb, Bally, Chicago Coin, and Williams. Gilbert and Sands tried to force their way into this oligopoly, which led to a spirited, five-year-long battle. In the end, in 1957, Gilbert pulled out."

"Pulled out?"

Nodding, he drank what remained of his coffee, grimaced, and dabbed at his mouth with his handkerchief.

"Yes—they were defeated. They still made money, though. From their Central American exports, you see. But they decided to get out before the bleeding got too bad…Manufacturing and maintaining pinball machines is a terribly complex operation. It requires a team of seasoned, specialized technicians, and planners to lead them. You also need to build a nationwide service network: agents who can supply parts when necessary and enough repairmen to reach a broken machine within five hours. Gilbert didn't have the clout to operate on that scale. So they swallowed their disappointment and withdrew, shifting their resources to things like vending machines and windshield wipers for Chrysler automobiles. That went on for about seven years. But they never abandoned their plans for pinball."

Here he came to a halt. He drew a cigarette from his jacket pocket, tapped it a number of times on the table, and lit it with a lighter.

"No, they hadn't given up. A matter of pride, I guess. They threw a big chunk of money into a secret factory for pinball research and covertly recruited Big Four retirees for their project team. The team's orders were as follows: within five years, build us a pinball machine that can compete with the Big Four. That was in 1959. They took full advantage of those five years, so that by the end they had used their other products to establish a network that stretched all the way from

Vancouver to Waikiki. With that their preparations were complete.

"They rejoined the game right on schedule in 1964 with their new model. The Big Wave."

He pulled a black scrapbook from his leather briefcase, opened it, and handed it to me. In it were pasted what appeared to be magazine clippings, including a photograph of the Big Wave, diagrams of its playfield and board design, and even a play guide.

"It's a unique machine, in fact, packed with all kinds of ingenious devices never seen before. Take the sequence pattern, for example. The Big Wave allowed you to set it to fit your own level of skill. People ate it up.

"Of course Gilbert's innovations are all old hat now, but at the time they were startling. The machine was also constructed in a very conscientious way. First of all, it was durable. The Big Four were turning out machines built to last about three years, but the Big Wave was built to last for five. Second, it emphasized technique, reducing luck's role in the outcome…Gilbert later produced a number of other great machines along the same lines. The Orient Express, Sky Pilot, TransAmerica—all praised to the skies by those in the know. Spaceship was the last model they released.

"Spaceship was radically different from its predecessors. The four machines that preceded it had been all about novelty, while Spaceship was extremely orthodox and simple. None of its mechanisms varied from what the Big Four were already using. In that sense, you could say it was a defiant gesture. They felt they no longer had to take a backseat to anyone."

He was speaking slowly and distinctly, as if to a student. I nodded again and again as I sipped my coffee, and when that was finished, my water. When that was gone I smoked a cigarette.

"Spaceship was an enigma. At first glance there seemed to be nothing special about it. But that changed the minute you began to play. It had the same flippers as the other machines, the same targets, yet something about it was different. Whatever that something was, it captivated people's minds, like opium. Why, I don't know…There are

two reasons I call Spaceship the machine of misfortune. First, no one grasped its true beauty. By the time they started figuring that out, it was too late. Second, its maker went bust. Gilbert was just too conscientious, I guess. So they got swallowed up by a conglomerate. That company saw no need to continue the pinball operation. End of story. That's why Spaceship is known as the phantom masterpiece: few have actually played it, even though fifteen hundred were produced. The going price in the United States now is two thousand dollars, but Spaceship fans never get a chance to pick one up."

"Why not?"

"Because nobody will let one go. They can't. It's a real enigma."

With his lecture complete, he checked his watch, a habit of his, and lit a cigarette. A second round of coffee arrived.

"How many machines were exported to Japan?"

"I looked into that. Three."

"Not very many."

He nodded. "That's because Japan wasn't part of the distribution network Gilbert had set up. In 1969 an importer brought a small number to Japan on a trial basis. Those three. By the time he decided to increase the order, Gilbert no longer existed."

"Do you know where those three machines are?"

He stirred sugar into his cup for a long time and scratched his ear.

"One ended up in a small game arcade in Shinjuku. That arcade shut down two winters ago. The machine's whereabouts are unknown."

"I'm familiar with that case."

"Another went to a game arcade in Shibuya. That place burned down last spring. Fire insurance paid for everything, though, so no one lost out. Other than the fact that one more Spaceship was lost to the world…The more I think about it, the more fitting 'machine of misfortune' seems."

"Kind of like the Maltese Falcon."

He nodded again. "But I have no idea where the third machine went."

I gave him the address and telephone number for J's Bar. "It's not there anymore, though. He got rid of it last summer."

He jotted down the information in his notebook as though recording a message from on high.

"The machine I'm interested in is the one in Shinjuku," I said. "Can you find out what happened to it?"

"There are several possibilities. Most often, machines are sold for scrap. The turnover is very rapid. A machine depreciates in three years, so it makes more sense to get a new one than it does to pay for repairs. Not to mention the role that fashion plays. So they're scrapped…The second possibility is that someone might have picked it up secondhand. Old models that are still usable frequently end up in small bars, where they spend their last days being pawed by drunks and amateurs. The third possibility is that a collector might have picked it up. That's very rare, though. Eighty percent of the time they go for scrap."

I gave myself over to dark thoughts, an unlit cigarette between my fingers.

"Regarding the last possibility, is there any way to check?"

"I could try, but it would be difficult. Fellow enthusiasts have no way to contact each other. No registers, no bulletins…But we can still give it a try. I have some interest in Spaceship myself."

"I'm deeply grateful."

He settled in his chair and puffed on his cigarette.

"Tell me," he said. "What was your best score on Spaceship?"

"165,000."

"That's something," he said without changing his expression. "Really something," he repeated, scratching his ear again.

I spent the whole next week in an oddly peaceful and quiet mood. Pinball was still ringing in my ears, but it was faint, not like before, when it was like the mad buzzing of a dying bee in a pool of winter sunlight. As autumn deepened, piles of dry leaves mounted up beneath the trees that surrounded the golf course. They were being burned here and there on the gentle suburban slopes; from our window we could see slender plumes of smoke rising straight into the air, like magic ropes.

Gradually, the twins were becoming a little less talkative, a little more meek. We took walks, drank coffee, listened to records, and slept entwined under a layer of blankets. On Sundays we strolled to the botanical garden an hour away to munch on mushroom and spinach sandwiches under the oaks. The sharp cries of black-tailed birds rang from the treetops.

Since the air was growing chilly, I picked up two new sport shirts and gave them to the girls together with two of my old sweaters, so 208 and 209 were replaced by olive-green turtle-neck and beige cardigan. The twins did not complain. Then I went out and bought them socks and new sneakers. I felt like Santa Claus.

The October rains were a treat. Cotton soft and fine as needles, they soaked the withered golf course. This time, though, the earth absorbed every drop, leaving no puddles behind. The groves were filled with the fragrance of wet fallen leaves; in the late afternoon, sunlight filtered through the trees, dappling the ground. Birds cut across the forest paths like runners in a race.

—

My days in the office were almost as pleasant. The work crunch had ended, so I smoked cigarettes and listened to tapes of classic jazz musicians like Bix Beiderbecke, Woody Herman, and Bunny Berigan as I worked, pausing every other hour for a shot of whiskey and a cookie or two.

Only the girl was busy, checking timetables, making plane and hotel reservations, and, as if that weren't enough, mending two more of my

sweaters and replacing the old metal buttons on my sport coat with new ones. She had changed her hairstyle and shifted to pale pink lipstick and thin sweaters that called attention to her breasts. She had begun to blend with the autumn air too.

A wonderful week that lulled us into believing things might stay that way forever.

## 19

The Rat found it nearly impossible to tell J he was leaving town. For some reason, the idea was eating him up. Three nights running he went to the bar, and all three nights he left without raising the subject. Each time he tried to say the words, his throat turned bone dry and he had to drink a beer. Then he would have another, and another, until he was overcome by an unbearable sense of futility. Damn it, he thought, what is the point of struggling like this? Where is it getting me? Nowhere.

When the clock pointed to twelve, the Rat gave up and, with a certain sense of relief, said his usual good-night to J and left the bar. The evening breeze had turned cold. He went back to his apartment, sat on the bed, and turned on the TV. Then he opened a can of beer and lit a cigarette. There was an old Robert Taylor western, commercials, the weather report, more commercials, and finally white noise…The Rat turned off the TV and took a shower. Then he had another can of beer and smoked one more cigarette.

Where would he go once he left town? No destination presented itself.

For the first time in his life, he felt real dread. Black and glistening it was, like a mass of eyeless, pitiless worms creeping up from the bowels of the earth. They wanted to drag him down, back to where they had come from. Their slime oozed through his body. He cracked open another can of beer.

By the end of those three days the Rat's apartment was filled with empty cans and cigarette butts. He missed the woman like crazy. His whole being longed for her warmth. He wanted to enter her and stay there. Yet he could never go back. Face the music, he told himself. You're the one who burned the bridges. You're the one who plastered the walls and sealed yourself inside, right?

The Rat looked down at the flashing beacon. The sky was starting to brighten, turning the ocean gray. Then, at the very moment the darkness was swept away by the clear morning sunlight like a tablecloth yanked from a table, the Rat fell into bed and slept—his pain, with no other place to go, stretched out beside him.

The Rat's determination to leave the town had once seemed unshakable. He had taken a long time to arrive at that decision, thought it through from every conceivable angle. Having ensured that there were no cracks in his reasoning, he had lit a match and torched the bridges, sending all the attachments he had to the place up in flames. Sure, a few traces of himself might stick around. But no one would care. As the town kept changing, those remnants would eventually vanish…Everything would follow its prescribed course.

And then there was J.

The Rat couldn't figure out why J's existence bothered him so much. It should be simple, he thought; just walk in, tell him I'm leaving town, and wish him the best. It wasn't as if they were best buddies—they hardly knew anything about each other. In the end they were just two passing strangers who had chanced to meet. So why this pain? The Rat lay on his bed and punched the air with his fist.

It was just after midnight on Monday when the Rat lifted the shutters of J's Bar and slipped underneath. As usual, J had turned off half the lights and was sitting at a table, smoking a cigarette. When he saw the

Rat come in he smiled and nodded. In the gloom, J looked strangely old. A shadow of black stubble covered his cheeks and jaw, his eyes were sunken, and his thin lips were dry and cracked. Veins stood out in his neck, and his fingertips were yellow with nicotine.

"Feeling tired?" the Rat asked.

"Yeah, a little," J said. He fell silent for a moment. "It's one of those days. We all have them."

The Rat nodded and pulled up a chair.

"There's a song that says, 'Rainy days and Mondays always get me down.' "

"They got that right," J said, staring at his fingers holding the cigarette.

"You should hurry home to bed."

"To hell with that," J said, shaking his head. He shook it slowly, as if shooing away a bug. "Doubt I'll be getting much sleep tonight anyway."

By reflex, the Rat glanced at his watch. Twelve twenty. The gloomy basement was dead quiet—time itself seemed to have died. With the shutters down, not a shred was left of the sparkle the Rat had sought there for so many years. Everything was faded and bone tired.

"Could you bring me a Coke?" said J. "Grab a beer for yourself while you're at it."

The Rat stood up and went to the fridge, returning with the drinks and two glasses.

"How about some music?" J asked.

"Not tonight," said the Rat. "Let's keep it quiet."

"Feels like some kind of funeral."

The Rat laughed. They sat there drinking the Coke and the beer in silence. The ticking of the Rat's watch on the table was almost deafening. Twelve thirty-five, yet it felt as if they had been there for ages. J barely moved. The Rat watched J's cigarette burn down in the glass ashtray until the butt turned to ash.

"Why are you so tired?" the Rat asked.

“Why?” J shifted his crossed legs as if he had just remembered to move them. “No special reason, I guess.”

The Rat downed half his beer and returned the glass to the table with a sigh.

“You know, J. Everyone’s rotting, correct?”

“True enough.”

“And there are many ways to rot,” the Rat went on, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “But I think each individual’s choices are really limited. We can choose between only a couple of ways—two or three at the most.”

“You could be right.”

What was left of the Rat’s beer sat in the bottom of his glass like a puddle of water, the bubbles gone. He pulled a crumpled pack from his pocket, drew out a cigarette, and put it to his lips. “But I’ve come to believe it doesn’t really make a damn bit of difference. One way or the other, we’re all going to rot. Don’t you think?”

J just listened, holding his glass of cola at an angle.

“Yet people keep changing. For the longest time, I couldn’t figure out what the point was.” Chewing on his lip, the Rat stared at the table in thought. “So here’s my conclusion. Whatever changes they go through, whatever progress they make, in the end it’s only a step on the road to decay. Am I wrong?”

“No, I don’t think you’re wrong.”

“That’s why I couldn’t care less about anyone who happily trots along toward the void…Or this whole friggin’ town, for that matter.”

J said nothing. The Rat did the same. He took a match from the box on the table, struck it, and watched the flame burn down the shaft before lighting his cigarette.

“The problem is,” said J, “*you* are about to make a change. Am I right?”

“Dead on.”

Neither spoke for a few seconds. Ten seconds, perhaps. It was J who broke the silence.

“People are awkward creatures. A lot more awkward than you seem to realize.”

The Rat emptied the last of his beer into his glass and downed it in a single gulp. “I’m lost.”

J nodded.

“It’s hard to know what to do.”

“I figured that much.” J smiled. The talking seemed to have tired him out.

The Rat slowly stood up and stuffed his cigarettes and lighter in his pocket. The clock said it was already past one.

“Good night,” the Rat said.

“Good night,” said J. “Hey, here’s something someone once told me: Walk slowly, and drink lots of water.”

The Rat smiled at J, opened the door, and headed up the stairs. The street was brightly lit and totally deserted. He sat down on the guardrail and looked up at the sky. So then, he thought, how much water do I have to drink?

## ▸ 20

The Spanish instructor telephoned during lunch the Wednesday after the November holidays ended. My partner had gone to the bank, and I was in the kitchen eating the spaghetti our office girl had whipped up. She had boiled it about two minutes too long and had substituted finely chopped *shiso* for basil, but it still tasted good. We were in the midst of a serious discussion about the art of cooking spaghetti when the phone rang. She picked up the receiver, but after a few words, she shrugged and handed it to me.

“I’m calling about Spaceship,” he said. “I’ve located it.”

“Where?”

“It’s a bit difficult to say over the phone,” he said. A moment of

silence followed.

“By which you mean?” I asked.

“I mean it’s hard to explain on the phone.”

“Like I won’t believe it until I’ve seen it?”

“No,” he said after a pause. “It’d be hard even if it were sitting right in front of you.”

I couldn’t think of a response, so I waited for him to go on.

“Look, I’m not blowing this out of proportion, and I’m not joking, either. We simply have to meet.”

“Sure thing.”

“How about this afternoon at five?”

“Fine with me,” I said. “Will I get to play?”

“Of course,” he said. I thanked him and hung up. Then I dug back into the spaghetti.

“Where are you going?”

“To play pinball. I’m not sure where.”

“Pinball?”

“Yeah. You know, hitting balls with flippers.”

“Of course I know. But why pinball?”

“Why? This world is rife with matters philosophy cannot explain.”

She put her elbows on the table, propped her chin in her hands, and thought for a moment.

“Are you good at pinball?”

“I used to be. It was the only thing I could really take pride in.”

“I’ve got nothing like that.”

“Then you’ve got nothing to lose.”

While she pondered that one, I ate what remained of my spaghetti and helped myself to a ginger ale from the fridge.

“There can be no meaning in what will someday be lost. Passing glory is not true glory at all.”

“Who said that?”

“Can’t recall. But I agree with the idea.”

“Is there anything in this world that can’t be lost?”

“I believe there is. You should too.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Maybe I see the world through rose-colored glasses. But I’m not as big a fool as I seem.”

“I know that.”

“I’m not bragging—I just think being an optimistic fool beats the alternative.”

She nodded. “So that’s why you’re off to play pinball this evening.”

“You got it.”

“Stick up your hands.”

I raised my arms to the ceiling while she inspected the armpits of my sweater.

“Okay,” she said. “Have a good time.”

I met the Spanish instructor at the same coffee shop as before, and we piled into a taxi without delay. Straight down Meiji Avenue, he told the cabbie. Once we were moving he pulled out a pack of cigarettes, lit one, and offered me one as well. He was wearing a gray suit and a blue necktie with three diagonal stripes. His shirt was blue too, though somewhat paler than the tie. I had on a gray sweater, jeans, and my scuffed desert boots. I felt like a failing student summoned to his professor’s office.

When we passed the Waseda Avenue intersection the cabbie asked if we were going much farther. Turn on Mejiro Avenue, the instructor said. A moment later we did.

“Is it very far?” I asked.

“Pretty far,” he answered, fumbling for another smoke. I looked out my window at the shops passing by.

“Our machine was damn hard to find,” he said. “I started by running

down my list of pinball fanatics, one by one. I contacted the whole lot, not just in Tokyo but across the country, all twenty of them. But I didn't come up with anything. None of them knew any more than we do. Next, I made the rounds of the dealers who handle used machines. There aren't many. But the total number of transactions is huge. Getting them to work through their lists was a real pain."

I nodded and watched as he lit his cigarette.

"Thank goodness we knew the approximate date. February 1971, right? I told them to focus on that time frame. And they found it! Spaceship, maker Gilbert and Sands, serial number 165029, February 3, 1971, tagged for disposal."

"Disposal?"

"Scrap. Crushed in a compactor, like in *Goldfinger*. Turned into a cube of metal to be recycled or dumped offshore."

"But you said…"

"Let me go on. Anyway, I thanked the dealer and went home. I figured it was a lost cause. But something deep inside kept nagging me. Call it intuition. He was wrong, said this little voice. It wasn't like that. So the next day I returned to the same dealer. And then I went from his office to the scrap yard. I watched them work for half an hour, went into the office, and gave my card to the guy at the desk. A university lecturer's business card does wonders with people who don't know what we do in reality."

He was speaking somewhat faster than the first time we had met, which made me a little uncomfortable.

"I manufactured a story—told him I needed to learn more about the scrap business for a book I was writing.

"He was willing to cooperate. But he couldn't recall any pinball machines from February 1971. That was natural: two years had passed, and there's no way he can track everything he handles. All he does is put the stuff together, toss it in the compactor, and wham! So I asked him one last question. If I saw something I wanted—say a washer or a bike frame—that was about to be scrapped, would he sell it to me if the price was right? Sure, he said. And are there ever cases like that?"

The autumn dusk had swiftly faded and the road was sinking into darkness. Our taxi was approaching the suburbs.

“He told me I should check with the supervisor on the second floor if I needed more detailed information. Of course I went up and asked. Did he know anyone who might have picked up a pinball machine around February 1971? Yes, he answered, I know one such person. When I pressed him for details, he gave me the man’s telephone number. It seems this guy is called when any machines come in. He slips the supervisor some money for the privilege. And how many had he bought up? I asked. That’s hard to say offhand, he said. The guy looks over each one; then he takes it if he likes it and leaves it if he doesn’t. A ballpark estimate is okay, I said. I don’t need a specific number. Well, he said, I’m sure he’s picked up at least fifty machines.”

“Fifty machines!” I cried.

“You got it,” the lecturer said. “That’s the man we’re going to see.”

## ▸ 21

Outside it had turned pitch black. Not a monochromatic but a layered black, as if various black paints had been slapped on like butter.

I sat with my nose to the taxi window looking out. As time passed, the black came to appear somehow flat, as if someone had taken a razor to matter without substance, and the darkness was the severed end. The result was a most odd perspective, at once three-dimensional and two-dimensional. A giant night bird with outspread wings rose before me.

The farther we drove, the more scattered the houses became, until all that was left were fields and groves of trees, from which arose the rumbling of a million insects. Low-lying clouds hung over the landscape like giant boulders while the creatures cowered, silent in the dark. Only the bugs retained their voice.

The Spanish instructor and I took turns smoking cigarettes without

exchanging a word. The cabbie was smoking too, as he scowled at the passing headlights. My fingers drummed on my knee. From time to time, I had the urge to open the cab door and flee.

Switch panels, sandboxes, reservoirs, golf courses, torn sweaters, pinball—how long would this go on? I sat there bewildered, clutching my random assortment of cards. I wanted to turn around that very instant and head home. Take a nice bath, crack open a beer, grab my cigarettes and my Kant, and climb into my warm bed.

So why was I racing through the darkness? To keep a date with fifty pinball machines. It was idiotic. A dream. A dream without substance.

Yet the siren call of the three-flipper Spaceship never wavered.

We were five hundred yards off the road in the middle of an empty field when the Spanish instructor told the cabbie to stop. The ground was level, with soft grass that brushed our ankles like river water in the shallows. I got out of the cab, stretched, and took a few deep breaths. I could smell chickens nearby. No lights were visible, but the faint illumination from the road brought the landscape into dim relief. The buzz of countless insects surrounded us. They seemed ready to drag me down somewhere by my feet.

We stood there, waiting for our eyes to adjust to the dark.

“Is this still Tokyo?” I asked after a long pause.

“Of course. Where did you think we were?”

“It looks like the edge of the world.”

The Spanish instructor nodded gravely. The fragrance of grass and the smell of chicken shit enveloped us as we smoked our cigarettes in silence. The smoke rolled along the ground like smoke from a signal fire.

“There’s a chain-link fence over there.” He pointed into the dark as if shooting a pistol on the practice range, his arm extended straight from his side. I could make out something fencelike if I strained my eyes. “Follow it for three hundred meters and you’ll hit the

warehouse."

"Warehouse?"

"Yes," he said, without glancing in my direction. "It's a big building—you can't miss it. It used to be cold storage for chicken carcasses. But it's not in use anymore. The chicken company went broke."

"But I still smell chickens."

"Smell chickens…? Ah yes. Their smell soaked into the soil. It's even worse when it rains. You can almost hear flapping wings."

Nothing was visible inside the chain-link fence. It was a frightening darkness. Even the insects sounded suffocated.

"The warehouse is unlocked. The owner left the door open for you. The machine you're looking for is inside."

"Have you been in there?"

"Only once…He was kind enough to let me take a look," he said. I could see the orange tip of the cigarette between his teeth bobbing in the dark. "The light switch is to your right as you enter. Watch out for the stairs."

"Aren't you coming?"

"Go in alone. That's the deal."

"The deal?"

"That's right," he answered, extinguishing his butt in the grass with his foot. "You're welcome to stay as long as you wish. Just turn off the lights on your way out."

The air was growing colder every minute. A blanket of chill rose from the ground.

"Have you met the owner?"

"Yes," he answered after a short pause.

"What kind of man is he?"

The instructor pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose. "Nothing special about him," he said with a shrug. "At least on the outside."

"Then why would he go out and buy fifty pinball machines?"

“Listen, there are all kinds of people in this world. It’s that simple, I guess.”

I doubted it was that simple. But I thanked him anyway and headed off along the chicken plant’s chain-link fence. No, not that simple at all, I thought. There was a slight difference between collecting fifty pinball machines and, say, fifty wine labels.

—

The warehouse looked like an animal crouching in the dark. Tall grass grew thick around its base, and its gray walls were windowless. A gloomy, foreboding structure. Above the double steel doors a name, probably that of the company, had been daubed over with white paint.

I stood ten paces away and looked at the building. The more I thought, the less likely it seemed that I would come up with any good ideas, so I walked to the entrance and gave the ice-cold doors a push. They swung open into a darkness completely different from the one I had been experiencing.

## ▸ 22

I found the wall switch in the dark and flipped it on. A few seconds later, fluorescent ceiling lights blinked into action, bathing the warehouse in white light. There must have been at least a hundred lights in all. The warehouse was bigger than it looked from the outside, but even so, the cumulative brilliance of all those fluorescent bulbs forced me to close my eyes. When I opened them again, the darkness was a distant memory—only the silence and the chill remained.

The warehouse resembled the inside of a giant refrigera- tor, which made sense given its original purpose. The ceiling and windowless walls had been painted a glossy white, but they were covered with stains, some black, some yellow, and some like no color I had seen before. I could tell right away the walls were very thick. It was like

being stuffed in a lead box. I kept glancing back at the door, fearful that, somehow, I might be trapped there forever. Surely no building had ever been designed to create a more disagreeable feeling.

Viewed in a charitable light, it could have been an elephant graveyard. But instead of white skeletons with folded legs, there were endless rows of pinball machines spread across the concrete floor. I looked down at this strange sight from the top of the steps. My hand crept to my lips, then returned to my pocket.

There were lots and lots of pinball machines. Seventy-eight, to be precise. I knew this because I counted, several times. Seventy-eight, beyond a doubt. They all faced the same direction in eight columns that stretched to the far wall of the warehouse. The columns were precise, as if following chalk lines on the floor. Like flies suspended in acrylic resin, the machines were frozen in time. Seventy-eight deaths, seventy-eight silences. My instinctive reaction was to start moving. Otherwise, I might be inducted into this company of gargoyles.

It was cold. And the smell of dead chickens was everywhere.

I slowly descended the five steps of the narrow concrete staircase. It was even colder at the bottom. Yet I was sweating. A nasty sweat, too. I took a handkerchief from my pocket and mopped my face, but there was nothing I could do about the sweat pooling under my arms. I sat on the bottom step and lit a cigarette with shaking hands. This was not the way I wanted to meet the three-flipper Spaceship. And I was sure this wasn't the way she preferred to meet me…pretty sure, anyway.

By closing the door, I had shut out all the insect voices. A perfect silence blanketed the floor like a heavy fog. The seventy-eight pinball machines stood rooted to the floor on their three hundred and twelve legs, tons of metal with nowhere to go. It was a pitiful sight.

I tried whistling the first four bars of "Jumpin' with Symphony Sid" from my seat on the step. Stan Getz and his head-shaking, foot-tapping rhythm section. My whistling resounded throughout the cavernous warehouse—I thought it sounded beautiful. Somewhat revived, I whistled the next four bars. Then the four after that. I could feel every thing around me pricking their ears to my tune. Of course, they didn't shake their heads or tap their feet. My whistling died away,

sucked into the far corners of the warehouse.

"Damn, it's cold," I muttered, after running through the whole song. The echo didn't sound like me at all. It flew up to the ceiling before swooping down to settle like mist on the floor. I sighed, the cigarette still in my mouth. I couldn't sit there forever doing my one-man show. If I didn't move, the cold and the chicken stink would penetrate my core. I stood up and brushed the cold dirt off my trousers. Then I crushed my cigarette with my shoe and tossed the butt into a tin can close by.

Pinball…pinball. Wasn't that why I had come? The cold seemed to be paralyzing my brain. Think! About pinball. About the seventy-eight machines…Okay, consider the switch. There has to be an electric switch somewhere in the building that can return all seventy-eight machines to life. Look for the switch.

With my hands in the pockets of my jeans, I shuffled along the wall of the cavernous room. Torn electrical wiring and severed lead pipes dangled from the naked concrete, remnants of the days when the building was used for cold storage. Holes gaped where the various meters, junction boxes, switches, and other machines had been located, as if they had been ripped out by brute force. Up close, the wall was slimier than it had appeared from a distance. Like the trail left by a giant slug. As I walked, I realized how enormous the building was. Not your usual chicken-packing plant.

At the far end of the floor was a staircase like the one I had just walked down with an identical steel door at the top. It was easy to imagine that I had walked in a full circle back to where I had started. I tried pushing the door open, but it didn't budge. It had no lock or bolt, but there was an absolute lack of movement, as if it had been glued shut. I withdrew my hand from the door and wiped my sweaty face. My hand smelled like chickens.

The switch was next to the door. A big lever. The moment I pulled it, a deep growl filled the room, a spine-chilling sound that seemed to rise from beneath the earth. Next came an immense flapping of wings, as if tens of thousands of birds had taken to the air at once. I wheeled around to look at the warehouse floor. The noise came from thousands

of numbers flipping back to zero in unison as the seventy-eight machines drank in the electricity. Once they finished, all that remained was a dull hum, like a swarm of bees. The sound of seventy-eight pinball machines, restored to life if only for a moment, filled the warehouse. Primary-colored lights flashed on every playfield, while the boards on the back cabinets competed to assert their individual dreams.

I descended the steps and strolled through the columns like an officer reviewing his troops. A few of the machines were vintage models I had only seen in photographs, while others I remembered with fondness from arcades of the past. Still others were remembered by no one, machines lost in time. There was Friendship 7, released by Williams—who was the astronaut featured on its board? Glenn…? That would have been from the early ’60s. There was Bally’s Grand Tour, with its blue sky, Eiffel Tower, and happy American tourists. Gottlieb’s Kings & Queens, the model with eight rollover lanes. It featured a Western Gambler with a manicured mustache, a nonchalant expression, and an ace of spades tucked in his suspenders.

Superheroes, monsters, college girls, football players, rockets, women—so many dreams left to fade and rot in darkened game arcades. Now they were all smiling at me from their boards. And the women…Blondes, platinum blondes, brunettes, redheads, Mexican girls with raven hair, ponytailed girls, Hawaiian girls with hair to their waists, Ann-Margret, Audrey Hepburn, Marilyn Monroe…each thrusting out her glorious breasts from beneath diaphanous blouses unbuttoned to the waist, or one-piece bathing suits, or pointy bras… Their colors would fade, but their breasts would retain their eternal beauty. The lights flashed on and off as if in time with the beating of my heart. The seventy-eight pinball machines were a graveyard of old dreams, old beyond recall. I walked slowly past those dream women.

The three-flipper Spaceship was waiting for me at the end of the line. She stood there, a picture of serenity, sandwiched between her gaudy sisters. She could have been seated on a flat stone in a forest clearing. I stood before her, gazing with fondness at her familiar board. The blue of her cosmos, so deep and dark it looked like poured

ink. The tiny white stars. And the planets: Saturn, Mars, Venus…A pure white spaceship floated in the foreground. Lights burned in its windows, inviting you to imagine the happy family moments being shared inside. Shooting stars arched across the night sky.

The field was just as I remembered. The same dark blue. The targets were pure white, like teeth flashing through smiling lips. The ten lemon-yellow bonus lights, stacked to resemble stars, pulsing up and down. Saturn and Mars, the two kick-out holes, and Venus, the rotating target—taken together, the epitome of peace and tranquillity.

Hey there, I said. Well, maybe I didn't say it out loud. But I placed my hands on the glass surface of her field. It was as cold as ice. When I removed my hands, their warmth left ten cloudy fingerprints. Awakened at last, she smiled at me. How I had missed that smile. I smiled back.

It feels like ages since I last saw you, she said. I pretended to add up the time on my fingers. Three years, I replied. Gone in a heartbeat.

We silently nodded at each other. We might have been sipping coffee in a café, toying with the lace curtains.

I think of you a lot, I said. It gets me feeling pretty low.

When you can't sleep?

Yes, when I can't sleep, I parroted. Her smile never wavered.

Aren't you cold? she asked.

Yes, I'm cold. Freezing, actually.

Don't stay too long. This place is too cold for you.

Seems so, I answered. My hands were trembling as I withdrew a cigarette from my pocket, lit it, and inhaled the smoke.

Want to play? she asked.

No thanks, I replied.

Why not?

My top score was 165,000. Remember?

Of course I remember. It was *my* best score too.

So I don't want to spoil the memory, I said.

She didn't speak. Only her ten bonus lights continued to pulse up

and down. I studied the ground as I smoked my cigarette.

Why did you come?

I heard you call.

Call? She seemed confused for a moment; then she smiled a bashful smile. Yes, you may be right. I may have called you.

I looked for you everywhere.

Thanks, she said. Talk to me.

There have been a lot of big changes, I said. Your game arcade became an all-night doughnut shop. Their coffee is the pits.

Is it really that bad?

It looks like the muddy water the dying zebra drinks in that old Disney flick.

She laughed softly. She was a real knockout when she smiled. But that was an awful neighborhood, she said, her face growing serious. Everything was so crude, so filthy…

It was like that everywhere back then.

She nodded. So what are you doing now?

I'm a translator.

Fiction?

No, I said. Scum. I scoop it from one ditch and dump it into another one, that's all.

Is it fun?

Fun? I've never thought of it in those terms.

Do you have a girlfriend?

You may not believe me, but I'm living with twins right now. They make really great coffee.

She looked off into space, the sweet smile playing on her lips. It feels strange somehow, she said. Like none of it really happened.

Oh, it happened all right. But now it's gone.

Does it make you sad?

No, I said, shaking my head. There was something that came out of nothing, and now it's gone back to where it came from, that's all.

We fell silent again. What we shared was no more than a fragment of a time long dead. Yet memories remained, warm memories that remained with me like lights from the past. And I would carry those lights in the brief interval before death grabbed me and tossed me back into the crucible of nothingness.

You'd better go now, she said. For sure, the cold was becoming harder to bear. I was shivering all over as I stubbed out my cigarette.

Thanks for coming to see me, she said. We may not meet again, but take care of yourself.

Thanks, I said. So long.

I passed between the columns of pinball machines, climbed the steps, and threw the switch. The machines fell silent, like balloons emptied of air. Silent and asleep. I walked the length of the warehouse once again, mounted the steps, turned off the lights, and shut the door behind me. Not once in all that time did I look back. Not once.

By the time I hailed a cab and returned to the apartment, it was almost midnight. The twins were in bed, finishing the crossword puzzle from a weekly magazine. I was as white as a sheet and reeked of frozen chicken. I threw my clothes in the washing machine and hopped in the bath for a long soak. After thirty minutes in the hot water I felt ready to rejoin the human race, but that didn't get rid of the icy cold that had seeped into my core.

The twins pulled the gas heater out of the closet and turned it on. It took fifteen minutes for me to stop shaking; then, after a short break, I ate a hot bowl of canned onion soup.

"I'm all right now," I said.

"For real?"

"You still feel cold," the other twin said, frowning, her hand on my wrist.

"I'll be warm in a minute."

The three of us climbed into bed and worked out the last two words

of the crossword. One was “trout,” the other “stroll.” I warmed up in no time, and none of us knew who fell asleep first.

I saw Trotsky’s four reindeer in my dream. They were all wearing thick wool socks. It was an awfully cold dream.

## ▸ 23

The Rat never saw the woman after that. Nor did he return to observe the light in her apartment. In fact, he avoided going anywhere near her building. Something had floated up in the pitch black of his heart like a wisp of white smoke from a blown-out candle and then disappeared. A dark silence followed. Silence. When you stripped something down layer by layer, what remained in the end? The Rat didn’t know. Pride?...He lay on his bed and studied his hands. It seemed that no one could live without pride. If that was all one had left, though, it was too dark. Way too dark.

—

Breaking up had been easy. He simply hadn’t phoned the woman one Friday evening. He guessed that she had stayed up late waiting for the call. The thought pained him. Time and again he had to hold himself back from reaching for the telephone. He put on his headphones and turned up the volume on his record player. He knew she wouldn’t phone, but even so he didn’t want to hear it ring.

She had probably waited until midnight before giving up. Then she would have washed her face, brushed her teeth, and gone to bed. Maybe he’ll phone tomorrow morning, she’d have thought as she turned out the lights. But the phone would not ring Saturday morning, either. She would open the windows, make breakfast, water the potted plants. She wouldn’t give up on his call for good until the afternoon. Then she would brush her hair and smile a few times in the mirror, as if practicing. Oh well, she would think, this is the way it was bound to

end.

The Rat spent all that time in his room with the blinds pulled down, staring at the hands of the electric clock on the wall. The air never moved. From time to time he lapsed into a light and fitful sleep. The clock no longer signified anything. The darkness grew thicker and lighter by turns—that was all. The Rat could feel his body losing its substance, its weight, its sensations, but he bore with it. How long have I been like this, he wondered. How many hours? The white wall facing him wavered with each breath. Space grew dense, and began to invade his body. When he judged he could stand it no longer, the Rat took a shower and shaved, still in a daze. Then he toweled himself off and drank a glass of orange juice from the refrigerator. When he had finished, he changed into fresh pajamas and went back to bed. Well, that's the end of that, he thought. This time he fell into a deep sleep. A terribly deep sleep.

## ▸ 24

"I'm leaving town," the Rat told J.

It was six in the evening, and the bar had just opened. The counter was waxed, the ashtrays emptied of butts and scrubbed clean. The rows of liquor bottles were wiped and shining with their labels facing out, while a neat arrangement of sharply creased napkins, Tabasco sauce bottles, and salt shakers perched on each of the little trays. J was whipping up bowls of three different salad dressings. The smell of garlic hung in the air like a fine mist. That quiet moment before the customers arrived.

The Rat had borrowed J's nail clippers, and was trimming the fingernails of his left hand, dropping the clippings into one of the ashtrays.

"Leaving? To go where?"

"Nowhere in particular. Someplace new. A small town probably."

J funneled the salad dressing into three large flasks. When he finished, he stuck the flasks in the refrigerator and wiped his hands.

"What'll you do there?"

"Find a job," the Rat said, carefully inspecting his fingers.

"What's wrong with this place?"

"Not an option," said the Rat. "I sure would like a beer."

"It's on me."

"Thanks a million."

The Rat took his time pouring the beer into a frosted glass. "Aren't you going to ask why this town doesn't do it for me?" he asked after draining half the glass in one gulp.

"I think I know already."

The Rat laughed and clicked his tongue. "See, J, it doesn't work," he said. "The way everyone pretends to be on the same wavelength without questioning or talking about things—it doesn't get anyone anywhere. I hate to say it, but…I feel like I've been hanging around that kind of world too damn long."

"You could be right," J said after some thought.

The Rat took a sip of beer and began working on the fingernails of his right hand. "I've given it a lot of thought. And I know the situation may be no different wherever I go. But I still have to leave. If it turns out to be the same, I can live with it."

"Think you'll ever come back?"

"Of course I will. Someday. It's not like I'm running away from anything."

The Rat took a few peanuts from the small bowl, opened them with an audible crack, and tossed their wrinkled shells in his ashtray. He took his napkin and wiped away the condensation his cold beer had left on the paneled counter.

"So when do you leave?"

"I don't know. Maybe tomorrow, maybe the day after. Within the next three days anyway. I'm all packed."

"It's really sudden."

“I know. Sorry to have been such a pain in the ass.”

“Hey, a lot of things have gone down.” J nodded several times as he dusted the rows of glasses on the sideboard with a dry cloth. “But when it’s over, it all seems like a dream.”

“I guess you’re right. But you know it’ll probably take me a hell of a long time to really feel that way.”

J paused for a moment.

“Yeah,” he laughed. “I know. I forget sometimes there’s twenty years between us.”

The Rat poured what remained of his beer into his glass and sipped it. He had never drunk a beer so slowly before.

“Want another?”

The Rat shook his head slowly. “No, I’m good. I planned this as my last beer. The last one *here*, I mean.”

“So you’re not coming again?”

“No, that’s part of the plan. It’d be too rough.”

J laughed. “We’ll meet again.”

“Next time you may not recognize me.”

“I’ll recognize your smell.”

The Rat took a long last look at his trimmed fingernails, stuffed the uneaten peanuts into his pocket, wiped his mouth with the napkin, and left the bar.

The wind flowed soundlessly, as if sliding through an invisible rift in the darkness. It rustled the tree branches overhead, dislodging their leaves, which made a faint, dry sound as they hit the car roof. After dancing about, they skated down the windshield to pile on the fenders.

The Rat sat alone in his car among the cemetery trees, staring through the windshield. Language had deserted him. A few meters ahead the land fell away. Beyond was dark sky and ocean; below, the lights of the town. He was slouching forward, both hands on the

steering wheel, his eyes fixed on a single point in the sky. Though his body was motionless, the tip of the unlit cigarette in his fingers described complex yet meaningless patterns in the air.

Breaking the news to J had left him with an unbearable empty feeling. It seemed as if, all of a sudden, the various rivulets that formed his consciousness, barely holding him together, had headed off in different directions. Could they find each other again? The Rat had no idea. Those dark streams would eventually reach the boundless sea. With luck, they might meet there, but…had his twenty-five years been lived for this? He couldn't answer his own question. It was a good question, though. The good ones never had answers.

The wind was growing stronger. It caught the faint warmth rising from humanity and carried it far away, leaving behind only the cold darkness and the countless glittering stars. The Rat removed his hands from the steering wheel. He played with the cigarette between his lips for a while; then, as if remembering, he lit it.

His head throbbed. It was a strange sensation, not so much pain, more like cold fingertips pressing on his temples. He shook his head to drive his thoughts away. Whatever, he concluded. It's all over now.

He pulled his road atlas from the glove compartment and leafed through it. He tried reciting some of the place names in order. Most were small towns wholly unfamiliar to him. They followed the roadways in an interminable line. After reading a few pages, he felt the fatigue that had built up over the past few days crash down on him like a towering wave. A lukewarm sludge oozed through his veins.

He longed to sleep.

Sleep would wash everything away. If he could just sleep…

When he closed his eyes he could hear the winter surf striking the seawall and threading its way between the concrete blocks of the breakwater back to the open sea.

At least I don't have to explain myself to anyone anymore, thought the Rat. How much more warm and peaceful and quiet the bottom of the sea might be than any of those towns. But enough thinking. Enough.

## 25

The hum of pinball machines had vanished from my life. Ditto the thoughts with no place to go. There would be no Knights of the Round Table–like grand finale, of course. That was still far away. From now on, I vowed, when my horse was exhausted, my sword broken, and my armor rusty, I would lay myself down in a meadow of green foxtail and listen to the wind. I would follow the path I should follow wherever it took me, whether that be the bottom of a reservoir or a chicken plant's refrigerated warehouse.

I know the following brief epilogue will seem trivial, of no greater consequence than a clothesline in the rain.

But here goes.

One day the twins came home from the supermarket with a box of cotton swabs. Three hundred swabs packed in one carton. After that they took to cleaning my ears when I finished my bath, one on each side. They were very good at it. I would close my eyes and drink beer and listen to the swabs whisper in my ears. One night, however, I happened to sneeze halfway through. And in that second, I lost almost all my hearing.

"Can you hear me?" asked the one on the right.

"Only a little," I said. My voice seemed to be coming from behind my nose.

"How about me?" said the one on the left.

"Same thing."

"It's your fault for sneezing," said one.

"Yeah," said the other. "That was dumb."

I sighed. It was as if I had bowled a seven-ten split, and both pins were nattering at me.

"Will drinking water help?" asked one.

"Fat chance," I shouted angrily.

Nevertheless, they forced me to drink a whole bucket of water. All

that did was make my stomach ache. But my ears didn't hurt, which I took to mean that the force of the sneeze had driven the earwax farther inside. That was the only theory that made sense. I located two flashlights in the closet and had them check. Like two spelunkers in a cave, they beamed their lights in my ears for several minutes.

"I don't see anything."

"Clean as a whistle on this side."

"Then why the hell can't I hear?" I shouted again.

"Your ears have given up the ghost."

"You're deaf."

Ignoring them, I found the ear, nose, and throat clinic nearest to us in the telephone book and gave them a call. Talking on the phone was no easy matter in my condition, but the nurse sounded sympathetic. Come right away, she said. We'll leave the front door open. The three of us threw on our clothes, raced out the door, and followed the bus route to the clinic on foot.

The doctor was a woman in her fifties with hair like tangled barbed wire, but she struck me as a nice person. Opening the waiting-room door herself, she stopped the twins' chattering with a clap of her hands, sat me down in a chair, and listened to my story with a bored look on her face.

I get the picture, so for goodness' sake stop shouting, she said when I finished. Then she took a huge syringe, filled it with an amber liquid, and handed me something like a tin megaphone to place beneath my ear. She inserted the syringe and pushed the plunger, whereupon the amber liquid went galloping merrily into my ear like a herd of zebras before overflowing into the megaphone. This was repeated three times, after which she probed the ear with a slender cotton swab. When she had treated both ears in this manner I could hear as well as before.

"I can hear!" I said.

"Earwax," she responded tersely. It sounded like that children's word game where you turn the last syllable of one word into the first syllable of the next.

“But we couldn’t see it.”

“Because of the curve.”

“The curve?”

“Your ear canals are a lot more curved than other people’s.”

She sketched my inner ear for me on the back of a matchbox. It was bent at a right angle, like a bookshelf bracket.

“So you see, if earwax goes around that bend, you can call it all day and it will never come back.”

“So what can I do?” I groaned.

“Do? Just be careful cleaning your ears. *Careful*.”

“Are there further consequences if your ear canals are especially bent?”

“Further consequences?”

“Like for example…psychological ones?”

*“None,”* she said.

—

We added an extra fifteen minutes to our walk home by cutting across the golf course. The dogleg on the eleventh hole reminded me of my inner ear, the flag of a cotton swab. And that wasn’t the end of it. The clouds crossing the moon became a squadron of B- 52s, the thick stand of trees in the west a fish-shaped paperweight, the stars moldy parsley flakes…you get the idea. Anyway, my ears were now attuned to the sounds of this world to a splendid degree. It was as if a veil had been stripped away. I could hear things taking place miles away: the cries of night birds, people shutting their windows, other people talking of love.

“What a relief,” said one twin.

“Thank goodness,” said the other.

Tennessee Williams once wrote: “So much for the past and present. The future is called ‘perhaps,’ which is the only possible thing to call the future.”

Yet when I look back on our dark voyage, I can see it only in terms of a nebulous “perhaps.” All we can perceive is this moment we call the present, and even this moment is nothing more than what passes through us.

That was pretty much what I was thinking when I said goodbye to the twins for good. I was silent the whole way across the golf course, as we went to catch the bus two stops down the road. It was a Sunday morning and the sky was a piercing blue. The grass beneath our feet was filled with the premonition of its approaching death until the next spring. Before long it would turn white with frost, and then disappear beneath a blanket of snow. The snow would glitter in the crystal-clear morning sunlight. The pale grass crunched beneath our feet as we walked along.

“What are you thinking?” one of the twins asked me.

“Nothing,” I said.

The twins were wearing the sweaters I had given them and carrying their sweatshirts and a change of clothing in paper bags under their arms.

“Where will you go?” I asked them.

“Back where we came from.”

“Yeah, we’re just going back.”

We passed the sand trap and the eighth hole’s straight-as-an-arrow fairway, and walked down the outdoor escalator. A big flock of small birds was sitting on the grass and the chain-link fence, watching us go by.

“I can’t say this very well,” I said. “But I’m really going to miss you both.”

“We’re going to miss you too.”

“We’ll be lonely.”

“But you’re going, right?”

They nodded.

“And you’re sure you have someplace to go?”

“Of course,” said one.

“If we didn’t, we wouldn’t go back,” said the other.

We climbed over the fence, cut through the trees, and there was the bus stop. We sat on the bench to wait for the bus. On a sunny Sunday morning, the stop was quiet and peaceful. We sat there in the light and played the children’s word game together. Five minutes later the bus arrived, and I gave them money for their fares.

“See you around,” I said.

“See you around,” said one.

“See you around,” said the other.

The phrase echoed in my heart for a long while.

The bus doors closed with a bang, and then they were waving to me from the window. Everything repeats itself…

I retraced the path we had taken back to my apartment, put the *Rubber Soul* record they had left me on the turntable, made some coffee, and sat there in the autumn light, watching the rest of that Sunday pass by outside my window. A November Sunday so tranquil it seemed that everything would soon be crystal clear.

1969–1973

## A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Haruki Murakami was born in Kyoto in 1949 and now lives near Tokyo. His work has been translated into more than fifty languages, and the most recent of his many international honors is the Jerusalem Prize, whose previous recipients include J. M. Coetzee, Milan Kundera, and V. S. Naipaul.