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The New York Times Book Review

Kōbō Abe
The Ruined
Map



PENGUIN MODERN CLASSICS

The Ruined Map

KŌBŌ ABE was born in Tokyo in 1924, grew up in Manchuria, and returned to Japan in his early twenties. Before his death in 1993, Abe was considered his country's foremost living novelist. His novels have earned many literary awards and prizes, and have all been bestsellers in Japan. They include *The Woman in the Dunes*, *The Ark Sakura*, *The Face of Another*, *The Box Man*, and *The Ruined Map*.

KŌBŌ ABE

The Ruined Map

Translated from the Japanese by E. Dale Saunders



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THE CITY – a bounded infinity. A labyrinth where you are never lost. Your private map where every block bears exactly the same number.

Even if you lose your way, you cannot go wrong.

APPLICATION FOR INVESTIGATION

Particulars of request: Ascertain the movements and whereabouts of the missing person.

Name: Nemuro Hiroshi.

Sex: Male.

Age: 34.

Profession: Section head for sales and expansion, Dainen Enterprises.

Comments: The missing man is the applicant's husband. No communication whatever since his disappearance six months ago. Everything necessary for the investigation will be made available.

I hereby make official application for investigation and enclose herewith the requisite fee. Furthermore, I swear to observe the strictest secrecy concerning all information, to make no disclosures, to make no abuse of any knowledge obtained.

2 February 1967

T—Detective Agency
Chief of Section for the
Investigation of Persons

Signature of applicant
Nemuro Haru

I pressed down the clutch and slipped the gear into low. The incline was a little too much for the light, twenty-horsepower car.

The surface of the street was not asphalt but a rough-textured concrete with narrow grooves about five inches apart, apparently to prevent slipping. But they did not look as though they would be much help to pedestrians. The purposely rough concrete surface was covered with dust and tire shavings, and on rainy days, even if one wore rubber-soled shoes, it would surely make for difficult walking. No doubt the pavement was made in this way for cars. If so, the grooves every five inches would be very effective. When the drainage of the street was obstructed by melting snow and sleet, they looked as though they would be useful in channeling the water into the gutters. Yet there were few cars, despite the trouble taken to build such a road. Since there were no sidewalks, four or five women carrying shopping baskets had spread out over the width of the street and were walking along completely absorbed in their chattering. I sounded the horn softly and passed through them. Then, instinctively, I jammed on the emergency brake. A young boy, perched on one roller skate and imitating a horn, sailed around the curve and came sliding down toward me.

On the left was a sharp rise with a high protective wall of stone blocks piled on top of each other. On the right was an almost perpendicular cliff, set off from the street by a minimally low guardrail and a ditch. I saw the drawn, pale face of the boy: he came sliding and tumbling down, as if he were holding the guardrail under his arm. My heart leapt thumping to my throat. I started to open the window with the thought of scolding the boy, but I flinched at the

reproachful looks which the women cast at me. It would be easier to let him go on by, I supposed. It would be ridiculous if by agitating the women I found myself in the position of having to take responsibility for the boy's bruises. Nothing would jeopardize my situation more than their trumping up some story against me. I had to be without blemish for the present, at least around here.

I stepped on the accelerator. The car barely moved, and there was the smell of burning rubber. Suddenly the curve was there. The colors of the women, clustered around the boy who had missed death with neither loss of blood nor broken bones, flew to the side of my rear-view mirror, and clear sky appeared like the surface of a Braun tube after the picture has disappeared. The stretch of road was flat, and a small bus station lay in a wide space carved out of the hillside. There were benches with roofs to ward off the rain, a public telephone, and even a drinking fountain beside a brick enclosure that perhaps was a flower bed in summer. Only a short distance beyond the station the road rose sharply again. Immediately ahead stood a large signboard with a yellow background like a traffic sign:

UNAUTHORIZED VEHICLES FORBIDDEN
WITHIN THESE PRECINCTS.

Despite the firm style of the letters, which appeared to have been the work of a professional sign painter, I ignored the threat and drove rapidly up the remainder of the slope.

Suddenly the scenery changed, and a straight, white line of road stretched to a sky daubed with white. It was some thirty feet wide. Between it and the footpaths on either side lay a belt of withered lawn, contained by a knee-high fence. The perspective was strangely exaggerated, perhaps because the grass had withered unevenly, and I was struck with an optical illusion. It was as if I were looking at some patterned infinity: the four-storied buildings, identical in height, each floor with six doors, were lined up in rows of six to the right and left. Only the fronts of the buildings, facing the road, were painted white, and the color stood out against the darkish green of

the sides, emphasizing even more the geometric character of the view. With the roadway as an axis, the housing development extended in two great wings, somewhat greater in width than in depth. Perhaps it was for the lighting, but as the buildings were laid out in staggered lines, on both sides one's view met only white walls supporting a milk-white dome of sky.

An unattended child swathed in blankets in a red baby carriage was crying shrilly. A young boy on a bicycle made of some light alloy, which had a glittering transmission, gave a deliberate, boisterous laugh as he sped by, his cheeks rosy with the cold. It was all ordinary enough at first glance, but when one focused on the distant landscape, people seemed like fanciful reflections. Of course, if one were used to living here, I should imagine the viewpoint would be quite the opposite. The view became fainter and fainter, transparent almost to the point of extinction, and only my face emerged like a picture printed from a negative. I had had enough of distinguishing myself. For this human filing cabinet with its endless filing-card apartments was merely the glass frame, each encasing its own family portraits.

12 East 3. East stands for the right side of the street, 3 for the third building from the front, facing the street, 12 for the second-floor apartment facing the landing at the left end. In the spaces between the blocks of lawn stood No Entry and No Parking signs, but cars were parked in front of the buildings. My luggage consisted of one small case containing a set of miniature equipment. The case was a foot and a half long, a foot wide, and something less than eight inches thick. The surface was flat and hard and served at times as a desk. In the end of the handle were hidden a mike and a switch with which one could start the tape recorder from the outside; other than that, it was a quite ordinary case. It was made of a nappy artificial leather that gave the feeling of being rather worn. Showy metal fittings had been added to the four corners. Anyway, it looked like nothing more than a traveling salesman's bag. Its appearance was useful for my purposes, but an inconvenience too.

Suddenly the wind, like an icy dust, struck my face. I shifted the briefcase to my leeward hand and, crossing the sidewalk, directed

my footsteps into a dark rectangle surrounded by nothing but the narrow eaves of the buildings. The sound of my shoes, like the clanking of an empty can, leapt up along the stairs. Eight mailboxes arranged in two horizontal rows. Written in white paint underneath number 12, the name Nemuro inscribed in a small hand on a piece of paper attached with Scotch tape. Walking slowly up the stairs, I wondered if I should not prepare myself so that, as soon as I knew what my client wanted, I could play the required role at once. It was our business to be well aware that there is no set type.



A white steel door bordered by a dark green frame. A white buzzer with a cracked plastic cover. The corner of the cloth over the postcard-sized window placed in the middle of the door at face height was raised at an angle. I heard the sound of a chain being removed; the knob turned and the door, which appeared to weigh all of a ton, was opened. There was the faint smell of burning oil. The kerosene stove had probably just been lit in preparation for my visit. The door opened in two movements, first twenty degrees and then sixty. The opener withdrew a step, clasping her hands together before her. It was a woman, younger than I had expected, though I could not make her out clearly since she was against the light. She was short, with a long neck, and she gave the feeling of swaying. Had it been a little darker I could have mistaken her for a child.

I drew out my card and modestly presented myself in the manner of a bank employee. Of course, I had never seen an actual bank employee under such circumstances in order to know just how he would present himself, but, anyway, I adopted that completely self-confident courtesy possible only of one who has not the slightest qualm. I was not merely play-acting to put the girl at ease. I had come on orders; there was no question of my having come to force a sale. But it would be best to keep my distance. If I did not, I would

be looked down on professionally. There is no need to act out a snake for someone who's afraid of them.

The woman spoke in a husky whisper. It was not due to strain, for this was apparently her natural voice. It was as if she were sucking on some piece of candy – perhaps it was because her tongue was short – but it put me at ease. The curtain rose, in this dimly lit vestibule, on my somber functions.

Directly to the left as one entered was a narrow kitchenette and dining room combined. Then came the living room, cut off by a heavy curtain. The next room on the right, looking from the vestibule, seemed to be a bedroom.

The first noticeable thing on entering the living room was a cylindrical kerosene stove with its flickering circle of blue flame. Then, in the middle of the room was a round table, with a vinyl throw, printed with a lacy design, that reached all the way to the floor. Bookcases occupied half of the left wall and the rest was taken up by a window. On the facing wall was a Picasso lithograph, perhaps clipped out of some magazine, depicting a girl looking up and to the left. The fact that it had been framed indicated it had a definite importance for the owner. Next to it was a cutaway sketch of an engine, Formula I, three times the size of the Picasso. There was a line drawn to one part of the engine and an annotation in red written with a ballpoint pen. A triangular telephone shelf fitted into the window corner. In the opposite corner, against the wall of the next room, stood a stereo amplifier, clearly a do-it-yourself assembly. The speakers were installed in the wall about three yards above it, at right angles. Thus they mutually canceled out the sound, and the stereo effect was probably nil. A chair was placed with its back to the amplifier. Offering the fact that she lived alone as an apology, the girl parted the curtain and went into the kitchen, doubtless to prepare some tea. As she passed, the faint breeze created by her movement dissipated the smell of kerosene, and in its place lingered a fragrance of cosmetics.

With the girl's disappearance beyond the curtain even my impression of her suddenly became faint and indistinct. I was annoyed. Once again I slowly breathed in, and after ascertaining that there was

neither the smell of tobacco nor that of a man, I lit a cigarette. I turned up the hem of the floor-length table throw and made sure there was nothing suspicious there. Yet, it was a strange business. The window was beginning to grow dark in the early winter evening, but it was not yet time to turn on the lights. If I concentrated I could just make out the black pen cap that had rolled under the telephone shelf. I had really seen her clearly. She had advanced a chair for me on the other side of the table and we had faced each other scarcely six feet apart. I was quite unable to understand why my impression had suddenly blurred. It was already four and a half years since I had been in the business. Though I was not particularly aware of it, I had the habit of grasping the distinguishing features of things seen and filing them away. I formed portraits with them, and when I needed to I could draw them out and at once restore them to their original state. For example, the child on the roller skate a little while ago . . . His overcoat was a dark blue woolen material with a wide, reversible collar. The muffler was of gray woolen yarn, the shoes white duck. The corners of his eyes turned down, his hair was stiff and thin, the hairline almost straight, the space between his mouth and his nose was red and inflamed. Fortunately the gradient was abrupt, and as my brakes had functioned well it turned out all right, but if the slope had been only half of what it was and the horsepower of my car twice as much, no matter how I might have cut the wheels it would have been too late. The boy would have tried to avoid the car, twisting his body to the left, but in so doing would have exposed his right flank and been forced under the wheels of the car from the other side. It would have been even better for him to have broken his leg. He would have had no ground resistance because of the roller skate, and the part of his body that was struck by the car wheels would have become a fulcrum. He would have been swung far out and flung full against the guard railing. If he hadn't had his skull broken, his collar bone would have snapped. His eyes would twitch and frothy vermilion blood, brilliantly clear, would well out of his mouth and ears. It was quite obvious I would not be here now if that had happened.

A tinkling noise came from beyond the curtain. It was not a

chinaware sound but rather that of glass. It would certainly not be a cold drink at this time of year. Or I wondered if she were planning to serve something alcoholic. No, surely not. What was going to begin now was an unbearably tragic scene. If she were just preparing a cup of tea, she was certainly taking her time. A woman's quiet way. The monotonous sound of water continuously flowing from the faucet. If she had felt some consolation in getting me to listen to her complaints, in continuing to talk, paying no attention to the curtain, jabbering on, begrudging even a moment, I would have played the unpleasant role I usually did, needling her by interrupting with talk of expenses, fully realizing she was sick, but she did not.

A woman I could not recall . . . a woman whose face vanished with a ripple of the curtain as if by sleight of hand. Was her face so impersonal? I wondered. Yet I could describe in detail over a hundred items of her clothing. Through them I could recall the contours of her body. She was on the slender side and had a subtle, well-balanced build. Her skin was fine-textured, but not too light in color; and instinctively one felt she had a down of hair on her back. Her spine was deeply arched and straight. It was obvious that for her years she was more mature, more womanly, than I had thought her when I had first seen her against the light. Yet her somehow childish body harmonized with the breasts that were neither too big nor too small, and she seemed quite suited to the latest style of dancing, with its violent body contortions. Since I could imagine this much, I might push my imagination a step further and propose a more fitting head for the body.

From imagination alone, it was a most striking face, large, sharply outlined, with a mobile expression. I tried in vain to sketch it, but I could not. There were spots on it, like pale, indistinct smudges on a wall – perhaps freckles. But the face aside, I could recall the appearance of the hair. It was rather fine, black and long. Softly masking the left half of her clear forehead it looked as if it would be difficult to comb. There was a metallic gleam to it. I had come thus far, without knowing how. Possibly she was consciously avoiding having her expression read. Or had she exhibited in the short time I had been here five or six quite different expressions at

the same time? She may have taken some dislike to me. If she had, this affair was more than I had anticipated, insidious, wheels within wheels. It would soon be three minutes since she had gone into the kitchen. Suddenly fretful, I lit a second cigarette. Rising from my seat, I walked around the table and stood by the window.

Individually, the panes of glass were small, but the aluminum frame left the view unobstructed. Across the flagstone walkway, about ten yards wide, rose the north wall of East 2. There was only an emergency stairway along the smooth, dark, windowless surface. Immediately down to the left ran the main road I mentioned before, which permitted an unimpeded view for some distance. When I brought my face close to the glass I could see my own parked car. When I crowded as closely as possible up to the bookcases at the left edge of the window, the vista stretched to a point just before the slope beyond the road; this joined the corner line of the next building at about a thirty-degree angle, and thus the view of the walkway was delimited by the far end of East 2.

At a point about the middle of my car, on an angle with my line of vision, the street light suddenly and eerily went out. Perhaps an automatic cutoff switch, functioning with hypersensitivity, had gone out of order somewhere. But, perhaps too it was time for the light to go out. The number of passers-by had increased amazingly from what it had been – not only women coming back from their shopping, but men returning home from work. Perhaps a bus had pulled in. Looking down on them as I was, I realized very well that man was a walking animal.

No, rather than walking, I had the feeling he was fighting gravitation, diligently lugging around his heavy bag of skin packed with viscera. Some were returning, going back to the place they had left . . . leaving in order to return. They go out to obtain walling material to make the thick walls of their houses thicker, stronger than ever to return to.

But sometimes, though rarely, some men go out never to return.



‘Well then, what about clues? Tell me in detail whatever occurs to you.’

‘I can’t. There’s absolutely nothing at all.’

‘Just anything that comes to you. Even if you don’t have proof or anything to back it up.’

‘Well, all right . . . There are the matches, for one thing.’

‘What did you say?’

‘A matchbox. A half-used box of matches from some coffee house. It was in his raincoat pocket along with a sports paper.’

‘I see.’ Suddenly her expression changed. Looking again at her face, which quite confused me, I found it rather unpleasant. Her face – the shallow smile quite suited it, as if the disappearance of her husband were a kind of satisfaction – was strangely composed, in perfect balance. Or could it be that after a half year of sorrow and despair the mainspring that controlled her will had been completely broken, and she had sunk to the depths of distraction at having been abandoned? Perhaps she had been a beautiful woman. Her features seemed to have slipped out of their proper place; it was as if I was looking at her through an unfocused lens. ‘If you think the matchbox might be some sort of clue . . .’

‘No, not particularly. It’s just that it was in the raincoat pocket, and I thought . . .’

‘Now if I could just get you to sign this application, we’ll get on with the investigation. But as I’ve explained to you, the deposit which you pay covers the investigation expenses for a week. In case we cannot locate your husband within one week we take no remuneration, of course; but there is no question of returning the thirty thousand yen on deposit, you understand. In case the investigation continues, that will mean another thirty thousand. And besides

that, we are obliged to charge for the actual expenses connected with the investigation.'

'Is this the place I sign?'

'But I can't carry on much of an investigation with the vague information you have given. It's all right, I suppose, since it's our business to get it, but don't you feel as if you were throwing thirty thousand yen out the window?'

'Oh, what a mess this is!'

'There must be something, something more concrete, like who you want me to tail, where you want me to look.'

'If only there was,' she sighed, turning her head slightly to the side. She raised the glass of beer to her mouth, drinking alone, for I had refused, since I was driving. 'But I can't believe this whole thing happened. He had all kinds of opportunities, nobody could understand . . . nobody.'

'Opportunities?'

'Business ones, I mean.'

'You've done some investigation yourself, haven't you? It's already been half a year.'

'Yes, my younger brother has.'

'Ah. He was the one on the telephone, wasn't he? He talked as if he represented you. If that's the case, it would be simpler if I addressed myself directly to him, I think.'

'But . . . well . . . I don't know exactly where he is.'

'Come now. It's a vicious circle, a man looking for someone who's disappeared and who has himself disappeared.'

'My brother isn't lost, you know. He always telephones me once every three days. He does. As long as he phones, there's still hope. I have such terrible thoughts. I can't stand not knowing my husband's motives.'

'But it doesn't seem all that terrible, does it, really?'

'It's strange. Maybe I've just got into the habit of being patient.'

'Since you've entrusted things to your brother, haven't you done anything yourself?'

'I've waited. Every day, every single day.'

'You've just been waiting . . . ?'

'My brother was against my doing anything, and then I was afraid to leave the house empty too.'

'Why?'

'Well, it would have been awkward if by any chance my husband had taken it into his head to come home while I was away. We would have missed each other altogether.'

'I'd like to know your brother's reason for not wanting you to do anything.'

'Ah, yes, I suppose . . .' Her expression became more and more distant, more and more vague; the dark spots under her eyes, like a veil enfolding her dream, suited her well. 'I suppose my brother had a mind of his own. But it was too much for him after all. I couldn't wait any longer either. Well, finally my brother gave up and we decided to go to you.'

'Mrs Nemuro, are you something of a drinker?'

The bottle of beer she was absently pouring into her glass immobilized in mid-air; she was stunned.

'Once in a while,' she said, nodding her head distractedly, 'since my husband's been away. When I'm just waiting here alone, I dream with my eyes wide open. It's a strange dream. I seem to be following him. And then he pops out right behind me and starts tickling me like this. I know it's a dream, yet I laugh and laugh with the tickling . . . it makes me feel very funny. A strange dream.'

'It is indeed. I think it would be well if I met your brother.'

'I'll tell him the next time he calls. But . . . I wonder . . . if he'll be very anxious to meet *you*.'

'Why do you say that?'

'How shall I say? I just feel it. I'm afraid I don't express myself very well.'

'Is it all right then? I've got to have information. I'm sure you understand, don't you? I don't intend to go prying into your brother's affairs at all. I'd just like to get him to give me the information he has. Isn't it a waste of time to start in all over again on what your brother's already done? As far as I'm concerned, I don't have anything more to say here.'

'I'll tell you everything I know. But what?'

'Well . . . any clues.'

'Oh, but there aren't any, no matter what you say.'

'All right then, let it go.' I too was ready to give up. 'Now, let's begin by your explaining things as they happened.'

'Well, it's all terribly simple. Too simple, really . . . surprisingly so. Let me see,' she said, rising lightly from her seat and running to the window corner where she beckoned to me with a finger. 'Over there. Can you see it? About ten paces in front of that street light. There, near the sidewalk on the lawn. See that small man-hole? Right there, he vanished into thin air. Why? Why in a place like that? There was no need for it, absolutely none at all.'



The dark street . . . too dark . . . The street, which until a short while ago had been too white, linked as it had been with the milky sky, was now a street in the depths of a gorge, sunk at the bottom of a sky stained with street lights. I stepped off ten paces from the light, groping for the manhole cover with the tip of my shoe – the place where the husband had, so she said, vanished.

Women out for their evening shopping and of course the red baby carriage and the boy with his bicycle were wiped away with a paintbrush of darkness, workers who had gone directly home were already settling down in their respective filing-cabinet homes while their friends, thinking it too early to return, tarried along the way . . . the abandoned gorges of unfinished time. I stood motionless in the very place where he had vanished.

The wind blew, threading its way between the dwellings. Freezing blasts of air, striking the sharp corners of the buildings, howled in a bass that the ear could barely catch. Even so, the moaning of this great pipe organ penetrated to the very quick of me. My whole body became gooseflesh, my blood congealed, my heart was transformed into a red, heart-shaped ice bag. A trampled asphalt walkway. The

broken, abandoned rubber ball visible as a white speck on the lawn. The cracked corpse of the street, illuminated by the street lights that gilded even my dust-speckled shoes. One could scarcely hope to arrive at any place worth mentioning along such a street.

Yes, of course, it was a half year ago, August to be exact, and the summer heat was at its worst. The asphalt was as sticky as gum and swarms of insects clustered around the street lights. The grass was a green pond rippled by the wind, into which the castaway ball had sunk to the bottom. One had to stamp one's feet, not because of the cold but because of the swarms of mosquitoes that welled up from the manhole. Supposing the husband had paused at such a place . . . No, that was wrong. It was still morning when he had passed here for the last time. Moreover, early morning; the street lights had blinked off and the insects had sunk into the depths of the grass. It was the time when the gorges stripped themselves of their darkness and again became the hillside town, so white, so close to the sky. Perhaps it was a marvelous morning of blue sky, a day with a strong southwesterly breeze. The first beat of the city's heart is a signal; within a five-minute period hundreds of filing cabinets are unlocked at one click and swarms of different but indistinguishable workers, like a wall of water released from the floodgates of a dam, suddenly throng the streets . . . a time of living.



'Yes, it's true. They're like a legion of rats cast under a magic spell. You know, like in the fairy tale.' The woman spread her arms wide, perhaps intending to show the width of the street. Her eyes blurred, no doubt from having drunk the beer alone, and looking from one to the other of her outstretched arms, she murmured as if in surprise, 'How dark!' Suddenly she stood up, switched on the light in the room, and then went into the kitchen. She continued speaking in the same tone through the curtain. 'It's not only the sidewalks; even the streets are packed. And they're all rushing for fear they'll

miss their bus . . . little by little they swarm together in the middle of the street.’

‘But a bus can’t keep its schedule in such a crowd, can it?’

‘Of course not,’ she said, holding in her hand another bottle of beer, as she came back into the room. ‘They rush all the more because it’s unreliable, I suppose.’

Placing the bottle on the table, she casually turned toward the window. With the light on, it was already evening outside. The Picasso print was reflected in the panes. As if threatened by something, she roughly pulled the curtains that covered half the wall, and their lemon-yellow color transformed the room. Lemon-yellow it was, but it was not very fresh. A rather withered and shop-worn lemon. The masterless room, which had been like a cast-off cicada skin, suddenly came alive again, thanks to the color. One could say that it was not the lost man that had been missing but simply the lemon color. Suddenly a stuffed cat appeared above the bookcases. Below the cutaway view, Formula I, was a small sconce and on it a lace-net glove. A room well suited to lemon-yellow. A woman well suited to lemon-yellow. Her room. A room for her, adjusted to her life. I tilted my head. My sixth cigarette. And she with her second bottle of beer. Something was suspicious.

A place about ten paces from the street light in the direction of the hill. Where there was a small manhole on the border of the lawn. There he was, absorbed in his thoughts, walking slowly along the edge of the sidewalk, skirting the crowd of workers, hurrying down the street as if pursued. Someone in the neighborhood had observed him. Even if it was true that this was the last sight of him, what could it possibly mean?

‘Wouldn’t it be more intelligent to assume that rather than running in the direction of the bus, which was unreliable, he had quietly gone down the hill with the intention of taking the subway from the very first? That very morning he must have had an appointment in S— station, for if he were going directly to work the bus would have been more convenient.’

‘But he didn’t keep the appointment.’

‘It is significant that his not keeping the appointment was deliberate and willful.’

‘You’re wrong there. I’ll put it another way. How shall I say . . .’

‘Did you say he’d been going back and forth to work by car until three days before he disappeared?’

‘Yes. He put it in the garage with something or other wrong with it.’

‘And what about the car now?’

‘Yes, I wonder what’s happened to it,’ she said, her eyes wide in what one could only suppose to be surprised innocence. ‘My brother would surely know.’

‘Your brother again? But unfortunately your brother isn’t available.’

‘Oh, my brother’s the one who had the idea of helping you like this. It’s true. Please believe me. My brother’s like that.’ Then suddenly her voice became more intense. ‘It’s true. My husband didn’t break his word. He didn’t, really. I’ve proof. It just occurred to me I have. That morning, he left once and then came back again right away. That’s important, I think. It was only a minute after he had gone downstairs. He forgot the paper clip. It occurred to him that he should clip separately some of the documents he was supposed to hand over at S— station.’

‘I’ve heard that already.’

‘Oh dear. I suppose you have.’ The girl smiled tightly with her lips, showing her teeth, but she could not conceal the anxiety in her eyes. ‘I’m always talking to myself. I’m sorry. It’s a habit. No one objects no matter how many times I say things to myself, you see. It’s stupid . . . the paper clip . . . I always thought so. But I wondered if the fact that he came back for it wasn’t proof he really intended to keep the appointment. Since I’m asked by everyone, I’ve got in the habit of repeating only that.’

‘Everyone?’

‘The ones I talk to when I talk to myself. But the clip business is so trivial. It’s all right for attaching papers, I suppose. But I realize my only real hope depends on that little clip.’



I walked slowly ahead, halted, turned on my heel, and walked back again over the rough asphalt sidewalk. With normal strides, it was thirty-two paces from the corner of building number three. When I looked up, the row of street lights, artificial eyes that had forgotten how to blink, seemed to be waiting for a festival procession that would never come. The pale, rectangular lights reflected in the windows had long since abandoned such festivals. The wind slapped at my sides like a wet rag. Raising the collar of my coat, I began walking again.

If I believed her literally – or the words she spoke to herself – within these thirty some paces an unreasonable and unforeseen event had lain in wait for him. And as a result of it he had not only disregarded the appointment at S— station, but had boldly and irreversibly stepped across a chasm, turning his back on the world.



‘All right. Purely in terms of imagination, the following is conceivable. For example – don’t take it amiss – a blackmailer who knew some weakness of your husband’s. For example, an old mistress, a child he may have had by her – these things happen – some youthful error still outstanding that could crop up like an unexpected ghost. Furthermore, it’s August, the month when they say dead souls come back to earth, just the right season for ghosts. And women aren’t the only ones who come back as spirits. A sometime accomplice in embezzlement, now ruined by dissipation, is a fine candidate too . . . a vindictive second offender just out of prison. Don’t you know of some habitual blackmailer who may have been

arrested through secret information given by your husband? Of course, the trap might also have been set by some perfect stranger. We've had our hands full with forgery cases lately. Apparently, forceful methods are in fashion . . . like secretly taking out insurance on a man in one's own name and then killing him by running him over in a car. Of course, unless the body is discovered and the identity confirmed, it isn't worth a yen. But I should imagine that's not your husband's case. Perhaps, since there's still no word from the police, we should consider the case as accidental death or the same as accidental death. If it's murder, he's probably incased in cement at the bottom of the ocean somewhere. But if that's true, it complicates matters. It would mean that he was involved with a pretty dangerous gang. A smuggling organization, maybe, or a counterfeiting ring.'

The girl had stopped drinking halfway through her second glass. One by one the bubbles collapsed, the beer turning to dregs before my eyes. I didn't stir. Was she deep in thought, was she angry, or was it absent-mindedness? Her lower lip protruded slightly, a lip like that of a still-nursing child. Because of that – at the angle at which her head was bent, the nostrils were barely visible – her nose had a certain impertinence.

'No, what would probably be more difficult to handle than such an organization would be a nobody. A worthless cigarette butt tossed away in the street. The fated accident, as it were. This happens to be a true story: a certain head of a branch bank, who was reputed to be especially conservative among his naturally conservative fellow bank employees, had arrived at the age of retirement. On the day he left work, he happened to go to see a nude show and was instantly infatuated with one of the girls. She was just one of the chorus line, nothing much in particular. She had the habit of constantly gnawing at her fingernails. Even while she was performing on the stage she was liable to keep on biting at them – perhaps she didn't care. Anyway, she made a rather poor showing. However, the fact that she bit her nails seemed to please him privately. After going back to the place for three days, he wrote a fan letter. On the fourth day, things seemed to be going pretty well, and he thought he would take her