

Sex	Male
Name	(omitted)
Code number	M-73F
Age	32
Height	1.76 meters
Weight	59 kilograms

Thin at first glance, but muscular. Wears contact lenses for mild near-sightedness in both eyes. Slightly frizzy hair. Inconspicuous scar at left corner of mouth (from a quarrel during student days, although the subject is extremely mild-tempered). Smokes under ten cigarettes daily. Special talent is roller skating. Has worked temporarily as male nude model. Currently employed at Subaru Sporting Goods Store. Director of sales promotion for jump shoes (sporting shoes with special elastic body – air-bubble springs – built into soles). Hobby is tinkering with machines. In sixth grade, won a bronze medal in newspaper-sponsored inventor contest.

This report contains the results of an investigation of the above man. Since it is not apparently meant for publication, I won't adhere strictly to form.

Before dawn, at around ten minutes past four, as I recall, I went as scheduled to the site of the old army target practice range to take the horse his dinner, and while there was suddenly entrusted with this assignment. Since I had been about to insist that the investigation be moved into full gear anyway, I was not particularly upset.

But the investigation I'd had in mind concerned the whereabouts of my wife. Unfortunately, at that point there were no indications of any kind regarding the person to be investigated, not even as to sex, and so naturally I assumed my wishes had been respected. Usually an investigation confers certain powers on the one in command; it seemed possible that at last I had won that much confidence.

Besides, the horse was in uncommonly good spirits this morning. He said he had trotted around and around the well-trodden 248-meter-long target range, managing to complete eight laps in all. During the whole time he claimed to have fallen down only three times; if true, it was quite a feat.

'In short, the trick is to run just with your two hind legs.' Breathing hard between words, he wiped the sweat from his face with a towel wrapped around his neck, gulped down in a single draught the carton of milk I had brought, then stood up proudly on his hind legs and gave a little skip. 'You see, I end up using my front legs, from force of habit. That's the problem right there. To run like a horse, you've got to leave all the kick up to your hind legs, and just throw in the forelegs as a kind of rudder.'

We were on the impact side of the indoor target range, which stretched out on an east-west axis, long and cavernous. High along the walls at the ceiling's edge, fixed-sash skylights were lined up like train windows, but still it was quite dark. By the wall straight ahead of us were layers of sandbags, directly in front of which was a deep trench used in manipulating the targets. On either side of the trench were big lighting fixtures, also used in target practice. Their slanting rays were all that illuminated the enclosure. The west end, where the firing positions were, was like a black hole. When the horse skipped, a double shadow stretched out long and thin across the dry, white ground, like insects struggling in a spider's web.

Since the fellow was obviously convinced that he was a horse, I didn't contradict him to his face, but he was a far cry from the real thing. His balance was all off. His trunk was short and dumpy, with the hips lowered and the hind legs bent as though he were squatting over the toilet. At that rate, not even a paper saddle would

have stayed put. However charitable I tried to be, at best he looked like a rickety baby camel, or a four-legged ostrich.

To make matters worse, above the waist he had on a blue tank top edged in dark red, while below the waist, in front and back, he had on navy-blue sweat pants and heavy white sneakers. Around his waist he had wrapped enough bleached cotton cloth to hide the gap between his top and his pants. It was altogether tasteless.

‘Actually, now that you mention it, that’s how it is with bicycles, too, isn’t it? You have to apply the brakes to the rear wheel first, or going downhill it’s dangerous.’

‘Anyway, at this rate who knows. Maybe by tomorrow I’ll be able to hop around in a pair of jump shoes!’

The horse gave a short laugh; I did not join in. The echo of his laughter reverberated emptily in the air, passing by like a puff of breath. The structure of the ceiling, arches alternating with square blocks, was evidently intended to muffle sound, but it had little effect. Maybe they had built it that way to keep from using pillars.

After gulping down a ham-and-lettuce sandwich, barely chewing, the horse sipped on a cup of sugarless coffee from a thermos. He told me he wanted to stay a little longer and go on practicing. With his appearance in the founding day celebration only four days off, he seemed fairly nervous. He is evidently determined to keep his own existence a secret until then, for greater effect, but he has nothing to worry about; nobody would be crazy enough to go poking around a firing range at such an odd hour.

I was just leaving when he asked me to take charge of the investigation. Casually, he handed me a notebook and three cassette tapes. The notebook was a large one with fine-quality paper – the very notebook I am writing in now. The labels on the backs of the tapes all bore the code M-73F, with serialized numbers; he explained that they contained records of wiretapping and other means used in tracking the object of the investigation.

I couldn’t help feeling suspicious. All along, with information about my wife in hand, they had been pretending to know nothing! I was enraged, and yet relieved at this evidence that somehow their plans had changed. In any case, three days had already gone by

since she disappeared. It was impossible to sit still any longer. I hurried back to my room, sat down, and played the tapes through from start to finish. It took just over two hours. After listening to them all, I spent another hour or so just sitting and staring into space.

My expectations were betrayed. Nowhere in those recordings was there the slightest trace of my wife. In fact, there was no trace of any woman, let alone my wife. The one being minced, peeled, and poked at by wiretaps and shadowers was a man. A man on display, torn into fragments of tongue-clucking, throat-clearing, off-key humming, chewing, entreaties, hollow obsequious laughter, belches, sniffing, timid excuses . . . And that man was none other than I myself, running around in frantic circles seeking my vanished wife.

Gradually, consternation gave way to indignation. Of all the asinine tricks. I could only think that I was being ridiculed. 'If you want to find your wife, first find yourself' – was that what the horse was trying to say? Unfortunately, I only wanted to know where she was, nothing so very complicated. Looking for my own whereabouts would be like a pickpocket filching his own wallet, or a detective slipping handcuffs on himself. No thanks, I could do without the moralizing at this point.

On top of everything else, the horse has made me agree to some rather strange conditions. For example, to keep me from twisting facts to my own advantage, he insists that I undergo a lie detector test at any time, on demand. Also, he wants me to avoid personal pronouns as far as possible, and to write in the third person. In other words, I'm supposed to refer to myself as 'the man', and to him as 'the horse'. Is he trying to put a gag on me, and keep me from dealing directly with anyone but himself? What is he so jittery about?

But finally, in fact, I have begun to write. Nor is this merely in grudging compliance with the horse's request. His attitude this morning contained enough genuine sincerity to satisfy me that he isn't up to any tricks. He was enthusiastic about his practicing, and when he did bring up the matter of the investigation, I was certain his expression contained sympathy. Besides, I can't overlook the

fact that he used the word 'incident' for the first time, thereby acknowledging my predicament, even indirectly. This curious self-investigation could be taken as just a more precise way of filing a complaint. And the directive to write in the third person might be intended to increase the credibility of the report, and attract the attention of the right people within the system – surely different ones are in charge of crime prevention, regulation, discipline, and so on. When caution is carried too far, it is all too often taken for spite.

Following instructions as closely as possible, I hope to have the semblance of a report put together by tomorrow morning. I intend to reconstruct the fragments on the tape using facts known only to me, and reproduce as faithfully as I can the conditions of the labyrinth into which this I called 'he' has been driven. I do have the feeling that things which would be awkward to write about in the first person may be more manageable in the third.

Well, if this preamble seems unnecessary, I'll have no objection if it is cut out later. I leave all that to the horse's judgment.

One summer morning an ambulance suddenly drove up, although no one remembered having sent for one, and carried away the man's wife.

It was an utter bolt from the blue. Until the siren woke them up in surprise, they had both been sound asleep, and so they were caught completely unprepared. Indeed, his wife herself, the one in question, had never complained of a single symptom. But the two men who carried in the stretcher were gruff, perhaps from lack of sleep, and paid no attention: of course she wasn't ready, they said; this was an emergency, wasn't it? They both wore crested white helmets, starched white uniforms, and big gauze masks. What's more, the card they held out was accurately filled in with her name and date of birth, so it was useless to try to protest.

There was nothing to do but let matters slide for the moment. Seemingly embarrassed at her wrinkled, shrunken nightclothes, his wife lay down as directed between the two poles of the stretcher, pressing her knees together, and the two men promptly wrapped her up in a white blanket. The man and his wife never even had a chance to say good-bye.

Emitting an odor like a mixture of hair tonic and cresol, the stretcher creaked its way down the building stairs. He remembered in relief that his wife was wearing panties. Shortly thereafter the ambulance pulled away, red light flashing and double siren sounding. The man watched it off timidly through a crack in the door. Looking at his watch, he saw it was then just three minutes past four in the morning.

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(The conversation below is taken from side two of tape one. The playback counter reads 729. Time is around 1:20 on the afternoon of the day in question. Place is the office of the assistant director at the hospital where the man's wife seems to have been taken. The assistant director speaks slowly in a low, unhesitating voice; occasionally, when he says something in an undertone, his words have an ironic twist. My own voice is impatient yet expressive, and comes off rather well, I think, although I should break that habit of pursing my lips at the end of every sentence. A watch busily ticking off seconds near the mike has a jarring effect.)

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: But what I can't understand is, why didn't you take some steps right then and there?

MAN: I did switch on the electric hot-water heater, but I guess I must have lost my head for a while.

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: You should have gone along in the ambulance.

MAN: That's what they said over the phone at emergency, too.

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: It only stands to reason.

MAN: But don't you think it's normal to hesitate in a situation like that?

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: I wouldn't have hesitated for a minute myself. With very little effort an ambulance can make just as good a cover as a hearse, you know; the perfect tool for a crime. And inside that sealed room on wheels, a scantily clad young woman and two strong masked men. If it were a movie, the next scene would be pretty grim. You say your wife was dressed in thin material, crepe or something; that sort of stuff is light and comfortable in hot weather, but it's so flimsy the front would tear right off, wouldn't it?

MAN: Please, don't even say such a thing.

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: Just a little joke. I am a realist, though, so don't expect me to swallow any story that's too far out.

MAN: But surely you know that that ambulance came to this hospital?

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: On paper it did, yes.

MAN: Then that guard was just talking through his hat?

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: Without proof, there's no telling.

MAN: In that case, my wife has to be here in the hospital. You see, she couldn't have gone out without a change of clothes. Besides, at that hour only the side entrance was open, and the guard there was keeping a sharp lookout.

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: If you want, I'll have her paged whenever you say. But really now, how could a grown woman get lost inside a hospital, in broad daylight? The police aren't going to buy a story like that.

MAN: Isn't it possible that she was forced to register by mistake?

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: But she refused to be examined, didn't she?

MAN: Only a person connected with the hospital could have carried off anything this elaborate.

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: All we really know for certain right now is that someone called for an ambulance.

MAN: What's that supposed to mean?

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: If this is all true, it's a terrible disaster. I want to be of help if I possibly can, but first I have to have some substantiation. The guard is under questioning, so just leave him to us. Actually, at this point it seems to me that the question of your own innocence deserves top priority.

MAN: What are you talking about?

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: I'm simply discussing the possibilities.

MAN: Look, I'm the victim!

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: That doesn't necessarily mean the hospital is at fault, however.

MAN: What am I supposed to do?

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: For now, why don't you have a talk with security? You were a little remiss in not personally checking out the scene yourself. Anyway, since you know the approximate time and place, the best thing you could do is to go back to square one and see if you can pick up any clues around the waiting room. Who knows, you might even turn up a witness or two.

(After this interview, the assistant director left the room to attend a conference, and his secretary introduced me – that is, 'the man' – to