

1

My Nickname is Pig – or Mole

Once a month I go shopping downtown, near the prefectural offices. It takes me the better part of an hour to drive there, but since my purchases include a lot of specialized items – faucet packing, spare blades for power tools, large laminated dry cells, that sort of thing – the local shops won't do. Besides, I'd rather not run into anyone I know. My nickname trails after me like a shadow.

My nickname is Pig – or Mole. I stand five feet eight inches tall, weigh two hundred fifteen pounds, and have round shoulders and stumpy arms and legs. Once, hoping to make myself more inconspicuous, I took to wearing a long black raincoat – but any hope I might have had was swept away when I walked by the new city hall complex on the broad avenue leading up to the station. The city hall building is a black steel frame covered with black glass, like a great black mirror; you have to pass it to get to the train station. With that raincoat on, I looked like a whale calf that had lost its way, or a discarded football, blackened from lying in the trash. Although the distorted reflection of my surroundings was amusing, my own twisted image seemed merely pitiful. Besides, in hot weather the crease in my double chin perspires so

much that I break out in a rash; I can't very well cool the underside of my chin against a stone wall the way I can my forehead or the soles of my feet. I even have trouble sleeping. A raincoat is simply out of the question. My reclusion deepens.

If I must have a nickname, let it be Mole, not Pig. Mole is not only the less unappealing of the two but also more fitting: for the last three years or so I've been living underground. Not in a cylindrical cave like a mole's burrow but in a former quarry for architectural stone, with vertical walls and level ceilings and floors. The place is a vast underground complex where thousands of people could live, with over seventy stone rooms piled up every which way, all interconnected by stone stairways and tunnels. In size the rooms range from great halls like indoor stadiums to tiny cubbyholes where they used to take test samples. Of course there are no amenities like piped water or drainage, or power lines. No shops, no police station, no post office. The sole inhabitant is me. And so Mole will do for a name, at least until something better suggests itself.

When I go out I always take along a supply of two items: a key to the quarry entrance and a small card with a map on the back and the words 'Boarding Pass – Ticket to Survival' on the front. Late last year I picked up thirty-five leather cases, and put one key and one card in each. I keep three in the pocket of my good pants. If I happen to come across any suitable candidates for my crew, I can invite them aboard on the spot. I've been ready for the last six months now, but the right sort of person has yet to appear.

Preparations for sailing are virtually complete; in fact, all I lack now is the crew. Despite the urgency of the situation, however, I have no intention of conducting any recruiting campaigns. Why should I? In payment for their labors, crew members will receive a gift of incalculable value – the gift of life itself. Were this known, I would be swamped with applicants. Just keeping order would be a problem. Call it an excuse for my retiring ways if you like, but I've always felt that eventually the right people will gravitate to me without my having to go search them out. So you see that whether I have any shopping to do or not, it is essential that I go out once a month or so to mingle with the crowds, come in contact with people, and make my observations.

Ordinarily I use the outdoor parking lot next to the prefectural offices, because the rates are low and it always has plenty of parking space. But today I decided to park underground, beneath the department store across from the station. The notice on a banner hanging from the roof caught my eye:

WONDERS AND CURIOSITIES NEVER SEEN BEFORE!
EXHIBITION AND SPOT SALE OF FAMILY HEIRLOOMS
AND TREASURES

This was obvious hype, but it succeeded in arousing my interest. Also, I wanted a look at the customers. When I entered the store, an announcement was being made to the effect that members of the general public were offering rarities and curios from their private collections for sale at the rooftop bazaar. Evidently I wasn't

the only one attracted; almost everyone in the elevator was headed for the roof.

I discovered that the entire rooftop was covered with a maze of some hundred or more stalls. It was like a festival or a fairground; a great tangle of people filled the aisles, some hurrying along, others hesitating in apparent bewilderment. Among the items available were these:

Key chains made of owl talons.

A 'bear's ass-scratcher', looking something like dried seaweed. This was apparently a kind of parasitic plant; the seller himself had no idea what to do with it.

A cardboard box filled with assorted springs and cogwheels.

Three sets of horses' teeth.

An old-fashioned inhalator, heated by using an alcohol lamp.

A sharpener for bamboo gramophone needles.

Two whale turds, each a foot in diameter.

Glass nails.

Ointment to rub on the trunk of an elephant with a cold; made in Singapore.

A bloodstained signal flag claimed by its owner to have been used in the Battle of the Japan Sea.

An adjustable ring with plastic ballpoint pen attached.

A sleep-inducing device to plug into your home computer; worn around the ankle, it applied rhythmic stimulation timed to the user's heartbeat.

A jar of sixty-five-year-old *shochu*, low-class distilled spirits ('Drink at your own risk').

An aluminum-can compressor, utilizing water pressure in accordance with the lever principle.

A privately printed telephone directory purporting to contain 'all you need to know' (for residents of Nerima Ward, Tokyo).

3.3 pounds of powdered banana peel (a marijuana substitute?).

A stuffed sewer rat, nineteen inches long.

A baby doll that could suck on a bottle.

And then – the eupcaccia.

Camped somewhere in the heart of the maze was a stall with a display of insect specimens. The stallkeeper must have had in mind schoolchildren with vacation bug-collecting assignments to complete, but his display was devoid of popular items like butterflies and giant beetles. Several dozen little containers about the size of a pack of cigarettes lay heaped in the center of the counter, and that was all. Each was made of transparent acrylic plastic, and each appeared empty. Aluminum foil labels bore the name 'Eupcaccia', neatly typed, with the Japanese name in parentheses beneath: *tokeimushi* – clockbug.

The containers appeared empty only because their contents were so unimposing: what was inside looked like a relative of one of those nameless bugs that crawl through garbage, unnoticed and unloved. The salesman himself cut no great figure. His glasses had lenses like the bottoms of two Coke bottles, and the crown of his

head bulged. All in all, a dour-looking fellow. Somewhat to my relief, he had customers to occupy him: a man and a young woman, both sensible-looking types, were turning containers over in their hands and studying them as they listened to the salesman's pitch. I couldn't help pausing to listen in, attracted as much by the authentic ring of 'eupcaccia' as by the intriguing nickname, 'clock-bug'.

I learned that in Epichamaic, the language spoken on Epicham Island (the insect's native habitat), *eupcaccia* is the word for 'clock'. Half an inch long, the insect is of the order Coleoptera, and has a stubby black body lined with vertical brown stripes. Its only other distinguishing feature is its lack of legs, those appendages having atrophied because the insect has no need to crawl about in search of food. It thrives on a peculiar diet – its own feces. The idea of ingesting one's own waste products for nourishment sounds about as ill-advised as trying to start a fire from ashes; the explanation lies, it seems, in the insect's extremely slow rate of consumption, which allows plenty of time for the replenishment of nutrients by bacterial action. Using its round abdomen as a fulcrum, the eupcaccia pushes itself around counterclockwise with its long, sturdy antennae, eating as it eliminates. As a result, the excrement always lies in a perfect half-circle. It begins ingesting at dawn and ceases at sunset, then sleeps till morning. Since its head always points in the direction of the sun, it also functions as a timepiece.

For a long time, islanders resisted mechanical clocks, deterred by the clockwise rotation, and by what appeared to them the suspiciously simple movements of hands

measuring off the passage of time in equal units, without regard for the position of the sun. Even now it seems they refer to mechanical clocks as *eupcanu*, to distinguish them from 'real' clocks – *eupcaccia*.

There was a charm to the unassuming *eupcaccia* that went beyond mere practical concerns. Perhaps its almost perfectly closed ecosystem was somehow soothing to troubled hearts. Guests at the Hotel *Eupcaccia*, the only such facility on Epicham, would come across the insects lying on flagstones (thoughtfully provided by the management) and become riveted to the spot. There were reports of a certain businessman who had sat day after day in the same place, magnifying glass in hand, and finally died raving mad, cheeks bulging with his own excrement. (He seems to have been either a Japanese watch salesman or a Swiss clock manufacturer.) All of this was doubtless more sales talk, but I chose to take it at face value.

The native population, in contrast, showed no such obsession with the insect. Around the start of the rainy season, when tourists went away, the bacterial action so crucial to the well-being of the *eupcaccia* would fall off, effectively slowing the progress of time. Next came the annual mating season, when time died, as the *eupcaccia* flew off like clock hands leaving their dials. Then impregnated females crisscrossed clumsily over the ground, fluttering wings as thin as the film on a soap bubble, as they searched for semicircles of dung on which to lay their eggs. The cycle was suspended, time invisible. The clocks shorn of hands were like claw marks on the surface of the ground, lifeless and sinister.

For all this, the islanders have never rejected time itself. The signs of regeneration are always the same.

I couldn't help marveling at the uncanny resemblance that the eupcaccia bore to me. It was as if someone were deliberately making fun of me, yet this insect dealer had no possible way of knowing who I was.

The male customer spoke, after clucking his tongue like someone sucking on a sour plum. 'Funny kind of bug,' he said. 'Looks to me like it's sulking in there.' His speech was unpleasantly moist, as if his salivary glands were working overtime. The girl looked up at him and said – her voice dry, the voice of someone sucking on a sugar candy – 'Oh, let's get one. They're so cute.'

She smiled prettily, dimpling the corners of her naturally red lips. The man stuck out his jaw and produced his wallet with an exaggerated flourish. All at once I decided to buy one too. I felt a strong sense of intimacy with the bug – the sort of feeling aroused by the smell of your own sweat. Fastened with a pin, I would doubtless make just as novel a specimen. Whether the price of twenty thousand yen was high or low I couldn't say, but I had a strange conviction that I had found exactly what I'd been looking for.

The eupcaccia was suspended inside its transparent acrylic container on two fine nylon threads hung at right angles, to make it visible from below as well as above. Without the clear vestiges of atrophied legs, it could have been a dung beetle with the legs torn off.

I paid my money after the couple paid theirs, and watched as the salesman inserted tablets of a drying agent into the top and bottom of the container. Then,

slipping it in my pocket, I felt a great easing of tension, like stepping into a pair of comfortable old shoes. ‘How many does this make?’ I asked. ‘That you’ve sold today, I mean.’

As if the question somehow offended him, the salesman kept his mouth clamped shut. His gaze was refracted in the thick lenses, making his expression hard to read. Was he just ignoring me, or had he not heard? Cheerful background music rose and fell with a passing breeze.

‘As soon as I get home I’m going to get out my atlas and see if there really is such a place as Epicham Island,’ I said, and then laughed. ‘Just kidding.’ Still no reaction. Maybe I had gone too far. I hesitated to say anything more.

2

Someday I'd like to Design a Logo Based on the Eupcaccia, and Use it for a Group Flag

Straight back from the entrance was a canvas-roofed rest area that probably doubled as a stage for outdoor concerts. Next to stands selling iced coffee and hamburgers was one selling shaved ice; I ordered a bowlful, flavored with syrupy adzuki beans. Seen through the protective wire-mesh fence, the dusty streets below looked like old torn fishnet. It seemed about to rain: mountains in the distance were swathed in clouds. The noise of thousands of car engines bounced off the sky and merged, interfering with the department-store Muzak in spurts like the gasps of a winded bullfrog.

The bowl of shaved ice and sweet purplish beans chilled my palms. People in the unroofed area were starting to head for the exits, but here nearly every seat was filled. I shared a table with a student (so I judged him to be from the long hair that fell to the nape of his slender neck, and his bloodshot eyes) wearing a dark blue T-shirt with white lettering that read PO PO PO. His face was bent over a bowl of chilled noodles. I crushed the beans in my ice with the back of my spoon, then scooped them up and ate them. The student looked up with a sound of

joints cracking in his neck. Evidently he was offended by the critical gaze I had turned on him. It's a bad habit I've developed ever since I started carrying the boarding passes with me. As I go out only once a month, I have to make the most of my time.

'Did you find anything?' I asked.

'Nah.' A noodle hung down on his chin; he pushed it into his mouth with a finger and added in a tone of disgust, 'What a bunch of junk.'

'Even the eupcaccia?'

'The what?'

'Eupcaccia.' I pulled the plastic case out of my pocket and showed it to him. 'It's the name of an insect. Didn't you see it? Second aisle from the back, around the middle, on the left.'

'What's so great about it?'

'It's a beetle, a kind of Coleopteron. The legs have atrophied, and it goes around and around in the same place like the hour hand of a clock, feeding on its own excrement.'

'So?'

'So isn't that interesting?'

'Not especially.'

So much for him. Disqualified.

At the risk of sounding pretentious, let me say I believe the eupcaccia is symbolic of a certain philosophy or way of life: However much you may move around, as long as the motion is circular you haven't really gone anywhere; the important thing is to maintain a tranquil inner core.

Someday, I thought, I'd like to design a logo based on

the eupcaccia, for a group flag. It would have to be based on the back, not the belly. The segmented belly has too many lines, like the underside of a dried shrimp, but the back could be represented easily enough by two adjacent ovals. Sort of like the radiator grille on a BMW – the car with the world's top driving performance. That settled it: I knew now where I was going to keep the eupcaccia. There could be no better place than the shelf over the toilet in my work area. That was where I kept all the luggage and other travel equipment. Suddenly I grinned, my humor restored at the notion of the eupcaccia as a travel accessory.

The student went off with a look of uneasiness. I had no intention of stopping him. Even apart from his boorish way of slurping his noodles, his approach to life was obviously wanting in gravity. The eupcaccia promised to become a useful litmus test, I thought, one that gave me an objective standard for deciding among potential crewmen. Anyone who showed no curiosity about such an insect – the fulcrum of a compass with which to draw the circumference of the very earth – was simply too insensitive to merit serious consideration.

I felt far greater interest in the young couple who had bought a eupcaccia before me. Where could they have gone? *They* were the ones I should have sounded out. Why did I never make the most of my opportunities? On second thought, however, the man anyway was no loss. He had been too restless, as if there were a Ping-Pong game going on inside his head. Hardly the type to adapt well to the life of a mole. The girl was another matter; she certainly would bear careful investigation. It had

been *her* idea to buy the eupcaccia; besides, it was only logical that my first crew member should be a woman. Savoring the coldness of the ice in my mouth, I turned regretful thoughts of her over in my mind. Why hadn't I spoken up right then? By now we might have been fast friends, based on our mutual interest in the eupcaccia. The only problem was the nature of her relationship with that man. If they were married, or anything like it, my hopes were wasted. Of course the eupcaccia itself belonged to the realm of soliloquy. It was hardly the sort of thing you'd expect a married couple to purchase together. On the other hand, I had to admit that unmarried couples who behave like man and wife are rare – far rarer than married couples who behave like mutual strangers.

Time to go. I had already had the amazing good fortune to stumble on the eupcaccia; it wouldn't do to be greedy for more. And on a windy day like this I couldn't drive after dark along that rocky ledge by the coast: salt spray would rust out the body of the jeep.

A shadow fell on the seat just vacated by the student. Conspicuously large cranium, heavy glasses for near-sightedness, dingy skin – it was the insect salesman. He unwrapped a sandwich and dragged a chair up, scraping it loudly against the floor. He still hadn't seen me. It wasn't an amazing coincidence that we should end up face to face, considering there were only a few seats vacant. He peeled off the top slice of bread from his sandwich, rolled it up into a cylinder, and began to take careful bites, sipping now and then from a can of coffee.

'Taking a break?' I said.

The insect dealer stopped chewing and looked up slowly. 'You talking to me?'

'Don't you remember me? You just sold me a eupcaccia a few minutes ago.'

For several seconds he continued to stare at me silently, through lenses so thick they seemed bulletproof. He seemed wary. Was it my weight? People tend to equate obesity with imbecility. Members of the opposite sex are distant, those of one's own sex derisive. Fat is even an obstacle to finding employment. The ratio of body size to brain size suggests unflattering analogies to whales and dinosaurs. I don't even like fat people myself – despite the obvious irony – and I generally avoid getting into conversations with them if I can help it.

'What's the matter? You want your money back, is that it?'

In the back of my mind I still had reservations about the eupcaccia, but I didn't want them forced into the open. I was in no mood to hear a confession.

'Not at all. I'm very happy with my eupcaccia. It's given me a lot to think about. Did you collect all those specimens yourself? They say environmental pollution is getting so bad that insects are disappearing all over the place. Some dealers have to raise their own, I've heard.'

'Yes, and some go even further – they conjure up non-existent specimens with tweezers and glue, I've heard.'

'How many have you sold altogether?' I asked, deeming it safest to change the subject.

'One.'

'No, really.'

'Look, if you want your money back, I don't mind.'

‘Why do you say that?’

‘To avoid a hassle.’

‘There were some other people who bought one before me.’

‘No, there weren’t.’

‘Yes, there were. Don’t you remember? A man and a young woman.’

‘You haven’t been around much, have you? I hired them as *sakura* – decoys, shills, to lure customers.’

‘They looked on the level to me.’

‘Well, they have a standing contract with the department store, so they’re in a little better class than your average confidence man. Besides, the girl is terrific. She makes great cover.’

‘She had me fooled.’

‘She’s a looker, all right. She’s got real class. That son of a gun . . .’

‘There’s a new system for classifying women into types,’ I said. ‘I saw it in the paper. The “quintuple approach”, I think it was called. According to that, women fall into five main types – Mother, Housewife, Wife, Woman, and Human Being. Which one would you say she is?’

‘That sort of thing doesn’t interest me.’

‘It’s all been carefully researched by a top ad agency. It’s some new tool they’ve worked out for market analysis, so it should be fairly reliable.’

‘You believe that stuff?’

A flock of sparrows flew low overhead. Then came a raincloud that brushed the department store rooftop as it sped by in pursuit. Canvas flaps over the stalls fluttered

and snapped in the wind; shoppers paused uncertainly. Here and there some stallkeepers were already closing up. They would be the ones whose goods were sold out, or who had given up on selling any more that day.

‘Shouldn’t you be getting back to your stall? Looks like rain.’

‘I’ve quit.’ He laid thin slices of ham and tomato on top of each other, speared them with a fork, and grinned. His boyish grin went surprisingly well with his bald head.

‘Don’t give up so soon,’ I said. ‘The eupcaccia gives people something to dream about; I’m sure you can sell at least a couple more if you try.’

‘You’re weird, you know that? What do you do for a living, anyway?’ He stroked his head with hairy fingers until the smokelike wisps of hair lay flat against his scalp, making the top of his head look even bigger.

A customer wandered up to the stall next to the rest area where we were sitting. The item for sale there was an all-purpose vibrator, oval in shape, featuring a metal fitting for an electric drill on the end, in which a variety of tools could be inserted: back scratcher, toothbrush, facial sponge, wire brush, shoulder massager, small hammer . . . you name it. It certainly was ingenious, yet it failed to fire the imagination. Besides, there at the counter they had only samples. To make a purchase you had to go through some fishy rigmarole, leaving a ten percent deposit and filling out an order blank with your name and address; the device would supposedly be delivered to your doorstep (for a slight charge) within a week. I found it hard to see why anyone would want to buy such a thing.

‘There you have the opposite of a dream,’ I said. ‘Sheer practicality.’

‘There you have a lesson in how to fleece people,’ said the insect dealer. ‘Nothing wild or fantastic, you see. Plain, everyday items are best – kitchen stuff, especially. If you’re clever, you can even fool people in the same line. But it doesn’t bear repeating. You can never work the same place, or the same item, more than once. And until you’ve mapped out your next strategy, you’ve got to keep jumping from town to town. Not an easy life.’

‘Does the eupcaccia bear repeating?’ I asked.

‘Ah – so now you’ve made up your mind it’s a fake.’

‘Just eat your sandwich, please. What did you have for breakfast?’

‘What does it matter?’

‘I always have sweet potatoes, or pancakes, with coffee. I make my own pancakes.’

‘I can’t make a good pancake.’

‘Neither can I.’

‘Haven’t eaten breakfast in a good ten years.’

‘Was that thunder?’

‘Who cares?’

He bit off a piece of his sandwich as if tearing into the world’s betrayal. I couldn’t blame him. If I were the discoverer of the eupcaccia, with sales so slow I’d undoubtedly feel the same way. A pillar of sand, understood only by dreamers. But even a pillar of sand, if it stands inside the earth, can hold up a skyscraper.

‘If you like, I’ll take the rest of the eupcaccias off your hands. Another four or five wouldn’t hurt, anyway.’

‘Why should you do that?’ the insect dealer said,

stuffing his mouth with the last of his sandwich. 'Don't talk like an idiot. I don't know what little scheme you may have in mind . . .'

'All right. Just because I'm fat, you don't have to snap at me that way.'

'Obesity has no correlation to character.' He stuck the wad of bread he was chewing over on one side of his mouth, and added in a muffled voice, 'It's caused by the proliferation of melanoid fat cells; only involves an inch or two of subcutaneous tissue.'

'You know a lot about it.'

'Just something I read in the paper.'

'Do you plan to sell the rest of the eupcaccias somewhere else?'

'Frankly, I've had a bellyful of them.'

'Surely you wouldn't just throw them away?'

'They're not even worth grinding up for medicine. I'll save the containers, though; I paid enough for them.'

'Then why not let me have the lot? I'll trade you that for a boat ticket. If you're going to throw them away anyway, why not? You've got nothing to lose.'

Whoops – too soon to bring up the boat ticket. After this slip, I felt as unnerved as if someone had just goosed me with an ice cube. I'd been too anxious to keep him from belittling my purchase, feeling that any criticism of the eupcaccia was a reflection on my judgment as well. The clockbug contained, I felt, a revelation that could save humanity much rancor and anxiety.

Take the anthropoids, who are thought to share a common ancestor with the human race. They exhibit two distinct tendencies: one is to make groups and build

societies – the aggrandizing tendency – and the other is for each animal to huddle in its own territory and build its own castle – the settling tendency. For whatever reason, both these contradictory impulses survive in the human psyche. On the one hand, humans have acquired the ability to spread across the earth, thanks to an adaptability superior even to that of rats and cockroaches; on the other, they have acquired a demonic capability for intense mutual hatred and destruction. For the human race, now on a level equal with nature, this two-edged sword is too heavy. We end up with government policies that make about as much sense as using a giant electric saw to cut open the belly of a tiny fish. If only we could be more like the eupcaccias . . .

‘Trade it for what, did you say?’

‘A boat ticket.’

‘Ah, the old survey con.’ He drank the rest of his canned coffee, and looked at me intently through his thick lenses. ‘If you’re trying to pull off one of those on me, better wait till you’re a little more experienced.’

‘Huh?’

‘You never heard of it? I guess not, from the look on your face. You know, you see them everywhere, those people standing on street corners with a pad of paper and a ballpoint pen in their hands.’

‘I’ve seen them. What are they there for?’

“‘Tell me, madam, have you settled on your summer vacation plans?’” They start out like that, and they wind up extorting an entrance fee for some super-duper travel club.’

‘You’ve got me wrong.’ After some hesitation, I decided

I had no choice but to bring out one of the leather cases. 'See? A key and a boat ticket. It's a ticket to survival.'

A tap on the shoulder from behind. A pungent whiff of pomade.

'No soliciting without a permit, buddy. Pay the fee and open your own stall, just like everybody else.' A boxlike man, hair parted on one side, stood looming behind me. His eyes, moist with intensity, were round and deep-set. His erect posture and the badge on his chest immediately identified him as a member of the store's security detail.

'I'm not soliciting.'

'You'll have to come with me. You can file your complaints over at the office.'

Eyes converged on us. A wall of curiosity, anticipating a show. Then Goggle Eyes grabbed my arm, his fingers digging into the flesh until my wrist began to tingle – a form of punishment he was evidently used to meting out. With my eyes I signaled to the insect dealer for help, expecting him to be able to say something in my defense. But he kept his head lowered, and did nothing but fumble in his pocket. The man was all talk, not to be trusted. Let that be a lesson to me. It wouldn't do to start passing out tickets recklessly.

Resigned, I began to get up. All at once, Goggle Eyes softened his grip. The insect dealer's right arm was extended toward us, displaying in two fingers a tan card.

'Permit number E-eighteen.'

'That won't work. This guy is the one who was soliciting.'

'He's my partner. Since when is use restricted to the bearer?'

‘Oh. Well, in that case . . .’

‘I’ll go along with you,’ offered the insect dealer genially. ‘It’s the least I can do.’

‘No, that’s okay, as long as I know the score.’

‘Not so fast. You’ve embarrassed us publicly. Now there has to be a proper settling up.’

‘I am sorry this happened, sir. But we do ask in principle that you restrict business activities to the place stipulated.’

‘Yes, certainly. Sorry to have troubled you.’

Palms facing us in a gesture of apology, Goggle Eyes backed speedily off and disappeared. I was filled with remorse, abashed that for those few seconds I had doubted the insect dealer.

‘Thanks. You saved me.’

‘A lot of those guys are former cops. Out to fill their quotas.’

‘Anyway, please take this,’ I said, pressing the case on him. ‘It may not be as fancy as the one for the eupcacias, but it’s pretty nice, don’t you think? Real leather, hand tooled.’

‘So the case is imposing and the contents are worthless, eh? At least you’re honest.’

‘No, no – this is a ticket to survival. Open it up and see for yourself.’

‘Survival? Of what?’

‘The disaster, of course.’

‘What disaster?’

‘Well, don’t you think we’re teetering on the brink of disaster right now – nature, mankind, the earth, the whole world?’

‘As a matter of fact, I do. But my thinking so isn’t going to make any difference.’

‘Come on. I’ll show you.’

I stood up and motioned for him to follow, but the insect dealer remained where he was, making no move either to touch the ticket case or to get up from his chair.

‘It’s just not my line. Social protest, that sort of thing. I’m the type who believes in letting things take their course.’

‘Nobody’s asking you to worry about anyone else. This is strictly for you yourself.’

‘Thanks, anyway. I think I’ll pass it up. Who am I to survive when other people don’t? Isn’t it a sin to ask for too much?’

There was something to what he said. He had found my vulnerable spot.

‘Don’t you see, I want to trade you this for the rest of the eupcaccias.’

‘Some other time. What’s the rush?’

‘That just shows how little you know. The disaster is on its way. Don’t you read the papers?’

‘Oh, yeah? When is it coming?’

‘It could very well be tomorrow.’

‘Not today? Tomorrow?’

‘I’m just talking possibilities. It could come this very instant, for all I know. All I’m saying is, it won’t be long.’

‘Want to bet?’

‘On what?’

‘On whether it comes in the next ten seconds.’ He prepared to start the stopwatch attachment on his

wristwatch. 'Ten thousand yen says this disaster you're talking about doesn't happen.'

'I *said* I'm only talking possibilities.'

'I'll make it the next twenty seconds.'

'Either way, it's a toss-up.'

'And in twenty minutes, or two hours, or two days, or two months, or two years, it'll still be a toss-up, right?'

'You mean the whole thing doesn't interest you unless you can *bet* on it?'

'Don't be so touchy. I know what you're thinking: Even if it *did* come in twenty seconds, winning wouldn't do you much good because you'd be too dead to collect. There could be no payoff unless it didn't come. Not much of a gamble any way you look at it.'

'Then why not go ahead and take the ticket?'

'What a depressing creature you are.'

'Why?'

'I just can't relate to someone who goes around hawking the end of the world.'

All right then, smart-ass, go ahead and drop dead if that's what you want. That head of yours looks terrific from the outside, but inside it must be stuffed with bean curd. Probably I overestimated the eupcaccia too.

'When you're sorry, it'll be too late,' I said.

'I'm going to take a leak.'

'You're positive you don't want it?'

The insect dealer began to get up. It wouldn't do to leave the precious ticket lying there any longer. My hand started for it, but before I could reach it, he had slid his hand under mine and snatched it up, smiling broadly

then as he adjusted his glasses. He might equally have been seeking reconciliation or merely teasing.

‘Wait back by the stall. I’ll be right there.’

‘Don’t walk out on me, now.’

‘All my stuff is still there.’

‘You mean the eupcaccias? You were going to throw them away, anyway. What kind of a guarantee is that?’

He took off his watch and set it where the ticket case had been. ‘It’s a Seiko Chronograph, brand-new. Don’t *you* make off with it.’

3

The Shills Ran Away with the Tickets to Survival

Everything in the insect dealer's stall was packed up, backing his assertion that he had decided to quit. The left-hand stall across the way – I've forgotten what it was selling – had likewise ceased business. The sky threatened rain any minute, and the hour was six-twenty – almost closing time. I entered the stall from the side, ducking under the canvas, and found in place of a chair a large suitcase, which doubtless contained the rest of the eupaccias. Overly conscious, as always, of the eyes of others, I lowered myself onto the suitcase, shoulders hunched to avoid looking conspicuous. I needn't have worried. The few remaining shoppers went scurrying past like young crabs racing to catch the tide.

I transferred the insect dealer's watch from my back pocket to my shirt pocket. My spirits were low – not, I thought, solely because of the weather. Was I sorry already that I had let him have the ticket? With what eagerness I had waited for and dreamed of this event – the finding of a companion – yet now that one had made his appearance, I began shrinking back. A bad habit. Must take a more positive view. He wasn't a bad fellow in the least. A bit plain-spoken, but that was better than a lot of

high-sounding talk. Not just anyone could have discovered the eupcaccia. He was probably a lot more quick-witted than he let on. The first crew member, above all, had to be far more than a mere cabin boy.

To erase any doubts, as soon as he came back from the men's room I could inform him that I was the captain, and have him sign a form stating that once aboard, he agreed unconditionally to obey any orders to disembark. The ship was mine. I discovered her, designed her, and built her. It was only proper for the crew to fall in line with my policies. Of course if he had a mind to disobey, no mere signature was going to stop him. In which case I'd have no choice but to put my punitive system into action. Basically a defense against invaders from outside, the apparatus was capable of inflicting fatal injury; but for communal living to succeed, minimum standards of order had to be preserved. Certainly I had no plan or desire to throw my weight around as captain, but then again, it wouldn't do to turn the ark into a great coffin.

I couldn't keep putting off the decision. Unless I compromised somewhere, plainly I would find myself battling windmills forever. One or two people could never run a ship that size; my plans called ultimately for a crew of 385. Unless I wanted to see the ship superannuated before ever weighing anchor, I had better make up my mind to take the insect dealer on board.

The lady directly across the way (whose stall boasted a collection of thousands of different matchbooks and matchboxes, candy wrappers and whatnot) had begun packing in a hurry. Apparently annoyed by the failure of her goods to sell, she was ripping off the tarpaulin and

stuffing it into her valise without even taking time to remove the thumbtacks. It was no wonder her sales were poor; the eupcaccia was eccentric in its way, but her merchandise was just too idiosyncratic. She herself, though past middle age, wore yellow sunglasses with a smart-looking kimono, for an effect somehow out of keeping with the surroundings. To make matters worse, at the bottom of her sign were the pathetic words 'Mementoes of My Departed Husband', which could only serve to put off potential customers. Perhaps the insect dealer had been right: expecting too much was indeed a sin.

The man selling a water cannon (*not* water pistol) at the stall on my immediate right was seated chin in hands by a peculiar machine placed directly on the floor. A tape recording recited his spiel for him while he looked resentfully up at the sky. The clouds were higher than before; now a wisp swirled fitfully by at about the speed of a helicopter. It looked as if the rain would hold off awhile longer, but no one was likely to buy a water cannon in any case. Besides, the price was too high. No sane person would part with ten million yen unless either there was solid reason to believe the price would rise further or the item was of enormous practical value. From listening to the tape, I deduced that he had based the figure solely on the number of days it had taken him to make the thing. A former employee of the Japan National Railways, he had utilized the principle of the steam locomotive. He had evidently applied for a patent, but to my layman's way of thinking it seemed hardly likely that steam pressure could have an explosive force comparable to gunpowder. If it was a low-noise, nonpolluting,

short-distance projectile he wanted, elastic could easily do the job. I didn't think much of the design, either: an unsightly bulging coal stove, and rising out of it, a stubby cannon. It looked exactly like the male genitalia. Good for a laugh maybe, but certainly nothing I'd pay even one hundred yen for.

These people were obviously genuine amateurs, just as advertised. Their offerings roused one's curiosity, but ultimately left one disappointed. All I could discern around me was out-and-out greed, and total lack of concern for psychology. Personally, I didn't mind a little wool over my eyes as long as the result was sufficiently entertaining. That was where the euphonia shone: now *there* was the unmistakable touch of the professional.

A man appeared in the corner of the aisle and stopped lightly, birdlike. In the heat, as sultry as a noodle-shop kitchen, he cut a conspicuous figure in his suit coat. Even without seeing the badge on his lapel, I knew instantly that this was the same security guard who had falsely accused me over at the rest area. Had he come to stir up some new storm? I didn't want to be hassled. With the stall cleared of merchandise, he might well stop to ask questions. I took out the remaining two tickets and placed them side by side on the counter. The plain wood surface of the counter, not one meter long, looked immeasurably vast. No reason to quail, I told myself; those cases held something of far more value than ten thousand stalls. The guard walked by without a flicker of expression. The edge of his glance swept over the counter in front of me. Sweat was dripping from the point of his chin, I noticed; I too poured rivers of sweat.

What was keeping the insect dealer? This was taking too long. Did the man have kidney stones?

A young couple stopped at the counter. The man had a crew cut, and he wore black trousers with a white, open-collared shirt. Fastened around his fat, sausagelike neck was a gold necklace. The woman's hair was mussed, as if she'd just gone through it with her fingers; she had on purplish lipstick and a T-shirt printed with a loud Hawaiian beach scene. They had come to the wrong place. I was only putting on an act; I had nothing to sell. I started to say so, when it hit me – this was *her*. There could be no doubt about it: she was one of the two other people who had bought, or pretended to buy, a eupcaccia. The hair and makeup and clothes were all different, but there was no mistaking who she was. Even the insect dealer had mentioned what 'class' she had, and indeed she had a striking way about her that no disguise could conceal for long.

About the man I was less sure. Was he or was he not the same person? That long hair before could have been a wig – if she wears disguises, then so does he, I told myself – but still, something didn't connect. Perhaps offensive people leave a more superficial impression. Unfortunately, he looked ten years younger than the one before, which made him a good match for her.

'Where's the bug man?' The man slid his fingers over the counter as if testing for dust. Uncertain how to respond, I stammered, 'Uh, probably the men's room.'

'Is he closing up, or just switching merchandise?' His fingers drummed as if hitting a telegraph key. His voice was raspy and monotonous. I knew I was under no obligation to answer, yet I did.

‘Closing up. He’s given up on selling the things.’

‘Why?’ Wonderingly, the girl tilted her head on its slender neck. She reached casually for a ticket. ‘They were such cute little bugs.’

Had it been the man, I would have reacted differently. But the girl’s fingers were transparent, as if she had no bones. There seemed little enough chance that the ticket was in any danger.

‘Great,’ said the man. ‘We’re here to collect some money. Can *you* pay us?’

‘I’m afraid business was pretty bad.’

‘Oh, no, it wasn’t.’ He raised his voice, as if his professional pride had been wounded. ‘I saw it with my own eyes. They were selling, all right.’

The girl nodded her head rapidly in agreement. Her look was intense. It seemed possible to interpret her reaction as a sincere defense of the eupcaccia – but that was ridiculous. She was a *sakura*, a shill; she couldn’t be serious. It had to be an act, I knew, and yet I couldn’t suppress a rush of affection. Rather like a cat-hater who finds a kitten purring and rubbing his legs. Without thinking, I indulged in a bit of small talk, thus inadvertently handing them a pretext to stay.

‘Don’t you remember me?’ I said, burying my chin in the folds of my neck, prickly with heat rash, to emphasize my bulk. ‘I remember you.’

‘I remember you too,’ said the girl, bringing her hands together. Her eyes sparkled. ‘You’re the one who bought the eupcaccia right after us, aren’t you?’

‘That’s right. That was it; that was the only one he sold.’

‘What do you mean?’ said the man. ‘We bought one too, didn’t we? That makes at least two.’

‘You can stop pretending. I know everything.’

‘Like what?’

‘Like what you two do for a living.’

They looked at each other and laughed nonchalantly. Consternation was apparent beneath the laughter.

‘What’s *your* relationship to him?’ the man asked.

‘None. I just took a fancy to the eupcaccia, that’s all.’

‘Funny. Why would he go and leave the store with a total stranger?’

‘Nature called.’

The girl held the ticket case to her ear and shook it. ‘Say, what do you suppose this is?’ Her voice was clear and a bit high, with a suggestion of strain. Was she flustered at having been found out?

‘Any bug that thin and flat could only be made out of paper.’ His voice was raspy and heavily ironic. He rotated his right shoulder and cracked his knuckles. ‘These days they have to have horns, or the kids won’t buy them.’

‘Eupcaccias don’t have horns,’ I said.

‘That’s the whole trouble with them.’

‘It’s something hard,’ she said. ‘Metallic.’

Swiftly the man reached out for the remaining case. Over my dead body. I snatched it up and pocketed it.

‘Is that nice?’ he demanded.

‘It’s not for sale.’

‘You don’t mind if I look inside, do you?’ The girl glanced up at me inquiringly.

‘Go on and open it if you want. It’s a free country.’ The man’s tone was brusque.