

The Critical Case of a Man Called K

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Week 1

THE MOMENT I WAKE, I'M overcome by a feeling of nausea.

I take a breath with difficulty, rub my eyes, stare out through a pall of sleep. There are dark spots on the pillow. I deduce from the way I'm breathing that they must have come from my nose. The left side of my mustache is stiff with coagulated blood and the blood in my nostrils is still moist. I jerk into consciousness, raise my head, and, in an instant, my pulse returns to normal. From the position of the sun in the window, I realize that I am, however you look at it, late. I turn over onto the other half of the pillow and close my eyes again.

I remember that before I went to sleep, just before dawn, I was reading a book and before that I'd taken a hot shower, which I'd read somewhere makes you sleepy. Before that, I'd had dinner, smoked, moved around from room to room, turned the lights on and off, got into bed and got out again, stood up and sat down, all to no purpose. Nothing different from what people do every night if they can't sleep. I've chosen a bad day to make do with just two hours' sleep, though any other day would be just as bad. From the midst of the chaos of the bedside table, the alarm clock's harsh bell keeps hammering away, like a nail being driven into my head.

It takes a few minutes for me finally to get out of bed. I turn over in my mind the fact that I'm late, without this impelling me to hurry. I piss, and from the color deduce that I'm dehydrated. I clean my teeth till the gums hurt, from which I deduce

that I've cleaned them long enough. I wash the traces of sleep off my face and of blood off my mustache and the inside of my nostrils. I smell the familiar metallic smell. A little blood trickles down my throat, like a burning clot of old memories.

As a child, I was always getting nosebleeds and would become aware of the movement of the warm blood as it trickled down through the respiratory tract before I saw it fall onto my clothes and feet. The first moment of seeing it was always terrifying, even though there wasn't any pain. Nosebleeds often prevented me from joining in games with the other boys after school, especially on hot, sunny days, and even though I became an expert at stopping the bleeding (by, for example, holding an ice cube against the top of my nose or closing the open vein by pinching it with two fingers from the outside), the sun, in its fury at this land, could always make it flow again.

Now, though, it's winter. I check by looking through the window. The day is bright, the sun's rays falling on traces of recent rain. I dress in a hurry, my only concession to being late. As soon as I leave the house, the downpour resumes.

In the car, music blasts out the moment I turn the key. I silence the radio with the same violent movement that I used to reach out to the alarm clock on the dressing table. Not a thought enters my head throughout the journey. The front windshield wipers move right and left like a hypnotist's pendulum. Suddenly, I find myself at the overflowing parking lot and become aware again of where I am. I park far away and walk with hurried steps. It's cold and something urges speed.

A number of times, during the long walk toward it, I raise my head to look at the tower. The entire building is visible and it's easy to find your way to it from anywhere, but the entrance remains hidden and getting to it requires several twists and turns. The closer you get, the more you feel you will never enter.

Everything is the way it was yesterday, but the feeling of alienation the building inspires is so strong that somehow it all seems different.

Immediately after you cross the side entrance, a strong smell of paint erupts, which the unventilated corridor holds in place. At the end of the corridor there's an escalator, whose end is invisible from where it starts and which moves endlessly upward, as though it could take you to wherever you want to go, though in fact it takes you only to the elevator lobby, where you wait. This late in the morning, no one is waiting in the lobby but me. Empty or full, however, makes no difference to how long you have to wait.

The lobby's glass façade looks out over an exterior courtyard containing a garden, in which no one ever strolls, and wooden benches, used by smokers. I can always tell how late I am by the number of smokers outside: no one goes out for a smoke immediately after he arrives; he has first to have been noticed by those upstairs long enough to establish his presence. Who knows, perhaps the glass façade was made specifically so that people could fill their vision with such observations while waiting, and the moment the elevator arrives, rush into it, as though unable to bear the sight a moment longer.

I enter and press the button for the tenth floor. The door remains open for a while before closing automatically. I glance at my watch. I check the zipper of my pants, as I often forget about it. I contemplate my clothes from top to bottom, as though noticing for the first time what I'm wearing.

The second I reach the tenth floor, I hide my hands in my pockets and try to look like someone confident he's on time. I maintain this look as I cross the marble corridor to the administrative offices and open the glass door that keeps the department separate, then make my way along the narrow aisles between the rows of desks, taking care to avoid bumping into this person or returning that one's greeting, and finally sit down in front of the computer. I pull off the yellow sticker, knowing without reading it who wrote it and stuck it on the screen, then say good morning to the Old Man, who sits next to me, my voice sounding scandalously exhausted. A phrase

from Kafka's *Diaries*, which I'm reading these days, keeps repeating itself in my mind: "At this sudden utterance some saliva flew from my mouth as an evil omen." When I hear the wan voice next to me return my greeting, I realize, as though discovering this for the first time since I woke, that it's just another ordinary day at work.

Nausea again, as soon as I set my eyes on the screen. Perhaps I'm still under the influence of the *Diaries*. It's only natural that if you overindulge in Kafka he'll get to you with all sorts of stuff. On the other hand, for a long time now I've experienced the same nauseating exhaustion, to a greater or lesser degree, in the early mornings. I remember it as an indefatigable visitor during my early adolescence specifically, maybe because things are always most noticeable at their beginnings.

After waking at six in the morning to go to school, I'd spend long minutes in the bathroom, resting my head on the lavatory bowl and almost dropping off, till startled by my mother's violent banging on the door telling me to hurry up and catch the bus. I'd give her all kinds of excuses so that I could stay home and, even though they were cloaked in the artifice that she could usually distinguish in my tone when I lied, the nausea and exhaustion weren't entirely invented. "Put up with it!" she'd reply; I remember the words well because she'd say them again, without thinking and very insistently, and I'd always be obliged to repeat my complaint, insisting from my side till I'd gotten rid of her suspicion that I was appealing to her for no good reason, or till I could overcome her assumption that I wasn't making an effort to "put up with it."

I was in first year middle school when, one day, they persuaded themselves that they ought to take me to the doctor. My father was with me and the room was small and cramped, or seemed so to me at the time. The doctor had large rough hands, with which he silently probed my body. After he'd examined me, he said everything was normal. Then he washed and dried his hands with movements that seemed to

indicate irritation, as though he had neither the time nor the inclination to cater to complaints of this kind, and when he went around behind his desk to sit down, his gown dragged against the wall, making a terrifying scratching sound that was much louder than one would expect from such a contact.

We, my father and I, were seated on the other side of the desk in facing chairs, our feet almost touching. The silence was oppressive. All we could hear was the sharp pouncing of the doctor's pen as he wrote something in the file that there was no longer any call for him to write, as it was clear that the case wasn't worth a visit to him. Suddenly, my father pulled his feet in a bit. Maybe if he hadn't been there, the visit wouldn't have made such an impression on me.

"It's perfectly normal," the doctor repeated, in a tone that implied he finally had the time to punish me for wasting his, and the inclination to do so. "At his age, during adolescence, the cells divide faster than usual, causing the body to expend its energy on growth." Then he put down his pen and crossed his arms in front of him, as though cradling his disgust. "If every adolescent boy kept visiting clinics just because he felt a little tired and nauseous, the clinics would be filled with them and we'd be too busy to attend to the important cases." In his eyes, I was one of those spoiled children who complain at the slightest stress; it may well have been clear to him too that I'd grow up to be one of those men who are always grumbling about their jobs.

He kept on talking, his rigid arm making a rustling sound on the desk that indicated the suppression of a more violent movement. My father, for his part, was looking distractedly at its corner, with the expression of a man being informed that his spermatozoa are weak. At some point, without looking at me, he said, agreeing with the doctor, "Quite. He exaggerates." Those were the only words he uttered, and he did so in the quietest tone possible, as though it would have been easier for him to accept if I'd been afflicted by something major.

“But he’s a healthy boy, and good-mannered,” the doctor said, making amends for any impression his tone might have given that he was criticizing my father’s genes or his child-raising practices. “And his body’s sound and can take a beating,” he went on, while continuing to look me up and down, with a smile of a kind that simultaneously complimented my father and indicated contempt for me. When my father smiled in response (something the doctor noted with a sideways, complicit look), his words began to take on a jolly character and all of a sudden he was offering advice and joking rebukes—“You have to be tough!”—supporting his pronouncements with his clenched fist while banging his rigid wrist on the desktop. When he sensed that his words weren’t having a positive effect on me, he laughed, to make clear that what he was saying was partly in jest, though that didn’t mean it wasn’t also important. Then he turned to my father and smiled, deriving from the smile he received in return further delegated powers, as though the doctor was my father’s censorious side, and even went so far as to say I should stop playing the invalid and worrying over nothing so that I didn’t upset my mother. No, it couldn’t be attributed to my father’s genes, because in the end the two of them were one and the same—or so, more or less, I thought, as I stared determinedly at the floor, like someone plucking up the courage to flee.

Suddenly he stretched out his cold, coarse hand, perhaps to stroke my cheek, or to wipe that look off my face. I felt instinctively that he was reaching out to slap me and flinched in response and sat back in my chair, while they both let out a raucous laugh, a self-satisfied laugh that confirmed the conclusion the two of them had reached about me. It had been decided, once and for all, that the defect, whatever it might be, resided in my own nature. The doctor thrust his open palm toward my father in an apologetic gesture, as though to say this was a sickness that he couldn’t cure, and in response my father did the same. They stood up together and shook hands

warmly, their two huge bodies taut above me, as though they were shaking hands over something other than the end of the visit. At that precise moment, I realized, somehow, that this would stay with me for a long time: it was simply another of those changes that take place as you grow and that hold you in their grip for as long as you live. That's all it takes—a trivial moment like that, after which you realize, for the first time and forever, what anguish it is to be yourself.



Week 2

ANOTHER BAD DAY TO MAKE do with just two hours of sleep. I wake in a panic, drive like a drunk, and make it to my desk on time. I rip off the yellow sticker, crumple it into a ball on the desktop, and give my good morning salutation to the Old Man (as I shall call him here, in homage to my favorite Hemingway novel). He's the man who occupies the desk next to mine or, perhaps I should say, to be more precise, the computer screen next to mine, since after they increased the number of employees to beyond the department's holding capacity, they put a new desk between each two old desks. Now the place is full to overflowing with squashed-together, parallel rows of screens, each open to the next, like in the computer lab at a school. The only thing that interrupts their serried lines is the space allotted to the printer, which continually gives off noises, pushing out one sheet of paper after another and forcing you to rush over to it the moment you print anything so that your sheet doesn't get lost among other people's.

Continuous congestion and incessant movement keep the inside of the tower in a constant hubbub, although from the outside it looks unoccupied.

By good luck, or bad, my desk is located right next to the printer; in fact, the printer impinges on part of its surface area, to the degree that whenever anyone prints anything I can feel the heat from the sheets of paper close to my head. The pace at which the sheets are ejected helps me to gauge the rhythm

of work in the department. Days when there's a crush on, I hold off on reading and surfing the internet as someone may rush over to the printer at any moment to pick up what he's printed, and someone else may come and stand behind him, and then another, and another, just like the line at the WC at the end of lunch hour.

This aside, my position provides good visual protection. Only the Old Man, if he were to stare at my screen, would be able to see that I'm writing about him right now, but I put my trust in his withdrawn nature, which ensures that he will forget my existence the moment he finishes responding to my greeting. He always answers without turning his head, to cut off any attempt to start a conversation with anyone, since nothing he might wish to hear from you could ever be more important to him than what's happening on his screen, and it's not his habit to abandon that screen at any time during work hours except to stand, stretch, and complain how cold the air conditioning is, on which occasion his voice will be suffused with something of the pallor that affects the vocal cords of those who go for long periods without speaking. Sometimes his clicking on the mouse seems pallid too, as if the sound it makes was coming from his throat.

It's his last month at work, though one might think he'd passed retirement years ago. His dark complexion, burned by the sun in ages past, has acquired a dullness from all its days between these walls. He wears a robe and headdress of faded white and lets the headdress hang down so that it hides both sides of his face, all day long; this makes it difficult for me to guess what his expression may betray as he stares at his screen. When I think about it, his appearance seems of a piece with the life of the old mariners and of the men who hunted for pearls in the depths of the Gulf, and that may indeed have been his profession before the oil cast him up at this desk. I still have no idea what role he plays in this particular department, next to the rows of shirts and pants, colored wraps, and even

new robes, whose heads speak English as they deal with minute technical details. Perhaps he doesn't know either. I wonder whether he might have received instructions to keep sitting here and pretending to work till he completes his years of service with the company, simply because they have no grounds to throw him out. With his lean frame, rigid above his desk, he looks, in fact, like a rusty nail stuck in this vast machine in which he has spent some thirty years.

I, for my part, have worked here three years. Let's call it the Eastern Petrochemicals Company, after the Eastern Petroleum Company where one of Tanizaki's protagonists works; this is appropriate as we are in the eastern, oil-rich, part of this country (it's better not to give specific names or places as I don't know who may not barge in some day and read what I've written). It's a large company, with a guaranteed future, and that's what matters. As an IT graduate, it would make no difference if I were working in an electricity, gas, fertilizer, or any other crap company. I didn't put a lot of thought into choosing my college major either. My father died when I finished high school, and that timing played a part in directing me toward options with financial incentives. This specialization was said to be in demand in the labor market, and what more can anyone ask than to be in demand in the labor market? One has to earn one's living somehow: young people are suffering from unemployment, the house needs the salary, and are you better than Kafka? These are good enough reasons for me to make sure I keep my place among the white-collar workers.

In any case, it doesn't call for any great effort to remain an employee in this department—just the regular reports confirming the absence of weak points or breaches in the system, the continuous complaints that reach one from other employees working on more important things who don't have time for technical issues, and the updates whose ends one reaches just in time to find that their beginnings need to be updated again; and even when, by some miraculous coincidence, there is no

work, things can be invented with which to task the employee should he ever be seen sitting empty-handed, unless he should take the initiative by asking for additional jobs, which is what he's supposed to do. "The employee should never let himself get used to doing nothing," say the experts here. "Then he will always be fully prepared when the need arises." These words of wisdom mean that jobs are thrown at you one after another, before you've finished the one before, so that you're always busy and prepared to be even busier, as though a single moment of idleness might ruin you.

My supervisor is devoted to maxims of that sort, just as he's wedded to an excessive caution and loves to repeat the American expression "You can never be too careful." His very appearance is irritating: he wears his pants high, almost above his navel, and as a result has to keep pulling them up as he walks so that they don't slip off his belly. He seems unaware how much his wide pants make him look like Charlie Chaplin. It may be that he thinks he possesses a contemporary look, and to confirm this thought, he keeps looking down at his Skechers, a stupid make of shoe that perfectly expresses his personality—bad taste, blind imitation, and an ever-present awareness that he isn't the right person for the position.

His one good quality is that he doesn't say much, contenting himself with sticking notes on your screen, and if you commit some terrible error, he says, "Hmm. I can't believe it." If you really blow it, you find him gazing at you in silence with a reproachful look, so you understand that your mistake has left him dumbfounded. Most of my mistakes dumbfound him, maybe because they're so hard to believe, even though he always does believe them and lives in the alert expectation of my making them. In fact, he even hopes that I'll forget certain tasks and makes up his mind not to remind me of them until the last day. If I forget to run the routine anti-virus checks as scheduled, he rolls his eyes back in their sockets till only the whites show, so that you think for a instant he's going to

faint; just hearing the word “virus,” on its own and irrespective of the context in which it occurs, is enough to make him lose his mind. And all this even though we haven’t spotted a single virus that posed a real threat to the system throughout my years here. He persists in treating these routine checks as though a disaster will happen if they aren’t run on schedule. When he comes to remind me of the time for the check, which I always forget, he stays and watches me till the scan is over, inspecting the progress of the work every two minutes, hovering around me with his wide pants, horrible shoes, and the latest catchphrases he’s picked up from the Americans.

Anyway, he may be a son of a bitch but what else are bosses supposed to be? He obviously comes under a lot of pressure from those higher up and has to vent it somewhere. His boss, though, the department director, he’s the real son of a bitch. Maybe the more of a bitch someone’s mother is, the better his chances of rising through the ranks.

It was the habit of this director of ours to postpone vacations as he fancied, on the excuse that the department was in urgent need of the employees during those critical days and all our days in the department were critical. That’s why, with the exception of scattered sick-leave days here and there, I had never had a vacation and kept postponing, year after year, my ambitions to travel to Prague or St. Petersburg. But the days when the company really was subjected to cyber attacks were the worst: pressure of work would require us to spend extra hours there, attempting to log every operation each employee had carried out via his account and isolate the machines that were suspected of having been hacked, even if the cause for suspicion was no more than someone having once or twice used the wrong password. These extra work hours weren’t subject to any financial compensation: the employee was supposed to work them out of concern for the company’s interests. On such occasions, the aforesaid director would make the rounds of the desks on his way out, his beard dangling over his neck,