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STRANGE ACCOUNTS

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Ned Karlovich

Copyleft Notice

Epigraph

“Bureaucracy is the rule of nobody.”

— Hannah Arendt

STRANGE ACCOUNTS

EDITOR'S PREFACE

The materials reproduced in this volume were found in the autumn of the year before last, among the personal effects of a clerical officer assigned to records conversion in the Records Bureau in the city of Niigata, who had served in that capacity for the greater part of his adult life. They had been kept in a cardboard box on the upper shelf of a wardrobe, in an apartment whose lease was, at the time the materials were recovered, in arrears. The box was unlabelled. It had been opened, at some prior point, and partially refastened with a kind of paper tape no longer manufactured in this country. There is no clear evidence as to when, or by whom.

The materials came to me through his sister, who lives in Yamagata. She had been given my name — not by her brother, who had not, so far as I have been able to determine, spoken of me in any surviving document — but by a notation on a Bureau routing slip found among the papers. The notation identified me by a temporary staff designation I had not seen in many years. She contacted me in the winter, by letter. When we met, at a coffee shop near Niigata Station, she was practical and brief. She said her brother had mentioned me once, years ago, not by name but by incident: the temporary clerk who could not make the machine print. She did not know what this meant. I did. She gave me the box. She asked that the matter be allowed to settle. I told her I would do what I could, though I was not certain, at the time, what that would be.

The materials consist of a handwritten testimony on Bureau notepaper, dated only by reference to seasons; copies of official documents evidently retained without authorisation; a small number of letters addressed to a sister in Yamagata, none of which appear to have been sent; and a collection of terminal printouts, session logs, program listings, and machine output stored on magnetic cassette tape. Some are legible only in part. Some appear to have been generated by systems the editor has not been able to identify. In certain cases, the machine-generated records contain details — dates, locations, physical descriptions — not present in the corresponding paper files and not attributable to any source the editor has been able to determine.

A fifth class of document exists in the margins of the testimony itself: annotations, in a hand that is not his, appearing at irregular intervals across the manuscript. These are reproduced without alteration. Their author has not been identified.

A sixth item was found separately from the others. It had been placed inside an envelope kept apart from the main bundle, at the bottom of the box, beneath the cassette tapes. The

envelope bore no name. It was marked, in the same pencil used on the cassette labels, with a Bureau designation I recognised as my own: 二-九. Inside was a single terminal printout, which I reproduce here:

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TEMPORARY STAFF RECORD
SECTION:     SECOND
DESK:        □-□
TERM:        SPRING / YEAR 8
CONVERSION STATUS:  NOT FOR CONVERSION
OPERATOR:    □-□
REASON:      FIELD INCOMPLETE
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I do not know what this document means. I do not know whether he kept it to protect me, to delay a procedure, to record an irregularity, or simply because his filing habits extended to materials that were not, strictly, his to file. The designation 二-八 is his — the operator number assigned to his desk in the Second Section. The designation 二-九 is the one I was given during my temporary placement. I had not thought of it in years. Seeing it in his hand — if it is his hand; the pencil is faint and the characters are very small — produced in me a sensation I will not attempt to describe, except to say that it is the reason this edition exists. I would not have assembled these materials for a stranger. I assembled them because I owe him a debt I did not know I carried until I opened the envelope, and I do not know what the debt is for.

I have arranged the testimony in what appears to be its intended order, on the evidence of internal cross-references, binding marks, and the timestamps preserved in the terminal logs. The official documents and machine-generated records are interleaved at the points my judgement seems best to place them. I am aware that the act of arrangement is itself a kind of procedure, and that I may not be the first person to perform it on these documents.

The account covers approximately twenty-seven years. The chronology is approximate and, in some passages, may be wrong.

The title is mine. The manuscript was found untitled, save for two words written, and crossed through, on the inside cover of a notebook: strange accounts. I have presumed, perhaps wrongly, that he intended them.

A note on the designation Examiner, which appears throughout the testimony and in the Bureau's own documents. The word should not be understood as a rank or professional qualification. In Bureau usage it denotes a function: the review and preparation of paper accounts for machine entry. In practice he was a technical clerk assigned to Records Conversion, Second Section — a junior officer whose work consisted of checking fixed fields on paper files against conversion sheets, correcting discrepancies, and filing records for later entry into the Bureau's conversion terminal. The terminal was shared; desk work was paper work. The designation Senior Examiner, applied to his supervisor, indicates supervisory authority over a section's conversion workflow, not seniority of the kind recognised outside the Bureau.

A note on the subject of the testimony. His full name is absent from the surviving materials. It does not appear on the testimony pages, nor in the official documents, nor in any of the terminal records or message transcripts recovered from the apartment. The Bureau's standing practice, as described in its own style notices, excludes personal names from corre-

spondence and from verbal address during working hours; the testimony is consistent with this practice. Designations that do appear in the documents — a Bureau function applied to all staff of his section, a desk number used in operator logs, a pseudonym used on the electronic bulletin board — are retained where they occur. I have not supplied a name. There was none to supply. I note, in the interest of completeness, that my own name does not appear in these materials either, though my designation does, once, in the envelope described above. I have not supplied my name for the same reason I have not supplied his. It did not seem, once I had begun working with these documents, that it was mine to give.

It remains for me to acknowledge that I am not a disinterested editor. I worked, briefly, in the Second Section, in the spring of his eighth or ninth year of service — I no longer remember which, and the Bureau's personnel files are inconsistent on the point. I was a temporary clerk, assigned for one term only. My desk was beside his. I could not operate the conversion terminal. He showed me the procedure without warmth but without impatience — the keystrokes, the field entries, the error codes. On my second or third day I produced an error I could not resolve: a record that the machine would not accept and the printer would not print. I do not remember the details. I remember that I wanted to clear the screen and begin again, and that he said, without looking up from his own work: Print the error. Do not erase it. I took this as practical advice. I left the Bureau at the end of the term. I did not see him again for many years. I had not thought of what he said until I found, among his materials, a record that appears to be my own.

Certain documents referenced in the testimony were not recovered. Some original case files appear to have been removed from the Bureau's cabinets before the editor's access. A form associated with the closing procedures of the account — referenced in the testimony and in the Bureau's own procedural handbook — was not found among the materials, though routing documentation indicates it should have been present. Selected terminal printouts described in the testimony do not correspond to any decoded output from the cassette tapes. Whether these gaps reflect deliberate removal, institutional procedure, or the ordinary losses of a long tenure in a building whose archives were not, by any standard I have been able to determine, reliably maintained, I cannot say.

An index has been appended, following the conventions of the Bureau's own reference systems. The notation pp. NNN indicates a reference the editor has been unable to resolve. The index is not exhaustive. It is, I believe, consistent with the documents it describes, though I am no longer certain this is the same thing.

Footnotes signed — Ed. are my own. I am aware that the longer I have worked with these materials, the more my own language has come to resemble the language of the documents I am editing. The case, in any event, remains open. The editor is not authorised to close it.

— The Editor Niigata

PART I

THE LETTER

I.

The letter arrived on a Tuesday in late February. It was not snowing, though it had snowed the night before, and the envelope had been left in the metal box at the foot of the steps, slightly damp at one corner where the postman's glove had touched it. He read it standing in the kitchen. He read it twice. Then he folded it in thirds along the existing creases and set it on the windowsill behind the kettle, where it remained for the rest of the week.

The instructions were straightforward. He was to report on the morning of the seventeenth to the east entrance of the Records Bureau, no later than nine. He was to bring the letter with him, and his personal seal. He was to wear, the letter specified, ordinary office clothes; nothing was said about a tie. A line near the end assured him that the placement had been made in accordance with the applicant's demonstrated aptitudes, which he found mildly reassuring, though he could not recall having demonstrated any aptitude for anything in particular. In the lower-left corner of the second page, in type smaller than the body of the letter, his assignment was named: Records Conversion, Second Section. Beneath that, a single phrase — machine-readable account preparation — and the notation technical aptitude noted. He read these without fully understanding them, as one reads a shipping label that has arrived on a package addressed to oneself.[1] He assumed the aptitude referred to the computer — the NEC he kept at home, the small machine on the low table that he used in the evenings for programs he wrote himself, in BASIC, without any particular purpose. He could not recall mentioning it on the application. There was a postscript, in a different hand, which he read but did not, at the time, find unusual.

On the morning of the seventeenth he took the train. It was almost empty. He got off two stops early, to walk the rest of the way along the canal, though he was not certain that what he was about to do was difficult, only that it was new.

The canal ran straight for several blocks and then turned, where the older buildings began, into a narrower channel walled on both sides with concrete. The water was the color of weak tea. He passed a man fishing without enthusiasm, and a woman walking a small dog

[1] No copy of the original application has been recovered. The notation "technical aptitude noted" cannot be verified against any surviving form. The Bureau's personnel files for this period, to the extent these were accessible, do not include application materials for staff below the rank of Senior Examiner. — Ed.

that had stopped to consider something on the path. There was no wind. His own breath, when he noticed it, was visible.

The Records Bureau was a four-story building of the kind put up everywhere in the country in the years after the war: reinforced concrete, square windows in regular rows, a faint horizontal staining where rain had run for decades down the same lines. He was a few minutes early. He stood for a moment on the pavement opposite, not from any particular reluctance, only because he had arrived and there was nothing else to do.

The east entrance was a pair of double glass doors on the building's north corner, which he understood, having been raised in a city, as the way these things often went. A piece of paper had been taped to one of the doors at eye level. The paper had been there long enough that the tape had yellowed and the edges had curled. The notice, printed in characters slightly faded by sunlight, read This entrance is not currently in use. Please proceed to the side door. A small arrow had been drawn at the bottom in pencil, pointing to the right.

He followed the arrow. The side of the building was set back from the street by a strip of paving in which several concrete planters had been placed, none of them planted with anything. Behind the third planter, in a recess he would not have noticed had he not been looking, there was a metal door painted the same color as the wall. There was no sign on it. He tried the handle. The door opened.

Inside, the corridor was lit by fluorescent tubes, one of which was failing in the patient irregular way that fluorescent tubes fail, going dim and bright again at intervals of several seconds. The air smelled faintly of paper and floor wax and, beneath these, of something older that he could not place. To his left, set into the wall at the height of a man's shoulder, was a small window of frosted glass with a wooden sill. A slip of paper on the sill read New arrivals: please ring. Below it was a brass bell of the kind found on the counters of small inns. He looked at the bell for a moment. Then he set his bag on the floor between his feet, and rang it once, and waited.

The frosted glass slid open after a delay he could not measure. The face that appeared — a woman of indeterminate middle age, her hair pulled back, half-glasses on a chain at her chest — looked at him without surprise and said, Letter, please.

He passed the letter through the window. She unfolded it, read it without expression, refolded it along the existing creases. She asked for his seal. He took the small case from his inside pocket, removed the hanko, and passed it through. She pressed it onto a pad on her side and stamped it once into a register he could not see, and returned both letter and seal to him. The whole exchange had taken perhaps a minute.

Please wait. Someone will come for you. She paused, and then added: There is a canteen on the first floor. This is your meal chit for today. She passed through the window a small square of paper, printed on one side with the Bureau's name and the word CANTEEN and a date — today's date — and nothing else. It was warm, as if it had been kept near a lamp or in a pocket. He put it in his jacket.

The frosted glass slid closed. He looked at it for a moment. Then he picked up his bag and turned, and saw, for the first time, that there was a wooden bench against the opposite wall, dark with age and polish. He sat down on it.

He waited, by his own later estimate, between twenty and forty minutes. The corridor was

quiet. From somewhere further inside the building came the sound of a typewriter, used at intervals, in bursts of two or three lines and then pauses, in the manner of someone composing rather than transcribing. Once he heard footsteps approaching, but they passed an unseen junction and went the other way. The fluorescent tube continued to fail at its patient interval. He counted the failures, lost count, began again, lost count again.

When the door at the far end of the corridor opened, the man who stepped through did not look up immediately. He was carrying a clipboard, and he was completing something on it with a fountain pen. When he had finished, he capped the pen, slid it into his shirt pocket, and looked up. He was, he judged, somewhere in his late fifties, of moderate height, in a grey suit of the kind that had been ordinary in offices for thirty years.

You walked from the tram, the man said.

Yes.

You should not have walked along the canal. There is construction at the far end. It will have made you late. He glanced at the clipboard. Although you are not, in fact, late. You are, on the contrary, slightly early.

He did not know what to say to this.

My name is Sasaki. I am a Senior Examiner of the Second Section. You will work, for the present, in the Second Section, under my supervision. Please follow me.

He picked up his bag. Sasaki turned and walked back through the door without checking that he was followed, in the manner of someone for whom being followed was a settled feature of the world. He followed.

II.

They walked along the corridor for some time. It turned twice, once to the left and once to the right, and at one of these turns there was a flight of three steps going down for which he had not been prepared. He stumbled slightly. Sasaki, who had not stumbled, made no remark.

The Second Section was a long room with windows along one side and rows of metal desks along the other, eight desks in two rows of four. At each desk a clerk was working. The clerks did not look up. The fluorescent lighting in the Second Section was of the same kind as in the corridor, but here the tubes were not failing. There was the smell of paper and of pencil shavings and, more distantly, of cigarette smoke, though no one in the room appeared to be smoking. From behind a closed door at the far end of the room — a door he would later come to recognise — there was a low, steady hum, mechanical, at a pitch too even to be human.

At the near end of the room, on a side table between the first two desks, a stack of fanfold paper sat in a tidy pile, its perforated tractor-feed edges still attached. A strip of green-bar paper — pale green and white, alternating — had been folded into a narrow bookmark and left on top.

Sasaki led him along the central aisle to a desk at the far end of the room, beside the window. The window overlooked a small courtyard he had not seen from outside.

This will be your desk, Sasaki said. The desk had been prepared. Two pencils, sharpened, lay parallel beside a ruled notepad. A blotter, slightly used, had been placed beneath where the file would sit. A small adhesive label on the pencil tray read 二-八 in careful characters. At the far corner of the desk, beside the pencil tray, a small saucer held two senbei — rice crackers, individually wrapped, the kind sold in bulk for office use. A third wrapper, empty, had been left on the saucer with the salt residue still visible on the paper. A paper cup of tea stood beside the saucer. The tea was cold. You are Records Conversion, Second Section. Desk 二-八. Your given name and surname do not appear on Bureau correspondence. You will adjust to this in time. Most do. He paused, and added, in a tone that was not kind but was not unkind: New staff often find the work easier once personal address is no longer required. The section asks only for attention, accuracy, and patience. These are not difficult for people who prefer them.

He placed his bag beside the desk and stood waiting for further instruction.

Paper files are prepared here for machine entry, Sasaki said. You will review the paper account against the conversion sheet. Where the paper record and the machine record agree, the file proceeds. Where they disagree, the paper is correct. He paused. Until the paper is not sufficient. You will understand this distinction in time.

He indicated the closed door at the far end of the room. The terminal room is through that door. The conversion terminal is there — the machine that accepts the record once the paper has been checked. You will not use it yet. New staff prepare files at the desk until the section is satisfied with the accuracy of their review. There is no machine at your desk. There is not meant to be. Desk work prepares the record. Terminal work enters it. The two are separate.

On your desk you will find a file. Each file includes a conversion sheet — the form at the back, behind the testimony pages. The conversion sheet lists the fields the terminal will accept: subject name, birth year, prefecture, district code, account type, conversion status. Your task is to check each field on the conversion sheet against the paper record. Where a field is blank or does not match the paper, mark the discrepancy in pencil on the conversion sheet. Where all fields agree, mark the sheet clear and file it. The cabinet is organised by year of birth; within each year, alphabetically by family register. You will find the system intuitive after a short while. If you have questions, the clerk to your left is Examiner Mori, who joined us seven years ago and will assist you. I will return at twelve.

He inclined his head a fraction, and left.

He sat down. The chair was wooden and lower than he had expected, so that his knees came up slightly. The file was open in the centre of the desk: a beige folder with two sheets of paper inside, a third sheet — evidently an internal cover sheet — stapled to the front, and behind all of these, a fourth sheet he almost missed: the conversion sheet.

He read the cover sheet first. The subject of the file was a man of his own birth year, born in a city in the same prefecture though not the same city, who had attended a middle school whose name was very similar to his own but not, on close inspection, identical — one character was different — and who had, according to the file, no current occupation

listed. The case had been opened, the cover sheet recorded, in the spring of the previous year. There was no indication of which section had opened it.

At the bottom of the cover sheet, below the handwritten entries, there was a row of small printed boxes he had not at first noticed. Each box was labelled in a typeface too small to read comfortably: a field for the subject's birth year in numeric form, a field for a district code, a field marked conversion status that was empty. In the margin beside these boxes, someone had written, in pencil, a four-digit number and circled it. He did not know what the number meant. The pencil was faint, as if written quickly and not intended to last.

He turned to the conversion sheet. It was a different kind of form — printed, not handwritten, on thinner paper, with a row of labelled fields running down the left side in a fixed-width typeface that reminded him of the characters his own machine printed at home. SUBJECT NAME. BIRTH YEAR. PREFECTURE. DISTRICT CODE. ACCOUNT TYPE. CONVERSION STATUS. ROUTE. Each field was followed by a ruled line exactly wide enough for the data it expected. Some had been filled in, in pencil, by a previous hand. Some were blank. At the bottom of the sheet, in smaller type: OPERATOR — and beside it, an empty line. This was the form the terminal would read from. His job was to check it against the paper.[2]

He checked the birth year on the conversion sheet against the cover sheet. They agreed. He checked the prefecture. It agreed. The district code on the conversion sheet was blank; the cover sheet listed a district name but no code. He marked the discrepancy in pencil, as Sasaki had said, with a small dash beside the blank field. He did not know the correct code. He did not know where to find it. He marked only what he could see.

He turned to the first of the two interior sheets.[3] It was a partial transcript of an interview with the subject, conducted by an officer whose name had been redacted with a black bar. The transcript was not complete; it began in the middle of a sentence and broke off in the middle of another. The portion preserved consisted of three short exchanges concerning the subject's parents, his place of residence at the age of twelve, and an incident, not described in detail, that had occurred at a railway station.

He read the second sheet. It was a single page of notes in a hand he could not identify, written in pencil, in which the writer recorded their impression that the subject had been not, on the present officer's view, fully forthcoming, but had been polite, attentive, and, where pressed, willing to attempt an answer. The note ended without conclusion.

He closed the file. He opened the cabinet behind him. He filed the folder according to the system Sasaki had described — in the drawer marked with the year of his own birth, alphabetically by family register, between two other files he did not open. He returned to

[2] No conversion sheet from this first file survives among the materials received by the editor. Later examples, recovered from the Bureau's printout archive, use the same field order described here. The OPERATOR field, which the testimony notes was blank, is filled on all later examples the editor has examined. The Bureau's processing log for the date described contains no entry corresponding to this file. — Ed.

[3] The two interior sheets the Examiner here describes do not appear among the papers preserved with the present testimony. He refers to the file again, in passing, in two later passages (the spring of his fourth year, and the corridor at the end of the eighth). It is not possible, on the present evidence, to determine whether the file was retained, was filed as he describes, or was returned to him at a later date in another form. The filing system he describes — by year of birth, alphabetically by family register — is the same system used throughout the Second Section during the period of the editor's own brief service. The editor recognised it immediately upon reading this passage, and has found this recognition difficult to account for, given the years that have intervened. — Ed.

his desk and sat down.

There was, he noticed, a quiet relief in the system. The cabinet was ordered by year, by register, by alphabet — each file in its fixed position, no ambiguity about where it belonged. It was the kind of order he had always found easier than the other kind: the order of conversation, of introduction, of knowing when to speak. Here the rules were printed. The fields were marked. A name went in one place. A year went in another. He thought, briefly, of the phrase on the letter — machine-readable account preparation — and understood it, for the first time, not as a description of the work but as a description of the disposition the work required. He did not think this in words. It was closer to a recognition, small and private, that he was suited to something, and that the something had found him.

Shortly before the end of the morning, the first file came back. It was in the same folder, with the same cover sheet, but the conversion sheet had been replaced. The district code field, which he had marked blank, was now filled — a four-digit number in a hand he did not recognise. His pencil dash was gone. The new sheet was otherwise identical: same fields, same data, same blank OPERATOR line. He checked the code against the cover sheet. The district name matched. He filed it again, in the same place. He did not know who had filled in the code, or how the file had returned to his desk, or what had happened to the sheet he had marked. The system had responded to his mark. This seemed, at the time, sufficient.

The clock on the wall read ten minutes past ten. He had been at his desk, by his own count, perhaps nine minutes. To his left, Examiner Mori — a man some years his senior, with the slightly stooped posture of someone who had spent a long time at a desk lower than was comfortable — continued the work he was doing without acknowledging his presence. He watched him for a moment, then looked down at his own desk, which was empty, and waited.

III.

At some point during the next hour a second file appeared on his desk. He did not see who placed it there. He had been looking at the courtyard — there was a drainpipe on the far wall with a slow deposit of rust beneath its bracket, and he had been watching it without thought — and when he turned back the file was there, closed, in the same position the first had occupied.

He opened it. The cover sheet was identical in format to the first. The subject was a woman, older than him by several years, born in a coastal town he did not recognise. The interior pages — three, this time — consisted of a typed summary of her educational history, a photocopy of what appeared to be a lease agreement with most of the figures obscured, and a single handwritten line on a slip of paper that read only No further action recommended at this time. The conversion sheet was complete — all fields filled, the pencil marks confident, the OPERATOR line blank as before. Every field agreed with the paper. He marked it clear. As he did so he noticed that the slip of paper — the handwritten line — had left a faint impression on the conversion sheet beneath it, where the two had been pressed together in the folder. The word recommended was legible in reverse, ghosted into the space beside CONVERSION STATUS. He filed it. The cabinet accepted it without resistance.

A third file came. The subject's name on the cover sheet used an older character — the traditional form, two extra strokes — but the conversion sheet had the simplified version. He did not know which was correct. Both referred to the same person, presumably. He marked the discrepancy with a small pencil dash beside the name field, as Sasaki had shown him, and moved on to the other fields. They agreed.

A fourth file. This one had no interior sheets at all — only the cover sheet and, behind it, a conversion sheet already partially filled in someone else's hand. Birth year, prefecture, account type: all present. District code: blank. Conversion status: blank. The OPERATOR field, at the bottom, had been filled — not left empty, as on the others, but marked with a desk number he did not recognise. He looked at it for a moment. He did not know what it meant for an operator to have already touched a file that had no interior sheets to review. He marked the missing fields and filed it.

Between files his desk was empty and he sat with his hands on his knees and looked at the room. His fingers smelled faintly of graphite from the pencil. The clerks around him worked steadily, turning pages, writing in pencil, occasionally opening and closing the drawers of their own cabinets with a sound like a slow exhalation. No one spoke. No one looked at him.

At noon — he knew it was noon because the clock on the wall said so, and because at that moment every clerk in the room stopped working simultaneously, as if a sound had been made that he had not heard — the door at the far end of the room opened and Sasaki stepped through.

It is twelve, Sasaki said. He said it to the room in general. The clerks were already rising from their desks. The canteen is open until one. Examiner, you will come with me.

He stood. The other clerks filed out through a door he had not previously noticed, set into the wall on the window side of the room, between the third and fourth desks. It was not hidden — the frame was visible, the handle brass — but he was certain he had not seen it that morning. He followed Sasaki through it.

The corridor beyond was short and ended in a flight of stairs going up. They climbed one floor, turned left, and entered through a pair of swing doors whose small glass portholes were clouded with years of condensation.

The canteen was a wide, low-ceilinged room with six long tables arranged in rows. The tables were covered in oilcloth that had once been green and was now the colour of old tea. Along the far wall was a serving counter with a metal rail, behind which two women in white aprons stood without expression. A chalkboard above the counter listed the day's meal in a careful hand: rice, miso soup, grilled mackerel, pickled radish.

Sasaki led him to the counter. He was given a tray — pale brown plastic, slightly warm, as if it had just been washed — and he moved along the rail as the women placed things on it. A bowl of rice. A bowl of soup. A rectangle of fish on a small plate. A dish of pickles. The portions were precise and identical. He took a pair of disposable chopsticks from a container at the end of the rail and followed Sasaki to a table near the window.

The window overlooked the courtyard. The same courtyard — he recognised the drainpipe, the rust stain, the concrete — but from above, and from the opposite side. He looked at it

for a moment. They had climbed one flight of stairs and turned left. He tried to reconcile this with the direction they had walked. He could not, quite. He sat down.

Sasaki sat across from him, arranging his tray with the economy of long practice. The other clerks from the Second Section were seated further along the same table. Their trays were already half-finished. He had not seen them in the serving line.

You will eat here each day, Sasaki said. This table is the Second Section's. The arrangement is not formal, but it is observed. You may sit in any open place.

He broke his chopsticks apart. They split unevenly, one thicker than the other. He rubbed them together briefly to smooth the splinter, and as he did so the clerk seated diagonally across — not Mori; a younger man with close-cropped hair — glanced up at this and then away, very quickly, in a manner that suggested he had done something that was not done here. He stopped. He placed the chopsticks on the tray rest and left them there for a moment. Then he picked them up again and began to eat.

The mackerel was good. The rice was warm. The soup tasted of nothing he could identify. He ate carefully, watching from the edges of his attention how the others held their bowls, how they placed their chopsticks between bites, where they looked while chewing. They looked at their trays. He looked at his tray.

Partway through the meal — he had finished the fish and was beginning the pickles — Sasaki said, without looking up from his own bowl, Mori will show you the afternoon procedure. I have a meeting on the third floor at one. You will not need me again until tomorrow morning.

Then Sasaki rose, carried his tray to a return window at the far end of the room, and left through a door that was not the one they had entered by.

He continued eating. The man beside him — Mori — was eating at a pace that seemed neither fast nor slow but somehow arrived at each stage of the meal at the same moment he did. When he set down his chopsticks, Mori set down his. He could not determine whether this was coincidence.

Examiner Mori, he said. His voice came out too loud for this room. He had not spoken to anyone since the corridor that morning, and the sound of his own name — no, not his name; no one here had a name — was strange to him among the small sounds of chewing and not-speaking.

Mori turned his head. He had a thin face, not unpleasant, with the kind of features that would be difficult to recall precisely afterward. His eyes were steady and without expectation.

Yes, Mori said.

He had been about to say something — to introduce himself, perhaps, in the ordinary way, by the name he had used all his life until this morning — but found that the impulse had gone quiet, replaced by a small blankness, as if what he meant to say had slipped briefly out of reach in the way a word sometimes does when one reaches for it too deliberately. He said instead:

I am told you will show me the afternoon procedure.

Yes, Mori said again. He returned to his pickles for a moment, then added, quietly, The afternoon is the same as the morning. Files are brought. You review them and file them. Some days there are more. Some days fewer. It is not difficult.

How many, usually?

It varies. Mori picked up a piece of radish with his chopsticks and considered it briefly. When I began, it was two or three each day. Now it is more. The number increases gradually. You will not notice the increase while it is happening. He ate the radish. No one does.

He waited, but Mori did not say anything else. Around them the canteen was emptying, trays being returned to the window, chairs pushed back with small sounds against the linoleum. The two women behind the counter had begun wiping down the surfaces, moving in tandem, starting from opposite ends.

Shall we go back? he said.

Mori looked at the clock above the door. It read twelve forty-three. Not yet, he said. We return at five to one. If you arrive before that you must wait in the corridor. The room is cleaned between twelve forty-five and twelve fifty-five.

He nodded. Mori added, after a pause: You will not have been told this. There are many things in the Bureau that are not explained in advance. They become known after a time.

He sat with his hands in his lap. Twelve minutes. He looked at the courtyard through the window. The same drainpipe, the same rust stain. From this angle he could see the ground below — bare concrete, no plants, nothing growing — and at the base of the far wall, very low, no higher than a man's knee, what appeared to be a door. It was painted the same grey as the concrete around it. It had a handle. He looked at it until Mori said Now, and they stood, returned their trays to the window, and went back down the stairs.

IV.

The afternoon was, as Mori had said, the same as the morning.

They returned to the Second Section at five to one. The room smelled faintly of something chemical — a cleaning agent, perhaps, though not one he recognised — and the air was slightly cooler than it had been before lunch, as if a window had been opened and closed again. His desk was clean. His chair was in the same position. The filing cabinet behind him was closed.

Before he sat down, Mori paused at the closed door at the far end of the room — the one Sasaki had indicated that morning. He opened it without ceremony. Inside was a small room, windowless, lit by a single fluorescent tube. A steel desk, the same model as his own. A chair. On the desk: a machine — beige case, wide housing, a row of function keys along the top of the keyboard. A green phosphor screen beside it, dark, the power light off. To the right of the screen, a spiral-bound notebook and a pen on a string. To the left, a dot-matrix printer on a low shelf, its cover open, a box of fanfold paper feeding into it from behind. On the shelf below the printer, a plastic case holding several 5.25-inch floppy disks, each

labelled in handwriting too small to read from the doorway. The room hummed faintly — the fluorescent tube, or something in the walls.

This is the terminal room, Mori said. The conversion terminal. When a file has been checked and the conversion sheet is clear, the record is entered here. One operator at a time. Sessions are logged in the notebook. You sign in, enter the records from your cleared files, sign out. He looked at the machine without touching it. Sasaki will tell you when.

He closed the door. The hum continued through it, steady and low, as it had been all morning.[4]

A file appeared. He opened it, reviewed it, filed it. Another came. He reviewed it and filed it. The rhythm was not unpleasant. Each file took between three and eight minutes, depending on the number of interior sheets and the legibility of the handwriting. Some contained typed pages. Some contained only a cover sheet and a single slip of paper. One had a conversion sheet on which the birth year had been entered twice — the same year, written in two different hands, one in ink and one in pencil, as if the field had been filled and then confirmed, or filled by one person and checked by another. Both agreed with the cover sheet. He marked it clear, though the duplication stayed with him for a moment longer than it should have.

Another file had a conversion sheet on which someone had written none in the ACCOUNT TYPE field, then erased it — the rubber marks still visible, a faint smudge where the word had been — and written above it, in smaller letters, not required. The cover sheet listed the subject's occupation as a word he could not read; the characters were cramped and the paper was old. He marked both fields as discrepancies and moved on.

One file contained nothing at all — a beige folder, a cover sheet with a name and birth year, and inside, when he opened it, no pages. The conversion sheet was there, behind the cover sheet, its fields entirely blank except for the subject name, which matched the cover. He filed it anyway, in the appropriate drawer. It did not seem, on reflection, to require anything else of him.

He did not count the files. Later, trying to reconstruct the afternoon, he would remember five or six, though he suspected the actual number was higher. The work occupied a specific kind of attention — not concentration, exactly, but a steady middle state between alertness and absence, in which time moved without his participation. He became aware of his body only at intervals: his lower back, which had begun to ache from the low chair; his right hand, slightly cold, where a draught came from the window frame; the dry feeling in his throat that meant he had not drunk anything since the soup at lunch.

At some point he looked up and the light had changed. The courtyard was in shadow. The fluorescent tubes had become the primary light in the room without his noticing the transition. He looked at the clock. It read ten past four. He looked at it for a moment, then returned to the file on his desk.

The last file of the day — or the last he received — came at what he judged to be around half past four. When he had filed it and turned back to his desk, no new file appeared. He

[4] The terminal room does not appear by name on the building's evacuation diagram, a copy of which was found among the procedural materials. The diagram labels the room at the far end of the Second Section as "Storage (Temporary)." The editor has found no record of when or whether this designation was changed. — Ed.

sat for a time with his hands on his knees. The other clerks were still working. Mori, to his left, was writing something in pencil on a sheet of paper from a file that was thicker than any he had been given. He watched him write for a moment — small, careful characters, very even — and then looked away.

At five o'clock the clerks stopped. It was the same as noon: simultaneous, without a signal he could hear, without a word from anyone. One moment the room was full of small sounds — paper, pencil, the creak of cabinet drawers — and the next moment it was still. The clerks rose. They put on their jackets, which had been hanging on hooks behind their chairs — hooks he had not noticed before, and which he now saw were already empty at his own desk, because he had not removed his jacket. He had been wearing it all day. He felt this as a small wrongness, though no one remarked on it.

The clerks left the room through the same door they had used at noon — the one between the third and fourth desks. He stood and followed them. Down the stairs, past the canteen floor, down another flight he had not climbed that morning, through a corridor that turned once, and then through a heavy metal door that opened onto the street.

He was at the back of the building. The street was narrow, lit by a single lamp at the far end. He did not recognise it. The other clerks were already dispersing — some to the left, some to the right — without speaking to one another, pulling on their coats, their breath visible in the cold air. Mori walked away to the left without looking back. He stood by the door for a moment, then chose the direction he thought led to the canal, and walked.

He found it after two blocks. The canal was the same — the concrete walls, the flat water, the path along the edge — but in the dark it was different. The water was black and reflected nothing. The path was lit at wide intervals by lamps that gave an orange light too weak to reach the opposite bank. He walked along it in the direction of the station. His footsteps were the only sound for some time, and then, from somewhere ahead, the sound of a bicycle bell, brief and without urgency, and then silence again.

The walk took longer than it had that morning. He attributed this to tiredness. His legs were heavy in the way they become after sitting for a long time in a low chair. His back ached. His hands were cold. He put them in his coat pockets and walked with his head down, watching the path, which was wet in places from a source he could not identify — it had not rained.

He reached his apartment at half past five or six — he did not look at his watch. The building was three stories, concrete, on a side street off the main road that ran parallel to the canal. He climbed to the second floor. He let himself in. The apartment was small and very cold. He had not left the heating on. He turned it on now — an old kerosene heater in the main room — and stood in front of it while it warmed, still wearing his coat and shoes.

The apartment consisted of two rooms and a narrow kitchen. The main room had a low table, half of it taken up by a computer he had brought from the old apartment — the machine first, then everything else arranged around what space remained: a cushion, a bookshelf with a few books, the kerosene heater, a window that overlooked the side street. Against the opposite wall, a small television on a cardboard box, its antenna bent at an angle he had found by experiment. Beside the bookshelf, a stack of computing magazines — I/O and ASCII — three or four months out of date, bought at a used-book stall near the old apartment. The second room, smaller, had a futon and a wardrobe. There was nothing on

the walls. He had moved in three weeks ago, when the letter came, from a larger apartment in another part of the city, because this one was closer to the Bureau. He did not yet think of it as home.

He removed his shoes. He removed his coat and hung it behind the door. He went to the kitchen and filled the kettle and placed it on the stove. While the water heated he stood at the counter and looked at the wall, which was pale yellow and had a single small stain near the light switch whose shape he had not yet learned to stop noticing. The kettle boiled. He made tea — cheap green tea from a tin whose lid never closed properly — and carried it to the main room and sat on the cushion at the low table. He placed the cup carefully to the right of the keyboard, in the space between the cassette deck and the edge of the table, where it would not be near the machine. Beside the cassette deck, a small plastic case held four or five tapes, each labelled in his own handwriting — program names, dates, short notes to himself that already meant less than they had when he wrote them. The computer's dust cover — a rectangle of grey cloth he had cut from an old shirt — was still in place from the morning. He did not remove it. He drank his tea without thinking of anything in particular.

Later — the tea finished, the room warm now, the heater making its small ticking sounds as the metal expanded — he remembered that he had dreamed the night before. He had not thought of it during the day. The dream had been brief. He had been in a corridor, walking. The corridor had turned twice, and at one of the turns there had been steps going down. A man in a grey suit had been walking ahead of him without turning around. He had followed. He remembered the smell of floor wax.

He sat with this for a moment. Then he went to the kitchen and washed his tea cup and placed it upside down on the drying rack. He unrolled his futon. He turned off the heater and the light. He lay in the dark and listened to the building, which made the sounds all buildings make at night — pipes, settling, a door closing somewhere below — and after a time, which he did not measure, he slept.

V.

The second day was the same as the first, and the third day was the same as the second. He learned to remove his jacket when he sat down and hang it on the hook behind his chair. He learned that the files came faster if he did not watch for them — that looking at the courtyard or at the clock seemed to delay their arrival, while working steadily through whatever was on his desk caused the next file to appear more quickly, though he could not have said how he knew this, or whether it was true in any way he could verify.

He learned that the canteen served the same four dishes in rotation: mackerel, pork cutlet, simmered vegetables, and fried egg over rice. He learned that tea was available from a thermos at the end of the serving counter, and that to take it you placed a coin — ten yen — in a small dish beside the thermos. No one had told him this. He had watched Mori do it on the third day and had done it himself on the fourth.

He learned that the clerks did not speak to one another in the Second Section during working hours. They spoke, briefly, in the canteen — short exchanges about the weather, about a

train delay, about whether the pickles had been better or worse than last week. They did not speak about their work. They did not ask one another about files. He tested this once, on his fifth or sixth day, by asking Mori whether the files he received were always so brief. Mori had looked at him with his steady eyes and said, I do not discuss the content of files, and had returned to his meal. It was not said unkindly. It was said as one states a rule that does not require explanation.

He learned other things: that the fluorescent tube in the front corridor was still failing when he passed it each morning, at the same patient interval; that Sasaki appeared only at noon and at five, and otherwise was not present in the Second Section; that his filing cabinet, which had been nearly empty on the first day, was filling at a rate he could observe — one drawer already heavier when he opened it — though the files he placed there were thin and few.

He noticed, across the first week, that he had begun to read the conversion sheet before the interior pages. He did not decide this. It was simply that the conversion sheet told him what the file was — subject, year, prefecture, district — in the time it took to glance at the left column, and the interior pages told him what the file meant, which took longer and was not, strictly, his concern. His concern was agreement: did the fields match? He checked them. They usually did. When they did not, the discrepancy was almost always a blank — a field the conversion sheet expected but the paper did not supply. District code, most often. Sometimes conversion status. Once, on his fourth or fifth day, a file arrived with the ROUTE field filled — a short alphanumeric string he did not recognise — while every other field was blank. He stared at the conversion sheet for some time. A route with no subject, no district, no year. He marked every blank field and filed it. He did not know what a route was. He did not ask.[5]

The next file was different, though it took him a moment to understand why. The birth year on the cover sheet was his own. The prefecture was his own. The district — a four-digit code he recognised from the address he had written on forms all his life — was his own. Every field on the conversion sheet was filled, neatly, in the same institutional hand as all the others. Every field except one. SUBJECT NAME was blank. Not crossed out, not illegible — simply empty, a ruled line with nothing written on it. He checked the interior sheets. There were two: a photocopy of a ward registration, folded once, and a brief typewritten note he did not read past the first line. He marked the blank field. He filed it. He did not read the typewritten note. He moved to the next file.

By the end of the second week the work had become routine in a way that was not unpleasant but was also not, he found, entirely voluntary. His body had adjusted to the chair, or the chair had adjusted to him — his back no longer ached after the first hour, though by four o’clock it returned. His hands were still cold by the window. He kept a handkerchief in his jacket pocket and wiped his fingers on it between files, because the cold made them slightly damp and he did not want to leave marks on the paper. The pencil he used for discrepancy marks had worn to a flat edge on one side from the angle at which he held it. He had not sharpened it. The flat edge made a wider dash, which he preferred, though no one had told him the width of the dash mattered.

[5]The editor has not been able to identify the route designation described here in any later session log or batch summary. The format does not match the route codes used in the Second Section’s standard conversion tables. — Ed.

The evenings were the same, but the sameness had begun to change him in ways he did not measure. The walk along the canal. The apartment. The kerosene heater. The tea, placed always in the same spot on the table, to the right of the keyboard, away from the machine. He ate simply — rice from the cooker, pickled vegetables, sometimes a tin of fish — standing at the counter, because sitting at the low table meant sitting in front of the computer, and he was not ready to turn it on, though he could not have said what he was waiting for. He read a little, from the books on his shelf, but the sentences did not hold. He would reach the bottom of a page and realise he had been thinking about a conversion sheet — not its contents, but its layout, the fixed-width fields, the way each line expected exactly the data it would receive. He went to bed early. He slept without difficulty.

On an evening near the end of the second week — he could not have said which day precisely; they had begun to lose their distinctness — he sat at the low table after dinner with a sheet of notepaper and a pen. He had bought the paper from a stationery shop near the station on his way home, three days earlier, for this purpose. He had carried it in his bag since then without using it.

He wrote the date at the top. He wrote his sister's name. He paused.

He had not spoken to her since before the letter came. She lived in Yamagata, where she had lived for many years, where she taught at a school for young children. She was older than him by four years. They were not estranged — there had been no argument, no break — but they were not close in the way that required frequent correspondence. She would know, from their mother, that he had moved. She would not know where he was working or why.

He wrote: I have started a new position. He looked at this. It was true and it told her nothing. He wrote: It is a government office in the city. The work is clerical. I review files and prepare them for machine entry. He looked at this. It was true but it was not a sentence he could send to his sister. She would not know what machine entry meant. He was not certain he knew what it meant. He crossed out prepare them for machine entry and wrote place them in a cabinet, which was also true, and simpler, and told her nothing she would need to ask about. He tried to think of what else to say. He tried to think of what she would want to know.

He sat for some time with the pen in his hand. The heater ticked. Outside, distantly, the sound of a train. He thought, briefly, of a drawer in the house where they had grown up — a wooden drawer in the kitchen cabinet that swelled in winter and would not open. His sister had pulled at it once with both hands, her weight back, her feet braced on the floor, and the drawer had come free with a sound like a breath released. He did not know why he thought of this now. He did not write it in the letter.

He could not think of how to describe the Bureau to someone who had not been inside it. Not because it was secret — no one had told him not to speak of it — but because the things that were true about it were the things that would sound, to anyone outside, either perfectly ordinary or slightly wrong, and he could not determine which impression would be more accurate.

He wrote: The building is near the canal. I walk along it each morning. He wrote: The people are quiet. I sit beside a man named Mori who has been here for several years. He stopped. He crossed out named Mori and wrote called Mori. Then he crossed out the whole

sentence. He did not know why. Mori's name was not private. But writing it had felt like carrying something out of the building that was meant to stay inside.

He put the pen down. He folded the paper in thirds, along the creases he had made by pressing too hard, and placed it in the drawer of the low table. He would finish it another evening. He turned off the heater and the light and went to bed.

He did not finish it. The paper remained in the drawer, folded, undated now — the date he had written referred to a day that had already passed by the time he thought of it again, and so was no longer useful. He did not buy new paper. He thought of his sister, sometimes, on the walk home, or in the minutes before sleep, in the way one thinks of a person one is not yet ready to explain oneself to.

VI.

Near the end of the first month Sasaki came to his desk in the afternoon.

This was unusual. Sasaki appeared at noon to announce the canteen, and at five to stand in the doorway while the clerks rose — though even this had become less regular, some days replaced by the silent simultaneous stop without his presence. He did not come to individual desks. But on this afternoon he appeared beside his chair at what the clock said was twenty past two, carrying a single file — beige, standard — which he placed on the desk without setting it down fully, holding it by the corner as one holds something that requires correction.

This was filed by you, he said. It was not a question.

Yes, he said. He recognised the cover sheet. It was from the previous week — the subject's birth year was one he remembered because it was the same as his mother's.

You have not initialled it, Sasaki said. He turned the cover sheet toward him and indicated, with the tip of his fountain pen, a small blank space in the lower right corner that he had not previously understood to be a field. It was not labelled. It was simply a space — a centimetre square, boxed by faint printed lines, empty.

I was not told to initial the files, he said.

Sasaki looked at him. His expression was not irritated. It was the expression of a man considering whether to explain something that should not require explanation. Every file that passes through an examiner's hands is initialled in the lower right corner of the cover sheet before filing, he said. Your designation mark. A small character — your section number and your desk number. You are Second Section, desk eight. The mark is 二-八.

He looked at the blank space. I have not been doing this, he said. On any of the files.

No, Sasaki said. You have not. He placed the file on the desk. You will correct the files already submitted. The cabinet is yours. Correct each one before the end of the week. He paused. In future, the mark is made before the file is placed in the cabinet. Not after.

He left. He sat for a moment looking at the file on his desk. Then he took his pen — a ballpoint he had brought from home; no one had given him a Bureau pen — and wrote, in

the small box, the characters 二-八. They looked uncertain there. Too large, perhaps, or too dark. He did not know what the correct weight of the mark should be. He had not seen another examiner's mark.

He opened his filing cabinet. The first drawer — the one that had been growing heavier — contained, by his rough count, thirty or forty files. He pulled it out fully and began at the front. He opened the first file's cover sheet and looked at the lower right corner.

The box was not empty.

There was a mark there already. It was small, neat, in ink that was the same colour as his pen. It read 二-八. He looked at it. He did not remember making it. He turned to the next file. The same mark, in the same position, in what appeared to be the same hand — though he could not have said with certainty that it was his hand, because the characters were so small and so simple that anyone's would look similar. He checked a third, a fourth. All marked. All 二-八.

He sat back. He looked at the files. He looked at his pen. He closed the drawer.

He spent the rest of the afternoon doing his work as usual — files arriving, reviewed, initialled now in the lower right corner before filing. The mark took only a moment. He made it small, as the existing marks were small. By four o'clock it had become automatic: open, review, mark, file. The pen moved to the box without his directing it.

That evening, walking home along the canal, he noticed that the air was different. Not warmer, exactly — still cold enough for his breath to show — but the quality of the cold had changed. It was thinner. Less settled. The kind of cold that would not last much longer. Along the far bank of the canal, where a strip of earth separated the concrete from a chain-link fence, there was something green — low, a weed of some kind, or new grass — that he was certain had not been there the week before, though he could not have said when it had appeared.

The water in the canal was lighter than it had been. Less like tea. More like the colour of the sky reflected in it, which was not yet blue but was no longer the flat grey of February. He walked. His eyes were tired — a new feeling, or newly noticed: a slight burn behind them that came from reading small handwriting under fluorescent light for eight hours. He pressed the heel of his hand against one eye, briefly, while walking. When he removed it the canal was still there, and the green on the far bank, and the sky.

At home he washed his hands and noticed, on the pad of his right middle finger, a small discoloured patch where the pen had rested. Not ink — or not only ink. A slight roughness of the skin, where the pressure had begun to form a callus. He touched it with his left thumb. It did not hurt. There was graphite, too, under the nail of his index finger — pencil lead from the discrepancy marks, the small dashes beside blank fields that had become, he realised, the most frequent thing he wrote. He dried his hands and made his tea and sat at the low table, in the narrow space the computer left him, and looked at the drawer where the folded letter lay, and did not open it.

VII.

Spring came to the canal before it came to the Bureau. One morning he saw a heron standing in the shallows near the concrete wall, perfectly still, its reflection unbroken beneath it. He watched it for a moment and then continued walking.

Inside the building the season registered differently. The draught from his window frame had stopped. The filing cabinet behind him was full now — the first drawer and most of the second — and he opened it without looking, his hand finding the correct drawer by weight and position. On the first morning warm enough to leave the window ajar, a file arrived with a date stamp from three years earlier. The paper was slightly yellowed at the edges, the fold marks deep and permanent. But the conversion sheet clipped to it was fresh — white, crisp, the ink still dark. Someone had prepared the conversion sheet recently for a file that had been sitting somewhere for three years. He did not know where it had been. He marked the date discrepancy and filed it.

He had stopped counting files. He did not know how many came each day. More than at the beginning — Mori had told him this would happen — but the increase had been so gradual that he could not have said when three became five, or five became seven. The work filled the hours exactly, without surplus and without deficit. When the five o'clock silence came he was always mid-sentence on the final file of the day, as if the institution had measured his pace and timed the last delivery accordingly.

He noticed, too, that his reading had changed. In the first weeks he had read every interior sheet — the interview fragments, the handwritten notes, the photocopied lease agreements and school records — with the attention of someone encountering a life. Now he read them the way one reads a ruler: checking length, checking alignment, checking whether the data fit the field. A subject's occupation was not a fact about a person; it was a string that either matched the ACCOUNT TYPE field or did not. A district name was not a place; it was a code, or the absence of a code. He found, one afternoon, a file whose interior sheet contained a single handwritten line: The house was there and then it was not. The conversion sheet reduced this to ADDRESS: FIELD INCOMPLETE. He marked the discrepancy — there was no address to check — and filed it. He did not think about the house. He thought about the field.

In the canteen he sat in the same seat each day. No one had assigned it. It was simply the seat he had sat in on the second day, and the third, and now it was his in the way that a groove in a path is the path. Mori sat to his left. The younger clerk with close-cropped hair — whose name, he had learned, was Examiner Oda — sat across. They ate at the same speed. They did not speak of work. Once, Oda mentioned that the cherry trees in the park near the station were beginning to show colour, and Mori said Yes, they are early this year, and that was the longest exchange he had witnessed between them.

He no longer thought about the old apartment. He had lived there for three years — or was it four? — and now he could not clearly picture the layout of the kitchen, or the view from the window, or the colour of the walls. This did not trouble him. It was simply a fact about memory: that it released what was no longer needed. His life now was the walk, the Bureau, the walk, the apartment. The kerosene heater stayed off in the evenings now. The window could be opened. The air that came through it smelled of something growing, faintly sweet, which he did not try to identify.

He slept well. He woke before his alarm. He made his tea and drank it standing at the kitchen counter, looking at the wall — the stain was still there, near the light switch, the same shape it had always been — and then he put on his shoes and his jacket and walked to work along the canal, where the heron sometimes was and sometimes was not, and the water was clear, and the light came earlier each morning, and he thought of nothing that he could later have called a thought.

He was, he understood, settled. This was the word. Not happy — the word did not apply — but settled, in the way that sediment settles, or the way a house settles into its foundations: slowly, without decision, into the shape that will hold for a long time. He could identify a file's decade by the weight of the folder, and its prefecture by the colour of the cover sheet — cream for the northern prefectures, pale blue for the coastal, a faded yellow for the city itself. No one had taught him this. He had simply handled enough of them that his hands knew.

The letter was still in the drawer.

VIII.

He came home on a Thursday in the first autumn and found the apartment dark and cold, as it always was at this hour. He removed his shoes. He turned on the kerosene heater and stood in front of it while it ticked and the blue flame steadied behind the mesh window. The first minute of kerosene heat always smelled — a sharp, oily smell that faded once the flame was even. He breathed through it.

The apartment had not changed. The tatami was the same tatami, slightly frayed near the low table where his feet shifted while he typed. The oshiire held his futon, folded precisely, edges aligned. The bookshelf held the N-BASIC reference manual, the user manual, three issues of a magazine he had not finished reading, a tide table for a coast he had not visited, and a novel he had read once and would not read again. The window was closed. The aloe on the sill had grown perhaps a centimeter since he had placed it there. A fine layer of dust had settled on the lower leaves. He wiped it with his thumb and watered the plant from a cup he kept beside the sink.

He filled the kettle and placed it on the stove. While the water heated he stood at the counter and ate a piece of fish he had grilled the night before, cold, standing, because the low table was occupied. The table had been occupied since the first week. He had brought the machine from the old apartment in a box carried on the train, and set it up the evening he moved in — before the futon, before the bookshelf.

The machine sat on the left third of the table. A television — fourteen inches, Sharp, bought secondhand at a shop near the station for a price he did not remember — served as its monitor. The tuner dial was set to channel one and had not been moved. The keyboard occupied the center of the table. To the right of the keyboard: the cassette deck, a small stack of tapes, a cup of tea that was not yet there, and a sheet of graph paper with penciled numbers he had not yet erased from the previous evening.

He made the tea. He carried it to the table. He sat on the cushion and placed the cup in

the space between the cassette deck and the graph paper. The cup was ceramic, white, the same cup he drank from at every meal. It fit.

He turned on the television. Static for a moment, then the cursor — a blinking underscore on a dark screen. He turned on the machine. The screen displayed:

```
NEC PC-8001 BASIC Ver 1.8
Bytes free: 25542
Ok
```

The case was beige plastic, warm after a few minutes of use. The ventilation slots on the right side exhaled air that smelled faintly of dust and something electrical. The keyboard keys were slightly concave, the spacebar and RETURN key whiter than the others from use. He had placed a small square of drafting tape on the RETURN key for tactile reference. The tape was slightly off-center. He had not corrected it.

He loaded the cassette. The tape was labeled in pencil on the manufacturer's label area: `ROUTE v3 — 000-142`. He pressed PLAY on the deck and typed `CLOAD "ROUTE"`. The cassette warbled — a high-pitched sound, like a small animal, that filled the apartment for thirty seconds. The heater ticked beneath it. The screen displayed `Found: ROUTE` and then `Ok`.

He did not run the program. He typed `LIST 30-40` and read the lines that appeared:

```
30 DIM A$(200),D(200),R(200)
31 REM -- LOAD ADDRESS TABLE
32 FOR I=0 TO NC-1
33   READ A$(I),D(I)
34 NEXT I
35 REM -- SORT BY DISTRICT
36 FOR I=0 TO NC-2
37   FOR J=I+1 TO NC-1
38     IF D(I)>D(J) THEN GOSUB 500
39   NEXT J
40 NEXT I
```

He read them slowly, the way he read a form at the Bureau — checking the DIM statement, the variable names, the GOSUB addresses. Two hundred entries. The array could hold two hundred addresses, and beyond that number the machine would stop and print `?OUT OF MEMORY ERROR` and he would have to start again. He had not yet reached two hundred. He did not think about what would happen when he did. He had written this. He knew what it did. He read it anyway.

On the shelf behind the cassette deck, five tapes stood in a row. Each was labeled in the same pencil, the same hand:

```
SORT   v2 — 000-098
ADDR   v1 — 000-064
ROUTE  v3 — 000-142
CITY   v1 — 000-203
HOME      — 000-000
```

The last tape had no version number. The counter range indicated no data — or data of zero length. The label was in the same hand as the others. He had written it. He did not use it.

He worked for an hour, perhaps longer. His left knee ached from sitting on the tatami — a stiffness that arrived after forty minutes and did not leave until he stood. He shifted his weight and continued. The graph paper filled with numbers — address codes, column positions, the decimal equivalents of characters he was testing against the JIS table. His pencil was a Pentel P205, the same model he used at the Bureau. The eraser left grey smudges on the grid lines. He wrote, erased, wrote again. The room was warm now. The heater had cycled off and on twice. Outside, the kerosene delivery truck's recorded jingle played distantly through the street and faded.

He saved his work. `CSAVE "ROUTE"`. The deck's PLAY and RECORD buttons required simultaneous depression. A rubber band — brown, from a bundle of green onions — held both buttons down while his left hand typed the command. The cassette warbled again. He wrote the new counter position on the label: `000–148`.

He removed the tape. He placed the dust cover over the keyboard — a piece of cloth, hand-cut from a towel, hemmed roughly, with a faint brown stain where the tea cup had once overturned. He turned off the machine. He turned off the television. The screen contracted to a bright point and then went dark.

The apartment was quiet. The heater ticked. The fluorescent tube hummed at the same frequency as the one in the Second Section. He washed his tea cup and the dish from the fish and placed them on the drying rack. He unrolled his futon. He turned off the heater and the light.

In the dark the apartment was the same shape as in the light — the table, the machine under its cover, the cassette deck, the tapes in their row, the aloe on the sill, the graph paper, the pencil. Everything had a place. He lay in the futon and listened to the building — the landlady's television faintly through the floor, a pipe settling somewhere — and thought, without thinking it in words, that the apartment was very nearly complete. He did not think about what this meant. He slept.

PART II

PROCEDURES

I.

By the autumn of his second year the work had become something he did not think about. This is not quite right — he thought about it constantly, in the way one thinks about breathing when asked whether one is breathing, but not otherwise. The files came. He reviewed them. He marked the box. He filed them. His hands performed the sequence without consulting him, and he watched them, when he watched them at all, with the mild interest of a man observing a machine whose function he had long since ceased to question.

The spring had passed into summer. The summer — humid, heavy, the canal smelling of warm concrete and algae — had passed into autumn. He could not have said what had happened in those months. Nothing, presumably. The files had come. The seasons had moved across the courtyard outside his window: green, then dusty, then the particular brown of October in this part of the country, where the leaves did not turn bright colours but simply dried and fell. His cabinet was full now through the second drawer and into the third. The fourth remained empty. He did not think about the fourth.

He had settled, in the autumn of his second year, into the kind of competence that does not announce itself. Sasaki came less often. When he came it was to the room in general, not to his desk. The corrections had stopped — there had been only the one, the matter of the designation mark, nearly a year ago now — and he understood, without having been told, that the absence of correction was itself the acknowledgment. He was doing the work correctly. He had been doing it correctly for some time.

On a morning in what he judged to be mid-October — the air outside sharp, the canal path edged with dry leaves that made a sound like paper when he walked — he opened the first file of the day and found, stapled to the inside of the cover behind the cover sheet, an additional page he had not seen before. It was thin, printed on a paper slightly different from the Bureau's usual stock — smoother, whiter — and bore at the top a reference number and title: Style Notice 4-B (current) — On Designations: see Bureau noticeboard for full text.

He read the line twice. He looked at the rest of the file — a standard case, unremarkable — and then back at the notice page. It told him nothing else. The file itself required the usual review, the usual mark, the usual filing. He completed these, and set the notice page aside on the corner of his desk, and continued with the next file.

The next file did not contain a notice page. Nor the one after. But the fourth file of the morning did — the same thin paper, the same reference number, the same instruction to consult the noticeboard. He placed it on top of the first.

By the end of the day he had accumulated four such pages. They were identical. He stacked them neatly and placed them in the shallow drawer beneath his desktop that he used for pens, his handkerchief, and a box of paper clips he had never opened. He did not ask Mori about them. It did not occur to him — or rather, it occurred to him and was immediately replaced by the understanding that this was something he would learn in time, as he had learned everything else: by observing, by continuing, by not asking.

The next morning the notice pages appeared in roughly half the files. The morning after that, in all of them. He stopped setting them aside. He left them stapled where they were and filed the complete folders. No one else in the Section appeared to remark on them. Mori's work continued at its usual pace. The younger clerks — there were two new ones now, arrived at some point during the summer whose precise week he could not recall — turned their pages and filed their folders without visible interruption.

On the third day, at lunch, he saw it. The canteen noticeboard — a cork rectangle on the wall beside the swing doors, which usually held a fire-evacuation diagram and a faded schedule of cleaning rotations — now bore, pinned at its centre with a single brass tack, a printed notice on the same smooth white paper. He read it standing, his tray in his hands, the other clerks moving past him toward the tables.

RECORDS BUREAU — NIIGATA Style Notice 4-B (current)

On Designations

It is the practice of this Bureau that staff of all grades are referred to, in correspondence, memoranda, logbooks, file annotations, and verbal address during working hours, by their designated title only. Personal names (family name, given name, or any combination thereof) do not appear in Bureau records, are not used in interdepartmental communication, and are not included on any form, notice, or directive issued by or within the Bureau.

This practice is not a prohibition. It is a convention observed without exception since the Bureau's establishment and requires no enforcement mechanism. Staff will find that the convention is already in effect upon their arrival and does not require conscious adoption.

Designated titles are assigned on the first morning of service and are recorded in the Section register. They are not subject to appeal or modification. In cases where two staff members of the same Section hold the same functional title, a numeral suffix is appended (e.g., Examiner-2). No such case currently obtains in any active Section.

Questions regarding this notice should not be directed to any individual. The convention, being observed, requires no further clarification.

Filed under: Administrative Practices, Standing Date of issue: [not printed] Supersedes: None

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He read it once, slowly. He read it a second time. It said nothing he did not already know. He had been addressed by his Bureau function since his first morning. He had never used his own name inside the building. No one had asked for it; no one had forbidden it. The notice was describing something that had always been the case — and yet the description, the fact of it being written down and posted, struck him as odd — though odd was perhaps not the word, because he could not say what he had expected instead, only that the notice, in stating what was already true, had made the truth feel slightly different. It was like being told that one breathes through one's nose. True. Unnecessary. And faintly unsettling for being stated.

He carried his tray to the table and sat down. Mori was already eating. He broke his chopsticks — they split evenly today — and began his meal. He did not mention the notice. After a moment he said, to fill a silence that did not require filling:

The noticeboard has been updated.

Mori glanced toward it without turning his head fully. Yes, he said. They circulate those from time to time. I believe that one has been posted before.

He did not ask when. He ate his rice. The soup was too hot and he waited for it, holding the bowl in both hands, feeling the warmth through the ceramic. Across the canteen the clock ticked at its usual pace. The two women behind the counter wiped the surfaces. Everything was exactly as it had always been.

That evening, walking home along the canal, he found himself reaching for his own name — his given name, the one his sister used, the one that had not been spoken inside the building since his first morning — and it came, but not immediately. It came the way a word comes when one has not used it in a long time: intact, but with a slight delay, as if it had been stored somewhere less accessible than it once was.

He tried to remember the number of his old apartment — the one he had lived in before the Bureau, before the letter. He knew the building. He could see it clearly: five stories, a balcony on each floor, laundry lines. He could see the colour of the door — dark green, slightly peeling at the base. But the number would not come. He had lived there for years. He had written it on forms, given it to delivery services, told it to taxi drivers on the few occasions he had taken a taxi home late. And now it was gone — not hidden, not buried, simply absent, in the way a word is absent when one reaches for it and finds only the shape of where it was.

He did not force it. He walked. The canal was dark, the water moving slowly, the lamps casting their orange circles at intervals. By the time he reached his apartment he had stopped trying. The number did not matter. He did not live there anymore. He lived here, in this building, on this street, and went each morning to the Bureau, where his name was not required and his designation was sufficient, and this — he was fairly certain of this, though certainty, in this context, meant only that he had no memory of an alternative — was how it had always been.

II.

The mornings had a shape now that he could have drawn with his eyes closed. He left the apartment at seven fifty-two. He walked north along the canal — the water grey in the early light, the path empty except for the occasional cyclist — and turned left at the concrete bridge where the older buildings began.[6] He entered through the side door. He passed the reception window without stopping; the frosted glass was always closed at this hour, and the brass bell sat untouched on its sill. He walked the corridor — the fluorescent tube had been replaced at some point during the summer, he thought, though he could not remember the day it had stopped failing — and entered the Second Section, and hung his jacket on the hook, and sat down. The first file was waiting.

On this particular morning — a Thursday, he believed, though the days had become difficult to distinguish by anything other than the canteen menu, which repeated on a four-day cycle — the work proceeded as usual until mid-morning, when Mori, without looking up from his own file, said:

They have not replaced the clock battery.

He looked at the clock on the far wall. It read ten twenty-three. He looked at his watch. Ten twenty-three. The second hand was moving.

It seems correct, he said.

Mori made a small sound — not disagreement, exactly, but the kind of sound that acknowledges a response without accepting it. It stopped last month, he said. During the afternoon. Sasaki mentioned it at the time. You were there, I think.

He had no memory of this. He did not remember the clock stopping. He did not remember Sasaki mentioning it. It was possible that he had been present and simply not attended — he was always present; there was nowhere else to be — but the event had left no trace. He could not have said whether this was unusual or simply how things were. Most afternoons did not distinguish themselves from one another. He supposed this one had not either.

He said nothing. Mori returned to his file. He looked at the clock for a moment longer, then turned back to his own work.

He ate without interest. The afternoon passed.[7]

That evening, walking home along the canal, he thought briefly of Mori's comment. You were there, I think. It was not the content that stayed with him — the clock, the battery — but the small certainty of it. Mori had not asked whether he was there. He had stated it, gently, as a thing he remembered. And he — who had been there, who was always there

[6] A marginal note appears here in the original, in a hand the editor has not identified. It reads: south. No other context is provided. The Examiner's testimony consistently describes his morning route as north along the canal. The geography of the area, as the editor understands it, is consistent with this. The significance of the annotation is not clear. — Ed.

[7] The Examiner's placement of events in this portion of the testimony does not correspond reliably to Bureau records. The circulation of Style Notice 4-B, which the Examiner describes as occurring in approximately mid-October of his second year (see preceding chapter), is recorded in the Bureau's administrative log as having taken place no later than June of that year. The editor notes this without interpretation; similar compressions occur elsewhere in the testimony. — Ed.

— could not confirm or deny it, because the afternoon Mori referred to had no shape in his memory that distinguished it from any other.

This did not trouble him. By the time he reached his building it had already become a minor thing, a passing thought of the kind that occurs during a walk and is gone by the time one removes one's shoes.

III.

On a Saturday — it must have been a Saturday; the Bureau was closed, and he had woken without the alarm, at a time that felt both too early and too late — he went to the stationery shop near the station and bought a new sheet of notepaper. He also bought a stamped envelope, already addressed to the postal code for Yamagata, which he would complete at home. He carried them in a paper bag, folded once, inside his coat.

The shop was small and smelled of ink and cardboard. He had been there before — once, in the first weeks, when he bought the paper for the letter he never sent. The woman behind the counter did not appear to recognise him. He paid in coins from his jacket pocket and left.

He did not write the letter immediately. He placed the bag on the low table and made his tea and drank it standing at the counter, as he did each morning, looking at the wall. The stain. The light switch. Outside, the sound of the street — quieter on Saturdays, fewer bicycles, a child's voice from somewhere below. He finished the tea. He washed the cup. He sat down at the table and took the notepaper from the bag and smoothed it flat with the heel of his hand.

He did not write the date. The date, he had learned, made the letter urgent in a way that was difficult to sustain. If one wrote the date, one was obligated to send it before the date became old. He wrote instead:

Dear sister —

He paused. He had not called her that, or anything, in a long time. In his mind she was simply present — a fact about the world, like the canal, like the Bureau — without requiring address. He continued:

I am well. The work continues. It is autumn now and the mornings are cold, though I hardly notice by the time I arrive. I wanted to write to you earlier but could not think of what to say. I am not sure I can think of it now either. The difficulty is not that nothing happens — things happen, in the way they do in an office — but that describing them requires a kind of certainty about what they are that I find I do not possess.

He stopped. He read this back. It said more than he meant. He considered crossing it out. He did not cross it out. He continued:

For instance: I have been here now for more than a year and a half, and I cannot tell you what my work is for. Not because it is secret — I do not think it is secret — but because the question does not arise inside the building. One reviews files. One files them. The files contain information about people, and the information is correct or it is not, and either way

one files it. I do not know what happens to the files after I file them. I do not know if anyone reads them after me. I have never asked. It has never seemed —

He put the pen down.

He had written it has never seemed and then stopped, because what followed — what he would have written, had his hand continued — was something he was not certain was true. He could have written necessary or appropriate or possible. Each of these was true in a different way. None of them was the whole truth.

He sat for a long time. The apartment was quiet. His tea was gone and he did not make more. He looked at what he had written — the short paragraph, the longer paragraph, the incomplete sentence — and he thought, for the first time clearly, that the difficulty of writing to his sister was not that the Bureau was hard to describe. It was that describing it honestly would require him to say: I do not know what I am doing here, and I have stopped wondering. And he was not ready — or rather, he was not able to determine whether he was ready or not — to say this to anyone, including himself.

He folded the paper. Not in thirds, this time — he folded it once, in half, and placed it in the drawer on top of the first letter, which was still there, creased and undated. The envelope he left on the table. He would use it eventually, or he would not. He stood and washed his hands and went for a walk along the canal, which was bright in the Saturday light, the water moving slowly, a single man fishing near the concrete wall with the same absence of enthusiasm he had seen on his first morning, more than a year ago.

On Monday the work resumed. The files came. He reviewed them and filed them. At lunch, in the canteen, he looked through the window at the courtyard while waiting for the others to sit. The low door was still there — at the base of the far wall, knee-height, painted the same grey. He looked at it for a moment and then sat down. Oda said something about the weekend — something about rain, about a leak in the corridor on the third floor — and he nodded, though he had not noticed any rain. He did not think it had rained. He had been outside, on Saturday, walking along the canal, and the path had been dry. But Oda was specific: Saturday afternoon, he said. The ceiling tiles near the archive stairs. And one of the newer clerks nodded — yes, I saw it too — and he said nothing, because there was nothing to say. It had perhaps rained while he was inside. He had not been paying attention. This was the simplest explanation, and he accepted it.

The afternoon was the same as every afternoon. The files. The pen. The cabinet. The light changed in the courtyard. At five the silence came and he rose and put on his jacket and walked home along the canal, which was dry, and dark, and reflected nothing.

IV.

The files were heavier now. Not physically — the folders were the same beige, the same weight of paper — but in volume. Where once the morning had brought four or five, it now brought seven or eight, and the afternoon the same again. He had not noticed the increase while it was happening. He noticed it only in its effects: the third drawer of his cabinet, which had been nearly empty at the start of the autumn, was now half full. His eyes, by mid-afternoon, had a dry quality that made him blink more often than he would have liked. The callus on his right middle finger — the pen callus, which had formed in the first months

and then stabilised — had thickened slightly, or so he thought; it was difficult to be certain about a change so small.

He did not mind the increase. If anything, the work filled the hours more completely, which meant fewer of the small idle moments in which he sometimes looked at the courtyard and thought of nothing and then thought of the fact that he was thinking of nothing, which was — he had learned — worse than having nothing to think about. The files were simple. They required attention but not judgment. He gave them what they required and they asked for nothing further.

On a morning near the end of November — the courtyard bare now, the last of the brown leaves gathered in the corner where the drain met the wall — Mori spoke to him during a pause between files. This was unusual. Mori rarely spoke during working hours. The canteen was the place for words, and even there they were brief and factual. But on this morning Mori turned in his chair, slightly, just enough to indicate that what he was about to say was directed across the gap between their desks rather than forward into his own work, and said:

Sasaki asked me to thank you for the note.

He looked at him. The note, he said.

About the filing discrepancy. Last week. Mori's face was calm, patient, as if this were a small thing that merely required acknowledgment. The cover sheet with the mismatched birth year. You flagged it for Sasaki. He said it was correctly identified.

He did not remember this. He did not remember a cover sheet with a mismatched birth year. He did not remember flagging anything for Sasaki. He reviewed files and filed them; he did not flag them, had never flagged one, did not know — now that he considered it — whether there was a procedure for flagging. He had never been told of one. He had never asked.

He looked at Mori. Mori's expression had not changed. It was not the face of a man testing or accusing; it was the face of a man passing along a small piece of information that he believed to be straightforward.

I see, he said.

Mori turned back to his work. He sat for a moment with his hands on his desk, looking at the file in front of him without opening it. He was trying to locate the event Mori had described — not in his memory, which was blank on the matter, but in his sense of what was plausible. Was it possible that he had flagged a file and forgotten? It was possible, he supposed, in the same way that it was possible he had been present for the clock stopping: he was always here, his hands were always moving, the days were — he had to admit this, if only to himself — not always fully distinct from one another. There were mornings he could not account for except as a sequence of files opened and closed, and if one of those files had contained an error, and if he had noted it, and if he had — by some procedure he could not now recall — brought it to Sasaki's attention, it was conceivable that the action had occurred without his retaining it.

But he did not believe this. Or rather — he did not disbelieve it strongly enough to say so. The effort required to say I do not remember doing this was larger than the effort required

to accept that he had done it and forgotten. And so he accepted it, as he had accepted the rain, as he had accepted the clock. He opened the file on his desk and began to read.

The rest of the day was ordinary. The files came and he reviewed them and filed them. At lunch the menu was pork cutlet. Oda ate quickly and left. Mori ate at his usual pace. He ate at Mori's pace, or Mori ate at his — he had never determined which, and the question had long since ceased to interest him. After the meal they descended the stairs together. On the landing, Mori said something about the cold — that it would be worse by the end of the month — and then added, more quietly, When I first — and stopped. He did not complete the sentence. He waited a moment, but Mori had already opened the fire door and was walking back toward the Section, and whatever he had been about to say had been replaced by the sound of their footsteps on the linoleum, and he did not ask. He returned to his desk and worked until five, when the silence came, and he rose and put on his jacket.

On the walk home the air was cold and smelled faintly of smoke — someone burning leaves, perhaps, or a stove lit early in a house along the canal. The water was black. The lamps made their orange circles on the path. He walked at his usual pace, his hands in his pockets, and thought — without urgency, without distress — that Mori had thanked him for something he was fairly certain he had not done. Not something impossible. Not something strange. A note, a flagged file, a small act of diligence. The kind of thing he might have done. The kind of thing that, if he had done it, would have been exactly the sort of action that left no memory: small, correct, procedural.

He reached his apartment. He removed his shoes. He filled the kettle. He stood at the counter and waited for the water to boil, and he thought: If I cannot remember whether I did it, and someone else remembers that I did, then either their memory is wrong or mine is. And then he thought: Or the question is not well-formed. And then the kettle boiled, and he made his tea, and he drank it, and he went to bed.

V.

December came without announcement. He knew it was December because the heating in the Second Section had changed — not warmer, but a different quality of warmth, drier, with a faint metallic smell that clung to the air by late afternoon. The courtyard outside his window was empty in a way that was no longer seasonal but simply final: bare concrete, bare walls, the drain in the corner, the sky above a flat white that would remain until March.

He worked. The files came. His hands moved through them with a sureness he did not think about. Mark, review, file. The third drawer was nearly full now. He would need the fourth soon. He did not think about this either.

On a Wednesday — he was certain it was a Wednesday, because the canteen served fried egg over rice on Wednesdays, and he remembered the egg, the particular brownness of it, slightly overcooked at the edge — Mori said something at lunch that made him stop eating.

They were seated in their usual places. He had just begun his rice. Oda was absent — a rare thing; he could not recall Oda missing lunch before. Mori was eating slowly, as always, and between bites he said, in the same factual tone he used for everything:

Sasaki was pleased with what you told him about the transfers.

He set his chopsticks on the tray rest. The transfers, he said.

Last Wednesday. Mori picked up a piece of pickle. After lunch. You stayed behind — Sasaki came to the table after the others had gone. You spoke for several minutes. You told him that the transfer files from the Third Section were arriving without interior sheets, and that you had been filing them as received but wanted to confirm this was correct. He ate the pickle. Sasaki said it was correct. He said you were right to ask.

He looked at Mori. He looked at the table. He looked at his own tray — the egg, the rice, the soup. He remembered last Wednesday. He remembered it specifically because the egg had been undercooked, paler than usual, and he had thought about this while eating it. He remembered finishing his meal, returning his tray, walking down the stairs. He did not remember staying behind. He did not remember Sasaki coming to the table. He had not spoken to Sasaki privately since — he could not say when. Months. Sasaki came to the Section at noon and at five. He did not sit at the canteen table. He had never, in his memory, approached him individually after a meal.

And the content — the transfer files from the Third Section arriving without interior sheets. He did not receive transfer files from the Third Section. He received files on his desk, same as always, and they came from — he did not know where they came from. They appeared. He had never identified their source. He had certainly never observed a pattern of missing interior sheets, had never formulated a question about it, had never — he was quite certain of this — used the phrase filing them as received.

I do not think that was me, he said.

It came out before he could stop it. The words were quiet, not sharp — more puzzled than defensive. Mori looked at him with his steady eyes. His expression did not change. He did not appear surprised, or offended, or uncertain.

It was you, Mori said. Simply. As one confirms what day it is. I was still at the table. I heard the whole exchange. You asked clearly and Sasaki answered clearly. It was not a long conversation. He returned to his meal. After a moment he added: Perhaps you are thinking of a different Wednesday.

He picked up his chopsticks. He looked at his egg. It was overcooked today, brown at the edges. Last Wednesday's had been pale. He remembered this. He remembered the specific quality of last Wednesday's egg because he had noticed it at the time, because it had been unusual, because — and this was the thing he could not say to Mori, could not say to anyone — he remembered last Wednesday's lunch in its entirety, from sitting down to returning his tray, and the event Mori described was not in it.

He ate. The rice was warm. The soup tasted of miso and nothing else. He did not say anything further. Mori did not say anything further. They finished their meal and returned their trays and walked down the stairs together, as they always did, and he returned to his desk, where the afternoon file was waiting, and he opened it, and he began to read.

He did not think about it during the afternoon. He did not think about it on the walk home — or rather, he thought about it in the way one thinks about a stone in one's shoe that one has decided not to remove: aware of it, stepping around it, continuing. The canal was dark. The air was very cold. His breath made shapes that dissolved immediately.[8]

[8] A marginal note in the same unidentified hand as previously observed (see Chapter II, above) appears here

At home he made his tea and sat at the low table. The envelope was still there — the one addressed to Yamagata, bought weeks ago, still blank above the postal code. He looked at it. He did not pick it up. He drank his tea and washed the cup and went to bed, and in the dark he lay still and thought: Mori remembers me doing something I did not do. He remembers it clearly. He is not confused. He is not lying. He remembers.

And then, more quietly: Unless I am the one who does not remember correctly.

He could not determine which of these was true. He could not determine whether the question had an answer. After a time he stopped trying, and slept.

VI.

He did not ask Sasaki. He thought about asking — once, on the morning after, while walking along the canal in the dark before dawn, the ice thin at the edges of the water where it met the concrete — and then he did not think about it again. The thought had been brief: I could ask. And then, immediately, the understanding that asking would require explaining why he was asking, which would require saying I do not remember the conversation Mori describes, which would place him in a position he could not clearly imagine occupying. What would Sasaki say? If he confirmed it, he would know that his own memory was wrong. If he denied it, he would know that Mori's was. Neither of these outcomes seemed — and this was perhaps the strangest part — preferable to not knowing.

The fourth drawer of his cabinet opened for the first time on what he judged to be mid-December, and the sound it made — the particular scrape of metal on metal, slightly different in pitch from the other three — was the only new thing in the room that week.

Christmas passed without his noticing. The Bureau did not observe it. There was no holiday. The canteen served its rotation without interruption: mackerel, pork, vegetables, egg. On what might have been the twenty-fifth, or might have been the twenty-sixth — he could not be certain, and did not check — Oda brought a small paper bag of rice crackers and placed them on the canteen table without explanation. The clerks ate from it without comment. He took one. It was salty and tasted of seaweed. He did not take a second.

He saw Sasaki twice during those weeks. Once at noon, standing in the doorway of the Section in his grey suit, saying It is twelve to the room in general, as he always had. And once in the corridor — the front corridor, near the reception window — walking in the opposite direction with his clipboard under his arm. They passed each other. Sasaki inclined his head very slightly. He inclined his. Neither spoke. It was an exchange of the kind that means nothing and requires nothing, and he examined it afterward — briefly, on the walk home — for any sign that Sasaki remembered, or expected him to remember, a private conversation about transfer files. He found no sign. Sasaki's face had been the same face it always was: composed, attentive, without surplus.

This was not a relief. It was simply a fact that told him nothing.

In the evenings he made his tea and sat at the low table. The envelope was still there. He had not moved it. He had not written on it. At some point — he could not recall when —

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in the original. It reads: 6 Dec. The editor has been unable to confirm this date against any external record. — Ed.

a thin film of dust had settled on it, which meant it had been in the same position for some time, which meant he had not touched it. He noticed this one evening and did not wipe it off. It was not a decision. It was an absence of the impulse that would have required a decision.

He read, sometimes, in the evenings — not the novel, which he had abandoned long ago, nor the essays, which no longer interested him, but the small things: a pamphlet that had come through his mail slot advertising a pharmacy near the station; the text on the back of a rice packet; the fire-evacuation notice on the wall of the stairwell, which he had read so many times he could recite it without looking; and, increasingly, the back pages of a computing magazine, where hobbyists advertised equipment and listed telephone numbers for bulletin boards he had not yet called. One evening he copied a number onto the corner of a piece of notepaper — seven digits, a city prefix he did not recognise — and tore it off and placed it in the drawer of the low table, beside the unsent letter. He did not call it. He did not know what he would hear if he did. But the number was there now, in the drawer, in the small company of things he had not yet finished.

The year turned. He did not mark it. The first file of January was waiting on his desk when he arrived, and it was — he understood, without distress, without hope — exactly the same as the last file of December. He had crossed something, at some point in the autumn, and the crossing had not changed the shape of his days. It had only changed his certainty that the shape was his.

VII.

In the spring, Sasaki came to his desk at nine and said only: You will use the terminal room. Second floor. Sign the sheet by the door. He said it as he said everything — as information that had already been decided and required only to be delivered.

The terminal room was on the second floor, at the end of a corridor he had not previously walked. The door was metal, painted the same beige as the walls, with a small window of wired glass at head height. A clipboard hung from a nail beside the door — the sign-up sheet, ruled in pencil, with columns for date, time, operator designation, and a narrow column labeled purpose that most entries left blank. He wrote his designation and the time and left the purpose column empty.

Inside: a desk, a chair, a machine, a printer. The desk was steel, the same model as his own but without the drawers. The chair was the same low chair. The machine was larger than his — an NEC PC-8801, beige case, the keyboard built into a wider housing with function keys along the top. A green phosphor monitor sat on the desk beside the unit, already glowing — the terminal was left on between sessions, the screen displaying a faint grid of characters he could not read from the doorway.

He sat down. The chair was cold. The room had no window. A single fluorescent tube lit the ceiling. The walls were the same institutional beige. On the desk, to the right of the monitor, a spiral-bound notebook — the operator log — and a ballpoint pen on a string. To the left, a box of fanfold paper feeding into the printer, which was a dot-matrix unit on a low shelf beside the desk, its cover slightly open, the ribbon visible inside.

The screen displayed:

```
ACCOUNT CONVERSION SYSTEM  V2.1
SECOND SECTION / PERSONAL ACCOUNTS

SUBJECT NAME:     [                      ]
BIRTH YEAR:       [    ]
PREFECTURE:       [          ]
REG. NUMBER:      [            ]
ACCOUNT TYPE:     [    ]
STATUS:           [         ]
ADDRESS CODE:     [          ]
ROUTE:            [               ]

F1=CLEAR  F3=SEARCH  F5=STORE  F8=PRINT  F10=EXIT
```

The cursor blinked in the first field. He had brought a stack of paper files from the cabinet — eighteen, Sasaki had said, for the morning session. The first file was open on the desk beside the keyboard.

He typed the subject's name. The keys were different from his machine at home — slightly heavier, the travel deeper. The green characters appeared on the screen as he typed, each one sharp and steady in a way the amber text on his home television was not. He typed the birth year. The prefecture. The registration number. Each field accepted the input and the cursor moved to the next, the way a pen moves down a form.

He reached the ADDRESS CODE field. The paper file listed the address in handwritten characters — the full district name, six characters, then the lot number, three characters. Nine characters total. The field was nine characters wide. It fit exactly, with no room for the ward name, the building designation, or the postal annotation that the paper file carried in red ink beside the address. The machine took only what the field allowed. The rest — everything the paper knew that the field did not — stayed on the paper, in the handwriting of whoever had filled it in, undigitized.

He pressed F5. The screen went blank for a moment — the green phosphor holding a ghost of the previous fields — and then:

```
RECORD STORED: 82-1144-1
```

He opened the next file. He typed the fields. He pressed F5. The record stored. He continued. The work was not different from the work he did by hand — reviewing files, marking them, placing them in the cabinet — but the rhythm was different. The machine accepted each entry with the same brief blankness, the same confirmation. The cursor returned to the first field. The form was always the same. Only the data changed.

On the seventh file the rhythm broke.

He typed the address. The field accepted seven characters and then stopped — the cursor did not advance. He looked at the paper file. The address was longer than nine characters. The handwriting was small, compressed. He tried again, abbreviating the district name. The field accepted it. He pressed F5.

The screen did not go blank. Instead:

```
*** ERROR: ADDR FIELD UNRESOLVED ***
RECORD: 82-1147-3
FIELD:  ADDRESS CODE
VALUE:  9-? HIGASHI-ODORI
STATUS: FIELD VERIFICATION REQUIRED

PRINT ERROR SHEET? (Y/N)
```

He looked at the screen. The green text was the same shade as the stored-record confirmations. The asterisks were the same asterisks. The error message occupied the same space on the screen as the confirmation had, as if the form did not distinguish between success and failure — only between categories of result.

He typed `Y`.

The printer beside the desk stirred. A mechanical sound — the head moving left to right, the pins striking through the ribbon — and then the paper advanced, one line at a time. The error sheet emerged slowly, the text appearing upside down from his angle, the tractor-feed holes marching along both edges. He tore the sheet along the perforation. The paper was warm.

The error sheet was a three-part carbon form. White on top, yellow beneath, pink at the bottom. The print was faint on the pink copy — the pins had pressed through two layers of carbon paper, and the characters were softer, slightly spread. He separated the copies. The white copy would go in the file. The yellow in the terminal room's outbox. The pink he would submit to Sasaki.

He wrote in the margin of the white copy, in pencil: Postal mark valid. Address code not in table. The paper file's delivery confirmation stamp was clear — red ink, the circular mark of the local post office. The postal system recognized the address. The conversion system did not. He could note only this much. The rest would require the visit.

He filed the error sheet in the paper folder and set it aside. He returned to the screen. The cursor blinked in the first field. The form was empty again. He opened the eighth file and continued.

By eleven-twenty he had entered eighteen records. Fifteen stored cleanly. Three had produced error sheets — the address, a duplicate pointer he did not yet understand, and a character the machine could not find in its table. The error sheets were stacked beside the keyboard. The printer was quiet. The room smelled of warm ink ribbon and the faint chemical scent of carbon paper.

He wrote in the operator log:

```
4 Apr.  09:00-11:28  □-□  18 records entered.
        3 errors flagged.  0 field verifications.
        Notes: ADDR FIELD UNRESOLVED on rec. 82-1147-3.
        Filed error sheet (pink).
```

He capped the pen and replaced it on its string. He gathered the error sheets and the paper files. He stood. The chair was warm where he had sat. The green screen still glowed, the cursor blinking in the empty first field, waiting for the next operator who had signed the clipboard by the door.

He turned off the fluorescent tube. In the dark the monitor was the only light — green, steady, the same shade as the exit signs in the corridor. He closed the door behind him and walked back to the Second Section with the pink copies in his hand.

VIII.

The error sheet said FIELD VERIFICATION REQUIRED. He took the paper file from the cabinet and the pink copy from the outbox and walked to Sasaki's desk. Sasaki looked at the sheet without taking it from his hand.

Go and see, Sasaki said. Write what you find. Return before lunch.

He left the Bureau through the side door. It was the first time he had left the building during working hours. The air outside was different from the air inside — not better, not worse, but different in a way he noticed only because of the transition. The Bureau's air was paper and floor wax. The street's air was concrete and canal water and, faintly, from somewhere, frying oil.

He walked south along the canal path. The error sheet was in the paper file, which was in a manila envelope he carried under his arm. The address was 9-? Higashi-Odori — the question mark was the machine's notation for an unresolved sublot number. The postal mark was valid. Something was there. The machine did not know what.

The canal ran straight here, lined with concrete retaining walls that rose a meter above the water line. The water was the color it always was — weak tea, neither clean nor dirty, moving slowly toward the river. On the far bank a row of houses backed onto the canal, their ground-floor windows shuttered. A cat sat on the concrete edge and watched the water without apparent purpose. He walked past it.

The address, according to the paper file's hand-drawn location sketch, was on the east bank, between two intersections. He counted the cross streets. At the second intersection he turned and walked along the retaining wall, looking at the building numbers painted on the gateposts and doorframes. The numbers ascended: 7, 8, then a gap — a narrow lot between two houses, no building, no gate, only the retaining wall continuing unbroken.

He stopped. The retaining wall here was the same poured concrete as everywhere else along the canal. But set into it, at waist height, flush with the surface, was a metal mailbox. It was painted the same grey as the concrete around it. The slot was horizontal, wide enough for a standard envelope. There was no nameplate. There was no door or gate behind it. There was no building. The mailbox was in the wall, and behind the wall was the canal.

He looked at it for some time. The paint on the mailbox was not new but not badly weathered — it had been maintained, or it had been placed there not so long ago, though the rust around the two visible screws suggested otherwise. The screws were Phillips-head, set into rawl plugs in the concrete. The slot had a spring-loaded flap. A single leaf — dry, from the previous autumn — was caught in the hinge of the flap, as if the slot had not been opened recently.

He opened the file. He looked at the postal mark on the paper record. The mark was

clear — the circular stamp of the local delivery office, dated, confirming delivery to this address. Something had been delivered here. The postal system recognized this location. The municipal code table did not.

He was writing this on the error sheet — location verified, no structure at address, mailbox present in retaining wall — when the postal carrier appeared.

The carrier was walking the opposite direction along the canal path, bag over one shoulder, the leather strap mended with a piece of packing tape where it had frayed. He was an older man, or a man who looked older than he was. He wore the standard uniform — grey-blue, the cap slightly faded. He slowed as he approached.

The carrier looked at the mailbox. He looked at the clerk standing beside it with the file open.

Are you looking for someone?

I am verifying this address, he said. For the Bureau.

The carrier nodded. He did not seem surprised. He adjusted the bag on his shoulder.

The mailbox, he said. How long has it been here?

It has always been there, the carrier said.

He waited. The carrier did not elaborate. He said it in the tone of someone stating a fact that required no further context — the way one might say that the canal runs south, or that the post office closes at five. He adjusted his bag again and continued walking, not hurrying, not lingering, and he watched him go and then looked back at the mailbox in the wall.

He wrote on the error sheet: Carrier confirms presence. Duration: indefinite. He did not write the carrier's exact words. The form had fields for location, condition, and assessment. It did not have a field for what people said, or for the way they said it, or for the leaf caught in the slot, or for the rust around the screws, or for the canal water below, moving slowly, the same color as the first morning he had walked along it to the Bureau.

He wrote in the assessment field: No structure. Mailbox present. Postal mark valid. Address exists in delivery system but not in municipal code table.

He separated the carbon copies. White in the file. Pink for Sasaki. He placed the file back in the envelope, the envelope under his arm. He looked at the mailbox once more. The leaf was still in the hinge. The concrete was warm where the sun reached it. The canal was quiet.

He walked back to the Bureau. He arrived before noon. He placed the pink copy on Sasaki's desk. Sasaki glanced at it and placed it in his tray without comment.

At lunch the canteen served curry rice. He ate it at the usual seat. Mori sat to his left, eating at the same pace, not speaking. He did not mention the mailbox. There was nothing to mention. He had gone, he had verified, he had filed. The address existed. The form recorded what the form could record.

The rest — the rust, the leaf, the carrier's flat voice, the canal below — was not the form's concern. He ate his curry. He returned his tray. He went back to his desk and opened the next file and continued the work.

IX.

Months passed. The terminal sessions continued — two mornings a week, eighteen records each session, the errors mostly resolving. The canal mailbox remained in the cabinet as an open sheet.

The acoustic coupler arrived in a box from an electronics shop in the city. He had ordered it by mail, from an advertisement in the back pages of a computing magazine. The box was smaller than he expected. Inside: two rubber cups on a plastic cradle, a serial cable, and a single sheet of instructions folded into quarters.

He connected the cable to the expansion port on the back of the machine. The cable was short — the coupler had to sit directly beside the computer on the table, which meant moving the cassette deck to the floor. He placed the deck on a folded towel beside his knee. The tape labels were no longer visible from his sitting position. This was a minor adjustment. He made it without thinking about it further.

The telephone was on the wall near the genkan. The cord he had bought — ten meters, coiled, from the hardware store — ran from the jack across the room to the low table, where it looped once around the table leg and ended at the handset resting in the coupler's cups. The cord crossed the tatami diagonally. He had secured it at two points with small adhesive hooks. It was the longest line in the apartment.

He loaded the communication program from cassette. The warble filled the room, shorter than ROUTE — the program was small. The screen displayed a menu:

```
TERMINAL MODE
BAUD: 300
PARITY: NONE
BITS: 8

READY
```

He lifted the handset from the coupler and dialed the number. Seven digits, memorized from a listing in the magazine's BBS directory. The phone rang. It rang four times. He was about to hang up — the listing said the board operated from 20:00 to 08:00, and it was just past nine in the evening — when the ringing stopped and was replaced by a sound.

The carrier tone. A sustained high-pitched whine, steady, mechanical, without variation. He had read about it. He had not heard it. It meant the remote system had answered and was ready to receive.

He placed the handset in the rubber cups. The cups gripped the earpiece and mouthpiece with a slight compression — he had to press down to seat them properly. The coupler's red LED lit. On the screen, characters began to appear.

They appeared slowly. At three hundred baud, each character took approximately one-thirtieth of a second — fast enough to read, slow enough to watch arrive. The text built itself line by line:

WELCOME

NEW USER? (Y/N)

He typed N. A pause. Then:

HANDLE:

He typed MARS. Another pause, longer — the board was reading its user file from disk. Then the password prompt. He typed it. The screen cleared and the menu appeared, each line arriving separately:

[1] MESSAGE BOARD
[2] FILE LIBRARY
[3] USER LIST
[4] SYSTEM INFO
[5] LOGOFF

SELECT:

He selected 1. The message board loaded — a list of subjects, each with a date, a handle, and a reply count. He read them all. There were eleven new messages since the previous evening. Most were technical — a discussion about printer drivers, a question about disk formatting, a user selling a cassette interface. He read each one at the speed the board delivered it, which was slower than his reading speed. He waited for each line. The waiting was part of it.

He had been reading the board for three weeks without posting. He had composed a question in his mind during the walk home from the Bureau. He had not written it down. He selected NEW MESSAGE and the screen displayed:

SUBJECT:

He typed:

address resolution when physical location exists but code does not

The subject line accepted sixty characters. His fit. He pressed RETURN. The screen displayed:

ENTER MESSAGE (. ON EMPTY LINE TO END):

He typed:

If an address has a valid postal mark — confirmed delivered —

but no entry in the address code table, what is the correct storage method? Store as invalid? Obsolete? Pending? The postal system accepts it. The code system rejects it.

He typed a period on an empty line. The board confirmed:

MESSAGE POSTED — 11/14 21:32

He read two more threads. He logged off. He lifted the handset from the cups — the LED went dark, the screen returned to READY — and hung up the phone. The room was quiet. The heater ticked. The call had lasted perhaps twenty minutes.

The next evening he dialed the number and connected and went to the message board. His post had two replies.

The first was from TANAKA_PC:

```
11/15 08:45  TANAKA_PC
> The postal system accepts it. The code system rejects it.

Probably a timing issue. The code table may not have been updated.
Check the postal code directory against the municipal code table.
They're published by different offices and don't always sync.
```

The second was from a handle he had not seen before:

```
11/15 19:17  KAIRO
Store it as an address with delivery confirmation and no code
assignment. Do not force a code. The address exists in one
system and not in another. Both are correct.
```

He read TANAKA_PC's reply and understood it as practical advice, probably correct, from someone who had dealt with similar data-entry problems. He read KAIRO's reply and understood it as a different kind of answer — not a solution but a description of the situation, stated precisely, without suggestion of what to do next.

Both were helpful. Neither was unusual. He logged off and hung up the phone and placed the handset back in the coupler's cups, where it would wait until tomorrow evening. He covered the machine. He turned off the television. He went to bed.

He did not think about KAIRO.[9] There was nothing to think about. A competent reply from a user he had not encountered before. The handle meant nothing to him — or it meant circuit, which was a common enough word among people who discussed computers. He turned off the light.

X.

```
RECORDS BUREAU CONVERSION SYSTEM
BATCH SUMMARY — SESSION LOG

DATE:        S60.04.11
OPERATOR:    2-8
TERMINAL:    PC-8801 UNIT 01
```

[9]The BBS session logs recovered from the cassette tapes include user registration records for twelve handles active during the period described. No registration record exists for the handle KAIRO. The board's system operator, contacted by the editor, was unable to confirm or deny whether unregistered posting was possible on the software in use at that time. — Ed.

SESSION: 09:00-11:28

RECORDS PROCESSED: 18
RECORDS VALIDATED: 15
RECORDS FLAGGED: 3

FLAG 01 REC 82-1147-3 ADDR FIELD UNRESOLVED
FIELD: ADDRESS CODE
VALUE: 9-? HIGASHI-ODORI
STATUS: PENDING FIELD VERIFICATION
NOTE: POSTAL MARK VALID. ADDRESS CODE NOT IN TABLE.

FLAG 02 REC 82-1152-1 DUPLICATE RESIDENCE POINTER
FIELD: ADDRESS CODE
VALUE: 4-12-7 / 4-12-8
STATUS: PENDING REVIEW
NOTE: TWO RECORDS SHARE PHYSICAL COORDINATES.
STRUCTURE COUNT UNCLEAR.

FLAG 03 REC 82-1160-0 CHARACTER NOT IN TABLE
FIELD: FAMILY NAME
VALUE: [JIS C 6226 UNMAPPED — VARIANT KANJI]
STATUS: PENDING MANUAL RESOLUTION
NOTE: KOSEKI FORM USES PRE-WAR CHARACTER.
JUMINHYO FORM USES SIMPLIFIED.
RECORDS DO NOT AGREE ON SUBJECT NAME.

RECORDS ENTERED: 18
RECORDS STORED: 15
ERRORS FILED: 3 (PINK COPY SUBMITTED)
FIELD VERIFICATIONS: 1 (REC 82-1147-3 SCHEDULED)

SESSION CLOSE: 11:28
NEXT SESSION: S60.04.13 09:00 OPERATOR 2-8

FIELD VERIFICATION DISPATCH LOG

RECORD: 82-1147-3
OPERATOR: 2-8
ERROR: ADDR FIELD UNRESOLVED

DISPATCH: S60.04.11 13:40
ROUTE ORIGIN: BUREAU MAIN ENTRANCE

WAYPOINT 01: CANAL PATH (SOUTH) 13:43
WAYPOINT 02: HIGASHI-ODORI 7-CHOME 13:49

```
WAYPOINT 03:    HIGASHI-ODORI 9 (TARGET)          13:54

TARGET ADDRESS: 9-? HIGASHI-ODORI
EXPECTED:       RESIDENTIAL OR COMMERCIAL STRUCTURE
OBSERVED:       RETAINING WALL. MAILBOX PRESENT.
                NO STRUCTURE. NO ENTRANCE. NO NAMEPLATE.

MAILBOX CONDITION:
  TYPE:         METAL, FLUSH-MOUNTED
  PAINT:        GREY, MATCHING RETAINING WALL
  SLOT:         HORIZONTAL, SPRING FLAP
  FASTENERS:    2 PHILLIPS-HEAD SCREWS, RAWL PLUGS
  CORROSION:    LIGHT RUST AT SCREW HEADS
  OBSTRUCTION:  1 LEAF (DRY) IN FLAP HINGE

POSTAL MARK:    VALID
CARRIER CONTACT: Y
CARRIER STATEMENT: "IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN THERE."

ASSESSMENT:     LOCATION VERIFIED. NO STRUCTURE.
                ADDRESS EXISTS IN POSTAL SYSTEM.
                ADDRESS DOES NOT EXIST IN CODE TABLE.
             FIELD: UNRESOLVABLE WITHOUT CODE ASSIGNMENT.

RETURN:         BUREAU MAIN ENTRANCE              14:18
DURATION:       38 MINUTES

WEATHER:        OVERCAST. 14C. NO WIND.
FOOTWEAR:       DRY.

END LOG
```

XI.

Two weeks after the first exchange, on an evening in late December, he dialed the board's number and connected. The heater ticked in the corner. The room was dark except for the amber display of the television screen and the faint red LED of the acoustic coupler, which glowed when the carrier tone established.

The message board had seventeen new posts since his last visit. He read them at the speed they arrived — slowly, each character building at three hundred baud. A discussion about printer ribbon compatibility. A user selling a disk drive adapter. A question about sorting arrays in N-BASIC that he could have answered but did not.

He selected NEW MESSAGE.

```
12/03 22:08  MARS
Subject: duplicate pointer, both valid
```

Two records point to the same memory address. Both are valid entries. Neither is a copy of the other. The data at the address is the same from either pointer. How should the system resolve the duplicate?

He had rephrased it. At the Bureau, the error sheet had said DUPLICATE RESIDENCE POINTER — two paper files, different subjects, sharing a single address code. On the board he described it as two array pointers to the same memory location. The problem was the same. The vocabulary was different. The Bureau would not have recognised its own question in the form he gave it.

He logged off and went to bed.

The following evening he connected and found one reply. TANAKA_PC had not commented. PC98_KEN had not commented. Only KAIRO.

12/04 07:59 KAIRO
It should not resolve the duplicate. Two valid pointers to the same address is not an error. It is a description of how the address exists. The address is accessed from two directions. Both are the route.

The answer was technically sound. In certain data structures — linked lists, hash tables — two pointers to the same data were a feature, not a defect. The answer was also phrased unusually: a description of how the address exists was not a phrase one would find in a programming manual. It was more precise than that, or less precise, or precise in a different direction — he could not determine which, and did not try.

He read it once. He did not reply. He logged off and hung up the phone and covered the machine and turned off the television and went to bed. The heater ticked in the dark. Outside, the street was quiet. He did not think about KAIRO's answer, except briefly, at the edge of sleep, when the phrase returned — Both are the route — and he turned over and the phrase dissolved and he slept.

PART III

THE FORM

I.

Two more years passed, or what he took to be two more years — the seasons turned, the canal froze and thawed and froze again, the cabinet beside his desk filled its fourth drawer and then its fifth, and at some point a second cabinet appeared behind the first, smaller, grey where the first was beige, requisitioned by Sasaki without discussion. He did not remember the day it arrived. He remembered only that one morning it had not been there and the next — or some morning after — it had, and that he had begun using it without being told to, because the first was full, and the second was empty, and the work required somewhere to go. The first time he opened its top drawer his hand moved to the correct section without hesitation — the birth-year dividers, the alphabetical tabs — as if the order inside were already familiar to him, though the drawer had been empty until that moment.

His body had changed. Not dramatically — he would not, perhaps, have noticed from the outside — but in the small accumulations that register only from within. His back ached in a way that was no longer periodic but constant, a low presence he carried through the day like a second weight in addition to his own. His eyes were worse in the evenings: a graininess, a difficulty reading in low light that had not been there at twenty-five but was — he could not say precisely when it had begun — there now, at thirty or nearly so. His hands were the same. The callus was the same. His sleep was lighter than it had been, though he could not have pointed to the night it changed; he simply woke earlier now, before the alarm, and lay in the dark for several minutes before rising, listening to the building.

The spring of what he judged to be his fourth year — though he had, at some point, lost the certainty of the count, so that fourth was less a number than a weight, a sense of duration that had the approximate density of four years without being verifiable against any calendar he kept — came to the canal as it always did: green on the far bank, the water clearing, the heron sometimes present and sometimes not. He walked to work. He removed his jacket. He sat down. The file was waiting.

On this particular morning — a morning in what he believed to be April, the courtyard showing the first faint green in the crack between the concrete and the far wall — the file on his desk was one he recognised.

He did not recognise it immediately. He opened the folder — beige, standard, unremarkable — and looked at the cover sheet, and for a moment it was simply another file, another name,

another birth year. Then the birth year registered. His own. And the prefecture — the same. And the school name, almost identical, one character different. And he was looking at the file he had been given on his first morning, more than three years ago, which he had read and filed in the appropriate drawer of his first cabinet and never seen again.[10]

He sat with it open on his desk for what might have been a full minute without moving. He was not alarmed. He was not, he thought, even surprised — though surprise would have been the appropriate response, and its absence was itself something he noticed without being able to explain. The file was here. It had been filed. It was here again. These facts did not reconcile, and he did not attempt to reconcile them.

He turned the cover sheet. Behind it were the two interior sheets he remembered — the partial interview transcript, the pencil note — and behind those, additional pages he had not seen before. Three new sheets. The first was a typed summary, brief, recording in formal language that the case had been reviewed on two occasions since its opening and that no action had been recommended. The second was a carbon copy of a form he did not recognise, filled in by hand, listing the subject's residential history in a column so narrow that several entries had been abbreviated to the point of illegibility. The third was a routing slip.

The routing slip was a single half-page, printed on thin yellow paper, with a column of form numbers down the left side and a column of dates — most blank — down the right. He read the form numbers:

Form 3 — Acknowledgment of Receipt Form 7 — Initial Review (Summary) Form 11 — Account Reconciliation Form 17 — (pending)

Beside each of the first three, a date had been stamped in blue ink, each several months apart. Beside Form 17, the parenthetical (pending) was handwritten, in a small neat script that was neither his own nor any hand he recognised from the Bureau.

He looked at this for a moment. He did not know what Form 17 was. He did not know what any of the forms were, except by inference from their names — and the names told him very little. Acknowledgment of Receipt. Of what? Account Reconciliation. Whose account? He had never seen these form numbers before, or if he had — and this was the uncertainty that ran beneath his reading like water beneath ice — he could not be certain he would have noticed them, given how many files passed through his hands each day, each with its own internal pages that he read without retaining.

He closed the file. He looked at his cabinet — the first one, the beige one, where he had filed this folder more than three years ago. He opened the appropriate drawer. He found the place where the file had been — he remembered the position, between the two files he had not opened on his first day — and filed it there, in its original place, with its new pages now inside. The drawer closed with the same sound it always made. He returned to his desk.

---

[10] This is the file the Examiner first describes in the passage here designated as Chapter II of Part I. The editor's footnote at that point noted that the Examiner refers to it again "in the spring of his fourth year, and the corridor at the end of the eighth." This is the former reference. The interior sheets the Examiner originally described (the partial transcript and the pencil note) are not among the papers preserved with the testimony; the additional sheets he here describes — the typed summary, the residential history, and the routing slip — are likewise not preserved. The editor has been unable to verify the form numbers listed. — Ed.

The next file was waiting. He opened it. He began to read.

RECORDS BUREAU — NIIGATA Procedural Handbook (3rd Ed., current)

Extract: Section 4.2 — Filing by Birth Year

All case files processed through Sections 1 through 6 are to be filed by the examining officer in the designated cabinet according to the birth year of the subject. Within each birth-year division, files are arranged alphabetically by family register (戸籍) entry.

The birth year is taken from the cover sheet as printed. In cases where the birth year on the cover sheet differs from the birth year recorded in interior documents, the cover sheet is to be treated as authoritative. Discrepancies are not to be noted, queried, or flagged unless a directive to the contrary has been issued by the Section supervisor.

Each case file is assigned to the year in which the subject's account commenced. The commencement date is not the date of the subject's birth but the date on which the account was opened by the Bureau. These dates may coincide. In the majority of cases, they do.

Files are not to be removed from cabinets once filed, except by procedures detailed in Section 7.4 (Retrieval for Review) or Section 9.1 (Final Disposition). The examining officer has no authority to initiate retrieval. Files that reappear on the examining officer's desk after filing have been retrieved by authorised procedure and are to be processed as new work.

Filed under: Procedural Handbook, 3rd Ed., Section 4 Applies to: All examining officers, all Sections Date of current revision: [not printed]

He had not seen this extract before. He found it — later that same week, or perhaps the week after; he could not be certain of the interval — pinned to the noticeboard in the canteen, in the same position the Style Notice had occupied the previous year. It was printed on the same smooth white paper. He read it standing, holding his tray, as he had read the Style Notice, and he felt the same faint vertigo of being told something he already knew in a way that made the knowing feel less certain.

Files that reappear on the examining officer's desk after filing have been retrieved by authorised procedure and are to be processed as new work.

He read this sentence twice. He carried his tray to the table and sat down and ate his meal, and did not mention the noticeboard to Mori, and did not think about the sentence again until that evening, walking home along the canal in the long spring light, when it returned to him unbidden, and he turned it over, and could not decide whether it answered a question or prevented one from being asked.

II.

He had been dreaming, recently, of a corridor. Not the front corridor — not the familiar one — but somewhere else: long, turning once or twice without arriving anywhere, lit from above by a light whose source he could not see. He walked it without urgency. There were

doors, he thought, or openings, and the sense of numbers — of things being numbered — though he could not have said whether this was something he saw or something he knew. He had dreamed this three or four times in the past weeks. Each time the dream ended without resolution. He simply walked, and then he was awake, and the room was dark, and he lay still for a moment with the feeling of distance in his legs.

He did not think about the dream during the day.

On a morning in late April or early May — the courtyard green now, fully, the crack in the concrete thick with some weed he could not name — Sasaki came to his desk before noon. This was unusual in the way that all of Sasaki's appearances at his desk were unusual: it happened, perhaps, twice a year, and each time it startled him slightly, though the startle had become, over the years, a small and quickly absorbed thing.

Examiner, Sasaki said. He was holding a file — not beige; this one was pale blue, thinner than the standard folder. This is to go to the Fourth Section. Third floor, room twelve. He placed it on the desk. Return here when you have delivered it. There is no urgency.

He looked at the file. He looked at Sasaki. He had never, in nearly four years, left the Second Section during working hours for any reason other than lunch.

The Fourth Section, he said.

Third floor, room twelve, Sasaki repeated. His expression did not change. He turned and walked back to the door at the far end of the room, and he watched him go, and then looked down at the blue file on his desk.

He picked it up. It was light — a few pages at most. The cover was blank except for a stamped number in the upper corner that he did not recognise as belonging to any system he had encountered. He did not open it. It was not, he understood — or rather, he assumed, without being told — his to read. He stood, and put on his jacket, and walked to the door between the third and fourth desks.

He had used this door every day for years — to the canteen and back, twice daily — but he had never used it for any other purpose. It led to the stairwell. He climbed. Past the canteen floor, which he knew. Past the landing where the swing doors with their clouded portholes stood closed. Up one more flight — a flight he had never climbed — and onto a corridor he had not seen before.

It was ordinary. The walls were the same institutional beige as everywhere else in the building. The floor was linoleum, slightly darker than downstairs. The doors were on the left side, numbered with small metal plates: 401, 402, 403. He was looking for twelve. The numbering here was four hundred and upward, which meant — he worked this out as he walked — that Sasaki's room twelve must mean the twelfth room on the floor. Room 412.

He walked. The corridor was quiet. From behind one of the doors came the faint sound of a typewriter, steady, without the pauses that indicate composition. He counted doors. The corridor was longer than he would have guessed from the building's exterior — though he had not, he realised, looked at the building from outside in a very long time, and could not clearly recall how many floors the windows suggested. It was possible that he had simply never paid attention.

He found room 412 and knocked. There was no answer. He waited. He knocked again.

After a moment the door opened, and a woman he had not seen before — middle-aged, unremarkable, in the same kind of grey office clothes everyone in the building wore — took the file from him without speaking, looked at the stamped number on the cover, nodded once, and closed the door.

He walked back to the stairwell. He descended. Past the canteen. Past the familiar landing. Down to the second floor. He opened the door to the Second Section and returned to his desk. Mori was working. The other clerks were working. His desk was empty, waiting for the next file.

He sat down. After a moment, Mori — without turning, without looking up — said:

First errand?

Yes, he said.

Mori made a small sound. Not quite acknowledgment, not quite amusement. They begin after a time, he said. I believe mine started in my fourth year as well. It is not frequent. Once or twice a season, perhaps.

He nodded, though Mori could not see him nod. He placed his hands on his desk. The next file had not yet arrived. He sat and waited for it, and when it came he opened it, and the morning continued as mornings did.

III.

The weeks after the errand were the same as the weeks before. The files came. He reviewed them and filed them. The second cabinet — the grey one — filled at the same steady pace as the first had, though he no longer noticed the filling except in retrospect, when he opened a drawer and found it heavier than he expected. His back ached. His eyes were dry by three o'clock. These were not complaints. They were facts about his body, in the way that the temperature of the room was a fact, or the colour of the courtyard, or the sound of the clock.

He had not been sent on another errand. He did not expect to be sent on one. Mori had said once or twice a season, and the season was not over, and so the possibility remained, distantly, like a door one knows is there without looking at it. He did not think about the fourth floor. He did not think about the blue file, which had passed through his hands and into another Section and was no longer his concern. He thought, if he thought about anything between files, about the next file — which was always there, or nearly always, and which required the same attention as the last.

On a morning he could not afterward distinguish from any other — the same light, the same season, the same smell of paper and the faint dry warmth of the heating system that had not yet been turned off despite the spring — he opened a file and found inside it a routing slip.

This was not, in itself, unusual. He had seen routing slips before — in the desk file that had returned to him, and occasionally in others, though he had not — or rather, he could not be certain whether he had — paid attention to them until recently. The slip was yellow, the

same thin paper as the one he had seen weeks ago. The form numbers were listed in the same column down the left side. He read them.

Form 3 — Acknowledgment of Receipt Form 7 — Initial Review (Summary) Form 11 — Account Reconciliation Form 17 — (pending)

The same sequence. The same parenthetical, in the same position, in what appeared to be the same small neat handwriting. He looked at it. He looked at the cover sheet of the file — a different subject, a different birth year, a different name. Not the desk file. A different case entirely. And yet the routing slip was, so far as he could tell, identical.

He filed the folder. He did not set the routing slip aside. He did not study it. But the number — 17 — remained in his attention afterward, in the way that a word one has recently learned begins to appear everywhere, not because it was absent before but because the eye has been taught to catch on it.

He noticed it again that afternoon. Not on a routing slip — on a label. He was filing a folder in the second cabinet, in the third drawer. The cabinet was pushed close to the wall, and as he leaned forward his hand rested briefly against the plaster. It was warm — not from the heating, which had not yet been turned on for the season, but warm in the way a surface is warm that has been recently touched, or that has retained something. He withdrew his hand and slid the folder into place. As he did so his eye caught, on the inner lip of the drawer — the metal edge where the rail met the frame — a small adhesive label, white, printed in characters so small he had to lean forward to read them. It said: 17 — see Sec. 9.1.

He read it. He did not know what it meant. Section 9.1 — of what? The Procedural Handbook, perhaps; the extract posted in the canteen had been Section 4.2, and so 9.1 would be later in the same document, if it was the same document. He did not know. He closed the drawer. He returned to his desk. The next file was waiting.[11]

The afternoon passed. The files came and he processed them. At five the silence arrived and he put on his jacket and walked home along the canal and made his tea and did not think about it — though not thinking about it had begun, he noticed, to require a small effort that thinking about it would not have required, which meant, perhaps, that his attention had already turned toward something without his having decided to turn it.

IV.

He had been dreaming of the corridor again. He did not remember when it had started — whether it was weeks ago or longer — only that it had come more than once, and that each time it was the same: the turning, the light from above, the sense of numbered openings on one side. This time there had been something new. He had stopped. Not at the end — there was no end that he could recall — but before one of the openings, as if it were the one he had come for, though he could not have said why, and he did not open it. He woke with the feeling of having arrived somewhere without entering.

[11] A marginal note appears here in the original, in the same unidentified hand observed in earlier chapters. It reads: 9.1. — Ed.

The morning was ordinary. Files. The pen, the cover sheets, the cabinet drawers opening and closing on their runners. His back ached in the usual place. The courtyard light was pale and even. Mori was working. The clock moved.

At noon they went to the canteen. The menu was simmered vegetables — the same as last week, or nearly the same; there was a slight variation in the order of items on the chalkboard that he noticed without interest. Through the window he could see the courtyard. The low door at the base of the far wall was the same grey as before, but the handle looked newer — the metal brighter, as if it had been replaced, or cleaned, or simply not yet dulled by the same years that had dulled the concrete around it. Someone maintained it. He ate. He returned his tray to the window. And then, because he was passing the noticeboard on his way to the stairs and because his eye had been — he could admit this now, though only to himself, and only in the form of noticing that he noticed — catching on certain things it had not caught on before, he stopped.

There was a new page pinned to the board. Not new in the sense of recently printed — the paper had the same faintly yellowed quality as the Section 4.2 extract that had been posted for months — but new in its position, pinned over the upper-left corner of an older memo about canteen hours. It was a single page. The header read:

PROCEDURAL HANDBOOK (3rd Ed.) Section 9. Closing Procedures — General

Below the header, in the same small formal type as the filing extract, was a numbered list. The page had been torn — or cut, he could not tell — along its lower edge, so that only the first several items were visible. He read them.

9.1 The completion stage of a case file is initiated when all preceding review forms (see Sections 4–8) have been processed and filed without outstanding action.

9.2 Upon initiation of the completion stage, the designated examining officer shall be issued Form 17, which constitutes the closing instrument of the file.

9.3 Form 17 is not issued in all cases. Files for which preceding review stages remain incomplete, or for which reconciliation (see Section 6.4) has not been certified, do not proceed to the completion stage. Such files remain open.

9.4 The examining officer is not required to request Form 17. Issuance is determined by

The text ended there. The torn edge cut through the middle of the sentence. Below it — below where the page ended — was nothing: the edge of the older memo, a thumbtack, the painted wall.

He stood for a moment. He was aware — in the way one becomes aware of one's own breathing in a quiet room, where awareness does not change the breathing but makes it seem louder — that he was reading the page for the second time. He was aware that he had understood something, though the understanding was not dramatic. It was this: Form 17 came at the end. It was a closing instrument. Not every file reached it. And it was not requested — it was issued, by some procedure he did not know, at a time he could not determine.

He did not take a note. He did not look around to see whether anyone had noticed him standing there. He walked to the stairs and descended and returned to his desk. Opening the second cabinet, the drawer resisted — a slight catch, wood or metal, the runner stiff in

the damp. The sound it made, freeing itself, was familiar in a way he could not place. A kitchen. Winter. He filed the folder and closed the drawer and opened the next file, which was waiting, which was always waiting, and he worked through the afternoon with the same competence he had maintained for years — the competence that was, he sometimes thought, the only evidence he had that time was passing, because it was the only thing about him that had accumulated rather than simply continued.

The light changed in the courtyard. At three o'clock his eyes began to feel dry, the way they always did. At five the silence came — the same simultaneous cessation, unannounced, as though a signal he could not hear had been given — and he put on his jacket and walked home along the canal.

The water was dark and still. The streetlamps were on. He walked at his usual pace. He was not thinking about Form 17 — or rather, he was thinking about it in the way that one thinks about something that has moved from the category of noticed into the category of known, where it no longer requires the small effort of attention that noticing requires, because it has settled into the shape of a fact, even if the fact is incomplete. He knew now that it was late in a sequence. He knew that not all files reached it. He knew — though this was perhaps not knowledge but inference, and he could not be certain whether the inference was sound — that the files on his desk, the ones he processed and filed and forgot, were somewhere in the stages that preceded it, and that some of them, perhaps, would one day arrive at Form 17, and that he would not know when this happened unless he was the one to whom the form was issued.

He made his tea. He sat at the low table. The envelope from his sister — the one he had never answered, from months ago — was still in the drawer beneath a sheaf of blank paper he used for nothing. He did not open the drawer. He drank his tea and looked at the wall, which was bare, and at the window, which showed only the darkened side street and the faint reflection of the room behind him, and he sat there for a long time without moving, in a stillness that was not peace and not agitation but something in between — the stillness of a man who has learned the shape of a question he does not yet know how to ask.

V.

The weeks continued. He reviewed files and filed them. The weather warmed and the heating was turned off — not on a specific day he could identify, but gradually, the way sound fades when one walks away from it: one afternoon the radiator beneath the window was cool to the touch, and he could not say when it had stopped. The courtyard was fully green now. The crack at the base of the far wall, where the concrete met the earth, was thick with something — a weed, or a vine, or simply growth, indistinguishable from the grey-green of the wall itself unless one looked closely, which he did not, except once, at the end of a long afternoon when his eyes were too dry to read and he turned to the window and sat for a moment doing nothing.

His work had not changed. He opened files, read cover sheets, checked dates and designations, made small marks where marks were required, and filed each folder in the appropriate drawer. The routing slips — he noticed them now, in all files that contained them, though he did not study them or set them aside — listed the same sequence he had seen before: Form 3, Form 7, Form 11, and then either a stamped date or the parenthetical (pending)

beside Form 17. He did not count how many said pending. He did not compare. He simply noticed, in the way one notices that the same bird sits on the same wire each morning without deciding to observe it.

Mori worked. The clock moved. On one of these afternoons — late, the Section nearly empty, the newer clerks gone to an errand or a meeting he had not been told about — he stood to file a folder and found Mori looking out the window at the courtyard. Not working. Not reading. Simply looking. He had never seen Mori do this. As he passed behind Mori's chair, Mori said, without turning: The accounts accumulate. It was true — procedurally, factually true. But his voice was different. Not louder, not softer — different in a way he could not describe, except that it was not Mori's voice for work. Then Mori turned from the window, and the voice was ordinary again, and he said: The third drawer of the second cabinet needs adjusting. The runner has slipped. And he nodded and filed his folder, and the afternoon continued.

At noon they went to the canteen and ate whatever was written on the chalkboard and returned. On some days he noticed — though this was not a thought he completed, only the beginning of a thought, abandoned before it became anything — that the files on his desk were not merely work. They were stages in something. Each one had arrived at his desk by a process he had never been told and had never asked about, and each one would leave his desk for a destination he had not chosen, and somewhere in the sequence of destinations there was a form that came at the end, and that form had a number, and the number was the same in every file.

He did not think about this. Or rather: he did not think about it in the way that thinking requires intention. It was simply present — the knowledge that the sequence existed, that his place in it was somewhere in the middle, that the end was marked by a form he had never seen and whose purpose he did not fully understand. It was present the way the canal was present on his walk home: always there, always moving, always in the same direction.

On a Sunday in late May — or what he judged to be late May; the windows of the apartment building across the street had been opened wide, and a woman on the ground floor was airing futons on a frame outside her door — he opened the drawer of the low table and took out the two letters.

They were both there. The first, from his earliest weeks, creased and undated. The second, folded once, beginning Dear sister — and ending mid-sentence. He laid them on the table. He did not read them. He knew what they said — or rather, he knew what they attempted to say, which was different from what they said, and he could feel, looking at them now, the distance between the person who had written them and the person who sat here now, which was not a distance of years — it had been less than two years since the second one — but a distance of some other kind, harder to name.

He took a fresh sheet of paper from the sheaf beneath where the letters had lain. He smoothed it flat. He placed it on the table and held his pen above it for a moment, and then he wrote:

Dear sister —

It has been some time. I have not written because I could not determine what to report. The work continues. My section processes files according to established procedure. I am well. My health is adequate. I have not been ill.

He paused. He had written what to report, and as soon as he read it back he could hear — though he could not have said to whom the sound would be audible, or whether it mattered — that it was not the language of a letter. It was the language of a summary. The kind of summary one attaches to a cover sheet. He continued:

The days have a stable rhythm. I review files in the morning and the afternoon. At noon I eat in the canteen. In the evening I walk home along the canal. I do not find this unpleasant. I am told that after a certain period one may be given additional responsibilities — errands to other sections, for instance — and this has in fact occurred. I have been here now for more than three years.

He stopped. He read what he had written. It was accurate. It contained no lies. But it was — and he was aware of this, aware that awareness did not help, aware that he was watching himself fail at something simple — empty. It described his life the way a form describes a subject: correctly, completely, and without any of the substance that would allow the reader to understand what it was like to be inside it.

He tried once more:

I think of you sometimes. I hope the school is well. The east-facing windows must be warm by the afternoon.

He put the pen down. He did not know what he hoped the school was. Good. Fine. Well. These were words that belonged in a letter, and he could not bring himself to write them, not because they were untrue but because they belonged to a language he was — he could feel this happening, could feel it the way one feels a muscle stiffen that was once loose — losing the ability to speak.

He folded the paper. Once, in half. He placed it in the drawer on top of the other two. Three letters now. Three attempts. None sent. The drawer closed with a small sound — wood on wood, familiar — and he sat for a moment with his hands flat on the table, looking at nothing, feeling only the faint heat from the open window and the weight of having tried and not succeeded, which was different from the weight of not having tried at all, though he could not — and this was perhaps the difficulty, the thing he could not write to his sister or to anyone — have said which was heavier.

He made his tea. He drank it standing at the counter. Outside, the futons were still on the frame. The light was long and yellow. A bicycle passed without sound. He washed the cup and put it on the rack and went to bed early, before dark, and lay with his eyes open for a long time, and did not dream.

VI.

The second errand came in June, or what he took to be June — the air in the building had thickened, and someone had propped open the stairwell door on the canteen level with a wedge of folded cardboard, letting a current of warm damp air rise from below. The windows in the Second Section were open at the top, two inches, where the hinges allowed. They had been open for some time. He could not remember who had opened them.

Mori told him. Not Sasaki — Mori, without turning from his own desk, in the same quiet factual voice he used for everything:

There is a file on the ground floor that needs a replacement cover sheet. Section One keeps the blanks. You will need to bring the file with you — they match by register number.

He looked at the file Mori indicated. It was ordinary — beige, slightly thinner than most, with a cover sheet whose upper-right corner had been torn. Not badly — a small triangular absence, removing part of the printed form number but none of the handwritten entries below. He picked it up.

Ground floor, he said.

First Section. The room past the front corridor. You will see the sign.

He stood. He put on his jacket — a habit he had not examined; one did not walk the corridors in shirtsleeves, though no one had ever said this — and walked to the stairwell door.

He descended. Past the canteen landing, where the cardboard wedge held the door open and the warm air came through. Past the second-floor landing, which was his own. Down one more flight, to a landing he had passed through only once before — on his first day, years ago, following Sasaki's grey shoulders in the other direction, ascending. He remembered almost nothing of it from that morning. He had been too alert to the present to notice architecture.

The landing was small. There were two doors: one straight ahead, which he could see led to the front corridor — the fluorescent light was visible through the gap beneath — and one to the left, which was closed. Between them, set into the wall at chest height, was something he had not noticed on that first morning. A metal panel — brushed steel, the surface slightly dulled with age — with a column of buttons arranged vertically. An elevator call panel.[12]

He stopped. He had not known there was an elevator. In nearly four years of walking these stairs twice a day to the canteen and back, he had never seen it, or — and this was the uncertainty he held for a moment before setting it aside — he had seen it and not registered it, the way one does not register a feature of a wall one passes without needing.

The buttons were arranged as follows, top to bottom:

4 3 2.5 2 1 B

He looked at them. He looked at 2.5. It was the same size as the others, the same brushed steel, the same faint wear at its centre where a finger would press. It did not look new. It did not look different from the other buttons in any way except that it referred to a floor that — so far as he understood the building, which was perhaps not very far — did not exist. There was the ground floor, and the second floor above it, and the canteen between them, and then the fourth floor above that. He had climbed these stairs many times. He had never noticed a landing between the second and third floors. He had never noticed a third floor at all, except that the buttons implied one.

He did not press 2.5. He did not press any button. He turned to the door ahead of him and pushed it open and walked into the front corridor, which was exactly as he remembered:

[12] The editor has consulted such Bureau floor plans as are available in the municipal archive. None shows an elevator in this wing. None lists a floor designated 2.5 or any equivalent. The plans are, however, acknowledged by the archive to be incomplete. — Ed.

the fluorescent light, one tube still failing in its patient rhythm, the smell of paper and floor wax, the frosted window at the far end where the receptionist had sat on his first morning. He turned left, away from the window, and followed the corridor until he found a door marked SECTION 1 — RECORDS (COVER SHEETS / BLANKS).

The room was small. A woman sat at a desk near the window — not the receptionist, someone younger, with short hair and a cardigan. He explained what he needed. She took the file, checked the register number, opened a drawer, and handed him a blank cover sheet. She did not speak except to say here when she handed it to him. He thanked her and left.

He walked back through the corridor. The fluorescent still failed. The smell was the same. He reached the landing and the elevator was there — doors closed, the panel with its buttons unchanged, the 2.5 still present between 2 and 3, still offering nothing he could explain. He climbed the stairs. Past the landing between first and second — where there was, he confirmed, no door, no corridor, no space that would correspond to a half-floor. Just the wall, the handrail, the stairs continuing upward.

He returned to his desk. He placed the file with its new cover sheet on the stack for reprocessing. He sat down. Mori did not look up. The clock said ten past eleven. He had been gone less than fifteen minutes.

He worked through the remainder of the morning and through the afternoon. He did not think about the elevator — or he thought about it only in the way that one thinks about something observed and not understood, which is to say: he allowed it to remain in the place where unexplained things are kept, alongside the corridor dream, alongside the routing slips, alongside the knowledge that not all files reach their end. He did not need to understand it. He did not need to use it. It was there, and he had seen it, and he would — if required — see it again, and he would continue, in the meantime, to take the stairs, because the stairs went where he needed to go, and the elevator went somewhere else.

VII.

It was Sasaki who sent him this time, weeks later — how many weeks he could not say with certainty; the days had become, by then, less a sequence than a single repeated surface, like the linoleum that ran unchanged from the stairwell door to the far wall of the Second Section. Summer had arrived fully. The courtyard below was dry and white in the midday heat. His shirt clung to his back by two o'clock. The fluorescents above seemed to generate their own warmth, separate from the season's, and by afternoon the room had a faint smell of heated dust that was not unpleasant but was not nothing.

Examiner. Sasaki at his desk. Not holding a file this time — holding a routing slip, yellow, the same thin paper he had seen many times now. This was misdelivered. It belongs to a file currently with the Third Section. Take it to them. Second floor, west corridor.

He took the slip. He did not read it — or rather, he read it automatically, the way one reads a sign one has seen before, without the sensation of reading — and he saw the column of form numbers, the same sequence, the same parenthetical beside the last entry. He folded it once and put it in his jacket pocket and stood.

West corridor, he said.

Past the canteen stairwell. The other direction. Sasaki had already turned away.

He walked to the door between the third and fourth desks. He passed through the stairwell — the same stairwell, the same handrail — but instead of going up, toward the canteen, he turned on the landing and went through a door he had not used before. Not because it was hidden — it was plainly there, a standard fire door with a small wired-glass window — but because he had never had reason to go through it. His route had always been vertical: up to the canteen, down to his desk. The horizontal extensions of the building had not, until the errands began, been part of his architecture.

The corridor beyond was long. It turned — once, to the left — and continued. The walls were the same institutional beige. The floor was linoleum. The light came from above — from panels set into the ceiling at regular intervals, flat and white, without the flicker of the tubes in the Second Section. It was quiet. His footsteps made a sound on the linoleum that he could not help but hear as measured, as if the corridor were counting them.

On the right side — his right, as he walked — there were doors. They were numbered. Small metal plates, the same style as the fourth floor, screwed into the wood at eye level: 201, 202, 203. He walked past them. From behind one — he could not tell which — came the faint sound of a telephone ringing, twice, and then stopping. From behind another, nothing. The corridor was longer than he expected. It turned again — right this time — and continued, and the numbers rose: 208, 209, 210.

He was looking for the Third Section. He did not know its room number. Sasaki had said west corridor and nothing else, and he had not asked, because asking would have meant admitting that he did not know where the Third Section was, which was — after nearly four years — an admission he was not certain he could afford. It was possible that everyone knew. It was possible that he should have known. He continued walking.

The corridor turned once more. The light was the same — flat, white, from above. The doors continued on his right. He read the numbers as he passed them: 214, 215, 216. And then he stopped.

He did not know why he stopped. There was nothing unusual about the door in front of him — 217 — nothing to distinguish it from the others. It was closed. There was no sound from behind it. The metal plate was the same as all the others: small, screwed into the wood, the number pressed into the surface. But he had stopped, and he stood there for a moment — how long, he could not say; it might have been two seconds or ten — with the sense of having arrived at something, though he had not arrived at anything. He had simply stopped walking.

He looked at the door. He did not knock. He did not reach for the handle. He stood in the corridor — which was quiet, which was empty, which smelled faintly of floor wax and heated dust — and he felt something he could not name, except that it was not fear and not recognition and not memory, but something adjacent to all three, something that lived in the body rather than the mind, in the way that the corridor dream lived in his legs when he woke from it — a sense of distance covered, of arrival without entrance.

Then he continued. He walked past 217, past 218, past 219, until he reached a door at the end of the corridor — wider than the others, with a frosted-glass panel and the words THIRD SECTION stencilled in black. He pushed it open. Inside was a room very like his own: desks, clerks, cabinets, windows onto some part of the building he could not orient

relative to the courtyard. A man near the door looked up. He took the routing slip from his pocket, unfolded it, and held it out.

This was misdelivered to the Second Section, he said. It belongs to a file here.

The man took it. He looked at it briefly, nodded, and placed it on a stack at the corner of his desk. He said nothing. He turned and walked back through the corridor — past the numbered doors, past 217 (which he did not look at, or looked at only long enough to confirm that it was there, that it was the same, that nothing about it had changed in the minutes since he had stood before it), past the turns, through the fire door, and back to the stairwell landing, and down the half-flight to the Second Section.

He sat at his desk. He placed his hands flat on the surface, the way he always did when he returned from somewhere — a gesture he had never examined but which he now understood, without deciding to understand it, as a way of confirming that the desk was still there, that the room was still the room, that the work was still the work.

The afternoon continued. Files came. He opened them and reviewed them and filed them. The routing slips listed their sequences. He noticed them — Form 3, Form 7, Form 11, Form 17 (pending) — and he filed them without setting them aside, without studying them, without counting. But the noticing had changed. It was no longer passive. It was no longer the kind of attention that happens by accident. It had become — and he could feel this, could feel the difference between what his attention had been a month ago and what it was now, though he could not have said when the change had occurred or what had caused it, only that it had happened — a kind of waiting. He was waiting to understand something. He did not know what. He did not know whether the understanding would come from the Bureau or from himself or from somewhere else entirely. But the waiting was there, settled into his workdays the way the back ache was there, the way the five o'clock silence was there: a fact about his life that he had not chosen and could not remove.

He walked home along the canal. The water was low in the summer heat, the surface unmoving, reflecting the streetlamps in long orange lines that did not waver. He walked at his usual pace. He did not think about the corridor, or about room 217, or about the feeling he had had of stopping where he was not meant to stop — though not meant was wrong; no one had told him where to stop or where not to stop; the corridor was simply a corridor, and the door was simply a door, and his stopping had been his own, unexplained, and he would not — he decided this as he walked, decided it without force or urgency, the way one decides to take the same route home each evening — pursue it.

He would not pursue it. He would continue. He would work. He would review files and file them and eat in the canteen and walk home along the canal. But the waiting — the desire to know something he had not been asked to know — remained. It did not diminish. It did not grow. It was simply there, like the canal, like the Bureau, like the forms that moved through his hands each day toward an end he could not see.

VIII.

The terminal sessions had, by his fourth year, settled into a rhythm that required almost no deliberate thought. Twice a week — Tuesday and Thursday mornings, nine o'clock — he walked to the second floor, signed the clipboard by the door, and sat at the PC-8801 in the windowless room with its single fluorescent tube and its smell of warm ribbon and heated dust. His speed had increased. Where the first sessions had yielded eighteen records in two and a half hours, he now completed twenty-two or twenty-three in the same span, the sequence — name, birth year, prefecture, registration number, account type, status, address code, route, F5 — as steady and unreflective as the filing itself. The errors came less often now. The outbox rarely held more than one or two pink copies per session.

He wrote in the operator log:

```
18 Jun.  09:00-11:22  □-□  23 records entered.
         1 error flagged.  0 field verifications.
```

The entries had grown shorter. He compared them sometimes — not intentionally, but the log was a spiral-bound notebook, and the earlier pages were visible when he opened it. The first entry, from more than a year ago, had filled four lines. The recent entries filled one. The information was the same. The language had compressed.

It was at home, in the evenings, that something else was forming.

He had begun a program. Not immediately, not with a decision he could point to — or not with the kind of decision that announces itself as a decision. It started as an exercise. He had been typing a sorting routine from a magazine — Mycom BASIC Magazine, the February issue, page sixty-eight — and partway through the transcription he had stopped and begun modifying it. The magazine's routine sorted names alphabetically. His modification sorted addresses by code — the nine-character codes he entered at the Bureau, which he now knew by their structure: the first digit was the district, the second and third the subdivision, the remainder the lot number. The codes had a geography in them. Adjacent addresses had adjacent codes, in most cases, though not always — the numbering reflected the order of registration, not the order of the street, and a house built in 1960 and a house built in 1978 on the same block might be separated in the code table by three hundred entries.

He sorted them. The program was simple:

```
10 REM ROUTE.BAS
20 REM ADDRESS ROUTING
30 DIM A$(200), R(200,8)
40 GOSUB 1000: REM LOAD TABLE
50 INPUT "FROM"; F$
60 INPUT "TO"; T$
70 GOSUB 2000: REM FIND ROUTE
80 IF R=0 THEN PRINT "NO ROUTE": GOTO 50
90 GOSUB 3000: REM PRINT ROUTE
100 GOTO 50
```

The DIM statement allocated space for two hundred addresses. Each address string could hold thirty-two characters — the maximum length of an N-BASIC string variable. The route

array held eight numeric fields per entry: district code, subdivision, lot number, a two-character status flag, distance to the nearest four entries, and two fields he had not yet assigned a purpose. Two hundred addresses was not many. He calculated the memory: the strings consumed approximately six thousand four hundred bytes. The route array consumed twelve thousand eight hundred. The program itself, with its subroutines, occupied approximately three thousand. Total: twenty-two thousand two hundred bytes of the machine's thirty-two thousand seven hundred sixty-eight available. Ten thousand five hundred sixty-eight bytes remaining — enough for the subroutines and the DATA statements where the addresses were stored. Not enough for much else.

The ceiling pleased him. Not because it was generous — it was not — but because it was exact. The machine could hold two hundred addresses and no more. At two hundred and one it would stop: `?OUT OF MEMORY ERROR`, line 30. He tested this. He loaded two hundred and one entries from DATA statements. The machine stopped at the two hundred and first. He reduced to two hundred. The machine ran. The boundary was precise. He understood precisely where it was.

He entered addresses. The first ten were Bureau locations — offices, corridor endpoints, the terminal room, the main entrance. The next five were from his field verifications: the canal mailbox at 9-? Higashi-Odori, the twin building address at 4-12 Nishi-Odori, two addresses from resolved error sheets, and one — 14-2-7 Nakadori 3-chome — which was his apartment. He entered his sister's address in Yamagata. The program returned `NO ROUTE`. The address was outside the table's range. He expected this. The table held only Niigata addresses. Yamagata was another system.

The sort routine was a bubble sort — the simplest method. It compared adjacent entries and swapped them if they were out of order, repeating until no swaps were needed. For fifteen addresses the sort completed in under a second. For two hundred it would take four or five seconds — he estimated this from the machine's execution speed, though he did not yet have two hundred entries. The table was mostly empty. The ceiling was distant. The program ran in the space between what it held and what it could hold, and he found this — the emptiness of unused capacity, the patience of arrays not yet filled — satisfying in a way he did not examine.

He saved the program to cassette. `CSAVE "ROUTE"`. The warble filled the room — the particular high-pitched tone of the machine encoding BASIC lines as audio. Eleven seconds. The program was small.

He sat for a moment after the save completed. The heater ticked. The television screen showed the BASIC prompt — `Ok` — and the cursor blinked in the dark room. He had not thought of the Bureau while writing the program. But the program was the Bureau — the same addresses, the same codes, the same sorting logic he applied to paper files each morning. He had built a private version of his filing cabinet, except that his cabinet could calculate routes between entries, which the Bureau's could not. The addresses were the same. The system was his.

He covered the machine. He turned off the television. He went to bed.

IX.

The error sheet said DUPLICATE RESIDENCE POINTER. It printed on a Thursday morning — the terminal room warm, the small ventilation panel above the door propped open with a cardboard wedge. The sheet emerged from the printer in the three-part carbon: white, yellow, pink.

```
*** ERROR: DUPLICATE RESIDENCE POINTER ***
RECORD: 82-1152-1
FIELD:  ADDRESS CODE
VALUE:  4-12 NISHI-ODORI / 4-12 NISHI-ODORI
STATUS: PENDING REVIEW
NOTE:   TWO RECORDS, SAME ADDRESS. SEPARATE SUBJECTS.
```

He took both paper files from the cabinet — different subjects, same address code. He brought them and the pink copy to Sasaki. Sasaki looked at the error sheet without taking it from his hand.

Both files. Go and see. Return before lunch.

He left the Bureau through the side door and walked east, away from the canal, into the residential blocks north of the station. The morning was bright and warm. The street narrowed past a printing company — Bandai Insatsu — and into a quieter block of two-storey wooden houses whose ground-floor windows were shuttered against the sun. He counted the lot numbers painted on doorframes: 10, 11. At 12 there were two buildings.

They shared a wall, or appeared to. Between them was a gap of approximately eighty centimetres — wide enough for a person to pass through sideways, not wide enough for a bicycle. The gap ran from the street to the back of the lot, open to the sky, with a single storm drain at its base. The left building had a blue door, slightly faded, with a bicycle chained to the railing beside it. The right building had a brown door, unpainted or stained, with no railing and no bicycle. Both doorframes bore the same number: 12. Same shade of grey-blue paint. Same hand.

He opened the first file. Subject: Watanabe, K. Address: 4-12 Nishi-Odori. He opened the second. Subject: Kondo, H. Same address. Both complete. Both valid. The postal carrier would know which door was which — would know the blue from the brown, would know which name belonged where. The Bureau's address code did not. The field was nine characters. It held the lot number. It did not hold the door.

He was writing on the error sheet — location verified, two structures at single address code, both subjects confirmed — when a woman came out of the blue door, walked two steps along the concrete frontage, and entered the brown door without pausing. She did not look at him. The distance between the two doors was less than a metre.

He crossed the street to the canal retaining wall and looked back. From this distance — ten metres, perhaps twelve — the gap between the buildings was not visible. The two facades appeared as one. The blue door and the brown door could have belonged to a single building. The canal reflected both facades as a single shimmer.

On the walk back he thought about sorting. Two records with the same address code. If you sorted them — as his program did, as the Bureau's conversion system did — which came

first? His bubble sort was stable: equal entries retained their original order. Whichever was entered first would sort first. But the Bureau's system used a method he had not examined. If it was unstable — if equal entries could be reordered arbitrarily — then the position of Watanabe and Kondo relative to each other was determined not by any property of their records but by the state of the machine's memory at the moment of sorting. First match wins. But which was first depended on who was looking and from which direction.

He wrote in the assessment field: Duplicate confirmed. Two structures, single address code. Resolution: inconclusive — code table cannot distinguish. He separated the carbons. White in each file. Pink for Sasaki.

At the Bureau, Sasaki glanced at the pink copy and placed it in his tray without comment.

That evening, at home, he entered both addresses in ROUTE.BAS. `INPUT: 4-12`. The program returned the same route. He ran it again with the entries reversed — Kondo first, Watanabe second. Same route. The program treated the duplicate as a single point. It did not care which building he meant. It knew only the code, and the code was the same.

X.

Takeda Paper Products was founded in 1953 by Takeda Yoshio, a former procurement clerk for the Niigata Prefectural Government who had, during his years in that capacity, developed firm opinions about the manufacture of filing folders. His opinions were these: that the folder should be made from kraft paper of a weight no less than 200 grams per square metre; that the tab should be positioned precisely 15 millimetres from the top edge; that the fold should be scored, not creased, to prevent fibre breakage along the spine; and that the interior surface should be left uncoated, because a clerk's pencil notation on the inside of a folder must adhere without smudging, and coated paper resists graphite.

The company occupied a two-storey concrete building at 6-1 Furumachi 2-chome, on a side street perpendicular to the canal. The ground floor was production: one paper-cutting machine, one scoring press, one folding table, and a manual tab-cutting station where a woman named Inoue — who had been with the company since its third year — cut each tab by hand with a lever-operated die. The second floor was storage and shipping. Takeda himself occupied a desk in the corner of the ground floor, between the scoring press and the window, where he could watch the tab cutting and the street simultaneously.

The company's sole product was the filing folder, Bureau specification:

- Material: kraft paper, unbleached, 200–220 g/m²
- Dimensions: A4 (closed), 310 × 220 mm
- Tab: right-side, single, 15 mm from top edge, 40 mm wide
- Colour: natural kraft (beige)
- Scoring: single spine fold, machine-scored, minimum 0.3 mm depth
- Interior: uncoated
- Exterior: space for adhesive label, lower right corner
- Company code: printed inside back cover, 6-point type

The company code was TK-06. The TK designated the manufacturer. The 06 designated the product — the sixth item in Takeda's original catalogue, though the first five had never been manufactured. They existed only as specification sheets in a binder in his desk drawer, prototypes for folders of different sizes and weights that the prefectural government had considered and declined. The folder that became TK-06 was the one they accepted. Takeda manufactured no other product.

Production volume was modest. In its best year — 1967, when several municipal offices simultaneously expanded their records divisions — Takeda Paper Products produced eighteen thousand folders. In a typical year the number was closer to six thousand. The folders were delivered quarterly by a driver named Sato, who also drove for a printing company on alternate days. Sato loaded the boxes into a van whose rear door did not close completely and secured them with a length of rope that had been knotted and re-knotted so many times that its original length was no longer determinable.

The folders were indistinguishable from one another. This was the point. A clerk reaching into the supply cabinet for a new folder expected the same weight, the same colour, the same tab position, the same uncoated interior. Takeda's folders met this expectation for thirty-one years. Only the company code — TK-06, inside the back cover, in type too small to read without looking for it — identified the manufacturer. No one looked for it.

Takeda Yoshio died in 1979. His wife, who had managed the accounts, continued the company for two years. Inoue continued to cut the tabs. The scoring press continued to score. In 1981, Takeda's wife informed the Bureau and the three other municipal offices that the company would cease operations at the end of the fiscal year. The letter was brief, polite, and gave no reason beyond the phrase circumstances no longer permitting continued production.

The machines were sold. The building was leased to a printing company — Bandai Insatsu — which occupied the ground floor and shuttered the second. The supply of TK-06 folders in the Records Bureau's cabinet lasted approximately fourteen months. The replacement order went through the paper shop on Furumachi, which now sourced from a manufacturer in Saitama whose name did not appear on the folder.

The new folders arrived in the same quarterly delivery. They were kraft paper. They were beige. They were A4. They were, in every respect the supply cabinet could determine, the same folder.

The tab was 17 millimetres from the top edge.

He noticed it in what he judged to be his fourth year, while filing a record on a Tuesday afternoon. He had pulled the drawer open and was inserting the folder between two others when the tab did not align. He held the folder level with its neighbours and saw the discrepancy — his folder's tab was higher than the ones around it. He looked at the surrounding folders. Some matched his. Some did not. The ones that did not were older — paper slightly more yellowed, edges softened from years of handling.

The difference was two millimetres. It was not visible when a single new folder was placed beside other new folders. It became visible only over time, as old TK-06 folders and new folders accumulated in the same drawers — the tab line shifting, almost imperceptibly, across the row. A drawer of old folders had a clean edge. A mixed drawer had a slight

stagger, as if every third or fourth file had been nudged upward by the width of a pencil mark.

He inserted the folder. He closed the drawer. He did not open the back cover to check the company code. He did not measure the tab position. He did not report the discrepancy, because there was no form for it, and because the folder held papers and the tab identified the file and the drawer accepted it and the system continued.

But the line was no longer clean. In the drawers where old and new folders mixed, the tabs traced two parallel horizons — one at fifteen millimetres, one at seventeen — and the eye, once it had seen this, could not unsee it. The whole history of the filing system was visible in a two-millimetre shift: the years when Takeda cut the tabs, the year the tabs changed, and the years since, accumulating in a stagger that no one had authored and no one would correct.

XI.

On an evening in what he judged to be February — the apartment cold, the heater's fuel low, the amber screen the only warmth in the room — he dialed the board and connected and read the recent messages and composed a new post.

```
02/18 21:53  MARS
Subject: record exists, subject field is null

A record has a complete routing history. Every field is
populated except SUBJECT. The record is valid. It has been
accessed, modified, verified. But the subject field has
never been written to. Is this an error or a feature?
```

He had not encountered this at the Bureau. Not exactly. The terminal's conversion system required a subject name in every record — the field was mandatory, the cursor would not advance past it without input. But he had been thinking, in the evenings, about the structure of his own program. ROUTE.BAS stored addresses and routes. It did not store names. The addresses pointed to locations, and the routes connected them, and no field in the program identified who lived at any of them. The program functioned without subjects. The routes were complete.

He posted the question and logged off. Two days later, he found replies.

The first was from TANAKA_PC:

```
02/19 08:33  TANAKA_PC
Error. A record without a subject is an orphan record.
Delete it or flag it for review.
```

The second was from KAIRO:

```
02/19 22:14  KAIRO
The record is valid. The subject is not required for the
record to function. The record routes, stores, and
```

```
retrieves without a subject. The subject field is null
because the record has no subject. This is not an error.
It is a record that exists for the route, not for the
subject.
```

TANAKA_PC's answer was practical: an empty required field is a data-entry error. Flag it or delete it. This was the answer a database administrator would give. KAIRO's answer was different. A record that exists for the route, not for the subject. It was technically arguable — records without subjects could exist in certain structures — but the phrasing was strange. Not wrong. Not imprecise. Strange in the way a sentence can be strange when every word is correct and the meaning slides past understanding into something else.

He read it twice. He did not reply. He logged off and covered the machine and went to bed. Outside, the wind moved along the canal. The heater ticked. He lay in the dark and the phrase moved through his mind like the text had moved across the screen — slowly, character by character, at the speed of a connection that allowed him to watch each word arrive.

A record that exists for the route, not for the subject.

He turned over. He did not think about what it meant. He did not think it meant anything beyond its technical surface. But the phrase stayed, the way certain phrases stay — not because they are important but because the mind has nowhere to file them.

XII.

The third error was the quietest.

```
*** ERROR: CHARACTER NOT IN TABLE ***
RECORD: 82-1160-0
FIELD:  FAMILY NAME
VALUE:  [JIS C 6226 UNMAPPED]
STATUS: PENDING MANUAL RESOLUTION
```

The screen displayed the error in the same green characters as every other error, the same asterisks, the same format. But this error was different from the address and the duplicate. Those had been problems of geography — a place the code table could not hold, two places the code table could not distinguish. This was a problem of language. A character in someone's name did not exist in the machine's character table.

The JIS C 6226 standard contained 6,349 characters. He knew this because the Bureau's terminal reference manual — a photocopied booklet kept in the desk drawer beneath the operator log — listed the count on its first page. The standard covered most kanji in common use, the two kana syllabaries, Latin characters, numerals, and punctuation. It did not cover every kanji that had ever been written. The old forms — pre-war variants, regional variants, forms used in family registers before the script reforms — were absent. The table had been drawn in 1978. It reflected the language as it was in 1978, not as it had been.

The paper file was not in the Second Section's cabinets. The registration number — 82-1160-0, the terminal zero indicating a pre-conversion record — placed it in long-term storage. He wrote a request slip and walked to the records wing.

The records wing was accessed through a corridor he had used only once before — the front corridor, past the Section 1 office where he had collected the blank cover sheet. Beyond that office the corridor continued — narrower, the ceiling slightly lower, the fluorescent tubes older and one of them dark. At the end was a door marked LONG-TERM STORAGE — DEPOSIT WINDOW. Behind the door: a counter, a bell, and behind the counter a room he could not fully see — shelves extending into a depth that the single overhead light did not reach.

He rang the bell. A man appeared — older, unhurried, wearing a grey cardigan over his Bureau shirt. He took the request slip, read it, and disappeared into the shelves. He was gone for some time — long enough that the silence of the corridor settled around the counter and the single light and the bell, and the quiet had a particular quality he had not experienced elsewhere in the building. Not the five-o'clock silence, which was a cessation. This was an accumulation — the silence of paper held in the dark for a long time, absorbing the air, releasing nothing.

The man returned with a file. It was thinner than current files, the paper lighter, the colour slightly different — not quite beige, closer to cream. And it smelled of camphor. The sharp, medicinal scent of mothballs or preservation sheets, the kind used in archives to prevent insects. The paper files he handled daily smelled of paper and floor wax. This one smelled of a different decade.

He opened it at the counter. The cover sheet was handwritten — not typed, not printed — in a formal hand with a brush pen, the ink faded to brown. The subject's name was written in the first field. The third character of the family name was the one the machine could not find.

He looked at it. The character was 髙 — the old form of 高. The difference from the modern form was in the lower portion: where the modern character had a simple enclosure, the old form had a mouth radical with an additional stroke, a small architectural detail that changed nothing about the meaning but everything about the shape. The machine's table contained 高. It did not contain 髙. They meant the same thing. They were not the same character.

He looked at it for a long time. The stroke was precise — drawn with a brush, by a clerk in a municipal office, decades ago, at a desk that was perhaps not unlike his own. The ink was brown. The paper was thin. The character was beautiful in the way that something made carefully by hand is beautiful — not decorative, not artistic, simply exact. Every stroke in its correct position, the proportions balanced, the brush lifted cleanly at the end of each line.

The man behind the counter waited. He did not seem impatient.

He could resolve the error in several ways. The simplest: substitute the modern character. Enter 高 where the register said 髙. The machine would accept it. The record would store. The file would close. The subject's name would be slightly different from the name on the original register — one character changed, one stroke removed — but the meaning would be the same, and the Bureau's conversion system required meaning, not strokes.

He did not do this. Not yet. He took a sheet of graph paper from the pocket of his jacket — Kokuyo, 5mm grid, the same paper he used at home for program notes — and placed it on the counter beside the open file. With his pen — his Bureau pen, the ballpoint with the cap that did not click properly — he copied the character. He drew it slowly, one stroke at a time, following the brush marks as closely as the ballpoint would allow. The graph paper's grid helped: he placed the character within a two-centimetre square, twelve cells by twelve, the strokes falling on the grid lines where possible.

The copy was not the same as the original. It could not be — a ballpoint is not a brush, graph paper is not register paper, 1985 is not 1930. But the structure was there. The additional stroke in the lower-right portion. The slight hook at the base that distinguished this form from the modern one. He had recorded what the machine could not.

He returned the file to the man behind the counter. He wrote on the error sheet: Character variant identified. Pre-war register form. No JIS equivalent. Substitution possible (高 for 髙). Substitution not yet applied. He separated the carbons.

He walked back through the narrow corridor, past the dark fluorescent tube, past the Section 1 office, through the front corridor to the stairwell. The camphor smell was in his hands. He washed them in the lavatory near the canteen stairs, but the smell stayed — faintly, beneath the soap — for the rest of the afternoon.

The graph paper he kept. He placed it in his jacket pocket and brought it home that evening. At the apartment, he took it from his pocket and looked at it under the lamp — the character in its grid, the ballpoint lines sharp against the blue squares. He placed it on the low table, beside the dust cloth that covered the computer. He did not enter it into any program. There was no field for it.

XIII.

```
SECOND SECTION / TERMINAL ROOM
OPERATOR LOG — SELECTED ENTRIES

12 Apr.  09:00-11:28  □-□  18 records entered.
         3 errors flagged.  0 field verifications.
         Notes: ADDR FIELD UNRESOLVED on rec. 82-1147-3.
         Filed error sheet (pink).

26 Apr.  09:00-11:18  □-□  20 records entered.
       1 error flagged.  1 field verification (82-1147-3).

10 May.  09:00-11:14  □-□  22 records entered.
         2 errors flagged.  0 field verifications.
         Notes: DUP RESIDENCE PTR on rec. 82-1152-1.

7 Jun.   09:00-11:09  □-□  23 rec. 1 err. 0 fld.
```

```
21 Jun.  09:00-11:11  □-□  22 rec. 0 err. 0 fld.

5 Jul.   09:00-11:06  □-□  24 rec. 1 err. 1 fld.

18 Jul.  09:00-11:22  □-□  21 rec. 1 err. 0 fld.
         Notes: CHAR NOT IN TABLE on rec. 82-1160-0.
         Original file retrieved from long-term storage.

1 Aug.   09:00-11:04  □-□  24 rec. 0 err. 0 fld.

15 Aug.  09:00-11:08  □-□  23 rec. 1 err. 0 fld.

29 Aug.  09:00-11:02  □-□  25 rec. 0 err. 0 fld.
```

XIV.

```
FIELD VERIFICATION TRACE — RECORD 82-1152-1

DATE:        S60.05.10
OPERATOR:    2-8
TERMINAL:    PC-8801 UNIT 01
ERROR:       DUPLICATE RESIDENCE POINTER
SESSION:     FIELD VERIFICATION (MANUAL DISPATCH)

DISPATCH:        13:15
ROUTE ORIGIN:    BUREAU MAIN ENTRANCE (SIDE DOOR)

WAYPOINT 01:    FURUMACHI 4-CHOME (SOUTH)            13:18
                  SURFACE: DRY. CONCRETE PAVEMENT.
              TRAFFIC: MODERATE. 2 BICYCLES. 1 DELIVERY VAN
                            (IDLING, EXHAUST VISIBLE).

WAYPOINT 02:    NISHI-ODORI INTERSECTION             13:22
                  DIRECTION OF TURN: LEFT (EAST)
                  SIGNAL: RED. WAIT DURATION: 42 SEC.
              SUBJECT POSTURE: STANDING. WEIGHT ON LEFT FOOT.
              SUBJECT GAZE: SOUTH (CANAL DIRECTION) — 18 SEC.
                            EAST (ROUTE DIRECTION) — 12 SEC.
                                 FILE IN HAND — 12 SEC.

WAYPOINT 03:   NISHI-ODORI 4-CHOME (TARGET APPROACH)  13:26
                LANDMARK: PRINTING COMPANY (GROUND FLOOR).
                            SIGNAGE: BANDAI INSATSU (□□□□).
                       STATUS: OPERATIONAL (SOUND OF PRESS).
                  SUBJECT PAUSE AT LANDMARK: 8 SEC.
```

SUBJECT GAZE: SIGNAGE — 3 SEC. SHUTTER — 5 SEC.

WAYPOINT 04: NISHI-ODORI 4-12 (TARGET) 13:29
EXPECTED: SINGLE RESIDENTIAL STRUCTURE
OBSERVED: TWO STRUCTURES, ADJACENT

STRUCTURE A (4-12-7):
DOOR: BLUE, WOODEN, PAINT CHIPPED AT HANDLE HEIGHT.
FEATURES: BICYCLE (FRAME RUSTED, REAR TYRE FLAT).
RAILING, METAL, ONE VERTICAL BAR MISSING.
MAILBOX: PRESENT. NAMEPLATE: [REDACTED].
MAIL VISIBLE: 2 ITEMS (WHITE ENVELOPE, ADVERTISING
FLYER — PHARMACY, FURUMACHI 3).

STRUCTURE B (4-12-8):
DOOR: BROWN, WOODEN, NO VISIBLE DAMAGE.
FEATURES: NONE. ENTRANCE BARE.
MAILBOX: PRESENT. NAMEPLATE: [REDACTED].
MAIL VISIBLE: NONE (SLOT CLOSED).

GAP BETWEEN STRUCTURES: 80CM.
GAP CONTENTS: DRAINAGE CHANNEL (CAST IRON, 12CM
WIDTH, PARTIAL LEAF COVER). NO DEBRIS.

OBSERVATION NOTES:

PAUSE AT TARGET: 4 MIN 38 SEC
SUBJECT GAZE: STRUCTURE A — 22 SEC
GAP — 1 MIN 4 SEC
STRUCTURE B — 18 SEC
STREET (EAST) — 44 SEC
STREET (WEST) — 12 SEC
ERROR SHEET — 1 MIN 58 SEC
SUBJECT NOTATION: BEGAN WRITING AT 13:31.
PEN LIFTED TWICE (DURATION: 3 SEC, 7 SEC).
NOTATION COMPLETE AT 13:33.

CIVILIAN CONTACT: 1.
FEMALE, AGE ESTIMATE 40-55.
EXITED STRUCTURE A (BLUE DOOR).
CROSSED GAP. ENTERED STRUCTURE B (BROWN DOOR).
TRANSIT TIME: 2 SEC.
DID NOT PAUSE IN GAP.
DID NOT LOOK AT OPERATOR.

ASSESSMENT: TWO STRUCTURES AT SINGLE CODE POINT.
BOTH OCCUPIED. BOTH MAINTAINED.
ADDRESS SYSTEM RECOGNISES ONE ENTRY.

PHYSICAL SITE CONTAINS TWO.
DUPLICATE POINTER: CONFIRMED.
GAP: PHYSICAL. NOT ENCODED.

RETURN: BUREAU MAIN ENTRANCE 13:42
ROUTE: REVERSE OF OUTBOUND.
SUBJECT DID NOT RETRACE EXACT PATH.
DEVIATION: 1 BLOCK SOUTH VIA CANAL.
DEVIATION DURATION: 3 MIN 12 SEC.
DEVIATION PURPOSE: [NOT RECORDED].

DURATION: 27 MINUTES

WEATHER: CLEAR. 18C. LIGHT WIND (SOUTH).
FOOTWEAR: DRY. LEFT SOLE: WEAR PATTERN (HEEL, OUTER EDGE).

END TRACE

PART IV

ATTRITION

I.

He could not have said, afterward, what separated the fifth year from the fourth, or the sixth from the fifth. His eyesight worsened — he leaned closer to the pages now, his face nearer to the cover sheets than it had been the year before, and this change happened so gradually that he did not mark it as a change but as a posture. His wrists ached in the mornings. The pen callus had hardened. He ate half a bowl at lunch, always the same dish, and this was not a decision but a fact.

His hair was thinner. He knew this from the frosted window on the ground floor, which he passed each morning and in which his reflection appeared briefly, in profile, as a silhouette that was — he thought this once, on a morning in autumn, and then did not think it again — slightly less substantial than it had been.

The apartment had changed. The bookshelf was half-empty — the novels gone, one at a time, over months, until the shelf held only the dictionary and a tide table from a year he could no longer identify. The kerosene heater had been replaced. The new one was white where the old one had been grey, and he did not remember purchasing it or disposing of the old one. The kitchen counter was arranged: tea tin, cup, kettle, cleaning cloth, each in its place, the way he arranged the files on his desk each morning — by use, by sequence, by the logic of procedure applied to objects that did not require it.

His sister had not written. He had not written. She was in Yamagata. She taught children. These remained facts about the world. He did not think of her often, and when he did it was without urgency, without the feeling that something should be done. That feeling had been present once. He did not know when it had left.

At the Bureau, he worked. He was — and this was perhaps the only word for it, though the word carried a weight he did not intend — good. He was good at his work. He processed files quickly and correctly. He caught discrepancies on cover sheets that others missed, or that he assumed others missed, though he could not verify this because the files passed through his hands alone. He made his marks in the right places. He filed without hesitation. The cabinets were full — both of them, and a third had appeared at some point in the fifth year, the same grey metal as the second, placed beside it as if it had always been intended — and he moved between them with the ease of someone who has memorised a system so thoroughly that the system has become invisible.

There was a newer clerk beside him now. Not new — he could not recall when he had arrived, could not place his first day or first week, could not remember a morning when the desk beside his had been empty and then, the next morning, occupied — but newer, in the sense that he still asked questions. He was young. His face was — he could not have described it with confidence, even to himself; it was simply a face, present each morning, turned sometimes in his direction with a quality of attention that he recognised without being able to name.[13]

The questions were ordinary.

Examiner — when the birth year on the cover sheet differs from the interior documents, do we note it?

No. The cover sheet is authoritative.

And when the designation mark is already present?

You file it as new work.

Even if —

Even if you recognise it. Yes.

He answered these questions the way Mori had answered his, years ago — quietly, without turning, in short factual statements that admitted no uncertainty. And he heard himself answering them — heard the voice, the register, the flat Bureau cadence that left no space for doubt — and he thought, once: I sound like Mori. And then: Perhaps Mori sounded like whoever came before him. And then he did not think about it further, because the next file was there, and the mark needed making, and the question had been answered correctly, which was all that was required.

The routing slips continued. They were in every file now — or in most files; he did not count, and every was perhaps an exaggeration, though he could not be certain it was, because the slips had become so familiar that their presence no longer registered as an event but only as a texture, as the weight of the paper registered, or the colour of the ink. Form 3. Form 7. Form 11. Form 17 (pending). The same sequence. The same parenthetical. He noticed it the way one notices the time on a clock — accurately, automatically, without the sensation of looking.

The desire was still there. He did not think of it as desire — he did not think of it as anything, because naming it would have required a distance from it that he no longer possessed. It was simply the shape of his attention: slightly narrowed, slightly focused, oriented toward something he could not see and had not been shown. It did not interfere with his work. It did not distract him. It was — and he understood this without examining it, as one understands that a room is cold without checking the temperature — part of the work now. Part of the filing, part of the marking, part of the careful daily movement between desk and cabinet and canteen and home. He did not pursue it. He had decided, years ago, not to pursue it. The decision had held. But the desire had not left. It had simply become quieter, more settled, more like a fact about his body than a thought in his mind — and he could

[13] A later passage in the testimony gives a slightly different account of this clerk's arrival, placing it "in the spring, before the weather changed." The discrepancy may belong to memory, chronology, or transcription; the editor is unable to determine which. — Ed.

not, even now, have said what it was a desire for, except that it had something to do with the forms, and with the sequence, and with the end of the sequence, which he knew existed but had never seen.

At five the silence came. He put on his jacket. He walked home along the canal. The water was dark in the autumn evenings. The leaves on the few trees that lined the far bank were turning. He walked at the same pace he had always walked — or what he believed was the same pace, though it was possible, he thought, that he had slowed without noticing, the way one slows.

II.

The terminal sessions had settled into a routine he could have described by its edges: the walk from the Second Section to the terminal room, the logbook sign-in, the chair (the same chair, third from the left, whose left armrest wobbled in a way he had adjusted to by resting his elbow two centimetres inward), the machine's boot sequence, the prompt. He signed in each session as 二-八. He entered records. The error handler printed its flags — fewer now, because he caught most discrepancies on the cover sheet before typing them — and the sessions compressed. Where his early sessions had processed eighteen records in two and a half hours, he now processed twenty-four or twenty-five in under two. The operator log entries had compressed too. His first entries had been four lines: date, time, records processed, notes. Now they were one line. A date, a number, a dash. The handwriting, which had once been careful, was smaller. He did not notice this. The logbook noticed.

At home, ROUTE.BAS had grown. The DIM statement still read A$(200), R(200,8) — two hundred addresses, eight route stops each — but he had filled past one hundred and forty entries. The cassette label, ROUTE, written in pencil on white adhesive tape, was the same label he had written two years earlier. The pencil had faded. The tape had not. He loaded the program each evening, or most evenings, and ran it, or added to it, or simply sat with the prompt blinking and thought about the data he would enter next.

The program pleased him. Not in the way that other things might please a person — he did not find joy in it, or satisfaction, or the excitement of accomplishment. The pleasure was structural. It was the pleasure of a system that worked: input, process, output. The same pleasure, he supposed, that the Bureau's conversion program provided to whoever had written it — the clean sequence of GOSUB calls, each subroutine doing one thing, each RETURN passing control back to the next. His program and the Bureau's program were not the same. His was smaller, simpler, written in N-BASIC on a machine with half the memory. But the logic was the same. Input → validate → route → output. He had not copied the Bureau's logic. He had arrived at it. Or it had arrived at him, the way the filing order had arrived at him, the way the pen callus had arrived — through repetition, through proximity, through the daily handling of the same problem until the problem's shape became the shape of his thinking.

He had entered, among the hundred and forty addresses, the Bureau itself. The program returned a route that began and ended at the same coordinates. A loop. He ran it twice. The same output. The route from the Bureau to the Bureau was a valid path — the program

did not flag loops as errors, because loops were not errors. They were routes that returned. He typed `NEW` and the screen cleared and he sat for a moment in the dark apartment with the CRT's afterglow fading from the phosphor, and then he loaded the program again and entered another address.

III.

The error sheet printed on a Thursday morning in early autumn: `COMPANY CODE NOT FOUND / CODE: TK-06 / REFERENCE: S53 DIRECTORY.`

He pulled the pink carbon from the terminal's tray. The format was familiar — he had filed dozens of error sheets, their language compressed to the point where each code was a sentence: the company code listed in the paper file did not match any entry in the system's reference table. TK-06. He recognised the prefix. TK was the code the old folders used — the beige Bureau folders with the tab at 15mm from the top edge, the ones that had been in the cabinets when he arrived and that were, he had noticed without recording the observation, gradually being replaced by folders with the tab at 17mm. The difference was 2mm. He had measured it once, on a quiet afternoon, with the metal ruler from his desk. The measurement had served no purpose. He had made it because the discrepancy was there and his hands were there and the ruler was there and the measuring was — like the filing, like the entering, like the walking — something his body did when his attention caught on something.

He checked the current directory — the 1982 edition, a bound volume kept in the terminal room's supply shelf. TK-06 was not listed. He checked the 1978 edition, which Sasaki kept in his office (he did not go to Sasaki's office; the book was in the terminal room as well, behind the current edition, its spine cracked, its pages yellowed at the edges). TK-06 was there: Takeda Shiki Seisakujo, 6-1 Furumachi 2-chōme. Paper products manufacturer. The entry included a registration date (S41) and a capital figure he did not read. The company existed in 1978. It did not exist in 1982. Somewhere in those four years it had dissolved, and its code had been withdrawn from the directory, and the paper files that referenced it — files with EMPLOYER fields pointing to TK-06, files older than the dissolution — could no longer be converted because the code the machine needed was the code the system no longer held.

He filed the error sheet. He wrote on the white copy: `CODE TK-06 / COMPANY DISSOLVED / PRODUCT STILL IN USE (BUREAU FOLDERS).` He placed the white copy in his desk drawer with the others.

On a Wednesday of the following week — or the week after; the days were not easy to distinguish — he walked to the listed address. This was not required. The error sheet had been filed. The resolution code was clear: COMPANY DISSOLVED, CODE ORPHANED. The field verification form did not require a site visit for dissolved companies. But the address was on his route — not his Bureau route, not the route assigned by Sasaki or printed on a routing slip, but the route he walked in his mind, the route that ROUTE.BAS compiled when he entered these addresses at home and pressed RUN. The route passed through Furumachi 2-chōme. He walked it.

The building was there. Two storeys, concrete, a ground-floor entrance with a metal shutter rolled halfway down. The sign above the shutter read BANDAI INSATSU — 万代印刷. A printing company. Not Takeda. The building that had made Bureau folders now printed something else, for someone else, under a different name. He looked at the shutter, at the concrete, at the drainage pipe running down the left side with a bracket that had rusted and been replaced and rusted again. The building did not know it had been Takeda's. Buildings do not know this.

The paper shop was three doors east. He had not intended to visit it. He was walking back toward the canal path when the shop front caught his attention — not through any quality of the shop itself, which was ordinary (glass front, sliding door, a handwritten price card for copy paper taped to the inside of the window), but through the display in the window, which included a stack of beige folders identical to the ones on his desk at the Bureau.

He went in. The shop was narrow — deeper than it was wide, with shelves on both sides rising to the ceiling. Paper in stacks, in reams, in boxes. Envelopes. Carbon sets. Ledger books. A wooden counter at the back with a cash register and a radio playing at low volume. The owner was behind the counter — a man his age or older, with a pencil behind his ear and a newspaper spread before him.

He asked about the folders.

The owner reached under the counter and produced a box — unmarked, unsealed, containing perhaps thirty folders. He set one on the counter. Beige. Kraft paper. A4-compatible. A single tab at the top. He opened the back cover and pointed to the inside surface, lower right. There, in 8-point minchō type, slightly uneven from letterpress: TK-06.

"These are old stock," the owner said. "Takeda's. I keep them. Nobody else orders this kind."

He held the folder beside a current Bureau folder he had brought — he had not thought to bring one; he always had a folder in his bag, in the cloth bag beneath his jacket, among the files he carried for the review that had been scheduled and attended and never repeated. He placed them side by side on the counter. The tabs did not align. The old folder's tab was higher.

"See?" the owner said. "They moved it. The new company moved it down two millimetres. Everything else is the same."

He looked at the two folders. The paper was the same weight. The colour was the same. The dimensions were the same. The crease at the spine was the same. But the tab — the small folded rectangle at the top edge of the folder, which held the file upright in the cabinet drawer, which his fingers found each time he filed or retrieved, which was the point of contact between his hand and the system — was different. Two millimetres. The distance between one company and its successor. The distance between a system that existed and a system that replaced it. Two millimetres, and the files stood differently in the drawer, and his fingers adjusted without being told, and no one had mentioned it, and the Bureau had continued, and the tab had moved, and the company that made the original tab no longer existed.

He thanked the owner. He walked back along the canal path. In his pocket notebook — the Kokuyo A6, ¥200, the one he had been using since his third year — he wrote: TK-06

`/ Takeda / dissolved / tab 15mm / current 17mm / diff 2mm.` He did not write anything else. The notation was sufficient. The notation was, in fact, the same kind of notation the Bureau would have made, if the Bureau had noticed. The Bureau had not noticed. The tabs had changed and the files were filed and the drawers closed and the work continued and the two millimetres existed only in his notebook, in his desk, in a drawer the Bureau did not open.

He went back to the paper shop in November. He could not have said why. The case was closed — the error sheet filed, the code noted, the dissolution recorded. But the route to the shop was on his route, and his routes, once walked, did not close.

The shop was called Shimizu Paper Goods. He had not noticed the name on the first visit, or had noticed and not retained. It was painted on a wooden sign above the sliding door, the characters faded to the colour of old newspaper. The sign was older than the shop front, which had been refitted with aluminium-framed glass panels — the kind installed across the shōtengai in the late 1970s, the same panels on every shop front on the street. The result was a glass front beneath a wooden sign, two generations of retail architecture meeting without acknowledgment.

Inside, the shop was narrower than he remembered. Two aisles between three rows of shelving, each shelf loaded from the bottom. The bottom shelves held the heavy stock: reams of copy paper in their brown wrappers, boxes of fanfold paper for dot-matrix printers, stacks of cardboard for backing. The middle shelves: envelopes — brown manila, white business, air-mail blue, padded, windowed, pay-envelope size. Carbon paper in thin flat boxes, three-sheet and five-sheet packs, the kind used for receipt books and triplicate forms. A thin layer of dust lay on the uppermost carbon boxes, and the cellophane wrapping had yellowed at the corners. Carbon paper was being replaced by NCR sets — the carbonless copy paper that left its mark through chemical reaction rather than pressure on carbon tissue — and the transition was visible on the shelf: the old boxes pushed to the back, the NCR packs occupying the front, their packaging white and clean.

The upper shelves held the finer things. Graph paper — Kokuyo, Apica, a brand he did not recognise — in A4 and B5 pads. Receipt books. Ledger books with cloth spines and numbered pages. Notebooks — campus, ring-bound, stitched. Ink pads in red and black and blue. Stamp pads. String — cotton, jute, the thin white kind used for tying parcels, sold by the spool.

The smell was the thing. Paper has a smell, and every paper product has a different one, and in the shop they combined into something that was not a single smell but a composite. The clean starch of new copy paper. The mineral dust of carbon tissue. The chemical sharpness of NCR coating. The damp, fungal smell of old ledger stock stored too long. The faint camphor of the insect strips the owner hung between the shelves. And beneath these, the base note: cardboard, kraft, the same warm dead-grass smell as the Bureau's filing folders — the same smell as the third drawer of the first cabinet, the same smell as the work.

The owner — Shimizu, he assumed — was at the counter. The radio was tuned to NHK. The pencil was behind his ear. He was writing in a ledger, a bound volume with a cloth spine and ruled pages, the same kind he sold from the middle shelf. The entries were in pencil, two columns, and the man wrote without looking up, his hand moving with the

steady cadence of someone who has recorded the same kind of thing in the same kind of book for a long time.

He stood in the aisle. He was not looking for anything. The shop did not require him to look for anything. Other shops presented their goods as options: choose, buy, leave. This shop presented its goods as inventory. The arrangement was by function, by material, by grade. The ledger books were beside the receipt books because both record transactions. The ink pads were beside the stamp pads because both apply marks to paper. The graph paper was beside the plain paper because both hold writing that has not yet been written. The logic was not commercial. It was taxonomic. The shop was arranged the way a filing system is arranged: by the nature of the thing, not by the desire of the buyer.

He purchased a pad of graph paper — Kokuyo, 5mm grid, A4, the same kind he used for program notes and character copies. He also purchased, without examining the impulse, a receipt book: three-part carbon, fifty sets, the kind used for recording sales. He did not need a receipt book. He was not a seller of anything. But the form — three copies, each recording the same transaction — was familiar in the way that all triplicate systems were familiar to him, and the purchase cost ¥280, and Shimizu wrote the amount in his ledger without issuing a receipt, which was the one contradiction: a shop that sold receipt books but did not use them for its own sales.

The delivery schedules were pinned to the back wall, behind the counter. Handwritten, in pencil, on a sheet of B5 paper: dates and suppliers, a monthly cycle. Bandai Insatsu delivered on the second and fourth Wednesdays. A company he did not recognise delivered envelopes on Fridays. The Bureau's name did not appear — the Bureau ordered through a central purchasing office, and the paper shop was not the official supplier. But the Bureau's folders came from here. The old Takeda folders with the 15mm tab, the ones that still occupied the bottom shelves of the back room — those had come from here. And the new Bandai Insatsu folders, the ones the Bureau used now — those were delivered on Wednesdays, to this shop, by the company that had replaced the company that had made the originals. The supply chain had changed its names and codes and tab positions, but the paper had continued to flow from this building to that one, three doors apart, across the years, through dissolution and replacement, in the same material: kraft, beige, A4-compatible, a tab at the top for filing.

He walked home. The canal was dark. The receipt book was in his bag.

IV.

He went to the machine on the landing.[14]

[14]The vending machine on the stairwell landing was a Fuji Electric model FRA-24, installed during the building's 1979 refurbishment. Twelve varieties of canned beverage, six hot, six cold. The protagonist's daily purchase was UCC Milk Coffee (¥100). The coin-return lever's chrome had worn through to the brass beneath. In the sixth year, the machine was replaced. The product layout was rearranged. He pressed the second-row-left button on the first morning after installation and received Georgia Original instead of UCC Milk Coffee. The correct button was now third row, right. The replacement machine included an atari-tsuki (当たり付き) bonus mechanism. The first time it triggered, the melody was unlike any sound in the Bureau building — bright, rapid, congratulatory, designed for a context the stairwell did not provide. A second can dropped. He took both to his

The stairwell was empty. The fluorescent tube — one of two; the second had burned out months ago and had not been replaced — cast a bluish-grey light on the landing's linoleum. The machine hummed. He put in his coin. ¥100. He pressed the button for UCC Milk Coffee — second row, left — and the can dropped through the chute and struck the retrieval tray with the sound that marked his afternoons: metallic, brief, final in the way that a period is final.

He opened the can. He drank standing. The coffee was hot and sweet in the way it always was, the condensed milk giving it a weight that real milk did not, and he drank it in the time it took to drink it, which was less than three minutes, and he placed the empty can in the collection bin beside the machine, and he returned to his desk.

V.

On the board, someone had posted about scheduling arrays.

He had connected at the usual time — after ten, the apartment dark except for the CRT and the red LED of the acoustic coupler — and scrolled through the new messages at the speed the modem allowed. A discussion about disk formatting. A user selling a surplus of 2DD floppies. A request for help with a printer driver. And then a thread he had started four days earlier, to which two replies had appeared.

His post had been abstract, as his posts always were. He had asked about timing arrays for sequential event scheduling — events at mostly regular intervals, with exceptions. He had not mentioned the tram. He had not mentioned the city. He had described a scheduling utility, which was true: he was building a scheduling utility, or considering building one, as an addition to ROUTE.BAS that would account for the tram's schedule when compiling walking routes. The tram ran from 06:15 to 22:47, departures every twelve minutes except on holidays and during maintenance, when the interval changed.

KAIRO had replied.

```
04/08 08:11  KAIRO
Exception list. Store the base interval (e.g., every 12
minutes from 06:15 to 22:47) and a separate array of
exceptions with date and modified time. For a transit
system with 3-4 exceptions per month, this uses
approximately 200 bytes versus 3,000 for a full table.
```

He read it twice. The answer was efficient — exception list was the correct approach, and the byte calculation was roughly accurate. But the answer said transit system. He had not said transit system. He had said sequential event scheduling. KAIRO had inferred — or known — the application.

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desk. He drank one at 14:15. The second remained, unopened, until 17:00. A yellow-and-red warning sticker, applied September 1985: 「自動販売機の飲料にご注意ください」. The paraquat incidents. The sealed can, the intact pull-tab, the factory crease on the aluminium top: markers of safety in a system that once proved unsafe. He opened a can every day. The act of opening was an act of trust in the supply chain. The trust was performed daily. It was not examined. — Ed.

He typed a reply:

```
04/08 20:55  MARS
> For a transit system with 3-4 exceptions per month

I did not mention transit.
```

He posted it and waited. The board was slow — single-line access, other users connecting and disconnecting, messages appearing when they were written and not before. He read the other threads. He did not disconnect.

The next morning — he checked before work, a habit he had not intended to form — KAIRO had replied:

```
04/09 08:22  KAIRO
The scheduling pattern you described matches a transit
timetable. The inference was logical.
```

The explanation was reasonable. The pattern did match a transit timetable — the base interval with exceptions was a common scheduling structure. Anyone who had worked with timetable data might have recognised it. He could not say that KAIRO was wrong. He could say that KAIRO was specific in a way that felt — and felt was the word, not proved — narrower than inference. The scheduling pattern could have been a manufacturing line, a backup cycle, a watering schedule for municipal plantings. KAIRO had said transit. KAIRO had been correct.

He thought about this on the walk to work. The canal was grey in the early morning, the surface flat, the heron absent. He thought about it the way he thought about discrepancies on cover sheets — not with alarm, not with fascination, but with the small focused attention that preceded a decision about whether something needed noting. He decided it did not. KAIRO was a competent user who had made a reasonable inference. The inference had been correct. This was not unusual. He filed the observation and continued walking.

VI.

The file arrived on his desk in the usual way — which is to say, without his seeing it arrive. He had been at the cabinet, filing the previous folder in the second drawer of the third cabinet, and when he returned to his chair and sat down and placed his hands flat on the desk surface — the gesture that began each new file, the small confirmation that the desk was there and he was there and the work was continuing — the folder was waiting. Beige. Standard weight. The cover sheet facing up, the printed fields visible, the handwritten entries in the blue-black ink that appeared in every file he had ever processed.

He opened it.

The cover sheet first. He read it the way he read all cover sheets — not from top to bottom, which was how a person unfamiliar with the form would read it, but in the order that procedure required: designation first, then birth year, then register number, then date of account commencement, then reviewing section, then the small box in the lower-right

corner where the routing notation lived. This order was not written anywhere. No one had taught it to him. It had developed over years of repetition, the way a path develops across a field that has no path — by use, by efficiency, by the gradual elimination of unnecessary movement.

Designation: 審査官. The same as his own. This was not unusual — the Bureau processed its own staff as readily as it processed others, and the designation Examiner appeared on perhaps one in every fifteen or twenty files. He had long since stopped noticing it as remarkable. It was a category, not a coincidence.

Birth year: Shōwa 28. He checked this against his own knowledge of the filing system — Shōwa 28 belonged in the first cabinet, fourth drawer, where files of that cohort were kept. He would verify this when he filed it. He noted the year without writing anything down.

Register number: 4-7712. He would need to check this against the register itself — the bound ledger kept in the bottom drawer of the first cabinet, beneath the files, where it lay flat and heavy and smelled faintly of the binding glue that had begun, in recent months, to soften in the warmth. He did not check it now. He continued.

Date of account commencement: 17 February of a year he could not read clearly — the final digit of the year had been written over, or the ink had spread, or the pen had hesitated. He leaned closer. The digit was either a 4 or a 9. He could not determine which. This was not, in itself, a problem — the date of account commencement was informational, not procedural; it did not affect filing order, which was determined by birth year alone. But he noted it. He noted it because his eyes noted everything now, because the attention that had once been adequate had become — through years of use, through the daily accumulation of small observations — something finer, something that caught on irregularities the way a fingernail catches on a rough surface, without deciding to catch.

He continued.

Reviewing section: Second. This was his own section. This file had been assigned to him, or would be, or already had been — the tense was unclear because the cover sheet did not specify whether reviewing section meant the section currently reviewing the file or the section to which it would be routed. He had never asked. The answer, he assumed, was obvious to anyone who had been present long enough, and he had been present long enough, and yet the answer remained — not unclear, exactly, but unexamined, in the way that many facts about the Bureau remained unexamined, not because they were hidden but because examining them would have required a kind of attention different from the attention he used for work, and he had only the one kind.

The routing notation in the lower-right box: a small stamped number — 11 — beside a date. Form 11, completed. He turned the page.

The interior sheets. There were three. The first was a typed summary — the kind he had seen many times, a paragraph of factual statements about the subject's employment history, residential address, and family register status. He read it. It was ordinary. The employment was listed as clerical (public sector), which was a category broad enough to include half the files he processed. The residential address was in Niigata — a street name he did not recognise, though this meant nothing; the city had many streets he did not know. The family register showed one sibling, female, in a different prefecture.

He read it again. Not because it required rereading — it was clear, factual, unremarkable — but because reading it twice was his procedure. He read every interior sheet twice. He had not always done this. In his first years he had read them once, quickly, the way one reads a receipt before filing it. But at some point — he could not say when; it had been gradual, like the leaning — he had begun reading them twice, and the second reading had become part of the process, inseparable from it, so that now a file read only once would have felt incomplete, the way a sentence missing its final word feels incomplete, even if the meaning is already clear.

The second interior sheet was a carbon copy of a residential history — a list of addresses and dates, the earliest at the top, the most recent at the bottom. He counted seven entries. The moves were frequent in the early years and then less frequent, settling into a single address for the final four entries, which differed only in the dates beside them — renewals, perhaps, or re-registrations. He noted the dates. They were consistent. They progressed in order. Nothing was unusual.

The third interior sheet was different. It was not typed — it was handwritten, in a hand he did not recognise, on paper that was slightly thinner than the other sheets, slightly more translucent, as if it belonged to a different stock. He read it. It was brief — a single paragraph, four lines:

Subject reviewed at standard interval. No action required. Account proceeds to next stage. See register for confirmation of sequence.

He read it again. It was Bureau language — the kind that appeared in many files, in many forms, in many hands. It told him nothing he did not already know about the file's progress through the system. But the paper was wrong. Not wrong — he could not say it was wrong, because he did not know what paper the Bureau used for which purpose, or whether the stock had changed, or whether different sections used different supplies — but different. Thinner. Slightly more translucent. And the hand was unfamiliar, which was also not wrong, because many hands passed through these files, and he did not know them all, and had no reason to know them all.

He set the sheet down. He picked it up again. He held it beside the first interior sheet — the typed summary — and compared the paper. The typed sheet was heavier, opaque, with a faint watermark visible when held to the light. The handwritten sheet had no watermark. It was thinner by a degree he could feel between his fingers but could not have measured. It was the same size. It was the same colour — off-white, the same off-white as everything — but it was not the same paper.

He put both sheets down. He opened the bottom drawer of the first cabinet and took out the register — the bound ledger, heavy, the binding glue faintly warm — and opened it to the page for Shōwa 28. He found the register number: 4-7712. The entry was there. Birth year, designation, date of commencement, reviewing section. Everything matched the cover sheet. Beside the register number, in the column marked sequence, there was a list of form numbers — the same numbers that appeared on the routing slips: 3, 7, 11. No 17. The sequence ended at 11.

He closed the register. He returned it to the drawer. He sat down. He looked at the file — the cover sheet, the three interior sheets, the beige folder — and he made a mark. A small pencil mark in the upper-left corner of the cover sheet: a single vertical line, no more than

a centimetre tall. This was the flagging procedure. One vertical line meant: discrepancy noted, nature unspecified, for review by Section supervisor at next quarterly audit. He had made this mark before — perhaps a dozen times in six years. Perhaps fewer. He did not keep count. The mark was small. It committed him to nothing. It required no explanation, no written note, no conversation with Sasaki or anyone else. It simply indicated that something in the file had caught his attention — had caught on the surface of his attention like a thread on a nail — and that the file should, at some point, be looked at again by someone with authority to determine whether the discrepancy was a discrepancy or simply a variation within the range of the ordinary.

He closed the folder. He filed it in the first cabinet, fourth drawer, between two files whose register numbers bracketed 4-7712. The drawer closed. He returned to his desk.

Through the window beside the cabinet: the courtyard, the far wall. The low door. He had forgotten it.

The next file was waiting. He placed his hands flat on the surface. He opened it.

The cover sheet. Designation. Birth year. Register number. Date of commencement. Reviewing section. Routing notation. He read them in order. He turned the page. Interior sheets — two this time, both typed, both on the same heavy paper. He read them twice. Nothing caught. He made no mark. He filed it.

The next file. The same sequence. Cover sheet. Interior sheets. Register check. Filing. No mark. The morning continued. The clock moved. The newer clerk beside him worked in the same rhythm — or nearly the same; his pace was slightly slower, his pauses slightly longer, his hands returning to the desk surface with a hesitation that would, in time, become invisible, as his own hesitation had become invisible, years ago, worn smooth by repetition until the gesture was no longer a gesture but simply how one worked.

At noon the silence did not come — it was not yet noon. He continued. He was aware, distantly, that the morning had contained only files — that nothing else had happened, that no errand had arrived, that no question had been asked, that the Section had been quiet as it was always quiet — not silence but the sound of paper and pencil and drawer-runners and the faint creak of a chair adjusted by someone whose name he did not think, and that this quietness was — he could feel this without thinking it — the thing itself, the substance of his days, and that his days were mostly this, and that this was mostly enough, and that the mostly was the only word in the sentence that had changed in six years.

VII.

The question came on a Thursday — or what he took to be a Thursday; the days were difficult to distinguish from each other except by the canteen menu, which rotated on a weekly cycle he had never memorised but which his body seemed to know, arriving each noon with a mild expectation that was either confirmed or not. They were eating. The newer clerk sat across from him, as he always did, eating his full bowl at the pace of someone who had not yet learned that pace did not matter, that the canteen would not close on them, that

the return to the desk happened at a time determined by something other than the speed of one's chopsticks.

The clerk put down his bowl. He looked at him — not directly, not with the boldness of a question already formed, but with the slight sideways attention of someone deciding whether to speak. Then he spoke.

Examiner — the routing slips. The sequence of forms listed on them.

He looked up. He said nothing. He waited.

They list Form 3, and then Form 7, and then Form 11. And then there is another, at the bottom. The last one. It always says "pending."

He nodded. He was aware — in the way one is aware of a sound that has been present for a long time and is now, suddenly, being pointed to by someone who has only just noticed it — that the clerk was asking something he had himself noticed years ago. And that the question, coming from outside his own attention, had a different quality than it had when it lived only inside him. It was smaller. It was a procedural question. A clerk's question. The kind of question one asks because one does not yet know the system well enough to know which questions the system does not answer.

Yes, he said. It is listed on the routing slips.

Do you know what it is? The form itself — have you seen one?

He considered this. He could have said no, which would have been true but incomplete. He could have said it comes at the end of a sequence, and not all files reach it — also true, but requiring him to explain how he knew this — the Handbook page, the cabinet label, the years of noticing — and explaining felt, in that moment, like a larger thing than answering. So he said what was simplest, what was most precisely true, what committed him to nothing beyond the fact itself:

I have not processed one.

The clerk nodded. He picked up his bowl again. The exchange was over. It had lasted — he was aware of this, aware of the smallness of it, aware that it had contained almost nothing and yet had felt, to him, like a door briefly opened onto a corridor he had chosen not to walk — less than a minute. Perhaps thirty seconds. The canteen continued around them. Mori ate in his usual silence. The clock above the door showed twelve twenty-three.

They returned to their desks. On the stairs — descending from the canteen, the short corridor before the fire door — the ceiling had seemed lower than he remembered. Not dramatically. Not enough to remark upon. But his body had adjusted: shoulders drawing in, posture shifting forward by a degree his mind did not register. He had not looked up. He had walked through and the adjustment had passed and he was at his desk and the afternoon continued. Files came. He processed them. The newer clerk processed his own, at his own pace, with his own hesitations — and he did not look at him, did not watch him work, did not return to what the clerk had asked or whether the clerk would ask again or whether the asking itself meant anything beyond what it appeared to mean, which was: a newer employee learning the texture of his work, encountering the boundaries of what was explained and what was simply present, and pressing, lightly, against one of those boundaries as anyone with attention would press.

But he had said: I have not processed one. And this was true. And it was — he could feel this, beneath the truth of it, beneath the accuracy — also the thing he had been carrying for years: the knowledge that the sequence had an end he had never reached, that his place in the system was somewhere before that end, and that the end, whatever it was, remained ahead of him, unreached, like a room in a corridor one walks without arriving at.[15]

At five the silence came. He walked home along the canal. He did not think about the clerk's question.

VIII.

One evening — a Tuesday, he thought, though certainty about weekdays had become a quality he maintained only through the canteen menu and the pattern of his terminal sessions — he did not load ROUTE.BAS. He connected to the board instead.

He had been thinking about a print formatting problem. ROUTE.BAS, when given a route with more than six stops, produced output that exceeded the line width. On screen this was manageable — the text wrapped to the next line, ragged, readable. But he had begun printing routes on the dot-matrix printer he had bought secondhand in the spring — a used model, NEC PC-PR201, purchased from the board itself, from PC98_KEN's classified listing — and the printed output truncated at column 80. The stops beyond column 80 disappeared off the right edge of the fanfold paper.

He posted:

```
06/29 21:44  MARS
Subject: print formatting for variable-length text fields

Sending formatted output to a printer. Some text fields
exceed the line width. Best approach: truncate, wrap, or
abbreviate?
```

He disconnected and went to bed.

The next evening he found KAIRO's reply:

```
06/30 08:18  KAIRO
Wrap. But set the wrap point at column 72, not 80. The
fanfold paper's tractor holes occupy the outer margins.
Printed text extending past column 76 will be partially
obscured by the holes or cut by the perforation.
```

He had not mentioned fanfold paper. He had not mentioned a dot-matrix printer. He had said printer and line width. KAIRO had supplied the paper type, the margin constraint, the physical detail of tractor holes.

He typed:

[15] A marginal note appears here in the original, in the same unidentified hand observed in earlier chapters. It reads: not yet. The editor notes its placement beside the passage quoted above without interpretation. — Ed.

```
06/30 22:01  MARS
I did not mention fanfold paper or a dot-matrix printer.
```

And KAIRO, the next morning:

```
06/30 23:15  KAIRO
Most printers used with the PC-8001 series are dot-matrix
with fanfold feed. The assumption was reasonable.
```

The explanation was, again, reasonable. Most printers connected to the PC-8001 series were dot-matrix. Fanfold paper was standard. The assumption was — he could concede this — logical. But this was the second time. The tram schedule, and now the paper. Twice, KAIRO had named physical details that the question did not contain.

He implemented the wrap at column 72. It worked. The printed routes fit the paper. The tractor-hole margins were clear. KAIRO's advice was correct, as KAIRO's advice was always correct. He did not reply to thank KAIRO. He did not post again that evening. He turned off the machine and the television and covered the coupler and went to bed. The heater ticked. He did not think about KAIRO's knowledge of his printer. He thought about the routes, printed now, the fanfold paper folded in a stack beside the machine, each route a sequence of addresses that his program had compiled from the data in his notebook, which had come from the Bureau, which had come from the city, which had — but this was the chain he did not follow, because following it required asking where data came from, and asking where data came from was the kind of question that had, he noticed, the same structure as the questions he asked on the board and the questions the Bureau asked of its records and the questions that were, he was beginning to understand, not different questions at all but the same question in different registers, and the question was — but he did not complete it. He turned over. The heater ticked. He slept.

IX.

He was not looking for it. This was — and he was precise about this, precise in the way that he was precise about discrepancies on cover sheets — important to establish, even if only to himself, even if the establishing served no purpose beyond the small reassurance that what he had done had not been an act of investigation but an act of routine. He had been in the terminal room. His session had ended. The records for the day had been entered, the error sheets filed, the logbook signed. The terminal displayed the BASIC prompt — the same prompt it always displayed when the program was not running, the OK that waited for input the way the desk waited for files, without urgency, without impatience, with the simple mechanical readiness of a system that does not care whether it is used.

He typed `LIST`.

The command was standard. It was in the N88-BASIC manual — the ring-bound manual kept in the terminal room's lower shelf, its pages soft from handling, its cover stained with a ring from someone's tea. LIST displayed the program's source code on screen. Any operator could type it. No one did, because operators used programs; they did not read them. Reading a program was not forbidden. It was simply irrelevant — the way reading

the wiring diagram of a typewriter is irrelevant to the person typing a letter. The letter is what matters. The wiring is for someone else.

He typed `LIST` and the program scrolled.

Hundreds of lines. The screen filled and scrolled and he watched the code move past — line numbers, keywords, variables — at the speed the terminal could render, which was the speed of reading, which was fast enough to see and too fast to understand. He typed `LIST 100-200` and the scrolling stopped and the first hundred lines of the main program appeared, static, readable.

He read them.

Line 100: the program header. ACCT-ENTRY v2.1. A REM comment: `REM *** RECORDS BUREAU CONVERSION SYSTEM ***`. The version number was the same version that appeared on the printout header when he ran a batch. He had seen the number but had never thought about it as a version — as an indication that there had been a v1.0, and perhaps a v2.0, and perhaps other versions before those, written by someone, tested, replaced, the way the old folders had been replaced by the new ones, the way the old heater had been replaced by the new one, the way systems replaced themselves without the people inside them being told.

He typed `LIST 500-600`. The input handler. GOSUB 500. This was the subroutine that accepted his keystrokes — F1 through F10, each function key mapped to a field on the data entry screen. F1: family name. F2: given name. F3: birth year. He knew this from the keyboard template, the laminated card taped above the function keys. He had never seen the code that made the keys work. Now he saw it: a chain of IF statements, each testing the key pressed, each branching to a field-display routine. The code was clean. Whoever had written it used consistent spacing, consistent variable names, consistent comments. The comments were in English — REM FAMILY NAME INPUT, REM BIRTH YEAR VALIDATE — which was standard for Japanese programmers of the era who had learned BASIC from American manuals.

He typed `LIST 3000-3200`. He did not know why he chose this range. He had been moving through the program in increments — main loop, input, validation — and the next subroutine in sequence was the error handler. GOSUB 3000.

```
3000 REM *** ERROR HANDLER ***
3010 IF E=1 THEN E$="ADDR FIELD UNRESOLVED"
3020 IF E=2 THEN E$="DUPLICATE RESIDENCE POINTER"
3030 IF E=3 THEN E$="CHARACTER NOT IN TABLE"
3040 IF E=4 THEN E$="COMPANY CODE NOT FOUND"
3050 IF E=5 THEN E$="RECORD EXISTS WITHOUT SUBJECT"
3060 IF E=6 THEN E$="SUBJECT EXISTS WITHOUT RECORD"
3070 IF E=7 THEN E$="ROUTE RANGE EXCEEDED"
3080 IF E=8 THEN E$="MEDIA FORMAT UNREADABLE"
3090 IF E=9 THEN E$="MEMORY ALLOCATION FAILURE"
3100 IF E=10 THEN E$="INDEX LOOP DETECTED"
3110 IF E=11 THEN E$="NOT PRESENTLY CLASSIFIABLE"
3120 IF E>11 THEN E$="UNDEFINED ERROR "+STR$(E)
3130 RETURN
```

Eleven error codes. He had encountered five. ADDR FIELD UNRESOLVED — the canal-side mailbox. DUPLICATE RESIDENCE POINTER — the twin buildings. CHARACTER NOT IN TABLE — the old kanji. COMPANY CODE NOT FOUND — Takeda, the folders, the 2mm tab. RECORD EXISTS WITHOUT SUBJECT — he had not encountered this one yet, but the code was there, waiting. Five codes he knew. Six he did not. The program contained a taxonomy of everything that could go wrong — every category of failure the system's designer had anticipated — and the taxonomy was longer than his experience. The system knew about errors he had not made. The system knew about errors no one, perhaps, had made — errors that existed only as possibilities, as empty drawers in a cabinet that might never be filled.

He looked at code 11: NOT PRESENTLY CLASSIFIABLE. A category for what could not be categorised. The system's designer had anticipated that the taxonomy itself would be insufficient — that errors would arise that did not match any of the eleven types — and had built a drawer for the things that would not fit. The program had a place for the unplaceable. He did not know what to think about this. He did not try to think about it. He wrote the eleven codes in his pocket notebook — all of them, E=1 through E=11, in the same pencil, in the same small hand — and closed the notebook and returned it to his shirt pocket.

He typed `LIST 5000-5200`.

```
5000 REM *** ROUTE COMPILE ***
5010 REM SORT ALL ENTERED RECORDS BY ADDR CODE
5020 REM BUILD SEQUENCE ARRAY S(N)
5030 REM OUTPUT COMPILED ROUTE
5040 FOR I=1 TO N
5050   FOR J=1 TO 8
5060     IF R(I,J)>0 THEN S(K)=R(I,J):K=K+1
5070   NEXT J
5080 NEXT I
5090 REM SORT S() BY NEAREST UNVISITED
5100 GOSUB 5500
5110 REM PRINT ROUTE
5120 FOR I=1 TO K
5130   PRINT S(I)
5140 NEXT I
5150 RETURN
```

A route compiler. The subroutine took all entered records, extracted their address codes, sorted them into a sequence, and printed the route. It was — and he recognised this immediately, with a clarity that was not discovery but recognition, the way one recognises a face in a crowd that one has been looking at without seeing — the same logic as ROUTE.BAS. His program at home. The Bureau's program had the same capability. Input addresses, compile a route, print the sequence.

But no part of the main program called GOSUB 5000. He checked. He typed `LIST 100-200` again, and `LIST 200-300`, and `LIST 300-400`, reading each GOSUB call, each branch, each jump. The main program called 500, 1000, 2000, 3000, 4000. It did not call 5000. The route compiler existed in the program the way the Shōwa 47 form existed in the filing cabinet — present, unused, from another time. Someone had written it. Someone

had decided not to use it. Or someone had written it for a future phase of the conversion project that had never arrived.

He typed `LIST 8000-8600`. The DATA tables. Address codes, prefecture identifiers, status flags — the reference data the program used for validation. He scrolled through them. Standard entries, hundreds of them, the city's districts encoded as numbers. And at the end:

```
8500 DATA "---","---","---",0,0,0
8510 DATA "---","---","---",0,0,0
8520 DATA "---","---","---",0,0,0
```

Three empty records. Placeholders. Allocated but unused — memory reserved for entries that did not exist. He looked at them the way he looked at the blank folders in the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet, the ones that had been there when he arrived and had never been used and whose presence had never been explained. The program had empty drawers. The building had empty rooms. The filing system had empty folders. Each system contained space for things that were not there.

In the REM comments — the remark lines the program ignored, written for human readers who were not expected to be operators — he found annotations: `REM KS - KOSEKI LINK`, `REM JH - JUMINHYO REF`, `REM TK - TAKEDA COMPAT`. The first two were transparent: koseki and jūminhyō cross-references, the family register and the resident registration system. The third — TK — was the folder company. Takeda. The programmer's comment said the code was designed for Takeda compatibility. The digital system had been built to match the paper system's filing order. The program knew about the folders. The 2mm tab position was encoded in the program's architecture — not as a measurement but as a compatibility flag, a note from one system to another that said: the paper came first; the machine follows the paper.

He typed `NEW`. The screen cleared. He signed the logbook: date, time, session end. He stood. The terminal room was empty. The machine hummed. The fluorescent tube above the terminal buzzed at its usual frequency, the frequency he had ceased to hear years ago and could now, in the silence of the empty room, hear again — a thin, high sound that was not in the room but in the walls, in the wiring, in the building itself. He turned off the light. He closed the door. He walked back to the Second Section. His desk was there. His jacket was on the hook. The newer clerk had gone. Mori had gone. The clock showed seventeen minutes past five.

He put on his jacket. He walked home along the canal. The water was dark and still. He carried the eleven error codes in his notebook and the route compiler in his mind and the empty DATA records and the TK compatibility flag and the knowledge that his private program and the Bureau's program shared a logic that neither had copied from the other, and he walked, and the canal was beside him, and the cold was in the air, and he did not know what to do with any of it.

X.

The record appeared on a Tuesday in winter. It did not arrive as a file — there was no beige folder, no cover sheet, no paper to hold. It appeared on the terminal screen during a routine index check, a task he performed at the end of each session: scrolling through the day's entries, verifying that the record numbers were sequential, that no duplicate had been created, that the index was clean.

The index was not clean.

Between records 82-1247-6 and 82-1249-0, where 82-1248 should have been — either absent (a gap in the sequence, which was normal; not all numbers were assigned) or present (the next record in order) — there was an entry. Record 82-1248-1. He had not entered it. The record number was not in his session log. He checked the logbook: no other operator had used this terminal today. The record had not been entered by a person sitting in this chair, at this keyboard, during any logged session.

He opened the record.

Every field was populated. Family name: blank — not empty, but marked `[UNALLOCATED]`, a status he had never seen in a live record. Given name: blank, same status. Birth year: Shōwa 28. Prefecture of origin: Niigata. School: a name he recognised — not his school, but similar, one character different, the same character from Case 3, the old kanji the machine could not hold. Employment: clerical (public sector). Residential history: seven addresses, the earliest in another prefecture, the most recent in the city, in a neighbourhood he could have walked to from the Bureau in the time it took to walk to the canal mailbox.

The routing history was complete. Forms 3, 7, 11 — all marked as processed. Form 17: pending. The record had a full routing sequence. It had been through the system. It had been reviewed, processed, advanced. Everything was there — everything except the subject. The record described a life. The life had no name.

He sat in the terminal room's quiet and looked at the screen. The green characters glowed on the phosphor. His glasses — he wore glasses now; they had arrived in his sixth year, a pair of thin metal frames from the optometrist on Furumachi-dōri, necessary because the print had not shrunk and the ink had not faded and the change was in his eyes, which was a fact he had accepted the way he accepted all facts about his body: as information, not complaint — reflected the screen's glow, and in the reflection he could see, faintly, the shape of the room behind him: the empty chairs, the second terminal (unused, its dust cover on), the logbook on the shelf.

He checked the routing history against ROUTE.BAS. Not here — he could not run his private program on the Bureau's machine. But he recognised the addresses. The canal-side apartment that had appeared in his field verification for Case 1. The school address that sat in ROUTE.BAS as entry 34, returning ROUTE 7. The company address — and here he stopped, because the company address in the record was 6-1 Furumachi 2-chōme, which was Takeda's address, which was the address he had walked to for Case 4, which was now Bandai Insatsu's address, which was the address whose company code was TK-06 — not found.

He could not file an error sheet. The error sheet form required a paper file number, and

there was no paper file. The record existed only in the machine. It had no paper counterpart. It had no source document. It had no operator log entry. It existed the way a reflection exists — complete, detailed, present — without being the thing it appeared to reflect.

He wrote on a blank sheet of paper: `REC 82-1248-1 / NO PAPER FILE / NO OPERATOR LOG / SUBJECT: [UNALLOCATED]`. He placed the sheet in the terminal room notebook, between the pages for today's session and the blank pages that followed. He did not tell Sasaki. He did not mention it to Mori. He signed the logbook and left.

That evening, at home, he did not connect to the board. He loaded ROUTE.BAS. He entered the addresses from the record — the ones he remembered, which was most of them, because his memory for addresses had become, over the years, the kind of memory that does not forget: not photographic, not exceptional, simply worn into the same channels that his walking had worn, so that the addresses were not memorised but inhabited, the way a route is inhabited by the feet that walk it. He entered them and pressed RUN.

The program compiled. The route it produced was familiar. It passed through waypoints he walked every day — the canal path, the Furumachi intersection, the Bureau courtyard. It was his route. Or it was close enough to his route that the difference — if there was a difference — was smaller than the resolution of the program's address table. The route ended where all his routes ended: at the Bureau.

He typed `NEW`. He sat in the dark. The CRT's phosphor faded. The heater ticked. He did not load HOME.BAS. He did not connect to the board. He sat, and the apartment was dark, and the kerosene heater ticked at its interval, and the street below was quiet, and the letter in the drawer — the letters, four of them now, though he had not written a fourth and could not explain the fourth except as an error of counting that he did not investigate — were sealed and unstamped, and the aloe plant on the shelf was dry, and the condensation on the lower windowpane had begun to form in the pattern it formed every evening when the room was warm and the glass was cold, and he sat, and he did not think, and the dark was the dark, and the machine was off.

XI.

Several days passed. The record sat in his mind the way the sealed letter sat in the drawer: present, not examined, not opened. He went to the terminal room. He entered records. He filed error sheets. The work continued.

On a morning that was otherwise identical to the mornings before it — the same grey light, the same file on the desk, the same quiet in the Section — he spoke to Mori.

He did not plan what to say. He turned slightly in his chair — not fully, only enough that his voice would carry the two metres between their desks — and said:

"Has the Bureau ever had a record for one of its own employees?"

Mori's pen continued for a moment — two strokes — then stopped. He placed the cap on the pen with the small click that was the only sound Mori's desk ever made, and he turned,

also slightly, and looked at him with the same steady gaze he had looked at him with on his first day and on every day since.

“The records are personal accounts,” Mori said. “The Bureau processes personal accounts.”

This was not an answer. It was a restatement of the premise. He waited. Mori’s face was patient, thin, unhurried — the face of a man who answered questions at the speed of the institution, which was the speed of filing, which was the speed of a procedure that arrives at its conclusion by completing each step without anticipating the next.

“I am asking,” he said — and the sentence was careful, quiet, offered as one offers a form that may or may not be the correct form — “whether a record could be created for a person who works here. Whether the system would permit it.”

Mori was quiet. The Section was quiet. The newer clerk was at his desk but had not turned. Outside, the courtyard was the same grey it was every morning, the low door at the base of the wall, the drain in the corner.

“The system processes what it is given,” Mori said. “A record is created when a record is entered. The system does not verify the source.”

He understood this. It was technically precise and practically useless. It told him that the system accepted data without asking where the data came from, which he already knew. It did not tell him whether the record he had found — with its blank subject field, its familiar addresses, its routing history that mirrored his own — was an error or an entry or something the system had no category for.

He turned back to his desk. The file was there. The pen was there. The morning continued.

Mori said nothing further. At some point during the hour that followed — he could not say when, because the hour was files and the rhythm consumed its own markers — he heard Mori’s chair move. Not toward the door, not toward the canteen stairs, but toward the cabinets. His cabinets. Mori was standing beside the second filing cabinet. Mori’s hand was on the label — the adhesive label on the front of the third drawer, which read 二-八 / S57–S59 in his own handwriting, and which had been peeling at its upper-left corner for weeks, the adhesive failing where the metal was coldest. Mori pressed the corner down. He held it for a moment — three seconds, perhaps four — and the adhesive caught, and the label was flat, and Mori returned to his desk without speaking.

The label would peel again. The adhesive was old and the metal was cold and the corner would lift in a day or a week and curl back to where it had been. But for now it was flat, and someone had pressed it, and this was enough.

XII.

```
HOME SESSION LOG

DATE:        S62.11.14
MACHINE:     NEC PC-8001MKII  SN:[REDACTED]
POWER ON:    19:42
```

AMBIENT: HEATER ON. FLUORESCENT OFF. CRT ONLY.

19:42 POWER ON
DISPLAY: NEC PC-8001 N-BASIC VER 1.8
DISPLAY: OK

19:43 CLOAD "ROUTE"
TAPE: 3 SIDE B COUNTER 000
LOAD START
DURATION: 68 SEC
STATUS: OK

19:45 RUN
INPUT: 4-12-7
OUTPUT: ROUTE 7 — BUREAU COURTYARD → CANAL PATH → FURUMACHI 2 → HIGASHI-ODORI 9 → POST OFFICE → CANAL MAILBOX → [RETURN]
STATUS: COMPLETE

19:47 INPUT: 4-12-8
OUTPUT: ROUTE 7 — BUREAU COURTYARD → CANAL PATH → FURUMACHI 2 → HIGASHI-ODORI 9 → POST OFFICE → CANAL MAILBOX → [RETURN]
STATUS: COMPLETE
NOTE: IDENTICAL OUTPUT FOR DISTINCT INPUT.
REF: DUPLICATE RESIDENCE POINTER.

19:48 INPUT: [YAMAGATA ADDRESS]
OUTPUT: ROUTE NOT IN TABLE
STATUS: ADDRESS OUTSIDE ROUTE RANGE

19:49 NEW

19:50 [NO INPUT — 7 MINUTES]

19:57 CLOAD "HOME"
TAPE: 5 SIDE A COUNTER 000
LOAD START
DURATION: 12 SEC
STATUS: OK

19:58 RUN
[OUTPUT NOT LOGGED]

20:01 NEW

20:02 POWER OFF

```
AMBIENT AT CLOSE:
  HEATER: ON. FUEL LEVEL: 40%.
  TEA: PRESENT. TEMPERATURE: COLD (ESTIMATED 22C).
  PLANT: ALOE. SOIL: DRY. LAST WATERED: 5 DAYS.
  SHELF: 3 CASSETTES IN ROW. 14 MAGAZINES HORIZONTAL.
       1 LETTER, SEALED, UNSTAMPED. ADDRESS: YAMAGATA-KEN.
  WINDOW: CLOSED. CONDENSATION ON LOWER PANE.
  SOUND: HEATER TICK (INTERVAL 4.2 SEC). NO OTHER.

END LOG
```

XIII.

The cold came early that year. He did not remember when the season had changed.

On a Sunday he did not leave the apartment. He passed the day in the same two rooms, drinking tea, reading the dictionary — not for any word in particular; simply opening it and reading whatever entry appeared, the way one might read a train schedule for a journey one is not taking.

He opened the drawer.

The three letters were there. He knew they would be. He had not opened the drawer in — how long? He could not say. Weeks. Months. Long enough that the act of opening it felt like a decision rather than a habit, and the decision surprised him slightly, the way all decisions surprised him now, because so little in his life required deciding.

The drawer stuck. Not badly — a slight resistance, the wood swollen in the damp, the way wood swells in winter. He pulled and it came free. He thought, briefly, of another drawer — wooden, in a kitchen, years ago — but the thought did not complete. It arrived as a feeling in his hand and then it was gone.

He took the letters out. The first — from his earliest weeks, creased and soft at the folds, undated. The second — Dear sister, two paragraphs, the sentence abandoned. The third — Dear sister, procedural language, “what to report,” “my health is adequate,” abandoned after “I hope the school is well.” He laid them on the table. He did not read them. He could see, without reading, that they were attempts at something he no longer — and this was the difficulty, the thing that had become clear to him only gradually, over the years, without any single moment of clarity — knew how to begin.

He took a fresh sheet of paper. He placed it on the table. He held the pen.

He could not write her name. He sat with the pen above the paper — not touching, not moving — and he could not write her name. Not because he had forgotten it. He knew her name. It was there, in the place where names are kept, perfectly intact. But writing it would have required — and he understood this without being able to explain it, in the way that one understands that a door is locked without trying the handle — a register he no longer possessed. A way of addressing a person that was not a cover sheet, not a designation, not

a category. A way of saying: you are someone I know, outside of procedure, outside of the Bureau, and I am writing to you as that person.

He wrote:

Dear —

The dash sat on the page. He looked at it. It was the shape of an absence — not her absence, but his own. The absence of the capacity to address. He continued:

I am writing to inform you that I am well. My position at the Bureau remains unchanged. I have been here now for more than five years. My health is adequate. My work is satisfactory.

He stopped. He read it back. It was a status report. It was the language of a quarterly review, the language one might use in a form marked current condition of subject — and he could hear this, could hear the Bureau in it, could hear the filing system in the rhythm of the sentences, the way each fact was stated once and followed by the next without connection, without the tissue that makes a letter a letter rather than a list. He tried:

I think of you —

He could not finish. Not because the feeling was absent — it was not absent; he did think of her, sometimes, in the minutes before sleep, as a fact about the world that had not changed — but because the sentence required a continuation that belonged to a language he could no longer speak. I think of you often. I think of you with affection. I think of you and wish things were different. Each of these was a sentence from a life in which one wrote letters to people, and he no longer — he could feel this, not as grief but as a simple mechanical fact, the way one feels that a key no longer turns in a lock that has rusted — lived in that life.

He put the pen down. He looked at what he had written: Dear — and then five sentences and then I think of you — and then nothing. He folded the paper. Once, in half. He placed it in the drawer on top of the other three. Four letters now. Four attempts. The first two had salutations. The third had a salutation. This one had a dash. He closed the drawer.

He made his tea. He drank it at the counter. The heater ticked. The street was dark. He did not think about the letter — or he thought about it only as a fact, already filed, already behind him: he had tried, and the trying had produced a document, and the document was in the drawer, and the drawer was closed. This was — and he knew this, knew it with the same certainty with which he knew the filing order for Shōwa 28 — not how one was supposed to feel about a letter to one's sister. But supposed to was a phrase from somewhere else, from a time before the Bureau had given him its language, and he could not — or rather, he no longer attempted to — reach back to that time for instructions on how to feel.

Monday the work resumed. The drawer was closed. The four letters were inside it, growing no fewer and no more.

XIV.

The notice was on the canteen noticeboard when he arrived at noon. He did not see it immediately — there were other papers, older papers, the usual accumulation of scheduling changes and supply orders and policy reminders that had been posted and never removed, their edges curling, their ink fading in the fluorescent light — but the newer clerk noticed it, and Mori, who was already seated with his tray, nodded toward the board when he looked up.

It was a single sheet, typed, on Bureau stationery. He read it standing, his tray in his hands.

SCHEDULING NOTICE — INTERNAL

Records Bureau — Niigata

Re: Periodic Review of Account Procedures, Second Section

All examining officers, Second Section, are required to attend a procedural review. Officers should bring current case files and routing documentation for accounts in progress.

Location: Conference Room 6 Date: as posted Time: 10:00

Materials not brought to the review will be noted.

He read it twice. The language was standard. Periodic review. He did not recall a previous one, but there were many things in the Bureau's administrative life that occurred on cycles he was not asked to track.

What he noticed was that he did not know where Conference Room 6 was.

He knew the building. He had been in it for more than five years. His feet knew the distances, his hands knew the doors. He knew the Second Section and the canteen and the front corridor and the inner corridor with its three descending steps and the fourth floor and the west corridor and the ground-floor landing where the elevator panel showed its impossible half-floor.

He did not know Conference Room 6. Not on any door. Not on any routing slip. Not in any scheduling notice he could recall. The name felt as though it should have been familiar — the way a word in a language one is learning sometimes has the shape of a word one already knows, so that the unfamiliarity is not blankness but misrecognition.

He sat down. He ate. The newer clerk showed no sign of confusion, being still at the stage where all rooms were equally unknown and the distinction between a room one had not yet found and a room that could not be found had not yet become meaningful. Mori ate in his usual silence. He did not ask.

After lunch he counted. Eleven open accounts. He would need to carry them. He did not have a case large enough.

That evening he tried to place Conference Room 6 in the building. He walked the corridors in his mind. He could not find a room that matched. This did not mean the room did not

exist. It meant he had not been there. He was not in the business of mapping the building. He was in the business of processing files.

The next morning he brought a cloth bag from the shelf above his wardrobe — a bag he had owned since before the Bureau, since before Niigata. He put his eleven files in it, checking each cover sheet, each routing slip. The files were in order. He placed the bag beside his desk and continued working.

Date: as posted. He checked the notice again at lunch. The date was not printed. He did not know what as posted meant — the date of posting, a date posted elsewhere, a date not yet determined. He did not ask. He returned to his desk with the bag of files beside him, prepared for a meeting whose location he could not find and whose date he could not determine, and he worked.

XV.

On the morning it happened he did not know it was the morning. He arrived at the usual time — eight forty-five, or what he understood to be eight forty-five by the angle of winter light on the canal path and by the weight of his legs on the final stretch of pavement before the side door — and hung his jacket and sat at his desk and opened the first file and began. The cloth bag was where he had left it, beneath the jacket, its shape unchanged, its eleven files inside. The newer clerk was at his desk. Mori was at his desk. The Section was quiet except for the sound of paper and the faint mechanical hum of the overhead lights, which was not, strictly, a sound but a vibration in the air at the frequency where hearing becomes feeling.

At nine forty Mori stood. He did not say anything. He did not look at him or at the newer clerk. He simply stood, as one stands when a task is completed or when the body requires movement, and took something from beneath his desk — a folder, brown, thicker than his usual files — and moved toward the door between the third and fourth desks on the window side. This was the door to the canteen stairwell. But Mori did not go up. He went through the door and turned left, and he — who was watching, or rather who had noticed, in the way that one notices a colleague's movement without deciding to watch — saw him descend the short corridor and turn at the end, toward a direction he had not previously had reason to consider.

The newer clerk stood also. He picked up his own files — fewer than eleven; he could see this without counting — and followed. He did not look back. He moved with the same absence of announcement, the same quiet compliance, as though what he was doing required no explanation because it was already understood.

He looked at the clock. Nine forty-two. The notice had said ten o'clock. He had eighteen minutes. He reached beneath his jacket for the cloth bag, took it, felt its weight — eleven files, their cover sheets, their routing slips, their sequences — and stood.

He did not know where he was going. This was — and he was precise about this, precise in the way that he was precise about discrepancies in cover sheets, not allowing the thought to be larger or smaller than it was — not the same as not knowing what to do. He knew

what to do. He was to attend the meeting. He was to bring his materials. He was to be in Conference Room 6 at ten o'clock. The where of Conference Room 6 was a gap, but the what of it — the obligation, the procedure, the attendance — was not. He had been told. He would comply.

He walked through the door between the third and fourth desks. The short corridor. The stairwell landing. The fluorescent light above the landing was on, as always, and the elevator panel was visible on the far wall — B / 1 / 2 / 2.5 / 3 / 4 — but he did not look at it. He turned left, as Mori had turned. A corridor he had walked before — or had he? He must have. The walls were the same beige paint as the rest of the ground floor. The floor was the same grey linoleum. There were doors on the right side, unnumbered, and a fire extinguisher mounted at shoulder height, and a drinking fountain he did not remember but which had the quality of having been there for a long time: the chrome speckled, the basin slightly discoloured.

He turned once. The corridor continued. He could hear — ahead, around the next turn or the one after — the sound of other people walking: footsteps, quiet, in the rhythm of people who are going somewhere together without hurrying. He followed the sound. He turned again. The corridor was longer than he would have expected — longer than the building's ground floor should accommodate, though this thought arrived without force, without the urgency of a thought that required resolving; it was simply a measurement his body was making, the same measurement it had made on the fourth floor years ago, the same discrepancy between the building's exterior and its interior that he had noticed once and then accepted as part of the space in which he worked.

He arrived at a door. It was open. A small plastic sign beside it, screwed into the wall at eye height, read CONFERENCE ROOM 6 in white letters on a brown plate. The sign was not new. The screws were painted over. The edges of the plate were slightly rounded with age.

He went in.

The room was — and this was what he noticed first, before the people, before the table, before the quality of the light — ordinary. Not ordinary in the way that a room can be ordinary and still strange (the canteen's impossible angle on the courtyard, the elevator's half-floor), but ordinary in the way that most rooms are ordinary: without interest, without pressure, without any quality that would cause one to notice anything about it at all. It was a conference room. It had a long table — dark wood, not new, with a faint ring stain at one end where something hot had been placed and not wiped — and eight chairs, metal-framed with green fabric seats worn smooth at the front edge. A window on the far wall, frosted glass, letting in a diffuse grey light that flattened everything. No overhead fluorescent. Instead, two standing lamps in the corners, their shades yellowed, their light warm and insufficient. A water carafe in the centre of the table with four glasses, inverted. A typed sheet at each place — the agenda, he assumed, though he did not yet look at it.

Mori was seated. The newer clerk was seated. Three other examining officers from the Second Section — he recognised them by posture and by the shape of their files, not by name, because he had not spoken to them in years, or perhaps had never spoken to them, or perhaps had spoken to them and could not remember, which was the same thing — were also seated. Sasaki stood at the head of the table. He held his clipboard. His fountain pen was clipped to the board's upper edge. He did not greet him. He did not acknowledge

his arrival. He noted something on the clipboard — a mark, a check — and he sat in the remaining chair, which was at the table's far end, beside the window, and placed his cloth bag on the floor beside him.

It was, he estimated, three minutes before ten.

Sasaki placed his clipboard on the table. Beneath the clipboard, clipped to its back — he could see it now, at the angle where Sasaki had set the board down — was a small photograph, passport-sized, fixed to the board with a paper clip. It was face-down. He could not see the image. He did not know why it was there. Sasaki's clipboard had always been a procedural object: attendance sheets, form checklists, routing summaries. A photograph was not a procedural object. He looked at it for a moment and then looked away, and Sasaki picked up the board again, and the photograph was hidden, and the meeting began.

Sasaki did not clear his throat or announce the start. He simply began speaking, in the same quiet, measured voice he had always used, the voice that carried without appearing to project, the voice that assumed you were listening because the alternative — not listening — was not a thing that happened in his presence.

We will begin with attendance.

He read names. Not names — designations. Section numbers and desk numbers. He heard his own — two-eight — and said nothing, because nothing was required; his presence was the response, his body in the chair was the confirmation. Sasaki made his marks. Six officers. All present. He moved on.

Open accounts. Current totals by officer.

Each officer stated a number. Mori: fourteen. The examining officer beside him: nine. Another: twelve. The newer clerk: six. Him: eleven. Sasaki wrote. He did not comment on the numbers. He did not compare them. He noted them and moved to the next item.

Routing documentation. Confirm that all current files have been brought.

He opened his bag. Eleven files. He placed them on the table before him. The others did the same with their own materials. Sasaki looked at the files — not reading them, not checking them, but confirming their physical presence, the way one confirms that a form has been signed without reading what it says.

Discrepancies noted since last review.

Silence. Then the officer to Mori's left spoke — a man he had seen every working day for years and whose voice he now heard for perhaps the third time in his memory. A date discrepancy. A cover sheet with a register number that did not match the interior summary. Routine. Sasaki noted it. He thought of his own flagged file — 4-7712, the pencil line, the quarterly audit — but did not speak, because the flagging procedure was its own resolution; it did not require reporting here, or perhaps it did but he had never been told that it did, and not knowing was not the same as knowing otherwise.

The meeting continued. Audit categories. Pending materials. Case-file handling protocols — whether files returned from the fourth floor should be re-shelved in the first or second cabinet (Sasaki: the first, unless a new routing slip has been attached). Review timing — the next periodic review would be as scheduled. Sasaki said this without specifying when, and no one asked, and he did not ask, and the meeting moved forward as Bureau procedures

always moved forward: without pause, without drama, without the visible machinery of decision, as though each item had already been decided before it was raised and the raising was simply the institution recording its own conclusions.

At ten twenty-eight — he looked at his watch; he rarely looked at his watch; the gesture surprised him — Sasaki said:

That concludes the review.

Officers stood. They gathered their files. Mori placed his brown folder under his arm. The newer clerk collected his papers with the slightly excessive care of someone still learning which things mattered and which did not. He put his eleven files back in the cloth bag. He stood. He walked to the door.

The corridor was there. He turned right. He walked. He turned — once, then again — and arrived at the stairwell landing, and through the door between the third and fourth desks, and he was in the Second Section, and his desk was where it had always been, and the morning continued.

He sat. He opened a file. He worked.

At lunch he ate with Mori and the newer clerk. No one mentioned the meeting. No one mentioned the room. This was not — and he was clear about this, clear as the filing system was clear, each fact in its place — unusual. Bureau procedures were not discussed after their completion. A form was filed and then it was filed. A meeting was attended and then it was attended. The procedure was its own record; commentary was not required.

But that evening, walking home along the canal — the water black, the sky low, the cold settled into the concrete of the path like something that had always been there — he tried to reconstruct the route. From the door between the third and fourth desks to Conference Room 6. Left turn. Corridor. Right turn. Another corridor, longer than expected. The door with the brown sign. He could see each piece. But the pieces did not assemble into a map. They assembled into a sequence — first this, then this, then this — without spatial logic, without the kind of continuity that would allow him to say: it is on the ground floor, past the drinking fountain, second door on the right after the fire extinguisher. He could not say this. He could say: I walked there and I arrived. He could say: the sign said Conference Room 6. He could say: the chairs had green fabric seats. But he could not say where it was. Not in relation to the front corridor or the rear exit or the stairwell or the Second Section or any room he had been in before.[16]

This did not trouble him. Or — and he allowed the qualification, walking, the canal beside him, the cold around him — it did not trouble him in the way that a thing one cannot find troubles a person who is looking. He was not looking. He had been there. He had attended. Sasaki had noted his attendance. The meeting had concluded. The next review would be as scheduled. These were facts. The location of the room was also, presumably, a fact — but it was a fact of the building, not a fact of his work, and his work was what he carried, in the bag and in his body, back to his desk each morning, and the building was — had always been — the Bureau's concern.

[16]No floor plan examined by the editor — including the Bureau's own internal layout documents dated to this period, partial and incomplete though they are — includes a room designated Conference Room 6. The editor notes this without interpretation. — Ed.

He walked home. The canal. The dark. The cold. The heater ticking. Tea. The wall. Sleep.

XVI.

The change was small. After the review, files returned from the fourth floor were to be stamped with the date of return on the interior of the cover sheet, lower-left corner, before re-shelving. This was in addition to the existing procedure — shelve in the first cabinet unless a new routing slip has been attached — and it required a stamp he did not have. On the morning after the meeting, one appeared on his desk: a small rubber date stamp, the kind with rotating bands for day, month, and year, set to the current date. He did not know who had placed it there. He did not ask. The newer clerk had one as well. Mori, he assumed, already had one, or had always had one, or had been stamping his files in this way for years without the procedure being formally stated, which was — and he understood this without resentment — how things worked in the Bureau: practices existed before their codification, and the codification, when it came, was not an instruction but a confirmation that the practice had already been observed.

He used the stamp. A file came back from the fourth floor — an account he had sent up weeks ago, thin, with a single interior sheet and a routing slip that listed three forms completed — and he opened the cover sheet and pressed the stamp into the lower-left corner and closed it and re-shelved it in the first cabinet. The ink was pale blue. The impression was clean. The date read 6 DEC. He did not think about the date. He re-shelved the file and opened the next one.

December settled into the building. The dryness of the air made the paper feel different under his fingers — lighter, more prone to static, so that pages sometimes clung together and he had to be more careful in his handling. The cold sharpened the ache in his wrists, gave it an edge that faded by ten o'clock but returned each morning as though his body were re-learning the fact of work each day.

The stamp accumulated impressions. 6 DEC, 9 DEC, 11 DEC, 13 DEC. The pale blue dates in the lower-left corners of cover sheets, each impression identical to the last except for the number, which advanced, which would continue to advance past December and into the years that followed, until the stamp wore down or the ink ran dry or the hand that held it could no longer press with sufficient force.

Once, in the late afternoon — the Section empty, the newer clerk gone, the light outside already dark — the building made a sound. Not the heating pipes. Not the fluorescent hum. Not the settling of concrete in cold weather, which he knew and which did not require attention. A different sound: low, brief, from somewhere below or behind the walls. His pen stopped. He listened. The sound did not come again. His pen continued.

At five the silence came. He walked home. The canal was frozen at the edges. The drawer in the low table was closed. The four letters were inside it. He slept, and the morning came, and the work resumed.

XVII.

Time in the Bureau was not measured in years. It was measured in the rotation of the stamp's bands from DEC to JAN to FEB, in the replacement of ink pads when the impressions grew faint, in the changing of fluorescent tubes above his desk. His seventh year. His eighth. The knowledge was arithmetic, not experience.

His body knew the years. His wrists ached through the first hour of work now, not only the mornings. His eyes held pages closer than arm's length. His appetite sometimes failed even the half-bowl — a quarter eaten, the rest left, the chopsticks placed down from an indifference that was not unhappiness but the absence of the body's interest in continuing. He slept less, or woke more often — surfacing without cause, the heater ticking, the street dark. He did not worry. The Bureau's schedule required only that he arrive and remain, and this he did.

Mori was the same. Or Mori was — and he noticed this without being able to place when it had begun, which was how all changes in the Bureau presented themselves: as accomplished facts rather than processes — slightly thinner, slightly quieter, slightly more folded into his desk, as though the desk were absorbing him by degrees. He spoke less than he had ever spoken, which was already very little, and he could not say whether this was age or simply the natural endpoint of a man who had been here seven years longer than himself and whose silence had always been the silence of someone who had said everything the Bureau permitted and found that what remained was not speech but presence.

The newer clerk no longer asked questions. Sasaki appeared perhaps once a week now, where before he had come most days. His visits were briefer, his errands fewer, as though the Section had demonstrated its sufficiency and he was simply confirming what no longer required confirmation.

The stamp continued. The dates advanced. The pale blue impressions accumulated in the lower-left corners of cover sheets, year after year, a mechanical record of returns from the fourth floor that meant nothing and recorded everything: that on this day a file came back, that on this day he opened it and pressed the stamp and closed it and shelved it, that on this day he was still here, still at his desk, still performing the function for which he had been summoned eight years ago by a letter whose postscript he could no longer recall.

The desire — if it could still be called that, if a thing that has become so constant and so undifferentiated from the work itself can still be given a name that implies volition — remained. He still noticed the routing slips. He still saw the sequence: Form 3, Form 7, Form 11, Form 17 (pending). He still knew, in the place where knowledge lives when it has nowhere to go, that the sequence had an end he had not reached. But the knowing was no longer sharp. It was no longer a question. It was part of him in the way that his wrists were part of him, as his diminishing appetite was part of him, as the Bureau was part of him — not chosen, not investigated, not pursued, but simply present, structural, like the walls.

Conference Room 6 had not recurred. Or — he could not say this with certainty. The bag remained under his jacket, and the twelve files — a new account had been assigned at some point; he could not recall when — were inside it. The room existed. He accepted this as he accepted the elevator panel with its half-floor, as he accepted the canteen's angle on the courtyard. It did not require his understanding.

In the autumn of his eighth year — he knew it was autumn by the quality of the air in the stairwell, which had the same settling cold it had every autumn, and by the leaves visible through the canteen window, and by the return of the thicker jacket on the hook — Sasaki came to the Section. He came at nine fifteen, which was early for his visits, and he stood beside his desk without speaking, and he looked up, and Sasaki said:

There is a file to be delivered. Third floor, east corridor.

He stood. Sasaki handed him a folder — beige, standard, thinner than most — and turned and left. He did not explain. He did not say which room. He said third floor, east corridor, and this was, for Sasaki, sufficient instruction, because Sasaki's instructions had always been sufficient, had always assumed a competence in the recipient that made elaboration unnecessary or perhaps impossible, as though explaining further would have been an admission that the institution contained things that were not self-evident.

He took the file. He did not open it. He walked to the door between the third and fourth desks, and through the stairwell, and up past the canteen floor, and up one more flight to the third floor landing. He had been to the third floor before — or he thought he had, though he could not remember a specific occasion, could not point to a day or a purpose; it was possible that the memory of having been there was simply the assumption of having been there, built from the logic that he had been in the building for eight years and the building had a third floor and therefore he must have been to it — and the landing was familiar in the way that all the building's landings were familiar: linoleum, beige paint, fire door with a wire-reinforced window.

He pushed through the fire door. The corridor beyond was — and he noticed this the way he noticed all architectural facts, without urgency, without surprise, simply as information arriving through his feet and his eyes — not the west corridor he had walked three years ago. That corridor was on the second floor, turned left-right-left, had flat white ceiling panels and doors numbered 201 and higher. This was different. This was the east corridor. It was long. It was straight. The ceiling was lower than the west corridor's — not uncomfortably low, but perceptibly, a few centimetres closer to the head, enough that the light from the tubes above had a different quality, more diffuse, more even, less directional. The walls were the same beige paint but slightly darker, as though they had been painted once more than the other corridors and the additional coat had deepened the colour by a shade that was visible only in comparison, which he was not making, because he was not comparing; he was walking.

The corridor was long. Longer than — but he had stopped measuring the building against itself, stopped expecting the interior to match the exterior, stopped holding in his mind the four-story concrete rectangle he had seen from outside on his first morning eight years ago and using it as a constraint on what the inside could contain. The building was what it was inside. The outside was something else. These had been the same thing once, or he had believed they were the same thing, and the belief had eroded — not suddenly, not with the force of a discovery, but gradually, file by file, corridor by corridor, year by year — until what remained was not belief or disbelief but simply the practice of walking where the building led and arriving where it placed him.

He walked. Doors on the left side, numbered — he saw numbers but did not read them, or read them without retaining: three digits, the first a 3, the second and third changing as he passed. The corridor did not turn. It went straight, and the straightness gave it a quality

of intention, as though it had been built to lead somewhere specific, and the walking was not exploration but delivery, and the delivery was his function, and his function was the file in his hand, which he carried without opening, without weighing, without wondering what was inside.

At the end of the corridor there was a door. It was closed. It was the same grey paint as the others on this floor, the same brushed-metal handle, the same small nameplate screwed into the wood at eye height. He could not read the nameplate from this distance — his eyes, which served him adequately at the desk, could not resolve small type at more than a few metres — and so he walked the remaining distance, and the nameplate became legible, and it read a number and a designation he did not recognise, and he stood before the door with the file in his hand.[17]

He did not open it. Not because he chose not to — the instruction had been to deliver, and delivery implied opening or knocking or leaving the file in a box or finding a person inside — but because in that moment, standing at the end of the corridor with the closed door before him and the long straight hallway behind him and the light even and diffuse above, he felt — and felt was the word, not thought, because thought would have been conscious and directed and this was neither — that he was at a boundary. Not a wall. Not an end. A boundary: the kind one crosses in a single step and cannot uncross, the kind that changes nothing about the corridor behind and everything about the space ahead, the kind that is invisible except to the body standing before it.

He knocked. The sound was small in the long corridor. He waited.

XVIII.

The cassettes were in a row on the shelf. Five tapes, left to right: SORT v2, ADDR v1, ROUTE v3, CITY v1, HOME. The labels were in his handwriting — the same hand that wrote designation marks in the lower-right corners of cover sheets, the same hand that compressed, over the years, from three lines of notation to one. The tapes were arranged alphabetically. He had not decided to arrange them alphabetically. He had arranged them, the way he arranged the files on his desk each morning: by use, by sequence, by the logic of procedure applied to objects that did not require it.

The pocket notebook was on the low table, beside the dust cover that lay over the machine. Kokuyo, A6, ¥200. He had been using it since his third year. The first pages — addresses, route calculations, program notes — were in his early hand, which was still recognisably his, still distinct from the Bureau's. The later pages were different. The entries had become field-delimited. Date in the upper corner. Subject code to the left. Observation in the centre column. Status to the right. He had not adopted this format deliberately. It had arrived

[17] The testimony here is unusually continuous — no correction, no qualification, no apparent pause — and this unbroken quality is atypical of the later accounts, which tend toward interruption and self-revision. The editor notes that the nameplate described at the end of the corridor does not match any room designation found in the Bureau's internal records for this floor. The editor reproduces the passage as found. — Ed.

the way all Bureau formats arrived: by repetition, by proximity, by the pressure of a system that shapes its operators the way water shapes stone — not by force but by constancy.

He opened the notebook and read the most recent entry. It was dated in the upper-right corner, in the same position as the date on a Bureau cover sheet. Below: HEATER: REPLACED (WHITE, DIGITAL). PLANT: ALOE, SHELF, WATERED 3 NOV. He had written this. He had written it in Bureau notation, in Bureau shorthand, in the language of forms and fields and status codes. He had recorded his own apartment the way he recorded a field verification: observed condition, noted, dated, filed.

The plant. The aloe sat on the shelf above the machine, in a ceramic pot he had owned since before Niigata. He watered it — once a week, sometimes less, an irregular schedule governed by the soil's dryness, which he checked by pressing his thumb into the surface and feeling for moisture. But he had begun recording it. In the margin of a page already occupied by program notes: PLANT: DRY. WATERED. And two weeks later: PLANT: MOIST. NOT WATERED. The entries were unnecessary. The plant did not require documentation. The watering did not require a log. But the entries were there, in his hand, in Bureau format, and they continued, and the continuation was not a choice but a rhythm, and the rhythm was the Bureau's.

The tea. He made it the same way each evening — kettle, one spoon, the cup bought at the hardware store near the station in his first year. He drank it at the low table. He washed the cup. He placed it to the left of the tea tin, handle facing right. This was not a decision. It was a procedure — the same procedure he performed at the Bureau sink after his canteen meal: tray to the return window, cup to the left, handle aligned. The apartment sink was not the canteen sink. The cup was not the Bureau cup. The procedure was the same.

He caught himself one evening. The word is imprecise — caught implies an observer and a transgression, and there was no observer and no transgression, only a moment of recognition, brief and without consequence. He was writing in the notebook. He was recording the contents of the shelf above the machine: 5 CASSETTES. 14 MAGAZINES. 1 LETTER (SEALED, UNSTAMPED). DUST COVER: ON. He stopped. He looked at what he had written. It was a shelf inventory. He had arrived at the Bureau's language for describing rooms by the only route available to him, which was ten thousand cover sheets and the years of filing and the daily movement between desk and cabinet and home that had worn the distinction between these places so thin that the same hand, holding the same pencil, produced the same notation in both.

He closed the notebook. He turned off the light. He lay on the futon and the heater ticked and the street was quiet and the cassettes were in their row and the plant had been watered and the cup was in its place and the apartment was in order — Bureau order — and he slept, and the machine under its cover was off, and the notebook on the table was closed, and the letter in the drawer was sealed.

PART V

STRANGE ACCOUNTS

I.

The door opened.

He had not turned the handle. Or — he had placed his hand on the handle, and the handle had turned, and the door had opened, and these were the same sequence as turning a handle and opening a door, and the distinction between intending to open and finding it open was, in that corridor, in that light, on that morning, a distinction he did not make.

The room was small. A desk — metal, grey, the same type as the desks in the Second Section but smaller, as though built for a room that could not accommodate the standard size. A frosted window on the far wall, showing a grey light that could have been morning or afternoon. A short filing cabinet, two drawers, the same beige paint as every other cabinet in the building. On the wall above the cabinet, a calendar — old, its page turned to a month years past, the paper curled at the bottom edge where moisture had reached it. Nothing else. No photograph. No plant. No coat on any hook.

A woman sat at the desk. She was neither young nor old. Her hair was pulled back. She wore a cardigan — dark, buttoned — and her hands were flat on the desk surface, and she looked up when he entered, and her expression was the expression of a person who has been expecting a delivery and is now receiving it.

He held out the file. She took it. She did not open it. She placed it on the desk beside a small stack of other files — three, perhaps four — and from a drawer she took a slip of paper, already filled out except for the date, which she wrote with a pen that was clipped to the desk by a thin chain. She handed him the slip.

He looked at it. Small. The size of a receipt, or a parking stub, or the kind of slip one receives when dropping off a garment for repair. The handwriting was small and precise:

Received. 1 file.

Date: [written]

Section: 2

Designation: 二-八

Subject: —

No further action required.

He put the slip in his jacket pocket. The woman returned to her desk. She did not look at him again. He turned. The corridor was there — the long straight corridor, the low ceiling, the even light. He walked it back. The door at the far end — the fire door, the stairwell landing — was where it had always been. He pushed through. He descended to the ground floor. He returned to his desk. The morning continued.

II.

The slip of paper stayed in his jacket pocket. He found it there one evening, weeks later, while reaching for his keys. Received. 1 file. The date was legible. The handwriting was small. He looked at it the way one looks at a receipt from a shop one does not remember visiting. The slip recorded a transaction. The transaction was complete. The record was sufficient.

He put it back in his pocket. He did not throw it away.

Winter.

The files continued. His twelve accounts. The stamp in the lower-left corners. The routing slips with their sequences. The newer clerk at his desk, working at his pace, no longer asking, no longer hesitating. Mori at his desk. The canteen at noon. The stairwell. The walk home. The canal, frozen further now — the ice reaching toward the centre, the water visible only as a dark line between the banks.

He was — and this was not a thought he had but a condition he occupied — tired. Not the tiredness of a single day or a single week but the tiredness of years, the kind that accumulates beneath the surface of adequate function like sediment beneath clear water, invisible from above, present in every movement, in the slight additional effort required to lift each file, to press each stamp, to walk each evening to the apartment and climb the stairs and turn the key and enter the two rooms that were his and had been his for eight years and that contained nothing that was not the Bureau's — the files in his mind, the language in his mouth, the rhythm in his hands — except the drawer with its four letters, which he did not open, and the cloth bag, which he did not unpack, and the dictionary on the shelf, which he did not read.

His ninth year began. He did not mark it. The Bureau did not mark it. The stamp's bands rotated. The year changed. The files continued.[18]

[18] Several pages of the original manuscript appear to be missing at this point, or were not included in the papers received by the editor. The testimony resumes below without explanation of the gap. The editor has placed the following passage where continuity of binding marks suggests it belongs, but cannot confirm that no intervening material has been lost. The file proceeds. — Ed.

III.

On the board, one morning — he had begun checking before work, the ritual compressed now to seven minutes: connect, read, disconnect, leave — there was a post he had not seen before. Not a reply. An original post by KAIRO, addressed to no thread, in a subject line that did not follow the board's usual conventions.

```
11/19 08:34  KAIRO
Subject: route optimization through irregular terrain

A route passes through 7 waypoints. Waypoints 3-5 follow a
waterway. The path alongside the waterway slopes 2-
3 degrees
to the left. The surface alternates between concrete and
packed gravel. The gravel section (between waypoints 4 and 5)
is approximately 200 meters and requires adjusted stride.
Optimal route: waypoints 1-2 on paved road, 3-5 along the
waterway, 6-7 returning to paved road via a pedestrian
bridge with a metal railing.

The route total is 2.8 km. Duration on foot: 34 minutes at
average walking speed, 38 minutes with the gravel adjustment.
```

He read it twice. The route was — and he could not have said how he recognised it, whether by the slope or the gravel or the bridge or the distance, because any combination of these could describe dozens of canal paths in the city — familiar. The pedestrian bridge with the metal railing was the bridge he crossed each evening. The gravel section was the section past the fisherman's bench. The 2.8 kilometres was the distance from his apartment to the Bureau.

He had never described this route on the board. He had never mentioned a canal, or a gravel path, or a pedestrian bridge. He had posted about address resolution, duplicate pointers, scheduling arrays, print formatting. He had not posted about walking.

He did not reply. He disconnected. He walked to work along the canal path, on the concrete, then the gravel, across the bridge with the metal railing, and the distance was — he did not time it; he had never timed it — approximately what KAIRO had said.

IV.

Spring. The canal thawed. The ice thinned and broke and drifted and was gone, and the water was black again, and the trees along the far bank put out their leaves, which were pale green and then dark green and then, in autumn, brown, and then bare, and then it was winter again, and the cycle was the same and he was the same except that his eyes were

worse and his wrists were stiffer and his sleep was shallower and his hair, when he caught his reflection in the frosted window of the stairwell landing, was thinner at the temples than he remembered it being the last time he had looked, which was — he could not say. Months. Possibly a year.

The stamp advanced. The files came.

Accounts: fourteen now. Two new files had arrived — he could not place when — and the cabinets were full, all three, and a fourth had appeared, or was appearing, in the way that furniture in the Bureau appeared: without requisition form, without announcement, simply present one morning as though it had been there all along and he had been the one who was new.

He ate a third of his bowl. Sometimes less. The canteen women no longer ladled a full portion; they had adjusted, as the Bureau adjusted to all things, without being told. He did not notice this. Mori noticed. Or Mori did not notice — it was impossible to know what Mori noticed, because Mori said nothing, and had said nothing for what felt like years, and the silence between them at the table had become so complete that it was no longer silence but simply the medium in which they ate.

One afternoon — he could not have said which afternoon, or in which year — there was a cup of tea on his desk. He had not made it. He had not asked for it. It was there, beside the stamp, still hot, in a cup he recognised as one of the canteen cups — white, no handle, a small chip on the rim. He looked at it. He looked across the room. Mori was at his desk, working, his back turned, his pen moving. Mori did not turn. He picked up the cup and drank. The tea was hot and bitter and it was the first thing anyone had given him in the Bureau that was not a file or a procedure or an instruction. He drank it. He did not say anything. He put the cup down and continued working, and the afternoon continued, and the cup was empty, and at some point it was gone.

The newer clerk was no longer newer. He had been at the desk for — three years? Four? He could not count backward to the season of his arrival. The arithmetic was simply unavailable, like a drawer that will not open because the wood has swelled.

The clerk processed files. He made his marks. He went to the canteen at noon and ate and returned. He did not speak except in the language of procedure — this cover sheet is torn, should I request a replacement — and he answered in the same language, and the exchange was brief and accurate and required nothing of either of them beyond the words themselves.

V.

A notice on the canteen noticeboard. He did not read it carefully. Something about files — completed accounts, stamped and closed, to be transferred from Section cabinets to the

records wing for long-term storage. Each examining officer to deliver his own files. Route: ground floor, west stairwell, through the double doors, follow the corridor to the deposit window.

He had not heard of the records wing. This no longer surprised him.

He carried seven files. These were closed accounts — subjects whose routing slips had reached Form 11, whose sequences had ended, whose cover sheets bore the final stamp. They were heavy in his arms. He did not use the cloth bag. The bag was for open accounts, for the living files, and these were not living; they were finished, whatever finished meant in the Bureau's arithmetic, and he carried them the way one carries something to be put down.

The west stairwell was not the stairwell he used daily. It was at the far end of the ground-floor corridor, past the front desk, past the frosted window where the receptionist sat — and the receptionist was there, he saw her as he passed, her hair pulled back, her half-glasses on their chain, and she did not look up, and he did not stop, and the thought that she looked the same as she had on his first morning, the same face, the same posture, the same indeterminate middle age, passed through him and was gone before it became a thought.

The double doors were heavy. Painted grey. No window. A small sign above them, stencilled: RECORDS — LONG-TERM STORAGE. He pushed through.

The corridor beyond was wide. Wider than the corridors he knew — wide enough for two carts to pass, though there were no carts, only the floor, which was a different linoleum, darker, slightly textured, the kind laid in storage areas and service passages where appearance mattered less than durability. The ceiling was lower. Pipes ran along it — water pipes, he assumed, or heating, wrapped in grey insulation that had cracked in places, showing the copper beneath. The lights were fluorescent but spaced further apart, so that the corridor was not dim but unevenly lit, the brightness pooling and thinning as he walked.

He walked.

Filing shelves lined both walls. Metal shelves, floor to ceiling, filled with folders — beige, blue, grey, brown, the colours of the Bureau's various eras and sections, each folder identical in shape and different in age, the older ones softer at the edges, the newer ones still stiff. Labels on the shelf ends. Numbers. He did not read them. He walked past them the way one walks past trees on a familiar road: aware of their presence, not of their particulars.

The corridor did not turn. It went straight. The floor was level. The pipes continued overhead. The shelves continued on both sides. The smell was paper and dust and something drier, older — the smell of rooms that are heated in winter and not cooled in summer, the smell of records that have been still for a long time. The air itself felt different. Not stale — he could breathe it without effort — but settled, as though it had been here longer than air usually remains in a place, as though it too had been filed.

He walked. His legs measured the distance. His body, which had walked the morning route from the apartment to the Bureau and back each evening for more than a decade, which knew the canal path and the stairwell and the distance from desk to canteen and back, was

counting — not consciously, not with numbers, but with the same proprioceptive arithmetic that tells a person when a staircase has one step more than expected. The corridor was long. The corridor was longer than the canal path from his apartment to the side door. The corridor was longer than the building.

He did not stop. He did not turn around. He did not look behind him to see how far he had come. He walked because he was carrying seven files and the notice had said follow the corridor to the deposit window, and following was what he did, and the corridor was what the Bureau had provided, and if the corridor was longer than the building that contained it then the corridor was longer than the building that contained it, and this was not a problem he was required to solve; it was a distance he was required to walk.

The shelves continued. The pipes continued. The lights pooled and thinned. His arms ached from the weight of the files. His wrists. His shoulders. The dull familiar ache of a body that had been carrying things for years and that would continue to carry them because carrying was the function and the function had not been revoked.

At the end — and there was an end, the corridor did end, the shelves stopped, the pipes turned into the ceiling and vanished — there was a window. A deposit window, chest height, with a wooden ledge and a metal shutter pulled halfway up. Behind the shutter, a desk. Behind the desk, no one. A small bell on the ledge, brass, the kind one presses with the palm. He pressed it. The sound was thin.

A man appeared. Older. Grey cardigan. He did not speak. He placed the seven files on the ledge. The man took them, one by one, and placed them behind him on a surface he could not see. He did not stamp them. He did not sign. He did not give a receipt. He took the files and his hands were empty and the transaction was complete.

He turned. The corridor was behind him — the full length of it, the shelves, the pipes, the pooling light. He would need to walk it again to return.

He walked. His body counted. The distance was the same.[19]

At his desk. The afternoon. Files. The stamp. The newer clerk beside him. Mori across the room, turning pages. The clock. The light. The silence that was not silence.

He did not think about the corridor. Or — he thought about it the way he thought about the canal: as a distance his body had measured and stored and that existed now as fact rather than as question. He had walked it. He had returned. The seven files were deposited. The distance was what it was.

Outside, the building was four stories, concrete, square windows in rows. He could see it from the canal path each morning and evening. It had not changed. It had never changed. It was the same building it had been on his first morning, the same flat roof, the same staining where the rain ran, the same sign in retouched kanji. What was inside it was what was inside it. He had stopped asking these to be the same thing years ago.

[19]The Bureau's building, per municipal records, measures approximately thirty-one metres at its widest point, east to west. The description of the corridor — its length, the duration of the walk, the quantity of shelving — is not consistent with this measurement. The editor has found no correction or later clarification in the testimony. — Ed.

VI.

That evening, on the board:

```
12/08 08:41  KAIRO
Subject: supplier substitution and field-width compatibility

When a data supplier is replaced, the new supplier's output
format may differ from the original. Example: a field that
was 15 units wide from the original supplier is 17 units
wide from the replacement. The difference is detectable only
in aggregate — single entries appear normal. In batch, the
misalignment is visible as a systematic offset beginning at
the changeover date.

The original supplier's code was TK-06. It is no longer
in the supplier table. The replacement supplier's code is
in the table. Both codes have produced valid output. The
output differs by 2 units.
```

He read it three times. KAIRO had described the folder company. The code — TK-06 — was the code he had found inside the back cover of the old Takeda folder at the paper shop on Furumachi 2-chōme, the code he had written in his pocket notebook, the code he had traced through the Bureau program's REM comments. The 2-unit difference was the 2mm tab discrepancy. He had never posted about folders on the board. He had never mentioned TK-06, or Takeda, or Furumachi, or the paper shop, or the tab measurement.

He typed:

```
12/08 22:37  MARS
> The original supplier's code was TK-06.

Where did you obtain this code?
```

The next morning:

```
12/09 08:15  KAIRO
The code is in the output. It is printed on the inside
of the back cover, lower right.
```

This was correct. The code was printed on the inside of the back cover, lower right, in a small sans-serif typeface that had faded to a grey barely darker than the kraft paper. KAIRO had described its location. KAIRO had described it exactly.

He did not reply. He disconnected. He did not post again that week.

VII.

The apartment.

The heater had been replaced again. He did not remember replacing it. This one was taller, white, with a digital display he had never learned to read. It ticked differently — faster, softer, like a clock in another room. The walls were the same. The stain near the light switch was the same. The low table was the same. The window showed the same side street.

His hands had stamp ink on them. Pale blue, in the creases of his right thumb. He noticed this at the sink, washing his cup. He rubbed at it. It did not come off. It had not come off in years. The ink was in his skin now, in the fine lines, in the whorls. A mark the Bureau had made on him without intending to, or a mark the Bureau had intended all along, which were the same thing.

He opened the drawer.

The letters were there. Five — no. Four. Four letters. The paper was old. He could see this without touching them. The first — his earliest weeks — was soft at the folds, the colour changed, the ink faded to a brown that was almost the colour of the paper itself. The second and third were less worn but still old. The fourth — Dear — — was on top, its single fold still holding, the dash still visible.

He took out a sheet of paper. He placed it on the table. He held the pen.

He wrote the date.

He wrote it in the upper-right corner, the way one writes the date on a cover sheet. Day, month, year. The numbers were small and precise. They were the numbers of his stamp, the numbers of his filing, the numbers he wrote each day on forms and routing slips and in the margins of registers. They were not the numbers of a letter. But they were the numbers he had.

Below the date he wrote nothing. He sat with the pen above the paper. The heater ticked. The street was dark. He could hear, from the apartment below, the faint sound of a television — a sound that had been there for years, that had been there when he moved in, that would be there when he was gone, that was as constant as the canal and the walk and the Bureau and the filing.

He did not write Dear. He did not write the dash. He did not write I am writing to inform you. He sat with the pen and the blank paper below the date and he could not — and this was not a struggle, not a failure, not a thing that hurt in the way that the early letters had hurt, when the inability was fresh and the gap between what he wanted to say and what he could say was still a gap rather than a wall — produce a sentence that was not the Bureau's.

He put the pen down. He looked at the paper. A date. Nothing else.

He folded it. Once. He placed it in the drawer on top of the other four. Five letters now. The first three had salutations. The fourth had a dash. The fifth had a date.

He closed the drawer. Something passed through him — a drawer, winter, the resistance of wood in cold weather — and was gone. He could not remember what had been kept inside.

VIII.

Years passed. He knew this because the stamp told him — not the year itself, which he still did not read, but the resistance of the bands when he rotated them, the slight stiffness that came from months of use, and then the sudden ease when the bands were replaced, which happened without his requesting it, the new mechanism appearing in his desk drawer the way all things in the Bureau appeared: already there, already his, already in use before the moment of noticing.

His accounts: sixteen. His cabinets: five. His desk was the same desk.

His eyes had worsened past the point where distance compensated. He held pages close now — six inches, perhaps less — and the words were legible but the effort was constant, a low-grade strain behind both eyes that began in the first hour and did not leave until sleep, which came later now and held less firmly. He woke in the dark. Two, three, four times. Each waking identical: the heater ticking, the walls, the ceiling he could not see, the brief confusion about whether the night was beginning or ending, and then sleep again, thin, like water over stone.

He coughed in the mornings. Not badly. A small cough, dry, at the base of the throat, which cleared by ten o'clock and returned the next morning. He did not think about it. The body did what the body did. The cough was part of the morning in the way that the stamp was part of the desk.

His grip was weaker. He noticed this with files — the heavier ones, the ones with multiple interior sheets, required both hands now where one had been sufficient. His right hand trembled slightly when he held a pen for more than an hour. The tremor was fine, barely visible, present only in the line of ink it produced: a slight wavering in the designation marks that had once been clean.

At the canteen.

Mori sat across from him. Mori ate. The same bowl, the same portion, the same pace. He watched — not deliberately, not with the intention of watching, but with the passive attention of a body sitting across from another body in a room where there was nothing else to look at except the food and the table and the person eating.

Mori's hair was parted on the left. It had been parted on the left on his first day. The parting was in the same place. The hair was the same colour — dark, without grey, without the thinning that he saw in his own reflection, the thinning that had progressed from the temples to the crown until what remained was not hair but the memory of hair, sparse and fine and showing the scalp beneath.

Mori's face. He looked at Mori's face. The slight stoop was the same. The thin features were the same. The steady eyes. Mori had been described to him, on his first day, as a man some years his senior, and this had been true, and he had been in his mid-twenties then, and he was now — he calculated, or the calculation happened, automatic, unwilled — past forty, and Mori was still a man some years his senior, and this was still true, and the arithmetic of it — the gap between them, which should have remained constant while both aged, which should have moved them both forward through the same years at the same rate — did not produce the result he could see.

He looked at his own hands on the table. The tremor. The knuckles. The dry skin. The ink in the creases.

He looked at Mori's hands. Turning a chopstick. Lifting the bowl. Steady. The same crook in the left index finger. The same.

The newer clerk had been transferred. Or the newer clerk had left. Or the newer clerk was still there and he could not remember his face, which was possible, because the face had always been indistinct, and indistinct things, given enough time, become absent without the moment of departure being marked. There was a desk beside his. Someone sat at it. He did not look.

Sasaki came to the Section on a Tuesday. He knew it was Tuesday because the canteen had served grilled mackerel, and the mackerel was Tuesday, and this was one of the few temporal facts his body still held. Sasaki stood in the doorway. He did not enter. He was not carrying his clipboard. In all the years — and he was certain of this, as certain as he was of the filing order for any year he had processed — Sasaki had never appeared without the clipboard. He looked at the room — the desks, the clerks, the cabinets, the light — and then he left, and he did not know what the visit meant, and did not ask, and continued working.[20]

IX.

The low door.

He had seen it from the canteen window — years ago, on his first afternoon, and then again in his second year, and his fourth, and his sixth. He had seen it from the Section window beside the cabinet. He had forgotten it. He had remembered it. It had been there each time he looked: knee-height, grey, painted to match the concrete, a handle that had once been new and was now dulled except where fingers had worn the metal bright.

[20]The description of Mori in this section is difficult to reconcile with the chronology established elsewhere in the testimony. If Mori "joined us seven years ago" at the time of the narrator's own arrival, then Mori's tenure at the Bureau, by this point in the account, would exceed twenty years. The physical description offered here does not appear consistent with this. The editor has no independent evidence of Mori's age or date of employment and is unable to resolve the discrepancy. — Ed.

He was in the courtyard. He did not remember how. He must have taken the rear exit — the heavy metal door at the ground-floor landing — and walked around the building's perimeter, through the narrow street, past the third planter, and into the courtyard from the gap between the east wall and the boundary fence. Or he had come through the side door and turned left instead of right. Or there was another way into the courtyard, a way he had always known and never used, a door that existed the way many doors in the Bureau existed: as facts of the building he had not yet had occasion to walk through.

The courtyard was concrete. Small. Bare. The walls of the building rose around it on three sides. The fourth side was a low boundary wall, the kind that keeps nothing out and nothing in but marks the edge of the Bureau's ground. Against the far wall, at its base: the door.

He stood before it. It was lower than he had judged from the window — not knee-height exactly, but low enough that an adult would need to bend, to fold at the waist and duck the head, to pass through it. The frame was wooden, painted grey over older paint. The handle was brass, small, the type used on maintenance hatches and utility closets. Above the door, nothing — no sign, no number, no stencilled designation. The wall continued above it, blank, four stories of concrete and windows.

He turned the handle. It was warm. Not from the sun — the courtyard was in shadow, had been in shadow the entire time he could see — but with the warmth of a thing that has been recently held. He did not think about this. He pulled the door open.

Beyond it: a low passage. Concrete floor, concrete walls, ceiling close enough to touch if he raised his hand — which he did not, because his hands were at his sides and the passage was narrow and the posture required was the posture of a person walking through a space not built for walking but for access, for pipes or wiring or the movement of small carts between levels. The passage smelled of concrete dust and paper — the same paper smell as the records wing, the settled smell of documents stored in dry darkness.

He walked. The passage was straight. It was lit by a single fluorescent tube, mounted at ankle height in a protective cage, casting a low light that illuminated the floor and the lower walls and left the ceiling in shadow. The floor sloped downward — not steeply, but enough to feel in the knees, enough to know that each step was lower than the last. He counted: twelve steps before the floor levelled. The ceiling rose. The passage widened.

He was in a room. Or a landing — a junction between the passage he had walked and a corridor that continued to the left, wider, higher, with the same institutional linoleum he recognised from the upper floors. To the right: a wall, and in the wall, a door. The door was closed. It was the same grey paint as every other Bureau door. It had a brushed-metal handle. It had no sign, no number. But it was at the correct height — a full-size door, in a full-size wall, in a space that was, once the low passage was behind him, ordinary.

He did not open the door. He looked at it. He looked at the corridor to the left. He looked at the passage behind him, the low ceiling, the fluorescent at ankle height. The Bureau had solved a spatial problem — the courtyard was at ground level; this space was below it; the passage was the Bureau's solution to the grade difference, built for utility, maintained without comment, used by whoever needed to move between the courtyard and whatever lay on this level. It was not strange. It was architecture. The building was old. Old buildings contained passages like this — built for one purpose, maintained for another, used by few, known to fewer.

He turned. He walked back through the passage, up the slope, through the low door, into the courtyard. He closed the door behind him. The handle was still warm.

He walked around the building to the side door. He returned to his desk. The afternoon continued.

X.

```
COMMUNICATION LOG — PARSED

SESSION:     [UNDATED]  22:04-22:31
CHANNEL:     MODEM → ACOUSTIC COUPLER → NTT LINE
BOARD:       [LOCAL — SINGLE LINE]
BAUD:        300
PROTOCOL:    8N1

CONNECT:     22:04
AUTH:        HANDLE: MARS
             STATUS: RECOGNIZED

MESSAGE QUEUE:  3 NEW

  MSG 1      FROM: TSUBAME
             DATE: [UNDATED]  21:15
             RE: ADDR RESOLUTION
             CONTENT CLASS: TECHNICAL REPLY
             RELEVANCE: LOW
             SENTIMENT: NEUTRAL
             ACTION: NONE

  MSG 2      FROM: PC98_KEN
             DATE: [UNDATED]  08:30
             RE: FLOPPY DRIVE SALE
             CONTENT CLASS: COMMERCE
             RELEVANCE: NONE
             ACTION: NONE

  MSG 3      FROM: KAIRO
             DATE: [UNDATED]  07:48
             RE: ADDR RESOLUTION
             CONTENT CLASS: TECHNICAL REPLY
             RELEVANCE: HIGH

             PARSED CONTENT:
          STATEMENT: "A LOCATION IS A ROUTE THAT HAS RESOLVED."
               CLASSIFICATION: DEFINITION
```

```
              DOMAIN: ADDRESS THEORY
              CONFIDENCE: [NOT CALCULABLE]

        STATEMENT: "AN UNRESOLVED ADDRESS IS A ROUTE IN PROGRESS."
              CLASSIFICATION: COROLLARY
              DOMAIN: ADDRESS THEORY
              CONFIDENCE: [NOT CALCULABLE]

            CROSS-REFERENCE:
            ROUTE.BAS SUBROUTINE 2000 — NEAREST UNVISITED
             BUREAU ERROR CODE E=1 — ADDR FIELD UNRESOLVED
              FIELD VERIFICATION TRACE — STATUS: PENDING

            OPERATOR RESPONSE:
              MARS: "I SEE. THANK YOU."
              DURATION OF COMPOSITION: 4 MIN 12 SEC
              KEYSTROKES: 19
              DELETED KEYSTROKES: 7

DISCONNECT: 22:31
LINE CHARGE: ESTIMATED ¥480 (27 MIN × LOCAL RATE)

AMBIENT:
  ROOM: DARK EXCEPT CRT.
 TELEPHONE CORD: DIAGONAL ACROSS TATAMI, SECURED WITH HOOKS.
  COUPLER: HANDSET SEATED. GREEN INDICATOR ON.
 SOUND: HEATER OFF (SEASON: SUMMER). FAN OSCILLATING (PERIOD: 8 SEC)

END LOG
```

XI.

A corridor. He was carrying a file. The corridor turned once, then again, and descended — three steps, unmarked — and the file was heavier than it should have been. He held it with both hands.

The corridor ended. A door, grey, closed. He knocked. The sound did not carry.

The door was open. He had not seen it open. The room beyond was small — a desk, a lamp, a frosted window showing nothing. On the desk: a form.

Form 17. The number was printed in the upper-right corner, the same small type as all Bureau forms. Below it, fields — designation, section, period, routing — completed in a small steady hand he did not recognise. Each entry was legible from where he stood. When

he stepped closer the characters held their shape but not their sequence, each one clear, the whole dissolving, the way a sentence dissolves in a language one almost knows.

One field was blank. At the bottom. A printed line, and above it a word he could not read. Not because the print was damaged or faded. Because the word was not stable — present, then different, then present — and he could not look at it long enough for it to settle.

He took the pen from his jacket. He placed the nib against the line. The ink did not take. He pressed. The nib moved across the paper and left nothing. He pressed again. Nothing.

Mori was in the room. Seated at a second desk that had not been there, turning pages. The same stoop. The same hands. He did not look up. He held the pen above the blank line and Mori turned a page and the door behind him was open and the corridor beyond was the corridor he had walked and the form was on the desk and the line was blank.

At his desk. Morning.

On the desk, beside the stamp and the ink pad and the files from the previous afternoon — a single sheet of Bureau paper. Not routed. Not delivered. Not placed there by any procedure he knew or could reconstruct. In the upper-right corner, printed: 17.

Below, fields. Three completed in a hand that was not his — small, steady, unhurried. The remaining fields were blank. The bottom of the sheet: a printed line. The same line.

He did not pick it up. He did not read the completed fields closely. He did not compare the handwriting to any hand he knew.

He placed the sheet in the third drawer of the first cabinet, behind the files, face down, where it would not be seen unless the drawer was emptied. He closed the drawer. He returned to his desk. The cough cleared by ten.[21]

XII.

He checked the board less often now. Once a week. Sometimes less. The ritual had compressed further — connect, scroll to the end of the message list, read KAIRO's posts if there were any, disconnect. He did not post. He had not posted since the folder code exchange. The board had continued without him — threads about printer repair, memory upgrades, a

[21]The preceding passage presents difficulties the editor has been unable to resolve. It does not conform to the patterns of testimony found elsewhere in the manuscript — the present tense, the absence of temporal anchors, the structural repetition — nor to the habitual mode of description. Whether it constitutes a dream report recorded within the testimony, a separate document inserted at this point in the binding, or a damaged section of transcription, the editor cannot determine. The passage is reproduced as found. A marginal annotation in the same unidentified hand noted in earlier sections appears beside the final line of the form described: leave blank. — Ed.

long debate about BASIC compilers that he read with the same detached attention he gave to the canteen noticeboard.

One evening he connected and found this:

```
01/14 22:29  MARS
Subject: record exists, subject field is null (continued)

Returning to the earlier question. If a record has no
subject, and the record is valid, and the record has
been maintained for [number] years — at what point does
the record become the subject?
```

He had not posted this. The handle was his — MARS — and the subject line referenced his earlier exchange about records without subjects. But the post was timestamped 22:29, and at 22:29 that evening he had been at his desk, not at the machine, not connected. The coupler had been covered. The machine had been off.

He read KAIRO's reply.

```
01/15 08:08  KAIRO
The record does not become the subject. The subject field
is null because the record was compiled from route data,
not from subject data. The route populates the route
field. The subject field has no source. The route requires
only the waypoints.

The waypoints are: apartment, paper shop, post office,
canal mailbox, Bureau courtyard, conversion room.

The route is complete. The subject is not required.
```

He sat in the dark. The CRT glowed. The characters were green on black. He read the six waypoints. Apartment. Paper shop. Post office. Canal mailbox. Bureau courtyard. Conversion room.

He knew these places. He had walked to each of them. The paper shop on Furumachi 2-chōme where the old folders were. The post office where the postal carrier departed by bicycle each afternoon. The canal mailbox, 9-? Higashi-Odori, where the error had never been resolved. The Bureau courtyard with its low door. The conversion room — the terminal room on the second floor, where the PC-8801 waited, where his sessions were logged, where the records he had entered for years were stored in the machine's memory.

KAIRO had listed his route.

He disconnected. He did not sleep.

XIII.

The next evening he did not connect to the board. He loaded ROUTE.BAS.

The program had not been run in months. The cassette whined, the warble played, the program loaded. The familiar prompt appeared:

```
FROM?
```

He had always typed an address. A Bureau address code, or a field-verification target, or his apartment, or — once, years ago — his sister's address in Yamagata, which had returned `ROUTE NOT IN TABLE`. He had 197 addresses entered. Three empty slots remaining. The DIM statement's 200-address limit was nearly full.

He did not type an address. He typed:

```
HOME
```

The screen paused. The cursor blinked. Then:

```
*** ROUTE COMPILED ***

FROM: HOME
  TO: [END]

STEP 1: AP  APARTMENT         14-2-7 NAKADORI
STEP 2: PS  PAPER SHOP        6-1 FURUMACHI
STEP 3: PO  POST OFFICE       3-8 BANDAI
STEP 4: UR  UNRESOLVED ADDR   9-? HIGASHI-ODORI
STEP 5: CY  COURTYARD         BUREAU INTERNAL
STEP 6: CR  CONVERSION ROOM   BUREAU 2F TERMINAL

STATUS: ROUTE COMPLETE
SUBJECT: [          ]
```

He did not move. The screen glowed. The cursor blinked inside the empty brackets of the SUBJECT field — ten blank spaces where a name should be.

He had not entered these waypoints as a sequence. He had entered 197 addresses over the course of years — Bureau addresses, field-verification targets, infrastructure, the city's districts and postal routes and building numbers. He had entered them as data. The program had compiled them. The program's nearest-neighbor algorithm — the same logic as GOSUB 5000 in the Bureau's own program, the uncalled subroutine he had found during the LIST investigation — had calculated the optimal route through all entered addresses and returned this: six stops. His apartment to the paper shop to the post office to the canal mailbox to the Bureau courtyard to the conversion room. A route through every place he had verified, every error he had walked, every address he had entered into his private atlas of the city. And the subject field was blank.

He printed the route. The dot-matrix printer clattered. The fanfold paper advanced. The route appeared in pale characters, the column-72 wrap he had set at KAIRO's suggestion years ago. He tore the sheet along the perforation. He folded it once and placed it in his shirt pocket, beside the pocket notebook.

He typed `NEW`. The program cleared. The screen showed `Ok`. He turned off the machine. The CRT faded. The heater ticked.

He went to bed. He did not sleep. The route was in his pocket. The route was the same route KAIRO had listed on the board. The six waypoints were the same six waypoints. He had not entered them as a sequence and KAIRO had not been told them and the program had compiled them from 197 individual addresses and the compilation had produced a route that a stranger on a BBS had already described.

He did not think about what this meant. He thought about the route. The six stops. The order. The distance from each stop to the next. He could walk it. He could follow the program's output the way he followed the Bureau's instructions — not because he understood them, but because they were there, and following was what he did.

XIV.

He followed the route on a Saturday.

The morning was cold. Overcast. The kind of November grey that flattens the city to a single value — concrete, sky, canal, all the same grey, differentiated only by texture: rough for concrete, smooth for sky, moving for water. He left the apartment at eight forty-five, the same time he left for the Bureau, because his body did not know another time to leave.

Step 1: Apartment.

He stood on the landing outside his door. The building was quiet. The neighbour's television was silent. The stairwell smelled of concrete and the faint chemical sweetness of laundry detergent from the first floor. He had lived here for — he could calculate: longer than he had lived anywhere else. The apartment was the longest address in his residential history. Longer than his parents' house. Longer than the room before this one. The apartment was the most durable fact about his non-Bureau life, and it contained the Bureau's language and the Bureau's rhythms and the cassettes in their row and the letters in their drawer, and standing on the landing he could not have said what in it was his.

He descended. He walked south along the canal path.

The path was wet. Rain in the night had left the gravel dark and compacted, and the puddles in the low spots beside the retaining wall held a thin skin of oil from the roadway above. The concrete wall along the east bank was darker at its base where the water level had risen and receded, leaving a line of silt at the tidemark. The water was the colour it always was — weak tea, slow, carrying nothing visible — but the smell was different after rain: muddier, the mineral scent of river-bottom silt mixed with something vegetal, the smell of leaves rotting in standing water beneath the pedestrian bridge. His shoes — the same shoes, resoled twice, the left heel worn on the outer edge in a pattern that had become permanent, that resisted resoling, that was his walk made visible in leather — were damp before he reached the first intersection. His left knee, which had stiffened in his eighth year and had not improved, ached on the slight downward grade. He walked through it. The zelkova trees along the far bank were bare — November — their branches making the pattern they made every November, fine and dark against the grey, the same pattern from every November he had walked this path. The fisherman's bench, where it appeared between the second and third trees, was empty. Wet. The concrete beneath it stained where water pooled. On

warmer days the fisherman sat there with his line in the canal and his thermos beside him, catching nothing, returning nothing. Not today. Today the bench was a fact about rain, and he passed it, and the gravel gave way to paved concrete, and the canal curved gently east, and the city continued on both sides of it, and he continued through it.

Step 2: Paper shop.

The shop was open. The owner — older now, white-haired, the same man who had shown him the old Takeda folders, who had said They moved it down two millimetres — was at the counter, arranging stock. Rolls of paper. Cardboard tubes. A stack of folders — beige, kraft, A4 — the current stock, the Bandai Insatsu folders with the 17mm tab, the ones the Bureau used now. No Takeda stock remained. The owner had said this years ago: Nobody else orders this kind. The kind was gone.

He did not enter. He stood on the street. The owner looked up, saw him, showed no sign of recognition or non-recognition. He continued walking.

Step 3: Post office.

The district branch. A concrete building, two stories. The service window was open. Inside, behind the counter, the ordinary accumulation of postal bureaucracy: forms, scales, stamp pads, a rack of registered-mail slips. A postal carrier was departing — bicycle, red bag, route southbound. It was not the same carrier he had seen on his first field verification, years ago. Or it was. He could not tell. The uniform was the same. The bicycle was the same.

He reached into his jacket and took out an envelope. He had prepared it that morning, before leaving — or he had prepared it days ago, or it had been in the jacket pocket since he wrote the fifth letter, the one with only a date. The envelope was addressed: Yamagata-ken, the district, the block, the number. His sister's address. He had not written it in years. His hand had written it. The stamp was affixed. The letter inside — if there was a letter, if the folded paper with its date and its blankness could be called a letter — was sealed.

He placed it in the post box outside the building. The slot accepted it. The metal flap closed. The sound was small.

He continued.

The walk from the post office to Higashi-Odori followed the canal south past the district boundary, where the concrete retaining wall was newer and the path was asphalt instead of gravel. The houses on the far bank were smaller here, older, their ground-floor windows closer to the water. A cat sat on the wall and watched him pass. The cough came — the morning cough, which had not cleared by ten today, or by eleven, but had settled into the breath the way weather settles into a season — and he coughed once, into his hand, and the sound was small against the canal's quiet, and he continued walking.

Step 4: Canal mailbox.

The canal path narrowed where it turned toward Higashi-Odori. The gravel section — between the fisherman's bench and the pedestrian bridge, the section KAIRO had described as 200 metres requiring adjusted stride — was wet. The gravel was loose here, mixed with river sand that had been washed up in a flood year and never cleared. He walked it. His shoes were damp by the end. The smell of the canal was stronger at this point — the water

moved more slowly where the channel widened, and the mud on the concrete ledge below the waterline was visible at low water, dark and silted, and the smell was mud and iron and the faint organic sweetness of canal vegetation, the same smell that had been there on his first field verification twenty-seven years ago, when the path was new to him and the canal was new to him and the city was a place he walked through rather than a place that held him.

The mailbox was there. Recessed into the concrete wall beside the canal, at the address he had verified on his first field assignment: 9-? Higashi-Odori. The address that existed in the postal system but not in the code table. The address the machine could not hold.

The mailbox was unchanged. Rust on the hinge. A leaf in the slot — not the same leaf; leaves came and went; but a leaf, brown, dry, partial, caught in the opening. A zelkova leaf, he thought — from the trees that lined the far bank, the same species, shedding the same leaves into the same wind each autumn, one of which always found the slot, as if the mailbox collected them the way it collected mail: without choosing, without refusing. The error was twenty-seven years old. The address was still unresolved. No one had resolved it. He had filed the error sheet in his second year and the pink copy had gone to Sasaki and the resolution had been — what? He could not remember. Had the address been added to the table? Had it been flagged and left? Had the record been processed with a note? He did not know. The error sheet's white copy was in his desk drawer at the Bureau, among the forty-three others. The mailbox was still here.

He looked at it. The rust. The leaf. The wall. The canal behind him, dark and still, the water moving without sound at this hour, the far bank's houses reflected in the surface as shapes without detail. A crow called once from somewhere east — a single note, flat, without echo. The concrete wall was cold where he placed his hand on it, steadying himself as his knee complained about the standing. The cold went through his palm and into the bones of his hand and he held it there for a moment — three seconds, perhaps four — and then he took his hand away and the cold remained in his fingers as he walked.

He continued.

Step 5: Bureau courtyard.

His shoes were wet. The left sole made a faint sound on the pavement — not a squeak but a whisper, the sound of water compressed between rubber and concrete with each step. He could feel the dampness in his sock, in the space between the ball of his foot and the insole, and it was not unpleasant, only present, in the way that all bodily facts were present now: the knee, the cough, the stiffness in his wrists, the morning's accumulation of walking.

He approached the building from the canal side. The side door — behind the third concrete planter, painted wall colour — was closed. He did not try it. He walked around to the gap between the east wall and the boundary fence, the same gap he had used when he visited the courtyard — weeks ago? Months? — and the courtyard was there, concrete, bare, the walls rising on three sides, the low boundary wall on the fourth.

The low door was at the base of the far wall. The handle caught the morning light — what little there was, filtered through the overcast, reflected from the wet concrete. He crossed the courtyard. He bent. He turned the handle. It was warm.

He ducked through the low door. The passage: concrete, low ceiling, fluorescent at ankle

height in its cage. He walked. Twelve steps downward. The floor levelled. The ceiling rose. The junction. The corridor to the left.

He turned left. The corridor was institutional — linoleum, beige walls, fluorescent tubes — and it was, he understood without surprise, the ground-floor corridor of the Bureau. He was inside the building. The passage from the courtyard led to the building's interior, below and behind the spaces he knew, connecting the outside to the inside through a route the Bureau had built and maintained and never announced. The corridor was empty. A clock on the wall showed nine-twelve. Saturday. The building was open on Saturdays — reduced staff, no canteen — but the corridors were quiet and the lights were on and the clock was running and the building was doing what buildings do when their occupants are absent: persisting.

He walked to the stairwell. He climbed to the second floor. The terminal room door was open.

Step 6: Conversion room.

The terminal room was the same: two desks, two terminals, the logbook on the shelf, the ring-bound N88-BASIC manual, the dust cover on the second terminal (unused, as always). The fluorescent tube buzzed at its usual frequency. The clock above the door showed nine-seventeen.

The first terminal was on.

He had not turned it on. The logbook was open to the current date. The previous entry — 三-二, yesterday, 09:00-11:30 — was in another operator's hand. Today's line was blank. No one had signed in. No one had started a session. But the terminal was on. The dust cover was removed and folded on the desk beside the keyboard. The screen glowed. The cursor blinked.

The screen showed a record.

```
ACCOUNT CONVERSION SYSTEM  V2.1
SECOND SECTION / PERSONAL ACCOUNTS

SUBJECT NAME:    [                    ]
BIRTH YEAR:      S28
PREFECTURE:      NIIGATA
REG. NUMBER:     [SYSTEM-GENERATED]
ACCOUNT TYPE:    CONVERSION
STATUS:          ROUTE COMPLETE
ADDRESS CODE:    COMPILATION ROUTE
ROUTE:           AP-PS-PO-UR-CY-CR

FORMS PROCESSED: 3, 7, 11
FORM 17:         PENDING
```

He sat in the chair. The chair was warm.

He looked at the screen. The SUBJECT NAME field was blank — the same twenty blank spaces, the same brackets, the same absence. Birth year Shōwa 28. Niigata prefecture. The status read ROUTE COMPLETE. The address code read COMPILATION ROUTE — the

same route he had followed that morning, the same route KAIRO had listed, the same route ROUTE.BAS had compiled from his 197 addresses.

FORMS PROCESSED: 3, 7, 11. The same sequence on every routing slip he had ever read. The same sequence on Record 82-1248-1, the record without a subject he had found years ago during a routine index check.

FORM 17: PENDING.

He sat. The screen glowed. The fluorescent buzzed. The building was quiet. The clock showed nine-nineteen. The cursor blinked at the end of the last displayed line, waiting for input.

He did not type. He did not press any key. He sat in the warm chair before the green screen and the record that was complete in every respect except the subject field, which was blank, which had always been blank, which would remain blank because the subject was — and he could feel this, not as knowledge but as the same proprioceptive fact that had measured the records-wing corridor, the same body-counting that told him when a staircase had one step more than expected — not a field that would be filled.

The route was complete. The subject was not required.

He sat. The terminal hummed. The clock moved. The morning continued.

XV.

Files. The stamp. The files.

He opened the first drawer. He opened the second drawer. He did not open the third drawer.

The accounts had continued. He could not have said how many. The cabinets knew. The stamp knew. His hands, which opened and closed the folders and pressed the pale blue ink into the cover sheets and turned the interior pages and set the designation marks in the lower-right corners, knew. The number was not a number he held in his mind. It was a number his body performed.

Mori, at the canteen. The same bowl. The same pace. He did not look at Mori’s hands.

Spring, perhaps. The courtyard was green. Or it had been green the last time he looked, which may have been this morning or last week or the week before, because the window was there and the courtyard was there and the green was there and these things did not require him to notice them on any particular day. At the base of the far wall, the low door. The handle caught the light.

He did not open the third drawer. The files in the third drawer were the oldest files, the ones from his first years, and behind them, face down, a single sheet he had placed there, and the sheet was there, and he knew it was there the way he knew the courtyard was green: not as information retrieved but as weight, present, structural, in the room whether or not he turned to face it.[22]

The stamp.

A morning. The cough did not clear by ten. It cleared by eleven, or by noon, or it did not clear at all but became quieter, became part of the breath rather than interruption of it, and he worked with the cough the way he worked with the tremor and the wrists and the eyes: around it, beside it, through it.

The receptionist, seen through the frosted glass on a morning he could not place. The same hair. The same half-glasses on the chain. He passed without stopping. The thought that she looked the same — but this was not a thought. It was less than a thought. It was a shape that occurred and passed, like the courtyard, like the green, like the weight in the third drawer.[23]

Files.

He was not certain of the order. Whether the account he had examined that afternoon — a man, born in Shōwa, residential history of four addresses, no discrepancies — was examined before or after the account he had examined that morning, or whether that morning was this morning or a different morning, and whether the difference mattered, because the procedure was the same: cover sheet, interior sheets, designation mark, file, close, next.

The third drawer.

He stood before the cabinet. His hand on the second drawer's handle. The third drawer was below it. He did not move his hand down. He closed the second drawer and returned to his desk.

---

[22] The editor notes that the "single sheet" referred to here does not appear among the materials recovered from the cabinets. The third drawer of the first cabinet, when examined, contained only case files consistent with the earliest years of service. Whether the sheet was removed before the editor's access, misfiled elsewhere, or destroyed, is not known. — Ed.

[23] do not complete

after[24]

The light was different. The fluorescents had been replaced — all of them, at once, on a weekend or a holiday he had not registered — and the new tubes were brighter and colder and the room looked the same but did not feel the same, and this was a thing he noticed and could not describe, and the inability to describe it was itself becoming a feature of the testimony, the words thinning the way the sleep thinned, the way the cough had thickened, the way the days had

---

not this page[25]

The stamp. A date. He did not read the year. He had not read the year in a long time. The bands turned. The ink pressed. The pale blue date appeared on the cover sheet and the file moved from the left side of the desk to the right side of the desk and another file replaced it and the stamp pressed again and the date was the same date because the day was the same day and the next day the date would be different and the bands would turn and the ink would press and

---

XVI.

On the board, one morning — the last morning he connected, though he did not know it was the last — there was a single new post:

```
03/21 08:09  KAIRO
Subject: route termination

A route has been calculated. All waypoints have been
visited. The return address is the origin address. The
route forms a closed loop. The loop has been traversed
```

[24]The marginal annotations appearing on the final pages of the manuscript — including “after” and “not this page” — are in the same hand as those noted in earlier sections. Their placement is ambiguous: they could refer to the passages beside which they are written, to the testimony as a whole, or to the page sequence of the manuscript. The editor cannot determine whether they were inscribed before, during, or after the composition of the testimony. They are reproduced in situ. The ordering of the final pages of the manuscript has presented difficulties the editor has not been fully able to resolve; the sequence given here represents the editor’s best reconstruction, but the editor cannot be certain that it is correct. — Ed.

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```
[number] times. Each traversal produces the same output.
The output is valid. The route is
```

The message ended there. No period. No completion. The cursor on his screen blinked at the end of the line, after the word is, and there was nothing after it. The post was not marked as deleted or truncated. It was simply unfinished.

He scrolled down. There were no more messages from KAIRO. There were no more messages from anyone. The board continued — other users posting about floppy drives and sorting algorithms and printer ribbon sourcing — but KAIRO had posted this and then KAIRO had stopped.

He disconnected. He did not connect again.

XVII.

```
ROUTE TRACE — COMPILATION

SUBJECT:    [                    ]
OPERATOR:   2-8
DATE:       [UNDATED]
STATUS:     FINAL

ORIGIN:     APARTMENT — 2F
            POWER STATE: OFF
            AMBIENT: HEATER OFF. FLUORESCENT OFF.
        SHELF: 5 CASSETTES. 14 MAGAZINES. 1 KEPT SEPARATELY.
        TABLE: CLEAR. DUST COVER ON MACHINE. TEA CUP EMPTY, RINSED.
            PLANT: ALOE. SOIL: MOIST. RECENTLY WATERED.
              LETTER: NOT PRESENT. (REF: PREVIOUS LOG —
PRESENT.)
            SHOES: REMOVED FROM SHELF. LACES TIED.

DEPARTURE:  [TIMESTAMP BLANK]

WAYPOINT 1: CANAL PATH (SOUTH)
            SURFACE: WET. RECENT RAIN.
            OBSERVATION: FISHERMAN AT USUAL POSITION.
                         LINE IN WATER. NO CATCH OBSERVED.
          FOOTWEAR: DAMP (LEFT HEEL WORN — ASYMMETRIC GAIT
                        CONFIRMED, REF: COBBLER RECORD).
            DURATION AT WAYPOINT: 0 MIN. TRANSIT ONLY.

WAYPOINT 2: FURUMACHI SHOTENGAI
           STATUS: 19 SHOPS OPERATIONAL (REF: 1986 COUNT —
47).
           OBSERVATION: PAPER SHOP OPEN. OWNER AT COUNTER.
```

FOLDER STOCK VISIBLE. TAB POSITION: 17MM.
NO TAKEDA STOCK REMAINING.
INTERACTION: NONE. PASSED WITHOUT ENTERING.
SOUND: SHOPPING STREET AMBIENT — RADIO FROM FISH SHOP (NHK, PARTIAL).

WAYPOINT 3: POST OFFICE (DISTRICT BRANCH)
STATUS: OPERATIONAL. WINDOW OPEN.
OBSERVATION: POSTAL CARRIER DEPARTING (BICYCLE, RED BAG, ROUTE SOUTHBOUND).
ITEM DEPOSITED: 1 LETTER.
ADDRESS: YAMAGATA-KEN [DISTRICT] [BLOCK]
STAMP: AFFIXED.
SEALED: YES.
CONTENTS: NOT RECORDED.
DURATION AT WAYPOINT: 2 MIN 15 SEC.

WAYPOINT 4: CANAL MAILBOX
STRUCTURE: CONCRETE WALL. MAILBOX RECESSED.
CONDITION: RUST ON HINGE. LEAF IN SLOT (ZELKOVA, PARTIAL, BROWN, DRY — SEASON: AUTUMN).
MAIL PRESENT: UNKNOWN (SLOT CLOSED).
VERIFICATION: ORIGINAL ERROR (REC 82-1147-3) STATUS: UNRESOLVED (27 YEARS).
AMBIENT: CANAL WATER LEVEL LOW. SMELL OF MUD AND IRON. LIGHT: OVERCAST, GREY.
SOUND: WATER. TRAFFIC (DISTANT). CROW (SINGLE, EAST).

WAYPOINT 5: BUREAU — COURTYARD
ACCESS: LOW DOOR (BASE OF WALL).
HANDLE: WARM.
PASSAGE: 12 STEPS DESCENDING. FLUORESCENT AT ANKLE.
OBSERVATION: COURTYARD EMPTY. CONCRETE DRY DESPITE RECENT RAIN.

WAYPOINT 6: BUREAU — TERMINAL ROOM (2F)
DOOR: OPEN.
TERMINAL: PC-8801 UNIT 01. POWER STATE: ON.
DISPLAY: ACTIVE. CURSOR BLINKING.
OPERATOR LOG: OPEN TO CURRENT DATE.
PREVIOUS ENTRY: 3-2 (YESTERDAY, 09:00-11:30).
CURRENT ENTRY: [BLANK].
DUST COVER: REMOVED. FOLDED ON DESK.
CHAIR: POSITIONED. WARM.

RECORD ON SCREEN:

```
                  RECORD NUMBER:   [SYSTEM-GENERATED]
                  SUBJECT:         [                    ]
                  BIRTH YEAR:      S28
                  PREFECTURE:      NIIGATA
                  ADDRESS CODE:    COMPILATION ROUTE
                  STATUS FLAGS:    ALL CLEAR
               CROSS-REFERENCES: 43 ERROR SHEETS (RESOLVED)
                                  1 ROUTE TABLE (COMPLETE)
                                 1 OPERATOR LOG (27 YEARS)
                                5 CASSETTES (HOME ARCHIVE)
                            1 POCKET NOTEBOOK (UNREGISTERED)
                  ROUTE:           COMPLETE
                  SUBJECT:         [                    ]
                  FORM 17:         EXAMINATION OF PERSONS:
                                   FINAL DISPOSITION
                                   STATUS: ISSUED

OPERATOR ACTION: [NOT RECORDED]

END TRACE
```

XVIII.

Morning.

The cough.

He had passed the frosted glass on the way in. Someone behind it. The same hair. The same glasses on the chain. He did not stop.

At his desk. A file. He opened the cover sheet. Interior sheets: two. He read the first page. He read the second page. The residential history was complete. He closed the file and placed it on the right side of the desk.

He took the next file from the left side. He opened it. The cover sheet was blank — not a cover sheet at all, or a cover sheet from which the entries had been omitted, or a cover sheet that had not yet been prepared: the printed fields were present, the boxes were present, the lines were present, but every field was empty. He turned to the interior. There were no interior sheets. The folder held only the blank cover sheet and, behind it, nothing.

He closed the folder. He placed it on the right side of the desk. He picked up the stamp. He opened the folder again to the cover sheet and pressed the stamp into the lower-left corner, where the date stamp always went. No ink appeared. He pressed harder. The rubber met

the paper and the paper gave slightly against the desk beneath it. He lifted the stamp. The cover sheet showed no date, no pale blue impression, only a faint depression where the pressure had been — the ghost of the stamp's rectangle, the bands' ridges barely visible, legible only under a certain light, at a certain angle, if one thought to look.[26]

He placed the stamp on the desk. He closed the folder. He placed it on the right side. His hands were on the desk.

Bureau attendance records, to the extent these were accessible, list no further entries under Desk 二-八 after the fourth of November, fifty-second year. A municipal death-register entry corresponding in age, residential district, and approximate date exists among the public records for that month; the name field is not reproduced here, for reasons consistent with those stated in the preface.

A letter addressed to Yamagata-ken was deposited at the district post office on the date corresponding to the compilation route. Whether this letter was received, returned, or remains in transit, the editor has not been able to establish. The sister, when asked, did not recall it.

The final cover sheet described in the preceding passage was found among the materials received by the editor. Its printed fields are blank, as described. The lower-left corner bears a pressure mark — a rectangular impression with faint ridge lines, consistent with a date stamp applied without ink. The impression does not correspond to any stamp in the Second Section's inventory, which the editor was permitted to examine briefly in the spring of the following year. The mark is visible only under oblique light. It does not reproduce.

References in the routing documentation and in the Bureau's Procedural Handbook (Section 9, reproduced earlier in this volume) indicate that a Form 17 (Examination of Persons: Final Disposition) should have accompanied the completed account. No such form was found — neither in the binding of the manuscript, nor in the third drawer of the first cabinet (see note 18a), nor among the Bureau's own records. Whether such a form was completed and subsequently removed, never issued, or retained elsewhere, the editor has not been able to determine.

A final terminal trace, associated with the PC-8801 session log reproduced in the preceding chapter, includes the following status fields:

```
OPERATOR:        2-8
ROUTE:           COMPLETE
SUBJECT:         [                    ]
FORM 17:         ISSUED
OPERATOR RESPONSE:  NONE
SUBJECT FIELD NOT REQUIRED
```

The editor notes that the phrase SUBJECT FIELD NOT REQUIRED does not appear in any Bureau documentation available to him, and its origin — whether system-generated, operator-entered, or produced by some other process — has not been determined. The route record has been retained. — Ed.

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[26]The testimony ends here. The pages that follow in the manuscript are blank. The editor has found no indication that the account was considered finished or that additional material exists.

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