

THE OUTSIDER

1

ROOFTOP SIGNAL

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COORDINATE 1 / KABESHIN CITY

English Edition

TOJI

The water came first.

My body rocked, up and down. Salt in my nose, a low engine turning over somewhere.

I was on a boat.

I wasn't.

I opened my eyes. There was a ceiling. Instead of waves, car noise through the window.

Kabeshin City.

For years now I'd had trouble with the order of it. Waking up, opening my eyes on the boat, and the part before either. It wasn't a dream and it wasn't a memory. Somewhere between the two my foot caught, a few seconds every time.

On the days it caught all the way, I had to smoke.

I went up to the roof. The lighter took three tries. Calvin's did too. That was the only part of him I kept.

Before the smoke thinned out, I saw a man standing on the roof across the way.

He was holding a paper cup.

He dropped it.

Then both hands went to his throat.

It looked like a man loosening his tie. It was a hot day.

One hand came down.

The other one didn't.

He stepped back. One step, two. It didn't look like walking. It looked like being pushed.

The railing hit him behind the knees.

The falling didn't take long.

It wasn't loud. The sound of a person going away is always lighter than you'd think.

The cigarette burned down between my fingers.

I heard people gathering below. I hung my arms over the railing and looked down. A briefcase had landed beside the body. The lid had come open and everything spilled out. A fountain pen. Business cards. A folded umbrella.

And a paper cup rolled along the sidewalk and stopped at the storm drain.

Whatever had been in it was already gone.

I looked at that cup for a while.

There was someone once who carried around coffee with the ice melted out of it. Not to drink. To carry. Because it's cold, she said.

Before I finished the cigarette, the phone started ringing downstairs.



That afternoon my office door opened. A face I hadn't seen before.

In this city they all were.

"Mr. Wayne."

That's the name I use here. Six years now. In this city a dead man can rent a name if he pays for it, and if you rent one long enough it stops being rented.

"You heard, right? Suicide case, but it won't come apart."

Local detective. I learned his name later. He didn't look thirty, and he wore his tie like it was the first one he'd ever tied.

"Who sent you."

"My section chief. He said take anything like this to Mr. Wayne."

"He still hasn't been fired."

"...Sorry?"

"Nothing."

"I watched him go over."

"You saw it happen?"

"From the roof across."

He started writing that down and stopped.

"Then you've heard about the note?"

"No."

"It's not his handwriting. But it's definitely his hand that wrote it."

The room went quiet.

"Can't be both."

"That's the problem."

He set the briefcase on my desk. The dead man's. Out came the pen, the cards, the folded umbrella. Last, an old leather notebook.

I picked up a card.

Buso. Accounting supervisor, import-export firm. Forty-two. No debt, no divorce, nothing on record.

"Ordinary."

"That's what's strange about it." He put down a photograph.

"His own team says he was quiet and reliable. People on the other floors—" He flipped through his notes. "They said he scared them."

"Meaning what."

"He wouldn't return a hello in the hallway. Wouldn't make eye contact. Then some days he'd go around smiling and greeting everyone like a completely different man. Same floor. Same month."

There was only one face in the photograph.

"And this probably doesn't matter." He turned a page. "Guy at the next desk says Buso had a habit. When he was counting figures he'd tap the desk twice with his left hand. Been doing it for over ten years."

"Why is that in a statement."

"Because Buso brought it up himself. Three days before he died."

"Said what."

He read it off the page.

"That it wasn't coming out anymore."

I opened the envelope.

I put on gloves and took out the paper. The writing was small and even. Not one waver from beginning to end.

I can no longer bear myself.

That was all of it.

I tilted the paper into the light. Every stroke exited toward the upper right. A right-handed man's strokes exit the other way.

The note on the back of his business card was right-handed.

Only the last line he ever wrote was left.

I opened the notebook.

The front pages had figures and dates. An accounting supervisor's handwriting.

Partway through, the slant reversed.

The back pages weren't writing at all. One stamp, pressed by hand, hundreds of times, until the paper tore. Three lines inside a circle, all avoiding each other.

I knew that stamp.

Years ago I'd seen it in the corner of a shipping document. There was someone standing next to me that day holding a coffee with the ice melted out of it, and she was the one who put her finger on it first.

You ever seen this before?

I lied to her then too.

Nobody asked this time.

"Some kind of compulsion, maybe."

"Could be."

The stamps at the front were crooked. They got straighter toward the back. The last page looked drawn with a ruler.

Compulsions don't improve like that.

"Let's go to the scene."

"Now? The photos alone should—"

"Photos don't answer questions."



There was nothing to see in Buso's apartment. The bed was squared off. The closet was arranged by color. Not a speck of dust on the table.

Not empty the way a place is when nobody lives there. Empty the way a place is when somebody erased himself out of it.

Two things didn't fit.

The first was next to the refrigerator. A membership card held up by a magnet. A cartoon elephant, smiling. The name of a pachinko parlor.

"A guy like this went to a place like that?"

"You're asking because it doesn't fit."

I took the card.

The second thing was inside the closet.

I pushed the clothes aside and found bare board. A series of short horizontal pencil marks. They looked like the marks you make measuring a kid's height, except sideways. Not bottom to top. Left to right, climbing.

Each line had a date beside it. The first was a week ago. The last was yesterday.

The spacing was about two finger-widths a day.

Beside the last line, instead of a date, there was a single short stroke. Like a man noting that there was nowhere left to go.

"What is this?"

"I don't know."

I meant it.

I just took a photograph.



The parlor had its lights on from three in the afternoon. Ball bearings pouring, machine noise, cigarette smoke, and the particular silence of a room where nobody speaks to anybody.

The manager looked at the card and pointed out the seat immediately.

"End of that row. Three years, always the same one."

I sat down in it.

The chair still felt pressed into the shape of him.

I asked the man in the next seat.

"You know Buso?"

Fifties, roughly. Cardigan. Slippers. Right hand on the lever, a few coins balanced on the fingertips of his left.

"Of course. See him every day."

Only then did he turn his head. Black suit, unfamiliar cop standing behind it.

"You police?"

"Did you see him today?"

"Not today. He was in yesterday." He pulled the lever. "Been a bit off lately, though. Made me wonder if something was going on."

"Going on how."

"No idea. Just seemed like a different person. The way he said hello and all."

While he said it, his left hand tapped the edge of the machine twice.

Tap. Tap.

The hand of a man counting figures.

There are no figures to count in a pachinko parlor.

I looked at that hand.

The right one was fifty years old. Thick knuckles, rough across the back, heavy nails.

The left one wasn't.

The nails were trimmed. No spots on the back of the hand.

There was a single callus on the side of the index finger, the kind that comes from handling paperwork.

Two hands living two different lives.

"That's a good hand you've got."

"Sorry?"

"Nothing."

He laughed. Then he flicked one of the coins off his left fingertips and caught it in his palm.

The fingers moved smoothly. They just didn't seem to move in the order he'd asked for.

"You want one? Sitting in that seat and not playing, that's a waste."

"I'm fine."

"Oh, come on, one spin. Buso used to sit right there doing the same thing."

I took the coin.

I don't know why. My hand just went out first.

His fingers brushed mine on the way.

They were cold.

It was an ordinary coin. Parlor name on the front, nothing on the back.

I pulled the lever.

The balls came pouring out.

Every light on top of the machine went off at once. Something like a siren filled the room. Paper streamers dropped from the ceiling. Every head in the place turned.

Jackpot.

The local detective was watching from the entrance.

His expression set very slowly.

"Whoa."

The man beside me clapped twice. He looked genuinely delighted.

"Lucky man."

The manager came running. Two staff behind him. One had a camera.

"Congratulations, sir. Second one this year for us."

"That's all right."

"Just one photo—"

"I'm here on police business."

I didn't say I was police.

"Ah — the paperwork, then."

A clipboard came at me. Large payout confirmation. Full name, contact number, identification number.

I looked at it for a while.

"What happens if I don't fill this out."

"We can't pay out, sir."

The local detective came over and spoke very quietly.

"Mr. Wayne. What do I put in the report about this."

"Don't put anything."

"I saw it happen."

"Then you didn't."

"A consulting adviser, in the position of a witness—"

"Nothing's written yet."

The machine was still screaming. The balls were still coming.
Out of a dead man's seat.

The man beside me tore off a length of the paper streamer and handed it to me.

"You don't see those often. Good day for you."

I took it.



The phone rang right then.

The local detective answered, listened a second, and handed it over.

"Preliminary autopsy findings."

"Go."

"The left arm's missing."

The noise of the machines got very far away.

"Say that again."

"The left arm. Gone from the shoulder."

"It came off in the fall."

"That's the thing—" I heard him turn a page. "It wasn't at the scene. They swept thirty meters out. Nothing. And there's almost no bleeding response at the separation."

"..."

"They're saying it came away after death, except it's too clean for that. And it isn't a blade."

I thought about the morning.

The man dropping the paper cup. Both hands going to his throat.

One hand came down. The other one didn't.

Two arms.

When he went over, that man had two arms.

"What's on the shoulder."

"How did you know that."

"Tell me."

"There's a set of horizontal cuts, and they're all severed. Like they ran on down the arm and got cut off. It looks like a ladder."

I thought about the pencil marks inside the closet.

Two finger-widths a day.

Buso wasn't out of his mind.

He was measuring.

He would have found out with a blade. Everything up to where it hurt was still his arm. Everything past where it stopped hurting wasn't.

The line moved up a little every day, and every day he marked it inside his closet door.

The first mark at the wrist. The last one at the shoulder.

Something was climbing from his wrist toward his shoulder, and Buso was counting the days until it arrived.

The most diligent investigator in this city was an accounting supervisor.

I hung up and looked at the seat beside me.

The man was still pulling the lever.

Tap. Tap.

A habit ten-some years old.

Buso's habit.

"Let's call it for today," I told the local detective. "Send everyone home."

"I don't have the authority to—"

"You do. You've just never used it."

He looked at me a moment, then reached for his radio.

"And you, Mr. Wayne?"

"I'll play a while longer."

"...You already won."

"Yeah."



I sat there two more hours. Fed in coins, pulled the lever, won nothing.

Then I pressed a button and the press didn't come back.

Left index finger.

I pressed again. It came that time. Half a beat late.

I pushed up my sleeve. Nothing on the forearm. No mark, no swelling, nothing.

The nothing was worse. There was no way to check. You can't look inside a bone, and there was nobody to ask.

Buso must have started here too. Nothing there, so nothing wrong.

There was a sound from the seat beside me.

Tap. Tap.



It was past nine when the man finally packed up and stood.

An old walk-up. Second floor. Key in the lock. The door opened and started to swing back.

I put my hand in the gap.

The door stopped with a thunk.

"Mind if I join you."

He made a sound. Too short for a scream, too long for a hiccup.

"Christ, you scared the—"

"My apologies."

"You can't just come up behind a person—"

"I walk quietly."

"I nearly had a heart attack."

"Are you all right?"

"No, I'm not all right."

"I didn't think so."

We stood there apologizing to each other through the door. My hand was still wedged in the frame.

He got his breath back and opened it the rest of the way.

"...Come in, then."

"Thank you."

"You can leave your shoes on—"

"No. I'll take them off."

"Slippers?"

"I'm fine."

"Floor's cold."

"...Then yes, please."

Half my foot hung out the back of them.



The apartment smelled like tea that had been steeped too long.

The kettle went on. Two cups came out. One had a chip in the rim. He set the chipped one in front of himself.

"Guest gets the good one."

"Is that a habit?"

"Old one."

A plate of rice crackers came out. He pushed it toward me.

"Have some. They're stale."

"...Thank you."

"You're eating them anyway."

"I like them stale."

I sat. The tea was hot and better than I expected.

"Good tea."

"Buy ten boxes, they throw in one."

"Sounds like you buy a lot."

"I've been drinking it a long time."

He wrapped both hands around his cup. The left one slid a little on the surface. It wasn't the condensation.

"You used to gamble."

His hands stopped.

"How'd you know that."

"The way you set the cups down. You didn't put the good one in front of me. You put the bad one in front of yourself. That's so the other man sits down comfortable."

He laughed.

"You must have played, then."

"I watched some."

"Watching's what improves fastest."

"You had a name once."

"I did."

"And now."

"No."

I laid my left hand on the table.

His eyes went there once and came back.

"Is the left arm yours."

Nothing but the kettle.

"...No."

"Where's the original."

"Taken."

"Taken where."

He set the cup down.

"At a table."

"You lost."

"No. I was winning."

"Then what."

"Got caught dealing off the bottom."

I didn't say anything.

"Thirty years I did that." He laughed. "First time I ever got caught."

"By who."

"Somebody I'd never seen before. Just another customer sitting next to me. I didn't find out what he actually was until a long time after."

"Name."

"Katsura. Don't even know if that's a family name or a given one."

"Was he angry?"

"No."

He set his half cracker down on the plate.

"That's what scared me most. He waited until the hand was over, and then he asked me one quiet question."

"Which was."

"It was the left one, wasn't it."

The tea cooled in the cup.

"Which house."

"Casino. The back rooms."

"How many at the table."

"Four counting me."

"The others."

"One was a man, he was practically asleep the whole night. One was a woman. Kept losing and wouldn't get up."

"So everyone but Katsura was a customer."

"...I thought they were."

"What did they do when he took the arm."

"...Nothing."

"Nobody stepped in."

"Nobody steps in, in a place like that."

He picked up his cup, saw it was empty, and put it back down.

"...But nobody was surprised, either. That was the strangest part."

A man's arm comes off in the back room of a casino and nobody is surprised.

I had a decent idea what kind of table that was.

I didn't ask any more about it.

"What was in your hand when he took it?"

He looked at me.

For the first time, the smile was completely gone.

"...A coin."

"So it came after that."

"..."

"I won't ask what came."

He wrapped his right hand around the cup. The left stayed on his knee.

"...I wanted my arm back. That's all it ever was."

"That isn't your arm."

"..."

"That's Buso's arm."

He pulled his cardigan sleeve down a little.

The way a man does when he doesn't want you to see.

"It attached this morning."

The sleeve came down a little more.

"Moves fine, from what I saw. It just keeps doing its own thing."

He dropped the left hand below his knee.

"...It does that for a while."

"Does what."

"Hands remember their owner."

The kettle came near a boil and stopped.

"It takes a week."

He lowered his eyes.

"For that hand to become yours. Or more exactly, for everything that hand feels to come across to you."

He reset his grip on his own hands, up on his knees.

"Buso cut his arm. Wrist to shoulder, every day."

"..."

"So you felt all of it."

The kettle lid rattled. He put his hand on it and held it down.

"...Woke me a few nights."

"You held up well."

"..."

"He knew that, I'd guess. It was the only thing he had left that he could do to you."

He gathered the cracker crumbs into a little pile with his fingers. Gathered them and then did nothing with them.

"And on the seventh day."

"..."

"You strangle him. With his hand. His throat."

The room got very quiet.

"Must be easier, not having to do it yourself."

"...Buso went backwards."

"..."

"I'm squeezing and he keeps going backwards. Keeps going. And then—"

He stopped.

"There was a railing."

"...Yes."

"So you didn't push him."

"...I squeezed."

"That's pushing."

He turned the cup by its handle, half a rotation. Like a man looking for somewhere to hold on.

"You've been watching the door this whole time."

"..."

"What time do they come."

"...Eleven."

"How many."

"Two."

"What do they do."

He laughed. Very briefly.

"They put a price on organs."

"..."

"I don't have money. So I agreed to pay with a body."

"With yours."

He didn't look at me.

The steam had gone out of the cup.

"A body's a body," I said.

"Doesn't have to be yours."

"..."

"So it was Buso."

"...Yes."

"Except Buso dragged it out a week."

His right hand took hold of his left wrist. His own hand, held like somebody else's.

"...He was quick with numbers, that one."



The cup was empty.

He picked up the kettle.

"Let me pour you another."

"No thank you."

"Come on, the water's already on."

"...Then yes."

The kettle went back on.

The clock said ten fifty.

"Excuse me a moment."

He stood.

Two steps toward the sink. He turned halfway, and when he came back around the angle was tighter than it had been.

The knife was short. A paring knife.

It went for my throat.

That wasn't a hand going for an arm. That was the hand of a man who needed a body before the night was out.

I brought my left arm up.

The point went into my forearm.

It wasn't hot. There was nothing at all.

He stood there unable to let go of the handle.

I put a cigarette in my mouth with my right hand.

The lighter took three tries.

I took a drag.

He was staring at me. He looked shocked, but the shock was pointed the wrong way.

Not frightened. Calculating time.

There was a sound at the entryway.



The door opened.

Two men came in. No coats, nothing in their hands. Men in that line of work usually carry nothing. Anything you bring you have to get rid of afterward.

The one in front looked at me.

At a man sitting there with a knife in his arm, smoking.

"...The hell is this."

"That's the gentleman I told you about." The man's voice was half a tone higher than before. "He's covering for me."

"We said bring him alive."

"He is alive. Look at him."

I checked the clock.

Eleven oh two.

When the jackpot went off at the parlor, this man clapped twice and then took out his phone. I'd been watching the balls.

The crackers, the slippers, one more cup of tea. All of it started there.

Every word exchanged since I walked into this apartment had been for the purpose of keeping me in this chair until eleven.

An old gambler's way of dragging out a hand.

"Hey."

He looked up.

"...Yes."

"Nicely stretched."

It was a compliment. Half of one.



The one in front came two steps closer.

I moved the cigarette to my left hand. The side with the knife in it.

What followed didn't take long.

Two fingers of my right hand went into the front one's eyes.

Before the sound got out I put a foot into the old man and pushed him clear. The chair went over and a cup broke.

The one in back got his hand into his pocket. He got that far.

I put an arm across his throat and counted three.

At three he went slack.

The cigarette was still burning.



The room went quiet.

The kettle started to boil. What he'd put on earlier was only now coming up.

I turned it off.

The shirt of the one on the floor had ridden up off his shoulder.

High on the back, where the lat begins, there was a small piece of lettering.

BOHEM.

Too small for a tattoo. It hadn't been done for anyone else to see.

It looked like something a man carves on himself so he doesn't forget who he belongs to.

"What is this."

The unconscious one couldn't answer. Asking the blind one would have gone the same way.

I doubt either of them knew anything to begin with.

Men who wear a name on their body are usually the bottom. The top doesn't need to.

Still, both of them saw my face.

One had lost his eyes and one was out cold, but both would walk out of here alive.

Six years of keeping quiet, and it all went in one night.

Everything the old man played tonight failed.

Except one.

Putting those two in this room.

That one I had no way to take back.



He was sitting beside the toppled chair.

He tried to get up and a slipper came off. He tried to put it back on and his foot wouldn't go in.

On the third try he gave up.

I pulled the knife out of my arm.

I put my right hand into the wound. I touched bone, and I touched what was sitting on top of the bone.

I took it out.

Something small and flat and slick with blood came up in my palm. I wiped it on my sleeve.

There was a single spade on the back of it.

The wound started closing. Fast. Like flesh stitching itself.

He watched that happen.

His mouth opened and shut.

"...Fuck."

Very short and very ugly.

Then he closed his mouth like a man trying to gather back up what he'd just spilled.

"...I apologize."

"Not at all."

I meant it. It was the most honest thing anyone had said in that apartment all night.



"Let's count what you did today."

I rolled the coin across my fingers.

"You put a coin in. Never got to use it."

"..."

"You used a knife. Didn't take."

"..."

"You called two men."

I looked at the floor.

"There they are."

He put his back against the wall. His knees wouldn't come up, so his legs stuck out any which way.

A button had been torn off his cardigan. Probably when I pushed him with my foot.

Thirty years reading other men's hands at a table, and he couldn't get his own slipper on.

"I'll give this back."

I took the pachinko coin out of my pocket. The ordinary one with the parlor's name on it.

He put his hand out on reflex.

He took it.

With his own hand.

"Thank you."

Then he looked at his palm.

There were two coins.

One with the parlor's name. Underneath it, one with a spade on the back.

"This—"

"Bottom deal's no fun if the other man notices, right?"

He looked at the coin. It was his own ability. He knew exactly what it did if it went into his own body.

Nothing.

So it wasn't a threat and it wasn't a curse.

It was thirty years of technique run back at him by a man who'd seen it for the first time that evening.

His face went through all of that.

What was left at the end wasn't anger and it wasn't fear. It was the expression a man wears standing up from a table when the hand is over.

"...You play well."

"I told you I watch some."



"Leave Buso's arm."

He looked at it.

"...What do you mean."

"There's a funeral to hold. You can't bury a man an arm short."

"...How would I take it off."

"You'd know better than me."

He put his right hand on his left shoulder, feeling for a seam.

He didn't find one.

Then the left hand moved.

Tap. Tap.

Twice, on his knee.

He looked at it. This time he couldn't put it down below his knee.

"...Why is it doing that."

"Hands remember their owner, you said."



It took eleven minutes for the police to arrive.

I was outside smoking.

Oshima came running up the stairs and stopped when he saw me.

"Three of them inside."

"...Three?"

"Two are asleep, one's sitting up."

"Then, uh, should I—"

"The one sitting up is murder. The ones asleep are attempted murder. Take the attempts first. They wake up."

He picked up his radio, set it down, picked it up again.

"Mr. Wayne."

"Yeah."

"What do I... what do I put in the report about this."

"That's twice today."

"..."

"Don't write it. I'll come in tomorrow and write it."



Ten minutes later they carried the old man out.

The cuff was only on his right wrist. The left arm had to be handled separately, they said. Regulations.

On the stretcher, going past, he looked at me.

"Mr. Wayne."

"Yes."

"How many years do you figure I get."

"Enough that you come out alive."

"...Is that a good thing to say?"

"It means the bad part isn't finished."

He laughed. The same laugh as when he was talking about stale crackers.

"How many years do you figure BOHEM gives you."

I asked it.

The laugh went out of his face where it sat.

The car door shut.



"What's your name."

Oshima looked up.

"...Sorry?"

"You."

"Oshima."

"Oshima."

"Yes."

"Oshima."

"...Yes."

"I'm not charging you for this one."

"Sorry?"

"We'll call it even for the jackpot."

"...You never filled out the form."

"Course I filled it out, kid."

"..."

He started to ask something else and didn't.

That's the first thing you have to learn in this business.



The rain came after I got back to the office.

Lines of it went slanting across the window. I sat at my desk and wrote the consulting opinion.

Three lines was enough.

Witnessed by consultant. Fall. Assessed as suicide.

He did die from the fall. I watched it happen.

I sat there a while after that.

Putting a blade to his own arm every day to find out how much of it was still his. Marking the speed at which it stopped being his on the inside of a closet door. Cutting it to make it hurt someone. Not handing the hand over until the last day.

He dragged it out a week and the other man's plan came apart.

There was no box for any of it.

Paperwork records how a man died.

It doesn't record how long he didn't.

I put the pen down and stood up.

Six flights. The rail was wet, and the sound of the rain got bigger the higher I went.

I pushed the steel door and the smell of rain came in first.

I stood where I'd stood that morning.

I could see the roof across the way. The railing was still there. That was the place a man had been walked backwards into, and there was nothing to mark it. Nothing down below either. The tape and the chalk were already gone.

I hung my arms over the railing. The rain stopped and started.

The lighter took three tries again.

I pushed up my left sleeve. Nothing there.

I pressed the railing twice with my fingertips. This time it came back on time.

Nothing ever marks the place where something left.

He couldn't get his out and I got mine out. Whether that was skill or whether it was the body, I still don't know.

Probably the body.

I looked at it again from the same angle.

The man dropping the paper cup. Both hands going to his throat. One coming down, the other one not.

He didn't jump.

He wasn't pushed either.

He spent a week running away from his own body, and at the end there was nowhere left to put his feet.

That morning I read it as a man loosening his tie.

When a man dies, the name goes first. After that the records, and after that the face.

Habits last the longest.

Sometimes even after they've moved onto somebody else's hand.

Buso will be buried an arm short.

And that arm is sitting in a holding cell right now, tapping a knee twice when nobody's looking.

I found the paper streamer in my pocket. The one from the pachinko parlor. The rain had gotten into it and the color had run.

I set it on the railing.

The wind took it.



I hung my wet coat over the back of the chair.

About two hours later the phone rang.

I didn't answer it.

I didn't answer the second ring either.