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The Voyeur

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Translated by Richard Howard



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The Voyeur

Part One

IT WAS AS IF NO ONE HAD HEARD.

The whistle blew again – a shrill, prolonged noise followed by three short blasts of ear-splitting violence: a violence without purpose that remained without effect. There was no more reaction – no further exclamation – than there had been at first; not one feature of one face had even trembled.

A motionless and parallel series of strained, almost anxious stares crossed – tried to cross – struggled against the narrowing space that still separated them from their goal. Every head was raised, one next to the other, in an identical attitude. A last puff of heavy, noiseless steam formed a great plume in the air above them, and vanished as soon as it had appeared.

Slightly to one side, behind the area in which the steam had just appeared, one passenger stood apart from the expectant group. The whistle had had no more effect on his withdrawal than on the rapt attention of his neighbours. Standing like them, his body and limbs rigid, he kept his eyes on the deck.

He had often heard the story before. When he was still a child – perhaps twenty-five or thirty years ago – he had had a big cardboard box, an old shoebox, in which he collected pieces of string. Not any string, not scraps of inferior quality, worn, frayed bits that had been spoilt by overuse, not pieces too short to be good for anything.

This one would have been just right. It was a thin hemp cord in perfect condition, carefully rolled into a figure of eight, with a few extra turns wound around the middle. It must have been pretty long – a metre at least, perhaps two. Someone had probably dropped it by mistake after having rolled it up for future use – or else for a collection.

Mathias bent down to retrieve it. As he straightened up again he noticed, a few feet to the right, a little girl of seven or eight gravely staring at him, her eyes enormous and calm. He smiled hesitantly, but she did not bother to smile back, and it was only after several seconds that he saw her eyes shift towards the wad of string he was holding at the level of his chest. He was not disappointed by a closer look: it was a real find – not too shiny, firmly and regularly twisted, and evidently very strong.

For a moment he thought he recognized it, as if it were something he had lost long ago. A similar cord once must have occupied an important place in his thoughts. Would it be with the others in the shoebox? His memory immediately edged away towards the indefinite light of a rainy landscape, in which a piece of string played no perceptible part.

He had only to put it in his pocket. But no sooner had he begun the gesture than he stopped, his arm half-bent, undecided, gazing at his hand. He saw that his nails were too long, which he already knew. He also noticed that in growing their shape had become exaggeratedly pointed; naturally he did not file them to look like that.

The child was still staring in his direction, but it was difficult to be sure she was looking at him and not at something behind him, or even at nothing at all; her eyes seemed almost too wide to be able to focus on a single object, unless it was one of enormous size. She must have been looking at the sea.

Mathias let his arm fall to his side. Suddenly the engines stopped. The vibration ceased at once, as well as the continuous rumbling sound that had accompanied the ship since its departure. All the passengers remained silent, motionless, pressed close together at the entrance to the already crowded corridor through which they would eventually leave the ship. Most of them, ready for the disembarkation for some time, held their luggage in their hands, and all were facing left, their eyes fixed on the top of the pier, where about twenty people were standing in a compact group, equally silent and rigid, looking for a familiar face in the crowd on the little steamer. In each group the expressions were identical: strained, almost anxious, strangely petrified and uniform.

The ship moved ahead under its own momentum, and the only sound that could be heard was the rustling of water as it slid past the hull. A grey gull, flying from astern at a speed only slightly greater than that of the ship, passed slowly on the port side in front of the pier, gliding at the level of the bridge without the slightest movement of its wings, its head cocked, one eye fixed on the water below – one round, indifferent, inexpressive eye.

There was the sound of an electric bell. The engines started up again. The ship began to make a turn that brought it gradually closer to the pier. The coast rapidly extended along the other side: the squat lighthouse striped black and white, the half-ruined fort, the sluice gates of the tidal basin, the row of houses on the quay.

“She’s on time today,” said a voice. “Almost,” someone corrected – perhaps it was the same voice.

Mathias looked at his watch. The crossing had lasted exactly three hours. The electric bell rang again; then once more, a few seconds later. A grey gull resembling the first one passed by in the same direction, following the same horizontal trajectory in the same deliberate way – wings motionless, head cocked, beak pointing downwards, one eye fixed.

The ship didn’t seem to be moving in any direction at all. But the noise of violently churning water could be heard astern. The pier, now quite close, towered several metres above the deck. The tide must have been out. The landing slip from which the ship would be boarded revealed the smoother surface of its lower section, darkened by the water and half-covered with greenish moss. On closer inspection, the stone rim drew almost imperceptibly closer.

The stone rim – an oblique, sharp edge formed by two intersecting perpendicular planes: the vertical embankment perpendicular to the quay and the ramp leading to the top of the pier – was continued along its upper side at the top of the pier by a horizontal line extending straight towards the quay.

The pier, which seemed longer than it actually was as an effect of perspective, extended from both sides of this base line in a cluster of parallels describing, with a precision accentuated even more sharply by the morning light, a series of elongated planes alternately horizontal and vertical: the crest of the massive parapet that protected the tidal basin from the open sea, the inner wall of the parapet, the jetty along the top of the pier and the vertical embankment that plunged straight into the water of the harbour. The two vertical surfaces were in shadow, the other two brilliantly lit by the sun – the whole breadth of the parapet and all of the jetty save for one dark narrow strip: the shadow cast by the parapet. Theoretically, the reversed image of the entire group could be seen reflected in the harbour water and, on the surface, still within the same play of parallels, the shadow cast by the vertical embankment extending straight towards the quay.

At the end of the jetty the structure grew more elaborate; the pier divided into two parts: on the parapet side, a narrow passageway leading to a beacon light, and on the left the landing slip sloping down into the water. It was this latter inclined rectangle, seen obliquely, that

attracted notice; slashed diagonally by the shadow of the embankment it skirted, it showed up as one dark triangle and one bright. All other surfaces were blurred. The water in the harbour was not calm enough for the reflection of the pier to be distinguished. Similarly the shadow of the pier appeared only as a vague strip constantly broken by surface undulations. The shadow of the parapet on the jetty tended to blend into the vertical surface which cast it. Jetty and parapet alike were still encumbered with drying fish, empty crates, large wicker baskets – crayfish and lobster traps, oyster hampers, crab snares. The crowd gathered for the ship's arrival circulated with some difficulty among the various piles of objects.

The ship itself floated so low on the ebb tide that it became impossible to see anything from its deck save the vertical embankment extending straight towards the quay and interrupted at its other end, just in front of the beacon, by the oblique landing slip – its lower section smoother, darkened by the water, and half-covered with greenish moss – still the same distance from the deck, as if all movement were at an end.

Nevertheless, on closer inspection the stone rim drew almost imperceptibly nearer.

The morning sun, slightly overcast as usual, indicated shadows faintly, yet sufficiently to divide the slope into two symmetrical parts – one darker, one brighter – slanting a sharp point of light towards the bottom where the water rose along the slope, lapping between the strands of seaweed.

The movement bringing the little steamer nearer the triangle of stone that thus emerged from the darkness was itself an oblique one, and so deliberate as to be constantly approaching absolute immobility.

Measured and even, despite slight variations of amplitude and rhythm perceptible to the eye but scarcely exceeding ten centimetres and two or three seconds, the sea rose and fell in the sheltered angle formed by the landing slip. On the lower section of this inclined plane the water alternately revealed and submerged great clumps of green seaweed. From time to time, at what were doubtless regular intervals – though probably of a more complex frequency – a powerful wash of water broke this rocking rhythm, and the two masses of liquid, rushing against each other, collided with a slapping sound and splattered some drops of foam a little higher up against the embankment.

The ship's side – now parallel to the embankment – continued to advance; the channel between must have narrowed little by little as that movement extended the length of the pier. Mathias tried to find a point of reference. In the angle of the landing slip the water rose and fell against the brown stone embankment. This far out from shore none of the wreckage covering most harbour floors was visible from the surface. The seaweed that grew at the bottom of the landing slip, rising and falling again and again with the wash of water, was as fresh and glossy as the kind found only at great depths; it was never exposed to the air for very long at a time. As each little wave rolled in, it lifted the free ends of the clumps of seaweed, drew them down immediately afterwards, and finally abandoned them once again, limp and outstretched on the streaming stones, trailing masses of tangled ribbon down the slope. From time to time a more powerful wash of water flooded the landing slip a little higher, leaving, as it flowed back, a shiny puddle in a hollow of the pavement that reflected the sky for a few seconds before it quickly disappeared between the stones.

Mathias decided on a mark shaped like a figure of eight, cut clearly enough in the steep, recessed embankment to make a good point of reference. The mark was exactly opposite him, that is, four or five metres to the left of the point where the landing slip emerged from the pier. A sudden rise in the water level caused it to disappear. When, after forcing himself to keep his eyes in the same place for several seconds, he saw it again, he was not quite sure he was looking at the same mark – other irregularities in the stone looked just as much like, or unlike, the two little coupled circles whose shape he still remembered.

Something fell, thrown from the top of the pier, landing on the surface of the water – a piece of paper the colour of a pack of cigarettes. The water rose in the sheltered angle of the landing slip, colliding with the backwash from its sloping surface. The periodic shock of this collision occurred just where the ball of blue paper was floating, and it was engulfed with a slapping sound; some drops of foam were spattered against the embankment, just as a more powerful wash of water again submerged the strands of seaweed and reached as far as the hollow in the pavement.

The water fell back at once; the limp seaweed remained outstretched on the wet rocks, trailing long strands down the slope. In the bright triangle, the little puddle reflected the sky.

Before it had time to disappear between the stones, this reflection was suddenly darkened, as if by the shadow of some great bird. Mathias raised his eyes. Flying from astern, the grey gull imperturbably described again, with the same deliberation, its horizontal trajectory – wings motionless and outspread in a double arc between the slightly drooping tips, head cocked to the right, one round eye fixed on the water, or the ship, or nothing at all.

According to their respective positions, it could not have been this gull's shadow that had just passed over the little puddle.

In the bright triangle the hollow of the pavement was dry. At the lower edge of the landing slip a rising wash of water had turned the seaweed so that it spread upwards. Four or five metres to the left Mathias noticed the mark in the shape of a figure of eight.

It was an eight on its side: two coupled circles of the same size, a little less than ten centimetres in diameter. At the point of tangency appeared a reddish excrescence that looked like the rust-corroded pivot of an old iron ring. The circles on either side might have been worn gradually into the stone by a ring fastened vertically into the embankment by the pivot and swinging freely to the right or left in the wash of the ebb tide. Such a ring had doubtless been used for mooring boats at the pier ahead of the landing slip.

But the ring had been set so low in the embankment that it must have been underwater most of the time – sometimes several metres beneath the surface. Furthermore, its modest size scarcely seemed adequate to the thickness of the ropes ordinarily used for mooring even the smallest fishing boats. The only rope that could have passed through such a ring would have to be a thin, strong cord. Mathias turned his eyes ninety degrees towards the crowd of passengers, then lowered them to the deck. He had often heard the story before. It was on a rainy day; he had been left alone in the house; instead of doing the next day's arithmetic homework he had spent all afternoon sitting at the back window, drawing a seagull that had perched on one of the fence posts at the end of the garden.

It had been a rainy day – to all appearances a rainy day like the rest. He was sitting at the table wedged into the window recess, facing the window, two big books under the chair so he could work comfortably. The room must have been very dark; the table top reflected only enough light from outside to make the waxed oak gleam – very faintly.

The notebook's white paper constituted the only bright thing in the room, along with the child's face, and perhaps his hands as well. He was sitting on a chair on top of two dictionaries – had been there for hours, probably. He had almost finished his drawing.

The room was very dark. Outside it was raining. The big gull remained motionless on its perch. He had not seen it land there. He did not know how long it had been where it was. Usually they did not come so near the house, not even in the worst weather, although between the garden and the sea there was no more than three hundred metres of open ground rolling towards an indentation in the coast, bounded on the left by the beginning of the cliff. The garden here was nothing but a piece of moorland planted with potatoes every year and fenced off with barbed wire fastened to wooden posts to keep out the sheep. The unwieldy size of these posts indicated that originally they had not been intended for such use. The fence post at the end of the central path was even thicker than the rest, in spite of the slenderness of the lattice gate it supported; it was a cylindrical post, a pine log roughly trimmed, and its almost flat top, a metre and a half above the ground, formed an ideal perch for the gull. The bird's head was turned towards the fence, in profile, one eye looking at the sea, the other at the house.

Between the fence and the house, the garden, at this time of year, consisted of little more than a few late weeds piercing the carpet of dead vegetation that had been rotting in the rain for several days.

The weather was very calm, without a breath of wind. The continuous light rain may have blurred the horizon, but did not obstruct the view for shorter distances. On the contrary, it was as if in this new-washed air the objects near at hand profited from an additional lustre – especially when they were light-coloured to begin with, like the gull. He had copied not only the contours of its body, the folded grey wing, the single foot (which completely concealed the other one) and the white head with its round eye, but also the wavy line dividing the two parts of its curved, pointed bill, the pattern of the feathers on its tail and along the edges of its wing, and even the overlapping scales down the length of its leg.

He was drawing on very smooth paper with a hard-lead pencil. Although scarcely pressing down at all, in order not to leave an impression on the next pages in the notebook, he obtained a clear black line; he had taken such care to reproduce his model faithfully that there

was no need to erase. His head bent over his work, his forearms resting on the oak table, he began to feel tired from sitting so long in one position, his legs dangling over the edge of the hard, uncomfortable chair. But he did not want to move.

Behind him the whole house was empty and black. Except when the morning sun brightened them, the front rooms, facing the road, were even darker than the others. Yet this room, where he had settled down to work, was lit by only one small, square window deeply recessed in the wall; the carpet was very dark, the high, heavy, dark-stained furniture crowded close together. There were at least three heavy wardrobe cupboards, two of them side by side opposite the door opening onto the hallway. On a lower shelf of the third one, in the right-hand corner, was the shoebox in which he kept his string collection.

The water level rose and fell in the sheltered angle at the bottom of the landing slip. The ball of blue paper, quickly saturated, had half unfolded and was floating between two waves a few centimetres below the surface. It was easier to tell now that it was the paper from a pack of cigarettes. It rose and fell, following the movement of the water, but always at the same point – neither closer to nor further away from the embankment, moving neither to the right nor the left. Its position was easy for Mathias to establish, for it was on a line with the mark shaped like a figure of eight.

The moment he became aware of this fact, he noticed, about a metre away from the first mark and at the same height, another design shaped like a figure of eight – two circles incised side by side, and between them the same reddish excrescence that seemed to be the remains of a piece of iron. There must have been two rings fixed into the embankment. The one nearer the landing slip immediately disappeared, submerged by a wave. Then the other one was engulfed in its turn.

The water, falling back from the vertical embankment, collided with the backwash from the inclined plane of the landing slip; a little cone of liquid leapt towards the sky with a slapping sound, and a few drops fell back around it; then everything was as it had been before. Mathias looked for the floating cigarette pack – it was impossible to tell exactly where it would surface again. He is sitting at the table wedged into the window recess, facing the window.

The window is almost square – a metre wide and hardly any higher – four identical panes – with neither curtain nor shade. It is raining.

The sea is invisible, though quite near. Although it is broad daylight, there is just enough light from outside to make the waxed table top gleam – very faintly. The rest of the room is very dark, for in spite of its rather large size it has only this one aperture, which furthermore happens to be located in a recess in the wall. A good half of the square, dark-stained oak table is wedged into the recess. On the table the white pages of the notebook, placed parallel to the edge, constitute the only bright thing in the room – not counting, above them, four slightly larger rectangles: the four panes of the window opening onto the fog that conceals the entire landscape.

He is sitting on a bulky chair that is on top of two dictionaries. He is drawing. He is drawing a big grey-and-white seagull. The bird's head is facing towards the right, in profile. The wavy line dividing the two parts of its curved, pointed bill can be distinguished, as well as the pattern of the feathers on its tail and along the edge of its wing, and even the overlapping scales down the length of its leg. Yet it seems as if something is missing.

There was something missing from the drawing, although it was difficult to tell exactly what. Mathias decided that something was either not correctly drawn – or else missing altogether. Instead of the pencil, his right hand was holding the wad of cord he had just picked up from the deck. He looked at the group of passengers in front of him, as if he were hoping to find among them the object's owner coming towards him, smiling, to ask for its return. But no one paid any attention to him or to his discovery; they all continued to turn their backs. Slightly to one side, the little girl seemed to be forsaken. She was standing against one of the iron pillars that supported the deck above. Her hands were clasped behind the small of her back, her legs braced and slightly spread, her head leaning against the column; even in a position as rigid as this the child maintained something of her graceful attitude. Her face shone with the confident, yet conscious gentleness imagination attributes to obedient children. She had been in the same position ever since Mathias first noticed her presence; she was still looking in the same direction, towards where the sea had been and where now the vertical embankment of the pier rose above them – quite close by.

Mathias had just stuffed the cord into the pocket of his duffle coat. He caught sight of his empty right hand, its nails too long and too

pointed. To give those five fingers something to do, he gripped them around the handle of the little suitcase he had been holding in his other hand. It was an ordinary enough suitcase, but its solid manufacture inspired confidence: it was made of a very hard, reddish-brown fibre, the corners reinforced with some material of a darker, almost chocolate colour. The handle, fastened with two metal clasps, was made of a softer, imitation-leather material. The lock, the two hinges and the three big rivets at each of the eight corners looked like copper, as did the clasps of the handle, but even slight wear had already revealed the real composition of the four rivets on the bottom: slightly coppered tinfoil, which was obviously what the other twenty rivets were made of – and doubtless the rest of the fittings as well.

The inside was lined with printed cretonne, of which the pattern only superficially resembled those customarily used for materials of this type, even in women's or girls' luggage; instead of bouquets or sprays of flowers, the decorative motif consisted of tiny dolls, like those used on nursery curtains. But unless examined closely, it was not apparent that they were dolls: they looked more like bright-coloured spots on the pale canvas – they might just as well have been bouquets of flowers. The suitcase contained an ordinary memorandum book, a few prospectuses and eighty-nine wristwatches mounted in rows of ten on nine rectangular strips of cardboard, one of which had an empty mounting.

Mathias had already made his first sale that same morning, before boarding the ship. Even though it had been a watch from the cheapest row – one hundred and fifteen crowns – on which he realized the most slender profit, he decided to consider this early start as a good omen. On this island, where he had been born, after all, and where he was personally acquainted with many families – where, at least, in spite of his bad memory for faces, he could make a harmless pretence of renewing old friendships, thanks to the enquiries he had made the day before – he had a good chance of selling most of his merchandise in a few hours. In spite of the fact that he had to leave on the four-o'clock boat, it was even possible – or not materially impossible – to sell every watch he had brought in the course of this one short day. Furthermore, he was not even limited to the contents of his suitcase: in the past he had occasionally taken orders for articles which were paid for on delivery.

But counting only the ninety watches which were in his luggage, the profit would be considerable: ten at one hundred and fifteen crowns, eleven at one hundred and fifty, ten at one hundred and thirty, thirteen at one hundred, fourteen at one hundred and fifty, ten at one hundred and fifty, four with a special wristband at five crowns extra apiece... To simplify matters, Mathias decided on an average price of two hundred crowns; the week before he had calculated the exact amount that a similar batch was worth, and two hundred crowns was a good approximation. So he should total about eighteen thousand crowns. His gross profit varied between twenty-six and thirty-eight per cent; figuring on an average of thirty per cent – three times eight, twenty-four, three times one, three, three and two, five – it came to more than five thousand crowns; that is, the gross profit was actually worth a whole week's work – even during a good week – in his usual territory. As for personal expenses, there would be only the sixty crowns for the round-trip boat fare, which was practically negligible.

It had taken hopes of such exceptionally favourable transactions as these to convince Mathias to make this trip, which was not included in his theoretical itinerary; otherwise two three-hour crossings represented too many complications and too great a loss of time for so small an island – barely two thousand inhabitants – to which nothing else, neither childhood friendships nor early memories of any kind, attracted him. The houses on the island were so much alike that he was not even sure he could recognize the one in which he had spent almost his entire childhood, and which, unless he was mistaken, was also the house where he had been born.

They assured him that nothing had changed for thirty years, but often a lean-to added onto a gable or a little stonework redressed is enough to make a whole building unrecognizable. And even supposing that everything, down to the smallest detail, had remained just as he had left it, he would still have to reckon with the errors and inaccuracies of his own memory, which experience had taught him to mistrust. More than any real changes on the island, or even hazy recollections – which were nevertheless numerous enough to prevent him from retaining any precise image of the place – he would have to be wary of exact but false memories which would here and there have substituted themselves for the original earth and stones.

After all, all the houses on the island looked alike: a low door between two small, square windows – and the same arrangement at the back. From one door to the other a tiled hallway split the house down the middle, separating the four rooms into two symmetrical groups: on one side the kitchen and a bedroom, on the other a second bedroom and a room used either as a parlour or as a kind of lumber room. The kitchen and bedroom on the street side faced east and received the morning sun. The remaining two rooms looked out towards the cliff over three hundred metres of open ground rolling towards an indentation in the coast. The winter rains and the west wind battered against the windows; it was only in milder weather that the shutters could be left open. He had been sitting all afternoon at the heavy table wedged into the window recess, drawing a seagull that had perched on one of the fence posts at the end of the garden.

Neither the arrangement of the grounds nor their orientation gave him enough clues. As for the cliff, it was the same all the way around the island – and the same, moreover, on the mainland opposite. Its indentations and rises could be as easily confused as pebbles on a beach, as grey gulls.

Fortunately Mathias did not care much about such matters. He had no intention of looking for the house at the moor's edge, or for the bird on its perch. He had only made his enquiries so carefully, the day before, about the forgotten topography of the island in order to establish the most convenient route, to facilitate broaching the subject of watches in the houses he was supposed to be returning to with such understandable pleasure. The extra effort of cordiality – above all of imagination – required by such an enterprise would be more than compensated for by the profit of five thousand crowns he expected to clear.

He really needed the money. For almost three months, sales had been noticeably below normal; if matters did not soon improve, he would have to get rid of his stock at cut prices – probably at a loss – and find another job again. Among the measures contemplated to settle his difficulties, the imminent canvassing of the island played an important role. Eighteen thousand crowns in cash at such a time meant much more than his thirty-per-cent commission: he would not immediately replace all the watches sold, and the sum would permit him to hold out until better days. If this privileged territory had not been originally included in his schedule, it was doubtless because he had wanted to

keep it in reserve for bad times. Present circumstances compelled him to make the trip – of which the inconveniences appeared ever more numerous, as he had feared.

The boat left at seven in the morning, which had forced Mathias to get up earlier than usual. When he travelled by bus or the local railroad he almost never started before eight o'clock. Besides, although his house was quite near the train station, it was a good distance from the harbour – and none of the bus lines brought him much nearer. He might as well walk the whole way.

At this hour of the morning the Saint-Jacques district was deserted. As he was walking down an alley which he hoped would be a short cut, Mathias thought he heard a moan – faint, yet seeming to come from so near by that he turned his head. There was no one in sight; the street was as empty behind him as in front. He was about to continue on his way when he heard the sound again, a distinct moan almost in his ear. At that moment he noticed a ground-floor window within reach of his right hand; a light was shining inside, although by now the daylight was barely obscured by the simple voile curtain that hung behind the panes. The room looked rather large, however, and its only window was of modest size: a metre wide, perhaps, and scarcely any higher; with its four identical, almost square panes it would have been more suitable for a farmhouse than these urban premises. The folds of the curtain made it impossible to see how the room was furnished. All that could be distinguished was what the electric light illuminated at the back of the room: the conical lampshade – a bed lamp – and the vaguer form of an unmade bed. Standing near the bed, bending slightly over it, a masculine silhouette lifted one arm towards the ceiling.

The whole scene remained motionless. In spite of the incomplete nature of his gesture, the man moved no more than a statue. Under the lamp, on the night table, was a small blue rectangular object – which must have been a pack of cigarettes.

Mathias had no time to wait for what was going to happen next – supposing that anything was going to happen next. He was not even certain the moans came from this house; he had guessed they came from a source still closer, less muffled than they would have been by a closed window. In thinking it over, he wondered if he had heard only moans, inarticulate sounds; had there been identifiable words? In any case it was impossible for him to remember what they were. Judging

from the quality of her voice – which was pleasant, and not at all sad – the victim must have been a very young woman, or a child. She was standing against one of the iron pillars that supported the deck above; her hands were clasped behind the small of her back, her legs braced and slightly spread, her head leaning against the column. Her huge eyes inordinately wide (whereas all the passengers were squinting because the sun had begun to break through), she continued to look straight ahead of her, with the same calmness with which she had just now looked into his own eyes.

Confronted with such insistence, he had thought at first that the wad of cord belonged to her. She might be making a collection herself. But then he had decided this was an absurd notion: that was no pastime for little girls. Yet boys always have their pockets full of knives, string, chains and those porous clematis stems they smoke for cigarettes.

Nevertheless, he couldn't recall that his tastes as a collector had been widely encouraged. The good pieces that came into the house were usually confiscated for some domestic purpose. When he complained, they seemed not to understand his disappointment, "since he didn't use them for anything, anyway". The shoebox was in the biggest cupboard of the back room, on a lower shelf; the cupboard was kept locked and he was allowed to have his box only after he had done all his homework and learnt his lessons. Sometimes he had to wait several days before he could put a new acquisition in it; meanwhile he carried it in his right pocket, where it kept company with the little brass chain which was a permanent resident there. In these conditions even the best-quality cords lost something of their sheen and their cleanness; the most exposed loops blackened, the torsion of the fibres slackened, little threads stuck out everywhere. Continual friction against the metal links must have hastened the fraying process. Sometimes after too long a wait the latest find became good for nothing except tying up packages.

A sudden anxiety crossed his mind: the majority of the pieces kept in the box had been put there without having been in his pocket, or at most after only a few hours of this test. So what confidence could he have in their qualities? Obviously less than in the others. To compensate he would have to subject them to a more rigorous examination. Mathias wanted to take out of his duffle coat the piece of cord rolled into a figure of eight in order to estimate its value again. But he couldn't reach his right pocket with his left hand, and his right hand was holding the little

suitcase. There was still time to set down the suitcase before becoming involved in the confusion of disembarkation, and even to open it in order to put the cord safely away. The contact with the coins in his pocket would be bad for it. Since Mathias had no need of company to enjoy this pastime of his, he didn't have to carry the best specimens with him for his schoolmates to admire – he didn't even know whether they would have liked them at all. Actually, the string other boys filled their pockets with seemed to have no relation to the string he collected; in any case, theirs demanded fewer precautions and evidently gave them less trouble. Unfortunately, the suitcase with the watches in it was not the shoebox; he tried not to clutter it up with questionable objects that might produce a bad impression on the clientele when the time came for him to display his wares. Appearances were more important than anything else, and he must omit nothing, leave nothing to chance, if he wanted to sell eighty-nine wristwatches to slightly less than two thousand people – including children and the poor.

Mathias tried to divide two thousand by eighty-nine in his head. He lost his place and decided to use a round number as his divisor – one hundred, to account for the cottages and shanties too isolated for him to visit. That would come to about one sale for every twenty inhabitants – so by supposing each family to average five people, that would mean one sale for every four houses visited. Of course he knew from experience that things turned out differently in practice: in one family, where they might feel well-disposed towards him, he sometimes succeeded in selling two or three watches at a time. Nevertheless, the overall rhythm of one watch for every four houses would be difficult to attain – difficult, not impossible.

Today especially, success would be a matter of imagination. He would have to have played, long ago, over there on the cliff, with many little friends whom he had never known. Together they would have explored, at low tide, the unfamiliar regions inhabited by forms of life of only an equivocal probability. He had taught the others how to make the sabellas and sea anemones open. Along the beaches they had found unidentifiable debris. For hours at a time they had watched the water rising and falling in the sheltered angle of the landing slip, had watched the seaweed alternately revealed and submerged. He had even showed them his string, had invented all kinds of complicated and uncertain games. People don't remember such things; he would manufacture

childhoods for them leading straight to the purchase of a wristwatch. With the young it would be more convenient to have known a mother, a grandfather or someone else.

A brother and an uncle, for instance. Mathias had reached the pier long before sailing time. He had talked to one of the sailors of the line, who like himself, he discovered, had been born on the island; the man's whole family was still living there, his sister in particular, who had three daughters. Two were already engaged, but the third girl was causing her mother many worries. She couldn't be made to behave, and even at her age had an upsetting number of admirers. "She really is a devil," the sailor repeated, with a smile that betrayed how fond he was of his niece in spite of everything. Their house was the last one on the road to the big lighthouse as you left town. His sister was a widow, in easy circumstances. The three girls were named Maria, Jeanne and Jacqueline. Mathias, who expected to put them to good use soon, added all these facts to the enquiries he had made the day before. In work like his, there was no such thing as a superfluous detail. He decided that he would have known the brother for a long time; if need be, he would have sold him a "six-jewel" model he had been using for years without it ever needing the slightest adjustment.

When the man made a gesture, Mathias noticed that he was not wearing a watch. His wrists stuck out beyond the sleeves of his jumper when he reached up to fasten the tarpaulin at the back of the post-office van. Nor was there a light strip around the skin of the left wrist, as there would have been if he had been wearing a watch until recently – if it was being repaired, for example. The watch, actually, had never needed repairs. The fact of the matter was that the sailor did not wear it during the week for fear of damaging it while he was working.

The two arms fell back. The man shouted something that was not understood on board over the noise of the engines; at the same moment he stepped to one side of the van and waved to the driver. The van's motor had not stopped, and the vehicle pulled away at once, making a quick, unhesitating turn round the little company office.

The employee in the chevroned helmet who had taken the tickets at the gangplank returned to the company office, closing the door behind him. The sailor who had just cast off the moorings from the pier and tossed them onto the deck took a tobacco pouch out of his pocket and began to roll himself a cigarette. At his right the ship's boy held out his

arms, letting them fall slack at a certain distance from his body. The two of them remained alone at the end of the quay, along with the man whose watch worked so perfectly; the latter, noticing Mathias, waved his hand as if to wish him *bon voyage*. The stone rim began its oblique receding movement.

It was exactly seven o'clock. Mathias, whose time had to be very strictly calculated, noticed this with satisfaction. If the fog didn't grow too thick, they would be on time.

In any case, once ashore he mustn't waste a minute; it was the brevity of his stay, made necessary by the rest of his itinerary, which constituted the chief difficulty. It was true that the steamship line was not making his work any easier for him: there were only two boats a week, one making a round trip on Tuesday, the other on Friday. There was no question of staying on the island four days; that would be almost a week, and the whole advantage of his undertaking would be lost, or just about. He would have to confine himself to this one all-too-short day, between the boat's arrival at ten and its departure at four fifteen that afternoon. He therefore had six hours and fifteen minutes at his disposal – that would make three hundred and sixty plus fifteen: three hundred and seventy-five minutes. Problem: if he wanted to sell his eighty-nine watches, how much time could he allow for each one?

Three hundred and seventy-five divided by eighty-nine... By using ninety and three hundred and sixty the result was easy: four times nine, thirty-six – four minutes for each watch. Using the actual figures would even give him a little extra time: first of all the fifteen minutes omitted from the calculation, and then the time that the sale of the ninetieth watch (already sold) would have taken – another four minutes – fifteen and four, nineteen – a nineteen-minute margin in order not to risk missing the boat back. Mathias tried to imagine this ideal sale which would last only four minutes: arrival, sales talk, display of the merchandise, choice of the article, payment of the amount written on the price tag, departure. Even not taking into account any hesitation on the customer's part, any fuller explanation on his, any discussion about the price, how could he hope to sell everything he had in so little time?

The last house on the road to the big lighthouse as you leave town is an ordinary house: a one-storey building with a small square window on either side of a low door. As he passes, Mathias knocks on the pane

of the first window and without pausing continues to the door. The second he reaches it, he sees the door open in front of him; there is no need whatever to hesitate before entering the hallway, and then, after a quarter-turn to the right, the kitchen itself, where he immediately sets his suitcase down flat on the big table. With a quick gesture he opens the clasp; the cover springs back and right on top can be seen the most expensive items; he seizes the first cardboard strip in his right hand while with his left he lifts the protecting sheet of paper and points to the three splendid ladies' watches at four hundred and twenty-five crowns. The lady of the house is standing near him, flanked by her two elder daughters (a little shorter than their mother), all three motionless and attentive. As one person, with a gesture of rapid, identical and perfectly synchronized acquiescence, all three nod their heads. Already Mathias is removing – almost tearing – from the cardboard strip the three watches, one after the other, in order to hold them out to the three women who one after the other extend their hands – the mother first, then the daughter on the right, then the daughter on the left. The amount, calculated in advance, is there on the table: one thousand-crown note, two hundred-crown notes and three twenty-five-crown pieces – twelve hundred and seventy-five crowns – four hundred and twenty-five multiplied by three. The amount is correct. The suitcase closes with a dry click.

As he was leaving he wanted to say a few words of farewell, but none came out of his mouth. He noticed this at the same moment he realized that the whole scene had been a stupidly wordless one. Once on the road, behind the closed door, his suitcase unopened in his hand, he understood that it all still remained to be done. Turning round, he knocked with his ring against the door panel, which echoed as if he had struck an empty box.

The varnished paint, recently renewed, imitated the veins and irregularities of wood to a fault. Judging from the sound of his knock, there could be no doubt that under this deceptive layer the door was really a wooden one. On a level with his face there were two round knots painted side by side: they looked like two big eyes – or more precisely like a pair of glasses. They were represented with an attention to detail not generally accorded to this type of decoration; yet although executed with the greatest possible realism, they comprised a perfection of design virtually beyond probability; it must have been

artificial because it appeared so studied, as if the accidents themselves had occurred in obedience to law. But it would have been difficult to prove by any particular detail the flagrant impossibility of any such pattern in nature. Even the suspect symmetry of the whole door could be explained by some new development in carpentry. If the paint were scratched away at this very point, two real knots might have been discovered in the wood, knots cut exactly in this shape – or in any case presenting a very similar formation.

The fibres formed two dark circles, thicker at the top and the bottom, and provided, at their highest points, with a little excrescence pointing upwards. More than like a pair of glasses, they looked like two rings painted in *trompe l'œil*, with the shadows they cast on the wood panel and the two nails on which they hung. Their position was certainly surprising, and their modest size seemed out of all proportion to the thickness of the ropes usually used: nothing much heavier than thin cords could have been attached to them.

Because of the green seaweed that grew on the lower section of the landing slip, Mathias was obliged to watch where he put his feet in order not to slip, lose his balance, and do some kind of damage to his precious burden.

After a few steps he was out of danger. Having reached the top of the inclined plane, he continued to make his way along the jetty at the top of the pier extending straight towards the quay. But the crowd of passengers moved very slowly among the nets and traps, and Mathias could not walk as rapidly as he wanted to. To jostle past his neighbours served no purpose, in view of the narrowness and complexity of the passage. He would have to advance at their pace. Nevertheless he felt a slight impatience rising within him. They were taking too long to answer the door. Lifting his hand on a level with his face this time, he knocked again – between the two eyes painted on the wood. The door, which must have been extremely thick, sent back a dull sound which would be barely audible inside. He was about to knock again, this time with his ring, when he heard a noise in the vestibule.

Now he must get something a little less ghostly under way. It was essential that the customers say something; therefore he would have to say something first. The exaggerated acceleration of his gestures also constituted a major danger: working fast must not keep him from remaining natural.

The door opened on the mother's mistrustful countenance. Distracted from her work by this unexpected visit and finding herself face to face with a stranger – the island was so small she knew everyone on it – she was already preparing to close the door again. Mathias was someone who had knocked at the wrong door – or else a travelling salesman, which was no better.

Of course she said nothing. He made what seemed to him a considerable effort: “Good morning, madam,” he said. “How are you?” The door slammed in his face.

The door had not slammed, but it was still closed. Mathias felt as if he were going to be dizzy.

He noticed that he was walking too near the edge, on the side where the pier had no railing. He stopped to let a group of people pass him; a narrowing of the path, caused by the accumulation of empty boxes and baskets, dangerously choked the line of passengers ahead of him. Down the vertical embankment his gaze plunged to the water that rose and fell against the stone. The pier's shadow coloured it a dark green – almost black. As soon as the path was clear, he stepped away from the edge – to the left – and continued on his way.

A voice behind him repeated that the boat was on time this morning. But this was not quite accurate: it had actually docked a good five minutes late. Mathias turned his wrist to glance at his watch. This whole landing was interminable.

When he finally managed to reach the kitchen, a period of time out of all proportion to the amount at his disposal must have passed, yet he had not promoted his interests in the slightest. The lady of the house had only admitted him apparently against her better judgment. He set his suitcase down flat on the big oval table in the middle of the room.

“You can judge for yourself,” he forced himself to say, but, hearing the sound of his own voice and the silence that followed, he sensed how falsely it rang. The words lacked conviction – density – to a disturbing degree; it was worse than saying nothing at all. The table was covered by an oilcloth with a pattern of little flowers, a pattern that might have been like the one on the lining of his suitcase. As soon as he had opened the suitcase he quickly put the memorandum book inside the open cover, in the hope of concealing the dolls from his customer.

Instead of the memorandum book spread conspicuously over the sheet of paper that protected the first row of watches, appeared the

wad of cord rolled into a figure of eight. Mathias was in front of the door to the house, contemplating the two circles with their symmetrical deformations painted side by side in the centre of the panel. Finally he heard a noise in the vestibule and the door opened on the mother's mistrustful countenance.

“Good morning, madam.”

For a moment he thought she was going to answer, but he was mistaken: she continued to look at him without speaking. Her strained, almost anxious expression indicated something more than surprise, something more than ill humour or suspicion, and if she was frightened, it was difficult to imagine why. Her features were frozen in the very expression they had assumed when she first saw him – as though unexpectedly recorded on a photographic plate. This immobility, far from making it easier to read her countenance, merely rendered each attempt at interpretation more uncertain: although the face, judging from appearances, expressed some intention – a very banal intention that seemed identifiable at first glance – it ceaselessly avoided every reference by which Mathias attempted to capture its meaning. He was not even altogether certain whether she was looking at him – the man who provoked her mistrust, her astonishment, her fear... – or at something behind him – beyond the road, the potato field bordering it, the barbed-wire fence and the open ground on the other side – something that came from the sea.

She didn't appear to see him. He made what seemed to him a considerable effort: “Good morning, madam,” he said, “I have news for you...”

The pupils of her eyes had not moved a fraction of an inch, yet he had the impression – he imagined the impression, he gathered it, a net full of fish, or of too much seaweed, or of a little mud – he imagined that her gaze fell on him.

The customer was looking at him. “I have some news for you, some news of your brother, your brother the sailor.” The woman opened her mouth several times, moving her lips as if she were speaking – with difficulty. But no sound came from them.

Then, very low, a few seconds later, came the words: “I have no brother” – words too brief to correspond to the movements the lips had made a moment before. Immediately afterwards – as an echo – came the expected sounds, somewhat more distinct although distorted,

inhuman, like the voice of an old phonograph record: “Which brother? All my brothers are sailors.”

The eyes had moved no more than the lips. They still looked away, towards the open ground, the cliff, the distant sea beyond the field and the barbed-wire fence.

Mathias, on the verge of abandoning his attempt, started to explain again: he meant the brother who worked for the steamship company. The voice became more regular as it answered: “Oh, of course, that’s Joseph.” And she asked if there was a message.

From then on, fortunately, the conversation gathered momentum and accelerated. Intonations and expressions began to come into focus; gestures and words were once again functioning almost normally: “...wristwatches... the finest being manufactured today, and the cheapest as well – all sold with a guarantee and a manufacturer’s certificate, registered and trademarked, waterproof, rustproof, shock-proof, anti-magnetic...” He would have to keep track of the time all this was taking, but at the moment the question of knowing whether the brother wore a watch – and for how long he had – threatened to lead to another collapse. Mathias needed all his attention to get past it.

He managed to reach the kitchen and its oval table, and set his suitcase on it while continuing the conversation. Then there was the oilcloth and the little flowers of its pattern. Things were going almost too quickly. There was the pressure of his fingers on the clasp of the suitcase, the cover opening wide, the memorandum book lying on the pile of cardboard strips, the dolls printed on the lining, the memorandum book inside the open cover, the piece of cord rolled into a figure of eight on top of the pile of cardboard strips, the vertical side of the pier extending straight towards the quay. Mathias stepped back from the water, towards the parapet.

Among the passengers lined up in front of him he looked for the little girl who had been staring into space; he did not see her any more – unless he was looking at her without recognizing her. He turned round as he was walking, thinking he might catch sight of her behind him. He was surprised to discover that he was the last passenger on the pier. Behind him the pier was empty again, a cluster of parallel lines describing a series of elongated planes alternately horizontal and vertical, in light and in shadow. At the very end was the beacon light that indicated the entrance to the harbour.

Before reaching the end of the pier, the horizontal plane formed by the jetty underwent a change, lost in an abrupt inset about two thirds of its width, and continued, thus narrowed, as far as the turret of the beacon light between the massive parapet (on the open sea side) and the embankment without a railing that was set back for two or three metres of its length, plunging straight down into the black water. From where Mathias was standing the landing slip was no longer visible because of the steepness of its slope, so that the jetty appeared to be cut off at that point without any reason.

When he turned round and continued his interrupted walk towards the quay, there was no one on the pier ahead of him either. It was suddenly deserted. On the quay, in front of the row of houses, only three or four little groups of people could be seen, and a few isolated figures moving in one direction or the other, going about their affairs. The men were all wearing more or less worn and patched blue canvas trousers and wide fishermen's jumpers. The women wore aprons and were bare-headed. All had on clogs. These people could not be the passengers who had disembarked to join their families. The passengers had disappeared – had already gone into their houses, or perhaps into the nearby alley leading to the centre of town.

But the centre of town was not situated behind the houses along the quay. It was a marketplace, opening at its narrowest side on the quay itself and roughly triangular in shape. Besides the quay, which thus constituted the base of the triangle pointing into the town, four roadways opened into it: one into each of the two long sides (the least important) of the triangle, and the two others at its point – on the right the road to the fort, which it skirted before following the coast towards the north-west, and on the left the road to the big lighthouse.

In the centre of the marketplace Mathias noticed a statue he did not recognize – at least he had no recollection of it. Rising from a granite pedestal cut to imitate living rock, a woman in regional dress (which was no longer worn) was scanning the horizon towards the open sea. Although there was no list of names cut into the sides of the pedestal, the statue must have been a monument to the dead.

As he was passing next to the high iron fence around it – a circle of rectilinear, vertical and equidistant rails – he saw at his feet, on the big rectangular paving stones laid around the monument, the shadow of the stone peasant woman. It was deformed in projection,