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THE CLERK'S JOURNAL



TODAY I AM LEAVING. I am leaving the Library, my house, my friends, the city where I live. I do not know where I am going. Strangest of all, I am leaving the Library in order to find a book. The only thing I have to guide me in my search is the notebook of the last Librarian. I can scarcely ask him, for he has gone, and his disappearance is precisely what drives me to find out what he found—if indeed there is anything to discover. If he found the book, he certainly has not thought it necessary to bring it back to the Library, but that is not surprising in the light of his strange observations, which, while they incite me to this strange journey of unknown destination, still leave me bewildered. Yet it is from that bewilderment that I have reached my decision. And it is at this moment, confessing to my inner confusion and

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surrendering to it, that I feel most in sympathy with my predecessor.

In jotting down these brief observations before departure, it occurs to me that this may be but the beginning of a chain of departures from the so-called center of learning out into the wilderness of the world, yet even that holds no comfort for me. At least I want to record the events that led up to this moment, for I still feel that if I could grasp them I would not even have to depart.

It all began, of course, with the disappearance of the Librarian, or, as he is officially called, K.A.S.U.L., Keeper of Archives, State University Library. While he was in office, I met him only once. I worked in Records and so had not even access to cassettes. Once books had been dispensed with and micro-dot recording had taken their place, S.U.L. became the central repository of all recorded information. The Select Committee had gone about its task with admirable thoroughness, blending computerized digest analyses with specialist field supervision, so that no useful book might be passed over. What amazed everybody was just how many books were in fact recorded and made available to the students and those who had recourse to study units. The Cataloguing Section was one of the finest in the world, and my job was highly specialized, so much so that my grade was higher than K.A.S.U.L.'s, although his post was considered to carry a certain academic distinction. His security and psychograph were, of necessity, impeccable, and he was a State servant, not only of repute, but of some consequence in society. His post was considered one of those rare jobs that linked the University to its now vanished tradition, for Kasul, as Keeper of Archives, was solely

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responsible for the handling of books in their original form and for deciding who might justifiably have the privilege of studying them. Once he had approved a reader's application, his assistants would take the precious manuscript or printed volume from the shelves and place it in the matiascope plugged in directly to the reader's screen. Then the reader would manipulate the controls himself, and the matiascope would turn the pages and also tape the contents as directed.

Even in Records, the statistics of the number of books that had been kept in printed form were not available, but it was generally reckoned to be in the region of several millions, including works printed as late as the end of the twentieth century. Until I took over Kasul's job, I had no idea that his unit was so large or that he had a whole group working under him. His assistants included recorders, who not only kept track of who was perusing what volume, but also of what reading matter was compelling the attention of the free-range students and scholars at any given date, and also bin men, who took the tomes from the shelf to the matiascope and back. The bin men were like the men who stack bullion in banks, usually mutant or deformed in some way, so that it might almost appear that their deformity was a result of their close contact with the objects they handled.

The work of S.U.L. was divided into three units. First, there was Records, where I worked—a complex computer unit which not only cross-indexed all the cassettes, but stored the internal index information of each cassette, so that reference work could be done without the student even needing to refer to the individual work

recorded on the cassette. From Central Indexing he could have all the references run off for him onto a special tape, so that the matrix never even left the building. Second, there was the Library, where the cassettes were either picked up by the researcher for private use or where he would screen them in the individual and group booths available for study. Third, there was Books, the central unit of books and manuscripts still in linear script form, which was Kasul's distinguished domain. He was, therefore, the only true librarian in the establishment, now that "Library" was void of books.

The one time I had come in contact with Kasul had left me with a strong impression of the man. A friend of mine who had graduated with me the year before was now doing research work on prescientific cosmologies. His work was considered unproductive by his professors, and non-mathematical theory was officially disapproved of in the State Observatory. As a result, he had had difficulty in pursuing his research into Aztec and Persian records, and a Museum ticket was refused him. He then asked me to use my influence to get him a reader's ticket for Books. His application had already been rejected by S.U.L. when he came to me. I decided to go directly to Kasul, for everyone spoke of him as a considerate and helpful person, admirable both as a scholar and as a man. He answered my telex the same day with a personal phone call asking me to come to his office. It was a bare room, except for a framed drawing behind his desk of a strange circular, Tantric-style maze. Before him was banked the usual communications complex, which he

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switched off as he rose to greet me. He was a large man, with large hands and a full healthy face lit by shining brown eyes with large black pupils that held you with their gaze. He listened patiently while I put my friend's case. I made it clear that I was not merely using my influence at S.U.L., but that I felt he deserved access to document material. Kasul nodded as I spoke, and when I had finished he opened a drawer and pulled out a card. He punched it through the Records Magnet, wrote my friend's name on it, and handed it to me. I realize now that he said only one sentence to me and that I left thinking what an interesting and intelligent man he was. After he had given me the card, he rose and showed me to the door. As he shook my hand, he said, "Tell your friend that the correct way to study the heavens is with the eyes shut." We both laughed briefly, and the door was closed. I never saw him again.

A month later, I heard that Kasul had disappeared from his post. The first story told of a letter he had left for the University Authority, then later this was officially denied. One thing was certain—he had gone. He hadn't been killed or arrested secretly. He had left of his own choice, turning his back on a much sought-after and comfortable post, a state pension, a house and garden, and an enviable salary, higher than anyone needed for a comfortable life. Where had he gone?

For a few weeks, the University discussed nothing else. He hadn't applied for a travel voucher, so it was almost impossible to see how he could have flown out of the country, or indeed have gotten very far, unless he had gone into the desert. The idea of a Librarian, who

had spent his life in the comfortable environment of study, suddenly heading out into the desert region among the nomads was unthinkable. Only two years previously, the International Commission on Nomads had abandoned their proposed integration scheme, and the nations' concerted attempts to settle the nomads were halted. It was obvious, if inexplicable, that they did not want to alter their difficult and lonely existence, and so they were left to their fate by the paternalistic but not disinterested Commission. They were allowed access to certain frontier towns, but never seemed to express any desire to penetrate into the civilized zones, so that official anxiety about their being without papers did not last long. One or two criminals were supposed to have gone into the desert to live with them, but their distaste for outsiders led people to believe that exiles did not survive long among the fiercely exclusive desert clans.

The speed with which Kasul was replaced indicated that the Authority knew he was not coming back. It was only a few days later that I received a telex instructing me to take over as temporary head of Books. (The post was allotted like University Chairs through the Senate, and so they needed a replacement for the rest of the year.) The instructions commended my work at Records and underlined the responsibility I would now bear in exercising my discretion over the availability of the books to the readers. The communiqué was dry and remote, and I felt no elation at my new post. I was to be held at the same salary and I was to be moved into Kasul's house at the end of the week. This to me was the sole consolation in the whole business. I lived in a cantilever block, which,

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although it commanded a fine view of the campus, depressed me, since I had once read while browsing in Books that prestressed concrete interrupted the body's picking up of some energy source in the cosmos—it was called “prana,” I remember—and that this resulted in mental depression and even blackouts. I never was able to follow up this odd information, and none of my friends in electronics had ever heard of such a thing, or of any device which might measure it. Nevertheless, I had always believed that in my twentieth-floor apartment I was daily being robbed of some vital ray and would spend whatever time I could on the terrace, sleeping there in summer.

Kasul's place turned out to be a small garden house, a one-story cube, all windows and steel frames, surrounded by banana trees and mimosa. There was no air-conditioning but it did not seem necessary, as the wind blew through the house leaving it fresh and scented with mimosa pollen.

I took up my new work without excitement. At first, after Records, it was tiring, with the constant necessity of confronting people. The people who were reading the books were not like the students who filed dutifully into Library for their daily Input sessions. They seemed restless and discontented. Once they abandoned Library and its structured programming, they had to handle all the incoming material themselves. With cassettes, everything that went into their heads could also be submitted for structuring to the central storage unit. There the information would be patterned and linked to the intake the student had accumulated since his education began. The

computer, having direct contact with the psychograph that recorded the subject's infantile medical and stress history, was able to see where fantasy elements or irrational structure breaks might occur. Thus a man could be steered away from a line of study that would cease to be productive or that might become dangerous for his inner balance, producing either memory block or repeat situation in social behavior.

I now understood why the security clearance at S.U.L. was so strict before readers were given access to Books. Once the reader had that access, there was no longer any control over his intake material, or more seriously, his structuring patterns, which could radically alter with the arrival of new incoming information. The creation of a socially unpredictable unit was hazardous, although it was easy to see how it was also advantageous to the society, if its responses were benign.

After a few days at Books, I began to enjoy myself. Instead of being fatigued by my daily encounters with the researchers, I began to look forward to meeting them, found myself almost becoming involved in their lines of study to the point where I began to neglect my own work on sound impulses in cortical communication.

But just as I began to relish my daily contact with the bizarre mixture of specialists who came into my office every day, I began to be troubled—troubled by something intangible that seemed always at hand insisting on my attention. It was as if I had mislaid a document or forgotten a vital equation. I could not pin down my uneasiness, and while it was not strong enough to merit

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submitting to a reading, it nonetheless would not let me be. I was on the point of telexing Prescriptions for a one-unit hallucinogen to see if I could free the impulse when it came to me. I was sitting in Kasul's office—I still thought of it as his—when I realized what had been nagging me. I whirled around in my chair and faced it—the strange circular Yantra that was the only piece of decoration in the room. It had been calling to me, signaling for my attention from the moment I had taken over the office, and I had stubbornly or dully refused to pick up its signal. This thought made me freeze in the chair. How could a picture send out a signal? It could indicate, but it could not actively signal. A poetic metaphor, I structured hastily, but my hands were shaking. I sat quite still. I stared at the mandala, my mind racing to describe it in some way that would render it again passive, pleasing geometry and no more. I shut my eyes. “Take it down and read what is written on the other side.” I held my breath. Where had the impulse come from? It couldn't be from the inanimate design on the wall—that was absurd. But if it was from me, from where in me and why from me? I got up and locked my office door. The act of locking the door committed me to some kind of secret collusion that was outside the taste of life as I had known it until that moment. I felt like an explorer in the days when the earth lay uncharted, but all I had to do was cross the floor of my office and take down a picture from the wall.

I unhooked the picture and laid it face down on my desk. I abruptly remembered to switch off the telecom, and in so doing, had a flash recall of Kasul's hand going

through the same motion as he beckoned me to sit with him. I saw his short-cropped hair, his deep, kind eyes, and I caught the flicker of a smile I had not at the time registered. My hands tore open the back of the frame. I levered the stiff cardboard away from the sides and opened it up. The drawing lay on the glass covered by a piece of backing paper. I lifted it away. There was something written on the back of the drawing. I took it out and held it up to the light. It said: "This knowledge cannot be attained by seeking it, but only those who seek it find it. Bayazid of Bistam."

What followed was a stop, a break in time and even space, as if my body was renewed with every breath I took. And then, calmly and systematically, I put the frame together again and hung it back on the wall, tidied my desk, and switched on the telecom. I did not reflect on the inscription I had found written on the drawing, nor did I give another look at the picture, which seemed to revert to its role as abstract decoration. Instead, something else had emerged in my head, not my brain—I knew that now—but some other center. It had risen in me as water rises in a well after distant rain has fallen. Yearning. But what the desired object was I did not know. It was neither a person nor a thing. It had no form that I could identify, no name that I could name, but without it I was incomplete. It stirred in me, troubling me, wakening me from what had been my life, for this yearning had in it something sharp and sweet that was not of any fruit I had so far tasted. And then it came to me—that what I yearned for Kasul already knew; that where he had gone, I would also go. The journey had

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begun as I sat immobile in that empty room.

There is no doubt that from that day on, if by any chance the University had asked for a psychograph on me, I would have been instantly removed from my post as acting Keeper of the Archives. I continued my work with a scrupulous attention to detail, so that there would be not the slightest outward indication of the turmoil that was taking place inside me. Drawn by this yearning that had settled on me like a haze, I was unable to sleep. Worse, I was unable to fix my thoughts on what I was doing. Somehow my training helped me to keep up an outward semblance of normality at work, but I could not disguise the broken veins in my eyeballs or the deep lines that formed across my tired face. With nothing to fill the void that I experienced or to still the restlessness that urged me to be up and off to—what, I did not know—my thoughts turned more and more to the vanished Librarian. If only I could contact him . . . But something in me confirmed the irrevocable nature of the official report that recorded him as neither dead nor missing but simply as “File closed.” I harbored no comforting dream that he was alive or in hiding. Instead I turned my thoughts to unearthing every trace of him that I could. I wanted to know all about him up until that mysterious day when he had walked out of his house, never to be seen again. What did he do? Where did he go? Who were his friends? What had he said?

After ten days I had found out nothing. Whoever his friends were, they had melted into total anonymity. His name produced no tremor of recognition in anyone except one or two regular readers at Books, who expressed

an already fading interest in the mystery of his departure. The complete blank that this senior official of the University had left behind convinced me more and more that if only I could turn the right combination, the door would spring open and I would find out what I wanted to know.

One morning at the office I sat before a pile of cards that had to be reissued. After punching a few, I went into a kind of dream. I was not sleeping, nor was I thinking, yet I was conscious. The contours of the room were clear and in focus. I swivelled my chair around and looked yet again, as had in fact become my wont each morning, at the enigmatic signal on the wall. I don't know how long I sat like that, but as I sat there my mind filled with the presence of Kasul. Yet it was not my mind, for I held no image in my awareness and I constructed no word patterns. Nevertheless, some part of me fixed, coagulated, crystallized on Kasul with such force that if he had materialized in front of me, I would have seen it as an inevitable and unalarming extension of what my inner activity indicated.

The state I was in came to an abrupt end, and I turned swiftly to see standing in front of me the mutated form of a dwarf with an enormous head. It was one of the bin men. He cleared his throat and held out a paper. I took the note from him. I observed that he had six fingers on his hand, but it did not strike me as odd or even interesting. Rather, I noted that there seemed room for the extra finger and that it was not a hindrance to him. He smiled at me.

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The paper was inscribed with a clear, open script of a kind one rarely sees nowadays:

My dear Kasul, I have just returned from Japan, where I met many of our brothers. I am eager to report to you. May I come up? Peace be upon you. Arnou.

I told the bin man to show the visitor up immediately. My breathing had completely gone, and I had to force it back to normal, for, coupled with my excitement over the arrival of a friend of Kasul's, was the irresistible sense of connection between his arrival and my time spent sitting before the drawing.

By the time the bin man came back with Kasul's visitor, I had composed myself. The man who was ushered into the room looked for all the world like one of the visiting professors at the University. He was foreign, yet the same as us—the stereotype of our society. I don't know why I had expected him to be different, but his ordinariness surprised me. What was unusual about him was his eyes. They shone, luminous yet cloudy, veiled and sleepy, yet alert like a fox's. I thought of Kasul. The man gave only a flicker, it seemed to me, on seeing that it was not Kasul behind the desk. We shook hands, and I motioned him to a seat. I switched off the telecom, and there was a momentary contact between us. Immediately, I explained to him about Kasul's disappearance. His reaction was baffling. He smiled and relaxed back into his seat. For a second, he shut his eyes, as if in relief.

For a moment, I panicked and wondered if this whole business was something quite different from what

I had imagined. Yet what, for that matter, had I imagined? The idea that it was some kind of security situation was a momentary anxiety, and no sooner had I thought it than I dismissed it. I realized that there was no reason why anything should be divulged to me, a total stranger, but because I was aware that there was something to be divulged I wanted somehow to indicate to this man that I was worthy of such a confidence. I decided to take the risk. He might decide I was mad and quietly call Medicine to take me away, but somehow I knew that that was not how it would be. I blurted out as coherently as I could my experiences since coming to work in Kasul's place. He nodded as I spoke, smiling. I was annoyed that nothing in my extraordinary story seemed to surprise him.

When I had finished he said nothing. I found the silence intolerable—a kind of judgment that made me feel unsafe.

“Well?” I demanded, as if it were up to him to solve the whole situation, my condition, my curiosity, my life. After another interminable silence he spoke.

“There's no doubt about it. You were sent.”

“Sent?” I thought of the dry telex announcing my appointment.

“You are one of us, brother.”

Before I could ask him to what strange brotherhood I belonged, he had risen and was holding out his hand to say goodbye.

I felt cheated and nervous. I had confided in him, expecting a confidence in return. The fact that it was not forthcoming made me uneasy. I had a built-in disapproval of secrecy—there was enough of it in the outer

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structure of society without having it in personal encounter. I refused his hand. He lowered his and stood patiently waiting for me to speak. Even his patience annoyed me, and I felt he was being condescending, although it was I who had rejected his outstretched hand.

"Tell me. Please. Where is he? Where are the others? Can I meet them?"

"Find out." He smiled his infuriating smile.

"But that's why I am asking you—because I want to find out."

Quite suddenly, he sat down. I too sat down, thinking that now he was going to tell me everything I wanted to know.

"I could only give you information—such as I have."

"But that's what I want!"

"Is it?"

I bit my lip. There was nothing I could say. He was right.

"Well then . . ."

He tapped his heart several times.

"Find out. It's all in here. Everything . . . out there . . . is in here. Hmm?"

I nodded. I knew what he was saying, and yet at the same time it sounded somehow too easy. Like an equation, I thought, the calculation of which is immense, but whose final statement is a mere handful of symbols. It was the authority with which he said it, the certainty he projected as he spoke, that silenced me. He rose again.

"You will have everything you need. Believe me. The affair is not in your hands. Hold on to that. Hmm?"

I sat with my head bowed, like a child who has done something wrong, but I felt excited, and my heart was beating loudly in my breast.

“Why do you think I came up here to this office? The heart finds the heart.”

He held out his hand a second time, and I took it. I murmured my goodbye. He smiled at me and was gone. My heart was tight and I wanted to weep, but I could not, and a pain began to fill my chest.

Now that the projection of clear certainty had been dispelled with his departure, I began to doubt that there had been any Dr. Arnou in my office. The heart indeed! The function of the heart, I reminded myself, is to pump blood to the head. Yet I could not pretend that this man, with his clear, intelligent identity, could have meant anything so gross as to suggest that the physical organ of the heart somehow contained the cosmos. He must then have been referring to some other heart. But we have only one heart. Or could it be that the heart is not merely phenomenal but subtle in the manner of the brain? I was weak in speculation programming and I gave up, for the more I tried to think it out the more confused I became. The key to what had been said lay in the man who said it.

The pain in my heart was acute, and I put my hand to my breast and began to massage it. I stopped short. The pain—the pain was in my heart, and the pain accorded with the inner state that Arnou’s visit had aroused in me.

I had to find out what was going on inside me—never mind about Kasul and curiosity about his friends.

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Something was happening, and I had to know what it was.

I turned my chair toward the drawing on the wall. This time I did it deliberately. Already the image of the maze was imprinted upon me, but I sat, eyes wide open, staring at its compelling design. After a moment, I felt constricted by the chair. I got up, pushed my desk aside, and sat down on the floor. Then I got up again and took the print down from the wall. I placed it in front of me and squatted again, crossing my legs. I stared into the vortex of the drawing, my hands resting lightly on my knees. I had no illusion now that the design was going to “do” anything, but I somehow sensed that it could “unlock” certain things inside me. Why and how this should be so I could not imagine, nor was I interested in finding out. I was too eager to get at whatever it was that awaited me. When the buzzer for closing time finally went, I jumped up, almost jubilantly, put back the drawing, and ran down the corridor to the elevator. I walked all the way home. The air was gentle and musky with spices from the market place, and I felt at ease for the first time in weeks. Nothing had come of my session in front of the Yantra, but I now felt confident that things would take their course and that the course would be as clear and structured as the maze that was engraved on what I already understood to be “my heart.”

For the first time in days I slept without difficulty. No sooner did my head touch the pillow than I seemed to be asleep. The dream came just before dawn. It happened in that zone of dreams that appears to be suspended in space, wall-less and ceiling-less,

and filled with light. We were all robed in white, and there was an unceasing sound of voices in a language I could not understand. I found myself prostrated before a man who was bathed in a luminous energy that penetrated my every pore. I could not look at him, but I felt his gaze upon me and I was both afraid and filled with a sweet sense of protection. He called me by a name I had never heard before and could not remember on waking. I heard his voice as if whispered right inside me:

“Start from where you are. Everything you need is in your own house.”

I awakened abruptly. It seemed for a minute that his voice had been not a part of the dream, but had come from somebody in the room. I fumbled for the light and saw that I was alone. Outside, the first silver ray of dawn was spreading in a line along the horizon beyond the garden. It occurred to me that things were not as difficult as I had imagined them to be, that I searched in and out and over and under every statement, thinking first one theory would lead me to a solution and then another. I resolved to take the advice of the dream at face value. I had awakened in a state of elation, and the feeling of gaiety stayed with me. I leapt out of bed and dressed hurriedly. I walked in my garden, watching the birds wheel in the sky, swirling and swooping, filling the air with song. I returned to the house and prepared some breakfast. As I sat sipping my coffee, it occurred to me that the pressure of the last weeks had left me negligent. The place was in disorder, clean from the dusting and sweeping of the cleaning woman, but without that order that comes from living in a place. I decided to rearrange

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everything—the furniture, the carpets, the paintings. I selected some music, put it on the tape deck, and set about my spring cleaning with a zest that had been lacking in my life for a long time. The simple operation filled me with calm, energy, and good humor. Twice I changed the tape to livelier music. Within an hour, my study was upside down, and I stood in the middle of the chaos and delightedly planned how I would rearrange the room. I wanted space to fit my new clarity of spirit.

There seemed nowhere for the vast foamy sofa that had dominated the study, and I decided to fling it out. The moment I had come to that decision I was happy. I had never liked its cumbersome functional design. It belonged in an office, not in a home. I began to maneuver it to the door, intending to leave it out on the terrace with the garbage cans. If necessary, I would pay the garbage men to take it away, but probably they would be pleased to have it. These were my thoughts as I struggled with the ungainly monster and dragged it almost protesting to the door. I could not imagine how they had ever got it into the house. Halfway out of the door it stuck. I pushed, I shoved. It was impossible to move it. It was upended, and I stood in the doorway trying to push it through. To get a firmer grip on it, I put my hand down the back of the sofa into the webbing and started to move it first one way and then the other through the door.

As I slid my hand further into the back, I felt something at the tips of my fingers. My hand moved until I grasped the object and drew it out. It was a leather-bound notebook of the kind we were issued

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with at the Library. I knew this was what I had been waiting for and that the dream, the tidying, the finding of the book, all were part of one total unity, in a morning of my life.