

eL/Aficionado

An Opera

BY ROBERT ASHLEY

THE OPERA

The principal character, a man described only as “The Agent”, is being cross-examined by two persons (“Interrogators”) under the direction of a third person (“First Interrogator”), who directs the narrative and comments throughout on the Agent's answers -- on his story telling ability and on his acuity. The relationship between The Agent and his Interrogators is unexplained. This mystery is fundamental to the mood of the opera.

This is the story of a person on trial, but on trial for what? On trial for his character and the quality of his answers. On trial for his skills of perception and his intelligence. On trial as a human being.

In this interrogation, he is required to recount his actions and explain his behavior in carrying out certain “assignments”, the circumstances of which are fully known to the Interrogators. It is clear that he is always under observation.

The Agent's answers do not explain whom he “works for” or even why he does what he does. In the world of espionage he would be called a “sleeper,” a person who leads an ordinary life, but is expected to respond without question to some deep obligation or contract with the past.

But the opera is not a spy story. The four scenes of the narrative are progressively concerned with events of an “otherworldly” nature.

Throughout the First Interrogator's remarks there are passing references to “analysis” and to the world of dreams. This is the trial of a mind or an imagination. It is the trial of “everyperson” in the adventure of contact with something foreign — the unknown.

The narrative begins and ends in one scene in the immediate past --The Agent reenacts a solitary job of watching and describing unknown persons who enter a particular building where “the department” has a meeting place. This scene is interrupted by extended “flashbacks” to three other scenes: first, a bizarre exercise in memory training; then, an encounter between a precocious child and an older man, who is terrorized by the child he is watching; finally, a scene of direct challenges to The Agent's “story” and to his understanding of the reasons for his trial.

SYNOPSIS

Scene One: "My Brother Called." The Agent has been directed to a cafe "across the street from the apartment," where he must watch the entrance to the apartment building and describe in code every person who enters. The code is in the form of personal solicitations from a newspaper (the "Personals.") In recounting this assignment The Agent describes "the apartment" itself, an empty room arranged and lit "to preclude surprise" and containing a mysterious map of a small city laid out on the floor in newspapers ("in a language I don't read") and a telephone connection to the cafe across the street.

Scene Two: "A Simple Border Crossing." The Agent describes his first assignment, a training program in the ability to answer the telephone before it rings and to travel through and memorize the contents of the rooms of a house where he will encounter a mortal danger. The danger is hidden in an illusion of welcome ("I thought you would never get here.")

This is the ancient story of the "labyrinth."

Scene Three: "An Answer is Expected." An "older" Agent on his last assignment goes to a cottage "out in the middle of nowhere" to observe and report on "a mere boy". This boy predicts a vision of a terrifying experience, "the face of a dog at the window." The prediction comes true. The Interrogators remind The Agent that "this is more or less what we expected" and remind him, too, that as regards this experience of the unnatural he is expected to "take it to your grave."

This experience is a profound secret.

Scene Four: "Viva's Boy" is interpolated into the final fourteen minutes of the opera. It takes the form of a series of direct challenges to The Agent's description of his actions in "My Brother Called." But the musical mood of this short, interpolated scene is the most extreme version of the "otherworldly" quality of The Agent's character --- a layering of questions and answers in a high, chanted monotone.

This is a scene of The Agent as a child.

I have imagined the progression through the four scenes to be interpreted visually as "backward in time." The opera would show The Agent in four stages of his life --- from the present time back to his earliest memories of childhood.

In this interpretation Scene Four, "Viva's Boy," is the "trial" of a very young child --- too young even to understand his accusers. The child is on trial for his "inherited" tendencies to take part in acts of "social disorder," actions that are in some way against the law or outside of the law. This is his deep obligation to the past. He is a born "revolutionary." He is genetically "alienated," a loner. This interpretation cannot be expressed in the text, but I believe it can be shown visually. It is the key to the plot of the opera in television form.

— Robert Ashley

Scene One: Personal

(Tacit)

(Tacit)

(Tacit)

(Tacit)

Warm, affectionate, intellectual, nonsmoking S.W.M.

Professional, 40s.

Many interests, cultured, artistic, humorous.

Unmaterialistic, multilingual.

Disenchanted by business values.

Unaddicted to week-ending or getaways.

Seeks S.W.F.

Gentle, intellectual, unmaterialistic, attractive.

Unmarried, 35-to-40, no kids.

For fun, laughter, intelligent conversation.

Sharing cultural interests.

Romance.

Scene Two: My Brother Called (A)

As a way of getting started, perhaps you should try to say it briefly in your own words. Use simple statements, thank you.

We may begin the observations at any time.

Long after I thought they had forgotten, my brother called.

Please, go to the café across the street from the apartment.

Wait there for a phone call.

The waiter will seat you near the telephone.

The waiter will take the call and give the telephone to you.

It will be as though you are talking to a friend.

Who else would know to find you there?

But there will be no other voice.

Describe every person that enters the apartment building.

Nothing is unimportant.

A child.

A very old person.

The code is given on the menu that the waiter brings.

No one will interrupt you.

No one will want to use the telephone.

This has been arranged.

Scene Three: My Brother Called (B)

Very accomplished. This is an unusual contribution to the meeting. The story is admirably clear, well-prepared, and, even with allowances for recourse to notes, almost usable. The time and date of this meeting are recorded for your protection.

After what is expected the waiter will bring the bill.
Say good-bye and give the telephone to him.
You are free to leave, then, and to forget.
This request is unusual, I know.
I'm sorry. I haven't time to explain.
The procedure has been approved.
Best regards on your recent work.
The waiter greets me indifferently, a regular customer.
I am seated by the telephone. The menu appears.
The telephone rings. The waiter answers,
moves it to the table. I study the menu,
watching the entrance to the apartment building.
He is not my brother in the ordinary sense.
It is a word we use in the department.
It means someone you can count on.
In any circumstances.

Scene Four: A Simple Border Crossing

Let us go on for a moment to something else found in the dossier — a record of a sequence of events apparently related to and occurring prior to the observations sequence. It would appear to be a typical, though somewhat melodramatic training sequence, including both the confusion-challenge and the place-code-memory requirements, and enhanced, as prescribed by a sense of urgency. What parts of this reading can you confirm?

I will try to get this right the first time.

 You recognized her?

Yes, but —

 There's more to it than that.

To say just that.

 You recognized her.

It's not the truth.

 It was more than recognition.

The word is too secretive.

 It hides something.

It keeps one of the secrets.

 Of which there is too much in this business.

Kept in the desk.

 By — desk people.

To make their lives exciting, I guess.

 Without knowing what a secret means.

Secrets increase the danger.

 It is hard enough, without the secrets.

Indeed, I recognized her.

 First, —?

As the companion of my father.

 Then, —?

I recognized her in the mirror.

 Finally, —?

I recognize her as she greets me.

 But the memory can't be trusted.

The artists are at work.

 What does that mean?

Their assignment is to change the world.

 Their assignment is appearances.

This artist can make you look like somebody's brother.

 Make you hear footsteps on the landing.

This artist comes to your place, while you are gone.

And when you return?
You don't live there anymore.
Or — anywhere.
The artist is assigned to change the world.
The artist works for the department.
Shambles in the halls in worn out clothes.
Makes friends with the custodials.
Tries to be invisible.
Through modesty.
And changes the world.
Not perfectly, of course.
Or permanently.
Just long enough to distract you.
To take your mind off things.
That's the danger.
The work of the artists.
Is part of the secret.
Part of the secrecy.
The artist had worked on her?
For my benefit.
Benefit is the word.
To make her recognized by me.
The play lasts a few seconds.
Just long enough to take the mind off business.
The business of staying alive.
"I thought you would never get here."
That's what she said?
And I thought so, too.
Without knowing where here is.
"You will know it, when you get there."
When the surprise comes.
All the traveling seems wasted.
You could have come straight here.
Why see the mountains in the north of Spain?
Wherever they are.
Why enjoy the wildlife in the deserts?
And, —?
"Let's see how the Lapps are living this year."
It's been different?
They were having problems with the reindeer.

Recite "Superior Seven", please.

**"From the moment you step inside this elegant
(spacious) prewar home
You will instantly appreciate
its flowing (and gracious)
Floor plan Oversized
(high ceilinged) rooms
Three bedrooms
(three baths)
Maid's room and beautiful kitchen
(plus pantry)
Complete this perfect picture."**

And?

There is no end to India.

As we know.

It is so varied.

Lots of differences there.

The final place of Empires.

Where they go to die.

Not a country at all.

So we've been told.

A huge collection of places.

Probably complicated.

The how-to-get-from has to be learned.

By rote.

A huge collection of wrong turns.

Dead ends.

Where the Empire runs out of water.

Recite "Jewel of the Nile", please.

**"Breathtaking river views
are yours (from every room)
In this spacious
(sixteen hundred square foot) home,
Split Master Bedrooms.
(each with own bath),
Surround expansive
(twenty-six foot) Living Room,**

**Large Formal Dining Room
(New Kitchen) —
Perfect for entertaining,
(Enclosed balcony
now a den) Many closets
(and Jacuzzi)
Mint condition.”**

The connections must have worn away.
There is surprise.
The recognition comes too late.
There is still surprise.
Don't forget the sudden end.
The swoon.
A state of mind has ended.
I have prepared myself.
With help, of course.
The state has gone to all expense.
To train you.
There should never be surprise.
Surprise is an ending.
The ending of a state of mind.
Not to be cultivated.
It was a modern pleasure.
“Surprise me.”
The charm of modernism.
Just recently passed.
Not missed at all.
Related to?
It can't happen here.
And?
I will never die.
That kind of stuff.

“Absoluteness please.”

“There is an absoluteness to surprise, he thinks.”

Where does that come from?
One of the media, probably.
I read it somewhere.

What about the telephone?
I practiced six months.
How did you do?
Got it to face value.
Parlor tricks.
The guy that knows when it will ring.
The — post-modernist.
He laughs.
About the absoluteness.
Where does that come from?
It's been around.
I know I read it.
What about the telephone?
Six months.
What kind of practice?
There is a room, a telephone —
And whatever makes you happy.
Just sit there.
Do whatever makes you happy.
Whatever you do. Don't wait.
Then, —
Go to the phone, —
Pick it up, —
And hope you hear the voice.
The guy from the department says, —
"You're getting better."
Otherwise, —
It rings.
You — pick it up.
"You're dead by now."
That's always hard.
I got through one whole day.
It's in the record.
Beat him three times that day.
One day out of six months.
All the other days I died at least once.
No wonder there's a population shortage.
It's surprise that kills 'em.
"— **absoluteness to surprise.**"
That guy knew something.
And after that?

We trained in other things.
The — department one?
And I.
Still, sometimes he would call.
Nothing very dramatic.
Not middle of the night.
Three wrong numbers in a row.
Can't get the idea.
A real pain in the neck.
The fourth time it rings?
I pick it up.
Enraged.
The guy from the department laughs.
"Four times in four minutes."
It's discouraging
Keep cool. Stay in school.
And keep an eye over your shoulder.
Hard way to learn.
I thought I was cooked when this one started.
"Come in tomorrow for an assignment."
Not like that, of course.
"Hello."
"This is a survey."
"This is education."
"You have won a free trip."
"To the end of the world."
"You can bring a friend, if you like."
Etcetera.
The call that I was waiting for.
Maybe waiting is not the word.
Then, —
It rings again.
And the voice says, —
"They got you this time."
Funny thing is I've never seen him.
Well, —
Maybe I have.
Too many times.
So far it's just the voice.
You'll catch on.
He lives across the street.

Drives a car paid for by the city.
Gives his wife a love pinch.
When he thinks nobody's looking.
And calls me on the phone.
To offer you the prize.
Retirement.
Where you live forever.
So, I report to the office.
To begin the trial.
The one that never ends.
Free trip to the end of the world.
And here I am.

Recite "Designed by Well-Known Architect", please.

**"This impressive (spacious brick con-
-temporary) Expanded
Ranch set in seclusion
(a private cul-de-sac.)
Elegant circular staircase
(leads to Master Bedroom suite)
His and Her dressing rooms
(marble bath and sun deck)
Separate children's wing, four
bedrooms (and three baths)
Enormous Great Room
(and Kitchen) —
All lead to treed patio
(with in-ground pool)
Heated cabana."**

And at the right time —
Go to this place.
And, — ?
Do this and that.
In order.
If everything is done right, —
You will be met.
You may recognize the person.
Don't be surprised.
There will be a message.

Of great importance to you.
This is the first assignment.
Y'have to start somewhere.

You must be aware by now that certain themes are forbidden. They may not be spoken of for the record, even if they have — what is the word? — “occurred” for you. References to “her,” “India, as a place to die” and “surprise” are in questionable taste, remember. With this warning in mind, you may continue with the narrative.

“A kind of test of your understanding.”
“Your progress.”
“You will hear from us as usual.”
“Best wishes.”

The one at the reception desk seems to be dozing.
The old one.
The trial or test of his understanding long past.
You stop.

What is the name of that feeling?
Pick up the phone.

The voice congratulates me for a good start.
The old one winks and smiles.

The feeling is too brief to have a name.
That was decided long ago.

“It was my intention when this work was begun, —”
Etcetera.

Where did I read that?
That the feeling is too brief to have a name?
Or why it came to mind.

Recite “Restored to Classic Elegance”, please.

**“This six-room dream offers
gracious living (to the most
discerning) Marvelous (for
entertaining)
Oversized living
(and dining) areas
Accessed by French doors
(with maid/guest rooms nearby)
— Original detail remains.”**

And about dreams?
They give false order to actions accumulated.
As experience.
They supply the narrative.
What about the feelings?
The feelings are brief.
Too brief to have a name.
Dreams are interpretations of the recent past.
Unjustified, of course.
Dreams are phony stories about ourselves.
There is no true recent past.
Not in stuff that dreams are made from.
Just an accumulation.
That has to be accounted for.
Just bookkeeping.
To satisfy a mysterious auditor.
Who is — unnamed.
And once accounted for, forgotten.
This could turn into a theory.
If we are lucky.
Work on it some more.
Thank you.

Recite “A One-of-a-Kind Treasure”, please.

**“Recently restored (with dis-
-tinct Old-World flavor)
In impeccable taste (by
European-born artist owner)
Main house eight rooms
(two baths) Master Bedroom
Suite (Kitchen featured
Country Living Magazine)
Two fireplaces
(— one walk-in)
Antique stained-glass
Windows (beamed ceilings)
Pegged oak floors; wine cellar
(exquisite landscaping)
Greenhouse contains oversized
Hot tub (splash pool)**

Brick walks and terraces
(covered and uncovered)
Large barn for horses (present-
-ly used as artist's studio)
Riding ring. Carriage house
(with efficiency apartment)
Summer kitchen in outdoor
area (Stone smoke house) Se-
-cluded estate historic district.
(convenient to major highways)
— Buildings and grounds immacu-
-lately kept (land flat)
Gently rolling meadows and
woods (overlooking trout
Stream). A one-of-a-kind treasure."

In other words, ...
To be forgotten.
If we are lucky.
And, if not?
Not forgotten.
Rehearsed —
This is the hard part.
Until every action accumulated has a name.
Even if it's hard to remember.
Imagine a dream house.
In a severe landscape.
It's always grey here.
No problems for light-sensitive skin.
Can be reached by car.
But nobody leaves.
Are there exceptions?
Except to wake up.
Having rehearsed and lost it.
One more time.
Not looking forward to return.
You've probably got everything.
Streets that don't lead to places.
Check them one more time.
The unbearable physicality of everything.
That's probably a clue.

The unbearable stupidity of everybody's actions.

That might be one, too.

The unbearable senselessness of the narrative.

That will not come together.

The artist is at work.

Or it's just writer's block.

Assigned to change the world.

Recite "Country Estate", please.

**"All stone slate-roofed estate
(located on eight acres)
A relaxed country style
(architectural refinements)
White stucco walls (leaded
windows) Elegant paneling
Beautiful wood floors
(— entry foyer)
Charming living room
(with fireplace)
Dining room
(— with fireplace)
Country kitchen, bar room
(fireplace and built-ins)
Four additional bedrooms
(two and a half baths)
Complementing the main residence
(— cutting gardens)
Specimen plantings
(— pool) — clay
Tennis court (large awninged
terrace) Outstanding
Opportunities (outdoor
family enjoyment) Recre-
-ation-filled entertaining."**

"I thought you would never get here."

And I thought I could never leave.

That's the equation.

Balanced on the fulcrum of deep sleep.

Six times a night, probably.

And on the seventh sleep he rested.
 And got up feeling great.
At least, the dream was over.
 What do you suppose all that stuff means?
Must be code for something.
 Code for what?
Mundane history, maybe.
 You mean a true story?
More or less.
 Why didn't you say so.
The story of his first assignment.
 You got this from the records?
He is told to go "someplace."
 This is a test?
But — for keeps.
 To see if he is careful.
To test his powers of observation.
 To coin a phrase.
To teach him about himself.
 Where — is he?
Not exactly a funhouse.
 Dark passageways.
Unknown destination.
 Doors and stuff.
He is looking for something.
 But he doesn't know what.
He will know it, when he finds it.
 What about the — real estate?
Code — for something.
 Why the recitals?
The usual testing.
 What about the dreams?
That is harder to explain.
 Keep at it.
"What is remembered is only a dream."
 We can leave it at that.
Memory blocks anticipation.
 Two sides of the coin.
Dreaming blocks the present.
 Which is where the danger is.
They should coincide.

The phone call and the answer.
Or else it's too late.
What about the man across the street?
That's a hard one.
And the old one at the desk?
Don't forget about the artists.
"— in the halls in worn out clothes."
"Makes friends with the custodials."
"Tries to be invisible."
"And changes the world."
"Not perfectly, of course."
"Or — permanently."
"Just long enough to distract you."
"To take your mind off things."
Very poetic.
He goes on a trial assignment.
It is his first assignment.
A test of his courage and mind.
And a test of his training.
The labyrinth is just a house.
Did we ever call it that?
Maybe not.
He is alone.
He is looking for something.
Doesn't know what the something is.
Imagines there is danger somewhere.
So he moves cautiously.
Memorizing certain landmarks.
In a code that he has been taught.
He supposes that —
If he survives this test —
He will be required to answer.
Certain questions. Give descriptions.
To remember what he has seen.
Memory in code is —
More accurate. Less fallible.
He believes the danger is real.
He has been trained for that.
And so the danger in this —
First assignment, this test —
Has to be real.

There is a constant sorting —
 You mean, in this life.
That he has not chosen —
 But that inevitably is his.
And this assignment is just the first of —
 Many versions of the sorting.
The sorting is irrevocable.
 So the danger is real.
He moves toward the center.
 Toward the danger.
There will have to be illusions.
 Tricks of the place.
That distract him.
 And increase the danger.
Lapses of attention —
 Failings of wariness —
Are indicated in references —
 To the world of dreams.
Suddenly — “finally,” perhaps —
 He is face to face with —
What he knows is the test.
 It is a person.
“I thought you would never get here.”
 Yes.
There is surprise.
 The recognition comes too late.
There is still surprise.
 Don’t forget the sudden end.
“I thought you would never get here.”
 That’s what she said.
“And I thought so, too.”
 Without knowing where here is.
“You will know it, when you get there.”
 When the surprise comes.
“All the traveling seems wasted.”
 “You could have come straight here.”
That’s the danger.
 The work of the artists is part of the secret.
Part of the secrecy.
 The artist had worked on her?
For his benefit.

Benefit is the word.

Scene Five: My Brother Called (C)

Your technique of observation, as demonstrated in the recording of the transmission in question, shows real improvement. Now, let us go on to memory devices. We are honored to acknowledge your reputation in the use of these techniques.

The apartment is useful for a certain kind of business.
An immense, square room, without furniture.
Low ceilings. Full windows on two sides, west and north.
A careful view of the two entrances to the building.
Against the east wall a small table with a telephone.
Left of the table, mounted on the wall, a loudspeaker.
The telephone is amplified. News from the outside world.
The table is lighted with one bulb, hung from the ceiling,
the bulb is shaded. This is the only artificial light.
Right of the telephone a door, the entrance to the room.
The visitor enters, blinded for a moment,
facing the western windows and the outside light.
Or, after sunset, turning to the artificial light
and its reflection off the patterns on the floor.
A person could be in the northwest corner of the room,
seeing all and unseeable from the entrance door.

Scene Six: My Brother Called (D)

It is our understanding that these practices of yours are believed to be predictive in those societies where they are used. And you have claimed this for them, in spite of repeated warnings about the possible consequences to be suffered for advancing such claims, especially for persons such as yourself.

On the floor, spreading from the east wall,
laid out in a great arc around the telephone,
and filling the room, a map of a small city.
The city blocks are cut from sheets of newspaper,
and obviously arranged with accuracy,
each block isolated by its surrounding streets.
A hardwood floor with sheets of paper precisely spread.

A person could not move across the map, except cautiously.
The newspaper is in a language I don't read.
The meaning of the scene is impossible to describe.
If one looks for meaning in the ordinary sense.
The apartment is useful for a certain kind of business.
This is a theater of ultimate precautions.
An idea realized perfectly to preclude surprise.
The actor enters upstage right in full view.
Announced by telephone from the café across the street.

Scene Seven: An Answer Is Expected

We have had the pleasure thus far of the observations sequence and the training sequence in performances that were acceptable, if not remarkable. You must have noticed that the intrusion of the language of "analysis" during moments of the training sequence was not welcomed by all of us. You know the reason well: it is antiquated. Let us go on to the objectivity sequence, where the rules of the exercise allow a certain flexibility of characterization in order that the requirement of plausibility is satisfied. You may begin at any time.

An answer is expected.
Yes, sir, it was just as I described.
He said there would be a dog at the window.
Can you blame me for being skeptical? A mere boy.
I don't think he was ten years old.
He said there would be a dog at the window.
I didn't know what he meant, of course.
He meant a dog's face.
I guess a dog can be said to have a face.
The face of a dog.
And that it would be terrifying.
The face of a dog. He kept saying that.
He was so confident.
Arrogant, if you don't mind me saying so.
That's the way I thought of it.
An arrogant, mere boy.
With this story of a dog at the window.
And that it would be terrifying.
Of course, I had to show him he was wrong.
Maybe wrong is not the word.
Show him I knew what he meant.
The man and his wife had a dog.

I think it was a purebred.
Medium size and lots of long hair.
I don't know what that breed is.
I don't know much about dogs.
But sometimes they can be a little scary.
Especially the purebreds. That confidence.
It's almost a human characteristic.
I guess that's why certain people like them.
And every day, while I was there —
They would take the dog for a walk.
And leave the boy at home.
I would be there with the boy. We would be talking.
The way grown-ups and children talk.
Half paying attention. Half pretense.
I would try to get a little information —
About his background.
I knew then that it would be important later.
I would try to get the boy to talk to me.
While the man and his wife were not there.
Try to get this mere boy to tell me something.
It was obvious that he had something to tell.
There was something about him — About his past —
Something mysterious.
As though he had come from some other place.
Some place almost not human.
Maybe that's too much to say.
We would be talking.
This and that. You know.
I say something.
He looks away. Distracted.
Or pretending not to listen.
It made me feel silly sometimes.
I would be looking for something to interest him.
A mere boy, pretending not to listen.
Or just not interested. It's hard to tell.
God!
That feeling that he was trying to humor me —
That's hard to take.
Then, he would turn on me.
As though I had pushed it too far.
Can you imagine?

A mere boy impatient with an adult.
And he would say it again.
Say it as a kind of threat.
That idea about the dog at the window.
And when it comes, it is terrifying.
Finally, I began to think that there was something —
— wrong with him.
Something wrong with his mind.
You could never tell from the way he behaved.
Completely grown-up. And not ten years old.
But, I understand that that can be possible.
Maybe even typical.
When something is wrong with the mind.
The surface is more than ordinary.
This mere boy was more than ordinary.
I think we have to take that into account.
For positive or negative.
I mean, that's my feeling.
It's your decision, of course.
I'm just here to witness.
But it was an unusual assignment for me.

Let us remind you, as the details accumulate, that this procedure is a typical and straightforward regression, in this case in four stages, and without major structural changes, except that in this stage and in the stage that follows your relationship to the first-person consciousness of the subject is limited and always in question. Think of this stage not as an impersonation, but as a time-displacement exercise. We can continue.

He is a mere boy. And more than ordinary.
So, to show him — to get his mind off of this idea —
The idea that a dog would appear —
So that maybe we could talk —
Maybe I could find out something —
I called him to the door one day —
When they were coming back.
It was about noon, but very dark.
It had been raining, and it was going to rain again.
Everything was wet.
You know the place where we were staying, of course.
The cottage, they called it.
Way out in the middle of nowhere.

God, how they stand that climate I don't know.
The road stopped about fifty yards away.
It came out of the trees.
And just stopped.
You'd think they would bring it to the door.
Especially in that climate.
So, whoever came had to stop the car and leave it.
About fifty yards away.
And walk the rest of the way.
Maybe it's that way to make it safe.
That's the only reason I could think of.
Otherwise, it makes no sense.
Stop the car and leave it.
Walk fifty yards through the wet grass.
It was never cut. Like a
neglected yard. Not a field.
It must have been cut once upon a time.
While I was there it was about six inches high.
And in that climate it was always wet.
So, whoever came, there was always business at the door.
Wet shoes and the smell of things wet.
The reason I am saying this is that we watched them coming.
I called him to the door.
And we stood there in the door together.
Watching them coming toward the house.
They had taken the car, for some reason.
I heard the car pull in and stop.
I called him to the door.
And we stood there in the doorway together.
They got out of the car. The man and his wife.
The man opened the back door of the car and
leaned in. And put the dog on a leash.
Very dramatic. In a way that's hard to describe.
That light. That grey green wet light.
We watched them get out.
We watched the man take out the dog.
We watched the woman wait.
So that they would walk together.
They saw us, of course.
And they waved in that silly way people do.
All of us living there together.

The man. The woman.
This mere boy.
And me.
They know the assignment.
We suppose the boy does not know, I guess.
We just stay there day after day.
Every day the man and woman go out for two hours or so.
Fresh air. Some excuse.
Or, when it's raining, into town for shopping.
Always the dog goes with them.
The boy never asks to go. Never even asks.
And I would be left there with the boy.
And I would try to talk with him.
To — find out something.
It was my assignment.
They would be gone for a couple of hours.
When they got back, the day would go as usual.
Cook a meal. Listen to the radio.
I would play chess with one of them.
Or, I would try to play checkers with the boy.
But he couldn't seem to concentrate.
The days passed. It seemed like an eternity.
At night, after everybody went to bed, I would write.
Reports.
Which you have read, I guess.
I think there is nothing there. Nothing in them.
I couldn't find out anything.
Except this story about the dog.
Which I tried to write. But it was too hard to write.
I am not an author, you know.

The opinion on why we tell these stories is still out, so to speak, and the idea that any imagined interpretation of the character-or-circumstances combination, to be facetious, has its roots in some "mysterious" need to structure details remembered of "previous" lives — or any lives, for that matter — has no consensus, as you know. We tell stories, and one is judged only on how well it is done. You may proceed.

We watched them approach through the wet grass.
We were standing in the doorway together.
And I said to him, "Is that the dog?"
He didn't even turn.

He just talked looking straight ahead.
And not very loudly.
Now that I tell it, it seems more like a meeting.
The kind you get used to in this business.
Two men at a bus stop.
The folded paper. The sign.
The whole quickness and the secrecy.
Afterwards the worry that you got it right.
You have to get out when you get older.
You can't trust your ears.
It happens so fast. As you know. One talks.
Looking straight ahead. The other listens.
Just as the bus comes or the taxi or whatever.
So there is always that noise, too.
The doors open.
One gets on the bus.
The other looks at his schedule and his watch.
Waiting for the next bus.
It happens as the bus comes. To block the view.
So you are hidden from the observers.
A few simple sentences.
In noise. I think I got it right.
This was the same.
As if the man and his wife were the observers.
As if the pattern of the four of us together had just —
Changed. As if the sides had changed.
It was so brazen.
Looking straight ahead and talking.
It seems so unreal now. So impossible.
A mere boy. And a grown-up. Standing in a
doorway together. Talking about a dog.
He said it so perfectly. Without hesitation.
No, I know that's what you think.
But you are wrong. That's not the dog.
That's not what you will see before you leave.
You think that I am afraid of this dog.
You think that I am trying to tell you something.
Something that I don't understand.
But, you are wrong. You'll see.
Like a grown-up talking.
I had the same sense of worry that I had heard it right.

When it happens that fast, you can't be sure.
It was like a dream. That's why this is so hard to tell.
I had to pretend that nothing happened.
I had to greet them both and talk about the weather.
Help them at the door. Smell the wetness again.
We unpacked the shopping bags.
They said that they had met a friend of mine in town.
The message: the assignment was over.
I thought how strange it was that it should end just now.
Just when I thought I had a breakthrough.
Finally something to report.
The boy went upstairs. He left the three of us together.
Talking about the friend they had met in town.
It was as if he left me alone with them.
So that I could be sure I had got the message right.
And that was the last time I spoke to him.
I read some to spend the afternoon.
We listened to the radio and made some supper.
After supper the boy went straight upstairs.
Nobody said much then.
It was coming to an end, and nobody knew anything.
I won't take another assignment like that one again.
I prefer to be on the street.
Where the dangers are real, at least.
I tried to say in my report that I had something to tell.
Something that is too hard to write.
That's why I am here, I suppose.

Yes, yes, "suppose." Very well done. That's here in the report, isn't it? May I quote you in your own words? Don't forget to use "suppose." Well, perhaps, not in your own words. Out of the old mongoose-and-cobra manual. Don't forget to use "suppose." We have found the report to be of interest and "interesting" in many ways like this. For instance, the meeting at the bus stop. Oh, the nostalgia of it. Old men eat sandwiches in hotel rooms, doing crossword puzzles. But the report stops before what happened the next day.

I would not like to have to write that down on paper.
After breakfast I packed.
I made the excuse that I had to be away for a few days.
That I had called a car.
What I had been instructed to say is that I would return.
In just a few days.

But I couldn't. I couldn't say it.
They knew, of course.
They had met a friend of mine in town.
I could not lie in front of that boy.
I could not lie —
Knowing that he would know that I was lying.
There is a limit to foolishness, even in this business.
I could not lie, knowing what was in store for him.
The assignment had ended. Everybody knew it.
The cleaner done with, the better.
So, finally, I simply said Goodbye.
He was standing in the doorway to his bedroom.
I had to pass the doorway on my way out.
He did not intend to come downstairs.
The pretense was ended.
The two of them were gone, and the dog with them.
Another errand. An excuse to be away.
My car came.
It pulled up at the end of the road. Fifty yards away.
The driver did not get out.
As instructed.
I picked up my bags and closed the bedroom door behind me.
He was standing in the doorway to his room.
I said Goodbye.
It was the only word possible.
He just looked at me.
I don't blame him.
I didn't think much of myself either by that time.
I must have been about halfway down the stairs.
I heard him say, "Be careful."
Those words were so unexpected.
They did something to me —
To my mind.
What happened next is like a dream.
I will say it once, here, in front of you.
Then, never again in my life to anyone.
What happened next is the reason I have resigned.
From the service.
What happened next has left a scar.
A scar that I hope no one will ever see.
I crossed the front room at the bottom of the stairs.

At the door I turned to take one last look.
You teach yourself to do that.
It is a form of cleaning up your memory.
That last look. In case anyone should ask.
in case you should ever need it.
And in the window on the right I saw it.
A dog was looking in the window.
I could see just the face above the sill. Just looking.
Jesus, what am I doing here?
Just a dog looking in the window.
And it was terrifying. Like he had said.
There was a coldness in the room.
I hope I will never feel that feeling again.
I started running toward the car.
A grown man, running.
And there was no sound, anywhere.
Until the car started.
I had the feeling that I would never get there.
I had the feeling that the car would leave.
Before I got to it.
And that I would never stop running. Ever.
What happened next has already been described.
It is in my record.
Thank you. This has been very helpful.
We would appreciate your confidentiality, of course.
Stories like the one you have just told —
— become more important later.
Later in one's life they become more important.
Just as the urgency seems lessened.
The basic equation of old age.
More important to be told.
Less important to be kept back.
We appreciate your understanding of this as of now.
Your services have been more than excellent.
But, let us stress again the warning.
Before you are excused to go.
The story is more or less what we expected.
It has been told in other forms.
It verifies opinion.
It is the reason we are here.
The more cause, then, that it should rest with you.

If we may be somewhat dramatic in speaking of it, —
— you should take it to your grave.

Yes, sir.

— —

— —

— —

— —

Scene Eight: My Brother Called (E)

The line has gone dead.
Suddenly, I realize that I am very tired.
The burden of improvisation,
and watchfulness about what the body says,
smiling, as if listening to a voice from the silence.
Every detail of human appearance is to be memorized
against the chance that the passer-by will enter.
The burden of the importance of inaccuracy of memory.
He is not my brother in the ordinary sense.
It is a word we use in the department.
It means someone you can count on.
In any circumstances.
The waiter appears and takes away the menu.
A cue to end the phantom conversation.
I hang up and the telephone is removed.
I don't know how long the scene has lasted.

Scene Nine: Viva's Boy

What is the meaning of “unmaterialistic, multilingual?”

As you might suppose, the code was neither literal nor obviously descriptive. It covered age and sex. Color and length and treatment of hair. Various ways of saying how tall, how heavy for the body-size. Apparent physical strength, style of clothing, whether something was carried: a purse or briefcase. Any special fact that might serve as some sort of warning.

What was the purpose of the choice of personal solicitations as a subject?

The simple purpose was to repeat a description in a different code. The person described as “sought” is the same person in a different code. I believe it is a kind of confirmation, both for the listener — whoever that was — and for the speaker. A double-check against the memory.

It seems unlikely that something as peculiar as the reciting of a list of personals to a phone-caller would go unnoticed in a café.

As I understood the assignment, my job was not to go unnoticed. As you must know, no arrangements can be perfect in this calling. Or, perhaps they were perfect. I did as I was told.

There were too many words of different sorts for your explanation to be believable.

It is not important to me that you believe me. You called me here. I have been trained. I have described my role as best I can. The “menu” was not such that you could order food from. Most of what happened makes no sense to me.

Can you remember enough of the code to be able to describe yourself to us now?

No. Nor would it have any meaning, if I could. The words were as senseless as they seem. Maybe they were the most important words I have ever spoken. Maybe it was just another test.

What was the outcome?

Scene Ten: My Brother Called (F)

The outcome was not clear.
The line went dead, as I have told you.
The waiter appeared almost immediately.

He brought the bill for the food that I had ordered,
which was untouched, except for what appearances required.
I don't know how long the scene had lasted.
It was dark outside now.
The lights in the café had come on.
And the light was on in the apartment,
as it must have been on from the beginning,
in readiness, but unnoticeable in the twilight.
Finally, my attention softened.
I paid the waiter and forgot why I had come.
His indifference canceled the urgency of the past.
I have nothing more to report to you.
I learned long ago that there is never any news.

End

Reference: The Personals

*Warm, affectionate, intellectual, non-smoking S.W.M.
Professional, 40s.
Many interests, cultured, artistic, humorous.
Unmaterialistic, multilingual.
Disenchanted by business values.
Unaddicted to weekendening or getaways.
Seeks S.W.F.
Gentle, intellectual, unmaterialistic, attractive.
Unmarried, 35-to-40, no kids.
For fun, laughter, intelligent conversation.
Sharing cultural interests.
Romance.*

*Well-achieved, vulnerable man.
37.
Alive and humane.
Attractive and fit.
Seeks similar woman for friend.
Playmate, lover.
Non-religious, friendly to libertarian thought.
Emotionally open, intellectually honest.
Hugger, cuddler.
Bach-lover, keyboard hacker.
Non-smoker, modest runner.
Art Deco fan, occasional collector.*

Pretty S.J.W.
39.
Successful.
Super-smart.
Sensuous.
Sensitive.
Cuddly.
Affectionate.
Seeks same.
In S.J.M.
Articulate.
For fun, friendship and fantasy.

Intellectual.
Non-wealthy gentleman.
54.
Loves marble, gardens, mountains, sea.
Would share Provence.
Or domestic equivalent.
Seeks musically sensitive lady.
40-ish.
I seek not wealth.
But sharing beauty.
Caring.
Family.

Honest, lonely country lawyer.
51.
Phi beta kappa.
Trial-weary.
Wants to yield to proven screen-writing abilities.
And proclivities.
Seeks congenial woman.
Substantial independent means.
Who needs a trustworthy professional.
As a life-mate.
Promises additional glitter.
For the remaining golden years.

Love the outdoors.
Tennis.
Long walks.
Ballroom dancing.
Also baroque music.
Cozy evenings.
Good conversation.
Youthful 50s.
S.W.C.F.
Seeking male companion.
To share interests.
Humor and good times.

Here I am.
Another petite, attractive woman.
Psychotherapist.
41.
Nurturing.
Sensitive.
Intuitive.
Looking for that man.
Caring, imperfect.
Non-smoking.
Professional.
There are no new words.

Original thinker.
Professional speculator.
Handsome, successful, intelligent, educated.
Passion for Piero, Palladio.
Puccini, pasta.
S.W.M., 41.
Seeks woman partner.
Discerning.
Pretty.
Young.
Bio. Photo.
Replies confidential.

Southern belle.
Blonde.
Green eyes.
Slender.
Well-educated, traveled, businesswoman.
Divorced.
Active with many interests.
Can relocate.
Seeks refined gentleman.
Sincere.
Successful.
Legally free.

Divorced male.
60. 5'11". 185 lbs.
Attractive, educated.
Intelligent, warm, supportive.
Independent means.
Wise in the ways of the world.
Seeks slim woman.
Sensual, bright, attractive.
Educated, professional.
50-ish.
For serious, monogamous, fun-filled relationship.
Recent photo a must.

Zany.
Exuberant.
Leggy.
Merry widow.
Looking for good time.
Long-term.
If you love the theater.
Movies.
Romantic walks on the beach at sunset.
Send letter.
Please.
I love to write.

Concupiscent.
Affluent.
Pacific.
Northwest.
Ph.D.
Former shrink.
Turned investor.
Seeking female.
Height/weight proportionate.
Combination.
Companion, long-term.
And swinger.

If you are a successful single active man.
Around 60 more or less.
Interested in music, good food, investments.
Travel, birds, scrabble, art.
Books, movies.
Gardening, family.
Or almost anything else.
How about having dinner?
See how the conversation goes.
I am a presentable woman.
Easy to be with.
Repeat, easy to be with.
Drop me a line.

Southern woman, 28, single, Caucasian.
Petite and feminine, professional and successful.
Hard-working and goal-oriented, living in a man's world.
Seeking a sensuous man with a desire and a persistence.
To pamper me, an ability to conquer my fantasies.
And explore my confusions. A man with an easy laugh.
An understanding heart, a dominant spirit.
A man more financially successful and older than myself.
With an inner strength, and an outer tolerance.
A man with an ability to help and yet to soar.
A man with whom I can learn.
And occasionally be defenseless.

G.W.M.
39.
5'11"
155.
Strongly committed to civil-rights issues.
Seeks long-term relationship.
With other male.
Caring and supportive.
Interests include theater and psychology.
Literature and film.

Southern physician.

40 years old.

Tall and handsome.

D.J.M.

Non-smoker.

Seeks missing link.

Successful, stunningly beautiful, blonde woman.

Intelligent, 25 to 39, tall and slender.

To share good times.

Sunny beaches.

Travel.

Hopefully new future.