

B A R N

B U R N I N G

By Haruki Murakami

I MET HER AT the wedding party of an acquaintance and we got friendly. This was three years ago. We were nearly a whole generation apart in age—she twenty, myself thirty-one—but that hardly got in the way. I had plenty of other things to worry my head about at the time, and to be perfectly honest, I didn't have a spare moment to think about age difference. And our ages never bothered her from the very beginning. I was married, but that didn't matter, either. She seemed to consider things like age and family and income to be of the same a priori order as shoe size and vocal pitch and the shape of one's fingernails. The sort of thing that thinking about won't change one bit. And that much said, well, she had a point. She was working as an advertising model to earn a living while studying pantomime under somebody-or-other, a famous teacher, apparently. Though the work end of things was a drag and she was always turning down jobs her agent lined up, so her money situation was really rather precarious. But whatever she lacked in take-home pay she probably made up for on the goodwill of a number of boyfriends. Naturally, I don't know this for certain; it's just what I pieced together from snippets of her conversation. Still, I'm not suggesting there was even a glimmer of a hint that she was sleeping with guys for money. Though perhaps she did come close to that on occasion. Yet even if she did, that was not an essential issue; the essentials were surely far more simple. And the long and short of it was, this guileless simplicity is what attracted a particular kind of person. The kind of men who had only to set eyes on this simplicity of hers before they'd be dressing it up with whatever feelings they held inside. Not exactly the best explanation, but even she'd have to admit it was this simplicity that supported her. Of course, this sort of thing couldn't go on forever. (If it could, we'd have to turn the entire workings of the universe upside down.) The possibility did exist, but only under specific circumstances, for a specific period. Just like with "peeling mandarin oranges." "Peeling mandarin oranges?" you say? When we first met, she told me she was studying pantomime. Oh, really, I'd said, not altogether surprised. Young women are all into something these days. Plus, she didn't look like your die-cast polish-your-skills-in-dead-earnest type. Then she "peeled a mandarin orange." Literally, that's what she did: She had a glass bowl of oranges to her left and another bowl for the peels to her right—so went the setup—in fact, there was nothing there. She proceeded to pick up one imaginary orange, then slowly peel it, pop pieces into her mouth, and spit out the pulp one section at a time, finally disposing of the skin-wrapped residue into the right-hand bowl when she'd eaten the entire fruit. She repeated this maneuver again and again. In so many words, it doesn't sound like much, but I swear, just watching her do this for ten or twenty minutes—she and I kept up a running conversation at the counter of this bar, her "peeling mandarin oranges" the whole while, almost without a second thought—I felt the reality of everything around me being siphoned away. Unnerving, to say the least. Back when Eichmann stood trial in Israel, there was talk that the most fitting sentence would be to lock him in a cell and gradually remove all the air. I don't really know how he did meet his end, but that's what came to mind. "Seems you're quite talented," I said. "Oh, this is nothing. Talent's not involved. It's not a question of

making yourself believe there is an orange there, you have to forget there isn't one. That's all." "Practically Zen." That's when I took a liking to her. We generally didn't see all that much of each other. Maybe once a month, twice at the most. I'd ring her up and invite her out somewhere. We'd eat out or go to a bar. We talked intensely; she'd hear me out and I'd listen to whatever she had to say. We hardly had any common topics between us, but so what? We became, well, pals. Of course, I was the one who paid the bill for all the food and drinks. Sometimes she'd call me, typically when she was broke and needed a meal. And then it was unbelievable the amount of food she could put away. When the two of us were together, I could truly relax. I'd forget all about work I didn't want to do and trivial things that'd never be settled anyway and the crazy mixed-up ideas that crazy mixed-up people had taken into their heads. It was some kind of power she had. Not that there was any great meaning to her words. And if I did catch myself interjecting polite nothings without really tuning in what she was saying, there still was something soothing to my ears about her voice, like watching clouds drift across the far horizon. I did my share of talking, too. Everything from personal matters to sweeping generalities, I told her my honest thoughts. I guess she also let some of my verbiage go by, likewise with minimum comment. Which was fine by me. It was a mood I was after, not understanding or sympathy. Then two years ago in the spring, her father died of a heart ailment, and she came into a small sum of money. At least, that's how she described it. With the money, she said, she wanted to travel to North Africa. Why North Africa, I didn't know, but I happened to know someone working at the Algerian embassy, so I introduced her. Thus she decided to go to Algeria. And as things took their course, I ended up seeing her off at the airport. All she carried was a ratty old Boston bag stuffed with a couple of changes of clothes. By the look of her as she went through the baggage check, you'd almost think she was returning from North Africa, not going there. "You really going to come back to Japan in one piece?" I joked. "Sure thing. 'I shall return,'" she mocked. Three months later, she did. Three kilos lighter than when she left and tanned about six shades darker. With her was her new guy, whom she presented as someone she met at a restaurant in Algiers. Japanese in Algeria were all too few, so the two of them easily fell in together and eventually became intimate. As far I know, this guy was her first real regular lover. He was in his late twenties, tall, with a decent build, and rather polite in his speech. A little lean on looks, perhaps, though I suppose you could put him in the handsome category. Anyway, he struck me as nice enough; he had big hands and long fingers. The reason I know so much about the guy is that I went to meet her when she arrived. A sudden telegram from Beirut had given a date and a flight number. Nothing else. Seemed she wanted me to come to the airport. When the plane got in—actually, it was four hours late due to bad weather, during which time I read three magazines cover to cover in a coffee lounge—the two of them came through the gate arm in arm. They looked like a happy young married couple. When she introduced us, he shook my hand, virtually in reflex. The healthy handshake of those who've been living a long time overseas. After that, we went into a restaurant. She was dying to have a bowl of tempura and rice, she said; meanwhile, he and I both had beer. He told me he worked in trading but didn't offer any more details. I couldn't tell whether he simply didn't want to talk business or was thoughtfully sparing me a boring exposition. Nor, in truth, did I especially want to hear about trading, so I didn't press him. With little else to discuss, the conversation meandered between safety on the streets of Beirut and water supplies in Tunis. He proved to be quite well informed about affairs over the whole of North Africa and the Middle East. By now she'd finished her tempura and announced with a big yawn that she was feeling sleepy. I half expected her to doze off on the spot. She was precisely the type who could fall asleep anywhere. The guy said he'd see her home by taxi, and I said I'd take the train as it was faster. Just why she had me come all the way out to the airport was beyond me. "Glad I got to meet you," he told me, as if to acknowledge the inconvenience. "Same here," I said.

THEREAFTER I met up with the guy a number of times. Whenever I ran into her, he was always by her side. I'd make a date with her, and he'd drive up in a spotless silver-gray German sports car to let her off. I know next to nothing about automobiles, but it reminded me of those jaunty coupes you see in old black-and-white Fellini films. Definitely not the sort of car your ordinary salaryman owns. "The guy's got to be loaded," I ventured to comment to her once. "Yeah," she said without much interest, "I guess." "Can you really make that much in trading?" "Trading?" "That's what he said. He works in trading." "Okay, then, I imagine so.... But hey, what do I know? He doesn't seem to do much work at all, as far as I can see. He does his share of seeing people and talking on the phone, I'll say that, though." The young man and his money remained a mystery. THEN ONE SUNDAY afternoon in October, she rang up. My wife had gone off to see some relatives that morning and left me alone at home. A pleasant day, bright and clear, it found me idly gazing at the camphor tree outside and enjoying the new autumn apples. I must have eaten a good seven of them that day—it was either a pathological craving or some kind of premonition. "Listen," she said right off, "just happened to be heading in your direction. Would it be all right if we popped over?" "We?" I threw back the question. "Me and him," came her self-evident reply. "Sure," I had to say, "by all means." "Okay, we'll be there in thirty minutes," she said, then hung up. I lay there on the sofa awhile longer before taking a shower and shaving. As I toweled myself dry, I wondered whether to tidy up around the house but canned the idea. There wasn't time. And despite the piles of books and magazines and letters and records, the occasional pencil here or sweater there, the place didn't seem particularly dirty. I sat back down on the sofa, looked at the camphor tree, and ate another apple. They showed up a little past two. I heard a car stop in front of the house, and went to the front door to see her leaning out the window of the silver-gray coupe, waving. I directed them to the parking space around back. "We're here," she beamed, all smiles. She wore a sheer blouse that showed her nipples, and an olive-green miniskirt. He sported a navy blazer, but there was something else slightly different about him; maybe it was the two-day growth of beard. Not at all slovenly looking, it even brought out his features a shade. As he stepped from the car, he removed his sunglasses and shoved them into his breast pocket. "Terribly sorry to be dropping in on you like this on your day off," he apologized. "Not at all, don't mind a bit. Every day might as well be a day off with me, and I was getting kind of bored here on my own," I allowed. "We brought some food," she said, lifting a large white paper bag from the backseat of the car. "Food?" "Nothing extraordinary," he spoke up. "It's just that, a sudden visit on a Sunday, I thought, why not take along something to eat?" "Very kind of you. Especially since I haven't had anything but apples all morning." We went inside and set the groceries out on the table. It turned out to make quite a spread: roast beef sandwiches, salad, smoked salmon, blueberry ice cream—and good quantities at that. While she transferred the food to plates, I grabbed a bottle of white wine from the refrigerator. It was like an impromptu party. "Well, let's dig in. I'm starved," pronounced her usual ravenous self. Midway through the feast, having polished off the wine, we tapped into my stock of beer. I can usually hold my own, but this guy could drink; no matter how many beers he downed, his expression never altered in the slightest. Together with her contribution of a couple of cans, we had in the space of a little under an hour racked up a whole tableful of empties. Not bad. Meanwhile, she was pulling records from my shelf and loading the player. The first selection to come on was Miles Davis's "Airegin." "A Garrard autochanger like that's a rare find these days," he observed. Which launched us into audiophilia, me going on about the various components of my stereo system, him inserting appropriate comments, polite as ever. The conversation had reached a momentary lull when the guy said, "I've got some grass. Care to smoke?" I hesitated, for no other reason than I'd only just quit smoking the month before and I wasn't sure what effect it would have. But in the end, I decided to take a toke or two. Whereupon he fished a foil packet from the bottom

of the paper bag and rolled a joint. He lit up and took a few puffs to get it started, then passed it to me. It was prime stuff. For the next few minutes we didn't say a word as we each took hits in turn. Miles Davis had finished, and we were now into an album of Strauss waltzes. Curious combination, but what the hell. After one joint, she was already beat, pleading grass on top of three beers and lack of sleep. I ferried her upstairs and helped her onto the bed. She asked to borrow a T-shirt. No sooner had I handed it to her than she'd stripped to her panties, pulled on the T-shirt, and stretched flat out. By the time I got around to asking if she was going to be warm enough, she had already snoozed off. I went downstairs, shaking my head. Back in the living room, her guy was busy rolling another joint. Plays hard, this dude. Me, I would have just as soon snuggled into bed next to her and conked right out. Fat chance. We settled down to smoke the second joint, Strauss still waltzing away. Somehow, I was reminded of an elementary school play. I had the part of the old glove maker. A fox cub comes with money to buy gloves, but the glove maker says it's not enough for a pair. "'Tain't gonna buy no gloves," I say. Guess I'm something of a villain. "But Mother's so very c-c-cold. She'll get chapped p-p-paws. P-p-please," says the fox cub. "Uh-uh, nothing doing. Save your money and come back. Otherwise—" "Sometimes I burn barns," the guy was saying. "Excuse me?" I asked. Had I misheard him? "Sometimes I burn barns," the guy repeated. I looked at him. His fingertips traced the pattern on his lighter. Then he took a deep draw on the joint and held it in for a good ten seconds before slowly exhaling. The smoke came streaming out of his mouth and into the air like ectoplasm. He passed me the roach. "Quality product, eh?" he said. I nodded. "I brought it from India. Top of the line, the best I could find. Smoke this and, it's strange, I recall all kinds of things. Lights and smells and like that. The quality of memory ..." He paused and snapped his fingers a few times, as if searching for the right words. "... completely changes. Don't you think?" That it did, I concurred. I really was back in the school play, reexperiencing the commotion on stage, the smell of the paint on the cardboard backdrop. "I'd like to hear about this barn thing," I said. He looked at me. His face wore no more expression than ever. "May I talk about it?" he asked. "Why not?" I said. "Pretty simple, really. I pour gasoline and throw a lighted match. Flick, and that's it. Doesn't take fifteen minutes for the whole thing to burn to the ground." "So tell me," I began, then fell silent. I was having trouble finding the right words, too. "Why is it you burn barns?" "Is it so strange?" "Who knows? You burn barns. I don't burn barns. There's this glaring difference, and to me, rather than say which of us is strange, first of all I'd like to clear up just what that difference is. Anyway, it was you who brought up this barn thing to begin with." "Got me there," he admitted. "You tell it like it is. Say, would you have any Ravi Shankar records?" No, I didn't, I told him. The guy spaced out awhile. I could practically see his mind kneading like Silly Putty. Or maybe it was my mind that was squirming around. "I burn maybe one barn every two months," he came back. Then he snapped his fingers again. "Seems to me that's just about the right pace. For me, that is." I nodded vaguely. Pace? "Just out of interest, is it your own barns you burn?" I thought to ask. The guy looked at me uncomprehendingly. "Why have I got to burn my own barns? What makes you think I'd have this surplus of barns, myself?" "Which means," I continued, "you burn other people's barns, right?" "Correct," he said. "Obviously. Other people's barns. Which makes it, as it were, a criminal act. Same as you and me smoking this grass here right now. A clear-cut criminal act." I shut up, elbows on the arms of my chair. "In other words, I wantonly ignite barns that belong to other people. Naturally, I choose ones that won't cause major fires. All I want to do is simply burn barns." I nodded and ground out what was left of the roach. "But, if you get caught, you'll be in trouble. Whatever, it's arson, and you might get prison." "Nobody's going to get caught." He laughed at the very idea. "Pour the gas, light the match, and run. Then I watch the whole thing from a distance through binoculars, nice and easy. Nobody catches me. Really, burn one shitty little barn and the cops hardly even

budge.” Come to think of it, they probably wouldn’t. On top of which, who’d suspect a well-dressed young man driving a foreign car? “And does she know about this?” I asked, pointing upstairs. “Not a thing. Fact is, I’ve never told anyone else about this but you. I’m not the sort to go spouting off to just anyone.” “So why me?” The guy extended his fingers of his left hand and stroked his cheek. The growth of beard made a dry, rasping sound. Like a bug walking over a thin, taut sheet of paper. “You’re someone who writes novels, so I thought, Wouldn’t he be interested in patterns of human behavior and all that? And the way I see it, with novelists, before even passing judgment on something, aren’t they the kind who are supposed to appreciate its form? And even if they can’t appreciate it, they should at least accept it at face value, no? That’s why I told you. I wanted to tell you, from my side.” I nodded. Just how was I to accept this at face value? From my side, I honestly didn’t know. “This might be a strange way to put it,” he took off again, spreading both hands, then bringing them slowly together before his eyes. “But there’s a lot of barns in this world, and I’ve got this feeling that they’re all just waiting to be burned. Barns built way off by the seaside, barns built in the middle of rice fields ... well, anyway, all kinds of barns. But nothing that fifteen minutes wouldn’t burn down, nice and neat. It’s like that’s why they were put there from the very beginning. No grief to anyone. They just... vanish. One, two, poof!” “But you’re judging that they’re not needed.” “I’m not judging anything. They’re waiting to be burned. I’m simply obliging. You get it? I’m just taking on what’s there. Just like the rain. The rain falls. Streams swell. Things get swept along. Does the rain judge anything? Well, all right, does this make me immoral? In my own way, I’d like to believe I’ve got my own morals. And that’s an extremely important force in human existence. A person can’t exist without morals. I wouldn’t doubt if morals weren’t the very balance to my simultaneity.” “Simultaneity?” “Right, I’m here, and I’m there. I’m in Tokyo, and at the same time I’m in Tunis. I’m the one to blame, and I’m also the one to forgive. Just as a for instance. It’s that level of balance. Without such balance, I don’t think we could go on living. It’s like the linchpin to everything. Lose it and we’d literally go to pieces. But for the very reason that I’ve got it, simultaneity becomes possible for me.” “So what you’re saying is, the act of burning barns is in keeping with these morals of yours?” “Not exactly. It’s an act by which to maintain those morals. But maybe we better just forget the morality. It’s not essential. What I want to say is, the world is full of these barns. Me, I got my barns, and you got your barns. It’s the truth. I’ve been almost everywhere in the world. Experienced everything. Came close to dying more than once. Not that I’m proud of it or anything. But okay, let’s drop it. My fault for being the quiet type all the time. I talk too much when I do grass.” We fell silent, burned out. I had no idea what to say or how. I was sitting tight in my mental passenger seat, just watching one weird scene after the next slip past the car window. My body was so loose I couldn’t get a good grasp on what the different parts were doing. Yet I was still in touch with the idea of my bodily existence. Simultaneity, if ever there was such a thing: Here I had me thinking, and here I had me observing myself think. Time ticked on in impossibly minute polyrhythms. “Care for a beer?” I asked a little later. “Thank you. I would.” I went to the kitchen, brought out four cans and some Camembert, and we helped ourselves. “When was the last time you burned a barn?” I had to ask. “Let’s see, now.” He strained to remember, beer can in hand. “Summer, the end of August.” “And the next time, when’ll that be?” “Don’t know. It’s not like I work out a schedule or mark dates in my calendar. When I get the urge, I go burn one.” “But, say. When you get this urge, some likely barn doesn’t just happen to be lying around, does it?” “Of course not,” he said quietly. “That’s why I scout out ones ripe for burning in advance.” “To lay in stock.” “Exactly.” “Can I ask you one more question?” “Sure.” “Have you already decided on the next barn to burn?” This caused him to furrow up wrinkles between his eyes; then he inhaled audibly through his nose. “Well, yes. As a matter of fact, I have.” I sipped the last of my beer and said nothing. “A great barn. The first barn

really worth burning in ages. Fact is, I went and checked it out only today.” “Which means, it must be nearby.” “Very near,” he confirmed. So ended our barn talk. At five o’clock, he roused his girlfriend, and then apologized to me again for the sudden visit. He was completely sober, despite the quantities of beer I’d seen him drink. Then he fetched the sports car from around back. “I’ll keep an eye out for that barn,” I told him. “You do that,” he answered. “Like I said, it’s right near here.” “What’s this about a barn?” she broke in. “Man talk,” he said. “Oh, great,” she fawned. And at that, the two of them were gone. I returned to the living room and lay down on the sofa. The table was littered with all manner of debris. I picked up my duffle coat off the floor, pulled it over my head, and conked out. Bluish gloom and a pungent marijuana odor covered everything. Oddly uneven, that darkness. Lying on the sofa, I tried to remember what came next in the elementary-school play, but it was long since irretrievable. Did the fox cub ever get the gloves? I got up from the sofa, opened a window to air the place, went to the kitchen, and made myself some coffee. THE FOLLOWING DAY , I went to a bookstore and bought a map of the area where I live. Scaled 20,000:1 and detailed down to the smallest lanes. Then I walked around with the map, penciling in X’s wherever there was a barn or shed. For the next three days, I covered four kilometers in all four directions. Living toward the outskirts of town, there are still a good many farmers in the vicinity. So it came to a considerable number of barns—sixteen altogether. I carefully checked the condition of each of these, and from the sixteen I eliminated all those where there were houses in the immediate proximity or greenhouses alongside. I also eliminated those in which there were farm implements or chemicals or signs that they were still in active use. I didn’t imagine he’d want to burn tools or fertilizer. That left five barns. Five barns worth burning. Or, rather, five barns unobjectionable if burned. The kind of barn it’d take fifteen minutes to reduce to ashes, then no one would miss it. Yet I couldn’t decide which would be the one he’d be most likely to torch. The rest was a matter of taste. I was beside myself for wanting to know which of the five barns he’d chosen. I unfolded my map and erased all but those five X’s. I got myself a right angle and a French curve and dividers, and tried to establish the shortest course leaving from my house, going around the five barns, and coming back home again. Which proved to be a laborious operation, what with the roads winding about hills and streams. The result: a course of 7.2 kilometers. I measured it several times, so I couldn’t have been too far off. The following morning at six, I put on my training wear and jogging shoes and ran the course. I run six kilometers every morning anyway, so adding an extra kilometer wouldn’t kill me. There were two railroad crossings along the way, but they rarely held you up. And otherwise, the scenery wouldn’t be bad. First thing out of the house, I did a quick circuit around the playing field of the local college, then turned down an unpaved road that ran along a stream for three kilometers. Passing the first barn midway, a path took me through woods. A slight uphill grade, then another barn. A little beyond that were racehorse stables. The Thoroughbreds would be alarmed to see flames—but that’d be it. No real damage. The third and fourth barns resembled each other like ugly twins. Set not two hundred meters apart, both were weather-beaten and dirty. You might as well torch the both of them together. The last barn stood beside a railroad crossing. Roughly the six-kilometer mark. Utterly abandoned, the barn had a tin Pepsi-Cola billboard nailed to the side facing the tracks. The structure—if you could call it that—was such a shambles, I could see it, as he would say, just waiting to be burned. I paused before this last barn, took a few deep breaths, cut over the crossing, and headed home. Running time: thirty-one minutes thirty seconds. I showered, ate breakfast, stretched out on the sofa to listen to one record, then got down to work. For one month, I ran the same course each morning. But—no barns burned. Sometimes, I could swear he was trying to get me to burn a barn. That is, to plant in my head the image of burning barns, so that it would swell up like a bicycle tire pumped with air. I’ll grant you, there were times that, well, as long as I was waiting around for him to do the deed,

I half considered striking the match myself. It would have been a lot faster. And anyhow, they were only run-down old barns. . . . Although on second thought, no, let's not get carried away. You won't see me torch any barn. No matter how inflated the image of burning barns grew in my head, I'm really not the type. Me, burn barns? Never. Then what about him? He'd probably just switched prospects. Or else he was too busy and simply hadn't found the time to burn a barn. In any case, there was no word from her. December came and went, and the morning air pierced the skin. The barns stood their ground, their roofs white with frost. Wintering birds sent the echo of flapping wings through the frozen woods. The world kept in motion unchanged. • • • THE NEXT TIME I met the guy was in the middle of December last year. It was Christmas carols everywhere you went. I had gone into town to buy presents for different people, and while walking around Nogizaka I spotted his car. No mistake, his silver-gray sports car. Shinagawa license plate, small dent next to the left headlight. It was parked in the lot of a café, looking less sparkling than when I last saw it, the silver-gray a hint duller. Though maybe that was a mistaken impression on my part: I have this convenient tendency to rework my memories. I dashed into the café without a moment's hesitation. The place was dark and thick with the strong aroma of coffee. There weren't many voices to be heard, only atmospheric baroque music. I recognized him immediately. He was sitting alone by the window, drinking a café au lait. And though it was warm enough in there to steam up my glasses, he was wearing a black cashmere coat, with his muffler still wrapped around his neck. I hedged a second, but then figured I might as well approach the guy. I decided not to say I'd seen his car outside; I'd just happened to step in, and by chance there he was. "Mind if I sit down?" I asked. "Please, not at all," he replied. We talked a bit. It wasn't a particularly lively conversation. Clearly, we didn't have much in the way of common topics; moreover, his mind seemed to be on something else. Still, he didn't show any sign of being put out by my presence. At one point, he mentioned a seaport in Tunisia, then he started describing the shrimp they caught there. He wasn't just talking for my sake: He really was serious about these shrimp. All the same, like water to the desert, the story didn't go anywhere before it dissipated. He signaled to the waiter and ordered a second café au lait. "Say, by the way, how's your barn doing?" I braved the question. The trace of a smile came to his lips. "Oh, you still remember?" he said, removing a handkerchief from his pocket to wipe his mouth. "Why, sure, I burned it. Burned it nice and clean. Just as promised." "One right near my house?" "Yeah. Really, right by there." "When?" "Last—when was it? Maybe ten days after I visited your place." I told him about how I plotted the barns on my map and ran my daily circuit. "So there's no way I could have not seen it," I insisted. "Very thorough," he giped, obviously having his fun. "Thorough and logical. All I can say is, you must have missed it. Does happen, you know. Things so close up, they don't even register." "It just doesn't make sense." He adjusted his tie, then glanced at his watch. "So very, very close," he underscored. "But if you'll excuse me, I've got to be going. Let's talk about it next time, shall we? Can't keep a person waiting. Sorry." I had no plausible reason to detain the guy any further. He stood up, pocketed his cigarettes and lighter, and then remarked, "Oh, by the way, have you seen her lately?" "No, not at all. Haven't you?" "Me, neither. I've been trying to get in touch, but she's never in her apartment and she doesn't answer the phone and she hasn't been to her pantomime class the whole while." "She must have taken off somewhere. She's been known to do that." The guy stared down at the table, hands buried in his pockets. "With no money, for a month and a half? As far as making her own way, she hardly has a clue." He was snapping his fingers in his coat pocket. "I think I know that girl pretty well, and she absolutely hasn't got yen one. No real friends to speak of. An address book full of names, but that's all they are. She hasn't got anyone she can depend on. No, I take that back, she did trust you. And I'm not saying this out of courtesy. I do believe you're someone special to her. Really, it's enough to make me kind of jealous. And I'm someone who's never ever been

jealous at all.” He gave a little sigh, then eyed his watch again. “But I really must go. Be seeing you.” Right, I nodded, but no words came. The same as always, whenever I was thrown together with this guy, I became altogether inarticulate. I tried calling her any number of times after that, but her line had apparently been disconnected. Which somehow bothered me, so I went to her apartment and encountered a locked door, her mailbox stuffed with fliers. The superintendent was nowhere to be found, so I had no way to know if she was even living there anymore. I ripped a page from my appointment book, jotted down “Please contact,” wrote my name, and shoved it into the mailbox. Not a word. The next time I passed by, the apartment bore the nameplate of another resident. I actually knocked, but no one was in. And like before, no superintendent in sight. At that, I gave up. This was one year ago. She’d disappeared. EVERY MORNING, I still run past those five barns. Not one of them has yet burned down. Nor do I hear of any barn fires. Come December, the birds strafe overhead. And I keep getting older. Although just now and then, in the depths of the night, I’ll think about barns burning to the ground.

—translated by Alfred Birnbaum