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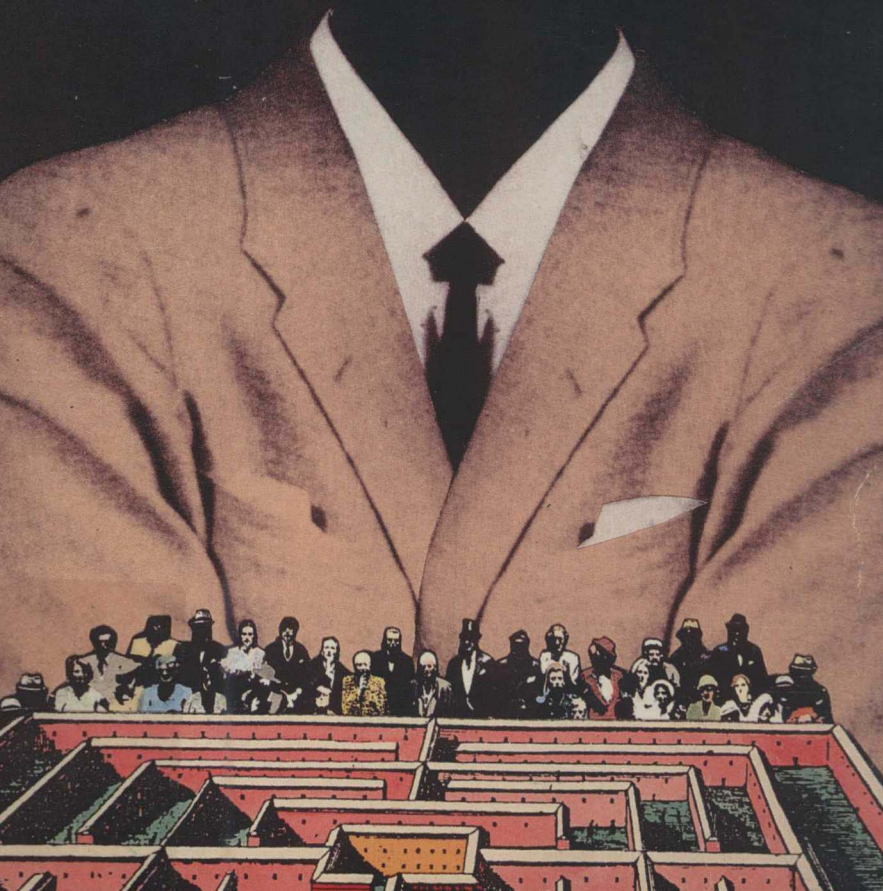
Kazuo Ishiguro
The Unconsoled

'A masterpiece.'
The Times



KAZUO ISHI(

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For Lorna and Naomi

I

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The taxi driver seemed embarrassed to find there was no one – not even a clerk behind the reception desk – waiting to welcome me. He wandered across the deserted lobby, perhaps hoping to discover a staff member concealed behind one of the plants or armchairs. Eventually he put my suitcases down beside the elevator doors and, mumbling some excuse, took his leave of me.

The lobby was reasonably spacious, allowing several coffee tables to be spread around it with no sense of crowding. But the ceiling was low and had a definite sag, creating a slightly claustrophobic mood, and despite the sunshine outside the light was gloomy. Only near the reception desk was there a bright streak of sun on the wall, illuminating an area of dark wood panelling and a rack of magazines in German, French and English. I could see also a small silver bell on the reception desk and was about to go over to shake it when a door opened somewhere behind me and a young man in uniform appeared.

'Good afternoon, sir,' he said tiredly and, going behind the reception desk, began the registration procedures. Although he did mumble an apology for his absence, his manner remained for a time distinctly off-hand. As soon as I mentioned my name, however, he gave a start and straightened himself.

'Mr Ryder, I'm so sorry I didn't recognise you. Mr Hoffman, the manager, he was very much wanting to welcome you personally. But just now, unfortunately, he's had to go to an important meeting.'

'That's perfectly all right. I'll look forward to meeting him later on.'

The desk clerk hurried on through the registration forms, all the while muttering about how annoyed the manager would be to have missed my arrival. He twice mentioned how the preparations for 'Thursday night' were putting the latter under unusual pressure, keeping him away from the hotel far more than

was usual. I simply nodded, unable to summon the energy to enquire into the precise nature of 'Thursday night'.

'Oh, and Mr Brodsky's been doing splendidly today,' the desk clerk said, brightening. 'Really splendidly. This morning he rehearsed that orchestra for four hours non-stop. And listen to him now! Still hard at it, working things out by himself.'

He indicated the rear of the lobby. Only then did I become aware that a piano was being played somewhere in the building, just audible above the muffled noise of the traffic outside. I raised my head and listened more closely. Someone was playing a single short phrase – it was from the second movement of Mullery's *Verticality* – over and over in a slow, preoccupied manner.

'Of course, if the manager were here,' the desk clerk was saying, 'he might well have brought Mr Brodsky out to meet you. But I'm not sure . . .' He gave a laugh. 'I'm not sure if I should disturb him. You see, if he's deep in concentration . . .'

'Of course, of course. Another time.'

'If the manager were here . . .' He trailed off and laughed again. Then leaning forward, he said in a low voice: 'Do you know, sir, some guests have had the nerve to complain? About our closing off the drawing room like this each time Mr Brodsky requires the piano? It's amazing how some people think! Two different guests actually complained to Mr Hoffman yesterday. You can be sure, they were very quickly put in their place.'

'I'm sure they were. Brodsky, you say.' I thought about the name, but it meant nothing to me. Then I caught the desk clerk watching me with a puzzled look and said quickly: 'Yes, yes. I'll look forward to meeting Mr Brodsky in good time.'

'If only the manager were here, sir.'

'Please don't worry. Now if that's all, I'd very much appreciate . . .'

'Of course, sir. You must be very tired after such a long journey. Here's your key. Gustav over there will show you to your room.'

I looked behind me and saw that an elderly porter was waiting across the lobby. He was standing in front of the open elevator, staring into its interior with a preoccupied air. He gave a start as I came walking up to him. He then picked up my suitcases and hurried into the elevator after me.

*

As we began our ascent, the elderly porter continued to hold onto both suitcases and I could see him growing red with the effort. The cases were both very heavy and a serious concern that he might pass out before me led me to say:

'You know, you really ought to put those down.'

'I'm glad you mention it, sir,' he said, and his voice betrayed surprisingly little of the physical effort he was expending. 'When I first started in this profession, very many years ago now, I used to place the bags on the floor. Pick them up only when I absolutely needed to. When in motion, so to speak. In fact, for the first fifteen years of working here, I have to say I used that method. It's one that many of the younger porters in this town still employ. But you won't find me doing anything of that sort now. Besides, sir, we're not going up far.'

We continued our ascent in silence. Then I said:

'So you've worked in this hotel for some time.'

'Twenty-seven years now, sir. I've seen plenty here in that time. But of course, this hotel was standing long before I ever got here. Frederick the Great is believed to have stayed a night here in the eighteenth century, and by all accounts it was a long-established inn even then. Oh yes, there have been events here of great historic interest over the years. Some time when you're not so tired, sir, I'd be happy to relate a few of these things to you.'

'But you were telling me,' I said, 'why you consider it a mistake to place luggage on the floor.'

'Ah yes,' the porter said. 'Now that's an interesting point. You see, sir, as you can imagine, in a town of this sort, there are many hotels. This means that many people in this town have at some point or other tried their hand at portering. Many people here seem to think they can simply put on a uniform and then that will be it, they'll be able to do the job. It's a delusion that's been particularly nurtured in this town. Call it a local myth, if you will. And I'll readily confess, there was a time when I unthinkingly subscribed to it myself. Then once – oh, it was many years ago now – my wife and I took a short holiday. We went to Switzerland, to Lucerne. My wife has passed away now, sir, but whenever I think of her I remember our short holiday. It's very beautiful there by the lake. No doubt you know it. We took some lovely boat rides after breakfast. Well, to return to my point,

during that holiday I observed that people in that town didn't make the same sorts of assumptions about their porters as people here do. How can I put it, sir? There was much greater *respect* paid to porters there. The best ones were figures of some renown and had the leading hotels fighting for their services. I must say it opened my eyes. But in this town, well, there's been this idea for many many years. In fact there are days when I wonder if it can ever be eradicated. Now I'm not saying people here are in any way rude to us. Far from it, I've always been treated with politeness and consideration here. But, you see, sir, there's always this idea that anyone could do this job if they took it into their heads, if the fancy just took them. I suppose it's because everyone in this town at some point has had the experience of carrying luggage from place to place. Because they've done that, they assume being a hotel porter is just an extension of it. I've had people over the years, sir, in this very elevator, who've said to me: "I might give up what I'm doing one of these days and take up portering." Oh yes. Well, sir, one day – it wasn't long after our short holiday in Lucerne – I had one of our leading city councillors say more or less those exact words to me. "I'd like to do that one of these days," he said to me, indicating the bags. "That's the life for me. Not a care in the world." I suppose he was trying to be kind, sir. Implying I was to be envied. That was when I was younger, sir, I didn't then hold the bags, I had them on the floor, here in this very elevator, and I suppose in those days I might have looked a bit that way. You know, carefree, as the gentleman implied. Well, I tell you, sir, that was the last straw. I don't mean the gentleman's words made me so angry in themselves. But when he said that to me, well, things sort of fell into place. Things I'd been thinking about for some time. And as I explained to you, sir, I was fresh from our short holiday in Lucerne where I'd got some perspective. And I thought to myself, well, it's high time porters in this town set about changing the attitude prevalent here. You see, sir, I'd seen something different in Lucerne, and I felt, well, it really wasn't good enough, what went on here. So I thought hard about it and decided on a number of measures I would personally take. Of course, even then, I probably knew how difficult it would be. I think I may have realised all those years ago that it was perhaps already too late for my own generation. That things had gone too

far. But I thought, well, even if I could do my part and change things just a little, it would at least make it easier for those who came after me. So I adopted my measures, sir, and I've stuck to them, ever since that day the city councillor said what he did. And I'm proud to say a number of other porters in this town followed my lead. That's not to say they adopted precisely the same measures I did. But let's say their measures were, well, compatible.'

'I see. And one of your measures was not to put down the suitcases but to continue to hold them.'

'Exactly, sir, you've followed my gist very well. Of course, I have to say, when I took on these rules for myself, I was much younger and stronger, and I suppose I didn't really calculate for my growing weaker with age. It's funny, sir, but you don't. The other porters have said similar things. All the same, we all try to keep to our old resolutions. We've become a pretty close-knit group over the years, twelve of us, we're what's left of the ones who tried to change things all those years ago. If I were to go back on anything now, sir, I'd feel I was letting down the others. And if any of them were to go back on any of their old rules, I'd feel the same way. Because there's no doubt about it, some progress has been made in this town. There's a very long way to go yet, that's true, but we've often talked it over – we meet every Sunday afternoon at the Hungarian Café in the Old Town, you could come and join us, you'd be a most welcome guest, sir – well, we've often discussed these things and each of us agrees, without a doubt, there have been significant improvements in the attitude towards us in this town. The younger ones who came after us, of course, they take it all for granted. But our group at the Hungarian Café, we know we've made a difference, even if it's a small one. You'd be very welcome to join us, sir. I would happily introduce you to the group. We're not nearly as formal as we once were and it's been understood for some time that in special circumstances, guests can be introduced to our table. And it's very pleasant at this time of the year with this gentle sunshine in the afternoons. We have our table in the shade of the awning, looking across the Old Square. It's very pleasant, sir, I'm sure you'll like it. But to return to what I was saying, we've been discussing this topic a lot at the Hungarian Café. I mean about

these old resolutions we each made all those years ago. You see, none of us thought about what would happen when we got older. I suppose we were so involved in our work, we thought of things only on a day to day basis. Or perhaps we underestimated how long it would take to change these deeply ingrained attitudes. But there you are, sir. I'm now the age I am and every year it gets harder.'

The porter paused for a moment and, despite the physical strain he was under, seemed to get lost in his thoughts. Then he said:

'I should be honest with you, sir. It's only fair. When I was younger, when I first made these rules for myself, I would always carry up to three suitcases, however large or heavy. If a guest had a fourth, I'd put that one on the floor. But three, I could always manage. Well, the truth is, sir, four years ago I had a period of ill-health, and I was finding things difficult, and so we discussed it at the Hungarian Café. Well, in the end, my colleagues all agreed there was no need for me to be so strict on myself. After all, they said to me, all that's required is to impress on the guests something of the true nature of our work. Two bags or three, the effect would be much the same. I should reduce my minimum to two suitcases and no harm would be done. I accepted what they said, sir, but I know it's not quite the truth. I can see it doesn't have nearly the same effect when people look at me. The difference between seeing a porter laden with two bags and seeing one laden with three, you must admit, sir, even to the least practised eye, the effect is considerably different. I know that, sir, and I don't mind telling you it's painful for me to accept. But just to return to my point. I hope you see now why I don't wish to put down your bags. You have only two. At least for a few more years, two will be within my powers.'

'Well, it's all very commendable,' I said. 'You've certainly created the desired impact on me.'

'I'd like you to know, sir, I'm not the only one who's had to make changes. We discuss these things all the time at the Hungarian Café and the truth is, each one of us has had to make some changes. But I wouldn't have you think we're allowing each other's standards to slip. If we did that, all our efforts over these years would be for nothing. We would rapidly become a laugh-

ing stock. Passers-by would mock us when they saw us gathered at our table on Sunday afternoons. Oh no, sir, we remain very strict with each other and, as I'm sure Miss Hilde will vouch, the community has come to respect our Sunday gatherings. As I say, sir, you'd be most welcome to join us. Both the café and the square are exceptionally pleasant on these sunny afternoons. And sometimes the café proprietor will arrange for gypsy violinists to play in the square. The proprietor himself, sir, has the greatest respect for us. The café isn't large, but he'll always ensure there's plenty of room for us to sit around our table in comfort. Even when the rest of the café is extremely busy, the proprietor will see to it we don't get crowded out or disturbed. Even on the busiest afternoons, if all of us around our table at one and the same time were to rotate our arms at full stretch, not one of us would make contact. That's how much the proprietor respects us, sir. I'm sure Miss Hilde will vouch for what I'm saying.'

'Pardon me,' I said, 'but who is this Miss Hilde you keep referring to?'

No sooner had I said this, I noticed that the porter was gazing past my shoulder at some spot behind me. Turning, I saw with a start that we were not alone in the elevator. A small young woman in a neat business suit was standing pressed into the corner behind me. Perceiving that I had at last noticed her, she smiled and took a step forward.

'I'm sorry,' she said to me, 'I hope you don't think I was eavesdropping, but I couldn't help overhearing. I was listening to what Gustav was telling you, and I have to say he's being rather unfair on those of us in this town. I mean when he says we don't appreciate our hotel porters. Of course we do and we appreciate Gustav here most of all. Everyone loves him. You can see there's a contradiction even in what he's just told you. If we're so unappreciative, then how does he account for the great respect they're treated with at the Hungarian Café? Really, Gustav, it's very unkind of you to misrepresent us all to Mr Ryder.'

This was said in an unmistakably affectionate tone, but the porter seemed to feel real shame. He adjusted his posture away from us, the heavy cases thumping against his legs as he did so, and turned his gaze away sheepishly.

'There, that's shown him,' the young woman said smiling. 'But

he's one of the very best. We all love him. He's exceedingly modest and so he'd never tell you himself, but the other hotel porters in this town all look up to him. In fact, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say they're in awe of him. Sometimes you'll see them sitting around their table on Sunday afternoons, and if Gustav hasn't yet arrived, they won't start talking. They feel it would be disrespectful, you see, to start proceedings without him. You'll often see them, ten or eleven of them, sitting there silently with their coffees, waiting. At most, they might exchange the odd whisper, like they were in church. But not until Gustav arrives do they relax and start conversing. It's worth going along to the Hungarian Café just to witness Gustav's arrival. The contrast between before and after is very marked, I have to tell you. One moment there are these glum old faces sitting silently around the table. Then Gustav turns up and they start yelling and laughing. They punch each other in fun, slap each other on the back. They sometimes even dance, yes, up on the tables! They have a special "Porters' Dance", isn't that so, Gustav? Oh yes, they really enjoy themselves. But not a bit of it until Gustav's arrived. Of course he'd never tell you any of this himself, he's so modest. We do all love him here in this town.'

While the young woman was speaking, Gustav must have continued to turn himself away, for when I next looked at him he was facing the opposite corner of the elevator with his back to us. The weight of the suitcases was making his knees sag and his shoulders quiver. His head was bent right down so as to be practically hidden from us behind him, but whether this was due to bashfulness or sheer physical exertion was hard to say.

'I'm so sorry, Mr Ryder,' the young woman said. 'I haven't yet introduced myself. I'm Hilde Stratmann. I've been given the task of ensuring everything goes smoothly while you're here with us. I'm so glad you've managed to get here at last. We were all starting to get a little concerned. Everyone waited this morning for as long as they could, but many had important appointments and had to go off one by one. So it falls to me, a humble employee of the Civic Arts Institute, to tell you how greatly honoured we all feel by your visit.'

'I'm very pleased to be here. But concerning this morning. Did you just say . . .'

'Oh, please don't worry at all about this morning, Mr Ryder. No one was put out in the least. The important thing is that you're here. You know, Mr Ryder, something on which I can certainly agree with Gustav is the Old Town. It really is most attractive and I always advise visitors to go there. It has a marvellous atmosphere, full of pavement cafés, craft shops, restaurants. It's only a short walk from here, so you should take the opportunity as soon as your schedule allows.'

'I'll certainly try and do that. Incidentally, Miss Stratmann, speaking of my schedule . . .' I paused rather deliberately, expecting the young woman to exclaim at her forgetfulness, perhaps reach into her attaché case and produce a sheet or a folder. But although she did break in quickly, it was to say:

'It *is* a tight schedule, yes. But I do hope it's not unreasonable. We've tried to keep it strictly to the essential things. Inevitably we were inundated, by so many of our societies, the local media, everybody. You have such a following in this town, Mr Ryder. Many people here believe you to be not only the world's finest living pianist, but perhaps the very greatest of the century. But we think in the end we've managed to bring it down to the essentials. I trust there's nothing there you're too unhappy with.'

Just at this moment the elevator doors slid open and the elderly porter set off down the corridor. The suitcases made him drag his step along the carpet and Miss Stratmann and I, following on behind, had to measure our pace so as not to overtake him.

'I do hope no one was offended,' I said to her as we walked. 'I mean, about my not having time for them on my schedule.'

'Oh no, please don't worry. We all know why you're here and nobody wants it said that they distracted you. In fact, Mr Ryder, aside from two rather important social functions, everything else on your programme relates more or less directly to Thursday night. Of course, you've had a chance by now to familiarise yourself with your schedule.'

There was something about the way she uttered this last remark that made it difficult for me to respond entirely frankly. I thus muttered: 'Yes, of course.'

'It *is* a heavy schedule. But we were very much guided by your request to be allowed to see as much as possible at first hand. A very commendable approach, if I may say so.'

Ahead of us, the elderly porter stopped in front of a door. At last he lowered my suitcases and began fiddling with the lock. As we came up to him, Gustav picked up the suitcases again and staggered into the room, saying: 'Please follow me, sir.' I was about to do so, when Miss Stratmann placed a hand on my arm.

'I won't keep you,' she said. 'But I did just want to check at this stage if there was anything at all on your schedule you weren't happy with.'

The door swung shut, leaving us standing out in the corridor.

'Well, Miss Stratmann,' I said, 'on the whole, it struck me as . . . as a very well-balanced programme.'

'It was precisely with your request in mind that we arranged the meeting with the Citizens' Mutual Support Group. The Support Group is made up of ordinary people from every walk of life brought together by their sense of having suffered from the present crisis. You'll be able to hear first-hand accounts of what some people have had to go through.'

'Ah yes. That's sure to be most useful.'

'And as you'll have noticed, we've also respected your wish to meet with Mr Christoff himself. Given the circumstances, we perfectly appreciate your reasons for requesting such a meeting. Mr Christoff, for his part, is delighted, as you can well imagine. Naturally he has his own reasons for wanting to meet you. What I mean, of course, is that he and his friends will do their utmost to get you to see things their way. Naturally, it'll all be nonsense, but I'm sure you'll find it all very useful in drawing up a general picture of what's been going on here. Mr Ryder, you're looking very tired. I won't keep you any longer. Here's my card. Please don't hesitate to call if you have any problems or queries.'

I thanked her and watched her go off back down the corridor. When I entered my room I was still turning over the various implications of this exchange and took a moment to register Gustav standing next to the bed.

'Ah, here you are, sir.'

After the preponderance of dark wood panelling elsewhere in the building, I was surprised by the light modern look of the room. The wall facing me was glass almost from floor to ceiling and the sun was coming in pleasantly between the vertical blinds

hung against it. My suitcases had been placed side by side next to the wardrobe.

'Now, sir, if you'll just bear with me a moment,' Gustav said, 'I'll show you the features of the room. That way, your stay here will be as comfortable as possible.'

I followed Gustav around the room while he pointed out switches and other facilities. At one point he led me into the bathroom and continued his explanations there. I had been about to cut him short in the way I am accustomed to doing when being shown a hotel room by a porter, but something about the diligence with which he went about his task, something about his efforts to personalise something he went through many times each day, rather touched me and prevented me from interrupting. And then, as he continued with his explanations, waving a hand towards various parts of the room, it occurred to me that for all his professionalism, for all his genuine desire to see me comfortable, a certain matter that had been preoccupying him throughout the day had again pushed its way to the front of his mind. He was, in other words, worrying once more about his daughter and her little boy.

When the arrangement had been proposed to him several months earlier, Gustav had little supposed it would bring him anything other than uncomplicated delight. For an afternoon each week, he was to spend a couple of hours wandering around the Old Town with his grandson, thereby allowing Sophie to go off and enjoy a little time to herself. Moreover, the arrangement had immediately proved a success and within weeks grandfather and grandson had evolved a routine highly agreeable to them both. On afternoons when it was not raining, they would start at the swing park, where Boris could demonstrate his latest feats of daring. If it was wet, they would start at the boat museum. They would then stroll about the little streets of the Old Town, looking in various gift shops, perhaps stopping at the Old Square to watch a mime artist or acrobat. The elderly porter being well known in the area, they would never get far without someone greeting them, and Gustav would receive numerous compliments regarding his grandson. They would next go over to the old bridge to watch the boats pass underneath. The expedition