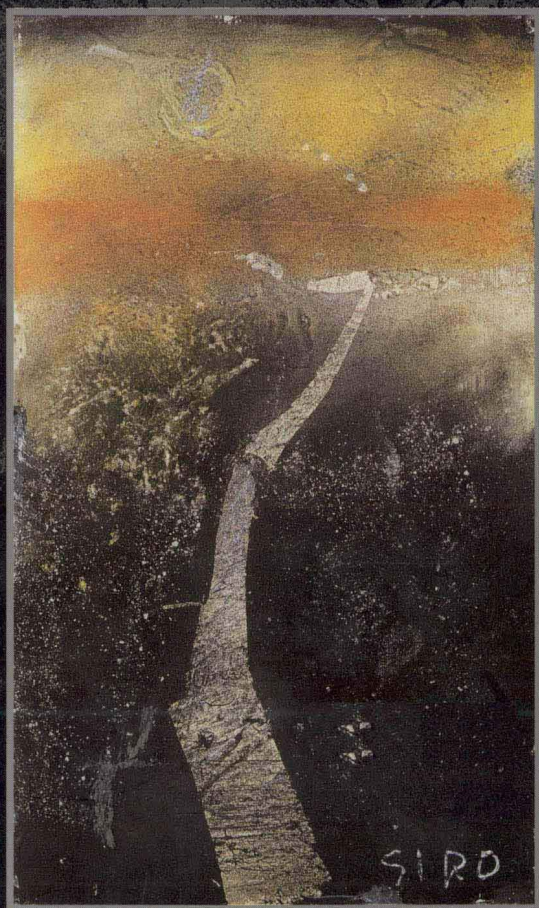


KOBO ABE

Beyond the Curve



AUTHOR OF *THE WOMAN IN THE DUNES* AND *FRIENDS*

Beyond the Curve



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Kobo Abe

Translated by Juliet Winters Carpenter

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Contents

An Irrelevant Death
9

The Crime of S. Karma
35

Dendrocacalia
43

The Life of a Poet
65

Record of a Transformation
79

Intruders
101

Noah's Ark
135

The Special Envoy
151

Beguiled
167

The Bet
183

The Dream Soldier
213

Beyond the Curve
223



An Irrelevant Death

*H*e had company. The guest was lying face down with his legs stretched out neatly toward the door. Dead.

Of course, it took awhile for this to sink in. There was the space of a few seconds before he felt any shock. Seconds filled with a quivering silence, like a sheet of blank paper wrapped in electricity.

Then the capillaries around his lips rapidly contracted, his pupils dilated, his vision blurred, and his sense of smell sharpened, detecting a whiff of something like rawhide. As if shaken awake by the odor, A—, the occupant of Apartment 7 in M—Apartments, shivered and realized for the first time the seriousness of the situation. One look at the right arm twisted grotesquely over the man's head was enough to persuade him his guest was dead.

A— peered cautiously out into the hall through the crack in the door, which he had not closed completely. Cords in his neck made noises like snapping matchsticks. The staircase banister

gave off a faint white glow, but there was no sign of movement. Relieved, he quickly pushed the door shut, wondering a little at himself as he did so. Had anyone come by, he would of course have sought help. Why not? He certainly had nothing to hide. And yet he felt distinctly relieved that the opportunity had not presented itself. He needed time to think, he told himself, but even so, something about his initial reaction troubled him.

Had he seen what lay behind this seeming anomaly and taken a different course of action, everything might have turned out differently. But once he'd closed the door, the next step was inevitable: he locked it. Introspection necessarily took a back seat. Still, who could blame him for neglecting the warning signal of that brief hesitation? The situation was far too serious, too upsetting.

He turned the lock hurriedly, as if pressed for time. It was the standard brass model, rubber-padded to fasten quietly and snugly. The dead bolt slid home with a satisfying solidness. Whereupon fresh shock swept over him, momentarily taking his breath away. Wait a second . . . Yes, he definitely remembered having turned the key in the lock to open the door. Unless the corpse had locked the door by itself, which appeared hardly likely, this clearly suggested homicide—a thought that had occurred to A—vaguely from the moment he discovered the body, yet one he had tried to shut from his mind. Not only that, it meant someone had broken in to lay the body here.

Then it had all been carefully planned. Not just the murder; A—himself had been counted on from the first as a necessary pawn. The thought of such unwarranted malice gave him goosebumps. Perhaps his failure to fetch help right away had been instinctive, a form of self-defense.

The lock on his door was certainly nothing fancy. It was apparently a simple cylinder lock, but whether it actually worked

like one was not clear. Some time ago he had lost his key and was making do now with a spare the building supervisor had happened to have on hand. It was a little trickier to use than the old one but he managed with it well enough. For all he knew, any key of a similar shape would work. In that case, maybe the criminal hadn't chosen this apartment because it belonged to him, but because of, say, its proximity to the stairs. Or maybe his recollection of having unlocked the door was only an illusion, caused by the ordinary resistance of his makeshift key in the lock. Just maybe, the door had been unlocked. Still, that didn't alter the basic ugliness of the situation. It only underscored how many different interpretations there could be.

With growing trepidation, he turned back toward the body. Again there was the sound of snapping matchsticks as cords cracked in his neck. Something about the corpse was vaguely irritating. Although perfectly still, it gave an impression of subtle but incessant movement, rather like the hands of a clock. Probably this was because of the way it was lying. It had an artificially posed look, like snapshots of dancers in midleap. The left arm was tucked under the body from the shoulder down, while the right arm lay twisted out at an impossible angle, as if it had no joints. The entire weight of the neck and head was concentrated in the forehead, which pressed into the floor. Yet the hips and legs lay perfectly straight, as if cast in a mold. This alone spoke unmistakably of outside intervention.

The dead man was dressed in dark blue trousers, wrinkled at the backs of the knees, creases gone. The shoes were light brown and had rubber soles, down at the heel, with large grains of sand embedded in them. There was sand in the trouser cuffs as well. A large, dark stain ran from the seat of the pants to the crotch. Maybe he'd been strangled, thought A—. Didn't hanging victims always wet themselves? The jacket was a bright blue,

with a vent cut at the back. The hem was flipped back, exposing the shirt beneath. For some reason there was no belt.

A— glanced hastily around the room. Nothing appeared to be amiss. Entryway with sink, faucet dripping. Six-mat room beyond, tatami flooring covered with a thin woven mat. Plywood ceiling with cruciform beams. Table, chairs, small bookcase. Bay window that took up half the wall, bathed in the warm orange glow of the setting sun. On a shelf above the window, a leafless potted plant and a dirty face towel.

His view of the bed, which was set against the north wall, was blocked by a cheap curtain the color of dried leaves, with a design of fish. He listened intently, but all he could hear was street noises. Never before had he realized how noisy this neighborhood was. The very squeaking of springs on a motor scooter somewhere in the distance sounded so close he felt he could almost reach out and touch it. At least three dogs were howling. Passers-by laughed shrilly. Someone was washing dishes. He could hear a train and even the echo of a ship's whistle.

The curtain swayed. Now that he noticed, it had been swaying all along. But somehow he wasn't alarmed. Perhaps subconsciously he knew that whatever threatened him would not appear from that direction. Averting his eyes from the corpse, he slipped out of his shoes, stepped from the entryway into the room and advanced toward the bed. It was of course empty. The bedding was rumpled, just as he'd left it, looking somehow terribly defenseless. For good measure, he checked under the bed. The white surface of an enameled bedpan glowed dimly.

Somewhat abashed, he drew the curtain and turned around to face the body again. From here he had a clear view of the upper torso and head. Stiff hair, cut short . . . a high, white collar, looking as if it had been yanked up . . . a wrinkled neck, muddy-colored, in startling contrast to the white of the collar . . .

withered-looking ears, pale and bloodless . . . thin, bluish fingers that looked as if they'd been sprinkled with powder . . . purplish nails . . .

He couldn't see the face clearly, but it was apparently no one he knew. Quickly he checked for wounds, circling the body nervously, one eye on it and the other on the floor beneath. It seemed imperative to find out whether the floor was stained with blood. His sudden curiosity might have been misplaced, but at least it served to bring him out of his stupor. As far as he could tell, there were no bloodstains. He stood still and stared at the man's jaw, where a single unshaven whisker stood straight up.

All at once, like a dam bursting, a flood of thoughts came rushing into his mind. They were not so much clearly formed thoughts as inarticulate impulses, reeling around like a herd of faceless creatures all consumed with a single desire: escape. But their movement was confused, like the aimless milling of cattle whose escape was cut off. Was there no way out, then? Well yes, of course—the door, right behind him. All he had to do was turn around and walk out. But that would take enormous courage. There was in fact nothing he feared more. And yet if he wanted to find words for this dread, this mad swirl of impulses, there was no other choice.

Of course, he had nothing whatsoever to do with this corpse. Of that he was now certain. But no one else would be likely to see it that way. Only those with intimate knowledge of the matter could share this certainty. For his knowledge of his innocence to become certifiable truth, he needed desperately to come up with proof. His position cried out for it. Hard proof would guarantee his safe conduct, enabling him to walk safely out the door when the time came. How difficult it might be to furnish that proof, time would tell. That his innocence was self-evident to *him* guaranteed nothing. The geometric proposition that paral-

lel lines never converge is patently true, yet impossible to prove, while its converse—that any two straight, nonparallel lines will inevitably cross—can easily be demonstrated. In any case, there would have to be a thorough investigation.

Then why not get started now, this minute? There was the door, right in front of him. Why hesitate? At least he might put off worrying about how to buttress his story until he'd heard what the watchman had to say. Besides, it would probably seem most natural just to insist loudly on his innocence. People would overlook his lack of corroborating evidence—perhaps even sympathize enough to help him in the search. Or would they?

Was this sort of thing so commonplace that ordinary rules applied? With no warning, a man finds a total stranger dead in his room. Did this conceivably happen often enough that it would be dealt with mechanically, as a routine nuisance? No, of course not. This incident was so bizarre that no amount of caution on his part could be excessive. How easy or hard it might be to furnish proof of his lack of involvement was beside the point. The very necessity of having to provide it hinted of a dangerous trap.

Out in the corridor he heard a light cough. His face twitched. Holding himself absolutely motionless, he strained his ears to hear better. Shudders coiled upward from his feet in ringlike waves, constricting him and prickling his skin. But not another sound could be heard. It struck him then that the same thing had often happened before. It had something to do with the acoustics of the building: noises originating in some other apartment would often seem to come from right outside his door. Not just any noises, either, but the sound of paper being torn, say, or a long sigh. The sort of noise that normally went unnoticed. That's what this must have been.

Somewhat relieved, he held up his head, opened his mouth and took a deep breath—but then abruptly clamped his lips shut

again and turned his face away from the corpse, afraid he might accidentally inhale some toxic substance. Then he was swept away by a new worry: what would he do when the corpse began to smell? So far, no sign of that. But it was only a question of time. He had never smelled decaying flesh, but he had a fair idea of what it must be like. Unbearable, gruesome, no doubt.

He couldn't stay here indefinitely, whatever the danger of passing through that doorway. And what lay beyond the door wouldn't remain as harmless as a disembodied cough forever—nor would the corpse itself just go on quietly lying there till doomsday. A—'s colleagues from work, or someone far more unwelcome, might pay him a surprise visit. In a short while, the corpse would start filling the whole apartment with the stench of death—a form of self-expression that nothing could deter. For A—, getting cold feet now might well mean abandoning all hope of escaping this predicament. Like a man in the grip of a snake with its tail in its mouth, he had fallen into an insoluble quandary. There was nothing to do but strike out at random and chop the snake in two.

But not even that was as simple as it sounded. It might seem that where you struck the snake wouldn't matter much, but that wasn't true. It could matter a great deal. And so despite the staunchness of his resolution, he wasted precious time debating the fine points, while the snake drew its coils ever tighter.

He shivered. The temperature was dropping. In no time, it seemed, the sun which had set the bay window ablaze had vanished without a trace. How long ago was that? Evening came on fast these days. Barely any time might have passed. And yet it felt like an eon. He glanced quickly at his wristwatch. Ten after five. Why the devil hadn't he checked the time right away? Damn. He felt a wave of fierce self-reproach. Evidently his faculties were badly muddled.

Soon it would be pitch black. He'd have to turn on the lights. A vision of the lighted window, seen from outside, came fleetingly into his mind. And then a burning sensation hit him in the region of his neck. Someone might see those lights. Once anyone did, he no longer had an alibi. He'd be guilty of concealment of a body, accessory after the fact, if nothing else.

But he couldn't very well leave the lights off. In the first place, he wouldn't be able to function in the dark. However brilliant a solution he might come up with, he would be unable to carry it out. Besides, he was by no means certain that he was safer with the lights out. In this building the slightest noise, like that cough a moment ago, carried a surprising distance. His footsteps, the sound of his key in the lock, the rattle of the door-knob, the squeak of the hinges—someone might already know, having heard all these, that he had come home. There might even be an eyewitness, for all he knew. Such a person would think it strange if the lights in A—'s apartment remained off—and later, when the business about the corpse came out, let his imagination run riot!

The outlook was grim. The only way to get himself off the hook now was either to make it seem that he'd never come home at all, or else get rid of the body somehow. Barring either of those alternatives, what could he do? Nothing but resign himself to his fate, square his shoulders, and report the discovery to the police.

Out of the question. Exactly what the criminal would want him to do. Who knew what sort of trap he might be walking into? The police officer would respond with a tight-lipped smile: "Oh, really? A complete stranger? You don't say." Of course it didn't matter what the police said, in the absence of incriminating evidence. Yet there was no way for him to prove his innocence, either. Had he known the dead man, the fact would have been