

ONE

A man on a bench. Rumpled clothes. The fingers of each of his hands are extended, resting like flying buttresses on the flatness of the bench beside him, in what seems like a characteristic posture. As the scene progresses, the right hand gestures freely. The left hand does not move.

That night,
In that train station—

I mean
Here, in this—

This place—

After all the doors had been locked
And all the gates
Chained
Shut—after all the employees
Had gone off
To their homes, there were, that night—I mean
This night, tonight, this same
Persistent
State of darkness—there were still—

There were four of us there.

Four of us—four
Stranded
Travelers, I suppose—four strangers
To one another who remained
Together
Inside. In that dark
Cavernous
Hall, that structure designed
For the coming and going, the intersection
Of thousands of lives, there were
That night—
Which is the same
Night as this night, in that place—which is
The same
Damn place as this—

*There were exactly
Four of us.*

I was quite sure of that—of our
Number,
I mean—our cardinality,
Our fourness. As that night began—I mean, when the last
Padlock
Clicked shut and the term
Of our enclosure
Commenced, what I did—to keep myself busy—
I began
To count. It's just a nervous
Habit of mine—I count people. I've done it
My whole life, in classrooms,
In taverns,
On all sorts of public
Transportation. I like the size
Of whatever
Set I belong to
To be—I mean, to have—
A fixed value. Now at that moment, I had, as yet,
No cause
To suspect
That my ability to manipulate
The small whole numbers and assign them, one
By one, to a nearby
Assortment
Of perambulatory objects, human or otherwise, was an ability
That could go
Out of whack. And there was no indication, not
The tiniest
Clue, that one
Or more of my companions might turn out to be
A numerical illusion, a quantitative
Phantom
Produced by some arithmetical disease—I mean, listen—
Put yourself here, on this
Bench, in my position—it's late. The doors
Are locked. Footsteps
Reverberate...

At such a time, in such a place, why
 Would you ever
 Even consider
The idea that the man or woman walking
 Right past you, or
 Standing beside you
Might be nothing but a teratoma, a benign
 But disfiguring
Tumor of your mind, a supernumerary
 Weed
 That has secretly
 Sprouted on some neglected
 Vacant lot
In your private mental map of the miniature
 Community
That has joined you, for a few uneasy hours, in the place
 Where you
 Happen to be?

 No, I don't
 Think you would
Entertain that notion, and neither
 Did I.

 Sometimes I counted
 While seated here like this,
Sometimes while standing, and now and then,
 For a change,
 I'd go up
 To the lower balcony, up the marble
 Staircase, one of the four—
 Or were there eight?—
Curving and redundant staircases, swirling up
 To that elliptical
Walkway, where I could get a better angle, a more
 Comprehensive
 Point of view. Over and over
 Again I counted, now
 With swift
Firm gestures of my right hand, and now with nods
 Of my head so slight that even I
 Could hardly notice.

(He begins to count, intently, with tiny nods of his head:)

One... Two... Three...

(He stops. Confused. Then he resumes, with large gestures:)

ONE!... TWO!... THREE!...

(He stops again. Panic. Then he recovers, smiles, and pats his tummy:)

Four.