

The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle

HARUKI MURAKAMI

Translated from the Japanese by JAY RUBIN



HARUKI MURAKAMI

Haruki Murakami was born in Kyoto in 1949 and now lives near Tokyo. The most recent of his many honors is the Yomiuri Literary Prize, whose previous recipients include Yukio Mishima, Kenzaburo Oe, and Kobo Abe. He is the author of the novels *Dance Dance Dance*, *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, and *A Wild Sheep Chase*, and of *The Elephant Vanishes*, a collection of stories. His latest novel, *South of the Border, West of the Sun*, will be published by Knopf in 1999. His work has been translated into fourteen languages.

Book One: The Thieving Magpie
June and July 1984

1

Tuesday's Wind-Up Bird

*

Six Fingers and Four Breasts

When the phone rang I was in the kitchen, boiling a potful of spaghetti and whistling along with an FM broadcast of the overture to Rossini's *The Thieving Magpie*, which has to be the perfect music for cooking pasta.

I wanted to ignore the phone, not only because the spaghetti was nearly done, but because Claudio Abbado was bringing the London Symphony to its musical climax. Finally, though, I had to give in. It could have been somebody with news of a job opening. I lowered the flame, went to the living room, and picked up the receiver.

"Ten minutes, please," said a woman on the other end.

I'm good at recognizing people's voices, but this was not one I knew.

"Excuse me? To whom did you wish to speak?"

"To *you*, of course. Ten minutes, please. That's all we need to understand each other." Her voice was low and soft but otherwise nondescript.

"Understand each other?"

"Each other's feelings."

I leaned over and peeked through the kitchen door. The spaghetti pot was steaming nicely, and Claudio Abbado was still conducting *The Thieving Magpie*.

"Sorry, but you caught me in the middle of making spaghetti. Can I ask you to call back later?"

"Spaghetti!? What are you doing cooking spaghetti at ten-thirty in the morning?"

"That's none of your business," I said. "*I* decide what I eat and when I eat it."

"True enough. I'll call back," she said, her voice now flat and expressionless. A little change in mood can do amazing things to the tone of a person's voice.

"Hold on a minute," I said before she could hang up. "If this is some new sales gimmick, you can forget it. I'm out of work. I'm not in the market for anything."

"Don't worry. I know."

"You know? You know what?"

“That you’re out of work. I know about that. So go cook your precious spaghetti.”

“Who the hell-”

She cut the connection.

With no outlet for my feelings, I stared at the phone in my hand until I remembered the spaghetti. Back in the kitchen, I turned off the gas and poured the contents of the pot into a colander. Thanks to the phone call, the spaghetti was a little softer than *al dente*, but it had not been dealt a mortal blow. I started eating-and thinking.

Understand each other? Understand each other’s feelings in ten minutes? What was she talking about? Maybe it was just a prank call. Or some new sales pitch. In any case, it had nothing to do with me.

After lunch, I went back to my library novel on the living room sofa, glancing every now and then at the telephone. What were we supposed to understand about each other in ten minutes? What *can* two people understand about each other in ten minutes? Come to think of it, she seemed awfully sure about those ten minutes: it was the first thing out of her mouth. As if nine minutes would be too short or eleven minutes too long. Like cooking spaghetti *al dente*.

I couldn’t read anymore. I decided to iron shirts instead. Which is what I always do when I’m upset. It’s an old habit. I divide the job into twelve precise stages, beginning with the collar (outer surface) and ending with the left-hand cuff. The order is always the same, and I count off each stage to myself. Otherwise, it won’t come out right.

I ironed three shirts, checking them over for wrinkles and putting them on hangers. Once I had switched off the iron and put it away with the ironing board in the hall closet, my mind felt a good deal clearer.

I was on my way to the kitchen for a glass of water when the phone rang again. I hesitated for a second but decided to answer it. If it was the same woman, I’d tell her I was ironing and hang up.

This time it was Kumiko. The wall clock said eleven-thirty. “How are you?” she asked.

“Fine,” I said, relieved to hear my wife’s voice.

“What are you doing?”

“Just finished ironing.”

“What’s wrong?” There was a note of tension in her voice. She knew what it meant for me to be ironing.

“Nothing. I was just ironing some shirts.” I sat down and shifted the receiver from my left hand to my right. “What’s up?”

“Can you write poetry?” she asked.

“Poetry!?” Poetry? Did she mean ... poetry?

“I know the publisher of a story magazine for girls. They’re looking for somebody to pick and revise poems submitted by readers. And they want the person to write a short poem every month for the frontispiece. Pay’s not bad for an easy job. Of course, it’s part-time. But they might add some editorial work if the person-”

“Easy work?” I broke in. “Hey, wait a minute. I’m looking for something in law, not poetry.”

“I thought you did some writing in high school.”

“Yeah, sure, for the school newspaper: which team won the soccer championship or how the physics teacher fell down the stairs and ended up in the hospital-that kind of stuff. Not poetry. I can’t write poetry.”

“Sure, but I’m not talking about great poetry, just something for high school girls. It doesn’t have to find a place in literary history. You could do it with your eyes closed. Don’t you see?”

“Look, I just can’t write poetry-eyes open or closed. I’ve never done it, and I’m not going to start now.”

“All right,” said Kumiko, with a hint of regret. “But it’s hard to find legal work.”

“I know. That’s why I’ve got so many feelers out. I should be hearing something this week. If it’s no go, I’ll think about doing something else.”

“Well, I suppose that’s that. By the way, what’s today? What day of the week?”

I thought a moment and said, “Tuesday.”

“Then will you go to the bank and pay the gas and telephone?”

“Sure. I was just about to go shopping for dinner anyway.”

“What are you planning to make?”

“I don’t know yet. I’ll decide when I’m shopping.”

She paused. “Come to think of it,” she said, with a new seriousness, “there’s no great hurry about your finding a job.”

This took me off guard. “Why’s that?” I asked. Had the women of the world chosen today to surprise me on the telephone? “My unemployment’s going to run out sooner or later. I can’t keep hanging around forever.”

“True, but with my raise and occasional side jobs and our savings, we can get by OK if we’re careful. There’s no real emergency. Do you hate staying at home like this and doing housework? I mean, is this life so wrong for you?”

“I don’t know,” I answered honestly. I really didn’t know.

“Well, take your time and give it some thought,” she said. “Anyhow, has the cat come back?”

The cat. I hadn’t thought about the cat all morning. “No,” I said. “Not yet.”

“Can you please have a look around the neighborhood? It’s been gone over a week now.”

I gave a noncommittal grunt and shifted the receiver back to my left hand. She went on:

“I’m almost certain it’s hanging around the empty house at the other end of the alley. The one with the bird statue in the yard. I’ve seen it in there several times.”

“The alley? Since when have you been going to the alley? You’ve never said anything-”

“Oops! Got to run. Lots of work to do. Don’t forget about the cat.”

She hung up. I found myself staring at the receiver again. Then I set it down in its cradle.

I wondered what had brought Kumiko to the alley. To get there from our house, you had to climb over the cinder-block wall. And once you’d made the effort, there was no point in being there.

I went to the kitchen for a glass of water, then out to the veranda to look at the cat’s dish. The mound of sardines was untouched from last night. No, the cat had not come back. I stood there looking at our small garden, with the early-summer sunshine streaming into it. Not that ours was the kind of garden that gives you spiritual solace to look at. The sun managed to find its way in there for the smallest fraction of each day, so the earth was always black and moist, and all we had by way of garden plants were a few drab hydrangeas in one corner-and I don’t like hydrangeas. There was a small stand of trees nearby, and from it you could hear the mechanical cry of a bird that sounded as if it were winding a spring. We called it the wind-up bird. Kumiko gave it the name. We didn’t know what it was really called or what it looked like, but that didn’t bother the wind-up bird. Every day it would come to the stand of trees in our neighborhood and wind the spring of our quiet little world.

So now I had to go cat hunting. I had always liked cats. And I liked this particular cat. But cats have their own way of living. They’re not stupid. If a cat stopped living where you happened to be, that meant it had decided to go somewhere else. If it got tired and hungry, it would come back. Finally, though, to keep Kumiko happy, I would have to go looking for our cat. I had nothing better to do.

•

I had quit my job at the beginning of April- the law job I had had since graduation. Not

that I had quit for any special reason. I didn't dislike the work. It wasn't thrilling, but the pay was all right and the office atmosphere was friendly.

My role at the firm was-not to put too fine a point on it-that of professional gofer. And I was good at it. I might say I have a real talent for the execution of such practical duties. I'm a quick study, efficient, I never complain, and I'm realistic. Which is why, when I said I wanted to quit, the senior partner (the father in this father-and-son law firm) went so far as to offer me a small raise.

But I quit just the same. Not that quitting would help me realize any particular hopes or prospects. The last thing I wanted to do, for example, was shut myself up in the house and study for the bar exam. I was surer than ever that I didn't want to become a lawyer. I knew, too, that I didn't want to stay where I was and continue with the job I had. If I was going to quit, now was the time to do it. If I stayed with the firm any longer, I'd be there for the rest of my life. I was thirty years old, after all.

I had told Kumiko at the dinner table that I was thinking of quitting my job. Her only response had been, "I see." I didn't know what she meant by that, but for a while she said nothing more.

I kept silent too, until she added, "If you want to quit, you should quit. It's your life, and you should live it the way you want to." Having said this much, she then became involved in picking out fish bones with her chopsticks and moving them to the edge of her plate.

Kumiko earned pretty good pay as editor of a health food magazine, and she would occasionally take on illustration assignments from editor friends at other magazines to earn substantial additional income. (She had studied design in college and had hoped to be a freelance illustrator.) In addition, if I quit I would have my own income for a while from unemployment insurance. Which meant that even if I stayed home and took care of the house, we would still have enough for extras such as eating out and paying the cleaning bill, and our lifestyle would hardly change. And so I had quit my job.

•

I was loading groceries into the refrigerator when the phone rang. The ringing seemed to have an impatient edge to it this time. I had just ripped open a plastic pack of tofu, which I set down carefully on the kitchen table to keep the water from spilling out. I went to the living room and picked up the phone.

"You must have finished your spaghetti by now," said the woman.

"You're right. But now I have to go look for the cat."

"That can wait for ten minutes, I'm sure. It's not like cooking spaghetti."

For some reason, I couldn't just hang up on her. There was something about her voice that commanded my attention. "OK, but no more than ten minutes."

"Now we'll be able to understand each other," she said with quiet certainty. I sensed her settling comfortably into a chair and crossing her legs.

"I wonder," I said. "What can you understand in ten minutes?"

"Ten minutes may be longer than you think," she said.

"Are you sure you know me?"

"Of course I do. We've met hundreds of times."

"Where? When?"

"Somewhere, sometime," she said. "But if I went into that, ten minutes would never be enough. What's important is the time we have now. The present. Don't you agree?"

"Maybe. But I'd like some proof that you know me."

"What kind of proof?"

"My age, say?"

"Thirty," she answered instantaneously. "Thirty and two months. Good enough?"

That shut me up. She obviously did know me, but I had absolutely no memory of her voice.

“Now it’s your turn,” she said, her voice seductive. “Try picturing me. From my voice. Imagine what I’m like. My age. Where I am. How I’m dressed. Go ahead.”

“I have no idea,” I said.

“Oh, come on,” she said. “Try.”

I looked at my watch. Only a minute and five seconds had gone by. “I have no idea,” I said again.

“Then let me help you,” she said. “I’m in bed. I just got out of the shower, and I’m not wearing a thing.”

Oh, great. Telephone sex.

“Or would you prefer me with something on? Something lacy. Or stockings. Would that work better for you?”

“I don’t give a damn. Do what you like,” I said. “Put something on if you want to. Stay naked if you want to. Sorry, but I’m not interested in telephone games like this. I’ve got a lot of things I have to-”

“Ten minutes,” she said. “Ten minutes won’t kill you. It won’t put a hole in your life. Just answer my question. Do you want me naked or with something on? I’ve got all kinds of things I could put on. Black lace panties...”

“Naked is fine.”

“Well, good. You want me naked.”

“Yes. Naked. Good.”

Four minutes.

“My pubic hair is still wet,” she said. “I didn’t dry myself very well. Oh, I’m so wet! Warm and moist. And soft. Wonderfully soft and black. Touch me.”

“Look, I’m sorry, but-”

“And down below too. All the way down. It’s so warm down there, like butter cream. So warm. Mmm. And my legs. What position do you think my legs are in? My right knee is up, and my left leg is open just enough. Say, ten-oh-five on the clock.”

I could tell from her voice that she was not faking it. She really did have her legs open to ten-oh-five, her sex warm and moist.

“Touch the lips,” she said. “Sloowly. Now open them. That’s it. Slowly, slowly. Let your fingers caress them. Oh so slowly. Now, with your other hand, touch my left breast. Play with it. Caress it. Upward. And give the nipple a little squeeze. Do it again. And again. And again. Until I’m just about to come.”

Without a word, I put the receiver down. Stretching out on the sofa, I stared at the clock and released a long, deep sigh. I had spoken with her for close to six minutes.

The phone rang again ten minutes later, but I left it on the hook. It rang fifteen times. And when it stopped, a deep, cold silence descended upon the room.

Just before two, I climbed over the cinder-block wall and down into the alley-or what we called the alley. It was not an “alley” in the proper sense of the word, but then, there was probably no word for what it was. It wasn’t a “road” or a “path” or even a “way.” Properly speaking, a “way” should be a pathway or channel with an entrance and an exit, which takes you somewhere if you follow it. But our “alley” had neither entrance nor exit. You couldn’t call it a cul-de-sac, either: a cul-de-sac has at least one open end. The alley had not one dead end but two. The people of the neighborhood called it “the alley” strictly as an expedient. It was some two hundred yards in length and threaded its way between the back gardens of the houses that lined either side. Barely over three feet in width, it had several spots at which you had to edge through sideways because of fences sticking out into the path or things that people had left in the way.

About this alley, the story was-the story I heard from my uncle, who rented us our house

for next to nothing-that it used to have both an entrance and an exit and actually served the purpose of providing a shortcut between two streets. But with the rapid economic growth of the mid-fifties, rows of new houses came to fill the empty lots on either side of the road, squeezing it down until it was little more than a narrow path. People didn't like strangers passing so close to their houses and yards, so before long, one end of the path was blocked off-or, rather, screened off-with an unassertive fence. Then one local citizen decided to enlarge his yard and completely sealed off his end of the alley with a cinder-block wall. As if in response, a barbed-wire barrier went up at the other end, preventing even dogs from getting through. None of the neighbors complained, because none of them used the alley as a passageway, and they were just as happy to have this extra protection against crime. As a result, the alley remained like some kind of abandoned canal, unused, serving as little more than a buffer zone between two rows of houses. Spiders spread their sticky webs in the overgrowth.

Why had Kumiko been frequenting such a place? I myself had walked down that "alley" no more than twice, and Kumiko was afraid of spiders at the best of times. Oh, what the hell-if Kumiko said I should go to the alley and look for the cat, I'd go to the alley and look for the cat. What came later I could think about later. Walking outside like this was far better than sitting in the house waiting for the phone to ring.

The sharp sunshine of early summer dappled the surface of the alley with the hard shadows of the branches that stretched overhead. Without wind to move the branches, the shadows looked like permanent stains, destined to remain imprinted on the pavement forever. No sounds of any kind seemed to penetrate this place. I could almost hear the blades of grass breathing in the sunlight. A few small clouds floated in the sky, their shapes clear and precise, like the clouds in medieval engravings. I saw everything with such terrific clarity that my own body felt vague and boundless and flowing ... and hot!

I wore a T-shirt, thin cotton pants, and tennis shoes, but walking in the summer sun, I could feel a light film of sweat forming under my arms and in the hollow of my chest. The T-shirt and pants had been packed away in a box crammed with summer clothing until I pulled them out that morning, the sharp smell of mothballs penetrating my nostrils.

The houses that lined the alley fell into two distinct categories: older houses and those built more recently. As a group, the newer ones were smaller, with smaller yards to match. Their clothes-drying poles often protruded into the alley, making it necessary for me to thread my way through the occasional screen of towels and sheets and undershirts. Over some back walls came the clear sound of television sets and flushing toilets, and the smell of curry cooking.

The older houses, by contrast, gave hardly any sense of life. These were screened off by well-placed shrubs and hedges, between which I caught glimpses of manicured gardens.

An old, brown, withered Christmas tree stood in the corner of one garden. Another had become the dumping ground for every toy known to man, the apparent leavings of several childhoods. There were tricycles and toss rings and plastic swords and rubber balls and tortoise dolls and little baseball bats. One garden had a basketball hoop, and another had fine lawn chairs surrounding a ceramic table. The white chairs were caked in dirt, as if they had not been used for some months or even years. The table-top was coated with lavender magnolia petals, beaten down by the rain.

I had a clear view of one living room through an aluminum storm door. It had a matching leather sofa and chairs, a large TV, a sideboard (atop which sat a tropical-fish tank and two trophies of some kind), and a decorative floor lamp. The room looked like the set of a TV drama. A huge doghouse occupied a large part of another garden, but there was no sign of the dog itself, and the house's door stood open. The screen of the doghouse door bulged outward, as if someone had been leaning against it for months at a time.

The vacant house that Kumiko had told me about lay just beyond the place with the huge

doghouse. One glance was all I needed to see that it was empty-and had been for some time. It was a fairly new two-story house, yet its wooden storm shutters showed signs of severe aging, and the railings outside the second-story windows were caked with rust. The house had a cozy little garden, in which, to be sure, a stone statue of a bird stood. The statue rested on a base that came to chest height and was surrounded by a thick growth of weeds. Tall fronds of goldenrod were almost touching the bird's feet. The bird-I had no idea what kind of bird it was supposed to be-had its wings open as if it wanted to escape from this unpleasant place as soon as possible. Aside from the statue, the garden had no decorative features. A pile of aging plastic lawn chairs stood against the house, and beside them an azalea bush displayed its bright-red blossoms, their color strangely unreal. Weeds made up the rest.

I leaned against the chest-high chain-link fence for a while, contemplating the garden. It should have been a paradise for cats, but there was no sign of cats here now. Perched on the roof's TV antenna, a single pigeon lent its monotonous cries to the scene. The stone bird's shadow fell on the surrounding undergrowth, breaking apart.

I took a lemon drop from my pocket, unwrapped it, and popped it into my mouth. I had taken my resignation from the firm as an opportunity to quit smoking, but now I was never without a pack of lemon drops. Kumiko said I was addicted to them and warned me that I'd soon have a mouthful of cavities, but I had to have my lemon drops. While I stood there looking at the garden, the pigeon on the TV antenna kept up its regular cooing, like some clerk stamping numbers on a sheaf of bills. I don't know how long I stayed there, leaning against the fence, but I remember spitting my lemon drop on the ground when, half melted, it filled my mouth with its sticky sweetness. I had just shifted my gaze to the shadow of the stone bird when I sensed that someone was calling to me from behind.

I turned, to see a girl standing in the garden on the other side of the alley. She was small and had her hair in a ponytail. She wore dark sunglasses with amber frames, and a light-blue sleeveless T-shirt. The rainy season had barely ended, and yet she had already managed to give her slender arms a nice, smooth tan. She had one hand jammed into the pocket of her short pants. The other rested on a waist-high bamboo gate, which could not have been providing much support. Only three feet- maybe four-separated us.

"Hot," she said to me.

"Yeah, right," I answered.

After this brief exchange of views, she stood there looking at me.

Then she took a box of Hope regulars from her pants pocket, drew out a cigarette, and put it between her lips. She had a small mouth, the upper lip turned slightly upward. She struck a match and lit her cigarette. When she inclined her head to one side, her hair swung away to reveal a beautifully shaped ear, smooth as if freshly made, its edge aglow with a downy fringe.

She flicked her match away and exhaled smoke through pursed lips. Then she looked up at me as if she had forgotten that I was there. I couldn't see her eyes through the dark, reflective lenses of her sunglasses.

"You live around here?" she asked.

"Uh-huh." I wanted to motion toward our house, but I had turned so many odd angles to get here that I no longer knew exactly where it was. I ended up pointing at random.

"I'm looking for my cat," I explained, wiping a sweaty palm on my pants. "It's been gone for a week. Somebody saw it around here somewhere."

"What kind of cat?"

"A big torn. Brown stripes. Tip of the tail a little bent."

"Name?"

"Noboru. Noboru Wataya."

"No, *not your* name. The cat's."

"That *is* my cat's name."

“Oh! Very impressive!”

“Well, actually, it’s my brother-in-law’s name. The cat sort of reminds us of him. We gave the cat his name, just for fun.”

“How does the cat remind you of him?”

“I don’t know. Just in general. The way it walks. And it has this blank stare.”

She smiled now for the first time, which made her look a lot more childlike than she had seemed at first. She couldn’t have been more than fifteen or sixteen. With its slight curl, her upper lip pointed up at a strange angle. I seemed to hear a voice saying “Touch me”-the voice of the woman on the phone. I wiped the sweat from my forehead with the back of my hand.

“A brown-striped cat with a bent tail,” said the girl. “Hmm. Does it have a collar or something?”

“A black flea collar.”

She stood there thinking for ten or fifteen seconds, her hand still resting on the gate. Then she dropped what was left of her cigarette and crushed it under her sandal.

“Maybe I did see a cat like that,” she said. “I don’t know about the bent tail, but it was a brown tiger cat, big, and I think it had a collar.”

“When did you see it?”

“When *did* I see it? Hmm. No more than three or four days ago. Our yard is a kind of highway for the neighborhood cats. They all cut across here from the Takitanis’ to the Miyawakis’.”

She pointed toward the vacant house, where the stone bird still spread its wings, the tall goldenrod still caught the early-summer sun, and the pigeon went on with its monotonous cooing atop the TV antenna.

“I’ve got an idea,” she said. “Why don’t you wait here? All the cats eventually pass through our place on their way to the Miyawakis’. And somebody’s bound to call the cops if they see you hanging around like that. It wouldn’t be the first time.”

I hesitated.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I’m the only one here. The two of us can sit in the sun and wait for the cat to show up. I’ll help. I’ve got twenty-twenty vision.”

I looked at my watch. Two twenty-six. All I had to do today before it got dark was take in the laundry and fix dinner.

I went in through the gate and followed the girl across the lawn. She dragged her right leg slightly. She took *a* few steps, stopped, and turned to face me.

“I got thrown from the back of a motorcycle,” she said, as if it hardly mattered.

A large oak tree stood at the point where the yard’s lawn gave out. Under the tree sat two canvas deck chairs, one draped with a blue beach towel. Scattered on the other were a new box of Hope regulars, an ashtray and lighter, a magazine, and an oversize boom box. The boom box was playing hard-rock music at low volume. She turned the music off and took all the stuff out of the chair for me, dropping it on the grass. From the chair, I could see into the yard of the vacant house-the stone bird, the goldenrod, the chain-link fence. The girl had probably been watching me the whole time I was there.

The yard of this house was very large. It had a broad, sloping lawn dotted with clumps of trees. To the left of the deck chairs was a rather large concrete-lined pond, its empty bottom exposed to the sun. Judging from its greenish tinge, it had been without water for some time. We sat with our backs to the house, which was visible through a screen of trees.

The house was neither large nor lavish in its construction. Only the yard gave an impression of large size, and it was well manicured.

“What a big yard,” I said, looking around. “It must be a pain to take care of.”

“Must be.”

“I used to work for a lawn-mowing company when I was a kid.”

“Oh?” She was obviously not interested in lawns.

“Are you always here alone?” I asked.

“Yeah. Always. Except a maid comes mornings and evenings. During the day it’s just me. Alone. Want a cold drink? We’ve got beer.”

“No, thanks.”

“Really? Don’t be shy.”

I shook my head. “Don’t you go to school?”

“Don’t you go to work?”

“No work to go to.”

“Lost your job?”

“Sort of. I quit a few weeks ago.”

“What kind of job?”

“I was a lawyer’s gofer. I’d go to different government offices to pick up documents, put materials in order, check on legal precedents, handle court procedures-that kind of stuff.”

“But you quit.”

“Yeah.”

“Does your wife have a job?”

“She does.”

The pigeon across the way must have stopped its cooing and gone off somewhere. I suddenly realized that a deep silence lay all around me.

“Right over there is where the cats go through,” she said, pointing toward the far side of the lawn. “See the incinerator in the Takitanis’ yard? They come under the fence at that point, cut across the grass, and go out under the gate to the yard across the way. They always follow exactly the same route.”

She perched her sunglasses on her forehead, squinted at the yard, and lowered her glasses again, exhaling a cloud of smoke. In the interval, I saw that she had a two-inch cut next to her left eye-the kind of cut that would probably leave a scar the rest of her life. The dark sunglasses were probably meant to hide the wound. The girl’s face was not a particularly beautiful one, but there was something attractive about it, probably the lively eyes or the unusual shape of the lips.

“Do you know about the Miyawakis?” she asked.

“Not a thing,” I said.

“They’re the ones who lived in the vacant house. A very proper family. They had two daughters, both in a private girls’ school. Mr. Miyawaki owned a few family restaurants.”

“Why’d they leave?”

“Maybe he was in debt. It was like they ran away-just cleared out one night. About a year ago, I think. Left the place to rot and breed cats. My mother’s always complaining.”

“Are there so many cats in there?” Cigarette in her lips, the girl looked up at the sky. “All kinds of cats. Some losing their fur, some with one eye ... and where the other eye used to be, a lump of raw flesh. Yuck!” I nodded.

“I’ve got a relative with six fingers on each hand. She’s just a little older than me. Next to her pinkie she’s got this extra finger, like a baby’s finger. She knows how to keep it folded up so most people don’t notice. She’s really pretty.” I nodded again.

“You think it’s in the family? What do you call it... part of the bloodline?”

“I don’t know much about heredity.”

She stopped talking. I sucked on my lemon drop and looked hard at the cat path. Not one cat had shown itself so far.

“Sure you don’t want something to drink?” she asked. “I’m going to have a Coke.”

I said I didn’t need a drink.

She left her deck chair and disappeared through the trees, dragging her bad leg slightly. I picked up her magazine from the grass and leafed through it. Much to my surprise, it turned out to be a men’s magazine, one of the glossy monthlies. The woman in the foldout wore thin

panties that showed her slit and pubic hair. She sat on a stool with her legs spread out at weird angles. With a sigh, I put the magazine back, folded my hands on my chest, and focused on the cat path again.

•

A very long time went by before the girl came back, with a Coke in her hand. The heat was getting to me. Sitting under the sun, I felt my brain fogging over. The last thing I wanted to do was think.

“Tell me,” she said, picking up her earlier conversation. “If you were in love with a girl and she turned out to have six fingers, what would you do?”

“Sell her to the circus,” I answered.

“Really?”

“No, of course not,” I said. “I’m kidding. I don’t think it would bother me.”

“Even if your kids might inherit it?”

I took a moment to think about that.

“No, I really don’t think it would bother me. What harm would an extra finger do?”

“What if she had four breasts?”

I thought about that too.

“I don’t know.”

Four breasts? This kind of thing could go on forever. I decided to change the subject.

“How old are you?” I asked.

“Sixteen,” she said. “Just had my birthday. First year in high school.”

“Have you been out of school long?”

“My leg hurts if I walk too much. And I’ve got this scar near my eye. My school’s very strict. They’d probably start bugging me if they found out I hurt myself falling off a motorcycle. So I’m out ‘sick.’ I could take a year off. I’m not in any hurry to go up a grade.”

“No, I guess not,” I said.

“Anyhow, what you were saying before, that you wouldn’t mind marrying a girl with six fingers but not four breasts ...”

“I didn’t say that. I said I didn’t know.”

“Why don’t you know?”

“I don’t know-it’s hard to imagine such a thing.”

“Can you imagine someone with six fingers?”

“Sure, I guess so.”

“So why not four breasts? What’s the difference?”

I took another moment to think it over, but I couldn’t find an answer.

“Do I ask too many questions?”

“Do people tell you that?”

“Yeah, sometimes.”

I turned toward the cat path again. What the hell was I doing here? Not one cat had showed itself the whole time. Hands still folded on my chest, I closed my eyes for maybe thirty seconds. I could feel the sweat forming on different parts of my body. The sun poured into me with a strange heaviness. Whenever the girl moved her glass, the ice clinked inside it like a cowbell.

“Go to sleep if you want,” she whispered. “I’ll wake you if a cat shows up.”

Eyes closed, I nodded in silence.

The air was still. There were no sounds of any kind. The pigeon had long since disappeared. I kept thinking about the woman on the telephone. Did I really know her? There had been nothing remotely familiar about her voice or her manner of speaking. But she definitely knew me. I could have been looking at a De Chirico scene: the woman’s long

shadow cutting across an empty street and stretching toward me, but she herself in a place far removed from the bounds of my consciousness. A bell went on ringing and ringing next to my ear.

“Are you asleep?” the girl asked, in a voice so tiny I could not be sure I was hearing it.

“No, I’m not sleeping,” I said.

“Can I get closer? It’ll be ... easier if I keep my voice low.” “Fine with me,” I said, eyes still closed.

She moved her chair until it struck mine with a dry, wooden clack. Strange, the girl’s voice sounded completely different, depending on whether my eyes were open or closed.

“Can I talk? I’ll keep real quiet, and you don’t have to answer. You can even fall asleep. I don’t mind.”

“OK,” I said.

“When people die, it’s so neat.”

Her mouth was next to my ear now, so the words worked their way inside me along with her warm, moist breath. “Why’s that?” I asked.

She put a finger on my lips as if to seal them. “No questions,” she said. “And don’t open your eyes. OK?” My nod was as small as her voice.

She took her finger from my lips and placed it on my wrist. “I wish I had a scalpel. I’d cut it open and look inside. Not the corpse ... the lump of death. I’m sure there must be something like that. Something round and squishy, like a softball, with a hard little core of dead nerves. I want to take it out of a dead person and cut it open and look inside. I always wonder what it’s like. Maybe it’s all hard, like toothpaste dried up inside the tube. That’s it, don’t you think? No, don’t answer. It’s squishy on the outside, and the deeper you go inside, the harder it gets. I want to cut open the skin and take out the squishy stuff, use a scalpel and some kind of spatula to get through it, and the closer you get to the center, the harder the squishy stuff gets, until you reach this tiny core. It’s sooo tiny, like a tiny ball bearing, and really hard. It must be like that, don’t you think?”

She cleared her throat a few times.

“That’s all I think about these days. Must be because I have so much time to kill every day. When you don’t have anything to do, your thoughts get really, really far out-so far out you can’t follow them all the way to the end.”

She took the finger from my wrist and drank down the rest of her cola. I knew the glass was empty from the sound of the ice.

“Don’t worry about the cat-I’m watching for it. I’ll let you know if Noboru Wataya shows up. Keep your eyes closed. I’m sure Noboru Wataya is walking around here someplace. He’ll be here any minute now. He’s coming. I know he’s coming-through the grass, under the fence, stopping to sniff the flowers along the way, little by little Noboru Wataya is coming closer. Picture him that way, get his image in mind.”

I tried to picture the image of the cat, but the best I could do was a blurry, backlit photo. The sunlight penetrating my eyelids destabilized and diffused my inner darkness, making it impossible for me to bring up a precise image of the cat. Instead, what I imagined was a failed portrait, a strange, distorted picture, certain distinguishing features bearing some resemblance to the original but the most important parts missing. I couldn’t even recall how the cat looked when it walked.

The girl put her finger on my wrist again, using the tip to draw an odd diagram of uncertain shape. As if in response, a new kind of darkness- different in quality from the darkness I had been experiencing until that moment-began to burrow into my consciousness. I was probably falling asleep. I didn’t want this to happen, but there was no way I could resist it. My body felt like a corpse-someone else’s corpse-sinking into the canvas deck chair.

In the darkness, I saw the four legs of Noboru Wataya, four silent brown legs atop four soft paws with swelling, rubberlike pads, legs that were soundlessly treading the earth

somewhere.

But where?

“Ten minutes is all it will take,” said the woman on the phone. No, she had to be wrong. Sometimes ten minutes is not ten minutes. It can stretch and shrink. That was something I did know for sure.

•

When I woke up, I was alone. The girl had disappeared from the deck chair, which was still touching mine. The towel and cigarettes and magazine were there, but not the glass or the boom box.

The sun had begun to sink in the west, and the shadow of an oak branch had crept across my knees. My watch said it was four-fifteen. I sat up and looked around. Broad lawn, dry pond, fence, stone bird, golden-rod, TV antenna. Still no sign of the cat. Or of the girl.

I glanced at the cat path and waited for the girl to come back. Ten minutes went by, and neither cat nor girl showed up. Nothing moved. I felt as if I had aged tremendously while I slept.

I stood and glanced toward the house, where there was no sign of a human presence. The bay window reflected the glare of the western sun. I gave up waiting and crossed the lawn to the alley, returning home. I hadn't found the cat, but I had tried my best.

•

At home, I took in the wash and made preparations for a simple dinner. The phone rang twelve times at five-thirty, but I didn't answer it. Even after the ringing stopped, the sound of the bell lingered in the indoor evening gloom like dust floating in the air. With the tips of its hard claws, the table clock tapped at a transparent board floating in space.

Why not write a poem about the wind-up bird? The idea struck me, but the first line would not come. How could high school girls possibly enjoy a poem about a wind-up bird?

•

Kumiko came home at seven-thirty. She had been arriving later and later over the past month. It was not unusual for her to return after eight, and sometimes even after ten. Now that I was at home preparing dinner, she no longer had to hurry back. They were understaffed, in any case, and lately one of her colleagues had been out sick.

“Sorry,” she said. “The work just wouldn't end, and that part-time girl is useless.”

I went to the kitchen and cooked: fish sauteed in butter, salad, and miso soup. Kumiko sat at the kitchen table and vegged out.

“Where were you at five-thirty?” she asked. “I tried to call to say I'd be late.”

“The butter ran out. I went to the store,” I lied.

“Did you go to the bank?”

“Sure.”

“And the cat?”

“Couldn't find it. I went to the vacant house, like you said, but there was no trace of it. I bet it went farther away than that.”

She said nothing.

When I finished bathing after dinner, Kumiko was sitting in the living room with the lights out. Hunched down in the dark with her gray shirt on, she looked like a piece of luggage that had been left in the wrong place.

Drying my hair with a bath towel, I sat on the sofa opposite Kumiko.

In a voice I could barely catch, she said, "I'm sure the cat's dead."

"Don't be silly," I replied. "I'm sure it's having a grand old time somewhere. It'll get hungry and come home soon. The same thing happened once before, remember? When we lived in Koenji..."

"This time's different," she said. "This time you're wrong. I know it. The cat's dead. It's rotting in a clump of grass. Did you look in the grass in the vacant house?"

"No, I didn't. The house may be vacant, but it does belong to somebody. I can't just go barging in there."

"Then where *did* you look for the cat? I'll bet you didn't even try. That's why you didn't find it."

I sighed and wiped my hair again with the towel. I started to speak but gave up when I realized that Kumiko was crying. It was understandable: Kumiko loved the cat. It had been with us since shortly after our wedding. I threw my towel in the bathroom hamper and went to the kitchen for a cold beer. What a stupid day it had been: a stupid day of a stupid month of a stupid year.

Noboru Wataya, where are you? Did the wind-up bird forget to wind your spring?

The words came to me like lines of poetry.

Noboru Wataya,
Where are you?
Did the wind-up bird
Forget to wind your spring?

When I was halfway through my beer, the phone started to ring.

"Get it, will you?" I shouted into the darkness of the living room.

"Not me," she said. "You get it."

"I don't want to."

The phone kept on ringing, stirring up the dust that floated in the darkness. Neither of us said a word. I drank my beer, and Kumiko went on crying soundlessly. I counted twenty rings and gave up. There was no point in counting forever.

2

Full Moon and Eclipse of the Sun

*

On Horses Dying in the Stables

Is it possible, finally, for one human being to achieve perfect understanding of another?

We can invest enormous time and energy in serious efforts to know another person, but in the end, how close are we able to come to that person's essence? We convince ourselves that we know the other person well, but do we really know anything important about anyone?

I started thinking seriously about such things a week after I quit my job at the law firm. Never until then- never in the whole course of my life-had I grappled with questions like this. And why not? Probably because my hands had been full just living. I had simply been too

busy to think about myself.

Something trivial got me started, just as most important things in the world have small beginnings. One morning after Kumiko rushed through breakfast and left for work, I threw the laundry into the washing machine, made the bed, washed the dishes, and vacuumed. Then, with the cat beside me, I sat on the veranda, checking the want ads and the sales. At noon I had lunch and went to the supermarket. There I bought food for dinner and, from a sale table, bought detergent, tissues, and toilet paper. At home again, I made preparations for dinner and lay down on the sofa with a book, waiting for Kumiko to come home.

Newly unemployed, I found this kind of life refreshing. No more commuting to work on jam-packed subways, no more meetings with people I didn't want to meet. And best of all, I could read any book I wanted, anytime I wanted. I had no idea how long this relaxed lifestyle would continue, but at that point, at least, after a week, I was enjoying it, and I tried hard not to think about the future. This was my one great vacation in life. It would have to end sometime, but until it did I was determined to enjoy it.

That particular evening, though, I was unable to lose myself in the pleasure of reading, because Kumiko was late coming home from work. She never got back later than six-thirty, and if she thought she was going to be delayed by as little as ten minutes, she always let me know. She was like that: almost too conscientious. But that day was an exception. She was still not home after seven, and there was no call. The meat and vegetables were ready and waiting, so that I could cook them the minute she came in. Not that I had any great feast in mind: I would be stir frying thin slices of beef, onions, green peppers, and bean sprouts with a little salt, pepper, soy sauce, and a splash of beer—a recipe from my single days. The rice was done, the miso soup was warm, and the vegetables were all sliced and arranged in separate piles in a large dish, ready for the wok. Only Kumiko was missing. I was hungry enough to think about cooking my own portion and eating alone, but I was not ready to make this move. It just didn't seem right.

I sat at the kitchen table, sipping a beer and munching some slightly soggy soda crackers I had found in the back of the cabinet. I watched the small hand of the clock edging toward—and slowly passing—the seven-thirty position.

It was after nine when she came in. She looked exhausted. Her eyes were bloodshot: a bad sign. Something bad had always happened when her eyes were red.

OK, I told myself, stay cool, keep it simple and low key and natural. Don't get excited.

"I'm so sorry," Kumiko said. "This one job wouldn't go right. I thought of calling you, but things just kept getting in the way."

"Never mind, it's all right, don't let it bother you," I said as casually as I could. And in fact, I wasn't feeling bad about it. I had had the same experience any number of times. Going out to work can be tough, not something sweet and peaceful like picking the prettiest rose in your garden for your sick grandmother and spending the day with her, two streets away. Sometimes you have to do unpleasant things with unpleasant people, and the chance to call home never comes up. Thirty seconds is all it would take to say, "I'll be home late tonight," and there are telephones everywhere, but you just can't do it.

I started cooking: turned on the gas, put oil in the wok. Kumiko took a beer from the refrigerator and a glass from the cupboard, did a quick inspection of the food I was about to cook, and sat at the kitchen table without a word. Judging from the look on her face, she was not enjoying the beer.

"You should have eaten without me," she said.

"Never mind. I wasn't that hungry."

While I fried the meat and vegetables, Kumiko went to wash up. I could hear her washing her face and brushing her teeth. A little later, she came out of the bathroom, holding something. It was the toilet paper and tissues I had bought at the supermarket.

"Why did you buy *this* stuff?" she asked, her voice weary.

Holding the wok, I looked at her. Then I looked at the box of tissues and the package of toilet paper. I had no idea what she was trying to say.

“What do you mean? They’re just tissues and toilet paper. We need those things. We’re not exactly out, but they won’t rot if they sit around a little while.”

“No, of course not. But why did you have to buy *blue* tissues and *flower-pattern* toilet paper?”

“I don’t get it,” I said, controlling myself. “They were on sale. Blue tissues are not going to turn your nose blue. What’s the big deal?”

“It is a big deal. I hate blue tissues and flower-pattern toilet paper. Didn’t you know that?”

“No, I didn’t,” I said. “Why do you hate them?”

“How should I know why I hate them? I just do. You hate telephone covers, and thermos bottles with flower decorations, and bell-bottom jeans with rivets, and me having my nails manicured. Not even *you* can say why. It’s just a matter of taste.”

In fact, I could have explained my reasons for all those things, but of course I did not. “All right,” I said. “It’s just a matter of taste. But can you tell me that in the six years we’ve been married you never once bought blue tissues or flower-pattern toilet paper?”

“Never. Not once.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. The tissues I buy are either white or yellow or pink. And I absolutely *never* buy toilet paper with patterns on it. I’m just shocked that you could live with me all this time and not be aware of that.”

It was shocking to me, too, to realize that in six long years I had never once used blue tissues or patterned toilet paper.

“And while I’m at it, let me say this,” she continued. “I absolutely detest beef stir fried with green peppers. Did you know that?”

“No, I didn’t,” I said.

“Well, it’s true. And don’t ask me why. I just can’t stand the smell of the two of them cooking in the same pan.”

“You mean to say that in six years you have never once cooked beef and green peppers together?”

She shook her head. “I’ll eat green peppers in a salad. I’ll fry beef with onions. But I have never once cooked beef and green peppers together.”

I heaved a sigh.

“Haven’t you ever thought it strange?” she asked.

“Thought it strange? I never even noticed,” I said, taking a moment to consider whether, since marrying, I had in fact ever eaten anything stir fried containing beef and green peppers. Of course, it was impossible for me to recall.

“You’ve been living with me all this time,” she said, “but you’ve hardly paid any attention to me. The only one you ever think about is yourself.”

“Now wait just a minute,” I said, turning off the gas and setting the wok down on the range. “Let’s not get carried away here. You may be right. Maybe I haven’t paid enough attention to things like tissues and toilet paper and beef and green peppers. But that doesn’t mean I haven’t paid any attention to *you*. I don’t give a *damn* what color my tissues are. OK, black I’d have a little trouble with, but white, blue-it just doesn’t matter. It’s the same with beef and green peppers. Together, apart-who cares? The act of stir frying beef and green peppers could disappear from the face of the earth and it wouldn’t matter to me. It has nothing to do with you, your essence, what makes Kumiko Kumiko. Am I wrong?”

Instead of answering me, she polished off her beer in two big gulps and stared at the empty bottle.

I dumped the contents of the wok into the garbage. So much for the beef and green peppers and onions and bean sprouts. Weird. Food one minute, garbage the next. I opened a

beer and drank from the bottle.

“Why’d you do that?” she asked.

“You hate it so much.”

“So *you* could have eaten *it*.”

“I suddenly didn’t want beef and green peppers anymore.”

She shrugged. “Whatever makes you happy.”

She put her arms on the table and rested her face on them. For a while, she stayed like that. I could see she wasn’t crying or sleeping. I looked at the empty wok on the range, looked at Kumiko, and drank my beer down. Crazy. Who gives a damn about toilet paper and green peppers?

But I walked over and put my hand on her shoulder. “OK,” I said. “I understand now. I’ll never buy blue tissues or flowered toilet paper again. I promise. I’ll take the stuff back to the supermarket tomorrow and exchange it. If they won’t give me an exchange, I’ll burn it in the yard. I’ll throw the ashes in the sea. And no more beef and green peppers. Never again. Pretty soon the smell will be gone, and we’ll never have to think about it anymore. OK?”

But still she said nothing. I wanted to go out for an hour’s walk and find her cheery when I got back, but I knew there was no chance of that happening. I’d have to solve this one myself.

“Look, you’re tired,” I said. “So take a little rest and we’ll go out for a pizza. When’s the last time we had a pizza? Anchovies and onions. We’ll split one. It wouldn’t kill us to eat out once in a while.”

This didn’t do it, either. She kept her face pressed against her arms. I didn’t know what else to say. I sat down and stared at her across the table. One ear showed through her short black hair. It had an earring that I had never seen before, a little gold one in the shape of a fish. Where could she have bought such a thing? I wanted a smoke. I imagined myself taking my cigarettes and lighter from my pocket, putting a filter cigarette between my lips, and lighting up. I inhaled a lungful of air. The heavy smell of- stir-fried beef and vegetables struck me hard. I was starved.

My eye caught the calendar on the wall. This calendar showed the phases of the moon. The full moon was approaching. Of course: it was about time for Kumiko’s period.

Only after I became a married man had it truly dawned on me that I was an inhabitant of earth, the third planet of the solar system. I lived on the earth, the earth revolved around the sun, and around the earth revolved the moon. Like it or not, this would continue for eternity (or what could be called eternity in comparison with my lifetime). What induced me to see things this way was the absolute precision of my wife’s twenty-nine-day menstrual cycle. It corresponded perfectly with the waxing and waning of the moon. And her periods were always difficult. She would become unstable- even depressed- for some days before they began. So her cycle became my cycle. I had to be careful not to cause any unnecessary trouble at the wrong time of the month. Before we were married, I hardly noticed the phases of the moon. I might happen to catch sight of the moon in the sky, but its shape at any given time was of no concern to me. Now the shape of the moon was something I always carried around in my head.

I had been with a number of women before Kumiko, and of course each had had her own period. Some were difficult, some were easy, some were finished in three days, others took over a week, some were regular, others could be ten days late and scare the hell out of me; some women had bad moods, others were hardly affected. Until I married Kumiko, though, I had never lived with a woman. Until then, the cycles of nature meant the changing of the seasons. In winter I’d get my coat out, in summer it was time for sandals. With marriage I took on not only a cohabitant but a new concept of cyclicity: the phases of the moon. Only once had she missed her cycle for some months, during which time she had been pregnant.

“I’m sorry,” she said, raising her face. “I didn’t mean to take it out on you. I’m tired, and

I'm in a bad mood."

"That's OK," I said. "Don't let it bother you. You should take it out on somebody when you're tired. It makes you feel better."

Kumiko took a long, slow breath, held it in awhile, and let it out.

"What about you?" she asked.

"What about me?"

"You don't take it out on anybody when *you're* tired. I do. Why is that?"

I shook my head. "I never noticed," I said. "Funny."

"Maybe you've got this deep well inside, and you shout into it, 'The king's got donkey's ears!' and then everything's OK."

I thought about that for a while. "Maybe so," I said.

Kumiko looked at the empty beer bottle again. She stared at the label, and then at the mouth, and then she turned the neck in her fingers.

"My period's coming," she said. "I think that's why I'm in such a bad mood."

"I know," I said. "Don't let it bother you. You're not the only one. Tons of horses die when the moon's full."

She took her hand from the bottle, opened her mouth, and looked at me.

"Now, where did *that* come from all of a sudden?"

"I read it in the paper the other day. I meant to tell you about it, but I forgot. It was an interview with some veterinarian. Apparently, horses are tremendously influenced by the phases of the moon—both physically and emotionally. Their brain waves go wild as the full moon approaches, and they start having all kinds of physical problems. Then, on the night itself, a lot of them get sick, and a huge number of those die. Nobody really knows why this happens, but the statistics prove that it does. Horse vets never have time to sleep on full-moon nights, they're so busy."

"Interesting," said Kumiko.

"An eclipse of the sun is even worse, though. Nothing short of a tragedy for the horses. You couldn't begin to imagine how many horses die on the day of a total eclipse. Anyhow, all I want to say is that right this second, horses are dying all over the world. Compared with that, it's no big deal if you take out your frustrations on somebody. So don't let it bother you. Think about the horses dying. Think about them lying on the straw in some barn under the full moon, foaming at the mouth, gasping in agony."

She seemed to take a moment to think about horses dying in barns.

"Well, I have to admit," she said with a note of resignation, "you could probably sell anybody anything."

"All right, then," I said. "Change your clothes and let's go out for a pizza."

•

That night, in our darkened bedroom, I lay beside Kumiko, staring at the ceiling and asking myself just how much I really knew about this woman. The clock said 2:00 a.m. She was sound asleep. In the dark, I thought about blue tissues and patterned toilet paper and beef and green peppers. I had lived with her all this time, unaware how much she hated these things. In themselves they were trivial. Stupid. Something to laugh off, not make a big issue out of. We'd had a little tiff and would have forgotten about it in a couple of days.

But this was different. It was bothering me in a strange new way, digging at me like a little fish bone caught in the throat. Maybe-just maybe- it was more crucial than it had seemed. Maybe this was it: the fatal blow. Or maybe it was just the beginning of what would be the fatal blow. I might be standing in the entrance of something big, and inside lay a world that belonged to Kumiko alone, a vast world that I had never known. I saw it as *a* big, dark room. I was standing there holding a cigarette lighter, its tiny flame showing me only the

smallest part of the room.

Would I ever see the rest? Or would I grow old and die without ever really knowing her? If that was all that lay in store for me, then what was the point of this married life I was leading? What was the point of my life at all if I was spending it in bed with an unknown companion?

This was what I thought about that night and what I went on thinking about long afterward from time to time. Only much later did it occur to me that I had found my way into the core of the problem.

3

Malta Kano's Hat

•

Sherbet Tone and Allen Ginsberg and the Crusaders

I was in the middle of preparing lunch when the phone rang again. I had cut two slices of bread, spread them with butter and mustard, filled them with tomato slices and cheese, set the whole on the cutting board, and I was just about to cut it in half when the bell started ringing.

I let the phone ring three times and cut the sandwich in half. Then I transferred it to a plate, wiped the knife, and put that in the cutlery drawer, before pouring myself a cup of the coffee I had warmed up.

Still the phone went on ringing. Maybe fifteen times. I gave up and took it. I would have preferred not to answer, but it might have been Kumiko.

"Hello," said a woman's voice, one I had never heard before. It belonged neither to Kumiko nor to the strange woman who had called me the other day when I was cooking spaghetti. "I wonder if I might possibly be speaking with Mr. Toru Okada?" said the voice, as if its owner were reading a text.

"You are," I said.

"The husband of Kumiko Okada?"

"That's right," I said. "Kumiko Okada is my wife."

"And Mrs. Okada's elder brother is Noboru Wataya?"

"Right again," I said, with admirable self-control. "Noboru Wataya is my wife's elder brother."

"Sir, my name is Malta Kano."

I waited for her to go on. The sudden mention of Kumiko's elder brother had put me on guard. With the blunt end of the pencil that lay by the phone, I scratched the back of my neck. Five seconds or more went by, in which the woman said nothing. No sound of any kind came from the receiver, as if the woman had covered the mouthpiece with her hand and was talking with someone nearby.

"Hello," I said, concerned now.

“Please forgive me, sir,” blurted the woman’s voice. “In that case, I must ask your permission to call you at a later time.”

“Now wait a minute,” I said. “This is-”

At that point, the connection was cut. I stared at the receiver, then put it to my ear again. No doubt about it: the woman had hung up.

Vaguely dissatisfied, I turned to the kitchen table, drank my coffee, and ate my sandwich. Until the moment the telephone rang, I had been thinking of something, but now I couldn’t remember what it was. Knife in my right hand poised to cut the sandwich in half, I had definitely been thinking of something. Something important. Something I had been trying unsuccessfully to recall for the longest time. It had come to me at the very moment when I was about to cut the sandwich in two, but now it was gone. Chewing on my sandwich, I tried hard to bring it back. But it wouldn’t come. It had returned to that dark region of my mind where it had been living until that moment.

•

I finished eating and was clearing the dishes when the phone rang again. This time I took it right away.

Again I heard a woman saying “Hello,” but this time it was Kumiko.

“How are you?” she asked. “Finished lunch?”

“Yup. What’d you have?”

“Nothing,” she said. “Too busy. I’ll probably buy myself a sandwich later. What’d you have?”

I described my sandwich.

“I see,” she said, without a hint of envy. “Oh, by the way, I forgot to tell you this morning. You’re going to get a call from a Miss Kano.”

“She already called,” I said. “A few minutes ago. All she did was mention our names—mine and yours and your brother’s—and hang up. Never said what she wanted. What was that all about?”

“She hung up?”

“Said she’d call again.”

“Well, when she does, I want you to do whatever she asks. This is really important. I think you’ll have to go see her.”

“When? Today?”

“What’s wrong? Do you have something planned? Are you supposed to see someone?”

“Nope. No plans.” Not yesterday, not today, not tomorrow: no plans at all. “But who is this Kano woman? And what does she want with me? I’d like to have some idea before she calls again. If it’s about a job for me connected with your brother, forget it. I don’t want to have anything to do with him. You know that.”

“No, it has nothing to do with a job,” she said, with a hint of annoyance. “It’s about the cat.”

“The cat?”

“Oh, sorry, I’ve got to run. Somebody’s waiting for me. I really shouldn’t have taken the time to make this call. Like I said, I haven’t even had lunch. Mind if I hang up? I’ll get back to you as soon as I’m free.”

“Look, I know how busy you are, but give me a break. I want to know what’s going on. What’s with the cat? Is this Kano woman-”

“Just do what she tells you, will you, please? Understand? This is serious business. I want you to stay home and wait for her call. Gotta go.”

And she went.

•

When the phone rang at two-thirty, I was napping on the couch. At first I thought I was hearing the alarm clock. I reached out to push the button, but the clock was not there. I wasn't in bed but was on the couch, and it wasn't morning but afternoon. I got up and went to the phone.

"Hello," I said.

"Hello," said a woman's voice. It was the woman who had called in the morning. "Mr. Toru Okada?"

"That's me. Toru Okada."

"Sir, my name is Malta Kano," she said.

"The lady who called before."

"That is correct. I am afraid I was terribly rude. But tell me, Mr. Okada, would you by any chance be free this afternoon?"

"You might say that."

"Well, in that case, I know this is terribly sudden, but do you think it might be possible for us to meet?"

"When? Today? Now?"

"Yes."

I looked at my watch. Not that I really had to-I had looked at it thirty seconds earlier-but just to make sure. And it was still two-thirty.

"Will it take long?" I asked.

"Not so very long, I think. I could be wrong, though. At this moment in time, it is difficult for me to say with complete accuracy. I am sorry."

No matter how long it might take, I had no choice. Kumiko had told me to do as the woman said: that it was serious business. If she said it was serious business, then it was serious business, and I had better do as I was told.

"I see," I said. "Where should we meet?"

"Would you by any chance be acquainted with the Pacific Hotel, across from Shinagawa Station?"

"I would."

"There is a tearoom on the first floor. I shall be waiting there for you at four o'clock if that would be all right with you, sir."

"Fine," I said.

"I am thirty-one years old, and I shall be wearing a red vinyl hat."

Terrific. There was something weird about the way this woman talked, something that confused me momentarily. But I could not have said exactly what made it so weird. Nor was there any law against a thirty-one-year-old woman's wearing a red vinyl hat.

"I see," I said. "I'm sure I'll find you."

"I wonder, Mr. Okada, if you would be so kind as to tell me of any external distinguishing characteristics in your own case."

I tried to think of any "external distinguishing characteristics" I might have. Did I in fact have any?

"I'm thirty, I'm five foot nine, a hundred and forty pounds, short hair, no glasses." It occurred to me as I listed these for her that they hardly constituted external distinguishing characteristics. There could be fifty such men in the Pacific Hotel tearoom. I had been there before, and it was a big place. She needed something more noticeable. But I couldn't think of anything. Which is not to say that I didn't have any distinguishing characteristics. I owned a signed copy of Miles Davis's *Sketches of Spain*. I had a slow resting pulse rate: forty-seven normally, and no higher than seventy with a high fever. I was out of work. I knew the names of all the brothers Karamazov. But none of these distinguishing characteristics was external.

“What might you be wearing?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I haven’t decided yet. This is so sudden.”

“Then please wear a polka-dot necktie,” she said decisively. “Do you think you might have a polka-dot necktie, sir?”

“I think I do,” I said. I had a navy-blue tie with tiny cream polka dots. Kumiko had given it to me for my birthday a few years earlier.

“Please be so kind as to wear it, then,” she said. “Thank you for agreeing to meet me at four o’clock.” And she hung up.

•

I opened the wardrobe and looked for my polka-dot tie. There was no sign of it on the tie rack. I looked in all the drawers. I looked in all the clothes storage boxes in the closet. No polka-dot tie. There was no way that that tie could be in our house without my finding it. Kumiko was such a perfectionist when it came to the arrangement of our clothes, my necktie couldn’t possibly be in a place other than where it was normally kept. And in fact, I found everything—both her clothes and mine—in perfect order. My shirts were neatly folded in the drawer where they belonged. My sweaters were in boxes so full of mothballs my eyes hurt just from opening the lid. One box contained the clothing she had worn in high school: a navy uniform, a flowered minidress, preserved like photos in an old album. What was the point of keeping such things? Perhaps she had simply brought them with her because she had never found a suitable opportunity to get rid of them. Or maybe she was planning to send them to Bangladesh. Or donate them someday as cultural artifacts. In any case, my polka-dot necktie was nowhere to be found.

Hand on the wardrobe door, I tried to recall the last time I had worn the tie. It was a rather stylish tie, in very good taste, but a bit too much for the office. If I had worn it to the firm, somebody would have gone on and on about it at lunch, praising the color or its sharp looks. Which would have been a kind of warning. In the firm I worked for, it was not good to be complimented on your choice of tie. So I had never worn it there. Rather, I put it on for more private—if somewhat formal—occasions: a concert, or dinner at a good restaurant, when Kumiko wanted us to “dress properly” (not that there were so many such occasions). The tie went well with my navy suit, and she was very fond of it. Still, I couldn’t manage to recall when I had last worn it.

I scanned the contents of the wardrobe again and gave up. For one reason or another, the polka-dot tie had disappeared. Oh, well. I put on my navy suit with a blue shirt and a striped tie. I wasn’t too worried. She might not be able to spot me, but all I had to do was look for a thirtyish woman in a red vinyl hat.

Dressed to go out, I sat on the sofa, staring at the wall. It had been a long time since I last wore a suit. Normally, this three-season navy suit would have been a bit too heavy for this time of year, but that particular day was a rainy one, and there was a chill in the air. It was the very suit I had worn on my last day of work (in April). Suddenly it occurred to me that there might be something in one of the pockets. In the inside breast pocket I found a receipt with a date from last autumn. It was some kind of taxi receipt, one I could have been reimbursed for at the office. Now, though, it was too late. I crumpled it up and threw it into the wastebasket.

I had not worn this suit once since quitting, two months earlier. Now, after such a long interval, I felt as if I were in the grip of a foreign substance. It was heavy and stiff, and seemed not to match the contours of my body. I stood and walked around the room, stopping in front of the mirror to yank at the sleeves and the coattails in an attempt to make it fit better. I stretched out my arms, took a deep breath, and bent forward at the waist, checking to see if my physical shape might have changed in the past two months. I sat on the sofa again, but still I felt uncomfortable.

Until this spring, I had commuted to work every day in a suit without its ever feeling strange. My firm had had a rather strict dress code, requiring even low-ranking clerks such as myself to wear suits. I had thought nothing of it.

Now, however, just sitting on the couch in a suit felt like some kind of immoral act, like faking one's curriculum vitae or passing as a woman. Overcome with something very like a guilty conscience, I found it increasingly difficult to breathe.

I went to the front hall, took my brown shoes from their place on the shelf, and pried myself into them with a shoehorn. A thin film of dust clung to them.

•

As it turned out, I didn't have to find the woman. She found me. When I arrived at the tearoom, I did a quick circuit, looking for the red hat. There were no women with red hats. My watch showed ten minutes left until four o'clock. I took a seat, drank the water they brought me, and ordered a cup of coffee. No sooner had the waitress left my table than I heard a woman behind me saying, "You must be Mr. Toru Okada." Surprised, I spun around. Not three minutes had gone by since my survey of the room. Under a white jacket she wore a yellow silk blouse, and on her head was a red vinyl hat. By reflex action, I stood and faced her. "Beautiful" was a word that might well have been applied to her. At least she was far more beautiful than I had imagined from her telephone voice. She had a slim, lovely build and was sparing in her use of cosmetics. She knew how to dress-except for the red hat. Her jacket and blouse were finely tailored. On the collar of the jacket shone a gold brooch in the shape of a feather. She could have been taken for a corporate sery. Why, after having lavished such care on the rest of her outfit, she would have topped it off with that totally inappropriate red vinyl hat was beyond me. Maybe she always wore it to help people spot her in situations like this. In that case, it was not a bad idea. If the point was to have her stand out in a room full of strangers, it certainly did its job.

She took the seat across the table from mine, and I sat down again. "I'm amazed you knew it was me," I said. "I couldn't find my polka-dot tie. I *know* I've got it somewhere, but it just wouldn't turn up. Which is why I wore this striped one. I figured I'd find you, but how did you know it was me?"

"Of course I knew it was you," she said, putting her white patent-leather bag on the table. She took off her red vinyl hat and placed it over the bag, covering it completely. I had the feeling she was about to perform a magic trick: when she lifted the hat, the bag would have vanished.

"But I was wearing the wrong tie," I protested. "The wrong tie?" She glanced at my tie with a puzzled expression, as if to say, What is this odd person talking about? Then she nodded. "It doesn't matter. Please don't be concerned."

There was something strange about her eyes. They were mysteriously lacking in depth. They were lovely eyes, but they did not seem to be looking at anything. They were all surface, like glass eyes. But of course they were not glass eyes. They moved, and their lids blinked.

How had she been able to pick me out of the crowd in this busy tearoom? Virtually every chair in the place was taken, and many of them were occupied by men my age. I wanted to ask her for an explanation, but I restrained myself. Better not raise irrelevant issues.

She called to a passing waiter and asked for a Perrier. They had no Perrier, he said, but he could bring her tonic water. She thought about this for a moment and accepted his suggestion. While she waited for her tonic water to arrive, she said nothing, and I did the same.

At one point, she lifted her red hat and opened the clasp of the pocket-book underneath. From the bag she removed a glossy black leather case, somewhat smaller than a cassette tape. It was a business card holder. Like the bag, it had a clasp-the first card holder I had ever seen with a clasp. She drew a card from the case and handed it to me. I reached into my breast

pocket for one of my own cards, only then realizing that I did not have any with me.

Her name card was made of thin plastic, and it seemed to carry a light fragrance of incense. When I brought it closer to my nose, the smell grew more distinct. No doubt about it: it was incense. The card bore a single line of small, intensely black letters:

Malta Kano

Malta? I turned the card over. It was blank.

While I sat there wondering about the meaning of this name card, the waiter came and placed an ice-filled glass in front of her, then filled it halfway with tonic water. The glass had a wedge of lemon in it. The waitress came with a silver-colored coffeepot on her tray. She placed a cup in front of me and poured it full of coffee. With the furtive movements of someone slipping an unlucky shrine fortune into someone else's hand, she eased the bill onto the table and left.

"It's blank," Malta Kano said to me.

I was still staring at the back of her name card.

"Just my name. There is no need for me to include my address or telephone number. No one ever calls me. I am the one who makes the calls."

"I see," I said. This meaningless response hovered in the air above the table like the floating island in *Gulliver's Travels*.

Holding her glass with both hands, she took one tiny sip through a straw. The hint of a frown crossed her face, after which she thrust the glass aside, as if she had lost all interest in it.

"Malta is not my real name," said Malta Kano. "The Kano is real, but the Malta is a professional name I took from the island of Malta. Have you ever been to Malta, Mr. Okada?"

I said I had not. I had never been to Malta, and I had no plans to go to Malta in the near future. It had never even crossed my mind to go there. All I knew about Malta was the Herb Alpert performance of "The Sands of Malta," an authentic stinker of a song.

"I once lived in Malta," she said. "For three years. The water there is terrible. Undrinkable. Like diluted seawater. And the bread they bake there is salty. Not because they put salt in it, but because the water they make it with is salty. The bread is not bad, though. I rather like Malta's bread."

I nodded and sipped my coffee.

"As bad as it tastes, the water from one particular place on Malta has a wonderful influence on the body's elements. It is very special-even mystical-water, and it is available in only the one place on the island. The spring is in the mountains, and you have to climb several hours from a village at the base to get there. The water cannot be transported from the site of the spring. If it is taken elsewhere, it loses its power. The only way you can drink it is to go there yourself. It is mentioned in documents from the time of the Crusades. They called it spirit water. Alien Ginsberg once came there to drink it. So did Keith Richards. I lived there for three years, in the little village at the foot of the mountain. I raised vegetables and learned weaving. I climbed to the spring every day and drank the special water. From 1976 to 1979. Once, for a whole week, I drank only that water and ate no food. You must not put anything but that water in your mouth for an entire week. This is a kind of discipline that is required there. I believe it can be called a religious austerity. In this way you purify your body. For me, it was a truly wonderful experience. This is how I came to choose the name Malta for professional purposes when I returned to Japan."

"May I ask what your profession is?"

She shook her head. "It is not my profession, properly speaking. I do not take money for

what I do. I am a consultant. I talk with people about the elements of the body. I am also engaged in research on water that has beneficial effects on the elements of the body. Making money is not a problem for me. I have whatever assets I need. My father is a doctor, and he has given my younger sister and myself stocks and real estate in a kind of living trust. An accountant manages them for us. They produce a decent income each year. I have also written several books that bring in a little income. My work on the elements of the body is an entirely nonprofit activity. Which is why my card bears neither address nor telephone number. I am the one who makes the calls.”

I nodded, but this was simply a physical movement of the head: I had no idea what she was talking about. I could understand each of the words she spoke, but it was impossible for me to grasp their overall meaning. Elements of the body?

Alien Ginsberg?

I became increasingly uneasy. I’m not one of those people with special intuitive gifts, but the more time I spent with this woman, the more I seemed to smell trouble.

“You’ll have to pardon me,” I said, “but I wonder if I could ask you to explain things from the beginning, step by step. I talked to my wife a little while ago, and all she said was that I should see you and talk to you about our missing cat. To be entirely honest, I don’t really get the point of what you’ve just been telling me. Does it have anything to do with the cat?”

“Yes, indeed,” she said. “But before I go into that, there is something I would like you to know, Mr. Okada.”

She opened the metal clasp of her pocketbook again and took out a white envelope. In the envelope was a photograph, which she handed to me. “My sister,” she said. It was a color snapshot of two women. One was Malta Kano, and in the photo, too, she was wearing a hat—a yellow knit hat. Again it was ominously mismatched with her outfit. Her sister—I assumed this was the younger sister whom she had mentioned—wore a pastel-colored suit and matching hat of the kind that had been popular in the early sixties. I seemed to recall that such colors had been known as “sherbet tone” back then. One thing was certain, however: these sisters were fond of hats. The hairstyle of the younger one was precisely that of Jacqueline Kennedy in her White House days, loaded with hair spray. She wore a little too much makeup, but she could be fairly described as beautiful. She was in her early to mid-twenties. I handed the photo back to Malta Kano, who returned it to its envelope and the envelope to the handbag, shutting the clasp.

“My sister is five years my junior,” she said. “She was defiled by Noboru Wataya. Violently raped.”

Terrific. I wanted to get the hell out of there. But I couldn’t just stand up and walk away. I took a handkerchief from my jacket pocket, wiped my mouth with it, and returned it to the same pocket. Then I cleared my throat.

“That’s terrible,” I said. “I don’t know anything about this, but if he did hurt your sister, you have my heartfelt condolences. I must tell you, however, that my brother-in-law and I have virtually nothing to do with each other. So if you are expecting some kind of—”

“Not at all, Mr. Okada,” she declared. “I do not hold you responsible in any way. If there is someone who should be held responsible for what happened, that person is myself. For being inattentive. For not having protected her as I should have. Unfortunately, certain events made it impossible for me to do so. These things can happen, Mr. Okada. As you know, we live in a violent and chaotic world. And within this world, there are places that are still more violent, still more chaotic. Do you understand what I mean, Mr. Okada? What has happened has happened. My sister will recover from her wounds, from her defilement. She must. Thank goodness they were not fatal. As I have said to my sister, the potential was there for something much, much worse to happen. What I am most concerned about is the elements of her body.”

“Elements of her body,” I said. This “elements of the body” business was obviously a

consistent theme of hers.

“I cannot explain to you in detail how all these circumstances are related. It would be a very long and very complicated story, and although I mean no disrespect to you when I say this, it would be virtually impossible for you at this stage, Mr. Okada, to attain an accurate understanding of the true meaning of that story, which involves a world that we deal with on a professional basis. I did not invite you here in order to voice any complaint to you in that regard. You are, of course, in no way responsible for what has happened. I simply wanted you to know that, although it may be a temporary condition, my sister’s elements have been defiled by Mr. Wataya. You and she are likely to have some form of contact with each other sometime in the future. She is my assistant, as I mentioned earlier. At such time, it would probably be best for you to be aware of what occurred between her and Mr. Wataya and to realize that these things can happen.”

A short silence followed. Malta Kano looked at me as if to say, Please think about what I have told you. And so I did. About Noboru Wataya’s having raped Malta Kano’s sister. About the relationship between that and the elements of the body. And about the relationship between those and the disappearance of our cat.

“Do I understand you to be saying,” I ventured, “that neither you nor your sister intends to bring a formal complaint on this matter ... to go to the police ... ?”

“No, of course we will do no such thing,” said Malta Kano, her face expressionless. “Properly speaking, we do not hold anyone responsible. We would simply like to have a more precise idea of what caused such a thing to happen. Until we solve this question, there is a real possibility that something even worse could occur.”

I felt a degree of relief on hearing this. Not that it would have bothered me in the least if Noboru Wataya had been convicted of rape and sent to prison. It couldn’t happen to a nicer guy. But Kumiko’s brother was a rather well-known figure. His arrest and trial would be certain to make the headlines, and that would be a terrible shock for Kumiko. If only for my own mental health, I preferred the whole thing to go away.

“Rest assured,” said Malta Kano, “I asked to see you today purely about the missing cat. That was the matter about which Mr. Wataya sought my advice. Mrs. Okada had consulted him on the matter, and he in turn consulted me.”

That explained a lot. Malta Kano was some kind of clairvoyant or channeler or something, and they had consulted her on the whereabouts of the cat. The Wataya family was into this kind of stuff-divination and house “physiognomy” and such. That was fine with me: people were free to believe anything they liked. But why did he have to go and rape the younger sister of his spiritual counselor? Why stir up a lot of pointless trouble?

“Is that your area of expertise?” I asked. “Helping people find things?”

She stared at me with those depthless eyes of hers, eyes that looked as if they were staring into the window of a vacant house. Judging from their expression, she had failed to grasp the meaning of my question.

Without answering the question, she said, “You live in a very strange place, don’t you, Mr. Okada?”

“I do?” I said. “Strange in what way?”

Instead of replying, she pushed her nearly untouched glass of tonic water another six or eight inches away from herself. “Cats are very sensitive creatures, you know.”

Another silence descended on the two of us.

“So our place is strange, and cats are sensitive animals,” I said. “OK. But we’ve lived there a long time—the two of us and the cat. Why now, all of a sudden, did it decide to leave us? Why didn’t it leave before now?”

“That I cannot tell you. Perhaps the flow has changed. Perhaps something has obstructed the flow.”

“The flow.”

“I do not know yet whether your cat is still alive, but I can be certain of one thing: it is no longer in the vicinity of your house. You will never find the cat in that neighborhood.”

I lifted my cup and took a sip of my now lukewarm coffee. Beyond the tearoom windows, a misty rain was falling. The sky was closed over with dark, low-hanging clouds. A sad procession of people and umbrellas climbed up and down the footbridge outside.

“Give me your hand,” she said.

I placed my right hand on the table, palm up, assuming she was planning to read my palm. Instead, she stretched her hand out and put her palm against mine. Then she closed her eyes, remaining utterly still, as if silently rebuking a faithless lover. The waitress came and refilled my cup, pretending not to notice what Malta Kano and I were doing. People at nearby tables stole glances in our direction. I kept hoping all the while that there were no acquaintances of mine in the vicinity.

“I want you to picture to yourself one thing you saw before you came here today,” said Malta Kano.

“One thing?” I asked.

“Just one thing.”

I thought of the flowered minidress that I had seen in Kumiko’s clothes storage box. Why that of all things happened to pop into my mind I have no idea. It just did.

We kept our hands together like that for another five minutes- five minutes that felt very long to me, not so much because I was being stared at by people as that the touch of Malta Kano’s hand had something unsettling about it. It was a small hand, neither hot nor cold. It had neither the intimate touch of a lover’s hand nor the functional touch of a doctor’s. It had the same effect on me as her eyes had, turning me into a vacant house. I felt empty: no furniture, no curtains, no rugs. Just an empty container. Eventually, Malta Kano withdrew her hand from mine and took several deep breaths. Then she nodded several times.

“Mr. Okada,” she said, “I believe that you are entering *a* phase of your life in which many different things will occur. The disappearance of your cat is only the beginning.”

“Different things,” I said. “Good things or bad things?”

She tilted her head in thought. “Good things *and* bad things. Bad things that seem good at first, and good things that seem bad at first.”

“To me, that sounds very general,” I said. “Don’t you have any more concrete information?”

“Yes, I suppose what I am saying does sound very general,” said Malta Kano. “But after all, Mr. Okada, when one is speaking of the essence of things, it often happens that one can only speak in generalities. Concrete things certainly do command attention, but they are often little more than trivia. Side trips. The more one tries to see into the distance, the more generalized things become.”

I nodded silently-without the slightest inkling of what she was talking about.

“Do I have your permission to call you again?” she asked.

“Sure,” I said, though in fact I had no wish to be called by anyone. “Sure” was about the only answer I could give.

She snatched her red vinyl hat from the table, took the handbag that had been hidden beneath it, and stood up. Uncertain as to how I should respond to this, I remained seated.

“I do have one small bit of information that I can share with you “ Malta Kano said, looking down at me, after she had put on her red hat. “You will find your polka-dot tie, but not in your house.”

High Towers and Deep Wells (Or, Far from Nomonhan)

*

Back home, I found Kumiko in a good mood. A *very* good mood. It was almost six o'clock by the time I arrived home after seeing Malta Kano, which meant I had no time to fix a proper dinner. Instead, I prepared a simple meal from what I found in the freezer, and we each had a beer. She talked about work, as she always did when she was in a good mood: whom she had seen at the office, what she had done, which of her colleagues had talent and which did not. That kind of thing.

I listened, making suitable responses. I heard no more than half of what she was saying. Not that I disliked listening to her talk about these things. Contents of the conversation aside, I loved watching her at the dinner table as she talked with enthusiasm about her work. This, I told myself, was "home." We were doing a proper job of carrying out the responsibilities that we had been assigned to perform at home. She was talking about her work, and I, after having prepared dinner, was listening to her talk. This was very different from the image of home that I had imagined vaguely for myself before marriage. But this was *the home I had chosen*. I had had a home, of course, when I was a child. But it was not one I had chosen for myself. I had been born into it, presented with it as an established fact. Now, however, I lived in a world that I had chosen through an act of will. It was my home. It might not be perfect, but the fundamental stance I adopted with regard to my home was to accept it, problems and all, because it was something I myself had chosen. If it had problems, these were almost certainly problems that had originated within me.

"So what about the cat?" she asked. I summarized for her my meeting with Malta Kano in the hotel in Shinagawa. I told her about my polka-dot tie: that there had been no sign of it in the wardrobe. That Malta Kano had managed to find me in the crowded tearoom nonetheless. That she had had a unique way of dressing and of speaking, which I described. Kumiko enjoyed hearing about Malta Kano's red vinyl hat, but when I was unable to provide a clear answer regarding the whereabouts of our lost cat, she was deeply disappointed.

"Then she doesn't know where the cat is, either?" Kumiko demanded. "The best she could do was tell you it isn't in our neighborhood any longer?"

"That's about it," I said. I decided not to mention anything about the "obstructed flow" of the place we lived in or that this could have some connection to the disappearance of the cat. I knew it would bother Kumiko, and for my own part, I had no desire to increase the number of things we had to worry about. We would have had a real problem if Kumiko insisted on moving because this was a "bad place." Given our present economic situation, it would have been impossible for us to move.

"That's what she tells *me*," I said. "The cat is not around here anymore."

"Which means it will never come home?"

"I don't know," I said. "She was vague about everything. All she came up with was little hints. She did say she'd get in touch with me when she found out more, though."

"Do you believe her?"

"Who knows? I don't know anything about this kind of stuff."

I poured myself some more beer and watched the head settle. Kumiko rested her elbow on the table, chin in hand.

"She must have told you she won't accept payment or gifts of any kind," she said.

"Uh-huh. That's certainly a plus," I said. "So what's the problem? She won't take our

money, she won't steal our souls, she won't snatch the princess away. We've got nothing to lose."

"I want you to understand one thing," said Kumiko. "That cat is very important to me. Or should I say to us. We found it the week after we got married. Together. You remember?"

"Of course I do."

"It was so tiny, and soaking wet in the pouring rain. I went to meet you at the station with an umbrella. Poor little baby. We saw him on the way home. Somebody had thrown him into a beer crate next to the liquor store. He's my very first cat. He's important to me, a kind of symbol. I can't lose him."

"Don't worry. I know that."

"So where is he? He's been missing for ten days now. That's why I called my brother. I thought he might know a medium or clairvoyant or something, somebody who could find a missing cat. I know you don't like to ask my brother for anything, but he's followed in my father's footsteps. He knows a lot about these things."

"Ah, yes, the Wataya family tradition," I said as coolly as an evening breeze across an inlet. "But what's the connection between Noboru Wataya and this woman?"

Kumiko shrugged. "I'm sure she's just somebody he happened to meet. He seems to have so many contacts these days."

"I'll bet."

"He says she possesses amazing powers but that she's pretty strange." Kumiko poked at her macaroni casserole. "What was her name again?"

"Malta Kano," I said. "She practiced some kind of religious austerities on Malta."

"That's it. Malta Kano. What did you think of her?"

"Hard to say." I looked at my hands, resting on the table. "At least she wasn't boring. And that's a good thing. I mean, the world's full of things we can't explain, and somebody's got to fill that vacuum. Better to have somebody who isn't boring than somebody who is. Right? Like Mr. Honda, for example."

Kumiko laughed out loud at the mention of Mr. Honda. "He was a wonderful old man, don't you think? I liked him a lot."

"Me too," I said.

•

For about a year after we were married, Kumiko and I used to visit the home of old Mr. Honda once a month. A practitioner of spirit possession, he was one of the Wataya family's favorite channeler types, but he was terrifically hard of hearing. Even with his hearing aid, he could barely make out what we said to him. We had to shout so loud our voices would rattle the shoji paper. I used to wonder if he could hear what the spirits said to him if he was so hard of hearing. But maybe it worked the other way: the worse your ears, the better you could hear the words of the spirits. He had lost his hearing in the war. A noncommissioned officer with Japan's Manchurian garrison, the Kwantung Army, he had suffered burst eardrums when an artillery shell or a hand grenade or something exploded nearby during a battle with a combined Soviet-Outer Mongolian unit at Nomon-han on the border between Outer Mongolia and Manchuria.

Our visits to Mr. Honda's place were not prompted by a belief on our part in his spiritual powers. I had never been interested in these things, and Kumiko placed far less trust in such supernatural matters than either her parents or her brother. She did have a touch of superstition, and she could be upset by an ominous prognostication, but she never went out of her way to involve herself in spiritual affairs.

The only reason we went to see Mr. Honda was because her father ordered us to. It was the one condition he set for us to marry. True, it was a rather bizarre condition, but we went

along with it to avoid complications. Neither of us had expected an easy time from her family. Her father was a government official. The younger son of a not very well-to-do farm family in Niigata, he had attended prestigious Tokyo University on scholarship, graduated with honors, and become an elite member of the Ministry of Transport. This was all very admirable, as far as I was concerned. But as is so often the case with men who have made it like this, he was arrogant and self-righteous. Accustomed to giving orders, he harbored not the slightest doubt concerning the values of the world to which he belonged. For him, hierarchy was everything. He bowed to superior authority without question, and he trampled those beneath him without hesitation. Neither Kumiko nor I believed that a man like that would accept a poor, twenty-four-year-old nobody like me, without position or pedigree or even decent grades or future promise, as a marriage partner for his daughter. We figured that after her parents turned us down, we'd get married on our own and live without having anything to do with them.

Still, I did the right thing. I formally went to ask Kumiko's parents for her hand in marriage. To say that their reception of me was cool would be an understatement. The doors of all the world's refrigerators seemed to have been thrown open at once.

That they gave us their permission in the end-with reluctance, but in a near-miraculous turn of events-was thanks entirely to Mr. Honda. He asked them everything they had learned about me, and in the end he declared that if their daughter was going to get married, I was the best possible partner for her; that if she wanted to marry me, they could only invite terrible consequences by opposing the match. Kumiko's parents had absolute faith in Mr. Honda at the time, and so there was nothing they could do but accept me as their daughter's husband.

Finally, though, I was always the outsider, the uninvited guest. Kumiko and I would visit their home and have dinner with them twice a month with mechanical regularity. This was a truly loathsome experience, situated at the precise midpoint between a meaningless mortification of the flesh and brutal torture. Throughout the meal, I had the sense that their dining room table was as long as a railway station. They would be eating and talking about something way down at the other end, and I was too far away for them to see. This went on for a year, until Kumiko's father and I had a violent argument, after which we never saw each other again. The relief this gave me bordered on ecstasy. Nothing so consumes a person as meaningless exertion.

For a time after our marriage, though, I did exert myself to keep relations between us on a good footing. And without a doubt, the least painful of my exertions were those monthly meetings with Mr. Honda.

All payments to Mr. Honda were made by Kumiko's father. We merely had to visit Mr. Honda's home in Meguro once a month with a big bottle of sake, listen to what he had to tell us, and go home. Simple.

We took to Mr. Honda immediately. He was a nice old man, whose face would light up whenever he saw the sake we had brought him. We liked everything about him-except perhaps for the way he left his television on full blast because he was so hard of hearing.

We always went to his house in the morning. Winter and summer, he sat with his legs down in the sunken hearth. In winter he would have a quilt wrapped around his waist to hold in the heat of the charcoal fire. In summer he used neither quilt nor fire. He was apparently a rather famous fortune-teller, but he lived very simply-even ascetically. His house was small, with a tiny entrance hall barely big enough for one person at a time to tie or untie a pair of shoes. The tatami mats on his floors were badly worn, and cracked windowpanes were patched with tape. Across the lane stood an auto repair shop, where there was always someone yelling at the top of his lungs. Mr. Honda wore a kimono styled midway between a sleeping robe and a traditional workman's jacket. It gave no evidence of having been washed in the recent past. He lived alone and had a woman come in to do the cooking and cleaning. For some reason, though, he never let her launder his robe. Scraggly white whiskers hung on his sunken cheeks.

If there was anything in Mr. Honda's house that could be called impressive, it was the huge color television set. In such a tiny house, its gigantic presence was overwhelming. It was always tuned to the government-supported NHK network. Whether this was because he loved NHK, or he couldn't be bothered to change the channel, or this was a special set that received only NHK, I had no way of telling, but NHK was all he ever watched. Instead of a flower arrangement or a calligraphic scroll, the living room's ceremonial alcove was filled with this huge television set, and Mr. Honda always sat facing it, stirring the divining sticks on the table atop his sunken hearth while NHK continued to blast out cooking shows, bonsai care instructions, news updates, and political discussions.

"Legal work might be the wrong thing for you, sonny," said Mr. Honda one day, either to me or to someone standing twenty yards behind me.

"It might?"

"Yep, it might. The law presides over things of this world, finally. The world where shadow is shadow and light is light, yin is yin and yang is yang, I'm me and he's him. I am me and / He is him: / Autumn eve.' But *you* don't belong to that world, sonny. The world you belong to is above that or below that."

"Which is better?" I asked, out of simple curiosity. "Above or below?" "It's not that either one is better," he said. After a brief coughing fit, he spat a glob of phlegm onto a tissue and studied it closely before crumpling the tissue and throwing it into a wastebasket. "It's not a question of better or worse. The point is, not to resist the flow. You go up when you're supposed to go up and down when you're supposed to go down. When you're supposed to go up, find the highest tower and climb to the top. When you're supposed to go down, find the deepest well and go down to the bottom. When there's no flow, stay still. If you resist the flow, everything dries up. If everything dries up, the world is darkness. 'I am he and / He is me: / Spring nightfall.' Abandon the self, and there you are."

"Is this one of those times when there's no flow?" Kumiko asked.

"How's that?"

"IS THIS ONE OF THOSE TIMES WHEN THERE'S NO FLOW?" Kumiko shouted.

"No flow now," Mr. Honda said, nodding to himself. "Now's the time to stay still. Don't do anything. Just be careful of water. Sometime in the future, this young fellow could experience real suffering in connection with water. Water that's missing from where it's supposed to be. Water that's present where it's not supposed to be. In any case, be very, very careful of water."

Kumiko, beside me, was nodding with the utmost gravity, but I could see she was struggling not to laugh. "What kind of water?" I asked.

"I don't know," said Mr. Honda. "Water."

On the TV, some university professor was saying that people's chaotic use of Japanese grammar corresponded precisely to the chaos in their lifestyles. "Properly speaking, of course, we cannot call it chaos. Grammar is like the air: someone higher up might try to set rules for using it, but people won't necessarily follow them." It sounded interesting, but Mr. Honda just went on talking about water.

"Tell you the truth, I suffered over water," he said. "There was no water in Nomonhan. The front line was a mess, and supplies were cut off. No water. No rations. No bandages. No bullets. It was awful. The big boys in the rear were interested in only one thing: occupying territory as fast as possible. Nobody was thinking about supplies. For three days, I had almost no water. If you left a washrag out, it'd be wet with dew in the morning. You could wring out a few drops to drink, but that was it. There was just no other water at all. I wanted to die, it was so bad. Being thirsty like that is the worst thing in the world. I was ready to run out and take a bullet. Men who got shot in the stomach would scream for water. Some of them went crazy with the thirst. It was a living hell. We could see a big river flowing right in front of us, with all the water anybody could ever drink. But we couldn't get to it. Between us and the

river was a line of huge Soviet tanks with flamethrowers. Machine gun emplacements bristled like pincushions. Sharpshooters lined the high ground. They sent up flares at night. All we had was Model 38 infantry rifles and twenty-five bullets each. Still, most of my buddies went to the river. They couldn't take it. Not one of them made it back. They were all killed. So you see, when you're supposed to stay still, stay still."

He pulled out a tissue, blew his nose loudly, and examined the results before crumpling the tissue and throwing it into the wastebasket.

"It can be hard to wait for the flow to start," he said, "but when you have to wait, you have to wait. In the meantime, assume you're dead."

"You mean I should stay dead for now?" I asked.

"How's that?"

"YOU MEAN I SHOULD STAY DEAD FOR NOW?"

"That's it, sonny. 'Dying is the only way / For you to float free: / Nomonhan.' "

He went on talking about Nomonhan for another hour. We just sat there and listened. We had been ordered to "receive his teaching," but in a year of monthly visits to his place, he almost never had a "teaching" for us to "receive." He rarely performed divination. The one thing he talked about was the Nomonhan Incident: how a cannon shell blew off half the skull of the lieutenant next to him, how he leaped on a Soviet tank and burned it with a Molotov cocktail, how they cornered and shot a downed Soviet pilot. All his stories were interesting, even thrilling, but as with anything else, you hear them seven or eight times and they tend to lose some of their luster. Nor did he simply "tell" his stories. He screamed them. He could have been standing on a cliff edge on a windy day, shouting to us across a chasm. It was like watching an old Kurosawa movie from the very front row of a run-down theater. Neither of us could hear much of anything for a while after we left his house.

Still, we-or at least I- enjoyed listening to Mr. Honda's stories. Most of them were bloody, but coming from the mouth of a dying old man in a dirty old robe, the details of battle lost the ring of reality. They sounded more like fairy tales. Almost half a century earlier, Mr. Honda's unit had fought a ferocious battle over a barren patch of wilderness on the Manchurian-Mongolian border. Until I heard about it from Mr. Honda, I knew almost nothing about the battle of Nomonhan. And yet it had been a magnificent battle. Almost bare-handed, they had defied the superior Soviet mechanized forces, and they had been crushed. One unit after another had been smashed, annihilated. Some officers had, on their own initiative, ordered their troops to retreat to avoid annihilation; their superiors forced them to commit suicide. Most of the troops captured by the Soviets refused to participate in the postwar exchange of prisoners, because they were afraid of being tried for desertion in the face of the enemy. These men ended up contributing their bones to the Mongolian earth. Sent home with an honorable discharge after he lost his hearing, Mr. Honda became a practitioner of divination.

"It was probably all to the good," he said. "If my hearing hadn't been ruined, I probably would have died in the South Pacific. That's what happened to most of the troops who survived Nomonhan. Nomonhan was a great embarrassment for the Imperial Army, so they sent the survivors where they were most likely to be killed. The commanding officers who made such a mess of Nomonhan went on to have distinguished careers in central command. Some of the bastards even became politicians after the war. But the guys who fought their hearts out for them were almost all snuffed out."

"Why was Nomonhan such an embarrassment for the army?" I asked. "The troops all fought bravely, and a lot of them died, right? Why did the survivors have to be treated so badly?"

But Mr. Honda seemed not to hear my question. He stirred and rattled his divining sticks. "You'd better be careful of water," he said.

And so ended the day's session.

•

After my fight with Kumiko's father, we stopped going to Mr. Honda's. It was impossible for me to continue visiting him, knowing it was being paid for by my father-in-law, and we were not in any position to pay him ourselves. We could barely hold our heads above water in those days. Eventually, we forgot about Mr. Honda, just as most busy young people tend to forget about most old people.

•

In bed that night, I went on thinking about Mr. Honda. Both he and Malta Kano had spoken to me about water. Mr. Honda had warned me to be careful. Malta Kano had undergone austerities on the island of Malta in connection with her research on water. Perhaps it was a coincidence, but both of them had been deeply concerned about water. Now it was starting to worry me. I turned my thoughts to images of the battlefield at Nomonhan: the Soviet tanks and machine gun emplacements, and the river flowing beyond them. The unbearable thirst. In the darkness, I could hear the sound of the river.

"Toru," Kumiko said to me in a tiny voice, "are you awake?"

"Uh-huh."

"About the necktie. I just remembered. I took it to the cleaner's in December. It needed pressing. I guess I just forgot."

"December? Kumiko, that's over six months ago!"

"I know. And you know I never do anything like that, forgetting things. It was such a lovely necktie, too." She put her hand on my shoulder. "I took it to the cleaner's by the station. Do you think they still have it?"

"I'll go tomorrow. It's probably there."

"What makes you think so? Six months is a long time. Most cleaners will get rid of things that aren't claimed in three months. They can do that. It's the law. What makes you think it's still there?"

"Malta Kano said I'd find it. Somewhere outside the house."

I could feel her looking at me in the dark.

"You mean you believe in what she says?"

"I'm starting to."

"Pretty soon you and my brother might start seeing eye-to-eye," she said, a note of pleasure in her voice.

"We just might," I said.

I kept thinking about the Nomonhan battlefield after Kumiko fell asleep. The soldiers were all asleep there. The sky overhead was filled with stars, and millions of crickets were chirping. I could hear the river. I fell asleep listening to it flow.

5

Hooked on Lemon Drops

*

Flightless Bird and Waterless Well

After doing the breakfast dishes, I rode my bike to the cleaner's by the station. The owner—a thin man in his late forties, with deep wrinkles in his forehead—was listening to a tape of the Percy Faith orchestra on a boom box that had been set on a shelf. It was a large JVC, with some kind of extra woofers attached and a mound of cassette tapes standing by. The orchestra was performing “Tara's Theme,” making the most of its lush string section. The owner himself was in the back of the shop, whistling along with the music as he ran a steam iron over a shirt, his movements sharp and energetic. I approached the counter and announced with suitable apologies that I had brought a necktie in late last year and forgotten to pick it up. To his peaceful little world at nine-thirty in the morning, this must have been tantamount to the arrival of a messenger bearing terrible news in a Greek tragedy.

“No ticket, either, I suppose,” he said, in a strangely distant voice. He was talking not to me but to the calendar on the wall by the counter. The photo for June showed the Alps—a green valley, cows grazing, a hard-edged white cloud floating against Mont Blanc or the Matterhorn or something. Then he looked at me with an expression on his face that all but said, If you were going to forget the damned thing, you should have *forgotten* it! It was a direct and eloquent look.

“End of the year, huh? That's a toughie. We're talkin' more than six months ago. All right, I'll have a look, but don't expect me to find it.”

He switched off his iron, set it on the ironing board, and, whistling along with the theme from *A Summer Place*, started to rummage through the shelves in the back room.

Back in high school, I had taken my girlfriend to see *A Summer Place*. It starred Troy Donahue and Sandra Dee. We saw it in a revival theater on a double bill with Connie Francis's *Follow the Boys*. It had been pretty bad, as far as I could remember, but hearing the music now in a cleaner's, thirteen years later, I could bring back only good memories from that time.

“That was a blue polka-dot necktie?” asked the owner. “Name Okada?”

“That's it,” I said.

“You're in luck.”

•

As soon as I got home, I phoned Kumiko at work. “They had the tie,” I said.

“Incredible,” she said. “Good for you!”

It sounded artificial, like praise for a son bringing home good grades. This made me feel uneasy. I should have waited until her lunch break to phone.

“I'm so relieved,” she said. “But I've got someone on hold right now. Sorry. Could you call me back at noon?”

“That I will,” I said.

After hanging up, I went out to the veranda with the morning paper. As always, I lay on my stomach with the want ads spread out before me, taking all the time I needed to read them from one end to the other, the columns filled with incomprehensible codes and clues. The variety of professions in this world was amazing, each assigned its place amid the paper's neat rows, as on a new graveyard map.

As happened each morning, I heard the wind-up bird winding its spring in a treetop somewhere. I closed the paper, sat up with my back against a post, and looked at the garden. Soon the bird gave its rasping cry once more, a long creaking sort of sound that came from the top of the neighbor's pine tree. I strained to see through the branches, but there was no sign of

the bird, only its cry. As always. And so the world had its spring wound for the day.

Just before ten, it started to rain. Not a heavy rain. You couldn't really be sure it was raining, the drops were so fine, but if you looked hard, you could tell. The world existed in two states, raining and nonraining, and there should be a line of demarcation between the two. I remained seated on the veranda for a while, staring at the line that was supposed to be there.

What should I do with the time until lunch? Go for a swim at the nearby ward pool or to the alley to look for the cat? Leaning against the veranda post, watching the rain fall in the garden, I went back and forth between the two. Pool. Cat.

The cat won. Malta Kano had said that the cat was no longer in the neighborhood. But that morning I had an indefinable urge to go out and look for it. Cat hunting had become a part of my daily routine. And besides, Kumiko might be cheered somewhat to learn that I had given it a try. I put on my light raincoat. I decided not to take an umbrella. I put on my tennis shoes and left the house with the key and a few lemon drops in my coat pocket. I cut across the yard, but just as I set one hand on the cinder-block wall, a phone rang. I stood still, straining my ears, but I couldn't tell whether it was our phone or a neighbor's. The minute you leave your house, all phones sound alike. I gave up and climbed over the wall.

I could feel the soft grass through the thin soles of my tennis shoes. The alley was quieter than usual. I stood still for a while, holding my breath and listening, but I couldn't hear a thing. The phone had stopped ringing. I heard no bird cries or street noises. The sky was painted over, a perfect uniform gray. On days like this the clouds probably absorbed the sounds from the surface of the earth. And not just sounds. All kinds of things. Perceptions, for example.

Hands shoved into the pockets of my raincoat, I slipped down the narrow alley. Where clothes-drying poles jutted out into the lane, I squeezed sideways between the walls. I passed directly beneath the eaves of other houses. In this way I made my silent way down this passage reminiscent of an abandoned canal. My tennis shoes on the grass made no noise at all. The only real sound I heard on my brief journey was that of a radio playing in one house. It was tuned to a talk show discussing callers' problems. A middle-aged man was complaining to the host about his mother-in-law. From the snatches I caught, the woman was sixty-eight and crazy about horse racing. Once I was past the house, the sound of the radio began to fade until there was nothing left, as if what had gradually faded into nothingness was not only the sound of the radio but the middle-aged man and his horse-obsessed mother-in-law, both of whom must exist somewhere in the world.

I finally reached the vacant house. It stood there, hushed as ever.

(Against the background of gray, low-hanging clouds, its second-story storm shutters nailed shut, the house loomed as a dark, shadowy presence. It could have been a huge freighter caught on a reef one stormy night long ago and left to rot. If it hadn't been for the increased height of the grass since my last visit, I might have believed that time had stopped in this one particular place. Thanks to the long days of rain, the blades of grass glowed with a deep-green luster, and they gave off the smell of wild-ness unique to things that sink their roots into the earth. In the exact center of this sea of grass stood the bird sculpture, in the very same pose I had seen it in before, with its wings spread, ready to take off. This was one bird that could never take off, of course. I knew that, and the bird knew that. It would go on waiting where it had been set until the day it was carted off or smashed to pieces. No other possibilities existed for it to leave this garden. The only thing moving in there was a small white butterfly, fluttering across the grass some weeks behind season. It made uncertain progress, like a searcher who has forgotten what he was searching for. After five minutes of this fruitless hunt, the butterfly went off somewhere.)

Sucking on a lemon drop, I leaned against the chain-link fence and looked at the garden. There was no sign of the cat. There was no sign of anything. The place looked like a still, stagnant pool in which some enormous force had blocked the natural flow.

I felt the presence of someone behind me and whirled around. But there was no one. There was only the fence on the other side of the alley, and the small gate in the fence, the gate in which the girl had stood. But it was closed now, and in the yard was no trace of anyone. Everything was damp and silent. And there were the smells: Grass. Rain. My raincoat. The lemon drop under my tongue, half melted. They all came together in a single deep breath. I turned to survey my surroundings once more, but there was no one. Listening hard, I caught the muffled chop of a distant helicopter. People were up there, flying above the clouds. But even that sound drew off into the distance, and silence descended once again.

The chain-link fence surrounding the vacant house had a gate, also of chain link, not surprisingly. I gave it a tentative push. It opened with almost disappointing ease, as if it were urging me to come in. "No problem," it seemed to be telling me. "Just walk right in." I didn't have to rely on the detailed knowledge of the law that I had acquired over eight long years to know that it could be a very serious problem indeed. If a neighbor spotted me in the vacant house and reported me to the police, they would show up and question me. I would say I was looking for my cat; it had disappeared, and I was looking for it all over the neighborhood. They would demand to know my address and occupation. I would have to tell them I was out of work. That would make them all the more suspicious. They were probably nervous about left-wing terrorists or something, convinced that left-wing terrorists were on the move all over Tokyo, with hidden arsenals of guns and homemade bombs. They'd call Kumiko at her office to verify my story. She'd be upset.

Oh, what the hell. I went in, pulling the gate closed behind me. If something was going to happen, let it happen. If something *wanted* to happen, let it happen.

I crossed the garden, scanning the area. My tennis shoes on the grass were as soundless as ever. There were several low fruit trees, the names of which I did not know, and a generous stretch of lawn. It was all overgrown now, hiding everything. Ugly maypop vines had crawled all over two of the fruit trees, which looked as if they had been strangled to death. The row of osmanthus along the fence had been turned a ghastly white from a coating of insects' eggs. A stubborn little fly kept buzzing by my ear for a time.

Passing the stone statue, I walked over to a nested pile of white plastic lawn chairs under the eaves. The topmost chair was filthy, but the next one down was not bad. I dusted it off with my hand and sat on it. The overgrown weeds between here and the fence made it impossible for me to be seen from the alley, and the eaves sheltered me from the rain. I sat and whistled and watched the garden receiving its bounty of fine raindrops. At first I was unaware of what tune I was whistling, but then I realized it was the overture to Rossini's *Thieving Magpie*, the same tune I had been whistling when the strange woman called as I was cooking spaghetti.

Sitting here in the garden like this, with no other people around, looking at the grass and the stone bird, whistling a tune (badly), I had the feeling that I had returned to my childhood. I was in a secret place where no one could see me. This put me in a quiet mood. I felt like throwing a stone—a small stone would be OK—at some target. The stone bird would be a good one. I'd hit it just hard enough to make a little clunk. I used to play by myself a lot like that when I was a kid. I'd set up an empty can, back way off, and throw rocks until the can filled up. I could do it for hours. Just now, though, I didn't have any rocks at my feet. Oh, well. No place has everything you need.

I pulled up my feet, bent my knees, and rested my chin on my hand. Then I closed my eyes. Still no sounds. The darkness behind my closed eyelids was like the cloud-covered sky, but the gray was somewhat deeper. Every few minutes, someone would come and paint over the gray with a different-textured gray—one with a touch of gold or green or red. I was impressed with the variety of grays that existed. Human beings were so strange. All you had to do was sit still for ten minutes, and you could see this amazing variety of grays.

Browsing through my book of gray color samples, I started whistling again, without a

thought in my head.

“Hey,” said someone.

I snapped my eyes open. Leaning to the side, I stretched to see the gate above the weed tops. It was open. Wide open. Someone had followed me inside. My heart started pounding.

“Hey,” the someone said again. A woman’s voice. She stepped out from behind the statue and started toward me. It was the girl who had been sunbathing in the yard across the alley. She wore the same light-blue Adidas T-shirt and short pants. Again she walked with a slight limp. The one thing different from before was that she had taken off her sunglasses.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“Looking for the cat,” I said.

“Are you sure? It doesn’t look that way to me. You’re just sitting there and whistling with your eyes closed. It’d be kinda hard to find much of anything that way, don’t you think?”

I felt myself blushing.

“It doesn’t bother me,” she went on, “but somebody who doesn’t know you might think you were some kind of pervert.” She paused. “You’re not a pervert, are you?”

“Probably not,” I said.

She approached me and undertook a careful study of the nested lawn chairs, choosing one without too much dirt on it and doing one more close inspection before setting it on the ground and lowering herself into it.

“And your whistling’s terrible,” she said. “I don’t know the tune, but it had no melody at all. You’re not gay, are you?”

“Probably not,” I said. “Why?”

“Somebody told me gays are lousy whistlers. Is that true?”

“Who knows? It’s probably nonsense.”

“Anyway, I don’t care even if you are gay or a pervert or anything. By the way, what’s your name? I don’t know what to call you.”

“Toru Okada,” I said. She repeated my name to herself several times. “Not much of a name, is it?” she said.

“Maybe not,” I said. “I’ve always thought it sounded kind of like some prewar foreign minister: Toru Okada. See?”

“That doesn’t mean anything to me. I hate history. It’s my worst subject. Anyhow, never mind. Haven’t you got a nickname? Something easier than Toru Okada?”

I couldn’t recall ever having had a nickname. Never once in my life. Why was that? “No nickname,” I said. “Nothing? ‘Bear’? Or ‘Frog’?” “Nothing.”

“Gee,” she said. “Think of something.”

“Wind-up bird,” I said.

“Wind-up bird?” she asked, looking at me with her mouth open. “What is *that*?”

“The bird that winds the spring,” I said. “Every morning. In the tree-tops. It winds the world’s spring. *Creeeak*.” She went on staring at me.

I sighed. “It just popped into my head,” I said. “And there’s more. The bird comes over by my place every day and goes *Creeeak* in the neighbor’s tree. But nobody’s ever seen it.”

“That’s neat, I guess. So anyhow, you’ll be Mr. Wind-Up Bird. That’s not very easy to say, either, but it’s way better than Toru Okada.”

“Thank you very much.”

She pulled her feet up into the chair and put her chin on her knees. “How about your name?” I asked.

“May Kasahara. May ... like the month of May.”

“Were you born in May?”

“Do you have to ask? Can you imagine the confusion if somebody born in June was named May?”

“I guess you’re right,” I said. “I suppose you’re still out of school?”

"I was watching you for a long time," she said, ignoring my question.

"From my room. With my binoculars. I saw you go in through the gate. I keep a little pair of binoculars handy, for watching what goes on in the alley. All kinds of people go through there. I'll bet you didn't know that.

And not just people. Animals too. What were you doing here by yourself all that time?"

"Spacing out," I said. "Thinking about the old days. Whistling." May Kasahara bit a thumbnail.

"You're kinda weird," she said.

"I'm not weird. People do it all the time."

"Maybe so, but they don't do it in a neighbor's vacant house. You can stay in your own yard if all you want to do is space out and think about the old days and whistle." She had a point there.

"Anyhow, I guess Noboru Wataya never came home, huh?" I shook my head.

"And I guess you never saw him, either, after that?" I asked.

"No, and I was on the lookout for him, too: a brown-striped tiger cat. Tail slightly bent at the tip. Right?"

From the pocket of her short pants she took a box of Hope regulars land lit up with a match. After a few puffs, she stared right at me and said, "Your hair's thinning a little, isn't it?"

My hand moved automatically to the back of my head.

"Not there, silly," she said. "Your front hairline. It's higher than it should be, don't you think?"

"I never really noticed."

"Well, *I* did," she said. "That's where you're going to go bald. Your hairline's going to move up and up like this." She grabbed a handful of her own hair in the front and thrust her bare forehead in my face. "You'd better be careful."

I touched my hairline. Maybe she was right. Maybe it had receded somewhat. Or was it my imagination? Something new to worry about.

"What do you mean?" I asked. "How can I be careful?"

"You can't, I guess. There's nothing you can do. There's no way to prevent baldness. Guys who are going to go bald go bald. When their time comes, that's it: they just go bald. There's nothing you can do to stop it. They tell you you can keep from going bald with proper hair care, but that's bullshit. Look at the bums who sleep in Shinjuku Station. They've all got great heads of hair. You think they're washing it every day with Clinique or Vidal Sassoon or rubbing Lotion X into it? That's what the cosmetics makers will tell you, to get your money."

"I'm sure you're right," I said, impressed. "But how do you know so much about baldness?"

"I've been working part time for a wig company. Quite a while now. You know I don't go to school, and I've got all this time to kill. I've been doing surveys and questionnaires, that kind of stuff. So I know all about men losing their hair. I'm just loaded with information."

"Gee," I said.

"But you know," she said, dropping her cigarette butt on the ground and stepping on it, "in the company I work for, they won't let you say anybody's 'bald.' You have to say 'men with a thinning problem.' 'Bald' is discriminatory language. I was joking around once and suggested 'gentlemen who are follically challenged,' and boy, did *they* get mad! 'This is no laughing matter, young lady,' they said. They're so damned seerious. Did you know that? Everybody in the whole damned world is so damned serious."

I took out my lemon drops, popped one in my mouth, and offered one to May Kasahara. She shook her head and took out a cigarette.

"Come to think of it, Mr. Wind-Up Bird," she said, "you were unemployed. Are you still?"

“Sure am.”

“Are you serious about working?”

“Sure am.” No sooner had the words left my mouth than I began to wonder how true they were. “Actually, I’m not so sure,” I said. “I think I need time. Time to think. I’m not sure myself what I need. It’s hard to explain.”

Chewing on a nail, May Kasahara looked at me for a while. “Tell you what, Mr. Wind-Up Bird,” she said. “Why don’t you come to work with me one day? At the wig company. They don’t pay much, but the work’s easy, and you can set your own hours. What do you say? Don’t think about it too much, just do it. For a change of pace. It might help you figure out all kinds of things.”

She had a point there. “You’ve got a point there,” I said.

“Great!” she said. “Next time I go, I’ll come and get you. Now, where did you say your house is?”

“Hmm, that’s a tough one. Or maybe not. You just keep going and going down the alley, taking all the turns. On the left you’ll see a house with a red Honda Civic parked in back. It’s got one of those bumper stickers ‘Let There Be Peace for All the Peoples of the World.’ Ours is the next house, but there’s no gate opening on the alley. It’s just a cinder-block wall, and you have to climb over it. It’s about chin height on me.”

“Don’t worry. I can get over a wall that high, no problem.”

“Your leg doesn’t hurt anymore?”

She exhaled smoke with a little sighing kind of sound and said, “Don’t worry. It’s nothing. I limp when my parents are around because I don’t want to go to school. I’m faking. It just sort of turned into a habit. I do it even when nobody’s looking, when I’m in my room all by myself. I’m a perfectionist. What is it they say- ‘Fool yourself to fool others’? But anyhow, Mr. Wind-Up Bird, tell me, have you got guts?”

“Not really, no.”

“Never had ‘em?”

“No, I was never one for guts. Not likely to change, either.”

“How about curiosity?”

“Curiosity’s another matter. I’ve got some of that.”

“Well, don’t you think guts and curiosity are kind of similar?” said May Kasahara. “Where there’s guts there’s curiosity, and where there’s curiosity there’s guts. No?”

“Hmm, maybe they are kind of similar,” I said. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe they do overlap at times.”

“Times like when you sneak into somebody’s backyard, say.”

“Yeah, like that,” I said, rolling a lemon drop on my tongue. “When you sneak into somebody’s backyard, it does seem that guts and curiosity are working together. Curiosity can bring guts out of hiding at times, maybe even get them going. But curiosity usually evaporates. Guts have to go for the long haul. Curiosity’s like a fun friend you can’t really trust. It turns you on and then it leaves you to make it on your own-with whatever guts you can muster.”

She thought this over for a time. “I guess so,” she said. “I guess that’s one way to look at it.” She stood up and brushed off the dirt clinging to the seat of her short pants. Then she looked down at me. “Tell me, Mr. Wind-Up Bird, would you like to see the well?”

“The well?” I asked. The well?

“There’s a dried-up well here. I like it. Kind of. Want to see it?”

•

We cut through the yard and walked around to the side of the house. It was a round well, maybe four and a half feet in diameter. Thick planking, cut to shape and size, had been used

to cap the well, and two concrete blocks had been set on the round wooden cap to keep it in place. The well curb stood perhaps three feet high, and close by grew a single old tree, as if standing guard. It was a fruit tree, but I couldn't tell what kind.

Like most everything else connected with this house, the well looked as though it had been abandoned long before. Something about it felt as if it should be called "overwhelming numbness." Maybe when people take their eyes off them, inanimate objects become even more inanimate.

Close inspection revealed that the well was in fact far older than the objects that surrounded it. It had been made in another age, long before the house was built. Even the wooden cap was an antique. The well curb had been coated with a thick layer of concrete, almost certainly to strengthen a structure that had been built long before. The nearby tree seemed to boast of having stood there far longer than any other tree in the area.

I lowered a concrete block to the ground and removed one of the two half-moons that constituted the wooden cap. Hands on the edge of the well, I leaned over and looked down, but I could not see to the bottom. It was obviously a deep well, its lower half swallowed in darkness. I took a sniff. It had a slightly moldy smell.

"It doesn't have any water," said May Kasahara.

A well without water. A bird that can't fly. An alley with no exit. And-

May picked up a chunk of brick from the ground and threw it into the well. A moment later came a small, dry thud. Nothing more. The sound was utterly dry, desiccated, as if you could crumble it in your hands. I straightened up and looked at May Kasahara. "I wonder why it hasn't got any water. Did it dry up? Did somebody fill it in?"

She shrugged. "When people fill in a well, don't they fill it all the way to the top? There'd be no point in leaving a dry hole like this. Somebody could fall in and get hurt. Don't you think?"

"I think you're right," I said. "Something probably made the water dry up."

I suddenly recalled Mr. Honda's words from long before. "When you're supposed to go up, find the highest tower and climb to the top. When you're supposed to go down, find the deepest well and go down to the bottom." So now I had a well if I needed one.

I leaned over the edge again and looked down into the darkness, anticipating nothing in particular. So, I thought, in a place like this, in the middle of the day like this, there existed a darkness as deep as this. I cleared my throat and swallowed. The sound echoed in the darkness, as if someone else had cleared his throat. My saliva still tasted like lemon drops.

•

I put the cover back on the well and set the block atop it. Then I looked at my watch. Almost eleven-thirty. Time to call Kumiko during her lunch break.

"I'd better go home," I said.

May Kasahara gave a little frown. "Go right ahead, Mr. Wind-Up Bird," she said. "You fly on home."

When we crossed the yard, the stone bird was still glaring at the sky with its dry eyes. The sky itself was still filled with its unbroken covering of gray clouds, but at least the rain had stopped. May Kasahara tore off a fistful of grass and threw it toward the sky. With no wind to carry them, the blades of grass dropped to her feet.

"Think of all the hours left between now and the time the sun goes down," she said, without looking at me.

"True," I said. "Lots of hours."

On the Births of Kumiko Okada and Noboru W a t a y a

*

Raised as an only child, I find it difficult to imagine how grown siblings must feel when they come in contact with each other in the course of leading their independent lives. In Kumiko's case, whenever the topic of Noboru Wataya came up, she would get a strange look on her face, as if she had put some odd-tasting thing in her mouth by accident, but *exactly* what that look meant I had no way of knowing. In my own feelings toward her elder brother there was not a trace of anything positive. Kumiko knew this and thought it entirely reasonable. She herself was far from fond of the man. It was hard to imagine them ever speaking to each other had the blood relationship not existed between them. But in fact, they *were* brother and sister, which made things somewhat more complicated. After I had my argument with her father and ended all contact with her family, Kumiko had virtually no occasion to see Noboru Wataya. The argument had been a violent one. I haven't had many arguments in the course of my life- I'm just not the type- but once I do get going, I go all the way. And so my break with Kumiko's father had been complete. Afterward, when I had gotten everything off my chest that I needed to get off, anger was mysteriously absent. I felt only relief. I never had to see him again: it was as if a great burden that I had been carrying for a long time had been lifted from my shoulders. None of the rage or the hatred was left. I even felt a touch of sympathy for the difficulties he had faced in his life, however stupid and repulsive the shape of that life might appear to me. I told Kumiko that I would never see her parents again but she was free to visit them without me anytime she wanted. Kumiko made no attempt to see them. "Never mind," she said. "I wasn't all that crazy about visiting them anyway."

Noboru Wataya had been living with his parents at the time, but when the argument started between his father and me, he had simply withdrawn without a word to anyone. This hadn't taken me by surprise. I was a person of no interest to him. He did his best to avoid personal contact with me unless it was absolutely necessary. And so, when I stopped seeing Kumiko's parents, there was no longer any reason for me to see Noboru Wataya. Kumiko herself had no reason to make a point of seeing him. He was busy, she was busy, and they had never been that close to begin with.

Still, Kumiko would occasionally phone him at his campus office, and he would occasionally phone her at her company office (though never at our home). She would announce these contacts to me without going into detail about the substance of their conversations. I never asked, and she never volunteered the information unless it was necessary.

I didn't care to know what Kumiko and Noboru Wataya were talking about. Which is not to say that I resented the fact that they were talking. I just didn't get it. What was there for two such different human beings to say to each other? Or was it only through the special filter of the blood relationship that this came about?

•

Though brother and sister, Noboru Wataya and Kumiko were separated in age by nine years. Another factor behind the lack of any perceptible closeness between the two was Kumiko's having lived for several years with her father's family.

Kumiko and Noboru had not been the only children in the Wataya house. Between them there had been a sister, five years older than Kumiko. At the age of three, however, Kumiko had been sent from Tokyo to distant Niigata, to be raised for a time by her grandmother. Kumiko's parents later told her that this was done because she had been a sickly child and they thought she would benefit from the clean air of the countryside, but she never quite believed this. As far as she herself could remember, she had never been physically weak. She had never suffered from any major illnesses, and no one in her Niigata home seemed overly concerned about her health. "I'm sure it was just some kind of excuse," Kumiko once told me.

Her doubts had been reinforced by something she heard from a relative. Apparently, there had been a long-standing feud between Kumiko's mother and grandmother, and the decision to bring Kumiko to Niigata was the product of a truce they had concluded. By offering her up for a time, Kumiko's parents had quelled her grandmother's rage, and by having a grandchild in her possession, the grandmother had obtained concrete confirmation of her ties with her son (Kumiko's father). In other words, Kumiko had been a kind of hostage.

"Besides," Kumiko said to me, "they already had two other children. Their third one was no great loss to them. Not that they were planning to get rid of me: I think they just figured it wouldn't be too hard on such a young child to be sent away. They probably didn't give it much thought. It was just the easiest solution to the problem. Can you believe it? I don't know why, but they had absolutely no idea what something like that can do to a small child."

She was raised by her grandmother in Niigata from the age of three to six. Nor was there anything sad or twisted about the life she led in the country. Her grandmother was crazy about her, and Kumiko had more fun playing with her cousins, who were closer in age to herself, than with her own brother and sister. She was finally brought back to Tokyo the year she was to enter elementary school. Her parents had become nervous about the lengthening separation from their daughter, and they insisted on bringing her back before it was too late. In a sense, though, it was already too late. In the weeks following the decision to send her back, her grandmother became increasingly overwrought. She stopped eating and could hardly sleep. One minute she would be hugging and squeezing little Kumiko with all her might, and the next she would be slapping her arm with a ruler, hard enough to raise welts. One minute she would be saying she didn't want to let her go, that she would rather die than lose her, and the next she would tell her to go away, that she never wanted to see her again. In the foulest language imaginable, she would tell Kumiko what a terrible woman her mother was. She even tried to stab herself in the wrist with a pair of scissors. Kumiko could not understand what was happening around her. The situation was simply too much for her to comprehend.

What she did then was to shut herself off from the outer world. She closed her eyes. She closed her ears. She shut her mind down. She put an end to any form of thinking or of hoping. The next several months were a blank. She had no memory of anything that happened in that time. When she came out of it, she found herself in a new home. It was the home where she should have been all along. Her parents were there, her brother and her sister. But it was not *her home*. It was simply a *new environment*.

Kumiko became a difficult, taciturn child in these new surroundings. There was no one she could trust, no one she could depend upon unconditionally. Even in her parents' embrace, she never felt entirely at ease. She did not know their smell. It made her uneasy. She even hated it at times. In the family, it was only toward her sister that she began, with difficulty, to open up. Her parents despaired of ever breaking through to her; her brother hardly knew she existed. But her sister understood the confusion and loneliness that lay behind her stubborn moods. She stayed with Kumiko through it all, slept in the same room with her, talked with her, read to her, walked with her to school, helped her with her homework. If Kumiko spent hours huddled in the corner of her room in tears, the sister would be there, holding her. She did everything she could to find a way into Kumiko's heart. Had she not died from food poisoning the year after Kumiko returned from Niigata, the situation would have been very

different.

“If my sister had lived, things might have been better at home,” Kumiko said. “She was just a little girl, a sixth grader, but she was the heart of that household. Maybe if she hadn’t died, all of us would have been more normal than we are now. At least *I* wouldn’t be such a hopeless case. Do you see what I mean? I felt so guilty after that. Why hadn’t I died in my sister’s place? I was no good for anybody. I couldn’t make anybody happy. Why couldn’t I have been the one? My parents and brother knew exactly how I felt, but they said nothing to comfort me. Far from it. They’d talk about my dead sister every chance they got: how pretty she was, how smart, how much everybody liked her, what a thoughtful person she was, how well she played the piano. And then they made *me* take piano lessons! *Somebody* had to use the big grand piano after she died. I didn’t have the slightest interest in playing. I knew I could never play as well as she had played, and I didn’t need yet another way to demonstrate how inferior I was to her as a human being. I couldn’t take anyone’s place, least of all hers, and I didn’t want to try. But they wouldn’t listen to me. They just *wouldn’t listen*. So to this day, I hate the sight of a piano. I hate seeing anyone play.”

I felt tremendous anger toward her family when Kumiko told me this. For what they had done to her. For what they had failed to do for her. This was before we were married. We had known each other only a little over two months. It was a quiet Sunday morning, and we were in bed. She talked for a long time about her childhood, as if unraveling a tangled thread, pausing to assess the validity of each event as she brought it forth. It was the first time she told me so much about herself. I hardly knew anything about her family or her childhood until that morning. I knew that she was quiet, that she liked to draw, that she had long, beautiful hair, that she had two moles on her right shoulder blade. And that sleeping with me was her first sexual experience.

She cried a little as she spoke. I could understand why she would need to cry. I held her and stroked her hair. “If she had lived, I’m sure you would have loved her,” said Kumiko. “Everybody loved her. It was love at first sight.”

“Maybe so,” I said. “But you’re the one I happen to be in love with. It’s really very simple, you know. It’s just you and me. Your sister’s got nothing to do with it.”

For a while, Kumiko lay there, thinking. Seven-thirty Sunday morning: a time when everything sounds soft and hollow. I listened to the pigeons shuffling across my apartment roof, to someone calling a dog in the distance. Kumiko stared at a single spot on the ceiling for the longest time.

“Tell me,” she said at last, “do you like cats?”

“Crazy about ‘em,” I said. “Always had one when I was a kid. I played with it constantly, even slept with it.”

“Lucky you. I was dying to have a cat. But they wouldn’t let me. My mother hated them. Not once in my life have I managed to get something I really wanted. Not once. Can you believe it? You can’t understand what it’s like to live like that. When you get used to that kind of life-of never having anything you want-then you stop knowing what it is you want.” I took her hand. “Maybe it’s been like that for you till now. But you’re not a kid anymore. You have the right to choose your own life. You can start again. If you want a cat, all you have to do is choose a life in which you can have a cat. It’s simple. It’s your right... right?”

Her eyes stayed locked on mine. “Mmm,” she said. “Right.” A few months later, Kumiko and I were talking about marriage.

•

If the childhood that Kumiko spent in that house was warped and difficult, Noboru Wataya’s boyhood there was strangely distorted in another sense. The parents were mad for their only son, but they didn’t merely shower him with affection; they demanded certain

things of him as well. The father was convinced that the only way to live a full life in Japanese society was to earn the highest possible marks and to shove aside anyone and everyone standing in your path to the top. He believed this with absolute conviction.

It was shortly after I had married his daughter that I heard these very words from the man himself. All men are *not* created equal, he said. That was just some righteous-sounding nonsense they taught you in school. Japan might have the political structure of a democratic nation, but it was at the same time a fiercely carnivorous society of class in which the weak were devoured by the strong, and unless you became one of the elite, there was no point in living in this country. You'd just be ground to dust in the millstones. You had to fight your way up every rung of the ladder. This kind of ambition was entirely healthy. If people lost that ambition, Japan would perish. In response to my father-in-law's view, I offered no opinion. He was not looking for my opinion. He had merely been spouting his belief, a conviction that would remain unchanged for all eternity.

Kumiko's mother was the daughter of a high-ranking official. She had been raised in the finest Tokyo neighborhood, wanting for nothing, and she possessed neither the opinions nor the character to oppose her husband's opinions. As far as I could see, she had no opinion at all about anything that was not set directly in front of her (and in fact, she was extremely nearsighted). Whenever an occasion arose in which she needed an opinion on something in the wider world, she borrowed her husband's. If this had been all there was to her, she wouldn't have bothered anyone, but as is so often the case with such women, she suffered from an incurable case of pretentiousness. Lacking any internalized values of their own, such people can arrive at a standpoint only by adopting other people's standards or views. The only principle that governs their minds is the question "How do I look?" And so Mrs. Wataya became a narrow, high-strung woman whose only concerns were her husband's place in the government and her son's academic performance. Anything that failed to enter her narrow field of vision ceased to have meaning for her.

And so the parents pounded their questionable philosophy and their warped view of the world into the head of the young Noboru Wataya. They egged him on, providing him with the best tutors their money could buy. When he took top honors, they rewarded their son by buying him anything he wanted. His childhood was one of extreme material luxury, but when he entered the most sensitive and vulnerable phase of life, he had no time for girlfriends, no chance to go wild with other boys. He had to pour all his energies into maintaining his position as number one. Whether Noboru Wataya was pleased to live that way or not I do not know. Kumiko did not know. Noboru Wataya was not the sort of person to reveal his feelings: not to her, not to his parents, not to anyone. He had no choice anyway. It seems to me that certain patterns of thought are so simple and one-sided that they become irresistible. In any case, Noboru Wataya graduated from his elite private preparatory school, majored in economics at the University of Tokyo, and graduated from this top institution with top grades.

His father expected him to enter the government or a major corporation upon graduation from the university, but Noboru Wataya chose to remain in academe and become a scholar. He was no fool. He knew what he was best suited for: not the real world of group action but a world that called for the disciplined and systematic use of knowledge, that prized the individual skills of the intellect. He did two years of graduate study at Yale before returning to the graduate school at Tokyo. He followed his parents' promptings shortly thereafter and agreed to an arranged marriage, but that lasted no more than two years. After his divorce, he returned to his parents' home to live with them. By the time I first met him, Noboru Wataya was a fully developed oddity, a thoroughly disagreeable character.

About two years after I married Kumiko, Noboru Wataya published a big, thick book. It was an economics study full of technical jargon, and I couldn't understand a thing he was trying to say in it. Not one page made sense to me. I tried, but I couldn't make any headway because I found the writing indecipherable. I couldn't even tell whether this was because the

contents were so difficult or the writing itself was bad. People in the field thought it was great, though. One reviewer declared that it was “an entirely new kind of economics written from an entirely new perspective,” but that was as much as I could understand of the review itself. Soon the mass media began to introduce him as a “hero for a new age.” Whole books appeared, interpreting his book. Two expressions he had coined, “sexual economics” and “excretory economics,” became the year’s buzzwords. Newspapers and magazines carried feature sections on him as one of the intellectuals of the new age. I couldn’t believe that anyone who wrote these articles understood what Noboru Wataya was saying in his book. I had my doubts they had even opened it. But such things were of no concern to them. Noboru Wataya was young and single and smart enough to write a book that nobody could understand.

It made him famous. The magazines all came to him for critical pieces. He appeared on television to comment on political and economic questions. Soon he was a regular panel member on one of the political debate shows. Those who knew Noboru Wataya (including Kumiko and me) had never imagined him to be suited to such glamorous work. Everyone thought of him as the high-strung academic type interested in nothing but his field of specialization. Once he got a taste of the world of mass media, though, you could almost see him licking his chops. He was good. He didn’t mind having a camera pointed at him. If anything, he even seemed more relaxed in front of the cameras than in the real world. We watched his sudden transformation in amazement. The Noboru Wataya we saw on television wore expensive suits with perfectly matching ties, and eyeglass frames of fine tortoiseshell. His hair had been done in the latest style. He had obviously been worked on by a professional. I had never seen him exuding such luxury before. And even if he had been outfitted by the network, he wore the style with perfect ease, as if he had dressed that way all his life. Who was this man? I wondered, when I first saw him. Where was the real Noboru Wataya?

In front of the cameras, he played the role of Man of Few Words. When asked for an opinion, he would state it simply, clearly, and precisely. Whenever the debate heated up and everyone else was shouting, he kept his cool. When challenged, he would hold back, let his opponent have his say, and then demolish the person’s argument with a single phrase. He had mastered the art of delivering the fatal blow with a purr and a smile. On the television screen, he looked far more intelligent and reliable than the real Noboru Wataya. I’m not sure how he accomplished this. He certainly wasn’t handsome. But he was tall and slim and had an air of good breeding. In the medium of television, Noboru Wataya had found the place where he belonged. The mass media welcomed him with open arms, and he welcomed them with equal enthusiasm.

Meanwhile, I couldn’t stand the sight of him- in print or on TV. He was a man of talent and ability, to be sure. I recognized that much. He knew how to knock his opponent down quickly and effectively with the fewest possible words. He had an animal instinct for sensing the direction of the wind. But if you paid close attention to what he was saying or what he had written, you knew that his words lacked consistency. They reflected no single worldview based on profound conviction. His was a world that he had fabricated by combining several one-dimensional systems of thought. He could rearrange the combination in an instant, as needed. These were ingenious-even artistic-intellectual permutations and combinations. But to me they amounted to nothing more than a game. If there was any consistency to his opinions, it was the consistent lack of consistency, and if he had a worldview, it was a view that proclaimed his lack of a worldview. But these very absences were what constituted his intellectual assets. Consistency and an established worldview were excess baggage in the intellectual mobile warfare that flared up in the mass media’s tiny time segments, and it was his great advantage to be free of such things.

He had nothing to protect, which meant that he could concentrate all his attention on pure acts of combat. He needed only to attack, to knock his enemy down. Noboru Wataya was an

intellectual chameleon, changing his color in accordance with his opponent's, ad-libbing his logic for maximum effectiveness, mobilizing all the rhetoric at his command. I had no idea how he had acquired these techniques, but he clearly had the knack of appealing directly to the feelings of the mass audience. He knew how to use the kind of logic that moved the great majority. Nor did it even have to be logic: it had only to appear so, as long as it aroused the feelings of the masses.

Trotting out the technical jargon was another forte of his. No one knew what it meant, of course, but he was able to present it in such a way that you knew it was your fault if you didn't get it. And he was always citing statistics. They were engraved in his brain, and they carried tremendous persuasive power, but if you stopped to think about it afterward, you realized that no one had questioned his sources or their reliability.

These clever tactics of his used to drive me mad, but I was never able to explain to anyone exactly what upset me so. I was never able to construct an argument to refute him. It was like boxing with a ghost: your punches just swished through the air. There was nothing solid for them to hit. I was shocked to see even sophisticated intellectuals responding to him. It would leave me feeling strangely annoyed.

And so Noboru Wataya came to be seen as one of the most intelligent figures of the day. Nobody seemed to care about consistency anymore. All they looked for on the tube were the bouts of intellectual gladiators; the redder the blood they drew, the better. It didn't matter if the same person said one thing on Monday and the opposite on Thursday.

•

I first met Noboru Wataya when Kumiko and I decided to get married. I wanted to talk to him before I saw her father. I figured that as a man closer to my own age, he might be persuaded to smooth the way for me with his father.

"I don't think you should count on his help," Kumiko said to me, with apparent difficulty. "I can't explain it, exactly, but he's just not the type."

"Well, I'll have to meet him sooner or later," I said.

"I guess," said Kumiko.

"It's worth a try," I said. "You never know."

"I guess," said Kumiko. "Maybe."

On the phone, Noboru Wataya displayed little enthusiasm for the prospect of meeting me. If I insisted, he said, he could spare me half an hour. We decided to meet at a coffeehouse near Ochanomizu Station. He was just a college instructor at the time, long before he had written his book and long before his sartorial conversion. The pockets of his sports coat bulged from having had fists thrust into them too long. His hair was at least two weeks overdue for a trim. His mustard-color polo shirt clashed with his blue and gray tweed jacket. He had the look of the typical young assistant professor for whom money was an alien object. His eyes had that sleepy expression of someone who has just slipped out of the library after a day of research in the stacks, but there was a piercing, cold gleam in them too, if you looked closely.

After introducing myself, I said that I was planning to marry Kumiko in the near future. I tried to explain things as honestly as possible. I was working in a law firm, I said, but I knew this was not the right job for me. I was still searching for myself. For such a person to risk marriage might seem to be a reckless act, but I loved his sister, I said, and I believed I could make her happy. The two of us could give each other strength and comfort.

My words appeared lost on Noboru Wataya. He sat with his arms folded, listening in silence. Even after I finished my little speech, he remained perfectly still. He seemed to be thinking about something else.

I had felt awkward in his presence from the start and assumed this was because of the

situation. Anybody would feel awkward telling a total stranger, "I want to marry your sister." But as I sat there across from him, an unpleasant feeling began to well up inside me. It was like having some kind of sour-smelling, alien gunk growing in the pit of your stomach. Not that there was anything in particular about what he said or did that rubbed me the wrong way. It was his face: the face of Noboru Wataya itself. It gave me the intuitive sense that it was covered over with a whole other layer of something. Something wrong. It was not his real face. I couldn't shake off this feeling.

I wanted to get the hell out of there. I actually considered getting up and leaving, but I had to see things through to the end. I stayed there, sipping my lukewarm coffee and waiting for him to say something.

When he spoke, it was as if he were deliberately setting the volume of his voice on low to conserve energy. "To tell you the truth," he said, "I can neither understand nor care about what you have been telling me. The things I care about are of an entirely different order, things that I suspect *you* can neither understand nor care about. To state my conclusion as concisely as possible, if you wish to marry Kumiko and she wishes to marry you, I have neither the right nor any reason to stand in your way. Therefore, I shall not stand in your way. I wouldn't even think of doing so. But don't expect anything further from me, either. And most important, don't expect me to waste any more time on this matter than I already have."

He looked at his watch and stood up. His declaration had been concise and to the point. It suffered from neither excess nor omission. I understood with perfect clarity both what he wanted to say and what he thought of me.

And so we parted that day.

After Kumiko and I were married, a number of occasions arose in which it was necessary for Noboru Wataya and me, as brothers-in-law, to exchange words- if not to engage in actual conversation. As he had suggested, there was no common ground between us, and so however much we might speak words in each other's vicinity, this could never develop into anything that could be called a conversation. It was as though we were speaking to each other in different languages. If the Dalai Lama were on his deathbed and the jazz musician Eric Dolphy were to try to explain to him the importance of choosing one's engine oil in accordance with changes in the sound of the bass clarinet, that exchange might have been a touch more worthwhile and effective than my conversations with Noboru Wataya.

I rarely suffer lengthy emotional distress from contact with other people. A person may anger or annoy me, but not for long. I can distinguish between myself and another as beings of two different realms. It's a kind of talent (by which I do not mean to boast: it's not an easy thing to do, so if you can do it, it is a kind of talent-a special power). When someone gets on my nerves, the first thing I do is transfer the object of my unpleasant feelings to another domain, one having no connection with me. Then I tell myself, Fine, I'm feeling bad, but I've put the source of these feelings into another zone, away from here, where I can examine it and deal with it later in my own good time. In other words, I put a freeze on my emotions. Later, when I thaw them out to perform the examination, I do occasionally find my emotions still in a distressed state, but that is rare. The passage of time will usually extract the venom from most things and render them harmless. Then, sooner or later, I forget about them.

In the course of my life so far, I've been able to keep my world in a relatively stable state by avoiding most useless troubles through activation of this emotional management system. That I have succeeded in maintaining such an effective system all this time is a matter of some pride to me.

When it came to Noboru Wataya, though, my system refused to function. I was unable simply to shove Noboru Wataya into a domain having no connection with me. And that fact itself annoyed the hell out of me. Kumiko's father was an arrogant, unpleasant man, to be sure, but finally he was a small-minded character who had lived by clinging to a simple set of narrow beliefs. I could forget about someone like that. But not Noboru Wataya. He knew

what kind of a man he was. And he had a pretty good idea of what made me tick as well. If he had felt like it, he could have crushed me until there was nothing left. The only reason he hadn't was that he didn't give a damn about me. I wasn't worth the time and energy it would have taken to crush me. And that's what got me about him. He was a despicable human being, an egoist with nothing inside him. But he was a far more capable individual than I was.

After that first meeting of ours, I had a bad taste in my mouth that wouldn't go away. I felt as if someone had force-fed me a clump of foul-smelling bugs. Spitting them out did no good: I could still feel them inside my mouth. Day after day, Noboru Wataya was all I could think about. I tried going to concerts and movies. I even went to a baseball game with the guys from the office. I drank, and I read the books that I had been waiting to read when I could find the time. But Noboru Wataya was always there, arms folded, looking at me with those malignant eyes of his, threatening to suck me in like a bottomless swamp. This set my nerves on edge and sent tremors through the ground on which I stood.

The next time I saw her, Kumiko asked me my impressions of her brother. I wasn't able to tell her honestly. I wanted to ask her about the mask he wore and about the twisted "something" that lay behind it. I wanted to tell her everything I had thought about this brother of hers. But I said nothing. I felt that these were things I would never be able to convey to her, that if I couldn't express myself clearly I shouldn't express myself at all—not now.

"He's ... different, that's for sure," I said. I wanted to add something to this, but I couldn't find the words. Nor did she press me for more. She simply nodded in silence.

My feelings toward Noboru Wataya never changed after that. He continued to set my nerves on edge in the same way. It was like a persistent low-grade fever. I never had a television in the house, but by some uncanny coincidence, whenever I glanced at a TV somewhere, he would be on it, making some pronouncement. If I flipped through the pages of a magazine in a doctor's waiting room, there would be a picture of Noboru Wataya, with an article he had written. I felt as if Noboru Wataya were lying in wait for me just around every corner in the known world.

OK, let's face it. I hated the guy.

7

The Happy Cleaners

*

And Kano Makes Her Entrance

I took a blouse and skirt of Kumiko's to the cleaner's by the station. Normally, I brought our laundry to the cleaner's around the corner from us, not because I preferred it but because it was closer. Kumiko sometimes used the station cleaner's in the course of her commute. She'd drop something off in the morning on her way to the office and pick it up on the way home. This place, was a little more expensive, but they did a better job than the neighborhood cleaner's, according to Kumiko. And her better dresses she would always bring there. Which is why on that particular day I decided to take my bike to the station. I figured she would prefer to have her clothes done there.

I left the house carrying Kumiko's blouse and skirt and wearing a pair of thin green cotton pants, my usual tennis shoes, and the yellow Van Halen promotional T-shirt that Kumiko had received from a record company. The owner of the shop had his JVC boom box turned up loud, as he had on my last trip. This morning it was an Andy Williams tape. "Hawaiian Wedding Song" was just ending as I walked in, and "Canadian Sunset" started. Whistling happily to the tune, the owner was writing in a notebook with a ballpoint pen, his movements as energetic as before. In the pile of tapes on the shelf, I spotted such names as Sergio Mendes, Bert Kaempfert, and 101 Strings. So he was an easy-listenin' freak. It suddenly occurred to me that true believers in hard-driving jazz-Albert Ayler, Don Cherry, Cecil Taylor-could never become owners of cleaning shops in malls across from railroad stations. Or maybe they could. They just wouldn't be happy cleaners.

When I put the green floral-pattern blouse and sage-colored skirt on the counter, he spread them out for a quick inspection, then wrote on the receipt, "Blouse and Skirt." His writing was clear and carefully formed. I like cleaners who write clearly. And if they like Andy Williams, so much the better.

"Mr. Okada, right?" I said he was right. He wrote in my name, tore out the carbon copy, and gave it to me. "They'll be ready next Tuesday, so don't forget to come and get them this time. Mrs. Okada's?"

"Uh-huh."

"Very pretty," he said.

A dull layer of clouds filled the sky. The weather forecast had predicted rain. The time was after nine-thirty, but there were still plenty of men with briefcases and folded umbrellas hurrying toward the station steps. Late commuters. The morning was hot and humid, but that made no difference to these men, all of whom were properly dressed in suits and ties and black shoes. I saw lots of men my age, but not one of them wore a Van Halen T-shirt. Each wore his company's lapel pin and clutched a copy of the *Nikkei News* under his arm. The bell rang, and a number of them dashed up the stairs. I hadn't seen men like this for a long time.

Heading home on my bike, I found myself whistling "Canadian Sunset."

•

Malta Kano called at eleven o'clock. "Hello. I wonder if this might possibly be the home of Mr. Toru Okada?" she asked.

"Yes, this is Toru Okada." I knew it was Malta Kano from the first hello.

"My name is Malta Kano. You were kind enough to see me the other day. Would you happen to have any plans for this afternoon?"

None, I said. I had no more plans for the afternoon than a migrating bird has collateral assets.

"In that case, my younger sister, Kano, will come to visit you at one o'clock."

"Kano?" I asked in a flat voice.

"Yes," said Malta Kano. "I believe I showed you her photograph the other day."

"I remember her, of course. It's just that-"

"Her name is Kano. She will come to visit you as my representative. Is one o'clock a good time for you?"

"Fine," I said.

"She'll be there," said Malta Kano, and hung up.

Kano?

I vacuumed the floors and straightened the house. I tied our old newspapers in a bundle and threw them in a closet. I put scattered cassette tapes back in their cases and lined them up by the stereo. I washed the things piled in the kitchen. Then I washed myself: shower, shampoo, clean clothes. I made fresh coffee and ate lunch: ham sandwich and hard-boiled

egg. I sat on the sofa, reading the *Home Journal* and wondering what to make for dinner. I marked the recipe for Seaweed and Tofu Salad and wrote the ingredients on a shopping list. I turned on the FM radio. Michael Jackson was singing “Billy Jean.” I thought about the sisters Malta Kano and Kano. What names for a couple of sisters! They sounded like a comedy team. Malta Kano. Kano.

My life was heading in new directions, that was certain. The cat had run away. Strange calls had come from a strange woman. I had met an odd girl and started visiting a vacant house. Noboru Wataya had raped Kano. Malta Kano had predicted I’d find my necktie. Kumiko had told me I didn’t have to work.

I turned off the radio, returned the *Home Journal* to the bookshelf, and drank another cup of coffee.

•

Kano rang the doorbell at one o’clock on the dot. She looked exactly like her picture: a small woman in her early to mid-twenties, the quiet type. She did a remarkable job of preserving the look of the early sixties. She wore her hair in the bouffant style I had seen in the photograph, the ends curled upward. The hair at the forehead was pulled straight back and held in place by a large, glittering barrette. Her eyebrows were sharply outlined in pencil, mascara added mysterious shadows to her eyes, and her lipstick was a perfect re-creation of the kind of color popular back then. She looked ready to belt out “Johnny Angel” if you put a mike in her hand.

She dressed far more simply than she made herself up. Practical and businesslike, her outfit had nothing idiosyncratic about it: a white blouse, a green tight skirt, and no accessories to speak of. She had a white patent-leather bag tucked under her arm and wore sharp-pointed white pumps. The shoes were tiny. Their heels thin and sharp as a pencil lead, they looked like a doll’s shoes. I almost wanted to congratulate her on having made it this far on them.

So this was Kano. I showed her in, had her sit on the sofa, warmed the coffee, and served her a cup. Had she eaten lunch yet? I asked. She looked hungry to me. No, she said, she had not eaten.

“But don’t bother about me,” she hastened to add, “I don’t eat much of anything for lunch.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. “It’s nothing for me to fix a sandwich. Don’t stand on ceremony. I make snacks and things all the time. It’s no trouble at all.”

She responded with little shakes of the head. “It’s very kind of you to offer, but I’m fine, really. Don’t bother. A cup of coffee is more than enough.”

Still, I brought out a plate of cookies just in case. Kano ate four of them with obvious pleasure. I ate two and drank my coffee.

She seemed somewhat more relaxed after the cookies and coffee. “I am here today as the representative of my elder sister, Malta Kano,” she said. “ is not my real name, of course. My real name is Setsuko. I took the name when I began working as my sister’s assistant. For professional purposes. is the ancient name for the island of Crete, but I have no connection with Crete. I have never been there. My sister Malta chose the name to go with her own. Have you been to the island of Crete, by any chance, Mr. Okada?”

Unfortunately not, I said. I had never been to Crete and had no plans to visit it in the near future.

“I would like to go there sometime,” said Kano, nodding, with a deadly serious look on her face. “Crete is the Greek island closest to Africa. It’s a large island, and a great civilization flourished there long ago. My sister Malta has been to Crete as well. She says it’s a wonderful place. The wind is strong, and the honey is delicious. I love honey.” I nodded. I’m not that crazy about honey.

“I came today to ask you a favor,” said Kano. “I’d like to take a sample of the water in your house.”

“The water?” I asked. “You mean the water from the faucet?”

“That would be fine,” she said. “And if there happens to be a well nearby, I would like a sample of that water also.”

“I don’t think so. I mean, there is a well in the neighborhood, but it’s on somebody else’s property, and it’s dry. It doesn’t produce water anymore.”

Kano gave me a complicated look. “Are you sure?” she asked. “Are you sure it doesn’t have any water?”

I recalled the dry thud that the chunk of brick had made when the girl threw it down the well at the vacant house. “Yes, it’s dry, all right. I’m very sure.”

“I see,” said Kano. “That’s fine. I’ll just take a sample of the water from the faucet, then, if you don’t mind.”

I showed her to the kitchen. From her white patent-leather bag she removed two small bottles of the type that might be used for medicine. She filled one with water and tightened the cap with great care. Then she said she wanted to take a sample from the line supplying the bathtub. I showed her to the bathroom. Undistracted by all the underwear and stockings that Kumiko had left drying in there, Kano turned on the faucet and filled the other bottle. After capping it, she turned it upside down to make certain it didn’t leak. The bottle caps were color coded: blue for the bath water, and green for the kitchen water.

Back on the living room sofa, she put the two vials into a small plastic freezer bag and sealed the zip lock. She placed the bag carefully in her white patent-leather bag, the metal clasp of which closed with a dry click. Her hands moved with practiced efficiency. She had obviously done this many times before.

“Thank you very much,” said Kano.

“Is that all?” I asked.

“Yes, for today,” she said. She smoothed her skirt, slipped her bag under her arm, and made as if to stand up.

“Wait a minute,” I said, with some confusion. I hadn’t been expecting her to leave so suddenly. “Wait just a minute, will you, please? My wife wants to know what’s happened with the cat. It’s been gone for almost two weeks now. If you know anything at all, I’d like you to share it with me.”

Still clutching the white bag under her arm, Kano looked at me for a moment, then she gave a few quick nods. When she moved her head, the curled-up ends of her hair bobbed with an early-sixties lightness. Whenever she blinked, her long fake eyelashes moved slowly up and down, like the long-handled fans operated by slaves in movies set in ancient Egypt.

“To tell you the truth, my sister says that this will be a longer story than it seemed at first.”

“A longer story than it seemed?”

The phrase “a longer story” brought to mind a tall stake set in the desert, where nothing else stood as far as the eye could see. As the sun began to sink, the shadow of the stake grew longer and longer, until its tip was too far away to be seen by the naked eye.

“That’s what she says,” Kano continued. “This story will be about more than the disappearance of a cat.”

“I’m confused,” I said. “All we’re asking you to do is help us find the cat. Nothing more. If the cat’s dead, we want to know that for sure. Why does it have to be ‘a longer story’? I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I,” she said. She brought her hand up to the shiny barrette on her head and pushed it back a little. “But please put your faith in my sister. I’m not saying that she knows everything. But if she says there will be a longer story, you can be sure there will be a longer story.”

I nodded without saying anything. There was nothing more I could say.

Looking directly into my eyes and speaking with a new formality, Creta Kano asked, “Are you busy, Mr. Okada? Do you have any plans for the rest of the afternoon?” No, I said, I had no plans.

“Would you mind, then, if I told you a few things about myself?” Creta Kano asked. She put the white patent-leather bag she was holding down on the sofa and rested her hands, one atop the other, on her tight green skirt, at the knees. Her nails had been done in a lovely pink color. She wore no rings.

“Please,” I said. “Tell me anything you’d like.” And so the flow of my life-as had been foretold from the moment Creta Kano rang my doorbell-was being led in ever stranger directions.

8

Kano’s Long Story

*

An Inquiry into the Nature of Pain

“I was born on May twenty-ninth,” Kano began her story, “and the night of my twentieth birthday, I resolved to take my own life.”

I put a fresh cup of coffee in front of her. She added cream and gave it a languid stir. No sugar. I drank my coffee black, as always. The clock on the shelf continued its dry rapping on the walls of time.

Kano looked hard at me and said, “I wonder if I should begin at the beginning-where I was born, family life, that kind of thing.”

“Whatever you like. It’s up to you. Whatever you find most comfortable,” I said.

“I was the third of three children,” she said. “Malta and I have an older brother. My father ran his own clinic in Kanagawa Prefecture. The family had nothing you could call domestic problems. I grew up in an ordinary home, the kind you can find anywhere. My parents were very serious people who believed strongly in the value of hard work. They were rather strict with us, but it seems to me they also gave us a fair amount of autonomy where little things were concerned. We were well off, but my parents did not believe in giving their children extra money for frills. I suppose I had a rather frugal upbringing.

“Malta was five years older than I. There had been something different about her from the beginning. She was able to guess things. She’d know that the patient in room so-and-so had just died, or exactly where they could find a lost wallet, or whatever. Everybody enjoyed this, at first, and often found it useful, but soon it began to bother my parents. They ordered her never to talk about ‘things that did not have a clear basis in fact’ in the presence of other people. My father had his position as head of the hospital to think about. He didn’t want people hearing that his daughter had supernatural powers. Malta put a lock on her mouth after that. Not only did she stop talking about ‘things that did not have a clear basis in fact,’ but she rarely joined in even the most ordinary conversations.

“To me, though, she opened her heart. We grew up very close. She would say, ‘Don’t ever

tell anybody I told you this,' and then she'd say something like, 'There's going to be a fire down the street' or 'Auntie So-and-so in Setagaya is going to get worse.' And she was always right. I was still just a little girl, so I thought it was great fun. It never occurred to me to be frightened or to find it eerie. Ever since I can remember, I would always follow my big sister around and expect to hear her 'messages.'

"These special powers of hers grew stronger as she grew older, but she did not know how to use or nurture them, and this caused her a great deal of anguish. There was no one she could go to for advice, no one she could look up to for guidance. This made her a very lonely teenager. She had to solve everything by herself. She had to find all the answers herself. In our home, she was unhappy. There was never a time when she could find peace in her heart. She had to suppress her own powers and keep them hidden. It was like growing a large, powerful plant in a little pot. It was unnatural. It was wrong. All she knew was that she had to get out of there as soon as possible. She believed that somewhere there was a world that was right for her, a way of life that was right for her. Until she graduated from high school, though, she had to keep herself in check.

"She was determined not to go to college, but rather to go abroad after graduating from high school. My parents had lived a very ordinary life, of course, and they were not prepared to let her do this. So my sister worked hard to raise the money she would need, and then she ran away. The first place she went to was Hawaii. She lived on Kauai for two years. She had read somewhere that Kauai's north shore had an area with springs that produced marvelous water. Already, back then, my sister had a profound interest in water. She believed that human existence was largely controlled by the elements of water. Which is why she went to live on Kauai. At the time, there was still a hippie commune in the interior of the island.

She lived as a member of the commune. The water there had a great influence on her spiritual powers. By taking that water into her body, she was able to attain a 'greater harmony' between her powers and her physical being. She wrote to me, telling me how wonderful this was, and her letters made me very happy. But soon the area could no longer satisfy her. True, it was a beautiful, peaceful land, and the people there sought only spiritual peace, free of material desires, but they were too dependent on sex and drugs. My sister did not need these things. After two years on Kauai, she left.

"From there she went to Canada, and after traveling around the northern United States, she continued on to Europe. She sampled the water everywhere she went and succeeded in finding marvelous water in several places, but none of it was the perfect water. So she kept traveling. Whenever she ran out of money, she would do something like fortune-telling. People would reward her for helping them find lost things or missing persons. She would have preferred not to take the money. Powers bestowed by heaven should not be exchanged for worldly goods. At the time, though, it was the only way she could keep herself alive. People heard about her divination everywhere she went. It was easy for her to make money. She even helped the police with an investigation in England. A little girl was missing, and she found where the body had been hidden. She also found the murderer's glove nearby. The man was arrested and confessed. It was in all the papers. I'll show you the clippings sometime. Anyhow, she went on wandering through Europe like this until she ended up in Malta. Close to five years had gone by since her departure from Japan, and this place turned out to be her destination in her search for water. I suppose she must have told you about this herself?"

I nodded.

"All the time she was wandering through the world, Malta would send me letters. Of course, there were times when she couldn't manage to write, but almost every week I would receive a long letter from her about where she was and what she was doing. We were still very close. Even over long distances, we were able to share our feelings with each other through her letters. And what wonderful letters they were! If you could read them, you'd see what a wonderful person she is. Through her letters, I was able to encounter so many different

worlds, so many interesting people! Her letters gave me such encouragement! They helped me grow. For that, I will always be deeply grateful to my sister. I don't negate what she did for me in any way. But finally, letters are just letters. When I was in my most difficult teenage years, when I needed my sister more than ever, she was always somewhere far away. I could not stretch out my hand and find her there next to me. In our family, I was all alone. Isolated. My teen years were filled with pain- and later I will tell you more about that pain. There was no one I could go to for advice. In that sense, I was just as lonely as Malta had been. If she had been near me then, my life would have been different from what it is today. She would have given me words of advice and encouragement and salvation. But what's the point of bringing such things up now? Just as Malta had to find her own way by herself, I had to find my own way by myself. And when I turned twenty, I decided to kill myself."

Creta Kano took her cup and drank her remaining coffee. "What delicious coffee!" she said.

"Thanks," I said, as casually as possible. "Can I offer you something to eat? I boiled some eggs a little while ago."

After some hesitation, she said she would have one. I brought eggs and salt from the kitchen and poured her more coffee. With no sense of urgency, Kano and I set about peeling and eating our eggs and drinking coffee. While we were doing this, the phone rang, but I didn't answer it. After fifteen or sixteen rings, it stopped. All that time, Kano seemed unaware of the ringing.

When she finished her egg, Kano took a small handkerchief from her white patent-leather bag and wiped her mouth. Then she tugged at the hem of her skirt.

"Once I had decided to kill myself, I wanted to leave a note behind. I sat at my desk for an hour, trying to write down my reasons for dying. I wanted to make it clear that no one else was to blame, that the reasons were all inside me. I didn't want my family feeling responsible for something that was not their fault.

"But I could not finish the note. I tried over and over, but each new version seemed worse than the last. When I read what I had written, it sounded foolish, even comical. The more serious I tried to make it, the more ridiculous it came out. In the end, I decided not to write anything at all.

"It was a very simple matter, I felt. I was disappointed with my life. I could no longer endure the many kinds of pain that my life continued to cause me. I had endured the pain for twenty years. My life had been nothing but an unremitting source of pain. But I had tried to bear it as best I could. I have absolute confidence in the validity of my efforts to bear the pain. I can declare here with genuine pride that my efforts were second to none. I was not giving up without a fight. But the day I turned twenty, I reached a simple conclusion: life was not worth it. Life was not worth continuing such a struggle."

She stopped speaking and spent some time aligning the corners of the white handkerchief on her lap. When she looked down, her long false eyelashes cast gentle shadows on her face.

I cleared my throat, I felt I ought to say something, but I didn't know what to say, and so I kept silent. In the distance, I heard the wind-up bird cry.

"The pain was what caused me to decide to die," said Kano. "And when I say 'pain,' that is exactly what I mean. Nothing mental or metaphorical, but physical pain, pure and simple. Plain, ordinary, direct, physical-and, for that reason, all the more intense-pain: headache, toothache, menstrual cramps, lower back pain, stiff shoulders, fever, muscle ache, burns, frostbite, sprains, fractures, blows to the body. All my life I have experienced physical pain with far greater frequency and intensity than others. Take my teeth, for example. They seemed to have some inborn defect. They would give me pain from one end of the year to the other. No matter how carefully I brushed, or how many times a day, or how strictly I avoided sweets, it did no good. All my efforts ended in cavities. To make matters worse, anesthetics seemed to have no effect on me. Going to the dentist was always a nightmare. The pain was

beyond describing. It scared me to death. And then my terrible periods began. They were incredibly heavy. For a week at a time, I would be in such pain, it was as if someone were twisting a drill inside me. My head would throb. You probably can't imagine what it was like, Mr. Okada, but the pain would bring tears to my eyes. For a week out of every month, I would be tortured by this unbearable pain.

"If I boarded a plane, my head would feel as if it were splitting open from the changes in air pressure. The doctor said it had something to do with the structure of my ears, that this sort of thing happens if the inner ear has a shape that is sensitive to pressure changes. The same thing often happened to me on elevators. I can't take elevators in tall buildings. The pain is so intense, it feels as if my head is going to split open in several places and the blood gush out. And then there was my stomach. At least once a week it would give me such sharp, piercing pain that I couldn't get up in the morning. The doctors could never find a cause. Some suggested it was mental. But even if it was, the pain still hurt. As much as I was suffering, though, I could not stay home from school. If I had skipped school every time something hurt me, I would never have gone at all.

"Whenever I bumped into something, it would leave a bruise on my body. Looking at myself in the bathroom mirror always made me want to cry. My body was covered with so many dark bruises I looked like a rotten apple. I hated to let anyone see me in a bathing suit. Ever since I can remember, I've hardly ever gone swimming for that reason. Another problem I had was the difference in the size of my feet. Whenever I bought new shoes, the larger foot would be in terrible pain until the shoe was broken in.

"Because of all these problems, I almost never did sports. In junior high school, my friends once dragged me to an ice-skating rink. I fell and hurt my hip so badly that afterward I would get a terrible ache there every winter. It felt as if I had been jabbed with a big, thick needle. Any number of times, I fell over trying to get up from a chair.

"I suffered from constipation as well. A bowel movement every few days would be nothing but pain for me. And my shoulders would stiffen up terribly. The muscles would tighten until they were literally as hard as a rock. It was so painful, I couldn't stand up, but lying down was no help, either. I imagined that my suffering must be much like that of a Chinese punishment I had read about. They would stuff the person in a box for several years. When my shoulders were at their worst, I could hardly breathe.

"I could go on and on listing all the various pains I have suffered in my life, but it would only bore you, Mr. Okada, so I will just leave it at this. What I want to convey to you is the fact that my body was a virtual sample book of pain. I experienced every pain imaginable. I began to think I had been cursed, that life was so unfair. I might have been able to go on bearing the pain if the other people in the world had had to live the way I did, but they didn't, and I couldn't. Pain was not something that was dealt out fairly. I tried asking people about pain, but nobody knew what real pain was. The majority of people in the world live without feeling much pain—at least on a daily basis. When this finally hit me (I had just entered junior high school at the time), it made me so sad I couldn't stop crying. Why me? Why did I have to be the one to bear such a terrible burden? I wanted to die right then and there.

"But at the same time, another thought came to me. This could not go on forever. One morning I would wake up and the pain would have disappeared—suddenly, with no explanation—and a whole new and peaceful life without pain would open up for me. It was not a thought in which I could place a great deal of faith, however.

"And so I revealed these thoughts of mine to my sister. I told her that I didn't want to go on living in such pain: what was I to do? After she thought about it for a while, she said this: There is definitely something wrong with you, I'm sure. But I don't know what it is. And I don't know what you should do about it. I don't have the power yet to make such judgments. All I know is that you should at least wait until you're twenty. Bear it until you turn twenty, and then make your decision. That would be the best thing.'

“This was how I decided to go on living until I was twenty. But no matter how much time went by, the situation did not improve. Far from it. The pain became even more intense. This taught me only one thing: As the body develops, the volume of pain increases proportionately.’ I endured the pain, however, for eight years. I went on living all that time, trying to see only the good side of life. I didn’t complain to anyone. I strove to keep on smiling, even when the pain was at its worst. I disciplined myself always to present an exterior of calm when the pain was so intense that I could hardly go on standing. Crying and complaining could not reduce the pain; it could only make me more miserable than ever. As a result of my efforts, people loved me. They saw me as a quiet, good-natured girl. I had the confidence of grown-ups and the friendship of people my own age. I might have had a perfect life, a perfect adolescence, if it hadn’t been for the pain. But it was always there. It was like my shadow. If I forgot about it for an instant, the pain would attack yet another part of my body.

“In college, I found a boyfriend, and in the summer of my freshman year I lost my virginity. Even this—as I could have predicted—gave me only pain. An experienced girlfriend of mine assured me that it would stop hurting when I got used to it, but it never did. Whenever I slept with him, the pain would bring tears to my eyes. One day I told my boyfriend that I didn’t want to have sex anymore. I told him, ‘I love you, but I never want to experience this pain again.’ He said he had never heard anything so ridiculous. ‘You’ve got an emotional problem,’ he said. ‘Just relax and it’ll stop hurting. It’ll even feel *good*. Everybody else does it, so you can too. You’re just not trying hard enough. You’re babying yourself. You’re using this “pain” thing to cover up your problems. Stop complaining; it won’t do you any good.’

“When I heard this, after all I had endured over the years, I exploded. ‘What do *you* know about pain?’ I shouted at him. The pain I feel is no ordinary pain. I know what pain is like. I’ve had them all. When *I* say something hurts, it *really hurts!*’ I tried to explain by listing every single pain I had ever experienced, but he didn’t understand a thing. It’s impossible to understand real pain unless you’ve experienced it yourself. So that was the end of our relationship.

“My twentieth birthday came soon after that. For twenty long years I had endured the pain, hoping there would be some bright turning point, but it had never happened. I felt utterly defeated. I wished I had died sooner. My long detour had only stretched out the pain.”

At this point, Creta Kano took a single deep breath. On the table in front of her sat the dish with eggshells and her empty coffee cup. On her lap lay the handkerchief that she had folded with such care. As if recalling the time, she glanced at the clock on the shelf. “I’m very sorry,” she said in a dry little voice. “I hadn’t intended to talk so long. I’ve taken far too much of your time as it is. I won’t impose on you any longer. I don’t know how to apologize for having bored you at such length.”

She grasped the strap of her white patent-leather bag and stood up from the sofa.

This took me off guard. “Just a minute, please,” I said, flustered. I didn’t want her to end her story in the middle. “If you’re worried about taking my time, then don’t worry. I’m free all afternoon. As long as you’ve told me this much, why not go to the end? There’s more to your story, I’m sure.”

“Of course there is,” she said, looking down at me, both hands in a tight grip on the strap of her bag. “What I’ve told you so far is more like an introduction.”

I asked her to wait a moment and went to the kitchen. Standing in front of the sink, I gave myself time for two deep breaths. Then I took two glasses from the cabinet, put ice in them, and filled them with orange juice from the refrigerator. Placing the glasses on a small tray, I brought them into the living room. I had gone through these motions with deliberate slowness, but I found her standing as I had left her. When I set the glasses of juice on the table, though, she seemed to have second thoughts. She settled onto the sofa again and placed her bag at her side.

“You want me to tell my story to the very end?” she asked. “Are you sure?”

“Quite sure,” I said.

She drank half her orange juice and went on with her story.

“I failed to kill myself, of course. If I had succeeded, I wouldn’t be here now, drinking orange juice with you, Mr. Okada.” She looked into my eyes, and I gave her a little smile of agreement. “If I had died according to plan, it would have been the final solution for me. Dying would have meant the end of consciousness, and I would never have had to feel pain again. Which is exactly what I wanted. Unfortunately, however, I chose the wrong method to die.

“At nine o’clock on the night of May twenty-ninth, I went to my brother’s room and asked to borrow his car. It was a shiny new Toyota MR2, and the thought of letting me take it made him look very unhappy. But I didn’t care. He couldn’t refuse, because I had lent him money to help him buy it. I took the key and drove it for half an hour. The car still had barely a thousand miles on it. A touch of the gas pedal could make it fly. It was the perfect car for my purposes. I drove as far as the Tama River on the outskirts of the city, and there I found a massive stone wall of the kind I had in mind. It was the outer wall of a big condominium building, and it stood at the far end of a dead-end street. I gave myself plenty of room to accelerate, and then I pressed the accelerator to the floor. I must have been doing close to a hundred miles an hour when I slammed into the wall and lost consciousness.

“Unfortunately for me, however, the wall turned out to be far less solid than it had appeared. To save money, they had not anchored it properly. The wall simply crumbled, and the front end of the car was crushed flat. That’s all that happened. Because it was so soft, the wall absorbed the impact. As if that weren’t bad enough, in my confusion I had forgotten to undo my seat belt.

“And so I escaped death. I was hardly even injured. And strangest of all, I felt almost no pain. It was the weirdest thing. They took me to the hospital and patched up my one broken rib. The police came to investigate, but I told them I didn’t remember a thing. I said I had probably mixed up the gas and the brake. And they believed me. I had just turned twenty, and it had been only six months since I got my license. Besides, I just didn’t look like the suicidal type. Who would try to kill herself with her seat belt fastened?

“Once I was out of the hospital, I had several difficult problems to face. First I had to pay off the outstanding loan on the MR2 that I had turned into scrap metal. Through some error with the insurance company, the car had not been covered.

“Now that it was too late, I realized that to do myself in, I should have rented a car with the proper insurance. At the time, of course, insurance was the last thing on my mind. It never occurred to me that my brother’s car wouldn’t have enough insurance on it or that I would fail to kill myself. I ran into a stone wall at a hundred miles an hour: it was amazing that I survived.

“A short time later, I received a bill from the condominium association for repair of the wall. They were demanding 1,364,294 yen from me. Immediately. In cash. All I could do was borrow it from my father. He was willing to give it to me in the form of a loan, but he insisted that I pay him back. My father was very proper when it came to matters of money. He said it was my responsibility for having caused the accident, and he expected me to pay him back in full and on schedule. In fact, at the time, he had very little money to spare. He was in the process of expanding his clinic and was having trouble raising the money for the project.

“I thought again about killing myself. This time I would do a proper job. I would jump from the fifteenth floor of the university administration building. There would be no slip-ups that way. I would die for sure. I made several trial runs. I picked the best window for the job. I was on the verge of jumping.

“But something held me back. There was something wrong, something nagging at me. At the last second, that ‘something’ almost literally pulled me back from the edge. A good deal

of time went by, though, before I realized what that ‘something’ was.

“I didn’t have any pain.

“I had felt hardly any pain since the accident. What with one thing coming up after another, I hadn’t had a moment to notice, but pain had disappeared from my body. My bowel movements were normal. My menstrual cramps were gone. No more headaches or stomachaches. Even my broken rib caused me hardly any pain. I had no idea why such a thing had happened. But suddenly I was free of pain.

“I decided to go on living for the time being. If only for a little while, I wanted to find out what it meant to live life without pain. I could die whenever I wanted to.

“But to go on living meant for me to pay back my debt. Altogether, I owed more than three million yen. In order to pay it back, I became a prostitute.”

“A prostitute?!”

“That’s right,” said Kano, as if it were nothing at all. “I needed money over the short term. I wanted to pay off my debts as quickly as possible, and that was the only way I knew of to raise the money. I didn’t have the slightest hesitation. I had seriously intended to die. And I still intended to die, sooner or later. The curiosity I felt about a life without pain was keeping me alive, but strictly on a temporary basis. And compared with death, it would be nothing at all for me to sell my body.”

“I see what you mean,” I said.

The ice in her orange juice had melted, and Kano stirred it with her straw before taking a sip.

“Do you mind if I ask you a question?” I asked.

“No, not at all. Please.”

“Didn’t you consult with your sister about this?”

“She was practicing her austerities on Malta at the time. As long as that went on, she refused to send me her address. She didn’t want me to disrupt her concentration. It was virtually impossible for me to write to her during the entire three years she lived on Malta.”

“I see,” I said. “Would you like some more coffee?”

“Yes, please,” said Kano.

I went to the kitchen and warmed the coffee. While I waited, I stared at the exhaust fan and took several deep breaths. When it was ready, I poured the coffee into fresh cups and brought it to the living room on a tray, together with a plate of chocolate cookies. We ate and drank for a while.

“How long ago did you try to kill yourself?” I asked.

“I was twenty at the time. That was six years ago, in May of 1978.”

May of 1978 was the month that Kumiko and I had married. So, then, the very month we were married, Kano had tried to kill herself and Malta Kano was practicing her austerities in Malta.

“I went to a neighborhood that had lots of bars, approached the first likely-looking man I saw, negotiated a price, went to a hotel, and slept with him,” said Kano. “Sex no longer gave me any physical pain at all. Nor any pleasure, either. It was just a physical movement. Neither did I feel guilt at doing sex for money. I was enveloped in numbness, an absence of feeling so deep the bottom was lost from view.

“I made very good money this way—close to a million yen in the first month alone. At that rate, I could easily repay what I owed in three or four months. I would come home from campus, go out in the evening, and get home from work by ten at the latest. I told my parents I was waiting on tables, and no one suspected the truth. Of course, they would have thought it strange if I returned so much money all at once, so I decided to give my father 100,000 yen a month and save the rest.

“But then one night, when I was propositioning men by the station, two men grabbed me from behind. At first I thought it was the police, but then I realized that they were gangsters.

They dragged me into a back street, showed me some kind of knife, and took me to their local headquarters. They shoved me into a back room, stripped my clothes off, strung me up by the wrists, and proceeded to rape me over and over in front of a video camera. I kept my eyes closed the entire time and tried not to think. Which was not difficult for me, because I felt neither pain nor pleasure.

“Afterward, they showed me the video and told me that if I didn’t want anyone to see it, I should join their organization and work for them. They took my student ID from my purse. If I refused to do what they wanted, they said, they would send a copy of the tape to my parents and blackmail them for all the money they were worth. I had no choice. I told them I would do as they said, that it didn’t matter to me. And it really didn’t matter. Nothing mattered to me then. They pointed out that my income would go down if I joined their organization, because they would take seventy percent, but that I would no longer have to go to the trouble of finding customers by myself or worry about the police. They would send me high-quality customers. If I went on propositioning men indiscriminately, I would end up strangled to death in some hotel room.

“After that, I didn’t have to stand on street corners anymore. All I had to do was show up at their office in the evening, and they would tell me which hotel to go to. They sent me good customers, as they had promised. I’m not sure why, but I received special treatment. Maybe it was because I looked so innocent. I had an air of breeding about me that the other girls lacked. There were probably a lot of customers who wanted this not-so-professional type. The other girls had three or more customers a day, but I could get away with seeing only one or, at most, two. The other girls carried beepers with them and had to hurry to some run-down hotel when the office called them to sleep with men of uncertain background. In my case, though, I always had a proper appointment in a proper first-class hotel-or sometimes even a condo. My customers were usually older men, rarely young ones.

“The office paid me once a week-not as much as I used to make on my own, but not a bad amount including individual tips from customers. Some customers wanted me to do some pretty weird things for them, of course, but I didn’t mind. The weirder the request, the bigger the tip. A few of the men started asking for me on a regular basis. These tended to be good tippers. I saved my money in several different accounts. But actually, by then, the money didn’t matter to me. It was just rows of figures, I was living for one thing only, and that was to confirm my own lack of feeling.

“I would wake up in the morning and lie there, checking to see that my body was not sensing anything that could be called pain. I would open my eyes, slowly collect my thoughts, and then, one part at a time, check the feeling I had in my body from head to foot. I had no pain at all. Did this mean that there was nothing hurting me or that, even though there was pain, I was not feeling it? I couldn’t tell the difference. Either way, it didn’t hurt. In fact, I had no sensations at all. After this procedure, I would get out of bed, go to the bathroom, and brush my teeth. Then I would strip off my pajamas and take a hot shower. There was a terrible lightness to my body. It was so light and airy, it didn’t feel like my body. I felt as if my spirit had taken up residence inside a body that was not my own. I looked at it in the mirror, but between myself and the body I saw there, I felt a long, terrible distance.

“A life without pain: it was the very thing I had dreamed of for years, but now that I had it, I couldn’t find a place for myself within it. A clear gap separated me from it, and this caused me great confusion. I felt as if I were not anchored to the world-this world that I had hated so passionately until then; this world that I had continued to revile for its unfairness and injustice; this world where at least I knew who I was. Now the world had ceased to be the world, and I had ceased to be me.

“I began to cry a lot. In the afternoons I would go to a park-the Shin-juku Imperial Gardens or Yoyogi Park-to sit on the grass and cry. Sometimes I would cry for an hour or two at a time, sobbing out loud. Passersby would stare at me, but I didn’t care. I wished that I had

died that time, that I had ended my life on the night of May twenty-ninth. How much better off I would be! But now I could not even die. In my numbness, I lacked the strength to kill myself. I felt nothing: no pain, no joy. All feeling was gone. And I was not even me.”

Creta Kano took a deep breath and held it. Then she picked up her coffee cup, stared into it for a while, gave her head a little shake, and put the cup back on the saucer.

“It was around that time that I met Noboru Wataya.”

“Noboru Wataya?! As a customer?!”

Creta Kano nodded in silence.

“But-” I began, then stopped to consider my words for a time. “I’m having a little trouble with this. Your sister told me the other day that Noboru Wataya raped you. Was that something separate from what you’re telling me now?”

Creta Kano took the handkerchief from her lap and dabbed at her mouth again. Then she looked directly at me. Something about her eyes stirred my heart in a way I found unsettling.

“I’m sorry to bother you,” she said, “but I wonder if I might have another cup of coffee.”

“Of course,” I said. I transferred her cup from the table to the tray and carried it into the kitchen. Waiting for the coffee to boil, I leaned against the drainboard, with my hands thrust in my pockets. When I carried the coffee back into the living room, Creta Kano had vanished from the sofa. Her bag, her handkerchief, every visible sign of her, was gone. I went to the front entrance, from which her shoes were gone as well.

Terrific.

9

Culverts and an Absolute Insufficiency of Electricity

•

May Kasahara’s Inquiry into the Nature of Hairpieces

After seeing Kumiko off the next morning, I went to the ward pool for a swim. Mornings were best, to avoid the crowds. Back home again, I brewed myself some coffee and sat drinking it in the kitchen, going over Creta Kano’s weird, unfinished story, trying to recall each event of her life in chronological order. The more I recalled, the weirder the story seemed, but soon the revolutions of my brain slowed down and I began to drift into sleep. I went to the living room, lay down on the sofa, and closed my eyes. In a moment, I was asleep and dreaming.

I dreamed about Creta Kano. Before she appeared, though, I dreamed about Malta Kano. She was wearing a Tyrolean hat with a big, brightly colored feather. The place was crowded (it was some kind of large hall), but Malta Kano’s hat caught my attention immediately. She was sitting alone at the bar. She had a big tropical drink kind of thing in front of her, but I couldn’t tell whether she was actually drinking it.

I wore my suit and the polka-dot tie. As soon as I spotted Malta Kano, I tried to walk in

her direction, but the crowd kept getting in my way. By the time I reached the bar, she was gone. The tropical drink stood there on the bar, in front of her now empty stool. I took the next seat at the bar and ordered a scotch on the rocks. The bartender asked me what kind of scotch I'd like, and I answered Cutty Sark. I really didn't care which brand of scotch he served me, but Cutty Sark was the first thing that came to mind.

Before he could give me my drink, I felt a hand take my arm from behind, the touch as soft as if the person were grasping something that might fall apart at any moment. I turned. There stood a man without a face. Whether or not he actually had no face, I could not tell, but the place where his face was supposed to be was wrapped in a dark shadow, and I could not see what lay beyond it. "This way, Mr. Okada," he said. I tried to speak, but before I could open my mouth, he said to me, "Please, come with me. We have so little time. Hurry." Hand still on my arm, he guided me with rapid steps through the crowd and out into a corridor. I followed him down the corridor, unresisting. He did know my name, after all. It wasn't as if I were letting a total stranger take me anywhere he liked. There was some kind of reason and purpose to all this.

After continuing down the corridor for some time, the faceless man came to a stop in front of a door. The number on the doorplate was 208. "It isn't locked. You should be the one to open it." I did as I was told and opened the door. Beyond it lay a large room. It seemed to be part of a suite of rooms in an old-fashioned hotel. The ceiling was high, and from it hung an old-fashioned chandelier. The chandelier was not lit. A small wall lamp gave off a gloomy light, the only source of illumination in the room. The curtains were closed tight.

"If it's whiskey you want, Mr. Okada," said the faceless man, "we have plenty. Cutty Sark, wasn't it? Drink as much as you'd like." He pointed to a cabinet beside the door, then closed the door silently, leaving me alone. I stood in the middle of the room for a long time, wondering what to do.

A large oil painting hung on the wall. It was a picture of a river. I looked at it for a while, hoping to calm myself down. The moon was up over the river. Its light fell faintly on the opposite shore, but so very faintly that I could not make out the scenery there. It was all vague outlines, running together.

Soon I felt a strong craving for whiskey. I thought I would open the cabinet and take a drink, as suggested by the faceless man, but the cabinet would not open. What looked like doors were actually well-made imitations of doors. I tried pushing and pulling on the various protruding parts, but the cabinet remained firmly shut.

"It's not easy to open, Mr. Okada," said Kano. I realized she was standing there-and in her early-sixties outfit. "Some time must go by before it will open. Today is out of the question. You might as well give up."

As I watched, she shed her clothes as easily as opening a pea pod and stood before me naked, without warning or explanation. "We have so little time, Mr. Okada, let's finish this as quickly as possible. I am sorry for the rush, but I have my reasons. Just getting here was hard enough." Then she came up to me, opened my fly, and, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, took out my penis. Lowering her eyes, with their false lashes, she enclosed my penis with her mouth. Her mouth was far larger than I had imagined. Inside, I immediately came erect. When she moved her tongue, the curled ends of her hair trembled as in a gentle breeze, caressing my thighs. All I could see was her hair and her false eyelashes. I sat on the bed, and she went down on her knees, her face buried in my crotch. "Stop it," I said. "Noboru Wataya will be here any minute. I don't want to see him here."

Kano took her mouth from my penis and said, "Don't worry. We have plenty of time for this, at least."

She ran the tip of her tongue over my penis. I didn't want to come, but there was no way of stopping it. I felt as if it were being sucked out of me. Her lips and tongue held on to me like slippery life forms. I came. I opened my eyes.

Terrific. I went to the bathroom, washed my soiled underpants, and took a hot shower, washing myself with care to get rid of the sticky sensations of the dream. How many years had it been since my last wet dream? I tried to recall exactly but couldn't, it had been so long.

I stepped out of the shower and was still drying myself when the phone rang. It was Kumiko. Having just had a wet dream over another woman, I felt a little tense speaking with her.

"Your voice is strange," she said. "What's wrong?" Her sensitivity to such things was frightening.

"Nothing," I said. "I was dozing. You woke me up."

"Oh, really?" she said. I could feel her suspicions coming through the earpiece, which made me all the more tense.

"Anyway, sorry, but I'm going to be a little late today," Kumiko said. "Maybe as late as nine. So I'll eat out."

"That's OK," I said. "I'll find something for myself. Don't worry."

"I really am sorry," she said. It had the sound of an afterthought. There was a pause, and then she hung up.

I looked at the receiver for a few seconds. Then I went to the kitchen and peeled an apple.

In the six years since I had married Kumiko, I had never slept with another woman. Which is not to say that I never felt the desire for another woman or never had the chance. Just that I never pursued it when the opportunity arose. I can't explain why, exactly, but it probably has something to do with life's priorities.

I did once happen to spend the night with another woman. She was someone I liked, and I knew she would have slept with me. But finally, I didn't do it.

We had been working together at the law firm for several years. She was probably two or three years younger than I. Her job was to take calls and coordinate everyone's schedules, and she was very good at it. She was quick, and she had an outstanding memory. You could ask her anything and she would know the answer: who was working where at what, which files were in which cabinet, that kind of thing. She handled all appointments. Everybody liked her and depended on her. On an individual basis, too, she and I were fairly close. We had gone drinking together several times. She was not exactly what you would call a beauty, but I liked her looks.

When it came time for her to quit her job to get married (she would have to move to Kyushu in connection with her husband's work), several colleagues and I invited her out for a last drink together. Afterward, she and I had to take the same train home, and because it was late, I saw her to her apartment. At the front door, she invited me in for a cup of coffee. I was worried about missing the last train, but I knew we might never see each other again, and I also liked the idea of sobering up with coffee, so I decided to go in. The place was a typical single girl's apartment. It had a refrigerator that was just a little too grand for one person, and a bookshelf stereo. A friend had given her the refrigerator. She changed into something comfortable in the next room and made coffee in the kitchen. We sat on the floor, talking.

At one point when we had run out of things to say, she asked me, as if it had suddenly occurred to her, "Can you name something-some concrete thing-that you're especially afraid of?"

"Not really," I said, after a moment's thought. I was afraid of all kinds of things, but no one thing in particular. "How about you?"

"I'm scared of culverts," she said, hugging her knees. "You know what a culvert is, don't you?"

"Some kind of ditch, isn't it?" I didn't have a very precise definition of the word in mind.

"Yeah, but it's underground. An underground waterway. A drainage ditch with a lid on. A pitch-dark flow."

"I see," I said. "A culvert."

“I was born and raised in the country. In Fukushima. There was a stream right near my house—a little stream, just the runoff from the fields. It flowed underground at one point into a culvert. I guess I was playing with some of the older kids when it happened. I was just two or three. The others put me in a little boat and launched it into the stream. It was probably something they did all the time, but that day it had been raining, and the water was high. The boat got away from them and carried me straight for the opening of the culvert. I would have been sucked right in if one of the local farmers hadn’t happened by. I’m sure they never would have found me.”

She ran her left index finger over her mouth as if to check that she was still alive.

“I can still picture everything that happened. I’m lying on my back and being swept along by the water. The sides of the stream tower over me like high stone walls, and overhead is the blue sky. Sharp, clear blue. I’m being swept along in the flow. Swish, swish, faster and faster. But I can’t understand what it means. And then all of a sudden I *do* understand— that there’s darkness lying ahead. *Real* darkness. Soon it comes and tries to drink me down. I can feel a cold shadow beginning to wrap itself around me. That’s my earliest memory.”

She took a sip of coffee.

“I’m scared to death,” she said. “I’m so scared I can hardly stand it. I feel like I did back then, like I’m being swept along toward it and I can’t get away.”

She took a cigarette from her handbag, put it in her mouth, and lit it with a match, exhaling in one long, slow breath. This was the first time I had ever seen her smoke.

“Are you talking about your marriage?” I asked.

“That’s right,” she said. “My marriage.”

“Is there some particular problem?” I asked. “Something concrete?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think so,” she said. “Not really. Just a lot of little things.”

I didn’t know what to say to her, but the situation demanded that I say something.

“Everybody experiences this feeling to some extent when they’re about to get married, I think. ‘Oh, no, I’m making this terrible mistake!’

You’d probably be abnormal if you *didn’t* feel it. It’s a big decision, picking somebody to spend your life with. So it’s natural to be scared, but you don’t have to be *that* scared.”

“That’s easy to say—‘Everybody feels like that. Everybody’s the same,’ “ she said.

Eleven o’clock had come and gone. I had to find a way to bring this conversation to a successful conclusion and get out of there. But before I could say anything, she suddenly asked me to hold her. “Why?” I asked, caught off guard. “To charge my batteries,” she said. “Charge your batteries?”

“My body has run out of electricity. I haven’t been able to sleep for days now. The minute I get to sleep I wake up, and then I can’t get back to sleep. I can’t think. When I get like that, somebody has to charge my batteries. Otherwise, I can’t go on living. It’s true.”

I peered into her eyes, wondering if she was still drunk, but they were once again her usual cool, intelligent eyes. She was far from drunk.

“But you’re getting married next week. You can have him hold you all you want. Every night. That’s what marriage is for. You’ll never run out of electricity again.”

“The problem is *now*,” she said. “Not tomorrow, not next week, not next month. I’m out of electricity now.”

Lips clamped shut, she stared at her feet. They were in perfect alignment. Small and white, they had ten pretty toenails. She really, truly wanted somebody to hold her, it seemed, and so I took her in my arms. It was all very weird. To me, she was just a capable, pleasant colleague. We worked in the same office, told each other jokes, and had gone out for drinks now and then. But here, away from work, in her apartment, with my arms around her, we were nothing but warm lumps of flesh. We had been playing our assigned roles on the office stage, but stepping down from the stage, abandoning the provisional images that we had been exchanging there, we were both just unstable, awkward lumps of flesh, warm pieces of meat

outfitted with digestive tracts and hearts and brains and reproductive organs. I had my arms wrapped around her back, and she had her breasts pressed hard against my chest. They were larger and softer than I had imagined them to be. I was sitting on the floor with my back against the wall, and she was slumped against me. We stayed in that position for a long time, holding each other without a word.

“Is this all right?” I asked, in a voice that did not sound like my own. It was as if someone else were speaking for me.

She said nothing, but I could feel her nod.

She was wearing a sweatshirt and a thin skirt that came down to her knees, but soon I realized that she had nothing on underneath. Almost automatically, this gave me an erection, and she seemed to be aware of it. I could feel her warm breath on my neck.

In the end, I didn’t sleep with her. But I did have to go on “charging” her “batteries” until two in the morning. She pleaded with me to stay with her until she was asleep. I took her to her bed and tucked her in. But she remained awake for a long time. She changed into pajamas, and I went on holding and “recharging” her. In my arms, I felt her cheeks grow hot and her heart pound. I couldn’t be sure I was doing the right thing, but I knew of no other way to deal with the situation. The simplest thing would have been to sleep with her, but I managed to sweep that possibility from my mind. My instincts told me not to do it.

“Please don’t hate me for this,” she said. “My electricity is just so low I can’t help it.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I understand.”

I knew I should call home, but what could I have said to Kumiko? I didn’t want to lie, but I knew it would be impossible for me to explain to her what was happening. And after a while, it didn’t seem to matter anymore. Whatever happened would happen. I left her apartment at two o’clock and didn’t get home until three. It was tough finding a cab.

Kumiko was furious, of course. She was sitting at the kitchen table, wide awake, waiting for me. I said I had been out drinking and playing mah-jongg with the guys from the office. Why couldn’t I have made a simple phone call? she demanded. It had never crossed my mind, I said. She was not convinced, and the lie became apparent almost immediately. I hadn’t played mah-jongg in years, and I just wasn’t cut out for lying in any case. I ended up confessing the truth. I told her the entire story from beginning to end-without the erection part, of course-maintaining that I had done nothing with the woman.

Kumiko refused to speak to me for three days. Literally. Not a word. She slept in the other room, and she ate her meals alone. This was the greatest crisis our marriage had faced. She was genuinely angry with me, and I understood exactly how she felt.

After her three days of silence, Kumiko asked me, “What would *you* think if you were in *my* position?” These were the very first words she spoke. “What if *I* had come home at three o’clock Sunday morning without so much as a telephone call? ‘I’ve been in bed with a man all this time, but don’t worry, I didn’t do anything, please believe me. I was just recharging his batteries. OK, great, let’s have breakfast and go to sleep.’ You mean to say you wouldn’t get angry, you’d just believe me?”

I kept quiet.

“And what you did was even worse than that,” Kumiko continued. “You *lied* to me! You said you were drinking and playing mah-jongg. A total lie! How do you expect me to believe you didn’t sleep with her?”

“I’m sorry I lied,” I said. “I should never have done that. But the only reason I lied was because the truth was so difficult to explain. I want you to believe me: I really didn’t do anything wrong.”

Kumiko put her head down on the table. I felt as if the air in the room were gradually thinning out.

“I don’t know what to say,” I said. “I can’t explain it other than to ask you to believe me.”

“All right. If you want me to believe you, I will,” she said. “But I want *you* to remember

this: I'm probably going to do the same thing to you someday. And when that time comes, I want you to believe *me*. I have that right."

Kumiko had never exercised that right. Every once in a while, I imagined how I would feel if she did exercise it. I would probably believe her, but my reaction would no doubt be as complex and as difficult to deal with as Kumiko's. To think that she had made a point of doing such a thing-and for what? Which was exactly how she must have felt about me back then.

•

"Mr. Wind-Up Bird!" came a voice from the garden. It was May Kasahara.

Still toweling my hair, I went out to the veranda. She was sitting on the edge, biting a thumbnail. She wore the same dark sunglasses as when I had first met her, plus cream-colored cotton pants and a black polo shirt. In her hand was a clipboard.

"I climbed it," she said, pointing to the cinder-block wall. Then she brushed away the dirt clinging to her pants. "I kinda figured I had the right place. I'm glad it was yours! Think if I had come over the wall into the wrong house!"

She took a pack of Hope regulars from her pocket and lit up.

"Anyhow, Mr. Wind-Up Bird, how are you?"

"OK, I guess."

"I'm going to work now," she said. "Why don't you come along? We work in teams of two, and it'd be sooo much better for me to have somebody I know. Some new guy'd ask me all kinds of questions-'How old are you? Why aren't you in school?' It's such a pain! Or maybe he'd turn out to be a pervert. It happens, you know! Do it for me, will you, Mr. Wind-Up Bird?"

"Is it that job you told me about- some kind of survey for a toupee maker?"

"That's it," she said. "All you have to do is count bald heads on the Ginza from one to four. It's easy! And it'll be good for you. You'll be bald someday too, the way you're going, so you better check it out now while you still have hair."

"Yeah, but how about you? Isn't the truant officer going to get you if they see you doing this stuff on the Ginza in the middle of the day?"

"Nah. I just tell 'em it's fieldwork for social studies. It always works."

With no plans for the afternoon, I decided to tag along. May Kasahara phoned her company to say we would be coming in. On the telephone, she turned into a very proper young woman: Yes, sir, I would like to team up with him, yes, that is correct, thank you very much, yes, I understand, yes, we can be there after noon. I left a note for Kumiko saying I would be back by six, in case she got home early, then I left the house with May Kasahara.

The toupee company was in Shimbashi. On the subway, May Kasahara explained how the survey worked. We were to stand on a street corner and count all the bald men (or those with thinning hair) who walked by. We were to classify them according to the degree of their baldness: C, those whose hair might have thinned somewhat; B, those who had lost a lot; and A, those who were really bald. May took a pamphlet from her folder and showed me examples of the three stages.

"You get the idea pretty much, right, which heads fit which categories? I won't go into detail. It'd take all day. But you get it pretty much, right, which is which?"

"Pretty much," I said, without exuding a great deal of confidence.

On May Kasahara's other side sat an overweight company type-a very definite B-who kept glancing uneasily at the pamphlet, but she seemed not to notice how nervous this was making him.

"I'll be in charge of putting them into categories, and you stand next to me with a survey sheet. You put them in A, B, or C, depending on what I tell you. That's all there is to it. Easy,

right?"

"I guess so," I said. "But what's the point of taking a survey like this?"

"I dunno," she said. "They're doing them all over Tokyo-in Shinjuku, Shibuya, Aoyama. Maybe they're trying to find out which neighborhood has the most bald men? Or they want to know the proportions of A, B, and C types in the population? Who knows? They've got so much money, they don't know what to do with it. So they can waste it on stuff like this. Profits are huge in the wig business. The employees get *much* bigger bonuses than in just any old company. Know why?" "No. Why?"

"Wigs don't last long. Bet you didn't know: toupees are good for two, maybe three years max. The better made they are, the faster they get used up. They're the ultimate consumer product. It's 'cause they fit so tightly against the scalp: the hair underneath gets thinner than ever. Once that happens, you have to buy a new one to get that perfect fit again. And think about it: What if you were using a toupee and it was no good after two years-what would go through your mind? Would you think, OK, my wig's worn out. Can't wear it anymore. But it'll cost too much to buy a new one, so tomorrow I'll start going to work without one? Is that what you'd think?"

I shook my head. "Probably not," I said.

"Of course not. Once a guy starts using a wig, he has to keep using one. It's, like, his fate. That's why the wig makers make such huge profits. I hate to say it, but they're like drug dealers. Once they get their hooks into a guy, he's a customer for life. Have you ever heard of a bald guy suddenly growing a head of hair? I never have. A wig's got to cost half a million yen at least, maybe a million for a tough one. And you need a new one every two years! Wow! Even a car lasts longer than that-four or five years. And then you can trade it in!"

"I see what you mean," I said.

"Plus, the wig makers run their own hairstyling salons. They wash the wigs and cut the customers' real hair. I mean, think about it: you can't just plunk yourself down in an ordinary barber's chair, rip off your wig, and say, 'I'd like a trim,' can you? The income from these places alone is tremendous."

"You know all kinds of things," I said, with genuine admiration. The B-category company type next to May was listening to our conversation with obvious fascination.

"Sure," she said. "The guys at the office like me. They tell me everything. The profits in this business are huge. They make the wigs in Southeast Asia and places like that, where labor is cheap. They even get the hair there- in Thailand or the Philippines. The women sell their hair to the wig companies. That's how they earn their dowries in some places. The whole world's so weird! The guy sitting next to you might actually be wearing the hair of some woman in Indonesia."

By reflex, I and the B-man looked around at the others in the car.

•

We stopped off at the company's Shimbashi office to pick up an envelope containing survey sheets and pencils. This company supposedly had a number two market share, but it was utterly discreet, without even a name plaque at the entrance, so that customers could come and go with ease. Neither the envelope nor the survey sheets bore the company name. At the survey department, I filled out a part-time worker's registration form with my name, address, educational background, and age. This office was an incredibly quiet place of business. There was no one shouting into the telephone, no one banging away at a computer keyboard with sleeves rolled up. Each individual worker was neatly dressed and pursuing his or her own task with quiet concentration. As might be expected at a toupee maker's office, not one man here was bald. Some might even be wearing the company's product, but it was impossible for me to tell those who were from those who weren't. Of all the companies I had

ever visited, this had the strangest ambience.

We took the subway to the Ginza. Early and hungry, we stopped at the Dairy Queen for a hamburger.

“Tell me, Mr. Wind-Up Bird,” said May Kasahara, “would you wear a toupee if you were bald?”

“I wonder,” I said. “I don’t like things that take time and trouble. I probably wouldn’t try to fight it if I went bald.”

“Good,” she said, wiping the ketchup from her mouth with a paper napkin. “That’s the way. Bald men never look as bad as they think. To me, it’s nothing to get so upset about.”

“I wonder,” I said.

•

For the next three hours, we sat at the subway entrance by the Wako Building, counting the bald-headed men who passed by. Looking down at the heads going up and down the subway stairs was the most accurate method of determining the degree of baldness of any one head. May Kasahara would say “A” or “B” or “C,” and I would write it down. She had obviously done this many times. She never fumbled or hesitated or corrected herself, but assigned each head to its proper category with great speed and precision, uttering the letters in low, clipped tones so as not to be noticed by the passersby. This called for some rapid-fire naming whenever a large group of bald heads passed by at once: “CCBABCAAC-CBBB.” At one point, an elegant-looking old gentleman (who himself possessed a full head of snow-white hair) stopped to watch us in action, “Pardon me,” he said to me after a while, “but might I ask what you two are doing?”

“Survey,” I said.

“What kind of survey?” he asked.

“Social studies,” I said.

“C A C A B C,” said May Kasahara.

The old gentleman seemed less than convinced, but he went on watching us until he gave up and wandered off somewhere.

When the Mitsukoshi clock across the street signaled four o’clock, we ended our survey and went back to the Dairy Queen for a cup of coffee. It had not been strenuous work, but I found my neck and shoulders strangely stiff. Maybe it was from the covert nature of the job, a guilty feeling I had about counting bald men in secret. All the time we were on the subway heading back to company headquarters in Shimbashi, I found myself automatically assigning each bald head I saw to category A or B or C, which almost made me queasy. I tried to stop myself, but by then a kind of momentum had set in. We handed in our survey forms and received our pay—rather good pay for the amount of time and effort involved. I signed a receipt and put the money in my pocket. May Kasahara and I rode the subway to Shinjuku and from there took the Odakyu Line home. The afternoon rush hour was starting. This was my first ride on a crowded train in some time, but it hardly filled me with nostalgia.

“Pretty good job, don’t you think?” said May Kasahara, standing next to me on the train. “It’s easy, pay’s not bad.”

“Pretty good,” I said, sucking on a lemon drop.

“Go with me next time? We can do it once a week.”

“Why not?” I said.

“You know, Mr. Wind-Up Bird,” May Kasahara said after a short silence, as if a thought had suddenly come to her, “I bet the reason people are afraid of going bald is because it makes them think of the end of life. I mean, when your hair starts to thin, it must feel as if your life is being worn away ... as if you’ve taken a giant step in the direction of death, the last Big Consumption.”

I thought about it for a while. "That's one way to look at it, I'm sure," I said.

"You know, Mr. Wind-Up Bird, I sometimes wonder what it must feel like to die little by little over a long period of time. What do you think?"

Unsure exactly what she was getting at, I changed my grip on the hand strap and looked into her eyes. "Can you give me a concrete example of what you mean by that-to die little by little?"

"Well... I don't know. You're trapped in the dark all alone, with nothing to eat, nothing to drink, and little by little you die..."

"It must be terrible," I said. "Painful. I wouldn't want to die like that if I could help it."

"But finally, Mr. Wind-Up Bird, isn't that just what life is? Aren't we all trapped in the dark somewhere, and they've taken away our food and water, and we're slowly dying, little by little ... ?"

I laughed. "You're too young to be so ... *pessimistic*," I said, using the English word.

"Pessi-what?"

"Pessimistic. It means looking only at the dark side of things."

"Pessimistic ... pessimistic ..." She repeated the English to herself over and over, and then she looked up at me with a fierce glare. "I'm only sixteen," she said, "and I don't know much about the world, but I *do* know one thing for sure. If I'm pessimistic, then the adults in this world who are *not* pessimistic are a bunch of idiots."

10

Magic Touch

*

Death in the Bathtub

*

Messenger with Keepsakes

We had moved into our present house in the autumn of the second year we were married. The Koenji apartment we had lived in until then was slated for renovation. We looked for a cheap, convenient apartment to move into, but finding such a place was not easy with our budget. When he heard this, my uncle suggested that we move into a house he owned in Setagaya. He had bought it in his youth and lived there for ten years. He wanted to tear the old place down and put up something more functional, but architectural regulations prevented him from building the kind of house he wanted. He was waiting for a rumored relaxation of the rules to take effect, but if he left the place vacant in the meantime, he would have to pay the property taxes, and if he rented it to strangers, there could be trouble when he asked them to vacate. From us, he would take only a nominal rent to cover the taxes, but in return he wanted us to agree to give up the place with three months' notice when the time came. We had no problem with that: the part about the taxes was not entirely clear to us, but we jumped at the chance to live in a real house, if only for a little while, paying the kind of rent we had been paying to live in an apartment (and a very cheap apartment at that). The house was pretty far from the nearest station on the Odakyu Line, but it was in a quiet residential neighborhood, and it had its own small yard. Even though it didn't belong to us, it gave *us* the feeling, once we moved in, that we were now part of a real "household."

My mother's younger brother, this uncle of mine never made any demands on us. He was kind of a cool guy, I suppose, but there was something almost uncanny about him in the way he left us alone. Still, he was my favorite relative. He had graduated from a college in Tokyo and gone to work as a radio announcer, but when he got "sick of the work" after ten years, he quit the station and opened a bar on the Ginza. It was an almost austere little place, but it became widely known for the authenticity of its cocktails, and within a few years my uncle was running a string of bars and restaurants. Every one of his establishments did extremely well: apparently, he had that special spark you need for business. Once, while I was still in college, I asked him why every place he opened was such a success. In the very same location where one restaurant had failed on the Ginza, he might open up the same kind of restaurant and do just fine. Why was that? He held the palms of both hands out for me to see. "It's my magic touch," he said, without a hint of humor. And that was all he said.

Maybe he really did have a "magic touch," but he also had a talent for finding capable people to work for him. He paid them high salaries and treated them well, and they in turn worked hard for him. "When I know I've got the right guy, I put a wad of bills in his hand and let him do his thing," he once told me. "You've got to spend your money for the things that money can buy, not worry about profit or loss. Save your energy for the things that money can't buy."

He married late in life. Only after he had achieved financial success in his mid-forties did he settle down. His wife was a divorcee, three or four years his junior, and she brought her own considerable assets to the marriage. My uncle never told me how he happened to meet her, and all I could tell about her was that she was a quiet sort of woman of good background. They had no children. She had apparently had no children with her first husband, either, which may have been the reason for the divorce. In any case, though not exactly a rich man, my uncle was in a position in his mid-forties where it was no longer necessary for him to break his back for money. In addition to the profits from his restaurants and bars, he had rental income from several houses and condos that he owned, plus steady dividend income from investments. With its reputation for respectable businesses and modest lifestyles, the family tended to see my uncle as something of a black sheep, and he had never shown much inclination for consorting with relatives. As his only nephew, though, I had always been of some concern to him, especially after my mother died the year I entered college and I had a falling-out with my father, who remarried. When I was living the lonely life of a poor college student in Tokyo, my uncle often treated me to dinner in one or another of his Ginza restaurants.

He and his wife now lived in a condo on a hill in Azabu rather than be bothered with taking care of a house. He was not given to indulging in luxuries, but he did have one hobby, which was the purchase of rare automobiles. He kept a Jaguar and an Alfa Romeo in the garage, both of them nearly antiques and extremely well cared for, as shiny as newborn babes.

•

On the phone with my uncle about something else, I took the opportunity to ask him what he knew about May Kasahara's family.

"Kasahara, you say?" He took a moment to think. "Never heard of them. I was a bachelor when I lived there, never had anything to do with the neighbors."

"Actually, it's the house opposite theirs I'm curious about, the vacant house on the other side of the alley from their backyard," I said. "I guess somebody named Miyawaki used to live there. Now it's all boarded up."

"Oh, Miyawaki. Sure, I knew him," said my uncle. "He used to own a few restaurants. Had one on the Ginza too. I met him professionally a few times. His places were nothing much, tell you the truth, but he had good locations. I thought he was doing all right. He was a

nice guy, but kind of a spoiled-rich-kid type. He had never had to work hard, or he just never got the hang of it or something, but he never quite grew up. Somebody got him going on the stock market, took him for everything he had- house, land, businesses, everything. And the timing couldn't have been worse. He was trying to open a new place, had his house and land up as collateral. Bang! The whole thing. Had a couple of daughters, I think, college age."

"The house has been empty ever since, I guess."

"No kidding? I'll bet the title's a mess and his assets have been frozen or something. You'd better not touch that place, no matter what kind of bargain they're offering you."

"Who? Me?" I laughed. "I could never afford a place like that. But what do you mean?"

"I looked into that house when I bought mine. There's something wrong with it."

"You mean like ghosts?"

"Maybe not ghosts, but I've never heard anything good about the place," my uncle said. "Some fairly well-known army guy lived there till the end of the war, Colonel Somebody-or-other, a real superelite officer. The troops under his command in North China won all kinds of decorations, but they did some terrible things there-executing five hundred POWs, forcing tens of thousands of farmers to work for them until half of them dropped dead, stuff like that. These are the stories that were going around, so I don't know how much is true. He was called home just before the end of the war, so he was here for the surrender, and he could see from what was going on that he was likely to be tried as a war criminal. The guys who had gone crazy in China-the generals, the field officers-were being dragged away by the MPs. Well, he had no intention of being put on trial. He was not going to be made a spectacle of and hanged in the bargain. He preferred to take his own life rather than let that happen. So one day when he saw a GI stop a jeep in front of his house, he blew his brains out on the spot. He would have preferred to slit his stomach open the old-fashioned samurai way, but there was no time for that. His wife hanged herself in the kitchen to 'accompany' her husband in death."

"Wow."

"Anyhow, it turned out the GI was just an ordinary GI, looking for his girlfriend. He was lost. He wanted to ask somebody directions. You know how tough it is to find your way around that place. Deciding it's your time to die-that can't be easy for anybody."

"No, it can't be."

"The house was vacant for a while after that, until an actress bought it- a movie actress. You wouldn't know her name. She was around long before your time, and she was never very famous. She lived there, say, ten years or so. Just she and her maid. She was single. A few years after she moved in, she contracted some eye disease. Everything looked cloudy to her, even close up. But she was an actress, after all; she couldn't work with glasses on. And contact lenses were a new thing back then. They weren't very good and almost nobody used them. So before the crew shot a scene, she would always go over the layout and memorize how many steps she had to take from A to B. She managed one way or another: they were pretty simple films, those old Shochiku domestic dramas. Everything was more relaxed in those days. Then one day, after she had checked over the set and gone back to her dressing room, a young cameraman who didn't know what was going on moved the props and things just a little bit."

"Uh-oh."

"She missed her footing, fell over, and couldn't walk after that. And her vision started getting even worse. She was practically blind. It was a shame; she was still young and pretty. Of course her movie-making days were over. All she could do was stay at home. And then the maid took all her money and ran off with some guy. This maid was the one person she knew she could trust, depended on her for everything, and the woman took her savings, her stocks, everything. Boy, talk about terrible stories! So what do you think she did?"

"Well, obviously this story can't have a bright, happy ending."

"No, obviously," said my uncle. "She filled the tub, stuck her face in, and drowned

herself. You realize, of course, that to die that way, you have to be pretty damned determined.”

“Nothing bright and happy about that.”

“No, nothing bright and happy. Miyawaki bought the property soon afterward. I mean, it’s a nice place; everybody wants it when they see it. The neighborhood is pleasant, the plot is on high ground and gets good sunlight, the lot is big. But Miyawaki had heard the dark stories about the people who had lived there, so he had the whole thing torn down, foundation and all, and put up a new house. He even had Shinto priests come in to do a purification. But that wasn’t enough, I guess. Bad things happen to anybody who lives there. It’s just one of those pieces of land. They exist, that’s all. I wouldn’t take it if they gave it to me.”

•

After shopping at the supermarket, I organized my ingredients for making dinner. I then took in the laundry, folded it neatly, and put it away. Back in the kitchen, I made myself a pot of coffee. This was a nice, quiet day, without calls from anybody. I stretched out on the sofa and read a book. There was no one to disturb my reading. Every once in a while, the wind-up bird would creak in the backyard. It was virtually the only sound I heard all day.

Someone rang the front doorbell at four o’clock. It was the postman. “Registered mail,” he said, and handed me a thick envelope. I took it and put my seal on the receipt.

This was no ordinary envelope. It was made of old-fashioned heavy rice paper, and someone had gone to the trouble of writing my name and address on it with a brush, in bold black characters. The sender’s name on the back was Tokutaro Mamiya, the address somewhere in Hiroshima Prefecture. I had absolutely no knowledge of either. Judging from the brushwork, this Tokutaro Mamiya was a man of advanced age. No one knew how to write like that anymore.

I sat on the sofa and used a scissors to cut the envelope open. The letter itself, just as old-fashioned as the envelope, was written on rolled rice paper in a flowing hand by an obviously cultivated person. Lacking such cultivation myself, I could hardly read it. The sentence style matched the handwriting in its extreme formality, which only complicated the process, but with enough time, I managed to decipher the general meaning. It said that old Mr. Honda, the fortune-teller whom Kumiko and I had gone to see so long ago, had died of a heart attack two weeks earlier in his Meguro home. Living alone, he had died without company, but the doctors believed that he had gone quickly and without a great deal of suffering- perhaps the one bright spot in this sad tale. The maid had found him in the morning, slumped forward on the low table of his foot warmer. The letter writer, Tokutaro Mamiya, had been stationed in Manchuria as a first lieutenant and had chanced to share the dangers of war with Corporal Oishi Honda. Now, in compliance with the strong wishes of the deceased, and in the absence of surviving relatives, Mamiya had undertaken the task of distributing the keepsakes. The deceased had left behind extremely minute written instructions in this regard. “The detailed and meticulous will suggests that Mr. Honda had anticipated his own impending death. It states explicitly that he would be extremely pleased if you, Mr. Toru Okada, would be so kind as to receive a certain item as a remembrance of him. I can imagine how very busy you must be, Mr. Okada, but I can assure you, as an old comrade in arms of the deceased with few years to look forward to myself, that I could have no greater joy than if you were indeed to be so kind as to receive this item as a small remembrance of the late Mr. Honda.” The letter concluded with the address at which Mr. Mamiya was presently staying in Tokyo, care of someone else named Mamiya in Hongo 2-chome, Bunkyo Ward. I imagined he must be in the house of a relative.

I wrote my reply at the kitchen table. I had hoped to keep the postcard short and simple, but once I had pen in hand, those few concise phrases were not forthcoming. “I was fortunate

enough to have known the late Mr. Honda and benefited from our brief acquaintance. The news that he is no longer living brings back memories of those times. Our ages were very different, of course, and our association lasted but a single year, yet-

I always used to feel that there was something about the deceased that moved people deeply. To be quite honest, I would never have imagined that Mr. Honda would name me specifically to be the recipient of a keepsake, nor am I certain that I am even qualified to receive anything from him, but if such was his wish, then I will certainly do so with all due respect. Please contact me at your earliest convenience.”

When I dropped the card into the nearest mailbox, I found myself murmuring old Mr. Honda’s verse: “Dying is the only way / For you to float free: / Nomonhan.”

•

It was close to ten before Kumiko came home from work. She had called before six to say that she would be late again today, that I should have dinner without her and she would grab something outside. Fine, I said, and ate a simple meal. Again I stayed home alone, reading a book. When she came in, Kumiko said she wanted a few sips of beer. We shared a midsize bottle. She looked tired. Elbows on the kitchen table, she rested her chin in her hands and said little when I spoke to her. She seemed preoccupied. I told her that Mr. Honda had died. “Oh, really?” she said, with a sigh. “Oh, well, he was getting on in years, and he was almost deaf.” When I said that he had left a keepsake for me, though, she was shocked, as if something had suddenly fallen out of the sky.

“For you?!” she exclaimed, her eyebrows twisting into a frown.

“Yeah. Weird, isn’t it?”

“He must have liked you.”

“How could that be? I never really talked to the guy,” I said. “At least *I* never said much. And even if I did, he couldn’t hear anything. We used to sit and listen to his stories once a month. And all we ever heard from him was the Battle of Nomonhan: how they threw Molotov cocktails, and which tank burned, and which tank didn’t burn, that kind of stuff.”

“Don’t ask me,” said Kumiko. “He must have liked something about you. I don’t understand people like that, what’s in their minds.”

After that, she went silent again. It was a strained silence. I glanced at the calendar on the wall. Her period was not due yet. I imagined that something unpleasant might have happened at the office.

“Working too hard?” I asked.

“A little,” Kumiko said, after taking a sip of beer and staring at what was left in her glass. There was an almost defiant tone in her voice. “Sorry I was so late, but you know how it is with magazine work when we get busy. And it’s not as if I do this all the time. I get them to give me less overtime than most. They know I have a husband to go home to.”

I nodded. “I’m not blaming you,” I said. “I know you have to work late sometimes. I was just worried you’re letting yourself get tired out.”

She took a long shower. I drank my beer and flipped through a weekly magazine that she had brought home.

I shoved my hand in my pants pocket and found the pay there from my recent little part-time job. I hadn’t even taken the cash from the envelope. Another thing I hadn’t done was tell Kumiko about the job. Not that I had been hiding it from her, but I had let the opportunity to mention it slip by and there had never been another one. As time passed, I found it harder to bring up the subject, for some strange reason. All I would have had to say was, “I met this odd sixteen-year-old girl from down the street and took a job with her doing a survey for a wig maker. The pay was pretty good too.”

And Kumiko could have said, “Oh, really? Isn’t that nice,” and that might have been the

end of it. Or not. She might have wanted to know more about May Kasahara. She might have been bothered that I was making friends with a sixteen-year-old girl. Then I would have had to tell her about May Kasahara and explain in detail where, when, and how we happened to meet. But I'm not very good at giving people orderly explanations of things.

I took the money from the envelope and put it in my wallet. The envelope itself I crumpled and threw in the wastebasket. So this was how secrets got started, I thought to myself. People constructed them little by little. I had not consciously intended to keep May Kasahara a secret from Kumiko. My relationship with her was not that big a deal, finally: whether I mentioned it or not was of no consequence. Once it had flowed down a certain delicate channel, however, it had become cloaked in the opacity of secretiveness, whatever my original "intention" may have been. The same thing had happened with Creta Kano. I had told Kumiko that Malta Kano's younger sister had come to the house, that her name was Creta, that she dressed in early-sixties style, that she took samples of our tap water. But I had remained silent on the fact that she had afterward begun to make startling revelations to me and had vanished without a word before reaching the end. Creta Kano's story had been too far-out: I could never have re-created the nuances and conveyed them to Kumiko, and so I had not tried. Or then again, Kumiko might have been less than pleased that Creta Kano had stayed here long after her business was through and made all kinds of troubling personal confessions to me. And so that became another one of my little secrets.

Maybe Kumiko had the same kind of secrets that she was keeping from me. With my own fund of secrets, I was in no position to blame her if she did, of course. Between the two of us, I was surely the more secretive. She tended to say what she was thinking. She was the type of person who thought things out while speaking. I was not like that.

Uneasy with these ruminations, I walked toward the bathroom. The door was wide open. I stood in the doorway and looked at Kumiko from behind. She had changed into solid-blue pajamas and was standing in front of the mirror, drying her hair with a towel.

"About a job for me," I said. "I *have* been thinking about it. I've asked friends to be on the lookout, and I've tried a few places myself. There *are* jobs out there, so I can work anytime I decide to work. I can start tomorrow if I make up my mind to it. It's making up my mind that's hard. I'm just not sure. I'm not sure if it's OK for me to pick a job out of a hat like that."

"That's why I keep telling you to do what you want," she said, while looking at herself in the mirror. "You don't *have to* find a job right away. If you're worried about the economics of it, you don't have to worry. If it makes you uneasy not to have a job, if it's a burden to you to have me be the only one working outside the house while you stay home and take care of the housework, then take some job-any job-for a while. I don't care."

"Of course, I'll have to find a job eventually. *I* know that, you know that. I can't go on hanging around like this forever. And I *will* find a job sooner or later. It's just that right now, I don't know what kind of a job I should take. For a while after I quit, I just figured I'd take some other law-related job. I do have connections in the field. But now I can't get myself into that mood. The more time that goes by, the less interest I have in law. I feel more and more that it's simply not the work for me."

Kumiko looked at me in the mirror. I went on:

"But knowing what I don't want to do doesn't help me figure out what I *do* want to do. I could do just about anything if somebody made me. But I don't have an image of the *one thing* I really want to do. That's my problem now. I can't find the image."

"So, then," she said, putting her towel down and turning to face me, "if you're tired of law, don't do it anymore. Just forget about the bar exam. Don't get all worked up about finding a job. If you can't find the image, wait until it forms by itself. What's wrong with that?"

I nodded. "I just wanted to make sure I had explained to you exactly how I felt."

“Good,” she said.

I went to the kitchen and washed my glass. She came in from the bathroom and sat at the kitchen table.

“Guess who called me this afternoon,” she said. “My brother.”

“Oh?”

“He’s thinking of running for office. In fact, he’s just about decided to do it.”

“Running for office?!” This came as such a shock to me, I could hardly speak for a moment. “You mean ... for the Diet?”

“That’s right. They’re asking him to run for my uncle’s seat in Niigata.”

“I thought it was all set for your uncle’s son to succeed him. He was going to resign his directorship at Dentsu or something and go back to Niigata.”

She started cleaning her ears with a cotton swab. “That was the plan, but my cousin doesn’t want to do it. He’s got his family in Tokyo, and he enjoys his work. He’s not ready to give up such an important post with the world’s largest advertising firm and move back to the wilds of Niigata just to become a Diet member. The main opposition is from his wife. She doesn’t want him sacrificing the family to run for office.”

The elder brother of Kumiko’s father had spent four or five terms in the Lower House, representing that electoral district in Niigata. While not exactly a heavyweight, he had compiled a fairly impressive record, rising at one point to a minor cabinet post. Now, however, advanced age and heart disease would make it impossible for him to enter the next election, which meant that someone would have to succeed to his constituency. This uncle had two sons, but the elder had never intended to go into politics, and so the younger was the obvious choice.

“Now the people in the district are dying to have my brother run. They want somebody young and smart and energetic. Somebody who can serve for several terms, with the talent to become a major power in the central government. My brother has the name recognition, he’ll attract the young vote: he’s perfect. True, he can’t schmooze with the locals, but the support organization is strong, and they’ll take care of that. Plus, if he wants to go on living in Tokyo, that’s no problem. All he has to do is show up for the election.”

I had trouble picturing Noboru Wataya as a Diet member. “What do you think of all this?” I asked.

“He’s got nothing to do with me. He can become a Diet member or an astronaut, for all I care.”

“But why did he make a point of coming to you for advice?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she said, with a dry voice. “He wasn’t asking my advice. You know he’d never do that. He was just keeping me informed. As a member of the family.”

“I see,” I said. “Still, if he’s going to run for the Diet, won’t it be a problem that he’s divorced and single?”

“I wonder,” said Kumiko. “I don’t know anything about politics or elections or anything. They just don’t interest me. But anyway, I’m pretty sure he’ll never get married again. To anybody. He should never have gotten married in the first place. That’s not what he wants out of life. He’s after something else, something completely different from what you or I want. I know that for sure.”

“Oh, really?”

Kumiko wrapped two used cotton swabs in a tissue and threw them in the wastebasket. Then she raised her face and looked straight at me. “I once saw him masturbating. I opened a door, and there he was.”

“So what? Everybody masturbates,” I said.

“No, you don’t understand,” she said. Then she sighed. “It happened maybe two years after my sister died. He was probably in college, and I was something like a third grader. My mother had wavered between getting rid of my sister’s things and putting them away, and in

the end she decided to keep them, thinking I might wear them when I got older. She had put them in a carton in a closet. My brother had taken them out and was smelling them and doing it.” I kept silent.

“I was just a little girl then. I didn’t know anything about sex. I really didn’t know what he was doing, but I could tell that it was something twisted, something I wasn’t supposed to see, something much deeper than, it appeared on the surface.” Kumiko shook her head.

“Does Noboru Wataya know you saw him?”

“Of course. We looked right into each other’s eyes.” I nodded.

“And how about your sister’s clothes?” I asked. “Did you wear them when you got bigger?” “No way,” she said.

“So you think he was in love with your sister?” “I wonder,” said Kumiko. “I’m not even sure he had a sexual interest in her, but he certainly had *something*, and I suspect he’s never been able to get away from that something. That’s what I mean when I say he should never have gotten married in the first place.”

Kumiko fell silent. For a long time, neither of us said anything. Then she spoke first. “In that sense, I think he may have some serious psychological problems. Of course, we all have psychological problems to some extent, but his are a lot worse than whatever you or I might have. They’re a lot deeper and more persistent. And he has no intention of letting these scars or weaknesses or whatever they are be seen by anybody else. Ever. Do you understand what I’m saying? This election coming up: it worries me.”

“Worries you? How’s that?”

“I don’t know. It just does,” she said. “Anyhow, I’m tired. I can’t think anymore today. Let’s go to bed.”

Brushing my teeth in the bathroom, I studied my face in the mirror. For over two months now, since quitting my job, I had rarely entered the “outside world.” I had been moving back and forth between the neighborhood shops, the ward pool, and this house. Aside from the Ginza and that hotel in Shinagawa, the farthest point I had traveled from home was the cleaner’s by the station. And in all that time, I had hardly seen anyone. Aside from Kumiko, the only people I could be said to have “seen” in two months were Malta and Kano and May Kasahara. It was a narrow world, a world that was standing still. But the narrower it became, and the more it betook of stillness, the more this world that enveloped me seemed to overflow with things and people that could only be called strange. They had been there all the while, it seemed, waiting in the shadows for me to stop moving. And every time the wind-up bird came to my yard to wind its spring, the world descended more deeply into chaos.

I rinsed my mouth and went on looking at my face for a time.

I can’t find the image, I said to myself. I’m thirty, I’m standing still, and I can’t find the image.

When I went from the bathroom to the bedroom, Kumiko was asleep.

11

Enter Lieutenant M a m i y a

*

What Came from the Warm Mud

*

Eau de Cologne

Three days later, Tokutaro Mamiya called. At seven-thirty in the morning. I was eating breakfast with Kumiko at the time.

"I am very, very sorry to be calling you so early in the morning. I do hope I haven't awakened you," said Mr. Mamiya, sounding genuinely apologetic.

I assured him that it was all right: I woke up every morning shortly after six.

He thanked me for my postcard and explained that he wanted to reach me before I left for work this morning, adding that he would be most grateful if I could see him briefly today during my lunch break. He was hoping to take an evening bullet train back to Hiroshima. He had planned to have more time here, he said, but something had come up that made it necessary for him to return home as soon as possible.

I pointed out that I was presently unemployed, that I was free all day, and that I could see him at his convenience, be it morning, noon, afternoon, or whenever.

"But surely you must have something planned at some point in the day?" he inquired with the utmost politeness.

I had no plan at all, I replied.

"That being the case, might I be permitted to call upon you at your residence this morning at ten o'clock?"

"That would be fine."

Only after I hung up did it occur to me that I had forgotten to tell him how to find our house from the station. Oh, well, I figured, he knows the address; he can make his way here if he wants to.

"Who was that?" asked Kumiko.

"The guy who's distributing Mr. Honda's keepsakes. He's going to bring mine here later this morning."

"No kidding?" She took a sip of coffee and spread butter on her toast. "That's very nice of him."

"Sure is."

"By the way," she said, "shouldn't we-or at least you-go to pay our respects at Mr. Honda's: burn a stick of incense, that sort of thing?"

"Good idea. I'll ask him about that."

Preparing to leave the house, Kumiko asked me to zip her dress up. It was a tight fit, and closing the zipper took some doing. She was wearing a lovely fragrance behind her ears-something perfect for a summer morning. "New cologne?" I asked. Instead of answering, she glanced at her watch and reached up to fix her hair.

"I'm late," she said, and took her handbag from the table.

•

I had straightened up the little room that Kumiko used for work and was emptying the wastebasket when I noticed a yellow ribbon she had discarded. It was peeking out from under a crumpled sheet of writing paper and a few pieces of junk mail. Its bright, glossy yellow was what had caught my eye. It was the kind of ribbon used to wrap presents, the bow tied in the shape of a flower. I lifted it from the wastebasket and examined it. The ribbon had been discarded along with some wrapping paper from the Matsuya department store. Under the paper was a box with the Christian Dior label. The lining inside the box formed the shape of a bottle. Judging from the box, this had been a pretty expensive item. I took it with me to the bathroom and opened Kumiko's cosmetics cabinet. Inside was a virtually unused bottle of Christian Dior eau de cologne, shaped like the hollow in the box. I opened the bottle's gold-colored cap and took a sniff. It was the same fragrance I had smelled from behind Kumiko's

ears.

I sat on the sofa, drinking the rest of my morning coffee and collecting my thoughts. Someone had obviously given Kumiko a gift. An expensive gift. Bought it at the Matsuya department store and had it wrapped with a ribbon. If the person who did this was a man, he was someone close to Kumiko. Men didn't give women (especially married women) cologne unless their relationship was a close one. If a woman friend had given it to her ... But did women give eau de cologne to other women? I could not be sure. One thing I could be sure of, though, was that there was no particular reason for Kumiko to be receiving presents from other people at this time of year. Her birthday was in May. So was our anniversary. She might conceivably have bought herself a bottle of cologne and had it wrapped with a pretty ribbon. But why?

I sighed and looked at the ceiling.

Should I ask her about it directly? "Did somebody give you that cologne?" She might answer: "Oh, that. One of the girls at work had a personal problem I helped her out with. It's too long a story to go into, but she was in a jam, so I did it to be nice. This was a thank-you gift. Wonderful fragrance, don't you think? It's expensive stuff!"

OK, that makes sense. That does it. No need to ask the question. No need to be concerned.

Except I was concerned. She should have said something to me about it. If she had time to go to her room, untie the ribbon, tear off the wrapping paper, open the box, throw all three in the wastebasket, and put the bottle in her cosmetics cabinet, she should have been able to come to me and say, "Look at this present I got from one of the girls at work." Instead, she had said nothing. Maybe she had thought it wasn't worth mentioning. Now, however, it had taken on the thin veil of secrecy. That was what was bothering me.

I looked at the ceiling for a long time. I tried to think about something else, but my mind wouldn't cooperate. I kept thinking about Kumiko at the moment I zipped up her dress: her smooth white back, the fragrance behind her ears. For the first time in months, I wanted a smoke. I wanted to put a cigarette in my mouth, light the tip, and suck the smoke into my lungs. That would have calmed me down somewhat. But I didn't have any cigarettes. I found a lemon drop and sucked on that.

At ten of ten, the phone rang. I assumed it was Lieutenant Mamiya. This house was not easy to find. Even people who had been here more than once got lost sometimes. But the call was not from Lieutenant Mamiya. What I heard coming from the receiver was the voice of the enigmatic woman who had phoned me the other day.

"Hi, honey, it's been a while," she said. "How'd you like it last time? Did I get you going a little bit? Why'd you hang up on me? And just when things were getting interesting!"

For a split second, I thought she was talking about my recent wet dream of Kano. But that had been a different story. She was talking about the day she called me when I was cooking spaghetti.

"Sorry," I said, "but I'm pretty busy right now. I'm expecting a visitor in ten minutes, and I've got to get the place ready."

"You're awfully busy for somebody who's supposed to be out of work," she said, with a sarcastic edge. The same thing had happened last time: her tone of voice changed from one second to the next. "You're cooking spaghetti, you're expecting a visitor. But that's all right. All we need is ten minutes. Let's talk for ten minutes, just you and me. You can hang up when your guest arrives."

I wanted to hang up without saying a word, but I couldn't do it. I was probably still upset about Kumiko's cologne. I probably felt like talking to someone, and it didn't much matter who.

"Look," I said, "I don't have any idea who you are." I picked up the pencil lying beside the phone and twirled it in my fingers as I spoke. "Are you sure I know you?"

"Of course you do. I told you last time. I know you and you know me. I wouldn't lie about

a thing like that. I don't have time to waste calling complete strangers. You must have some kind of blind spot in your memory."

"I don't know about that. Really, though—"

"Enough," she said, cutting me off. "Stop thinking so much. You know me and I know you. The important thing is—well, look at it this way: I'm going to be very nice to you. But you don't have to do a thing. Isn't that marvelous? You don't have to do a thing, you have no responsibilities, and I do everything. *Everything*. Don't you think that's great? So stop thinking so much. Stop making everything so *complicated*. Empty yourself out. Pretend you're lying in some nice, soft mud on a warm spring afternoon."

I kept silent.

"You're asleep. You're dreaming. You're lying in nice, warm mud. Forget about your wife. Forget you're out of work. Forget about the future. Forget about everything. We all come out of the warm mud, and we all go back to it. Finally— Oh, by the way, Mr. Okada, when was the last time you had sex with your wife? Do you remember? Quite some time ago, wasn't it? Yes, indeed, maybe two weeks now."

"Sorry, my visitor is here," I said.

"*More* than two weeks, wasn't it? I can tell from your voice. Three weeks, maybe?"

I said nothing.

"Oh, well, never mind," she said, her voice like a little broom sweeping off the dust that had piled up on the slats of a Venetian blind. "That's between you and your wife. But I will give you everything you want. And you, Mr. Okada, you need have no responsibilities in return. Just go round the corner, and there it is: a world you've never seen. I *told* you you have a blind spot, didn't I? You still don't understand."

Gripping the receiver, I maintained my silence.

"Look around," she said. "Look all around you and tell me what's there. What is it you see?"

Just then the doorbell rang. Relieved, I hung up without a word.

•

Lieutenant Mamiya was a bald old gentleman of exceptional height, who wore gold-rimmed glasses. He had the tan, healthy look of a man who has done his share of manual labor, without an ounce of excess flesh. Three deep wrinkles marked the corner of each eye with perfect symmetry, as if he were on the verge of squinting because he found the light harsh. It was difficult to tell his age, though he was certainly no less than seventy. I imagined he must have been a strapping fellow in his prime. This was obvious from his erect carriage and efficient movements. His demeanor and speech were of the utmost respectfulness, but rather than elaborate formality, this gave an impression of unadorned precision. The lieutenant appeared to be a man accustomed to making his own decisions and taking responsibility for them. He wore an unremarkable light-gray suit, a white shirt, and a gray and black striped tie. The no-nonsense suit appeared to be made of a material that was a bit too thick for a hot and humid June morning, but the lieutenant was unmarked by a drop of sweat. He had a prosthetic left hand, on which he wore a thin glove of the same light-gray color as the suit. Encased in this gray glove, the artificial hand looked especially cold and inorganic when compared with the tanned and hairy right hand, from which dangled a cloth-wrapped bundle, knotted at the top.

I showed him to the living room couch and served him a cup of green tea.

He apologized for not having a name card. "I used to teach social studies in a rural public high school in Hiroshima Prefecture, but I haven't done anything since I retired. I raise a few vegetables, more as a hobby than anything, just simple farm work. For that reason, I do not happen to carry a name card, although I realize it is terribly rude of me."

I didn't have a name card, either.

"Forgive me, but I wonder how old you might be, Mr. Okada?"

"I'm thirty," I said.

He nodded. Then he took a sip of tea. I had no idea what it meant to him that I was thirty years old.

"This is such a nice, quiet home you live in," he said, as if to change the subject.

I told him how I came to be renting it from my uncle for so little. Ordinarily, with our income, we couldn't afford to live in a house half the size, I added. Nodding, he stole a few hesitant glances around the place. I followed his lead and did the same. *Look all around you*, the woman's voice had ordered me. Taking this newly conscious look at my surroundings, I found a certain coldness in the pervading atmosphere.

"I have been in Tokyo two weeks altogether on this trip," said Lieutenant Mamiya, "and you are the very last person to whom I am distributing a keepsake. Now I feel I can go back to Hiroshima."

"I was hoping I could visit Mr. Honda's home and perhaps burn a stick of incense in his memory," I said.

"That is a most laudable intention, but Mr. Honda's home-and now his grave-are in Asahikawa, Hokkaido. The family came from Asahikawa to sort out the things he left in his house in Meguro, and now they have gone back. There is nothing left."

"I see," I said. "So Mr. Honda was living alone in Tokyo, then, far away from his family."

"That is correct. The eldest son, who lives in Asahikawa, was concerned about leaving his old father to live by himself in the big city, and he knew that it did not look very good. Apparently, he tried to persuade his father to come and live with him, but Mr. Honda simply refused."

"He had a son?" I asked, somewhat taken aback. I had always thought of Mr. Honda as utterly alone in the world. "Then I assume Mr. Honda's wife must have passed away some time ago."

"Well, that is a rather complicated story. Mrs. Honda committed a lovers' suicide with another man after the war. In 1950 or 1951, I believe. The details of that event are not something that I would know about. Mr. Honda never said too much about it, and of course I was in no position to ask."

I nodded.

"After that, Mr. Honda raised his children alone-one son and one daughter. When they became independent, he moved to Tokyo by himself and began his work as a diviner, which is how you knew him."

"What sort of work did he do in Asahikawa?"

"He was partners with his brother in a printing business." I tried to imagine Mr. Honda standing in front of a printing press in coveralls, checking proof, but to me Mr. Honda was a slightly grimy old man in a grimy old kimono with a sash more suited to a sleeping robe, who sat, winter and summer, with his legs in the sunken hearth, playing with his divining sticks atop his low table.

With deft movements, Lieutenant Mamiya used his good hand to untie the cloth bundle he had brought with him. A package emerged, shaped like a small box of candy. It was wrapped in kraft paper and tightly tied in several loops of string. The lieutenant placed it on the table and slid it toward me.

"This is the keepsake that Mr. Honda left with me to give to you," he said.

I picked it up. It weighed practically nothing. I couldn't begin to imagine what was inside.

"Shall I just go ahead and open it?" I asked.

Lieutenant Mamiya shook his head. "I am sorry, but Mr. Honda indicated that he wished you to open it when you were alone." I nodded and returned the package to the table. "In fact," said Lieutenant Mamiya, "I received the letter from Mr. Honda exactly one day before

he died. It said something like this: 'I am going to die very soon. I am not the least bit afraid of dying. This is the span of life that has been allotted to me by the will of Heaven, Where the will of Heaven is concerned, all one can do is submit to it. There is, however, something that I have left undone. In my closet there are various objects-things that I have wanted to pass on to certain people. Now it appears that I will not be able to accomplish that task. Which is why I would be most grateful if you would help me by distributing the keepsakes on the attached list. I fully realize how presumptuous this is of me, but I do hope that you will be so kind as to think of it as my dying wish and exert yourself this one last time for my sake.'

I must say, I was utterly shocked to receive such a letter from Mr. Honda. I had been out of touch with him for years-perhaps six or seven years without a word. I wrote back to him immediately, but my reply crossed in the mails with the notice from his son that Mr. Honda had died." He took a sip of his green tea.

"Mr. Honda knew exactly when he was going to die," Lieutenant Mamiya continued. "He must have attained a state of mind that someone like me could never hope to reach. As you said in your postcard, there was something about him that moved people deeply. I felt that from the time I first met him, in the summer of 1938."

"Oh, were you in the same unit with Mr. Honda at the time of the Nomonhan Incident?"

"No, I wasn't," said Lieutenant Mamiya, biting his lip. "We were in different units-different divisions, even. We worked together in a small-scale military operation that preceded the Nomonhan battle. Corporal Honda was later wounded at Nomonhan and sent back to Japan. I didn't go to Nomonhan. I lost this hand of mine"-and here Lieutenant Mamiya held up his gloved left hand-"in the Soviet advance of August 1945, the month the war ended. I caught a slug in the shoulder from a heavy machine gun during a battle against a tank unit. I was on the ground, unconscious, when a Soviet tank ran over my hand. I was taken prisoner, treated in a hospital in Chita, and sent to an internment camp in Siberia. They kept me there until 1949. I was on the continent for twelve years altogether from the time they sent me over in 1937, never set foot on Japanese soil the whole time. My family thought I had been killed fighting the Soviets. They made a grave for me in the village cemetery. I had a kind of understanding with a girl there before I left Japan, but by the time I got back she was already married to another man. Twelve years is a long time."

I nodded.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Okada," he said. "This talk about the old days must be boring to a young fellow like you. I would like to add one more thing, though. And that is that we were just ordinary young men, the same as you. I never once thought I wanted to be a soldier. I wanted to be a teacher. As soon as I left college, though, they sent me my draft notice, stuck me in officers training, and I ended up on the continent for twelve years. My life went by like a dream." Lieutenant Mamiya clamped his mouth shut.

"If you wouldn't mind," I said, after some time had passed, "I would very much like to hear the story of how you and Mr. Honda came to know each other." I genuinely wanted to know what kind of man Mr. Honda had been before I met him.

Hands placed precisely on his knees, Lieutenant Mamiya sat thinking about something. Not that he was uncertain as to what he should do. He was just thinking.

"That story might be a long one," he said.

"I don't mind," I said.

"I've never told it to anyone. And I'm quite certain that Mr. Honda never told it to anyone, either. The reason I say that is that we ... made a pact... to keep this one thing secret. But Mr. Honda is dead now. I'm the only one left. It wouldn't hurt anyone if I told."

And so Lieutenant Mamiya began to tell me his story.

Lieutenant Mamiya's Long Story: Part I

*

I was shipped to Manchuria at the beginning of 1937, Lieutenant Mamiya began. I was a brand-new second lieutenant then, and they assigned me to the Kwantung Army General Staff in Hsin-ching. Geography had been my major in college, so I ended up in the Military Survey Corps, which specialized in mapmaking. This was ideal for me because, to be quite honest, the duties I was ordered to perform were among the easiest that anyone could hope for in the army.

In addition to this, conditions in Manchuria were relatively peaceful- or at least stable. The recent outbreak of the China Incident had moved the theater of military operations from Manchuria into China proper. The China Expeditionary Forces were the ones doing the actual fighting now, while the Kwantung Army had an easy time of it. True, mopping-up operations were still going on against anti-Japanese guerrilla units, but they were confined to the interior, and in general the worst was over. All that the powerful Kwantung Army had to do was police our newly "independent" puppet state of Manchukuo while keeping an eye on the north.

As peaceful as things supposedly were, it was still war, after all, so there were constant maneuvers. I didn't have to participate in those, either, fortunately. They took place under terrible conditions. The temperature would drop to forty or fifty degrees below zero. One false step in maneuvers like that, and you could end up dead. Every single time they held such maneuvers, there would be hundreds of men in the hospital with frostbite or sent to a hot spring for treatment. Hsin-ching was no big city, but it was certainly an exotic foreign place, and if you wanted to have fun there, it provided plenty of opportunities. New single officers like me lived together in a kind of rooming house rather than in barracks. It was more like an extension of student life. I took it easy, thinking that I would have nothing to complain about if my military service ended like this, just one peaceful day after another.

It was, of course, a make-believe peace. Just beyond the edges of our little circle of sunshine, a ferocious war was going on. Most Japanese realized that the war with China would turn into a muddy swamp from which we could never extricate ourselves, I believe-or at least any Japanese with a brain in his head realized this. It didn't matter how many local battles we won: there was no way Japan could continue to occupy and rule over such a huge country. It was obvious if you thought about it. And sure enough, as the fighting continued, the number of dead and wounded began to multiply. Relations with America went from bad to worse. Even at home, the shadows of war grew darker with every passing day. Those were dark years then: 1937, 1938. But living the easy life of an officer in Hsin-ching, you almost wanted to ask, "War? What war?" We'd go out drinking and carousing every night, and we'd visit the cafes that had the White Russian girls.

Then, one day late in April 1938, a senior officer of the general staff called me in and introduced me to a fellow in mufti named Yamamoto. He wore his hair short and had a mustache. He was not a very tall man. As for his age, I'd say he was in his mid-thirties. He had a scar on the back of his neck that looked as if it might have been made by a blade of some kind. The officer said to me: "Mr. Yamamoto is a civilian. He's been hired by the army to investigate the life and customs of the Mongolians who live in Manchukuo. He will next be going to the Hulunbuir Steppe, near the Outer Mongolian border, and we are going to supply him with an armed escort. You will be a member of that detachment." I didn't believe a thing

he was telling me. This Yamamoto fellow might have been wearing civilian clothes, but anybody could tell at a glance that he was a professional soldier. The look in his eyes, the way he spoke, his posture: it was obvious. I figured he was a high-ranking officer or had something to do with intelligence and was on a mission that required him to conceal his military identity. There was something ominous about the whole thing.

Three of us were assigned to accompany Yamamoto-too few for an effective armed escort, though a larger group would have attracted the attention of the Outer Mongolian troops deployed along the border. One might have chosen to view this as a case of entrusting a sensitive mission to a few handpicked men, but the truth was far from that. I was the only officer, and I had zero battlefield experience. The only one we could count on for fighting power was a sergeant by the name of Hamano. I knew him well, as a soldier who had been assigned to assist the general staff. He was a tough fellow who had worked his way up through the ranks to become a noncommissioned officer, and he had distinguished himself in battle in China. He was big and fearless, and I was sure we could count on him in a pinch. Why they had also included Corporal Honda in our party I had no idea. Like me, he had just arrived from home, and of course he had no experience on the battlefield. He was a gentle, quiet soul who looked as if he would be no help at all in a fight. What's more, he belonged to the Seventh Division, which meant that the general staff had gone out of their way to have him sent over to us specifically for this assignment. That's how valuable a soldier he was, though not until much later did the reason for this become clear.

I was chosen to be the commanding officer of the escort because my primary responsibility was the topography of the western border of Manchukuo in the area of the Khalkha River. My job was to make sure that our maps of the district were as complete as possible. I had even been over the area several times in a plane. My presence was meant to help the mission go smoothly. My second assignment was to gather more detailed topographical information on the district and so increase the precision of our maps. Two birds with one stone, as it were. To be quite honest, the maps we had in those days of the Hulunbuir Steppe border region with Outer Mongolia were crude things-hardly an improvement over the old Manchu dynasty maps. The Kwantung Army had done several surveys following the establishment of Manchukuo. They wanted to make more accurate maps, but the area they had to cover was huge, and western Manchuria is just an endless desert. National borders don't mean very much in such a vast wilderness. The Mongolian nomads had lived there for thousands of years without the need-or even the concept-of borders.

The political situation had also delayed the making of more accurate maps. Which is to say that if we had gone ahead and unilaterally made an official map showing our idea of the border, it could have caused a full-scale international incident. Both the Soviet Union and Outer Mongolia, which shared borders with Manchukuo, were extremely sensitive about border violations, and there had been several instances of bloody combat over just such matters. In our day, the army was in no mood for war with the Soviet Union. All our force was invested in the war with China, with none to spare for a large-scale clash with the Soviets. We didn't have the divisions or the tanks or the artillery or the planes. The first priority was to secure the stability of Manchukuo, which was still a relatively new political entity. Establishment of the northern and northwestern borders could wait, as far as the army was concerned. They wanted to stall for time by keeping things indefinite. Even the mighty Kwantung Army deferred to this view and adopted a wait-and-see attitude. As a result, everything had been allowed to drift in a sea of vagueness.

If, however, their best-laid plans notwithstanding, some unforeseen event should lead to war (which is exactly what did happen the following year at Nomonhan), we would need maps to fight. And not just ordinary civilian maps, but real combat maps. To fight a war you need maps that show you where to establish encampments, the most effective place to set up your artillery, how many days it will take your infantry to march there, where to secure water,

how much feed you need for your horses: a great deal of detailed information. You simply couldn't fight a modern war without such maps. Which is why much of our work overlapped with the work of the intelligence division, and we were constantly exchanging information with the Kwantung Army's intelligence section or the military secret service in Hailar. Everyone knew everyone else, but this Ya-mamoto fellow was someone I had never seen before.

After five days of preparation, we left Hsin-ching for Hailar by train. We took a truck from there, drove it through the area of the Khandur-byo Lamaist temple, and arrived at the Manchukuo Army's border observation post near the Khalkha River. I don't remember the exact distance, but it was something like two hundred miles. The region was an empty wilderness, with literally nothing as far as the eye could see. My work required me to keep checking my map against the actual landforms, but there was nothing out there for me to check against, nothing that one could call a landmark. All I could see were shaggy, grass-covered mounds stretching on and on, the unbroken horizon, and clouds floating in the sky. There was no way I could have any precise idea where on the map we were. All I could do was guess according to the amount of time we had been driving.

Sometimes, when one is moving silently through such an utterly desolate landscape, an overwhelming hallucination can make one feel that oneself, as an individual human being, is slowly coming unraveled. The surrounding space is so vast that it becomes increasingly difficult to keep a balanced grip on one's own being. I wonder if I am making myself clear. The mind swells out to fill the entire landscape, becoming so diffuse in the process that one loses the ability to keep it fastened to the physical self. That is what I experienced in the midst of the Mongolian steppe. How vast it was! It felt more like an ocean than a desert landscape. The sun would rise from the eastern horizon, cut its way across the empty sky, and sink below the western horizon. This was the only perceptible change in our surroundings. And in the movement of the sun, I felt something I hardly know how to name: some huge, cosmic love.

At the border post of the Manchukuo Army, we transferred from truck to horseback. They had everything ready for us there: four horses to ride, plus two packhorses loaded with food, water, and weapons. We were lightly armed. I and the man called Yamamoto carried only pistols. Hamano and Honda carried Model 38 regulation infantry rifles and two hand grenades each, in addition to their pistols.

The de facto commander of our group was Yamamoto. He made all the decisions and gave us instructions. Since he was supposedly a civilian, military rules required that I act as commanding officer, but no one doubted that he was the one in charge. He was simply that kind of man, for one thing, and although I held the rank of second lieutenant, I was nothing but a pencil pusher without battle experience. Military men can see who holds actual power, and that is the one they obey. Besides, my superiors had ordered me to follow Yamamoto's instructions without question. My obedience to him was to be something that transcended the usual laws and regulations.

We proceeded to the Khalkha River and followed it to the south. The river was swollen with snowmelt. We could see large fish in the water. Sometimes, in the distance, we spotted wolves. They might have been part wild dog rather than purebred wolves, but in any case they were dangerous. We had to post a sentry each night to guard the horses from them. We also saw a lot of birds, most of them migratory fowl on their way back to Siberia. Yamamoto and I discussed features of the *topography*. Checking our route against the map, we kept detailed notes on every bit of information that came to our notice. Aside from these technical exchanges, however, Yamamoto hardly ever spoke to me. He spurred his horse on in silence, ate away from the rest of us, and went to sleep without a word. I had the impression that this was not his first trip to the area. He had amazingly precise knowledge of the landforms, directions, and so forth.

After we had proceeded southward for two days without incident, Yamamoto called me

aside and told me that we would be fording the Khalkha before dawn the next morning. This came as a tremendous shock to me. The opposite shore was Outer Mongolian territory. Even the bank on which we stood was a dangerous area of border disputes. The Outer Mongolians laid claim to it, and Manchukuo asserted its own claims to the territory, which had led to continual armed clashes. If we were ever taken prisoner by Outer Mongolian troops on this side, the differing views of the two countries gave us some excuse for being there, though in fact there was little danger of encountering them in this season, when snowmelt made fording so difficult. The far bank was a different story altogether. Mongolian patrols were over there for certain. If we were captured there, we would have no excuse whatever. It would be a clear case of border violation, which could stir up all kinds of political problems. We could be shot on the spot, and our government would be unable to protest. In addition, my superior officer had given me no indication that it would be all right for us to cross the border. I *had*, of course, been told to follow Yamamoto's orders, but I had no way of knowing if this included such a grave offense as a border violation. Secondly, as I said earlier, the Khalkha was quite swollen, and the current was far too strong to make a crossing, in addition to which the water must have been freezing cold. Not even the nomadic tribes wanted to ford the river at this time of year. They usually restricted their crossings to winter, when the river was frozen, or summer, when the flow was down and the water temperature up.

When I said all this to him, Yamamoto stared at me for a moment. Then he nodded several times. "I understand your concern about the violation of international borders," he said to me, with a somewhat patronizing air. "It is entirely natural for you, as an officer with men under your command, to consider the locus of responsibility in such a matter. You would never want to put the lives of your men in danger without good cause. But I want you to leave such questions to me. I will assume all responsibility in this instance. I am not in a position to explain a great deal to you, but this matter has been cleared with the highest levels of the army. As regards the fording of the river, we have no technical obstacles. There is a hidden point at which it is possible to cross. The Outer Mongolian Army has constructed and secured several such points. I suspect that you are fully aware of this as well. I myself have crossed the river a number of times at this point. I entered Outer Mongolia last year at this time at this same place. There is nothing for you to worry about."

He was right about one thing. The Outer Mongolian Army, which knew this area in detail, had sent combat units-though just a few of them-across to this side of the river during the season of melting snow. They had made sure they could send whole units across at will. And if *they* could cross, then this man called Yamamoto could cross, and it would not be impossible for the rest of us to cross too.

We stood now at one of those secret fords that had most likely been built by the Outer Mongolian Army. Carefully camouflaged, it would not have been obvious to the casual observer. A plank bridge, held in place by ropes against the swift current, connected the shallows on either side beneath the surface of the water. A slight drop in the water level would make for an easy crossing by troop transport vehicles, armored cars, and such. Reconnaissance planes could never spot it underwater. We made our way across the river's strong flow by clinging to the ropes. Yamamoto went first, to be certain there were no Outer Mongolian patrols in the area, and we followed. Our feet went numb in the cold water, but we and our horses struggled across to the far shore of the Khalkha River. The land rose up much higher on the far side, and standing there, we could see for miles across the desert expanse from which we had come. This was one reason the Soviet Army would always be in the more advantageous position when the battle for Nomonhan eventually broke out. The difference in elevation would also make for a huge difference in the accuracy of artillery fire. In any case, I remember being struck by how different the view was on either side of the river. I remember, too, how long it took to regain feeling in limbs that had been soaked in the icy water. I couldn't even get my voice to work for a while. But to be quite honest, the sheer tension that

came from knowing I was in enemy territory was enough to make me forget about the cold.

We followed the river southward. Like an undulating snake, the Khalkha flowed on below us to the left. Shortly after the crossing, Yamamoto advised us to remove all insignia of rank, and we did as we were told. Such things could only cause trouble if we were captured by the enemy, I assumed. For this reason, I also removed my officer's boots and changed into gaiters.

We were setting up camp that evening when a man approached us from the distance, riding alone. He was a Mongol. The Mongols use an unusually high saddle, which makes it easy to distinguish them from afar. Sergeant Hamano snapped up his rifle when he saw the figure approaching, but Yamamoto told him not to shoot. Hamano slowly lowered his rifle without a word. The four of us stood there, waiting for the man to draw closer. He had a Soviet-made rifle strapped to his back and a Mauser at his waist. Whiskers covered his face, and he wore a hat with earflaps. His filthy robes were the same kind as the nomads', but you could tell from the way he handled himself that he was a professional soldier.

Dismounting, the man spoke to Yamamoto in what I assumed was Mongolian. I had some knowledge of both Russian and Chinese, and what he spoke was neither of those, so it must have been Mongolian. Yamamoto answered in the man's own language. This made me surer than ever that Yamamoto was an intelligence officer.

Yamamoto said to me, "Lieutenant Mamiya, I will be leaving with this man. I don't know how long I will be away, but I want you to wait here- posting a sentry at all times, of course. If I am not back in thirty-six hours, you are to report that fact to headquarters. Send one man back across the river to the Manchukuo Army observation post." He mounted his horse and rode off with the Mongol, heading west.

The three of us finished setting up camp and ate a simple dinner. We couldn't cook or build a campfire. On that vast steppe, with nothing but low sand dunes to shield our presence as far as the eye could see, the least puff of smoke would have led to our immediate capture. We pitched our tents low in the shelter of the dunes, and for supper we ate dry crackers and cold canned meat. Darkness swiftly covered us when the sun sank beneath the horizon, and the sky was filled with an incredible number of stars. Mixed in with the roar of the Khalkha River, the sound of wolves howling came to us as we lay atop the sand, recovering from the day's exertions.

Sergeant Hamano said to me, "Looks like a tough spot we've got ourselves in," and I had to agree with him. By then, the three of us- Sergeant Hamano, Corporal Honda, and I- had gotten to know each other pretty well. Ordinarily, a fresh young officer like me would be kept at arm's length and laughed at by a seasoned noncommissioned officer like Sergeant Hamano, but our case was different. He respected the education I had received in a nonmilitary college, and I took care to acknowledge his combat experience and practical judgment without letting rank get in the way. We also found it easy to talk to each other because he was from Yamaguchi and I was from an area of Hiroshima close to Yamaguchi. He told me about the war in China. He was a soldier all the way, with only grammar school behind him, but he had his own reservations about this messy war on the continent, which looked as if it would never end, and he expressed these feelings honestly to me. "I don't mind fighting," he said. "I'm a soldier. And I don't mind dying in battle for my country, because that's my job. But this war we're fighting now, Lieutenant- well, it's just not right. It's not a real war, with a battle line where you face the enemy and fight to the finish. We advance, and the enemy runs away without fighting. Then the Chinese soldiers take their uniforms off and mix with the civilian population, and we don't even know who the enemy is. So then we kill a lot of innocent people in the name of flushing out 'renegades' or 'remnant troops,' and we commandeer provisions. We have to steal their food, because the line moves forward so fast our supplies can't catch up with us. And we have to kill our prisoners, because we don't have anyplace to keep them or any food to feed them. It's wrong, Lieutenant. We did some terrible things in

Nanking. My own unit did. We threw dozens of people into a well and dropped hand grenades in after them. Some of the things we did I couldn't bring myself to talk about. I'm telling you, Lieutenant, this is one war that doesn't have any Righteous Cause. It's just two sides killing each other. And the ones who get stepped on are the poor farmers, the ones without politics or ideology. For them, there's no Nationalist Party, no Young Marshal Zhang, no Eighth Route Army. If they can eat, they're happy. I know how these people feel: I'm the son of a poor fisherman myself. The little people slave away from morning to night, and the best they can do is keep themselves alive-just barely. I can't believe that killing these people for no reason at all is going to do Japan one bit of good."

In contrast to Sergeant Hamano, Corporal Honda had very little to say about himself. He was a quiet fellow, in any case. He'd mostly listen to us talk, without injecting his own comments. But while I say he was "quiet," I don't mean to imply there was anything dark or melancholy about him. It's just that he rarely took the initiative in a conversation. True, that often made me wonder what was on his mind, but there was nothing unpleasant about him. If anything, there was something in his quiet manner that softened people's hearts. He was utterly serene. He wore the same look on his face no matter what happened. I gathered he was from Asahikawa, where his father ran a small print shop. He was two years younger than I, and from the time he left middle school he had joined his brothers, working for his father. He was the youngest of three boys, the eldest of whom had been killed in China two years earlier. He loved to read, and whenever we had a spare moment, you'd see him curled up somewhere, reading a book on some kind of Buddhist topic.

As I said earlier, Honda had absolutely no combat experience, but with only one year of training behind him, he was an outstanding soldier. There are always one or two such men in any platoon, who, patient and enduring, carry out their duties to the letter without a word of complaint. Physically strong, with good intuition, they instantly grasp what you tell them and get the job done right. Honda was one of those. And because he had had cavalry training, he was the one who knew the most about horses; he took care of the six we had with us. And he did this in an extraordinary way. It sometimes seemed to us that he understood every little thing the horses were feeling. Sergeant Hamano acknowledged Corporal Honda's abilities immediately and let him take charge of many things without the slightest hesitation.

So, then, for such an oddly patched-together unit, we attained an extraordinarily high degree of mutual understanding. And precisely because we were not a regular unit, we had none of that by-the-book military formality. We were so at ease with one another, it was almost as if Karma had brought us together. Which is why Sergeant Hamano was able to say openly to me things that lay far beyond the fixed framework of officer and noncom.

"Tell me, Lieutenant," he once asked, "what do you think of this fellow Yamamoto?"

"Secret service, I'm willing to bet," I said. "Anybody who can speak Mongol like that has got to be a pro. And he knows this area like the back of his hand."

"That's what I think. At first I thought he might be one of those mounted bandits connected with top brass, but that can't be it. I know those guys. They'll talk your ear off and make up half of what they tell you. And they're quick on the trigger. But this Yamamoto guy's no lightweight. He's got guts. He is brass-and way up there. I can smell 'em a mile away. I heard something about some kind of secret tactical unit the army's trying to put together with Mongols from Soviet-trained troops, and that they brought over a few of our pros to run the operation. He could be connected with that."

Corporal Honda was standing sentry a little ways away from us, holding his rifle. I had my Browning lying close by, where I could grab it at any time. Sergeant Hamano had taken his gaiters off and was massaging his feet.

"I'm just guessing, of course," Hamano went on. "That Mongol we saw could be some anti-Soviet officer with the Outer Mongolian Army, trying to make secret contact with the Japanese Army."

“Could be,” I said. “But you’d better watch what you say. They’ll have your head.”

“Come on, Lieutenant. I’m not that stupid. This is just between us.” He flashed me a big smile, then turned serious. “But if any of this is true, it’s risky business. It could mean war.”

I nodded in agreement. Outer Mongolia was supposedly an independent country, but it was actually more of a satellite state under the thumb of the Soviet Union. In other words, it wasn’t much different from Manchukuo, where Japan held the reins of power. It did have an anti-Soviet faction, though, as everyone knew, and through secret contacts with the Japanese Army in Manchukuo, members of that faction had fomented a number of uprisings. The nucleus of the insurgent element consisted of Mongolian Army men who resented the high-handedness of the Soviet military, members of the landowning class opposed to the forced centralization of the farming industry, and priests of the Lama sect, who numbered over one hundred thousand. The only external power that the anti-Soviet faction could turn to for help was the Japanese Army stationed in Manchukuo. And they apparently felt closer to us Japanese, as fellow Asians, than they did to the Russians. Plans for a large-scale uprising had come to light in the capital city of Ulan Bator the previous year, 1937, and there had been a major purge carried out. Thousands of military men and Lamaist priests had been executed as counterrevolutionary elements in secret touch with the Japanese Army, but still anti-Soviet feeling continued to smolder in one place or another. So there would have been nothing strange about a Japanese intelligence officer crossing the Khalkha River and making secret contact with an anti-Soviet officer of the Outer Mongolian Army. To prevent such activities, the Outer Mongolian Army had guard units making constant rounds and had declared the entire band of territory ten to twenty kilometers in from the Manchukuo border to be off-limits, but this was a huge area to patrol, and they could not keep watch on every bit of it.

Even if their rebellion should succeed, it was obvious that the Soviet Army would intervene at once to crush their counterrevolutionary activity, and if that happened the insurgents would request the help of the Japanese Army, which would then give Japan’s Kwantung Army an excuse to intervene. Taking Outer Mongolia would amount to sticking a knife in the guts of the Soviets’ development of Siberia. Imperial Headquarters back in Tokyo might be trying to put the brakes on, but this was not an opportunity that the ambitious Kwantung Army General Staff was about to let slip from their fingers. The result would be no mere border dispute but a full-scale war between the Soviet Union and Japan. If such a war broke out on the Manchurian-Soviet border, Hitler might respond by invading Poland or Czechoslovakia. This was the situation that Sergeant Hamano had been referring to in his remark on the potential for war.

The sun rose the next morning, and still Yamamoto had not returned. I was the last one to stand sentry. I borrowed Sergeant Hamano’s rifle, sat atop a somewhat higher sand dune, and watched the eastern sky. Dawn in Mongolia was an amazing thing. In one instant, the horizon became a faint line suspended in the darkness, and then the line was drawn upward, higher and higher. It was as if a giant hand had stretched down from the sky and slowly lifted the curtain of night from the face of the earth. It was a magnificent sight, far greater in scale, as I said earlier, than anything that I, with my limited human faculties, could fully comprehend. As I sat and watched, the feeling overtook me that my very life was slowly dwindling into nothingness. There was no trace here of anything as insignificant as human undertakings. This same event had been occurring hundreds of millions-hundreds of billions-of times, from an age long before there had been anything resembling life on earth. Forgetting that I was there to stand guard, I watched the dawning of the day, entranced.

After the sun rose fully above the horizon, I lit a cigarette, took a sip of water from my canteen, and urinated. Then I thought about Japan. I pictured my hometown in early May—the fragrance of the flowers, the babbling of the river, the clouds in the sky. Friends from long ago. Family. The chewy sweetness of a warm rice puff wrapped in oak leaf. I’m not that fond of sweets, as a rule, but I can still remember how badly I wanted a *mochi* puff that morning. I

would have given half a year's pay for one just then. And when I thought about Japan, I began to feel as if I had been abandoned at the edge of the world. Why did we have to risk our lives to fight for this barren piece of earth devoid of military or industrial value, this vast land where nothing lived but wisps of grass and biting insects? To protect my homeland, I too would fight and die. But it made no sense to me at all to sacrifice my one and only life for the sake of this desolate patch of soil from which no shaft of grain would ever spring.

Yamamoto came back at dawn the following day. I stood final watch that morning too. With the river at my back, I was staring toward the west when I heard what sounded like a horse's whinny behind me. I spun around but saw nothing. I stared toward where I had heard the sound, gun at the ready. I swallowed, and the sound from my own throat was loud enough to frighten me. My trigger finger was trembling. I had never once shot a gun at anyone.

But then, some seconds later, staggering over the crest of a sand dune, came a horse bearing Yamamoto. I surveyed the area, finger still on the trigger, but no one else appeared—neither the Mongol who had come for him nor enemy soldiers. A large white moon hung in the eastern sky like some ill-omened megalith. Yamamoto's left arm seemed to have been wounded. The handkerchief he had wrapped around it was stained with blood. I woke Corporal Honda to see to the horse. Heavily lathered and breathing hard, it had obviously come a long way at high speed. Hamano stood sentry in my place, and I got the first-aid kit to treat Yamamoto's wound.

"The bullet passed through, and the bleeding stopped," said Yamamoto. He was right: the bullet had missed the bone and gone all the way through, tearing only the flesh in its path. I removed the handkerchief, disinfected the openings of the wound with alcohol, and tied on a new bandage. He never flinched the whole time, though his upper lip wore a thin film of sweat. He drank deeply from a canteen, lit a cigarette, and inhaled with obvious relish. Then he took out his Browning, wedged it under his arm, removed the clip, and with one hand deftly loaded three rounds into it. "We leave here right away, Lieutenant Mamiya," he said. "Cross the Khalkha and head for the Manchukuo Army observation post." We broke camp quickly, with hardly a word among us, mounted the horses, and headed for the ford. I asked Yamamoto nothing about how he had been shot or by whom. I was not in a position to do so, and even if I had been, he probably wouldn't have told me. The only thought in my mind at the time was to get out of this enemy territory as quickly as possible, cross the Khalkha River, and reach the relative safety of the opposite bank.

We rode in silence, urging our horses across the grassy plain. No one spoke, but all were thinking the same thing: could we make it across that river? If an Outer Mongolian patrol reached the bridge before we did, it would be the end for us. There was no way we could win in a fight. I remember the sweat streaming under my arms. It never once dried.

"Tell me, Lieutenant Mamiya, have you ever been shot?" Yamamoto asked me after a long silence atop his horse.

"Never," I replied.

"Have you ever shot anyone?"

"Never," I said again.

I had no idea what kind of impression my answers made on him, nor did I know what his purpose was in asking me those questions.

"This contains a document that has to be delivered to headquarters," he said, placing his hand on his saddlebag. "If it can't be delivered, it has to be destroyed—burned, buried, it doesn't matter, but it must not, under any circumstances, be allowed to fall into enemy hands. *Under any circumstances*. That is our first priority. I want to be sure you understand this. It is *very, very* important."

"I understand," I said.

Yamamoto looked me in the eye. "If the situation looks bad, the first thing you have to do is shoot me. Without hesitation. If I can do it myself, I will. But with my arm like this, I may

not be able to. In that case, you have to shoot me. And make sure you shoot to kill.”

I nodded in silence.

•

When we reached the ford, just before dusk, the fear that I had been feeling all along turned out to be all too well founded. A small detachment of Outer Mongolian troops was deployed there. Yamamoto and I climbed one of the higher dunes and took turns looking at them through the binoculars. There were eight men-not a lot, but for a border patrol they were heavily armed. One man carried a light machine gun, and there was one heavy machine gun, mounted on a rise. It was surrounded by sandbags and aimed at the river. They had obviously stationed themselves there to prevent us from crossing to the other bank. They had pitched their tents by the river and staked their ten horses nearby. It looked as if they were planning to stay in place until they caught us. “Isn’t there another ford we could use?” I asked.

Yamamoto took his eyes from the binoculars and looked at me, shaking his head. “There is one, but it’s too far. Two days on horseback. We don’t have that much time. All we can do is cross here, whatever it takes.”

“Meaning we ford at night?”

“Correct. It’s the only way. We leave the horses here. We finish off the sentry, and the others will probably be asleep. Don’t worry, the river will blot out most sounds. I’ll take care of the sentry. There’s nothing for us to do until then, so better get some sleep, rest ourselves now while we have the chance.”

We set our fording operation for three in the morning. Corporal Honda took all the packs from the horses, drove the animals to a distant spot, and released them. We dug a deep hole and buried our extra ammunition and food. All that each of us would carry would be a canteen, a day’s rations, a gun, and a few bullets. If we were caught by the Outer Mongolians, with their overwhelmingly superior firepower, we could never outfight them, no matter how much ammunition we might carry. Now the thing for us to do was to get what sleep we could, because if we did make it across the river, there would be no chance to sleep for some time. Corporal Honda would stand sentry first, with Sergeant Hamano taking his place.

Stretching out in the tent, Yamamoto fell asleep immediately. He apparently hadn’t slept at all the whole time. By his pillow was a leather valise, into which he had transferred the important document. Hamano fell asleep soon after him. We were all exhausted, but I was too tense to sleep. I lay there for a long time, dying for sleep but kept awake by imagined scenes of us killing the sentry and being sprayed with machine gun fire as we forded the river. My palms were dripping with sweat, and my temples throbbed. I could not be sure that when the time came, I would be able to conduct myself in a manner befitting an officer. I crawled out of the tent and went to sit by Corporal Honda on sentry duty. “You know, Honda,” I said, “we’re maybe going to die here.”

“Hard to say,” he replied.

For a while, neither of us said anything. But there was something in his answer that bothered me-a particular tone that contained a hint of uncertainty. Intuition has never been my strong suit, but I knew that his vague remark was intended to conceal something. I decided to question him about it.

“If you have something to tell me, don’t hold back now,” I said. “This could be the last time we ever talk to each other, so open up.”

Biting his lower lip, Honda stroked the sand at his feet. I could see he was wrestling with conflicting feelings. “Lieutenant,” he said after some time had passed. He looked me straight in the eye. “Of the four of us here, you will live the longest- far longer than you yourself would imagine. You will die in Japan.”

Now it was my turn to look at him. He continued: “You may wonder how I know that, but

it is something that not even I can explain. I just know.”

“Are you psychic or something?”

“Maybe so, though the word doesn’t quite seem to fit what I feel. It’s a little too grandiose. Like I say, I just know, that’s all.”

“Have you always had this kind of thing?”

“Always,” he said with conviction. “Though I’ve kept it hidden ever since I was old enough to realize what was happening. But this is a matter of life and death, Lieutenant, and *you* are the one who’s asking me about it, so I’m telling you the truth.”

“And how about other people? Do you know what’s going to happen to them?”

He shook his head. “Some things I know, some things I don’t know. But you’d probably be better off not knowing, Lieutenant. It may be presumptuous of someone like me to say such big-sounding things to a college graduate like you, but a person’s destiny is something you look back at after it’s past, not something you see in advance. I have a certain amount of experience where these things are concerned. You don’t.”

“But anyhow, you say I’m not going to die here?”

He scooped up a handful of sand and let it run out between his fingers. “This much I can say, Lieutenant. You won’t be dying here on the continent.”

I wanted to go on talking about this, but Corporal Honda refused to say anything more. He seemed to be absorbed in his own contemplations or meditations. Holding his rifle, he stared out at the vast prairie. Nothing I said seemed to reach him.

I went back to the low-pitched tent in the shelter of a dune, lay down beside Sergeant Hamano, and closed my eyes. This time sleep came to take me—a deep sleep that all but pulled me by the ankles to the bottom of the sea.

13

Lieutenant Mamiya’s Long Story: Part II

*

What woke me was the metallic click of a rifle’s safety being released. No soldier in battle could ever miss that sound, even in a deep sleep. It’s a—how can I say it?—a special sound, as cold and heavy as death itself. Almost instinctively, I reached for the Browning next to my pillow, but just then a shoe slammed into my temple, the impact blinding me momentarily. After I had brought my breathing under control, I opened my eyes just enough to see the man who must have kicked me. He was kneeling down and picking up my Browning. I slowly lifted my head, to find the muzzles of two rifles pointed at my face. Beyond the rifles stood two Mongolian soldiers.

I was sure I had fallen asleep in a tent, but the tent was gone now, and a skyful of stars shone overhead. Another Mongolian soldier was pointing a light machine gun at the head of Yamamoto, who was lying beside me. He lay utterly still, as if conserving his energy because he knew it was useless to resist. All of the Mongols wore long overcoats and battle helmets. Two of them were aiming large flashlights at Yamamoto and at me. At first I couldn’t grasp what had happened: my sleep had been too deep and the shock too great. But the sight of the Mongolian soldiers and of Yamamoto’s face left no doubt in my mind: our tents had been discovered before we had had a chance to ford the river.

Then it occurred to me to wonder what had become of Honda and Hamano. I turned my head very slowly, trying to survey the area, but neither man was there. Either they had been killed already or they had managed to escape.

These had to be the men of the patrol we had seen earlier at the ford. They were few in number, and they were equipped with a light machine gun and rifles. In command was a ruggedly built noncom, the only one of the bunch to be wearing proper military boots. He was the man who had kicked me. He bent over and picked up the leather valise that Yamamoto had had by his head. Opening it, he looked inside, then he turned it upside down and shook it. All that fell to the ground was a pack of cigarettes. I could hardly believe it. With my own eyes, I had seen Yamamoto putting the document into that bag. He had taken it from a saddlebag, put it in this valise, and placed the valise by his pillow. Yamamoto struggled to maintain his cool, but I saw his expression momentarily begin to change. He obviously had no idea what had happened to the document. But whatever the explanation might be, its disappearance must have been a great relief to him. As he had said to me earlier, our number one priority was seeing to it that the document never fell into enemy hands.

The soldiers dumped all our belongings on the ground and inspected them in detail, but they found nothing important. Next they stripped us and went through our pockets. They bayoneted our clothing and packs, but they found no documents. They took our cigarettes and pens, our wallets and notebooks and watches, and pocketed them. By turns, they tried on our shoes, and anyone they fit took them. The men's arguments over who got what became pretty intense, but the noncom ignored them. I suppose it was normal among the Mongols to take booty from prisoners of war and enemy dead. The noncom took only Yamamoto's watch, leaving the other items for his men to fight over. The rest of our equipment—our pistols and ammunition and maps and compasses and binoculars—went into a cloth bag, no doubt for sending to Ulan Bator headquarters.

Next they tied us up, naked, with strong, thin rope. At close range, the Mongol soldiers smelled like a stable that had not been cleaned for a long, long time. Their uniforms were shabby, filthy with mud and dust and food stains to the point where it was all but impossible to tell what the original color had been. Their shoes were full of holes and falling off their feet—quite literally. No wonder they wanted ours. They had brutish faces for the most part, their teeth a mess, their hair long and wild. They looked more like mounted bandits or highwaymen than soldiers, but their Soviet-made weapons and their starred insignia indicated that they were regular troops of the Mongolian People's Republic. To me, of course, their discipline as a fighting unit and their military esprit seemed rather poor. Mongols make for tough, long-suffering soldiers, but they're not much suited to modern group warfare.

The night was freezing cold. Watching the white clouds of the Mongolian soldiers' breath bloom and vanish in the darkness, I felt as if a strange error had brought me into the landscape of someone else's nightmare. I couldn't grasp that this was actually happening. It was indeed a nightmare, but only later did I come to realize that it was just the beginning of a nightmare of enormous proportions.

A short time later, one of the Mongolian soldiers came out of the darkness, dragging something heavy. With a big smile, he threw the object on the ground next to us. It was Hamano's corpse. The feet were bare: someone had already taken his boots. They proceeded to strip his clothes off, examining everything they could find in his pockets. Hands reached out for his watch, his wallet, and his cigarettes. They divided up the cigarettes and smoked them while looking through the wallet. This yielded a few pieces of Manchukuo paper money and a photo of a woman who was probably Hamano's mother. The officer in charge said something and took the money. The photo was flung to the ground.

One of the Mongolian soldiers must have sneaked up behind Hamano and slit his throat while he was standing guard. They had done to us first what we had been planning to do to them. Bright-red blood was flowing from the body's gaping wound, but for such a big wound

there was not much blood; most of it had probably been lost by then. One of the soldiers pulled a knife from the scabbard on his belt, its curved blade some six inches long. He waved it in my face. I had never seen such an oddly shaped knife. It seemed to have been designed for some special purpose. The soldier made a throat-slashing motion with the knife and whistled through his teeth. Some of the others laughed. Rather than government issue, the knife seemed to be the man's personal property. Everyone had a long bayonet at his waist, but this man was the only one carrying a curved knife, and he had apparently used it to slit Hamano's throat. After a few deft swirls of the blade, he returned it to its scabbard.

Without a word, and moving only his eyes, Yamamoto sent a glance in my direction. It lasted just an instant, but I knew immediately what he was trying to say: Do you think Corporal Honda managed to get away? Through all the confusion and terror, I had been thinking the same thing:

Where is Corporal Honda? If Honda escaped this sudden attack of the Outer Mongolian troops, there might be some chance for us—a slim chance, perhaps, and the question of what Honda could do out there alone was depressing, but some chance was better than no chance at all. They kept us tied up all night, lying on the sand. Two soldiers were left to watch over us: one with the light machine gun, the other with a rifle. The rest sat some distance away, smoking, talking, and laughing, seemingly relaxed now that they had captured us. Neither Yamamoto nor I said a word. The dawn temperature dropped to freezing in that place, even in May. I thought we might freeze to death, lying there naked. But the cold itself was nothing in comparison with the terror I felt. I had no idea what we were in for. These men were a simple patrol unit: they probably did not have the authority to decide what to do with us. They had to wait for orders. Which meant that we would probably not be killed right away. After that, however, there was no way to tell what would happen. Yamamoto was more than likely a spy, and I had been caught with him, so naturally I would be seen as an accomplice. In any case, we would not get off easily.

Some time after dawn broke, a sound like the drone of an airplane engine came out of the distant sky. Eventually, the silver-colored fuselage entered my field of vision. It was a Soviet-made reconnaissance plane, bearing the insignia of Outer Mongolia. The plane circled above us several times. The soldiers all waved, and the plane dipped its wing in return. Then it landed in a nearby open area, sending up clouds of sand. The earth was hard here, and there were no obstructions, which made it relatively easy to take off and land without a runway. For all I knew, they might have used the same spot for this purpose any number of times. One of the soldiers mounted a horse and galloped off toward the plane with two saddled horses in tow.

When they returned, the two horses carried men who appeared to be high-ranking officers. One was Russian, the other Mongolian. I assumed that the patrol had radioed headquarters about our capture and that the two officers had made the trip from Ulan Bator to interrogate us. They were intelligence officers, no doubt. I had heard that the GPU was at work behind the scenes in the previous year's mass arrest and purge of antigovernment activists.

Both officers wore immaculate uniforms and were clean-shaven. The Russian wore a kind of trench coat with a belt. His boots shone with an unblemished luster. He was a thin man, but not very tall for a Russian, and perhaps in his early thirties. He had a wide forehead, a narrow nose, and skin almost pale pink in color, and he wore wire-rim glasses. Overall, though, this was a face that made no impression to speak of. Standing next to him, the short, stout, dark Mongolian officer looked like a little bear.

The Mongolian called the noncom aside, and the three men talked for a while. I guessed that the officers were asking for a detailed report. The noncom brought over a bag containing the things they had confiscated from us and showed them to the others. The Russian studied each object with great care, then put them all back into the bag. He said something to the Mongolian, who in turn spoke to the noncom. Then the Russian took a cigarette case from his

breast pocket and opened it for the other two. They went on talking and smoking together. Several times, as he spoke, the Russian slammed his right fist into his left palm. He looked somewhat annoyed. The Mongolian officer kept his arms folded and his face grim, while the noncom shook his head now and then.

Eventually, the Russian officer ambled over to where we lay on the ground. "Would you like a smoke?" he asked in Russian. As I said earlier, I had studied Russian in college and could follow a conversation pretty well, but I pretended not to understand, so as to avoid any difficulties. "Thanks, but no thanks," said Yamamoto in Russian. He was good.

"Excellent," said the Soviet Army officer. "Things will go more quickly if we can speak in Russian."

He removed his gloves and put them in his coat pocket. A small gold ring shone on his left hand. "As you are no doubt aware, we are looking for a certain something. Looking very hard for it. And we know you have it. Don't ask how we know; we just know. But you do not have it on you now. Which means that, logically speaking, you must have hidden it before you were captured. You haven't transported it over there." He motioned toward the Khalkha River. "None of you has crossed the river. The letter must be on this side, hidden somewhere. Do you understand what I have said to you so far?"

Yamamoto nodded. "I understand," he said, "but we know nothing about a letter."

"Fine," said the Russian, expressionless. "In that case, I have one little question to ask you. What were you men doing over here? As you know, this territory belongs to the Mongolian People's Republic. What was your purpose in entering land that belongs to others? I want to hear your reason for this."

"Mapmaking," Yamamoto explained. "I am a civilian employee of a map company, and this man and the one they killed were with me for protection. We knew that this side of the river was your territory, and we are sorry for having crossed the border, but we did not think of ourselves as having made a territorial violation. We simply wanted to observe the topography from the vantage point of the plateau on this side."

Far from amused, the Russian officer curled his lips into a smile. "'We are sorry?'" he said slowly. "Yes, of course. You wanted to see the topography from the plateau. Yes, of course. The view is always better from high ground. It makes perfect sense."

For a time he said nothing, but stared at the clouds in the sky. Then he returned his gaze to Yamamoto, shook his head slowly, and sighed.

"If only I could believe what you are telling me! How much better it would be for all of us! If only I could pat you on the shoulder and say, 'Yes, yes, I see, now run along home across the river, and be more careful in the future.' I truly wish I could do this. But unfortunately, I cannot. Because I know who you are. And I know what you are doing here. We have friends in Hailar, just as you have friends in Ulan Bator."

He took the gloves from his pocket, refolded them, and put them back. "Quite honestly, I have no personal interest in hurting you or killing you. If you would simply give me the letter, then I would have no further business with you. You would be released from this place immediately at my discretion. You could cross the river and go home. I promise you that, on my honor. Anything else that happened would be an internal matter for us. It would have nothing to do with you."

The light of the sun from the east was finally beginning to warm my skin. There was no wind, and a few hard white clouds floated in the sky. A long, long silence followed. No one said a word. The Russian officer, the Mongolian officer, the men of the patrol, and Yamamoto: each preserved his own sphere of silence. Yamamoto had seemed resigned to death from the moment of our capture; his face never showed the slightest hint of expression.

"The two of you ... will... almost certainly ... die here," the Russian went on slowly, a phrase at a time, as if speaking to children. "And it will be a terrible death. They ..." And here the Russian glanced toward the Mongolian soldiers. The big one, holding the machine gun,

looked at me with a snaggletoothed grin. "They love to kill people in ways that involve great difficulty and imagination. They are, shall we say, aficionados. Since the days of Genghis Khan, the Mongols have enjoyed devising particularly cruel ways to kill people. We Russians are painfully aware of this. It is part of our history lessons in school. We study what the Mongols did when they invaded Russia. They killed millions. For no reason at all. They captured hundreds of Russian aristocrats in Kiev and killed them all together. Do you know that story? They cut huge, thick planks, laid the Russians beneath them, and held a banquet on top of the planks, crushing them to death beneath their weight. Ordinary human beings would never think of such a thing, don't you agree? It took time and a tremendous amount of preparation. Who else would have gone to the trouble? But they did it. And why? Because it was a form of amusement to them. And they still enjoy doing such things. I saw them in action once. I thought I had seen some terrible things in my day, but that night, as you can imagine, I lost my appetite. Do you understand what I am saying to you? Am I speaking too quickly?"

Yamamoto shook his head.

"Excellent," said the Russian. He paused, clearing his throat. "Of course, this will be the second time for me. Perhaps my appetite will have returned by dinnertime. If possible, however, I would prefer to avoid unnecessary killing."

Hands clasped together behind his back, he looked up at the sky for a time. Then he took his gloves out and glanced toward the plane. "Beautiful weather," he said. "Spring. Still a little cold, but just about right. Any hotter, and there would be mosquitoes. Terrible mosquitoes. Yes, spring is much better than summer." He took out his cigarette case again, put a cigarette between his lips, and lit it with a match. Slowly, he drew the smoke into his lungs, and slowly he let it out again. "I'm going to ask you once more: Do you insist that you really know nothing about the letter?"

Yamamoto said only one word: "*Nyet.*"

"Fine," said the Russian. "Fine." Then he said something in Mongolian to the Mongolian officer. The man nodded and barked an order to the soldiers. They carried over some rough logs and began to sharpen them with their bayonets, quickly turning them into four stakes. Pacing off the distance between the stakes, they pounded them into the ground with rocks at the four corners of a square. All these preparations took some twenty minutes to complete, I guessed, but I had absolutely no idea what they were for.

The Russian said, "To them, an excellent slaughter is like an excellent meal. The longer they take with their preparations, the more enjoyment they derive from the act. Simply killing a man is no problem: one pistol shot and it's all over. But that would not be"-and here he ran his fingertip slowly over his smooth chin-"very interesting."

They untied Yamamoto and led him to the staked-off area. There they tied his arms and legs to the four stakes. Stretched out on the ground, stark naked, Yamamoto had several raw wounds on his body.

"As you know, these people are shepherds," said the Russian officer. "And shepherds use their sheep in many ways: they eat their flesh, they shear their wool, they take their hides. To them, sheep are the perfect animal. They spend their days with sheep-their whole lives with sheep. They know how to skin them with amazing skill. The hides they use for tents and clothing. Have you ever seen them skin a sheep?"

"Just kill me and get it over with," said Yamamoto. The Russian brought his palms together and, while rubbing them slowly, nodded to Yamamoto. "Don't worry," he said. "We will be certain to kill you. I guarantee you that. It may take a little time, but you will die. There is nothing to worry about on that score. We are in no hurry. Here we are in the vast wilderness, where there is nothing as far as the eye can see. Only time. All the time we need. And I have many things I wish to tell you. Now, as to the procedure of skinning: Every band has at least one specialist-one professional, as it were, who knows everything there is to know about cutting off the skin, a man of miraculous skill. His skinning is a work of art. He does it

in the twinkling of an eye, with such speed and dexterity you would think that the creature being skinned alive never noticed what was happening. But of course"-he took the cigarette case from his breast pocket once again, shifted it to his left hand, and tapped upon it with the fingers of his right-"not to notice such a thing would be out of the question. The one being skinned alive experiences terrible pain. Unimaginable pain. And it takes an incredibly long time for death to come. Massive hemorrhaging is what does it finally, but that takes time."

He snapped his fingers. The Mongolian officer stepped forward. From his coat pocket he produced a sheathed knife. It was shaped like the one used before by the soldier who had made the throat-slitting gesture. He pulled the knife from its sheath and held it aloft. In the morning sun, the blade shone with a dull white gleam.

"This man is one of those professionals of whom I spoke," said the Russian officer. "I want you to look at his knife. Closely. It is a very special knife, designed for skinning, and it is extraordinarily well made. The blade is as thin and sharp as a razor. And the technical skill these people bring to the task is extremely high. They've been skinning animals for thousands of years, after all. They can take a man's skin off the way you'd peel a peach. Beautifully, without a single scratch. Am I speaking too quickly for you, by any chance?"

Yamamoto said nothing.

"They do a small area at a time," said the Russian officer. "They have to work slowly if they want to remove the skin cleanly, without any scratches. If, in the meantime, you feel you want to say something, please let me know. Then you won't have to die. Our man here has done this several times, and never once has he failed to make the person talk. Keep that in mind. The sooner we stop, the better for both of us."

Holding his knife, the bearlike Mongolian officer looked at Yamamoto and grinned. To this day, I remember that smile. I see it in my dreams. I have never been able to forget it. No sooner had he flashed this smile than he set to work. His men held Yamamoto down with their hands and knees while he began skinning Yamamoto with the utmost care. It truly was like skinning a peach. I couldn't bear to watch. I closed my eyes. When I did this, one of the soldiers hit me with his rifle butt. He went on hitting me until I opened my eyes. But it hardly mattered: eyes open or closed, I could still hear Yamamoto's voice. He bore the pain without a whimper-at first. But soon he began to scream. I had never heard such screams before: they did not seem part of this world. The man started by slitting open Yamamoto's shoulder and proceeded to peel off the skin of his right arm from the top down-slowly, carefully, almost lovingly. As the Russian officer had said, it was something like a work of art. One would never have imagined there was any pain involved, if it weren't for the screams. But the screams told the horrendousness of the pain that accompanied the work.

Before long, the entire skin of Yamamoto's right arm had come off in a single thin sheet. The skinner handed it to the man beside him, who held it open in his fingertips, circulating among the others to give them a good look. All the while, blood kept dripping from the skin. Then the officer turned to Yamamoto's left arm, repeating the procedure. After that he skinned both legs, cut off the penis and testicles, and removed the ears. Then he skinned the head and the face and everything else. Yamamoto lost consciousness, regained it, and lost it again. The screams would stop whenever he passed out and continue when he came to again. But his voice gradually weakened and finally gave out altogether. All this time, the Russian officer drew meaningless patterns on the ground with the heel of his boot. The Mongolian soldiers watched the procedure in silence. Their faces remained expressionless, showing neither disgust nor excitement nor shock. They watched Yamamoto's skin being removed a piece at a time with the same kind of effaces we might have if we were out for a stroll and stopped to have a look at a construction site.

Meanwhile, I did nothing but vomit. Over and over again. Long after it seemed there was nothing more for me to bring up, I continued to vomit. At last, the bearlike Mongolian officer held up the skin of Yamamoto's torso, which he had so cleanly peeled off. Even the nipples

were intact. Never to this day have I seen anything so horrible. Someone took the skin from him and spread it out to dry the way we might dry a sheet. All that remained lying on the ground was Yamamoto's corpse, a bloody red lump of meat from which every trace of skin had been removed. The most painful sight was the face. Two large white eyeballs stared out from the red mass of flesh. Teeth bared, the mouth stretched wide open as if in a shout. Two little holes were all that remained where the nose had been removed. The ground was a sea of blood.

The Russian officer spit on the ground and looked at me. Then he took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his mouth. "The fellow really didn't know anything, did he?" he said, putting the handkerchief back. His voice sounded somewhat flatter than it had before. "If he had known, he would have talked. Pity. But in any case, the man was a professional. He was bound to have an ugly death sooner or later. Ah, well, can't be helped. And if *he* knew nothing, there's no way that you could know anything."

He put a cigarette between his lips and struck a match. "Which means that you are no longer of any use to us. Not worth torturing for information. Not worth keeping alive as a prisoner. We want to dispose of this affair in the utmost secrecy. There could be complications if we brought you back to Ulan Bator. The best thing, of course, would be to put a bullet in your brain here and now, then bury you or burn you and throw your ashes into the Khalkha. That would be a simple end to the matter. Don't you agree?" He fixed his eyes on mine. I continued to pretend that I could not understand him. "You don't understand Russian, I suppose. It's a waste of time to spell this out to you. Ah, well. I might as well be talking to myself. So hear me out. In any case, I have good news for you. I have decided not to kill you. Think of this as my own small expression of penitence for having pointlessly killed your friend in spite of myself. We've all had our fill of killing this morning. Once a day is more than enough.

And so I will not kill you. Instead, I will give you a chance to survive. If all goes well, you may even come out of this alive. The chances of that happening are not good, of course. Perhaps nonexistent. But a chance is a chance. At least it is far better than being skinned alive. Don't you agree?"

He raised his hand and summoned the Mongolian officer. With great care, the man had been washing his knife with water from a canteen and had just finished sharpening it on a whetstone. The soldiers had laid out the pieces of Yamamoto's skin and were standing by them, discussing something. They seemed to be exchanging opinions on the finer points of the skinner's technique. The Mongolian officer put his knife in its scabbard and then into the pocket of his coat before approaching us. He looked me in the face for a moment, then turned to his fellow officer. The Russian spoke a few short Mongolian phrases to him, and without expression the man nodded. A soldier brought two horses for them.

"We'll be going back to Ulan Bator now," the Russian said to me. "I hate to return empty-handed, but it can't be helped. Win some, lose some. I hope my appetite comes back by dinnertime, but I rather doubt it will."

They mounted their horses and left. The plane took off, became a silver speck in the western sky, then disappeared altogether, leaving me alone with the Mongolian soldiers and their horses.

They set me on a horse and lashed me to the saddle. Then, in formation, we moved out to the north. The soldier just in front of me kept singing some monotonous melody in a voice that was barely audible. Aside from that, there was nothing to be heard but the dry sound of the horses' hooves kicking up sand. I had no idea where they were taking me or what they were going to do to me. All I knew was that to them, I was a superfluous being of no value whatever. Over and over in my head I repeated to myself the words of the Russian officer. He had said he would not kill me. He would not kill me, but my chances of surviving were almost nonexistent. What could this mean? It was too vague for me to grasp in any concrete way.

Perhaps they were going to use me in some kind of horrible game. They wouldn't simply dispatch me, because they planned to enjoy the dreadful contrivance at their leisure.

But at least they hadn't killed me. At least they hadn't skinned me alive like Yamamoto. I might not be able to avoid being killed in the end, but not like *that*. I was alive for now; I was still breathing. And if what the Russian officer had said was true, I would not be killed immediately. The more time that lay between me and death, the more chance I had to survive. It might be a minuscule chance, but all I could do was cling to it.

Then, all of a sudden, the words of Corporal Honda flared to life again in my brain: that strange prognostication of his that I would not die on the continent. Even as I sat there, tied to the saddle, the skin of my naked back burning in the desert sun, I repeatedly savored every syllable that he had spoken. I let myself dwell on his expression, his intonation, the sound of each word. And I resolved to believe him from the bottom of my heart. No, no, I was not going to lie down and die in a place like this! I would come out of this alive! I would tread my native soil once again!

We traveled north for two hours or more, coming to a stop near a Lamaist devotional mound. These stone markers, called *oboo*, serve both as the guardian deity for travelers and as valuable signposts in the desert. Here the men dismounted and untied my ropes. Supporting my weight from either side, two of them led me a short distance away. I figured that this was where I would be killed. A well had been dug into the earth here. The mouth of the well was surrounded by a three-foot-high stone curb. They made me kneel down beside it, grabbed my neck from behind, and forced me to look inside. I couldn't see a thing in the solid darkness. The noncom with the boots found a fist-sized rock and dropped it into the well. Some time later came the dry sound of stone hitting sand. So the well was a dry one, apparently. It had once served as a well in the desert, but it must have dried up long before, owing to a movement of the subterranean vein of water. Judging from the time it took the stone to hit bottom, it seemed to be fairly deep.

The noncom looked at me with a big grin. Then he took a large automatic pistol from the leather holster on his belt. He released the safety and fed a bullet into the chamber with a loud click. Then he put the muzzle of the gun against my head.

He held it there for a long time but did not pull the trigger. Then he slowly lowered the gun and raised his left hand, pointing toward the well. Licking my dry lips, I stared at the gun in his fist. What he was trying to tell me was this: I had a choice between two fates. I could have him shoot me now—just die and get it over with. Or I could jump into the well. Because it was so deep, if I landed badly I might be killed. If not, I would die slowly at the bottom of a dark hole. It finally dawned on me that this was the chance the Russian officer had spoken of. The Mongolian noncom pointed at the watch that he had taken from Yamamoto and held up five fingers. He was giving me five seconds to decide. When he got to three, I stepped onto the well curb and leaped inside. I had no choice. I had hoped to be able to cling to the wall and work my way down, but he gave me no time for that. My hands missed the wall, and I tumbled down.

It seemed to take a very long time for me to hit bottom. In reality, it could not have been more than a few seconds, but I do recall thinking about a great many things on my way down. I thought about my hometown, so far away. I thought about the girl I slept with just once before they shipped me out. I thought about my parents. I recall feeling grateful that I had a younger sister and not a brother: even if I was killed, they would still have her and not have to worry about her being taken by the army. I thought about rice cakes wrapped in oak leaves. Then I slammed into dry ground and lost consciousness for a moment. It felt as if all the air inside me had burst through the walls of my body. I thudded against the well bottom like a sandbag.

It truly was just a moment that I lost consciousness from the impact, I believe. When I came to, I felt some kind of spray hitting me. At first I thought it was rain, but I was wrong. It

was urine. The Mongolian soldiers were all peeing on me where I lay in the bottom of the well. I looked up to see them in silhouette far above me, taking turns coming to the edge of the round hole to pee. There was a terrible unreality to the sight, like a drug-induced hallucination. But it was real. I was really in the bottom of the well, and they were spraying me with real pee. Once they had finished, someone shone a flashlight on me. I heard them laughing. And then they disappeared from the edge of the hole. After that, everything sank into a deep silence.

For a while, I thought it best to lie there facedown, waiting to see if they would come back. But after twenty minutes had gone by, then thirty (as far as I could tell without a watch), they did not come back. They had gone away and left me, it seemed. I had been abandoned at the bottom of a well in the middle of the desert. Once it was clear that they would not be returning, I decided to check myself over for injuries. In the darkness, this was no easy feat. I couldn't see my own body. I couldn't tell with my own eyes what condition it was in. I could only resort to my perceptions, but I could not be sure that the perceptions I was experiencing in the darkness were accurate. I felt that I was being deceived, deluded. It was a very strange feeling.

Little by little, though, and with great attention to detail, I began to grasp my situation. The first thing I realized was that I had been extremely lucky. The bottom of the well was relatively soft and sandy. If it hadn't been, then the impact of falling such a distance would have broken every bone in my body. I took one long, deep breath and tried to move. First I tried moving my fingers. They responded, although somewhat feebly. Then I tried to raise myself to a sitting position on the earthen surface, but this I was unable to do. My body felt as if it had lost all sensation. My mind was fully conscious, but there was something wrong with the connection between my mind and my body. My mind would decide to do something, but it was unable to convert the thought into muscular activity. I gave up and, for a while, lay there quietly in the dark.

Just how long I remained still I have no idea. But little by little, my perceptions began to return. And along with the recovery of my perceptions, naturally enough, came the sensation of pain. Intense pain. Almost certainly, my leg was broken. And my shoulder might be dislocated or, perhaps, if luck was against me, even broken.

I lay still, enduring the pain. Before I knew it, tears were streaming down my cheeks-tears of pain and, even more, tears of despair. I don't think you will ever be able to understand what it is like-the utter loneliness, the feeling of desperation-to be abandoned in a deep well in the middle of the desert at the edge of the world, overcome with intense pain in total darkness. I went so far as to regret that the Mongolian noncom had not simply shot me and gotten it over with. If I had been killed that way, at least they would have been aware of my death. If I died here, however, it would be a truly lonely death, a death of no concern to anyone, a silent death.

Now and then, I heard the sound of the wind. As it moved across the surface of the earth, the wind made an uncanny sound at the mouth of the well, a sound like the moan of a woman in tears in a far-off world. That world and this were joined by a narrow shaft, through which the woman's voice reached me here, though only at long, irregular intervals. I had been left all alone in deep silence and even deeper darkness.

Enduring the pain, I reached out to touch the earthen floor around me. The well bottom was flat. It was not very wide, maybe five or five and a half feet. As I was groping the ground, my hand suddenly came upon a hard, sharp object. In reflexive fear, I drew my hand back, but then slowly and carefully I reached out toward the thing. Again my fingers came in contact with the sharp object. At first I thought it was a tree branch, but soon enough I realized I was touching bones. Not human bones, but those of a small animal, which had been scattered at random, either by the passage of time or by my fall. There was nothing else at the bottom of the well, just sand: fine and dry.

Next I ran my palm over the wall. It seemed to be made of thin, flat stones. As hot as the desert surface became in daytime, that heat did not penetrate to this world belowground. The stones had an icy chill to them. I ran my hand over the wall, examining the gaps between stones. If I could get a foothold there, I might be able to climb to the surface. But the gaps turned out to be too narrow for that, and in my battered state, climbing seemed all but impossible.

With a tremendous effort, I dragged myself closer to the wall and raised myself against it, into a sitting position. Every move made my leg and shoulder throb as if they had been stuck with hundreds of thick needles. For a while after that, each breath made me feel that my body might crack apart. I touched my shoulder and realized it was hot and swollen.

•

How much time went by after that I do not know. But at one point something happened that I would never have imagined. The light of the sun shot down from the opening of the well like some kind of revelation. In that instant, I could see everything around me. The well was filled with brilliant light. A flood of light. The brightness was almost stifling: I could hardly breathe. The darkness and cold were swept away in a moment, and warm, gentle sunlight enveloped my naked body. Even the pain I was feeling seemed to be blessed by the light of the sun, which now warmly illuminated the white bones of the small animal beside me. These bones, which could have been an omen of my own impending fate, seemed in the sunlight more like a comforting companion. I could see the stone walls that encircled me. As long as I remained in the light, I was able to forget about my fear and pain and despair. I sat in the dazzling light in blank amazement. Then the light disappeared as suddenly as it had come. Deep darkness covered everything once again. The whole interval had been extremely short. In terms of the clock, it must have lasted ten or, at the most, fifteen seconds. No doubt, because of the angles involved, this was all the sun could manage to shine straight down to the bottom of the hole in any single day. The flood of sunlight was gone before I could begin to comprehend its meaning.

After the light faded, I found myself in an even deeper darkness than before. I was all but unable to move. I had no water, no food, not a scrap of clothing on my body. The long afternoon went by, and night came, when the temperature plunged. I could hardly sleep. My body craved sleep, but the cold pricked my skin like a thousand tiny thorns. I felt as if my life's core was stiffening and dying bit by bit. Above me, I could see stars frozen in the sky. Terrifying numbers of stars. I stared up at them, watching as they slowly crept along. Their movement helped me ascertain that time was continuing to flow on. I slept for a short while, awoke with the cold and pain, slept a little more, then woke again.

Eventually, morning came. From the round mouth of the well, the sharp pinpoints of starlight gradually began to fade. Still, even after dawn broke, the stars did not disappear completely. Faint almost to the point of imperceptibility, they continued to linger there, on and on. To slake my thirst, I licked the morning dew that clung to the stone wall. The amount of water was minuscule, of course, but to me it tasted like a bounty from heaven. The thought crossed my mind that I had had neither food nor water for an entire day. And yet I had no sense of hunger.

I remained there, still, in the bottom of the hole. It was all I could do. I couldn't even think, so profound were my feelings of loneliness and despair. I sat there doing nothing, thinking nothing. Unconsciously, however, I waited for that ray of light, that blinding flood of sunlight that poured straight down to the bottom of the well for one tiny fraction of the day. It must have been a phenomenon that occurred very close to noon, when the sun was at the highest point in the sky and its light struck the surface of the earth at right angles. I waited for the coming of the light and for nothing else. There was nothing else I could wait for.

A very long time went by, it seems. At some point I drifted into sleep. By the time I sensed the presence of something and woke, the light was already there. I realized that I was being enveloped once again by that overwhelming light. Almost unconsciously, I spread open both my hands and received the sun in my palms. It was far stronger than it had been the first time. And it lasted far longer than it had then. At least it felt that way to me. In the light, tears poured out of me. I felt as if all the fluids of my body might turn into tears and come streaming from my eyes, that my body itself might melt away like this. If it could have happened in the bliss of this marvelous light, even death would have been no threat. Indeed, I felt I *wanted* to die. I had a marvelous sense of oneness, an overwhelming sense of unity. Yes, that was it: the true meaning of life resided in that light that lasted for however many seconds it was, and I felt I *ought to die* right then and there.

But of course, before anything could happen, the light was gone. I was still there, in the bottom of that miserable well. Darkness and cold reasserted their grip on me, as if to declare that the light had never existed at all. For a long time, I simply remained huddled where I was, my face bathed in tears. As if beaten down by some huge power, I was unable to do-or even to think-anything at all, unable to feel even my own physical existence. I was a dried-up carcass, the cast-off shell of an insect. But then, once again, into the empty room of my mind, returned the prophecy of Corporal Honda: I would not die on the continent. Now, after the light had come and gone, I found myself able to believe his prophecy. I could believe it now because, in a place where I should have died, and at a time when I should have died, I had been unable to die. It was not that I *would not* die: I *could not* die. Do you understand what I am saying, Mr. Okada? Whatever heavenly grace I may have enjoyed until that moment was lost forever.

At this point in his story, Lieutenant Mamiya looked at his watch. "And as you can see," he added softly, "here I am." He shook his head as if trying to sweep away the invisible threads of memory. "Just as Mr. Honda had said, I did not die on the continent. And of the four of us who went there, I have lived the longest."

I nodded in response.

"Please forgive me for talking on at such length. It must have been very boring for you, listening to a useless old man chatter on about the old days." Lieutenant Mamiya shifted his position on the sofa. "My goodness, I'll be late for my train if I stay any longer."

I hastened to restrain him. "Please don't end your story there," I said. "What happened after that? I want to hear the rest."

He looked at me for a moment.

"How would this be, then?" he asked. "I really am running late, so why don't you walk with me to the bus stop? I can probably give you a quick summary along the way."

I left the house with him and walked to the bus stop.

"On the third morning, I was saved by Corporal Honda. He had sensed that the Mongols were coming for us that night, slipped out of the tent, and remained in hiding all that time. He had taken the document from Yamamoto's bag with him. He did this because our number one priority was to see to it that the document not fall into enemy hands, no matter how great the sacrifice we had to make. No doubt you are wondering why, if he realized that the Mongols were coming, Corporal Honda ran away by himself instead of waking the rest of us so that we could escape together. The simple fact of the matter is that we had no hope of winning in such a situation. They knew that we were there. It was their territory. They had us far outnumbered and outgunned. It would have been the simplest thing in the world for them to find us, kill us, and take the document. Given the situation, Corporal Honda had no choice but to escape by himself. On the battlefield, his actions would have been a clear case of deserting under fire, but on a special assignment like ours, the most important thing is resourcefulness.

"He saw everything that happened. He watched them skinning Yamamoto. He saw the Mongolian soldiers take me away. But he no longer had a horse, so he could not follow immediately. He had to come on foot. He dug up the extra supplies that we had buried in the

desert, and there he buried the document. Then he came after me. For him to find me down in the well, though, required a tremendous effort. He didn't even know which direction we had taken." "How *did* he find the well?" I asked.

"I don't know," said Lieutenant Mamiya. "He didn't say much about that. He just *knew*, I'd say. When he found me, he tore his clothing into strips and made a long rope. By then, I was practically unconscious, which made it all the more difficult for him to pull me up. Then he managed to find a horse and put me on it. He took me across the dunes, across the river, and to the Manchukuo Army outpost. There they treated my wounds and put me on a truck sent out by headquarters. I was taken to the hospital in Hailar."

"What ever happened to that document or letter or whatever it was?" "It's probably still there, sleeping in the earth near the Khalkha River. For Corporal Honda and me to go all the way back and dig it up would have been out of the question, nor could we find any reason to make such an effort. We arrived at the conclusion that such a thing should never have existed in the first place. We coordinated our stories for the army's investigation. We decided to insist that we had heard nothing about any document. Otherwise, they probably would have held us responsible for not bringing it back from the desert. They kept us in separate rooms, under strict guard, supposedly for medical treatment, and they questioned us every day. All these high-ranking officers would come and make us tell our stories over and over again. Their questions were meticulous, and very clever. But they seemed to believe us. I told them every little detail of what I had experienced, being careful to omit anything I knew about the document. Once they got it all down, they warned me that this was a top-secret matter that would not appear in the army's formal records, that I was never to mention it to anyone, and that I would be severely punished if I did. Two weeks later, I was sent back to my original post, and I believe that Corporal Honda was also returned to his home unit."

"One thing is still not clear to me," I said. "Why did they go to all the trouble of bringing Mr. Honda from his unit for this assignment?"

"He never said much to me about that. He had probably been forbidden to tell anyone, and I suspect that he thought it would be better for me not to know. Judging from my conversations with him, though, I imagine there was some kind of personal relationship between him and the man they called Yamamoto, something that had to do with his special powers. I had often heard that the army had a unit devoted to the study of the occult. They supposedly gathered people with these spiritual or psychokinetic powers from all over the country and conducted experiments on them. I suspect that Mr. Honda met Yamamoto in that connection. In any case, without those powers of his, Mr. Honda would never have been able to find me in the well and guide me to the exact location of the Manchukuo Army outpost. He had neither map nor compass, yet he was able to head us straight there without the slightest uncertainty. Common sense would have told you that such a thing was impossible. I was a professional mapmaker, and I knew the geography of that area quite well, but I could never have done what he did. These powers of Mr. Honda were probably what Yamamoto was looking to him for."

We reached the bus stop and waited.

"Certain things will always remain as riddles, of course," said Lieutenant Mamiya. "There are many things I still don't understand. I still wonder who that lone Mongolian officer was who met us in the desert. And I wonder what would have happened if we had managed to bring that document back to headquarters. Why did Yamamoto not simply leave us on the right bank of the Khalkha and cross over by himself? He would have been able to move around far more freely that way. Perhaps he had been planning to use us as a decoy for the Mongolian troops so that he could escape alone. It certainly is conceivable. Perhaps Corporal Honda realized this from the start and that was why he merely stood by while the Mongolians killed him.

"In any case, it was a very long time after that before Corporal Honda and I had an

opportunity to meet again. We were separated from the moment we arrived in Hailar and were forbidden to speak or even to see each other. I had wanted to thank him one last time, but they made that impossible. He was wounded in the battle for Nomonhan and sent home, while I remained in Manchuria until the end of the war, after which I was sent to Siberia. I was only able to find him several years later, after I was repatriated from my Siberian internment. We did manage to meet a few times after that, and we corresponded. But he seemed to avoid talking about what had happened to us at the Khalkha River, and I myself was not too eager to discuss it. For both of us, it had simply been too enormous an experience. We shared it by not *talking about it*. Does this make any sense?

“This has turned into a very long story, but what I wanted to convey to you was my feeling that real life may have ended for me deep in that well in the desert of Outer Mongolia. I feel as if, in the intense light that shone for a mere ten or fifteen seconds a day in the bottom of the well, I burned up the very core of my life, until there was nothing left. That is how mysterious that light was to me. I can’t explain it very well, but as honestly and simply as I can state it, no matter what I have encountered, no matter what I have experienced since then, I ceased to feel anything in the bottom of my heart. Even in the face of those monstrous Soviet tank units, even when I lost this left hand of mine, even in the hellish Soviet internment camps, a kind of numbness was all I felt. It may sound strange to say this, but none of that mattered. Something inside me was already dead. Perhaps, as I felt at the time, I should have died in that light, simply faded away. That was the time for me to die. But, as Mr. Honda had predicted, I did not die there. Or perhaps I should say that I *could not* die there.

“I came back to Japan, having lost my hand and twelve precious years. By the time I arrived in Hiroshima, my parents and my sister were long since dead. They had put my little sister to work in a factory, which was where she was when the bomb fell. My father was on his way to see her at the time, and he, too, lost his life. The shock sent my mother to her deathbed; she finally passed away in 1947. As I told you earlier, the girl to whom I had been secretly engaged was now married to another man, and she had given birth to two children. In the cemetery, I found my own grave. There was nothing left for me. I felt truly empty, and knew that I should not have come back there. I hardly remember what my life has been like since then. I became a social studies teacher and taught geography and history in high school, but I was not, in the true sense of the word, alive. I simply performed the mundane tasks that were handed to me, one after another. I never had one real friend, no human ties with the students in my charge. I never loved anyone. I no longer knew what it meant to love another person. I would close my eyes and see Yamamoto being skinned alive. I dreamed about it over and over. Again and again I watched them peel the skin off and turn him into a lump of flesh. I could hear his heartrending screams. I also had dreams of myself slowly rotting away, alive, in the bottom of the well. Sometimes it seemed to me that that was what had really happened and that my life here was the dream.

“When Mr. Honda told me on the bank of the Khalkha River that I would not die on the continent, I was overjoyed. It was not a matter of believing or not believing: I wanted to cling to something then- anything at all. Mr. Honda probably knew that and told me what he did in order to comfort me. But of joy there was to be none for me. After returning to Japan, I lived like an empty shell. Living like an empty shell is not really living, no matter how many years it may go on. The heart and flesh of an empty shell give birth to nothing more than the life of an empty shell. This is what I hope I have made clear to you, Mr. Okada.”

“Does this mean,” I ventured, “that you never married after returning to Japan?”

“Of course not,” answered Lieutenant Mamiya. “I have no wife, no parents or siblings. I am entirely alone.”

After hesitating a moment, I asked, “Are you sorry that you ever heard Mr. Honda’s prediction?”

Now it was Lieutenant Mamiya’s turn to hesitate. After a moment of silence, he looked

me straight in the face. "Maybe I am," he said. "Maybe he should never have spoken those words. Maybe I should never have heard them." As Mr. Honda said at the time, a person's destiny is something you look back at afterward, not something to be known in advance. I do believe this, however: now it makes no difference either way. All I am doing now is fulfilling my obligation to go on living."

The bus came, and Lieutenant Mamiya favored me with a deep bow. Then he apologized to me for having taken up my valuable time. "Well, then, I shall be on my way," he said. "Thank you for everything. I am glad in any case that I was able to hand you the package from Mr. Honda. This means that my job is done at last. I can go home with an easy mind." Using both his right hand and the artificial one, he deftly produced the necessary coins and dropped them into the fare box.

I stood there and watched as the bus disappeared around the next corner. After it was gone, I felt a strange emptiness inside, a hopeless kind of feeling like that of a small child who has been left alone in an unfamiliar neighborhood.

Then I went home, and sitting on the living room couch, I opened the package that Mr. Honda had left me as a keepsake. I worked up a sweat removing layer after layer of carefully sealed wrapping paper, until a sturdy cardboard box emerged. It was a fancy Cutty Sark gift box, but it was too light to contain a bottle of whiskey. I opened it, to find nothing inside. It was absolutely empty. All that Mr. Honda had left me was an empty box.

Book Two: Bird as Prophet

July to October 1984

1

As Concrete as Possible

*

Appetite in Literature

Kumiko never came back that night. I stayed up until midnight, reading, listening to music, and waiting for her, but finally I gave up and went to bed. I fell asleep with the light on. It was