

ノルウェイの森 II

NORWEGIAN WOOD

II

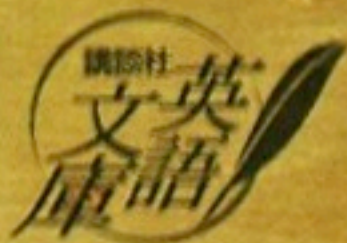
Haruki Murakami

ノルウェイの森

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NORWEGIAN WOOD

II

Haruki Murakami

Translated by
Alfred Birnbaum

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CHAPTER 6 *(continued)*

The scene at dinner was pretty much the same as the evening before—same faces and talk and atmosphere. Only the menu had changed. The lab-coated man who had talked about stomach secretions under weightless conditions joined our table and told us about brain size in correlation to its abilities. He told us about the brain capacities of Napoleon and Bismarck while we ate something called soyburger steak. He pushed his plate aside and, pulling out a notepad, began to draw a diagram of the brain in ballpoint. “No, that’s not quite right,” he’d say, then start over. When he finally finished the drawing to his satisfaction, he returned the notepad to a pocket of his lab coat and slipped the pen into his breast pocket. That made three ballpoint pens, a pencil, and a ruler in his breast pocket. “Winter’s great here, I tell you. You simply must come next winter,” he said as he left, same as yesterday.

"Is he a doctor or a patient?" was all I could think to ask Reiko.

"Which do you think?"

"I have absolutely no idea. Whichever, he hardly seems too together."

"He's a doctor. Dr. Miyata," said Naoko.

"He's got to be the biggest nut around here. I'd wager on it," said Reiko.

"Him and Mr. Omura, the gatekeeper, who's pretty far out, too," said Naoko.

"Yeah, he's crazy all right," said Reiko, nodding as she jabbed a fork into her broccoli. "The guy shouts who knows what while he does those impossible exercises every morning. Then, before Naoko's time, there was this girl named Kinoshita in accounting who tried to commit suicide, not to mention Nurse Tokushima who became a real bad alcoholic and had to quit last year."

"Sounds like the staff and the patients ought to change places," I said with some concern.

"You said it," said Reiko, waving her fork. "I see you're getting to know the ropes around here."

"So it would seem," I agreed.

"The together thing about us," said Reiko, "is that we know we're not together."

We returned to the room, and Naoko and I

played cards while Reiko picked up the guitar again and practiced Bach.

"What time will you be leaving tomorrow?" Reiko asked me when she stayed her hand long enough to light a cigarette.

"I should get off after breakfast. There's a bus a little after nine, which would mean I wouldn't have to skip out on my job."

"Too bad. Sure wish you could take more time off."

"If I did that, I'd probably just stay on here," I said with a laugh.

"Quite so," agreed Reiko, then reminded Naoko, "Oh, I mustn't forget to pick up those grapes from Oka's place. It nearly slipped my mind."

"Shall we go together?" asked Naoko.

"Say, Watanabe, can I borrow *your* services?"

"Sure thing."

"Well, then, looks like we're off on another night stroll, the two of us," said Reiko, taking my hand. "There's only a bit more from where we left off last night, so let's take it through to the end tonight."

"Be my guest, whatever you like," giggled Naoko.

The wind was a little brisk, so Reiko pulled on a light blue cardigan and thrust both hands into her pants pockets. While walking she looked up at the sky, sniffing the air like a dog. Then she came out

with the verdict: "Smells like rain." I gave a few sniffs, too, but didn't smell anything. A lot of clouds in the sky, and the moon half-hidden behind them.

"Live here long enough and you can smell the weather," said Reiko.

As we entered the woods around the staff housing, Reiko asked me to wait a moment while she went over to a cottage and pushed the doorbell. Out came the lady of the house, who chatted a bit with Reiko, then let out a chuckle before stepping inside and coming back with a large plastic bag. Reiko thanked her, said her good-nights, and headed back my way.

"See? Grapes!" said Reiko, showing me the contents of the bag. It was filled with bunches of them.

"Like grapes?"

"Sure."

She grabbed the top bunch and handed it to me. "They're washed, so they're okay to eat."

I walked along eating the grapes and spitting out the seeds and skins. Plump and juicy they were. Reiko ate a bunch herself.

"I teach piano to the boy in that family from time to time. Give me all sorts of different things by way of thanks. Last time it was wine. Sometimes I get them to do a little shopping for me in town."

"I believe I'm about ready to listen to the rest of yesterday's story," I said.

"Fair enough," said Reiko. "But if we get back late two nights in a row, Naoko might start wondering if something is going on between us."

"I'd like to hear it anyway."

"Okay, but let's talk somewhere there's a roof. It's a little chilly today."

She turned left this side of the tennis courts, descended some narrow steps, and came to a place where several small sheds stood in a line like row houses. Opening the door of the first shed, she flicked on the light. "Come on in. Nothing much to see, though."

Inside the shed were a bank of cross-country skis and poles and boots neatly arranged against the wall, with snow shovels and other snow-clearing equipment and chemicals in a pile on the floor.

"I used to come here all the time to practice guitar. Or when I wanted to be alone. Nice and cozy, don't you think?"

Reiko took a seat on a sack of chemicals and told me to sit down, too. Which I did.

"Mind if I smoke? It'll smoke the place up a bit."

"Go right ahead."

"Just can't seem to quit these things," said Reiko with a frown. Then her whole face lit up as she took

a puff. Smokers who get such pleasure from a cigarette are few and far between. I ate the grapes one at a time, carefully discarding the skins and seeds in a tin box that was being used for a garbage can.

"So how far did we get yesterday?" asked Reiko.

"Up to the part where you were scaling the cliff that stormy night to get a swallow's nest," I said.

"You manage to keep a straight face through it all, I see," said Reiko, disgruntled. "We'd gotten up to where I'd begun giving the girl piano lessons Saturday mornings, I believe."

"Correct."

"If there are two types of people in this world, those who can teach and those who can't, then most likely I belong to the former," Reiko began. "Wouldn't have thought so when I was young. Or maybe I just didn't want to think so. Only when I got old enough to be able to size myself up did I come to realize. That I'm good at teaching others. I really am."

"I'll say," I agreed.

"I'm more patient with others than with myself, I'm better at bringing out their good side than mine. I'm just that type. I'm like the striking side of a matchbox, in other words. But that's okay, as far as that goes I have nothing against it. I'd rather be a first-rate matchbox than a second-rate matchstick.

That really came home to me, I'd say, from the time I took this girl on as a pupil. Up until then I'd taught any number of people on a part-time basis, but I never really thought much about it. It was only when I started teaching her that it came to me. Like, was I really this gifted at teaching people? The lessons went that well.

"As I was saying yesterday, the girl wasn't much when it came to technique, nor did she especially want to become a musician per se, which meant I could take things pretty easy. Plus she was going to one of those 'university track' girls' schools where decent grades automatically pushed you into college, so that even her mother would tell her, 'Take it easy. Maybe take up music.' And for that reason I didn't push the girl very hard. From the moment I set eyes on her, I could tell she was one of those kids who resent being told what to do. Tell you whatever pretty words she thinks you want to hear, but absolutely never do anything but what she herself had in mind. So I figured, first let her play however she wants. One hundred percent her way. Then I'd show her how the same piece could be played in various other ways. Then we'd debate which was the best. Then I'd have her play the piece again. In this way I got her to improve her playing a few steps up from what it had been. She'd tune in on the good parts."

Reiko took a breath and looked at the burning end of her cigarette. I said nothing but just went on eating grapes.

“I tend to have fairly good musical intuition, but this girl was even better than I in that department. It was almost a shame. If only she'd had a good teacher and gotten serious training when she was small, she might actually have amounted to something. But no. The girl wasn't the kind to put up with serious training. There're people in the world like that. Blessed with loads of wonderful talent, but can't make the effort to put it in order, so that in the end they just dissipate their talent in dribs and drabs. I've seen it happen to a number of people. At first they wow you. The kind who dash off a monster of a difficult piece sight-reading it the first time through. Bowls you over just to watch. Me, I can hardly keep up. But then that's it, that's as far as they go. And why don't they go further? Because they don't put in the effort. They don't have the training drilled into them to put in the effort. They're spoiled. They had almost too much talent, too much praise heaped on them from when they were small—being so good without even practicing—that they take it into their heads that making any effort is for the birds. I mean they can do in half the time what would take another kid three weeks. Then go on to the next piece. They never

have to face up to being disciplined, so they miss out on one of the essentials in building character. That's the real tragedy. I have a bit of that in me myself, but luckily my teacher was good and strict with me, so I only turned out like this.

"I tell you, though, those lessons were fun. Like driving on a highway in a high-performance sports car, the slightest touch of a finger and, *bleep-bleep*, out comes the instantaneous reaction. Maybe just a little too instantaneous at times. The trick for teaching a kid like that is to go easy on the praise. After being praised from so early on, no matter how much you praise them, to them it's only, 'What, again?' A judicious smattering of praise now and again, and that's plenty. And one more thing, it's good practice not to press matters. Let them chose for themselves. Don't keep pushing them ahead. Stand by silently and let them ponder things. That's all. That much done, the rest takes care of itself."

Reiko dropped her cigarette butt on the floor and trod it out. Then she took a deep breath to put a lid on her feelings.

"After the lessons, we'd have tea and talk. Sometimes I'd imitate some jazz piano for her. Here's Pat Powell and here's Thelonius Monk. But mostly it would be she who talked. A great talker, too, that kid. Reel you in just like that. As I told

you yesterday, most of it I imagine she simply made up, but it was interesting even so. She was truly sharp with her observations, chose just the right expressions, had biting wit and humor, enough to stimulate people's feelings. The girl was a needle. She really had the knack. And she herself knew it, so she took every opportunity to use her skills to optimum effect. To anger people, to make them sad, to make them sympathize, to bring them down or cheer them up—she could manipulate emotions with great exactness. And all for the sole purpose of testing her own limits, she'd manipulate feelings meaninglessly. Of course, it only occurred to me much later that that's what she'd been up to. At the time I didn't have any idea."

Reiko shook her head as she downed a few more grapes.

"Sick," said Reiko. "A real sickness, a disease. And like a rotten apple, that sort of disease ruins everything around it. There was nothing anyone could do about her disease. She'll stay sick like that until the day she dies. So, in fact, depending on how you look at it, the child was really a pathetic creature. Even I would have thought so had I not fallen prey to her myself. I'm one of her victims."

Again, a few more grapes. She seemed to be trying to figure out how to go on with her tale.

"So, for about six months, everything went fine.

On occasion something might strike me as odd. I'd catch myself going, 'Huh?' Or remarks would come out in the course of our conversation that would floor me. She'd take these vicious, irrational, and pointless swipes at someone or other. She'd home in with such amazing precision I could only wonder what the kid was really up to in her thinking. But people all have their faults, don't they? And who was I, a mere piano teacher, to say anything about 'character' or 'kindness,' right? All she had to do for me was practice well and everything'd be okay by me. And, anyway, the truth is I was kind of taken with the kid.

"Only I made a point of never talking too much about my own personal affairs with her. Instinctively, I just somehow felt it'd be better if I didn't. So that whenever she'd ask this or that about me—she was always wanting to know something—I'd only tell her things that didn't matter anyway. How I was brought up, what schools I went to, things like that. And when the girl would say she wanted to know more about me, I'd say, to what end? Mine is a boring life: I have a regular guy for a husband, a child, tons of housework. But she really thought the world of me, she said, and look me in the face, melting. When she looked at me like that, I'd shudder. Not a bad feeling by any means. Even so, I wouldn't tell her any more than I had to.

“May, I guess it was, when right in the middle of a lesson she said she wasn’t feeling well. And looking at her, she certainly did seem pale and was starting to sweat. So I asked her, did she want to go home? To which she said that if she could lie down for a little while, she’d be all right. Fine, I told her, and I showed her to my bed, practically having to carry her there. She was so sorry and apologetic, which made me even more concerned. How about a glass of water or something, I asked. But no, she just wanted me to stay by her side, and of course I did.

“After a while, the girl spoke up as if in pain: could I rub her back a bit? She was really sweating by this point, so I rubbed her back as best I could. Whereupon the girl was saying she hated to be such a bother, but would I mind undoing her bra for her? It was so tight. Well, what could I do? I unbuttoned her fitted blouse, then unhooked the backstrap. She had big boobs for a thirteen-year-old, at least twice the size of mine. Even her bra, too—it wasn’t your junior, it was an adult bra. And a nice one at that. But what difference did that make? I went on rubbing her back, like a real idiot. She said she was truly sorry, and she did sound truly sorry. And every time she said that, I told her not to worry, I remember.”

Reiko tapped her cigarette ash onto the floor by

her feet. I set aside my grapes and gave my full attention to her story.

“Soon enough the girl began crying.

“‘What’s wrong?’ I asked her.

“‘Oh nothing,’ she said.

“‘Can’t be nothing. Tell the truth,’ I said.

“‘Sometimes I just get this way. I can’t help it. I get so lonely and miserable, with no one to lean on, no one who even cares about me. It’s awful. I can’t sleep at night, hardly have any appetite. The only thing that keeps me going is coming here to your place.’

“‘Well then, why don’t you tell me what’s troubling you? I’ll listen.’

“So she tells me how there’s troubles in the family. How she doesn’t love her parents and how her parents don’t love her. The father has another woman and hardly comes home at all, which makes her mother go half-crazy and take it out on her, beating her nearly every day. It’s tough for her to face going home. And then she starts sobbing, tears welling up in those lovely eyes. Even God would melt to see her like that. So I tell her, if it’s so hard on her going home, she’s welcome to drop by even when she doesn’t have a lesson. She kneels before me and begs my forgiveness, saying she’d be utterly lost if it wasn’t for me. Saying, don’t forsake her. If I were to forsake her, she’d have nowhere to go.

“Now there wasn’t much I could do but take her in my arms and stroke her head, ‘There, there.’ And in no time at all the girl has her arm around me and is stroking my back. When a strange feeling started to come over me. Like I was lit by a flame. I mean there I am, in bed with a girl pretty as a picture, with her arms around me, holding me, stroking me, and unbelievably sensual, too. My husband couldn’t even come close. With each pass of her hand she pulled out my stops. I felt like my body was coming undone, she was that good. Before I knew it, she’d removed my blouse, unfastened my bra and was caressing my breasts. That’s when I finally realized, the girl was a through-and-through lesbian. I’d had a similar experience once before, back in high school, with an upper-class girl. I couldn’t take it, I just couldn’t. I told her to stop.

“‘Please. Just a little. I’m so lonely. No lie, I’m lonely as can be. I’ve got no one but you. Don’t leave me like this.’ Then the girl takes my hand and places it on her breasts. Incredibly well-formed breasts. Just to touch them, the sensation that shot through me! Even as a woman. I didn’t know what to do. I kept saying, no, no, no, it’s no good, this is insane. But somehow my body wouldn’t move. In high school I’d managed to shake things off fine, but this time there was nothing doing. My body was out of control. The girl held my hand in her

left hand and pressed it against her breasts, while she licked and gently nibbled at my nipples, and caressed my back and sides and rear with her right hand. Stripped bare by a thirteen-year-old girl in a curtained room—clothes were just slipping off layer by layer at that point—fondled and ignited, it's incredible just to think of it now. It was crazy. But at the time it was as if I was under a spell. The girl was sucking at my nipples, saying, 'I'm lonely, I've got no one but you, don't leave me, I'm so lonely,' on and on. And me, it was no, no, no...."

Reiko stopped talking to take a puff on her cigarette.

"You know, this is the first time I've ever spoken about it to a man," said Reiko, looking me in the face. "I guess it's all right, telling you all this, even if I'm thoroughly embarrassed by the whole affair."

"I'm sorry," I said. Other than that, I had no idea what to say.

"Well, we kept at it for a while and her right hand starts moving down my body. And she starts playing through my panties. By then I was already gushing wet down there. Talk about embarrassing. Never had I been so wet, before or after. When it comes to it, I'd never thought much of myself on the sexual side. So when I found myself coming like that, I must admit I was dumbfounded. Then she reaches inside my panties with soft, delicate fingers,

like...well, I'm sure you can imagine. I could never begin to tell you, not in the least. All I can say is, it was worlds apart from being fondled by a man. It was incredible. I mean it. Like being tickled with a feather. I felt a fuse was going to blow in my head. Still, somewhere through the fog my mind was flashing, this is wrong. Do this once and there's no telling where things'll end up, not to mention that a secret like this floating around in my head was bound to screw up the works. Then I thought about my child. If she caught us like this, that'd be the end of everything. Saturdays she was at my folks' until around three o'clock, but what if she came home unexpectedly? That'd be it. That's when I summoned up all my strength to get up and shout, 'Stop it, please!'

"But the girl wouldn't stop. She already had my panties off and was going down on me. I'd always been too shy to even let my husband do that to me, and here was this thirteen-year-old girl lapping me up. It was too much for me. I burst into tears. The sensation was just so heavenly.

" 'Stop it!' I yelled again and slapped the girl on the cheek. No holds barred. Only then did she lay off. She sat up at once and stared at me. The both of us, stark naked, sitting on the bed, staring at each other. The girl, thirteen years old and me, thirty-one. But the girl's development, her physique,

was literally stunning. I still can't believe it. Next to hers, mine was but the flimsiest excuse for a body. I could almost cry. Honestly."

There was nothing for me to say, so I said nothing.

"So then the kid asks me what we ought to do. 'You *do* enjoy this, don't you, Teach? I knew it all along. You like it, right?' She could tell about these things. That it was much better than with a man. Just look how wet I was. And she'd do me lots better, too. She'd have me melting, she'd do me so good. What could I say? The trouble was she was perfectly right. It was lots better than with my husband. Oh, I did indeed want more of the same. But as much as I did, it was absolutely out of the question. 'How about if we do this once a week? Who's to know? It'll be our little secret, Teach,' she told me.

"I got up and slipped on a bathrobe, told her to go home and never show her face at my door again. But the girl just looked at me. And as she looked, her eyes went flat as never before, flat as if they were painted in poster colors. No depth at all. She stared at me like that for the longest time, then gathered up her clothes and put them on slowly, one by one, almost showing off. Then she returned to the living room where the piano was, took a hairbrush out of her bag and proceeded to brush her

hair, wiped the blood from her lips with a handkerchief, put on her shoes, and stepped out the door. And as she left, her parting words were, 'You know you're a lesbian, really. No matter how much you try to kid yourself, you will be until the day you die.' "

"And are you?" I thought to ask.

Reiko curled her lip and thought it over a while. "Yes and no. True, I did come better with this girl than with my husband. Which is why I was seriously concerned for a while, understandably, that maybe I really was a lesbian. But lately, I've come around to thinking differently. Of course, I don't say that I don't have that tendency in me. Very probably it is there. But that doesn't make me a lesbian, not in any strict sense of the word. It's not like I actively go out of my way to have relations with girls. Reasonable enough?"

I nodded.

"Still, certain girls do come on to me and the come-ons do get to me. Then and only then does that side of me come out. That's why when I hold Naoko, for instance, I don't feel anything of the kind. When it gets hot, we walk around practically naked here at home and we take baths together besides. Sometimes we even sleep under the covers together, but nothing happens. I don't feel anything special. She has a beautiful body and all, but,

well, that's all there is to it. Though we did once play at being lesbians, Naoko and me. Not that I'd imagine you'd want to hear."

"No, please tell me."

"Well, when I told her about all this—we tell each other everything—Naoko petted me a few strokes here and there, just to see. Both of us naked. But no go. Zilch. It just tickled, so much I thought I'd die. It still gives me tingles just thinking about it. I mean she was so clumsy at it. Relieved?"

"To be honest, yes," I said.

"That is pretty much how it went," said Reiko, scratching her eyebrow with her little finger. "After the girl left, I just sat there in a chair, spaced out, at a loss what to do. I could hear my heartbeat echoing, *b-boom, b-boom*, from way down inside me, my limbs weighted down, mouth all dusty like I'd been eating moths or something. But my child would be coming home soon, so I decided to take a bath. For what it was worth, I thought I'd wash down the body the girl had stroked and licked and sucked. But no matter how hard I scrubbed with soap and water, I couldn't get rid of the slimy feeling. Probably it was all in my head, but that didn't make any difference. In any case, that night, I had my husband make love to me. Thought I'd shed the dirt that way. Of course, I didn't tell him anything. How could I? I just asked him to make love to me

and he did. Take your time, I said, do it slower than you usually do. And he did, nice and slow, taking his time. And you know what? I really came, right on target. Zweeee! The first time ever like that in my married life. And why do you think? It was because that girl's touch was still on me. That's all there was to it. Hey, now that's embarrassing. I'll break out sweating, all this talk of 'doing' and 'coming,' " laughed Reiko, curling her lip again. "It lasted for two, maybe three days, that girl's touch. But, you know, everything went dead again. And then it was her departing line that kept echoing in my head.

"The following Saturday the girl didn't show. Not that I expected she would, although I admit I was a little anxious staying around the house, in case on some outside chance she did come. I couldn't get myself to concentrate on anything. But she didn't come. She had her pride, and given the way things turned out, she didn't come. Not that week, nor the following, nor the next. A whole month went by. I thought that in time I'd forget all about it, but it wasn't so easy. All alone at home, I felt like I was haunted by her presence. It was unsettling. I couldn't play piano, couldn't get down to anything. Things went on like that for a month, until one day it struck me. I got the strangest feelings as I was out walking. The neighbors were all acting

odd toward me. The way they looked at me was all distant, estranged. Naturally they greeted me, but their tone of voice, their manner, was somehow different. Even the neighbor lady who'd come over on occasion I swear was avoiding me. Still, I tried not to let it get to me. Letting that kind of stuff get to you is an early symptom of sickness.

“One day a housewife I was on good terms with came to call. The same age as I, she was the daughter of a friend of my mother, and our kids played together at nursery school, so we were reasonably close. The woman appeared without warning and asked whether I knew there was a rumor going around about me. I said no, I didn't know.

“‘What sort of rumor?’

“‘What sort? Well, it's really difficult to say.’

“‘Difficult to say? You've brought yourself this far, come out with it.’

“With grave reservations, she told me the whole story. I mean she herself had come to talk in the first place, right? As it turned out, rumor had it that I'd been in and out of mental hospitals and labeled a bona fide homosexual, and that I'd had my way with the girl who came for piano lessons, stripped her naked and ravished her, beating her until her face swelled when she resisted. The story was turned rather skillfully topsy-turvy, but how

on earth did she ever know I'd been hospitalized? That's what shocked me.

"Now I've known you from way back, enough to know you're not like that, and I tell people that," she said. "But let me warn you, the girl's parents believe it and they're spreading the word. That you took advantage of their daughter, and, moreover, when they had you investigated, they found you had a psychiatric record."

"According to her, one day—the day of the fateful event—the girl came home from her piano lesson all teary-eyed, and her mother asked her what was wrong. The girl's face was swollen, lip bleeding, a button missing from her blouse, her undergarments torn in places. I mean, can you believe it? Naturally the girl had fabricated all that to back up her story. Put blood on her blouse, ripped the lace of her bra, worked herself up into tears to get her eyes good and red, tousled her hair, then went back home to spill three bucketsful of lies. I could just picture it.

"But what was I supposed to do, take everyone to task who believed the kid? I'm sure I would have believed her if I were in their place. A doll of a devil like that comes crying, 'No, no, I refuse to tell, it's too embarrassing,' and no wonder people were bowled over. And to make matters worse, I did have a history of mental hospitals, didn't I? I did hit

her in the face, didn't I? Who would possibly listen to me? Probably only my husband.

"After pondering the situation for a few days I decided to tell my husband, and he did believe me, of course. I mean I told him everything. How I'd been lured into something nearly lesbian and ended up hitting her. Needless to say, I didn't tell him how turned on I'd been. That would have been too much, even considering. He was infuriated. 'This is no game. I ought to pay that family a visit and give them a piece of my mind.' Here I was, married to him, with a child, so why put up with this lesbian nonsense?

"Nonetheless, I stopped him. I told him not to go. Told him that would only drag us in deeper. I could see it coming. The kid's just sick in her mind. Her body's rotted through to the core. Beneath that beautiful skin, it's all rotten. Maybe that was a terrible thing to say, but it was true. Still, who out there'd understand that? Come what may, no way I'd emerge vindicated. The girl was a champion at manipulating adults' feelings, and we were only so much raw material to her. First of all, who'd believe that a thirteen-year-old girl set up a woman over thirty in a homosexual gambit? People are going to believe what they want to believe, no matter what. We'd only be undermining our own standing the more we dug in.

“ ‘Let’s move,’ I told him. ‘That’s the only thing to do. If we stay here any longer, the tension’s just going to mount and that screw in my head is going to spring. Right now I still have some time, but let’s just move somewhere far away where we don’t know anyone.’ But my husband wasn’t about to pick up and leave. To begin with, he didn’t really see the gravity of the situation. His job was right at the point of really getting interesting, we’d finally managed to buy that little pre-fab of our own, our daughter was happily adjusted to nursery school. Hey now, not so fast, he said, let’s not rush into things. What with the slim prospect of finding a job right off the bat and the business of selling the house and finding a new nursery school, it would all take another two months at the very least.

“ ‘Nothing doing,’ I told him. ‘We’re sitting ducks just asking to be crippled.’ I wasn’t just saying this to scare him. It was dead true. I could see it happening. Already by that time there was a ringing in my ears and insomnia was creeping in. Okay, then, you go on ahead and I’ll come after you once I’ve cleared up things this end.

“ ‘No way,’ I told him. ‘I’m not going anywhere alone. If I leave your side now, I’ll go to pieces. What I need right now is you. Don’t send me out on my own.’

“He embraced me and told me to bear with

things just a little while longer. Just one more month. Meanwhile he'd take care of all the arrangements. He'd square away his work, sell the house, see to the child's nursery school, find a new job. He even had a possible lead on a job in Australia. So just hang in there and everything'd work out fine. What could I say? The more I said, the lonelier it would have made me feel."

Reiko sighed and looked up at the ceiling light.

"I didn't last a month, though. The screw in my head went *sproing!* This time real bad. I took sleeping pills, turned on the gas. But I didn't die. The next thing I knew I was in the hospital. That was the end of everything. When I was able to think at least partly straight again a few months later, I asked my husband for a divorce. I told him it was the best thing for him and for our daughter. He only answered that he had no such intention.

"'We can start all over again. In some new place, just the three of us,' he said.

"'It's too late,' I told him. 'That all ended then and there, back when you said to hold out one month. If you really wanted to start all over, you shouldn't have said that then. No matter where we go now, no matter how far away, the same thing's bound to happen. I'll just be demanding the same thing of you and making your life difficult. That's nothing I want to do.'

"So we divorced. Or rather I pressured him into divorce. He remarried two years later, which to this day strikes me as a good thing. Honestly. By then I knew that what I had was a lifelong condition and nothing I wanted to drag anybody else into. I didn't want to force anyone to live a life of worrying when the screw might next spring loose.

"He'd been good for me. He was trustworthy, tried and true, a strong and abiding presence, all in all an ideal husband as far as I was concerned. He tried with all his might to cure me, just as I, too, tried to cure myself, both for his sake and for the child's. And I really thought I was cured. Six years of marriage, happiness itself. He was ninety-nine percent the perfect husband. But it was that last one percent, a mere one percent, that did me in. *Sproing!* Everything we'd built just crumbled in an instant, reduced to zero, leveled. All because of that one girl."

Reiko picked up the cigarette butts lying at her feet and deposited them in the tin can.

"Unthinkable. Here we'd worked so hard, building up little by little. Only to have it destroyed, and in one brief flash. To think that everything can go just like that."

Reiko stood up and thrust both hands into her trouser pockets. "Let's head back to the room. It's getting late."

The sky had gotten darker, and clouds completely obscured the moon. Even I could smell the rain coming now. Mixed with the smell of the grapes fairly bursting out of the paper bag.

"That's why I hardly ever leave here," said Reiko. "I'm afraid of having to go out and get along with the outside world. I'm scared to meet all those different people and all the things they'd think."

"I can understand," I said. "But I'm sure you could make a go of it out there."

Reiko smiled sweetly but didn't say anything.

*

Naoko was sitting on the sofa reading a book. Legs crossed, fingers playing with the wisps of hair at her temples while she read, almost as if she were feeling the words as they entered her head. Rain had begun to come down in drips and drops, and a fine dust of electric light hummed about her body. Naoko seemed all the younger to my eyes after talking with Reiko for so long.

"I'm sorry we came back so late," said Reiko, giving Naoko a pat of the head.

"Had a good time, you two?" Naoko looked up to ask.

"Natch," quipped Reiko.

"What did you do, the two of you?" Naoko asked me.

“Nothing I’d talk about with ladies present,” I said.

Naoko giggled and set down her book. We ate grapes, listening to the sound of the rain.

“With it raining like this, it’s as if we three are the only people left in the world,” said Naoko. “If only it’d keep raining so we could stay like this.”

“And while you two were cuddling, I’d be cooling you with a long-handled fan like some African slave to the background music of guitars? No way!” said Reiko.

“Really now, I’d loan him to you once in a while,” joked Naoko.

“Well then, maybe that wouldn’t be so bad,” Reiko conceded. “Let it pour!”

The rain kept coming down. With occasional thunder thrown in. After we’d finished the grapes, Reiko lit up her standard cigarette and fetched her guitar from under the bed. This time she played “Desafinado” and “The Girl from Ipanema,” followed by a few Bacharach and Lennon-McCartney numbers. Reiko and I had wine again, and when that was gone the rest of the brandy in the flask. Then we made conversation. I really did wish it would go on raining like that forever.

“Will you come to visit again sometime?” asked Naoko, looking me in the face.

"Of course I'll come," I said.

"Will you write me?"

"Every week."

"Write me something, too," said Reiko.

At eleven, Reiko unfolded the sofa and made the bed for me like the previous night. Then we said our good-nights, turned out the light, and hit the sack. I didn't sleep too well, so I had a good long read of my *Magic Mountain* by a flashlight I pulled out of my knapsack. At a little before twelve the bedroom door quietly opened and Naoko came over to get under the covers with me. Unlike the night before, this was the same Naoko as ever. Her eyes weren't glassy, and her movements were lively. She brought her lips to my ear and whispered, "I can't seem to sleep for some reason." The same with me, I told her. I put down my book, turned off the flashlight, drew Naoko to me and kissed her. We were enveloped softly in darkness and the sound of the rain.

"What about Reiko?"

"It's okay, she's fast asleep. Once she's gone, she's gone," said Naoko. "Will you really come visit again?"

"Sure."

"Even if I can't do it with you?"

I nodded yes in the dark. I could clearly feel the shape of Naoko's breasts against my chest. I traced

the rises and falls of her torso through her gown. Running my hand over each curve, I registered the lines of her body in my mind. From shoulder to back, then to her waist, slowly, gently. We stayed in that embrace for the longest time, then Naoko gave me a little kiss on the forehead and slipped out of bed. Naoko's pale blue gown floated about her aquatically in the dark.

"'Bye," she said softly.

I listened to the rain until I drifted quietly into sleep.

Morning came and it was still raining. Only now it fell in an invisibly fine mist. I couldn't even tell until the ripples on the puddles and droplets from the eaves clued me in. The view out the window was milky white when I awoke, but as the sun rose the mist blew off, gradually revealing the outlines of the trees and hills.

Just as the previous morning, we three ate breakfast, then went to tend to the birds. Naoko and Reiko wore yellow plastic hooded raincoats and I a waterproofed windbreaker over my sweater. The air was damp and chilly. The birds had all huddled into the back of the bird coop to stay warm and dry.

"Cold when it rains, isn't it?" I said to Reiko.

"And with each rain it gets colder until finally it

snows," she said. "The clouds that blow in from the Japan Sea all drop their snow hereabouts before heading over the mountains."

"What do the birds do over the winter?"

"They stay indoors, of course. You don't really think we shovel frozen birds out of the snow in the spring and defrost them back to life, saying, 'Here, everybody, feeding time,' do you?"

I poked at the wire fence with my fingers and the parrot flapped its wings, squawking, "Shithead," "Thanks," "Crazeee."

"That's one I'd like to freeze," said Naoko gloomily. "Nothing but that, day after day, it's enough to drive you crazy."

After finishing bird duty we returned to the room, whereupon I packed and the two women readied to go out to the field. We set out together and parted ways just past the tennis court. They took a right and I went straight ahead. We said our goodbyes and I tacked on a see-you-before-long. Naoko smiled and disappeared around the corner.

I passed a few people on the way out to the gate, all wearing the same yellow slickers as Naoko, hoods pulled up over their heads. The colors shone vivid in the rain: the soil dark and black, the pines brilliant green, the yellow-sheathed figures looking like some special breed of ghost only allowed to venture out on rainy days. All carrying gardening tools

and baskets and whatnot, they wander over the face of the earth without a sound.

"You're the one come out from Tokyo, right?" confirmed the old man, checking my address. "Only been there once myself. Great place for pork."

"Oh? Is that so?" I responded, at a loss as to what else to say.

"Didn't think much of most things I ate in Tokyo, but the pork was good. They must have some special method of raising pigs."

I told him I didn't know anything about that. In fact, I couldn't say I'd ever heard tell of Tokyo pork tasting different.

"When was this you're talking about? When were you in Tokyo?" I asked him.

"When was it now?" the old man wondered as he tilted his head to one side, thinking. "Right around the time of the Crown Prince's wedding, it was. I have a son in Tokyo and figured I ought to go visit him at least once. So I did."

"Well, there you are. The pork in Tokyo was probably good at that time," I said.

"How's it nowadays?"

I really couldn't say, but I didn't recall hearing anything of the sort. This seemed to disappoint the old man somewhat. But before he could swing back into any more stories, I cut him short, mentioning I had to catch a bus soon, and walked off toward the

road. Pockets of mist still lingered here and there along the stream, ushered aimlessly this way and that over the windy slope. I stopped in my tracks several times, looked behind me, and sighed for no reason. I felt almost as if I was on a different planet with different gravity. Ah yes, that's right, this was the outside world. A depressing thought.

It was four-thirty when I got back to the dorm, so I set down my satchel, quickly changed clothes, and headed out to my job at the record store in Shinjuku. And from six o'clock to ten-thirty I minded the shop and sold records. When nothing else presented itself, I watched the passers-by outside. Families and couples, drunks and petty thugs, perky girls in short skirts, scruffy-bearded hippies, and nightclub hostesses, and every nondescript type in between, all walking the streets. If I put on some hard rock, hippies and bums would gather around the store, dancing and sniffing glue and lolling around doing nothing. When I put on a Tony Bennett record, they all crawled off somewhere.

Next to the store was an adult toy shop, where a drowsy middle-aged man sold sex goods. I could never figure out why anyone could possibly want that stuff, but the place did a thriving business. Diagonally across from the store a student who'd had too much to drink was puking in an alley. In

the game center a bee-line across the way, some cooks from a nearby restaurant played bingo for cash in their time off. A grimy-faced bum squatted in the doorway of a closed-down shop, scarcely moving. A girl who, despite the pale pink lipstick, could only have been a junior high school student came into the store and asked if I wouldn't mind putting on the Stones' "Jumping Jack Flash." When I brought out the record and put it on, she snapped her fingers to the rhythm and swayed her hips. Then she asked me if maybe I had a cigarette. So I gave her one of the Larks from the pack my boss left lying around. She gave a few choice puffs, and when the record was over she slipped out without a word. Ambulance and police car sirens swept through hearing range every fifteen minutes or so. Three plastered businessmen were shouting "Fuck!" and laughing at a pretty girl with long hair who was making a call from a pay phone.

Surveying this scene, I got to feeling more and more mixed up, it was all so very, very... What on earth is all this? What could it all possibly mean?

The store manager came back from eating and told me, hey, Watanabe, made it with the girl in that boutique day before last. He'd had his eye on a girl who worked in a nearby boutique for a good while now and had occasionally taken her records

from the store as gifts. Nice-going, I told him, and he spelled out the details at great length. If you wanna make it with a girl, he boasted, all you gotta do is ply her with presents, then get her good and drunk, and the rest is history. Easy, eh?

I caught a train and returned to the dorm still carrying confusion in my mind. I shut the curtains of my room, turned out the light, and lay down on my bed, somehow expecting that any minute Naoko might climb into bed beside me. Closing my eyes, I could feel the soft swell of her breasts at my chest, the lines of her body at my fingertips. She'd whisper in my ear. There in the dark I returned to that small world of Naoko's. I could smell the grass, hear the sound of the rain at night. I could picture Naoko's naked body as I'd seen it in the moonlight, that beautiful full body swaddled in a yellow raincoat as she cleaned the coop and tended the vegetables. I grabbed at my erect penis and thought about Naoko until I came. Once I'd ejaculated, my confusion abated slightly, but not enough to let me sleep. I was dead tired and by all rights should have been sleepy, but somehow I just couldn't fall asleep.

I got up and walked over to the window to look out dumbly at the flagpole stand. The flagless white pole pierced the night sky like a huge bare bone. I wondered what Naoko might be doing that very

moment. Surely sleeping. Snoozing away safe and sound, enveloped in the darkness of that odd little world of hers. I wished her pleasant dreams.

CHAPTER 7

The next day I had my Thursday morning gym class. I did a few laps in the fifty-meter pool and felt refreshed by the brisk exercise. I also worked up an appetite. I ate my fill of a voluminous set menu at a lunch place, then headed off to do some research at the Lit Department Library, when whom should I run into but Midori Kobayashi. She was with a petite girl wearing glasses, but at the sight of me she came running over by herself.

"Where are you off to?" she asked.

"The library," I said.

"Can it and come have lunch with us. What say?"

"I just got through eating."

"Fine. Then come eat again."

In the end Midori and I went into a coffee shop, where she ordered curry and I a cup of coffee. She was wearing a yellow knit vest with a fish design over a white long-sleeved shirt, a thin gold necklace, and a Disney watch. She dug into her curry

with relish, and chased it with three glasses of water.

"You haven't been around for a while, have you? I kept trying to call," Midori said.

"Something pressing?"

"No, not really. I just thought I'd call."

"Hmph."

"And what's that supposed to mean, that 'Hmph'?"

"No meaning, especially, just an interjection," said I. "So how goes it? Any fires lately?"

"No, but that last one sure was fun. Hardly any damage, but a whole lot of smoke to give it a sense of reality. They ought to have fires like that more often." So saying, Midori gulped down more water. Then, with a sigh, she gave me a good long look. "Say, Watanabe, what's the matter? You look dazed. Your eyes aren't focusing."

"I'm just a little spaced out from traveling. No big deal."

"You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Hmph."

"Tell me, Watanabe, d'you have class this afternoon?"

"German and Religion."

"Why don't you skip them?"

"Can't. Not German. I've got a test today."

"What time are you done?"

"Two."

"Well, how about going out for a drink after that?"

"At two in the afternoon?" I asked.

"Once in a while won't kill you. You look completely fazed, so have a little eye-opener with me. I need a pick-up myself. How about it?"

"Okay, then, let's have a drink," I acquiesced with a sigh. "I'll wait for you at two o'clock in the Lit Department courtyard."

After German class we took a bus into Shinjuku and swung around back of Kinokuniya Bookstore into Dug, a "Jazz and Booze" den, for two vodka tonics apiece.

"I come here sometimes. The atmosphere's conducive to daytime drinking."

"You often drink from midday?"

"Intermittently," said Midori, rattling the last of the ice in her glass. "On those occasions when the world gets to be too much for me, I come here for a vodka tonic."

"Is the world that unbearable?"

"On those rare occasions," said Midori. "I've got problems of my own."

"Like?"

"Family problems, boy troubles, missed periods—the works."

"Care for another drink?"

“Sure.”

I signaled a waiter and ordered two more vodka tonics.

“Say, remember you kissed me that Sunday?” Midori. “I’ve been doing some thinking. That was nice, real nice.”

“Ditto for me.”

“‘Ditto for me.’” Midori was back to repeating. “You really have a funny way of talking.”

“Think so?” I said.

“Well, whatever. I was thinking about that time. How wonderful it would have been if that was the first time a guy ever kissed me. If I could reorder the events of my life, I’d make that my first kiss. Absolutely. Then I could think about it the rest of my life. Like, I wonder where he is today, that Watanabe who gave me my first kiss up on the laundry platform? Looking back at fifty-eight, a flash-from-the-past. Wouldn’t that be great?”

“Yeah, great,” I said, cracking a pistachio nut.

“Tell me why’re you so spaced out? If I might ask again.”

“Probably still not quite used to the world,” I said after a moment’s thought. “This somehow doesn’t quite seem like the real world. The people, the scenery, none of it real.”

Midori planted an elbow on the counter and

stared me in the face. "It's like that Jim Morrison song."

"People are strange when you're a stranger."

"Peace," said Midori

"Peace," said I.

"Why not go off to Uruguay with me?" said Midori, elbow still on the counter. "Dump your love life and family and university and everything."

"Doesn't sound bad," I said with a laugh.

"Just toss it all off and head where you don't know a soul. Pretty impressive, eh? Sometimes it seems like the only thing to do. So if you were to whisk me off somewhere far away, I'd bear you lots of babies sturdy as oxen. And we'd all live happily ever after. All sprawled out on the floor."

I laughed and polished off the third vodka tonic.

"Not much for babies as sturdy as oxen, eh?" said Midori.

"No, I'm interested. Enough to see," I said.

"It's okay if you don't want 'em," said Midori, eating a pistachio. "I'm only saying what comes into my head over afternoon drinks. All this talk of dropping everything and heading off somewhere. I mean, what'd you expect to find in Uruguay but donkey shit?"

"True enough."

"It's all donkey shit though, the world over.

Whether I stay here or go somewhere else. A world of donkey shit. Here, have this one, it's too hard for me," said Midori, handing me a pistachio, which I proceeded to shell with some difficulty.

"But that Sunday really came as a relief. Up there on the laundry platform, watching the fire, drinking, singing. I don't know how long it's been since I felt so relaxed. I mean everybody's always so pushy. If it's not one thing, it's another, from the word go. At least you're not pushy."

"I don't know enough about you yet to demand anything."

"So you're saying that if you knew me better, you might just demand all sorts of things? Just like everybody else?"

"That a possibility," I admitted. "People in the real world do live by demanding things of one another."

"But I don't think that's you. I can just tell, somehow. I'm something of an expert about pushing and being pushed around. You're not the type, that's why I'm so at ease around you. There's plenty of people in this world who actually like pushing and being pushed around. You should hear all the fuss they make about their pushiness. They go wild over it, but not me. I only do it when it can't be helped."

"And what's your special brand of pushiness?"

Midori put some ice in her mouth and sucked on it a while.

"You want to know more about me?"

"I'm interested, slightly."

"I asked you, 'Do you want to know more about me?' So where do you get off, answering like that?"

"I'd like to know more about you," I stated again.

"Honest?"

"Honest."

"Even if you might want to look the other way in the end?"

"Is it all that bad?"

"You could say that," said a frowning Midori. "I'd like another drink."

I called the waiter and ordered a fourth round. Midori waited, chin propped up on hand. I said nothing, but filled my head with Thelonus Monk playing "Honeysuckle Rose." There were five or six other customers in the place, but we were the only ones drinking alcohol. The robust smell of coffee drifting through the dim interior created a warm, intimate afternoon mood.

"You free this coming Sunday?" asked Midori.

"I think I told you before, I'm always free on Sundays. Until my six o'clock job, that is."

"Well, then, what say to hanging out with me this Sunday?"

"Sure."

“Sunday morning I’ll meet you at your dorm. Can’t promise what time. Hope you don’t mind.”

“Fine. No problem,” I said.

“So Watanabe, m’boy. Guess what I’d like to do now.”

“Haven’t the foggiest.”

“Well, for starters, I’d like to lie down on a soft, soft bed,” said Midori. “A little drunk—just nicely over the edge—with not a speck of donkey shit anywhere around and you lying next to me. Then you’d take off my clothes one by one. Ever so gently. Like a mother undresses a small child.”

“Mmm,” was my input.

“Me, I’m just lost in the enjoyment of it all, at least partway. But then, all of a sudden, I come to my senses and shout, ‘No, Watanabe! I like you and all, but I just can’t. I’m going with somebody else. I’m pretty hard-headed about these things, so just stop it, please.’ But there’s no stopping you.”

“I’d stop.”

“I know that. But this is fantasy. So let me have my scenario like it is,” said Midori. “So then you show it to me. Your thing. Standing straight up and out. I immediately look away, but still manage to get in a glance or two. Then I say it, ‘No way. Not that. Nothing that big and hard will ever fit.’”

“It’s regular size. It’s not so big.”

“Okay, no matter. This is fantasy. Next thing,

you put on this sorry look. And I console you. There, there, poor guy.”

“Which means now you’d like to get it on?”

“Right-o.”

“Wowie-zowie,” I said.

Altogether we had five vodka tonics each before leaving. As I was about to pay the bill, Midori slapped my hand and pulled a crisp new ten-thousand-yen bill from her wallet and settled it. “It’s okay. Money just came in from work, so let me treat you,” said Midori. “But, of course, if you’re a hard-core fascist and don’t want to be treated to drinks by a woman, that’s another story.”

“No, I wasn’t thinking that at all.”

“I didn’t let you put it in, after all.”

“The big, hard item?” I said.

“Correct,” said Midori. “Because it was big and hard.”

Midori missed a step, being a bit drunk, and we nearly tumbled to the bottom of the stairs. When we stepped outside, the overcast sky had cleared and a near-evening sunshine was pouring down on the city. Midori and I strolled through the streets a while. She said she’d like to go climbing trees, but unfortunately Shinjuku isn’t known for its trees and the Shinjuku Gyoen Garden would already be closing.

“Too bad, I really like tree-climbing,” said Midori.

Walking along with Midori, window-shopping, the city didn't seem so unnatural to me any more.

“Thanks to meeting up with you, seems I'm back more in tune with the world.”

Midori came to a stop and peered into my eyes. “It's true. Your eyes are focusing nice and sharp. You see, going out with me does have its benefits.”

“For sure,” I said.

At five-thirty Midori said she had to be going home to fix dinner. Whereupon I told her I'd catch the bus back to the dorm. I walked her to Shinjuku Station, then we split up.

“Know what I'd like right now?” Midori asked me on parting.

“Haven't a clue what you're thinking,” I said.

“To be captured by pirates and stripped naked, put face to face, and bound with ropes.”

“Why would they want to do that?”

“Perverted pirates.”

“Look who's talking about perverted,” I said.

“They'd say, ‘We'll throw you overboard in an hour, so enjoy yourselves while you can.’ And they'd stow us away in the hold.”

“And then?”

“We enjoy that one hour to the fullest. Rolling about, wriggling.”

“And that’s what you want more than anything right now?”

“Check.”

“Yowza-yowza.”

Sunday morning at nine o’clock Midori came to meet me. I had just woken and hadn’t even washed my face. Someone beat on my door, saying, “Hey, Watanabe, there’s a woman here to see you!” So I shuffled downstairs to find Midori in an incredibly short jeans skirt, sitting legs-crossed on a chair in the lobby and yawning. The guys passing by on their way to breakfast all gawked at the leggy figure sitting there. She really did have a gorgeous pair.

“Am I too early?” asked Midori. “Why, Watanabe, you’ve barely just woken up, right?”

“I was about to wash and shave. I’ll be another fifteen minutes, if you don’t mind waiting.”

“I don’t mind, but everyone keeps staring at my legs.”

“What do you expect? You come to a men’s dorm wearing a short skirt, they’re going to look.”

“That’s okay. Today I’m wearing cutsie undies. Pink with pretty lace frills.”

“So much the worse,” I said with a sigh, returning to my room to wash and shave as quickly as possible. I donned a gray tweed jacket over my blue button-down shirt, headed back down, and led

Midori to the front gate. Sweating slightly I was.

"So everyone here masturbates? Like, jerk-jerk?" asked Midori, looking up at the building.

"I guess."

"Do guys think of girls when they do it?"

"Pretty much," I said. "Can't imagine there'd be many guys who masturbate to the stock market or verb conjugations or the Suez Canal. So I guess most do think of girls."

"The Suez Canal?"

"Purely a fr'instance."

"I mean, do they each think of some particular girl?"

"Ahem, isn't that something you ought to ask your boyfriend?" I suggested. "Why does it fall my lot to have to explain these things to you first thing on a Sunday morning?"

"I just wanted to know," said Midori defensively. "And besides, he'd get really pissed if I asked him something like that. He'd only say it was none of a woman's business."

"Well, can't say I disagree."

"But I do want to know. Pure curiosity. So tell me, do guys think of someone particular when masturbating?"

"Sure. At least I do. Can't speak for others, though," I resigned myself to replying.

"Have you ever done it thinking about me? Now answer truthfully. I won't get mad."

"No, I haven't, in all honesty," I answered.

"Why not? I'm not attractive?"

"Of course you're attractive. You're cute and quite the provocative dresser."

"Well, then, why don't you fantasize about me?"

"Well, first of all, in as much as I think of you as a friend, I don't want to involve you in all that. Sexual fantasies et cetera. And secondly—"

"You have someone else who comes to mind."

"Well, yes, that's how it is," I said.

"You're so proper, even in this," said Midori. "That's what I like about you. Just once, though, won't you cast me in the role? In your sexual fantasies or dreams or what have you. I'd like to play a part. I'm asking as a friend. C'mon, who else can I ask? I mean I can't say to just anyone, think of me tonight when you masturbate. It's because we're friends I feel I can ask. And then afterwards I'd like you to tell me about it. What you did and all."

I heaved a sigh.

"But you can't put it in. We're just friends, remember? As long as there's no penetration, the rest is fine. Imagine whatever you want."

"Hmm, I wonder. I've never done it under such controlled conditions," I said.

“Well, think about it, okay?”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Now, Watanabe, I don’t want you to think me lewd or loose or provocative or anything. I’m just extremely interested. I want to know about these things. I was raised in girls’ schools all along, right? I’d just like to know more about guys, what they think, what goes on in their bodies. And not like in those inserts in women’s magazines, either. More as your fieldwork case study.

“A case study, eh?” I muttered despairingly.

“If I show too much interest in these things, learning or actually doing, my boyfriend only gets upset. Says it’s nympho. He says I’m sick in the head. He’ll hardly even let me give him fellatio. I really need to study it.”

“Hmph,” I said.

“Don’t you like fellatio?”

“I don’t dislike it, not when it comes to it.”

“In fact, you rather like it.”

“Well, yes, if you must know,” I said. “But what say we talk about all this some other time. It’s such a nice Sunday morning, I don’t want to waste it on masturbation and fellatio. Let’s talk about something else. Is your guy in the same university?”

“No, another one. But I knew him back in high school, from club activities. I went to a girls’ school and he went to a boys’ school. Your typical story,

right? Joint concerts, stuff like that. We only got involved after high school, though. But, say, Watanabe?"

"Hmm?"

"Once is all I ask. Just please imagine me, okay?"

"Okay, I'll give it the old college try. Next time," I said, giving in.

We caught a train to Ochanomizu. Since I hadn't eaten breakfast, when we changed trains at Shinjuku I bought some thin sandwiches and coffee that tasted like boiled ink. The Sunday morning trains were filled with families and couples going on outings. A swarm of young boys all fitted out in the same uniform were padding about the car with baseball bats. There were other girls in short skirts, but none as short as Midori's. From time to time Midori would tug at her skirt hem for that extra inch of stretch. A number of men ogled her thighs, visibly unsettled, but Midori herself couldn't seem to care less.

"Know what I'd like to do more than anything right now?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," I said. "But whatever it is, I beg of you, don't start talking about it on the train. Other people might overhear."

"Too bad. It was a good one, this one," said Midori, mildly disappointed.

“By the way, what is it we’re going to in Ochanomizu?”

“Just string along and you’ll see.”

Sunday Ochanomizu was overrun with junior and senior high schoolers, all converging on some pre-exam or prep school class. Midori held onto the strap of her shoulder bag with her left hand while holding my hand with her right as we waded through the sea of students.

“Watanabe, do you think you can explain the difference between the present conditional and the past conditional in English?” she asked me out of the blue.

“I think so,” I said.

“Let me just ask, then, do you think knowing that makes any difference in daily life?”

“I doubt it,” I answered. “It seems to me, though, that the real point is probably not any concrete application as such, but the training in systematic thinking.”

Midori put on a serious expression and thought that over a second. “You know, you’re one clever fellow,” she said. “That never occurred to me, I never considered that all these conditional tenses and differential calculus and chemical symbols might not even be a question of having an application or not. I always just skipped over that com-

plicated stuff. Maybe I've been doing things all wrong."

"You skipped over them?"

"Like they weren't even there. I don't know my sine from my cosine."

"It's a wonder you got into university," I said in disbelief.

"Don't be foolish," retorted Midori. "Don't you know? All you need is good intuition to pass entrance exams. You don't actually need to know anything. You just have to play your hunches which of the multiple choices feels right."

"My intuition's not as good as yours, so I'm afraid I need to impose some kind of system on my thinking. Just like a crow might stow bits of glass in the hollow of a tree."

"And that comes in handy?"

"Who knows?" I admitted. "I guess it makes some things more manageable."

"Like what?"

"Metaphysical thought, foreign languages, just to name a couple."

"And what are they good for?"

"That depends on the person. Some people may find them plenty useful, others not at all. But whatever, it's merely a question of training. Useful or not, that's all secondary. Like I said to begin with."

"Hmm," said Midori, as if impressed, leading me downhill by the hand. "You're really good at explaining things to people, Watanabe."

"Think so?"

"Sure. I don't know how many people I've asked about the English conditional up to now and nobody's been able to put it as pat as you have. Not even my English teacher. Whenever I've asked, everyone just looked confused or got angry or made fun of me. Nobody ever really told me what's what. Maybe if someone like you had been around to give me a good explanation, I'd have taken an interest in the conditional tense.

"Hmm," I said.

"Have you read *Das Kapital*?" she asked.

"Yes. Not the whole thing, of course. Pretty much like everyone else."

"And did you understand it?"

"I understood some parts, others not. To read *Das Kapital* means taking on a full-blown system of thought. But I'd guess I have a fairly good picture of what Marxism is about as a whole."

"Do you imagine that most freshmen who've never tackled a book like *Das Kapital* can make much sense out of it?"

"Pretty much out of the question," I ventured.

"You know, when I entered university I joined a folk music club. I wanted to sing songs. Well, such a

line-up of sneaks you have never seen. I shudder just to think of it now. As soon as I joined, the first thing they had me do was read Marx. Like lessons, from page such-and-such to page such-and-such. Folk songs were a touchstone to society and radicalism and...I got this whole long speech. What could I do? I went home and read Marx. But I couldn't make head or tail of it. Even less than with the conditional. I gave up after three pages. At the next week's meeting I told them I hadn't been able to make much sense of what I'd read. And they all ganged up on me, like I was an idiot, saying I had no social consciousness or critical awareness and I don't know what. No joke! Just because I said I wasn't able to understand what was written. What a load of crap!"

"Hmm," I offered.

"Then came the discussions, which were even worse. Everybody putting on such pompous expressions and using big words. Asking me difficult questions because I didn't understand. 'What does imperialist exploitation mean? What bearing does it have on East Indian society?' Or 'Given the aim of crushing the industrial-academic complex, is it wrong to go out and get a company job after university?' Nobody would explain a thing to me. Far from it, they got furious. Can you believe it?"

"Sure I believe it."

“Anyway, they railed on and on. What did I mean not knowing about these things? What was going on in that head of mine? Well, that was it. I’m simple, I admit it. I’m common. Not an exploited member of the common people, just the common salt-of-the-earth type. What’s this ‘social revolution,’ using words common people can’t even understand? What’s ‘revolutionary’ about that? I mean I want to make the world a better place to live in. If people are really being exploited, I want it to stop. All the more reason not to grill me about my ‘commitment,’ wouldn’t you think?”

“So I’d imagine.”

“Well, that’s what I thought. Sneaky louts, the lot of them, flaunting those big empty words, trying to impress this freshman girl. All those creeps were really thinking about was feeling her up under her skirt! Then, when they reach their senior year, they all cut their hair short and get jobs with Mitsubishi or TBS or IBM, take themselves a pretty thing of a wife who’s read Marx, have kids and give them intellectual names. Who’s smashing what system? Don’t make me laugh! The other freshmen were just as bad, all pretending they understood what’s what, looking oh-so-smart about it. And they say that I’m just stupid, so if I don’t understand, I should just go yes-yes to everything. You wanna hear something that got me even madder?”

“Fire away.”

“One day, when we were to attend a political meeting, we girls were told to bring twenty rice balls each for a late-night snack. No joke, no way. Utterly sexist. But I wasn’t one to make waves, so I fixed my twenty, complete with seaweed and salted plums, too. And what thanks did I get? They complained that Kobayashi’s rice balls only had salted plums inside and there was no side dish, either. The other girls had all put in salmon or cod roe, with a rolled omelet on the side. I was so dumbfounded I couldn’t speak. All this talk of revolution and here they were fussing over their midnight meal. Talk about nit-picking! Seaweed and salted plums weren’t good enough for them. What about those starving children in India?”

I laughed. “So what became of the club?”

“I was so disgusted I quit in June,” said Midori. “Still, almost everyone at school’s trying to pull something over. They’ve all got their antennas out, twitching for fear someone’s going to find out they don’t know something or other. That’s why they read the same books, toss around the same words, listen to the same John Coltrane records, are moved in the same way by the same Pasolini movies. Is that revolution?”

“You’ve got me. Can’t say I’ve ever seen a revolution.”

“Well, if that’s what they mean by revolution, who needs it? I’d probably be shot for just putting salted plums in my rice balls. You’d be bound for the firing squad, too, for actually understanding the conditional or some such crime.”

“Quite possible,” I said.

“Listen, I can see it all. I’m common. Comes the revolution or not, the common people will still be up to nothing special. What’s all the fuss about revolution? All that’d do is change the names on the government offices. But them, they didn’t see that at all, not those big-word boys. Ever seen a tax man.”

“No.”

“I’ve seen lots of them. Seen them strutting about the house all high and mighty. What’s this ledger? Not much of a business you have here, eh? Out with the receipts. Receipts, man, receipts! We’d just stay out of his way, and when mealtime rolled around, we’d order him *sushi*, the top-of-the-line. And this is even though Father never once cheated on his taxes. Really! He was just that kind of person, the type they don’t make any more. Yet the tax man would pick him apart over little nothings. Isn’t this income figure a bit small? ‘No kidding! That’s because we didn’t make any money.’ It really pissed me off. I wanted to tell the guy where he could go—somewhere where they

have more money! Comes a revolution, do you really imagine tax men will change their attitudes?"

"Highly doubtful."

"Then I don't need to believe in revolutions. All I need is love."

"Peace," I said.

"Peace," said Midori.

"So tell me, by the way, where is it we're heading?" I posed the question again.

"To the hospital. Father's hospitalized. I have to be with him all day today. It's my turn."

"Your father?" I said with a start. "But didn't your father go off to Uruguay?"

"That was just a story," said Midori, completely straight-faced. "The old man has always made a big thing about wanting to go to Uruguay from way back, but actually picking up and leaving's another thing entirely. Why, he can hardly see clear to getting out of Tokyo."

"And his health?"

"Frankly speaking, he hasn't got long."

We walked along in silence a ways.

"It's the same thing Mother had, so I can tell. A brain tumor. Can you believe it? And not two years after Mother went. Now it's Father who has the brain tumor."

The university hospital was bustling with Sun-

day visitors and out-patients. It was permeated with an unmistakable hospital smell. The whole place was wall-to-wall disinfectant and get-well flower and bed linen odors, through which the nurses went to and fro, their heel clicking drily.

Midori's father had the bed nearest the door in a double room. Lying there on the bed like some wounded animal, absolutely motionless, several tubes inserted into his left arm. He was a short, thin man, and bound to get shorter and thinner by the look of things. His head was heavily bandaged, his arm pocked with needle marks. His half-opened eyes looked at a point in space but didn't quite focus, yet he managed to turn his bloodshot gaze slightly to watch our entrance. Ten seconds, then his weak stare drifted back off into space.

The man was not long for this world. I could tell that just by looking at him. There was hardly any life left in his body. He was barely the husk of a living creature. An old home stripped of all the furniture and fittings, just waiting to be torn down. Stubble grew about his parched lips like weeds. Funny how a beard will still grow on a man's face even when the life's all but leached out of him.

Midori announced our presence with a hello to the stout man in the other bed by the window, who smiled and nodded back, doubtlessly unable to speak. Then he coughed a couple of times, took a

sip of the water at his bedside, and turned on his side to look out the window. The view was of telephone lines and poles. Sky. No clouds even.

"How're things with you, Father?" Midori spoke directly into her father's ear in a tone more suited to a microphone test. "How's it today?"

Her father moved his lips to form a weak, "Not very." Hardly speech, more of a dry wheeze. "H...Head," came the mutter.

"Head hurt?" asked Midori.

"Ye...s," was about all he could squeeze out.

"Nothing much we can do about that, I'm afraid. You're just getting over an operation, after all. It's bound to hurt. Poor thing, you'll just have to bear with it," said Midori. "Oh and yes, this is Toru Watanabe. He's a friend of mine."

Pleased to meet him, I said. Her father opened his mouth partway, then closed it.

"Sit down," said Midori, indicating a round vinyl stool at the foot of the bed.

So I sat. Midori poured her father a drink of water and asked if he'd like some fruit jelly. He refused. But when Midori insisted he eat something, he wheezed that he'd already eaten.

Midori took a large paper bag from the bedside stand that supported a pitcher of water and glass, a tray, and a clock, pulled out several changes of underwear, a clean hospital gown, and other small

items, and put them away in the cabinet by the door. By way of sustenance, at the bottom of the bag there were two grapefruits, a fruit jelly, and three cucumbers.

"Cucumbers?" puzzled Midori. "Why cucumbers? What could my sister possibly be thinking? And after I phoned in a shopping list! Who said anything about cukes?"

"Maybe she misheard kiwi fruit or something," I suggested.

Midori snapped her fingers. "That's it! I asked for cakes. But she ought to know better. Whoever heard of bringing cucumbers to an invalid? Father, want a cucumber?"

"N...No..."

Midori took a seat by the head of the bed and chatted to her father, saying that she'd had the TV repaired, that her aunt in Takaido would be around to visit in a day or two, that Mr. Miyawaki, the pharmacist, took a spill on his motorcycle, and so on, her father responding to each bit of news with an "Uh-huh."

"You really don't want to eat anything, Father?"

"N...No..."

"Toru, want a grapefruit?"

"No thanks."

After a while Midori led me to the TV room for a cigarette. There, sitting on the sofa, were three in-

patients in their pajamas, smoking and watching a political discussion on TV.

"See that man with the crutches over there?" Midori remarked gaily. "He's been shooting glances at my legs. The man with the blue pajamas and glasses."

"What do you expect, wearing a skirt like that!"

"I don't mind. Everybody must be bored to tears here anyway, so what's wrong with looking at a young girl's legs once in a while? Might get 'em excited enough to speed up their recovery."

"Just so long as it doesn't do the reverse," I said.

Midori eyed the cigarette smoke.

"About Father," Midori said. "He's not a bad person, really. From time to time he might say something to infuriate me, but at least deep down he's a straight-shooter. And he really did love Mother with all his heart. He's done things as best he could, even if he is a little weak in character and no genius at business, either. Wasn't terribly popular. Still, compared to all the weasels and con men that are around, he's a good guy. I'm a fine one to talk, mind you. I never take anything back once I've come out and said it, so we were always getting into fights. Not a bad person, though, all things considered."

Midori reached for my hand like someone might pick up something from the road and placed it on

her lap, half on the hem of her miniskirt, half resting on her thigh. Then she gave me a good look.

"So, Watanabe, I hate to ask this of you, but would you mind keeping me company here today?"

"I can stay till five," I said. "I enjoy being with you and I haven't got anything else to do."

"What do you usually do on Sundays?"

"Laundry," I said. "And ironing."

"Toru, you'd rather not talk about that other girl, am I right? The one you're going with."

"Not really. It's kind of complicated, sort of hard to explain."

"Oh, never mind. No need to explain." Midori backed off. "May I tell you how I imagine things, though?"

"Go ahead. Your imagination fascinates me."

"Well, I see you involved with a married woman."

"Hmm," I said.

"Thirty-two or -three, beautiful, rich. Fur coat and Charles Jourdan shoes, silk underwear, the wealthy wife type and simply starved for sex. That and she's a real bitch. Weekday afternoons, it's just she and you. But Sundays are out, because that's when her husband's home. Am I wrong?"

"Interesting line of thought, that's for sure," I admitted.

"I bet she has you tie her up and blindfold her and lick her all over. Or else it's, you know, putting strange things up her or contorting like acrobats and taking Polaroids."

"Sounds like fun."

"She's so starved, anything goes. That's all she thinks about, day after day. I mean she's got all the time in the world. It's next time you come over, do this, do that. And every time you get into bed, she has to come three times in all sorts of different positions. And she tells you, 'No young girl's gonna satisfy you! Can a young girl do this? Or this? How about this? No, no, don't come yet.' Things like that."

"If you ask me, you've seen too many porno movies," I said with a laugh.

"Maybe," said Midori. "I do have a thing about porno movies, you're right. Let's go see one together sometime."

"Fine. You name the time."

"Really? That'll be a treat. Let's go to some SM flick. With whips and golden showers, the whole works. I could really go for that."

"Okay."

"Tell me, Toru, what do you think I like most about porno movies?"

"I haven't the least idea."

"Well, you know when the big sex scene comes,

you can hear everyone in the audience swallowing all at once," said Midori. "That gulp, that sound, I love it. It's so darling!"

We returned to the sick room and Midori struck up a "conversation" with her father. That is, her father injected "ahs" and "ums" at appropriate intervals. At eleven, the wife of the man in the next bed showed up to change her husband's hospital gown and peel him some fruit. A round-faced, pleasant person, she and Midori talked about this and that. Meanwhile, a nurse came by to change an intravenous feed bottle, exchanged a few words with Midori and the woman, then left. The whole time I gazed out the window for lack of anything better to do, staring at the telephone lines where alighted an occasional sparrow. So went the day: Midori talking with her father, wiping off the sweat, collecting the phlegm he'd cough up, conversing with the nurses and the other man's wife, talking to me, checking the intravenous tubes.

At eleven-thirty a doctor made the rounds and sent Midori and me out into the corridor to wait. When he came out, Midori asked, "Tell me, doctor, how is he?"

"Well, he's exhibiting immediate post-operation reactions and under strong pain suppressants, so he's pretty exhausted," said the doctor evasively.

"It'll be another two or three days before we can know the results of the operation. If it doesn't look good, we'll have to reconsider things from there."

"You won't have to cut open his head again, will you?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," said the doctor. "Say, that's a mighty short skirt you're wearing, young lady."

"Cute, huh?"

"Must present problems climbing stairs, no?" the doctor queried.

"Not really. I give everybody a good, clear shot," said Midori, and the nurse behind her giggled.

"I'd say you ought to check into the hospital and let us have a look-see what's inside that head of yours," said the doctor, completely deadpan. "That and you ought to use the elevators whenever possible. We can't handle any more stroke patients. We're busy enough as it is."

Not long after the doctor's visit came mealtime. Nurses wheeled food trays into each room. Midori's father was given a potage of some sort, boned and simmered fish, vegetables mashed beyond recognition and served in aspic, and fruit. Midori helped him sit up by cranking the handle at the foot of the bed to tilt the head of the mattress, then spoon-fed him the soup. After five or six spoonfuls he averted his face and got out a "N...No..."

"But, Father, you must eat!" insisted Midori.

"N...Not now," he wheezed

"What am I to do with you? How are you going to build your strength if you won't eat?" said Midori. "Do you need to take a pee?"

"Aaah," responded her father.

"Say, Toru, shall we go eat down in the cafeteria?" prompted Midori.

I told her okay, but I honestly didn't much feel like eating. The cafeteria was a confusion of doctors and nurses and visitors. A large windowless underground hall with rows of tables and chairs where people sat feeding their faces and talking—probably about ailments—the whole place resounding like the subway. Occasionally a PA announcement summoning doctors and nurses would override the noise. I set about finding us a table, while Midori fetched two portions of food on an aluminum tray. The day's menu consisted of cream croquettes with potato salad, shredded cabbage, simmered fish, rice, and soup, served up on the same white plastic plates used for patients. I ate half my portion and left the rest. Midori polished off everything on her plate.

"Aren't you hungry?" asked Midori, sipping her tea.

"Not really," I said.

"It's the hospital," Midori assured me as she

looked around. "Happens to anyone who isn't used to the place. The smells and sounds and heavy air, the faces of the patients, all tense and irritable and distressed and pained and tired—it all kind of gets to you. It's actually pretty hard for your stomach to register hunger under the circumstances. Once you get used to it, though, it gets to be like nothing at all. You stop noticing. Plus you need to eat to maintain your strength to keep watch bedside. No, really. After nursing my grandfather, grandmother, mother, and father, that much I know. Something might happen to prevent you from eating the next meal, so you'd better eat up.'

"I understand what you're saying," I said.

"Say some relative pays a visit and we come down here together to eat, everyone leaves half their meal, just like you. But me, I eat everything, so that they inevitably say, 'Midori, you're just so healthy. I'm so full I can't take another bite.' I'm the one who's got to do the nursing, though. It's no joke, no way. The others only come for the occasional visit. But I'm the one who has to take care of the shit and the phlegm and wipe him off. If well-wishing alone could take care of the shit, I must be doing fifty times their share of well-wishing. And for that I get dirty looks and this 'Midori, you're just so healthy' for finishing my food? Maybe they all think I'm a pack mule or something. At their

age, they've all been around enough, how can they be so dense? Pretty words are fine and dandy, but the real question is who cleans up the shit. I mean I get to feeling hurt, too, you know. It all becomes too much. There're times I feel like crying. The doctors keep cutting him open and poking around inside, even though he hasn't got a chance of recovery and each time he gets worse. You see how much you can stand, watching all this going on before your eyes. It's unbearable. On top of which, all our savings are being siphoned away. I mean I've still got three and a half years of university ahead of me. At this rate my sister won't be able to afford a wedding."

"How many days a week do you come here?" I asked.

"Four on average," said Midori. "The place is supposed to provide full nursing, but there aren't enough nurses to go around. They're really doing their best, but they just don't have the numbers and there's too much to be done. So the families have to take up the slack. Sister minds the store and I come here whenever I can find time between classes. That makes three days a week here for my sister and four for me. And any other spare moment we use for dates. Tight scheduling."

"So how is it you see me so often, if you're that busy?"

"I like being with you, that's why," said Midori as she toyed with her empty plastic teacup.

"Why don't you take a walk for a couple of hours," I suggested. "I'll watch out for your father."

"Why?"

"You owe it to yourself to get away from the hospital and relax by yourself a bit. Just to empty out your mind without having to talk to anyone."

Midori thought it over, then nodded. "Okay. You're probably right. But do you know what to do? How to take care of him?"

"I have a pretty good idea from watching you just now. I check the IVs, give him water to drink, wipe away the sweat, have him cough up the phlegm. The bedpan's under the bed and there's leftovers from lunch if he gets hungry. Anything else I can ask the nurses."

"Well, if you've got that much, it should be all right," said Midori with a smile. "Only you should know that his mind's starting to go, so he might say something odd. Things that don't make any sense. So don't get concerned."

"I'll be fine," I said.

We returned to the room and Midori told her father that she had something to take care of and that meanwhile I'd be watching out for him. To which he showed no particular response. Either

that or he hadn't understood anything. He just lay there, staring up at the ceiling. If not for an occasional blink, he might have passed for dead. His eyes were as bloodshot as if he were drunk, and his nostrils flared ever so slightly when he took a deep breath. Otherwise he didn't twitch a muscle or even attempt to answer Midori. I hadn't the faintest idea what he might be thinking there at the bottom of that stupor.

Once Midori had gone, I tried to think what I should talk to him about but couldn't come up with anything to say. He shut his eyes and went to sleep. I took a seat on the stool by the head of the bed, and, while I observed the infrequent quivering of his nose, prayed he wouldn't die on me. At the same time it struck me how surreal it would be if this man were to take his last breath under my watchful gaze. I'd only met the fellow minutes before, after all, and my only tenuous tie to him was Midori, who wasn't here. And even if she was, our only connection was that we took the same "History of Theatre II" class.

Thankfully he wasn't dying. He was merely sound asleep. When I put my ear close to his face I could hear him breathing. More at ease, I struck up a conversation with the wife of the neighboring patient. She seemed to think I was Midori's boyfriend and talked to me at length about her.

“Such a darling, that girl,” she said. “She really looks after her father. So thoughtful and kind, very attentive, a good head on her shoulders, and pretty to boot. Be good to her! You mustn’t let go of her. You won’t find another like her.”

“I’ll be good to her,” I said so as to make the woman happy.

“I’ve got a twenty-one-year-old daughter and a seventeen-year-old son, but they never come to the hospital. Whenever they get a free moment, they’re out surfing or on dates, anything to have a good time. It’s shameful. They just squeeze us for what allowance they can get, then they’re total strangers.”

At one-thirty the woman said she had to do some shopping and took her leave. The two patients were fast asleep. The room was filled with a gentle afternoon light. It was so peaceful even I fell asleep on the stool. White and yellow chrysanthemums were arranged in a vase on a table by the window, telling everyone that today was autumn. A sweet smell wafted from the simmered fish the patients hadn’t touched. The nurses walked up and down the halls, their heels clicking the same as ever, talking in clear voices back and forth. Every once in a while a nurse would tiptoe into the room, see the two of them asleep, smile at me, and disappear. I wished I’d brought along some reading material, there being no book, magazine, or

newspaper in the room. Only a calendar on the wall.

I thought about Naoko. I thought about Naoko naked, with nothing but her hairclip. I thought about the curve of her hips and the shadowy trace of her pubic hair. Why had she shown herself naked to me? Had she been in a trance? Or had that Naoko been a figment of my imagination? The more time passed and the farther I was from that little world at the lodge, the more improbable the events of that night came to seem. I couldn't tell what was real and what was illusion. But for an illusion it had been all too detailed and for a real occurrence far too beautiful. Both Naoko and the moonlight.

Suddenly Midori's father woke up and began to cough, cutting short my reverie. I reached for a tissue paper for his phlegm and wiped his brow with a towel.

"Care for some water?" I asked. A quarter-inch nod. I gave him tiny sips of water from a small dispenser. His parched lips trembled, his throat twitched. He drank all the lukewarmish water in the dispenser.

"Care for some more?" I asked, leaning over to hear what seemed to be a response. "E...nough," came a low, dry rasp. Lower and drier than it had sounded before.

“How about something to eat? Are you hungry?” I asked. The old man gave a short nod. So I cranked the handle on the bed the way Midori had done and spoon-fed him mouthfuls of vegetable aspic and simmered fish by turns. It took forever for him to finish even half, whereupon he shook his head slightly to say he’d had enough. Apparently it hurt him to shake his head any more than that. When I offered him fruit, he said “N...No thanks.” I wiped his mouth, lowered the bed, and put the food tray out in the hall.

“How was the food?” I asked.

“T...Te...Terrible.”

“Sure didn’t look too good, I’ll say that,” I joked by way of consolation. But Midori’s father just looked at me blankly with eyes that didn’t know whether to open or shut. I supposed that the man had some idea who I was. At least I felt he seemed more relaxed alone with me than with Midori. Either that or he’d completely mistaken me for someone else. If that was indeed the case, I could only be grateful.

“Nice weather today,” I said, sitting back down on the stool and crossing my legs. “A bright, clear Sunday in autumn. There’s plenty of people outside wherever you go. It’s really good to just loll about indoors on days like this, though. No over-exertion. Only wears you down fighting the crowds.

Air's bad, too. Most Sundays I just do my laundry. I do the washing in the morning, hang it out to dry on the roof of my dorm, then take it in by late afternoon and do the ironing, all at once. I'm not one to mind a little ironing, you see. I enjoy watching crumpled things get all smoothed out. And I'm not bad at it. Granted I was none too good at first. I mean you tend to iron in creases. But give it a month and you get good at it. So I've set Sunday aside as my washing and ironing day. Although I didn't get around to it today. Tough luck, eh? And it was a prime laundry day, too.

"But that's okay. I'll get up early tomorrow and do it. Then, after hanging it out to dry, I'll go to my ten o'clock class. Midori takes that class, too. 'History of Theater II.' We're studying Euripides right now. Ever heard of Euripides? He was an ancient Greek, one of the 'Big Three' of Greek tragedy along with Aeschylus and Sophocles. Said to have met his end by being bitten by a dog in Macedonia, though there are other accounts. That's Euripides. I myself prefer Sophocles, but that's probably just a matter of taste.

"Euripides' plays are usually so crammed full of goings-on that everything grinds to a standstill, if you can picture that. All sorts of people appear, each of whom has their say about their circumstances and reasons, each seeking justice and

happiness in their own way. Which throws everything into one fine mess. Predictably. Even in principle it would be impossible for everyone to receive justice or for everyone to achieve happiness. What you get is chaos. So what do you think happens? It's really very simple. In the end, the gods come out. To kind of conduct traffic. You come here, you go there, you two get together, you stay right there a while, like that. A regular fixer. That's the way everything falls into place, nice and neat. It's called *deus ex machina*. Euripides uses this *deus ex machina* in his plays a whole lot, which tends to divide critical opinion about him.

"Still, can you imagine how easy things would be if there really were such a thing as *deus ex machina* in the world? You get into a jam and God drops from out of nowhere and fixes everything, simple as can be. Anyway that's 'History of Theater II.' That's the kind of stuff we study in university."

All the while I'd been rambling on, there wasn't a word out of Midori's father. He just looked at me blankly. I couldn't tell if he understood anything I said or not.

"Peace," I said.

I was famished after talking for so long. I'd hardly had any breakfast and eaten only half my lunch. I regretted not having eaten more, but there wasn't much I could do about that now. I looked around

for something edible. I found some seaweed and cough drops and soy sauce, and then I remembered the cucumbers and grapefruit in the paper bag.

"Mind if I help myself to a cucumber? I'm awfully hungry all of a sudden," I asked.

Midori's father said nothing. I washed three cucumbers in the washbasin, poured some soy sauce on a plate, wrapped the cucumbers in sheets of seaweed. Then I dipped them in the soy sauce and crunched away.

"Delicious," I said. "Simple, fresh, healthy. Good cucumbers, these. Tons better than cakes any day."

I finished one cuke and began on the next. My crunching filled the room. After polishing off the second one, I took a breather. I heated up some water on a burner in the hallway and made tea.

"Care for some water or juice?" I asked.

"C...Cuke," he said.

I broke into a smile. "All right. With seaweed?"

He gave a little nod. So I raised the bed again, cut large pieces of cucumber with a fruit knife and wrapped them in seaweed, dipped them in soy sauce and conveyed a piece by toothpick to his waiting mouth. He chewed and chewed, hardly changing his expression, then swallowed.

"How is it? Good?" I asked.

"Good," he said.

“Nice when there’s good things to eat. Tells you you’re really alive.”

In the end, he ate one whole cucumber. After which he wanted some water to drink, so I made with the dispenser again. After drinking the water, he said he’d like to take a leak, so I fetched the bedpan from under the bed and positioned his penis. After he’d finished pissing, I poured out the bedpan and rinsed it out. Then I returned to the room and finished my tea.

“How’re you feeling?” I asked.

“A l...little...” he wheezed. “H...Head.”

“Your head hurt?”

He grimaced slightly as if to say yes.

“Well, you’re recovering from an operation, so I guess that’s just the way it goes. I’ve never had an operation myself, so I really don’t know what it’s like.”

“Tic...Ticket,” he said.

“Ticket? What ticket?”

“Mi...dori,” he insisted. “Tic...ket.”

I had no idea what he was talking about, so I said nothing. He also fell silent for a while. Then he came out with something that sounded like “Ask.” Then he opened his eyes wide and stared me in the face. He apparently wanted to convey something, but I couldn’t tell what that something was.

"Ue...no," he murmured, "Mido...ri."

"Ueno Station?"

Nod.

"Ticket, Midori, ask, Ueno Station?" I tried to put the pieces together. Still no good. Probably he was in a daze or confused about something, though his gaze seemed more focused than before. He raised the arm that wasn't receiving an IV and extended it toward me. The effort taxed him considerably, making his hand waver in midair. I got up and took hold of the tortured hand. He returned my grip feebly, then repeated, "Ask."

I told him not to worry, I'd get Midori to take care of the ticket, everything would be just fine. Whereupon he lowered his hand and shut his tired eyes. His breathing slowed. After checking that he hadn't passed away, I went to put on another kettle of water to boil, then had some more tea. Only then did I realize the warm feeling I held for this dying vestige of a man.

A little later the wife of the other patient returned and asked me how everything had gone. Er, fine, I told her. Her husband kept right on snoozing away, oblivious to the world.

Midori came back around three o'clock.

"I just lolled about in the park," she said. "Just

like you suggested. Didn't talk to anyone and just emptied my mind."

"How was it?"

"I must thank you. I feel a whole lot lighter. Still a little groggy but more relaxed than before. Guess I was more stressed-out than I thought."

Her father was sleeping soundly and didn't particularly require anything at the moment, so Midori and I bought coffee from a vending machine and went to the TV room. I reported on everything that had transpired in her absence. How he'd slept, then woken up, eaten half the leftovers from lunch, asked for a cucumber when he saw me eating them, pissed, and slept.

"You really are something, Watanabe," said Midori with admiration. "Here everyone tries so hard to get him to eat anything and he's asking you to feed him a cucumber! I can't believe it."

"I don't really know why, but I guess it was because I made it look so good when I ate it," I said.

"Or maybe you have the ability to put people at ease?"

"Oh c'mon." I laughed at the very thought of it. "Most people say just the opposite."

"What did you think of Father?"

"I like him. Not that we really talked or anything, but he seemed nice enough."

"Was he quiet?"

"Very."

"Just last week, though, he was horrible," said Midori, shaking her head. "He went a little crazy and started thrashing around. Threw a cup at me, yelled, 'Drop dead, you bitch!' It happens sometimes with these head problems. No one can say just why, but suddenly they'll turn mean. It happened to Mother at times, too. What do you think she said to me? 'You're not my child, I hate you.' Totally blacked me out for an instant. That's the way it is with his illness. Somewhere there's pressure on the brain that makes them irritable, makes them say abusive things. I understand it, so it's okay, but if you didn't, you really feel hurt. Maligned. I mean here you are doing your darnedest for them and they come out and say these terrible things.

"I can see that," I sympathized. Then I remembered that nonsense Midori's father had babbled at me.

"Ticket? Ueno Station?" said Midori. "What's that about? It doesn't ring any bell."

"Then he said, 'Ask,' 'Midori.'"

"Well, that's clear enough."

"Maybe he wanted you to buy him a ticket at Ueno Station?" I suggested. "Mean anything to you?"

“Ueno Station....” Midori was lost in thought. “The only thing Ueno brings to mind are the two times I ran away from home, once when I was in third grade and once in fifth grade. Both times I took a train from Ueno to Fukushima. Took money from the cash register and ran. I was fed up with something. I had an aunt in Fukushima whom I was fond of, so I headed for her place. Father had to drag me home. Came all the way up to Fukushima. And we rode back together to Ueno eating box lunches. Father told me about all kinds of things then, in bits and pieces. About the Great Tokyo Earthquake and the war and the way things were around the time I was born, things he never talked about ordinarily. Come to think of it, those are about the only times we two ever had a good long talk. Get this. Father was right in the middle of the city when the Tokyo Earthquake hit and he didn’t even notice.”

“Oh, c’mon,” I exclaimed in disbelief.

“Honest. Father was riding around Koishikawa at the time on a bicycle with a pull-cart attached, said he didn’t feel a thing. But when he got home he found all the tiles off the roof and the whole family huddled around the house posts. He had to ask what had happened. That’s Father’s memories of the Great Tokyo Earthquake,” said Midori with a laugh. “All Father’s stories are like that. No drama

at all. They're all off somewhere. Real clunkers. To listen to him, you'd think nothing had happened in Japan the last fifty, sixty years. You ask him what about the February 26th Incident or World War II, and it's like, oh yeah, they happened, too. It's a joke!

"So he talked to me in dribs and drabs, all the way back from Fukushima to Ueno. And in the end he capped it off like this, like he always did. 'Midori,' he'd say, 'it's all the same, no matter where you go.' What was I to think? A child only knows what she's told."

"And that's your memory of Ueno Station?"

"Guess so," said Midori. "Ever run away from home, Toru?"

"Can't say I have."

"Why not?"

"Never occurred to me. The idea of running away."

"Everything about you's so odd," effused Midori, turning her head.

"Oh?" said I.

"In any case, it sounds as if Father was asking you to look after me."

"Really?"

"Really. That I'd understand. Just my intuition. So what did you answer?"

"I didn't know what to say, so I told him not to

worry, that things would be fine. I'd handle you and the ticket, so it was okay."

"Well, then, you made a pledge to Father, did you? That you'd look after me?" Midori went all serious and peered into my eyes.

"Nothing like that," I blurted out. "I couldn't make sense of anything so—"

"Steady there. Just kidding," laughed Midori. "You're so cute when you're cornered."

We finished our coffee and returned to the room. Her father was still sound asleep. When I went close to him, I could hear him breathing. As the afternoon wore on, almost imperceptibly the light outside changed color, taking on a subtle autumnal hue. A flock of birds alighted on a telephone line, then flew off. Midori and I sat side by side in a corner of the room and talked in a whisper about various things. She read my palm, predicting that I'd live to be one hundred and fifty, would get married three times, and die in a car crash. Not a bad life.

Past four her father woke, whereupon Midori took a seat by the head of the bed to wipe off his perspiration, give him water to drink, and ask about his head pains. A nurse came by and took his temperature, noted the frequency of his urination, and checked his IV. I went to the TV room, sat on the sofa, and watched a live soccer match.

"Guess I'll be going," I told Midori at five. "I have to go to my part-time job," I explained to her father. "I sell records from six to ten-thirty in Shinjuku."

He turned to look at me and gave me a nod.

"Hey, Toru, I don't know how to say this exactly, but thanks for everything today," said Midori as she saw me off in the hospital lobby.

"I didn't do all that much," said I. "But if it's any help, I'll come next week, too. I'd like to see your father again, anyway."

"Really?"

"Believe me, I'm not doing anything hanging around the dorm. Might as well come here and eat cucumbers."

Midori folded her arms and tapped the heel of her shoe on the linoleum floor.

"Let's go out drinking again sometime, the two of us," she proposed, cocking her head to one side.

"And take in a porno flic?"

"First, the porno flic, then drinking," she amended. "Then we can get it on with our usual dirty talk."

"Don't look at me. You're the one with the dirty talk," I protested.

"Doesn't matter who. The point is we've got lots of dirty talking and drinking ahead of us. We can get roaring drunk and sleep together."

"Un-uh, I can see it coming," I said with a sigh.

"Heh, heh, heh," she sniggered.

"Well, anyway, come by for me early like you did this morning. Next Sunday, okay? We can come here together."

"Wearing a slightly longer skirt this time?"

"Right," I said.

As it turned out, however, I didn't go to the hospital the following Sunday. Midori's father died the Friday before.

Midori rang me up at six-thirty the same morning to let me know. When the bell rang announcing the call, I pulled a cardigan over my pajamas, trudged down to the lobby, and picked up the phone. A chill rain was falling noiselessly. And a small voice at the other end of the line, Midori's, was saying her father was dead. Was there anything I could do, I asked.

"Thank you but it's okay," said Midori. "We're used to funerals by now. I just wanted to tell you."

Was that a sigh I heard?

"Don't come to the funeral, please. I hate these affairs. I wouldn't want to have to see you there."

"I understand," I said.

"Will you really take me to a porno film?"

"Sure thing."

"A real heavy-duty sex number."

"I'll be sure to do my homework and find just the thing."

"Mmm. I'll be in touch from my side," said Midori, then hung up.

No word came, though, for over a week after that. I didn't see her in the classroom and I didn't get any phone call. I checked whether there were any messages for me each time I returned to the dorm, but there wasn't one. One night, I tried masturbating while thinking of Midori in order to keep my promise to her, but nothing happened. So I gave up and switched over to Naoko midway, but even Naoko's image didn't help much. It all seemed pretty silly. I decided to have some whiskey, then brushed my teeth and hit the sack.

*

Sunday morning, I wrote Naoko a letter. In it I told her about Midori's father. That I went to pay a get-well visit to the father of this girl and nibbled on leftover cucumbers. Whereupon he asked to have one, too. But as it turned out he died the morning of the fifth day after that. I could still remember the crisp *crunch, crunch*, of us eating cucumbers. A person's death leaves behind all sorts of strange little memories.

I wrote that I thought about her and Reiko and

the bird coop when I got up in the morning. The peacock and pigeons and parrot and turkey. The rabbits, too. I remembered the yellow hooded poncho she wore that rainy morning. It felt good to think of her being up and about when I was in bed. It was almost as if she was there beside me curled up asleep. If only that could come true.

I got lonely at times, but all in all I was fine. I had my routines. Every morning I wound up my spring much the same way she took care of the birds and did the gardening. I got out of bed, brushed my teeth and shaved, ate breakfast and dressed, left the dorm and headed out to school, equivalent to thirty-six good winds of my spring. Made me think it was worth living another day. I hadn't noticed, but people told me I often talked to myself around then. Probably it was something I was muttering while winding my spring.

It was hard on me not being able to see Naoko, but, without her, life in Tokyo would have been a lot harder. It was thinking of her as I lay in bed in the morning that, more than anything, gave me the push to get up and wind my spring. Knowing she was there, doing her best, made me feel like doing my best.

Today was Sunday, though, the day I didn't wind up. I did my laundry and wrote a letter. Then put a stamp on it and posted it and nothing else to

do the rest of the day. I didn't even study on Sundays. Between classes I crammed in the library, so Sunday I was free. Sunday afternoons were quiet and tranquil and lonely. Generally I'd read or listen to music. Sometimes I recalled all the streets, each and every one we walked when Naoko was in Tokyo. The clothes she wore all came vividly to mind. Sunday afternoons I recalled a lot of things.

Closing with my regards to Reiko, I told her I missed her guitar at night.

I posted the letter, then bought a coke and an egg sandwich at a neighborhood store and ate it on a park bench. A kids' baseball game was in progress, the perfect distraction. The autumn sky seemed to get higher as the season progressed, and now two exhaust trails were moving west across it, parallel as railroad tracks. When a foul ball came my way, I threw it back to the kids, whereupon they doffed their caps as they thanked me. Like most kids' games, there were a lot of walks and stolen bases.

Come afternoon, I returned to my room to read, but couldn't concentrate and ended up staring at the ceiling and thinking of Midori. What if Midori's father really had been asking me to look out for her? Who could tell? There was no way of knowing. He probably mistook me for someone else. Whatever the case, he'd died one cold and

rainy Friday morning, and there was no way to check. I imagined he'd shrunk even smaller when he died. And long since turned to ash in a crematorium. Leaving behind only an undistinguished bookstore on an undistinguished shopping street, together with two daughters, at least one of whom was on the unique side—some consolation! What kind of life was that? What had been running through that cut-up and bandaged head as he lay there on that hospital bed looking at me?

Thinking of Midori's father like that began to get to me, so I quickly went up on the roof and took in my laundry a little early before heading out for a walk in Shinjuku to pass the time. There was some relief to be found among the busy Sunday shoppers out on the street. Kinokuniya Bookstore was as packed as a commuter train in rush hour. Still, I managed to buy a copy of Faulkner's *Light in August*, then ducked into the loudest jazz coffee shop I could locate and listened to Ornette Coleman and Bud Powell while I drank strong, deadly coffee and read my newly purchased book. At half past five I closed the book and went out to eat a simple evening meal, thinking to myself that I was in for tens, maybe hundreds, more Sundays like this. "Quiet, peaceful, solitary Sundays," I said out loud. No winding the spring on Sundays for me.

CHAPTER 8

In the middle of the week I cut my hand badly on some glass—I hadn't noticed that one divider in the record racks was broken. A startling amount of blood came pouring out and splattered everywhere, staining the floor deep red. The record store manager ran in with towels to improvise a bandage, then rang up information to locate a nighttime ambulance service. The guy was a real jerk most of the time, but he sure was on the ball when it came to this kind of thing. Luckily there was an emergency room near by. Still, the towels were soaking red by the time we got there, dripping blood onto the pavement. People made way for me—they must've thought I'd been in a fight. I felt no real pain; all I knew was that I was losing a lot of blood.

Without the least show of emotion the doctor removed the towels, tied off a wrist tourniquet, then disinfected and stitched up the wound. Come back tomorrow, he said. When I returned to the record store, the manager told me to go home and

he'd mark me in as having worked my hours. I caught a bus back to the dorm and went straight to Nagasawa's room. I was worked up from my accident and needed to talk to somebody. Moreover, I hadn't seen Nagasawa in a good long while.

He was in his room watching a Spanish lesson on TV while drinking a beer. He looked at my bandages and asked what had happened. A little injury, I told him. Did I want a beer? No thanks, I said.

"This'll be over in a jiffy, so just hang on for a second, okay?" said Nagasawa, practicing his Spanish pronunciation. Meanwhile I put some water on to boil and put a teabag in a cup. A woman was reading a sentence drill. "*¡Qué tremenda esta lluvia! Unas puentes eran destruidas en Barcelona,*" mimicked Nagasawa, then added, "How do they think up these dopey examples? Their pattern sentences are always like this."

When the Spanish lesson was over, Nagasawa switched off the TV and fetched another beer from his small icebox.

"I'm not in the way, am I?" I asked.

"Not at all. I was kind of bored, in fact. Sure you won't have a beer?"

I was sure.

"Oh yeah, they just announced the exam results. I passed," said Nagasawa.

"The Foreign Service exam?"

"The very one. Formally speaking, the Foreign Ministry Civil Service Employment Primary Examination. What a joke!"

"Congratulations!" I said, extending my left hand.

"Thanks."

"Of course, there was never any doubt."

"Of course," chuckled Nagasawa. "Still, it's good to have it under your belt."

"You going overseas once you enter the Ministry?"

"Naw, the first year's local training. Then they station you abroad for a long stay."

I sipped my tea. He took a healthy swig of his beer.

"Now this icebox, it's yours if you want it when I leave," said Nagasawa. "You could use it, couldn't you? Drink nice cold beer in your room?"

"I'd be more than glad to take it off your hands, but won't you need it? You're going to move into an apartment, aren't you?"

"Give me a break! When I leave this dump I'm going to live in style, buy me a big refrigerator. Four years of scrimping's quite enough. I don't even want to see the stuff I've got here. Anything you see you can have. How about the TV? Or this thermostat? The radio?"

"Whatever you feel like giving away," I said. Then I reached for the Spanish textbook off his desk and gave it a once-over. "Taken up Spanish?"

"Yeah. The more languages I can speak the better, and I've always been pretty good at them. I'm practically fluent in French from studying on my own. It's a game. You figure out one rule and the rest just follows. Like with women."

"Pretty introspective way of living," I jibed.

"Say now, care to eat out with me sometime soon?" suggested Nagasawa.

"This isn't another of your woman hunts, is it?"

"No, none of that, a meal pure and simple. Hatsumi and you and me, just the three of us for dinner. To celebrate my employment. We'll make it some fancy restaurant. It's my father's money, after all."

"Shouldn't just you and Hatsumi do a two-some?"

"No, it'd make things easier if you came along. Both for me and for Hatsumi," Nagasawa said.

Just great, I thought. Exactly like with Kizuki and Naoko.

"Afterwards I'll stay over at Hatsumi's, but we should at least have dinner, the three of us."

"Well, if it's okay with you two, I'll tag along," I agreed. "But now that you mention it, what's going to happen with you and Hatsumi? Once you're

through training, you'll be sent overseas and won't come back for years. What'll she do?"

"That's Hatsumi's problem, not mine."

"I don't get it."

He just sat there with his beer and his feet up on the desk and yawned.

"What I'm saying is I have no intention of marrying anyone. I've already told Hatsumi that. She's free to marry someone if she wants. I won't stop her. If she wants to wait for me, she can. End of discussion."

I murmured my concern.

"You must think I'm terrible,"

"You said it."

"It's not my fault if the world is unfair. That's just the way things are. Never once have I tried to pull anything over on Hatsumi. That's the kind of terrible person I am, and if she can't accept that, then it's too bad."

Nagasawa finished off his beer and lit a cigarette.

"Aren't you unsure of anything in life," I asked, incredulous.

"Now listen, I'm not that stupid," Nagasawa replied. "Of course there are things in life I'm unsure of. That goes without saying. Only I don't recognize fear as a premise. I'm out there to do things one hundred percent. I take what I want and leave what I don't want. If I hit a snag, I retreat and

rethink. Looking at things another way, an unfair society actually makes for greater use of your abilities."

"Sounds pretty selfish if you ask me," I said.

"But you can't very well just look up to heaven and wait for fruit to fall. I'm doing my share of struggling, I'll have you know. Ten times more than you."

"Probably so," I admitted.

"That's why, sometimes when I take a good look around me, it really gets to me. How come these simpletons don't make an effort? They don't make an effort and they complain that things are unfair!"

I shot Nagasawa a surprised look. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but from where I sit I sure get the impression that people are grinding away like mad. Am I wrong?"

"That's not effort, that's just labor," Nagasawa spat out. "Not the effort I'm talking about. The effort I'm talking about is to go about things with will and purpose."

"Like taking up Spanish once you've landed a job, when everybody else would just lie back?"

"Precisely. I'm going to master Spanish by spring. To add to my English and German and French, plus passable Italian. Can you get this far without making an effort?"

He took a drag on his cigarette and I thought of

Midori's father. I don't think he would even think of studying Spanish from TV. A difference between effort and labor? He'd probably been too busy to even consider that. Busy with work, busy bringing his daughter back from Fukushima.

"About that dinner, how about this Saturday?" suggested Nagasawa.

Fine by me, I told him.

The restaurant Nagasawa chose was a quiet but posh little French bistro off in a corner of Azabu. At the mention of Nagasawa's name we were conducted to a private room in the back. It was a small room with fifteen etchings on the wall. Nagasawa and I discussed Joseph Conrad over a glass of wine while waiting for Hatsumi to show. Nagasawa was wearing what was apparently an expensive gray suit and I my ordinary navy blazer.

Hatsumi showed up fifteen minutes later, nicely made-up and wearing gold earrings with an haute couture dress of deep blue and striking red pumps. When I complimented her on the color of her dress, she told me it was called midnight sapphire.

"Lovely place," said Hatsumi.

"My father always dines here when he comes to Tokyo. I've come here once before with him, though I must admit I don't much care for these snooty places," said Nagasawa.

"Still, they're nice once in a while. Don't you think so, Watanabe?" prompted Hatsumi.

"Sure. As long as I'm not paying," I said.

"My father usually comes here with a woman," said Nagasawa. "He has a mistress in Tokyo."

"Oh?" said Hatsumi.

I drank my wine and pretended not to hear.

At length the waiter appeared and took our orders. We selected various hors d'oeuvres, soups, and, for the main dish, duck for Nagasawa and bass for Hatsumi and me. The dishes took their time in arriving, so we continued talking over our wine. First it was Nagasawa's Foreign Ministry exam. Most of the others who'd taken the exam had merely been so much trash to be dumped in a bottomless quagmire, though there had been a few deserving ones, Nagasawa admitted. I asked whether the ratio had been higher or lower than in society at large.

"Why, the same, naturally," said Nagasawa without a moment's thought. "That's a fixed and immutable constant."

We finished the wine and Nagasawa ordered another bottle, plus a Scotch for himself.

Then Hatsumi once again said she knew a girl she wanted to introduce me to. An eternal go-around between Hatsumi and me. An underclasswoman from her club whom I was always avoiding.

"But she really is such a nice girl. Pretty, too. I'll bring her along next time so you can meet her. I'm sure you'll hit it off."

"No, really," I demurred. "I'm too poor to go out with any of the girls from your school. I don't have money and we wouldn't have anything to talk about."

"Don't you believe it. She's really straightforward and nice. Not stuck up at all."

"At least you ought to meet her once," said Nagasawa. "You don't have to jump on her or anything."

"Of course not. In fact, that'd wouldn't do at all. She's still a virgin," said Hatsumi.

"Just like you once were."

"Yes, just like I once was," said Hatsumi with a smile. "But honestly, Watanabe, what does it matter if you've got money or not? Sure, there are a few die-hard snobs in my class, but the rest of them are regular enough. They eat two-hundred-fifty-yen lunches—"

"Hold it, Hatsumi," I interrupted. "At our school cafeteria we've got A, B, and C lunches. The A is a hundred and twenty yen, the B is one hundred, and the C is eighty. And those who eat the A lunches get dirty looks. And for those who can't handle the C, they've got a sixty-yen bowl of noodles. That's the kind of university I attend. Do you

still think we'd have so much to talk about?"

Hatsumi let out a big laugh. "Boy, is that cheap! Maybe I ought to go there to eat. But really, Watanabe, I'm sure you'd have loads to talk about. I bet she'd really go for the hundred-and-twenty-yen lunch."

"Fat chance." I laughed at the thought. "Nobody likes the stuff. They just eat it because they don't have much choice."

"Don't judge us by our containers, Watanabe. Sure it may be your lah-dee-dah school for debs, but there are any number of girls who're earnestly doing their share of thinking and living. Not everyone wants a guy with a sports car for a boyfriend, you know."

"Of course I know that."

"Watanabe already has a girl," said Nagasawa. "But the guy never utters one word about that, does he? Talk about tight lips! It's all shrouded in mystery."

"Is that true?" Hatsumi asked me.

"Yes, it's true, but no mystery. It's just kind of complicated and not particularly easy to talk about."

"An illicit love affair perhaps? C'mon, you can tell me."

I took a sip of wine to avoid the issue.

"See? Tight-lipped. What'd I tell you?" pro-

nounced Nagasawa, already on his third whiskey. "Once the man's decided not to talk, he don't talk."

"Too bad," said Hatsumi, daintily carrying a slice of terrine to her mouth with her fork. "If you and that girl had gotten on, we could have double-dated."

"And done a little swapping when we got good and drunk," said Nagasawa.

"Don't say such tasteless things."

"What's tasteless? Watanabe likes you."

"That's got nothing to do with it," said Hatsumi, pouting. "I'm sure he's not that kind of a guy. He takes very good care of what's his, I can tell. That's why I thought to introduce this girl in the first place."

"Me and Watanabe did a little partner-switching once, though. Isn't that right?" said Nagasawa ever-so-casually, then raised his whiskey glass to order another.

Hatsumi set down her knife and fork and wiped her mouth with her napkin. Then she looked me in the eye and said, "Watanabe, did you really do that?"

I didn't know what to say.

"Go on and tell her. Out with it, I don't mind," said Nagasawa. Things were sure taking a turn for the worse. Sometimes liquor turned Nagasawa into one snide bastard. But tonight the snideness wasn't

turned on me, it was turned on Hatsumi. I knew just what was happening, which made me all the more uncomfortable.

"I think I ought to hear this. It sounds very interesting," Hatsumi said to me.

"We were drunk," I explained.

"That's okay, I'm not trying to blame you. I just wanted to hear about it."

"Well, Nagasawa and I went drinking in this bar in Shibuya and we became friendly with a couple of girls. From some junior college, the two of them clearly on the make, and, well, we all went to a love hotel thereabouts. Me and Nagasawa in adjacent rooms. Around midnight, Nagasawa comes around and knocks on the door, saying, hey, Watanabe, let's swap girls. So I take his room and he takes mine."

"Didn't those girls object?"

"They were so drunk it was all the same to them. They were up for anything."

"I had my reasons," said Nagasawa.

"What sort of reasons?"

"About those two girls, the difference between them was just too great. One was pretty enough, but the other was a real dog. It just wasn't fair. I mean for me to have the good-looking girl all to myself at Watanabe's expense. That's why I switched. Am I right, Watanabe?"

"Well, I guess," I said. But if the truth be known, I rather preferred the not-so-beautiful one. She'd been more interesting to talk to and seemed generally nicer. We'd been lying in bed talking after sex when Nagasawa had burst onto the scene with his, hey, let's swap. I'd asked her what she thought of it and she'd deferred to me. If that's what we wanted to do, it was fine with her. She probably thought I was anxious to get it on with her good-looking friend.

"Was it fun?" Hatsumi asked me.

"The sex?"

"Everything."

"Not particularly fun, no," I said. "It was just something to do. I've never thought sleeping with girls like that was all that great."

"Then why do it?"

"Cause I lure him out," said Nagasawa.

"I was asking Watanabe," Hatsumi said pointedly. "What makes you do it?"

"Sometimes I just really want to sleep with a girl," I said.

"But if you've got a girl you care about, why not do it with her?" voiced Hatsumi after a moment's thought.

"There are complications."

Hatsumi let out a sigh.

At that the door opened and in came the food.

The roast duck was carried to Nagasawa and the two bass were set down before Hatsumi and me. Next came a garnish of hot vegetables and sauce on top. Then the waiter took his leave and we were left to ourselves. Nagasawa cut into his duck and washed it down with whiskey. I tried the spinach. Hatsumi didn't touch her food.

"Listen, Watanabe, I don't know anything about these complications of yours, but I can tell you that you're not the type to go playing around like that. It's not you. What do you think?" asked Hatsumi, placing her hands on the table and giving me a firm look.

"Probably not," I said. "I often find myself thinking that, too."

"Then why don't you stop?"

"I just need a little warmth sometimes," I said in all honesty. "Without that warm skin contact, I just get unbearably lonely at times."

"If I might say so, I believe it all boils down to this," Nagasawa put in his ten yen's worth. "Watanabe likes this girl, but there are reasons he can't do it with her. So he chooses to make a separate thing of sex and deal with it as such. What's so wrong about that? Sounds perfectly acceptable to me. Better than holing up in your room and masturbating all the time."

"But if you really loved this girl, shouldn't you be

willing to put up with it for her sake, Watanabe?"

"Maybe so," I said, forking a piece of sauce-covered fish into my mouth.

"You have to understand the male sex drive," Nagasawa told Hatsumi. "Here we are, for instance. I've been going with you for three years now and sleeping with a lot of other women the whole while. But I hardly remember any of them. Can't remember their names or even what they looked like. Nobody loses any sleep over one-night stands. It's find 'em, fuck 'em, forget 'em. What's wrong with that?"

"The thing I can't stand about you is your almighty cocksureness," said Hatsumi in a measured tone. "It's not whether you go sleeping around or not. Never once have I gotten seriously upset about your womanizing, have I?"

"You can't call that womanizing. It's just a game. Doesn't hurt anybody," said Nagasawa.

"It hurts me," said Hatsumi. "Just why am I not enough for you?"

Nagasawa toyed with his whiskey glass in silence. "It's not that you're not enough. It's a different thing entirely. I just have this craving in me. And if that causes you any hardship, I'm sorry. It's not a question of your not being enough at all. I live as I must by that craving. That craving is me. There's nothing I can do about it."

Only then did Hatsumi finally pick up her knife and fork and begin eating her bass. "You shouldn't go dragging Watanabe into this, though."

"Watanabe and I have certain things in common," said Nagasawa. "Basically, we're alike in that we're really only interested in ourselves. The only difference is whether we're 'cocksure' about it or not. I'm only interested in what I think, what I myself feel, what I do. And for that very reason I can consider myself completely set apart from my fellow human beings. That's also what I like about Watanabe. It's just that the guy doesn't quite recognize this side of himself—yet. So he wavers and gets his feelings hurt."

"What human being alive doesn't waver or get hurt feelings?" said Hatsumi. "Or are you trying to say that you never get confused or hurt?"

"Sure I get confused and hurt. But it's possible to reduce those problems through training. Give a laboratory rat electric shocks and it'll choose the less painful path."

"But rats don't fall in love."

"Rats don't fall in love," repeated Nagasawa, glancing over in my direction. "How marvelous! Where's the background music? An orchestra with two harps—"

"This is no joke. I'm utterly serious."

"Please, I'm eating," said Nagasawa. "And be-

sides, there's a guest present. It's only polite to leave serious discussions for some other time."

"Shall I leave?" I asked.

"No, I'd rather you stay right here," said Hatsumi.

"If you come out for the evening, you really should stay for dessert," insisted Nagasawa.

"I don't mind either way," I said.

A prolonged silence fell over the dinner table. I polished off my fish, while Hatsumi left half of hers. Nagasawa made short work of the duck and went back to his whiskey.

"That bass was great." I threw out the line, but there were no takers. It was like tossing a pebble down a bottomless well.

The waiter cleared away our dishes and brought us lemon sherbets and espressos. Nagasawa hardly touched either before quickly lighting a cigarette. Hatsumi didn't even look at the sherbet. Just fine and dandy, I thought to myself as I demolished my sherbet and drank my coffee. Hatsumi fixed her gaze on her hands, neatly folded on the table. They betrayed a patrician elegance just like everything else about her and her accouterments. Just then Naoko and Reiko came to mind. What would they be doing right now? Naoko was probably reading in bed and Reiko playing "Norwegian Wood" on the guitar. My thoughts raced to their tiny quarters.

How I longed to be back there! What the hell was I doing here?

"Watanabe and I are alike in that we don't ask others to understand us," Nagasawa was saying. "That distinguishes us from the rest of 'em. Everybody is so hard-set on being understood. But not me and not Watanabe. Who cares if nobody understands us? What difference does it make? It's me for myself and everyone else for themselves."

"Is that so?" Hatsumi asked me.

"Not at all," I objected. "I'm not that strong. Nor do I not want to be understood. There are those with whom I'd like to come to a common understanding, others with whom that will probably never happen, but that's just the way things go. I can only expect so much. Don't make me out in Nagasawa's mold, not wanting understanding."

"He's saying almost the exact same thing I am," Nagasawa declared, coffee spoon in hand. "Really identical. Late breakfast versus early lunch. Same food, same time, just calling it by another name."

"Mr. Nagasawa, might I inquire whether you don't mind not being understood by me? Pray tell me," asked Hatsumi.

"You don't seem to understand, my dear. There's a time and a place for people to understand one another. It's not a question of wanting to be understood."

“Well then, I’m deluding myself in wanting to be understood by someone, is that it? Someone like you, for instance?”

“No, it’s not a delusion at all,” answered Nagasawa. “Normal folks call that love, that is, if you want to understand me. My system of living is wholly unlike others’.”

“Which is to say you’re not in love with me.”

“No, that’s not it at all. By my system—”

“To hell with your system!” shouted Hatsumi. That was the only time I ever saw her yell at him.

Nagasawa rang the bell beside the table for the waiter to bring the check. He pulled out a credit card and handed it over.

“Sorry about tonight, Watanabe,” said Nagasawa. “I’ll see Hatsumi home, so can I ask you to make your own way back?”

“No problem. I’ll be fine. It was a delicious meal,” I said, to no avail.

The waiter brought back the credit card and Nagasawa checked the amount before signing. Then we got up and left. Out on the street, Nagasawa was about to flag down a taxi, but Hatsumi stopped him.

“I’ll thank you not to have any more to do with me this evening. So no need to see me anywhere. It was a lovely dinner.”

“As you wish,” said Nagasawa.

"I'll ask Watanabe to see me home," said Hatsumi.

"As you wish," repeated Nagasawa, "But Watanabe and I are practically carbon copies. Kind and considerate he may seem, but underneath it all he's just as incapable of love. Sometime, somewhere, he'll wake up to the fact and he'll give himself over to his inner cravings. I can see it already."

I hailed a taxi and let Hatsumi get in first, telling Nagasawa I'd see her home safe and sound.

"Sorry," he said, but he looked as if he'd already started thinking about something else.

"Where to? Back to Ebisu?" I asked Hatsumi, since her apartment was there. Hatsumi, however, shook her head. "Well, then, shall we have a drink somewhere?"

"Mmm," she assented.

"Shibuya," I told the driver.

Hatsumi folded her arms, shut her eyes, and eased back into the corner of the seat. Her tiny gold earrings jiggled to the rhythm of the taxi. Her midnight blue dress looked made-to-order for blending into shadowy recesses. Her full, pastel-frosted lips twitched now and then as if she were about to say something under her breath. I could easily understand what Nagasawa saw in her. There were surely other women more beautiful than Hatsumi, and

Nagasawa just as surely had his way with any number of them, but compared with all those women, there was something that grabbed you about Hatsumi. Not that she exerted herself for this. Hers was an effortless power to summon up a resonance in others. I kept looking at her all the way to Shibuya, trying to pinpoint just what these feelings she elicited in me were, but came no closer to discovering.

It was only some twelve or thirteen years later that I finally knew what it was she'd evoked in me. I was in Santa Fe, New Mexico, to interview an artist and had stopped off in a diner for beer and pizza when I saw this miraculously beautiful sunset. It painted the whole landscape fire red. My hands, the dishes, the table, everything in sight was bright red. It was as if I'd bathed my senses in the juice of some extraordinary brilliant crimson fruit. Suddenly, in the midst of that overwhelming sunset, Hatsumi came to mind. And I understood.

I was reawakened to an unfulfilled—and eternally unfulfillable—adolescent infatuation. A quality of infatuation, pure, unblemished, and unremitting, set aside and long-disregarded there inside me, its very existence erased from memory. Some part of me that Hatsumi had moved. I almost broke down and cried when I realized what a very, very special

woman she'd been. A remarkable human being someone should have saved.

Yet not I nor even Nagasawa had been capable of saving her. When Hatsumi—just like a great many more of my acquaintances—reached a certain stage in life, she simply put an end to it all, without warning or ceremony or explanation. Two years after Nagasawa left for Germany, Hatsumi married another guy, and two years after that she slit her wrists with a razor.

Nagasawa had been the one to tell me the news, in a letter from Bonn. "Hatsumi's death has taken something out of me and the loneliness is unbearable, even for someone the likes of me." I threw away the letter and never wrote to him again.

*

We went into a tiny bar and had us a couple of drinks each. Neither Hatsumi nor I said much of anything. We just sat there drinking and munching peanuts like some couple whose marriage was on the rocks. After a while the place started to get crowded so we stepped out for a walk. Hatsumi offered to pay her own way, but I told her it'd been my invitation, hence my treat.

Outside, the night air was getting chilly. Hatsumi

wrapped a light gray cardigan about her shoulders and walked along beside me, silent as ever. I had no particular course in mind, slowly strolling the night streets with both hands in my pockets. Just like walking with Naoko, I thought.

"Say, Watanabe, know any place around here to shoot billiards?" asked Hatsumi out of nowhere.

"Billiards?" I queried. "I didn't know you played billiards."

"Well, I do. Not badly either. And you?"

"I can hold my own at Four Spot. I'm not the best player around, though."

"How about it, then? Shall we?"

So we located a pool hall nearby and went in. It was a small joint at the dead end of an alley. We looked completely out of place in that pool hall, Hatsumi in her chic dress and I in my navy blazer and regimental tie, but nothing seemed to faze Hatsumi as she selected a cue and chalked up. Then she fetched a hairclip out of her bag and pinned her hair off to the side of her face so it wouldn't interfere with her shooting.

We played two rounds of Four Spot. Hatsumi was every bit as good as she'd said, while I was handicapped by my bandaged hand. She easily won both games.

"You're some player!" I remarked admiringly.

"Can't judge by appearances, eh?" she countered

with a smile, carefully sizing up her next shot.

"Where on earth did you learn to play like that?"

"My grandfather on my father's side used to be something of a man of the world in the old days, and he had a billiard table in his house. So my brother and I used to play whenever we went over there. Then, when we got a little older, he gave us lessons. He was a real character. Sharp dresser, handsome, too. Prided himself on having met Deanna Durbin in New York years back."

She took three bonus shots in a row but missed the fourth. I barely managed to get one bonus point, then missed an easy shot.

"It's the bandage," Hatsumi consoled me.

"It's not having played in ages, that's what it is. It's two years and five months since I touched a pool cue."

"How can you remember so clearly?"

"I played billiards with a friend of mine and that very night he died. Something like that sticks in your mind."

"And you haven't played billiards since?"

"Nope, though not especially for that reason," I answered after a little thought. "I just somehow haven't had occasion to play, that's all."

"How did your friend die?"

"Traffic accident," I said.

She took a few more shots. She installed a serious

look in her eyes each time she lined up the balls, and used a precise amount of power when she took a shot. Just to see her earrings flashing from behind her pushed-back hairdo, her pumps planted squarely on the floor, and her slender fingers braced on the green felt, that dingy pool hall was transformed into a games corner of some fashionable, high society club. It was my first time ever alone with her, but what a wonderful experience it was. With her I felt as if I'd been pulled up to the next stage in life. After finishing the third game—naturally, she won all three—my cut hand had begun to throb slightly so we decided to call it quits.

“Sorry, I guess I shouldn’t have dragged you into billiards,” said Hatsumi apologetically.

“Think nothing of it. It’s not much of a cut. And, besides, I enjoyed myself. A lot,” I said.

Upon leaving, this thin middle-aged manager type came up to Hatsumi and told her, “That’s some shootin’ arm ya got there, lady!” To which Hatsumi responded with a simple, “Thanks,” and a smile. This time she paid the tab.

“Does it hurt?” Hatsumi asked once we were outside.

“Not that much,” I said.

“Did the cut open up?”

“It’ll probably be okay.”

"No, really, come to my place. I'll look at your cut and bandage it up again," said Hatsumi. "I've got some gauze and antiseptic at home, and it's just around the corner."

I assured her that it was nothing to worry about, that I'd be quite all right, but she insisted that she really ought to have a look at it.

"Or is it that it makes you uncomfortable to be around me? Are you in such a hurry to get back to your own place?" kidded Hatsumi.

"Not on your life," I said.

"Well, then, don't stand on ceremony. It's only a short walk."

Hatsumi's apartment was a fifteen-minute walk from Shibuya in the direction of Ebisu. A fancy, if not exactly luxurious, apartment block, though it did have a small lobby and elevators. She sat me down at the kitchen table of her two-room spread, went into the next room to change, reemerged in a Princeton University yacht parka and cotton slacks, gold earrings gone. Hauling out a first-aid kit from somewhere, she set it on the table and proceeded to undo the bandages, check the cut, give it a quick once-over with disinfectant, and put on a new bandage. She handled everything with singular skill.

"How can you be so good at so many things?" I asked.

"I used to do volunteer work. Sort of like playing nurse. That's how," said Hatsumi.

After the bandaging, she fetched two beers from the refrigerator. She drank half of one can and I the other one and a half. Then she showed me some snapshots of underclasswomen from her club. To be sure, there were some cute ones among them.

"If you're ever in the market for a girlfriend, just come to me. I'll introduce you right away," she said.

"Will do."

"Tell me, though, Watanabe. Be honest. You probably think I'm some kind of nosey-mother go-between, don't you?"

"A little," I admitted, laughing at my own honesty. Hatsumi smiled, too. She had a face made for smiling.

"So tell me, then, what do you think about Nagasawa and me?"

"What do you mean, what do I think? What about you two?"

"What do you think I ought to do, from here on?"

"My saying anything's not going to lead anywhere," I said into my beer.

"That's no problem. Just say what you think."

"Well, if I were you, I'd leave the guy. Then I'd find me someone a little more understanding to live

with. I mean the guy's not even thinking about his own happiness, let alone anyone else's. Stay with him and you'll go haywire. The way I see it, the fact that you've stood by him for three years is already some kind of minor miracle. Granted I like the guy, in my own way. He's interesting and has tons of things to recommend him, abilities and strengths I could never hope to attain. But he's utterly unreasonable in the way he looks at things, the way he lives. Talking with the guy, I sometimes get the feeling that I'm really only going around in circles. He may be going somewhere by that same process, he may be in an upward spiral, but for me it's all an exercise in futility. Which is to say he operates on a different system. Do you know what I mean?"

"Only too well," said Hatsumi, retrieving another beer from the refrigerator.

"On top of which, once he enters the ministry and finishes his one year of local training, he's going to be abroad for a good long while, right? What're you going to do then? Are you going to hang on and wait for him? The guy's not thinking of getting married, not ever."

"I know that."

"Then I have nothing more to say."

"Umm," said Hatsumi.

I took my time pouring beer into my glass.

"You know, I was thinking while we were playing

billiards," I said. "Now I, being an only child, have never had siblings, yet I've never once felt lonely or in want of brothers or sisters. I've always pretty much resigned myself to being alone. But just now, when we were shooting pool, it suddenly occurred to me how nice it would have been to have had an older sister like you. A pool-shark of a sister who looked so stunning in a midnight blue dress and gold earrings."

Hatsumi looked at me and smiled. "That has to be the nicest line I've heard all year. Honest."

"What I'm saying is that I'd like to see you happy, too," I said, blushing. "Which is all the more strange, because while it would seem you could be happy with almost anyone, why is it that you cling to someone like Nagasawa?"

"I realize it's virtually hopeless. It's something I find myself helpless to do anything about. But as Nagasawa would have it, that's my responsibility. Nothing he should have to concern himself with."

"He would say that," I agreed.

"But you know, Watanabe, I'm no smart cookie. If anything, I'm your dumb old-fashioned girl. The System or responsibilities, that all means very little to me. It'd be enough for me to be married and sleep each night with the man I loved and have children. Only that. That's all I want."

"And what he wants is something completely different."

"But people change, do they not?" Hatsumi rationalized.

"They go out in the world and brave the elements, meet obstacles and setbacks, grow up. Is that what you mean?"

"Right. And who knows? Once we've been apart for a while, his feelings toward me might change."

"If we were talking about your normal human being, they might," I said. "But not him. He has more willpower than either of us could possibly imagine, and each day it grows stronger. And each blow to his person only makes him want to build up his strength even more. He'd rather slurp down slugs than show anyone his back. What can you possibly expect from a guy like that?"

"But can't you see, Watanabe, as I am now, all I can do is wait," said Hatsumi, propping her chin on her hands.

"Are you really so stuck on Nagasawa?"

"I really am," she answered at once.

"Oh boy!" I sighed and drank the last of my beer. "I guess it must be wonderful to love someone with such absolute faith."

"I'm just dull and old-fashioned," said Hatsumi. "Care for more beer?"

"No, I'm fine. I have to be going soon. Thanks for the bandage and beer."

I got up, walked to the door, and was putting on my shoes when the phone rang. Hatsumi looked at me, then at the telephone, then back at me. "Good night," I said and went out the door. As I quietly closed the door, I caught a glimpse of Hatsumi picking up the receiver. That was the last I ever saw of her.

*

It was eleven-thirty by the time I returned to the dorm. I went straight to Nagasawa's room and knocked. After about the tenth knock, however, I remembered it was Saturday night, and Saturday nights Nagasawa had a standing alibi of "staying with relatives" for his weekly overnight pass.

I returned to my room and took off my tie, coat, and slacks, hung them on a hanger, then changed into pajamas and brushed my teeth. Then I happened to think that tomorrow was Sunday. Oh boy! Seemed like Sundays came around once every four days recently. And in another two Sundays I'd be twenty. I rolled over on my bed and stared at the calendar on the wall, feeling singularly depressed.

*

Sunday morning, I sat at my desk writing a letter to Naoko as I listened to an old Miles Davis record. A long letter, fueled by a big cup of coffee. Outside it was overcast and drizzling, making the room feel like an aquarium. Chilly. The heavy sweater I pulled out of my clothes drawer smelled of mothballs. A plump fly adhered to the upper reaches of the window pane, absolutely motionless. The Rising Sun drooped for lack of wind, plastered against the flagpole like an elder senator's toga. A skinny, timid-looking brown dog wandered into the courtyard from somewhere and began to sniff at the flowers in a corner of the flowerbed. What possible reason a dog could have for sniffing flowers on a rainy day was beyond me.

I looked out the window whenever the cut in my right hand made it too painful for me to write.

First of all I'd written how I'd cut my hand on the job at the record store, and how Hatsumi and Nagasawa and I had gone out on Saturday night to celebrate his passing the Foreign Service exam, giving details of the restaurant and food. I went so far as to say that I wished that the mood had stayed as refined as the food.

I debated whether or not to write about Hatsumi and me playing billiards as a possible tie-in to Kizuki, and decided to do so. It seemed like the right thing to do.

“That day—the day Kizuki died—I still can picture the last shot he made. It was a fairly difficult bank shot and not one I’d expected him to make. But by what could only have been sheer fluke, he hit it one hundred percent dead on. The white and red balls moved over the green felt and glanced off one another with serene precision. That ended up being the deciding bonus point. I can still picture that beautiful shot in my mind’s eye. Not since that time have I touched billiards.

“Yet the night I played billiards with Hatsumi, the fact that I didn’t even think of Kizuki until the first game was up came as something of a shock. Which is to say that ever since his death, I’d somehow always expected billiards to remind me of him. But I didn’t even think of him until I went to buy a Pepsi from the vending machine after the first game. And the only reason I thought of him then was that there’d been a Pepsi machine in our regular pool hall back then, too. We’d often betted drink money.

“I felt bad that I hadn’t thought of him, like I’d almost abandoned him. But when I returned to my room that night, it occurred to me that here it was, two and a half years later, and he was still seventeen. Although that’s no reason for his memory to have faded any. Everything brought on by his

death was still fresh in my mind, some things maybe even more vivid than they'd been at the time. Now I'm soon to be twenty. Part of what Kizuki and I shared in our sixteenth and seventeenth years has already gone, never to be reclaimed, no matter how hard I rail. I can't explain it any better than that, but I trust you'll understand what I feel, what I'm trying to say. I doubt anyone else could understand all this like you.

"I've done a lot more thinking about you than I ever have before. Today it's raining. Rainy Sundays throw me off. I can't do laundry, hence no ironing, either. No going for walks or sunning myself on the roof. Instead, I sit at my desk with nothing better to do than listen to "Kind of Blue" on auto-repeat and look out at the rainy courtyard. As I wrote before, on Sundays I don't wind my mainspring. Which is why my letters drag on so long. I'll stop here. I'm off to the dining hall for lunch. 'Bye for now."

CHAPTER 9

Midori didn't show for up the following Monday's lecture. What'd come over that girl? I'd last talked to her over the phone ten days before. I thought of calling her house, but she'd made it clear she'd be the one to call me.

That Thursday I met up with Nagasawa in the dining hall. He took a seat next me, set down his tray, and apologized for the other night.

"Not at all. You treated me, after all," I said. "Though I suppose it was rather strange as new job celebrations go."

"You said it," he said.

Then we ate in silence.

"I made up with Hatsumi," Nagasawa said suddenly.

"I should hope so," I said.

"Seems I gave you a piece of my mind, too."

"So what's with this repentance? You sick or something?"

"Well, maybe so," he mulled, nodding slightly.

"By the way, I just thought I'd ask, but did you advise Hatsumi to break up with me?"

"What d'you expect?"

"Fair's fair, I guess."

"She's just such a good person," I said, slurping my soup.

"I know," sighed Nagasawa. "Too good for the likes of me."

*

A buzzer announcing a telephone call broke into my sleep. There I'd been, dead to the world, plunging toward the inner reaches of dreamland. My head was swimming, my brain waterlogged. I didn't know what was what. The clock read six-fifteen. A.M. or P.M.? Which day of the week? What date? The flag wasn't atop the pole outside, so I figured it must be six-fifteen in the evening. So the flag-raising has some use after all.

"Hey, Watanabe, you free?" Midori was asking.

"What day is it?"

"Friday."

"Evening?"

"Aren't you the sharp one. What a thing to ask! Always an oddball, aren't you? It's...let's see...six-eighteen P.M."

Evening, eh? I must have fallen asleep while reading on my bed. Friday. No part-time job Friday

nights. "I guess I'm free. Where are you now?"

"Ueno Station. Can you meet me in Shinjuku?"

We fixed when and where to meet and then hung up.

By the time I arrived at "Jazz and Booze" Dug, Midori was already seated at the end of the counter, drink in hand. She was wearing a crumpled man's trenchcoat over a thin yellow sweater and jeans, two bracelets on her wrist.

"What're you drinking?" I asked her.

"A Tom Collins," she replied.

I ordered a whiskey and soda, then I noticed the large leather satchel at her feet.

"I've been away," she explained.

"Where to?"

"Nara and Aomori."

"In one trip? They're in opposite directions." I showed my surprise.

"Give me a break! I may be an oddball, but I wouldn't even think of doing Nara and Aomori in one go. I made two separate trips. To Nara with my boyfriend and Aomori all by my lonesome."

I took a sip of my whiskey and soda, then held a match to the Marlboro that Midori put to her lips.

"A trying time, I suppose, what with the funeral and all."

"The funeral was child's play. We're used to it by

now. Wear a black kimono and sit tight with a somber look on your face, and everyone around you takes care of the rest. Relatives, friends of the family. They buy the saké, order the *sushi*, do the consoling and the crying, raise a fuss, divvy up the keepsakes. It's easy. A picnic compared to visiting the hospital day in and day out, a real picnic. We were so exhausted, my sister and me, no tears would even come. Honest. It was enough to make others see us as cold. Still, we refused to cry, out of spite almost. Sure, we could have cried false tears, but no way were we about to put on a show for anyone. Everyone expecting us to cry only made us want to do the opposite. My sister and I are alike in that way, though otherwise we're totally different."

Midori's bracelets rattled as she summoned a waiter to order another Tom Collins and pistachios.

"Once everyone had gone home, we stayed up drinking saké until dawn, a whole big bottle of it. We bad-mouthed the lot of them, the funeral crowd. So-and-so was a real idiot, this guy a jerk. Mangy dogs, pigs, hypocrites, common crooks. The whole night through. We got it out of our systems and felt loads better for it."

"I bet."

"Then we crawled under the covers and slept. I can't tell you how well we slept. The others may

have phoned for all we knew, but we slept through it all. When finally we awoke, the two of us ordered *sushi* and had another good long talk. That's when we decided. We'd close the store for a while and just do the things we'd been wanting to do. We'd had our share of hard times, now was time for a break. So I thought I'd take a little trip with my boyfriend and we'd fuck our brains out," said Midori. Then she pursed her lips and scratched her ear. "Sorry about my language."

"Quite okay. So you went to Nara?"

"Right. I've always liked Nara."

"And you really did up the town?"

"I wish," she said with a sigh. "The moment we checked into the hotel, I got hit with my period. A real gusher."

I laughed in spite of myself.

"It was no laughing matter, let me tell you. It came a week early. I broke down and cried. It ruined everything. I'm sure all the tension threw me off schedule. He was furious. He's just that type, gets mad at anything. But what was I supposed to do? It wasn't like I'd wanted it to happen. But when I get my period, I get it heavy, generally. For the first couple of days I never feel up to much. I don't recommend seeing me at those times."

"I'll try not to. How am I supposed to tell, though?" I asked.

“Well, how about if I wore a red cap the first two days of my period?” Midori tossed out with a laugh. “So if you saw me on the street wearing a red cap, you’d know to stay out of my way.”

“Now if only all the women in the world would do the same,” I appended. “But what did you end up doing in Nara?”

“I fed the deer in the park, what else? Walked and strolled and walked and strolled, went back to the hotel. The pits. Had one bang-up fight with him and haven’t seen him since. I hung around Tokyo a couple of days, then decided to take off for Aomori by myself. I have a friend in Hirosaki I stayed with for two days, then I looped over through Shimokita and Tappi. Nice places, let me tell you. I’d written them up once for a travel guide. Ever been up there?”

I told her no.

“Oh,” said Midori, sipping her Tom Collins and cracking a pistachio. “And the whole time I was traveling, I thought of you. So you see, I’m happy as can be to find myself sitting here next to you now.”

“How’s that?”

“‘How’s that?’” she said, blanking out at me in disbelief. “What do you mean, ‘How’s that?’”

“What I mean is, why all this thinking about me?”

"Because I'm falling for you, stupid! What other reason could there be? Who dreams of being with someone they haven't got a thing for?"

"But what about your boyfriend? Shouldn't you be thinking about him?" I asked over a slow sip of my whiskey and soda.

"I can't think about you if I've got a boyfriend, is that it?"

"No, I didn't mean..."

"Say, Watanabe," she said, pointing a finger. "I must warn you. This has all been building up inside me for a month now. The pressure is just incredible. So don't give me any nonsense. Or I might just break down and cry on the spot. And once the tear ducts are primed, I'll be crying all night. Got it? I cry like a real animal, heedless of anything around me. I swear."

That shut me up. I simply nodded and ordered a second whiskey and soda to go with the pistachios. A percussion section of cocktail shakers, clinking glasses, and ice machine thuds backed up a smooth old Sarah Vaughan love song.

"Ever since the tampon incident, he and I had been on shaky grounds," said Midori out of nowhere.

"Tampon incident?"

"Uh-huh. Maybe a month ago, me and him and his friends, five or six of us, went out drinking and I

told them how once this neighbor of mine sneezed and her tampon popped right out. Funny, right?"

"Funny, I'd say," I chortled in agreement.

"Well, so did everybody else, except him. He got all mad, saying why'd I have to be so crude? I don't know why he's so straight-laced. He's a good person and all, but narrow-minded, if you know what I mean. He even gets bent out of shape if I wear underwear that's some other color besides white. Now that's narrow-minded, wouldn't you say?"

"Mmm, but there's no accounting for taste," I said, more surprised that a guy like that could have taken up with Midori in the first place. I wasn't about to say that, though.

"And what've you been up to?"

"Nothing much. More of the usual." Then I remembered, I'd masturbated as per Midori's request. I lowered my voice so no one could hear what I told her.

Midori's face glowed and she snapped her fingers. "How was it? Come off okay?"

"I got embarrassed midway. I don't know why."

"Lost it, did you?"

"Kind of."

"That'll never do," chided Midori, looking at me out of the corner of her eye. "You must never get embarrassed. You've got to think your dirtiest. I give you my okay. Next time I'll cue you by phone."

Oooh...ah...yes, right there...oh so-o-o good...no, no, I'm coming...no, not that...you know, stuff like that. You can do it listening."

"The dorm telephone is in the lobby, right where everybody and his brother passes by," I explained. "The dorm supervisor would beat me to death, no questions asked."

"Well now, that does put a crimp on it."

"I haven't given up. I'll try again by myself sometime."

"Keep at it."

"Will do."

"Maybe I'm just not sexy. Not enough presence or something."

"No, that's not it at all," I said. "It's more, how can I put this, a question of stance."

"Stance, eh? I really get off from behind. A good slick finger job."

"I'll remember that."

"Say, how about going to see a movie? Some real hard-core SM," prompted Midori.

So we went to a restaurant specializing in eel and had dinner, then scoured Shinjuku's numerous scummy backstreet theaters and found a place showing a triple feature. According to the paper, this was the only place running SM pix. The movie theater smelled screwy to say the least. We'd lucked out and just happened to enter at the beginning of

the feature. It was a story—if you can call it that—about two sisters, a secretary and a high school girl, who get abducted by these men who keep them locked away somewhere for their sadistic pleasure. The men threaten to rape the younger sister so as to give the older sister a real working over, only she turns totally masochist in the process and has them do it to her right in front of the younger sister, who goes crazy. The whole thing was so limited to perversion and darkness that it got a little tedious.

“It’d take more than that to make me go crazy if I was the younger one,” Midori told me. “I’d move in for a better look.”

“I bet,” I said.

“And you know, for a high school virgin, her tits are a little too pronounced, don’t you think?”

“I’d say.”

She practically ate up the film, she was so into it. I was in total admiration at her ability to get the most out of the cost of her ticket. She gave me a full report whenever something occurred to her.

It was, “Wow, get a load of that!” Or, “Three guys at once and I’d be in pieces.” Or, “Now that’s something I’d like to try out on someone!” It was more fun watching her than watching the movie.

At the interval, when the lights came on, it became clear that Midori was the only woman in the house. One young student-type took a gander

at Midori and moved off to another seat far away.

"Tell me, Toru," asked Midori. "Do you get hard seeing stuff like this?"

"Well, sure, sometimes," I admitted. "I mean that's what the movie was made to do, no?"

"So when those scenes roll around, everyone's erect? Thirty or forty guys' things standing straight up? Doesn't that strike you as odd when you think about it?"

Well, now that she mentioned it, it did.

The second feature was rather tame by comparison, and by the same measure it was a whole lot more tedious. The film was heavy on oral sex. Each time there came a scene with fellatio or cunnilingus or sixty-nine, the whole theater resounded with lapping and sucking noises. Hearing all these sounds, I couldn't help but wonder what a curious planet I lived on.

"Who comes up with all these sounds?" I said to Midori.

"Me, I love these soundtracks," said Midori.

There was the sound of a penis going in and out of a vagina. There were sounds I never knew existed. The man panted, the woman moaned, "Oh yes, oh yes," and "More, more." Your standard repertoire. There was the creaking of the bed. Endlessly prolonged scenes. At first Midori was riveted to the screen, but even she had had her fill

after a while and suggested we go. Once outside, I took a deep breath. It was the first time I'd ever thought Shinjuku air refreshing.

"Good fun," said Midori. "Let's go again sometime."

"It'd only be more of the same no matter how many films we saw," I said.

"Them's the breaks. You can't say we do any different, though."

She did have a point.

We then hit another bar, where I had whiskey and Midori three or four unfathomable cocktails. When we left, Midori said she'd like to go climb trees.

"No trees around here. Plus I don't imagine we're up to tree-climbing as smashed as we are," I said.

"You're always coming out with such categorical statements and putting a damper on things. I wanted to get drunk, so I got drunk. You think I can't climb a tree just 'cause I'm drunk? Hmph! I'll show you. I'll go to the top of a tall, tall tree like a cicada and piss a storm over everybody."

"You need to find a toilet, is that it?"

"Correct."

I led Midori to a pay toilet in Shinjuku Station, put change in the outer entrance, bought an evening paper at a newsstand, and waited for her to emerge. But she didn't. After fifteen minutes I

started to worry. I was just about to go check out the situation when out she came, looking a little pale.

"Sorry. I fell asleep on the toilet," Midori apologized.

"You all right?" I asked as I put my coat around her.

"Not really."

"I'll see you home," I said. "You ought to have a hot bath and get to bed. You're probably worn out."

"I'm not going home. There's nobody there and I don't want to sleep alone."

"Fine and dandy," I said. "So what's the plan?"

"Let's check into a love hotel around here and I can sleep in your arms. Straight through until morning. Then we can eat breakfast somewhere and head off together for school."

"Was this your plan all along?"

"Of course."

"You could've just as easily called up your boyfriend, couldn't you? Wouldn't that have been the natural thing to do? That's what lovers are for, aren't they?"

"But I want to be with you."

"That's just not possible," I snapped. "First of all, I've got to be back at my dorm by midnight. Otherwise I get saddled with an Unauthorized Leave,

which I've had to deal with once before and it was no fun. Secondly, if I slept with you, I'd of course want to do it with you, and I don't like having to hold myself back. I might even force myself on you."

"Would you beat me and tie me up and rape me from behind?"

"Listen, this is rio joke."

"But I'm lonely. Terribly lonely. Don't you think it makes me feel bad to have to ask you? I'm so demanding and I give you nothing. I'm such a motor-mouth, always ringing you up and dragging you around. But you're the only one I can ask. In my twenty years up to now, I've never had my way. Father and Mother would never listen to me, and my boyfriend just wasn't the type. He'd get mad if I wanted my own way and it'd be another fight. That's why you're the only person I can talk to like this. Meanwhile, I'm just so frazzled, I only want to sleep with someone who'll tell me I'm pretty and lovable. That's all I ask. To wake up all bright and fresh. I'd never be so pushy again, never. I'll be a good girl."

"I don't want to hear this," I said.

"Please. If not, I'll sit here crying all night. And I'll end up sleeping with the first guy that comes along."

There wasn't much I could do. I rang up the

dorm and had Nagasawa paged to the phone to ask if he could arrange to make it look as if I'd returned to the dorm. I told him I was with a girl. Fine, glad to aid and abet my delinquency, he said. "Don't worry. I'll turn over the sign to make it seem that you're in your room. Then tomorrow morning you can climb in through my window."

"Thanks. I owe you one," I said and hung up.

"How'd it go?" asked Midori.

"Okay, more or less," I said with a deep sigh.

"Well, it's still a little early. Why don't we go to a disco?"

"Weren't you worn out?"

"I've got special energy reserves for this."

"Now she tells me," I said.

Actually, dancing did gradually perk Midori up. And two coke-and-whiskeys didn't hurt either. We were out on the floor until the sweat was pouring from our faces.

"I'm having a great time," said Midori, catching her breath as she sat down at a table. "Been a while since I've gone dancing. Great psychological release just to move the old body around."

"From where I sit, I'd have said you always look pretty 'released.'"

"How can you say that?" laughed Midori with a

toss of her head. "Get me this up and I get famished. What say we go for a pizza?"

I took her to a pizza house where I often went and ordered two draft beers and an anchovy pizza. I wasn't all that hungry, so I only ate four of the twelve slices, while Midori shoveled down the rest.

"You recover quickly. And you were so pale just a little while ago." I could have kicked myself.

"My pleading paid off," said Midori. "Pretty good ploy, I'd say. But isn't this fabulous pizza, though?"

"Hey, be honest now, is there really no one else at home?"

"Honest. My sister's staying over at a friend's. She's a real 'fraidy-cat. Won't sleep at home if I'm not there."

"Fine, but let's take a rain check on the love hotel," I said. "Going to one of those places is so pointless. Let's go to your house instead. You do have extra bedding for me, don't you?"

Midori gave it a little thought and nodded. "Fine, let's go home," she said.

We took the Yamanote Line to Otsuka, raised the shutter of the Kobayashi Book Shop and went in. A piece of paper pasted on the shutter read, "On Holiday." The store hadn't been opened in a long time, it seemed, and the interior had a musty

smell of old paper. The shelves were half-empty, and almost all the magazines tied up in bundles would be returned for pulping. It was even emptier and colder than I remembered from my first visit. It seemed like some beached shell of a shipwreck.

"Think you'll ever start the store again?" I thought to ask.

"We've decided to sell." Midori dropped the line flat. "We'll sell the store, and my sister and I'll split the money. Then it'll be up to us to make our own way without anybody looking out for us. My sister'll be getting married next year and I've still got another three years of university. Probably just about enough money. I'll continue to work, too. Once we've sold the store, my sister and I'll rent an apartment somewhere and live together for a while."

"Does it look like the store'll sell?"

"Probably. There's one person we know who wants to set up a knitting supply store and was asking about the place not long ago," said Midori. "Poor Father. Worked so hard to save up and buy this store, paying off loans little by little, and what did he end up having to show for it? Practically nothing. Everything vanished like so much foam."

"You're still here," I offered.

"Me?" snickered Midori, then she let out a big sigh. "Let's go upstairs. It's cold here."

She ran the bath and I put the kettle on for tea, which we drank sitting across from each other at the dining table, waiting for the water in the tub to heat up. She planted her elbows on the table for a chin rest and gave me a good look. The only sounds were the ticking of the clock and the refrigerator switching on and off. The clock read close to twelve.

"Toru, you have an interesting face when one really looks at it," said Midori.

"Thanks a lot," I said, somewhat hurt.

"I usually go for looks, but the more I look at you, I get to thinking, just as soon him as another."

"I get to feeling that way sometimes, too. Might as well be me as another."

"Say, now, I didn't mean to put you down. It's just that I'm not too good at expressing my feelings, so don't get me wrong. I'm trying to say how much I like you. Or did I already tell you that?"

"You did," I said.

"You see, I'm learning about men, slowly but surely."

Midori fetched a pack of Marlboros and lit one. "Starting from zero, I've got a lot to learn."

"I'll bet," I said.

"Oh, before I forget, would you light some incense for my father?" asked Midori. I followed her to a room with a Buddhist altar, offered a stick of in-

cense, and put my palms together in a gesture of respect.

"See the portrait of Father? The other day I stood naked before the photo, just to show him. 'Father, these are my tits, this is my cunt,' like that."

"What's this now?" I asked, at something of a loss.

"No particular reason. But half of me is Father's sperm, after all. Why shouldn't I show him? Like 'This is your daughter.' I admit I was a little drunk at the time."

"Hmm."

"Then my sister happened along and nearly had a fit. I mean, there I was, giving Father's funerary image a full-crotch view, she must have been surprised."

"I guess so."

"So I explained to her what I was doing. That I was doing it for such-and-such reasons. I told her, 'Momo, you should take off your clothes and show yourself to Father, too.' But she refused. She just stormed off in a snit. She's so old-fashioned about stuff like that."

"You mean she's relatively normal," I said.

"Tell me, Toru, what did you think of Father?"

"I'm none too comfortable about meeting people for the first time, but I didn't feel awkward being

alone with him. In fact, I was pretty much at ease. We talked about a lot of things.”

“Like for example?”

“Euripides.”

Midori let out a cheery laugh. “You’re such an oddball, I swear. Who else would talk about Euripides with a man in his death throes?”

“Who else would give her deceased father’s portrait a spread-crotch shot?” I countered.

Midori snickered as she rang the altar bell. “Good night, Father. We’re going to have a good time from here on in, so rest easy. No more troubles for you. You’re dead and gone away from all your suffering. If you’re still in pain, put in a word with God. You know, like, ‘This isn’t quite fair.’ Meet up with Mother in heaven and do it all you want. I helped you when you needed to take a piss, so I know you’ve got a good thing on you. So keep at it. Good night.”

We took turns in the bath, then changed into pajamas. I borrowed a just-like-new pair of her father’s. They were a little tight, but better than nothing. Midori laid out guest bedding in the room with the altar.

“You’re not afraid of sleeping in front of the altar, are you?” asked Midori.

"Why should I be? I haven't done anything wrong," I said with a smile.

"But you will hold me until I get to sleep, won't you?"

"Sure."

I held her for a good long time, though I nearly rolled off the edge of Midori's tiny bed a few times. Midori burrowed her nose into my chest, her hands flung loosely about my waist. I put my right arm around her back and kept myself from falling by gripping the bedpost with my left. Hardly a scene of sexual ecstasy. The tip of my nose touched Midori's head, and her short-cropped hair tickled my nostrils.

"C'mon, speak to me, tell me something," insisted Midori, her face buried in my chest.

"Like what?"

"Anything, whatever, just to make me feel good."

"You're so cute."

"Midori," she said. "Tack my name onto that."

"You're so cute, Midori."

"How much is so cute?"

"Cute enough to crumble the mountains and dry up the seas."

Midori looked up with a start. "I must say you have a unique way with words."

"I really melt when you say that," I bubbled.

"Say something even more wonderful."

"I'm crazy about you, Midori."

"How much now?"

"I'm as crazy about you as a bear in spring."

"A bear in spring?" Midori looked up again.

"What's that supposed to mean, 'a bear in spring'?"

"There you are, strolling alone through the spring meadows, when, from the other direction, who should come along but a cute little bright-eyed baby bear with fur all velvety smooth, saying, 'Hello there, Miss, won't you come a-tumbling with me?' So you hold onto the bear and roll down the clover-covered hill. You play like that all day long. Wouldn't that be wonderful?"

"That'd be more than wonderful!"

"Well, I'm that crazy about you."

Midori hugged me tightly. "You're tops," she said. "If you really like me that much, you'll give a listen to what I have to say, won't you? Without getting mad?"

"Of course."

"And you'll be good to me?"

"Of course," I said, stroking her boylike head of fine crew-cut hair. "It's all right, nothing to worry about. Everything'll be fine."

"But I'm frightened," said Midori.

I cradled her gently in my arms and soon enough her shoulders began to go up and down with a gen-

tle regularity. As soon as I could hear the soft breathing of Midori's sleep, I quietly extricated myself from her bed and went into the kitchen for a beer. I wasn't feeling the least bit sleepy, so I looked around for maybe a book to read. How could there not be one book lying somewhere? I thought about going back into Midori's room, but I didn't want to wake her by poking through her bookshelves.

After sipping my beer a while, it suddenly struck me. This was a bookstore, right? I went downstairs, switched on the light, and scanned the shelves of paperbacks. Very few titles caught my fancy, and most of those that did, I'd already read. But I did need something to read. So I picked out a long-un-sold copy of Herman Hesse's *Beneath the Wheel* with a discolored spine and left the purchase price by the register. It was the least I could do toward helping reduce dead stock at the Kobayashi Book Shop.

I settled back down to my beer at the kitchen table and plowed through the book. The first time I'd read *Beneath the Wheel* had been in my first year of junior high. And here I was, eight years later, sitting in the kitchen of a girl's house, wearing her dead father's size-too-small pajamas, reading that very same book in the middle of the night. Isn't life strange? If not for these circumstances, would I ever have picked the book up again?

Beneath the Wheel may have been a little corny,

but it was not a bad little novel at that. I had a great time of it, happily reading on in the hushed late-night kitchen. I saw a dusty bottle of brandy on a shelf, so I poured myself a little in a coffee cup. The brandy warmed my insides but didn't make me any sleepier.

Just before three o'clock I went in to check on Midori, but she was still fast asleep. She really must have been tired. The lamps lining the shopping street outside cast their pale artificial light into the room, but Midori had her back to it all. She seemed frozen in place, unmoving, though I could hear her faint breathing when I leaned closer. She was sleeping just like her father, it occurred to me.

Midori's travel satchel lay just where she'd dropped it by the bed, and her white coat was draped over the back of a chair. Everything was neat on her desk, and a Snoopy calendar hung on the wall behind. I drew the curtain slightly and peered down on the deserted shopping street. The shops had their shutters lowered, but a row of vending machines crouched in an all-night vigil in front of the liquor store. All was silent except for the occasional whine of truck tires in the distance. I returned to the kitchen and poured myself another cup of brandy before continuing with the Hesse.

The sky was growing light by the time I finished the novel. I made myself some instant coffee and

wrote a quick note on a memo pad, saying I'd helped myself to some brandy, bought a copy of *Beneath the Wheel*, and headed home at dawn, thanks. Then, after a moment's hesitation, I addressed it "To My Sleeping Cutie." I washed out my coffee cup, turned out the kitchen light, went downstairs, and cautiously raised the shutters to leave. I was worried what the neighbors might think if they saw me, but nobody was up and about at six o'clock, only the crows glaring down from a nearby roof, same as ever. I looked up at Midori's window with its pink curtain, then set out for the streetcar and rode it to the last stop, walking to the dorm from there. A small set-menu restaurant was open for breakfast, so I went in and had soup with rice, pickles, and a fried egg. Then I swung around the back of the dorm and rapped lightly on Nagasawa's window. He opened it immediately to let me in.

"Care for some coffee?" he offered, but I told him no. I thanked him for everything and repaired to my own room, brushed my teeth, took off my slacks, and crawled under the covers for some shut-eye. Before long, a lead-heavy lid of dreamless sleep slid over me.

*

I wrote to Naoko every week and several letters

came from her. Not very long letters, but she did write that since November the mornings and evenings had been getting chilly.

"Your return to Tokyo coincided with the approach of autumn, so that for a while I could not tell whether this emptiness inside me is due to your absence or to the season. I talk a lot about you with Reiko. She sends her best regards. Reiko looks out for me as always. I doubt I could stand the life here if it wasn't for her. When I get lonely I cry. Reiko says it's good for me to cry. Still, this loneliness is hard to take. When I get to feeling lonely, all sorts of people talk to me from the shadows. Like the wind whistling through the trees at night. Kizuki and my big sister, they both talk to me. I guess they're lonely, too, and need someone to talk to.

"Sometimes, on nights when the loneliness starts to get to me, I reread your letters. Most things that come in from the outside only confuse me, but the things you write—about what happens around you—put me at ease. Strange. Why is that? So I keep reading them over and over. Reiko does, too. Then the both of us talk about what you wrote. I like the part about this Midori's father. Your weekly letters are one of the few entertainments we have—yes, letters *are* entertainment, up here at least. We look forward to them.

"I try my best to set aside time to write you, but

without fail I always get depressed when a sheet of stationery is lying there before me. I'm squeezing out my last drop of strength to write this letter. Please don't get me wrong. There's many, many things I want to tell you, Toru, but I just can't seem to put them into words very well. Reiko scolds and tells me that I should answer your letters, but writing letters is tough for me.

"This Midori you write about sounds like an interesting person. Reading your letter, I get the feeling that she likes you, but when I brought it up with Reiko, what she said was, 'That's obvious! I like Watanabe, too.' Every day now we're picking mushrooms and gathering chestnuts. It's chestnut rice, mushroom rice, all sorts of good things to eat, day after day. I can't get enough of it. Yet Reiko still keeps on smoking and hardly eating. The birds and rabbits are all well. 'Bye for now.'"

*

Three days after my twentieth birthday a package came from Naoko. Inside was a burgundy crew-neck sweater along with a letter. "Happy Birthday!" Naoko had written. "I wish you all the best for your twentieth year. My twentieth year looks like it's destined to end up my worst. I can only hope yours is better. That would make me truly very happy. Reiko and I each knitted half this

sweater. If I had done it all myself, it would have taken until Valentine's Day next year. The good half is Reiko's and the bad half is mine. Reiko is good at whatever she does. I sometimes get so frustrated with myself just watching her. I'd like to be able to do something I could be proud of. All for now. Take care."

There also was a short note from Reiko.

"How goes everything? To you Naoko may represent the essence of happiness, but to me she's just a clumsy girl who's no good with her hands. Still, somehow we managed to finish this sweater together. So what do you think? Striking, eh? We both decided on the style and color. Happy Birthday!"

CHAPTER 10

1969 was one hopeless swamp of a year. I felt sure my feet were going to pull right out of my shoes with the least step, so deep was I into the sticky thick of it. But there I was, treading my darnedest through the mire. I couldn't see a thing before me or behind. Only that dark slime as far as the eye could see.

Even time slowed to spurts, glued to my pace, step by step. Other people went on ahead at a normal clip, leaving me to my pathetic crawl through the mud. The world around me changed dramatically. John Coltrane and who knows who else died. People were calling for reforms, and it seemed certain that reforms were going to come sweeping through. But ultimately it all turned out to be meaningless background to what was really going on. I hardly looked up from one day to the next. Before my eyes all was sludge and mire without end. I'd put my right foot down, pick up my left, put down my left, and up with my right. I had no real idea

where I was, no confidence I was even heading in the right direction. All I knew was I had to go on, one step at a time.

I turned twenty and autumn turned to winter, but there was no appreciable change in my life. I attended university, went to my part-time job three times a week, reread *Gatsby* from time to time, and on Sundays I did the laundry and wrote long letters to Naoko. Occasionally I'd see Midori and we'd eat out or go to the zoo or take in a movie. Prospects for selling off the Kobayashi Book Shop were looking good, so she and her sister moved into a two-bedroom apartment near Myogadani Station, though as soon as her sister got married Midori said she'd find another place of her own. She once had me over for lunch. The rooms were nice and sunlit, much more comfortable than above the Kobayashi Book Shop.

Nagasawa invited me to go out with him several times, but I always turned him down, saying I had things to do. I simply couldn't be bothered. Not that I didn't want to sleep with girls, mind you. It was just that the thought of going out on the town, drinking, targeting some girl, and striking up a conversation only to do the hotel scene, that whole process depressed me. I had to hand it to a guy like Nagasawa being able to carry on that way so tirelessly. Perhaps it was due to what Hatsumi had said,

but I was much happier thinking about Naoko than sleeping around with girls whose names I didn't even know. The thought of Naoko's fingers getting me off in the middle of the fields, that touch came to mind more vividly than anything.

At the beginning of December I wrote Naoko to ask if I might visit her over my winter break. And Reiko replied, saying they'd love to have me come. She was writing for Naoko who wasn't up to writing at the moment. Not that I should worry that she was ill. It was just one of those cycles.

Winter break rolled around and I packed my knapsack, donned my snow boots, and headed for Kyoto. As that crazy doctor had said, the mountains were truly impressive covered in snow.

Just like before, I stayed at Naoko and Reiko's place. And just like before, I was there for three days. Every night, when the sun went down, Reiko would play the guitar and the three of us would talk. In the daytime, instead of picnics we'd go cross-country skiing. One hour in boots and skis and I'd be sweating and out of breath. In spare moments I'd help shovel snow. Miyata, that weird doctor, once more joined our table to tell us, "why the middle digit is longer than the first on the hand but shorter on the foot." And Omura the gatekeeper raved on about Tokyo pork again. Reiko was delighted with the records I brought her

and had soon scored a few songs for the guitar.

Naoko, however, seemed more reserved than when I'd visited in the autumn. When the three of us were together, she'd hardly say a word and just sit there on the sofa, smiling. Reiko, meanwhile, took up the slack and talked for both of them. "Don't mind me," Naoko would say. "It's just a phase. I'd rather listen to you."

As soon as Reiko concocted some reason to disappear somewhere, Naoko and I bedded down together. I kissed her neck and shoulders and breasts, and she did me by hand, same as before. When I came, I embraced her and told her how much I'd remembered her touch these past two months. That I'd fantasized about her from memory when I masturbated.

"You didn't sleep with anyone else?" Naoko asked.

"Not once," I said.

"Well, then, remember this, too," she said as she slid down to kiss my penis, envelop its heat in her lips, and slide her tongue along its length. Naoko's long, straight hair spilled over my abdomen and swayed to her mouthed rhythms. And I came again.

"Think you can remember that?" teased Naoko.

"I believe that'll do me for a while," I said. I drew Naoko close to me and reached my fingers inside

her panties, but she wasn't a bit moist. Naoko shook her head and I removed my hand. We embraced for a while without saying anything.

"After this school year I'm thinking of leaving the dorm and finding a place of my own," I said. "Dorm life is starting to get to me, and, besides, I can make ends meet with my part-time job. Who knows? Maybe we could live together? Like we talked about before."

"I can't tell you how happy that makes me," said Naoko.

"Not that it's such a bad little place here. It's peaceful enough. No complaints about the surroundings, either. And Reiko's so wonderful. But it's no place to stay for too long. It's a little too special a place for that. After a while you'd never want to leave."

Naoko said nothing but simply turned her eyes toward the window and the scenery outside. Snow clouds swept in low across the snow-covered ground, leaving only the narrowest gap between.

"Take your time, think it over," I said. "But in any case I'll be moving by March. So I'll be ready for you if and when you want."

Naoko nodded. I took her in my arms as delicately as if I was holding a piece of fine glassware. She put her arms around my neck, I naked, she in her

white scanties. Her body was so beautiful I just couldn't get over it.

"Why am I not wet," Naoko half-asked herself. "It's really only happened to me once. On my twentieth birthday back in April. That night you had me. What could be wrong with me?"

"It's all in your head, so just give it time. There's no rush. Everything'll turn out just fine."

"All my problems are in my head," said Naoko. "What if I never get moist, what if I can never have sex in my whole life? Would you still want me then? You're going to tell me you'd put up with hand-and-blowjobs the rest of your days? Or would you get your sex from another woman?"

"I'm basically an optimist," I offered.

Naoko sat up in bed, pulled a T-shirt over her head, and donned a flannel shirt and jeans. Hinting that I should get dressed, too.

"Give me some time to think about it," said Naoko. "And you, too, you take some time and think about it."

"I'll think about it," I said. "Meanwhile, your fellatio was quite a number."

Naoko blushed, then smiled. "Kizuki always said so."

"He and I usually did agree on things," I said with a laugh.

Afterwards we sat around the kitchen table, drinking coffee and reminiscing. She'd finally come around to being able to talk about Kizuki, albeit a little at a time, with carefully chosen words. The snowfall was stop and go, continually, and it never once cleared up the three days I was there. I told her I thought I'd make it up again in March, then we embraced through our heavy coats and kissed. Goodbye, Naoko told me.

*

The year 1970 arrived, striking the closing note of my teens. A whole new sound to my ears, the seventies. And I found myself setting foot in a whole new quagmire. Final exams I passed with relative ease. Having gone to school nearly every day for the lack of much else to do, I didn't really have to study in order to pass.

We had our share of problems on campus. One faction of activists hid an arsenal of helmets and steel pipes in the dormitory, which instigated something of a run-in with the resident jocks, and in the fracas two students were wounded and six expelled from the dorm. The whole affair dragged on for what seemed like ages, with some little flare up practically every day. A heaviness loomed over the whole place, putting everyone on edge. With all that loose energy in the air, even I seemed headed

for some close scrapes with the gym crew, were it not for Nagasawa's intervention on my behalf. Whatever, the time was ripe for me to leave the dorm.

Once through with the worst of my exams, I began seriously to look for an apartment. After one week I managed to find an affordable place in the suburbs near Kichijoji. The commute was a little inconvenient, but the great thing was that it was an actual house. A real find. It was situated in one corner of a large residential lot, like a guest house or gardener's shed, with the main house located beyond the scruffy remains of a garden. The landlord used the main entrance and I the back, so there was privacy aplenty. I had a couple of rooms with a small kitchen and toilet, not to mention a ridiculous amount of closet space. The side facing the garden even had a traditional Japanese veranda. I leased it on the condition that I'd give it up should the landlord's grandson move to Tokyo the next year, hence the low price. The couple who owned it were getting on in years. Very nice, easy-going people who allowed me a fairly free hand with the place.

Nagasawa helped me move. He borrowed a small truck from somewhere, and threw in the promised refrigerator and TV and big thermos. All highly appreciated items. Two days later he, too, was slated

to move out of the dorm to an apartment in Mita.

"Well, I doubt we'll be seeing much of each other for a while, so take care," he said on parting. "But like I said, some chance something somewhere down the line is going to throw us back together. I just know it."

"I'll look forward to that," I said.

"By the way, just for the record, that time we changed girls, I liked the one that wasn't pretty."

"Same here," I said. "But whatever you do, Nagasawa, take good care of Hatsumi. You'll never find another like her and she's more fragile than she looks."

"I know that," he admitted. "That's why, if you want to know the truth, after me I think you ought to take her under your wing. You and Hatsumi'd hit it off for sure."

"This is no joking matter," I said, startled.

"Only kidding," said Nagasawa. "In any case, you be happy. A lot of shit is bound to come your way, but if you stick with it as stubbornly as me, you'll always come out on top. Just one word of warning, though, if I might."

"Ready and waiting."

"Never sympathize with yourself," he said. "It's the scum of the earth who feel sorry for themselves."

Then he shook my hand and we parted, he for a new world, I back to my quagmire.

"I'll bear that in mind," I said.

*

On the third day after my move I wrote to Naoko. I described my new quarters and how happy I was to be out of that squalid dorm, free of all those nobodies with their nothing ideas. Here I could make a fresh start in fresh surroundings.

"Outside my window is a large yard which the neighborhood cats use for a meeting place. At noon-time I spy the cats taking a snooze on the veranda. I have no idea how many of them there are, but anyway there are more than I can count, all of them lolling about in the sun. They seem none too pleased that I've moved in here, although a number came running when I put out some week-old cheese and ate it cautiously. Given time, perhaps we'll be on friendly terms. One tom has a half-chewed-off ear and bears an amazing resemblance to my old dormitory's supervisor. I half-expect him to raise the flag any moment now.

"School is a longer commute now, but once I'm through with my general ed curriculum, my morning class load will go down, so it won't be such a problem. In fact, it should mean I'll be able to

spend more time reading on the train. All that remains is to sniff out a bit of part-time work, three or four days a week in the Kichijoji area. Then I can get back to winding my mainspring.

"I don't want to rush you into a decision, but seeing that spring is a time for new starts, maybe April would be the right time for us to start living together. If all went well, you could go back to university. Or if living together presented problems, you could find an apartment of your own in the neighborhood. The important thing is that we be near each other. Of course, there's no special reason it has to be spring. If summer is better for you, no problem. So tell me what you think, okay?"

"I'm thinking about doing a good stint of work, mostly to pay for the cost of moving. It takes a lot of money to set up on your own. Pots and pans, plates and dishes, the whole works. Still, come March I'm going to have a break and I'm really dying to come see you. Please tell me when might be convenient. I'm dying to see you, so answer as soon as you can."

For the next two or three days I went about Kichijoji rounding up household effects and began cooking simple meals at home. I bought wood at the local lumber yard, had it cut to size, and built a

desk to study on. I also ate my meals on it for the time being. I even built shelves and laid in a stock of spices. A female cat barely six months old took up with me and soon I was feeding her indoors. "Birdy," I called her.

So much for the home front. I found myself a job with a painter and worked as his assistant for two weeks solid. The pay was good, but it was hard work, and I felt faint from paint thinner. After work, I'd eat in a cheap supper place and drink a beer, then go home to play with the cat and fall dead asleep. Two weeks passed and still no reply from Naoko.

One day, while I was painting, I happened to remember Midori. Come to think of it, I hadn't been in touch with her in over three weeks. I hadn't even told her I'd moved. I'd gone as far as to tell her I was thinking about moving, which had elicited an "Oh?" from her, and that was it.

I went to a phone booth and dialed Midori's apartment. On the line came an older-sister voice who, once I'd announced my name, told me to wait just a second. Yet after what seemed like ages, there was still no Midori.

"Listen, Midori's very mad and doesn't want to talk to you," said the supposed sister. "You didn't tell her a thing when you moved, right? No forward-

ing address, no nothing. You just blipped off the screen, right? She's furious. And once you get her out of shape, she stays mad. She's like an animal."

"I'll explain everything, just put her on."

"She says she doesn't want to hear your explanations."

"Well, then, let me explain to you and maybe you can tell Midori."

"Not me," declared the disembodied sister. "You explain that for yourself. You're a man, aren't you? Take some responsibility, will you?"

I had no choice but to hang up. I couldn't actually say I blamed Midori for being angry. What with the move and all that work for money to get settled in, Midori had completely slipped my mind. Hell, I'd all but forgotten about Naoko. An insidious trait of mine—get absorbed in one thing and I lose sight of everything else.

I tried to put myself in Midori's place. I'd feel hurt for sure. Badly, too. We weren't lovers, but on one level we were even more intimate. Admitting that, however, only made things worse. Hurting someone—and someone important to me at that—the very idea was abhorrent to me.

When I returned from the day's work to my new desk, I wrote Midori a letter. I set down my thoughts directly and honestly, no excuses or explanations. I apologized for my thoughtlessness and

insensitivity. I told her how much I wanted to see her, how much I wanted her to see my new place, how much I wanted a reply of some sort. Then I posted it special delivery.

But wait as I might, no answer came.

A strange spring it was shaping up to be. All spring vacation I waited for word. I took no trips, made no visit home, couldn't even work. No telling when a letter from Naoko might arrive saying, "Come quick." Days I'd go see double features in Kichijoji, hang around in jazz coffee shops, read books. I saw no one, hardly talked to a soul. And once a week without fail I wrote to Naoko. By now, in these letters, I left off pressing for a reply. I didn't want to rush her. Instead, I wrote about my painting work, about Birdy, about the peach blossoms in the yard, about local characters, the kindly lady selling bean curd and the nasty delicatessen lady, all everyday stuff. Still no reply came.

When I tired of reading books and listening to records, I tried my hand at gardening. I borrowed a yard broom and rake and clippers from my landlord, then did some weeding and trimming among the numerous plants. With very little effort I had the place looking fairly presentable. And when the landlord saw my handiwork, he invited me for tea. We sat on his veranda, the two of us, and made polite conversation over tea and rice crackers. It

turns out he'd had a post-retirement position with an insurance company for a while, but quit even that two years ago and was now simply taking it easy. The house and land were his from a long time back, and his children had all gone off on their own, so now he and his wife were always taking trips.

"Lucky you," I said.

"No, siree," he countered. "Traveling doesn't interest me a bit. Working's more in my line."

The reason the yard was so run down, he explained, was that there weren't any decent gardeners in the area. Really he ought to have done the work himself, little by little, but recently an allergy of his had taken a turn for the worse, so putting about in the garden was out of the question. Sorry to hear that, I told him. After tea he showed me his shed and said that, while he couldn't do much in the way of thanks, he could offer me the use of anything I found there. Inside was a lot of junk, everything from a bathtub to a kiddie pool to a baseball bat. I found myself an old bicycle and a smallish dinette set with two chairs, a mirror, and a guitar, and asked if I might borrow them. It's all at your disposal, he told me.

I spent one whole day cleaning the rust off the bicycle, oiling it, putting air in the tires, adjusting the gears, then had the clutch wire replaced at a

bicycle shop. It looked like a whole new bike. I gave the dinette table a good clean and a coat of varnish. The guitar I furnished with new strings, plus a dab or two of glue where the wood facing looked ready to pull away. I also removed the rust from the neck screws with a wire brush so I could tune it. Not the best-sounding guitar, but playable. Now that I thought about it, this was the first time I'd touched a guitar since high school. I sat on the veranda and slowly picked out the Drifters' "Up on the Roof" from memory. Strange how I could still remember the basic chords.

With leftover boards I built a mailbox, which I painted red, inscribed with my name, and put up by my door. But by April 3 all I had to show for it was a forwarded high school alumni club announcement. Why that and only that, of all things? The class Kizuki and I had been in. Yet another reminder. I threw it straight into the trash.

On the afternoon of April 4 there was a letter from Reiko in the mailbox. I cut open the envelope with scissors and sat down on the veranda to read it. Before I even began I had the feeling it wasn't going to be good news, and was I ever right.

First thing, Reiko apologized for not writing sooner. Naoko had made a brave struggle to write a reply, but just never could get it written. Reiko had offered any number of times to help her get it done,

but Naoko kept saying it was too personal, she had to write herself. So it'd come to this late date. Apologies. The letter was dated March 31.

"It may have been hard on you not hearing any word in over a month, but believe me it's been one grueling month for Naoko. Please understand. Frankly speaking, her present condition is none too good. She tried to make a stand on her own two legs, but without much success, I'm afraid.

"The more I think about it, the first sign was that she couldn't write letters. Not since the end of November or the beginning of December. Then she began hearing things. Whenever she started to write a letter, all sorts of voices would talk to her and interfere. They'd prevent her from choosing her words. Up through your second visit here, such symptoms were relatively minor and, to be honest, I didn't take much notice of them. Each of us has certain symptoms that appear in cycles, after all. Once you'd gone home, however, these symptoms took a turn for the worse. Now it even taxes her to hold a conversation. She's confused and frightened. And the voices in her head are getting worse.

"Every day we have a session with a specialist. Naoko, the doctor, and I talk things out, trying to get to the root of her problems by pinpointing fragmented elements of her psyche. I suggested that

you should join in the sessions and the doctor agreed, but Naoko refused. To use her words, she said that when the time comes she wants to meet you with her 'body all beautiful.' I tried my darnedest to tell her that that was not as important as her getting recovered as soon as possible, but she wouldn't change her mind.

"As I believe I explained to you once before, this is not a specialized institution. Of course, we do have specialists here who do give effective treatments, but in-depth treatment is difficult. The purpose of this facility is to provide a therapeutic environment conducive to self-help, but strictly speaking this does not include medical treatment. So that if Naoko's condition gets any worse, we may have no choice but to transfer her to another hospital or clinic. It'd be tough for me, but we may have no alternative. Of course, even if it came to that, she'd be 'on leave' from here and could return any time. Or perhaps she'd be cured and could just go home. Either way, we're doing all we can and Naoko's really pulling, too. Please pray for her recovery. And keep writing letters like you've been doing.

"Reiko Ishii."

After reading the letter through, I sat on the veranda and looked at the garden in full spring

bloom. There was an old cherry tree almost at the peak of its blossom. The breeze was gentle, and the light came in strangely unfocused hues. Before long Birdy happened by to sharpen her claws on the veranda, then stretched out beside me for a lazy snooze.

I knew I should be immersed in thought, but for the life of me I couldn't come up with any idea what I should be thinking about. To be perfectly honest, I didn't want to think at all. Maybe sooner or later a thought would just pop into my head, at which point I could think it over. At the very least, I didn't want to think about anything for now.

I leaned against a post of the veranda and petted Birdy and passed the whole day gazing at the garden. I felt as if all the energy had been drained from my body. The afternoon progressed and dusk came on, enveloping the garden in blue twilight. Birdy had wandered off somewhere, but I still hadn't gotten my fill of the cherry tree. The cherry blossoms looked like sores bursting through the skin of the spring evening. The whole garden reeked sweet and thick with the rotten flesh of so many blossoms. I thought about Naoko's body. Naoko's beautiful body lying in the dark, countless plants sprouting from her skin, all trembling green in some unseen breeze. Why did such a beautiful

body have to be taken ill? Why couldn't they leave Naoko in peace?

I went indoors and drew the curtains, but still the room was filled with the springtime fragrance. It permeated everything, but all it brought to mind was the stench of decay. Shut off there in my room, I railed furiously at spring. I hated everything that spring hurled my way. I felt swollen with disgust to the pit of my gut. It was the most I'd ever resented anything in my entire life.

The next three days I felt I was walking the ocean floor. Strange days they were. If someone talked to me, I couldn't hear what they were saying. It was as if my whole body were enveloped in some clinging membrane, preventing me from contact with the world outside. But, at the same time, neither could they touch me. I was powerless, as long as I was in this state, and they, too, were powerless to affect me.

I leaned up against the wall and gazed unfocused up at the ceiling, shoveling whatever edibles I had on hand into my mouth, drinking water, then switching to whiskey when I got to feeling bad, and finally falling asleep. I didn't bathe, didn't shave, for three days.

On April 6 a letter came from Midori, saying that she had to register for classes on the tenth, so

why didn't we meet in the courtyard and have lunch together. She said she'd intentionally delayed replying until she felt we were even, so now it was time to make up. After all, wrote Midori, she'd been lonely without my company. I read her letter four times and still didn't get what she was trying to say. What was this letter supposed to mean, anyway? I just couldn't follow the connection between one sentence and the next. What did meeting on registration day have to do with being even with her. What made her so eager to "have lunch together"? I must be going crazy, I thought. My consciousness was flabby, feeble as the roots of a plant raised in total darkness. Somewhere in the back of my mind I was thinking I had to pull myself together. I couldn't stay like this forever. I had to take some kind of action. Suddenly I remembered Nagasawa's words: "Don't sympathize with yourself. It's the scum of the earth who feel sorry for themselves."

Well, well, Mr. Nagasawa, you are a gentleman and a scholar after all. I heaved a sigh and stood up.

For the first time in ages I did my laundry, bathed and shaved at the public bath, cleaned my room, went shopping and cooked myself a decent meal, fed Birdy, kept myself to beer-drinking, and did thirty minutes of exercises. One look in the mirror at my newly shaved face told me I was down to

skin and bone. My eyes boggled, and I looked like someone else.

The following morning I took a long spin on my bike, returning for lunch, whereupon I reread Reiko's letter. Then I put my ass in gear trying to see what I should do. The main reason I'd been so shocked on first reading, I realized, was that my optimism about Naoko's condition had been rudely upset. Naoko herself had said that her ailment was deep-seated, and even Reiko had told me she didn't know what to expect. Still, I'd visited Naoko twice and I'd thought she'd been getting better, so the only problem I'd foreseen was her reluctance to return to society. If only she had the will, we two could make a go of it by our combined strength.

But Reiko's letter had toppled that castle of dreams in no time flat. All that was left was a senseless expanse of nothingness. Somehow I had to right myself. Naoko's going to take a long time to recover, I allowed. But even should she recover, she's going to be a lot more debilitated and unsure of herself than before. I had to adjust to these new circumstances. Naturally, I understood that my becoming stronger as a person was not the end-all solution, but still it was the sum of what I could do. That and wait patiently for her recovery.

Hey, Kizuki, I thought, unlike you I've decided to live. And not just live, I've decided to make a go of

it. I'm sure you had it hard, but I swear I've had a tough time, too. This is all because you had to up and die on Naoko. But me, I'm not going to turn my back on her. Never. Because I'm fond of her and I'm stronger than she is. And I'm going to be much stronger than I am now for her. I'm going to mature. I've got to grow up. No more of this wanting to stay seventeen or eighteen forever. I'm no teenager. I've got responsibilities. I'm no longer the guy you knew. I'm twenty now. I've got to pay my dues to keep on living.

"Hey, Watanabe, what's with you?" asked Midori. "You're so thin!"

"Oh, really?" I said.

"Been overdoing it with that housewife lady friend of yours?"

I shook my head and laughed. "I haven't slept with a woman since the beginning of last October. Not once."

Midori whistled cynically. "You're telling me you haven't had any in six months? Really?"

"That's right."

"Then why'd you lose so much weight?"

"Because I became an adult," I replied.

Midori put her hands on my shoulders and looked me in the eyes. Then she broke into a

smile. "Well I'll be damned. I guess you really have changed a little. Compared to before."

"I've grown up a little."

"You're great, you know that? Being able to think that way!" said Midori admiringly. "Let's go eat. I'm starving."

We decided to go to a little restaurant behind the Lit Department. I ordered the daily special and she settled for the same.

"Tell me, Watanabe, are you still angry?" asked Midori.

"About what?"

"About my paying you back by not writing a reply to you all this time. Do you think that was wrong? Even if I've come to apologize?"

"I'm the one to blame," I said.

"Sis tells me that it's not right. That it's too intolerant and childish."

"Still, you got it out of your system, didn't you? Paying me back in kind."

"Mmm."

"Well, then, so much the better, right?"

"You sure are tolerant," said Midori. "But tell me, Watanabe, are you trying to tell me that you honestly haven't had sex in six months?"

"I honestly haven't," I said.

"Which would mean that when you tucked me in-

to bed the other night, you probably wanted to do it."

"Yeah, probably."

"But you didn't, right?"

"Right now, you're my most important friend, someone I can't afford to lose," I said.

"Still, if you'd come onto me then, I doubt I could've refused you. I was so washed up at the time."

"Nah, I would have been too big and hard for you."

She broke into a smile and brushed my wrist with her hand. "You know, since a little while ago I've decided to trust you. One hundred percent. That's how I could sleep so soundly then. I was with you, so I was all right. I really fell sound asleep, didn't I?"

"Sure did," I said.

"If, though, you'd turned to me and said, 'Hey, Midori. Let's fuck. It'll make everything all right,' I probably would have gone ahead and done it. But don't get the wrong idea just because I'm telling you this. I'm not trying to seduce you or get you excited or anything. I'm simply telling it like it is with me."

"I understand," I said.

We ate lunch and showed each other our registration cards, discovering that we'd both signed up for two of the same courses, so we'd be seeing each

other at least twice a week. Then the conversation turned to her home life. It seems her sister and she hadn't taken to apartment living at first, the reason being that everything was so much easier than the way they'd lived up to then. There was no one to visit in the hospital, no store to mind, no busy everyday routine. It took some getting used to.

"But lately I've come around to thinking this is really quite okay," said Midori. "This is really living as it was meant to be for us, so what's to stop us from spreading out and doing as we please? Still, it's been a little unsettling. It's like we're floating an inch off the ground, unreal. How could life be this good? We're both on edge, just waiting for the whole thing to come tumbling down any second now."

"The Hard-Time Sisters," I said with a laugh.

"It's been all too hard up to now," admitted Midori. "But that's neither here nor there. It only makes us all the more determined to get what we're owed in full."

"You'll survive, if I know you," I said. "What's your sister doing with her time?"

"A friend of hers recently opened a jewelry shop near Omote-Sando, and she helps out there three times a week. Other than that, she's studying cooking, having dates with her fiancé, going to the movies, spacing out, whatever. Life on easy street."

She asked me about my new circumstances, and I told her about the house and garden I was renting, Birdy, and my landlord.

“Having fun?”

“Not bad,” I said.

“You sure don’t seem so up,” said Midori.

“And it’s spring, too,” I said.

“And you’re wearing that wonderful sweater your girlfriend knitted for you, too!”

I started and looked down at my own burgundy sweater. “How did you know that?”

“You’re so straight. It was a shot in the dark!” said Midori, astonished. “But, really, you do seem kind of down.”

“I’m trying to pick myself up, though.”

“Just think of life as your own private cookie jar.”

I shook my head a couple of times, then gave Midori a look. “Maybe I’m just slow in the head, but sometimes I don’t have the foggiest idea what you’re talking about.”

“The cookie jar’s packed full of all different kinds of cookies, so all you have to do is pick the ones you want, right? And if you eat the ones you like first, that leaves the ones you don’t like so much. I think of that whenever something bad happens. Like, if I just get this out of the way, then there’ll be

good things to come. That's the cookie jar of life."

"A philosophy of sorts, I guess."

"But it's true. I've learned that from experience," said Midori.

While we sat there drinking our coffee, two of Midori's classmates came in, and the three of them compared registration cards, asked about last term's German grades, gossiped, admired one another's shoes, on and on. I wasn't exactly listening, for it all sounded like echoes from the far side of the globe. I just sipped my coffee and gazed out the window. Your perennial college campus in spring. Misty sky, cherry trees in bloom, freshmen toting new books and strolling along the paths. I began to feel a little light-headed. I thought about Naoko missing another year of school. By the window was a small glass with some anemones in it.

The girls said their bye-byes and found a table of their own, prompting Midori and me to head out for a walk. We went to a few used book stores and bought some books, then went into another coffee shop, followed by a pinball arcade, and finally sat down on a park bench to talk. Midori did most of the talking while I just made assenting noises. Midori said she was thirsty, so I went to buy two cokes at a nearby shop. When I came back she was

scribbling away on a pad with a ballpoint pen. I asked what she was writing, but all she would say was that it was none of my beeswax.

Three-thirty rolled around and she said she had to be going, she was supposed to meet her sister in Ginza. I walked her to the subway and we split up. As she was leaving, she stuffed a folded sheet of paper into the pocket of my coat and told me to read it when I got home. I read it on the train.

“Dear Toru,

“I’m writing this while you’re off buying cokes. This is the first time I’ve ever written a letter to someone sitting next to me on a bench. But short of this, I doubt I can get across to you what I’m trying to say. I mean you hardly even listen to what I say. Don’t tell me you do.

“I bet you don’t even know how inconsiderate you were to me today, do you? You didn’t even notice I’d changed my hairstyle, did you? Here I’ve been, trying my darnedest to grow my hair, and I finally managed to get a halfway feminine hairstyle. And you didn’t even notice! After all my trying to surprise you with my first ‘cute look’ in ages and you couldn’t even be bothered to notice, you brickhead! No doubt you never remember what outfits I wear, either. Well, in case it slipped your attention, I’m a girl. Sure you’ve got things on your mind, but you could at least look at me. You could

have said, 'Cute hairstyle' or something, then gone on thinking, and I'd have forgiven you.

"For this reason, I'm going to lie to you. I'm going to tell you I have an appointment with my sister in Ginza. I was planning on spending the night at your place, so I brought my pajamas with me. That's right, in my bag along with my toothbrush. Ha, ha, ha, like a real idiot. You didn't even think to invite me over. Well, so what? Since you seem so dead-set on leaving me alone, I'll leave you alone. Why don't you just give it all a good long think?"

"Still, don't think I'm furious at you. I'm really only lonely. And depressed. I mean you've been so kind to me over and over again and I haven't done anything for you. You're always in your own little world. I knock and knock, but no sooner do you look up than you retreat inside again.

"Well, I see you've come back with the cokes. Walking along, lost in thought. I hope you trip up! But you don't. You sit down next to me and guzzle your coke. I should have known better than to expect that you'd return with the drinks and say, 'Hey, you've changed your hair.' If you had, I'd have torn up this letter and said, 'Let's go to your place. I'll make us a nice dinner and we can slip into something more comfortable.' But no, you're as thick as iron!

"P.S. Don't talk to me if we meet up in class."

I tried calling Midori's apartment from Kichijoji Station, but there was no answer. I didn't have anything special to do, so I looked for job openings on my route to school. I wasn't having much luck finding work to meet my schedule—Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday evenings after five, plus weekends. I gave up and headed home, bought stuff for dinner, and tried Midori again. Her sister came to the phone and said she hadn't come home yet, nor had she any idea when she would. I thanked her and hung up.

After dinner I tried writing Midori a letter but gave up after several failures and wrote to Naoko instead.

I wrote about the beginning of the new school year, how sad I was at not being able to see her, how I longed to see her no matter when or how, how I wanted to talk to her. But come what may, I'd made up my mind to become strong. That there was no other path to take.

"Also, I realize it's my own business and probably of no real concern to you, but I'm not sleeping with anyone. I can't forget how you touched me. It's far more important to me than you could imagine. I'm always thinking about that time."

I put the letter in an envelope, put a stamp on it, and just sat there at my desk looking at it. A much

shorter letter than usual, but so much the more convincing, I hoped. I poured an inch of whiskey in a glass, downed it in two goes, then went to bed.

*

The following day I found a Saturday-Sunday job near Kichijoji Station as a waiter in a smallish Italian restaurant. The pay wasn't all that great, but I got lunch and transportation expenses thrown in. And they were agreeable to my coming in whenever the waiter on the Monday, Wednesday, or Thursday late shift took off, which was often, so it worked out okay for me. I'd get a raise after three months, so could I come in from this Saturday? The manager seemed a lot more on the up and up than that jerk at the Shinjuku record shop.

When I called Midori's apartment, her sister said that she still hadn't returned since yesterday and she herself would like to know what had become of her. Did I have any clues? She sounded worn out, but all I could tell her was that Midori had pajamas and a toothbrush in her bag.

It was at Wednesday's class when I caught up with Midori. She was wearing a moss green sweater and her dark sunglasses from the summer before.

She sat all the way at the back talking with the short girl with glasses I'd seen once before. I went up to them and told Midori I'd like to talk to her later. First the girl with the glasses gave me a look, then Midori gave me a look. Sure enough, Midori was sporting a very feminine hairstyle. Plus it made her look a little more grown-up.

"I've got an appointment," said Midori with an abrupt shake of her head.

"It won't take long. Five minutes at the most," I said.

Midori took off her sunglasses and squinted as if she were looking at the ruins of a building a hundred yards distant. "I don't want to talk. Sorry."

The girl with the glasses gave me a she-doesn't-want-to-talk-sorry look.

I took a seat in the front row to the far right and listened to an exposition on "The Plays of Tennessee Williams and His Place in American Literature," then, after it was over, counted to three before turning around. Midori was nowhere in sight.

April was the cruelest month to spend on my lonesome. April had everyone around me looking so happy, doffing their winter coats, chatting in the bright sun, playing catch, falling in love. But there I was, all alone. No Naoko, no Midori, no Nagasawa, nobody to tell me "Good morning" or "Good

night." I even missed Kamikaze. Some spring. I tried repeatedly to talk to Midori, but her reply was always the same. She didn't want to talk, not now, and I could tell she meant it. Usually she was with the girl with the glasses. Either that or with a tall, short-haired guy with incredibly long legs and white basketball shoes.

April came and went, May arrived and was worse still. More and more spring brought unsettling feelings in me, a shiver that ran through me at dusk. The scent of magnolias wafting through the gloom filled me with vacillation and pain. It was all I could do to shut my eyes tight and grit my teeth and wait for the feeling to pass. When at last it did, a dull ache would remain lodged inside me.

At times like that I'd write to Naoko. In my letters to her everything was beautiful and carefree. I'd write about the smell of the grass and warm spring breezes, moonlight and movies I'd seen, favorite tunes and memorable books. Reading my own letters was enough to comfort me. What a wonderful world I lived in! I wrote a good number of letters like that. Still no answer came, either from Naoko or from Reiko.

I got to be on speaking terms with a fellow part-timer my age named Ito at the restaurant, a broody sort of guy studying oil painting in art school. It took a long time to break the ice, but soon we got

to going to a place nearby for a beer and a talk after work. He was also into books and music, which is what we generally talked about. Ito was skinny but handsome, sported short hair for an art student in those days, and had a general clean-cut appearance. He had clear likes and dislikes, but never made much of an issue of them. A fan of French literature, he read Georges Bataille and Boris Vian, while his musical tastes ran to Mozart and Ravel. And like me, he'd been looking for a friend with whom to discuss his interests.

Once he invited me to his apartment, a strange little one-story affair around the back of Inokashira Park, the whole place chock-full of paints and canvases. I asked to see some of his paintings, but he told me he didn't have anything worth showing yet. We drank Chivas Regal he'd lifted from his father, ate smelts we grilled over a tiny charcoal brazier, and listened to a Mozart piano concerto played by Robert Casadesus.

He was from Nagasaki originally and had come to Tokyo, leaving a girlfriend behind. He slept with her whenever he went home, but lately he admitted to wandering thoughts.

"Some things you can just tell about girls," he said. "All of a sudden between the ages of twenty and twenty-one they start thinking concretely about all sorts of things. They become such realists.

And there you are, watching everything you'd loved in them erode away month by month. Each time she sees me, usually after we've made love, she has to ask me what I plan to do after university."

"Well, what are you going to do?" I asked likewise.

He crunched on a smelt and shook his head. "What am I going to do? What is there for me to do? An art student in oils. Nobody'd ever study oils if they were thinking about that. I mean who eats straight out of art school? So then she tells me to go back to Nagasaki and teach art, 'cause she is planning on teaching English. Fine and dandy."

"You're not so crazy about her any more, I take it."

"It would seem not," Ito admitted. "But more than that, who wants to be an art teacher? I don't want to spend the rest of my days like some monkey trying to keep unruly junior high-schoolers in line."

"That aside, though, wouldn't it be better to break up? For the both of you," I said.

"I'm getting to think so. But I just can't bring myself to tell her. It'd kill her. I mean she still wants to be with me. I can't just say, 'Sorry I don't feel anything for you any more.'"

We drank our Chivas straight, and when the smelts gave out, we switched to cucumbers and

celery sticks with bean paste. As I popped cukes into my mouth, I thought of Midori's father. I felt totally empty with Midori gone from my life. Unknown to me, she'd taken on a big presence in my world.

"You got a girl?" asked Ito.

I did, I told him after taking a breath. But there were circumstances that kept her far away.

"But you're on the same wavelength?"

"I'd like to think so. There's no hope if I don't," I half-joked.

He spoke quietly about the greatness of Mozart. He was as intimately acquainted with the ins and outs of Mozart's music as with each turn of a mountain path back at his home in the country. His father, it seems, was something of a Mozart devotee and had played him concertos since he was three. I really wasn't that much of a classic buff, but just to hear him point out the intricacies of certain passages—"Now, here, listen to how it..." or, "You won't believe this part..."—I felt more at ease than I had in ages. We gazed out at a crescent moon over the woods of Inokashira Park as we polished off the last of the Chivas.

Ito invited me to stay over, but I said I had something to do. I thanked him for the whiskey and left before nine. On the way home I tried call-

ing Midori from a phone booth. Unexpectedly, she came to the phone.

"I'm sorry, I don't want to talk with you now," said Midori.

"I know that very well. I've heard it before. But I don't want things between us to end like this. You're really one of the few friends I've got and I feel terrible not being able to see you. At this rate, when will you ever feel like talking? Just tell me that much."

"When I'm ready to talk, we'll talk."

"So are you well?"

"I guess," she said, then hung up.

In mid-May a letter came from Reiko.

"Thanks for your regular letters. Naoko reads them with pleasure. I also take the liberty of reading them. I hope you don't mind.

"Please excuse the long delay in replying. To be perfectly honest, I'm kind of worn-out and there's not much good news. Naoko's condition is none too good. Her mother came up from Kobe the other day and we had a session with a specialist. The four of us agreed she should be transferred to a specialized clinic for intensive therapy for a while and we'd see the results, although Naoko said she'd prefer to stay on and get better at the lodge. If I had

my way, I would have her stay here. I even worry for myself without her. But the truth is she's getting out of control. Normally she shows no outward signs, but occasionally she'll become so unstable I can't let her out of my sight. You never know what might happen. She hears so many things, she might just withdraw into herself irretrievably.

"I guess this means she'd be better off getting treatment in a bona fide clinic for a while. Sorry to have to say so, but that's the way it goes. Like I told you before, these things take time. You can't give up. You've just got to untangle the threads one by one. No matter how hopeless it all may seem, there's always a way. When it's pitch black all around, you've just got to stay still until you get used to the dark.

"By the time you receive this letter, Naoko should already be at the clinic. I apologize for not telling you before now, but everything got decided at the last minute. Rest assured that the clinic is good and the doctors there really know their stuff. I enclose the address so you can write her there. When and if I have any news about her, I'll let you know. I hope I'll get to write good news. I'm sure this is hard on you, too, but hang in there. Please drop me an occasional line, whether Naoko's here or not."

*

That spring I wrote a hell of a lot of letters. Weekly letters to Naoko, letters to Reiko, letters to Midori. I wrote letters in the classroom, at home with Birdy on my lap, at the Italian restaurant during my break. The only tenuous continuity to the crumbling shambles of my life was letters.

I wrote Midori how lonely my April and May had been without her. The hardest spring of my life. I'd rather have three extra Februaries in a row. At this late date it was probably worse than nothing, but I complimented her on her new hairstyle. I told her I was working in an Italian restaurant now, learning to make pasta. Make her a meal sometime.

Every day I went to university, three times a week I worked at the restaurant, sometimes I discussed music and books with Ito, borrowed Boris Vian novels to read, wrote letters, played with Birdy, made spaghetti, gardened, thought about Naoko and masturbated, saw endless movies.

It was near the middle of June before Midori deemed to speak to me. We hadn't talked in two months at that point. After class she came over and sat down next to me, propped up her chin and said nothing at first. It was raining outside. Your

straight-down windless rainy season rain, making everything miserably damp. Midori stayed like that even after all the other students had left the classroom. Then she pulled a pack of Marlboros from the pocket of her jeans jacket, put one to her lips, and passed me some matches. I gave her the requisite light, whereupon she pursed her lips and slowly blew smoke in my face.

“Like my hairstyle?”

“Very much.”

“How much?”

“Enough to topple all the forests of the world,” I said.

“Oh, really?”

“Yes, really.”

She stared me in the face a while longer, then extended her right hand. I reached over to hold it. She seemed even more relieved than I. Midori tapped her cigarette ash onto the floor and stood up.

“Let’s go get something to eat. I’m starved,” said Midori.

“Where to?”

“The cafeteria at Takashimaya Department Store in Nihonbashi.”

“Why go all the way across town?”

“I go there from time to time.”

So we boarded the subway for Nihonbashi. It

had been pouring all day so there was hardly a soul in the department store. The whole store had a rainy day smell, and all the employees seemed somehow at a loss for something to do. We went to the cafeteria in the basement and did a thorough check of the menu samples in the window before settling for the box lunch. The place was empty, despite it's being noontime.

"It's been forever since I ate in a department store cafeteria," I said, eyeing my glossy white teacup, the kind you virtually never see except in department store cafeterias.

"Me, I like them," said Midori. "I always feel it's something special. Childhood memories, no doubt. I only got taken to department stores on rare occasions."

"I seem to remember going all the time. I guess because my mother liked to shop."

"How nice for you."

"Nothing of the kind. What's so nice about going to department stores?"

"Not that. I mean getting such attention as a kid."

"Well, I was an only child," I said.

"When I was a kid, I always thought that when I grew up, I'd come to department store cafeterias by myself. Then I'd eat anything I felt like, and as much of it as possible!" said Midori. "But what a

disappointment it turned out to be. Eating all alone is no fun at all, especially since the food's not that great. Cafeterias are just big and crowded and poorly ventilated."

"These two months have been no fun at all, either." I changed the subject.

"So I read in your letters," said Midori, but without any emotion. "What say we just eat? I don't want to think about anything else just now."

We polished off our box lunches, sipped our broth, drank our tea. Midori smoked a cigarette. When she'd finished smoking, she stood up without a word and grabbed her umbrella. I followed.

"Where do we go from here?" I asked.

"Where else? We've come to a department store and eaten in the cafeteria. Next we go to the roof," said Midori.

No one was up on the roof in the rain. There wasn't any sales clerk at the pet counter, and the shutters were down on the snack stalls and ticket booths for the rooftop amusement park. We put up the umbrella and wandered among the wet rides and deck chairs. A wasteland smack in the heart of Tokyo! Midori said she wanted to look through the telescope, so I put in a coin and held the umbrella for her while she looked.

There was a game center of sorts off in one corner, with a line-up of kiddy games. We sat ourselves

down side by side on a box and watched the rain falling.

"Talk to me," commanded Midori. "You do have something you want to tell me, I believe."

"I don't feel like making excuses. I'm so out of it. You really threw me for a loop. I just couldn't think straight," I said. "But one thing I did learn by not being able to see you. That is, it's your being there that's gotten me through. With you gone, nothing goes right."

"You probably don't know this, Toru, but these two months without you have been hard on me, too."

"No, I had no idea," I said, rather surprised. "I thought you were so fed up with me you never wanted to see me again."

"How can you be so blind? Of course I wanted to see you. I told you I care for you, didn't I? I don't switch off and on just like that, you know. I didn't stop liking you. Didn't that even register?"

"Well, sure, I..."

"Okay, I blew my top. I felt like kicking you a hundred times. I mean I hadn't seen you in how long? But you were light-years away thinking about some other girl and not even looking in my direction. Of course I was furious. But even aside from that, I thought maybe I ought to put some distance between us. Just to set things straight."

“Things?”

“Things between you and me. Our relationship. Being with you is getting interesting, more interesting than being with him. Which is as awkward as it is unnatural. Of course, I still like him and all, even if he is kind of a selfish, narrow-minded fascist. He does have his good points, which is why I took an honest liking to him in the first place. But there’s something special about you, to me at least. Everything just falls into place when we’re together. I know I can trust you. I like you a lot. I don’t want to let you go. In other words, I’m all mixed up. That’s why I went to him and had a serious talk with him. Like, what should I do? Well, he told me not to see you again. That if I saw you again, it’d be over between us.”

“So what did you do?”

“We broke up nice and clean,” said Midori, Marlboro in mouth, hand cupped around a match flame, a puff of smoke on the way.

“But why?”

“Why?” Midori shouted back. “What’s wrong with you? You understand the English subjunctive, you can handle number series, you’ve read your Marx, how can you be so thick? Why do you have to ask? Is there something that makes you need to have a girl come out and tell you? I like you better than him. What could possibly be clearer? I’d

rather have fallen for more of a hunk, you know, but too late now. I'm gone on you."

I tried to say something, but the words caught in my throat.

Midori tossed her cigarette butt into a puddle. "Hey, don't look so destroyed. You're bringing me down with that face of yours. It's okay. I know you've got someone else so I'm not making any demands. But you could at least give me a hug or two. These two months have really been the pits."

So we embraced, umbrella held up, right there in the back of the game center. We held each other tight, our lips seeking each other. The scent of the rain was in her hair, in her collar. Her body so soft and warm. Through her jeans jacket I could feel her breasts against my chest. How long had it been since I'd held another human being?

"The last time I saw you, that very night I went to him and talked. And we broke up," said Midori.

"You know I'm crazy about you," I said. "I mean it, from the bottom of my heart. I don't want to be without you again. But it's no good. I'm stuck and I can't move."

"Because of her?"

I nodded.

"Hey, tell me this, have you ever slept with her?"

"Just once, a year ago."

"And you haven't seen her since?"

"Twice. But we didn't do anything," I said.

"And why not? Didn't she like you any more?"

"That's not for me to say," I said. "The whole situation's pretty involved. With all sorts of problems jumbled into the works. And it's been going on like this for a long time now, so there's no telling what's what. Not from my side or hers. All I can tell is that I have some kind of responsibility as a human being. It's not something I can just cast aside. At least, that's how I feel about it. Even if she didn't love me."

"Hey, I'm a real live girl, you know," said Midori, pressing her cheek against my neck. "What's more, you're holding me while I'm confessing my love for you. And if you told me how you wanted me to be, you know I'd make the effort. I may have my screwy aspects, but I'm a good kid. Honest, hard-working, thrifty, brave. I'm cute enough, got nice tits, can cook up a storm, and I've got Father's inheritance and savings to boot. I'm a real bargain if you ask me! Offer good for a limited time only. If you don't take me soon, I'll disappear who knows where."

"I need time," I said. "Time to think, to sort things out, to decide. It's awful of me, but for now that's all I can say."

"But you are crazy about me, from the bottom of

your heart, right? You don't want to let me go, et cetera."

"That's right."

Midori pulled away, then smiled at me. "Okay, I'll wait it out. Because I believe you," she said. "But when you come for me, make sure it's just me. And when you have me, make sure it's just me you're thinking about. Am I getting through?"

"Loud and clear."

"Also, I don't care what you do with me, just don't hurt me. I've had enough hurt for one life already. So no more, please. I want to be happy."

I drew her to me and kissed her.

"C'mon, put down that stupid umbrella so you can give me a decent hug with both arms," said Midori.

"We'll get drenched."

"Fine by me. I just want to be held and not have to think about anything. I've put up with it for two months now."

I put the umbrella at my feet and gave Midori one rainy embrace. The dull drone of speeding automobile tires on the highway surrounded us like a dense fog. The rain fell steadily, noiselessly, soaking through our hair, running like tears down our cheeks, darkening her jeans jacket and my yellow nylon windbreaker.

"Isn't it about time we headed somewhere under cover?" I suggested.

"Come on over to my place. There's nobody there. We'll catch our death of cold like this."

"You said it."

"We look like we just swam across a river or something," laughed Midori. "And boy, I feel great!"

We bought a towel at the toiletries counter, then took turns going to the restrooms to dry our hair. Then we caught the subway to Myogadani and her apartment. Midori made me take a shower immediately, then took one herself. I borrowed a bathrobe while my clothes dried and she changed into a polo shirt and skirt. Then we sat at the kitchen table over coffee.

"Tell me about yourself," commanded Midori.

"What about myself?"

"Oh, I don't know...how about your dislikes?"

"Well, I dislike chicken and venereal disease and talkative barbers."

"What else?"

"I dislike lonely April nights and lace doilies on telephones."

"What else?"

I shook my head. "I can't think of anything else."

"My boyfriend--my ex-boyfriend—he disliked all sorts of things. My wearing short skirts and smok-

ing and getting roaring drunk and talking dirty and insulting his friends. So you can tell me if there's something you don't like about me. And if it's something I can change, I'll change it."

"Can't think of anything," I said with a shake of my head after a moment's thought. "Really."

"Really?"

"I like all the things you wear, all the things you do and say, and how you get drunk—I like it all."

"You mean you'll take me as I am?"

"I can't really think of anything to change, so as-you-are is fine."

"How much do you like me?" Midori labored the question.

"Enough to melt all the tigers in all the jungles of the world into butter," said I.

"Uh-huh," said a partly satisfied Midori. "Give me another hug."

We embraced on Midori's bed. Under the covers, we listened to the sound of the rain and talked about everything imaginable, from the way the world came about to how we liked our eggs.

"I wonder what on earth ants do on rainy days," quizzed Midori.

"Don't know," I said. "Probably clean their ant holes and do stock-taking. They're so industrious."

"If they're so industrious, why are they still ants and haven't evolved?"

"Don't know that, either. But I guess it's because their bodies are not made for evolving. I mean compared to, say, apes."

"You really don't know much, do you?" said Midori. "And I thought you were Mr. Know-It-All."

"There's a whole lot out there to know."

"Mountains high, oceans deep," said Midori. Then she reached a hand inside my bathrobe to grab my erection. Then she took a breath. "Sorry to have to say this, Toru, but no joke. This is just too big and hard. It'll never fit. I refuse."

"Some joke," I said with a sigh.

"A good joke," giggled Midori. "But it's okay. Don't worry. This size, it'll fit just nicely. Can I see you close up?"

"As you like," said I.

Midori dove under the covers and played with my penis a while, pulling at it, weighing my balls in the palm of her hand. Then she popped her head out and sighed. "I must say I do like your thing, though, and I'm not just saying that."

"Thanks," I said frankly enough.

"Still, I bet you don't want to do it with me. Not until you set things straight for yourself."

"It's not that I don't want to," I pleaded. "I want to so much I'm going out of my mind. It's just that it wouldn't be right."

"Stubborn, aren't you. I'd do it if I were you. Then maybe I'd think about it afterwards."

"Really?"

"Just kidding," whispered Midori. "I probably wouldn't. If I were you, I'd do the 'right thing,' which is really what I like about you. Really and truly."

"How much do you like me?" I turned the tables on her, but she didn't answer. Instead she moved her body up against mine, put her lips to my nipple and began to jerk me, nice and slow. The first thing that came to mind was how different her hand motions were from Naoko's. Both were wonderful in their own way, but something was different, enough to make the experience entirely new.

"Say, Watanabe, you weren't thinking of another woman, were you?"

"Not me," I lied.

"Honest?"

"Honest."

"When we're like this, there's to be no thinking about other women."

"Wouldn't dream of it," I said.

"Want to touch my breasts or you-know-where?"

"I sure do, but I probably shouldn't, not yet. Do too much at once and the stimulation would be too strong."

Midori nodded, then reached under the covers

to worm out of her panties and wrapped them around the tip of my penis. "Here, come into these."

"But I'll get them dirty."

"Say one more dumb thing and you'll have me crying," said Midori on the edge of tears. "I can wash them. Don't hold back, just have a good come. And if it bothers you, buy me new ones. Or is it that you can't come with me?"

"Give me a break!"

"Well, then, come. It's okay."

I ejaculated and she did a spot-check. "Quite a lot!" she said admiringly.

"Too much?"

"Not at all. Really! You can just fire away," she laughed and kissed me.

Come evening, she went out to do some shopping in the neighborhood, then made dinner. Tempura and rice with string beans. And beer.

"Eat well and make lots of sperm," said Midori. "And I'll shoot it off for you."

"Thanks," I said.

"I know lots of ways. I studied my women's magazines when I minded the bookstore. Like for pregnant women who can't do it the regular way, there are ways to do their husbands so they don't

get any other ideas. There was a whole feature section. Really all kinds of ways. Curious?"

"Next time," I said.

I left Midori's and bought a newspaper at the station to read on the train home. But when it came down to it, I didn't really want to read and I didn't understand when I tried to. I stared blankly at that incomprehensible spread, but I kept thinking about what lay ahead and how the situation might change around me. Occasionally, I'd feel the pulse of the world. I heaved a sigh and shut my eyes. I didn't have one regret about the events of the day, and I felt sure that if I had to do everything all over again, I'd do it exactly the same. I'd embrace Midori on a rainswept roof, get dripping wet, have her do me by hand in her bed. That much I had no doubt of. I liked Midori and was overjoyed to have her back beside me. The two of us ought to make a go of it, I thought. And, as she herself had said, here was a real live girl, a warm-blooded body to hold in my arms. It was all I could do to hold back the yearning to get her naked and plunge inside that warmth. There was no way I could have stopped once those fingers of hers took me in hand, slowly, surely. That's what I wanted, that's what she wanted. We were already in love. Who was going to stop us? So I was in love with Midori. I should have

known before. I'd just been avoiding the obvious conclusion.

The problem was how to explain these new developments to Naoko. Forget about it until some other time. There was no way I could tell Naoko in her present condition that I'd fallen for another girl. And, anyway, I did love Naoko. No matter how strange or twisted that love, there was no mistake. I did love her, and I still kept a large space untouched in my heart for Naoko.

All I could do was write everything openly and honestly to Reiko. On returning home, I sat on the veranda looking out on the dark rainy night garden as I lined up the words in my head. Then I went to my desk to write. "It pains me to have to write this," I began my letter to Reiko, and I went into a lengthy description of Midori and me thus far, explaining everything that had gone on that day.

"I came to love Naoko and I love her still. Yet what exists between Midori and me is in some sense definitive. It's nothing I can resist, a relentless power I know will drive us further and further. What I feel for Naoko is so very quiet and gentle and pure, but what I feel for Midori is an emotion of a whole other kind. It has a life of its own. It stands up and walks and breathes. Its heartbeat makes me tremble. I don't mean to make excuses, but I've tried in my own way to live sincerely and

have not lied to anyone. I've taken pains to try not to hurt anyone. So why have I been cast into this maze? I have no idea. What am I to do? I have no one to talk to but you."

I affixed special delivery postage and mailed it that very night.

Reiko's reply, dated June 17, came five days later.

"Regards.

"First, the good news.

"Naoko's getting better sooner than we expected. I talked to her once on the telephone and her speech was very lucid. At this rate she might even be able to return here before long.

"Next, about you.

"I think it's wrong for you to take everything so seriously. It's a wonderful thing to love someone, and if that love is sincere it won't cast you into a maze. Have confidence in yourself.

"My warning to you is thus quite simple. First of all, if you're strongly attracted to this Midori, then naturally you'll fall in love with her. It might go well, it might not. But that's the nature of love. It's entirely natural that if you fall in love, you give yourself over to it completely. Or so I believe. It is but another form of sincerity.

"Second, this question of whether or not you

have sex with this Midori is no business of mine. You should talk things over with her and reach some suitable decision.

“Third, please say nothing of this to Naoko. If it comes time to have to tell her, then let us both think of a good plan of action. But for the time being, mum’s the word. Please believe me.

“Fourth, you’ve been a great strength to Naoko up to now, so that even if you cease to want her as a lover, there’s still lots you can do for her. So don’t take each and every thing so seriously. We (both the sane and the not-so-sane, that is) are imperfect people living in an imperfect world. We don’t live our lives by rulers or protractors or bank accounts, do we?

“If I might state my own feeling, I think this Midori is probably one amazing girl. I can tell that just reading your letter. And I also understand how you can be attracted to Naoko at the same time. It’s no crime. It happens all the time in this big, wide world. You set sail on a lovely lake on a beautiful day, and you’re bound to say how nice the sky and the water look. So stop torturing yourself. Let things take their natural course. Do your best and still somebody gets hurt. That’s life. I don’t want to sound like I’m lecturing you, but it’s time you learned that lesson. Sometimes you try too hard to make life conform to you. If you don’t want to wind

up in an institution, you should open up a little more and give yourself over to living. Even a weak-willed imperfect woman such as I sometimes has to marvel at the sheer wonder of living. Really! So you have every reason to be even happier. Make an effort to be happy.

“Of course I’m sorry no happy ending awaits you and Naoko. But, in the end, who’s to say what is or isn’t for the best? Therefore, don’t hold back on anyone’s account. Take advantage of every opportunity you have to be happy. In my humble experience, such opportunities come but two or three times in a lifetime. Let them slip by and you’ll regret it your whole life.

“I play the guitar every day with no one around to hear. What a bore! I hate rainy nights. Someday I hope to play guitar for both you and Naoko while eating grapes in the room here.

“All for now,
“Reiko Ishida.”

CHAPTER 11

Even after Naoko died, Reiko continued to write to me, that it wasn't my doing, or anybody's doing, that these things just come without anybody asking, like the rain. Still, I could never write any replies. What was I supposed to say? And anyway, what did it matter any more? Naoko was no longer in this world, but was reduced to a handful of ash.

At the end of August, after Naoko's all-too-hushed funeral, I returned to Tokyo and told my landlord I'd be away for a while, went to my part-time job to say I wouldn't be in. I couldn't bring myself to say anything to Midori. I wrote her a short letter asking for her patience, that I'd explain it all soon enough. And for the next three days I went around to all the movie theaters and watched films morning to night. After I'd seen all the films showing in Tokyo, I packed my knapsack, withdrew my entire savings, went to Shinjuku Station, and caught the first express train I saw.

I have absolutely no memory of where or how I

traveled. I can still recall scenes and smells and sounds fairly well, but no place names whatsoever. No order to it all, either. From one town to the next, by train or bus or hitching rides with passing trucks, sleeping in empty lots or stations or parks or on riverbanks or seashores or any place I could roll out my sleeping bag. I stayed once in a police box and once beside a graveyard, never getting in anyone's way. Wherever I could get a good night's sleep was fine by me. I'd wrap my walk-weary body in my sleeping bag, take a few swigs of cheap whiskey, and fall fast asleep. In friendly towns, people would bring me meals and give me mosquito coils; in unfriendly towns, people would call the police and have me driven out of their parks. Either way was fine by me. All I was after was a good sleep in unfamiliar surroundings.

When the money ran low, I did manual labor for three or four days to make enough to get by. I always seemed to find work. I moved about aimlessly from town to town. A big, wide world, full of strange and mysterious people and things. I once rang up Midori. I was desperate to hear her voice.

"I hate to tell you this, but school started up a long time ago," scolded Midori. "There's lot of papers you have to turn in. What're you going to do, really now? It's been three weeks and not a peep from you. Where the hell are you?"

"Sorry, but I can't go back to Tokyo. Not yet."

"That's all you've got to say?"

"I can't say anything now, not so it makes sense. Come October—"

Midori hung up on me without another word.

I kept on wandering. Every once in a while I'd stay in a cheap hotel to bathe and shave. My face in the mirror was appalling. Skin dry and sunburned, sunken-eyed, hollow-cheeked, scarred and smudged beyond recognition. A primitive man just crawled from his pit-dwelling.

By then my travels had brought me to the Japan Sea coast—Tottori and the north shore of Hyogo. Following the shoreline was easy. I never failed to find some place on the beach for a nice snooze. I'd gather driftwood for a fire, buy dried fish at a store and roast it. Eating and drinking whiskey, listening to the sound of the waves, I'd think of Naoko. How impossibly strange it was that she'd died and was no longer present in the world. I still couldn't accept it. I'd heard them nailing her coffin shut, yet I just couldn't assimilate the fact that she'd returned to nothing.

If anything, I remembered her only too clearly. Her mouth gently enveloping my penis, her hair falling over my abdomen. Her warm breath, the futility of ejaculation. It was as if it had happened not five minutes ago. I felt I could reach out and

touch her sitting next to me. But, of course, Naoko was not there. Her flesh no longer existed.

On hopelessly insomniac nights, I'd recall Naoko, her various looks. There were just too many Naokos crammed inside me. The slightest opening and they'd all come gushing out. There was no way I could stem the flood.

I saw her that rainy morning in her yellow poncho, cleaning the bird coop and hauling sacks of feed. I felt her tears on my shirt that half-demolished birthday cake night. I remembered it was raining that night, too. I walked the winter streets beside her in her camel-hair overcoat. The ever-present clip in her hair she constantly toyed with. Her crystal clear eyes peering into mine. Her chin on her knees as she sat on the bed in her blue nightgown.

Images of her washed over me one after the other like waves, sweeping along to some unfathomable place, a place where I was living with the dead. And there I found Naoko, alive and well, able to talk with me, to embrace me. There, death was not the definitive end-all to life. There, death was but one of many elements of life. Thus Naoko could go on living with death in her. And she told me, "It's all right, Watanabe, it's just death. Nothing to worry about."

In this place, I felt no sadness. Death was death,

Naoko was Naoko. What was the fuss about? Here I am, Naoko would tell me, smiling shyly, one of the little things that had always so endeared her to me, that put my heart at ease. And I thought, what indeed was all the fuss about? If this is death, what's so bad about it? That's right, said Naoko, dying's nothing special. Death is just death. "What's more," her voice came through the waves, "everything's so nice here."

But the tide withdrew, leaving me alone on the beach. Alone and weak, with nowhere to go in this dark night of sorrow. I often cried then, or rather sweated out tears more than cried.

When Kizuki died, his death taught me one thing. Something I took upon myself with resignation, or rather thought I'd taken on. And that was this: Death is not the opposite of life, but something underlying this life we live.

This much is certain truth. That the very act of our living at the same time creates death. But this is only one part of the truth we have to learn. Naoko's death taught me this. That no truth can ease the sorrow of losing that which we love. Not truth, not sincerity, not strength, not grace can soothe that suffering. All we can do is suffer through it and hope to learn something from it, even though that lesson will be of no use for alleviating the next unforeseeable onslaught of suf-

fering. Night after night, all alone and listening to the wind and waves, emptying bottle after bottle of whiskey, I tried to think these things through. Day after day, eating bread and drinking water from my canteen, sand in my hair and knapsack on my shoulders, I walked ever westward.

One windy evening, as I lay curled up in the shadows of an abandoned ship, weeping, a young fisherman came along and offered me a cigarette. I accepted what must have been my first smoke in ten months. He asked me why I was crying. I lied as if by reflex that my mother had died, that I'd set out on the road to ease the pain. He sympathized and brought a big bottle of saké and two glasses from his house.

The two of us drank on that windswept dune. The fisherman told me he, too, had lost his mother at sixteen. She'd worked morning to night despite a weak constitution, worn her body to the bone, and died. I drank and listened to his tale, interjecting appropriate comments now and again. How distant his story seemed! All I could think was, so what? Big fucking deal! I felt like wringing the guy's neck. So what if you lost your mother? I lost Naoko! A physical form so beautiful perished and gone. How can you talk of your mother at a time like this?

But just as suddenly the rage evaporated. I shut

my eyes and half-listened to the fisherman speaking. Eventually he got around to asking me if I'd eaten yet. Not yet, I answered, but I had bread and cheese and a tomato and chocolate in my pack. Then he asked me what I'd eaten for lunch, and I told him I'd had bread and cheese, a tomato, and chocolate. Whereupon he told me to wait right there and disappeared somewhere. I tried to stop him, but he vanished heedless into the night.

I drank my saké. What else was there for me to do? The beach was littered with the cardboard casings of fireworks and the waves roared furiously. A scrawny dog wandered by, wagging its tail and sniffing around my makeshift fire for something to eat, then scurried off when it saw there was nothing.

Thirty minutes later the same fisherman came back with another big bottle of saké and two packs of *sushi*. Eat this, he said. The bottom pack had *norimaki* and *inarizushi*, so it'd keep till the next day, he told me. He refilled my glass with saké and I refilled his. I thanked him and ate enough of the *sushi* for two people. Then we both drank some more. We drank until I reached my limit and he invited me to sleep at his house. But when I declined, saying I was better off sleeping alone on the beach, he didn't press me. As he was heading off, he pulled a folded five-thousand-yen bill from his pocket and stuffed it in my shirt pocket, saying I was to get

some nourishment into my body with that and stop looking so forlorn. I said that after all he'd done for me, I couldn't accept money. To which he said it wasn't the money, it was the thought, so not to fill my head with all these ideas, just take it. So I thanked him and took it.

After the fisherman left, I happened to think of the first girlfriend I slept with in my senior year of high school. When I thought about how thoughtless I'd been to her, I shivered inside. I'd hardly given a damn about what she'd thought or felt or how I'd hurt her. And up to now I had scarcely ever thought of her. She'd been a kind, sweet girl, but I'd taken her kindness for granted, with scarcely a second thought. What was she doing now? And had she ever forgiven me?

I felt terrible and went over to the ruined boat to throw up. I'd drunk too much. My head ached. I'd lied and I'd even accepted money from that poor fisherman. Time for me to be heading back to Tokyo. I couldn't keep on like this forever. I rolled up my sleeping bag and hoofed it to the nearest train station and asked the attendant how best to get back to Tokyo. He checked the train schedule and told me there was a night train that made a good connection for Osaka by morning, from where I could catch the "bullet train" to Tokyo. I thanked him and gave him the five-thousand-yen

bill in return for a ticket to Tokyo. Then, while waiting for the train, I bought a newspaper. I looked at the date. October 2, 1970. Exactly one month on the road. And now to return to reality.

My one-month journey had done little to lighten my spirits and nothing to alleviate the shock of Naoko's death. I returned to Tokyo for the most part unchanged from a month before. I couldn't even call Midori. How on earth could I broach things with her? What was I to say? It was all over and done with, so now we two could live happily ever after, was that it? Of course I couldn't bring myself to say anything of the kind. For no matter how I put it, no matter what voice I adopted, the facts I had to relate were the same. Naoko had died, Midori remained. Naoko was reduced to white ash, Midori was a living flesh-and-blood human being.

I saw myself in all my degradation. Back in Tokyo, I spent the first few days alone in my room. Almost all my consciousness was given over to the dead, not the living. I opened the doors to the room I'd set aside for Naoko, the furniture shrouded with sheets and windowsills covered in a layer of dust. I spent the greater part of the day in there. And I thought about Kizuki. Hey, Kizuki, you've finally got Naoko back! Well, she was yours to begin with, so I guess she's where she belongs. But you can't say

I didn't do my best for her, here in this world, this imperfect world of the living. I really tried to make a new life here for me and her. But that's okay, Kizuki. She's yours now. Naoko chose you. Naoko hung herself deep in a forest as dark as her own mind. You know what, Kizuki? A long time ago you dragged a part of me with you into the land of the dead. And now Naoko's dragged another part of me there, too. I'm beginning to feel like a curator of my own museum. A huge museum that no one will ever visit, looked after for no one but myself.

*

The fourth day after my return to Tokyo a letter arrived from Reiko by special delivery. It was exceedingly simple in its message. She'd been trying to reach me and was worried stiff. I was to call, please. She'd be waiting by the telephone at nine in the morning and nine in the evening.

I rang her up that night at nine. Reiko came on the line immediately.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"Well enough," I said.

"Say, would it be okay if I came to see you?"

"Came to see me? Here in Tokyo?"

"Yes. I'd like to talk things over, the two of us."

"But Reiko, that means you have to come out into the world."

"I can't very well see you if I don't," she said. "It's about time I left. I've been here eight years now, after all. Any more and I'll rot."

I was at a loss for words.

"Can you come to meet my 'bullet train' at Tokyo Station the day after tomorrow at three-twenty? You still remember what I look like? Or have you lost all interest in me since Naoko died?"

"Of course not," I protested. "Day after tomorrow, three-twenty, Tokyo Station. I'll be there."

"It'll be easy to spot me. There can't be many middle-aged women carrying a guitar case."

I found Reiko at Tokyo Station straight away. She was wearing a man's tweed jacket, white slacks, and red sports shoes, her hair bobbed short as usual, a brown leather suitcase in her right hand and her guitar in her left. Her face crinkled up in a warm smile as soon as she saw me, and I smiled back. I took her suitcase and walked with her over to the Chuo Line platform.

"Tell me, Watanabe, how long have you looked so terrible? Are terrible looks the rage in Tokyo?"

"I've been traveling. And not eating well," I said. "How was the 'bullet train'?"

"Horrible. Can't even open the windows. Thought I'd buy lunch en route, but was I ever in for it!"

"Didn't they come around with the lunch wagon?"

"You mean with those awful, expensive sandwiches? A starving half-dead horse'd turn up its nose at that cardboard! I used to like to buy red snapper lunches as we passed though Gotemba."

"Say things like that and people will take you for an old lady."

"Fine by me. I *am* an old lady," said Reiko.

All the way to Kichijoji she gazed through the window in amazement at the sprawl of housing across the Musashino Plain.

"Has the place changed so much in eight years?" I asked.

"You know, Watanabe, I bet you don't have any idea what's running through my head right now."

"No, I don't."

"I'm almost out of my mind with fright. Don't know what I'd do if I were set down alone out there," said Reiko. "Isn't 'out of my mind' a great expression, though?"

I laughed and grabbed her hand. "It's all right. I'm here, so there's nothing to fear, and anyway you came this far under your own steam."

"My leaving there wasn't under my own steam," said Reiko. "My leaving there was thanks to you and Naoko. I couldn't stand staying on without Naoko, so I knew I had to come to Tokyo to talk

things out with you. That's why I left. If nothing of the kind had happened, I probably would have stayed there for the rest of my life."

I nodded.

"So what do you plan to do now, Reiko?"

"I'm going to Asahikawa. Can you believe it? Asahikawa!" she said. "A friend of mine from music college opened a music school there and has been trying to get me up for two, three years now, but I always refused on account of the cold. I mean, who'd just up and decide to go to Asahikawa on her own? Really! The place is the pits."

"It's not that bad," I laughed. "I went there once and it wasn't such a bad town. Kind of interesting even."

"Really?"

"Uh-huh. Better than being in Tokyo, I'm sure."

"Well, I don't have anywhere else to go and I already sent my bags ahead," she said. "Just promise me you'll come visit me there, okay, Watanabe?"

"You bet. But are you heading up there right away? Aren't you going to stay a while in Tokyo?"

"Sure. I thought I'd take it easy for two or three days. That is, if I can crash at your place. I don't want to impose."

"Not at all. I'll sleep in my sleeping bag in the closet."

"I appreciate it."

"No problem. The closet's plenty big enough."

Reiko lightly strummed the strings of the guitar she held between her legs. "I probably need to get myself reacclimatized before I head up there. I'm still not used to the outside world. Too much I don't understand, too much stress. Can you help me out a bit? I don't have anybody else I can trust."

"Glad to be of service if I can," I said.

"I'm not being too demanding, am I?"

"Too demanding of what?"

Reiko looked me in the face and curled the corners of her lips in a smile but didn't say another word.

We got off the train at Kichijoji and took a bus to my place without much in the way of conversation. Just passing remarks about how Tokyo had changed and times back in music college and my one trip to Asahikawa. Naoko's name didn't come up once. It was ten months since I'd seen Reiko, but walking beside her put my mind strangely at ease. I felt soothed. Moreover, I felt as if I'd known this feeling before. Come to think of it, the feeling was just like when I used to walk with Naoko across Tokyo. What formerly Naoko and I had shared with the dead Kizuki, Reiko and I now shared with the dead Naoko. No sooner had this hit me than I

fell silent. Reiko went on talking by herself for a while, but when she realized I wasn't talking, she fell silent, too, and neither one of us said anything the rest of the way home.

The afternoon was filled with the same crisp early autumn light that had lit Kyoto the first time I visited Naoko a year before. The clouds were white and fine as bones, the sky cut clear through to the heights. Another autumn has arrived, I thought. It's in the wind, in the sunlight, in the clumps of grass flowers, an orchestrated annunciation. And with each passage of the seasons, I was that much further away from those who had died. Kizuki was seventeen, Naoko twenty-one. Forever.

"It's such a relief to get to a place like this," said Reiko as soon as she climbed down from the bus and looked around.

"That's because there's nothing here," I said.

I led Reiko in the back gate and through the garden to my little house.

"Such a nice place you've got here," said Reiko. "Did you make all this yourself? These shelves and the desk?"

"You got it," I said, boiling water for tea.

"You're pretty handy, eh, Watanabe? Keep a tidy house, too, I see."

"Thanks to Kamikaze. He converted me into a

real cleanliness fanatic. But it's ingratiated me with the landlord, the fact that I'm so careful with things in the house."

"Oh, that's right. I must give my greetings to the landlord," said Reiko. "He lives in the house across the garden, right?"

"Greetings? What's with this 'greetings'?"

"A matter of course, I'd think. You bring over a middle-aged lady who plays the guitar and what's he supposed to think? That's why it's best to square it away first. And I brought along a box of cakes for just that purpose."

"You think of everything," I said.

"Comes with age. I'll say I'm an aunt on your mother's side from Kyoto, so play along. It'll be easy, especially since our ages are so different. Who's to suspect?"

While she extracted the box of cakes from her suitcase and headed over, I sat on the veranda, drank another cup of tea, and played with the cat. Reiko reappeared some twenty minutes later. She opened her suitcase and took out a box of rice crackers, which she said was a gift for me.

"What on earth did you find to talk about for twenty minutes?" I asked, munching on a cracker.

"Why, you, of course," said Reiko, picking up the cat and rubbing it against her cheek. "He complimented you on being so neat and studious."

"Me?"

"Yes, you," laughed Reiko. Then she caught sight of my guitar and picked it up, tuned it a bit, then struck up Carlos Jobim's "Desafinado." It had been a long time since I'd heard her play, but it was still as heart-warming as ever.

"You practicing guitar?"

"I'm just borrowing this one I found lying in the shed. Try to give it a play now and then."

"Well, let me give you a free lesson later," said Reiko, setting down the guitar and taking off her tweed jacket, then leaning back against a post on the veranda for a smoke. Underneath her jacket she'd been wearing a short-sleeved madras shirt.

"Nice shirt, eh?" said Reiko.

"I'd say," I agreed. A real smart number.

"This was Naoko's," said Reiko. "Did you know that Naoko and I were almost the same size. Especially at the time she entered the lodge. Afterwards she put on some weight, but our sizes were close enough. In shirts and slacks and shoes and hats. Only our bra sizes, I guess, were different. I practically don't have boobs. Still, we exchanged clothes all the time. Virtually shared them between us."

I took another look at Reiko's physique. Sure enough, she was about Naoko's size and height. Maybe it was just the shape of her face or her skin-

ny wrists that gave the impression that she was more petite than Naoko. A careful look revealed she was quite sturdily built.

"The slacks and the jacket, too. All Naoko's. Does it turn you off to see me wearing Naoko's things?"

"Not at all. Naoko'd probably be happy to have someone wearing them. Especially you, Reiko."

"Strange thing," began Reiko with a little snap of her fingers. "Naoko left no final letter to anyone, but she left a note about her clothes. One dashed-off line, on a pad on her desk. 'Give all my clothes to Reiko.' Strange girl. When it comes my time to die, I wonder if I'll think about clothes. You'd think that'd be the last thing on your mind. There ought to be tons of other things you'd have to say to people."

"But maybe not for her."

Reiko puffed on her cigarette and was lost in thought. "You probably want me to tell you everything from the beginning, I guess."

"Please," I said.

"Once the hospital test results were in, that Naoko's immediate symptoms were checked but that she eventually ought to undergo thorough treatment for her own sake, it was decided that Naoko be transferred to a hospital in Osaka for a

long-term stay. I believe I wrote you this much in a letter, I guess around August tenth.”

“I remember that letter.”

“On August twenty-fourth, I had a call from Naoko’s mother, and she said Naoko wanted to come up once and would I mind? She wanted to pack up her belongings and talk things over with me since she wouldn’t be up again for a long while, so could she stay over one night? And of course I said yes. I really wanted to see Naoko and talk, too. So the next day she and her mother came by taxi, and the three of us packed her things. Caught up on all the gossip, too. Toward the end of the day, Naoko told her mother to go, that she’d be all right, so her mother called a taxi and left. Naoko seemed in such good spirits. Neither her mother nor I were very concerned. The truth is, though, I’d been really worried beforehand. Maybe she’d be all depressed and worn to a frazzle. I knew only too well how much those hospital tests can take out of you, so I had my fears about her condition. But as soon as I saw her I could tell she was all right. Her face looked so healthy, all smiles and joking, and her speech was so much better than before. She’d even been to a beauty salon and was showing off her new hairstyle, so I thought, fine, we’ll be okay just the two of us. She came right out and told me how she wanted to use this chance to get complete-

ly cured at the hospital and I said, yes, that sounds like a good thing. Then we went out for a walk and we talked. About plans for the future, what we wanted to do. And she said it'd be nice, once we got out of there, if we could live together."

"Together with you?"

"Right," said Reiko with a shrug of her shoulders. "That's when I said, fine by me, but what about Watanabe? And she said, 'I'll take care of him.' That's all. Then she went on talking about where we could live, what we would do. After which, we paid a visit to the bird coop."

I took a beer out of the refrigerator and started drinking it. Reiko was still smoking, cat curled up asleep on her lap.

"The girl had everything all laid out in her mind. That's probably why she seemed so on top of things. She'd decided, so her mind was at ease. Then we went and cleaned up the room, burning unnecessary things in an oil drum. The notebook she used as a diary, her letters, everything. Your letters, too. Now, I thought something was odd about that, so I asked her, is it okay to burn them? After all, she'd held onto them so carefully up till then and read them over all the time. But she just said, 'I'm going to get rid of everything up to now and start a new life,' and I say, hmm, I can accept something like that pretty easily. After all, she did

make sense, in her way. All the better if it helps get her back on her feet, I thought. I mean she looked so cute as she said all this, you should have seen her.

“So then we ate supper in the dining room as usual, took a bath, and opened a bottle of wine I’d been saving, which we drank while I played guitar. The usual Beatles songs. “Norwegian Wood” and “Michelle,” all her favorites. We were feeling pretty good. We turned off the lights, got undressed, and went to bed. It was a dreadfully hot night, hardly a breeze even with the window wide open. Outside was pitch black, making the insects sound that much louder. The whole room was suffocating with the smell of summer grass. Then, all of a sudden, Naoko started talking about you. About sex with you. In extreme detail, too. How you took off her clothes, how you touched her, how she got excited, how you put it into her, how wonderful it felt, well, really telling all. So I decided to ask her, just off-hand, why was she telling me all this now? I mean she’d hardly ever talked about sex before. Of course, we do make a practice of discussing sex frankly, as a form of therapy, but the girl never went into details. She was too embarrassed. So it took me by surprise to hear her suddenly burst into this flood of talk.

“‘I just feel like talking,’ she said. ‘You don’t have to listen if you don’t want to.’

“‘No, I think it’s good for you to talk things out. Glad to lend an ear,’ I told her.

“‘When he came inside me, it hurt so much I didn’t know what to do,’ she said. ‘It was my first time. I was moist so it slid right in, but it still hurt. I blanked out. He went in deep, so deep I thought he’d gone as far as he could go, but then he lifted my legs a bit and went in even further. I got chills all over my body. Like I’d been plunged into a glacier. My arms and legs were all pins and needles, and freezing cold. I thought I was going to die, but that was fine with me. But he could tell I hurt, so he just stayed still inside me and held me gently, kissing my hair and neck and breasts. A long while. Gradually the warmth came back to my body. And slowly he began to move. It was so wonderful, I swear my brains could’ve melted. I wanted to spend my whole life like that, in his arms. Honestly.’

“‘If it was so good, why not do it with Watanabe every day?’ I asked.

“‘No, Reiko, it wouldn’t work,’ she said. ‘I can tell. Do it once and that’s it. It’d never be like that again. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Never before or after have I felt anything. Never even thought about doing it, never got turned on.’

"Of course, I tried to explain everything, that such feelings were common in young women, that it usually got better with age, just naturally. It went well once, so she needn't worry. When I got married, I had such a hard time at first because nothing went right.

"'It's not that,' she said. 'I'm not worried, Reiko. I just don't want anyone inside me again, ever. I don't want anyone to have his way with me.'"

I downed the last of my beer. Reiko finished her second cigarette. The cat stretched on Reiko's lap, assumed a new position, and went back to sleep. After some hesitation, Reiko lit a third cigarette.

"Then Naoko began sobbing," she resumed. "I sat on her bed and stroked her head, saying, 'There, there, everything'll be fine. A pretty young woman like you ought to be happy to have a man.' It was so hot that night, I couldn't tell if Naoko was sweating or crying, she was so wet. I fetched a bath towel and wiped off her face and body. Even her panties were sopping wet, so I told her to take them off. I mean, don't get me wrong. Here we'd been taking baths together, she was practically a little sister to me."

"Yes, I know," I said.

"Naoko told me to hold her. But it's so hot, I told her, but she said, it'll be the last time, just hold her. So I wrapped her up in a towel, so I wouldn't get

sweaty. Then I held her and when she'd calmed down a bit, I wiped off the sweat again, put her in a nightgown, and tucked her in. And she went straight to sleep. Or she might have been pretending. Her face looked so sweet. Like a girl of thirteen or fourteen, never been hurt in her life. So I felt better and fell asleep.

"The next morning, when I woke at six, she wasn't there. Her nightgown lay tossed aside and her clothes and shoes were gone along with the flashlight she kept by her pillow. I didn't like the look of it. Taking a flashlight meant she'd gone out in the middle of the night. Just to see, I checked the desk and found the note. 'Give all my clothes to Reiko.' I immediately got everyone to search for her. And the whole lodge went out scouring the woods. It took five hours to find her. That girl, she'd even brought her own rope."

Reiko sighed and stroked the cat on the head.

"Want some tea?" I asked.

"Thanks," she said.

I boiled water for tea and brought the pot back to the veranda. It was already getting on for dusk, the light fading, trees casting long shadows right up to where we sat. We drank our tea and viewed the garden with its queer free-for-all riot of blossoms—globeflower and wisteria and nandin.

"Soon the ambulance came to take Naoko away

and the police asked all sorts of questions. Not much of an investigation, really. After all, she'd left a suicide note of sorts. It seemed a pretty open-and-shut case. I mean they wouldn't think twice about a mental patient committing suicide. But they asked all the normal questions anyway, for form's sake. As soon as the police left, I sent you a telegram.

"A sad funeral, wasn't it?" I said. "All hushed, not many people. Everyone in her family wanted to know how I knew she'd died. That's all they seemed to care about. Probably horrified that outsiders might know it'd been a suicide. I really shouldn't have gone to the funeral. I felt so totally destroyed by it I had to take a trip right away.

"Watanabe, what say we take a walk?" suggested Reiko. "We could shop for dinner. I'm starving."

"Sure thing, what do you feel like eating?"

"Sukiyaki," she said. "I haven't eaten any one-pot dishes in years. I tell you I dream about sukiyaki. With meat and leeks and devil's tongue threads and bean curd and chrysanthemum leaves, all simmering away—"

"Sounds great. Just one thing, though. I don't have a sukiyaki pot."

"That's okay. Just leave it to me. I'll borrow one from the landlord."

And off she went to the main house, returning

with a dandy sukiyaki pot and table-top burner and gas hose.

"How's this? Not bad, eh?"

"You said it," I admitted admiringly.

We headed out to the neighborhood shopping street and bought beef and eggs and vegetables and bean curd, as well as a relatively decent-looking white wine from a liquor store. I offered to pay, but in the end she won out.

"I'd be the laughing stock of the whole family if I let my nephew pick up the tab for groceries," said Reiko. "And, besides, I'm not badly off for money, so don't worry. I'm not about to venture out without a penny to my name, not me."

When we got home, Reiko washed the rice and put it on to cook. I led the gas hose out to the veranda and readied the sukiyaki cooking things. Once all the preparations were finished, Reiko removed her guitar from its case, took a place on the veranda in the twilight, and slowly started up a Bach fugue as if to check the tuning. She picked delicate parts lovingly, now slow, now fast, then brusquely, then sentimentally, a myriad variations to soothe the ear. She looked just like a teenage girl choosing her favorite dress as she played. Eyes sparkling, mouth closed attentively, yet flushed with the slightest hint of a smile. After she'd finished playing, she

leaned back against the veranda post and looked up at the sky, thinking.

"May I say something?" I asked.

"Certainly. I was just thinking how hungry I am," said Reiko.

"I was just wondering, aren't you going to see your husband and daughter? They're in Tokyo, aren't they?"

"Yokohama. But no, I won't. Didn't I ever tell you? It's better that I don't have anything to do with them any more. They've started new lives, and it would only be hard on them to see me. It's for the best that I don't look them up."

She crumpled up her now-empty Seven Stars box and threw it away, then took a new box out of her suitcase, opened it, and put a cigarette to her lips. She didn't light it.

"That life's over for me. What you see before you is but the residue of that former self. All that was most important in me is already long dead and gone. I'm simply going through the motions I've memorized."

"But I like you as you are, residue or not. And even if it's of no importance, I'm glad that you wore Naoko's clothes for me."

Reiko smiled and lit her cigarette. "For someone your age, you really know how to make women happy."

I blushed. "I just say what I honestly think."

"I know," Reiko said with a smile.

The rice finished cooking and I oiled the pan for the sukiyaki.

"Tell me this isn't a dream!" exclaimed Reiko, sniffing the aroma.

"I'd say from experience this is one-hundred-percent reality," I said.

Conversation pretty much fell off at that point, giving way to plain eating and beer-drinking. Birdy smelled the meat, so I fed her some. When we were both stuffed, we leaned back against the veranda posts and looked at the moon.

"Satisfied?" I asked.

"You bet. No complaints," said a satiated Reiko. "I've never eaten so much in my whole life."

"So what's your pleasure now?"

"First one cigarette, then I'd like to go to the public bath. My hair could use a washing."

"Okay, there's one nearby," I said.

"By the way, Watanabe, if you don't mind my asking, are you sleeping with this Midori girlfriend of yours?"

"You mean, have we had sex? Not yet. I decided I needed to put myself more together first."

"And are you more together now?"

I shook my head, I-don't-know. "You mean, have things fallen into place now that Naoko's dead?"

"No, that's not it. After all, you'd already made your decision before Naoko's death, right? That you couldn't let go of this Midori. No matter whether Naoko lived or died. You chose Midori, Naoko chose to die. You're an adult. You should take responsibility for your decisions. Otherwise nothing is worth anything."

"But I can't forget just like that," I said. "I'd told Naoko I'd wait for her. Yet I couldn't wait. When it came right down to the wire, I let go. It's not a question of who is or isn't to blame. It's a question I have to answer for myself. Very likely it would all have amounted to the same thing. Even if I hadn't let her go, Naoko probably would have chosen to die. But no matter, I still find it hard to forgive myself. You'll probably say that's natural and can't be helped, but my relationship with Naoko was not that simple. When you think about it, we were bound, life-and-death, from the very beginning."

"I think if you harbor some pain over Naoko's death, you should hold onto that pain and feel it for the rest of your life. And if there is something to be learned from that, then you should learn. But completely separate from that, I think you should be happy with Midori. Your pain has nothing to do with her. If you hurt her any more than you apparently already have, there'll be no making up for it. So however much it hurts, be strong. Grow up,

be an adult. That's why you left the dormitory to live here on your own, isn't it? All the way out here in that coffin of a train."

"I understand what you're saying," I said. "I'm just not ready yet. But, honestly, wasn't that a pitiful funeral? A person shouldn't have to die like that."

Reiko reached out her hand and patted me on the head. "We all have to do that sometime. You and me included."

*

We walked five minutes along a stream to the bathhouse and came back home feeling a little refreshed. Then we uncorked the wine and drank it on the veranda.

"Watanabe, could you bring one more glass?"

"Sure. But why?"

"We two're going give Naoko a wake," said Reiko. "A unlonely one."

I brought another glass and Reiko filled it to the brim, then set it out on the garden lantern. Then she sat back down on the veranda, picked up her guitar, and smoked.

"Also, could you bring matches, if you've got any. Big ones, preferably."

I brought out a box of kitchen matches and took a seat beside her.

"Each song I play, will you lay out a match there? I'm going to play everything I know."

First she did a beautiful, quiet rendition of Henry Mancini's "Dear Heart." "You gave this record to Naoko, didn't you?"

"That's right. For Christmas the year before last. She really liked the song."

"So do I. Truly a fine song." She quickly strummed a short passage from "Dear Heart" again, then took a sip of wine. "Well now, how many songs can I play before I get roaring drunk? Not a bad way to hold a wake, eh?"

Next Reiko switched to the Beatles, playing "Norwegian Wood," then "Yesterday," then "Michelle," then "Something," then "Here Comes the Sun," then "Fool on the Hill." I lined up seven matches.

"Seven songs down," said Reiko, sipping her wine and smoking. "The guys really know a thing or two about life's sorrow and elegance"—"the guys" meaning John Lennon, Paul McCartney, and George Harrison, of course.

Letting out a sigh, she put out her cigarette, picked up her guitar again, and launched into "Penny Lane," then "Blackbird," then "Julia," then "When I'm Sixty-Four," then "Nowhere Man," then "And I Love Her," then "Hey Jude."

"How many songs is that?"

"Fourteen," I said.

"Phew," she puffed. "Can't you play one song?"

"Badly."

"Badly is fine."

I brought out my own guitar and stumbled my way through "Up on the Roof." Meanwhile Reiko had a smoke and more wine. She even gave me a round of applause when I finished.

Then Reiko played her own careful, lovely arrangements of Ravel's "Pavanne for a Dead Princess" and Debussy's "Claire de Lune." "I learned these two pieces after Naoko died," she said. "I'm afraid to the very last Naoko's musical tastes never rose above the sentimental level."

Then she performed a few tunes by Bacharach. "Close to You" and "The Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head" and "Walk On By" and "Wedding Bell Blues."

"Twenty songs," I said.

"Your regular human jukebox," exclaimed Reiko. "My teachers at music college would flip if they saw me."

She drank more wine and smoked while she continued with her repertoire, one song after the next. Close to ten bossa novas, followed by Rogers and Hart and Gershwin, everything from Bob Dylan and Ray Charles to Carole King to the Beach Boys and Stevie Wonder, the "Sukiyaki Song" to "Blue

Velvet" to "Green Fields," every song you could think of, sometimes closing her eyes and humming along to the melodies.

When the wine gave out, we moved on to whiskey. I dumped the wine in the glass out in the yard over the lantern and refilled it with whiskey.

"How many songs does this make now?"

"Forty-eight," I said.

Reiko made her forty-ninth tune "Eleanor Rigby," the fiftieth "Norwegian Wood" again. After the fiftieth, she rested her hand and took a drink of whiskey. "Enough? Shall I keep it to this?"

"Enough," I said. "Quite something, I'd say."

"So, Watanabe, forget all about that miserable other funeral," Reiko said, looking me square in the eye. "Just remember this wake. Great, wasn't it?"

I nodded.

"And one for good measure," said Reiko. A fifty-first piece, her trademark Bach fugue.

"Say, Watanabe, shall we?" Reiko whispered after finishing playing.

"Funny you should say that," I said. "I was just thinking that myself."

We drew the curtains, and Reiko and I embraced as if it were the most natural thing in the world. I took off her shirt and slacks and underwear.

"I tell you, I've done some strange things in my

time, but I never thought I'd have a guy nineteen years younger than me take off my panties," said Reiko.

"Then do you want to take them off yourself?" I asked.

"It's okay, take them off," she said. "But don't get upset at my wrinkles."

"Me, I like your wrinkles."

"I could just cry," said Reiko in a near-whisper.

I put my lips to her all over, licking the folds. Then I put my hands over her shallow breasts, softly nibbling the nipples, slowly moving my finger in her warm, moist vagina.

"No, Watanabe," she whispered in my ear, "Not there. That's just a wrinkle."

"Is that all you can say at a time like this? Jokes?" I was taken aback.

"Sorry," said Reiko. "I'm scared. I haven't done this in so long. I feel like a seventeen-year-old girl come visiting a boy in his room and being taken advantage of."

"I actually feel like I'm taking advantage of a seventeen-year-old girl."

I ran my finger along her folds of flesh and kissed her from her neck over to her ear, pinching her nipple. Then as her breathing picked up and a trembling came to her throat, I slowly spread her slender legs and went into her.

"Tell me it's all right, you won't get me pregnant or anything, will you?" pleaded Reiko in a low voice. "I'd be ashamed to get pregnant at my age."

"Don't worry. Rest assured," I said.

I pushed my penis all the way in. She trembled and sighed. I gently caressed her back while working my penis around, then without any warning I suddenly ejaculated. It was unstoppable, that ejaculation. Still clinging to her, I came in her again and again.

"Sorry. I couldn't help myself," I said.

"Stupid boy, don't think about it," said Reiko, slapping my behind. "Do you always think so much when you're in the middle of doing it with a girl?"

"Well, I guess."

"When you're doing it with me, don't think about it. Forget it. Let it come out whenever it wants to come out. How was it? Good?"

"Great. That's why I couldn't hold back."

"Why hold back? It's okay. For me, too, it was great."

"Say, Reiko," I said.

"What?"

"You should find yourself a lover. You're wasting yourself."

"Oh, I'll think about it," said Reiko. "You suppose people fall in love in Asahikawa?"

After a while my penis got hard again and I put it

into her again. I could feel Reiko swallow her breath underneath me. I slowly moved my penis around as I held her and talked about all sorts of things. It was marvelous talking to her while being inside her. When I said something funny and she giggled, the feeling came down to my penis. We stayed in that embrace for a good long time.

"It feels so nice like this," said Reiko.

"Moving around's not bad either," I prompted.

"Shall we?"

I lifted up her tail and drove further in, rotating her body, drinking in the sensations and finally coming.

We ended up fucking four times that night. After four coituses, Reiko shut her eyes in my arms, quivering and sighing.

"I won't need any more of this as long as I live," said Reiko. "Say that once for me, please. Say that you've done your whole life's worth here tonight, so I can rest easy."

"Who can tell about such things?" I said.

*

I told Reiko she'd get there a lot faster and easier by plane, but she insisted on traveling by train.

"I want to take the Aomori-Hakodate Ferry. Who wants to fly?" said Reiko. So I accompanied

her to Ueno Station. She carried her guitar and I her suitcase, both of us waiting on a bench on the platform for the train to come. She wore the same tweed jacket and white slacks she'd been wearing when she arrived in Tokyo.

"You really think Asahikawa's not going to be so bad?" asked Reiko.

"It's a nice town," I said. "I'll visit you there someday."

"Honest?"

I nodded. "I'll write."

"I like your letters. And to think Naoko burned them all. They were such good letters, too."

"Letters are only paper," I said. "Burn 'em and the feelings still remain that are going to remain. Keep them and what's lost is still lost."

"To be perfectly truthful, I'm scared shitless. Going all the way to Asahikawa by myself. So letters, please. I always feel like you're there beside me when I read your letters."

"If it's my letters you want, I'll oblige as often as you like. But don't be so uptight. You'll make it wherever you are."

"I get the feeling that there's something stuck inside me, or is that only an illusion?"

"A residue," I said with a laugh. And Reiko laughed, too.

"Don't forget me," she said.

"I won't, ever," I said.

"I might never see you again, but wherever I am, I'll always remember you and Naoko."

I looked Reiko in the eyes. She was crying. I kissed her in spite of myself. Passers-by all stared at us, but I didn't care. The two of us were living, and I had to believe we'd go on living.

"Be happy," were her parting words to me. "I warned you of all I know to warn you about. I have nothing more to tell you. Just be happy. Enough for me and Naoko, too."

We shook hands and parted.

*

I called Midori and told her I simply had to talk to her. I had loads to tell her. Things I had to get off my chest. There was nothing else I wanted in this world but her. Let's meet and talk, I said, everything depends on that.

Midori stayed silent on the other end of the line the whole while. Silent as all the rain in the world falling over all the grass of the world, on and on. I pressed my forehead against the windowpane and shut my eyes. And finally Midori spoke to me. "Where are you now?" she calmly asked.

Where was I now?

I looked up, receiver in hand, and spun around in the phone booth, taking in my surroundings.

Where the hell was I? I couldn't tell. Not a clue. All I could see about me were people, scores of people, all tired of walking about aimlessly. I held onto the line to Midori from there in the middle of nowhere.

NOTES

CHAPTER 6 (continued)

- p. 7 7 brain size in correlation to its abilities 脳の大きさとその能力の
相関関係 11 diagram of the brain 脳の絵を描く 14
finished the drawing to his satisfaction 満足いくまで描き終えた
- p. 8 4 have absolutely no idea 全然見当がつかない 7 the biggest
nut いちばん頭のおかしい人 8 wager on it 賭けてもいい
10 pretty far out 相当狂っている 12 jabbed a fork into her
broccoli ブロッコリーをフォークでつきさした 13 shouts
who knows what わけのわからないことを叫ぶ 19 ought to
change places 入れかえるべきである 22 getting to know the
ropes 世の中のしくみがわかってきた 24 together thing
about us 私たちのまともな点 25 that we know we're not
together 自分たちがまともじゃないとわかっていること
- p. 9 8 skip out on my job 仕事をすっばかす 15 nearly slipped
my mind 忘れるところだった 22 let's take it through to the
end 最後までやりましょう 23 be my guest, whatever you
like いいわよ、どうぞお好きに 24 pulled on a light blue car-
digan ブルーのカーディガンを着ていた 25 thrust both
hands 両手を(ズボンのポケットに)つっこんで
- p. 10 7 staff housing スタッフの住宅 11 let out a chuckle クスク
ス笑う 21 spitting out the seeds and skins 皮と種を地面に吹
いて
- p. 11 1 about ready to listen to the continuation 話の続きが聞きたい
11 row house 長屋 15 a bank of cross-country skis and
poles and boots クロス・カントリー用のスキーとストックと靴の
列 18 chemicals 薬品 26 her whole face lit up as she

- took a puff おいしそうに煙草を吸った
- p. 12 7 scaling the cliff 崖をのぼる 9 manage to keep a straight face through it all まじめな顔で通す 19 size myself up 自分を見きわめる 20 came to realize わかるようになった 22 I'll say そう思います 25 the striking side of a matchbox マッチ箱のざらざらした部分 28 first-rate 一流の
- p. 13 1 came home to me はっきりとそう思うようになった 6 gifted at teaching 教える才能がある 10 a musician per se 音楽の専門家 12 'university track' girls' schools where decent grades automatically push you into college 大学までエスカレーター式に上っていける女子校 16 push the girl very hard ああしろこうしろって、その女の子に押しつける 18 resent being told what to do 押しつけられるのは嫌いである 28 on the good parts 良いところ
- p. 14 4 fairly good musical intuition かなりの音楽的な勘 8 amounted to something よいところまでいった 9 put up with serious training 訓練に耐える 12 make the effort to put it in order 体系化する努力をする 14 in dribs and drabs つまらないことに 16 sight-reading 初見で 17 Bowls you over just to watch. 見る者を圧倒する。 20 don't put in the effort 努力をしない 21 the training drilled into them to put in the effort 努力させる訓練 22 too much praise heaped on them 誉められすぎている 26 for the birds 下らない
- p. 15 1 face up to being disciplined 鍛練に耐える 1 miss out on one of the essentials to building character 人間形成に必要な要素をおっことす 7 a high-performance sports car 高性能のスポーツカー 11 to go easy on the praise 誉めすぎないようにすること 12 from so early on 小さい頃から 16 press matters 物事を押しつける 18 stand by silently and let them ponder things 黙って彼等に考えさせる 18 takes care of itself 勝手にうまくいく 28 Reel you in just like that. ついつい引きこまれる。
- p. 16 1 she simply made up 彼女は話を作りあげた 7 optimum effect できるだけ巧妙に有効に 10 manipulate emotions with great exactness 人の感情を思うがままに刺激する 12 testing

- her own limits 自分能力を試す 14 what she'd been up to
彼女が企んでいたこと 22 how you look at it どう見ても
23 pathetic creature かわいそうな子 25 fallen prey to her
myself 自分が彼女の餌食になる
- p. 17 1 strike me as odd おかしいと思う 5 home in with 精通して
いる 12 was kind of taken with the kid その子が好きだった
14 made a point of never talking 話さないことにしていた
23 a boring life つまんない人生 24 thought the world of
me 私を気にいって
- p. 18 7 showed her to my bed ベッドへ連れていった 17 undoing
her bra ブラジャーをははずす 20 big boobs 大きなおっぱい
24 like a real idiot ばかみたい
- p. 19 6 Can't be nothing. Tell the truth なんでもなくないでしょ、正
直に言ってごらん 8 with no one to lean on 誰も頼る人がい
ない 19 take it out on her 彼女にあたる 26 utterly lost if
it wasn't for me 私(先生)がいなかったらどうしていいかわから
ない 27 forsake 見捨てる
- p. 20 3 in no time at all すぐに 5 was lit by a flame (体が)ほて
る 8 My husband couldn't even come close. 亭主なんて足も
とにも及ばない。 10 my body was coming undone 体のクガ
がはずれていく 14 a through-and-through lesbian 筋金入り
のレズビアン 18 no lie 嘘じゃない 22 the sensation that
shot through me 胸がきゅんとする 26 shake things off fine
はねのけることができる
- p. 21 2 nibbled なめた 4 stripped bare 裸にされて 6 fondled
and ignited 愛撫されてもだえた 8 under a spell 魔法にかかっ
た 17 thoroughly embarrassed すごく恥ずかしい
- p. 22 3 was worlds apart 全然違う世界にいた 5 a fuse was going to
blow in my head 頭のヒューズがとぶ 7 do this once 一度こ
んなことをやると 15 summoned up all my strength 全身の
力をふりしぼった 24 No holds barred. 思いきり。 24
lay off やめる
- p. 23 2 I could almost cry 泣きだしそうだった 20 never show her
face at my door again 二度と家に来ないでくれ
- p. 24 3 her parting words 捨てゼリフ 4 no matter how much you

- try to kid yourself どんなに自分をごまかそうとしても 9 did
 come better with this girl この子との方がより感じた 20
 come on to me 私に感応する
- p. 25 2 play at being lesbians レズごっこをする 8 Zilch. ぜんぜん。
 14 at a loss what to do どうしてよいかわからない 23
 couldn't get rid of the slimy feeling ぬめりを取除けなかった
- p. 26 3 I really came 私バッチリいっちゃったわよ 12 her depart-
 ing line that kept echoing in my head 彼女の最後のせりふが頭
 の中でこだまするみたいにわんわんと鳴りひびいていた 17
 if on some outside chance she did come 万が一彼女が来たとした
 ら 18 get myself to concentrate 集中する 24 haunted by
 her presence 彼女の気配につきまとわれる 24 unsettling 落
 着かぬ
- p. 27 2 distant, estranged 変なかんじで、よそよそしい 7 early
 symptom of sickness 初期徴候 8 on good terms 仲のよい
 18 brought yourself this far あなたはそこまで言った 22
 rumor had it that うわさというのは 24 labeled a bona fide
 homosexual 札つきの同性愛者 24 had my way with the girl
 彼女を思いのままにした 28 turned rather skillfully to spy-tur-
 vy 話をうまく作りかえた
- p. 28 6 spreading the word 言いふらす 7 took advantage of their
 daughter 彼等の娘をいたずらした 9 a psychiatric record 精
 神病の病歴 12 teary-eyed 目を泣きはらして 19 tousled
 her hair 髪をくしゃくしゃにしていた 20 I could just picture
 it. ありありと目にうかぶわよ。 22 take everyone to task み
 んなを責める 24 a dollop of a devil 人形のような悪魔 27 to
 make matters worse おまけに具合の悪いことには
- p. 29 6 lured into しかけた 9 This is no game. 冗談じゃない。
 15 drag us in deeper 傷が深くなる 20 come what may どう
 転んでも 22 so much raw material 好材料 27 standing
 立場
- p. 30 2 the tension's just going to mount 緊張が増してくる 8 the
 gravity of the situation 事の重大さ 8 at the point of really
 getting interesting 面白くなってきたところで 10 pre-fab 建
 売り住宅 14 right off the bat 簡単に 17 sitting ducks

just asking to be crippled 二度と立ちあがれないくらい傷ついて
21 insomnia 不眠 26 Don't send me out on my own. ひとり
りこしないで。

- p. 31 3 square away 整理する 4 see to 手配する 6 just hang in
there 待ってくれ 10 didn't last a month 1ヵ月ももたなかつた
12 the next thing I knew 気がつく
- p. 32 1 pressured him into divorce 無理に離婚した 9 tried and
true 誠実な 11 with all his might 精いっぱい 16 did me
in 私を狂わせた 17 crumbled in an instant 一瞬にして崩れた
- p. 33 16 drips and drops ぽつぽつと 24 natch もちろん
- p. 34 1 nothing I'd talk about with ladies present 女性の前では言えない
ようなこと 8 were cuddling 抱きあっていた 9 a long-
handled fan 長い柄のついた扇
- p. 35 7 hit the sack 寝る 12 get under the covers ふとんにもぐる
18 drew Naoko to me 直子をひきよせる
- p. 36 1 her torso 彼女の体 2 registered the lines of her body in
my mind 体の線を頭の中に叩きこんだ 14 droplets 雨だれ
15 clue me in わかる 19 tend to 世話をする 23 damp
and chilly 湿ってひんやりと
- p. 37 7 defrost 解凍する 10 flapped its wings 羽をばたつかせる
17 parted ways 別れた 22 slickers 合羽 26 special
breed of ghost 特殊な魂 26 venture out on rainy days 雨の
日にさまよう
- p. 38 5 Great place for pork. 豚肉がおいしいところ。 17 tilted
his head 首をひねった 18 Crown Prince 皇太子殿下 27
cut him short 話を切りあげる
- p. 39 7 A depressing thought. かなしい気持ち。 9 satchel 荷物
13 passers-by 通行人 15 perky 元気な 16 nondescript
type わけのわからない種類の人々 21 crawl off somewhere ど
こかに消える 23 drowsy 眠そうな 25 thriving 繁盛する
27 was puking 吐いていた
- p. 40 1 a bee-line across the way 筋向いの 9 snapped her fingers
to the rhythm 指をならしてリズムをとる 15 swept through
hearing range きこえてきた 17 plastered 酔払った 19

- pay phone 公衆電話 24 made it with the girl in that boutique ブティックの女と一発やった
- p. 41 2 spelled out the details at great length こと細かに話した 6
 carrying confusion in my mind 混乱した頭を抱えたまま 22
 by all rights should have been sleepy 眠くてしかたがない
- p. 42 2 enveloped in the darkness 闇に包まれた

CHAPTER 7

- p. 43 2 gym class 体育の授業 4 worked up an appetite 食欲がでる
 7 the Lit Department library 文学部の図書館
- p. 44 5 something pressing 何か用事 10 just an interjection あい
 づち 15 gulped down more water またごくごくと水を飲んだ
- p. 45 4 Once in a while won't kill you. たまにはいいでしょ。 5
 fazed ぼおとして 6 need a pick-up myself 元気になるたい
 12 two vodka tonics apiece ウォッカを2杯ずつ 18 when
 the world gets to be too much for me 世の中が辛くなると
 25 missed periods 生理不順
- p. 46 7 Ditto for me. 僕も同じだ。 13 reorder the events of my
 life 人生の出来事を組みかえる 27 planted an elbow on the
 counter カウンターに片肘ついた
- p. 47 7 dump your love life 恋人を捨てなさい 13 whisk me off
 somewhere far away どこか遠くに私を連れてって
- p. 48 4 shell 殻をむく 8 everybody's always so pushy みんないつ
 も押しつける 17 live by demanding things of one another
 互いに要求しあって生きる 22 so at ease around you あなた
 と一緒にいると落ち着く 26 when it can't be helped 仕方ない
 きには
- p. 49 13 frowning 顔をしかめて 20 robust smell 香ばしい 26
 hanging out with me 私とつきあう
- p. 50 7 for starters まず 11 Ever so gently. すごくやさしく。
 14 at least partway 少なくとも途中までは 15 come to my
 senses 我に返って 17 going with somebody else 他につきあ
 っている人がある 25 get in a glance or two ちらっとみえる
- p. 51 1 sorry look 哀しそうな顔 4 Right-o. そうよ。 5 wowie-

- zowie やれやれ 12 hard-core 筋金入りの 12 don't want to be treated to drinks 酒なんかおごられたくない 19 missed a step 踏み外す 26 the Shinjuku Gyoen Garden 新宿御苑
- p. 52 6 in tune with the world 世間馴染んだ 13 walked her to Shinjuku Station 彼女を新宿駅まで送った 21 pervert 変質的な 25 stow us away in the hold 船倉におき去りにする
- p. 53 12 leggy figure すりりと足のびた脚 13 a gorgeous pair 美しい脚 22 cutesie undies 可愛い下着 24 so much the worse 余計悪い
- p. 54 2 jerk-jerk ショッコ 8 verb conjugations 動詞の活用 15 why does it fall my lot to have to explain どうして僕が説明しなくてはならないのか 26 can't speak for others 他人のことはわからない
- p. 55 3 in all honesty 正直なはなし 8 in as much as I think of you as a friend 友人として君をみているから 15 cast me in the role 私に出演させて 22 heaved a sigh ため息をついた 27 controlled conditions 制約
- p. 56 4 lewd 淫乱 9 More as your fieldwork case study. いわばケース・スタディーとして。 13 upset 怒る 14 nympho 淫乱 27 club activities クラブ活動
- p. 57 1 Joint concerts, stuff like that. 合同コンサートとかそういうもの。 13 outings 出かけること 13 a swarm of young boys 男の子の一群 17 tug at her skirt hem スカートの裾をひっぱる 18 ogled じろじろ見る
- p. 58 3 just string along ついてくればよい 5 converging on 集まってくる 6 pre-exam 模擬テスト 6 prep school class 予備校の授業 8 waded through the sea of students 学生の人ごみの中を抜けた 11 present conditional 仮定法現在 12 past conditional 仮定法過去 18 in any concrete application 具体的に何かの役に立つ 19 systematic thinking 系統的に考えること 22 you're one clever fellow あなたは偉い
- p. 59 3 skipped over 抜かした 18 Who knows? どうかな? 21 metaphysical thought 形而上的思考 21 just to name a few たとえば
- p. 60 7 pat きちんと 9 made fun of me 私をばかにした 15

- Das Kapital 「資本論」 21 have a fairly good picture かなり理解している 28 such a line-up of sneaks インチキなやつらの集り
- p. 61 1 shudder ソッとする 5 a touchstone to society and radicalism 社会と急進主義の試金石 13 social consciousness 社会問題意識 13 critical awareness 批判精神 19 putting on such pompous expressions and using big words わかったような顔してむずかしい言葉を使っている 21 imperialist exploitation 帝国主義的搾取
- p. 62 4 I'm common. 私は庶民よ。 14 sneaky lous インチキなやつら 15 big empty words 偉そうな言葉 17 feeling her up under her skirt スカートの下に手をいれて 25 look oh-so-smart about it all わかったような顔 27 go yes-yes ハイハイそうですかと言う
- p. 63 3 rice balls おにぎり 4 late-night snack 夜食 5 Utterly sexist. 全くの性差別。 5 make waves 波風をたてる 9 side dish おかず 10 cod roe たらこ 11 rolled omelette 卵焼き 13 fussing over ぶつぶつ言う 18 was so disgusted いやになった 27 You've got me. どうかな。
- p. 64 12 tax man 税務署員 16 all high and mighty 威張りくさって 20 the top-of-the line 特上の 24 pick him apart over little nothings 何でもないことで、くどくど文句をつける
- p. 65 10 hospitalized 入院している 11 It's my turn. 私の番。 15 straight-faced けろっとして 21 hasn't got long 時間の問題である 24 brain tumor 脳腫瘍 (しゅよう)
- p. 66 1 visitors 見舞客 1 out-patients 外来患者 1 permeated 滲っていた 7 double room 二人部屋 12 arm pocked with needle marks (注射や点滴の) 針の跡がある腕 18 There was hardly any life left in his body. 肉体に生命力がほとんど見うけられなかった。 26 stout man 肉づきのよい男
- p. 67 13 It's bound to hurt. 痛むにきまつてる。 18 partway 半分 27 several changes of underwear 下着の着替え
- p. 68 2 sustenance 病人のための食べ物 13 an invalid 病人 18 be around to visit 見舞にくる予定 28 in-patients 入院患者

- p. 69 4 been shooting glances at my legs 私の脚をちらちら見ている
8 bored 退屈している 11 recovery 回復 16 at least down
deep he's a straight-shooter 根は正直な人 23 never take
anything back once I've come out and said it 言いだすとあとに
引かない
- p. 70 5 keeping me company here 一緒にここにいること 18 in-
volved with 交際している 23 simply starved for sex セックス
に飢えている 27 interesting line of thought 面白い線をつ
いている
- p. 71 6 anything goes なんだってやる 9 she has to come three
times 3回はいっちゃう 10 positions 体位 20 name the
time 都合のよい時を言ってよ 22 flick 映画
- p. 72 6 injected 'ahs' and 'ums' <ああ>とか<うん>とあいづちを打
った 11 intravenous feed bottle 点滴のビン 21 a doctor
made the rounds 医師の回診があつた
- p. 73 6 we'll cross that bridge when we come to it またその時点で考え
よう 12 give everybody a good, clear shot ぼっちり見せちゃ
うの 22 boned and soft-simmered fish 骨抜きのもろかく煮た
魚
- p. 74 5 Do you need to take a pee? おしっこしたい? 14 ailments
病氣 18 two portions of food 二人分の定食 20 shredded
cabbage キャベツのせん切り 23 polished off everything 全部
平らげた
- p. 75 6 register hunger お腹をすかす 10 nursing 看病をすること
23 well-wishing ときたまの慰め 28 a pack mule or some-
thing 荷車引きのロバなんか
- p. 76 1 been around enough いい年をして 11 savings are being
siphoned away 貯えが乏しくなる 18 full nursing 完全看護
20 don't have the numbers 数が足りない 26 Tight schedul-
ing. 過密スケジュール。
- p. 77 2 toyed with ~ ~をいじくりまわした 13 IV 点滴 15
bedpan しびん 20 his mind's starting to go 頭がおかしくな
り始めている 22 don't get concerned 気にしないで
- p. 78 3 might have passed for dead 死んでいると言っても通りそうだ
つた 9 stupor 混濁した意識 15 wouldn't die on me 僕の

- みているうちに死なないように 17 take his last breath under
my watchful gaze 僕が看護している時に息を引きとる 25
struck up a conversation 話をした
- p. 79 4 Be good to her! 彼女を大事にしなさいよ。 4 let go of her
彼女を放す 9 squeeze しぼりとる 10 allowance おこづか
い 12 took her leave 出ていく
- p. 80 7 in a trance 夢遊状態 27 a low, dry rasp 低い乾いた声
- p. 81 20 mistaken me for someone else 誰かと間違えている 26
loll about のんびりする 27 over-exertion 無理をすること
28 wear you down 疲れさせる
- p. 82 6 I'm not bad at it わりこ上手いんです 18 Greek tragedies
ギリシヤ悲劇 25 grinds to a standstill 一歩も動かない
27 have their say 言い分がある
- p. 83 7 conduct traffic 交通整理をする 16 get into a jam 身動きが
とれない 25 was famished ひどくお腹がすいた
- p. 84 4 mind if~? ~してもかまいませんか? 10 crunched away
ポリポリかじる 10 cuke キュウリ 15 took a breather 一
息ついた 16 a burner ガス・コンロ
- p. 85 5 dispenser 水さし 14 grimace 顔をしかめる
- p. 86 5 put the pieces together まとめる 6 in a daze 意識が混濁し
て 19 this dying vestige of a man この死にかけている男
24 oblivious to すっかり忘れて
- p. 87 6 stressed-out 疲れていた 9 vending machine 自動販売機
16 with admiration 感心して
- p. 88 5 thrashing around 曇れること 6 drop dead 死んじまえ
11 blacked me out 目の前が真暗になる 15 Maligned. けな
されて。 16 doing your darnedest 一生懸命やって 20
nonsense わけのわからないこと
- p. 89 1 was lost in thought 考えこんだ 2 brings to mind 思い出さ
せる 3 ran away from home 家出した 6 was fed up with
いやになって 12 in bits and pieces ぼつぼつと 17 Get
this. わかる。 22 with a pull-cart attached リヤカーをつけ
て 25 huddle around the houseposts 柱にしがみつく
- p. 90 9 capped it off like this しめくくる
- p. 91 3 made a pledge 約束した 6 blurted out あわてて言った

- 9 you're cornered 困らされている 18 read my palm 手相を
みる 22 past four 4時すぎに 28 watched a live soccer
match サッカー中継を見た
- p. 92 2 go to my part-time job アルバイトに行く 20 porno ポルノ
22 dirty talk いやらしい話
- p. 93 1 I can see it coming あとは想像がつくよ 3 come by for me
迎えにきてくれ 8 as it turned out 結局 13 trudged down
to the lobby 重い足どりでロビーへ降りた
- p. 94 3 I'll be in touch from my side 私の方から連絡する 18 nibbled
on かじった 22 the crisp crunch, crunch ぱりぱりとかじる
音
- p. 95 9 wound up my spring ネジをまく 16 talk to myself ひとり
ごとを言う 17 muttering ぶつぶつ言う 22 gave me the
push to～ 僕を～しようという思いにさせてくれた
- p. 96 2 crammed つめこんで勉強する 9 my regards to Reiko レイ
コさんによろしく 15 exhaust trails 飛行機雲
- p. 97 4 undistinguished ばつとしない 22 deadly まずい

CHAPTER 8

- p. 98 7 improvise 間に合わせの 9 a real jerk ろくでもない男
10 on the ball 機敏な 14 made way for 道をあけてくれた
18 tourniquet 止血帯 19 disinfected 消毒した
- p. 99 11 in a jiffy すぐに 11 hang on for a second ちょっと待って
ろよ 18 dopey ばかげた 23 in the way 邪魔
- p. 100 2 Foreign Ministry Civil Service Employment Primary Ex-
amination 外務公務員採用一種試験 10 have it under your
belt 自分のものにする 13 local training 国内研修 23 Gi-
ve me a break! 馬鹿言っちゃいけないよ。 25 scrimping きり
つめること
- p. 101 7 figure out わかる 9 introspective 内省的な 9 jibed 皮
肉を言った 19 twosome 二人で
- p. 102 9 free to～ ～するのは自由である 17 pull anything over on
Hatsumi ハツミをだます 22 incredulous げげんそうに
25 That goes without saying, そんなのあたり前じゃないか。

- 28 if I hit a snag うまくいかなかったら
- p. 103 6 doing my share of struggling 俺は俺なりにずいぶん努力している
12 simpletons ばか者たち 16 grinding away 身を粉にして
22 landed a job 職が見つかった
- p. 104 18 nicely made-up とてもきちんと化粧をして 27 snooty 気取った
- p. 105 16 quagmire 沼地 16 deserving まともな 21 immutable constant 一定不変
25 eternal go-around 永遠の話題
- p. 106 3 hit it off 気に入る 9 Not stuck up at all. うぬぼれの無い。
19 die-hard snobs すごく傲慢(ごうまん)な人 26 get dirty looks いやな目つきで見られる
- p. 107 7 Fat chance. 見込み薄ですよ。 11 lah-dee-dah チャラチャラしている
11 debs お嬢様たち 19 Talk about tight lips! なにしろ口が固くてね。 19 shrouded in mystery 謎に包まれている
25 an illicit love affair 道ならぬ恋
- p. 108 5 gotten on 仲よくなる 26 Things were sure taking a turn for the worse. まずいことになってきた。
28 snide bastard 意地悪
- p. 110 5 burst onto the scene その場に現れた 7 deferred 従った
9 get it on with ~ ~ と(セックスを)する 18 lure him out 彼を誘い出す
- p. 111 3 garnish つけあわせ 26 holing up (部屋に)とじこもっている
- p. 112 1 for her sake 彼女のために 10 one-night stand 一夜だけの(セックス)相手
14 cocksurenness 傲嬌さ 14 in a measured tone 整然と 24 craving 渴望
- p. 113 4 in common 共通の 13 wavers 迷う
- p. 114 13 threw out the line その言葉を言ってみた 14 there were no takers 答える人はいなかった
23 patician elegance 高質で上品なさま 24 accouterments 身につけているもの
- p. 115 1 longed to ~ ~ したいという激しい思いにかられた 6 hard-set あくせくしている
16 Nagasawa's mold 永沢の言う、型にはまった説 23 pray tell どうぞ言って 29 deluding あざむく
- p. 116 17 said to no avail 言ったが誰も何も答えなかった 21 flag

- down 手をあげてとめる 26 as you wish お好きなように
- p. 117 4 carbon copies まったく同じ 24 shadowy recesses 片隅の闇
25 twitched びくりと動いた
- p. 118 5 summon a resonance 心の共振をよぶ 8 came no closer to
discovering 最後までとうとうわからなかった 11 evoked よ
びおこす 13 a diner 食堂 18 crimson fruit 深紅のフルー
ツ 22 adolescent infatuation 少年期の憧憬 23 un-
blemished, and unremitting 汚れない無垢な 26 I almost
broke down and cried 僕はほとんど泣きだしてしまい、そんな哀し
みを覚えた
- p. 119 6 put an end 終える 21 on the rocks 危機にひんしている
- p. 120 11 hold my own at ~ができる 14 a pool hall 玉突き場
16 out of place 場違い 18 faze 気にする 27 You're
some player! 上手いですね。
- p. 121 4 a man of the world 遊び人 11 in a row 続けて 28 in-
stalled a serious look in her eyes 真剣なまなざしをした
- p. 122 2 a precise amount of power 正確な力の入れ方 4 pushed-
back hair 後ろにまわした髪 5 squarely きちんと 5
braced upon 押えて 6 dingy うす汚ない 7 transformed
into 形を変えた 13 throb ずきずきする
- p. 123 3 antiseptic 消毒薬 3 it's just around the corner すぐ近くの
の 8 to be around me 私のそばにいること 11 not on
your life まさか 12 stand on ceremony 遠慮する 21
hauling out 引っ張り出して 21 first-aid kit 救急箱 24
disinfectant 消毒 25 with singular skill 手際よく
- p. 124 3 fetched two beers 缶ビールを二本出してきた 13 go-be-
tween お見合いの仲人 16 a face made for smiling 笑顔がとて
もいい顔 27 if I were you あなたの立場だったら
- p. 125 3 go haywire 神経がおかしくなる 14 in futility 無駄に
- p. 126 2 siblings 兄弟 3 in want of 欲しい 4 resigned myself あ
きらめる 7 pool-shark ビリヤードの名人 15 cling to そ
んなにこだわる 22 no smart cookie 頭の悪い女
- p. 127 3 rationalized 正当化した 5 brave the elements 危険に立ち
向う 15 slurp down slugs ナメクジをのみこむ 16 show
anyone his back うしろをみせる 23 Ohboy! やれやれ。

25 absolute faith 確信

- p. 128 7 caught a glimpse ちらっと見た 15 overnight pass 外泊許可
21 in another two Sundays あと二回日曜日がきたら
- p. 129 4 overcast and drizzling 雲がたれこめて雨が降っている 7
mothballs 防虫剤 7 adhered to くっついた 9 drooped びたりとくっついたまま動かなかった 15 was beyond me さっぱりわからなかった 26 a possible tie-in 関連づけるもの
- p. 130 4 sheer fluke 全くの偶然 7 with serene precision 音もたてない位そとと、そして確実に 20 betted drink money (ペブシの) 代金を賭けてゲームをした 23 abandoned 見捨ててしまった
- p. 131 5 reclaim 取戻す 6 rail 抵抗する 12 throw me off 少し混乱させる 18 I'm off to ~ ~ へ行く

CHAPTER 9

- p. 132 5 made it clear はっきりと言った 15 made up with 仲直りする 18 gave you a piece of my mind お前にもけっこうきついことを言った 19 repentance 反省
- p. 133 3 What d'you expect? あたり前でしょ。 10 plunging toward ~ の中樞に達して 12 waterlogged 水びたしになって 23 oddball 変な人
- p. 134 7 crumpled しわくちゃの 14 I've been away 旅行に行っていたの 27 child's play 楽なもの
- p. 135 2 a somber look on your face 神妙な顔 5 divvy up 分けあう 6 keepsakes 形見 10 out of spite 意地でも 21 bad-mouthed 悪口を言った 23 mangy 皮膚病にかかった 23 crooks いやな奴
- p. 136 16 gusher ひどい
- p. 137 4 stay out of my way そばにこないで 6 appended 続けて言った 10 pits 地獄 10 had one bang-up fight すごい喧嘩をした 15 looped over ぐるっと回った 25 blanking out ぼかんとして 26 in disbelief 不信感を持って
- p. 138 1 falling for 好きになる 14 tear ducts are primed 泣き出す 16 heedless 気にせず 24 on shaky grounds いささか険悪な

仲で

- p. 139 2 popped right out とび出す 3 chortled カラカラ笑った
6 straight-laced 融通がきかない 15 what've you been up
to? あげたの方は何をしていたの 28 cue 手引きをする
- p. 140 6 no questions asked まず間違いなく 8 put a crimp on 妨害
する 11 keep at it 頑張ってる 16 question of stance 立場
の問題 25 triple feature 映画の三本立 26 pix 映画
27 smelled screwy わけのわからない臭いがした
- p. 141 10 perversion 変態 10 tedious 退屈な 15 tits オッパイ
16 pronounced 黒ずんでいた 18 was so into it それにひた
り切っていた 19 get the most out of the cost of her ticket 入
場料のもとをとる 28 took a gander ちらっと見た
- p. 142 8 strike you as odd 不思議な気がする 12 by the same
measure 同じ計りでみると 15 lapping and sucking noises ベ
ちゃべちゃとか、くちゃくちゃとかいう擬音 26 repertoire レ
パートリー 28 had her fill 充分味わった
- p. 143 12 unfathomable わけのわからない 16 smashed 飲んだくれ
て 17 categorical statements 分別くさいこと 25 pay-
toilet 有料トイレ 26 change 小銭
- p. 144 9 I'll see you home 家まで送るよ 16 straight through until
morning 朝までずっと 28 get saddled with 責任を負う
28 Unauthorized Leave 無断外泊
- p. 145 3 hold myself back 我慢した 12 motor-mouth 好き勝手を言
う 14 had my way 自分の思い通りにする 19 frazzled 疲
れた 22 pushy 身勝手な
- p. 146 1 paged to the phone 電話口に呼び出してもらった 4 abet
my delinquency 僕の片棒をかつぐ 8 I owe you one 恩に着る
16 perk up 元気になる 20 I'm having a great time すごく楽
しいわ 22 release 解放されている
- p. 147 4 I wasn't all that hungry それほどお腹がすいてなかった 6
shoveled down 平らげた 9 my pleading paid off わがままが
聞いてもらえた 15 'fraidy-cat 怖がり屋 17 take a rain
check この次にする 27 musty かびくさい
- p. 148 5 beached shell of a shipwreck 海岸にうち捨てられた廃船 8
dropped the line flat ぼつりと言う 9 split the money お金を

分ける 25 foam あぶく

- p. 149 6 ticking of the clock 時計のコツコツという音 12 go for looks 面食い 16 put you down 悪く言う 17 expressing my feelings 自分の感情を言葉で表す 18 don't get me wrong 誤解しないで 26 light some incense お焼香する 28 a Buddhist altar 仏壇
- p. 150 6 What's this now? なんでもた? 13 had a fit 腰をぬかした 14 funerary image 遺影 15 a full-crotch view 股をひろげて見せていること 22 stormed off in a shit とび出していく 26 meeting people for the first time 初対面
- p. 151 7 in his death throes 死の苦しみにいる 10 altar bell 仏壇の鐘 14 put in a word with God 神様と話をしなさいね 18 keep at it 頑張る
- p. 152 8 burrowed her nose into my chest 僕の胸に彼女は鼻を押しつけた 13 tickling my nostrils 鼻をくすぐっていた 28 melt 心がけなごむ
- p. 153 6 what's that supposed to mean どういう意味なの 12 the clover-covered hill クローバーの茂った丘 17 you're tops あなたって最高
- p. 154 2 extricated ぬけでた 11 scanned the shelves 棚を探してみた 15 Beneath the Wheel 「車輪の下」 20 plowed through とにかく読み通した 28 corny 古臭い
- p. 155 2 hushed しんとした 5 warmed my insides 体を温めてくれた 20 deserted 人気のない 22 crouched 身をすくめるようにして 22 vigil 寝ずの番
- p. 156 1 memo pad メモ用紙 17 rapped たたいた 21 repaired ひきあげた 24 before long やがて 24 a lead-heavy lid of dreamless sleep slid over me 重い鉛のふたのような夢のない眠りが訪れた
- p. 157 4 coincided with the approach of autumn 秋が深まったのと同同時だった 10 if it wasn't for her もし彼女がいなかったら
- p. 158 1 get depressed 気持が沈みこむ 16 day after day 来る日も来る日も 16 can't get enough of it それでも飽きません 24 is destined to ～～になりそうです
- p. 159 4 get so frustrated with myself つくづく自分が嫌になる 10 a

CHAPTER 10

- p. 160 2 hopeless swamp どうしようもないぬかるみ 6 mire 泥沼
- p. 161 21 I simply couldn't be bothered. 僕はただ面倒臭かったのだ。
- p. 162 7 winter break 冬休み 12 rolled around やってきた 22
in spare moments 暇な時間には 23 weird 奇妙な 25 mid-
dle digit 中指
- p. 163 1 scored a few songs 何曲かを譜面にした 2 reserved 口数が
少ない 6 took up the slack 代わりにそのぶんをしゃべった
7 It's just a phase. 今こういう時期なの。 9 concocted でっち
あげた 21 envelope 包みこむ 23 abdomen 腹
- p. 164 6 starting to get to me うんざりしてきた 7 make ends meet
何とかやりくりする 7 averted 向けた 22 take your time
ゆっくり、時間をかけなさい
- p. 165 2 couldn't get over とれだけ見ているも見飽きなかった 7 It's
all in your head それは精神的なものである 7 There's no
rush. あせることはない。 17 donned 身につけた
- p. 166 2 reminiscing 思い出を語りながら 8 embraced 抱き合う
10 striking the closing note of my teens 十代に終止符をうった
13 with relative ease 比較的楽に 18 arsenal 兵器 19 in-
stigated 煽動する 20 run-in こぜりあい 20 jocks 体育会
系の学生 21 fracas さわぎ 21 expelled 追い出された
23 flare up 喧嘩 25 putting everyone on edge みんなをビリ
ビリさせる
- p. 167 1 scrapes 窮地 2 intervention 仲裁 3 time was ripe 頃合
だった 6 affordable 手頃な 9 find 掘りだしもの 12
scruffy 荒れた 21 getting on in years 年を取っていた 26
highly appreciated items ありがたい物 27 was slated to ~ ~
する予定だった
- p. 168 5 down the line ずっと先に 16 take her under your wing 彼
女を君がひきうける
- p. 169 6 squalid むさ苦しさ 6 all those nobodies くだらないあの連
中 14 lolling ねころんで 19 resemblance そっくり

- p. 170 2 sniff out さがす 5 rush you into a decision 結論を急がせる
8 if all went well すべてうまくいけば 9 presented problems
問題になる 15 a good stint of まとまった量の仕事 19 dy-
ing to～是非～したい 24 round up 狩り集める, 集める
- p. 171 3 took up with me なついた 6 So much for the homefront.
体裁が整うと。 8 solid ぶっとおしで 18 elicited 引き出
した 26 the supposed sister お姉さんらしい人
- p. 172 1 blipped off the screen ぶいと姿を消す 9 disembodied つき
放すような様子で 12 hang up 電話を切る 16 an in-
sidious trait of mine 僕に潜在している癖 17 get absorbed in
夢中になる 24 abhorrent 嫌な 27 excuses 言い訳
- p. 173 11 hang around うろつく 14 left off ふれなかった 21
gardening 庭いじり 22 yard broom 庭ぼうき 22 rake く
ま手 22 clippers 植木ばさみ 23 weeding and trimming
雑草を抜くこと 25 presentable 見苦しくしない
- p. 174 1 post-retirement 退職後 9 no, siree とんでもない, 違います
よ 15 puttering about ぶらつくこと 19 in the way of
thanks お礼の意味で 24 at your disposal 好きにだけ
- p. 175 2 coat of varnish ニスの上塗り 4 ready to pull away はがれ
そうになっている 16 forwarded 転送されてきた 16
alumni 同窓会
- p. 176 6 grueling 苦しい 13 hearing things 幻聴 17 symptoms
症状 19 cycles 周期 21 taxes 負担をかける 24
specialist 専門医 27 fragmented elements 断片的部分
27 psyche 精神
- p. 177 4 I tried my darnedest to tell her 必死で説得した 10 effec-
tive treatment 効果的治療 12 therapeutic 自己治療をする
13 strictly speaking 厳密に言えば 19 'on leave' 「出張」
28 in full spring bloom すっかり春らしくなっている
- p. 178 1 at the peak of its blossom 満開で 3 hues 色あい 7 be
immersed in ～に熱中する 18 enveloping the garden in blue
twilight ぼんやり青い闇が庭をつつみながら 21 sores ただれ
22 reeked 臭った
- p. 179 6 stench of decay 腐臭 7 railed ののしった 8 hurled 投
げかけた 15 membrane 膜 15 preventing me from con-

- tact with the world outside 外界と接触するのを妨げる 27
 register for class 課目登録をする
- p. 180 4 make up 仲直りすること 12 consciousness 意識 12
 flabby ゆるんでいる 15 pull myself together しっかりする
 28 I was down to skin and bone げっそりやせた。
- p. 181 3 a long spin on my bike 自転車での遠出 4 put my ass in
 gear 腰をすえた 8 so rudely upset あまりにもひどくくつがえ
 された 9 ailment 病い 10 deep-seated 根が深い 15
 our combined strength 力を合わせれば 16 toppled ひっくり
 返した 17 in no time あっという間に 21 debilitated 衰
 弱する 24 end-all solution 問題のすべての解決 28 make
 a go of it ちゃんとやっていく
- p. 182 10 I've got to pay my dues to keep on living. 生き続けるための
 代償を払わなくてはならない。
- p. 183 17 intolerant 非寛容な 27 tucked me into bed 寝かしつけて
 くれた
- p. 184 6 I can't afford to lose 失えない 23 seduce 誘惑する 27
 signed up for 登録した
- p. 185 10 it was meant to be for us 私たちのための本来のものだ
 12 unsettling 落ち着かない 17 Hard-Time 苦労性の 28
 Life on easy street. 楽しい人生。
- p. 186 12 a shot in the dark あてずっぽう 12 nonplussed あきれて
- p. 187 10 the far side of the globe 地球の裏側 12 perennial 相変わ
 らずの 14 toting 抱えて 15 feel a little light-headed 少し
 ぼんやりとした気分になる 19 prompting 促す 20 used
 book stores 古本屋
- p. 188 3 none of my beeswax 何でもない 17 inconsiderate 思いや
 りのない 25 brickhead イツアタマ 26 in case it slipped
 your attention 気がつかなかったのなら
- p. 189 11 Why don't you just give it all a good long think? 心ゆくまで
 よく考えたらどう? 13 depressed 気持が沈む 13 trip つ
 まづく 20 guzzle ごくごくのむ 24 torn up 破った
- p. 190 3 job openings 仕事の口 22 of no real concern to you 君に
 とってはどうでもいいこと
- p. 191 1 convincing 説得力がある 2 in two goes ふた口で 6

- wasn't all that great あまりよくない 10 late shift 遅番
11 raise 昇給
- p. 192 6 sporting 見せびらかしている 6 plus it made her look a little more grown-up それに、彼女を少し大人っぽくみせた 12 squinted 目を細めた 13 the ruins of a building 廃屋 25 doffing 脱ぎ捨てて 26 playing catch キャッチボールをした
り
- p. 193 13 grit my teeth 歯をくいしばる 17 carefree 快い 25 on speaking terms 話をする間柄 26 broody むっつりした 28 break the ice 打解ける
- p. 194 6 had clear likes and dislikes きちんとした好みと考え方を持っていた 14 chock-full きっしり 17 lifted from ~のところから、黙って持ってきた 18 smel~~as~~ ししゃも 18 charcoal brazier 七輪 27 concretely 具体的
- p. 195 2 eroding away むしばんでゆく 14 I take it そうなんだね 19 unruly junior high schoolers しつけの悪い中学生 21 that aside それほともかく 23 I just can't bring myself to tell her 彼女に言い出せないんだ
- p. 196 4 unknown to me 自分で知らないうちに 10 there's no hope 救いがない 13 ins and outs of Mozart's music モーツァルトの音楽に精通していること 18 buff ファッション 22 crescent moon 三日月 23 polished off 飲み干した
- p. 197 8 at this rate この分では 16 take the liberty of ~ 勝手に~する 24 intensive therapy 集中治療
- p. 198 2 getting out of control コントロールできなくなってきた 4 can't let her out of my sight 彼女から目を離すことができない 7 irretrievably 取り返しのでつかないほど 9 bona fide 適切な 14 pitch black まっ暗闇 20 at the last minute ギリギリになって 20 rest assured 安心して下さい 25 is hard on you あなたも辛いでしょう 26 drop me an occasional line たまに手紙を書いて下さい
- p. 199 5 tenuous 希薄な 6 the crumbling shambles of my life バラバラに崩れてしまいそうな生活 10 it was probably worse than nothing 何を言っても始まらないだろう 22 deemed to ~するようになった 24 propped up her chin 頰杖をついた

- p. 200 6 I gave her the requisite light 火をつけてやった 7 pursed her lips 唇をすぼめた
- p. 201 3 seemed somehow at a loss for something to do なんとなく手持ち無沙汰な風情だった 6 menu samples in the window ウィンドーの料理見本 11 virtually まずどうやら 15 on rare occasions まれに 28 what a disappointment it turned out to be すごく空しいものね
- p. 202 3 poorly ventilated 空調が悪い 19 snack stalls 売店 22 smack in the heart of Tokyo 東京のご真中
- p. 203 9 that's gotten me through 何とかやってこられた 19 switch off and on just like that 好みを簡単に変える 221 blew my top 頭にきた 28 Just to set things straight. いろんな事をはっきりさせるために。
- p. 204 10 Everything just falls into place when we're together. 一緒にいるとすごくぴったりする。 18 nice and clean さっぱりと 19 hand cupped around a match flame マッチの火を手でおおった 24 number series 数列 25 thick 頭が鈍い
- p. 205 1 more of a hunk もっとハンサムな男 2 I'm gone on you あなたのことが好きになっちゃったんだから 8 I'm not making any demands. あなたに期待しているわけではないわよ。 21 from the bottom of my heart 心の底から 22 I'm stuck 身動きがとれない
- p. 206 5 jumbled からみあう 5 going on 続いている 9 cast aside 放り出す 14 confessing 告白する 17 screwy aspects むちゃくちゃな面 19 inheritance 遺産 20 I'm a real bargain if you ask me! お買い得よ。 24 to sort things out 整理する
- p. 207 8 Am I getting through? わかってくれる? 8 get drenched ずぶ濡れになる
- p. 208 4 catch our death of cold 風邪を引いてしまう 20 venereal disease 性病 23 lace doilies レースのカバー
- p. 209 1 roaring drunk へべれけに酔っ払うこと 10 You mean you'll take me as I am? このままの私でいいの? 13 labored the question その質問をひたひた出した 26 industrious 勤勉な 28 evolved 進化した

- p. 210 5 Mr. Know-It-All 何でも知っている人 17 as you like お好きなように
- p. 211 8 turned the tables 逆襲を食わせた 15 make the experience entirely new 全く別の体験にする 23 wouldn't dream of it 考えられないよ
- p. 212 1 worm out of もそもそと脱ぐ 1 wrapped them around それを巻きつけた 7 don't hold back 遠慮しないで 20 sperm 精液
- p. 213 5 when it came down to it そんなもの考えてみたら 8 incomprehensible spread 理解できない新聞の紙面 21 yearning 激しい欲望
- p. 214 1 I'd just been avoiding the obvious conclusion. はっきりした結論を避けてきた。 4 Forget about it until some other time. 他の時期ならともかく。 9 I still kept a large space untouched in my heart for Naoko まだ僕の心の中には直子のために広い場所が手つかずに残されていた 21 a relentless power 抗しがたい力
- p. 215 2 cast into this maze 迷宮に放りこまれる 12 lucid はっきりしている
- p. 216 3 suitable decision 納得のいく結論 7 mum's the word 黙っている 14 protractors 分度器 23 stop torturing yourself 自分を責めるのはやめなさい 23 Let things take their natural course. 物事は流れるべき方向に流れさせなさい。 28 conform あわせる
- p. 217 2 give yourself over to living 人生に身をゆだねる 4 have every reason to ~するの は当然である 13 slip by 逃がす 16 What a bore! なんだかつまらないですよ。

CHAPTER 11

- p. 218 8 reduced to a handful of ash 一握りの灰になった 18 withdrew my entire savings 貯金を全額おろした
- p. 219 3 no order to it all, either 順番も覚えていない 4 hitching rides with passing trucks 通りかかったトラックをヒッチハイクしながら 10 my walk-weary body 歩き疲れた体 13 mos-

quito coils 蚊取線香 18 the money ran low 金が乏しくな
った 20 aimlessly あてもなく 23 I was desperate to hear
her voice. どうしても彼女の声が聞きたかった。 26 turn in
提出する

- p. 220 5 hung up on me 電話をきられてしまった 6 wandering さす
らいの旅 8 appalling ひどい 9 hollow-cheeked こけた頬
9 smudged beyond recognition わけのわからないよごれ 11
pit-dwelling 堅穴住居 14 never failed to find 必ず見つけるこ
とができる 22 assimilate 順応する 22 returned to
nothing 無に帰した
- p. 221 2 Her flesh no longer existed. 彼女の肉体はすでに存在しない。
5 crammed inside me 僕の中につまっていた 6 gushing out
とめどなく出てきた 10 half-demolished 半分くずれた
18 washed over me 僕にうちよせた 19 unfathomable place
わけのわからない場所 23 the definitive end-all to life 生をし
めくくる決定的なもの
- p. 222 15 took upon myself with resignation 諦観として身につけた
18 underlying this life we live 我々の生の中に潜んでいるもの
22 no truth can ease the sorrow どのような真理をもってしても
哀しみを癒すことはできない 28 alleviating 軽減する 28
onslaught 急襲
- p. 223 9 lay curled up 身を丸くして横になる 12 by reflex 反射的に
16 windswept dune 風の吹きすさぶ砂浜 19 weak constitu-
tion 体が丈夫でないこと 19 worn her body to the bone 身を
すり減らした 20 interjecting さしはさみながら 23 wring-
ing ひねること 27 the rage evaporated 怒りは消えた
- p. 224 9 heedless さっさと 11 was littered with ~で散らかってい
た 13 scrawny dog やせこけた犬 14 makeshift fire 当座
しのぎのたき火 15 scurried off ちょこちょここと走って行った
23 reached my limit 限界に達する
- p. 225 11 given a damn about 気にもしなかった 14 taken her
kindness for granted 彼女の優しさをごく当り前のものだと思っ
ていた 22 hoofed it 歩いて行った
- p. 226 4 on the road 旅行中 9 broach 切り出す 22 shrouded
白い布でおおわれて

- p. 227 7 you dragged a part of me with you into the land of the dead
お前は僕の一部を死の世界へ連れていった 9 curator 博物館の
管理人 15 was worried stiff とても心配だ 18 came on
the line 電話に出た
- p. 228 4 at a loss for words 言葉が出てこない 17 crinkled up in a
warm smile しわをくしゃっと曲げて笑った
- p. 229 5 cardboard ロクでもないもの 11 the sprawl of housing 住
宅のたち並ぶ風景 20 a great expression 素敵な表現
- p. 230 12 the pits 落とし穴 25 crash at your place あなたのところに
厄介になる
- p. 231 5 get myself reacclimatized 体を馴らす 10 too demanding
過度の要求をすること 27 No sooner had this hit me than I
fell silent. そう思うと僕は急に話せなくなった。
- p. 232 10 in the clumps of grass flowers 草むらの花の群 11 or-
chestrated annunciation 音の響き 25 You got it. そうですね。
26 handy 器用な 28 He converted me into a real cleanliness
fanatic. 彼が僕を清潔好きに変えた。
- p. 233 1 it's ingratiated me with the landlord 大家さんは喜んでいる
4 give my greetings 挨拶する 8 a matter of course あたり前
のこと 10 square it away きちんとする 11 a box of
cakes 菓子折り 14 Comes with age. 年の功。 15 play
along 話をあわせる
- p. 234 2 caught sight of 見つけた 9 try to give it a play 弾いてみる
16 A real smart number. 洒落てるじゃないの。 26 phy-
sique 体格 26 sure enough たしかに
- p. 235 2 petite 小柄な 3 sturdily built がっかりした体格 5 turn
you off 嫌な気にさせる 11 one dashed-off line 一行の走りが
き 14 You'd think that'd be the last thing on your mind. 最
も考えつかないことだと思う。 16 tons of 山ほどたくさん
- p. 236 7 pack up her belongings 荷物を整理する 16 in such good
spirits すごく元気である 20 take out of you 消耗する
28 get completely cured 完全に回復する
- p. 237 16 everything all laid out in her mind すべて彼女の心の中では
決めていた 24 she'd held onto them (あなたの手紙を) 大
切にしていた 26 get rid of 処分する

- p. 238 1 all the better その方がいい 14 suffocating ムッとしていた
20 just off hand 突然 23 make a practice of ~ することにし
ている 24 as a form of therapy 治療法として 27 flood of
talk 急にべらべらしゃべりだすこと
- p. 239 4 lend an ear 耳を貸す 11 I'd been plunged into a glacier 氷
の中に放りこまれた 12 pins and needles じんとしびれて
25 once-in-a-lifetime 一生に一度の
- p. 240 12 assumed a new position 姿勢を変えた 13 after some
hesitation 少し迷ってから 14 resumed 再び話し始めた
21 sopping wet ぐっしょり濡れている
- p. 241 11 I didn't like the look of it. それを見て嫌な感じがした。
16 scouring the woods 林の中をくまなく探して 23 getting
on for dusk 日暮れになっている 26 with its queer free-for-all
riot of blossoms 奇妙に雑然とした花
- p. 242 6 for form's sake 形式的に 18 one-pot dishes 鍋もの 25
Just leave it to me. 私にまかせなさい。
- p. 243 10 the laughing stock of the whole family 親戚中の笑いもの
11 pick up the tab 勘定を払う 14 without a penny to my
name 無一文で 22 brusquely ぶっきら棒に 23 a myriad
variations いろいろ変化させて 26 attentively きちんと
26 flushed with 浮かべて
- p. 244 13 I don't look them up 彼等を訪ねない 14 crumpled up 丸
めた
- p. 245 6 sniffing the aroma 匂いをかぎながら 12 stuffed お腹いっ
ぱいになる
- p. 246 3 you couldn't let go of Midori 緑と離れられない 9 when it
came right down to the wire 最後のさいごになって 13
amounted to ~ という結果になった 20 harbor 心に抱く
26 If you hurt her any more than you already apparently have,
there'll be no making up for it. これ以上彼女を傷つけたら、とり
返しがつかなくなる。
- p. 247 9 You and me included. あなたも私も含めて。
- p. 248 1 lay out a match マッチ棒を並べる 3 rendition 演奏 6
the year before last 一昨年 9 short passage 小節
- p. 249 2 phew ふう 7 gave me a round of applause 拍手をしてくれ

- た 14 the sentimental level センチメンタルリズムという地平
 15 tune 曲 21 flip ひっくり返る
- p. 250 15 looking me square in the eye 僕の目をじっと見て 18
 and one for good measure 一曲はおまけ 19 trademark おなじみのトレードマーク
- p. 251 9 I could just cry 泣けるわね 9 in a near-whisper ささやくよ
 うな声で 24 folds ひた(しわ) 27 slender ほっそりした
- p. 252 6 caressed 愛撫した 13 behind おしり 29 swallow her
 breath 彼女が息をのむ
- p. 253 11 drinking in the sensations 興奮を味わいつくして 15
 coitus 性交 25 accompanied ついて行った
- p. 254 17 I'm scared shitless すごく怖い 22 uptight 緊張する
 25 illusion 錯覚
- p. 255 5 passers-by まわりを通りすぎる人達 14 Things I had to get
 off my chest. 話さなくてはならないこと。 25 spun around
 ぐるっとみる
- p. 256 2 scores of 多数の 4 in the middle of nowhere どこでもない
 場所のまん中から

(翻訳家 藤井ひろこ)

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