COIN LOCKER BABIES

RYU MURAKAMI

PUSHKIN PRESS

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Translated by
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The woman pushed on the baby's stomach and sucked its penis into her mouth; it was thinner than the American menthols she smoked and a bit slimy, like raw fish. She was testing to see if the baby would cry, but the little arms and legs were still, so she peeled away the plastic wrapping over its face. She lined a cardboard box with towels, laid the baby inside, and taped the box shut. Then she tied it with string and wrote a made-up name and address on the side in big print.

Her breasts started to ache again just as she finished doing her makeup and was about to put on a polka-dot dress. They were still swollen with milk, and she stopped for a minute to rub them, without bothering to wipe up the whitish liquid that dripped on the carpet. Slipping on her sandals, she left the apartment with the box. As she got into a cab she'd hailed, her mind was on the lace tablemat she was making; it would be done soon, and she decided to put it under the pot of geraniums. The heat had made her a little dizzy, which wasn't surprising since the man on the radio said it was breaking records. Six people—most of them elderly or unwell—had already died. She got out at the station, went straight to the coin lockers, and shoved the box into an empty one in the back row.

Wrapping the key in a sanitary napkin, she disposed of it in the toilet, then left the station, which was stifling, for the comfort of a department store. When she'd cooled down a bit after a cigarette in the restroom there, she did some shopping: pantyhose, nail polish, bleach. She had an orange juice, then went to the ladies' again to put on the nail polish. Around the time she was finishing the thumb of her left hand, the baby, half-suffocated in the dark box, broke out in a sweat. At first it was just a little dampness on the forehead and chest, perhaps under his arms, but soon he was wet all over and his temperature began to drop. Finally, his fingers twitched, his mouth opened, and he let out a tremendous wail.

It was the heat. No one could have gone on sleeping in a damp, double-sealed box like that. The heat had started the baby's blood pumping, which

woke him up, and so, just seventy-six hours after he first emerged between his mother's legs, he was virtually born again, in a hot coin locker. The baby continued to cry until he was found.

He was taken to the police hospital, then placed in the custody of an orphanage. A month later he was given a name: Kikuyuki Sekiguchi. Sekiguchi was the name the woman had written on the box; Kikuyuki, the eighteenth entry on the list for naming abandoned children used by the welfare office in the north ward of the city of Yokohama. Kikuyuki Sekiguchi had been found on July 18, 1972.

A high metal fence surrounded the orphanage where Kikuyuki was raised; the building was set back from the road, at the end of a drive lined with cherry trees, and there was a cemetery on the grounds. The other children at the Cherryfield Orphanage of the Virgin Mary called him Kiku. As soon as he was old enough to understand, he learned that the nuns there prayed for him every day; they were also fond of telling him, "Your Father in Heaven is watching over you, little Kiku." There was a picture of this Father hanging on the wall of the chapel, a bearded man standing on a cliff looking out at the sea. In his arms he held a newborn lamb which he seemed to be offering to the sky.

"How come I'm not in the picture?" Kiku wanted to know. "And why doesn't my father look Japanese?"

The nuns said the picture was done before he was born, and that the Father had lots of children, with different colors of hair and eyes…

Children at the Cherryfield Orphanage were adopted according to looks, the cutest ones going first. On Sunday, when they were finished with church, they all went to play outside, where they were looked over by the prospective parents. Kiku wasn't what you would call an ugly child, but at Cherryfield the orphans of choice had lost their parents in traffic accidents or some other tragedy, and those who had simply been abandoned had to be exceptionally attractive to get the nod. Kiku had learned to walk, and then was old enough to run around the playground, and still he was one of the leftovers when the Sunday inspection ended.

The nuns hadn't told him yet that he had been born in a coin locker. That was left to another child at the orphanage, Hashi, to do. Hashio Mizouchi, like Kiku, was a leftover. One day he approached Kiku in the sandbox:

“We’re the only two, you know. All the others died. You and me, we’re the only ones who made it out of the coin lockers alive.”

Hashi was thin, a bit nearsighted, and gave off a slightly antiseptic smell. His eyes were moist and seemed to stare right through you, off into the distance; when he spoke to Hashi, Kiku felt like the Invisible Man. Unlike Kiku, who had screamed in the box until a policeman found him, Hashi was saved by his delicate constitution. The woman who abandoned him had wrapped him naked in a paper bag without even bothering to wash him and had just tossed the bundle into a coin locker. Fortunately, however, she’d dusted him all over with talcum powder for a protein allergy rash, and the powder had made him vomit; the smell of the vomit, laced with the fragrance of the powder, had seeped out of the locker, and a blind man’s dog that happened to be passing by had begun to howl.

“It was a big black dog. I love that kind of dog,” Hashi would say to anybody who’d listen.

The first time Kiku actually saw a coin locker was on a trip to an amusement park in the suburbs. Hashi pointed it out to him by the entrance to the roller-skating rink. A man with skates opened one of the little doors and put his overcoat and a bag inside. It’s just a kind of shelf, thought Kiku, going up for a closer look. The dust from the locker smudged his hand as he poked around.

“It’s like a beehive, isn’t it?” Hashi said. “Remember? We saw it once on TV: bees hatch their eggs in these little boxes. But you and me, Kiku, we’re not bees… so we must have come from people eggs… I wonder if bees have the same problem?—they lay lots of eggs, but most of them die.”

Kiku imagined the bearded Father on the chapel wall putting slimy human eggs in the coin lockers. But somehow he knew it wasn’t quite like that. He had a feeling that women laid the eggs, and the Father just held them up to show heaven once they were born.

“Hey, look!” Hashi was calling him again.

A woman in sunglasses with dyed red hair was walking around with a key searching for her locker.

“She’s going to lay one right now. Look how big her butt is,” Hashi noted.

The woman stopped at a locker and inserted the key. As the door opened, a round red object fell to the ground, and Kiku and Hashi let out a

cry. More of the red things tumbled out as the woman struggled to hold them back, and one rolled over to where the two boys were standing: a tomato, not an egg. Kiku stamped on it as hard as he could, getting juice all over his shoe, but there was no baby brother inside.

The other children at the orphanage had tended to pick on Hashi, but now Kiku came to his rescue. Soon, Hashi would let no one else near him. He had a particular fear of grown-up men, and burst into tears so easily that Kiku sometimes wondered whether his body wasn't hollow and filled with water. Once, for example, the man who delivered bread to the orphanage had patted Hashi lightly on the shoulder and joked that he smelled of liniment, and even this had set him off. But Kiku knew that all he could do to help was sit with him until he calmed down. No matter how much he cried or shook or babbled on about how sorry he was for this or that, Kiku would just sit by impassively and wait. When Hashi took to following him around and even refused to let him go to the toilet alone, Kiku didn't seemed to mind. The truth was, he needed Hashi as much as Hashi needed him, the way a healthy person sometimes needs a disease, imaginary though it may be, as a kind of retreat, a safe haven from the problems of the real world.

Every year, about the time the cherry trees were in full bloom, Hashi used to get a cough that sounded like a storm in his throat. One year his condition—"nervous asthma," as the doctors called it—was particularly bad and was accompanied by a slight fever, preventing him from playing outdoors with Kiku. Alone in his room, Hashi retreated even further into himself, developing a passion for a strange game of "house" played out on the floor next to his bed. First he would arrange neat place-settings of plastic dishes, knives, forks, and spoons; then he would carefully position a toy washing machine, refrigerator, and tiny pots and pans until he had created the model of an efficient kitchen. Once the room was done, however, God help whoever touched it: the least nudge or shift of the tiniest detail, even by accident, and Hashi burst into a violent tantrum, far beyond anything the nuns ever thought possible in a timid boy like him. At night he slept near his model kitchen, and in the morning the first thing he did was to check every item to make sure nothing had been moved. When he was convinced that all was well, he would sit motionless for a long time gazing

contentedly at his handiwork; but, as often as not, a faint tinge of displeasure would then show on his face, followed by growing rage, until at last he would leap to his feet and smash the whole thing to smithereens.

Eventually, the kitchen alone was not enough: he needed to expand. He collected scraps of cloth, spools, buttons, thumbtacks, random bicycle parts, stones, sand, and bits of broken glass—all the materials he needed for a more ambitious kingdom. And when it was finished, his protective instincts were all the stronger, as one unfortunate little girl who happened to trip over a tower of spools soon discovered: by the time the nuns pried him loose, he had come as close to strangling her as his strength would allow. That night his cough was worse than ever, and he was running a high fever.

When Kiku finally came to see the model, though, Hashi cheered up.

“This is the bakery over here. These are gas tanks, and this is the graveyard.”

Kiku waited until Hashi had finished.

“So where are the coin lockers?” he asked at last. Hashi pointed at the taillight from a bicycle.

“There,” he said.

The taillight was perfect: a bright orange plastic reflector covered the tiny light bulb, the chrome casing was spotless, and the red and blue wires had been carefully wrapped in a neat ball. The coin lockers shone at the heart of Hashi’s kingdom.

As he conducted the tour Hashi grew lively, almost talkative, which bothered Kiku for some reason. When Kiku sat and watched him in one of his moods, crying or pouting, he felt like a patient being shown his own X-rays; he knew that hidden inside himself were the same fears and anxieties that were transparent in Hashi, and somehow he’d been hoping that Hashi’s tears would heal both their wounds. But now Hashi had taken to sleeping near this model kingdom, and seemed to have forgotten Kiku; his tears and apprehensions were reserved for his miniature world. The disease that had served as a sort of sanctuary for the healthy one of them had somehow escaped and remained alive on its own. In an obscure way, Kiku realized he would have to find a new disease.

One day, he went to a public clinic with one of the nuns for a polio vaccination, and managed to get lost on the way back, ending up at the city bus yard. The driver said that the boy had boarded the bus at the first stop

and had stayed on through four round trips to the yacht harbor. Eventually the driver had asked him where he was going, but Kiku just sat there staring out the window, so he'd called the police. That was the first incident.

Three days later, a little after noon, Kiku walked out of the front gate and flagged down a cab. He told the driver to take him all the way to Shinjuku, and when they arrived at the station there, he muttered "Now Shibuya." The driver deposited him at the police box in front of Shibuya Station, and he was returned to the orphanage. Another time, when he tried to stow away in the back of a liquor store delivery truck, the nuns had managed to find him before he left the grounds, but soon afterward he got as far as Kamakura, an hour down the coast, by tricking a couple who had come to tend a grave in the cemetery. After that, Kiku used to go up to complete strangers and say, "I'm lost. Could you take me home to Kamakura?"

A young nun was assigned to watch him, to make sure he stayed put, but she was too softhearted to be very strict. Whenever she could, she borrowed her family's car and took him out for a drive.

"You love cars and buses, don't you? Why do you like riding around so much?"

"The earth goes around," Kiku blurted out, "so why should I sit still?"

In fact, it had nothing to do with the earth—it was just something he couldn't help. Sitting still made him fidgety. He would get this feeling that something, not far off, was spinning fiercely round and round, and that this thing, whatever it was, was about to blast off at any minute. He would feel the ground tremble, hear the air fill with a whirring sound. Eventually, these liftoffs were occurring at regular intervals, and each time Kiku was left behind he felt a sharp despair. But then, almost immediately, preparations would begin for the next one—the smell of fuel in the air, the rumbling, the spinning—and his anxiety would begin to build all over again.

Kiku knew he had to keep moving, he had to do something. As the launch approached, as the whirring grew shriller, his discomfort would turn into a real panic, and keep growing. He had to get on board!

One day, when the children were taken on an outing to the amusement park, Kiku got on the roller coaster and wouldn't get off; but, unlike the other kids, he wasn't screaming with delight, he just sat there, stock still, with a blank look on his face. When the attendant finally told the young nun

to get the boy out of there, she found him crouched down in the seat, rigid and pale as a ghost. His skin was damp and covered with gooseflesh, and the sister had to pry his fingers from the rail of the car one by one. It was only then that she realized that Kiku's fascination with locomotion was more disease than hobby, and it was soon afterward that he and the other boy—the one whose bedside was arrayed with fiercely guarded rubbish and who had recently ripped an intravenous needle from his arm in a bid to fend off an intruder—were taken to see a psychiatrist.

The doctor, idly examining a photograph of Hashi's bedside kingdom, said he assumed that the nuns, accustomed as they were to caring for orphans, were aware that such children frequently developed symptoms of autism due to lack of a normal parental relationship.

The very next day, Kiku and Hashi started going there for therapy. They were given some guava juice laced with something to induce a certain drowsiness, followed by an hour or two of exposure to the soothing sound of an *in utero* heartbeat in a special chamber. The room had padding on the floor and walls so that even the most violent patient would be safe from himself. Inside, the heartbeat was broadcast from speakers set in the walls and ceiling and covered with some sort of material so as to be invisible. Tiny recessed lights, which lined the edge of the padding where the ceiling and walls met, could be adjusted to give a uniform brightness. The room contained nothing but one oversized couch facing a 72-inch video screen behind a layer of thick glass. Once the sleeping drug had taken effect, the boys were joined on the couch by a doctor. Gradually, almost imperceptibly, the lights dimmed while a variety of images played across the screen: waves lapping on a South Pacific beach; skiers negotiating new powder snow; a herd of giraffes running in slow motion against a sunset; a white sailboat cresting the waves; thousands of tropical fish skimming along a coral reef; birds and gliders, ballerinas and trapeze artists. The images changed only very gradually, in the tiniest of increments—the size of the waves, the intensity of the setting sun, the color of the reef, the speed of the yacht, the scenery on the stage. By the time the changes became imperceptible and consciousness had begun to fade, the room had grown completely dark. As for the sound, it had been playing from the time the boys entered the place at an almost inaudible volume, but as the room grew dark and the images slowed, it gradually increased to a crescendo just as

they fell asleep. Somewhere between fifty and eighty minutes later the boys would wake up from their nap, but the tape loop would still be showing the same images so they would have no sense that time had passed. To add to the illusion, the treatment was scheduled from 10:30 A.M. to noon, the time of day when the change in the angle of the sun is least noticeable. There were even ways to compensate for days when the weather didn't cooperate with the illusion; for example, when it was clear in the morning but started to rain while the boys were inside, the sound of rain could be added to the audio in the room several minutes before they regained consciousness, and the lighting was adjusted to resemble a rainy day. Throughout all this, however, Kiku and Hashi were not told that they were being treated at all; they thought they were just going to the hospital to see a movie, and a movie is what they saw.

Within a week, results were apparent. As the sessions progressed and the boys got used to the treatment room, the nuns were no longer needed as chaperones. In a month's time, the psychiatrist was using hypnotism in place of the sleeping drug and exploring the changes in the boys' subconscious brought on by the "rechanneling" of their special energy.

"What do you see when you hear that noise?" he asked.

"The sea," they answered together.

Kiku would describe the image flashing on the inside of his eyeballs: his own small body being held up to heaven by the bearded Christ standing on a cliff overlooking the ocean. He was wrapped in something soft, and a cool breeze was blowing. The sea was calm and sparkling. The treatment continued for about three months, at which point the psychiatrist called in the nuns again.

"The therapy is nearly finished. The important thing now is to avoid giving the boys any idea how much they've changed. Above all, you mustn't tell them about the heartbeat or anything else we've been doing here."

Kiku and Hashi, waiting in the corridor, stared out the window at the golden glow of the sky and, below, a line of deep green ginkgo trees trembling in the wind. As the elevator doors opened, they turned to look at an old man, his chest bandaged and a tube extending from one nostril, who was being wheeled into the hall. A young girl carrying a large bunch of

lilies was talking to the nurse pushing him along. Kiku and Hashi went up closer to him. His veins were visible under the transparent skin, while his lips were moist and red. His ankles were strapped to the trolley with leather belts, and tiny spots of blood oozed from around the needles of the tubes attached to both arms. The old man opened his eyes and, seeing the boys peering down at him, twisted the corners of his mouth into a smile. At that moment, the nuns emerged from the room directly in front of them repeating the doctor's last words:

"They don't realize that they've changed; they think it's the world that changed."

2

An adoption was finally arranged for Kiku and Hashi during the summer before they were to begin school. The nuns persuaded a couple who had applied for twins to take the boys. The application had come via the Holy Virgin Relief Society from a small island off the west coast of Kyushu. At first the boys refused to even consider leaving the orphanage, but they were shown a picture of the people who would be their foster parents and at last they agreed; the couple had been photographed with the sea in the background.

In the company of a welfare officer, they made the long journey south by ferry, sitting inside on torn plastic-covered seats, where the heat was made worse by the oil fumes. They were met at the dock by their new parents. Perhaps it was the fading light, but to Hashi they looked more like mother and child than man and wife. As the welfare officer made the necessary introductions, Kiku studied his new father, Shuichi Kuwayama, with disappointment. Not only was he short but his pale arms and legs were spindly and the flesh seemed to sag on his body. He was clean-shaven, and the hair on his head was thinning; he had absolutely nothing in common with the Father in the picture in the chapel.

From the neck up, his wife was thickly painted with white powder, which was beginning to dissolve in her sweat and trickle down into a pool collecting on her collarbone. Kazuyo Kuwayama was in fact six years older than her husband, and had just turned forty. After leaving her first husband, she had come to the island with her uncle, a miner, in the days before the coal mines that were dug under the sea were closed down. Big-boned, with rather narrow eyes and a nose too large for her face, she had trained as a beautician, then worked in a bar, before settling down with Kuwayama, who had a small factory next door to his place where he produced disposable styrofoam lunchboxes.

Kiku and Hashi, as soon as they got home, were put to bed in matching pajamas with locomotives on them. Hashi was exhausted and running a

slight temperature, for which Kazuyo made him an ice bag. She fanned the boy as he slept while her husband saw the welfare officer off. When he was gone, Kuwayama went straight back to work. A bug Kiku had never seen before flew in through the window, and he got out of bed to look out into the darkness. From the windows of the orphanage he had liked to watch the lights of the city and the stream of cars passing, but here it was pitch dark, though he thought he could just make out a tree with big black leaves rustling in the mild breeze. When Kuwayama turned on the styrofoam press, the noise drowned out the pleasant hum of the bugs.

“It makes a racket, but he can never get to sleep unless he gets a little work done before going to bed,” Kazuyo explained. Ignoring her, Kiku eyed the strange beetle, and when it landed nearby he stamped on it.

“You mustn’t kill living things like that!” Kazuyo scolded.

Back at the window, Kiku spotted a tiny point of light in the distance; a star, he thought, but Kazuyo told him it was a lighthouse.

“It shines all night so the ships at sea don’t bump into the rocks.” The light spun around, revealing the rough surface of the sea for an instant. “Time for bed,” said Kazuyo. “You must be tired, too. Get some sleep.”

Kiku suddenly wanted to scream, to turn himself into a huge jet plane and bomb the hell out of the bugs, the leaves, this window, Kuwayama’s machine, the lighthouse. The smell of the summer night, of sun-warmed trees cooling in the darkness, was somehow unbearable.

“Hashi and the nuns call me Kiku, but my real name’s Kikuyuki,” he managed to say before he burst into tears. Kazuyo went on fanning, without saying anything. As he got into bed, Kiku realized he had no idea why he was crying. Before long he was fast asleep and the new sheets were damp with sweat.

By the time the boys woke the next morning, Kuwayama’s press was already humming. Kazuyo presented them with new shorts, shirts, and tennis shoes before leaving for the beauty parlor that she owned and worked at.

“You two can watch TV or whatever. We’ll be back at noon,” she told them.

Kiku and Hashi had some rice with a raw egg and miso soup, then counted the sailboats printed on their shirts. The TV had nothing but

cooking programs to offer, so they turned it off and wrestled for a while on the floor. Then they discovered an awl on the desk and practiced sticking it in the paper doors from several paces away, but, getting bored with this, they ran out into the small garden, which had some tomatoes and eggplants growing in it. They could see Kuwayama's sweat-soaked back as he bent over the machine in the shed at the end of the yard, raising and lowering a steel bar.

"Looks like a robot, huh?"

Lush carina lilies lined the steep, narrow road that stretched down from the front of the house, then crossed the main road that ran the length of the island and led straight on to the sea. Beneath a large tree, three sunburned children were busy catching cicadas. As Kiku and Hashi approached, the children eyed their new clothes.

"What are you doing?" Hashi asked, and one of them held up a cage full of insects. Hashi took the cage, buzzing like a broken radio, and peered at its contents. Then they looked up at the tree where the children were pointing, but no matter how hard they stared, they couldn't spot the cicadas on the bark through the gaps in the thick branches. When the trap—a shell filled with birdlime tied to the end of a stick—was pushed gently nearer the trunk, however, the sawing of the insects suddenly became louder, wings began to beat like toy birds, and the bugs were easily snared. Kiku and Hashi were as excited as if they'd seen a magic trick. One of the kids spotted a large bug high up on a limb and passed the stick to Kiku, who was the tallest among them.

"I can't see it," Kiku protested, but several dirty fingers pointed at what looked like a knot on the branch. Kiku held his breath and crept nearer; the cicada was trilling for all it was worth on a branch just at a height he could reach standing on tiptoe. He stepped up onto a broken concrete block at the base of the tree as the children explained that he had to maneuver the stick to approach from the bug's blind spot. As he was adjusting his angle, the block began to totter. Hashi cried out and Kiku thrust the stick out as if trying to spear the cicada in the tail, barely managing to catch the fluttering wings and bring the insect down as the others cheered. The huge cicada struggled to free itself, making the stick to which it was attached dance on the ground, but the children had soon freed it and, wiping the birdlime away, presented it to Kiku. Hashi asked whether the steep road was a good

way to get to the beach, but was told it ended in a cliff with no way down. The best route, they explained, was to take the main road as far as the second side street, which led to the beach.

Kazuyo's beauty parlor was above a bus stop not far down the main street, and when she saw the boys passing she came down, shouting "Where do you think you're going?" Kiku pointed mutely toward the sea. "Well, all right, but you're not to go near the old mines." Kiku and Hashi had never heard of "mines" before.

The second side street, which the other kids had recommended, was so overgrown the boys walked right by it. They turned instead at a likely looking lane that soon divided into two winding tracks, and after several turns they had no idea at all how to get back to the main road. Attacked by swarms of mosquitoes, their legs cut by the thick grass, the boys began to panic. They wanted to yell for help, but they knew no one was around to hear them. The road divided again, with a dark tunnel to the right, so they went left, only to find a snake slithering across the ground ahead of them. With a scream they headed for the tunnel.

A gradual curve made the opening at the other end of the tunnel appear as a distant tube of light. It was cool inside, and the boys found themselves walking through thick mud. Before they had gone very far, a drop of water from the ceiling caught Hashi on the back of the neck and he took off with another shout that seemed about to bring the tunnel down on their heads. After a few steps, he tripped and lay blubbering in the mud.

"Stop it," Kiku ordered. "Get up and walk. We're almost out." Skirting the smelly, stagnant puddles, they headed for the far end of the tunnel, but when they finally emerged, covered with dirt, they found the way blocked by a tangle of grass and barbed wire. There was, however, a hole on the right just big enough for a child to squirm through, and with some damage to the little boats on their new shirts, they managed to wriggle on. Once through, Hashi again refused to move, but Kiku reminded him that there were snakes if they went back, and they inched along on their bellies, propelling themselves with their elbows. Finally the grass gave way to concrete, and, standing up, they looked out over an extraordinary scene: a full-scale version of the toy city Hashi had constructed next to his bed the year before.

Hashi's kingdom lay before them, life-sized but apparently lifeless. The neat gray rows of miners' quarters seemed normal enough except for the occasional tuft of weeds pushing through a broken window, but there was an eerie stillness, almost as if a siren had sounded and everyone had cleared out, leaving the boys as a human sacrifice. The inhabitants were all waiting now, wherever they were hiding, for the boys to be slaughtered. Posters were still stuck to a bulletin board: a concert by the Kyushu Naval Brass Band playing "The River Kwai March," "Anchors Away," and "The Stars and Stripes Forever." The boys stood stock still for a moment, then, spooked by the silence, began to run. They ran among the houses, but the only sound they heard was the echo of their own footsteps. They stopped when they came to an abandoned tricycle with grass sprouting through its faded plastic seat, half expecting the children who had been trapping cicadas to appear from somewhere. When Hashi gingerly touched the handlebars, the bike collapsed with a rusty squeal, like a pig having a spike driven into its head, and a watery mixture of oil and rust oozed from the frame. Unnerved by this sight, they fled the rows of houses up a flight of crumbling wood and gravel stairs to a world that seemed to have been suddenly dyed red, where the sun shone through the cracks in a brick wall that stretched as far as the boys could see. Peering through the cracks, they discovered a group of structures unlike any they had seen before: a funnel-shaped tower linked by a ditch to a concrete pond divided into neat compartments; bare steel skeletons; brick cylinders choked with ivy. It all seemed familiar to Hashi, but when he turned to ask if Kiku had the same feeling, Hashi saw that he'd gone pale. More than mere models grown out of proportion, this new vision looked like an exact replica, all in concrete, of the chart of the human digestive system that had hung on the wall of the waiting room at the hospital where they'd gone for the movies. But for Kiku there was something else besides: the ruins, bathed in heat and shadows, were also the blast-off site for the great spinning rocket that had haunted him.

When they were able to go on, they found a school nearby, gutted and half collapsing, and in front a dried-up fountain with succulent plants forcing thick leaves through the cracks in the concrete. On closer inspection, though, the spiked leaves were not from a plant at all, but part of a machine, perhaps of the sort that might excavate undersea tunnels.

Around the fountain were flower beds, but the neglected seeds had blown away, and the only sign of flowers was the few stray blossoms in the dirt that had collected in the bottom of an overturned toilet. The school was partly covered with tarpaulins that fluttered noisily when the wind blew and stirred up a great flock of crows perched on the roof. The birds taking flight made it seem as if part of the building were caving in.

Hashi was still wondering where they could be, what sort of place this was, and whether he might be dreaming. Everything was clear up to the point where he had fallen in the tunnel; he was sure of that part because his shirt was caked with dried mud and reeked of oil and stagnant water. Kiku, however, had just noticed that the sun was beginning to go down, and it occurred to him that in the dark the ruins would no longer be much fun. They would have to start looking for a way back.

They cut across the playground of the abandoned school, past a twisted and broken horizontal bar. Cactuses grew luxuriantly in the sandbox, their needles covering the surface of a nearby pool filled with murky water. Three telephone poles, rotted and splitting, provided a nest for thousands of termites, and clouds of transparent wings filled the air. Beyond this translucent curtain, the boys could make out a town, or rather a row of empty shops facing a row of abandoned brothels and bars, and between the two a street from which the pavement was mostly gone.

“Look! Isn’t that beautiful!” cried Hashi, suddenly pointing toward a pit which contained, apparently, all the broken glass tubing from the neon signs on the bars and restaurants. The shards formed a luminous carpet that sparkled when the wind blew, shifting the bits of glass to catch the sunlight at new angles. As they watched, shivers of color shot through the pit, recreating a huge, formless neon sign. Kiku went up to it and selected a gently curved piece of glass that was smooth and pink on the outside and a rough yellow inside. He gave it a heave and followed it with his eyes as it came to rest in the dust some distance away. When he went to retrieve it, though, he made a startling discovery. Getting down on his hands and knees, he crawled along studying the ground.

“Kiku?” said Hashi, still holding an S-shaped neon tube which was almost intact.

“Tire tracks. Fresh ones. There’s only one, so it must have been a motorbike. Someone else has been here,” Kiku said. The tracks ended at a

movie theater that stood at the entrance to a street lined with brothels. In front hung a crooked sign saying “Piccadilly.” Kiku studied the area. There were no other tracks and no sign that the rider had made a U-turn. Hashi meanwhile was looking at half a poster that still hung under the sign for coming attractions and some publicity photos from the movie that were stuck in a crack in the theater wall. The poster, a picture of a woman, was ripped off above her eyes, leaving a nose, tongue, and jaw, and a strangely disconnected breast. The photos included one of a foreign man brandishing a revolver, a prone blonde woman gushing blood, and two ladies on horses riding into the sunset. Careful not to tear the brittle paper, Hashi brushed the sand from each and inspected it closely. Somewhere toward the middle of the pile he came across one of a nude woman, which he tried to slip into his pocket, only to have it shred into little pieces. Meanwhile, Kiku was checking the windows of the theater which had all been boarded shut.

Suddenly, Hashi looked up and his heart stopped. Somebody was watching them from the second floor of the theater… a young man dressed only in a pair of leather pants. Kiku had seen him too. The man looked first at one boy, then the other, then twitched his jaw as if to say “get lost.” Petrified, the boys stood their ground, until a low voice made it plainer:

“Get lost!”

At this point, Hashi would have taken to his heels, but Kiku still made no move to go.

“Kiku!” Hashi shouted, but Kiku’s eyes were fixed on the thin young man with the long beard.

“So I finally found you,” he was muttering to himself. “This is where you’ve been. The man who’s supposed to take me up to heaven lives in the town destroyed by the spinning rocket.” But as he spoke, the man pulled his head back inside the window, and they could hear a door close somewhere.

Kiku shook himself and shouted: “But where’s the motorbike?” There was no answer.

“Come on, let’s go home,” said Hashi, near tears as he tugged at Kiku’s sleeve. Kiku eventually gave up, but as they rounded the corner of the theater they heard a scraping sound, and a sheet of thin corrugated metal from the second story broke away and fell to earth. Then, all of a sudden, a motorbike exploded from the hole in the wall and disappeared in a cloud of

dust. The noise of the engine faded in the distance, but Kiku was sure he'd seen the rider smile as he raced by.

When questioned by Kazuyo about the mud on their shirts, Hashi confessed that they'd gone to investigate the area around the mines. For this she scolded them at length. Didn't they know how dangerous it was? Hadn't she told them about the two bums who'd been bitten by snakes while picking through one of those buildings? And then there was the little boy who'd fallen down a shaft… The planks that covered the entrances were all rotted out, Kazuyo told them, and the tunnels themselves were full of gas. If you fell in, you dropped three thousand meters straight to the bottom, where you became food for all sorts of creepy bugs and snakes. And there were chemicals in the old storerooms that could eat your flesh down to the bone in a second if you happened to spill them on you, not to mention the crazy old drifters who lived in the abandoned buildings and did nasty things to little girls and most likely to little boys, too. And if something were to happen, there was nobody to help you; you could never yell loud enough to be heard back in the village. When the lecture was over, she had managed to extract a promise from Kiku and Hashi never to go near the mines again.

Kuwayama and Kazuyo decided that the beauty shop should be closed until the boys were used to life on the island, so Kazuyo had time to take them around and introduce them at each house in the neighborhood. Then she bought them bathing suits to take them swimming.

The boys caught a whiff of salt air through the high grass and ran yelling in the direction of the beach. Just as their bare feet sank into the hot sand, a wave broke, showering them with spray. Tiny crabs scuttled into holes, and small fish stranded by the receding tide lurked in the shadows of the tidal pools. Kiku and Hashi groped around trying to catch the minnows, smaller than one's thumb, but had no luck. Still, they learned to poke their fingers into the tips of the brightly colored sea anemones to feel the pleasant sucking sensation when the mouths closed. After that, they watched the hermit crabs swarm over the remains of their lunch, then held races from the dunes to the waterline.

Hashi waved at the cicada kids who came down to the beach wearing goggles and carrying spears. They quickly disappeared into the sea, and

before long a spear broke the surface, its end decorated with what seemed to be a lump of plastic.

“Octopus!” yelled the boy brandishing the spear, and Kiku and Hashi ran to look as he clambered back on shore. This octopus was different from the one they’d seen at the aquarium on an orphanage outing. That one had been reddish, with a head, eight legs, even little eyes; this one was a mass of splotchy darkness oozing black liquid as it writhed atop the prongs, more like a tattered rag than a living thing. As it was being pulled from the spear, the rag managed to wriggle free and set off slithering toward the water, which happened to take it right to where Kiku and Hashi were standing.

“Grab it!” a boy yelled, so Hashi stuck out a hand, only to have the octopus latch on tight. Speechless with fear, he watched the slimy, shapeless, glistening thing squirm up his arm toward his face. When he finally realized what was happening and began clawing at the creature with his free hand, he only succeeded in transferring its grip to the other arm and boosting it up until a tentacle reached his shoulder. From a distance, Hashi’s gyrations might have been mistaken for a dance, but Kazuyo came running when she heard the screams, to find Hashi on the ground with the octopus about to cover his face. Kiku and the other children were doing their best to peel the monster off, but it was stuck so fast it was like part of his skin. Kazuyo ripped off her blouse, wrapped the dry cloth around her hand, and began to peel away the tentacles one by one. Once she had transferred the octopus to the blouse, she banged it again and again on the rocks.

Hashi’s shoulder and neck were swollen and red, and the suckers had left round marks, but he managed to get to his feet to stare at the dead octopus before he burst into tears. Kazuyo gathered him in her arms. Her breast digging into his side tickled a little, and when he buried his face on her shoulder, he could taste the salt on her skin.

The flowers on the canna lilies on the hillside were falling. Cracked brown petals turned to dust underfoot. When a typhoon blew through scattering faded summer blooms and overripe nuts, Kazuyo showed Kiku and Hashi how to gather chestnuts in the hills, now beginning to turn dry and sere. First you stamped on the thorny balls, then picked the kernels, three to a nut and all different sizes, from the cracked shell. The bit sandwiched in the

middle was always the biggest, having sucked most of the nourishment away from the other two, which were often shriveled and dead.

“Look how lonely it is when you’re selfish and crowd the others out,” Kazuyo would say.

Kiku found a chestnut with two kernels exactly the same size joined back to back in the shell.

“Now that’s odd,” said Kazuyo. “Usually ones like this get a little bubble inside the shell and end up rotting.”

Kiku and Hashi put half each in their pockets.

Twice a month Kuwayama rented a small boat to go fishing. These outings started well before dawn when it was icy cold, but he insisted on taking the boys along however much they hated it. Sipping hot green tea flavored with salt, they would huddle in the tiny cabin watching the first rays of sunlight on the surface of the sea. Eventually, the air began to warm a little, and the fish began to accumulate in the bottom of the boat, blue fins sharp as knives in pools of clear, dark blood. There was the smell of drying scales, the yellowish waves lapping the hull, the faint hiss of snowflakes expiring in the sea.

About the time that thousands of small white butterflies began hatching in the cabbage fields, Kazuyo presented Kiku and Hashi with boxes tied up with ribbon; inside they found school satchels.

3

The old woman cut across the playground. A drifter, she survived by sleeping in abandoned miners' sheds, pilfering from the fish-drying racks, begging rice door to door, or, occasionally, stealing potatoes from the fields. She had lived on the island a long time, left a widow and childless when her husband was killed in an accident in the days before the mines were closed. For a time she had been in a mental hospital, but she escaped, made her way back to the island, and refused to leave. Everyone agreed she was harmless and left her alone. Hashi, however, couldn't get her out of his head.

"Every time I see her," he told Kiku, "I wonder if she could be my mom. I hate seeing women like her going around begging and scraping. It makes me think my mom's probably having the same kind of bad luck for throwing me away. She couldn't be happy, not after doing something like that. So when I see some poor old lady, I feel like running up and hugging her and calling her Mommy. But then I think, if it really were my mom, I'd probably kill her instead." Not long after they had started elementary school, another child had seen the old woman passing through the schoolyard and shouted at Hashi, "Hey! Kuwayama, that old hag's your mother." The old rage had come back in an instant and Hashi had taken off after him. "Sorry, Grannie! I mistook you for Kuwayama's mother!" the boy yelled again, exultant for a moment at least before Kiku joined in the fight and began to hit him. The encounter was Kiku's introduction to violence, in a way, since neither the Kuwayamas nor the nuns had ever laid a hand on either of them. For the first time in his life he clenched his fist and planted it on someone's chin, flattening the little boy with a single punch and knocking out two teeth. The whole thing was over in a second, and Kiku, as though a little disappointed, stood kicking him in the side until he lost consciousness. Then, for good measure, he went on to beat up the other kids who had laughed at the boy's taunts. When he was done, the whole class was afraid of him. Perhaps because he was usually so mild-mannered, he seemed all the more frightening, but, whatever the reason, no

one was willing to cross the two boys after that. Hashi's sadness at the sight of the old woman, however, remained. Once he watched her from a distance as she was picking rags out of a dustbin—purple ones seemed to be her favorites—and draping them around her shoulders and hips. When the wind blew, she was like a figure in a dream, all fluttering lavender.

Breaking their promise to Kazuyo, they often went to explore the ruins. By the time they were in fourth grade, it was almost a daily routine; they would drop off their satchels at the house and head straight for the abandoned town. They had drawn a rough map dividing the area into quadrants—the miners' quarters, the mines themselves, the school, and the deserted streets—and each was given a comic-book name: Zoule, Megad, Puton, and Gazelle. Zoule was the leader of a fierce band of space pirates, Megad a spaceship base on Venus, Puton was a robot serving in the defense of the Third Star in the constellation Cygnus, and Gazelle a noble emissary, son of Superman and a Chinese woman. The miners' buildings, in Zoule zone, were surrounded on three sides by hills covered with vines under which vipers lived, so the boys had all but given up on the idea of exploring that section. All they knew for sure was that the wind could sometimes be heard whistling through tall buildings beyond the hill.

One day, however, while carefully hacking at the vines on the hillside, Kiku had discovered a concrete staircase which, if it went to the top, promised a view of the unexplored buildings and the sea beyond, and thus the possibility of completing their map. The stairs were steep and overgrown, so the boys worked cautiously, checking under the vines for snakes before cutting them. Finally, however, they reached a place where they could see the whole ruined complex: twelve eight-story apartment blocks overlooking the ocean.

The buildings, labeled with the letters A through L, were reached by a wide track that ran along the crest of the hill before sloping down to the apartments. In places the vines covered second-story balconies, but the glass in many of the windows seemed to be intact. Unlike buildings they had explored before, the entrances here were open. A plant cascading from a balcony on the seventh floor of building B looked, from a distance, like a pale green mattress set out to air; but from directly below, the gray vines and fuzzy green leaves were more like a monster that had devoured the inhabitants of the apartment. The boys knew from experience there could be

all sorts of good stuff inside: broken dishes, graffiti, salvageable tatami mats. What a find—a dozen buildings, apparently untouched.

Kiku and Hashi had already made quite a collection from the other abandoned buildings: a dagger, old records, photographs, a fishing rod, scuba tanks, a gas mask, a miner's headlamp, a helmet with leather straps, goggles, eighteen cans of ammonium sulfate, a globe, an anatomical model of the human body, and a flag—all hidden safely away in the basement of the coal refinery. This time, Kiku was hoping for a bicycle.

As they approached the buildings, Hashi suddenly stopped short.

"Something's wrong," he said. He was quick to sense things and would always warn Kiku of the clump of grass where a snake was hiding, the exact location of the bat in the tunnel, or the patch of seaweed with a jellyfish in it. "I can hear somebody breathing," he said.

Kiku peered cautiously through the wall of weeds ahead and then broke into a smile.

"Hashi, come and look," he called. But Hashi refused to budge, remembering other times when Kiku had said the same thing and he had gone cheerfully forward only to find a ceiling covered with bats, or worse. "It's a puppy!" said Kiku at last.

It took a promise of his diving mask if he was lying, but Hashi finally came forward to find a white puppy playing in the entrance to building B. They watched as the puppy dug at a hole for a while, then ran off after a bug. Before Hashi could even suggest that they take the dog for a pet, Kiku had run out of the bushes. The puppy was still a little unsteady on its feet and should have been easy to catch, but it saw Kiku coming and set off in the other direction. Chasing it, they got as far as the entrance to building C when a growling sound froze them in their tracks. It seemed to come from the entire building, a low moan filling the great concrete cavity. A moment later they noticed several shining eyes in the dark entrance, and then as their own eyes adjusted to the light, they could make out bared teeth and crouching forms. Eyeing them malevolently, one dog crept out into the open and began howling, which set off all the others.

That was enough for Kiku; he was about to turn and run when Hashi grabbed him.

"If you turn your back on them they attack. I read in a book on big game hunting you're supposed to look them in the eye and back up slowly." As

they watched more dogs appear from the building, they remembered that the body of some man—a vagrant, everyone had said—had washed ashore a while back with the haunches, belly, and sides eaten away. The police said it couldn't have been fish since fish always eat the eyeballs first. And when a chicken or a pig disappeared from somebody's farm, people talked about wild dogs, but no one had ever tried to hunt them, mostly because they lived right where the vipers were most abundant.

"What do you mean 'look them in the eye'? *Which* eye? There're hundreds of them," moaned Kiku. "We're dead if they get behind us. Can't you think of something?" Hashi suggested they try yelling as loud as they could, but the yell rose to a shriek and the baying grew louder. By now they were surrounded.

"All they do is sit there and howl. Maybe they only eat stuff that's already dead," Kiku started to say, but just then a small reddish dog darted forward and snapped at Hashi's leg. Kiku swung the sickle he'd been using on the weeds, catching it on the side of the head and drawing a spurt of blood. The animal rolled away, but another came jumping over it, biting Hashi's collar and dragging him to the ground. This time Kiku couldn't aim for the thing's head for fear of hitting Hashi, so he drove the blade into its flank, but when it turned to run, the sickle was pulled from Kiku's hands.

Now the ring of dogs was getting tighter. One leapt at Kiku's throat, but he managed to grab Hashi's sickle and jab it in its face. Almost without flinching, it turned and sank its teeth into Hashi's wrist.

"Hashi! Get up!" Kiku screamed, cutting the dog along one side, but this only made it bite down harder. As he raised the blade to strike again, a mass of black fur fastened itself to Kiku's thigh. He collapsed on top of Hashi, who had gone as white as a sheet, but by shielding himself with both arms he was able to keep the dog away from his throat. Then, suddenly, a deep roar shook the ground, a cloud of dust swept up, and from its midst a motorbike appeared outside the pack of dogs. It was Gazelle, the man from the theater in the old town. He pulled off his helmet, wiping his brow with the back of his hand, then tossed some white stuff in the dogs' direction. A space opened in their circle and, yelling like a cowboy driving a herd of cattle, Gazelle advanced, scattering bread as a decoy as he came. Even the black creature that had hold of Kiku loosened its grip to pounce on a lump that fell nearby.

The motorbike drew slowly forward and the rider signaled for them to get on. Kiku managed to hoist Hashi, who was beginning to go faint, onto the seat, then climbed on behind to hold him in place by grabbing Gazelle's belt. Gazelle donned his helmet, checked his cargo, and took off in another swirl of dust.

The bike headed toward the sea, wheels engulfed in vines, with Gazelle kicking the dogs that followed with his heavy boots. Cutting through the apartment buildings, they plunged into a thicket, finally coming out onto the bus road where they picked up speed. By now the boys could feel the air cooling and drying their wounds, and Kiku opened his eyes for a moment to catch a glimpse of the sea, glistening, smooth, and wide, before his vision blurred. As he rubbed his thigh, which was slippery with blood, he felt it was all part of a long, vivid dream; and in his mind's eye he could see the bearded man standing on a cliff overlooking the sea, holding aloft a newborn Kiku as an offering to heaven. At last he had found his way into the picture on the wall of the orphanage chapel; at last he knew the blessing of a real birth.

"D'you live in the theater?" he shouted.

Gazelle nodded.

"Can we come visit you sometime?"

"I once saw a guy with rabies," said Gazelle. "He tried to stick his hand down his throat to scratch out his own lungs. If they tell you that you guys have rabies, come to the theater. I'll scratch them out for you."

Gazelle only allowed them in the theater once, for a tour of his digs. Since water to the abandoned town had been shut off, he had dug a well in the courtyard of the school, which he covered with stray lumber and grass to avoid detection by the local authorities. Inside the theater, he had put up steel struts to reinforce the mezzanine so it would support the weight of his bike. Apart from a large number of broken seats and a sheet hung in front of the screen, the place was much as it had always been. Gazelle had also managed to tap into a transformer to siphon off electricity, but except when he ran the projector, he rarely needed it.

There were only two films in the projection room, both shorts, and these Gazelle ran for them without any introduction. The first one, titled "Nature in the Occupied Ogasawara Islands," was mostly underwater shots in

tropical waters. The entire frame was filled with tropical fish except for the lower edge where the shot included an underwater cave and some words superimposed. Gazelle stopped the projector and stared at the frame. The only sound was the hum of the fan.

“DATURA,” he said almost inaudibly. He started the film again only after he realized that Kiku and Hashi were staring at him, and even then he went on gazing at the makeshift screen with a pained expression, muttering “DATURA.”

The other short was a documentary on the daily life and work of the security guards for the National Stadium during the Tokyo Olympics. In between scenes featuring the guards, there were long sequences showing the finals of the men’s hundred-meter dash and the pole vault. It was the first time Kiku had seen pole vaulting, and as he watched Hansen being catapulted by the fiberglass pole in slow motion, he had the strange sensation that he too was being drawn along up into the sky. At the age of twelve, the muscles he would one day develop still slept under Kiku’s skin, but on the way home from Gazelle’s theater he found a long stick and pretended to be a pole vaulter.

It was the hottest day of summer vacation. Kiku and Hashi had been spending nearly every afternoon at the beach working on the seashell collection that was their summer homework project. Hashi, who had learned to snorkel, was hunting for abalone in the shallows, while Kiku, not feeling very well, sat watching on the sand. He had tried to take a nap, but woke up from a dream in which his legs were being roasted over a gas burner.

“The way you were curled up, your legs are going to be sunburned,” said Hashi, setting his catch down on the sand. Kiku rubbed his numb calves with hot sand and seawater to relieve the tingling.

A young couple spread a blue towel on the rocks just above where Hashi was diving and sat down in the sun. Every day this couple, or another like it —they all seemed interchangeable—spread out the same blue towel printed with the name of the local inn. The woman’s predictably pale skin, slathered with sunscreen, was marked here and there with red blotches left by insect bites. Hashi, cradling his bucketful of shells and sea urchins,

reported to Kiku that there were no abalone below, then turned his attention to the newcomers.

“That lady has a cat, you can bet on it,” he concluded after a quick look.

Kiku had begun to practice vaulting, using a bamboo pole and the sea as a landing pit. He hadn’t quite got the hang of it yet, but one thing he had figured out was the need for speed in the approach. The faster he could run, the further and higher he would fly; so the first problem was to work out how to run faster. He decided his stance at the start was wrong, recalling the way Bob Hayes had crouched before the finals of the hundred meters at the Tokyo Olympics: legs set, back extended, every muscle tensed, as if his body were itself a pole. That way, the body would just shoot forward on its own when the strength gave out in the lead leg. He remembered that Hayes had adjusted his stance again and again, checking it against some mental ideal of the perfect sprinter. That must be it, Kiku thought: running was just leaning so far forward you were about to fall on your face and then sticking out the other leg before you actually fell. The first ape to struggle up from all fours must have done it like that, and if it was good enough for him, it was good enough for Kiku. So, whenever he raced along the beach, sweat dripping, limbs growing heavy, he pictured his precarious ideal to himself, running on until he was exhausted and the idea of another step had become unbearable.

As Hashi sat on the rocks drinking orange juice from a thermos, the young man with the blue towel approached and asked whether there were any jellyfish in the water.

“No, the water’s still warm. They don’t come till mid-August,” Hashi told him.

The man gave him five hundred yen for the shellfish and sea urchins, which Hashi spent later on a new face mask. The man picked his way back over to the woman and began cracking the shells of the sea urchins with a broad knife. The sound of the blade penetrating the shells distracted the woman, and she stopped fixing her makeup to watch him scrape the ocher roe onto the blade, which he then held up for her to lick with a deft tongue.

Kiku and Hashi watched the whole scene, riveted.

“It looks like he’s trying to kill her,” Hashi said. Kiku felt a bit sick imagining the soft yellow eggs dissolving in her warm mouth and sliding down her throat. As a sequel to this, the woman got one of the spines from a

sea urchin stuck in the back of her leg, and she bent over while the man tried to extract it with his teeth. He must have tickled her, as she let out a high-pitched laugh that set Kiku's teeth on edge. Against the dark rocks and the sea, her wriggling leg seemed sickeningly white, and, suddenly despising all women, Kiku spat in the sand.

"I'd like to beat her to a pulp," he muttered, as the feverish feeling that had been pent up in his head spread gradually throughout his body. Closing his eyes, he thought murderous thoughts as he mumbled, "Why do they let such gross people on the beach? Why do they let them live?"

After a while he forgot about the woman, but by then his whole body was burning with the fever. He walked over to the firm wet sand at the water's edge and pressed his heel into it, lightly at first but then harder and harder. Eventually, he stopped and crouched down, spreading his legs to take the pose of a runner in a racing start. Back arched, palms down, he held his breath and focused on the stretch of beach in front of him. Watching the waves being sucked into the tiny crevices in the sand, Kiku suddenly had a blinding vision of himself running, the vision splitting the air several steps ahead of where the real Kiku was crouching.

"Go!" yelled Hashi, and Kiku did, as if trying to catch the image of himself speeding away a few steps ahead. At about the third stride in the hard sand, he suddenly felt lighter, as though he had actually merged with the vision and was no longer running but being hurled along. Somewhere just beneath the skin, his muscles seemed to be splitting open, cracking their spiny shell and coming to life. The heat that coursed through him, having nowhere else to go, pumped in bursts to his legs. Feeling on the verge of taking off, of simply flying up into the air, Kiku let out a tremendous yell. I've got it, he thought; that spinning metal thing that's been scaring me all along… it's in *me* now!

4

The year the boys graduated to junior high school, they had outgrown all their clothes, so Kazuyo took them shopping in Sasebo on the mainland. This was not their first trip to the town, but every time they'd been there it was raining, so Kiku and Hashi always pictured the place as gray and plain. The only thing they liked about it was the seal that lived in a tank on the roof of the department store.

The store was unusually crowded that day, but they managed to finish their shopping quickly, ate some rice omelettes in the cafeteria, and headed up to the roof. Right where the giant spinning coffee cup usually stood, a temporary stage had been set up; on it was a man, apparently an emcee, wearing heavy stage makeup, a silver suit, and butterfly-shaped sunglasses, and a woman with dyed red hair in a dress dotted with artificial roses. Balloons had been strung up around the stage, and to one side were five fairly elderly-looking men with instruments—a band of some sort, it seemed. Beyond the stage Kiku and Hashi could see the seal's cage, but the crush of people kept them from getting any closer. After a little introduction, the red-headed woman started a song-and-dance routine to music so loud Kazuyo and the boys could hardly hear one another, and Kiku thought he would slip away to the pet shop to check on the German shepherd puppy he and Hashi had decided to buy with their allowance. But again the crowd was so thick he could hardly move, and eventually all three were pushed gradually toward the stage. From close up, they could see that the woman with red hair was covered all over with powder which was beginning to run in the heat, making weirdly shaped stains on her nylons. When she finished her song, the man in the silver suit came out applauding and babbling compliments in a voice like a crackly radio. The woman, "Miss Kanae," was sweating hard now, the powder washing from her face to reveal the coarse skin underneath, but she launched gamely into the next song, during which she plucked the artificial roses from her dress and tossed them into the crowd.

Kiku was starting to feel suffocated and the constant tug of the shopping bags hurt his fingers, while Kazuyo had long since begun looking for somewhere to sit down. But Hashi, who loved singing, was thrilled. He had given his bags to Kiku and squirmed up to the front row to watch the red-headed woman dance around in her snakeskin high heels. At the end, she went into a ballerina's pirouette with one leg extended, as the aging musicians fumbled with their sheet music. When she finally came to rest, the silver-suited emcee reappeared blowing soap bubbles at the singer.

"Now, let's see if we can't prevail on Miss Kanae to treat us to a spectacle from her first career!" he said, as big red and green balls were brought on stage. Rapidly changing her high heels for crepe-soled shoes, Miss Kanae obligingly hopped up on one of the balls.

"Right you are! Miss Kanae was a circus star! But she tells me that her real specialty wasn't acrobatics but riding an elephant or a lion through a sea of fire!" Before he could finish, Miss Kanae had jumped down from the ball and taken the microphone.

"Yes, dear, but my *real* forte was hypnotism, you know."

"Hypnotism! Isn't that *amazing*! I don't suppose you'd still be able…"

"I've probably forgotten how…"

"How about it, ladies and gentlemen? Who'd like to be hypnotized by Miss Kanae?" Several hands shot up. "This *is* a brave crowd—I don't think I'd be willing—they say it's a bit dangerous, isn't it? Well, then, who'll it be?…"

"I know how we'll pick him," said the singer. "Four years back I had a record; not a very good one, I'm afraid—it never sold much—but is there anyone out there who remembers the title of my record?" The crowd fell silent and the emcee looked a bit embarrassed, but just as he was about to give them a hint, a small voice spoke up.

"What was that? Louder, please."

"*Petals of Sorrow*."

"That's right. Thank you for remembering," said the redhead, gesturing in the direction of the owner of the voice. It was Hashi.

As she prepared to hypnotize Hashi, Miss Kanae asked that the audience refrain from making any noise to allow her to focus her powers. Hashi, seated tensely on the stage, gave a cautious wave at Kazuyo and Kiku. The emcee asked if he had ever been under psychiatric care, to which Hashi

answered “No.” A large black box was brought out on stage, Hashi and the woman went inside, and when they emerged ten minutes later, Hashi’s eyes were shut tight. A murmur went through the audience, and the woman put her finger to her lips.

“Your name and age?”

“Hashio Kuwayama, thirteen.”

“Hashio, tell me, where are we now?”

“Hawaii.”

“Where in Hawaii?”

“Near… no, on the sea.”

“And how is it here in Hawaii?”

“Hot!”

The crowd, bundled against the cold, burst out laughing. Hashi, however, was actually sweating and began to take off his coat.

“What are you doing here in Hawaii, Hashio?”

“Taking a nap.”

“You’ve finished your nap, haven’t you?”

“Yes. I’m fishing.”

“By yourself?”

“Kiku’s here too.”

“And who’s Kiku?”

“He’s my brother, or my friend, really.”

“And besides Kiku?”

“Mr. Kuwayama.”

“Mr. Kuwayama?”

“I mean, my father…”

Kazuyo had begun to look uneasy, and Kiku, thinking he should put a stop to the whole thing, was trying to make his way toward the stage. Hashi was beginning to look pale and anxious, scratching absently at his throat from time to time.

“Well, Hashio, that’s about enough. What do you think? Hawaii’s too hot anyway. How about going home? Shall we go home?”

“Where? Home where?”

“Hmm… Good question. This time, Hashio, why don’t you go back to when you were a little boy; in fact, all the way back to when you were a tiny baby. That’s it, the clock is running backward, back to the time when

you weren’t even a year old, to when you were a baby… Well, how does it feel?”

“Hot.”

“What? No, you’re home from Hawaii now. Where are you?”

“It’s hot… so hot it’s killing me.”

“Hashio, you’ve left Hawaii! You’re a newborn baby.”

“Stop it!” yelled Kiku at that point, but just as the red-haired woman turned to hush him, Hashi, trembling all over, looked up at the cloudy sky and let out a wail that sent shivers down the spine of everyone within earshot. Startled, the woman clapped her hands three times near Hashi’s head. At this, Hashi opened his eyes, rose from the chair, and began to stagger around the stage. Forcing his way through the front row of spectators, Kiku jumped up and cradled Hashi in his arms as the redhead, the silver suit, and everyone else watched blankly. For some reason, their uncaring eyes made Kiku furious, and in an instant he had left Hashi, decked the emcee with one punch, and was kicking the woman in the stomach. The audience continued to scream until he was subdued by the doddery band. Having watched all this with a mournful expression, Hashi leapt down from the stage and ran through the crowd, which parted before him; only Kazuyo made any move to stop him, but, caught in the crush and unable to make herself heard, she could only watch helplessly as Hashi disappeared down the stairs. Meanwhile, the band held Kiku pinned face down on the stage, arguing about whether they should call the cops. And, above everything, the seal barked cheerfully.

Hashi had stopped going to school and even refused to speak to anyone, much as he had at the orphanage when he’d retreated into his miniature kingdom. After he fled the department store, he had been missing overnight, and was discovered the next day unconscious and naked from the waist down in a public toilet in the park along the river.

This time, instead of building toy kingdoms, he took to watching TV. From the time he got up in the morning until the last station signed off at night, he never left the television. If Kuwayama or Kazuyo so much as mentioned turning the set off, he flew into a rage. Kiku was the only one he spoke to, and then only when they were alone.

“Do you know how nasty I really am?” was the kind of thing he said most often.

Kuwayama made plans to send Hashi away for help, but Kazuyo blamed herself and spent a lot of time praying at the local shrine. Hashi refused to speak to either of them, making Kiku his only confidant.

“I’m not really crazy; I’m just trying to figure something out. Do you remember when we used to go to that hospital and they showed us those movies? Waves and gliders and tropical fish and stuff? Well, when I was hypnotized I realized that all that time we were supposed to be watching movies we were actually listening to some sound; I even heard it again while she had me under, real clear. It was beautiful! So beautiful I felt like I wanted to die just listening. And that’s why I’m watching all this TV; I’m trying to find that sound, and TV’s the best chance I’ve got here on this island. Cooking shows are really good: dishes and glasses clinking, eggs hitting a hot frying pan, sounds like that. Then there’s the sound of guns shooting or bombs exploding, airplanes, the wind, accordions, cellos—I know all the instruments by now. The sound a woman’s skirt makes, kisses, high heels on a metal staircase; I sit in front of the TV, shut my eyes, and listen… By the end of it I’ll know all the sounds in the world. But I won’t go back to school until I figure out what it was we heard at the hospital.”

Kiku listened quietly, but this time he wondered if Hashi wasn’t, in fact, a bit crazy. His face had the same blank expression as when they’d first met at the orphanage—you felt invisible again when you talked to him. But as it occurred to Kiku that Hashi would probably end up in a hospital, he remembered the time with the play kingdom and how the awful spinning thing had appeared almost as soon as Hashi left him. And now, again, his head began to ache, as if his eyeballs were drying out, and the space right in front of his nose which he could only see when cross-eyed turned a deep, rich green. The colored patch slowly began to expand until it covered both eyes, and everything became very still. Then this blind spot gradually hardened and seemed to grow heavy, becoming a dull metallic wheel; the spinning started… and the buzzing again. As its speed increased, the wheel expanded, until a huge, vague ring hung in the air. Kiku still had no idea what it was, but this time he wasn’t afraid. This time he learned to cope: at the first sign of pain in his eyes, he would set out for a run on the beach,

and as he picked up speed the blind spot between his eyes would recede; as the strength flowed into his body, the metal ring would fade and vanish.

One day, after running on the beach and doing practice jumps with the bamboo pole, Kiku headed for the deserted town. A bright green snake slithered from the shattered entrance to the colliery; everything seemed alive, fluttering in the wind, except Kiku's own heavy shadow. It had been a long time since he had taken a walk alone, and he used the time to think.

Sunshine like this feels like midsummer to me, no matter what time of year it is; always has, ever since I was born. They say I went on crying in that locker till they found me… all sweaty; I don't remember, of course, but it must've been hot… Nine others, panting away, but they all died. Hashi and I made it because it was summer… heat and sweat brought us back to life! Must have been summer! That's why other seasons hardly exist for us… Just heat, light, and shadows…

I wonder if they've still got that paper bag at the orphanage? Books on lace-making she left in the locker with me. Police checked the fingerprints but couldn't find a match; at least she didn't have a record. Must've liked making lace… Maybe that's why I always feel funny when I see lace… All Hashi's got is those flowers—bougainvilleas his mother left. Keeps those dried petals like they were some kind of charm.

The wind howled through the streets past peeling signs for empty shops: Shirayama Meats, Harbor Lights Dance Hall, Kamijima Bicycles, Bar Niagara, Restaurant Hanabusa.

As Kiku turned the corner, Gazelle, busy repairing his bike, looked up to greet him.

"Alone today?" he asked. Kiku nodded. Gazelle had bleached his hair into a brilliant blond helmet, but his face was black with grease and sweat. "The carburetor's busted," he explained.

"Have you got a bit of bread I could have?" said Kiku.

"Hungry?"

"I don't need much."

"I've got some cold noodles you're welcome to," he offered.

"I'd just as soon have the bread."

"This for you?"

"No…" said Kiku.

“For the dogs?” Kiku nodded. Gazelle was back in a minute carrying a small piece of French bread. “They like this stuff best,” he said, handing it over. “But if you’re thinking of doing a little dog-hunting, today’s not the day. It’s the Festival of the Dead this week, and you don’t want to go messing with souls right now, not even dog souls.”

Breaking the bread in half, Kiku put a piece in each pocket, mumbled, “Thanks, Gazelle,” and turned to go.

“Kiku, hold on a second. Didn’t you tell me one time that you were thrown out as a baby?”

“Uh-huh.”

“So do you hate your mother for it?” he continued.

“You mean the woman who left me in the locker?”

“Right. Do you hate her?”

“Hmm. I guess so… Yeah, I hate her.”

“Ever think you’d like to kill her?” asked Gazelle suddenly.

“I don’t even know who she is. How could I kill her?”

“But what if you killed everybody? Then you’d be sure to get her too, wouldn’t you?”

“Wouldn’t that be a bit tough on all the people who had nothing to do with it?” Kiku asked.

“You’ve got rights, you know,” said Gazelle. “Seems to me, after what you’ve been through you’d have the right to kill everybody, even if it was only to get back at your mother. Anyway, if you ever feel like it—I mean offing the whole world to get even with your mom, I’ve got a secret formula that’ll let you do it.”

“Secret formula? What are you talking about?”

“One to use if you ever decide you want to get rid of everybody. It’s foolproof. You ready? This is it: DATURA.”

“DATURA?”

“DATURA.”

“DATURA,” repeated Kiku.

“Don’t forget it now. I promise you it’ll come in handy someday.”

Nearly all the dogs were napping in the shade of the apartment complex as Kiku approached. He had come in search of a puppy, one with long white hair to give to Hashi, who had always wanted a dog.

The pack noticed Kiku coming and began to snarl: seven in the entrance to one building, four lying in the grass in front, three on the second-story balcony, and two more that came running out of building D when they heard the others. They were all fairly small but, with fangs bared and hackles up, frightening enough. Worse, more and more kept coming. When a particularly tough-looking black dog came down the stairs of building C, the others scrambled to get out of its way. It was carrying something in its mouth that at first seemed to be a black rag, but Kiku soon realized it was a crow with the head bitten off. He decided he should keep an eye on this one. For a while the black dog eyed Kiku back, then seemed to lose interest and walked off around the corner of the building.

Kiku had noticed a puppy, a white one chewing on an old inner tube. Between him and the puppy, however, was a beautiful dog with a long white coat and floppy ears that appeared to be the mother; not a bad thing in itself since it meant the puppy too would probably be beautiful when it grew up, but it did present an obstacle. He studied the situation for a moment as he took out of his pockets the French bread and a bludgeon he'd made by wrapping a leather strap around a heavy piece of steel pipe. The puppy, having tired of the tube, tried to nose its way under its mother's side, but when she pushed it off, it settled down for a nap with its face buried in her soft coat. Just as the puppy was beginning to doze, its tail wagging contentedly, Kiku tossed a piece of bread just out of reach of the mother. She hesitated, but before she could make up her mind, a small spotted dog darted out, without taking its eyes off Kiku, and pounced on the bread. As it raced off, the prize in its teeth, the mother gave a bark and set out in pursuit, as if to claim what was rightfully hers. At that instant, Kiku rushed forward and scooped up the puppy, which was about to follow its mother. He shoved the little dog under his shirt, tossed the remaining bread in the direction of some other dogs sitting in the entrance, and ran.

The struggling puppy scratched softly at Kiku's chest as he glanced back over his shoulder. The rest of the pack, scrambling for the bread, didn't seem to be following. Nevertheless, he ran as fast as he could, leaping through the bushes and wondering whether snakes could bite someone running at full speed. When he finally slowed to look back again, the apartment blocks were no bigger than boxes and the dogs were nowhere to

be seen, but he still kept running. The puppy was whimpering under his shirt.

Suddenly, something struck his neck from behind. Everything went black and he fell, barely managing to catch himself on one elbow to keep from crushing the puppy. He heard a snarl just behind his ear and pain shot down his back, but for a moment Kiku had no idea what had happened. It wasn't until the dog shook the fangs it had buried in his shoulder and neck that Kiku realized that he'd been bitten. With his face pinned against the ground, all he could see was a trickle of blood forming a pool beside his head. The sun seemed to melt into his wounds, setting them on fire.

After a moment, Kiku tried to get to his feet, but the dog forced its teeth deeper into his skin and he collapsed under the weight. He began to feel cold. The wounds were burning but he was covered with gooseflesh and starting to shiver. He was also having trouble breathing, and his stomach began to churn. Just as he was about to vomit, though, he and the dog were suddenly showered with cold water and he heard the thud of metal hitting soft flesh. He looked up, and there was Gazelle. Next to Kiku, the mother dog cowered on crushed forelegs, a pale red liquid trickling from her jaw. At the sight of Gazelle grinning merrily and raising the pole to strike again, Kiku closed his eyes and yelled:

"No! Don't kill the mother!"

*

Hashi named the puppy Milk. As for Kiku, the mother's teeth had torn gaping holes in his neck, which took a long time to heal. The hardest part was that the sores had to be kept dry so they wouldn't get infected; Kiku was a cloud of gauze for weeks. Eventually, though, new skin grew to fill in the gouges, and as Kiku healed, Hashi too seemed to return to the world of the living. He had apparently memorized almost every sound the television had to offer without finding the one he'd been looking for.

"You know, I never really thought what we heard back at that hospital could have come from the TV. TV sounds are all the same; there's no difference between the sound of the wind in Northern Ireland and the wind on a Polynesian island. You can't tell anything unless the air vibrations are produced directly. On TV, the original vibrations in the air pass through a

microphone to tape, then from the tape they're converted to electrical waves; somewhere in there the real sound dies and all you've got left is electricity. The sound they played for us was probably reproduced somehow, but it was more than just taped; there was something special about it. As far as I can tell, it must've been a mixture of natural sound, something fixed up electronically, and some kind of electronic instrument. There's nothing like that on TV. All you get on TV is pigs squealing."

Having done nothing for three months but listen to sounds, Hashi's hearing had become extremely acute. He had heard all kinds of things: the wind blowing in the garden, leaves rustling, metals, glass, animals, musical instruments, and human beings—everything had its own distinctive sound, and Hashi could distinguish them all from the tiniest sample. As a condition for going back to school, he demanded a tape recorder, and with Kiku as guinea pig, he began to experiment with mixing sounds together. He had learned two important things about the soothing sound he was searching for: one, that it had to be indirect, refracted or muffled in some way; and two, that the sound had to give the impression that it would continue forever. His test subject, Kiku, found two most comforting: the sound of someone practicing the piano heard faintly from an unknown direction, and the sound of gentle rain outside a window, punctuated by drops falling on the casement.

Nothing changed when Hashi went back to school; he was constantly rooting out new noises, new types of music. He also began to study the fundamentals of musical scales, rhythm, and harmony. Then one day, by chance, he stumbled on a tune that was somehow similar to the sound they had heard at the hospital. He knew the tune from recordings, but it hadn't clicked until he happened to pick up an old music box in the deserted town. A spring was broken in the music box, so the mechanism had to be pushed around by hand, but as Hashi turned the rough surface against the vibrating bars, it came to him: this was nearly it. Even Milk stopped barking and sat wagging his tail happily. The tune was tantalizing but still not quite right; it only made him more determined to find the real sound, even if it took his whole life, but at least now, thanks to the music box, he had a name to call it: Träumerei.

In the summer of the year they turned fifteen, Kiku and Hashi took Milk to the beach almost every day. Milk loved anything that had to do with water. From the time he was a puppy, he would plant his paws in his water dish, more interested in a splash than a drink, and when chasing a ball, he always found a way to guide it into a ditch or puddle. And once he was in the water, no amount of coaxing could get him out. He preferred the rocky part of the coast to the sandy beaches, so they made him dog shoes from scraps of leather to protect his soft paws, and at the mere sight of them he would begin to bark for joy at the promise of water. It wasn't long before Milk was a better swimmer than Hashi, and the silky white hair he had inherited from his mother was almost always damp. At the end of a day of swimming, as the sun was going down, the boys would groom Milk on the beach, leaving the comb caked with salt crystals when they were done.

In one thing, Kiku and Hashi actually envied Milk a little: though he'd lost his mother early in life just as they had, Milk later got a chance to meet her. One evening, on the way home from the beach, they came across several dogs rooting in some garbage. Though she was completely changed from their last meeting, Kiku immediately recognized one of them as the white dog from the mining town. A patch of fur was missing where Gazelle had hit her, her eyes were cloudy, and she drooled a bit, but it was unmistakably the same dog. Her right front leg was bent and dragged along the ground. Milk, having no idea that this was his mother, growled quietly for a while, then seemed to lose interest and passed on with the boys. The mother never even glanced up. When they had gone quite a distance, Milk stopped at the crest of a hill, shook himself, and gave a long, mournful howl.

5

Anemone woke past noon but stayed in bed another two hours. An unlit cigarette dangling between her lips, she wondered why she hadn't had any nightmares. Could be the extra oxygen from the new plants, or the heat, or maybe even the new feather mattress. Which? She fished out some bottles from the refrigerator by the bed: vegetable juice, mango juice, a lactic acid drink, and seltzer. Grabbing the thermometer and an electronic blood pressure meter from the dresser, she checked herself over. Temperature normal, blood pressure a shade low; so she did ten minutes of yoga in bed and drank some mango and vegetable juice. She put the rest of the bottles back in the refrigerator and lit the cigarette. Swirling the smoke in her mouth, which was still a bit numb from the acid-sweet combination, she made a mental note that the world's worst flavor combination was mango and menthol. Her friend at the Turkish restaurant had been right, she thought, remembering an ad she'd seen in a magazine featuring a fat lady pushing a laxative: "A moving experience." The friend had told her that all fat women were habitual liars: their center of gravity is lower or something, putting pressure on the front lobe of the brain. Flabby stomach muscles and stiff shoulders make for shaky scruples.

Glancing at the calendar mobile suspended from the ceiling, she realized that she had no work lined up for the whole week. Plenty of time for tennis, she thought, but then she remembered that the gut in both of her rackets had broken three months earlier and the guy at the tennis shop kept putting her off, saying that he had to order real gut from New Zealand. The idiot had probably ordered live sheep for all the time it was taking. She tried to imagine what else she could do to kill a whole week, but the effort made her tired and she gave up.

Anemone had been born seventeen years earlier, the product of the union of the manager of a company that produced a popular nasal decongestant spray and a child singer, now forty years old, who had her vocal chords fixed so her voice had never changed. Anemone was their only child, and

unlike most children, whose first word is usually “mama,” meaning something between “mother” and “food,” Anemone’s first word was “cute.” This was because, all day every day when she was still a baby, everyone around her was constantly saying, “How cute!”

Anemone’s mother had the surgery on her vocal chords when she was nine, but by the time she was eighteen her records had stopped selling anyway, so she decided to have more surgery, this time on her face. The narrow eyes that had been charming as a child were almost grotesque on a teenager, so they were rounded out, and a new face was born, one that looked as if it could go on singing children’s songs well into its thirties. Not long afterward, that face managed to cast a spell over Anemone’s father, and they were married.

Anemone’s mother was content enough being a pretty wife until the time came to give birth. As the day approached, she got more and more anxious: what if the baby turned out ugly? Then her own surgical enhancements would be found out—and perhaps not only the work on her face but the little matter of a reconstructed hymen and the vocal chords as well. Her husband would divorce her, and she would have to go back to singing numbers like “A Shoal of Minnows” and “Rainy Night Moon” to drunken men in some cabaret. It was understandable, then, that when baby Anemone turned out so cute, her mother tended to solicit compliments, even from the servants, a little more often than the average doting parent. But as Anemone grew up, there was really no need for coercion; the reconstructed and remodeled child singer had given birth to a beauty. Searching for some explanation for her good fortune, Anemone’s mother decided that perhaps during one of her own operations, the doctor had accidentally left some tweezers and a scalpel inside and they had somehow slipped down into her womb and performed gradual, natural, and completely successful plastic surgery on the fetus.

While still in junior high school, Anemone appeared in a commercial for a new product her father’s company was introducing. She was spotted by an agency, and had worked as a model ever since. A year ago, she had dropped out of high school. She wasn’t quite tall enough for fashion modeling, so she concentrated on TV commercials and printed ads, signing regular contracts with several companies. Once, she had been asked to do a movie,

but they cast her opposite an actor with pyorrhea and she walked off the set during the first day of shooting.

The year she dropped out of school, she had also left home and moved into this condominium. There were two major reasons for the move. One was that her mother and father had each taken a younger lover with the full knowledge of the other, and yet remained on the best of terms. What made this all the more disgusting was that she was convinced her parents really did like one another and weren't just putting on an act for her benefit. Once they all had dinner together, the five of them: mother, father, young lovers, and Anemone. Afterward, while they were playing cards, Anemone had suddenly burst into tears.

"Now there's nothing to cry about, honey," her father had said. "You mustn't go crying and feeling sorry for yourself. Anemone, your mother and I are doing what we truly want to be doing, but you know we'll always love each other. You're still young, but some day you'll understand: it's not that we're unhappy with each other, not at all; it's just that it's not all that easy being a grown-up, all alone in the world. It took your mom and me a long time, years even, to work through this, but we've come to realize that we really do love each other. And once we were sure of that, we decided it would be best to get the whole thing out in the open. But the main thing to remember is that Mom and Dad are grown-ups; you're going to grow up one day yourself, and when you do you'll see what I mean. This is better than sneaking around, much better… And if you still insist on crying, tell yourself this, young lady—life's not easy, and it won't do any good to act like a spoiled child!"

The other reason concerned the pet that Anemone had kept for the past six years: a crocodile. Six years earlier her parents had bought it at a department store with the guarantee that it would grow to be no more than a meter long. "Eats raw meat or fish; change water weekly; just add a rubber tree and you're in the Amazon!" the ad read. Anemone had been tempted by the piranhas, but when she found out how long a crocodile could live, her mind was made up. The creature was installed in a meter-square tank, and all was well in the Amazon until one night six months later when Anemone woke to the sound of shattering glass. No one had noticed that the crocodile had long since outgrown the tank. Anemone's parents phoned the department-store pet shop.

“The variety we sell was developed in Sri Lanka by selective breeding of the Congo Pygmy Crocodile, which comes from equatorial Africa. It’s impossible that one could be more than fifty centimeters long, maximum. There is a chance, of course, that some other variety got mixed in with the shipment from Singapore—the famous crocodile garden at the zoo in Singapore.”

Anemone’s pet got bigger every day. In a year’s time, it measured a full two meters. A write-up in a newspaper prompted a visit from scientists at a reptile research center who came to the conclusion that the animal was an Indian gavial. The crocodilian order, they said, included at least three families: crocodiles, alligators, and gavials. The latter have long, slender muzzles that flatten into an octagonal shape at the end. The long snout and the odd, bulging eyes give the gavial a slightly comical appearance, explaining perhaps why gavial babies once enjoyed tremendous, if short-lived, popularity as pets in a certain city in the U.S. Children, it seems, loved the baby gavials, but the parents were less charmed, and the fad came to an end when hundreds were flushed down toilets all over town. When they disappeared down the drain, they were no bigger than a man’s finger, but some managed to survive and prosper in the pipes, and eventually they attacked and killed a sewer worker. Faced with dozens of huge monsters in its bowels, the city government had called in the army; gasoline was fed into the pipes, and the animals were burned alive. End of story.

But Anemone’s pet was already too big to fit down the toilet, and, besides, she had finally decided to give it a name—up to this point it had been simply “crocodile.” She called it Gulliver. And it gave her a thrill to think how far Gulliver had come from that tropical river, and even more of one to think that she was now his owner. What, she wondered, were the odds of Gulliver living in a bathtub in the Meguro ward of Tokyo? Millions to one, at least…

By this time the damage done by Gulliver’s food bill—ten kilos of meat a day—was severe, not to mention the damage to the nerves of Anemone’s mother, who was no longer able to use the shower. Her father explained matters to Anemone as best he could and began to make inquiries at the zoo; but Anemone refused to even consider parting with Gulliver.

No one could touch Gulliver except Anemone, and she herself made it a rule to always enter his room crawling on her belly. Since crocodiles were

always creeping along low to the ground, she reasoned, they must feel as though they're being looked down on—and nobody would like that much. If she got down to their level, they might think of her as a friend. Gulliver, she found, was very fond of music, and would sit peacefully listening to anything she played for him as she cleaned his teeth with a screwdriver. His favorite, though, was David Bowie's "Uranus."

On the day her father had arranged for the men from the zoo to take Gulliver away, Anemone threatened suicide, but that was nothing compared to Gulliver's show. The zookeepers had none of the luxury of space afforded by a jungle river, and in the cramped bathroom the situation got a little out of hand. When the first man tried to sedate him, Gulliver broke his leg with a swish of his tail; then he chewed two fingers off the hand of another man who tried to wire his jaw shut. In the confusion, Gulliver managed to slip out the door of the bathroom, which had been widened for his removal, taking refuge in the living room. When Anemone arrived on the scene, her mother was dancing around the room trying to keep clear of him.

"Get down and crawl!" Anemone urged, as Gulliver, broken furniture and torn carpet in his wake, was closing in. The scars from her plastic surgery twitched and pulled as Anemone's mother dropped to the ground screaming.

"Mama, try singing! He'd never eat you while you're singing." So her mother, half fainting, sang "Blue-eyed Doll" with all the strength in her surgically enhanced vocal chords while Gulliver listened, one leg planted squarely in the middle of her back.

At the time of their move to the condo, Anemone was seventeen years old, Gulliver three meters long. Anemone did some renovating in Gulliver's new home, breaking down the walls between the rooms and adding a humidifier, with the heat turned up high all the time to simulate the crocodile's birthplace, the delta of the Irrawaddy River in Burma. Future plans included a couple of dozen ultraviolet lights to be hung from the ceiling. Gulliver's room she dubbed Uranus—"King of the Heavens"—a distant world where one year equals eighty-four, and where the atmosphere is so heavy that only low-lying lichens and ferns could survive, with only creeping animals like the crocodile to walk among them. The Uranean wind sighed a long, low song as Anemone envisioned the tropical garden she

would make in the apartment: a realm of brilliant colors, with the crocodile as lord and master and she herself as jungle goddess; the air choked with the fragrance of flowers and ripe fruit, and here and there coral reefs and pools of seaweed teeming with sea turtles, palm trees, and lite beer.

"Rain again," said the driver, catching Anemone's eye in the rear-view mirror and striking up a conversation. He seemed to be the chatty sort. Anemone stared out the window at the traffic, which was getting heavy.

"Rain," he repeated. "The weatherman said yesterday the rainy season's over, but it's still so humid you can't keep the windows from fogging up. My grandmother always told me there were only two things in life you could trust: the weather forecast on NHK and Sanseido's English-Japanese Dictionary. That and the signs on the cages at Ueno Zoo… And maybe the umpires in high school baseball. Grandma graduated from college in the twenties when almost nobody where we came from even went to school… Shit! Look at that asshole trying to cut in… She was a smart old girl… Damn glass keeps fogging up… Uh, miss, pardon me for being nosy, but what college do you go to? I'll bet it's a music college…"

Anemone ignored him, and the man went on chuckling to himself and cursing other drivers. She had flagged down the cab in front of the wholesale butcher's, where her heavy bundle of frozen meat had been carried to the car. It was just bad luck, she discovered after she was settled inside, that the driver was a bit too friendly.

"Know how I can tell music students? They're a dead giveaway: powerful shoulders means a pianist; a thick neck means a singer; violinists have got calluses on the chin; and cellists are bowlegged. Pretty good, huh? Guess you could say I'm not your run-of-the-mill cabbie. I've always had this gift for noticing things, and my friends all tell me it's a shame to waste it in a job like this. They say I should've been a writer or a ship's captain or something. Ship's captain… now there's a job. You have to be able to size up your crew pretty good or you can end up in trouble… Yep, you'd have to be real sharp for that… Real sharp… Miss?… Miss? You asleep?" People get chattier all the time, Anemone was thinking. They come up and start talking to you on the train, waiting in line somewhere, at the movies, in a coffee shop or at the supermarket, and if you so much as say "boo" back, you're doomed; they go on talking forever. More assholes out there all the

time: they smile nice, offer to carry your bag or buy you a cup of coffee, and suddenly you're their best friend. Seems dangerous, all these pathological talkers. Anemone had read of a case where a man had tried to walk away from a talkative stranger and got a knife in the back.

"Tired, huh? It's bad to get worn out like that, makes you cranky… Damn this drizzle! It's hell on the wipers and worse on the drivers. Hardly see anything with this glare… Blinding, huh?… Yup, blinding… You sure are quiet, lady. Uh… where was it you said you were going? You're so quiet back there I completely forgot… I'm not kidding, I really can't remember… Come on, lady, give me a break," he pleaded, glancing back at Anemone. He wiped his sweaty palms on his pants as she opened the window a crack to get some air. The smell of warm, damp concrete came flooding into the car, the smell of evening.

"No, really, I'm serious—you've got to tell me, where do you want to go? I can't remember." The driver stopped the taxi in the middle of the road and put on his flashers. Sharp honks came from the traffic backing up behind.

"Daikanyama," Anemone muttered. The man had barely managed to catch what she said, but his face immediately relaxed.

"Right! Daikanyama it was; Yamate Avenue, I believe. Just slipped my mind for a minute… Miss, excuse me for saying so, but you're not like most other girls. In this line of work I learn a lot about people—must meet fifty or more every day—and I'm telling you, you're a bit different… in a good sense, of course. I mean, for example, you take your normal young lady, she'll at least make small talk, say hello, something… I guess what I mean is, your normal young lady's got some manners. Take for instance a few minutes ago, when I said to you 'Rain again.' I remember that 'cause we were just going under an overpass, the odometer said 70,092 kilometers, and the fare was at ¥1,780—like I said, not much I don't notice… Well, a normal girl would have said something like 'Yes, it certainly is pretty sticky,' or 'The rainy season ought to be over by now,' or something like that. People always talk about the weather to get things started; it's just good manners.

"You know, miss, I'm a pretty easygoing guy in general. Yeah, I have my rough edges, but all in all I'm pretty open-minded… but I've got to tell you, you are the quietest fucking lady I ever met. Shit, this *traffic*! Slow as

molasses, and rain, too. And a tight-lipped, bad-assed fare. Guess this is what I get for being such a nice guy."

The taxi had hardly moved, and ahead the red blur of brake lights glistened on the pavement. With nothing else to do, the driver was studying Anemone's profile in the mirror as the lights from the oncoming cars lit her pale, transparent skin and cast mauve shadows on her eyelids and cheeks.

Here the road began to slope gently downward to a part of Tokyo popularly known as "Toxitown," a contaminated area right in the center of the city. About five years earlier, birds and small animals had suddenly begun dying in the neighborhood. Tests revealed an abnormally high level of chlorine in the soil, high enough to cause eruptions on the skin of those exposed to it, or liver and nerve damage in cases where the contaminant got into the system. Pregnant women were warned of the danger of miscarriage or birth defects. But that was all that was ever said; no explanation was offered as to how the chlorine got into the soil, though there was plenty of speculation. Since there was no chemical plant in the area, some said the stuff must have leaked from a passing truck. There was talk of illegal dumping, shoddy construction practices, or even some peculiar natural chemical reaction triggered by the high ground temperature. At any rate, whatever the cause, this particular waste could not be cleaned up by any normal means: it wasn't water soluble, it was impervious to heat treatment, and even those microorganisms developed especially for eating waste were useless. In the end, the Public Health Department came up with large subsidies to have the residents relocated, and the area was sealed off. The ground was covered with cement, the perimeter ringed with barbed wire, and sentry boxes were set up.

There were two theories as to why the place came to be known as Toxitown: one was simply because it was a health hazard, the other because the sealed area became a hotbed of crime, particularly drug traffic. The criminal element found its way in and out of Toxitown in spite of the guards who patrolled the perimeter in protective suits. The guards, toting flamethrowers, were there to prevent anyone from entering, but even more to stop vandals from removing anything. Since the houses and their contents had been abandoned once the pollution was discovered, the authorities were afraid the area would be particularly tempting to looters, and they put out the word that the guards would incinerate not only

contaminated property but anyone carrying it. The warning, however, didn't have much effect on traffic in and out of Toxitown, since the people it was meant to scare off were interested in the new territory precisely because it was the one place in Tokyo where police jurisdiction didn't extend. And once the area had been colonized by gangsters and hoods, other types began to collect there too; drifters and vagrants, the deinstitutionalized mentally ill, low-class whores, male prostitutes, wanted criminals, degenerates, cripples, and runaways all took up residence in Toxitown, and an odd sort of society began to form. In the end, apparently, even the police preferred to look the other way thanks to an unexpected side effect of so many marginal types gathering in one spot: the crime rate, particularly for sexual offenses, began to fall sharply in other parts of the city. Everybody, in fact, was unofficially satisfied with the situation, except for one small detail: the barbed-wire compound lay directly adjacent to and in the shadow of the cluster of new skyscrapers in West Shinjuku, as if the crown of the Tokyo skyline rose above a cesspool.

"It's just common sense," the driver was saying. "Just use your common sense—that's what I always say. And all these folks who don't *have* any common sense, well you might as well take them out and shoot the lot of them. Look at this traffic jam, for instance: if every fool in Tokyo wants to go the same place at the same time, well, *of course* it's going to end up like this. What we need is somebody to come up with some alternatives, something creative. There must be all sorts of other ways to do this—flying cars, or underground highways, or something… And this goddamn rain doesn't help either…

"Waaaait a minute! Wait just one fucking minute! Hey… miss… it's you, isn't it?—yes, that's it! You're in that TV commercial, the one where the shampoo gets in your eyes, they turn red, and you turn into a rabbit. Shit! If that don't beat all. A model!"

The rain was falling a little harder as Toxitown came into view on the left. The pale light bathing the guardpost and armored cars illuminated a sign: "Toxic Waste Area, Keep Out!" The whole scene shimmered, as if great strips of light on the skyscrapers had peeled away and settled onto the barbed-wire fortress. The driver, realizing he had a celebrity in his cab, got even chattier.

“You know who you remind me of? That old Hollywood actress who used to do those underwater scenes where she winked at the camera. You’ve got the same big, beautiful eyes…” And then: “Whoa! What’s today? Friday! I should’ve known! Last week I had my fortune read, and the lady said that this Friday I’d meet the person who would change my life, somebody who’d make my whole future. She meant you! Today! And you sure do look like somebody who could change a guy’s luck. What a face!… And eyes! Those eyes! Like one of those plastic babydolls my kid sister used to play with that could really drink milk. You’ve got rainbows on your eyelids, did you know that? Yeah, real pretty, all those colors on your eyes… Uh, I’m sorry if I’m talking crazy, but you’ve got a face that could make a guy go out of his mind… But I guess everybody tells you that.”

Somewhere behind them a horn honked so long it sounded as if it were stuck, and several drivers were leaning out to see what was going on. Somebody yelled “Shut the fuck up, you asshole!” which echoed through the rain. Then two more horns joined in and engines revved. Inside, the driver’s excitement had steamed up all the windows, while some people along the road, annoyed by the noise—or maybe just bored—began throwing stones at the cars. When one bounced off the bumper of the cab, Anemone started to feel uneasy. The slick surface of the road seemed to shift and roil, throwing back the lights of the city in her face. The driver rolled down his window and shouted “Shut-the-fuck-up!” eleven times in succession by Anemone’s count. When he was done, she noticed, he heaved a sigh that shook a drop of rain from his chin.

“What shit, what total bullshit,” he muttered, shaking his head. “Listen to that, miss. This fucking traffic is going to kill me if I don’t get out of here.” His voice had grown shrill, and he stumbled over rapid, hissed words. “But that’s *it*! We’ll run away together. What do you say? The company has a little beach house out east in Chiba; we could go there together. Be a way to get away from this traffic. How ‘bout it? You and me in Chiba?… Except… it takes money to make a getaway, specially with a girl like you. I bet you could never go for a guy without money. There’s probably nothing but cheap booze at the beach house, and a girl like you must drink some fancy wine. Then there are those mattresses… probably all moldy; and we’d need new sheets. Yep, got to have money to run away…

“Wait a *minute*! Are we on Yamate Avenue? Wait just one damn minute. This bookie I know’s got an office in that building up there. Sucker’s been making a fool out of me for years; but I’ll fix him, and fix us up at the same time. If you don’t mind sitting here for a bit, I’ll go up and get some cash from him, and while I’m at it—ha!—I wouldn’t mind sticking a knife in the pig! Now I won’t be a minute…” and he was gone.

The driver had stopped the car at the side of the road; Anemone, who had hardly been listening, assumed he was going to buy cigarettes or something. She was beginning to worry that the package of horsemeat and chicken heads in the trunk would spoil if she didn’t get it in the freezer soon, and she all but ignored the shouted insults as cars tried to squeeze by the taxi, which was half blocking the lane. When the driver hadn’t come back in five minutes, Anemone was furious. Rubbing a circle in the fogged window, she peered out to find a soldier, gun at his side, standing right beside the car. The young man wore a transparent plastic raincoat, and his foot was keeping time to the music filling his ears from the headphones strapped to his head.

“Sooorryyy!” piped the driver, sliding back into his seat. Anemone took one look at him and tried to scream, but nothing came out: his face and shirt were covered with blood. “What a letdown that was! Whodda thought a body was that mushy. Well, at least I got the money. Let’s roll!” The driver’s voice was a little shaky, but his technique was impeccable as he jumped the curb, turned the car around, and shot past the other stalled traffic. Anemone had no idea what to do; she knew she should be screaming, but found she couldn’t. Her body, covered with gooseflesh, was shivering but her head felt hot. Now the meat will spoil for sure, she thought, beginning to get really angry. Meanwhile, the driver’s luck with the traffic had come to an end and the cab was wedged in the crush; worse, he had managed to dent the fender of the car behind. The man in the other car got out, came over to the window of the taxi, pressed his face against the glass and yelled “Open up,” but the cabbie by this time was too shaky to do anything. Getting no response, the other man began to kick the door, joined by a companion who smashed the windshield with an aluminum baseball bat. Anemone threw herself on the floor as the driver, reviving a bit, shot the car into reverse and bumped over the sidewalk. Spotting a place where a pole in the barbed-wire fence had fallen down, he stomped on the

gas and rammed into the opening until the tires caught on the fence and the engine stalled.

Just then, the generators of some floodlights groaned into life and a powerful beam fell on the car. A whistle blew, and the soldier with the headphones tossed them into his sentry box and came running, gun leveled. As two more guards in white protective uniforms emerged from an armored car, the cabbie managed to get the engine started and jammed the gearshift again into reverse. The guards, as advertised, aimed their flamethrowers, but before they could open fire the cab ripped through the fence and disappeared into Toxitown.

They drove along slowly for a minute or two until several scruffy figures appeared in the headlights. A greasy smell came from the driver, and Anemone could see that he was covered with a sticky mixture of blood and bits of *ramen* noodles. A bluish vein was pumping on his forehead, and his damp, trembly hands seemed about to slip off the wheel, but he still managed to keep up his spiel.

“I can see how it’ll be: we’ll wake up together in the morning, the sea just beginning to shine. I’ll make toast and soft-boiled eggs; you’ll say ‘Really, I couldn’t, darling. After last night, all I want to do is sleep.’ And I’ll say you have to eat to keep up your strength, and bring you breakfast in bed… Except… I’m not sure they even have beds at this place… Oh well, who cares. I can just see you, sleeping in the nude, those rainbow eyes shut tight.”

Just as he was wiping a bit of noodle from his cheek, Anemone lunged forward and pulled the parking brake as hard as she could. The taxi screeched to a halt, but before she could get out, the driver’s hand, sticky with blood and *ramen*, had fastened on her arm.

“Where do you think you’re going? I thought we were making our getaway.”

Anemone, terrified now, looked him straight in his bloodshot eyes and shouted:

“Get your filthy hands *off* me!”

“But we’re going to the beach together. I swear, one little dip in the ocean and all this stuff will wash right off.”

“And in the meantime, my meat’s going bad,” she squawked, as the driver tightened his grip and tried to kiss her.

“Oh, angel face! Please, please!”

“Let me *go*, you asshole! I hate you!” Anemone shouted louder than she had ever shouted before. The voice was not the high, fluty one she’d inherited from her mother; this came from deep inside and seemed to bring her guts with it as it came bursting out. The driver held her with one hand while the other reached for the kitchen knife stuck in his belt. Blood was still dripping from the blade.

“Ohhh, so that’s it—you hate me. Well, I guess that’s that. Nothing I can do about it. I only thought it might be nice to go away to the beach for a while with a pretty girl like you, but if you’re not interested I guess it won’t work out…”

Anemone was not particularly frightened any more. The whole thing seemed like a dream anyhow; she would probably end up getting killed, but she had that dream almost every night. The only difference was that in the dreams she was always quiet when they were killing her, but this time she’d been able to shout. Another difference, too: she was mad as hell that Gulliver’s meat was going to spoil, probably already had. The mere thought of the meat made her want to spit; for the sake of that meat, she’d listened to this *fool* run on at the mouth for hours… And suddenly her anger boiled over, emerging in a scream that echoed across the stillness of Toxitown.

“You freak! Just who the fuck do you think you are?! Take a look in the mirror, asshole. You’re gross! Just take a *look*! You’re filthy, you’ve got noodle shit all over your face. Besides that, you’re ugly, and you stink too. You’re the biggest freak I’ve ever seen!” As she went on yelling, she could feel the fever in her head beginning to cool. The driver, though, was taking it hard; he hung his head and tears welled up in his eyes.

“Stink? I really stink?” he said in a small, quaking voice. Anemone felt the rage boil up from her toes again. I hope he stabs me quick, she was thinking, determined to go on insulting him as he churned the knife around inside her.

“You’re the dirtiest, smelliest shithead I’ve ever seen,” she added.

“But I’m not always like this,” he pleaded. “When I got to the guy’s office, he was eating his lunch—a bowl of noodles—and as soon as he saw the knife, he threw it at me. Guess he wasn’t anxious to bite the big one. What can I tell you?” The driver loosened his grip on her arm, let the knife fall from his other hand, and climbed out of the cab. He was wailing loudly

as he staggered away, but just beyond the range of the headlights he let out a shriek, his knees buckled, and he sank to the ground. It was then that she first noticed the human shapes lurking in the darkness around the car. A moment later, when one of them stepped forward into the light, she covered her eyes in fright: the child, about nine or ten years old, had holes in its face.

The surrounding skin was as horrible as the holes themselves, all crusty and suppurating, as if loose, gray elephant skin had been pasted to the face and left to rot. Directly under the headlights, the reddish black hollows seemed to bubble with pus, like chunks of meat simmering in a stewpot, and from one a cheekbone protruded at a startling angle. The chlorine had done its work. The boy—she could still tell it was a boy—came up to the car and peered in at the window, and Anemone, though unable to stop trembling, screwed up the courage to meet his gaze. Although she wanted to say something to him, she couldn't, but when he stuck his hand in through the window, she fished a five thousand yen note from her purse and passed it to him. Hardly looking at the bill, the boy crumpled it in his fist, shoved it in his pocket, and had his hand back in the window almost instantly. This time Anemone realized that he was pointing at the pin on her chest, an airplane with tiny neon lights. When she had given it to him, the boy withdrew and Anemone, climbing into the front seat as fast as she could, started the engine. The taxi lurched forward, but before it had gone more than a few meters, the boy was waving at her frantically. Sticking her head out the window, Anemone asked:

"What *now*?"

He came up to the window. His tongue rattled around in his head, flicking out now and then to rake across his lips, and it was everything Anemone could do to make out what he was saying:

"Burrrnnn. Stay'n the car and you burrrnnn." But it was enough to remind her of the guards with flamethrowers, and she immediately crawled out from behind the wheel. Opening the trunk, she hauled out the cardboard box filled with meat, but the load—five twenty-kilo bundles—was too much for her and the whole lot fell to the ground, splitting the box and leaving bloody trails as the meat rolled off in every direction. In the blink of an eye, the lurking shadows swooped in, and the meat vanished almost before it came to rest.

The boy with the ruined face had started to walk away, but from time to time he turned to beckon to Anemone, who quickly realized she had no choice but to follow him. As they walked along the narrow street, Anemone noticed red Xs on several houses and, below each X, a small sign noting that some animal had died there. Under the eaves hung strings of light bulbs, as on a Christmas tree, and piles of broken concrete torn from the street and wrapped in shiny aluminum foil glittered like bulky decorations. The street itself, stripped of its pavement, had become a swamp in the rain, and she found it slow going. Finally, the row of houses came to an end and they entered a park bisected by a broad avenue. Beyond a cluster of dead trees, the thirteen office towers were visible. The boy stopped and pointed to a staircase at the top of which a hole, just the size a person might slip through, had been cut in the barbed wire.

"Thanks," said Anemone, and headed for the stairs, when the boy stopped her again.

"Wait till dark or'll find you," he gurgled.

Again, she had to admit the advice made sense, so she sat down to wait on the single unbroken swing in the park and gazed at the skyscrapers, which seemed to lean over her, about to fall. It occurred to her that if King Kong came to Tokyo and climbed up to play around on those buildings, they wouldn't have to call out the helicopters and machine guns and fighter planes; all they'd need do was lure him in here and let him muck around until he was covered with this stuff, and then blow him away with a little napalm.

Although there was no visible source of light, the park was not pitch dark. The boy said to wait till it's dark, she thought, but it never gets really dark anywhere in the city. In the valley of the thirteen towers of light, there was always a dim phosphorescence drizzling down from on high. From outer space, Tokyo must look like a big, bright blob with no place to hide from the light. It seemed to penetrate every barrier, the smokiest glass, the thickest membrane, to find its way into every corner of every room, every nook and cranny, every bird's nest and beehive. There was nowhere to run, nowhere they couldn't find by your shadow.

In the middle of the park was a murky pond, from which the breeze brought the smell of decay. As she sat there watching, a fat man appeared at the edge of the park and made his way toward the pond. He was barefoot

and he jumped around—more a twitch actually—as he walked, as if someone were shooting at his feet with a machine gun. Probably St. Vitus's Dance, thought Anemone. He stared in her direction, face bathed in sweat, and appeared to be trying to tell her something, but only a strangled cry punctuated his dance at intervals. The sound was something between "gu" and "gi," like a large bird calling to its flock; he held it until the breath died in his throat and then, just as the sound was fading away, he clawed his way up another octave.

When the fat man reached the edge of the pond, where he seemed to be thinking of wading in, the short, slight figure of a young woman appeared from the shadows of the healthier trees lining the west side of the park and ran up to him. Nimbly dodging the man's legs, which jerked about from time to time, she managed to whisper something in his ear. Soon, between the man's squawking sounds, Anemone realized that she was actually singing in a thin, shaky voice, and as she sang the fat man's cries faded. The song grew louder and began to seem strangely familiar to Anemone, who closed her eyes trying to remember where she'd heard it. She was sure she knew it, as if the memory of the thing were just under the skin of her head—the title, the singer, everything about the piece. The song was about the evening, at the moment the sun was about to sink below the horizon—she was sure of that much. There was only the faintest light left; the sea coast… no, a silhouette, of a building or some mountains, just when they'd been reduced to a dark line and the light was going… Anemone gave up trying to recall its name, but as it washed through her head the tune stirred up memories and images of memories, which quickly took on a life of their own beyond her control. She hadn't fallen asleep, but somehow on the back of her eyelids a scene appeared: a harbor at dusk, ringed with mountains. It was a large harbor, and in the middle of it they were raising a huge sunken ship. Cranes and winches and anchoring blocks had been gathered from all over the area, and divers, carrying a wire cable as thick as a man's arm, were just disappearing below the surface. When they came up again, the cable was fastened to a tugboat which pulled it to shore, where it was then wrapped twice around the biggest, sturdiest building in town. Meanwhile, the local people had all gone to a restaurant at the top of one of the mountains overlooking the harbor and were scarfing down mounds of steamed shrimp, as bets were taken on whether the ship would be raised or

the building would collapse. And from loudspeakers in the restaurant, the tune was playing.

The harbor had just turned blood red in the dying light when the surface of the water was breached by the bow of the ship, which itself was already larger than any other boat in the harbor. The silver hull, all crusty with barnacles, caught the last rays of the sun with a blinding flash. The cable, stretched to breaking point, was sawing through the building amid clouds of dust, and each successive pull exposed a few more inches of the ship, sending a great swell toward shore. On the hilltop, dinner was forgotten for the moment; every breath was held, waiting for the outcome, while the speakers continued to blare the tune. The building seemed to bend slightly as the melody swept out over the harbor and off into the distance—as far as Anemone could see. Still sitting in the swing, she felt the tension; laughing, gasping, then almost crying from the excitement, until at last the music stopped. As the sound died away, she opened her eyes to see a pair of dirty tennis shoes moving across the dark earth directly in front of her. For a moment she was disoriented, and then she realized she'd been dreaming.

"Makes you sad, doesn't it?" said the slim singer Anemone had thought was a woman but who now turned out to be a young man. "He'll go on jumping around like that till he keels over and falls asleep. Miserable, isn't it?" He was standing right beside Anemone, dressed in a woman's blouse and slacks and lightly made up. The broad face was turned toward her, but the eyes seemed to wander off in all directions. At first she thought he had something physically wrong with him, but then some headlights in the distance caught his eyes, and she could see from the empty gaze that she might as well have been invisible to him.

6

Gazelle was dead. Two summers back, in 1987, he had crashed his motorcycle off a cliff. Gradually, since his death, Kiku had stopped picturing Gazelle's face when he was sprinting along the beach. As his muscles matured and grew stronger, he no longer confused Gazelle with the bearded man on the chapel wall.

In their third year of junior high school, Kiku's times in the sprint at the National Athletic Meet attracted attention: 10.9 in the hundred meters; 22.2 in the two hundred. Invitations came from private high schools all over the country, but he refused them. He didn't quite know why himself. It would have been nice to have a crack at pole vaulting at a big school with all the right equipment. Hashi had very little to say while Kiku was deciding, but he did point out that none of the high schools in question was near the sea. It occurred to Kiku that he refused all of them in the end because he didn't want to leave Hashi, who, surprisingly, was proving to be the popular one at school. Unlike Kiku, Hashi found it easy to make friends, to be nice to people. Kiku, on the other hand, was naturally rather quiet—and then there was the constant, lonely running practice; sometimes he was sorry he'd ever taken up track. It suited him to be alone, he realized, but still, he wished at times that he had more friends. He was incapable of playing a team sport—in fact, of cooperating on almost anything at all. At one point he had played basketball in gym class, but once the ball was passed to him, he could never bring himself to pass it on and ended up shooting on every play. Naturally, he wasn't very popular with his teammates and soon lost interest in the game. Somehow, his increasingly impressive muscles could never be put to use for anything that involved other people, and each time the strength began to flow through his body, everyone else seemed to fade away. In the end, he decided, maybe he was better off sticking to track.

Once he was in high school, Kiku got serious about pole vaulting, as he'd been planning all along. His motive was simple: he wanted to fly. He had nursed this dream ever since the day Gazelle had shown them a film of

the record-breaking jumps at the Tokyo Olympics where Hansen and Rheinhardt had dueled for the gold medal. As he'd watched the film, Kiku imagined himself being snapped into space on the end of a fiberglass pole. For Hashi bliss came in the form of a sound, but when Kiku closed his eyes it was a long pole that appeared before him, and a bar, horribly high, that had to be cleared, every nerve and tissue, every muscle and tendon uniting in the effort to fly over it. It made him feel ecstatic.

Kiku learned to jump without a coach, devouring every book he could find on training and technique. At first, he didn't even have a real pole, so he used a piece of bamboo and concentrated on basic physical conditioning and building a proper runway and pit. Though he had turned down invitations from high schools where he could have been well trained, he never once complained about the primitive conditions, not even when he had to save Kazuyo's old sponges and rags to stuff a bag for the pit. He did find one thing hard to take—his lack of a fiberglass pole—but he diverted the ache of this frustration into making his body strong. And he spent more and more time alone, often finding that Hashi would be waiting for him at the end of a long training session.

It was hard to miss the fact that Hashi was proud of Kiku. When he was practicing outside a classroom window, he would often point him out to his friends.

"That's my big brother," he would say, forcing them to watch him make attempt after attempt. Whenever Kiku cleared the bar, Hashi would applaud from the window.

One day during the summer, Hashi met him at the school gate after practice and they headed home together. When they got off the bus at the bottom of the hill among the clumps of canna lilies, Hashi told him that a girl in his class had said that Kiku was cute. Kiku blushed.

"You're the one they like," Kiku said. Hashi picked one of the flowers and peeled back its petals, sending a puff of pollen into the air.

"No," he said. "It's just that I talk to them. I know what they want to hear. Sometimes I get sick of it, you know. It's always been that way; remember at the orphanage how I got to be friends with the milkman? You were always picking fights, even got yourself beat up a few times. Remember?" Kiku nodded. Wiping the pollen on his pants, Hashi went on: "But in the end I think you were the one who really got to be their friend…

And the whole time I was wishing I could be like you and beat the shit out of anyone I wanted to." Kiku laughed.

"What's so funny?" Hashi asked.

"I always wanted to be able to talk like you so they'd like me," said Kiku. "But no matter what I did, it didn't come out right and I ended up hitting somebody." A cicada landed in a tree halfway up the hill and tucked its wings together. The late afternoon sun dyed the road orange.

"Who woulda thought it," said Hashi, kicking an empty can. The can rolled down the slope and bounced with a clatter off the tin roof of a chicken coop.

Kiku stared straight ahead, holding a fiberglass pole that only flexed a little in his tight grip. It was the autumn All-Prep track meet for Nagasaki City, and he had reached the finals of the pole vault. There were nine competitors, all of them, except for Kiku, seniors. But he wasn't thinking about the competition or about jumping higher than the rest of them; the only thing in his mind was an image of himself sailing over a black and white bar hung in the sky, and all his energy was focused on making his body overlap with that image. That's why he was vaulting. Inside his head he sketched a picture of himself defying gravity and floating into space; and once the picture was complete, at the instant of the actual jump, the image would paste itself onto his body, momentarily liberated, and the two would become a weightless, soaring one. That was Kiku's method.

Almost before he realized the competition had started, the bar was at 4.70 meters, a height he had never cleared, and only three other vaulters were left. The favorite was a kid in glasses, but there was also a tall boy who had good times in the four hundred meters, and another guy who attended a high school for gifted students run by a university known for its track and field program.

Kiku was to be the first to vault. The vaulting area was to one side of the track, but since the other events had all finished, people had drifted over to watch. Kazuyo was there too. Kiku had insisted she didn't need to come, but she'd closed the beauty parlor, packed a lunch, and made the trip from the island.

"That's my son," she told anyone who would listen. Hashi sat a few seats away, slightly embarrassed.

Kiku began by checking the clearance to aim for, holding his pole straight up in the box below the bar. Next he measured the distance of the approach, adding a bit extra for a height he had never attempted; pivoting on the take-off point, he paced off the distance to the starting line, beginning with the other foot—not the one he would end on—and counting an even number of steps. His approach would start on the take-off foot.

So now he was staring straight ahead, imagining himself soaring, then falling, then gazing up at the stationary bar from the landing pit. He started his run and almost immediately his muscles relaxed into the sprint. Don't be nervous, he reminded himself, just make sure you reach top speed as you hit the mark. His spikes dug up the track as he leaned into his run; the stadium grew quiet. The pole planted smoothly in the box, bent almost double, and suddenly he was snapped aloft, legs perpendicular to the ground. A shudder went through the pole, Kiku's arms strained, and he was sailing through the air. This is it, he thought, as he rode the recoil through the soft, whirling sky spread out before him. Applause… and he was lying still in the pit looking up at the motionless bar. A perfect jump.

The other boys seemed a little rattled—all, that is, except the one in glasses. The other two tried to pump themselves up by saying they couldn't let a freshman beat them. The sprinter paced off his approach again and again, while the other kid did endless stretching exercises; but both failed to clear the height. After a miss apiece, they began to feel the pressure, and their form only got worse. Kiku, meanwhile, watched them coolly, muttering "Plants too early, no rhythm in the approach, upper arm bent, twists his hips too late…" Just then the boy in glasses came up.

"You a freshman?" Kiku looked him in the eye and nodded. "You're not bad. Who's your coach?" This time Kiku shook his head. He hated small talk. "No coach, huh? I thought you were pretty much winging it. You've got the timing down OK, but I'd like to see how you'd do with a headwind."

Now it was just Kiku and the guy in glasses. At 4.75 meters, glasses chose to pass, but Kiku, who never let his opponents bother him, decided to have a go at it. After two misses, he reached down and pulled up a few blades of grass, then tossed them in the air. A breeze had come up as the sun began to set, a light headwind. As he glanced up at the stands, an uneasy feeling came over him: Hashi was nowhere to be seen. Why do I

feel so funny, he wondered. Can't be the stupid wind; must be because of Hashi. But what does Hashi have to do with it? Then it occurred to him for the first time: could I be jumping just so Hashi'll watch me? Sounds too stupid. He tried to concentrate on the bar, to see himself lofted over it, but it didn't work. It wasn't so much that the image was out of focus; it felt as if the plug had been pulled on the projector. Haven't I done all this practicing by myself? Why should I lose my concentration just because Hashi isn't here to watch?

He measured the approach and the position of the bar, but his body still felt heavy. Hashi must have gone to get some ice cream, he thought, annoyed that his head should be full of such crap right before a jump. Putting his pole down, he walked toward the main track, empty now that all the other events had finished, and slipping past the officials cleaning up after the meet, he took off on a fast lap. The people left in the stands looked on admiringly as he found his rhythm and allowed himself to be carried along on the wind, forcing himself to stop thinking about Hashi. If he could only drain the blood from his head into his muscles… As he broke into a sweat, the image of himself clearing the bar revived and came into focus. The lap finished, Kiku didn't so much as glance at the stands. He doesn't mean a thing to me, he told himself. I'm alone like I've always been. It's just me and the bar, nobody else… and it's time. Raising his hand to signal the judge that he was ready, he started his run-up. The shock from the cleats flashed up through his veins straight to his head, as the image began to crystallize in a haze of speed and churned earth. Once again he could see himself up there over the bar. The pole plant, the mark, his body dipping slightly, and then the explosive snap. But at the very instant of the spring-back, the image ruptured, bursting from Kiku's pores and dissolving in the air. His knee caught the bar, and he crashed into the pit. Sighs could be heard from here and there in the crowd as Kiku lay motionless on his back, a puzzled look on his face.

As he lay there, however, he wasn't wondering why he had missed; a new image, something he had never seen before, had appeared to him at the instant he was catapulted skyward, and he could still see it from the pit. He had seen himself vaulting a different hurdle, much higher than the bar, something soft, red, and quivering that he was clearing with ease. What was it, this damp red thing? He pondered the mystery for a while, but then it

slipped his mind as another image came into focus, this one of Hashi, smiling and applauding, and licking an ice cream cone.

Kazuyo came running onto the field waving a piece of paper which she handed to Kiku with trembling hands.

Kiku,

Take care of Milk for me. Make sure not to give him anything salty. I'm going to Tokyo. I know you can win at the national meet. You'll show them. I'll see you again soon.

Hashi

"What does it mean? What's happened?" Kazuyo was frantic. "Kiku, do you know anything about this?" She was on the verge of tears. Though he didn't say so, Kiku, in fact, had a good idea why Hashi had run away: he had gone to look for his mother.

Three days earlier they had been watching an interview program on TV. The guest was a seventy-two-year-old woman, a novelist, who had been a kleptomaniac since childhood and had served four separate sentences for larceny. A book of hers called *Apples and Hot Water*, based on her own experiences, had apparently become a bestseller and won some sort of prize. The interviewer's first question was why she had written the novel.

"No reason in particular," she'd answered. "When I was a young girl, I enjoyed writing little compositions, but somewhere along the line I got interested in stealing, and one thing led to another until now I'm old and don't go in for theft much any more. I suppose I couldn't think of anything else I really wanted to do, so I took up writing again after all these years. The main thing is, you see, I realized that I knew hundreds of unhappy women, women with no other way to express themselves than through crime, and I wanted to tell their stories in my book. One of these women—if we have time?—one of them stabbed her husband to death, but was so scared by what she'd done she threw up all over the carpet. She then wasted every last bit of her best perfume trying to get rid of the smell. I think the perfume was called Vol de Nuit. Is there one called that? Yes, that was it.

"Another woman embezzled a hundred million yen from the bank she worked in for her boyfriend. She only used ¥350 for herself, and that only

because she suddenly got her period and didn't have the money for the necessaries. And another poor soul told me that she'd abandoned her own baby somewhere with only some bougainvilleas for comfort—bougainvilleas because they were the most expensive thing in the shop… With stories like these, I wanted to show the daily trials and triumphs that are all part of the life of the female criminal…"

"Kiku, did you hear that?!" Hashi had said, white in the face, and spitting out bits of some fried egg he was eating. Bougainvilleas were what he'd been keeping as pressed flowers for years. He fished them out of a desk drawer, then checked in a dictionary to make sure he had got the color and shape of the petals right. "What should I do?" he said, beginning to tremble. "Kiku, that old lady knows the woman who put me in the locker. What do I do?"

The next day he went out and bought *Apples and Hot Water*, but there was nothing about the bougainvillea lady in the book. Kuwayama and Kazuyo hadn't been watching the program and knew nothing about his pressed flowers, so he had only Kiku to give him advice. But Kiku wasn't much use; the whole episode had made him oddly angry. Why, Kiku wondered to himself, did this dumb story have to come and upset Hashi now like this?

Hashi borrowed some money from him and began to make plans.

"And what are you going to do if you find your mother?" Kiku wanted to know.

"I'm not sure," he said, shaking his head. "I just want to see her, that's all. I don't even have to meet her necessarily. I've been giving it a lot of thought, and I suppose actually meeting her would be pretty scary; so I think I'd just watch her from a distance, see how she talks, how she walks. That kind of stuff."

Since then, only one postcard had come, telling them he was alive and well. The postmark was Tokyo but there was no return address. Kazuyo turned the card over and over in her hand, held it up to the light, and even sniffed it, looking for anything that might lead them in his direction. She had already filed a missing persons report and placed several items in the "Personal Inquiries" columns of Tokyo newspapers, but they had heard nothing. When Kiku picked up Hashi's postcard, however, his reaction was

a little different from Kazuyo's; the card made him feel that he too would like to go somewhere far away and send someone a card just like this.

Kiku did his best not to think too much about Hashi, though somehow he had lost interest in almost everything, including pole-vaulting practice. But it had nothing to do with Hashi, he told himself; it was just that everything suddenly seemed a bit stupid—the island, the way the sea sparkled, the smell of fish drying, the canna lilies down by the hill, Milk's barking… everything. I'm bored, he thought, standing on the practice field. The warm, soft breeze blowing from the sea was particularly unbearable.

7

Kiku was reading a novel on the Bullet Train. The summer of the year after Hashi had left home, Kazuyo had announced that she was going to Tokyo to look for him, so Kiku agreed to go along. As he read, she picked over a box lunch they'd bought at the station, looking as though she were about to burst into tears, but Kiku was secretly in a good mood. Looking up from his book, he gazed at the fresh green fields as the train hurtled along. Hashi will probably be waiting on the platform for us, all smiles, he thought, but the feeling might also have had something to do with the fact that he'd almost finished *Apples and Hot Water*. It was nice to reach the end of a book; liberating somehow.

"Next stop, New Yokohama Station," the public address system on the train repeated and repeated until it seemed to Kiku that it was urging him personally to dredge up memories of Yokohama. But the only memory he had was shut inside a coin locker, and he wasn't anxious to take it out and dust it off.

At Tokyo Station they were met on the platform by a staff member from the National High School Track Association. A coach at Kiku's school, realizing they knew no one in Tokyo, had made a phone call that had apparently resulted in this small man in a green suit standing by the stairs calling Kiku's name in exactly the same tone as the recorded announcements on the train. His jaw pumped so regularly and his tone was so flat that Kiku thought of a robot. Machinelike, arms folded, the green suit repeated its taped message: "Kikuyuki Kuwayama! Kikuyuki Kuwayama!"

All the same, Kazuyo seemed pleased to be met. When she caught sight of the little robot, she paused for a moment, pulling a mirror from her purse to check her makeup, and then rushed up to the man bowing at full speed. She said her hellos, then went on bowing to what Kiku thought was a ridiculous degree.

“He liked music,” she was saying to the man as Kiku approached. The green suit told them that runaways tended to congregate in Shinjuku.

Their hotel had been picked by Kazuyo from a picture in a travel magazine. It turned out to be behind a pinball parlor in east Nakano: “Hotel Springtime,” in large neon letters with the “t” in “Hotel” burned out. In real life, the outside didn’t look much like the magazine picture. In the photograph there had been a little pond stocked with goldfish and, flowing into the pond, a waterfall flecked with maple leaves. Parked in front were big foreign cars, and a foreign couple was walking out of the door arm-in-arm under a colorful display of flags. Since the picture was taken, however, the waterfall had dried up and a movie poster had been pasted over the cracked cement. The pond, also dry, was stacked with boxes, and a cleaning woman with dyed hair was standing in for the couple in the entranceway. She puffed away at a cigarette as she slopped water around with a mop, keeping one eye on the television in the lobby blaring a program about an air show. The silver in the cleaning woman’s teeth glinted as she flicked her cigarette ash into the mop bucket.

At the front desk were two men in bow ties who interrupted their game of checkers to greet the new guests. Kazuyo took her time filling out the registration card, carefully writing “beautician” in large letters in the blank marked “occupation.” After giving them the key, one of the men carried their luggage to the elevator where two dark-skinned, strong-smelling women were just getting out. One of them turned to look at Kazuyo and Kiku and said something in a foreign language. As the doors were closing, Kiku could see them pointing at Kazuyo and laughing, and when he turned to look, she was checking her dress, makeup, and nylons, trying to decide what was wrong. The man with the bags was staring at Kiku, but looked away with a smirk when he glared back.

“Have a good stay,” muttered the bow tie before abruptly leaving them in a room overlooking some workmen’s sheds, a building in the process of being demolished, and a line of drying laundry.

“You used too much powder,” Kiku said as soon as he had gone, pointing at her chest. A white line of sweat and makeup ran from Kazuyo’s neck down between her breasts.

For quite a long time they sat on the edge of the bed without saying a word while the gasoline-scented breeze from the air conditioner dried

Kazuyo’s breasts.

“What could Hashi want in a place like this?” she muttered at last. The crash of a wrecking ball striking concrete rattled the window.

Shinjuku. Gaudy movie palaces with fountains; drunks and drifters in equal numbers. Squatters camped out on newspaper and crushed cardboard boxes, guzzling sake and silently watching the road; a man in a plastic mask feeding dried fish to his dog; a violinist, pretending to be blind, holding the bow in his teeth. Kiku was particularly depressed by the sight of two beggars—a father, wearing a ragged wig and old kendo armor, accompanied by his child. For passersby who threw money, the two of them would switch on a portable phonograph and act out a story to a scratchy record. The father would always end by sinking to his knees, with the child yelling triumphantly, “My fallen mother is avenged. Prepare to die!” as a tube of red paint hidden in the man’s armor split and spewed everywhere.

Kiku and Kazuyo went from bar to bar, every place they could hear music playing. They were usually welcome enough at first, but each time they showed the picture of Hashi and explained that they were looking for a runaway, they were told to check with the police and asked to leave. The tiny bars were stacked vertically, with dozens in a single building, and it seemed to Kiku it would take a hundred years to check them all. His nerves were already shot from the harsh blur of neon, smoke, topless girls and drunks. On the staircase of a building without an elevator, Kazuyo slipped on some newspaper that had been laid out to cover a pool of puke, taking a hard fall that left her dress covered with yellow slime.

They went into a small bar to rest. The only other customers were three women, all with makeup heavier than Kazuyo’s. Kiku drank his Coke in one gulp, but Kazuyo didn’t touch her cacao fizz; she had given up smoking and drinking—even tea—until they found Hashi. She did, however, hold the glass and sniff at the drink.

“It can’t hurt to have one,” said Kiku. She shook her head but, reaching across the table, put the glass under Kiku’s nose.

“Smells good, doesn’t it?” The cloudy brown liquid gave off a sweet odor; sugared mud, thought Kiku.

As they were getting up to go, they could hear the women at the bar discussing their children, all apparently in kindergarten.

“His skin is so delicate, he breaks out all over his body just from a mosquito bite…,” one of them was complaining as the door closed.

Back in the street, they were stopped by a young man who said he’d seen them come into the bar where he worked earlier that evening; the places were all running together in their heads, but they thought he meant a bar with especially loud music and a woman dancing topless in a huge lighted ball.

“You’re from Kyushu, aren’t you?” he asked after introducing himself. Kazuyo nodded, and the man explained that he came from there himself. “I was working when you came in, so I couldn’t talk, but I want to help if I can.” When Kiku showed him Hashi’s picture again, he said he thought he’d seen him somewhere. He took them to the staff room of the bar he worked in and brought Kazuyo a damp towel to wipe her dress with.

“Mind if I keep the picture a while?” he asked Kiku. “I’ve got a hunch I could find him for you. When I get off work tonight, I’ll do some asking around. I know this town; it’ll take me half an hour to find out what you’d need a year to dig up. There are only so many places where runaway kids hang out, and I can hit them all. Come back tomorrow and I’m sure I’ll have something for you.” Kazuyo took a ten thousand yen bill out of her wallet, but he refused to take it.

“If you want to know, about four years back I ran away from home myself. I guess somebody must have come looking for me pretty much the same way… but I heard my mom died last year… Anyway, I don’t need your money. And don’t worry, we’ll find your son.”

They went back to the hotel exhausted. In the elevator, the cleaning woman was wiping down the walls. Though quite elderly, her hair was dyed, and she wore dark eyeliner and bright red lipstick that filled the deep wrinkles around her mouth.

“Hot, isn’t it?” she said to Kazuyo.

“And terribly sticky,” answered Kazuyo pleasantly as the old woman spat in her mop bucket.

“Hey, by the way, you two find anything weird in your toilet?” she asked suddenly. “Those Filipina whores been throwing some pretty strange stuff down the johns. It’s a bitch having to clean them out. Rubbers you expect, but this is getting ridiculous.”

The elevator had reached the fifth floor, but when Kazuyo and Kiku got off, the woman left her bucket and mop and followed them.

“Good night, then—we’re pretty tired,” said Kazuyo, trying to slip into the room, but she grabbed her arm.

“I’m finding these big wads of pubic hair—must be shaving down there. Clogs up the pipes and I have to clean it out by hand. But that’s not the worst of it. A while back I found eggs stopping up one toilet, and I *don’t* mean chicken eggs. It was *frog* eggs—these huge frog eggs. Well, I thought that was a bit peculiar, so I did some asking around and found out those Filipina girls keeps the frogs as sort of special pets, real special. Seems they like to stick them up inside themselves… feels good and squishy. But somebody’s got to clean up after them, and what kind of job is that—pulling frog eggs out of a toilet?… Goddamn Filipino hookers and their goddamn frogs… I ask you!” Bursting into tears, the maid held tight to Kazuyo’s arm. Her mascara began to run and black canals formed along her wrinkles.

At last Kazuyo managed to wriggle free and escape into the room. As Kiku stood for a moment looking at the weeping cleaning lady, he had the disturbing notion that she might be the woman who had left him in the locker. Then suddenly he was almost certain; this body of his—standing here anointed with the ripe scent of strippers, the ooze of cacao fizz, the aura of beggars, puke, and noise—probably *had* come from the belly of that broken-down old charwoman.

All night they could hardly sleep for the giggling and groaning in the rooms on either side, and as they lay in the dark, wide awake, Kiku insisted they find another hotel first thing in the morning.

“This place is full of creeps,” he muttered.

“Yes, let’s move,” said Kazuyo, tossing and turning and finally drifting off with both arms wrapped around her head.

In the morning they went to the police station, but since there was no news of Hashi, all they could do was reconfirm the missing persons report. It was hours till the appointment with the waiter from the bar, so Kazuyo suggested they see a movie and then go out for dinner.

“Let’s find the best restaurant in town, better than any place we’ve ever been before,” she said as they strolled beneath a row of dusty trees. “We

can’t do anything about Hashi right this minute, and this is the first time we’ve ever been in Tokyo together—and, who knows, maybe the last.”

They went to see a movie at a big, elegant theater, about a Russian ballerina defecting to America who was forced to choose between love and dancing in her homeland. She had to make her decision while she was performing *Swan Lake*. To Kiku, she was an idiot: people who don’t know what they want, he firmly believed, never get it. During the last scene, as the heroine was dying in her lover’s arms, Kazuyo was crying out loud. Afterward, they went to an amusement park and rode the whirling teacup and the roller coaster.

“I used to say I wanted to ride one of these just once before I die,” said Kazuyo, ecstatic.

At dusk they walked through a park near the Imperial Palace eating ice cream, fed popcorn to the pigeons, and lay on the close-cropped grass. The smell reminded them of the hills back home. As she stared off into the distance, Kazuyo began to talk about her childhood in Korea.

“Every day, when I got home from school, I’d throw my book bag in the house and head for the fields. About this time of year, the wild strawberries were ripe, and since we didn’t have any candy or things like that, we loved those strawberries. But I was the oldest, so by the time I got home, my little brothers and sisters would always have eaten all the ripe red ones. How many times did I eat myself sick on the green ones?… Someday, when you boys are older, I’d love to take you to Korea.” It was the first time she had ever spoken of her childhood to Kiku.

“Fine by me,” he said softly, “but I never want to go back to see that orphanage where Hashi and I grew up.”

“That’s because you’re still young,” she said, staring off into space. “When you grow up, I promise you, you’ll want to see the old places.” Kiku realized then that he knew nothing about his foster mother. He was just about to tell her that he’d take her to Korea himself when she jumped up, brushing the grass from her dress, and pointed in the direction of the palace: some children, using a hook and a piece of string, had caught an enormous, brilliantly speckled carp. As the children must have known, fishing in the palace moat was strictly forbidden, but they probably hadn’t counted on catching anything; so now as they stood with their huge, struggling prize, they were frantically looking around for someone to help them out. The

scene was so innocent and charming Kazuyo clapped her hands and laughed with pleasure.

In the restaurant that evening, surrounded by cool white walls and thick red carpeting, they feasted on things they'd never even dreamed of. A blind pianist in the center of the room was taking requests, and Kazuyo asked for "Morning in the Meadow" as the waiters appeared with exotic dishes: sautéed scallops served in the shell, a chilled soup in hollowed-out halves of cantaloupe, steamed pheasant with currants. Again and again she asked Kiku if he was enjoying the meal, and laughed contentedly when he said he preferred her rice omelettes.

"You boys certainly are fond of those omelettes," she said. When the pianist began playing "Morning in the Meadow," the fork dropped from her hand and fell to the carpet. She bent over to retrieve it, but before she had straightened up again, a waiter had appeared with a clean one and a towel for her hands. Suddenly, as she was settling back into her seat, her shoulders began to heave and she covered her face with the cloth.

"I know you're feeling burned-up inside," she said at last. "I wish you'd tell me if there's something that's happened since you came to us to make you and Hashi feel this way. If you told me what we've done, I could apologize, try to find a way to make it up to you."

It wasn't that he didn't want to, but Kiku couldn't find the words to explain. He tried to remember if there was something in *Apples and Hot Water* that might do, but his mind drew a blank. He bit into the scallop he'd just put in his mouth and a lump of butter melted on his tongue.

The street outside the restaurant was full of fortunetellers, and Kazuyo took her place at the end of the longest line to ask about Hashi. A few minutes later, a gang on roller skates came barreling down the street. One girl had grabbed the bumper of a car to hitch a ride, and they sped by, horn and radio blaring. Another skater, out of control, slammed into a serious-looking youth in a student's uniform just getting out of a cab, and they both went flying. The student recovered first and kicked the skater in the face as he tried to get up.

"Dumb punk."

A fight broke out, and the people waiting in line for the fortuneteller scattered. Kazuyo, however, stood shouting encouragement to the student and his friends who were, it seemed, outnumbered. Just then, one of the

skaters darted away from the group to avoid a beating and hurtled in Kazuyo's direction. He was skating wildly, as fast as he could, and as he came up to Kazuyo his arm swung out and caught her shoulder, knocking her to the ground with a thud. Without thinking, Kiku grabbed him and smashed his fist a few times into his face; then he dropped the limp boy and gathered Kazuyo in his arms. He had seen her hit her head on the root of a tree as she'd fallen, but she nodded woozily and managed to get to her feet. She looked awful, but Kiku was relieved to see her laughing and brushing the dirt from her dress.

A patrol car appeared and the fight was stopped. Not long afterward, however, Kazuyo was pale, sweaty, and complaining of chills, though she refused to let Kiku take her back to the hotel, despite the fact that she could hardly stand; she agreed to give up on the fortuneteller for now, but they had to keep their appointment with the young man from the bar. Slowly, leaning on Kiku's shoulder, she made her way through the streets of Shinjuku.

The waiter was shaving in the staff room when they arrived. They could hear the noise of the bar through several doors over the buzz of his electric razor. When he finished, he took a yellow bottle of aftershave from his locker, stubbing out his half-smoked cigarette in what remained of his tea. Kazuyo lay on the couch with a damp cloth over her face.

"This cheap-shit lotion burns your skin," he grumbled, turning to face them. "Well, I think I've found your boy, folks." Kazuyo cried out and tried to get up. "Whoa, lady," he said, restraining her, "you're in no shape to go anywhere. Anyway, I think it'd be better if your son here went by himself."

She tried to protest, but the waiter insisted that Kiku go alone, explaining that the place was a little rough. Kiku eyed the tiger-and-bamboo design embroidered in gold thread on his shirt.

"I'll draw you a little map so you don't get lost," he said, taking out a pen and some paper, and explaining as he drew. "It's around behind Seibu Shinjuku Station. There's a big restaurant there, the Futatsu-ya. Out front they have this fish tank—you can't miss it. The place you're looking for is in the building right across from the restaurant. The first floor is a pinball parlor, but I think it's closed by now. Anyway, you want to find the stairs—looks pretty much like a fire escape—and go up to a place with a green door. The sign should say Blind Mice. Go inside and tell a middle-aged guy

with a lump on his neck—right about here—tell him you want to hear his Lee Connitz records. That's the password. Look, I'll write it down so you don't forget: 'his Lee Connitz records.' When he hears that, this guy is supposed to tell you where your brother is. But watch yourself: this is a serious music bar—you know these types—touchy, hard to talk to."

A few minutes later, Kiku was staring at skewers of shrimp grilling over coals and the fish tank beyond. It might have been the light, but though the fish—all mackerel—were still swimming around, they looked sluggish, as if they'd been lying in the sun for the better part of a day. Kiku located the staircase and then stood gazing at the cloudy tank a while longer. Two of the fish were clearly dying, and another had a bent backbone, probably some kind of birth defect. As it had grown, the deformed body had apparently put pressure on the gills, and now the fish could barely move. Yet another fish, the victim apparently of its companions' hunger, trailed ragged strips of its own guts as it swam in diminishing circles in one corner of the tank. A trickle of blood—fish blood turned out to be gray in the water—was escaping from the wound, mixing with the general slime to cloud the tank.

There was no sign on the door; instead, "Blind Mice" was carved right into the wood. Inside, Kiku found a room whose walls were completely covered with old records. There were no other customers. On a shelf behind the bar was an impressive tape deck. Just the kind of place Hashi might like, thought Kiku. The squint-eyed man at the counter wore glasses and had a fist-sized lump on his neck. The pores of his skin were so large, Kiku could make out each one individually even in the dim light.

"If you're selling theater tickets, we don't want any," said the man.

Kiku took the slip of paper he'd been given from his pocket and read out the password:

"Uhh… I'd like to hear some Lee Connitz… records, I mean…"

The man looked startled for a moment and then gave a wide grin.

"What's that? Did you say 'Lee Connitz'? Hey, I'm impressed; for such a young guy, you really know your jazz. Nobody comes in here asking for the old West Coast stuff any more. Well… let's see what we've got in this treasure trove. How 'bout this little number: a duet with Miles Davis. It's out of print now in the States, and it never even sold in Japan. I picked it up long ago in New York…

“You hot, kid? The air conditioner’s broken and it gets pretty steamy in here. Still, makes it feel a bit like summer in the Big Apple. Not bad, huh? Hot night, cool sound…

“Hey, by the way,” he went on, wiping his steamed-up glasses on his shirt, “you didn’t come in here looking for somebody, did you?” Kiku, who was himself drenched in sweat, tried to answer but the man stopped him. “Never mind, you don’t have to say a thing. And there’s nothing to be embarrassed about. I’ve heard the whole story. They tell me you’re a pole vaulter; that for real?” Kiku slumped onto a stool, wiped the sweat from his forehead, and nodded.

“So where is he?” he asked.

“Who?” chirped the bartender.

“Him. The guy I’m looking for,” said Kiku.

The man with the lump began to whistle casually as he crushed some ice. “You shouldn’t call him a ‘guy,’” he said. “But don’t you worry, I’ll make a phone call and he’ll be here in half an hour. I already told him you’d be coming today, and he was pretty happy to hear it. He said it’s been a long time. But you have to do these things at the customer’s convenience, so we weren’t that definite about the time. You get me?…” So saying, he went to the phone and, after a brief conversation in a hushed voice, came back to the bar with a wink for Kiku.

“You know, kid, I like you. You’ve got style. While we’re waiting, mind if I come around and take a seat out there with you?” The skin on the lump strained as he made his way around the bar, and Kiku caught a glimpse of bulging bluish veins. Just like a fish belly full of eggs, he thought, remembering the cold, early morning boat trips with Kuwayama when they had often cut the roe out a fish while it was still squirming and eaten it with a little hot salt water to keep warm.

The man sat next to Kiku and put his hand on his shoulder. His fingers were hot and trembled slightly. The room was shut tight, and Kiku was dripping.

“You’ve got a city feel to you somehow,” the man continued. “But it beats me how someone so young could have developed so much style. I bet I know, though: I’d say it’s because you’ve suffered. But, of course, there’s suffering and there’s suffering. I suppose you could say a hick suffers smelling cow shit and rolling around in the weeds all day, but that’s not

you. Then there's the guy who rows a little boat around a fishing port that smells like dirty cunt, just to support his sick mother; but that's not you either. You're more like me: born with that big-city sophistication that breeds its own kind of pain… Aren't you?" As he stopped talking, the man began to run his fingers through Kiku's hair and along his neck, making little lapping sounds in the sweat as he caressed and stroked.

"I couldn't be wrong," the man went on, "otherwise, why would you be coming in here asking for Lee Connitz. You and me, we're two of a kind. We're guys who like noise and good friends, who sit down in front of a juicy steak, rare, of course, and work out how much jogging we'll have to do—and how much fucking we'll miss out on—to burn off the extra calories; but we *eat* the steak!

"It blows your mind, doesn't it, a city? You feel yourself—your body, your mind—being worn down, the life being sapped out of you by the energy of the place. It's that energy blows you away. Guess that's the best way of putting it: that easy-come kind of pleasure that just sneaks up on you. But I don't have to tell *you* any of this. There's no getting around it, this sleek, crazy energy. Yeah, that's not bad… 'sleek, crazy'… right kind of words. It's a sleek, crazy life; that's me, that's Tokyo… that's you, kid. It's West Coast, it's Lee Connitz. It's this sad, crazy wreck of a city."

As he finished his soliloquy, the lump-man plunged his free hand into Kiku's lap and began to rub, his breath coming in ragged gasps. Kiku looked at the lump, now red and swollen with blood, and realized that the bad feeling he'd had the minute he walked in the bar was right on the mark. Whenever one of these sinister premonitions came true, Kiku thought of a magnet: somehow, the bad feelings started aligning everything around him, giving them an actual shape. The sweat, the whining alto sax, the lump, and that hand groping him intently; he decided to put up with it for another ten seconds.

"You're beautiful," the man was saying, "incredibly beautiful. Just relax. They told me it would be your first time, but there's nothing to worry about. It's easier than pole vaulting, I can promise you that. The guy who's coming owns a stationery business. Not a bad guy, in a way, but… don't laugh… hasn't got much to work with, if you know what I mean. Smaller than a fountain pen… But that's good for you, means he probably won't even get it in… He's a sucker, I hear, real tongue man."

Kiku finished his deliberate counting and then shoved him off the stool onto the floor. As the man tried to retrieve his glasses and scramble to his feet, Kiku grabbed his greasy collar in one hand and the ice pick on the counter in the other. Spinning him around to almost throttle him, he caught the tip of the pick on the lump, drawing a dark ooze of blood and soon a bigger glob of clear, sticky liquid.

"Don't!" the man screamed. "I'm sorry! I know it's wrong! I deserve it, you've every right to hurt me, but please…" Suddenly, Kiku noticed that they were being watched impassively by a little girl in pajamas clutching a stuffed turtle. Tiny teeth peeked through her slightly parted lips as she peered out from behind the counter. The whitish pus was running more freely now, down the man's neck and onto Kiku's hand.

Back in the movie district, Kiku scrubbed his hands in a fountain. The white stuff, it turned out, wouldn't dissolve in water but formed cloudy clumps that sank to the bottom of the pool. As he washed, a drunk lying slumped against the fountain grabbed hold of his leg and asked for a cigarette.

"Don't touch me!" cried Kiku, loud enough to turn the heads of people walking by, but the drunk just whimpered and held tight. "Don't *touch* me!" he said again, more quietly, and tried to pull free, but the drunk slithered along with him. Then I'll fuckin' kill you, Kiku thought, aiming a kick at the man's head but stopping inches short. He couldn't help thinking of the lump-man at Blind Mice: these guys are brain-dead; you could kick them or beat them senseless and they wouldn't lift a hand to save themselves. Probably wouldn't even feel it. Hurts my foot more than it does him. He dropped three hundred-yen coins at his feet and walked away.

When he got back to the room in the other bar where Kazuyo was waiting, the young guy was nowhere in sight. Kazuyo was still on the couch, but she had gone white as a sheet and was shivering. She managed to explain that soon after Kiku left she had given some money to the friendly waiter and he had vanished. Kiku would have gone to look for him, but Kazuyo kept repeating that she wanted to go back to the hotel and lie down, so he helped her to her feet and they made their way down to the street. But they couldn't get a cab to stop. As she stood leaning against Kiku with her eyes closed, Kazuyo asked whether he had found Hashi.

"You saw him, didn't you?" she said in a tiny voice.

“No, he wasn’t there,” Kiku answered.

She nodded, then mumbled against his shoulder, “But we sure did have some fun today. Such a good movie…” Her voice trailed off and she was quiet. When Kiku asked if she was all right, she just breathed softly and unevenly on his arm.

Cab after cab sped by, each with the “For hire” light shining in the window, but none stopped. Kiku was puzzled. Even when he frantically waved his arms, they hardly slowed down, hurtling past as if he weren’t there. There was something in the rules of the city he didn’t understand. Just how do you make contact with these people? Doesn’t seem to be money, or even force—at one point he had gone out into the traffic and waved a cab down, but when he pounded on the window and threatened to break the glass, the driver just laughed and shook his head. He had tried waving money at him and screaming that he’d pay triple the fare, but still the door hadn’t opened. As they stood by the road, Kiku could feel the strength draining from his body, as if blood were trickling from his toes. He had never felt so powerless. After about thirty minutes, by pure chance, a cab suddenly drew up and let them in, and it occurred to Kiku that he had now learned one of the rules of the city: waiting. No need to make a noise, to get violent, to run around; you just stood still, face blank, and waited—until all the energy in you had dissipated into thin air.

Kazuyo went to bed without even getting out of her clothes. She must have caught a cold or something, Kiku thought as he pulled off her stockings and put a blanket over her. He got a damp towel to cool her forehead, and before long she was snoring a reassuring, wide-mouthed snore. Kiku decided to take a shower. As he stood under the faucet, he wondered how they managed to get the water up five floors to this bathroom. The city was full of strange things, including all those tough people who managed to live in it. He thought to himself that he would never be one of them.

While the water ran down his body, he remembered something that Gazelle had once said to him. Why do you suppose human beings learned to make tools, Gazelle had asked. Why had they first piled up rocks? To knock them down, he’d said, answering his own question. It’s the need to destroy that makes people build things. The destroyers of this world are the chosen ones. And you’re one of them, Kiku; you’ve got the right, and when

your time comes and you realize you've got to start busting things up, remember the magic formula: DATURA. He said it again. When you want to do it, one by one or all of them at once, DATURA's the thing… It occurred to Kiku that if he lived in this city, he'd be saying DATURA twenty-four hours a day. A small smile curled the corners of his mouth: DATURA for the lump-man at Blind Mice; DATURA for the father and child begging in the street; DATURA for the drunk, for the taxi drivers, for the cleaning lady. DATURA for the lot of them, and he wished it weren't just a word but something that, like the magnet, had the invisible power to "rearrange" their miserable lives.

When he turned off the shower, someone was knocking at the door of the room. He thought perhaps Kazuyo would answer it, but when the knocking continued he dried himself quickly, put a towel around his waist, and left the bathroom. She was still asleep but no longer snoring. There was another knock, so Kiku went to the door and opened it a crack to find a foreign woman with a heavy coat draped over her shoulders despite the heat. The coat parted in the middle to reveal rich, dark breasts and, below, a darker triangle. Muttering, "DATURA," Kiku pointed at the sleeping Kazuyo, and it was only then that he noticed something strange about the way she was lying. Watching for a moment, he realized that the blanket no longer seemed to move; she had stopped snoring—it finally sunk in—but there was no sound of any breath at all. He went over and put his hand on her hip to shake her, and immediately let go in shock; but as he did so, a naked leg snaked through the half-open door, bringing into the room the sour smell of body odor and damp wool. Distracted, he grabbed an ashtray from the nightstand and threw it at the leg. The ashtray shattered, and the leg was quickly withdrawn with a hail of incomprehensible abuse. Gathering his courage again, Kiku touched Kazuyo's hip a second time: it felt like wood. Poking here and there, he found it all felt the same. She was obviously dead.

Kiku decided he had to try to open her eyes, convinced for some reason that the body had gone rigid so quickly because her eyes were shut so tight. He pinched the stiff eyelids and pulled until the lids suddenly gave way, peeling back with a snap to reveal blank, staring eyeballs that seemed drier than in life. The effort he put into this made Kazuyo's head slip off the pillow, and then the whole body began to slide over the side of the bed as if

melting. Kiku managed to prop her back up, but now he found the staring eyes unnerving. Since it was clear that she was dead, he thought it would probably be better now to close them. Supporting her cheek and jaw with his left hand, he tried to push the lids down with his right, but her makeup by now was greasy, and this proved difficult. Only the eyeballs seemed to be drier than ever.

It was then that Kiku realized for the first time that he was fumbling around with a corpse. It struck him as strange that it hadn't bothered him before. But he still hadn't managed to get the eyes closed; in fact, they seemed to be opening wider every minute until he wondered whether the whole face would eventually become two dry, staring eyes. Not willing to wait to find out, he stripped the sheets from the bed and wrapped the body tightly in them, binding it at the feet and waist with the belts from their bathrobes. When he had finished, he lay down on the sheetless bed, recalling something that Kazuyo had often said. The first time he'd heard it was long ago on the island one day when he woke up suddenly in the middle of the night. Opening his eyes, he'd seen Kazuyo sitting bolt upright in bed, hands on her knees, and when he asked her what she was doing, she had said bashfully that she was thinking… thinking about where and how she was likely to die.

The white of the sheets on the body reflected the glare of the lights, so Kiku turned them off. Once it was dark, he realized how tired he was, how much he wanted to sleep. He knew he should call a doctor right away, and the police had to be notified, and Kuwayama. He really ought to do it now… but *she was dead*, he thought, drifting into a light sleep. In his dream, he was being trampled by a giant.

Sunlight straggled through the gaps in the curtains, heating the sealed concrete-and-glass box where Kiku slept, soaked with sweat. Outside, the generator at the demolition site came to life and set the windows of the hotel rattling. As the wrecking ball made its first strike of the morning at the shattered building, Kiku woke from his dream with a wail. He had no idea where he was until he looked around the room and saw the shrouded figure on the bed next to him. But now it was only half white; Kazuyo's body had apparently bled from the mouth in the night, dyeing the top half of the mummy a deep rust color and laminating the sheet to the skin so that Kiku could see every detail of the face and chest.

He began to shake. His hands still smelled of Kazuyo's makeup, as if her scent had lived on after her body had become a statue. The wrecking ball went on battering the building. But as his own skin broke into yet another sweat, something carefully hidden in him began to rise to the surface, and his fear from the night before changed to anger. With a sudden intensity, he was aware that he was shut up tight in a box of a room, that the heat was unbearable. He wondered how long he had been here. Since the moment he was born, it seemed, sealed inside these gummy walls. And how long would he have to stay here? Until he too was a hard red doll draped in a sheet? Outside, concrete was being pulverized, the street was melting in the sun, the buildings panted audibly—and suddenly Kiku thought he could hear the city calling him. Not this city, not Tokyo exactly, but a vast, empty city that stretched from here to the island he'd come from, a huge, dead metropolis rising up inside his head. The vision lasted only a moment, then settled back into the real Tokyo; but the call went on, Tokyo was calling Kiku and he was listening. "Destroy me!" it was saying. "Smash everything!" Looking down from the window on the people and cars writhing in the street, Kiku felt the way he did at the moment he was attempting a pole vault. He saw his own body as he wanted it: an image of himself razing Tokyo, a visionary Kiku slaughtering every living soul, leveling every last building. He saw the city as a sea of ashes, bloodied children wandering among the few surviving birds and insects and wild dogs. And the image, for some reason, set Kiku free. Abruptly, and for the first time, he burst out of the cramped, hot, miserable box he'd been shut up in, as though bursting from an outgrown shell or castoff skin. And with liberation, memories he had kept buried began to worm their way to the surface—memories, he realized, of summer. He remembered another Kiku, one seventeen years younger, and the suffocating heat of the coin locker. He remembered how he had resisted it, had screamed at the top of his lungs, and all at once he remembered for the first time the voice that had called to him then as it was calling to him now, a voice that urged him on, urged him to revive, to escape. Then, as now, it told him: "Kill them! Destroy everything!" The voice came from somewhere down there among the people and the cars, blending with the shrill noise of the city, adding its chant to theirs: "Kill them all! Smash everything! Wipe this cesspool off the face of the earth!"

8

Kiku spent July 18, 1989, his seventeenth birthday, in Tokyo. At Kazuyo's funeral, Kuwayama had done his best to persuade him to go back to the island, but he had refused. When they were scraping around among Kazuyo's ashes collecting the bones, Kuwayama had picked out a finger-sized piece and, wrapping it in a white cloth, had handed it to him. "If you're absolutely certain you won't come home, at least take this," he said. Kiku pocketed the little bundle, deciding he would show it to Hashi if he ever found him.

There was something Kiku wanted to do: go to one of those big bookstores to check the dictionaries. He wanted to look up DATURA. He started with the dozen or so encyclopedias, but, having no luck there, he went to find a clerk.

"What do you do when the word you're looking for isn't in those big reference books?" he asked.

"Maybe it's some sort of specialist term," said the clerk, directing him to a row of smaller volumes divided up according to subject. Kiku plowed into these, beginning with the thickest and heaviest. It took him a whole day, but he went through the dictionaries of philosophy, psychology, law, medicine, and engineering without finding it. Whenever he came across a similar word, he made a note:

> ***Dachua.*** *Minor fishing port on southern shore of Black Sea; principal industry: caviar. Local legend links children in region born with black fingernails to caviar fishery.*
>
> ***Datcher, Matthew.*** *English painter of military subjects; born suburban London, second son of a fireworks technician. Self-taught tempera artist, began painting military scenes on joining the army; produced over 2,000 works before dying in battle during Ceylon rebellion.*

datural. *Anonymous choral work; Latin and German lyrics extant.*

daturany polyp. *Egg-shaped tumor growing on short stem from mucous membrane in nostril; usually result of chronic inflammation. Also known as nasal bud tumor.*

Daturaz Brothers. *Centrifuge manufacturer for Apollo Space project soil survey. Main facility: Arlington, Virginia.*

Eventually, the store clerk couldn't resist asking Kiku what he was looking for.

"DATURA," Kiku answered. "But I don't even know if it's Japanese or English or what."

The clerk went to a shelf, pulled down an enormous English-Japanese dictionary, and turned to a thick section under "D." He flipped through the pages for a moment, then ran his finger down a column.

"Ah! Could be this," he said at last. "But the pronunciation seems to be 'Datsura' rather than 'Datura'… Maybe it's either way. Says it's a kind of plant, *Datura alba*, or Korean morning glory; a member of the eggplant family."

Kiku felt a bit let down: the magic formula for annihilating the human race, for wiping out the entire planet, was… a kind of eggplant. The clerk fished his glasses out of his pocket.

"Hold on a second. There's something else here in smaller print. Second definition says 'poison.'"

"Poison?" Kiku repeated, suddenly perking up.

"Yep. Common name 'Korean morning glory'; also called 'crazy eggplant.' Says it 'contains alkaloids that can be poisonous, also known to cause disorientation, mood swings, even hallucinations. Cultivated in Central and South America (Sp. *bolatiero*) for important medicinal tropane alkaloids such as atorphine and scopolamine.'"

"What's all that mean?" asked Kiku.

"Sounds like it's poison," muttered the clerk, sliding a thin green book out of its slipcase. Kiku made out the words "Compendium of Psychoactive Drugs" on the spine. The clerk thumbed through the index.

“Ah, here it is. Listed under ‘Gabaniazid: an anti-depressant developed in the United States in 1984 as a result of a search for a more powerful stimulant when commonly used mood enhancers, principally iproniazid, proved ineffective with a rapidly increasing population of depressive patients. Classified research on MAO inhibitors, a family of anti-depressants, and a third mood enhancer led to the development of gabaniazid; the drug was brought out by a multinational known as Greer Pharmaceutical, which declined to reveal its constituent ingredients but marketed the product as a powerful, non-addictive mood enhancer with no noticeable side effects. The product was an immediate and conspicuous success.’ Seems it was six months before they began to notice something was wrong: ‘Psychiatrists in England found that patients receiving large doses tended to lose self-control and often became violent, and they demanded that Greer reveal the contents of the drug. Greer refused, citing corporate privacy rights, but after it was discovered that the defendants in three separate murder cases in the United States had been undergoing treatment with gabaniazid, a Senate hearing was convened. A Dr. Goldman from the U.K. testified that he believed Greer was using a diluted form of a military toxin called DATURA as the principal ingredient in gabaniazid, something that had been rumored since the introduction of the drug but never proven. Goldman, however, revealed the results of his experiments with two groups of rats, one injected with diluted DATURA and the other with large doses of gabaniazid. Both groups exhibited violent behavior quite uncharacteristic of rats.’ The result of the hearings: Greer admitted to using DATURA in its drug and pulled it from the market; later it was rumored that a U.S. navy officer in charge of biological weaponry was arrested for allowing a chemical agent to get into private hands. Sounds like your DATURA is some kind of weapon,” the clerk concluded, closing the book.

The street outside was jammed with people as Kiku emerged with *The Compendium of Psychoactive Drugs* tucked under his arm (the clerk had slipped a red bookmark in at the entry for gabaniazid). It was nine days since Kazuyo had died, seven since Kuwayama had gone back to the island with the bones. Having run out of money, Kiku checked out of the hotel and stood staring through frosted display windows at rows and mounds of food; at least no one would ever starve to death in this city, he lied to himself. The

streets were clogged with cars and the occasional giant truck shaking the sidewalks. The whole scene made him think of the model of the human body that had stood in the corner of the science classroom at school. The physiological systems and organs mapped out on the dummy were just like those of the city: the raw materials flowing into the city were food coming down the throat; power plants were the city's lungs, and government offices and businesses were the digestive system, absorbing all available resources; the wires strung everywhere were the nervous system, streets were veins and arteries, and the people, cells; the harbor was a gaping mouth, and the runway out at the airport, a tongue.

Kiku climbed the stairs of a pedestrian overpass and looked around; Tokyo was a mass of concrete in all directions, as far as the eye could see in the smoggy haze. The cluster of skyscrapers, thirteen in all, loomed up in front of him like great towered fortresses rather than office buildings. Now and then, the sun reflecting on the walls of glass transformed them into tall pillars of light, the shafts of searchlights in daytime, drawing him toward them. So he set out in that direction, mumbling to himself that even they would soon be full of stray dogs.

He walked for quite a while, yet the buildings were still the same height, still leaning over him but apparently no closer. Distances were deceptive when dealing with towers. The road, though, was changing, getting narrower as he came to a shopping district filled with the smells of dinnertime. The sidewalks here were so crowded that people spilled over into the street, stopping traffic. Kiku moved past a woman yelling at a driver who had apparently nearly hit her child; her voice was accompanied by a chorus of honking horns from the cars backed up behind them. The driver, having heard enough, jammed his car in gear in mid-insult, and traffic began flowing again; but the mother, refusing to give up, ran after him. As she ran, lemons rolled out of her shopping basket and into the street to be crushed under the wheels of oncoming cars. A sour yellow smell followed Kiku as he walked away, wishing the book under his arm contained DATURA itself and not just its definition. Suddenly, he turned and pretended to lob the book, like a grenade, into the crowd. It exploded with a rumbling blast at the back of Kiku's throat, as the woman scrambled around trying to retrieve the lemons. She stopped only long enough to slap her child, who began to wail.

The skyscrapers seemed to have disappeared. Kiku wondered for a moment whether he'd made a wrong turn, before he realized that the buildings on either side of the alley were blocking the view. It occurred to him that the streets of the abandoned town back on the island had once been as crowded and noisy as this one; then, when the mines had closed, things changed almost overnight. Kuwayama always talked about how the butchers on the island had been forced to sell off their stock cheap when their customers started leaving in droves. It was sukiyaki every day for supper, he'd often said, and even then they couldn't sell it fast enough, and the dogs ended up getting some of it. When the butchers themselves finally pulled out of town, they had left behind whole haunches of lamb that rotted and covered the island with the stench of death. Someday, this place will be like that, thought Kiku to himself.

As he left the narrow streets of the restaurant district, the towers reappeared, so close now it hurt his neck to look up at them. They rose before him, fading in the last light of the sun, and now Kiku could see that they were dozens of times bigger than the apartment blocks back on the island. He went nearer, until the buildings filled the whole sky. Here and there, lights were beginning to come on in the walls of glass, cutting bright squares out of the dark monoliths. He felt dizzy staring at them, and the buildings seemed to swell into gaping holes that threatened to swallow him. We could crush you in an instant, they were telling him. He was close enough now to touch a wall; it was hot, perhaps from the sun, and unpleasantly thick.

Kiku walked among the buildings looking for barbed wire. When he was leaving the hotel that morning for the last time, the dark-skinned hooker—by now an old acquaintance—had told him that there was a place called Toxitown near the skyscrapers and that it was surrounded by barbed wire. In the center of Toxitown, she said, there was something known locally as "The Market" where they sold everything from kittens to old fairies.

"They also have these weird, pale-faced guys peddling every kind of drug and chemical you ever heard of," she'd confided. "And whatever this stuff is you're looking for, if you can't get it there, it can't be got."

Kiku's reconnoitering turned up various things down among the roots of the towers. In the wall of one building was a revolving door with flashing lights leading to a hotel; nearby, under a row of flags, was the entrance to

the tower, flanked by an aluminum sculpture that seemed to be infested with bugs that rattled around inside. There was even a fountain with strobe lights. Eventually, as he made his way deeper into the forest of towers, Kiku sensed something in the air, like a stale, damp draft from the cracks in the concrete, as if there were a tunnel somewhere nearby connecting this plaza to a forgotten garden beyond the buildings. He began to run, cutting across the wide boulevard that divided the towers and into an empty lot used for storing leftover building materials. Just where the streetlights gave out, he could see a dozen or so glinting parallel lines: a barbed-wire fence half hidden by tall weeds. From beyond the fence came the familiar smell of ruin and decay; Kiku was sure there would be dogs inside. The Market must be in there, he told himself, and that's where I'll find some gabaniazid. Who knows, maybe Hashi will turn up too. One thing's for sure, if Hashi stood where I'm standing now and smelled that smell, he'd manage to find a way in. We were *raised* on that smell… Yeah, I bet he's in there, Kiku told himself as he tried to gauge the height of the fence. Four meters… I've jumped higher, he thought.

The next day he showed up early at the office of the High School Track Association and, after announcing that he was in training for the national meet, he managed to borrow a fiberglass pole that was slightly springier than the one he was used to, then headed straight for the athletic field in Yoyogi Park. He was going to practice with a shorter approach and no padding in the pit, as he wanted to learn to land on his feet instead of his back.

A little past noon, an army of men carrying cameras and other equipment filed into the arena. They were shooting a commercial for tennis shoes, and they brought along an official from the track association who asked Kiku if he'd mind appearing in the background practicing his jumps.

"You don't have to do anything special," the man assured him, "just go on with your training as if they weren't there."

Evidently, the shot they wanted featured a smiling model hitching up her long lace wedding dress to reveal her tennis shoes just at the instant Kiku sailed into the background. For this they needed a generator and a bank of blinding lights, even though it was midday and sunny. The unnatural lighting, with the high-kicking model going over and over her lines, began to make him feel a bit sick.

“What flies?” she kept saying. “Airplanes and balloons, helicopters and gliders, birds and kites, butterflies and bugs… And one more thing… the well-dressed bride in Herman’s Hermits Sneakers.” Just as she said “And one more thing,” she was supposed to hoist up her dress and smile, but the girl seemed a little uncertain about how to do the line—not, apparently, because she was nervous but because she found the whole thing ridiculous. When some clouds moved in temporarily, the director called for a break and the model wandered over in Kiku’s direction.

“Hot, isn’t it?” she said, but Kiku hardly heard her; he was busy looking at her enormous eyes. She reminded him of a picture he’d once seen of a woman in a wedding dress standing against a gray, lowering background: “Lonely Bride,” it had been called.

“Is there a way I could have some of that milk without anybody seeing?” asked the girl, pointing at the half-finished carton Kiku had been drinking from. He wasn’t surprised she was thirsty, wearing that dress in this heat. “They won’t let me drink while we’re shooting ’cause they say my stomach sticks out,” the Lonely Bride explained.

She squatted down in front of him, pretending to be deep in conversation as she palmed the milk and emptied it in one suck. A drop escaped from the corner of her small mouth and ran down her chin. Watching the way the line of her neck undulated as she swallowed, Kiku was amazed how beautiful she was.

“You like to pole vault?” she said, looking straight into his eyes and delicately wiping her lips.

“Why do you ask?” said Kiku, looking down in confusion.

“Because I love it, that’s why,” she answered.

“I guess I’ve always liked flying,” he said.

“Since you were a kid?”

“Yeah, I suppose so.”

“I thought people who liked to fly usually turned out to be pilots,” said the bride. “But they say you have to be smart to be a pilot, and me, personally, I can’t stand anything you have to be smart for.” One of the camera crew yelled at her not to get sunburned, and, without bothering to answer, she opened the parasol she was carrying as a prop.

“Picky, aren’t they?” said Kiku.

“You think so too?”

“Lights in the middle of the day—seems pretty weird to me.”

“I’m glad you agree.”

“When I see guys like that, I always think they’d be better off dead,” said Kiku, at which the Lonely Bride’s eyes got very wide.

“I once read this novel,” said the girl, apparently changing the subject, “where the sun expands and the whole earth gets real hot. Places like Tokyo and Paris are like Tahiti, and everybody moves to places that used to be too cold to live in.”

“Like Hokkaido?”

“No, much colder, like the North and South Pole. Hokkaido would be like the tropics.”

“And what happened to Tokyo?” asked Kiku.

“Tokyo? It turned into a swamp.”

“Why a swamp?”

“’Cause the South Pole melted and the sea level went way up, and I think it rained all the time too.”

“Neat,” said Kiku.

“And you know what else? There was just this one man and woman in the Tokyo swamp, and they were in love.”

“But I thought it was supposed to be too hot, hotter than the tropics. How did they survive?”

“They drank a lot of beer,” said the girl. From time to time she dabbed the sweat from her upper lip, careful not to disturb her elaborate makeup. Kiku noticed how thin her skin seemed; the pale blue veins in her eyelids blended with her eye shadow to form mysterious patterns that made his head swim. If you pricked her with a needle, he thought, her skin would burst like a balloon and she’d disappear into those patterns.

“If you tell me when you have a meet, I’ll come watch,” she was saying.

“I don’t go to meets,” Kiku told her.

“You mean you just practice?”

“Not exactly, but I don’t go to meets.”

“I just thought it would be fun to cheer for you a little,” she said, sounding a bit disappointed.

“Well, if you just want to watch me jump…” The girl nodded. “Then come tonight and wait between the Sumitomo Building and the Overseas Union Bank. I’m jumping barbed wire tonight.”

“You jump at night?” she asked in a slightly dubious voice.

“You don’t have to come if you’re not interested.”

“I’ll be there,” she said. She was being called again; apparently they wanted to fix her hair before they started shooting. As she stood up to leave, Kiku thought to ask her name. Lifting the hem of her long dress, she looked back over her shoulder as she walked away.

“Anemone,” she said.

That evening, Kiku arrived early and spent a long time calculating the exact distance between the uppermost line of barbed wire and the tip of the pole as he held it vertical. Then, when he was satisfied that his measurements were correct, he marked a spot and dug a hole twenty centimeters deep. This he filled with sand to form a makeshift box for planting the pole in; the sand would help absorb some of the shock. Next he strung a piece of rope along the ground perpendicular to the fence and, standing on the rope, made a right-angled triangle, with his body—arms stretched over his head—as the hypotenuse and the pole and the ground as the legs. Where his feet were placed would be the take-off mark. From there he paced off an even number of steps, counting two steps walking for each he would run. Then he lined the path from the take-off mark to the starting point with small white pebbles and removed the rope.

His preparations completed, Kiku went over to Anemone, who was waiting in the bushes with a Polaroid camera around her neck—“to take a picture of the jump,” she’d told him.

“When I make a new friend, I always take their picture. Kind of a souvenir, see?” It occurred to Kiku that Anemone was the first person he had met since coming to Tokyo who kept her word, seeing that she’d actually turned up. When he told her that he planned to jump the barbed wire to get into Toxitown, she tried to make him change his mind. She talked fast and what she said was a little muddled, but as far as Kiku could make out, it seemed he would end up with holes in his face, that the entire area was contaminated with some kind of poison, and—worse—if he were discovered trying to break in, he’d be fried alive by a flamethrower. Something like that. If he simply *had* to get in, she conceded eventually, she could show him a way; but when she led him to the hole in the fence that the boy with the rotting face had once shown her, they found it had been

repaired. As they walked, Kiku studied his guide; she had removed all the makeup from that afternoon and was wearing jeans with a red enameled belt and a silver lamé blouse with ducks printed on it.

The guards had passed by on their rounds three times during the preliminaries, and each time Kiku and Anemone had huddled together in the bushes. During their second circuit, Anemone had started to whisper something and Kiku had pressed his hand over her mouth to shut her up. There were still red marks from his fingers on her pale cheek.

“Kiku, guess what, I have a pet crocodile,” she whispered at last, as the lights of a car passing in the distance showed for a moment that the red weals were gradually fading. The shadows of the bushes fluttered across her face, hiding her eyes. Kiku thought again how pretty she was, but he had the feeling that he could forget her in no time simply by shutting his eyes.

“His name is Gulliver. What do you think?”

“What do I think about what?” he asked, confused.

“About raising a crocodile,” she said.

“Pets are all the same; they’re cute but they’re a lot of work.”

“He’s a big crocodile—very,” she added, her lips pursed as she whispered this new bit of information. Her breath was warm on his ear, and from the nape of her neck came the smell of soap.

“A crocodile, huh? I only saw one once, in an aquarium. Looked a bit stupid to me,” said Kiku.

“You want to come see mine sometime? It’ll make you feel like you’re in the jungle.” Kiku wanted to tell her that he felt as though he were already in a jungle: hot and a little bothered. “So when you’ve taken care of whatever it is you have to do, come by sometime and see him.”

“Tonight’s out,” Kiku said.

“You know there’s a brand of whisky called Crocodile Tears?” She had changed the subject again.

“Tonight’s impossible,” Kiku repeated.

“Doesn’t matter when. Come whenever you like.”

Kiku wondered why he was having trouble breathing; it had started about the time he left the red marks on the girl’s cheek, an act that had seemed quite brutal to Kiku even as he was doing it. The cheek had been cool and soft, and Kiku had wondered what it would be like on the inside; still cool but probably a little gooey. The graceful curve of her jaw and

neck, and that slightly pursed lower lip, were visible from time to time in the light that filtered down from the office towers, as if lit by the lighthouse back at home. The silhouette shifted subtly when Anemone whispered or smiled or caught her breath. He reached out to touch her cheek again, tracing the faint marks with his finger.

“So you’ll come see my crocodile?” she was saying. “Come any day, just phone first.”

“OK. I guess it’s about time,” said Kiku, straightening his legs. He went to get the pole he had hidden in the grass. As he shouldered it, Anemone gasped.

“It’s beautiful, like a laser beam,” she whispered as the opalescent shaft caught the light. “Make it a nice jump,” she added, “… for the camera.”

After warming up, stretching his calves, and running in place for a moment, Kiku stood at the starting line staring at the top of the fence. Anemone crouched nearby, camera at the ready. Then, going fast, he set off down the makeshift runway, conjuring the essential image: his body being sucked up into the air and over the barrier—except in this case the image featured the jagged spikes of the wire rather than the harmless bar. At the halfway point, his stride evened out and his speed picked up; and then, one step before the take-off mark, he planted the pole in the sand hole. His body dug in, the pole bent… and somewhere, just at that instant, a whistle blew.

“Halt!” a voice yelled, as two guards in white protective suits charged from the shadows. One fired a warning shot, but Kiku was already airborne and the shot merely broke his concentration as he was clearing the fence. His left hand came off the pole, his body twisted, and the prongs of the barbed wire flashed before him. One barb caught his cheek at the corner of his mouth and sank in like a knife, so, to avoid being ripped to pieces, he instinctively caught hold of the wire and came to rest suspended on the strands. Directly below stood the helmeted guards, their guns pointing at his head. Feeling his mouth fill with blood, Kiku tried to plug the hole with his tongue, but numbness was setting in and there was little he could do about it.

“Don’t move or we’ll shoot,” one guard ordered, waving a flashlight in Kiku’s face. “Now climb back down on this side.” Kiku caught a glimpse of Anemone hiding in the bushes at the edge of the circle cast by the spotlight

overhead. She was busily snapping pictures. Strange girl, thought Kiku, smiling to himself.

“Listen, asshole, don’t mess with us,” the guards yelled at him, apparently angered by the smile. “We have orders to fire at will. You want to die right there?” Bored with endless circuits around the barbed-wire perimeter, they seemed to fancy the idea of actually killing somebody. One of them raised his gun to aim right between Kiku’s eyes, his helmet bobbing with excitement; but before anything could happen another guy appeared under the spotlight—a strange, huddled figure on the inside of the fence, who lurched forward clutching a gun of his own and, just as the guards swung toward him, opened fire. Buckshot spat from the wide barrel, tearing through the fence and ripping fine black holes in the white uniforms as the guards were hurled backward. Kiku turned to see a small, dark-skinned, toothless man beckoning to him. Smoke was still pouring from the barrel of his gun.

“What do you think you’re staring at? If you hang around up there, they’ll fry your butt. Get *down* here, pole boy!” Kiku did as he was told, but as he struggled down from the fence, more guards, apparently drawn by the shots, came racing toward them in an armored car. He looked back just long enough to see Anemone waving at him and making her escape, and then he followed the little man into the darkness. When they were safely hidden, his guide stopped and pointed toward a low, shadowy building from which a shaggy figure was approaching. It was Hashi.

9

“So this is the great Kiku? You know, you’ve got to stop pulling stunts like this. If we hadn’t shown up when we did, you’d be a cinder by now… Hashi tells me you’re a big-time pole vaulter. No shit? A real live jock? Boy, that’s bad; in fact there’s nothing as bad as jocks with sweat glands where their brains ought to be, getting all razzed up, yelling ‘Go, team, go!’ How can you stand yourself?”

The guy with no teeth, Kiku learned, was Tatsuo—Tatsuo de la Cruz, from the Philippines. He and Hashi, who had been hiding nearby during the rescue, lived together on the second floor of a small tin-roofed factory building, where Hashi now silently led them. Beneath the bare light bulb at the bottom of the stairs, a pregnant woman was stooping with difficulty to put polish on her toenails. She straightened up just long enough to swat a moth fluttering around the light, sending a few flecks of powdered gold drifting down onto her wet nails.

The room on the second floor was dim and smelled of piss. A plastic hose wound in through one window to a garbage pail full of cloudy brown water where Hashi washed his hands. The tatami matting had been stripped away, and the floor was spread instead with a square of canvas that might once have been a painter’s back-cloth. In the center of the room was a small table with two cups crusted with dried tea bags. The other furnishings included a black and white TV, a cassette recorder, and a vanity table. Vanity table… Now that Kiku thought about it, there was something odd about Hashi: he seemed to be wearing makeup. His eyebrows had been plucked and his face had a light coat of powder on it. Without a word or a glance at Kiku, Hashi went to the mirror. It was Tatsuo instead who spoke.

“So, did you get a load of my handiwork, Jock? The way I blew away those grunts? Made the gun myself, a sawed-off shotgun. Not fuckin’ bad, huh? Nobody else in Japan can make a gun like that. Modeled it after one they called the Liberator that the partisans used in Europe in WWII. Hey, Jock, you know what ‘Liberator’ means? Huh?… Nah, I guess you physical

types don’t spend much time studying… I’d been wanting to make a beauty like this since way back, and I would’ve called mine a Liberator if it’d turned out just like the partisans’; but it was tricky figuring out how to keep the recoil down and still pack a big bang. Maybe I’ll work it out someday. Anyway I call this baby a Getaway, after a movie I saw as a kid. There was this American guy in the movie, had his hair cut real short, and he was always blasting people with a shotgun…”

As he jabbered on, Tatsuo moved around the room poking into old paper bags and a disintegrating box filled with shuttlecocks and shoehorns. “That’s weird,” he said as he finished his search, “I was sure we had some mercurochrome somewhere.”

He went to the bucket and wet a handkerchief, mumbling continually, half to himself and half to Kiku: “So just keep that in mind, pole boy: I’ve got a shotgun.” When he handed him the handkerchief to wipe his bloody cheek, Kiku noticed Tatsuo’s hand was trembling.

“OK then, Jock, I’m going out to buy you something to put on that cut,” he said finally, turning to leave. When he reached the door, though, he looked back to deliver a last word of warning. “But don’t you forget it: me and my Getaway here, we don’t like being made a fool of. I’d take you outside right now and show you a little of what this Getaway can do, but there’s an old guy lives down there called the Quaker, and when he hears loud noises he gets all upset and screams ‘Earthquake!’ loud enough to make you deaf. It’s like a fit, I guess, but he sure makes one helluva noise, and then he kind of collapses in a heap, poor guy.”

“Must have been scared by an earthquake once,” said Kiku softly, his eyes on the floor.

“He said something!” laughed Tatsuo, slapping Hashi on the shoulder. “The pole boy can speak! And for a jock it wasn’t half bad. We didn’t even have to knock him around to get him to talk. You know, kid, Hashi here really likes you. When we saw you trying to vault your way in, he said to me right away, ‘You go help him.’ Yeah, he sure does like you… What was I talking about? Oh, the Quaker. No, you’re wrong about him. He doesn’t hate earthquakes. You see, he was a security guard since he was thirteen years old. Sixty years he worked as a guard, saving up his salary the whole time and buying emergency rations and canned goods and bottled water. Then a few years back he got sick, some kind of lump on his spine so he

can hardly walk, can't even take a piss by himself, and what do you think? His family leaves him here in Toxitown with nothing but a barrow full of his old emergency rations. So now he says earthquakes are the only thing you can count on, that he worked those sixty years for an earthquake. And whenever anything happens, he starts yelling 'Earthquake!' louder than the real thing. Pretty interesting neighbors we got here, don't you think? This is a pretty good place… And I'm a pretty good guy," said Tatsuo, bringing the rapid-fire monologue to a sudden end. "I'm off for the medicine," he added, and with a wave to Kiku he disappeared through the door.

Hashi, still seated in front of the mirror, opened a jar of cream and began rubbing it on his face.

"Where can you buy medicine at this time of night?" Kiku wanted to know. It was one in the morning.

"You're in the city, Kiku. There's an all-night market," said Hashi, speaking for the first time. He continued staring at the mirror. His voice, at least, was much the same, Kiku thought. "I work at The Market myself, and I've got to get going pretty soon. When Tatsuo gets back with the medicine, you should try to get some sleep. We can talk tomorrow."

Hashi seemed to have lost some weight, but he knew what he was doing with the makeup, brushing on pale blue eye shadow with a practiced hand. Kiku caught a whiff of perfume on the warm night air: it was a woman's smell, like the smell that came from between the legs of the foreign whore at the Hotel Springtime.

"Hashi," he said, "do they make you dress like that where you work?"

"Kiku, please—could we drop it for now? I feel like my head's going to burst, you showing up all of a sudden like this. Like I said, we'll talk about it tomorrow… we'll talk about everything tomorrow."

Hashi pulled off his T-shirt and put on a cream-colored bra, stuffing it with mounds of sponge. Then he put on a pink shirt, tying the shirttails across his stomach. From behind he could have been a small-assed girl.

"There're some blankets in that closet, and if you get hungry Tatsuo can fix you something to eat," he said, getting into a pair of high-heeled sandals. Kiku noticed the green nail polish on his delicate toenails and the silver chain around his ankle. Hashi opened the door and stood for a moment with his back to him.

"How's Milk?" he asked.

“Milk’s fine, but Kazuyo’s dead. I brought you one of her bones.” As he bent down to unravel the thread that held the bone in his trouser cuff, Kiku was suddenly, inexplicably furious. Kazuyo’s face, with its scarlet death shroud, floated up before him, bringing with it the fear and anger of that night. He remembered the feeling of being sealed inside something tight and pulpy. He felt he had to tell Hashi, to ask him if he too had felt trapped, to tell him about the fear. He wanted Hashi to know about the voice the night she had died, the one that said that nobody needed him, that he was completely useless. He wanted to tell Hashi that the voice was meant for him too, and he wanted him to know about DATURA, and how he would be able to kill them all if he could only get his hands on some. But most of all he wanted to ask Hashi why he was dressed up like a girl. Instead, he took the bone, which he’d finally managed to extract from his cuff, and threw it on the floor. Hashi turned to look, his face screwed up with pain and his shoulders heaving softly.

“Some asshole knocked into her while we were searching for you in Shinjuku and she fell and hit her head. It killed her. Do you remember how she used to sit up in bed sometimes at night? It was kind of spooky, remember? She always said the same thing: that she got to thinking about how she would end up dying and she couldn’t sleep. She’d just sit there blubbering away like a little kid, holding us until she fell asleep. Remember? Well, she probably never imagined she’d die spitting blood in a creaky bed in some stinking hotel. But you’re lucky, Hashi—you didn’t have to be there to see it… you’re really lucky…” Kiku was almost in tears as everything that had been bottled up since Kazuyo’s death came spilling out. When he was done, he felt drained.

“I’ve got to get going,” said Hashi, averting his eyes from the bone lying on the floor.

“It’s part of her. Just take one look, just spend one second thinking about her.”

“I haven’t got time—I’m late as it is.”

“Just say a little prayer and go. It won’t take a minute.”

Hashi turned. Tears were streaming down his face. “Stop it!” he screamed. “Think for once how *I* feel, what kind of situation *I’m* in!”

“Situation my ass,” Kiku muttered, grabbing a plate of leftover spaghetti from the table and hurling it against the wall. Hashi sat down at the top of

the stairs and began to whimper. Just then, Tatsuo returned.

Seeing his friend in tears, Tatsuo lunged at Kiku, but Kiku stepped inside and landed an open hand hard on his jaw, sending him rolling into a corner of the kitchen. He then took Hashi by the shoulders and shook him. “What the hell are you doing here?” he yelled. “Did you find that woman who left you in the locker? Is that it? Say something!”

Through his tears, Hashi could only mumble “I’m sorry,” over and over again. “It’s all my fault. I’m sorry, Kiku, I really am. I just wanted to be a singer. I’m sorry for everything.” His odd, nasal voice slowly filled the room like a fog, settling on Kiku’s skin, sinking in through his pores, and calming the anger and anxiety that had been streaming through him a moment before. He wanted to tell Hashi how lonely he’d been since he left the island, but he couldn’t.

Suddenly Hashi screamed “No! Don’t!” Tatsuo had recovered and was now aiming his gun at Kiku. Hashi flung himself at Kiku and they both went flying just as he pulled the trigger. The light bulb and a piece of the wall shattered, and the room went dark.

“I’ll kill any fucker who messes with Hashi or thinks he can make a fool out of me,” they could hear him muttering. Hashi lit his lighter to find Kiku, in one piece, brushing bits of glass from his hair as he got to his feet.

“Eaaarthquaaake!” a hoarse voice bellowed from below. “Banzai! Banzai! Turn off the gas! EARTHQUAKE!!!”

“Can’t call this place boring, anyway,” said Kiku. Nodding, Hashi began to laugh.

Tatsuo had been born in Japan, the son of Laguno de la Cruz and Lurie de Leon, both from Cebu City in the Philippines. The couple had come to Japan in 1969, he to work as a musician, she as a dancer, but lacking any real talent, they had found it difficult to make a living in the city. After knocking around in increasingly mediocre shows, they ended up in a touring company working small towns in the provinces. Six months later, Lurie got pregnant and couldn’t take the constant traveling any longer, so they signed a contract with a hot-spring hotel northwest of Tokyo. The terms of the contract were terrible; the four band members and three dancers got up at 5:00 A.M. to help make breakfast and were kept busy until the floorshow in the nightclub ended at midnight. Still, they preferred it to

life in Cebu, and in time their hard work and reliability made them friends in the place.

Tatsuo was born in the winter of 1971. As soon as he was old enough to toddle around on his own, they started training him to be an acrobat, and by the time he was five he was performing in the dinner show at the hotel with Emiko, the daughter of one of the other dancers. They were something of a hit. Emiko, a “half”—Filipina and Japanese—was three years older than Tatsuo, and had a crush on him. In fact, he was the pet of the whole hotel, the front desk clerk even nominally adopting him so he could have Japanese citizenship and attend elementary school. Twice a year, Tatsuo and Emiko would give a benefit at a hospital nearby for people with leprosy, which earned them a certificate of merit from the local government.

The summer of the year he was to enter junior high school, Tatsuo made a crucial discovery. He was poking around in a closet looking for mosquito coils when he found a strange bundle wrapped in several layers of paper. Inside was a gun. It was a working model of a Browning revolver that his father had smuggled in piece by piece and assembled himself, and with it were more than a hundred .22 bullets. His hands were shaking uncontrollably, but he took both the gun and the ammunition and hid them under the floor mats.

After that, whenever he could find the time, Tatsuo would stuff the gun under his shirt and escape into the mountains for a bit of target practice. Sometimes, when something was bothering him, or to celebrate his birthday or whatever, he’d stand on the side of a hill, the earth reeking of sulfur from the hot springs, and shoot straight up into the air. He began buying books and magazines about firearms to learn more about how they were made. One day in the mountains, he shot his first living thing: a cock pheasant. He got it at such close range the head came right off. The recoil and the satisfying shudder that went through him afterward drove home the fact that killing things was pretty easy. And it wasn’t long before it occurred to him that it might be that much more interesting, and no more difficult, to shoot a human being. Unfortunately, however, he remembered a line from a gun book he particularly trusted: “Never fire unless the situation has become absolutely hopeless, and even then fire only to intimidate your adversary.” Tatsuo couldn’t read the characters for “intimidate” and so interpreted the

passage to mean that one could only shoot people when the situation was “absolutely hopeless.”

From that time on, he began to pray for one of these desperate situations to turn up. The chances of being attacked by savages or stormtroopers in a small hot-spring resort were, admittedly, slim, but this didn’t prevent him becoming more and more impatient to try his hand at shooting someone. It’s because I’m really a Filipino, he told himself—I’m not cut out for this soggy old Japanese mountain town. He would look at pictures of Cebu and long for the warmth of the sun to thaw him out, melt those icebound shapes outside which often looked to him like guns.

The winter he turned fourteen, the hotel was full of skiers, and Tatsuo and Emiko were still doing their routine for the dinner show. One evening, a young drunk leapt up on the stage while Emiko was in the middle of a handstand and started to pull off her leotard. When the emcee and one of the stagehands tried to get the man to leave, he began tossing chairs around the room. Some of his friends joined in, smashing plates, turning over tables, and yelling “She’s a Filipina, she’s *got* to be a stripper!” Emiko stood alone on the stage in her torn costume, crying her eyes out. At this point, the manager arrived on the scene, and Tatsuo overheard him mumble to himself “Absolutely hopeless.”

“What did you say?” asked Tatsuo.

“I said it looks absolutely hopeless,” the manager repeated, running to phone the police.

Tatsuo was bursting with excitement. Here it was when he least expected it: the longed-for situation. He ran to his room for the gun and was back outside the ballroom in almost no time, but when he kicked in the door and yelled “Get your hands up!” the melee was already over and the staff had begun cleaning up the mess. By then, however, it was too late to dampen Tatsuo’s enthusiasm, and he ended up pulling the trigger anyway. Three times. One shot caught a maid in the shoulder as she was sweeping up a pile of broken glass.

Tatsuo, after being evaluated by a psychiatrist, was packed off to an institution for troubled youths. Two months later, at Emiko’s urging and with her help, he escaped, and the pair went to Tokyo. Tatsuo found work operating a lathe in a machine shop, but everything about the place reminded him of guns, and before long he was making his own. When he

had four working models, he hit on the idea of selling three to buy ammunition, but almost as soon as he showed up with the homemade guns at a firearms store, he was arrested. He spent the next three years being shunted from the court system to a mental hospital and finally to a home for juvenile delinquents. His only visitor during this time was Emiko, who told him that his parents had gone back to the Philippines.

By the end of his time in there, he was determined, again with Emiko's help, to turn over a new leaf. Still, he knew he couldn't live without guns, so he decided to join the army. When he appeared at the recruiting office, however, the officers in charge found it hard not to laugh, saying that they'd never had the pleasure of reviewing a candidate who had not only failed to graduate from junior high school but came to them fresh from an institution.

Tatsuo and Emiko retired to an obscure section of Tokyo, where Emiko got work in a cabaret. Then, one night, she didn't come home. Asking around, Tatsuo learned that she was working as an acrobat at a place called The Market in Toxitown, and that was when he decided to slip through the fence himself and do what he could to find her. He made guns he sold to gangsters to support himself while he searched, and eventually he fell in with a fairy with a sweet voice who lived on the second floor of this old factory. "And that was Hashi," Tatsuo said to end his story, as he painted the mercurochrome on Kiku's cheek.

The hole made by the barbed wire took four days to heal; four days of listening to Tatsuo's nonstop chatter every time Hashi went off to work. It started with his autobiography, moved on to Hashi's job, then the history and specifications of every conceivable type of firearm, the lowdown on every character in the neighborhood, and so forth. Late in the evening, Hashi would put on his makeup and leave for The Market, not to return until almost dawn, if then; according to Tatsuo he was going to "singing lessons." During the day he mostly slept, waking only when the sun was already low in the sky. Then he would make dinner for Kiku and Tatsuo, which, since Kiku had arrived, consisted of their old favorite, rice omelettes. The hotplate, Kiku gathered, like everything else electric in Toxitown, ran off power siphoned illegally from city power lines. As they picked at their meal, Kiku and Hashi talked almost exclusively about what they could remember of the old days at the orphanage.

It didn’t take much imagination for Kiku to figure out what Hashi did when he went off to The Market in drag. Remembering the lump-man at Blind Mice, he tried not to think about it. On the fourth evening, however, as Hashi sat down to put on his makeup, Kiku announced that he was going with him. “I’ve got some shopping to do,” he said.

So an hour later, accompanied by Tatsuo who thought he might have another look for Emiko, they left the factory. The narrow street was lined with tin-roofed shacks, and here and there were the remnants of a cinderblock building invariably marked with red paint. Hashi warned Kiku not to touch the red-splashed walls or the earth itself. “That’s where the stuff that eats holes in your face is worst.” The eaves of the shacks were decked with strings of tiny Christmas lights that attracted swarms of insects. Groups of children played in the occasional empty lot, hopping about, kicking cans, trying to fly a kite, or catching lizards. One little girl stood clutching a rag doll next to the burning body of a dog, while nearby a group of boys pulled the tires from an abandoned car.

The road had been almost entirely stripped of asphalt, revealing a damp red clay that stuck to their shoes, and puddles covered with white foam that gave off a sour smell. Apparently, in this street, all the wooden buildings had been torn down and the scraps used to put up the makeshift shacks. Several of them seemed to be businesses: a grocer’s of some kind, a clothing shop, a liquor store. The night was hot and humid, and they sweated heavily as they walked. As they were passing a place lit from within by a pale, colored light, they could hear a woman moaning and shrieking all at once.

“This whole street is full of crazies,” Hashi said. “If somebody tries to talk to you, just ignore them.”

A crowd of people had collected at the end of the block, all pointing at the roof of a house across the street. One of them, a man with cloudy, yellowed eyes, was shouting, “It’s Superman! It’s Superman!”

Actually, it was a naked baby, perched precariously on the roof and crying at the top of its lungs.

“Fly!” shouted the man with the yellow eyes. “Fly, Banzai Boy!” The ladies of the street, all out for a look in nothing but their slips, were adding comments of their own.

“The sun’s gone down, you silly boy, you won’t get a tan at this time of day!” yelled one. “Poor baby, oh you poor, poor baby!” cried another.

A fat woman in black underwear stuck her head out of a window near where the child was tottering about and bellowed: “It’s my baby!” She then tried to scoop him up in a bug net but, realizing it was a waste of time, turned on the crowd outside and with a “What are *you* staring at—this ain’t a freak show!” slammed the window shut.

“Did you see the mark on that baby’s butt?” It was the man with the yellow eyes again. “That’s the sign! He’s the one! The one who’s going to save the world. That baby could flap those ears and fly right out of here like a pink elephant. Whaddya think about *that*, young man? Whaddya think?” He had grabbed hold of Kiku’s shoulder and was shaking it as he spoke.

“Don’t pay any attention to him,” said Tatsuo, pulling him loose. Kiku had a sudden urge to run upstairs and beat up the woman in black underwear; and while he was at it, he wouldn’t have minded finding the father-and-child begging team he’d seen in Shinjuku and bashing their heads in, either. Yet it wasn’t exactly that he wanted to get back at parents for mistreating their children: he was just struck by how helpless children were, by the way they could only sit there and cry, even when they got locked away in a box, that there was nothing for them to do but thrash around a bit and wail. He’d once seen on television that a baby giraffe could stand up and run an hour after birth; things would be different if human babies could do the same. If I could have done that, I’d already have beaten the shit out of them all by now, he thought.

They had stopped again. Looking over at Kiku, Tatsuo winked and pointed toward a window where a purple light was hanging.

“If you can manage to keep quiet, this one should be in full swing about now. What do you think, pole boy, want to have a peek?” Tatsuo brought over a large drum filled with rotting fish and signaled to Kiku to climb up on the rim. From this perch, Kiku could see through the window. The first thing that caught his eye was a large Buddhist altar on one wall festooned with little lavender-colored plaques bearing the names of somebody’s ancestors. Beneath the altar was an expanse of white that Kiku first took to be a mattress but gradually came to realize was a woman’s ass. The owner was so flabby that Kiku couldn’t make out where the buttocks ended and the thighs began, but somewhere in the middle, where the wrinkles all

seemed to come together, a pale penis could be seen thrusting its way now and again up into the light. And no ordinary penis it was, either, but an enormous thing as thick as Kiku's arm, though not particularly hard. As Kiku watched, the woman pulled free and rolled off the man. Lumbering over to a washbasin, she scooped up some ice cubes, popped them in her mouth and, like a blimp coming to earth, returned to settle on the owner of the limpish dick. She then began stroking and teasing and icing it down with her tongue, and Kiku was admiring the way her gold teeth glittered in the soft light when Tatsuo gave his trouser leg a tug as a sign that his time was up.

Quietly, Kiku hopped down from the drum.

"Well, how was it?" Tatsuo asked.

"She's beautiful," he whispered as Tatsuo clambered up and peered through the curtain.

"Whaaaat?!" Tatsuo squealed, his voice rising in volume. "You liar! Beautiful? She's a pig!" As he turned toward Kiku, he lost his footing on the rim and slipped down among the fish, toppling the drum and sending a wave of half-decayed things into the street. In a moment, a cloud of flies had gathered, and before he could get clear, the woman, her head draped in a cotton scarf and her body wrapped in a towel, leaned out the window.

"Excuuuuuse me! Young man! Who exactly were you calling a pig? Not me by any chance?" She lit a cigarette and glared at him, flapping her hand to keep the flies away. "If you were referring to me, I assure you you're mistaken. I don't much appreciate rude jokes, dear boy. You see, I used to be in the movies, in Hong Kong; made almost fifty pictures. I may be getting a bit loose around the edges, but I'm not finished yet. Oh no. You *betcha* I'm not finished… and I swear I'll murder the motherfucker who calls me a pig!" Her voice had risen to a howl.

At this point Kiku and company thought they should withdraw, but when they turned to go, another woman blocked their path, brandishing a kitchen knife.

"Was it you guys turned over the goldfish bowl? Didn't you know? If you turn over the bowl, the fish die. Guess you'll have to clean it up." Meanwhile, the woman in the window was offering to inject Tatsuo's prick with a shot of silicon, an offer that made him giggle nervously.

“What’s so funny, punk? Sounds like you’re just itching for that shot,” the fat woman screamed, shaking her hair into a wild bush and finishing with a tearful “Baaaastard!”

By this time, the neighbors were peering out of their shacks.

“Why the fuck do I have to take this from these bastards?” she continued. “Where does a punk like this get off calling me a pig?”

“Can’t blame a guy for telling the truth,” laughed one of the spectators just loudly enough to be heard from her window. For his trouble, the woman threw an empty bottle at him, breaking the pane of glass next to his head.

“Shit, lady, what the hell do you think you’re doing? It’s bad enough without having to watch the sows wallow in their sty.” While improvising other insults, he knocked the rest of the pane out of the window and jumped down into the street. The man, who was about three times the size of Tatsuo, may in fact have had a neck but his shoulders were too knotted with muscle for it to be visible. He wore nothing but boxer shorts and a T-shirt, which he peeled off and began to twirl around his head.

“Laaaaadies and gentlemen! In the red corner, at two hundred and ninety-nine pounds, Ortega Saito!” he bellowed as he danced in a little circle. When he’d finished his introduction, he carefully set the drum the right way up, then asked his audience, “Now which of you assholes is to blame for this?”

“Him! HIM!” cried the fat lady, pointing at Tatsuo. “He killed the goldfish, and he called me—me, the most famous cunt in Hong Kong—a PIG! It’s all his fault!” The words had scarcely left her mouth when Tatsuo felt himself being lifted off the ground by a fistful of his hair.

“They say,” he heard the neckless wrestler tell him in a friendly voice, “that pulling the hair smooths the face and relieves depression. Did you know that?” Tatsuo, mute with pain and fear, said nothing. “I’m asking how you like the massage, buddy. Say something,” the man shouted in his ear. Kiku chose this moment to aim a kick at the wrestler’s belly, but succeeded only in numbing his own leg; the man hardly flinched. Seconds later, an arm lashed out and knocked Kiku back head over heels into the gutter, where he came to rest with a thud and lay still for a while.

“You’re that Filipino kid, aren’t you?” the wrestler asked Tatsuo. “I had a tag-team partner once, a guy from the Philippines. He was another wimp,

too, like you. Used to spray his balls with cologne before every match, but they stank anyway… And you know," he added, yanking Tatsuo a little higher, "the thing is, I just replaced the glass in that window day before yesterday. Now I take it you were peeping in the lady's room, that it? Well, as punishment, what we're going to do is rip an ear off here." He grabbed his ear and began to pull. Tatsuo let out a piercing scream.

"Please, mister!" This came from Hashi. "I'll pay for the window; just let him go."

"Oh, it's you, the fairy. You want me to let your friend go? OK. Then you'll have to entertain us—do one of those tricks you fairies do, whistle with your asshole or something." Tatsuo was still wailing, and his legs twitched uncontrollably. There was blood where his earlobe was beginning to peel away from his head. "Or better still," said the wrestler again, "how 'bout having the Filipino kid tell us what he saw in the lady's boudoir. Go on, kid, tell us a story."

At some point in all this, a skinny man with a large bulge in his underpants had appeared framed in the window next to the fat lady. He looked around shyly as Tatsuo just managed to choke out: "They were… doing… it… owwww, help! Owwww, shit! Owwwww!"

"What's that 'it' mean, eh? Doing *what* exactly? Or do you want to lose this ear?" asked the wrestler, giving a harder tug that made Tatsuo's legs jerk about even more. The blood was now dripping on the ground, and he was close to fainting. As his head lolled back and his eyes bulged, the crowd rocked with laughter.

Hashi clutched the wrestler's leg and began to beg.

"Please, I'll do anything, pay anything, just let him go." The wrestler looked down at Hashi for a moment, then answered slowly:

"OK. Here's the deal, faggot. You sing me a song; if I like it, I let the Filipino go…"

A high, thin sound that reminded Kiku of birds singing in the hills back on the island greeted him as he came to and lifted his face out of a puddle. His right eye still hurt where the wrestler's hand had landed, and the people in the street all looked a little blurry. As the whistling of the birds gradually grew and formed a melody, he realized for the first time that Hashi, still kneeling at the wrestler's feet, was singing. The song, however, was the oddest one he'd ever heard. Hashi's voice now sounded like a telephone

ringing in the distance, or tiny speakers playing in his ear. The sound was constant, faintly oppressive, as though an incredibly thin membrane had covered the whole area, sticking to everyone's skin and seeping in to disturb the nervous system, stimulate the memory. Soon after he started singing, everybody within earshot could feel the effect: vision blurred, colors and smells faded, the air became damp, heavy, and you began sinking to the bottom of the sea, into a private vision summoned by the song.

Kiku found himself watching a jet black horse galloping through a park at dusk. The vision, however, wasn't like a dream, the scene wasn't projected in front of his eyes; instead he was pulled into it, as if sucked down into the whorls of paint on a canvas. The horse, pitch black yet bathed in an orange glow, was charging through a grove of trees at a terrific pace. It whinnied as it ran, but the sound grew imperceptibly until it was more a series of small explosions, and Kiku suddenly noticed that the animal's smooth, shiny coat had changed to metal. He was riding a huge motorcycle through a valley of silver windows. Yet he wasn't exactly riding the bike; somehow his viewpoint was slightly behind it, following at exactly the same hectic speed, as though he saw everything through the viewer of a movie camera mounted on rails. Things passed in a whirl—he lost track of what was moving so fast. Was *he* hurtling through space? Or the camera? Or the motorcycle? Or maybe it was the lights and buildings lining the road that were moving and he was standing still? He began to feel dazed, and anxious to get out of the painfully beautiful vision.

"Stop, please!" a woman's voice begged, and Kiku's motorcycle vanished. The fat lady was clinging to the man with the big, soft penis and crying uncontrollably. Kiku managed to get to his feet and make his way over to Hashi. He could see the rest of the crowd, frozen where they stood like zombies, their pupils dilated, eyes staring into the distance. Hashi's song had drawn them back into memories of the deep past, when their brains were still mushy, their minds yet to be formed. The wrestler, lost in his own maze of recollection, had released Tatsuo and fallen on his knees where he tore at his chest and muttered things that made little sense.

"Momma, don't make such scary faces. Your eyes are funny, a funny color… a scary color. I promise I won't be naughty any more, Momma—please stop beating the cat…"

"That's enough," said Kiku, standing next to Hashi. "Enough."

“I’ve practiced every day,” said Hashi as they continued on their way to The Market. “I try it out on the kids with holes in their faces or one of my friendly perverts, the cum-and-go crowd. And what I realized is that its power has got nothing to do with the tone or the melody itself; what you have to do is create an environment, a sound that’s no sound at all. You see what I mean? Silence—I mean total silence—stirs up people’s most primitive memories. I base the whole thing on the mating call of the West African pygmy hippo, and it seems to work on everybody—crazies, cripples, and particularly people who think they’re ‘normal.’ You see, everyone carries their own personal silence inside; all my song has to do is bring out a little corner of that silence.”

“What’s the name of the song?” asked Tatsuo.

“It’s an original,” Hashi answered. “I may call it ‘The St. Vitus’s Blues.’ As far as I can tell, people who have convulsions get real calm when they hear it, but everybody else is in for a treat too…”

At the entrance to The Market, a foreigner dressed like a priest was preaching from the pulpit of an empty industrial spool, backed up by scratchy recorded hymns. An open-collar shirt, black pants, and high rubber boots were complemented by a knotted rope around his neck, and the whole ensemble was topped off with a garland of hibiscus flowers. He was flanked by a sign that read “REPENT!” in enormous letters and “Cleanse your soul at the Church of Our Lady Juanita” in smaller ones. His Japanese was impeccable, except for an “e” sound that occasionally crept in where an “i” should have been.

“Brothers and sesters, go away from thes place! You come here to satesfy the lust of the flesh, but your money will only buy you greater loneliness. Look on thes place! Who are these women? They are mothers and wives and sesters. They are *your* mothers and wives and sesters! What can your money buy you here? Shame and misery, that’s what! And some of you others, you’ve come for the pitiful HO-MO-*SEX*-UAL, and you see hem puff his cigarette and weggle his pretty behind and you fall under hes spell. But what does JESUS have to say to the HO-MO-*SEX*-UAL? JESUS does not SUFFER the HO-MO-*SEX*-UAL! I say unto you, the judgment of SODOM is coming to thes place!”

The Market was a four-lane highway that ran through a tunnel in the area. The guards had apparently been bought off so that the tunnel could serve as a ready link between customers on the outside and the services provided inside. The system seemed to work, since the stalls that lined the road were doing a brisk business—with one difference: the commerce was almost completely silent. Not a voice could be heard as buyers and sellers, whatever the commodity, conducted their transactions in whispers, their lips pressed against each other's ears. The street stalls were fairly rudimentary, just a table and some chairs set up along the side of the road where the customers sat down and waited for the prostitute in attendance—in some cases a woman, in others a man—to quietly bring them a drink. The list of drinks was simple: watered-down beer or a kind of sweet wine in dark bottles. The freelance whores lining the street advertised with creative postures but rarely went out of their way to approach a passing customer. The men, it seemed, had been there from the beginning, but the number of women had increased suddenly when the underground highway had opened. Now they lined the tunnel, leaning against the walls, smoking with one hand and hiking up their skirts with the other. One woman had got hers up further than the rest, and the silver ring embedded in the fleshy lips between her legs glittered in the ancient yellow fluorescent light. A black woman languidly sucked grapes from a bunch, skinning them deftly with her mouth and letting them roll on her tongue like green marbles. Her dress, split down the back to the top of her ass, barely covered the sour, velvet skin beneath. A young girl was dancing in the street in toeshoes tied with white ribbons. On her thigh was a tattoo of a hydrofoil, and around her neck she wore a snakeskin collar complete with leash. A pair of twins had been painted on her buttocks, one per cheek, and they seemed to be clutching the real, lighted candle protruding between them.

In addition to the women, the tunnel walls were lined with makeshift drugstores which dealt almost exclusively in tranquilizers, the non-addictive drug of choice for both the working girls and their customers. A tranquilizer called Neutro, in fact, could almost have been said to be the pillar on which the social system of The Market was built. It was Neutro that one had to thank for the placid whispers, the smooth conduct of commerce minus the usual irritations and problems. Under a Neutro-induced haze, activity along the subterranean road was reduced to mutters, sighs, and muffled coughs,

the sound effects of a concert hall between the movements of a symphony. The Market was a circus with the soundtrack left off, a silent parade, a muted ballet with only a light ringing in the ears gently lulling the spectator into the general torpor. Not silence exactly, but an odd, noiseless noise, like rustling silk, or soft footsteps on wet concrete—like a tongue sucking at a gap between two teeth, or skin on skin, or clear sake being poured into a glass. The Market was a masked ball with only the sound of the feathers fluttering on a thousand strange costumes. Those who saw it for the first time invariably said they thought they had died and gone on to some other life.

At midnight, the three of them sat down at one of the stalls to put some mentholatum on Tatsuo's torn ear.

"Shit! That *hurts*!" yelled Tatsuo.

"Shut up," Hashi told him. "If it gets infected, the germs could get in your head and you'd end up paralyzed. Then you might as well forget about women; even if you did find Emiko, she'd probably have nothing to do with you. You can't let these things go, you know. At the very least you'd lose an ear, and then we'd have to throw out the stereo. This isn't like stubbing your toe; the ear's right there on the side of your head!…" Hashi chattered on to distract Tatsuo while he worked.

The underground road that ran through The Market intersected another road a hundred meters further on. From time to time, when a car passed this crossing, slowing down to a crawl, the crowd of prostitutes would drift along the tunnel in that direction. If the car contained a customer, the window would glide down, a finger would point at a man or woman, and the person chosen would get in. Other cars stopped just long enough to disgorge someone returning from a trick, and the newcomer would blend into the throng, immediately searching for the next customer. It was one of the latter who attracted Tatsuo's attention as they sat in the stall. After staring for a long while at her face, he mumbled almost to himself: "It's Emiko."

The girl in question had blown a kiss at the car as she got out, then turned four back somersaults to arrive at the table next to theirs, apparently at the invitation of the bearded, pipe-smoking man sitting there.

"Shiiiit! So she's a fucking whore. If I had the Getaway… and my ear wasn't all fucked up… I'd drag her home right now." Tatsuo was

whispering again. Emiko, however, was speaking just loudly enough to be overheard at the next table.

"… It's called 'marionetting' and they say it's *crazy*! You take some surgical floss and wrap one end up inside a capsule; then you swallow the thing and it unravels on the way down until you get it out the other end with a nice little enema. It takes about seven meters of string—isn't that incredible?—but when you've got it all the way through you can do all kinds of amazing things with it. There's this French girl who tied the end to a cork so she could plug herself up. I heard somebody did it with a tennis ball. Anyway, when you pull the string they *do* jump around, just like puppets. It's the funniest thing…"

Tatsuo was on the verge of tears. "Shit! Did you hear that? Did you hear the kind of girl she's become? She used to be too embarrassed to burp out loud, let alone fart, and now she's talking about dancing around with some string stuck out her ass." He hopped up. "She's going with me, even if I have to hog-tie her. I'm going to earn some money and we're going back to Cebu to live like civilized human beings."

Catching sight of Tatsuo approaching, Emiko tried to get away, but he caught her arm and they argued for a moment in Tagalog. Suddenly, Tatsuo slapped her cheek, but when Emiko hit back she caught Tatsuo's tattered ear and he let out a scream that could be heard throughout The Market. While he lay writhing on the pavement, Emiko came up to where Kiku and Hashi were sitting.

"Are you Tatsuo's friends?" she asked. Kiku nodded. "I'm saving enough money for Tatsuo and me to go back to the Philippines. He promised to stop making guns so I've agreed to go with him. There's just one thing I need some advice about: what should I do with the guns he has… get rid of them?"

"Why don't you bury them?" Kiku said after a bit of thought. "Do you know Yoyogi Park? There's a stadium near the west gate. What if you buried the guns and the cartridges there, say—under the third bench on the right? Would that solve the problem?"

Hashi gave him a funny look. "What do you want guns for?"

"Oh, you never know when they might come in handy," Kiku laughed.

After seeing Tatsuo and Emiko part of the way down the tunnel, Kiku stopped at one of the drugstores to ask if they had any gabaniazid.

“No way,” mumbled the young man behind the counter. He had a ratty sort of face. “Sold the last of it about three years back. Doubt we could sell it even if we had any left—the only thing people buy these days is Neutro. There isn’t much market for stimulants; seems all they want is to doze off.” The store was stocked to the ceiling with merchandise; in addition to the Neutro, there were imported peasant costumes, the odd musical instrument, assorted bangles, and smoking paraphernalia. But Kiku was more interested in the framed botanical photographs that decorated the walls. One in particular showed a plant with red trumpet-shaped flowers dangling from fragile stems; “*Datura sanguinia*,” the caption read. The young guy noticed Kiku staring at it.

“It’s called ‘red bolatiero,’” he murmured. “That one next to it is a betel nut from Palau, and at the end is some kava from Fiji. Over here’s the pit of a kola nut from Guinea; that’s peyote, coca leaves from Peru, and last you’ve got joppo. Every one of them’s a fine drug, no question. Course, we don’t have any of them here.”

“Doesn’t Datura have another meaning?” Kiku tried asking. The rat-faced man nodded, fishing out a tattered pamphlet from the clutter on the shelves and handing it to him.

“Take a look at that,” he said. “I wrote out a translation on the back; you can keep it.”

Kiku turned the paper over and began reading:

Monthly Bulletin of the Princeton University Faculty Committee on Neurosurgery. July 1988.

The Hyper-Stimulant DATURA

In the early years of the eighteenth century, British soldiers billeted in the province of Assam in India reported a series of attacks by a particularly vicious and determined tiger. Under normal conditions, tigers, like other wild animals, have what it is known as an instinctive “attack distance,” i.e., the area of proximity within which prey must come in order to be of interest. Even within this area, however, it was the experience of the soldiers that tigers, when fired upon, would retreat. This particular tiger, it seems, was notable for its complete

disregard for guns and its total lack of a set attack distance. Apparently it had already tasted human blood when the series of attacks on the soldiers began, and it managed to kill twenty-eight men before it was finally stopped. Dissection of the animal revealed that it was suffering from advanced bone marrow deterioration, and the bones themselves throughout the body were so severely rotted and brittle that every movement must have caused the tiger great pain. Still, after a thorough examination of the reports submitted by British officers, it is our conclusion that the tiger might actually have continued to exist, to overcome this pain, solely for the purpose of continuing to kill—that the very act of sinking its teeth into human flesh may have been what preserved the animal's will to live.

This conclusion is, we believe, corroborated by our colleague Dr. Schubelsweinbach who reports that victims of the nerve agent known as DATURA exhibit symptoms identical to those of this tiger. While the components of the DATURA compound remain classified, it is quite clear that it is manufactured around a nucleus of the indole group. It is thought that the characteristic onset of psychosis is brought about by metabolic changes in celtonin, but the precise mechanism remains undetermined due to the extreme efficacy of the smallest amounts of the toxin. No doubt the enzyme level is the key. The potency of DATURA is estimated as being several dozen times that of LSD-25 and probably as much as a million times that of mescaline.

We have learned that human tests on DATURA were conducted in strictest secrecy at the Naval Center for Chemical Weapons Research, using imprisoned servicemen as subjects. Records of thirteen of these cases have survived. A previous study suggests that, among other things, DATURA completely destroys all brain functions associated with control or restraint (Millet, 1985). The primary effect of DATURA would seem to be a form of criminal psychosis, the creation of an irreversibly destructive personality ranking with some of history's greatest villains. But the patients exposed to DATURA exhibited none of the traces of remorse that normally remain in even the most deranged megalomaniac; instead, they experienced an ecstatic sense of their own power, described as an "explosive

exaltation." Their reaction is thus fundamentally different from what schizophrenics describe as "revenge against lost reality" or the "bliss of death" associated with opium (H. D. Guido).

As far as can be determined, the user of DATURA experiences a complete loss of memory in the initial stages, followed by euphoria. The final stages have been compared to extreme psychosis (Tournelle, Sorbonne, 1986), but it would be more accurate to suggest that the patient comes to resemble some new life form in human shape. In the midst of feeling an intense well-being, the subject begins to destroy everything around him. Again according to the surviving clinical reports, the initial physical symptom is dilation of the pupils, followed by vomiting of a greenish foam. Patients were then said to develop extraordinary strength, examples of which included one prisoner who burst a leather football between his hands and then tore it to shreds. At this point, the destructive urge, particularly directed toward living things, sets in and does not abate until death. The subjects became obsessed with killing and were absolutely uncontrollable short of being killed themselves.

DATURA was banned worldwide in the Cairns Accord in 1987. In reality, however, a large part of the existing stockpile—approximately three tons, in solid, liquid, and gas forms—was never destroyed but instead sealed in drums and sunk somewhere in the ocean. A certain amount of the chemical surfaced in 1978 during the People's Church incident in Guiana, where its effects were first seen on a large number of people. This incident, and a toxological assessment of DATURA, will be taken up in a later issue.

Sometime around 1:00 A.M., a black Rolls Royce pulled slowly into the shadowless light of The Market. The fluorescent tubes buried in the walls and ceiling of the tunnel cast a strange, indirect glow over the scene as if everything were covered in a thin coating of phosphorescent plankton that had seeped down into the cavern, filling the air with tiny beads of cool light. The figures loitering at the edges appeared as nothing more than vague, dimensionless outlines. Light and dark were somehow reversed in their effect; a castaway drifting on the sea at night might spot a distant

harbor light and make for it as quickly as he could, but the denizens of the cavern seemed to long for a hint of shadow to creep off to and escape the perpetual, sallow lighting. Into this world the Rolls moved like a mobile refuge, and people crowded around as though eager to be swallowed up in its glossy blackness ringed in chrome. Young men in drag, women fiddling with their makeup, dancers and beggars—everyone stopped and drifted toward it. But the dark, green-tinted windows of the car revealed nothing but the twisted reflection of a beggar woman clutching a bunch of dried flowers.

Meanwhile, Kiku was telling Hashi about DATURA:

“I heard about it from Gazelle. Don’t you think it’s got to be incredible stuff? With just a little bit we could make this whole place into a deserted city like the one back home.” Hashi, however, was staring at the car, no longer listening. “Hashi, have you heard anything I’ve been telling you? We could make this whole place into a giant playground—go looking for dogs, check out empty theaters, explore *like* we used to… Hey, come on, don’t tell me you like this dump!”

Hashi wasn’t listening; he was watching as the window of the Rolls slid down and the beggar woman thrust in her dried flowers followed by her head. The next instant she pulled back with a wild scream: someone inside had set her hair on fire. They could hear a giggle from the prostitutes as the smell of burning hair wafted in their direction.

“Yes,” Hashi said eventually, “I like this place. I love putting on makeup, making a fuss of myself. I love singing. Don’t you see, Kiku? I’m gay—you know, homosexual. And you’ve always been part of my problem. You’re strong, and I’m jealous of that. I’ve always been the weakling, the one running away from something. Do you remember the last field day we had at school? I was the only one who didn’t go out; I watched the whole thing from the classroom. But I wasn’t really sick or anything, I was just faking. I was always faking in those days, always copping out. I couldn’t stand being laughed at. And I hated you because you were so good-looking, because you could pole-vault. In the end, I couldn’t even stand to be around you; you made me hate myself.”

As Hashi spoke, a man in a white suit and red bow tie had climbed out of the Rolls with an incredibly tall white woman clinging to his shoulder.

They stood by the car while the man took her wrists and lifted her arms to sniff under them; his face was at just the right height.

“Kiku, what I’m telling you is that I’m gay. I like men. You may hate me for it, but it’s what I am.” The man with the Rolls had casually thrust both hands up under the woman’s skirt and was weighing her ass in his palms like melons. The woman brought her face close to his, and he withdrew one hand to pry her mouth open, catching her long, pointed, scarlet tongue in his fingers as it darted out, then starting to dance with her, red tie to red tongue, and giving a wave in Hashi’s direction.

“He’s my sponsor,” said Hashi. “Everybody calls him D—he’s loaded. They say D stands for ‘Director,’ but he claims it’s ‘Dracula.’” Hashi went on to tell him how they’d met.

The first time had been purely a business transaction: Hashi had sold his ass to him. It was soon after he had arrived in the city, and he’d already decided he should be in Toxitown, but he had no idea how to get through the fence. So, completely broke, he’d taken a job as a garbage collector, going around dressed in a blue uniform picking up trash at bars and restaurants, until one day he ran into a fag hanging out next to one of his dumpsters who told him how to get into The Market via a passage in a subway station. Without even bothering to change out of his uniform, Hashi had gone straight there.

“And that’s when I met Mr. D. You know, Kiku, I could tell from the minute I saw him in that car window that he wanted me—there’s this special look, kind of hot and bothered, when a man wants you.”

Summoned by D’s driver, he had pushed his way through a crowd of wigs and powder and perfume. At first, D had laughed at him, along with the driver and the other whores.

“Rather an original costume for this line of work,” he’d said.

They had gone to a hotel—an amazing place, the only thing like it Hashi had ever seen was the Bullet Train station. Everything in the restaurant on the top floor sparkled: the ceiling, the walls, the night lights outside the window. The food was Chinese, and Hashi had had bear paws, fried frog, and sweet-and-sour pork. He liked the pork best; so much so he’d eaten eight big pieces, but all that rich food on an empty stomach, combined with a bad case of nerves, had made him feel sick, and, not knowing that one was supposed to go to the toilet, he’d puked all over the floor. When he was

done, he was sure D would yell at him and throw him out; but he was wrong.

“Incredible,” D had said, laughing—“just like those ancient Romans.”

The sheets on the bed were cream-colored and shiny. After they got undressed, Mr. D had wanted to talk.

“What is it exactly that you do in that uniform?” he asked. Hashi had explained. “And do you like collecting garbage?” he went on.

“No,” Hashi had answered, his tongue poised above D’s navel, “but I suppose I’ll get used to it.” The silk sheets made a funny screaky noise as Hashi’s thin legs rubbed against them; D listened appreciatively to the sound and asked another question.

“And what is it you really like doing?”

“Singing,” Hashi had said without missing a beat.

“Then sing something for me now,” said D, delighted, but Hashi had been too nervous to produce a note. To calm him down, D had stroked his face, telling him over and over how beautiful he was. “I bet you look just like your mother, a real beauty.” At that Hashi had started to talk, and before he knew it he was telling D everything: about the coin locker, the bougainvillea, the orphanage, the island… everything.

“You should go on TV,” was D’s advice. “You’d be a hit; the sympathy alone would do it.”

After D came, Hashi got up to go, but as he was getting dressed, D grabbed him playfully and toppled him onto the carpet. “Let’s try some makeup,” he suggested; “you’re going to look even more stunning.” First he shaved Hashi’s eyebrows. When he saw his eyebrowless face in the mirror for the first time, Hashi had a creepy feeling that someone else was looking back at him, someone horny. It was the face of all those men who wanted to touch him. But D forged ahead. “Now for some lipstick,” he said, pulling a tube from his pocket. When Hashi tried to refuse, D had pinned him down and done the honors himself, getting the awful, greasy stuff in his mouth. But this time when he looked in the mirror he had a different sensation, as if he were seeing his own face in some more natural state, as it was always meant to be. A strange, intoxicating power welled up in him; he felt he could do almost anything.

“I think I might have a try at that song now,” he told D. “You name some emotion, some way you want to feel, and I’ll sing a song to make you feel

like that.”

“OK, make me feel nervous, then irritated, and then break my heart,” D had told him. So, after giving a precisely hummed performance of the dance passage in Strauss’s *Salome*, Hashi sang the tune produced by playing “Round Midnight” backward, and finished with a fairly straightforward version of “All the Flowers in the World.” D was a little pale by the end, apparently in shock.

“We’re going to make a star out of you,” he managed to say. “The boy’s a genius; you may not know it, kid, but you’re a goddamn genius!”

And D had been as good as his word: Hashi was making his debut as a singer soon, apparently. Kiku heard this last part of the story with the person in question standing behind them. It was hard to say, even from this close, whether he was young or old; his hairline had receded, exposing a broad forehead, but the skin was smooth and unlined. His eyes were narrow, his lips full. He wore tortoiseshell sunglasses and a sweaty silk shirt, and the red bow tie seemed to be spotted with the tall woman’s saliva. Stubby fingers with close-cut nails and a cat’s-eye ring completed the picture. There was a slight smell of peppermint about him.

D bent over Hashi, cupped his chin, and brought their lips together in a long kiss. It seemed the most natural thing in the world, like parent and child, or two people greeting each other at a party. Kiku was sure D would stop soon to ask who he was, to scold Hashi for not introducing his friend—the thought made him shudder. But he couldn’t help feeling left out, a little jealous of both of them. Hashi had found an older man, a father, and D had found someone who needed him; whereas Kiku hadn’t found but lost something—his temper, if nothing else.

At last D broke off the kiss to say: “Let’s go get something to eat. They tell me they’ve got a new duck dish, with raisins and cucumber. Sounds good to me.” Hashi looked over at Kiku.

“This is my friend, the one I told you about: Kiku,” he said.

“Ahhh. I remember. The kid who comes from the same, shall we say, ‘background’ as you, the one you wanted me to help. Well, he can come too—looks like he could use some of that duck.”

“Thank you,” Hashi said, smiling at Kiku, but Kiku was glaring at D as if he were about to hit him in the face. He stood up as D rattled on:

“You like duck, kid? If you don’t, we can get you sushi or something instead.”

“I don’t want duck shit or anything else if you’re buying.” Hashi had never heard him use this tone before; he sounded on the verge of tears. Bracing both hands on the table and struggling to catch his breath, Kiku calmed himself. “I’m going home, Hashi. You can do whatever you want, just don’t tell this creep anything more about me.” But as he turned to leave, D grabbed his shoulder.

“Hold on a second. Who’re you calling a creep?”

“Let go.”

“Listen, kid, Hashi was only trying to do you a favor. Seems to me, if you’re going to refuse, you could at least be a bit nicer about it.”

Kiku brushed aside his hand: “Don’t touch me. Just because you go around feeling up every jerk on your payroll, don’t get the idea you can do it to me.”

“Tetchy, aren’t we?” said D, backing off momentarily. “But don’t you think you’re embarrassing Hashi acting like that? And where do *you* get the idea I get a kick out of touching you? But for that matter, why shouldn’t I give you a squeeze if I feel like it? Do you know where you are? This is a meat shop, dear boy, a temple of the flesh. See these boys and girls?—they’ve come here to sell, and I’ve come to buy. Nothing out of line about that. You’re the one out of line. If you want to act all proud and uppity, if you’re so keen on exercising your inalienable rights, go do it in a hotel lobby or your own marble palace. Here people have business to transact: they’ve got something to sell—nobody’s forcing them to do it—and I’ve got money to spend. Beggars aren’t supposed to be choosy—shows a lack of enterprise or something. What I’m saying, my little friend, is that you should stop pretending to be what you aren’t; there’s a right way and a wrong way for everybody to act, and this is the first time I ever saw a hustler act like the Queen Mother. You punks are supposed to shut up and stick out your asses, not go mouthing off all the time. Got it?”

As D finished speaking, Kiku grabbed the neck of the wine bottle on the table and held it over his head; but in one motion, D fell back and his driver stepped in, twisting Kiku’s arm behind his back. The driver grinned as his white gloves tightened their grip.

“Break his arm!” D urged. “See if you can make him cry.”

Make me cry? thought Kiku to himself—that's all they've done since the day we were born. Don't listen to them, Hashi, they're the ones who put us in the locker, and now they're just looking for other ways to hurt us.

But Hashi was apologizing. "Don't pay any attention to him, sir—please; he says things but he doesn't really mean them."

"I understand," said D, stroking Hashi's face again, "I understand. You know, in a way he's just like you, Hashi: spoiled. You kids don't know what it's like to go hungry. You think you've had it hard just because somebody left you in a coin locker, but there must be thousands of kids like you. You're both spoiled rotten; don't know how good you had it at that orphanage—even ended up getting adopted—fuckin' spoiled, that's all."

At this point, Kiku jabbed his heel into the driver's shin and lunged at D, trying to punch him, but Hashi slipped nimbly between the two of them.

"Stop it, Kiku," he ordered. "Mr. D is an important person."

Kiku wished he was good at talking—wished he could find the right words to tell Hashi that he was being taken advantage of. He stared into Hashi's eyes and tried to make him understand, but the eyes looking back were ones he didn't recognize. Hashi had changed. He stood with his hand on Kiku's shoulder.

"Go home, Kiku, go back to your pole vaulting." His words seemed to suck all the strength out of Kiku, and he could feel tears welling up. Still, he swung his fist in one last punch, no longer sure who he wanted to hit but needing to do something to keep from crying. But his movements had gone sluggish, fuzzy, and the driver caught him with a kick to the stomach before his slow-motion punch could land. Kiku rolled out into the road and lay face down.

"Are you OK?" asked Hashi, running over to him. Kiku raised his head slightly to nod…

10

“Pretty shitty floodlights,” Anemone muttered as she studied the dark Polaroid frames. Since the night she had taken them, Kiku had appeared in her dreams several times, but when she woke she could never remember exactly what he looked like. She could picture his hair and forehead, but down around the nose and eyes things got a little fuzzy and her mind would substitute parts from friends or some celebrity. She was sure that somewhere deep in her head she had a memory of Kiku’s face, it was just that she couldn’t develop it into a clear picture. This kind of thing happened to Anemone all the time, however, and she managed to be satisfied with a mental place-marker where the memory of Kiku should have been.

But why was she so stuck on him, anyway, she wondered. When she saw him in her dreams, he was always flying, leaping buildings in a single bound—not stretched flat with his arms out like Superman but using his supple pole to snap into the air. Then, somewhere in her subconscious, Anemone would realize that Kiku’s place-marker seemed to be whispering something to her in that same whisper she’d heard as they hid in the bushes to escape the guards. The whisper sounded stiff and forced: “When I soar aloft and look back on all of you, I feel like a butterfly flying o’er the Amazon delta,” or something. After dreaming about him, she always woke up feeling wonderful.

In the afternoon, she set out for the hospital to visit Sachiko, a friend from her modeling crowd. Sachiko was older than Anemone and had always played the part, taking Anemone out to dinner or on trips to the beach. Still, Sachiko insisted that it was Anemone who had more poise and self-control.

“Girls with big eyes are always that way,” she would say. “I’d swear you actually see more than the rest of us.” Sachiko, with her long, straight hair, had been popular with foreigners, and in the end she married one, an Italian diplomat. That was two years ago. A couple of letters had come from Italy complaining about the formal functions she had to attend, then nothing. But

just recently Anemone had heard that she had divorced the diplomat, come home to Japan, and was in the hospital with some sort of lung problem. Anemone stopped in at a bakery on the way and bought some candied chestnuts.

The hospital room was an antiseptic white, Sachiko a little heavier than Anemone had remembered.

"… I'm not boasting," Sachiko was saying, "but I really wasn't bad-looking back then, was I?"

"I don't know what you mean, 'back then,'" said Anemone.

"You know exactly when I mean. When we used to go for sushi at dawn, play billiards in the nude, and jump in the pool in our best little frocks. Don't say you don't remember."

"I think you're still pretty," said Anemone.

"But I was prettier back then. I was crazy about makeup, anything that would make me look better. It's only now I can see how dumb I was. I thought if I were beautiful enough, all my dreams would come true. But you don't stay beautiful forever; one day you wake up and it's gone, and then where are you? You know what I learned?… Dreams are *made* with blood and sweat and tears. Do you see what I mean?"

"Not exactly…"

"I suppose not. Maybe you're still too young."

"But I do have dreams… at night, that is," said Anemone.

"That's normal enough at your age. But you know what bothers me about young people these days? They don't seem to care about anything. I've done my share of stupid things, and now I'm paying for it—that's why I'm here. But at least I *did* things, went places, had more men than you could count. I wanted excitement, wanted to *do* something. I may have worn myself out along the way, but it was a helluva ride. But when I look at you, Anemone, I can't even tell if you're feeling anything at all. You keep everything bottled up inside so nobody knows *what* you're thinking, and you drift along going nowhere. If you get a few kicks a day, if life is easy enough, reasonably pleasant, you're satisfied. If you ask me, though, that's not really living."

"It doesn't even have to be pleasant," said Anemone quietly. Then: "Sachiko, have you ever been pregnant?"

"Sure, and I've got one kid."

“What’s it like when you first find out you’re pregnant? They say you feel sick a lot.”

“Not only that. It’s a big, natural feeling, like you’re a real live mammal.”

“Sometimes I have a feeling almost like that, like all the blood in my body’s being collected in a sack somewhere down in my stomach. It feels just like a baby must feel when it starts to grow, and sometimes I think when it gets big enough, the sack is going to break and then I’ll understand all kinds of things that don’t make sense now…”

“Sure, honey, I know what you’re talking about, but you’ve got to ignore stuff like that; they’re illusions, self-deceptions, what you feel when you want everything but you’re not willing to do anything to get it. You’re fooling yourself and you don’t even know it.”

“Illusions? But that’s fine with me.” Yes, thought Anemone, illusions are just fine.

Outside the sealed hospital windows, the late August sun was slowly roasting the city; Anemone’s eighteenth summer was drawing to an end. Sachiko was obviously incapable of understanding her thoughts about the future as she chattered away, listing parties and jewels and lovers, and a certain silver fox coat in a glass box, and how she had suffered for it, dieting to get the best modeling jobs, doing midnight shoots, hustling any way she could. But Anemone, she supposed, had been born with a silver fox coat, and couldn’t begin to imagine its real worth…

The windows were double-glazed, perhaps because the room had once housed tuberculosis patients, and through the thick glass the late-summer shadows appeared long and spidery. Large buildings around the hospital left the room itself in deep shadow. Poor Sachiko, thought Anemone, you’re trapped, and not just in this hospital room either; you’ve been trapped since birth. Suddenly, in mid-thought, a sharp image of Kiku’s face appeared to her, clear down to the last detail. In the distance, the sun was setting amid the cluster of skyscrapers—the ones Kiku said he liked. We both like them, Anemone decided, because we both picture them as the only surviving buildings after the rest of the city has sunk into a boiling swamp. And her thoughts wandered on.

About once a month, Gulliver would stop eating and begin to move nervously around the apartment, finally exploding in a fit of madness,

whipping his tail against the walls until it was all bloody and the whole building was shaken to its foundations. The fit would last twenty-four hours, during which Gulliver would groan and foam a bit at the mouth, and then it would be over, leaving him looking miserable. During one of these spells, Anemone had realized that Gulliver's tropical blood was just registering a protest against the fake tropics of Uranus.

Sachiko too, she remembered, used to say that she got jittery if she had nothing to do. She also used to say that every one of a hundred thousand cities around the world had its own special sunset, and it was worth going there, just once, if only to see the sun go down. And then she would tell her about the silver scales of the huge fish at the mouth of the Amazon, or listening for hours to gypsy songs in the hills of Portugal. But Anemone had finally seen through all this talk; all Sachiko's trips and lovers and "experiences" amounted to the same thing: boredom. They were exactly the same as Gulliver's fits—her way of lashing out at the concrete walls that had her boxed in. And no matter how hard she struggled, or if she managed, for a while anyway, to exhaust herself, to forget that she was a prisoner, she was still a million miles away from the tropics…

"Anemone," Sachiko was saying, "you don't know what really wanting something means, do you? You were born in a supermarket world; you could have anything, eat anything, do anything, and the result is you don't *need* anything. You think people who have to say out loud 'I want this or that' are a little tacky."

"You could be right. I wouldn't say I 'want' much of anything, but I am *waiting* for something."

"Waiting for what? And why? You could wait forever—nothing'd ever come of it. It's just more self-indulgence, more illusions. You're lost in the desert, and you think you've found water when anyone can see you're gulping down sand." The illusions again! thought Anemone. It's all a mirage, is it?… Well, fine! I'm sick of water anyway, sick to death of water. I'd rather suck on this mirage, I'd rather eat sand till I'm spitting blood than drink another drop of smelly water. The whole city stinks of age and stagnation and boredom, and it makes Sachiko as sick as it does me; but she goes on listening to the same old songs, trying to keep from dying of boredom, while I'd rather puke it all out, puke up a great cloud of boredom and let it rain down all over Tokyo, rain till your lungs rot in your chest, till

the streets crack and wash away and rivers of puke run between the buildings… puke going higher and higher, the air so thick it chokes you, and mangroves sprouting from the cracks in the sidewalks… the old trees washed up by the roots, rotting in little pools to become nests for poisonous bugs, horny bugs that hatch out in swarms to creep all over you, Sachiko, like things in the worst nightmares you ever thought up in your orgies of booze and cum, to crawl over you and lay their eggs right on your skin, hatching their squirmy little babies from your rotting body. Sachiko, dear, this room is already a nursery for the creeping and crawling, and you're a rotting pusbag for them to feed on… But what I'm waiting for comes when you're gone, when the rain stops and a huge swollen sun rises over the city; then I'll get mine—you see, Sachiko, there is something I want—and Gulliver and I will live on the roof of one of those skyscrapers, surrounded by a swamp full of jungle flowers, great tropical forests, and the last few feverish people, slowly wasting away.

"You've changed, Anemone," mumbled Sachiko through a mouthful of marron glacé. A bit of chestnut dropped from her lip down the front of her hospital gown. "You may not see it yourself, but you've changed."

Within minutes of leaving the air-conditioned hospital, Anemone's blouse was soaked in sweat. But when she arrived back at her apartment, she let out a little cry of delight: Kiku, looking slightly ill, was leaning against the door.

"I came to see the crocodile," he said.

Mr. D had mobilized his record company for Hashi's singing debut, building the publicity around his unusual background. Work had begun in secret on a documentary feature scheduled to be broadcast at Christmas. Tentatively titled "Born in a Coin Locker," the show would follow Hashi from the orphanage, through life on the island, to his experiences as a hustler in The Market. But the climax was to be a live, on-camera reunion between Hashi and his mother, and D had already hired a private investigator to find the woman. Hashi, however, was told nothing about this.

Final preparations had also been made on a new condo D had bought for him, and Hashi went back to the factory in Toxitown to get the few things he'd left behind there. A bit surprised that Kiku and Tatsuo were both gone,

he sat down on the floor and began lining up the junk he'd been storing in a cardboard box: a coffee cup, an ashtray, wads of paper, a broken lighter, an empty soda can, a rusty spoon, nail clippers, a used-up lipstick, hairpins, apple seeds, shoelaces, a rubber band. Suddenly he remembered that he used to play this game all the time—on the floor, next to his bed at the orphanage. He had been making some kind of miniature garden—no, a whole city, out of odds and ends… He remembered now. He remembered how feverish he had felt as he worked at the model, but there was something else, scraps of memories about… what had stood for what. All he could recall for sure were the tower of spools and the awl: the spools were the fire house, and the awl a cannon. He picked up the empty can and weighed it in his hand. It was just a can, nothing more; it didn't dissolve before his eyes and become a symbol for something else, something larger, more sinister. That pulp in his head must have finally dried out, he told himself, he had finally outgrown this old habit. But then a whole string of old memories came back to him: the can… just a can… had been a water tank; the spoon, the spoon had been a runway; hairpins, machine gun-toting soldiers; rubber bands were trucks, a round plate a baseball field, and assorted seeds and pits had been ships at sea.

As he stood looking over his collection, with memories rushing in to attach themselves to the appropriate object, his eye was suddenly caught by something that lay off in one corner of the room. At first, as it came into focus, he couldn't quite remember what it was—just one more item in the reemerging pattern of the city. But this one wouldn't cooperate, frozen in its original shape; and somehow this bothered Hashi. He picked the thing up and left the room.

Out in the dim corridor, the pregnant woman was cutting her fingernails. The skin, stretched tight across the mound of her stomach, was visible through her thin house dress.

"It's raining," she told Hashi. "You want to borrow an umbrella?" The woman smelled vaguely of talcum powder.

"Thanks anyway," said Hashi, giving her a gentle squeeze on the fleshy nape of her neck.

"That tickles!" giggled the woman, glancing at his hand in which he was carefully holding the little whitish thing.

"Hey, what kind of stone's that?" she asked.

“It’s not a stone,” said Hashi over his shoulder as he went down the stairs, “it’s a bone.”

11

Kiku watched as the crocodile noisily chewed at a meal of chicken heads, the blood trickling from between his teeth. The thermostat in Uranus was set at 25° Celsius, and eight humidifiers scattered around the apartment pumped a thin fog over the pool, which took up half the large room. The water was choked with a feathery green weed that caught the light and seemed to boil and seethe at the slightest ripple, erupting into waves of glittering green ooze to mark Gulliver's passing. The bottom was covered with a layer of mud on thick acrylic sheeting pitted with thousands of tiny holes connected to the aerating system. Around the pool were little clumps of bougainvillea, mangroves, and rubber trees, planted right in the dark, coarse soil that carpeted the floor, and the white concrete walls had childish paintings of the sun, birds, a panther, and assorted native people. Twenty infrared lights hung from the ceiling illuminating the whole scene in a dazzling glare.

"Your electricity bill must be murder," Kiku observed, at which Anemone opened the door to an adjacent room to show him an industrial-grade generator.

"I've been hoping you'd come," she said. "I thought, if you were going to live here, you could help me figure out what kind of birds we could raise."

"I've always liked those big macaws," he answered after thinking for a moment, "but you should probably get those birds you see all the time on nature programs, the ones that sit in the crocodile's mouth and clean its teeth."

"I don't think I want that kind. Cleaning Gulliver's teeth is my job…. once a week, with a screwdriver. It's our little time together and I'm not sure I'd like being replaced by birds." To change the subject, Anemone said she wanted to cook Kiku his favorite food.

"Rice omelette," he said without giving it much thought. Anemone was disappointed. Somehow she'd imagined he would like the same things she

did, the only ones she could make without looking at a recipe: beef stew, spinach in soy sauce, and marinated herring roe. And, anyway, she didn't even know what a "rice omelette" was. When she asked, Kiku, who was flipping through a magazine spread featuring her, answered without looking up:

"An omelette stuffed with ketchup rice."

"And what's 'ketchup rice'?"

"Just rice and ketchup mixed up together."

"And that's your favorite food in the whole world?" Anemone was skeptical.

"Sure is," he told her. "And maybe a little miso soup on the side if you've got any, but don't worry about it. Beggars can't be choosers."

Anemone washed out her rice cooker, which hadn't been touched in several months, and measured three cups of rice. When the rice was done, she dumped it into a bowl, added the ketchup, and stirred, but as she was doing this she began to wonder if there really was any such thing as a "rice omelette." Maybe Kiku was just pulling her leg.

"Kiku, the rice has turned bright red."

"So? That's just what it's supposed to do."

"And that's really all there is to it—rice and ketchup?"

"You mean you didn't put in any peas?" said Kiku, sounding a bit shocked.

"What peas? You didn't say anything about peas!"

He reached the kitchen to find Anemone, on the verge of tears, clutching a bowl containing what looked like an iceberg awash in a sea of blood. In the end, at his suggestion, she served the ketchup rice on a bed of spaghetti and garnished with the omelette cut into yellow confetti. When they finished eating, Kiku lay down on the carpet and fell asleep immediately, not even stirring when Anemone pulled off his socks and covered him with a blanket.

Anemone herself wasn't particularly sleepy, so she decided to read for a while. From time to time, Kiku would twitch and mutter something in his sleep that sounded like "Milk, don't go in there! It's dangerous! Milk! No!" Anemone had a brandy and turned out the lights, but just as she was dozing off, Kiku sat bolt upright and screamed. By the time she reached him, he was gasping for air and shaking all over. In the dark, she couldn't tell what

sort of look he had on his face, but as he got up to pace around the room, she realized he must have had a nightmare. If it was just a bad dream, she thought, he should get back to sleep, but if it was a real nightmare he'd be up all night. Those evil thoughts would get into the room and hide in the curtains to watch you, and then how could you possibly go back to sleep?

Kiku came over to the bed. Anemone pretended to be asleep but opened her eyes as he reached out to touch her hair.

"Right pig, right pig, left pig. Right pig, right pig, clock, butterfly," she chanted. "That's what we used to say as kids to drive away bad dreams."

"Right pig, right pig, left pig. Right pig, right pig, clock, butterfly," Kiku repeated.

Anemone made room for Kiku to lie down next to her. The mattress sagged in the middle, and when she rolled against him the trembling in his damp body echoed through her. She could feel his muscles, as hard as Gulliver's skin. She felt thirsty.

"I was back on the little island where I grew up," Kiku said. "We were at the beach and my brother was smashing crabs with a stone and laughing. I told him to stop but he shook his head and kept killing them. So I told him again, but he still didn't stop. Finally I yelled at him and he started to cry and said he was sorry. I told him I was sorry too, that I shouldn't have yelled, but when I got to where he was standing, he looked up at me, stuck his tongue out, and started laughing and smashing the crabs again. There was this horrible smell coming from the crabs and I was mad at having been tricked, so this time I punched him—but just lightly. So then he was crying for real. He sat there on the ground saying he couldn't understand why he wasn't supposed to kill the crabs. So I told him it was OK, he just wasn't supposed to laugh while he was doing it. 'So it's all right if I cry while I'm smashing them?' I told him it was. Then he started smashing them again, only this time he was crying, and it got louder and louder, almost like a siren, but even though he was crying, when you looked at him you could see his face was still laughing. So now I'm a bit scared, the whole thing is so weird, and I begin beating on him again, and then I get a little crazy, and somehow I have the rock he was using on the crabs and I start using it on Hashi. And I beat him till his face swells up like a balloon, but he's still laughing. 'That the best you can do?' He starts teasing me, and I run away along the beach but he follows, laughing the whole time, and then he is a

big balloon, like a huge swollen baby, and he's crushing me, he's really heavy, suffocating me…" As he finished telling her his dream, Anemone seemed about to say something, but he covered her mouth with his hand. "Please don't say it. I know I've got to be a little more patient and somehow everything with my brother will work out…' She bit his finger before he could finish.

"Patient?! What are you talking about? Sometimes you don't make any sense," she said. "'Patience' is the thing I hate most in the whole world. We're all too patient as it is. It's the way we've been raised: just wait politely, grin and bear it, and supposedly everything will turn out all right. We're so patient our heads have turned to mush." Beginning to get a bit excited, she shook off Kiku's hand which was still holding her jaw.

As his eyes adjusted to the light, he could see a faint vibration in the delicate line of her throat. On her cheek were the same faint red marks from his fingers he'd noticed that night among the weeds. Now she had her eyes tightly closed and her body twisted away from him. The pale blue veins were visible on her eyelids. Kiku took hold of her earlobes and pulled them until she moaned and jerked away: more marks, this time bright red. She rolled over on her stomach, trying to get away, but he pinned her with an elbow in the back. Taking her head between his hands, he watched as the crimson patches around her ears slowly faded to white. Next he tried dragging the tips of his fingers along her skin from her jaw, down her neck, and out onto her breast, leaving a series of wavy, reddish lines. He realized he wanted to dye her whole body red, from head to toe; then, if he stuck her with a pin, she would disappear, leaving only a pool of ketchup in his palm.

When he tried to lift her nightgown from behind, Anemone curled her legs and began to writhe and shake her head. Grabbing her hair, he raised her head to see what her face could tell him; if she were crying, he wasn't sure what he would do. But her expression was neutral, mouth set, eyes blank. He tried ripping the nylon nightgown down the back, but the material was tough and bit into his hand. He could see her skin where the gown was wet from the sweat dripping from his forehead. In desperation, he used his teeth to start a tear, and the whole gown came apart in one motion. At the same moment, his teeth nipped her leg and her knees slid under her as her ass jutted out. Grabbing her hips, he tore at her panties.

Anemone went limp, her eyes tight shut, as Kiku began to undress. He tried without much luck to stop trembling, and the more he hurried, the worse he shook, and the louder the bed creaked. As he was climbing out of his pants, she opened her eyes and smiled. Sitting up, she ran her tongue along his sweaty side, then hung from his neck giggling quietly. Kiku's arms eventually gave way under the weight and they sank into the bed, bumping noses as they fell. A loud, simultaneous "ouch" left them both in hysterics.

By flapping his legs, Kiku finally managed to get out of his pants, but he hesitated over the underpants, not quite sure what he was supposed to do with a girl or whether he had to be naked to do it. You left your shorts on when you took a piss, he reasoned…

"Kiku, kiss me," said Anemone, puckering up, and as soon as their lips came together, Kiku felt her tongue thrusting into his mouth, poking about to find his own. Closing his eyes, he slowly expelled the tongue from far back in his throat, forcing it out between his teeth. They went on kissing for a while, until he worked up the courage to push his tongue into her mouth, but once it was inside, she bit down on it as hard as she could. For a moment, he didn't realize what had happened, but then the pain hit him and he found himself on the floor next to the bed, his hand pressed over his mouth while Anemone sat wide-eyed, staring at the dripping blood. The puddle of red collecting in his palm looked a lot like ketchup.

When he finally managed to get to his feet, she screamed and jumped out of bed to escape, but he caught her by the hair and threw her on the floor.

"I… I… I," she laughed, hardly able to speak, "I was… just so happy… to see how soft your tongue was, since a certain other part was so hard."

He tried to tell her to shut up, but when he opened his mouth, blood showered her face. She winced as he slapped her and grabbed her by the ankles to pull her legs open. His finger was slippery from the blood, and she stiffened only slightly when he slid it up her ass. Shifting his hips so he could work his cock in behind the finger, he slowly thrust his hips forward, and as the finger slid out and his cock hit home, Kiku came.

A few minutes later, Anemone pulled free and crawled toward the bathroom, blood and cum dripping down her legs onto the carpet. By the time Kiku joined her, she was already under the shower. He washed his

hands and then rubbed away the steam on the mirror to examine his tongue. The tip was in shreds and blood was still flowing. Finishing her shower, Anemone wrapped herself in a towel and left the room without a word, while Kiku, still soaking wet, slipped into his pants. When he finished dressing, he walked out to the entrance and mumbled that he would see her later. She started to say something, hesitated, cleared her throat, and finally managed:

“Don’t go. You can’t go. You’ve got to stay here.”

Kiku couldn’t speak. He walked to the window breathing heavily, and muttered a faint “I…” as he opened the curtains. Staring out, his forehead pressed against the glass, he beckoned to her. She tiptoed over to him, the tendons in her feet straining into delicate arches as her scarlet toenails dug into the carpet. “I…” Kiku tried to continue. “I… was born in a coin locker,” he said at last. Adding, “I like you, but I didn’t think a pretty girl like you…” This time it was Anemone who put her hand over his mouth.

“You don’t have to say anything,” she whispered, pressing her cheek against his. Beads of water fell from her hair to the gooseflesh on her back.

12

Hashi’s album was recorded at Mr. D’s studio in the mountains of the Izu Peninsula. The studio, dubbed The Spaceship, was an ark-shaped building sheathed in silver metal and topped with a clear bubble roof complete with telescope. Astronomy was Mr. D’s hobby.

D was the youngest child of a straight-laced history teacher who doubled as a sports coach. He had two sisters and five brothers, the eldest being more than twenty years older than him. His parents were middle-aged when he was born, and D’s upbringing had been extremely strict. In the dead of winter, he was forced to go without socks, and at the dinner table he was forbidden to touch his chopsticks until his father was seated. When the stalls selling toys were set up at festival time, D never had any money to buy anything, and he was not allowed to invite friends home. In the end, though he became a high-strung child, he did learn to navigate among the various rules and restrictions of life at home; but there was one that he could never understand, and that was his father’s stricture against eating the fatty part of his meat. According to his father, fat and entrails were vulgar, lower class, and whenever they had roast ham or something special to eat, the fat had to be trimmed away beforehand.

For some reason, more than any of the other taboos, this one took on a particular fascination for him, and, in his early years, D was constantly thinking about the secret delights of the white bits cut away by his mother’s carving knife. Finally one day he found a scrap of raw bacon fat discarded in the sink and he promptly popped it in his mouth. It slithered across his tongue and down his throat, leaving a trail of salt and greasy savor that excited him so much he almost wet his pants. The fat passed on to his stomach where it danced a little jig, as if to remind him that everything else he’d ever eaten was as dry and tasteless as straw by comparison.

After this first encounter, he was able to procure a fairly regular supply of fat behind his mother’s back, but one day his father caught him roasting a bit of pork on the stove.

“You little animal!” he shouted at him several times, smacking him finally in the face and sending him away without dinner. This was the second time D had been hit by him.

The first was soon after he entered elementary school. He had been diagnosed as nearsighted, but his father dismissed the condition as a sign of weakness and ordered him to spend an hour a day in Zen meditation staring at the distant mountains. The first beating, as punishment for neglecting the exercise, made quite an impression since it was a pretty rare event in the house. Not that his father was opposed to corporal punishment or doubted its efficacy; but his children had always been sufficiently afraid of him to do whatever was necessary to avoid being beaten. Thus singled out for an unusual punishment, D was humiliated, demoralized. His shame developed into a mild neurosis, and he began missing school, which only made his father angrier. His mother had nothing to say to him except to urge him to apologize, and his brothers and sisters, too, deserted him, with the exception of one sister who occasionally took his side.

When he was in the fourth grade, D tried to hang himself, but he was found in time and cut down. Soon afterward, while he was still in bed with a bandage around the burn marks on his neck, his father came and gave him a short lecture.

“Life is tough. It’s full of things that you may not like, but you’ve got to accept them like everybody else.” At this point he produced a small telescope and laid it by D’s pillow. “Here, this is for you. Whenever something’s bothering you, look at the stars; it will remind you how small you really are, and I promise you, you’ll feel much better.”

For the next three years, D did little else besides look through the telescope. In middle school, he even won a prize for the diary he kept of his observations; he called it “The Changing Milky Way.” One day, however, his father died suddenly of a heart attack, and while he was helping sort through his papers, he came across a stack of pornographic pictures of sweaty young men with shaved heads, in acrobatic poses. Nothing but young men. D hid the pictures away in his own room and consulted a precocious classmate:

“Can homos have children?” he asked him.

“Sure, why not? They’ve got sperm like everybody else, and plenty of them don’t let on they’re queer and get married and have children and

everything.” His friend was something of an expert. “Seems they even like to keep their wives pregnant all the time so they don’t have to do it with them.”

“And is it hereditary?” he asked next.

“That I don’t know,” his friend admitted.

D, as it happened, was already aware of his own preferences. Not that he didn’t fancy doing it with women, but to get that far he had to have eaten a particular food: fat. It became a kind of ritual; he would sit down to a plate of fat, eye it for a while, savor the aroma, rub some around on his lips, and then let it dissolve on his tongue. As it slid down his throat and began to burn in his belly, he would invariably begin to want a woman. After orgasm, however, just as invariably, he would feel the digesting fat begin to coat his insides, sapping the heat from his body and leaving him feeling sick.

D’s career thus far had centered around the discovery and promotion of two bona fide rock stars. The first he had found in the days when he still worked for a record company; he had ignored the skepticism and opposition of the other producers and pushed the singer through to a debut. His reward was a smashing success. The second came after D had struck out on his own, and this time he independently produced eight albums for the singer before he finally moved to an English label. Each of the eight had gone gold, making D an immensely wealthy and powerful man. In both cases, he had picked singers who, according to the common wisdom, had no commercial value, but to him there had been no doubt from the beginning that the two kids were stars just waiting to be discovered.

D had a genius for picking out talented young men, but it was genius based on a system. Five days a week, he would gorge himself on fatty meat before making his rounds; any kid who still looked good to him on a bellyful of fat was invited to dinner. Those who failed to answer “music” when asked about their interests were fucked and sent home. Those who said the magic word were booked for a return engagement. Before these second meetings, D would eat an enormous quantity of fat and empty himself in a random vagina; then he was ready to try out the young man’s musical talents. If the system was followed to the letter, his judgment at the audition was absolutely foolproof. Hashi was only the third ever to pass muster.

In Hashi’s case, not only had D consumed the requisite quantity of fat, but the woman herself had had a big white body—a good sign. As he listened to Hashi’s song, however, his reaction hadn’t been what could be called typical: he’d felt an overwhelming need to puke all over the bed, a feeling that only gradually faded into a warm sensation in his gut. The song had been almost atonal, the voice reedy and hoarse, but from the moment Hashi opened his mouth the tune had seemed to rush in through D’s pores to grab at his insides. When it had finally subsided, D realized the room had grown horribly silent. It was only afterward he understood that his brain had resisted Hashi’s song but the other organs had fallen instantly under its spell. And when he asked for an encore, Hashi sang a second song that rattled him even more, giving him moments of pleasure as intense as the gloom it also caused.

To say the least, the performance set him thinking. The kid can definitely sing—no doubt about it, damnedest thing I ever heard. Problem is, the first time you hear him, it makes you feel like shit, and people who feel like shit don’t buy records. What I’ve got to do is figure out some way to get people to hear the kid sing without knowing what they’re listening to; then when they think they’re hearing him the first time, they’ll actually have heard him before. The solution, fortunately, was simple enough: promote Hashi as the Coin Locker Boy, letting the addictive, repellent singing take over in due course.

The day Hashi finished making his first record, D told him he could have anything he wanted for dinner. Hashi ordered a rice omelette. They were in the dining room of The Spaceship looking out over the ocean. On the wall was a print of men dressed like priests and hermaphrodite children riding enormous butterflies with lips on their wings—an illustration from a two-volume study of Incan myths that D had published. The wallpaper was a deep, lustrous red, the floor a gold metal that rang oddly as D’s cook, a tall, muscular, high-heeled woman, entered the room.

“Do you want crab or shrimp in that rice omelette?” she asked.

“Crab,” said Hashi. “Uh… excuse me…,” he added, staring at her, “didn’t you play volleyball in the Olympics? I remember seeing you on TV.”

“Must have been my mother,” the woman laughed. “But I used to throw the javelin,” she said, flashing a mouthful of gold caps. D decided on some

duck pâté and a cassis sherbet.

“Heard you and the drummer had a squabble yesterday. What did you say to him? He was mad as hell,” said Mr. D.

“I told him he was making a lot of noise… ’cause he was.”

“The drummer?”

“… I hate it when they just pound away.”

“He’s the best drummer around,” said D.

“Then I guess I just hate drums.”

“Hate drums? What do you mean, ‘hate drums’?”

“Like I said, they make too much noise.”

“Hashi, you’re a weird sucker,” said D, his narrow eyes narrowing a bit more. In all the time Hashi had known him, he had never caught a glimpse of D’s pupils. The pâté glistened on his lips and teeth. “You told me once you like Helen Merrill better than Carmen McCrae.”

“So?”

“So why?”

“No particular reason,” said Hashi.

“There must be a reason,” D insisted.

“No, not really. That’s just the way it is. I like Clara Neumaus better than Elizeth Cardoso, Schwarzkopf better than Maria Callas. Anything wrong with that?”

“Maybe not. But there does seem to be a pattern forming: you pick the sister types over the mother types all the way down the line. Perhaps because there’s always a mother type around when people are born,” he speculated.

Hashi ate the outside of the omelette, then stuck his fork into the rice flecked with bits of scarlet crab. In the middle of it all, the fork punctured a steamed tomato, releasing a sourish smell that brought back a memory of someone stamping on a raw tomato. It was a child’s sockless foot in small black tennis shoes, and when the thing had rolled by, the foot snapped out, sending a spray of red juice flying. The smell now was identical, pervasive, a smell that might have filled the air at the instant of his birth.

“Mr. D, I’m going to be a singer,” said Hashi, half announcing, half asking.

“Of course you are. Now eat your omelette.”

“I’m really happy,” said Hashi, trying to picture the future.

“Fine, now eat,” said D. “It’s bad for the farmers if you kids stop eating rice.”

“But do you know why I’m so happy?” asked Hashi.

“Because you’re going to be a star.”

“It’s partly that, but it’s also ’cause I feel like I’ve broken out of myself, left something behind. You see what I mean?”

“No, can’t say I do. But I can tell you this: you are going to sell records, kid.”

“You know, there wasn’t one thing on that island I loved, not one thing. I may have thought there was at the time, but there was nothing there for me. So that’s why I broke out; something told me that there must be something better somewhere, that there must be a place I could find something to love. At night, after I’ve been singing all day, I go to bed and everything seems obvious. I spent my whole life up to now in a daze. The whole place was wrong for me, and I had to leave it, I had to get clear.

“You often hear these stories about a pet, a little cat or something, that gets lost and then taken in by a new owner who lives far away. It stays for a while, but it can never quite settle down, and one day it just takes off and goes on this long journey, overcoming all these obstacles to find its way back home—its real home, that is. I guess I’m one of those cats, and when I got to the city, when I got to sing, I knew I was finally home.”

“A lost kitten, eh? Maybe so,” said D. “But seriously, Hashi, would you stop yacking and eat that rice?… I know I’ve told you that there’s something about rice that gives me the creeps. Not you? Don’t you get the feeling there’s something a little off about it, the way it just sits there in the dish? It’s a bit like a rugby ball, if you see what I mean: it’s safe enough, predictable, as long as you’ve got it in your hands or you’re pinning it on the field, but once you kick it and you’ve got it rolling along end over end, there’s no telling where it’ll go. Exactly like rice. It’s like farming itself, and all us Japanese are basically farmers deep down… You see what I’m getting at here?”

“Can’t say I do, exactly,” said Hashi, bewildered.

“Doesn’t matter one way or the other. Let’s drop it. But your story about the cat did remind me of a little puss I found when I was a kid. My dad was a tough old bastard—used to get mad at me if I cried at a sad movie—but he did have a soft spot for animals, and when I found this cat, he let me

keep it out in the storehouse. Now this was some cat, beautiful long hair—black, brown, and cream, all mixed together—and I always thought it probably escaped from a pet shop somewhere. Anyway, I found it while it was still a kitten, and it got pretty attached to me. But that cat taught me something I've never forgotten: cats have this way of competing with each other to see who can be most aloof—it's their way of showing their strength. You know anything about psychology? Suppose we have two cats, people, whatever; call them A and B. There's always going to be one of them who's the leader, who calls the shots, and that's always the one who doesn't seem to care, the one who's most casual about the whole thing. You follow me?"

"…"

"Maybe it'd be easier to understand if we say A and B are a man and a woman. Now suppose A falls in love with B, but B acts as if she doesn't give a shit about A; naturally, B's gonna have A by the balls. With cats it's the same thing, indifference is power; and it's even worse with the kind that costs a pile of money and has a pedigree and all that shit. Then you have to take care of it like it was made of gold because if it dies your investment goes down the toilet. It's not long before the cat figures this out—it doesn't have to worry about where its next meal is coming from, it doesn't have to worry about anything—and then it has you; it's won the war of indifference. Maybe that's why the one I had as a kid was such a good cat; it was just a stray that followed me home, so I didn't really care if it lived or died, and that meant I won the war right at the start. All I had to do was give it a little milk when it came rubbing its head against my leg and that cat was mine. Wherever I went, it came along, whatever I did, it was right there watching.

"Then one day the cat disappeared for a while, and when it came back it was acting funny. Pretty soon I noticed its stomach was getting bigger and bigger, and I realized it was going to have kittens. Well, I wasn't going to miss seeing that, so I didn't let her out of my sight, and finally she had them, five in all, and no bigger than mice. I guess because I was just a kid and learning about the mystery of life and so on, I got pretty excited and I started doing a little dance around the mother and her kittens—silly, I know, but what do you want; I was just a kid—anyway, it turned out to be the worst thing I could have done. I found out later that she probably thought I was going to kill the kittens; that's why she started taking them in her

mouth one by one. At first I thought that was normal enough—she was just going to lick off the sticky stuff or something—but then I realized she was eating them, chewing them up and swallowing them, bit by bit. I yelled and even tried to hit her, but she sank her teeth into my hand. Then I was crying, and terrified, and there was the cat, chewing up the last baby. But for some reason, she couldn't get it down and she spat it out, half-chewed. It just lay there, not moving.

"I decided I needed some help, so I went to find one of my sisters and told her what had happened. She took the kitten and washed it, but it still wasn't moving. She said it was no use and that I should bury it, so I wrapped it in some newspaper and put it in a plastic bag; then I went out into the yard to dig a hole—I guess the whole thing took about an hour. Then, just as I was finishing the hole, I thought I heard a noise in the bag, but I went ahead with my little funeral anyway. I was about to put the bag in the hole when it started to move. I opened it up and, sure enough, the kitten was still alive. Well, that kitten grew up to be one tough cat, lorded it over the whole neighborhood, and never lost a fight. In its prime, there were an awful lot of one-eyed dogs in that town…"

"And just what, exactly, is this story supposed to mean?" asked Hashi before D was quite finished.

"Nothing in particular, just that the cat cried and came back to life. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?…"

"So you're saying I'm like this cat?" said Hashi, his voice getting shrill.

"No need to get all hot and bothered. I was just trying to suggest that the woman who left you in the locker probably didn't do it because she hated you; she may have done it out of instinct, to protect you—like the cat," said D.

"Sounds like bullshit to me."

"Why bullshit?" he objected. "I thought it was a pretty good story."

"What time of year was all this supposed to happen?" asked Hashi suspiciously. "Winter?"

"No, summer," said D.

"And what was the name of the cat?"

"Which one?"

"The mother."

"I called her Peko."

“And the kitten?”

“It was wild, lived outside, so I never gave it a name.”

“And do you know what made that little cat come back to life and get so strong?”

“I suppose because a lousy start like that made it fight all the harder for something better…”

“Wrong!” said Hashi. “It was hatred, pure and simple.” The fork in his hand dropped to the floor, and with it D’s eyes dropped from Hashi’s face, unable to stand the expression there, one not unlike the mother cat’s as she was eating her kittens. The cook, who had come in with some iced water and persimmons, put a clean fork beside Hashi’s plate.

“I’ll get it later,” she said as he bent to retrieve the other one. D sat staring at the cool, shining fork against the dark floor, wondering whether he should tell Hashi that he was planning a televised reunion with his mother.

“That’s just the way it works,” Hashi continued. “With cats and fish and birds and everything else; they give birth to dozens and dozens of babies, but only a few of them survive, so the babies are born hating the parents that eat them—in fact, resenting everything around them, every little breeze that touches their skin before their eyes are ever open. They’re born despising everything that’s not them—not consciously, of course, they’ve only got those pulpy little brains, but with every cell in their bodies, instinctively. Everything’s dangerous, everything’s hateful. It’s nature, going on without thinking, like people’s hair and fingernails growing for a while after they’re dead… There’s always a little life left… It was summer, wasn’t it? Must have been summer. And the sun was burning hot, unbearably hot, and the heat started his blood pumping, and he couldn’t stand it any longer and he started to wail… and that’s when he came back to life, came back hating his mother… hating everything!”

“Whoa!” D interrupted. “Now who’s telling stories?… Yours?”

“I suppose so,” said Hashi.

No. It was Kiku’s. Suddenly Hashi caught hold of the memory that had been playing around the edges of his brain ever since his fork dug into the tomato… An orphanage field trip, coin lockers like a beehive in front of a roller rink. Maybe little brothers and sisters inside. A red-haired lady,

tomatoes everywhere, and Kiku, a furious look on his face, stamping on them… and that sour smell.

"Is it hate that makes you sing?" asked D.

"No, not really."

"Then are you trying to forget your hate?"

"Who knows?" said Hashi.

"'Who knows?' Nobody, if *you* don't. Well, I'll tell you what *I* know, I know you're a spoiled brat. When I listen to kids like you talk, it makes me want to puke; in fact if this weren't my dining room, I would puke, right here. Seems to me kids today *don't know* much of anything. You were born in a world with central heating and air conditioning. You don't know what it means to be cold or hot. You want everybody to feel sorry for you because you've had it so tough, but if you ask me, they spoiled you rotten—that orphanage, your foster parents, everybody. I suppose you could say that for a few minutes, just after you were born, you got a bum deal, but then they put you right in the air conditioning, and you haven't been out of it since. You can whine your lungs out, but you're never going to get *me* to feel sorry for you."

Taking a gulp of water, Hashi tried to answer, but nothing came out. If he were Kiku, it occurred to him, he would have said something nasty and taken a punch at D long before this. He poked at the steamed tomato with his clean fork, making an effort not to think about the hard layer of muscles covering Kiku's body. He hates me now anyway, he thought as he dug out a greenish lump from the middle of the tomato and put it in his mouth.

"Like it?" asked the cook, smiling proudly. "I stuffed it with parsley and seaweed."

D shoveled up half his melting sherbet in one spoonful. The bits of purple ice sizzled as they melted on his tongue.

Back in the city, Hashi was introduced to the stylist D had arranged to work with him, a woman named Neva. She made a series of sketches showing hair, makeup, and costume possibilities and, after consulting at length with D, took Hashi on the rounds. First stop: hair. The salon, in Aoyama, occupied the eighth floor of a building sheathed in black glass. The woman who met them at the door wore alarming, lizardlike eye shadow. In the window, a neon sign flashed the name of the establishment: Marx. One wall

was completely covered with Polaroids of famous clients. The rest of the decor was less like a beauty shop than a nineteenth-century parlor, though with quirky touches such as a dark teakwood cabinet displaying antique corsets with impossibly small waists. In the center of the room was an old enamel bathtub doubling as a fountain with a marble sculpture depicting a young mermaid surrounded by dolphins, some sort of thorny plant, and a cloud of soap bubbles. There were only two chairs in the whole place.

As Neva entered the room, the four employees stopped what they were doing to greet her.

“Where’s the boss?” she asked one of them.

“He’s just gone out for a sec,” said a young woman with a ribbon tied around her bangs in an odd-looking clump. Telling them to go find him, Neva sat down on a couch. Hashi stood behind her. A few minutes later, a heavyset man in a baseball uniform bustled sweatily into the shop. The letter “P” was embroidered on his cap, and he had a mustache. After wiping his face and lighting a cigarette, he turned to Neva.

“This the kid?” he asked her, one eye drifting shut.

“This is the one,” she said, rising from the couch to run her fingers through Hashi’s hair. She showed the man some of her sketches, and he produced several thick, worn books of his own from the back of the shop. Flipping through the pages, he stopped and pointed at one. Neva nodded. When Hashi asked whose picture it was, the man answered in a high, fluty voice: “Brian Jones at seventeen.”

First they washed his hair, for which the fat man changed the regular nozzle on the hose for an old, rusty brass one. As he rinsed Hashi’s head, he explained that he’d stolen it from the bathroom in a hotel room where Rudolph Valentino had once stayed.

“It’s a lucky charm. I always say with performers ‘Your hair is your trademark…’ So, D’s calling you his ‘Beggar Prince.’ What’s he mean by that?”

“…”

While his hair was being cut, Hashi studied Neva in the mirror. Her eyes and eyebrows were somehow suspended on the surface of her oval face; her lips were pencil thin. Like women must have looked during the war, he thought. She wore a sober, navy blue suit, slightly wrinkled flesh-tone stockings, and high heels, and she carried a heavy-looking purse. Put a little

headband on her and get her to stand up straight and salute, and she'd fit right in on any battlefield, he thought, smiling to himself. His eyes met hers in the mirror as she was sawing at her teeth with a piece of dental floss, and he noticed that the hand holding the floss was that of an old woman, wrinkled, dry, and blotchy.

Next they went to a fancy hotel with a fountain in the lobby, where Neva ordered Hashi's costumes, five identical sets, from a shop in the basement: five black satin blouson jackets and five pairs of toreador pants with little bows down the sides. Since they had a photo session later, she explained, they wanted the silk shirts altered on the spot. While they were waiting, the manager, an older gay man, told Neva the story of a trip he'd taken the month before to a South Pacific island in the company of a male actor. He repeated the same details over and over: how they had gone deep-sea fishing and the actor got so excited when he was about to land a swordfish that he'd sprained his ankle and nearly fallen overboard; how the locals made fun of him; how they'd smoked the thing and had a party; how they'd forced him to be the floor show, making him stick a neon bulb up his bum and do an imitation of a phosphorescent fish—that kind of thing. Neva nodded at all the right places in the story and managed to talk him into a five percent discount.

"From now on, you've got to pay attention to how you look," she said when they were back in the car. As he stared at the ravaged hands clutching the wheel, Hashi felt they belonged to someone else. "You've got to be fashion-conscious," she was saying. "Fashion is the silliest, vainest game there is, which is exactly why it's so much fun. Do you know what clothes and makeup are for? Why we put them on? It's simple: just to take them off, to have something to strip away in order to feel naked. Clothes are there to make other people think about what they can't see. But that, of course, is the great joke, because when you strip off the clothes and wash off all that makeup, what do you have? Zero, that's what. But then again, that's the fun of it, don't you think?" She laughed for the first time since they'd met.

Hashi's publicity stills were to be shot on a set that consisted of a large-scale model of the city, complete with Tokyo Tower. Since they had some work to do on the model, he went to have a look at some of the other studios while they were getting it ready. In the first, sumo wrestlers were waltzing with pregnant women in a plastic watermelon patch. The melons

were fitted with blinking lights. A young man with a megaphone explained that they were shooting a commercial for a tranquilizer.

In the studio next door, an orangutan waving an American flag was hanging from the turret of a tank, but as the cameras started to roll, the monkey dropped off. The trainer tried to coax it back up with a lump of sugar, making a muffled apology about the lights probably being too bright. They decided to lower the lights until the orangutan was in position and then turn them up as shooting started, but when the lights dimmed, the ape let out a long, low screech. In the dark, the trainer did what he could, wrapping one of the monkey's hands around the gun turret and the other around the little flag, but as the lights came up several of the women on the set screamed: the flag was nowhere to be seen, and the hairy little hand held a swollen monkey penis which it was vigorously pumping. As Hashi stood there laughing, Neva came up from behind to tell him that they were almost ready on the set. The smile faded from his lips when he saw her glance at the penis, a troubled look showing on her face.

As they walked back to the studio, they passed twin girls in swimsuits with baskets of fruit balanced on their heads. The girls glistened all over with some sort of oil, and they were crying. One had a thermometer in her mouth. After them came a man, apparently their manager, screaming "Tits! All the asshole wants is tits! Tits, tits, tits!" The strong smell that came from the girls as they passed made Hashi turn, and as he did so, a melon fell from one girl's basket and split at her feet, showering bright red toenails with flesh and seeds. While the manager was wiping her feet, she noticed Hashi staring at her and smiled, thermometer and all. Hashi did not return the smile.

That night Hashi drank for the first time in his life. The photo session had run three hours over schedule, ending well past midnight, and after taking him to dinner Neva invited him to a bar on the top floor of a tall building. Hashi said he was worn out from smiling so much and following the photographer's orders, and she suggested that he have a drink. He hesitated, instinctively hating anything to do with alcohol from years of Kuwayama's nightly drinking. After a few drinks, this usually quiet man would get loud and talkative; it also made his piss stink, Hashi remembered. He would drone on about how much he had suffered, about the joys and

sorrows in life, and in the end he would start to cry and break into an old mining song. That was as much as Hashi knew about liquor.

Neva, who had already had several whiskeys, called the waiter over, and he came back almost immediately with a clear drink garnished with several slices of lemon.

“This’ll be good for your nerves,” she told him. His tongue was numb after the first sip.

Neva’s cigarette butts piled up in the ashtray, the filters smudged with red. When she reached for the one she was still smoking, Hashi noticed the thin, ruined fingers and remembered that he wanted to ask her what had happened to her hands.

“Mind if I ask you a question?” he said, downing the rest of his drink. “Your hands…” he managed to get out before a fit of coughing shook him, making him feel as if burning sand were being poured down his throat and then shoveled out of his stomach. Neva laughed as she patted his back. At about the time the cough subsided, the alcohol began to take effect; the noise around them receded into the distance, while Neva herself seemed painfully real and close. Hashi ordered another drink and drained it, this time without coughing. Neva applauded, but his head had started to pound before he put down the glass, and he decided not to ask again about her hands.

Now he was staring at the way her smooth, plump ankles arched down into her patent leather shoes as if by suction. He thought it was beautiful. Next he studied her lips and the cigarette silhouetted in the dim bar light. The waiter came over to empty the ashtray, and Hashi noticed that Neva seemed to hide her hands from him. Suddenly, he was overwhelmed by all the sadness in the world, by the thought that there was no such thing as happiness, and as he struggled to keep from weeping, his mood slowly changed, gradually becoming more like rage. This beautiful woman, he thought, this woman who slaved all day for me—the hair, the clothes, the photo session—this woman who had kept a straight face while she haggled over the price of silk shirts, this woman sitting here sipping her whiskey, with her elegant legs, her soft lips, and her shrewd eyes that turned sweet when she laughed, this wonderful woman was miserable all on account of her wrinkled hands. I just can’t let it happen, he thought… Still, there was nothing he could do to prevent her unhappiness, no way he knew of fixing

her hands. If only he could, if only he were some kind of magician and could make them young again. He'd do anything to help her. He'd give her anything he had, the shirts, Kazuyo's bone, his voice, anything. He was surprised himself how angry it made him, so surprised he sat for a moment, stunned.

Noticing that Hashi was beginning to behave oddly, Neva tried to get him to drink some water, but he dumped it on the floor, grabbed her hand, and burst into tears.

"I'm sorry I can't do anything for you," he sobbed, "I'm so sorry." His whole body shook as he looked around for some way to release his sorrow; but just when there seemed no hope of finding one, his eye fell on the pianist who had been playing, rather badly, the whole time. Still clutching Neva's hand, he began shouting insults across the room in his direction.

"Look what you've done! Your playing is so shitty you've made her hands shrivel up! You've made everybody miserable. Whoever wrote that tune worked his ass off to make it good, to come up with a few notes that would keep people from getting lonely, remind them of old friends or whatever, and look what you've done to it." As he finished his speech, he saw himself producing Tatsuo's shotgun from out of nowhere and blowing the pianist's head to bits. It was about the only thing he could think of doing for Neva.

Then he stood up, suddenly and resolutely.

"OK. Now I'm going to save the beautiful Neva from all you fuckers," he announced, moving toward the piano. When she tried to stop him, he shook her off and, grabbing a whiskey bottle, took a swing at the piano player… and missed, slamming the bottle on the keyboard in a grotesque chord of breaking glass, gushing whiskey, and Hashi spewing his gutful of dinner and cocktails. For a moment the bar was deathly silent, then broke into an uproar. In the midst of this commotion, Neva and a waiter ran over to try to calm Hashi down, but before they could reach him, he screamed in a voice that threatened to split the building down the middle:

"DON'T TOUCH ME!"

After that, he crouched on all fours while the other waiters, who had started cleaning up, apologized to disgruntled customers. The pianist, still muttering about the maniac with the bottle, stood next to Neva, who seemed a bit lost. Neva, though, was the first to hear it. Then the piano player

seemed to prick up his ears. The waiters stopped sweeping and the customers froze in their tracks. Everything became absolutely still: Hashi was singing.

On his knees, his eyes shut tight, he had started humming like a bird; and soon the hum began to grow into a tune, but one that nobody there had heard before. It was “The St. Vitus’s Blues.”

Whatever it was, it made Neva break out in gooseflesh. The sound appeared to be coming through a sheer membrane woven from some incredibly fine animal hair. It didn’t flow through the room; it seemed instead to envelop the bar like a shroud. The tune was nearly inaudible, but it refused to die away, attaching itself to the skin and creeping in through the pores to mingle with the blood. And anything left over collected in the air, becoming thick and palpable. When the air had become as sticky as jam, Neva could feel the song beginning to probe her brain, reviving a memory of something long forgotten. She fought off the memory as long as she could, until a scene suddenly floated into her head: a city at dusk, the sky still glowing orange behind the mountains in the distance; everything else faded to a deep blue, broken only by the lights of a train speeding across town.

As the train passed, she shook her head and looked around at the bar where she’d been a moment ago. Not a soul was moving. The pianist sat holding his head in his hands, slowly swaying back and forth. Realizing she had to put a stop to this, she made her way over to Hashi and cupped her hand over his mouth. Startled, he bit her and rolled around furiously for a moment. And just before he passed out, he murmured to her: “Useless—got no guts.”

13

Not wanting to go back to the apartment D had rented for him, Hashi walked off the effects of drink on the damp streets and thought about Neva. She was thirty-eight, he had learned, and had lost both breasts to cancer, making her a woman from the waist down only—but his first woman. He had no idea why he'd gone hard when he saw her naked; he never had before with a woman. It might have been because her chest was flat, or the way her warm, firm tongue had probed the pucker between his legs, or maybe just that he was drunk. He didn't much mind the rain now, he just wanted to walk. Anyway, it had almost stopped, and the clouds, having split down the middle, were streaming off to the east. When the sky was like this, Hashi knew from experience, it was going to clear up.

He knew about rain because he had prayed for it so often back in junior high school, heavy rain being the only thing that could rescue him from gym class. On days when he was scheduled for gym, he had spent most of his time thinking about rain. And of all the sports to be dreaded, the worst was gymnastics, mostly because he was the only boy in his class who couldn't do a backflip on the high bar. But what made it particularly hard to take was that Kiku, who was always the best in the class, had to witness his failure. Once, when gym class threatened, Hashi had gone to considerable trouble to perform a Central American Indian rain-making spell he had read about in a book. The spell involved hanging the bodies of mice under the eaves of the house, so he went to the abandoned mining town and caught a cageful. For Hashi, the hardest part of the spell was drowning the mice, and it occurred to him that if it didn't rain after all this, he was sure to be punished for such a gruesome crime. He hated himself, but he also couldn't think of any way to escape P.E. without a little self-hatred. And, on balance, he hated the high bar more than he hated himself.

The twelve tiny corpses were hung beneath the eaves on pieces of thin wire, a job that strained his nerves to the point of collapse. As he worked, he had been thinking up an excuse for when the mice were discovered, and

he decided eventually to say that it was some sort of biology experiment. When he was done and stood back to look, Hashi had the feeling that the mice could grant him anything he wished—maybe even the ability to do a backflip. And as he stood watching the mice swinging against a clear blue sky, he had really believed that thick black clouds would be coming over the horizon at any moment.

A minute or two had passed when he heard the cry of birds and saw the shadow of wings wheeling over the yard. A dozen hawks circled briefly before settling on the roof. Hashi tried throwing stones at them for a while, but then gave up and watched quietly as the hawks rose up from the roof in unison, stalled above the house to sight their prey, and then fell from the sky. A single pass was enough: they left only spindly gray tails dangling from the wires like drips of water suspended in the air.

Tokyo in the rain lacked definition. Instead of clear reflections, the puddles gave the passing nightwalker a muddied, warped image. Earlier, Hashi had stood at the window, watching the tiny drops on the pane.

“Rain always makes me feel as though I should be remembering something,” he’d said as Neva came up behind him, fastening her padded bra.

“Hashi, it’s OK for now to remember, but when you get famous, you’ve got to forget all about the past. You have to forget who you are. Once you’ve made it, you can’t think about where you came from; it’ll make you crazy if you do. You wouldn’t be the first.”

Hashi wandered without paying much attention where he was going, and before he quite realized it he was at the entrance to the tunnel that led to Toxitown. It was nearly dawn and The Market was at last quieting down. The makeshift bars had closed, and the prostitutes who hadn’t gone home with a customer sat on the curb among litter and broken glass and cigarette butts. A foreign woman was changing into running shoes, and two others were doing deep knee bends; after standing around all night on the street, you would stiffen up if you didn’t stretch before going home. It was no fun, Hashi knew, waking up from a nightmare in the middle of the day with leg cramps. Then, all the curtains and shutters in the world couldn’t keep out the daylight, and there was no getting back to sleep.

As Hashi watched, one of the women staggered and fell—apparently a broken heel—ripping her skirt and unceremoniously exposing her crotch. She was not wearing underwear.

“Pardon me, honey,” said a ghostly male prostitute standing nearby, “but looks to me like somebody’s been using your pussy as an ashtray.” The woman ignored the remark and, without making any effort to cover herself, worked intently on her broken heel. After a few minutes, however, she gave up and, throwing the shoe as hard as she could, started limping away. The single heel made a rhythmic clicking on the pavement until she finally realized one shoe was useless as she reached the end of the tunnel. She came to a stop, then kicked the remaining shoe high in the air. Walking out of the tunnel barefoot, she stretched out her arms, palms up, and tilted back her head. The rain had stopped. As she disappeared into the light, she passed a boy racing in on a bike loaded with cartons of yogurt to sell to the hookers after their long night of work, a night in The Market that came to an end as a dozen hands slowly wiped the sticky white liquid from around weary mouths.

Almost immediately, Hashi was stopped by a man he knew, a former colleague who was still turning tricks. The man was a deaf-mute, but he expressed his admiration for Hashi’s silk shirt with his hands.

Toxitown had a familiar, comforting smell. The puddles made crazy reflections as they always had, and the streets and houses were the same as ever. It had only been two months since he’d left, so there was really no reason to expect anything to have changed. Still, Hashi almost wished that this world within barbed wire had somehow vanished in the interim. And not just this place; he would be better off without any of the old scenery—the island down south, Kuwayama’s crummy house, the slope where the cannas bloomed in summer, Milk’s doghouse, the beach, the orphanage, the rows of cherry trees, the sandbox, the chapel, everything. But why? It was simple: because he, Hashi, had become a singer.

In point of fact, when he thought about it, he hadn’t exactly “become” a singer; actually, he’d been born wanting to be a singer, and now that he was close, it was just a matter of convincing himself that up till now he had never really existed. All that time before, he’d just been some guy with a forced smile in a badly focused snapshot; or maybe if you looked all the way back, long before he started singing, you’d find a little naked baby,

frightened and bawling its head off—a baby in a box, sprinkled with powder and left for dead. That's what he'd been all along, and it wasn't until he became a singer that he had been able to get out of the box, out of that coin locker. But now that he was out, he despised his old suffocating self and wanted to erase all traces of him, everywhere he'd been, everything he'd done.

As he walked along, he remembered how Neva's tongue had felt as it ran down his back, how it probed at his ass, fluttered over his cock and on down to his toes. He could still feel it, rough and pliant yet firm, as if it concealed a nice streak of gristle. It was long and wet, tapering perfectly at the tip. She had swallowed his cum, he remembered; from experience he knew how it must have tasted, how it caught in the throat and refused to be washed away even when you gargled. It stuck to the gums, flavoring your next cup of tea, like a remembrance of fellatios past. Neva said it was the first time she'd ever sucked a cock.

"Hashi," she had told him when she'd finished, "I'll give you a piece of important advice. When you're with a woman, you've got to square your shoulders and stick your chest out, not hunch up like you were doing." Neva had never even hinted that it might be his first time; she had treated him like a man, and it made Hashi feel different. I'm not a faggot any more, he told himself.

Just then, Hashi stopped short, recognizing the man coming toward him along the street. It was his old neighbor, the Quaker.

"It *is* you!" the old man said. "I saw you from the window, and I thought I knew that face. So. You back to stay?"

"No, just came for a look around the old neighborhood," said Hashi.

"It's pretty quiet around here now that you all left. Gets a little scary sometimes and I don't sleep so good."

"That so?… Well, I've got to be going," he added.

"Why don't you stick around a while and have some noodles? I bought them fresh and there's plenty left."

"Thanks anyway, but I've really got to get home."

The old man was dressed in faded flannel pajamas and a pair of women's sandals. He had a slightly sour smell. As he stood hesitating, Hashi had a sense of foreboding; he knew he shouldn't hang around any

longer, but when he turned to retreat down the alley, the old man grabbed his sleeve.

“Look, if you can’t stay to eat, there’s something I want you to do for me,” he said.

“I’m sorry, but I’ve got to go. I’ll come back sometime to visit,” Hashi told him, noticing for the first time that he was clutching a cardboard box.

“There’s nobody else I can ask,” he said. “I want you to bury this for me.”

“What is it?”

“You remember the streetwalker lived next door to you? The one with the big belly? Well, she left this behind when she cleared out.”

“Why don’t you just keep it? Nobody would care.”

“You don’t understand. This isn’t something I can keep; it’s a body.”

His premonition had been right. The old man put the box down on the pavement and turned to run, but Hashi managed to catch hold of his pajama top.

“Wait a second. Why do I have to do this?” he demanded. The skin at the back of the Quaker’s neck was so cold and clammy, Hashi released his grip with a shudder. Sinking to his knees, the old man began to cry and shake. Then he reached down and clawed at the damp soil with his fingernails as a stream of incomprehensible insults came from his mouth. The tears welling from his bloodshot eyes collected in the deep, scaly wrinkles that covered his face.

“Monster!” he shouted. “God’s judgment is upon you! The Lord will not suffer your kind to desecrate a body. In the Revelation of St. John it says that the earth will crack and the whole world will be rent asunder and then even those who call the Lord’s name will find it is too late!”

Lights had come on in windows up and down the alley, and somewhere a voice shouted for the old fool to shut up. Hashi retreated into the shadow of an empty oil drum as a man and woman, naked from the waist up, appeared at one window. The Quaker, still crouching on the ground, continued his cryptic tirade in a shrill, whining voice. Looking up at the sky, he began to pray. “Lord, send down Thy judgment upon us miserable sinners,” he begged. A teacup sailed out of a nearby window and shattered at the old man’s feet, and then, from somewhere behind them, a whiskey

bottle, better aimed, smacked into the back of his head, breaking into a thousand pieces.

“Fucking asshole! There’s your judgment for you!” a voice shouted. The old man slumped to the ground and lay still as the lights and faces disappeared from the windows. The neighborhood fell silent.

Hashi slowly approached him. The Quaker groaned quietly as Hashi helped him up and walked him back to his room, a narrow space stacked to the ceiling with emergency rations, fuel, medicine, and bottled water. Putting him to bed, Hashi dressed his wound with some mentholatum and then wrapped it in strips of torn towel. When he was done, he went back to the alley to retrieve the box, which looked ordinary enough except that it was taped tightly shut and tied around and around with string. Giving it a shake, Hashi could feel the baby’s stiff body shift inside.

He carried the box to a junkyard where he thought he might find a shovel. There wasn’t one around, so he picked up a flat piece of fender and began scraping a hole in a clear space among the abandoned cars. He dug mindlessly, quickly breaking into a sweat that plastered the silk shirt he was wearing to his skin. Scratching away for as long as he could with the blunt metal, he then took to clawing at the earth with his fingernails. If I don’t go deep enough, dogs will come dig it up, he thought, or hawks will swoop down and tear the hard little body to shreds… He worked on, his arms growing numb and his hips aching. Hashi had never had much stamina when it came to physical labor; he always tired more quickly than anyone he knew. In addition to a stomach and lungs and intestines like everybody else, he decided he must have a special organ in him, a fatigue gland of some sort. But his mind was now on other things; he was digging furiously, scraping with his fingers or whatever bit of wood or metal came to hand. As he dug, he mumbled to himself.

“Nope, I’m never doing any more rain spells. No more hanging mice for me, no way, because if it rains now, the box gets wet and the baby rots…”

When he cut his hand on a piece of broken glass, he finally realized it was daylight. The glass sparkled in the rays of light filtering through gaps in the row of skyscrapers. He felt as though his body had been stretched into a length of fine, shining wire reaching through the spiky fence to the trees and buildings beyond, and from there on to the horizon. But you, my little friend, he thought to himself as he gathered up the box, you will never

shine. You, he told the box, are worm food. Putting it in the hole, he began replacing the earth.

“And I,” he said, “—I funked it, I got away.”

14

Mystery of the Caves at Uwane

The island of Garagi, a volcanic mound 4.6 kilometers square and forty kilometers south of Iwo Jima, was officially returned to Japan by the U.S. government only in 1985, seventeen years after the rest of the islands in the Ogasawara archipelago. For reasons never made clear by the U.S. authorities, during the entire period of this extended occupation the island was closed to its former residents, and even requests made by people wanting to visit family graves were routinely turned down. It is known that the U.S. navy maintained a small intelligence and communications outpost on the island, and it was rumored that the base served as a listening post for spy satellites, but according to well-placed sources with the Self-Defense Forces on Iwo Jima, the Americans operated nothing more than a radar tracking post, part of the navy's worldwide network. In any case, all traces of the radar equipment had been removed by the time the island was returned to Japan, and the wooden buildings that had apparently housed the installation are now elementary and junior high schools.

Garagi Island: population 184; principal features, pineapple fields and an office of the National Weather Bureau. The population these days is about evenly divided between the descendants of prewar inhabitants and young urbanites seeking refuge from the city, but dreams of further expansion and a booming tourist industry have been stymied by the lack of transportation—the ferry from the main island of Ogasawara stops only twice a week. Still, Garagi is a tropical paradise; lush green hills sloping down to clear blue waters which, on the north shore of the island, enclose a spectacular coral reef. With the destruction in recent years of the coral surrounding the other Ogasawara islands by illegal Southeast Asian fishing boats, the

reef at Garagi has become the last remaining example of this undersea wonder in Japanese waters.

It was in 1985, just after the island was returned to Japan, that Wataru Aritsuki quit his job in Tokyo and moved to Garagi to open a diving shop. His original capital consisted of nothing more than a diving instructor's license and a small savings account, but before long the island's reputation began attracting enthusiasts from as far away as Australia and Germany, and by the time our story begins, more than a thousand divers had made the roundabout journey to Garagi. At one point, a famous underwater photographer was calling Garagi's reef the most beautiful in the world. But a darker side to the beauties of these waters has been revealed by Aritsuki himself, who even now, when the entire diving area has been closed off and swimming strictly prohibited, can't bring himself to leave the island, making a living by working part-time in the pineapple fields. We caught up with him recently for an interview.

"It's really sad, especially seeing that places like this are so rare nowadays. People don't have any idea how badly most other coral has been damaged, not only by poachers, but just by having big developments going up on a beach. The old-timers on the island were always complaining about the bad ferry service, but I thought it was great. Put in an airport, throw up hotels, and this place would be Okinawa all over again; but Garagi was a diver's paradise, a dream of an island. We have table coral out there over eight meters across—nothing like it anywhere else. But now… It's a shame what's happened… You want to know about the 'accidents'? Actually, I'm trying to forget all about it. It was a real shock. I suppose if it had stopped after the first one, you could have called it a fluke, but three times in a row…"

In its heyday, there were thirty-one diving sites on Garagi's north shore, something for every diver from the complete beginner to the professional. Among them, Uwane Cove was known as the most treacherous. First, before you ever put on a tank, there was the problem of getting to the site; it lies at the bottom of a sheer cliff, with only one very steep and narrow path down. The challenge of carrying air tanks the hundred or so meters to the water restricted it to the

young, strong, and healthy. A few meters offshore, an almost vertical shelf falls away to a depth of eighteen meters, but the coral here is still sparse, and you have to swim out along a bare, gently sloping bottom to a depth of about eighty meters where, nearly a kilometer and a half from shore, you come to a great outcrop of rock. Around this rock, dubbed Little Uwane, which actually protrudes above the surface in one spot, flow powerful and unpredictable tidal currents and whirlpools that could suck a diver to the bottom and leave him there forever. But it is also around this rock that the intrepid diver finds—or used to find—some of the world's most spectacular coral and a rainbow display of tropical fish, all guarded by friendly dolphins.

Uwane quickly became known as the most beautiful and thrilling diving site in Garagi, if not the world, and it was in order to make this spectacular dive a bit safer that Aritsuki and some friends set about charting the currents. Still, only the most experienced were allowed the privilege of diving at Uwane—"experience" meaning, in this case, not only a mastery of diving equipment and techniques but an unquestioning willingness to follow the guide's instructions.

In September of 1986, the well-known French underwater photographer, J. E. Claudel, spent three months on Garagi and had this to say about Uwane Cove:

"The water is ten times clearer than in the Maldives, the fish a hundred times more numerous than in Tahiti or Rangiroa, and the coral… is breathtaking! I must say, I seriously doubt that even Jacques Cousteau himself, when first beginning to explore the unknown ocean floor shortly after the invention of the aqualung, could have been more thrilled or more satisfied than I was at Uwane." The photographs Claudel took of this reef more than do justice to his enthusiasm and, sadly enough, have become almost the only record we have at present of this extraordinary spot.

On November 4, 1987, an undersea volcano two hundred kilometers to the south of Garagi erupted, shaking the island with dozens of minor earthquakes and, naturally enough, altering the pattern of the currents that swirl around Little Uwane. It was in the wake of this eruption, while beginning to rechart the tidal patterns,

that Aritsuki first discovered a large underwater cave. The entrance, which he speculates may have been opened by the earthquakes, was in the form of a long split in the rock just wide enough for a person to slip through, but, once inside, the passage widened gradually and began to twist about at fantastic angles until you came eventually to a large rock ledge. The ledge, apparently, was a nesting place for shrimp. Aritsuki and his companions ended their initial exploration at this ledge, noting that from that point on the passage split into three separate branches, each of which they considered fairly dangerous to follow. The depth gauges at the ledge read twenty-nine meters, sufficient to require considerable decompression time, and factoring this in with the eight minutes it took to reach the ledge from the surface, with no time for sightseeing, Aritsuki calculated that they had come to the limits of their twelve-liter double tanks. If they were to explore further and perhaps find another exit, they would need better equipment and more help.

It was a few months later, on January 19, 1988, that the first "accident" occurred. It happened during a routine tour of the cave that Aritsuki was conducting for two German women, a Mrs. Franz Mayer and her companion. Leaving a rope trailing behind them to mark the route, they passed through the entrance into the passage lit only by their flashlights. It was somewhere in the part just before the ledge that Aritsuki heard a clinking sound which he immediately recognized as a dolphin. What was odd, however, was that the thing was coming their way at a terrific rate. He knew, of course, that dolphins almost never attack people, and even in the rare case where a pregnant female turns on swimmers, it is more to frighten them than to do any real harm. Thinking that the animal had perhaps been startled by the light, Aritsuki signaled the two women to lie flat on the floor of the passage and then, switching off his flashlight, sank down himself to wait for the dolphin to pass overhead. Soon, he could sense a single animal approaching, then racing by, but almost instantly it must have turned and begun butting Mrs. Mayer, who was nearest at hand, with its snout. Hearing her scream, Aritsuki turned on his flashlight to find the dolphin savagely attacking both Mrs. Mayer and

her friend. The shock of the attack had made Mrs. Mayer lose her regulator.

"I'd never seen a dolphin do anything brutal like that before. I suppose it must have wandered off from its herd and gone a little crazy, but by the time I saw it, it was all covered with cuts and just out of its mind—no other way to describe it. I could see that Mrs. Mayer was going to drown without her regulator so I tried to use myself as a decoy to draw off the dolphin, but by this time things were so stirred up inside the tunnel that you couldn't see anything. It didn't look like the dolphin was going to break off the attack, so I did what I could to get the ladies outside, but they'd stopped moving, and in the end it was everything I could do just to get myself out. We were pretty deep, and I knew I would have to decompress, but before I'd even grabbed onto the anchor chain to wait, the dolphin came charging out of that hole after me. I thought I was a goner, but it didn't turn out like that; just as it spotted me and started to charge, it spit out a cloud of blood, went belly up, and floated to the surface, stone-dead.

"I have a feeling the police and the German insurance company were a bit suspicious of me for a while. They couldn't believe that a dolphin would attack like that, and I can't say as I blame them; if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes I wouldn't have believed it myself. Yep, that was the first 'accident.'"

The second occurred on February 2 of the same year, this time without Aritsuki there to witness it. A local fisherman, Tetsuji Owa, and his two sons went shrimping in the cave and all three perished. His wife, Katsue, concerned when they failed to come home, had contacted the fishing co-op, and Aritsuki had been dispatched to find them. This he did: all three bodies were floating on the ceiling above the rock ledge. The autopsies reported the cause of death as acute coronary failure, but all three had been in perfect health prior to the accident and there was no history of heart disease in the Owa family. The ledge where they were found was a space about as wide and high as the average living room, and it was thought that a sudden, violent upcurrent might have thrown them against the ceiling, damaging their tanks. But all this seemed unimportant beside the oddest aspect of the case: one of the sons was found with a hand spear buried in his thigh,

and the other had a gaping cut in his shoulder made by a diving knife. The spear, as far as they could tell, belonged to the father, while the knife belonged to the boy who had been speared. Nearly as odd, perhaps, was the fact that all three still had their regulators held firmly in their mouths, sealed there by rigor mortis. So in the end, despite what the autopsies said, it was widely assumed that the three men had died in some sort of violent family feud.

Two months later, in March of 1988, an underwater photographer working for a Tokyo documentary film company came to the island with four assistants to make a movie about this strange incident. Naturally, they got in touch with Aritsuki. It was then that the third "accident" occurred.

"I told them they should forget about it. The Diving Center in Tokyo had sent a directive banning diving in the cave, and you can see why I wasn't crazy about the idea of going back there, but this photographer—Ozaki was his name—said it didn't matter whether I went with them or not, they were still going to the cave. I figured I didn't have a choice, and at least if I went along I could see to it that nothing happened, or if anything did happen, make sure we'd have a way of keeping in touch. I had them rig everybody up with waterproof transceivers, and I tied ten reserve air tanks to the anchor chain to go down with us. 1 also made Ozaki leave one of the assistants at the mouth of the cave holding the end of a rope that was tied around the rest of us; he had instructions to pull us out if anything went wrong.

"The camera lights for the filming were much brighter than anything I'd ever had with me, so I got a good view of the inside of the cave for the first time. We even discovered the young of a really rare kind of shrimp and a nest of blind moray eels. We'd made it all the way to the ledge without any trouble and we were poking around at the entrances to the three tunnels when it happened. Ozaki threw his camera down and started thrashing his arms and legs about like he was in terrible pain. After that he clawed at his chest for a few seconds and then stopped moving altogether. When I think back on it, it started just after Ozaki had taken his regulator out of his mouth for a few seconds to focus his camera. Anyway, as soon as I saw him go spinning around, I realized something was wrong and pulled on the

rope according to plan. I tried to stop them, but three other guys swam over to Ozaki; they must have thought his hose was broken, because they all tried to give him their regulators, but almost as soon as they had them out of their mouths, things started to go crazy. The guy closest to Ozaki let out a bloodcurdling scream—people think you can't hear underwater but you can, you know; you may not be able to make out words and stuff, but you can hear, and this was one loud scream… Anyway, he let out this scream and then shot his spear gun into the chest of another guy who was holding the lamp. The light fell out of his hands and went spinning over the edge, down somewhere deep, but for one second I got a glimpse way back in one of those cracks. I suppose my eyes could have been playing tricks on me, but, you know, I swear I saw these weird-looking flat gray things—rocks, maybe, but too regular for any rocks I've ever seen—stacked up inside that crack. Looked exactly like concrete, but why would there be concrete down there at the bottom of the ocean?…

"Anyway, I didn't have much time to worry about it. The next thing I knew, the guy who had fired the spear gun was drawing his knife and coming after me and the other assistant there. At least that's what I thought was happening as near as I could tell—it got real dark after the light went over the edge, and the water was full of sand and blood by this time. I figured it wasn't worth waiting around to see what was going to happen, so I started pulling on the guide rope for dear life. As I was heading out the tunnel, I heard a terrible scream—as bad as with the German ladies and the dolphin. I suppose that's when the assistant who was following me out of the tunnel got it. I've never been so scared in all my life. I didn't really know what was going on, except that a crazy man was coming after me in the dark. Well, I finally got out of the tunnel and started trying to make the guy waiting at the entrance understand what had happened, but he didn't seem to be getting it at all, and besides that he was tied to those lines, most of which now had dead bodies at the other end. It seemed to me about the only thing I could do was cut him loose, but just as I was drawing my knife, the crazy guy appeared with his big sheath knife. I couldn't see his whole face because of his mask, but it looked like he was real mad about something—all worked up into a rage like nothing I'd ever

seen—but as I said, I'm not exactly sure of any of this. Of course, the guy who'd been waiting outside didn't know what was up, so he moved toward the other man thinking he must be in trouble, but as soon as he got in range, the crazy guy planted his knife in his neck, up to the hilt. It all happened in a second. Then he started stabbing him again and again, and blood was spurting out into the water. By this time I was sure I should be getting out of there—not only because of the crazy guy, but now there would be sharks to deal with as well, and I made a quick calculation and decided that I was more afraid of the man and the sharks than I was of the bends. I thought I would swim for the surface at an angle to avoid getting really bad bends, but the man was swimming after me, and before I got very far I felt a hand grab my arm. But this was no ordinary hand doing the grabbing; I've never felt a grip that strong, like a gorilla. Fortunately for me, everything gets slowed down underwater, so when he swung the knife I was able to twist out of the way and slice through his hose. Even then, he went on flailing around with that knife for more than thirty seconds. Now, that may not sound so amazing—most people can hold their breath for that long—but when somebody's moving about like that, at that depth, you'd expect him to last no more than five seconds, tops. Finally, though, this spurt of air came out of his mouth and he stopped moving, but I was still in a fix since he hadn't let go of my arm and his hand stayed rock-hard even after he passed out.

"And then the sharks started to show up. A whole swarm of them were chewing on the body of the guy who'd been stabbed in the neck while I was trying to pry those fingers off my arm. But they were like steel—rigor mortis, I guess—so I decided I'd just have to take him to the surface with me. When the sharks finished with the other bleeding guy, they came after us, and it took them all of one second to take off the leg of the guy I was dragging. Somebody pulled me up on deck just as the sharks were going for me; I was sure I was a goner."

The police coroner examined the body of the man who was pulled aboard with Mr. Aritsuki, and the findings proved as surprising as everything else about this case. The muscles were, as Aritsuki's account suggested, unusually rigid and the person seemed to be in a state of extreme excitement, but in every other way the blood, tissues,

and organs were perfectly normal, and, according to all the evidence, the cause of death was simple drowning.

Aritsuki himself saw to sealing up the entrance to the cave with wire mesh, after which it was briefly rumored that frogmen from the Coast Guard were planning to investigate the area; but for reasons unexplained—perhaps simply the inherent danger—these plans never materialized, and soon afterward the whole north coast of Garagi Island was closed to swimming and diving. That was in May of last year, and the mystery remains unsolved. Various explanations have been offered, all ultimately unsatisfactory, and at least one novel has already appeared based on the incident. Theories range from the bite of some unknown sea snake, or the curse of a local sea god, to simple madness brought on by panic, but the truth is sealed in a cave off the north shore of Garagi. And there it may remain, a cousin of the Bermuda Triangle, as a lesson that the sea is an inscrutable mistress and that we humans are, by comparison, pitifully small and vulnerable. It's a lesson that all of us who challenge the sea as divers would do well to remember.

Kiku closed the scuba diving magazine and put it down. He'd found it on Anemone's bookshelf, and this was his tenth time through that article, so the pages were worn and grubby. He mumbled a line he'd memorized from the pamphlet on DATURA that the drug dealer in The Market had given him: "A large part of the existing stockpile… sunk somewhere in the ocean." He and Anemone then went to a store that specialized in navigational charts and bought two: the quadrant for the Ogasawara archipelago and a detailed map of Garagi.

In the evening, Kiku went along to watch Anemone work. The downtown studio was basically an empty warehouse—dim, damp, and cool—that had been rigged with a metal framework on the ceiling, from which hung hundreds of lights. The floor and walls were concrete, painted snow-white, and when the lights were focused, a person standing in that vast, colorless space cast absolutely no shadow.

Shortly after they arrived, workers started wheeling in props and decorations. For this particular set, the white room was to become a meadow in Bulgaria; an enormous background photo was brought in, then

yards of rolling artificial turf, a fence, a cottage complete with chimney, and a flock of live sheep. Finally, someone led in a long-haired dog, while the finishing touches—real dandelions—were scattered on the “grass.” When everything was ready, a smiling Anemone, clad in a frilly white frock and checked apron and carrying a basket of yogurt, was supposed to stroll across the phony countryside. After the shooting started, Kiku quickly lost interest and decided to look around at the other sets while he was waiting.

There were lots of things to see: a tropical island, an iceberg, a desert battlefield, an amusement park, the grand hall of a palace, a circus tent, and the surface of Mars. In order to get a view of everything at once, Kiku climbed up to the lighting scaffold and sat down; from there he could watch all the shooting.

“Finished,” said a laughing Anemone some time later as she appeared at his elbow, still in costume. They were beginning to dismantle the sets in the various studios and the lights were dimming. Below, shadowy figures were scurrying about with plants and furniture, weapons, toys, musical instruments, fountains, stone walls, and whatever else came to hand, and in a few minutes the two of them were sitting above what was once more just an empty room, as if white paint had rained from the sky, obliterating every last hint of scenery.

“It’s so white,” murmured Kiku.

“And what’s strange about that?” asked Anemone as she peeled off her golden lashes.

“Over there,” said Kiku, pointing at a darkened studio, “until a few minutes ago they were holding a ball in a beautiful palace. Now it’s just a big white room.”

On the way home from the studio, they made a detour to west Shinjuku and drove about among the skyscrapers. The sparsely lit towers looked like damascene cliffs rising above them, and at the top, red signal lights blinked on and off with sinister regularity.

“Let’s go to Garagi to find the DATURA,” said Kiku.

“Datura?” said Anemone, stopping the car in the valley of towers. The reflection of a red light was blinking where Kiku’s pupil should have been.

“The medicine to make Tokyo snow-white,” he said.

15

D’s offices occupied an older nine-story building nestled among the skyscrapers in west Shinjuku. After the success of his first rock singer, D had taken over the seventh floor of the building and set up an independent record company. Then, when the second discovery had become something of an international sensation, he bought the building outright. The basement was used for storage and parking space; the first four floors housed business, accounting, promotion, and production offices; and the fifth and six floors were recording studios. The next floor had screening and editing facilities for dubbing in soundtracks produced for commercials and movies, and on the eighth floor were the offices of various music magazines ostensibly independent of D’s little empire. Right at the top were a couple of conference rooms and the president’s suite.

D’s office was famous for the impossibly bad taste of its decor, which took its cue from his obsession with American movies of the forties, particularly those starring Bob Hope. The room was an exact replica of the boss’s office in a Bob Hope film about a mill company executive whose ambition was to be a big game hunter. One wall was covered with enormous photographs of the jungle and savannah, and the floor was strewn with zebra and lion skins. In the corner stood a stuffed gorilla and a stuffed ostrich, and in the center of the room was a jet of water rising from a heart-shaped pool. It was in this setting, on Monday mornings, that D could be found with his masseuse, a black woman in a gaudy bathing suit, lying prone before a wall of windows that looked out on the thirteen skyscrapers. D was convinced that the drones at work in the offices across the way could see what he was up to, and were jealous as hell. On Monday mornings, as he lay beneath the masseuse’s hands, he was in the habit of saying:

“Take a good look, kiddos. It won’t be long before I *buy* one of your big tall buildings, lock, stock, and barrel.”

D’s company had run off thirty thousand copies of Hashi’s debut single, ninety percent of which had already sold, making Hashi something of a hit.

Anything over ten thousand would have been a good showing, D had thought, but he hadn't taken into account the full impact of the story of Hashi's origins. News that the young singer had been found in a coin locker resulted in no fewer than eleven magazine features and seven television appearances. To make sure the interviews went according to plan, D hired three scriptwriters to work up answers to possible questions, and then chose the best of their suggestions for Hashi to memorize.

Q. Is it true that as a baby you were abandoned in a coin locker?
A. Yes, that's correct. (*Pause before answering; keep answer short, almost curt, as if you find the question impertinent. Stare for a few seconds into the interviewer's eyes; don't scowl*)
Q. Then you must have suffered a lot?
A. Do I look like I've suffered? (*Answer immediately, perhaps with slight, though friendly, smile; tone should be innocent, open, as if to say "Yes, I suppose it must show on my face." After this question, no matter what the interviewer does, look down and keep quiet for a while*)
Q. I'm told that you liked music even as a child, but what sort of music, and which singers in particular?
A. My favorite stars are Shimakura Chiyoko and Elisabeth Schwarzkopf. (*Object here is to give names of two singers who are completely unrelated, preferably a different pair at each interview. Answer promptly; selections should combine a known celebrity—Mick Jagger, for example—and someone the interviewer has probably never heard of, perhaps an obscure folk singer. If the interviewer asks about the little-known singer, be prepared to give a detailed biography, continuing until interviewer interrupts*)
Q. What do you see as the main factor that enabled you to become a singer?
A. Being lonely. (*Avoid appearance of seeking sympathy; answer cheerfully, positively, as if to say that now you aren't at all lonely. A slight smile permissible here, but don't give the impression of smiling in order to cover embarrassment. After this answer, remain silent for a time*)
Q. Would you like to be able to meet your real mother?

A. I see her all the time… in my dreams, though they're usually nightmares. (*Line should be delivered with a serious expression, but avoid looking pained; breathe out slowly as you speak, but don't let it turn into a sigh. Pause after "time," then spit out the rest; absolutely no smile; shift line of sight during answer*)

Q. If you did meet her, what would you say to her?

A. Long time no see. (*The interviewer's response to this answer is important: if he/she is smiling even the least bit, look hurt and angry; if the interviewer maintains a serious expression, smile slightly. Then, if the smiling interviewer stops smiling and looks embarrassed, you smile, but if he/she continues to smile, simply get up and leave; in the case of the serious interviewer, if he/she eventually smiles back, immediately frown slightly, but if the serious expression continues, slowly allow the smile to fade from your face*)

Q. Do you feel any hatred for this mother who abandoned you?

A. Just a bit. (*Questions of this kind are most likely to come from tough reporters or sentimental female emcees; in either case, answer bluntly, as if the question bored you*)

Hashi's performance during the interviews was superb. He didn't really mind all the questions; to him they were just a sign that he was finally attracting attention. Following D's instructions, he carefully cultivated the image of "a young man who was unusual but not unlikable," taking a certain pleasure in giving unexpected answers. As he found that he was able, just by talking, to make someone angry or sad, or cause surprise or admiration, something developed inside Hashi that had never been there before: confidence. Television became his mirror, and the reflection he saw there was not the sniveling person he had always been but someone else.

Quickly, Hashi grew to like the new self D had invented for him, and he set about trying to turn the real Hashi into the image he saw reflected in the cathode tubes and newsprint. It was neither difficult nor painful, a matter of a slight readjustment of outlook. He had, he reasoned, always been different from other people, always willing to play the weakling, but now he saw this willingness in a new light. If in the past he had been terrified of grown men to the point of tears, that was simply—on the new scale of values—

something he had done because it made men happy to see him cry. And though he'd often pretended to be sick to escape gym class and had hated himself for it, self-hatred, he now realized, was his own, idiosyncratic way of changing his character.

Hashi himself was surprised how easily he was able to manipulate the self inside his head, even down to his memories, to make it resemble the confident person he projected on TV. As he thought back, he decided that Kiku, sailing high above the heads of their classmates on his pole, had never been the hero he appeared, but was actually just a musclebound jock; and the girls at school who had laughed at Hashi as he sat and watched, pale and fragile in his school uniform, were stupid, spoiled things who'd never experienced real feelings. And how would that dumb robot Kuwayama react if he had to face an interviewer's microphone? He'd faint dead away, that's how. One by one Hashi reworked each memory, and as he did so, he began to realize that the dividing line between his two selves could be traced to a specific incident. Before the incident he had been a victim, unaware of his real role, his mission, all his powers lying dormant. He had been measured by meaningless, arbitrary standards and judged a weakling; simply because he couldn't swing on the high bar, he had been found wanting, had learned to despise himself. But since that day, everything had changed; he had discovered his own desires, had realized what it was he wanted—he had begun his search for sound.

And slowly, as he reshaped his memories, he began to recall the incident itself: it had happened after the hypnotist had conjured up the paralyzing terror in him that day on top of the department store by taking him back to the smells and sensations of the coin locker, the feel of the talcum powder, the smell of the stuff all over his body, the puke in his throat oozing from his mouth to mingle with it. She of the botched eye-job and the dyed red hair, she had brought it all back with a vengeance, and he had fled away from the stage, out of the building and down along the river until he found refuge in a toilet in the park. He remembered the dampness, the view of the harbor through the window where everything—sea, sky, buildings, boats—seemed to dissolve in a gray evening haze. As the lights began to come on, the scene had dimmed and an enormous shadow tanker being pulled out to sea merged with the darkness in the distance.

While he stood looking out the window, Hashi had suddenly sensed that someone else was in the place: a large man in a straw hat, a bum apparently, was squatting in one corner. Almost as soon as Hashi noticed him, the man began to moan and shake the swollen penis in his hand. Hashi remembered thinking at the time that he was very big, but that his body still seemed light, almost buoyant somehow, as if his veins were full of air rather than blood. If he'd had a pin, he might have slipped it deep into the man's neck and watched him shrivel up like a balloon and go shooting out the window into the night. This was the man of smoke who appeared from the lamp to aid the hero in his hour of need and then, obligingly, withdrew into the lamp when the wish had been granted. As Hashi had stood there in the half-light that evening, the laughing man of smoke had come to him and pulled down his pants, muttering, "Please, pleeease, pleeeeease. Don't be afraid."

Hashi wasn't afraid. For him, this slobbering, barefoot character was a genie whom the smoke had changed into a faithful dog, and before Hashi could move, the dog crouching there before him had taken his penis in its mouth, which felt less like a mouth than a cluster of soft sea anemones. Hashi closed his eyes and allowed himself to be sucked. His body became warm, and each time he breathed he felt a little sick, but the faithful dog continued to sniffle and whine before him, lapping with its long, whitish tongue. Suddenly a feeling not unlike the urge to pee swept through his body and gathered behind his eyes. From his eyes it invaded his brain, eating away at a wall of cartilage that had been concealing a part of him that now quivered to life; and with that quiver, Hashi realized that his whole body was trembling. The secret thing that had awakened whispered to him to be still as the moist tentacles of the anemones released him one by one, and he felt all the strength drain from his body. It was then that the memory of a great red lump, shriveling and swelling in turn, had come to him, and he had pulled free from the mouth with a yell.

"OK!" he had ordered. "You can go now; back into smoke!" As Hashi moved away, the big man had followed, still on his knees, drooling and clutching at Hashi's cock. But the memory was already huge, raw and red and stirring behind Hashi's eyes. "That's it," he told the kneeling man, "you've done what you were meant to do, now get back in the lamp!" The man's pale tongue arched out of his mouth almost to his chin as his straw hat tumbled to the ground. The head underneath was pointed, and it

occurred to Hashi that somewhere at the top of that head there must be a switch of some sort, some way to turn the man off. Grabbing a piece of brick that lay nearby, Hashi swung at the switch with all his might. The brick sank into the man's skull and a puff of bright red smoke came from his head as he staggered to his feet and disappeared through the door into the darkness. Hashi quickly threw the bloodstained brick into one of the toilets, but it was already mixed up with the memory that had come to him. He could *hear* it now, this memory, somewhere beyond the wail of the balloon man which still rang in his ears.

And that was how I first came to remember, Hashi realized; a sound that swirled around, became music of a kind, and wrapped me all up. That night, just before he fell asleep, he had seen tropical fish swimming over a coral reef, giraffes loping across the savannah at dusk, a glider soaring above an iceberg—and faces, Kiku, the nuns, the psychologist, and the room with padded walls in the big gray building—but most of all that sound, the one that had wormed its way into his veins and coursed through his whole body. For some reason, perhaps thanks to that degenerate, he had rediscovered the sound that night in the public toilet by the river, and it had changed him. That night the embryo he carried inside him had burst through—for which he had to thank… a pervert? No way! No, the other thing he had discovered was the courage to split the man's pointy head open with a brick, and that from time to time it would be necessary to add a lump or two to people's skulls, even his most loyal followers. Why? Because he found it necessary!

"Sales to date: 29,111 records. Not bad for a newcomer. But you know, kid, I couldn't buy the window glass in one of those towers with that kind of money." D's body glistened as the black masseuse rubbed it with ram oil. Hashi had been called into the boss's office to discuss the preliminary arrangements for his second album. For the occasion, the woman rubbing D was dressed in a bikini and high-heeled boots.

"Now the way I figure it," he went on, "there are about three hundred thousand people out there who've heard of a singer named Hashi at this point. But there must be over a million who've heard something about some kid left in a coin locker who's causing a stir. That's why this second album is so important, and why we've got to get it done pronto. I've got the lyrics here; have a look." D didn't mention that he was sure that after Hashi was

reunited with his mother on national TV, there would be several million more who knew who he was. As D saw it, Hashi's music was like a narcotic: at first, there was a reaction against it, but once people were let in on the secret—the truth of Hashi's origins—they would begin to accept it. Born in a coin locker! That's what set him apart from every other bland singer with a passable voice. If he could only get them to listen to Hashi a third time, they'd be hooked.

The Story Begins

Point your finger at the sky
And shoot the sun!
Bring it shining down
To blind the world.
Gather golden shards,
Knives of light,
To pierce your heart,
To whisper in your ear,
Dull days are almost done.
I'll drive you crazy,
The story's just begun.

Heave a sigh and split the night,
The world lies tattered,
Gasping at my feet.
Take the tatters
For a velvet cloak
To steal into your room
To wake you from your sleep,
Dull nights are almost done.
I'll drive you crazy,
The story's just begun.
I'll drive you crazy,
The story's just begun.

"Well? You like it? It cost me plenty," said D.

“Pretty mushy, seems to me.”

“But do you think you can sing it?”

“It won’t be easy, but I’ll give it a try.”

Rising from the massage table, D stared out at the skyscrapers as he rubbed the oil off with a towel.

“You’d better,” he said, “because you’re going to buy me one of those, Hashi.”

The black woman took her money and, pulling free of D’s hand which lingered on her hip, changed into a woolen dress without bothering to remove her boots. She stuffed her wig in her handbag while telling him, in Japanese, that he should stretch his neck and shoulders mornings after he’d been out late. When she’d gone, D gave his shriveled penis a flip and smiled at Hashi.

“What do you say we go down to The Market and buy us some boys? I hear there’s some new talent around.”

“D, there’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you.”

“What? If you’re after another of those rice omelettes, you’re out of luck—all I’ve got here is some soba.”

“I want you to make Neva my manager.”

“That old lady? Why?”

“She’s a wonderful person.”

“OK, OK, maybe you’re right. Fine, consider it done. But as I was saying, how about us picking up a couple of kids at The Market and having a little party? It’s been a while… And what’s all this stuff about women all of a sudden? Don’t tell me you’ve suddenly changed your ways. You haven’t started liking all the sloppy things that go on down there, have you?”

“I don’t do men any more,” Hashi announced.

“Well, listen to him,” said D. Having finished dressing, he reached for the phone and yelled into the receiver, “Soba—now!”

A few minutes later, a secretary came in carrying two bowls of noodles. D pulled a blue can from the drawer of his desk and removed the lid, spooning a mixture of chicken fat and pineapple into his soup.

“Want some? Comes from Taiwan. Can’t beat it.” He licked the grease from his fingers as Hashi shook his head. Hashi ignored his noodles, staring at D, whose lips were glistening. He then said softly:

“Neva and I are planning to get married.”

Neva had one ambition in life: to design an angel’s costume.

Her father had been a musician who played the piano when he was younger, or so she was told, but he had never been able to earn his living that way and finally took a job accompanying singers on an accordion in a cafe. Neva’s mother was a student who had frequented the cafe, and the two had married against their parents’ will.

Shortly after Neva was born, her mother had developed lung trouble. The doctor said it was probably the result of a new medicine she’d taken during pregnancy to ease the birth. At any rate, the young couple soon realized that it wouldn’t do to have a baby and an invalid living in the same tiny house—all they could afford on an accordionist’s salary—so they swallowed their pride and Neva and her mother went home to live with her parents.

At her family home, an old inn in Okayama, the reception was less than warm; her parents had been urging divorce for some time, but Neva’s mother refused to listen. Nevertheless, it was beneath the high ceilings of this ill-lit, ancient inn that Neva was raised until she was fourteen. Her mother would sit all day in a murky room, coughing her lungs out and dabbling at her watercolors. Since the lung disease was thought to be potentially infectious, Neva had never been hugged or held close by her, so she was only too willing to pose for her, sitting perfectly still on a chair, hands on her knees, as her mother stared at her for hours on end. Nice, too, was the way she always made her look prettier than she really was. While she painted, Neva’s mother often talked to her, telling her that both of them deserved a better home than this.

Her accordionist father came to visit twice a year, bringing with him dolls and toys that you couldn’t get in the country. He would pick her up again and again and rub his cheek against hers, and when dinner was over he would sing and play the accordion for them. But somehow Neva always hated this skinny man, perhaps because her mother invariably cried after each of his visits.

At about the time Neva entered elementary school, the accordion player stopped coming to see them. Her mother’s illness seemed to stay the same, never much worse or much better. Neva was the tallest in her grade and an

excellent student, but one didn’t often see her smile. It was in the fifth grade that she first got her hands on some dress material and a needle and thread. She wanted to make a snow-white dress, like the one her mother always painted on the little girls in the pictures for which Neva posed, and having found the right material, she worked on it every evening until late. When it was done, she showed it to her mother before anybody else. “It’s a dress for an angel,” she was told, and was given a big hug.

After that Neva made any number of white dresses, and with each new dress she received a hug. Once, her mother even began to cry as she held her. As Neva remembered it, this must have happened in summer; her mother’s sweat was cold and clammy, and when she had felt it against her skin she’d had a terrifying thought: when she dies, there will be no one left to touch me at all. Even now she had no idea why this had occurred to her; possibly it was brought on by the excitement of finally being touched by a mother who had kept her distance for so long. At any rate, she had suddenly been convinced that no one would ever hold her close again. And unfortunately the idea caught on, and by the time Neva began attending middle school, it was firmly rooted in her mind. When, for example, the boys in her class refused to join hands with her during folk-dancing practice, she took it as a sign, not of the usual shyness of that age, but that her premonition was coming true, and it made her shiver. She bought a book on sewing and turned out one white dress after another, but now, each time her mother wrapped her arms around her, she felt surer than ever that no one else would do this after she was gone.

Though her mother was against the move, Neva entered a private girls’ high school in Tokyo that was run by missionaries, and from there went on to university. One summer, during a college festival where she was selling some dresses she’d made, a young man stopped and began talking. It was hot, and the student—a tall, tanned boy—suggested something cool to drink. Neva agreed, and by the time she’d finished her fizzy soft drink, she had decided to marry him. That night, she allowed him to do anything he wanted; she still didn’t know his name, but she did know enough to avoid mentioning marriage or related subjects, and things went fairly smoothly. In the days that followed, she refused him what she had allowed once and instead spoke of a certain Swiss fashion-design prize which, if she were lucky enough to win it, would allow the man who married her to lead a

pretty easy life. She also let it be known that her family owned a large inn in Okayama, but these facts came out gradually, almost accidentally, as the occasion arose. A year later, the two were married.

After graduating, the young man became an utterly average employee in an utterly average company, his only source of pride being his physique. As for Neva, she felt absolutely no love for this muscular husband of hers; he had simply been the first man who had ever tried to touch her. Accordingly, she took no pleasure at all in married life, and one suffocating day followed the next with the one consolation that she was at last free of her old obsession. She resisted her husband's desire to have children and, not having the money to open a design shop of her own, went to work as a stylist; but with the fading of the phobia went her enthusiasm for angels' clothes.

Ten years passed this way, Neva hardly knowing if she was dead or alive, and then one day she discovered a lump in both her breasts. They proved to be malignant. Neva cried when they told her she would lose the breasts, but at the same time she realized that the operation brought with it a strange hope: she would probably be able to divorce her husband afterward. Somewhere in her sadness lay a spark of joy; when her breasts were gone, she could leave this man.

Her divorce was finalized while she was still in the hospital, and with the marriage now behind her, the old familiar worry was waiting. Who, she asked herself, would want to look at the hideous scars? Who would touch her flat, fleshless chest? This time, however, the thought was not a painful one; nor, in fact, was it an illusion any longer but a reality. Still, there was no reason to fear the truth; she simply faced facts, cried for a few days, and that was that.

Hashi, however, had opened Neva's scars and let the loneliness she had stored inside flow out. That first evening, in the taxi home, he had grabbed her hand, and Neva had decided then and there that it was time she gave herself a treat. She had taken him up to the apartment, undressed him, and licked his body all over, and while doing this she felt desire for the first time, felt she wanted him to touch her absent breasts. Neva's ministrations had given Hashi an erection and he was generally beginning to revive. When she turned on the light and asked him to feel her chest, he blinked and glanced down as if uncertain what he'd find; then he burst out laughing,

a deep, pleased laugh. Thinking that he was laughing at the idea of touching someone so ugly, Neva had begun to cry, but Hashi took her in his arms and held her tight. Gently rubbing her flat chest, he licked and nibbled his way down her side as his cock pressed against her thigh. “Heaven,” he had murmured.

D had been unable to resist a little sarcasm when he agreed to make Neva Hashi’s manager: “You lucky bastard, you. What could be better for a fairy’s first?” As for Neva, even after she understood why Hashi had laughed that night, it made no difference. So what if he was queer? She couldn’t care less; it had been a great fuck, he had lapped her up as no one else had ever done, and those lonely memories of hers were laid to rest where they could no longer do her any harm.

It wasn’t long after this that she went to work designing costumes for Hashi’s concert tour. Two dreams, it seems, had come true at once: she had an angel to love, and she was making that angel snow-white satin clothes to wear.

16

There was still time before he was to meet Neva for dinner and he had forgotten to buy flowers—Neva liked orchids—so Hashi decided to pay off the cab and walk the rest of the way. A huge Christmas tree stood in front of the flower shop, but inside the air was warm and smelled of damp leaves. As Hashi entered, he was greeted by the shopkeeper, a dark man whose chest hair, threading through an ivory necklace, peeped out of his open-necked shirt. He was cutting roses. Hashi ordered five orchids: white with just a touch of red at the edges. While the flowers were being wrapped in silver foil, a man in a fur jacket—obviously queer—walked in the door.

"You know what I'm just dying for?" he announced. "Bougainvillea, and masses of it, stems and all." The owner of the place put down the orchids for a moment and went to a refrigerator at the back of the shop. When he came back, his arms were filled with bougainvillea.

"What do you need them for?" he asked the fur jacket.

"We're having a Christmas pageant, and I'm going to put some in my hair and play Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer. Now be gentle with the little things, the petals drop off if you so much as sneeze at them."

It was the first time that Hashi had seen the brilliant color of the flower; the ones he'd kept as a souvenir of his mother had long since turned brown. "I wonder what bougainvillea means botanically," he mumbled. The shopkeeper smiled and shook his head, but the man in the fur said "Must have something to do with buggers, don't you think?" and winked at Hashi. Hashi laughed. I didn't realize they were so fragile, he was thinking. Why would my mother have put some in the locker with me? That woman writer said it was because they were the fanciest thing in the flower shops at the time… As he stood lost in thought, the fairy breezed by him and out of the shop, crimson petals scattering on the shoulders of his silver fox jacket.

Back in the street, a dog sat next to a blind old man playing a violin. Every time the wind blew, the tune seemed to go astray, perhaps because the man's fingers were numb from the cold. The dog's breath came in white

clouds. A group of drunks came by, and one called to the others to stop as he sat down in front of the dog and began to open a small box of sushi. The dog, a hairless breed of some sort, sniffed at the food, then looked up at its master. Without stopping his playing, the man croaked:

"What is it?"

"Just thought I'd give your dog some of this here tuna," said the drunk.

"Sorry," said the old man, "but he can't eat anything raw." The drunk had grabbed its collar and was trying to force the fish into its mouth.

"Hey, you stupid mutt, this is fuckin' *toro*!" he said. The dog curled its tail, let out a howl, and tried to wriggle free while the blind man apologized and went on playing. "All right, then," the drunk conceded, and, stuffing the remaining sushi into the man's money can, he left. As Hashi walked away, the old musician was squatting by the can clawing out bits of rice and throwing them on the ground.

In Roppongi, young drifters had lined the street with makeshift stalls consisting of nothing but flattened cardboard boxes on which jewelry, original paintings, or perhaps a private collection of poetry were spread. One group had a Christmas cake they'd probably found in the garbage behind some bakery, which was being devoured in great handfuls. A young girl, back hunched against the cold, had a safety pin through the flesh of her cheek from which a large tag dangled with the words "Punk Forever!" written on it. The pin looked slightly rusty, and though it was hard to tell in the dim light, the skin around the hole in her cheek seemed to be infected. From time to time she took a tube of ointment from her pocket and dabbed at it. At the moment her cheek was stuffed with cake, which didn't prevent her, however, from taking her turn inhaling from a plastic bag filled with paint thinner.

A young man nearby, seated in Zen meditation, had painted his face in the red, white, and blue of the French flag. Though it was December, he wore nothing over his T-shirt, nor any socks with his rubber sandals. Another man was tending a display of blowguns which he demonstrated for any willing passerby, and the show seemed to be working, as a small knot of people had collected around his stand. The guns, consisting of nothing more than lengths of lead pipe and cone-shaped rivets wrapped in paper, packed a surprising punch, and the man was able to stick the darts in a board ten meters away with apparent ease. The sign next to his display read:

“Lethal.” As Hashi was watching the demonstration, someone tapped him on the shoulder. Turning, he found himself looking at a scraggly face whose smile revealed missing teeth in front.

“Hashi, it’s me,” hissed the man. It was Tatsuo. He was selling a book of poetry at a stand next to the girl with the safety pin; *The Bee’s Remains*, it was called. “It’s not my book,” he was quick to tell him. “This weird old guy writes this stuff, has them printed up, and then gives them away free… But Hashi, you’re getting to be a star, right?” Though Hashi tried to refuse, Tatsuo pushed a copy of the book into his pocket as he went on: “I’ve heard your record. Most folks around here don’t like it much, but when anybody says anything bad about it I punch them out for you.” Tatsuo was staring at Hashi’s bouquet. “Those sure are pretty. Must be from the south. Flowers, fish, everything’s prettier down there, you know.”

“Tatsuo, I’m afraid I’m in a hurry,” Hashi interrupted.

“Oh… Well, OK, if that’s the way it is.”

“How’s Emiko?” Hashi thought to ask, and suddenly Tatsuo seemed to come to himself and covered his toothless mouth with his hand.

“Lost more of my teeth,” he muttered. “They pulled them out without even giving me any novocain. That jock brother of yours hid my shotguns somewhere, and I couldn’t tell them where even when they tried to get it out of me by pulling my teeth. Shit, that hurt—even worse than getting my ears shredded. Guy wasn’t even a dentist, not that it would have made much difference…”

“I’m sorry, but I’ve really got to go,” said Hashi.

“You know, those were good times we had together. Seems like years ago now, but it was just yesterday… So, you rich now? Have you been to Cebu? Seems all the rich people go there sometime. You been yet?”

“Let’s talk some other time—soon—OK?” said Hashi, beginning to walk on, but Tatsuo caught him by the sleeve.

“Look, I know you’re in a hurry, but there’s just one thing I’d like you to do for me. Uh … I don’t mean to be a nuisance, but if you should get to Cebu and run into Emiko, could you say hello for me? Tell her I may have lost my teeth but I’m doing fine. Tell her I’ll never hit her again. You’re sure to be going, aren’t you? You’re rich now; you’ve got to go. You should bring back a guitar—they’ve got handmade ones dirt cheap. You can’t make any money selling that mother-of-pearl shit everybody brings back—guitars

are the only way to go. Singapore Air is the cheapest way to get there. Air India's cheap too, but you get nothing but curry to eat. You transfer to a domestic flight in Manila; takes another fifty-eight minutes from there. From Japan, with transfers and all, it's six hours, twenty-nine minutes. Pretty amazing, isn't it? Six hours and twenty-nine minutes—no time at all—and you're there. I've already been sitting *here* more than four hours…"

Hashi said nothing, and Tatsuo hadn't let go of his sleeve, so Hashi transferred the orchids to his other hand. Tatsuo extracted a small circle of glass from his pocket; it was a ring.

"I read in a magazine that you're engaged," he said. "This isn't much, but it's my present to you. And if you're my friend, you've got to like it. That's what friends do—give each other stuff…" When Hashi put the ring in his pocket, Tatsuo smiled his toothless smile and released his grip on the sleeve.

"Well, be seeing you," said Hashi, and he walked on down the street. He turned now and then to look back over his shoulder, and each time Tatsuo could be seen hopping up above the heads of the crowd and waving.

"My throat hurts from smoking too much," Neva was saying as they sat across from each other at the restaurant. Between them were the orchids, which Hashi had asked the waiter to put in a vase.

"Do you think bougainvillea are pretty?" he said suddenly.

"Why do you ask?" said Neva.

"They had some at the florist. I kind of liked them."

"They don't have any smell," said Neva.

"The woman who abandoned me put some of them in the coin locker before she left."

"Really? She must have been fond of flowers."

"Why do you suppose she did that, though?" Hashi asked, but Neva just looked down at her drink and drained it in one gulp. Hashi watched her for a minute, then laughed and changed the subject.

Neva was, in fact, feeling uncomfortable, but not for the reason Hashi imagined. She was thinking that it was only a week until the Christmas Eve broadcast during which Hashi would meet that very woman. The woman's name and address had already been discovered; Hashi alone knew nothing about it. D had told her to say nothing unless she was sure she could

convince him to go through with it. It seemed he had thought of telling Hashi himself several times but hadn't been able to. "Tell him if you can," D had said. Neva couldn't.

On the other side of the table, Hashi was wondering why seeing Tatsuo had left such a bad taste in his mouth. No doubt it had something to do with the damage that old friends did to the carefully reworked memories he'd made to match his TV image. These fresh, cheerful memories, free of any sense of shame, just crumbled to pieces when confronted with a living, breathing part of his past. The thought made Hashi shudder. It made him wish them all dead, these people who knew him as he once had been. Tatsuo's toothless smile came floating into his head. With an effort he managed to push Tatsuo out of the way, only to have Kiku take his place. There was no getting rid of Kiku.

"Hashi?" said Neva, calling him back to the present. She was wearing a velvet dress with a low neckline, and he reached across the table to slide his hand under the material. "Not here!" she scolded as he squeezed the spongy bra and stiff wire. Dinner was just a prelude, like foreplay, Hashi thought, filling his mind with images of Neva's body. A man's chest above, a cunt below. He wondered what the huge sort of breasts one saw in magazines would feel like; the only thing like that he'd ever touched was on a cow. Probably pretty sexy… So how about someone with a woman's breasts and a cock? That would be perfect; probably sprout wings on the back if they ever came up with that.

The waiter brought the hors d'oeuvres and then soup served in turtle shells. Hashi took a spoonful of the soup and found it so delicious that he soon forgot all about Kiku and Tatsuo.

17

His nickname was Handy. An acquaintance of D's from the mahjong tables, his job, ostensibly, was dealing in antiques, but he was really just a handy man to have around. It was to Handy that D went with his request: find the woman who abandoned the child Hashio Kuwayama, alias Hashi; do it in such a way that neither Hashi nor the woman knows what's going on; and, finally, find out for certain where she'll be on Christmas Eve and what she'll be doing. To accomplish this, Handy was given exactly three months and two days.

Time being short, Handy figured he had no choice but to start with what seemed like a good hunch, one that, if correct, just might enable him to find the woman in time. If it proved wrong—well, he'd never find her in three decades, let alone three months. The hunch was this: the woman who left Hashi in the coin locker had had other children whom she'd also got rid of or killed. Working on this assumption, Handy did the only thing he could in the absence of other clues: he combed the police records of every woman who had ever been arrested for infanticide or abandonment.

Hashi, Handy learned, had been left in a paper bag in locker number 309 at Sekikawa Station on the Negishi Line of the National Railway. According to the report made by the officer who discovered him, his body had been covered with talcum powder and he was vomiting a yellowish liquid that had a medicinal odor. The police hospital determined later that the stuff was a prescription cough syrup. Also, the baby appeared to be no more than thirty hours old when found. So, for a start, Handy knew that the woman he was looking for had been in Sekikawa Station on July 19, 1972, and that she had, in all likelihood, been in a hospital somewhere about thirty hours earlier. So far so good.

The next clue: the bag in which baby Hashi had been left came from a shop selling imported goods in downtown Yokohama by the name of Gingham. It was a largish bag, the sort that might have been used for a coat or suit, and it was brand-new. Then there was the spray of bougainvillea

which was still fresh when the baby was discovered. Handy did a little digging and found that there were no more than eleven flower shops in the greater metropolitan area that would have had bougainvillea in those days. OK, he reasoned, everything taken together—fancy shop with a name like Gingham, fancy flowers and all—it looked like the woman hadn't come to town from the country to have this baby, and he felt safe in concentrating on women who were living in the vicinity of Yokohama in July 1972. When he had correlated all the variables, he found there were, fortunately, only three women with records for infanticide or abandonment who fitted the bill.

Subject number one, Chiyoko Kunisaki, had been twenty-three at the time in question and was living in Yokosuka with her boyfriend who worked for a used-car dealership. The two had split up six months later, and in February of the next year Chiyoko had taken a job as a waitress at a restaurant in the suburbs. That same year she married a man who earned his living as a broker for golf club memberships. It was a second marriage for him, and he brought along a baby from his first marriage. Chiyoko, Handy learned, had just one hobby, playing the stock market, which she had refrained from doing for a time after her marriage; but eventually, without her husband's knowledge, she invested heavily in the stock of a household-appliance manufacturer and the stock had suddenly taken a tumble. A terrible fight broke out when her husband discovered her losses—nearly two hundred thousand yen—and by the end of it Chiyoko had strangled the child who had been sleeping in the next room. She served six years of her eight-year sentence before being paroled from Tochigi Prison in 1980; currently, she was living alone in an apartment in Hodogaya Ward, Yokohama City. Age: forty. Occupation: cleaning lady.

Handy secured the services of a young man who styled himself an "enforcer" and went to pay a visit to a certain car wax salesman living in public housing in Yokohama—the man who had once lived with Chiyoko Kunisaki in Yokosuka. Pretending to be Chiyoko's elder brother, Handy showed up at the old boyfriend's door at noon on Sunday just as he was sitting down to a lunch of instant noodles with his wife and two kids. When Handy mentioned Chiyoko's name, the man nearly choked. With a slight nod from Handy to the young "enforcer," he was led trembling to a nearby park where he willingly told them everything he knew about Chiyoko Kunisaki, even the fact that she liked it from behind, but as far as he knew

she'd never got rid of a child. She had, he admitted, had a couple of abortions, but she'd never abandoned one she'd given birth to. Handy gave the man five thousand yen and suggested he forget the whole thing.

Fumiko Itoya had been twenty at the time, a student living in central Yokohama who was involved with a man old enough to be her father—a veterinarian. In July 1970 she had been arrested for abandoning a child and sentenced to two years and eight months, though the sentence had then been suspended and she was given five years' parole. The child had apparently been dumped in a ditch at the side of a road.

"He refused to own up that the kid was his," she explained to Handy, referring to the vet. "You see, I worked as a sculptor's model while I was going to night school trying to get into college. I was a dumb kid from the country and I had it bad for that sculptor. I guess I was wowed by all those beautiful things he made. He promised me that I could keep my clothes on, but then he started saying he needed to see my 'womb,' as he called it; something about how the statue was supposed to show a woman's strength, and for that he had to see where the strength came from. He insisted it wasn't my privates he wanted to see, it was my womb—nothing dirty about it, just the opposite. He was very persuasive. Anyway, in the end I showed him. Afterward I realized what a disgusting man he was. I guess I cried a lot at the time, but by then it was too late.

"I started college and tried to forget all about him, and not long after that I met the Doctor"—her name for the vet—"and then I guess I really did forget him. When I got pregnant, though, the Doctor didn't want to have anything to do with me. I thought a lot about abortion, but I was afraid if I had somebody go poking around in my 'womb,' I'd start thinking about the sculptor again. Well, while I was trying to decide, my stomach was getting bigger and bigger, and before I knew it, out popped the baby. I went to show it to the Doctor, but he got mad; I guess I'd lied somewhere along the line and told him I'd got rid of it. Anyway, he said some terrible things, called me a slut, said I was trying to blackmail him. Then he kicked me out. And that's when I went a bit crazy. On the way home I started thinking that the baby looked just like the sculptor, that it wasn't really the Doctor's kid at all, that I'd got it from the sculptor that time, from all the gross stuff he'd done to me that day, all those strange things he stuck in me. Anyway, I

guess that's when I just dropped the baby in the ditch and ran off. Somebody saw me and started yelling, but I just kept running."

Custody of the child was eventually assumed by Fumiko's parents, and, perhaps surprisingly, Fumiko continued to see the vet for nearly three years. But in January of 1973 she went through a nasty breakup with him, sued him successfully for a share of his considerable fortune, and went to live with her parents. At present, she was thirty-nine, single, and still living there.

As he was returning home one evening, the Doctor found himself suddenly pulled into a passing car and driven away.

"Did Fumiko Itoya abandon your child in a coin locker in July 1972?" asked Handy straight out.

"Who the hell are you?" the Doctor wanted to know. "Yakuza? You can't frighten me. I'm sure you've already checked, but I haven't got any family—except a sick old father, and you'd only be doing me a favor if you bumped him off."

"We're not interested in hurting you or anybody else. We just want you to tell us the truth," said Handy.

"What gang are you from? I'll have you know that I'm a staff doctor for the Kennel Club, and I know everybody, all the big guys, so I'm telling you, don't fool around with me… OK, how about this? I promise I won't say anything to anybody and you let me out now. But I should warn you, I've already memorized your license number." As the Doctor rattled on, Handy followed his assistant's directions all the way to a large factory, the main processing center for a restaurant chain. The guard at the gate took one look at the hired thug and let them pass. Handy's helper also seemed to be in possession of a key and, once inside, led the Doctor to a huge, funnel-shaped machine whose function he proceeded to explain.

"This here's the machine they use to turn meat into mush. You put the whole thing in here—don't matter if it's a cow or an elephant—and it comes out the other end like a pile of shit. Then they freeze it and two or three years down the line it's somebody's hamburger." When the explanation was over, the Doctor had a good deal to say.

"When I first met her, she seemed perfect—at least, in bed. You know about boxers, the way they say they've got to be both fighter and technician? Well, she was both in spades. Quite a woman. The only trouble

was, I didn’t really want to get married. I was happy single and, besides, she wasn’t exactly the smartest person I’d ever met.

“Anyway, when I found out she’d had that baby, I wasn’t exactly overjoyed. It felt weird to think there’d be a kid of mine running around somewhere. So I got hold of this stuff we use on sheep and horses to keep them from getting in the family way; it’s highly acidic and makes the eggs disintegrate. Makes the cunt hot and tight too—I could get you boys some if you’re interested. Anyway, it works as well with people as it does with animals, and after that first time, I can guarantee you Fumiko never got pregnant again. No way she could have even if she wanted to.”

Miki Yoshikawa, twenty-one years of age in 1972, had been a housewife living in the Kohoku district of Yokohama. Her husband had worked for the city, but after Miki’s first “incident,” he quit to drive a recycling truck. Miki herself was still serving time in Tochigi Prison.

The first case had occurred in 1974. Miki was arrested for abandoning a dead infant; the child had apparently been suffocated under a mattress, and Miki had put it in a plastic bag and left it in a dumpster. The court found mitigating circumstances—the fact that it was a first offense, the shock of having caused the death of her child—and the sentence was eventually suspended. Nevertheless, the publicity from the trial had made it impossible for her husband to go on working for the city government.

In 1976, Miki gave birth to a stillborn child. Immediately after the delivery, she had apparently become obsessed with the idea that the death of the second child was caused by a curse from the first one and, fearing that a proper burial for the second baby would arouse further jealousy, she dropped the tiny body down the shaft leading to the hospital incinerator. This time there was no indictment, on the grounds of temporary insanity from the loss of the child. In 1980, she had become pregnant for a third time; afterward, her husband made the following statement in court:

“In the early stages of this pregnancy, my wife became pretty unstable. I suppose she was worried because I was out of work and we didn’t really know how we were going to get by. She kept saying she was sure that the baby was already dead, that it had to be dead because the first two babies had left a curse on her. I thought this was all probably connected with her morning sickness, and she’d stop worrying as the pregnancy went along, so

I didn’t do anything special. And, sure enough, about the fifth month she seemed to calm down.

“Things were still pretty tough, but I’d started working down on the docks around that time. Then, as she got closer to her due date, she started acting strange again; she’d say the baby wasn’t moving, that it felt like a rock and that meant it had to be dead, dead and rotting away inside her. That’s when I decided I’d better ask a psychiatrist about it. I guess you could say she was talking crazy by then; she’d say things like ‘You know, dear, even if this baby isn’t dead, I’m going to have to kill it once it’s born. It just wouldn’t be fair to the other two to play favorites.’ The psychiatrist advised me to have her committed for a while after the birth, and that’s exactly what I did. She had a healthy baby girl and then went straight into a clinic for treatment.

“Well, things seemed to start to go a little better after that. I finally managed to find a proper job, and my wife seemed to be getting better. After about four months, she came home from the clinic all smiles and, soon as she was through the door, she went to pick up the baby. Unfortunately, the baby was a bit fussy and that seemed to set Miki off; before I could stop her she threw the kid down on its head.”

This time the court found criminal intent. Miki said in public that she hated the baby, resented it for crying at the sight of her after she’d spent so much time getting cured of her illness. She admitted to wanting to kill it. Furthermore, this time around the court psychiatrist found her sane, so there was no escaping the sentence. At present, she was forty-two years old and an inmate in Tochigi Prison.

Handy learned that the husband had not divorced Miki and was actually still waiting for her release. He was working as the driver for a tropical fish shop, which was where Handy decided to pay him a call. When he asked him about Miki, the man smiled fondly.

“She’s a good woman. You know what I mean? You can just feel it about her; she’s a real good woman.” He pointed at a fish swimming languidly in a large tank. “See that? It’s an Arowhana, worth more than two hundred thousand yen. Whenever I see it, I think of her. She wanted one of those fish more than anything in the world. I once went through some stuff she left at her parents’ house, and I found a notebook she kept as a kid with this detailed description of how you take care of a fish like this, all written in a

little girl’s handwriting—it was cute, I’m telling you. That’s the kind of kid she was; it got to me. You know, she really loved little live things; that notebook was proof—it was written long before she’d ever met me, so it had to be true. I guess you could say the past never lies, does it? And I suppose I always wanted to trust her; I used to tell myself over and over what a strong, good woman she was. But, you know, in the end I had to face it: Miki’s a good woman who happens to kill babies. Who knows, maybe she’s just too good.”

As he was listening to Yoshikawa’s story, Handy was doing some calculating that proved rather discouraging: seventeen years ago, Miki and her husband had been living in city housing; in such close quarters, surrounded by his co-workers, it wasn’t likely that a pregnancy or birth could have gone unnoticed. What’s more, after the later incidents, there would have been a thorough investigation that would have turned up any previous suspicious activities. No, he had to accept the fact that Miki Yoshikawa couldn’t possibly have left Hashi in locker 309, and that meant that his original hunch, which he’d known all along was pretty shaky, was in fact just wrong. He smiled bitterly as he thought of the huge reward D had offered. When Yoshikawa finished speaking, Handy tapped on the fish tank and asked absently:

“Don’t suppose you’ve ever heard of a woman who left a baby in a coin locker?”

“Yep. I heard of one,” Yoshikawa said.

“You have?” said Handy, coming to life.

“Yep, from when I drove a recycling truck. There was this guy they called Goat who worked for the same company; funny sort of fella—used to be a roof tiler, they said, but as far as I could see he spent most of his time playing checkers for money. As I remember, he was missing the little finger on his left hand. He used to like to talk about the women he’d made it with; usually, they were middle-aged waitresses or hookers, but there was this one time he came in bragging how he’d scored with a girl from a massage parlor. Said she really knew how to rub him the right way. Anyway, seems she got a bit drunk and started talking about her past; Goat said she told him she came from… Kochi, I think it was, and how this one time she’d run into a guy she’d known back there… I guess I still remember all this ’cause of what happened with Miki… Well, the guy she met was married, but they

did it once anyway, and she ended up having a kid. She told Goat it was dead when she had it, and that's why she left it in a coin locker."

Handy slipped a five thousand yen bill into Yoshikawa's pocket and headed back to his car. His next stop was the recycling company, where he was told that Goat had quit long ago but was now working as a driver for a pet grooming school.

The Aoyagi Pet Care Academy was located on the banks of the Tama River in Kawasaki City. In order to give its students training in grooming live cats and dogs, the school arranged to borrow pets from neighborhood residents in return for a free shampoo or clip. Goat was in charge of transporting the pets. Handy dropped in on the school and found out where Goat was supposed to be making stops. When he caught up with him, the truck was parked by the side of the road and Goat was standing in the street spinning a cage containing a poodle around and around. Ignoring the howls, which were getting more and more frantic, he calmly spun the cage until the dog stopped barking and began to be sick. Satisfied, he then tossed the cage into the back of the truck and went over to piss by a telephone pole. It was at this point that Handy and his helper approached to make inquiries about a certain girl in a certain massage parlor; as an ice-breaker they brought with them some money and a knife, and a minute later, with a small slice in his cheek and a five thousand yen bill in his pocket, Goat got talkative.

"It was a place called Tenman round back of Kawasaki Station. But that was more than ten years ago; who knows if she's still there." He didn't know her name, but she was a big girl, especially her hands. Her eyes were narrower than usual, and if he remembered right, she had a scar, like from an appendectomy. And a whole lot of dyed blond hair. That was about it. At Tenman, of course, there was no such person, but the manager said they'd always used licensed girls and they could check with the union to find out who it might have been. He even made the call himself.

A week later, Handy received his fee: five times what he normally charged. Kimie Numata, forty-four, was currently employed in a massage parlor in Tachikawa City, but Handy had heard that back in May 1972 she had unmistakably been pregnant, and after taking a month off from work in June and July, she had told at least four people that she'd left the baby in a coin locker. Two of these were girls from the massage parlor, one was Goat, and the other was a young bartender with whom she'd been living at one

point for six months. The bartender was sure of the following: Kimie had abandoned the baby when she was twenty-seven years old, that is, in 1972; it was summer; and the baby had been a boy. Furthermore, Kimie didn't go on vacation that summer; this last Handy learned from the lady who delivered milk door-to-door in the neighborhood—it seems Kimie had put out empties every day. In short, in the summer of 1972, Kimie Numata had left a male infant in a coin locker in the city of Yokohama. Facts were facts. And there were only were only two baby boys discovered in Yokohama that summer…

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The crocodile was submerged in the artificial pond that occupied much of Anemone's living room, the single eyeball protruding above the surface following the lumps of meat swinging overhead. Kiku had secured two dripping red chunks the size of babies' heads on a pole and was gingerly proffering them in Gulliver's direction. According to Anemone's instructions, he had to keep dinner moving until Gulliver came after it; the point was to lure him out of the water and get him to walk around a little before feeding him. Gulliver was prone to a crocodile disease that left its victims too fat to walk, with teeth and bones brittle and atrophied. Unchecked, Anemone was afraid it would kill him.

Normally she fed Gulliver herself, but today she'd got up early and worked all day on a Christmas dinner for Kiku. The menu was to include a potato salad with shrimp, candied yams with chestnuts, sea bream soup, turkey teriyaki, and a chocolate cake. Kiku said he thought yams were New Year's food, but Anemone explained that when she'd taken Home Economics in junior high school, it was the one dish her teacher said she made well—and anyway, a holiday was a holiday. She'd bought a whole bucket of chestnuts.

No matter how much Kiku shook the meat, Gulliver made no move to go after it. The two five-kilo lumps of flesh suspended from a drying pole cut in half had long since worn out Kiku's arms; but just as he was going to tell Anemone that it was no good, Gulliver gave a huge twitch of his tail, leapt a meter out of the water, and downed one of the meatballs in a single gulp. Kiku had no chance to yank the pole away, and now he was wet from head to foot.

"Something the matter?" said Anemone, poking her head around the kitchen door to find Kiku holding the pole with only one piece of meat on it.

"Seems he got it," said Kiku.

“I guess I’ll have to show you how it’s done,” said Anemone, handing him the bowl of yams and taking the pole. Having polished off the first lump of horsemeat, Gulliver had sunk back to the bottom of the pond, but when she dangled the remaining lump over his nose, he began to stir. “You can tell when he’s about to make his move by the way he tenses up his tail.”

As tiny ripples broke the surface of the pond, Anemone started shaking the pole, and almost simultaneously Gulliver gave a powerful rake of his tail and lunged out of the water. Anemone, however, was quicker, pulling the meat just out of reach and going on with her lesson:

“You see, a crocodile doesn’t move along at an even pace; it kind of jerks forward five or six quick steps, using its tail for balance, and then stops still as a stone. But it’s not like he’s thinking or anything when he just stands there; he’s actually storing up energy for the next rush. He seems to get energy from just about anything: you, me, the wall, the ceiling, even the air; and then when he’s got it, he can run a few more steps. But sometimes, in Gulliver’s case, I think he’s just disgusted at being penned in and he’s trying to turn disgust into the killer instinct.”

Just as she was finishing, Gulliver lashed out as though trying to flip himself around, and in the process caught the lump of meat with his tail. The cord from which the meat was hung eventually snapped, but not before Anemone was pulled up over the railing and almost into the pond. Kiku was just quick enough to catch her, and as they tottered on the edge, Gulliver and the meat disappeared beneath the surface. In a moment, a film of blood and grease began to spread across Uranus.

The Christmas tree on the dinner table was made of interlocking plastic panels bristling with hair-thin tubes filled with a glowing liquid, looking like luminous pine needles. To add to the effect, the liquid turned all the colors of the rainbow when it changed direction in the tube. Blowing on the tree set off a regular light show, and a puff of air from below created an effect not unlike a triangular cloud at sunset, with the bottom white, the middle various shades of blazing orange, and the top fading to deep red with just a hint of blue. Anemone had five bottles of Pommery champagne chilling in a tub of ice, and from the sideboard she selected two crystal glasses etched with a floral pattern. She had been to the beauty parlor, returning with her hair swept up to the right and held back with a pin

embossed with an image of a naked nymph perched on a dragonfly. It was Christmas Eve.

Kiku was thinking about Christmas Eves at the orphanage. In the afternoon they used to put on red and white costumes with tassels on the cuffs and hems, and then file into the chapel to sing hymns. The curtains were always drawn, and in the darkness each child carried a single candle, tiny fingers numbed by the cold. To warm up their hands and avoid dropping the candles, they sang the hymns as loudly as they could. When the service was over, a trombone-playing Santa Claus appeared and presented each child with a paper stocking. Among the contents, Kiku could remember caramels, cocoa powder, a plastic rugby ball, a panda bear balloon, and an eraser shaped like an army tank.

Earlier in the day, Anemone had handed Kiku a package, telling him he couldn't open it until she gave the word. Kiku had one for her as well: a book called *All about Omelettes*, with a recipe for rice omelettes in it. Having finished the rest of the cooking, she was busy with the chocolate cake. Kiku was changing into the black suit she'd bought for him when the phone rang. Anemone answered it, then handed the receiver to him with a strange look on her face. "It's for you," she said.

"You remember me, kid? Sorry if I was a little rough on you." The voice, all sugar and gravel, was unforgettable: it was Mr. D.

"How'd you get this number?" asked Kiku.

"Does it matter? I hear you're living with a real doll. I guess Hashi isn't the only one of you boys with 'talent,' shall we say."

"Good-bye," said Kiku.

"Wait a second. I just wanted to find out if Hashi's there." Instantly, Kiku had a sinking feeling.

"Why should he be here? Has something happened to him?"

"Not seen him? OK, sorry to bother you," said D, as if ready to hang up.

"Wait!" said Kiku. "What's happened to Hashi?"

"Don't you read the papers?" D said, and the line went dead.

When he had replaced the receiver, Kiku picked up the newspaper and started from the front page, looking for Hashi's name. As he turned the pages, his sense of foreboding grew into a great, suffocating cloud. He reached the columns listing upcoming radio and television programs, then jumped up from his seat: beneath a picture of Hashi was a caption

describing him as a singer left in a coin locker who was about to meet his mother for the first time in seventeen years.

As he hurried around the apartment getting ready to go out, Anemone stopped him, but before she could speak, he put his hand over her mouth.

“I’ll be back, I promise. Just don’t open my present while I’m gone,” he said, ripping a steaming drumstick from the turkey on the table and stuffing it in his mouth as he headed for the door.

“Kiku!” Anemone called, but he was already gone.

The elevator door opened and he crossed the lobby at a jog, then broke into a run when he reached the street. He gnawed at the turkey as he went. Just wait for me, Hashi, he repeated to himself; I’ll help you. He ran into Yoyogi Park, straight to one particular bench in the stadium, and began to dig. In a few minutes he had extracted a package tied with heavy wax paper; inside were four shotguns and a supply of cartridges. A moment later, the guns were loaded and Kiku ran off into the night.

A faint rush of wings over the water, ducks probably, and a cry carried off by the wind. Hashi’s breath was white as he crossed the park for a second time. The bodies of two lovers kissing on a bench made a rustling sound. A cigarette dangled from the man’s hand; her hair had a scorched, dry look. Another rustling sound, their lips still stuck together, and the cigarette went out. It had begun to snow, a light, big-flaked snow so fluffy it hardly seemed to reach the ground, sticking instead to the trees, the lovers, the streetlights, the birds’ wings. A young girl came running up with a dog that started barking at him. The girl jerked the dog’s chain and apologized, then ran on. As she passed, he thought he saw a faint smile on her lips, and he suddenly wanted to call to her, to stop her, to make contact. He wanted to ask her the question that was preying on his mind: if you met the mother who abandoned you, what would you say to her?

It was Neva who had told him, three days earlier.

“It’s a done deal, Hashi, and there’s nothing we can do about it. You’ve got to go through with it. Neither of us is strong enough to stop it. I tried to think of a way out; I knew how much it would hurt you—I swear I want it to hurt me just as much. But the way I see it, we only have two choices: one is for you to act your way through the whole thing; go through with it, meet this woman—who may or may not be your mother—but tell yourself that

she means nothing to you, that you just happened to have borrowed her womb for a while. No matter what she does, you don't get angry, you don't cry, you just stare at her with a sad look on your face, and that's that. It's all over in thirty minutes, and everybody goes home and forgets about it. The audience forgets, you forget, and it's history. The other choice is for you to go with your feelings, which could be more dangerous, but in a way it could be easier, too. You just do what comes naturally if it's too hard to control your emotions. But I doubt you'll feel anything anyway. I bet you when you meet this woman she'll seem just like a stranger, like anybody else you were meeting for the first time, and it won't be such a big deal."

But Neva, thought Hashi, understood nothing, nothing at all. She just didn't see how it was; she couldn't understand what hell it had been imagining the sort of woman who might be his mother. The images were never pleasant, the face never smiled, marked for life with the horror of having thrown away a child. The women who lingered at the edges of Hashi's mind were racked by remorse, doomed to blame themselves continually, eternally. They were crazy old beggars, ugly as sin and draped in stinking rags, their bodies too riddled with disease even for dogs to feed on. In Hashi's imagination, these broken women were forever being knocked down, bloodied, tortured until they pissed their pants—over and over again, until he felt appeased.

Afterward, he was left with gooseflesh all over his body and a nasty taste in his mouth; and somehow, in the process, he always came to pity them, to feel like weeping for them. He wanted to make their minds whole again, make them ten years younger and not so wrinkled. He wanted to pick them up from the trash heap, comb their hair, bathe them, dress them, put their shoes back on, and set them toddling on their way. He wanted to take them to a hospital and have them cured of their boils, then erase the ugly scars they left. He wanted to dry their tears and send them off for a night on the town, with a nice man to keep them company. He wanted them to find a nice place to get undressed, to show off their freshly healed skin, a little flabby perhaps but clear and pink. He even wanted the man to stick his head between their thighs, to make them groan with pleasure. And then at last he would hear it: the women laughing. Unmistakably, laughing. And that was enough to set him off again—too much, as always, for him to stand. The

next moment the women were on the road back to poverty, disease, insanity. No, one thing was quite clear: Neva just didn't know what it was like.

Still, until yesterday Hashi had thought he would go through with the broadcast anyway, confident that he could keep control of himself, confident of his acting abilities. He had even been in training, convincing himself that the woman he was going to meet, no matter what she might turn out to be like, meant nothing to him, a total stranger. Running away before the broadcast had been the last thing on his mind. Then, this morning, he'd had his first look at Kimie Numata from a distance. D had taken him in his car, and they'd watched her out shopping for her dinner. She was a big woman, tall with a thick neck. Despite the cold, she wasn't wearing any stockings, and the plastic shopping bag she carried was cheap-looking and dirty. She'd stopped at a grocer's for a daikon radish and some pickles. While they were wrapping them, she picked up an orange, but reluctantly put it back on the shelf when she heard the price. She's not exactly rich, Hashi noted.

Her hair, he could tell from the car, was dyed, and her hands were rough. She was wearing a little makeup, but not much. They followed her to a fish store where she bought one dried cod. One—so she must live alone. No husband and no kids. She chatted a while with the fishmonger who must have told a joke because he laughed at it himself. The woman didn't laugh. Hashi looked closely to make sure: she didn't laugh. He was trembling, on the verge of tears. He had to grab the seat to keep from shouting, he was so happy. *She hadn't laughed*. Finally, he couldn't stand it any longer and tried to jump out of the car, but D caught him and clapped his hand over his mouth just in time to muffle the scream: "Mother!"

Inside, he was bursting: his mother, the woman who'd given birth to him, WASN'T CRAZY! She wasn't a beggar, or sick, or ugly. She was just a normal woman! A little down on her luck, maybe, and living alone. She was probably lonely, and she didn't feel much like laughing. But SHE WAS JUST A WOMAN!… When he finally got himself back under control, Hashi began to feel a little scared: what if this perfect-looking mother just rejected him again? He pictured himself running to embrace her, hoping his feelings for her would be returned, only to find that she was angry, that she wanted to push him away—the thought left him dazed.

That afternoon, he'd slipped out of a bathroom window to escape D's guard and hurried to the woman's apartment. She wasn't home, and he had ended up in this park, crossing it in search of another house in the quiet neighborhood beyond it. By the time he found the gate and rang the bell, the snow made things hard to see. A young woman came out to ask what he wanted, and Hashi answered in a mechanical tone, as if a tiny robot were speaking from the back of his throat:

"My name is Hashio Kuwayama. I'm a singer. I'm seventeen years old. I was found seventeen years ago in a coin locker in Yokohama along with a bunch of bougainvillea. A year ago I saw the lady who lives here on TV and she said she once met a woman who left a baby and some bougainvillea in a locker. She was in prison at the time. I want to ask her about that woman; I think she's my mother. I know it's late, but I'm afraid it has to be now."

The young woman frowned. Hashi noticed she was dressed like a nurse.

"I'm sorry. Madam is ill and can't see anyone," she said as if repeating a formula, and shut the door in Hashi's face while he was still considering what to say next. As the bolt clicked into place, he could hear a voice saying, "Please go away."

He didn't. The snow was too wet to stick, but his hair was getting soaked as he stood watching the house. The lights were on, but there was no sign of life inside. He found himself counting the snowflakes as they appeared in the circle of light cast by the street-lamp. Unlike insects and moths that usually collect around a light, the snow whirled and drifted silently; in fact, it seemed to deaden all sound, muffling the faint cries of the birds in the park which had been audible until that moment. The sound of cars in the distance had also grown almost too faint to hear, muted by each flake that appeared in the light. Hashi leaned against the gate and relished the damp chill that was overtaking his body, making his teeth chatter and his limbs go numb. Then, just as he was growing too cold to think, he heard the small rattle of a shutter being opened behind him. As he turned, he could see the silhouette of an old woman standing in a patch of light and fresh snow.

"Not as cold as you might think," said the shadow, ignoring the snow that had begun to collect on Hashi's hair, as she opened the gate. Circling around to the back of the house through the garden, Hashi noticed a cage

containing a pair of peacocks. The hen slept on a nest while her mate stood guard in the snow, his tail spread out full and flashing luminescent green in the light that escaped through the shutters. The snow as it fell was sucked into the brilliant fan of feathers.

“Please come in,” said the old writer, beckoning to Hashi.

When she’d finished massaging her customer, the woman went back to the waiting room for a cigarette—menthol-tipped, extra long. One of the other girls who was done for the night had changed back into street clothes and was nibbling at a piece of cake as she pointed out the window at the snow. The woman peeled off her shorts and rubbed her legs with a towel. As she was wriggling into her pantyhose, she caught them on a nail and started a run at the ankle. Shit. Then she remembered she’d worn her new boots today—more bad luck: she was buying them on time and she’d only made three payments so far. The guy at the shoe store had warned her not to wear them in the rain or snow (actually, he’d said snow was the worst, could shorten the life of the boots by half.) She stared glumly out the window; the streets were still clear, but a light coating had begun to collect on roofs here and there. Another girl looked up from the magazine she was reading.

“Anything interesting going on out there? A while back some guys in hats were messing around with some big lights. Looked like they were setting up for a movie. They still there?”

The woman shook her head. She’d decided what she’d do: as soon as she got home, she would wipe off the boots and rub them down with Vaseline. Once she’d had dinner she tended to lose steam and there was no telling when she’d get around to them, so she had to do them first thing after she got home. That much Kimie Numata had decided.

At various points around the building that contained the massage parlor, four discreetly placed video cameras and a dozen five-kilowatt arc lights were ready and waiting. In a vacant lot fifty meters away were assembled a mobile power unit, an equipment van, a video relay truck for live remotes, and cars belonging to assorted media types. D was in the relay truck staring at a blank monitor but taking frequent glances at his watch. At his side sat Neva, her face buried in her hands.

“I really think it would be better if he didn’t come at all,” she was saying without lifting her head. The phone in the van rang just then, and she

pounced on it. “Did you find him?” she asked in a shrill voice, but her expression soon faded to disappointment and she handed the phone to D. He listened for a long while, nodding occasionally, then said, “No, nix that,” and hung up. The call had been from Handy back at the office; it seems a young man in a black suit carrying a gun had come around asking for D. When he was told he wasn’t there, he wanted to know where Hashi would be meeting his mother. Handy had tried to clam up, but the kid had shot a great big hole in the ceiling and frightened the secretaries. One helluva gun. In the end, he’d spilled the beans. Now he was wondering whether he should call the police, or what. It was this last suggestion D had nixed. Instead, he got on his walkie-talkie and told his people in key positions there that if a young man in a black suit showed up, he was to be brought straight to the relay truck.

“Tell him Hashi’s here with me, tell him anything, only no rough stuff. Just bring him to me.” D was looking at his watch again.

Next to Neva in the truck sat the program announcer running through the script one last time. “Ladies and gentlemen, the atmosphere is electric as our true-life drama is about to begin. Think back for a moment to the series of cruel incidents—children abandoned, infants slain—that preceded it. And now, amidst the swirling snow, one of those children, left for dead in a coin locker, and his mother, the woman who left him there, are going to meet for the first time in seventeen years. There is no denying this woman’s guilt, no forgiving her crime; but her son has overcome these hardships and grown up to become a famous singer. And it is our privilege here tonight to watch this incredible encounter. Words alone could never do justice to what we are about to see, but a young French philosopher once wrote: ‘A mother, and the sea: each compelled by rage to kill its child—or is it to give him life?’…”

Neva was remembering how Hashi had tossed and turned the night before, unable to get to sleep. Usually, when his nerves were shot and he was having trouble sleeping, he would ask her to suck him off. Last night, she’d suggested it herself to calm him down, but he had said he’d rather talk about something nice instead. She had gone into detail about the honeymoon they were planning for after the New Year: two weeks in Canada and Alaska. She told him how much he was going to like skiing,

how easy it was to learn, and he had listened quietly, his face pressed against his pillow. After a while he interrupted her.

“Neva. Do you think it’s OK to love somebody you’ve never met? Or hate them for that matter?” Neva didn’t answer, but climbed into Hashi’s bed and took him in her arms. “I’m fine,” he had mumbled, “I’m fine. When I meet her, I’ll just say, ‘Long time no see, Mom,’ and leave it at that.”

She was sorry she hadn’t answered him last night, sorry she hadn’t said that a woman has a duty to raise the children she bears, and it would be the most natural thing in the world, the right thing, for him to hate this woman who had failed him. She wished she’d told him he had every right to hate someone he had never met. But she didn’t have time to blame herself more because at that moment the back door of the truck flew open and one of D’s assistants yelled, “Quick! She’s coming out!”

As they jumped from the van, the generator truck came to life with a loud hum and D started shouting:

“When she gets out in the street, surround her. If she tries to get away, use the lights and cameras to hem her in. Forget about keeping this to ourselves, just keep her there! And double the guards to make sure the guy in the black suit doesn’t get through—and that goes for all the other jerks hanging around. But if Hashi shows up, bring him to me; I don’t care what you have to do—tie him up, knock him out—just get him in front of those cameras!”

“Wait here,” Kiku ordered, getting out of the cab without paying. “I’m just going to get somebody and I’ll be right back.” He was gone before the driver had time to object. A few minutes later, while he was running along wondering how he was going to find Hashi in this maze of dark alleys, one of them suddenly lit up like day.

“Gas, I expect, but where’s the bang?” murmured an old man pushing a cart as Kiku hurried by in that direction. At the head of the alley leading there, however, he ran straight into four men.

“Sorry, buddy, there’s filming going on back there. You’ll have to find another way through,” said one.

“Listen, asshole,” Kiku hissed, “I’m a friend of Hashi’s.”

“No one gets in. We’ve got orders.”

“But Hashi’s my friend!” Kiku yelled. The street was beginning to fill with bystanders. The hum of the generator shook the ground beneath the ring of snow-filled light. In the distance, raised voices could be heard.

“Take me to Mr. D, then! He knows me,” Kiku told the men blocking his path. Silence and shaking heads. The building illuminated by the arc lights was around a corner twenty meters down the alley and to the right. Kiku could see men turning the corner, most of them carrying cameras or other equipment. The crowd behind him pressing to get by the guards continued to grow. From where, they stood, they could hear a woman’s shrill voice. Someone shouted: “He’s here!” The crush increased. “Hashi!” a woman called. The generator groaned a steady counterpoint to the din. Kiku’s voice caught in his throat when he saw Hashi at the far end of the alley, disappearing into the swarm of photographers. He seemed to be smiling.

As he tried again to push his way through the line of guards, the nearest man caught him by the arm. A punch to the jaw sent the guy rolling into the snowy gutter, but when the others closed in from either side and shoved him back, Kiku calmly pulled one of the sawed-off shotguns from his belt and fired at the line of feet ahead of him. Wet snow showered two of the men, who fell to the ground clutching their legs, and Kiku’s “Get back” sent the last one running down the street. Kiku followed. At the corner, he came up against a wall of straining backs and clicking shutters on the other side of which were the lights and an announcer who could be heard starting his spiel. After trying once more to break through the line, he pulled the next gun from his belt. This time he fired over the heads of the photographers, and in an instant every face in the crowd had turned to look at him. Leveling the gun, he marched slowly forward as the wall of people parted.

“Hashi!” he yelled into the sudden silence. “Come on! I’ve got a car waiting. Let’s go home.”

Hashi appeared between the photographers, his face barely visible, backlit by the huge lights, but Kiku could see that he was waving.

“Kiku, come over here a minute. There’s somebody I want you to meet,” he said.

Kiku advanced into the pool of staring eyes and artificial daylight surrounded by high steel frames holding black boxes. It was the boxes that made all the light. Staring into one of them, he felt dizzy, his vision became a yellow blur, and for a moment he was nearly blind. When he could see

again, he noticed that D was standing nearby with the tall woman who had been on TV with Hashi. The announcer had lit a cigarette. And there was one more woman there, someone he didn't recognize, who for some reason was crouching on the ground and trying to cover her face with her sweater. She was shaking, her skirt and boots were covered with mud, and she refused to look up even though the lights were focused mainly in her direction. There were four television cameras, Kiku noticed, two rigged up on the scaffolding, one on a dolly next to the announcer, and a hand-held one circulating through the crowd. D stared long and hard at Kiku, then mumbled something to himself that sounded like "Damned if they don't look alike."

When he got to where Hashi was standing, Kiku could see that his eyes were moist, and he waited for the familiar "Thank you" he'd heard so many times after a rescue. Instead, Hashi pointed at the woman cowering under her sweater and said:

"Kiku, that's your mother."

Kiku had no idea what he was talking about.

"I went to see that old lady writer I saw on TV. She told me my mother died last year, so this has to be *your* mother!"

The announcer took this as his cue to run up to the woman: "Mrs. Numata, your son is here—the real one, this time. Please, say something to him. He's come specially to meet you, and I must say, he looks just like you. A big, healthy kid, a fine young man. Come on, you must have something to say to your own son after all these years. He's an athlete, apparently. Won't you at least have a look at him? Here he is, standing right here, the baby you left in a coin locker seventeen years ago. I'm sure he's come here to forgive you. Please…" The man holding the portable camera swooped in on Kiku for a closeup only to be shoved back as he tried to force his way out of the shimmering ring of people closing like a noose around him. Dozens of clicking cameramen pressed in to block his way.

"Get back, please," he told them, his voice beginning to waver. "I'm leaving now." His mind was set on heading back to Anemone's apartment, but something else, not quite a thought and not yet a memory, began to twitch somewhere inside his head. Something metallic—silver it was—and heavy and shining, something that had been buried in the walls of his brain, began to heat up, to hum and whirr. Suddenly feeling sick, he closed his

eyes, but on the back of his eyelids he saw a rubber doll with red liquid dribbling from its mouth; a doll with Kazuyo's stiffened thighs. Stop *looking* at me! Let me out of here! Shut off that light and let me go home now! As he opened his eyes, an eddy of snow blew past and for a moment everything was blurred again. The first thing to come back into focus in the field of white was the shivering sweater woman. They're saying that's my mother? To him she was like a figure in a nightmare. The stiff, ungainly body trembling in the snow might have been every feeling of dread, every sense of loathing he'd ever had—covered with a sweater. She was hardly human, more like some… blob… of metal. His eyes had started to ache, strafed by the light from the black boxes overhead. He could feel his eyeballs drying in their sockets, and the focus was beginning to go again, beginning to form the familiar gap between left and right. That was where the colors always appeared, bright primary colors, and from the gap they started to spread. They poured into the eyes of the people standing around him, and onto their cheeks and lips and down their necks. Now I know what's going on, Hashi. You've cooked up one of your little model worlds—and you got me here by pretending to cry. Kiku's whole field of vision now was filled with a blazing white metal wheel which threw off shards of light as it began to turn, glowing shards that cut deep into one's skin. As the wheel picked up speed, Kiku could hear the whirring noise it made.

When the TV cameraman crept up again, close enough to touch his pale face, Kiku let out a scream and drew the third shotgun.

"Get back!" D bellowed. The cameraman dived out of the way just as the gun went off, and the lens turned to powder, sifting down into the snow. His back heaving, Kiku tossed the empty gun aside and took out the last one.

"Stop this," a voice said. "Please."

Kiku spun around. It was the woman; the sweater was no longer covering her head and she was looking straight at him.

"Please, stop," she said again. "If you're going to shoot someone," she said quietly, "shoot me." She was standing now and walking slowly toward him.

I'm trapped! Trapped in a dome of light! Got to break out! Got to smash the light! Kiku took aim at the brilliant shards and pulled the trigger. For one instant, the big woman was standing directly in his path, her head level

with the mouth of the barrel. A second later, her face had been ripped away and her arms spread open as she collapsed into the same crouch as before, covered now with what might have been a bright red sweater. Her head was just a smooth globe with no trace of eyes, nose, lips, ears, or hair. The globe tilted up at Kiku, and a muddy red pool drank in the snowflakes from the sky, giving back a fine, faint steam.

19

Her bags packed, Anemone fried up the last omelette, dumped it out on the one remaining plate, and shoveled it into her mouth with the final fork. How many omelettes had she made since that night he'd told her not to open her present until he got back? She'd broken her promise and opened the package, and since then she'd eaten almost nothing but eggs—omelettes three meals a day.

The police had called Anemone in for questioning on seven separate occasions, each time with something new to ask. "Did he tell you where he got the guns?" "Was he carrying them when he left your apartment on Christmas Eve?" "What did he say he was going to do when he left?" "Did he say he was going to kill someone?" "What was he doing that night before he left your apartment?" "When did you first meet him?" "How would you describe your relationship with the accused?" "Are you sexually involved?" "How old are you?" "Is Anemone your real name?" She refused to give them any information, but the interrogation never really got heavy; she only had to smile sadly and they broke off the session. It seemed that she wasn't the most important witness anyway.

Then there was the lawyer D had hired for Kiku; he'd been around several times asking her to testify at the trial. "Miss Anemone," he'd said, "Hashio Kuwayama says he's convinced that Kiku was only trying to save him, to help him avoid meeting his mother in front of a TV camera. Does that make sense to you? Was there anything Kiku said before he left that might have given you that idea? 'I'm off to help Hashi' or something like that? If you did hear something of that sort, it would be very much to Kiku's advantage." Still, Anemone refused to cooperate.

"But why won't you help us?" the lawyer wanted to know.

"Because I hate all this legal bullshit," she told him.

When Anemone first saw Kiku again in court, she remembered that he'd spent a couple of days in a mental hospital for observation. From the look of him, she thought they might have done more than just observe, maybe

tampered with his brain or something. The boy who stood in the dock was a bundle of nerves, fidgeting and rolling his eyes. His back was hunched and he seemed to have gained some weight. His dull, dry eyes stole rapid, anxious glances around the room. Anemone, who had dressed down to avoid attracting attention, watched from the spectators' gallery as the prosecutor read the charges: illegal possession of firearms, willful destruction of property, assault and battery, and first-degree murder. Kiku tried to say something to the bailiff, but when the judge warned him to be quiet and listen to the indictment, he shrank back in his seat.

In the aftermath of the shooting, Kiku had become something of a celebrity. Though as a minor his name and photograph weren't supposed to appear in print, he had done the deed on live, nationwide TV, with thirteen minutes' worth of closeups of his face and an announcer shrieking "We are here with Kikuyuki Kuwayama, athlete and adopted brother of the pop singer Hashi." The news reports dubbed him "Youth A," the first person ever to commit murder on live TV, and thanks to the notoriety he attracted, Hashi's new record, rushed to the stores a month later, was a huge hit.

The trial did not get underway until some time later, after the fuss had died down a bit. When the indictment was finished, though, Kiku immediately pleaded guilty to all the charges, bringing his attorney running to the prisoner's dock and sending a buzz through the gallery. The man whispered in his ear, trying to persuade him to plead innocent to the murder charge. For a few minutes, Kiku shook his head, but in the end he reluctantly stood up and said "I didn't mean to kill her," which, though sounding like a puppet's voice, made his lawyer, the spectators, the judge, and even the prosecutor look relieved.

The defense case took three days to present. Kiku's lawyer did not contest any of the other charges, but insisted that there was no premeditation on his client's part, in fact no murderous intent at all. His strategy was to argue that Kiku had been unable to bear the idea that his dearest friend—indeed, his brother—was to be made a spectacle of on TV, and had committed the assault in a state of severe emotional distress. Angling for a reduced sentence, he called various witnesses, who adopted much the same tone as that of the media reports, one sympathetic to Kiku's plight. His foster father came from the island, joined by the nuns from the orphanage, to testify to the utter inseparability of the two boys, a story that

left the gallery in tears. And, after them, an unusually candid Mr. D took the stand.

“If there’s anyone to blame here, it’s me,” he announced. “I’m the one who should be on trial. This whole thing started when I got the bright idea of cashing in on Hashi’s background to sell records. I’d be the first to admit it wasn’t the kind of thing one human being should do to another, and I guess I must look pretty much like a monster—guess I am one. You just don’t go around playing with other people’s pain to sell some lousy records… Anyway, it seems to me there’s nothing very strange about young Kiku here coming to the rescue of his little brother.”

Kiku made no secret of where the shotguns had come from, which Hashi was called on to corroborate: “Yes, he was keeping them for a Filipino named Tatsuo de la Cruz.” The last witness for the defense was the coroner who had performed the autopsy on the body of Kimie Numata. He was asked specifically about the wound in her skull. From the angle of entry, he had determined that the barrel of the gun at the time it was fired was somewhere between fourteen and twenty-eight degrees above horizontal. In other words, the evidence showed that Kiku had fired virtually into the air, probably due to the violent emotion he was experiencing.

“And so, just as Kikuyuki fired the gun, Kimie Numata—who was an unfortunately tall woman—stumbled in front of the barrel,” his lawyer concluded. “There was no intent to injure. The barrel, as we have shown, was pointed skyward, endangering no one—not the reporters, not the photographers, no one. What we have here is a tragic accident, pure and simple.” Kiku squirmed uncomfortably and began to shiver as the coroner went over the X-rays of the dead woman’s skull; wincing at particularly gruesome details, he closed his eyes and tried to cover his ears. Eventually he burst into tears. Cutting short the coroner’s testimony, the judge ordered a thirty-minute recess, and Kiku was led out, back bent and hands covering his face. No one in the courtroom seemed to doubt his suffering.

When the prosecutor started to make his case, it quickly became apparent that he wouldn’t even try to prove Kiku had intended to commit murder. He made no attempt to discredit the defense witnesses, settling for a brief review of the highlights of the case which took less than half a day. The only point he hadn’t raised before was that the gun Kiku used was, in fact, a lethal weapon. When he was done, everyone in the courtroom, Kiku

included, seemed somehow relieved and satisfied with the way things had gone. Everyone, that is, except Anemone.

The defense proceeded with its summing-up:

“I am the first to recognize that we must be wary of allowing ourselves to be swayed by the drama of this case. The law, and rightly so, must ignore the complex fabric of human history and psychology that serves as a backdrop to these events. The law must be applied sternly and with the evenest of hands. Nevertheless, when I think of the very *origin* of that self-same law, namely, an abiding respect for human life, I can’t help feeling that the fault here lies not with this young man but with the society that each and every one of us has helped to create. Make no mistake about it, seventeen years ago when he was abandoned, completely helpless, in that coin locker, the young man who stands before you today as defendant was himself already a victim. Which is not, I hasten to say, a justification for his actions in the present case; yet we must bear in mind that those actions—heinous as they may be—spring from nothing more reprehensible than the desire to help a brother who had shared similar sorrow and shame. In the final analysis, it is manifestly clear that this tragic accident in no way demonstrates the defendant’s disregard for the sanctity of human life, but rather just the opposite.”

The prosecutor insisted that it was the responsibility of the court to examine the nature of the crime and not the particular circumstances of the criminal:

“It should be said here once and for all: it is not—it *must not*—be in the power of this court to grant clemency on the basis of a defendant’s unfortunate personal history. However, I would be the first to recognize that this was a crime brought about in large part by the desire of others to gain profit from the revelation of secrets which those involved might quite reasonably have preferred to leave undisclosed…”

On the day the court’s decision was to be announced, Kiku was as nervous as he had been throughout the trial. He sat trembling in his chair, his eyes roaming the room. The verdict was much as expected: he was found guilty of possession of firearms, willful destruction of property, and assault and battery, while the first-degree murder charge was reduced to manslaughter in the absence of any demonstrable premeditation or intent on Kiku’s part. For these crimes, he was sentenced to five years. When the

court had adjourned, the crowd stood to leave. Mr. D shook hands with Kiku's lawyer. The prosecutor was smiling, and glancing around a bit sheepishly, as if to let everyone know how difficult he had found his role in the whole affair. And Hashi buried his face on Neva's shoulder as she stroked his head.

"He'll be out in three years, no more, I promise. And then he can come live with us," she whispered.

The bailiff had taken Kiku by the arm and was leading him out of the room. As she watched, Anemone began to get a choking feeling in her chest. At first she thought it was the bad air in the courthouse, and she tried clearing her throat; opening her mouth, she placed her fingers along her delicate neck and forced air through her nose and teeth. But instead of the cough she expected, she produced a shrill wail.

"Kiku!" she cried, leaning out from the spectators' gallery and waving her white beret. "What about the DATURA? You can't let them do this to you!" The other spectators stopped in their tracks and turned to stare at this doll-like figure in her snow-white suit and boots, neon brooch in the shape of a rose, and shining cap of tight, frosted curls. Kiku was the last to turn. The word DATURA had made him flinch.

"We're not through with this yet!" she screamed. He smiled at her for just a moment, standing up straight for the first time since the trial began, until the bailiff gave him a little shove and he stumbled through the door. He was still wearing the black suit she'd bought him for their Christmas dinner, though it was slightly the worse for wear, with buttons missing, cuffs frayed, and shiny patches at the knees and elbows. When she lost sight of him, Anemone headed for the exit, ignoring the stares of the crowd. Behind her she could hear Hashi's voice talking about poor Kiku, how bad he must feel. At the door to the courtroom, she turned and eyed the friends of the defendant murderously, settling on Neva's hollow face.

"Someday you'll be Gulliver's supper," she muttered at her.

That night, Anemone opened Kiku's Christmas present, the cookbook called *All about Omelettes*. Kiku had drawn a red circle around the recipe for Rice Omelettes on page 182. So she went out and bought a couple of hundred eggs and began to practice; and, except when she had to go shopping for more ingredients, she made rice omelettes from the time she got up in the morning to the time she went to bed, until the apartment was

awash in eggs and ketchup and rice. When every horizontal surface, her bed excepted, was covered with the stuff, Anemone stopped to look around, laughed a moment at her own looniness, and then burst into tears.

When she was through crying, she took the nearest plate and flung it against the map of Garagi Island on the wall. With the sound of it breaking, an image of Kiku's naked body appeared before her eyes, his hard muscles covered with only a paper-thin layer of skin, and suddenly she was seized with the thought that she might have touched that body for the last time. She began to shake and tears came welling up again, though she thought she hadn't any left in her to cry. I guess I'll just go crazy, she decided. Instead, she took off her underpants and put her finger between her buns the way Kiku used to do. It felt cold, and she was covered with gooseflesh, but she dug her fingernail into the soft flesh and kept it there until she had stopped shivering. Finally, something began to ooze inside, and she slowly slid the finger along her ass, grabbing a nylon from beside her on the bed to stuff in behind it. Listening to the slurpy sound of the stocking in her pubic hair and the sour juice that was flowing freely now, she drew the outline of his hard-on in her mind, remembering how the real thing had always reminded her of steamed asparagus. But it didn't work. She ended up seeing only the asparagus, or else her father's penis which she'd seen long ago in the bath. She gave up on the cock, having better luck picturing the thick patch of hair on his chest, the deep folds of muscle across his stomach, the broad sinews down his side, and the calluses on the soles of his feet. But just as she'd worked her finger into her crotch, she realized she had completely forgotten what his face looked like, and she jumped out of bed wailing. With the stocking still hanging out of her, she waded through the swamp of ketchup-flavored rice, grabbed a framed picture of Kiku from the table, and stood staring at it. It took all of thirty seconds for her to make up her mind: she would have to follow him.

The next day she sold the condo and just about everything in it—jewelry, tennis rackets, everything—and put the proceeds in seven different bank accounts around the city; the deposits together came to just over two hundred million yen. She told her parents she was going to London, and then phoned the modeling agency to tell them she was breaking her contract. In return for letting her out four months early, she offered to

forego the payment she still had coming from the previous year. No trouble there.

Now, her bags all packed, she sat eating the last of the omelettes. Gulliver waited below, his tail curled to fit inside the tank that occupied most of the rear of her remodeled ’87 Ford Bronco. She had wavered over whether to take him, but in the end it had been impossible to do anything else. “You’ll only be stuck in there ten hours or so,” she told him as she loaded enough diving gear for two and a small bag containing clothes into what remained of the cargo space. “Then we’ll get to see Kiku. You miss him as much as I do, don’t you, fella?” At three in the morning, the Ford rolled out of Tokyo.

She headed north on the Tohoku Expressway. The jail where Kiku was being sent was in the harbor town of Hakodate at the end of the highway and across a narrow strait. Anemone’s foot, shod in a red satin Chinese slipper with a design of cabbage flowers done in gold thread, maintained an even pressure on the gas pedal. The Bronco purred along at 130 kph, 4500 rpms. Anemone was whistling. As yet it hadn’t hit her that she was leaving Tokyo behind; every light in the city still lingered in the fibers of her gold lame shirt.

Anemone hated traveling; in fact, up till now she had only made one other long journey in her life. That had been her middle school class trip: four days and three nights in Kyoto and Nara. At the first hotel, she had eaten three times more than she was used to and talked all night with her friends. After that, she slept through the rest of the journey on the bus. She knew they were supposed to have toured some old buildings and gardens, but she could hardly remember anything about them. All she registered, in a vague, physical way, was the motion, the moving from place to place. Collapsed in her seat, from time to time she’d been woken by the noise and vibration; and through a tiny crack in her eyelids, she would check the view out the window, which invariably had changed from the last time she had checked. The scene would fade, and in the distance lights would come on. So this is traveling, she remembered thinking at the time. Why bother, if that’s all it’s got to offer?

She kept her foot on the gas pedal, watching the way the headlights would pick out a patch of darkness, freeze it in an instant of daylight, and then send it hurtling back into oblivion. The sliver of ghost-gray road

streaming out ahead was growing imperceptibly lighter; it would soon be dawn. Deciding she should stop for gas and something to eat, she pulled into a service area. She fished a chunk of horsemeat out of the cooler on the passenger's seat, took a peek at the tank behind her and, after tossing Gulliver his breakfast, headed across the parking lot for the restaurant. The clientele at that hour was mostly truck drivers, and Anemone, with her frosted perm, silver fox coat, black leather pants, and Chinese slippers, attracted a fair amount of attention. When she got up to go to the restroom, thinking she would freshen up a bit while she was waiting for her curry and miso soup with clams, every head in the place rose from the plate or bowl it had been buried in and followed her narrow hips across the room.

The restroom, out behind the kitchen, had apparently just been cleaned since the floor was still wet. There was no heating in it, and Anemone's breath appeared as white puffs in the broken mirror. The icy tap water felt good on her face. The steam seeping through the cracks in the door from the kitchen brought a faint smell of cabbage with it. Suddenly, one of the stalls opened and two men stumbled out; one of them, naked from the waist down, was shivering violently.

"Cut it out," he was blubbering. The other man, who brandished a hypodermic needle, was laughing. All at once, they noticed Anemone standing by the sink.

"A *woman*!" hissed the first man as he lost his footing and planted his bare ass on the wet floor. As he fell, he grabbed at his crotch with both hands to cover his hard-on. He came to rest in front of the exit, blocking the way and leaving Anemone to inspect his companion's costume: snakeskin jacket, beret, baggy riding pants, and heavy work shoes. He was a short man, with a powerful neck and large hands. For a moment he stopped laughing, but when he saw his friend trying to stuff himself into a pair of underpants and hide the bulge under the tails of his shirt, he burst out laughing even louder.

"Doooon't!" the guy on the floor pleaded. "Not in front of *her*!" He picked himself up and dressed himself in a hurry: yellow pants, pink socks, and black leather boots that laced up the side. The socks were worn through at the heel. While he got dressed, he looked at the ground to avoid meeting Anemone's eyes. He was even shorter than the man with the needle, the top of his head not reaching Anemone's mouth. Though he couldn't have been

more than thirty, he had a bald patch in the middle where the few remaining hairs had been slathered with oil and parted neatly on one side.

He began trying to explain, telling her how he'd been raised by his granny and it was her fault he'd turned out this way, made him put this electric thing up his ass because his bowels were bad, and so on… His breath was sour, and flecks of spit at the corner of his mouth sprayed on Anemone's arm as he talked. She began to feel sick. The other man had put away the needle and turned to the window where sunlight was streaming in.

"You don't think I'm a creep, do you, miss? You just feel sorry for me, don't you?" Thick veins bulged in his neck and along his temples, and he was sweating heavily though the room was freezing. Finally, Anemone tried to dodge under his arm and squeeze past him.

"Miss, don't go yet… You see, my granny's real sick now, 'bout to die, they say, but I can't quit working so I get these injections of Korean vitamins to keep me going. Can't be all that bad, can I?…" He had grabbed Anemone's arm and was squealing in her ear.

"You!" she shouted at the guy by the window. "*Do* something!"

The muscleman in the beret frowned at his friend and shook his head. "Cool it," he said. "You're getting messy again." Then he turned to Anemone. "You want me to shut him up?" And when Anemone nodded, he launched himself across the room and landed a big, meaty fist right between the bald man's eyes. Baldy clutched at his face, then crumpled to the floor, his eyes wide and unfocused. In no time, there was blood everywhere.

Anemone made her escape, almost puking by this stage, but as she returned to her seat the muscleman came trailing after.

"Hey, how 'bout a little thank-you?" he said.

She ignored him. Her curry was cold, and she'd lost her appetite anyway. She took a half-hearted sip of the soup as the man swung into the next seat.

"Well, how 'bout it? Where's my thank-you?" His front teeth were plated with gold fillings, and when he leaned toward her his pendant dangled in front of her eyes: a miniature of a woman giving a blow job. "I beat the shit out of him for you and you can't even say 'Thanks, mister'?" The rest of the drivers were grinning at them now. Anemone reached into her purse, took out two thousand-yen bills, and handed them over. For a moment he held them up to the light and examined them thoughtfully; then

he spat on the floor and, using the bills as a ladle, sloshed the curry over Anemone's hand which was still resting on the table. Bits of the brown stuff sprayed in her face and over the fur coat. "Bitch!" he hissed.

Anemone put the bills back in the bowl and wiped herself with a handkerchief. Just as she was finishing, though, she looked up: the other man was standing at the end of the table, his face covered with blood. He had one hand on the table to steady himself and with the other was clutching his nose to stop the flow, but a steady stream came from another cut on his forehead.

"Hurt much?" asked his friend. He shook his head. Noticing the blood, some of the waitresses came running up. "Don't get excited," said the muscleman, waving them off. "He just slipped in the toilet. He'll be fine; just seems to have broken his nose." Still clutching his face, the first man nodded in agreement, then slid into the seat across from Anemone and started eating the cold curry. After a minute he stopped, fished the thousand-yen bills from the bowl, and studied them with a puzzled look. Finally he started laughing uncontrollably, sending a stream of blood trickling into the bowl.

"Fir… fir… fir… ha… first time I… I… ha … ha… ever ate curry with… ha… *cash* in it!!!" As Anemone left the restaurant, she looked back over her shoulder. The two were still pointing at the limp brown bills and laughing.

She cut across the parking lot in front of a line of huge trucks. There was no sign of her friends as she had the Bronco filled at the gas pump. An hour later, she was listening to Hashi's voice on the radio singing "I'll drive you crazy, the story's just begun," and was just reaching for her sunglasses to ward off the glare, when a horn blasted behind her. Startled, she looked in the rearview mirror to find a truck right on her tail, less than a meter from her bumper. The truck was too high for her to see the driver's seat in the mirror, which showed nothing but a massive strip of grillwork, so she downshifted and hit the gas, pulling ahead for a moment. As the window of the truck came into view, she recognized her two friends from the truckstop. Baldy was driving; his face had been cleaned up but his shirt was still stained with blood. She rolled down her window and signaled for them to pass, but the truck's horn let out an ear-splitting blast and they closed in on her again. She tried to tell herself to stay cool; she'd wait till the next hill

and pull away on the upgrade, but if she lost her head now, they'd rear-end her and she'd wind up in a ditch.

Unfortunately, the highway continued on a long, gentle downward slope. Anemone dropped her speed. She wasn't sure what they were planning to do, but whatever it was, it would be easier to deal with at a slow speed. She was only doing about 30 kph when the truck suddenly came to a near stop and opened a gap of a hundred meters between them. After a few kilometers like that, however, Anemone checked the mirror again to find the truck had accelerated and was closing fast. Instantly, she stamped on the gas, but it was too late. Horn blaring, the truck slammed into the right rear end of the Bronco and went tearing by. The steering wheel shuddered as she fought to keep control; downshifting and pumping the brakes at the same time, she barely managed to keep from running off the road, but the side of the Bronco made a hideous noise as it scraped along the steel and cement guardrail. With her teeth clenched together, she held tight to the wheel and forced her way back into the lane; then, just as she was beginning to relax, she took one more look in the rearview mirror and let out a scream.

"Gulliver!"

The door of the cargo area was sprung and there was no sign of the crocodile. She hit the brakes, threw the Bronco in reverse, and started to back along the highway until other cars appeared and she had to stop, pulling over to one side. Climbing out, she ran along the road until she spotted him, lying on his back at the edge of the median strip. She screamed again and was about to go across when a steady stream of traffic cut her off. Gulliver lay still, probably in shock from the fall and the cold, but at the sound of Anemone's voice, his tail began to twitch.

"He's OK, he's OK," she muttered. His skin's tough and he weighs a ton—bet their stupid truck got the worst of it, she said to reassure herself. But how to help him? She went on calling his name, and the crocodile began to try to right himself, twisting his pale, lumpy belly and grasping at the air with his short legs. The passing cars managed to avoid hitting him as he bent his tail under his body and arched his back like a wrestler avoiding a pin. Anemone could see a tear in his side where the blood had started to flow. Next he tried raising his tail as high as he could and slapping it against the pavement while wrenching his body to one side, and eventually he managed to flip himself over. When he had regained his feet, Gulliver

looked around and then headed for the bushes covering the center strip. Presumably that seemed preferable to braving the road, which shook under the wheels of the trucks passing in tight clusters.

As Anemone stood there at the side of the highway, exhausted from calling Gulliver's name, she felt something come stealing up from under her feet, through the Chinese slippers and leather pants: a wave of sympathy—or grief, perhaps—for the animal trying to hide itself in those scruffy bushes. She'd never felt this way before. It was like being very cold, and her whole body was shivering. Suddenly, she longed for rain; the clear blue sky above the ridge of hills was unbearable. The traffic was getting thicker, and as each truck went by in a cloud of dust, she gave a little yelp. The trucks had somehow grown to an immense size, and she felt like an ant, waiting for something even more massive than them to smash her. She began to sob: "Mama, help me! Mama, please!" Soon, on the far side of the median strip, there was a heavy thud, and Gulliver sailed up into the blue sky. As he reached the top of the arch, his body split in half, the head end coming to rest in the bushes while the back landed in the road to splatter against the next truck, which sped away, its wheels drawing parallel red lines into the distance.

20

A yellow fiberglass pole had been tied to the roof of the van carrying four new inmates and two guards to the prison. The prisoners sat silently in the dark rear of the van while the guards chatted about their fishing trip of the week before, when they'd caught over a dozen rock trout. One prisoner, his hair slicked back with oil, interrupted them.

"Hey, jailer," he started out but, noticing the frowns on the guards' faces, immediately retreated: "Sorry, that's what we used to say where we just been… But what I wanted to ask is, do they mix barley with the rice in jail? You see, I can't take barley—the smell gets to me." The guards looked at each other and burst out laughing. The prisoner laughed along with them, but when they noticed him, they scowled and looked away.

On the lawn in front of the Juvenile Detention Center was a stand of palms and a bronze statue of two men wielding hammers. "Image of Hope" was carved in the stone that held the bronze. The gray, windowless building was immaculately maintained and in the early afternoon light might have been a suburban factory rather than a prison.

"Hey, Kuwayama," one of the guards in the van called to Kiku as he headed toward the entrance. He was carrying the fiberglass pole. "They'll keep this for you in in the Intake Room. Be sure to write it down when they're cataloguing your stuff. Understand?" Kiku nodded. "You got a tongue?" the guard prompted.

"Yes," said Kiku, almost inaudibly.

The four prisoners entered the building.

"Smells like a fuckin' hospital, don't it?" muttered the one with hair grease, but nobody bothered to answer. They were led up some steps and through a door labeled "Warden's Office." Three men were seated on a sofa in the bright, spacious room. One, a thin fellow with glasses in a double-breasted suit, was glancing through some papers. Next to him was an older man in a navy-blue uniform dragging on the butt of a filterless cigarette;

and at the far end, a fat man, also in uniform, who had pulled off his boots and was lounging back scratching his feet.

“The new intake has arrived, sir,” announced the guard who had brought them in. The man in the double-breasted suit looked up slowly as the fat guy squeezed back into his boots.

“I’m Warden Tosa. You men have been assigned to this facility to serve your respective sentences, and I want you to know that our primary purpose here is not to punish you but to help you to reform, to get you ready to return to society as useful citizens. All of you are first offenders, which is why you’ve been sent to us. Our facility is designed for people who haven’t yet developed fixed criminal tendencies, and we have a number of activities and programs to help you turn things around. You’ll find we can offer you vocational training in a wide variety of fields; we also have conventional education programs, correspondence courses, club activities, sports, and cultural programs. In return for all these opportunities, we ask for your full cooperation; get yourself used to prison life as quickly as you can, get to know the other fellows who’ve made progress through our system, try to turn yourself into what we like to call ‘model prisoners,’ and do your damnedest to get out of here and back to your families as soon as possible. That’s all.”

Just as his speech ended, the guy with greased-back hair gave a little laugh, more out of nervous tension than amusement. The fat man stepped forward.

“Something funny, buster?” He stood inches away from him, smothering him in the smell of sweat from his bull neck and barrel chest. “Maybe you didn’t get what the warden was saying. That it, mister? Or maybe you’ve been itching to get thrown in jail since the day you were born, and now that you finally made it, you’re just tickled pink? How ’bout it, asshole?” His boots were nearly twice the size of the prisoner’s tennis shoes.

“Sorry,” Hair Oil muttered several times, his cheek twitching uncontrollably.

“It doesn’t matter,” said the warden to smooth things over. “Shall we let it go this time, Tadokoro? They’ll catch on soon enough.”

Tadokoro, the head of Supervision, waddled along ahead of them. They could see that both his ears were badly mangled after years of doing judo, probably. He may have been fat, but his flesh looked quite firm. They

followed him into what appeared to be a classroom, where two guards drew heavy curtains over a wall of windows that looked down on the sea. Once they were seated, a movie started: a beach scene at sunset with a voice-over saying “This film is designed to help you get acquainted with prison life. Pay close attention.” A silhouette of the statue out in front was superimposed on the seascape. “A noted sculptor spent more than a year creating this image—your image—the image of young men working hard to reform themselves, working toward the day when they will rejoin the world outside.” The statue faded into a shot of inmates in an auto body shop. “Our Juvenile Detention Center is renowned for the variety and quality of its vocational training programs and the outstanding job placement rate for its graduates. Graduates of the woodworking, printing, garment manufacturing, and metalworking programs are provided with certificates by the bureau chief of the Vocational Training Division of the Labor Ministry.”

The film went on to introduce the various training programs. “Our center can take pride in a vast array of state-of-the-art facilities including: a high-speed timber drier and ultra-modern planer in the woodworking department, an electric lithographic printer in the print shop, an eyelet setter in the tailoring studio, a fully automatic treadle cutter in the sheet metal department, acetylene torches in the welding department, hydraulic jacks and superchargers in the automobile service department, our maritime division’s 89-ton *Yuyo Maru*, our communications department’s microwave telephone equipment, the barber school’s lifelike practice dummies, the automatic high-speed potato peeler in the cooking department, and the hundred-cubic-meter Corniche boiler in the boiler division.” In each scene, the men running the machines were smiling.

The next sequence showed happy inmates in the recreation room playing cards or strumming a guitar and singing. A closeup from a high angle revealed the silver and gold stripes embroidered on the shoulders of their uniforms. “For six months of exemplary behavior, an inmate is awarded a silver stripe. Four silver stripes—in other words, two years without incident—and the inmate is awarded a gold stripe which the warden presents at morning assembly along with a commendation. Those with two or more gold stripes are designated as model prisoners and are eligible for transfer to deluxe individual cells featuring curtains, a mirror, and shelf space.” To protect the privacy of the prisoners, most of the scenes in the film avoided

showing any faces, but where faces appeared, they had been blacked out on the negative. Little clusters of faceless figures practiced judo, jogged around the yard, painted in watercolors, made pottery, or listened attentively to a sermon.

"Twice a year, in spring and autumn, a field day is held, where the vocational counselors and guards join in. The various cell blocks also organize annual intramural competitions in ping-pong, rugby, softball, volleyball, soccer, judo, and kendo. In autumn as well, our cultural clubs arrange recitals and presentations in the fine arts, calligraphy, poetry, choir singing, creative writing, and drama, inviting guests in from the surrounding community." There were quick cuts to the infirmary, baths, barbershop, chapel, a typical communal cell, solitary confinement, and the toilets, ending with the visitors' room. "Visiting privileges are ranked in two classes, with model prisoners entitled to first-class rooms." The shot of the second-class room showed the prisoner behind a wire grill and a guard keeping watch, while the first-class room had a table surrounded with chairs and a small vase of flowers in the center. The rest of the film focused on life in a communal cell with detailed instructions for reveille, roll call, tidying the cell, bed-making, etc., and ended with a sequence showing a prisoner on the day of his release: the lucky ex-con, once again in civilian dress, standing at the main gate saying good-bye to the warden and his vocational counselor, before being welcomed with open arms by his assembled family; then a closeup of his face as he takes a big bite of his mother's sushi, with tears trickling down from the blacked-out area around his eyes. "We encourage each of you to do your best to reach this happy outcome just as soon as possible."

Someone sighed as "The End" appeared on the screen and the guards drew the curtains. Two prisoners, Hair Oil and a large man with pale, lifeless-looking skin, took this as a cue to get up.

"Who told you to stand?" barked the guard running the projector. "Whaddya do, sleep through the fuckin' movie? They just said you don't even shit without asking permission! Get it, you morons?"

Hair Oil immediately fell back in his chair, but the pale giant remained standing.

"Did you hear that? What the fuck's the matter with you? You speak Japanese?" said Tadokoro, scowling.

“No one ordered me to sit,” said the prisoner, a deadpan expression on his face.

“So that’s the way you want it,” Tadokoro muttered, marching up to him. He was almost as tall, and both of them were at least fifteen centimeters taller than Kiku. Tadokoro ordered the man to sit down and then asked his name.

“Motohiko Yamane,” he replied coolly, glancing around the room. For a moment his eyes met Kiku’s. A shock of soft hair fell across his smooth, pale forehead, shading his graying eyebrows and lashes. The eyes peering out below were all but colorless, and his nose was just a round blob like a rubber doll’s. The lips were also smooth, almost hard-looking. The whole effect was masklike, as if his face had been sprayed with a coat of gray plastic.

The four prisoners were led down a flight of stairs and along a dark corridor that ended at an iron door. At a signal from Tadokoro, the door opened with a creak onto a small room. Two guards were waiting for them, billyclubs dangling at their sides. One handed Tadokoro a black notebook labeled “Register,” which he filled in under columns marked “Date,” “Name,” and “Reason for Entry”: “March 29; Tadokoro; accompanying new prisoners.” The other guard slipped a large key into one of the room’s metal walls, which Kiku soon realized was actually a door as both guards pushed it open. A blinding light poured into the room, and at Tadokoro’s command they walked squinting through the door. On the other side was yet another barrier, a turnstile made of tubular spikes protruding from rotating poles. They were sent through one at a time, the turnstile closing and then, with a buzz, spitting them out on the other side. Four turns of this contraption, metal grinding against metal, and Tadokoro pointed down a dauntingly long hall:

“Your new home, boys.”

The light was coming from windows in the ceiling, fitted with steel grating. On either side of the corridor, stretching off almost as far as the eye could see, were heavy doors set in cement walls and a floor dyed ocher by the light from above. They could hear the iron door shutting behind them.

“Shit,” murmured Hair Oil, crumpling to the floor and hanging his head. Shuffling up behind him, Tadokoro grabbed his collar and hauled him to his feet again. The bright light and sheer length of the place made them all a bit

dizzy as they set off down the spotless hall past lines of the massive wooden doors fastened with steel locks. The only decoration was a heavy latticed shadow from the sunlight streaming through the grating overhead.

Tadokoro was lecturing them again: “If you boys were machines, we’d have to say you’ve broken down, you’re out of order for the time being. Now usually, when you take a broken machine in to get it fixed, the repairman charges you a fee, right? You take a broken washing machine to an electrician, he sends you a bill, right? But the beauty of a jail is, it works backward: the government pays you to get fixed. A pretty good deal, eh? But the first thing we’ve got to do here is convince *you* just how good a deal it is.” He kept this up until they reached the Intake Room, where canvas screens had been set up to form a line of cubicles. They were each told to enter a cubicle, strip, and hop for a minute or so on one leg and then the other. Then they were issued skivvies and prison uniforms, the latter exactly the same shade as the concrete all around them. The pants fastened at the waist with drawstrings. The shoes were canvas with crepe soles. No socks. Their own clothes were numbered and tagged and stored away in wooden boxes, each item being carefully recorded in the personal property register. In the column marked “Other Possessions” Kiku wrote “American-made fiberglass pole-vaulting pole.”

When they had finished changing, they were led to the prison barbershop for regulation haircuts. Shoulders bowed, Hair Oil watched as his slimy locks fell on the floor, and then broke into loud sobs. The barber, a fellow prisoner, shook him by the tuft of hair in his hand.

“Wriggle around like that and I’ll cut your head to ribbons,” he warned. “And what is this shit you got in your hair, anyway? Stinks like hell.”

“And look at this one,” said Tadokoro, pointing at Yamane. “A regular fuckin’ Frankenstein!” The haircut had revealed a thick scar running in a circle around Yamane’s skull just above his ears, with red cross-hatching forming a grim lattice where, it seemed, the top of his head had been sewn back on. The sight was so peculiar that Hair Oil stopped crying and sat wide-eyed and sniffling.

“I had a plastic plate put in my head,” said Yamane, sounding slightly less confident than he had before.

They were assigned prison numbers, which were written in black ink on white patches on their uniforms. Then they practiced answering as

Tadokoro called their names and numbers; when they weren't loud enough, he made them repeat the answer again and again.

"Kunio Hirayama, 418; Takumi Kudo, 477; Motohiko Yamane, 539; Kikuyuki Kuwayama, 603."

The one-man cells were two meters square. The floor was covered with thin straw matting, and rolled up in the corner was a mattress and one blanket. A plastic bag stuffed with a towel served as a pillow. That was it. On three sides, the walls were cream-colored concrete; on the fourth was the thick wooden door with two small windows that opened only from the outside. One window, face-high, was for the guard on patrol to check on the occupant; the other, about thirty centimeters off the ground, was for passing in a plate of food in the morning and evening. From the ceiling hung a fluorescent light, too high for even the tallest prisoner to reach. Toilets and drinking water were down the hall, and except for designated periods, dry throats and full bladders had to wait for the guard to come by on his rounds.

While they were finishing the orientation program and a battery of tests and evaluations, new prisoners were kept in these one-man cells. Invariably the thick walls that deadened every contact with the outside world, blunting light, smells, and sound, brought on some degree of claustrophobia. From the warden's point of view, this spell of solitude was useful in arousing a need for social contact in his prisoners, and for helping the staff assess their character. It was also effective as a preliminary course in prison discipline. Forbidden to speak, the inmates sat in their cells with only their own resources to relieve the tedium and nervous tension; the most popular remedies included exercise, deep breathing, Zen meditation, and jerking off. But they soon found themselves anxiously hoping for transfer to the group cells with their vocational training sessions and club activities. The majority were begging for an activity, any activity, before very long; and the few who bore up under the solitude without seeming to mind it were noted on the Supervision Department's list of people in need of special psychological evaluation.

Kiku, who actually seemed to like solitary confinement, was at the top of the list. He would sit in his cell, uncomplaining, for whole days at a time. At night, his screaming often brought the guard running, but, apart from these nightmares, his condition seemed unchanged since he'd arrived: he

was a blank slate. He showed no interest in anything or anybody else; he followed orders well enough, but it was almost as if he didn't even hear them, as if his will had unconditionally surrendered. When the official administering the aptitude test had asked him what he wanted to do, his answer was noncommittal.

"You've got to do *something*," the man insisted.

"Anything's fine. It doesn't matter," said Kiku quietly, hardly looking up.

The psychologist assigned to his case examined him and decided that the severe emotional withdrawal for which Kiku had been hospitalized immediately after the shooting had not yet been cured. "My conclusion," he wrote, "is that rather than overcoming the psychological trauma of having killed his own mother, he has retreated into the trauma itself, using it as a kind of refuge."

On entering the prison, each inmate was given a complete physical examination which, in addition to checking his height, weight, eyesight, and hearing, involved a whole series of X-rays. He was then made to take a variety of intelligence tests before being sent to the training division for a Vocational Aptitude Test and a Kraepelin Personality Census. Finally, when all this probing was over, he sat down for an interview with a vocational counselor who had studied his academic and, usually, his criminal records, and together they worked out a "vocational goal." In a case like Kiku's, however, where the prisoner was still experiencing emotional complications, or in cases where the inmate had difficulty adjusting to the idea of prison life, this counseling was put off for six months and the prisoner was assigned to work teams involved in the day-to-day operation of the prison. Thus, when his time in solitary was up, Kiku found himself attached to the Food Service Unit No. 3, and getting up two hours before everybody else to help make breakfast.

On the day of his reassignment, Kiku was moved to a group cell reserved exclusively for this Food Service Unit. When he arrived, he found that Yamane, the tall, pale man with the masklike face, had been put in the same outfit. Together they were made to kneel at the entrance to their new home and pay their respects to their new roommates, four older prisoners who identified themselves as Fukuda, Hayashi, Sajima, and Nakakura.

After the newcomers had finished their introductions and the guard had left, Fukuda, who seemed to be the oldest, spoke up.

"There's something we've got to know right off," he said, scratching his head. "It's kind of a rule with us: new guys have to tell us what they did to get put inside. Then we clue them in on the stuff they need to know to get by in here…"

"Murder," said Yamane, still kneeling, before Fukuda had even finished.

"A killer," murmured Hayashi and Sajima, turning to give each other a look.

"Well, it's always good to know what you're dealing with," said Fukuda. "So how 'bout you, Kuwayama?"

"Me, too. Murder," said Kiku.

"Full house," laughed Nakakura, and the others were chuckling as well. Kiku and Yamane remained silent, eyes down. "Us too, we're all in for murder. Kind of funny, isn't it? Our little family here helps keep the country from getting overcrowded: all told, we managed to lower the population by six."

"A bit more," said Yamane. "I killed four people myself." The laughter died.

"Four?" said Nakakura, leaning forward and cocking his fingers into a gun. "Whaddya use? Zip gun? Saturday Night Special?"

"No. My hands."

"Your *hands*?! Whaddya mean? Karate? Boxing?" he asked, staring at Yamane's hands.

"Karate."

"And how many years you get for that?"

"Ten."

"*Ten fuckin*' years! What kinda sentence is *that*? You ain't no minor. Kills four people and all he ends up with is ten fuckin' years." Nakakura was indignant.

"I got pretty messed up myself," said Yamane quietly.

"You mean that head of yours? Yeah, I can see that. OK, let's drop it. Anyway, now we know you're a tough guy, so don't go beatin' on any of us, even as a joke. I can't think of anything dumber than getting yourself killed while you're in jail."

Nakakura, they learned, had worked in a restaurant. One day, while he was learning to trim pork from the bone, his grandmother came in to see him. Apparently she was a funny-looking old lady, and the other guys in the kitchen had started making fun of her. Before he knew what he was doing, Nakakura had planted his carving knife in the chest of the man next to him. “I didn’t even mean to stab him,” he explained. “I was only trying to make him shut up, and the thing went in up to the handle. Human meat’s a helluva lot softer than pork.”

Sajima had worked on a sport fishing boat. The day of the murder, it had been cloudy since morning and his back right molar had started hurting as it always did in that kind of weather. Despite the pain, he’d had herring for lunch, and some little bones had got stuck in his teeth. Just as he was trying to pull the bones out of his mouth, one of their clients had puked all over the deck. “I started thinking how I’d have to clean up that asshole’s mess, and how bad my tooth was hurting, and then another guy started complaining ’cause I wasn’t watching the wheel, and I just kind of flipped. I ended up kicking the guy; I didn’t even kick him that hard, but he fell on the screw and got all tangled up in it. Chopped him to bits, and I end up a murderer. If you ask me, they should have tried the boat, not me.”

Fukuda had cleaned boilers in a shipyard. During junior high school he’d been a pitcher on the baseball team. In high school he’d been moved to the outfield, but he’d always been proud of his strong arm. Soon after he got the job in the shipyard, he’d married and had a son; he got through the long days at the yard by telling himself that when the boy grew up he’d be proud of his dad’s strong arm too. He worked for two years hammering clots of hardened oil out of boilers before he realized that a hundred thousand strokes of the heavy hammer had ruined his arm. A couple of days after he found out he would never throw a ball again, he got drunk, got dragged into a fight, and ended up killing a man with a chair. “I used to be able to throw a softball sixty-five meters. A fuckin’ *softball*! Big as a grapefruit. That was something.”

Hayashi had been a water-skiing instructor. With money problems he couldn’t handle, he’d robbed a barbershop. When the old man who ran the place caught him at it and started yelling, he’d tried to shut him up. The barber, though, had bitten him on the hand, and Hayashi had strangled him. “I hate the smell of shampoo, makes me think of that old bastard. They all

stink of shampoo, those barbershops. Other thing I can't stand is somebody's tongue. When you choke a man to death, his tongue flops out. And it's longer than you think; hangs down below his chin. I've told the other guys before, but I'll never forget that tongue, flopping out right there in front of me."

The six men of the Food Service Unit No. 3 had more than murder in common: all of them were licensed, or at least qualified, to handle small boats. This was natural enough for Sajima as a fishing boat hand and Hayashi as a water-skiing instructor, but before taking the job in the restaurant, Nakakura had operated a cable-laying boat for a salvage company, and Fukuda had been a keen net fisherman when he worked at the shipyard. Realizing he and his fishing buddies could never afford to hire a captain for their weekly outings, he'd decided to cut costs by getting a license for himself. In Yamane's case, the family of a friend at school had owned a large yacht complete with a motorized launch which he'd learned to use. Before his head injury, he had also learned to scuba dive. And Kiku had picked things up from trips on the dilapidated scow his foster father went fishing in. With the exception of Kiku, the group had one more thing in common as well: all five had failed the test to get into the fifteen-man team that made up the prison's small-craft training unit. They had been assigned to this kitchen outfit while they waited for the next chance to take the test, six months down the line. Kiku was bunking with them because the counselors thought that the enthusiasm of the other five for the small-craft program might rub off on him and help bring him out of his shell.

The detention center was a model institution, and even one of the inmates was supposed to have said that if it weren't for the high concrete perimeter wall and the double-plated iron doors at the entrance, the place could easily be mistaken for a decent boarding school. Its guiding principle was that even the slightest hint of open resistance should be swiftly and firmly dealt with, but as long as you obeyed the rules, the daily routine wasn't particularly harsh. After all, the facility was equipped with almost everything a young man could possibly need or want, and care was taken to make him feel that he was being fairly treated. Once every other month, for example, a survey was taken to gauge prisoner satisfaction, and a special system had been set up to adjust an inmate's daily portions of rice or bread according to the amount of physical labor required in his work unit. Still,

despite this solicitous attention on the part of the management, whenever the prisoners had a few minutes of free time in the TV room after a hard day's work, or when they were lying in bed at night before going to sleep, two things inevitably came to mind: the high wall and the double-plated iron doors.

Inevitably, when a prisoner had a minute to himself, he thought of the world outside. Almost to a man, the inmates of the Juvenile Detention Center, like those in any other prison, drove themselves half-crazy thinking about their families, about life beyond the wall, and like men in any other prison, they spent a good part of their waking life looking for an opportunity to escape. But what was needed in most cases, more than the opportunity perhaps, was a reason—something to drive them to the decision to escape, someone who made them mad enough they *had* to escape. More often than not, though, a look around failed to turn up the necessary motive, and that was when it hit them: they were caught, shut in, watched every moment, but it was exactly because they tended to lose sight of that fact that they never seemed to work up the dissatisfaction needed to attempt an escape. Here were the guards and the counselors, at every turn, making their life on the inside as comfortable as possible, and distracting them with all this vocational training, clubs, sports, and what have you. And for a while, typically, a prisoner would be distracted. Then, without fail, the wall and iron doors would return to haunt their idle minutes and a new round of wishful thinking would begin: if only the wall would disappear, if only my family were here. The system was perfectly designed, or so it seemed, to keep a prisoner oscillating between these two states until enough oscillations had convinced him to do his time quietly and get the hell out. In the end, the men came to see that what separated them from the outside was not the wall and the double-plated iron doors but time itself, and with this realization came a new determination to shorten their sentence in whatever way they could. The usual appetites and urges were tucked away for the duration, as the toughest of the tough turned themselves into model prisoners bent on accumulating an armful of silver and gold stripes. Once this bitter time-pill had been swallowed, escape was never an issue, and the residents of the Juvenile Detention Center went about their business in a state of semi-hibernation.

There was no question that this was an almost ideal way to run a jail, with the one drawback being it required the maintenance of a fine balance that could be upset at any moment by a single defector. The greatest potential danger, and the thing that the administration feared most, was suicide. The day-to-day mood in the prison was much like that in a retirement home: low-level, chronic, communal depression; and in such an atmosphere, a single suicide was almost bound to set off a chain reaction. A sufficient number of suicides and the tension level among the inmates would rise, stability would crumble, and the entire prison population would spew out the foul dose of time it had been convinced to swallow. It was with this in mind that Supervision had transferred Kiku to the Food Service Unit; drawn into the common goal of passing the seamanship test, his withdrawal would never progress to the point where he might consider harming himself—or so their thinking went.

As the steamer began to howl, announcing the rice was done, the din in the kitchen rose to a roar. The whole Food Service division, eighteen men in three teams, was responsible for preparing and serving four hundred people with three meals a day. The teams worked in rotation, two days on and one off, under the supervision of two cooks who provided them with an endless string of chores: chopping onions or cabbage, washing rice, stirring mountains of pickling vegetables, soaking beans, measuring sugar and salt, and so on. When enough for four hundred portions of something was ready, it was divided up among the serving buckets, a ladle with a long handle being used to dredge up the sediment from the tanks of miso soup.

“Getting the hang of it, Kuwayama?” asked Nakakura, mopping the sweat from his forehead during a short breather before the dirty dishes began coming back. Kiku leaned against the range and nodded. Nakakura was about three years older than him and had a cherry blossom tattooed on his left arm. “You’re a weird one, aren’t you?” he continued. “Always been so tight-lipped?” Kiku nodded again. “There’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you. You mind?” Ignoring Kiku’s frown, he forged ahead. “Was it a real bummer—killing your own mother, I mean?…”

Kiku scowled and let the piece of cabbage he’d been fingering fall to the floor. “Drop it,” he said softly. “Gives me nightmares.”

Now it was Nakakura nodding. “I get you. Enough said. But you know, I never done anything to my old lady, and I still get nightmares about her all the time. Drives me nuts, and sometimes I think I’d be better off if she was dead, but it’s not exactly something you can try out to see if you like it. Ends up being kinda permanent. Anyway, now I know it probably wouldn’t help any. Thanks.”

Kiku was staring at the damp floor. Next to the sink was a stack of boxes containing frozen whale meat. When they’d finished washing four hundred tin plates, the cook would probably hack the meat up with the chain saw. Kiku could already see the blizzard of ice and flesh settling gently on the vision behind his eyelids: a smooth, gory globe, stripped of hair and ears and eyes, merging somehow with the lump of meat. As soon as that hot, raw face had disappeared beneath the snow that night, the flashing had started, regular, even, matching his pulse and brighter than the flashbulbs. In between the strokes of light he’d seen another face, the face of the woman before he killed her, the one who looked like him. “Please, stop,” she’d muttered just a moment before she stuck her head in front of the barrel. He could see her, her expression utterly serious, lips forming the words: “Please, stop.” And with each flash, he could hear her. “Please, stop.” “Please, stop.” “Please, stop.” Not knowing what it was she wanted him to stop, he stopped everything, every voluntary muscle in his body.

“Kuwayama’s always spaced out,” said Yamane, coming up to join them. He too was wiping the sweat from his flushed face, and the scar on his skull had turned bright red in the heat. Under constant needling from Nakakura and Fukuda, he had finally told them the story of the operation. It seemed that during the brawl, in the process of killing the four people, he had been badly hurt—smashed in the head by a signpost, as best he could remember. At any rate, the whole left side of his skull had caved in. It was something of a miracle that he had survived at all, and without brain damage either, but there was no saving the shattered cranium. The bits of bone were fished out of his head, and two doctors used a Bunsen burner to mold a plastic plate to match the shape of his skull.

“But you know, I used to be as spaced out as Kuwayama,” he added, leaning against the wall. The operation to insert the plate had been a success, apparently, but the front right lobe of his brain had got infected; it had taken six more operations—over a hundred hours, all told—to finally

cure him. One night, after one of these operations, he'd overheard a couple of surgeons talking about his condition: "Looks like this one's done for. No way we're going to save him." That was the gist of what he heard. Thinking the anesthesia hadn't yet worn off, they'd left a multi-angled mirror above Yamane's head under the oxygen tent. In it, he could see his own brain covered with a bright web of veins and arteries. It occurred to him that it looked exactly like tofu, so much so that he wouldn't have been surprised to see chopsticks reaching out and taking a piece. The doctors were still talking, and he knew they were talking about him, but he had the distinct impression it was someone else.

"I think it was 'cause it looked so much like tofu. I stared at it till I was sure it couldn't be me, till it didn't matter any more. How could it, if the thing that had been thinking and feeling all the time was just a lump of tofu? I sort of switched off, pretty much like you now, Kuwayama."

Kiku and Yamane had "tasting duty" for the noon meal. This meant taking samples of the day's fare around to the section chiefs in Administration and Supervision as well as to the warden himself; the plates were arranged on a red tray and covered with a glass dome before being delivered to the appropriate offices. On any given day the menu might include a mixture of seven parts rice and three parts barley, salt broiled herring, boiled beans with cabbage, and seaweed soup. The warden took a small mouthful of each and then told Kiku to water his plants. Yamane's job was to feed his pet sparrows and change the paper in the bottom of their cage.

Taking the kettle the warden handed him, Kiku went to fill it at the sink. When he'd finished watering the geraniums, Yamane called him over to have a look: one of the birds was splashing around in the fresh water, but the other was perched on his palm pecking at a pile of seeds. The warden had left the office for a minute, and Yamane kept glancing nervously at the door. After letting the bird poke around a bit, he suddenly closed his hand and withdrew it from the cage. With the other hand, he began gently stroking the sparrow's head since it had started to struggle and peck at his finger.

"You try it," he said to Kiku when the bird had calmed down. It hardly flinched as Kiku reached out to take it, and when it had settled on his hand, Yamane leaned down to put his ear next to the bird's breast.

“You know, Kuwayama, I’ve been pretty wild since I was a kid, but it’s been a lot worse since the operation. It’s like I’m crazy almost… You know why people sleep, Kuwayama? This doctor told me once: it’s partly to rest the body, but it’s also because the brain needs to rest too, deep down. Seems if you don’t rest the brain deep down, a man turns mean, crazy. I guess that’s what happened to me after my operation; it was pretty bad for a while—I don’t remember all of it, but I remember the attacks and how crazy I’d get. And it wasn’t like I was breaking stuff or beating the nurses with chairs—it was more like there was something strange that was filling up my whole body, and I would die if I didn’t find a way to let it out. It was like my body wouldn’t listen; they had me tied up the whole time, but I know if I’d ever got loose, I’d have killed dozens of people. Later, when I was a bit more used to it, it got so I could tell when one of these fits was coming on, and I thought up a lot of different ways to try to control them. I tried counting, and I tried Zen. I even used to try singing. But you know what worked best? What do you think? It was listening to the sound of a heartbeat—mine, somebody else’s, didn’t matter, whenever I got desperate that’s what I did. One time my wife brought our son to the hospital; he was just four months old at the time, but he had this great little heartbeat—it really got to me. It’s that baby’s heartbeat I’d try to remember, and somehow that made it all right.”

Kiku put his ear to the bird’s breast. He could feel the warmth of the tiny body and hear the heart, quick yet faint, like the sound of a small engine far off in the distance.

21

“Kuwayama, are you fast?” Fukuda asked Kiku one night during their free time before bed. He was trying to put together a relay team to represent Food Service No. 3 in the upcoming field day. “You used to be a pole vaulter, right?” Kiku looked at his shoes and said nothing. “If you’re really fast, we could make a killing.” The relays were one of the few chances the men had to wager their rations—candy, underwear, tennis shoes—and parlay them into a real horde. Fukuda explained the situation to him: “The counselors’ team has won three years running—they’re the favorites. Then there’s the body shop; they’ve got at least one guy who’s a ringer—used to be a professional bike racer. Last fall they missed winning by a nose. Hayashi, Nakakura, and I have teamed up with a guy from Food Service No. 2, but if you’re really bad-ass fast, you’re in. You see what this could mean? Since nobody knows anything about you, we could clean up. If we win, we’ll all have chocolate and shit coming out our asses… So, be straight with us: you really fast?”

“I’ll run if I have to,” said Kiku looking up.

“That’s not what I’m asking. I want to know if you’re *fast*.”

“Doesn’t matter to me one way or the other,” said Kiku, not quite to the point. Nakakura pushed in close, clearly pissed off.

“You don’t get it, do you? We’re gonna *bet* on this race! If you’re fast, we’ll be able to stuff our faces with the payoff,” he yelled. Reining him in, Yamane asked Kiku his best time at a hundred meters.

“It’s been more than a year since I was clocked, but I’ve done 10.9 three times,” said Kiku. The men grouped around him gasped, and Fukuda immediately put his name on the list. Though he looked a bit put out, Kiku made no objection.

“That’s one weird sonovabitch,” Nakakura muttered as he spread out his bedding. “Weird as *hell*, I tell you. If he’s so fucking fast, why didn’t he jump up and down and tell us he’d run right at the start?

“You know what the guards call you?” he said, raising his voice so Kiku could hear. “‘Lobo’; that’s short for ‘Lobotomy.’ You know—when they take out part of your brain and make a vegetable out of you, the way they do with guys who get fits and things? Lobo, that’s what they call you.”

There was a fair amount of sand scattered about the athletic field at the detention center, apparently brought in over fifty years earlier when the land had been leveled and the soil prepared for crops. It was a fine sand that blew up in a strong wind and might have long since washed away in heavy rains if there hadn’t been a high concrete wall to keep it in place. Kiku scooped up a handful and tossed it in the air just as Fukuda came up.

“Starting to get hot,” Fukuda said. Nodding, Kiku went into his warm-ups, stretching his legs, doing a few jumping jacks and high-kick sprints, loosening up his ankles, and giving his Achilles tendon a good rub.

“Looks real professional,” said Nakakura. Kiku’s muscles seemed to remember on their own what they were supposed to be doing.

There were six four-man teams in the heat, each man running one lap or two hundred meters. The order for Food Service No. 3 would be Fukuda, Nakakura, and Hayashi, with Kiku as anchor.

“Hey, Kuwayama, you running in this?” said a guard who was standing nearby. “Don’t freak out in the middle of the race and drop the baton.”

The runners lined up, the gun fired, and they were off. Fukuda made a good start and managed to hold on to second place during his lap, perhaps because the body shop team and the counselors were in the next heat. If they finished in the first two places in this heat, they would meet them in the final. Nakakura wasn’t far behind when he got the hand-over from Fukuda, but he didn’t have as much speed, and the runner from the woodshop team was soon threatening to pass him. Sensing the danger, Nakakura tried to trip the guy up as he came level, but it was Nakakura instead who lost his balance, and when the passing runner bumped his shoulder it sent him sprawling on his face. By the time he was up and running again, he was last, more than twenty meters behind the leader. Hayashi and Fukuda gave an audible groan.

“It’s your own fault. You were the one doing the tripping,” they reminded him on his return, when he had to be restrained from laying into the woodshop man.

Hayashi managed to move them into fifth place, but the distance between them and the lead was still almost twenty meters when Kiku stepped out on the track, took a couple of deep breaths and, with Hayashi about five meters away, started running. The other teams could be heard joking that Lobo would probably hit the dirt as well, until they saw him move past one runner almost before they realized he'd set off.

"Never can tell," murmured Fukuda as they watched him streak away. His form was perfect, his upper body smooth and steady while his legs did the work. Not even a glimmer of excitement crossed his face as he passed a second runner, but a stir had started in the crowd. As he sped along, Kiku's gray prison uniform fluttered around him as if ready to shred under the strain. His speed made the other runners seem almost motionless by comparison, and at the finish line he had moved up to second place. His teammates ran up to hug him while the other prisoners sat looking dazed in the stands. Finally someone stood up and called in his direction: "Hey, Lobo! You're hot shit!" And soon there was a crowd around him as he tried to leave the field.

"You some kind of Olympic star or something?"

"You a pro or what?"

Kiku, not even breathing hard after the race, wiped a bit of sweat off his forehead and looked around at them, as if their questions bothered him. Just then, Yamane came running up.

"Way to kick ass," he said, cuffing him playfully on the back of the head. Kiku shut his eyes as a gust of wind blew sand across the field. His skin, cooled by the sweat, was covered with gooseflesh. He opened his eyes again just a crack, but the sand had obscured the world outside and the circle of prisoners around him had become dense, dark shadows backed by a swirling haze. The shadows bore down on him, pointing shadow fingers at the end of shadow arms. Kiku felt faint and looked down at the ground. He had an odd feeling that someone was crouching nearby just out of sight, barely hidden by the pale sand. The thought made him shudder: a woman, no, a red ball of flesh that had been a woman. Brutally vivid, the image, the same one as always, began to flash in Kiku's head.

"Kiku? Something wrong? You feeling sick?" Yamane was right beside him staring into his white face. "You sick from running?"

“Why are they all crowding me?” Kiku managed to get out. There were even more people around him now, drawn by his odd behavior. Yamane put his arm around his shoulder.

“They’re all impressed, that’s all. Never seen anybody run like that before.”

“Leave me alone,” Kiku pleaded. “Quit watching me. I haven’t done anything.” He lunged toward a gap in the line but it closed before he could get through.

“You’re good enough to be on TV,” said one of the crowd, grabbing him by the shoulders and shaking him for emphasis. Kiku broke free and squatted down, folding his arms above his head and shielding himself with his jacket. At this point one of the guards arrived and made the crowd back off.

“Kuwayama, you nuts or something? What the hell’s going on here?” he demanded, giving him a shake. Kiku was as still as a rock.

“It’s the rays of the sun, at sundown,” said a prisoner standing nearby. “These guys freeze when the rays start zapping them; then they start foaming at the mouth and go all crazy.”

Kiku was carried to the infirmary still huddled up like a fetus. His body was trembling and covered with cold sweat, and he seemed unable to speak. The doctor tried to give him an injection to calm him down, but his arms and legs were knotted up and the needle bent before it could reach a vein. His teeth had begun to chatter, so an attendant stuffed a towel in his mouth to keep him from biting his tongue. His teammates had followed him into the infirmary.

“Doc, will he be able to run in the finals?” Nakakura asked the question that was on all their minds. The doctor laughed.

“Are you kidding? I don’t even know if he’ll snap out of this or not.”

“Excuse me,” said Yamane, stepping forward, “but I was in a mental hospital for six months and I once treated a guy like this with a special technique they use in karate to bring people round. Mind if I give it a try on him?” The guard and the doctor mulled it over, but after Yamane assured them there was no risk involved, they allowed him to proceed. As soon as he had the go-ahead, he grabbed Kiku from behind and felt around with his thumb just at the point where the head and neck come together. When he’d found the right spot, he gave a sharp yell and dug in. In response, Kiku’s

whole body twitched, he threw back his shoulders, and his face jerked up toward the ceiling. And, just as suddenly, all four limbs shot out, his eyes popped open, and his lips began to move. Quickly, Yamane bent down and pulled the towel out of his mouth.

"Kiku, can you hear me? If you can, blink your eyes. I'm trying to help you, you hear?" Kiku blinked.

"You afraid of something?" Yamane asked next. Again Kiku blinked. "What I want you to do is scream as loud as you can, so loud you think your guts are gonna come out. Trust me, it'll help." Yamane delivered his instructions in a strange, deliberate, unaccented tone; he spoke as though reading his lines, and the sound was somehow remote, as if coming through the wall from the next room. Kiku blinked once more, then let out a scream that made the bed shake. The high, hoarse cry went on for what seemed a long time and then died away, leaving Kiku's shoulders heaving. He had begun to cry.

"What's scaring you?" Yamane whispered next to his ear. "Try to spit it out. As long as it's stuck in your throat, it'll go on bothering you. You've got to try to get it out."

Kiku shook his head violently.

"Listen, Kiku. Get real. You're like a baby right now. If you give up, if you let this thing beat you, it's all over. The second you give in, it'll be hell for you. You've got to spit out whatever it is that's eating you."

"I… I…" gasped Kiku, his neck arched like someone with rabies.

"That's right… *you*. You're scared to death of something, you're shaking like a leaf and bawling like a baby. You don't have to pretend with me. I want to help. What is it you keep seeing? What's got you scared shitless?"

"It's a face," Kiku managed.

"Whose face?" urged Yamane.

"A woman's face, and she's looking at me."

"Who is this woman?"

"I don't know."

"You do too. You've got to know her."

"But I don't. I really don't."

"Just say it! You *know* her!"

"Dammit, I don't! Her face blinks on and off, like a light. Shit! Shiiiiit! It's my mother! But I *don't* know her. She carried me nine months, but I

don't know her! We only met once; how could I know her? She's wearing this bright red sweater, and her face—it's bright red too—blood red. It's not even a real face, it's a big red egg, no eyes, no nose, no ears, no hair, no nothing! I don't know any woman like that. But *that's* what I can't get out of my head, that bloody mess. And it's talking to me, telling me to stop. 'Please, stop,' it keeps saying over and over and over. But I don't know what it is I'm supposed to stop. How should I? Stop *what*?!"

Yamane gently wiped away the sweat on Kiku's forehead and around his mouth. "Can you hear me, Kiku?" he asked again. Kiku blinked. "OK. Now listen carefully and do exactly what I tell you. You've got to chase this picture out of your head, and the words along with it. I want you to have nothing in your head but sounds… Now, what do you hear?"

"Your voice… Yamane's voice."

"Is that all? Listen carefully." Kiku closed his eyes.

"I can hear people shouting."

"They're playing games on the field. Anything else?"

"Cars, or maybe a big truck, and horns."

"What else?"

"Birds singing."

"That's right, they're in the trees outside. But I'm sure you can hear other stuff. What else?"

"Footsteps, but soft, like somebody wearing slippers or barefoot. The bed squeaking, your breath, someone swallowing, some other people breathing, a glass or something rolling on a table, the wind, a flag fluttering, kids' voices, and maybe somebody kicking a ball, a rubber one that needs air in it, and bells… or my own ears ringing… no, somewhere over the hill there're bells ringing. I'm sure of it: bells."

"And how are you feeling?" Yamane asked.

"Now I can hear your voice, I feel all relaxed."

"Great!"

"And I can hear the rain." It wasn't raining. "Raindrops, falling right here near my head. Big, fat ones, and they sound loud, but gentle too—nice, steady raindrops."

"Are you sure it's rain?" asked Yamane.

"Sure. I've heard it before. Seems like I heard it when I was just a little kid."

“That so? I think I get it now… Kiku, how about a little nap?” he said, signaling the doctor to inject a sedative. Kiku twitched slightly as the needle pricked his skin, but a moment later his whole body went limp.

He had the feeling that he had become a tiny bug crawling along the ground. His bug ears were filled with the dripping sound, and before he quite knew what was happening, he’d been sucked into a huge drop. The sound grew louder and the woman’s face appeared. “Please, stop,” she repeated. Kiku did; he ceased all activity, reverting to the self he’d been five seconds earlier. And that’s the way he stayed, being himself, only five seconds ago. As he was sucked further down into the drop, the water began to darken, becoming at last a brilliant red—shimmering, scarlet water shot through with rays of light. As himself five seconds before, Kiku was sinking, sinking at a fearful rate, down into the depths of this slimy, thick red water.

Suddenly, he remembered and let out a shout. Everyone in the infirmary turned to look as he sat up in bed.

“What’s going on?” the doctor said. “That shot should have knocked him out.” Kiku rubbed his eyes, banged the sides of his head, and waggled it about. He tried to stagger out of bed, pushing the doctor’s arms away. Feeling as though every bone in his body had been broken and his blood turned to ice, he slumped weakly to the floor. Yamane did his best to prop him up.

“You’d better try to get some sleep,” he said as Kiku fell against him, his legs sliding out from under him in different directions. His tongue felt thick in his mouth.

“I… I…’ mmm gonnna runn noww.”

Somehow Yamane managed to persuade the doctor and the guard. “Don’t you see? He’s *got* to run! This is the first thing he’s wanted to do since he got here.” Wrapped in Yamane’s arms, Kiku stumbled outside.

“Please, let me go,” he said finally; “I can walk by myself.” On his own, Kiku swayed about but managed to keep on his feet. With infinite care he began to massage his legs. “How long till the race?” he asked.

“Seven minutes or so,” said Nakakura.

“Seven minutes to get my blood flowing,” murmured Kiku.

“Hey, you sure you’ll be able to run?”

“Just look,” said Kiku, straightening his back and straining every nerve to make his limbs obey. The drab material of his uniform clung to the muscles knotted along his arms and thighs as his whole body became a rigid pole. In that posture, he leaned forward precariously, but just as he was about to crash to the ground, one leg shot out to catch him: the perfect sprinter’s form. Running is just sticking one leg out after the other so you don’t fall, he told himself. If you can keep going flat out, you’ll never fall. It’s a safe bet that the first ape ever to struggle up off all fours was actually a sprinter. Gazelle, I’m going to run…

Fukuda, in the lead-off spot, ran third behind the counselors’ team which was a clear favorite and the body shop which was a strong second. Meanwhile, Kiku was still rubbing his arms and legs, pausing occasionally to splash water on his head. Yamane came over to check on him. “Sure you’re up to this?” he asked.

Nakakura took the baton with Hayashi screaming that he couldn’t fall this time and managed to hold on to third place, though the pair in front increased their lead. As Hayashi started his lap, Kiku straightened up and walked out onto the track. He would still be in third place when he got the baton, about seven or eight meters behind the leader and only three behind the body shop man. While they waited, the anchor for the body shop, a small guy whose thighs, nonetheless, were thicker than Kiku’s, turned to have a word with him.

“You take this seriously?” he asked. “Not me. No prize money at stake, no reason to get too serious. Don’t go getting a big head if you pass me. I’m just out here for the hell of it.”

The counselors’ anchor was first to get away, then the biker, and finally Kiku. The biker made a tremendous start and quickly closed the gap, but the first-place runner refused to let him pass. Kiku was creeping up on both of them, but he hadn’t been able to shake the effects of the drug completely and his form was off, his arms and legs felt heavy. He was desperately hoping to catch a through draft and let the wind carry him along; if he could find just the right spot, he could slip in between the other air currents. The trick was to make yourself denser, close up your pores, the very gaps between cells, and allow yourself not to be pushed forward by the wind but actually borne along by it. Or at least that was the way it felt.

On the second curve, Kiku swung wide left. As he did so, he seemed to lose his balance, his arms began to flail, and his left foot missed a step, but in the instant he started falling he managed to get his other foot under him and catch himself with a powerful kick that sent a shock through his body and finally woke him up. His head cleared; he could feel himself settle into the cool shaft of air he'd been searching for. In the straightaway, Kiku pulled up behind the leaders. With a burst of speed he let himself slip between the cracks left by the other runners; everything around him seemed to shrink, the world became pale, opaque, two-dimensional, and, for a moment, almost peaceful. The speed had churned up the passing scenery and somehow recast it with his own inner self mixed into it; it was like standing in a pitch-black room and the light being suddenly turned on—the darkness retreating too fast for the eye to see it becoming his own shadow, something taking solid shape. The sand, the two runners just ahead, the bellowing spectators, the cell-blocks, the trees shimmering with soft leaves, the high gray wall all around, and beyond that a smudge of oily smoke rising into the sky… even Kiku himself—everything seemed to contract at once, and in its place an incandescence, like a light bulb shrinking the surrounding darkness, was kindled in his head. Revealed was a strange, slippery, crimson animal, its coat glowing at the ends; the stadium the animal's entrails, a spleen; the track with its cloud of dust a lymphatic vessel. The runners were white blood cells and germs… And Kiku remembered, remembered it all in great detail. What had that woman been telling him? Wasn't it to stop everything and go back to the person he'd been five seconds before? Back. By turning into a lump of red flesh, by having all the features ripped from her face, hadn't she been trying to tell him something?—to go back upstream, to swim against the current, back into the womb, into her womb, and remember. Yes, that was it! That was what she'd been trying to say. Remember… that *sound*, the one he and Hashi had heard in the padded room. It wasn't the sound of raindrops outside the window, Hashi; but you were right, it was distorted, heard at a distance, through layers of obstruction, and it would give whoever heard it peace. It was the sound of a human heart beating; that's what we heard in the hospital: the sound of a heart. It was the beating heart of that woman doomed to be shot one day by the baby she threw away. That woman who was my mother. That woman who had me and left me, in the summer, in a

box; that woman who left me for dead, but was trying to teach me something by dying herself, becoming a raw, rubbery thing. In that one instant she was teaching me everything I'd need to know to go on living after I'd been left alone. I can see now: nothing else mattered for her; she stood up and came to me, no one else; and it was for me alone that she spoke. She was a wonderful mother…

As they entered the final straightaway, Kiku swung wide, and in a few strides he passed the two men ahead of him. Even after he crossed the finish line, he went on running, the tape fluttering around his chest. His teammates let out a cheer and surged toward him, but Kiku still wanted to run. His body felt light, as if he could have jumped the gray prison wall without even using a pole. Propelled forward by an energy that seemed to course up through his legs, he ran straight to the wall and hurled the red baton as hard as he could, as if draining every last bit of strength in his body. The baton rose in a high arc, caught the sunlight for a moment, then tumbled out of sight.

22

Hashi's records were selling like hot cakes. His fifth single and second album broke all sorts of sales records, and Mr. D's office was besieged by distributors asking for extra stock. Hashi and Neva had an official wedding ceremony, and D threw a lavish reception; he also installed them in a condominium that took up one whole floor of an apartment tower. Preparing for the reception, he had planned to invite virtually everyone Hashi had ever known: the nuns from the orphanage, Kuwayama, classmates from school, his friends in Toxitown, even the other hustlers who had hung out at The Market. But Hashi refused in no uncertain terms, ripping up the invitations before they could be sent.

"What do you want to go and do that for?" asked D. "You know what the word 'mankind' means? Means you're kind to your fellow man. You're the person you are today because of all those people, and if you think you got here all by your lonesome, you're dead wrong."

"Sorry, *you're* the one who's wrong," said Hashi. "I've changed, see? Up to now, everything about my life was a lie. So naturally the idea of meeting all those people from that part of my life gives me the creeps." The reception went ahead as planned, in an enormous hall decorated with dozens of ice sculptures, but at Neva's insistence the wedding ceremony itself was just the two of them at the local shrine near their new apartment.

The honeymoon in Alaska and Canada was postponed for a year when it couldn't be worked into Hashi's packed schedule of recording sessions, television and radio appearances, filming, and a six-month concert tour. It was, in fact, Neva who made the schedule, going against D's recommendation that Hashi get some rest. She'd come to the conclusion that it would be better not to give him any time to stop and brood about everything that had happened in the past few months. "At the moment," she told D, "he's like a guy who can't swim who gets thrown in a fast-flowing stream. Rather than dragging him out and letting him rest, it makes more sense to leave him where he is a while and let him learn to swim. If it turns

out he’s not up to it and drowns, that’s just proof he wasn’t fit to be out in the water anyway.

“Going on tour is murder, but that’s where real musicians get made. The longer you’re on the road, the more the towns all start to look alike. To make it, you’ve got to be able to put up with the same songs, the same bump and grind night after night. And in the end, even the excitement of the crowds doesn’t get you off any more. When you get to the point that you’re totally strung out, you have to ask yourself if it’s really worth it, if you really like the life.”

A good deal of attention was paid to putting together a band, with Hashi giving D very specific instructions as to style and personnel. The sound was to be as close as possible to French pop groups of the early sixties, with simple, straightforward drums (lots of snare), a muddy bass line, a jazzy guitar (more Django Reinhardt than Jimi Hendrix), a sax, and an accordion —exactly like the band Johnny Hallyday took on tour to Denmark in 1963. He also had two conditions for selecting the musicians: they had to be financially secure and they had to be gay. When D wanted to know why, he refused to say. Neva supposed Hashi wanted the band members more or less to fall in love with him. As for the money part, perhaps he was afraid that younger guys joining the group to get rich would create problems. Then, too, his peculiar style might not suit most musicians. For Hashi, the idea that music could express human emotions was bullshit; in fact, the whole idea of human emotions made him feel a bit queasy. “Let the sound stand on its own,” he was always telling the players. “What I want is a sound that’s cut loose from you as people, as humans playing music; what I want is naked sound, period—sound washed clean of your sweat glands, your body heat.” His own reasons for setting these conditions were that only well-heeled musicians would take radical risks, and that if they were all gay there was less chance of their turning against him. He had what could be called an intimate knowledge of the art of handling gay men.

The drummer they chose was a thirty-one-year-old Japanese American named John Sparks Shimoda whose day job was running an antique shop specializing in Ch’ing dynasty pieces. Shimoda had been playing drums since he was eight, and in his teens, while living on the West Coast, had actually sat in with the Lee Connitz group. Six years earlier, he had come to Japan with his lover and patron, the head of the Japanese branch of a

fountain pen company. Though he only worked off and on, he had continued to keep his hand in as a studio musician. The bass player was a twenty-nine-year-old photographer named Toru who had started as a hairdresser and gone to the States to take pictures of hair fashions. He came back with three new habits: jazz bass, cocaine, and sleeping with men. Six years ago he had been given a suspended sentence for possession. In a pinch, he could make it with women too. On guitar was Yuji Matsuyama, twenty-two, the only son of the owner of a large firm that provided security guards for the huge industrial complexes along the coast east of Tokyo. Matsuyama had had private guitar lessons beginning in elementary school; Wes Montgomery was his idol. He, too, was capable of sex with women so long as they were thin and relatively odor-free. The sax player was Hiroshi Kitami, twenty-one, the scion of a long line of doctors who was forced to break with family tradition because he was color-blind and couldn't get into medical school. The failure had led to his parents' divorce, which resulted in Kitami living with his mother, who managed several condominiums. After dropping out of music school where he had studied clarinet, he had gone on tour as the accompanist for a chanson singer. He was just back, and free. Finally, the accordion slot was taken by Shizuya Tokumaru. Tokumaru, sixty-two, was well known as a composer, and with over a dozen hits to his credit was able to live comfortably on his royalties. He had got his start in a tango orchestra while still at school, and his arrangement of "Olé Guapa" was still something of a legend in postwar tango history. In addition to his musical notoriety, he was a regular at The Market in Toxitown and known as a connoisseur of beautiful boys. Once a year he made a pilgrimage to Rio de Janeiro to sample the local talent.

When the players had been picked, Hashi gave the group a name: Träumerei.

Almost immediately, Träumerei took off on five weeks of closed rehearsals at D's studio in the Izu highlands, and from the very start Hashi was pleased with the way things went. D had promised to put together the best band that money could buy and he'd kept his promise. Each of the five musicians brought an uncommon sensitivity to his playing (which Hashi attributed partly to sexual orientation), and as time went by he could feel his voice wrapping around their sound. There were none of the irritations that had routinely cropped up with previous bands, and it was a treat to be able

simply to describe what he had in mind—an intro like the sound of rain on a stormy spring night, say—and hear it pouring out of their instruments.

"You guys are fabulous! Real poets!" he told them. As the rehearsals progressed, his enthusiasm grew.

The studio was large enough for each man to have his own room. Wake-up call was at 11:00 A.M., but Matsuyama, the guitarist, was up by nine even if they'd rehearsed until nearly dawn the night before. He had a morning regime that included a strenuous workout combining calisthenics and karate, but he went for an occasional ride on his motorbike as well. In general, he was the quietest of the group, and often, before the others crawled out of bed, he could be seen out on the lawn that sloped down to the coast road sipping tea and watching the birds peck at pieces of apple he'd set out for them. The last up was usually Toru who would invariably make his appearance, singing, only after all the others were at the breakfast table and the cook was about to go rouse him forcibly. The lyrics were always the same: "Hey, baby! Let me squeeze your lemon juice, till it flows down round your feet…" His silk shirt and flannel pants reeked of aftershave. Toru, unlike Matsuyama, could seldom keep his mouth shut, and it made little difference to him who was listening.

"Hey, Kitami, watch that second beat in the third bar of 'Rust.' Don't blow it, you hear? Eggs sunnyside up, again?… Any of you guys have a tape of the '79 Grammies? I'm trying to remember who won the gospel award… By the way, did you know that TWA is the only airline that lets cats ride inside with the passengers? Rest of them don't allow any kind of pets at all."

Breakfast lasted until late, but half an hour after it was over, rehearsal started and continued without a break until dinner. Each man had his instrument, his score, his own sound, but it was generally left to Kitami to make sure the number added up to a coherent whole and moved along as it was meant to; not because he was especially good at this but because no one else was much interested in doing it. The role fell to the youngest player partly because he hero-worshiped Hashi, the only person younger, and seemed determined to serve as his go-between with the band. During the session he would stand close to Hashi and repeat every instruction that came from his mouth as if through a loudspeaker:

“That guitar riff needs to sound more metallic… And see if you can go easy on the bass from the second bar where the accordion comes in… And put a little heat into that final drum roll, could you?”

The reminders might almost have been unnecessary since the other four seemed quite willing and able to give Hashi the sound he wanted, that stripped-down sound without a trace of sweat or blood in it. In fact, it was often Kitami who, for all his eagerness, found himself odd man out in this group with its cool, crisp, mechanical sound. After a particularly frantic sax solo that stood out from the seamless line, the others would give him a hard time, obliging Hashi sometimes to come to his rescue, patting him on the back as he looked around sheepishly and telling him he’d done “just fine.”

In the first week of rehearsals, Neva phoned D three times.

“Things seem to be coming together pretty much along the lines Hashi had in mind, but something’s still bothering me… there’s something missing. The band is too tight, too perfect. It’s not the kind of thing that works in a concert; you’ll have half the audience asleep in their seats and the other half heading for the doors. Hashi has no idea what it means to sing in front of a crowd that size.” But each call produced the same response from D.

“I don’t want you to say anything until Hashi realizes the problem himself. And don’t worry about it; those guys in his band aren’t likely to sit around and just take orders forever. He’ll hear about it from them soon enough.”

Around seven, the tall cook would march into the practice session and wave perfunctorily to indicate that dinner was ready. Before their period of seclusion began, they had all been given the option of ordering a special, personalized menu, but only John Sparks Shimoda had availed himself of the opportunity, the rest being content to eat whatever the cook put in front of them. Shimoda the gourmet, however, had ordered several cases of wine and other provisions to satisfy his needs. Nor was it just in the matter of taste that Shimoda seemed a little different from the rest. Though his features looked Japanese enough, his hair was almost silver and his skin was pale and thin, revealing a net of bluish veins below. He also had a morbid fear of dirt that nearly made him vomit once when he happened to notice dark smudges under Matsuyama’s fingernails. While the others usually finished dinner as quickly as they could and went off to do other

things, Shimoda would linger at the table savoring whatever dish had been prepared for him with only Neva for company. She, it seemed, was the only one who could put up with endless conversations about porcelain, screens, ivory carvings and other Chinese antiques.

There was a two-hour break following dinner, during which Hashi studied videos of various lighting effects that might be used on the tour: lights thrown from spherical mirrors, lasers, a device that resembled a funhouse mirror, a 3-D film projected on a dome, and a machine that cast huge silhouettes of the band on a screen. Hashi finally came up with an idea to run by the design crew: a film of pigs being dissected, projected on the inside of a huge domed screen, combined with a pump that spewed out glittery, metallic confetti.

While Hashi was watching videos, Matsuyama used to go for a walk, sometimes returning dripping wet from a dip in the sea. Kitami religiously practiced scales on his sax, while Shimoda played chess by himself. Toru would call his lover or watch TV or amuse himself creating a new style for Neva's hair; he seemed somewhat at a loss, not having enough players for a game of mahjong. Tokumaru read books on gardening or called in a masseuse from a nearby inn before lying down for a nap. But once the rest period was over, they all got back to work again until three in the morning or later.

When Hashi and Neva were finally alone in their room, Neva often began haranguing him about the band:

"Hashi, I know you're pretty pleased with things, but I'm telling you, I know this business, and at this rate Träumerei will end up self-destructing in no time. You haven't even been together ten days and already the band sounds like it's twenty years old. It's too neat, too cold-sounding, like a bunch of corpses up there playing something they've played a million times before."

"You think I can't hear it?" said Hashi, who was already much more subdued than he had been when rehearsals had started. "I began to hear it myself a few days ago, but I don't know what to do about it. In the beginning I couldn't believe how good they were, just about perfect. Now I keep thinking they must be laughing at me behind my back."

"Well, you had me fooled. It looked to me like you were sailing along loving every minute of it. But I don't think you realize just how much

energy it takes to make a concert tour work. At the level you're playing at now, you'd never make it beyond the first show."

"So you're saying we need to pull together, up the energy level and really work as a group?" asked Hashi.

"That's not exactly it either. When you're doing a concert, it's you, the singer, who has to control the crowd; you've got to grab every one of however many thousands of people you've got out there in front of you and shake them up; you've got to wrap them in your arms and then shove them away—you've got to make each one of them feel it, feel that you're the boss. It's a kind of power, like the pull of a huge magnet, almost a kind of magic. But if a guy doesn't even have the power to control his own backup band, you can bet he's not going to be able to control an audience."

"Neva, I'm scared," said Hashi.

"What of?"

"I feel as though I've been dragged to the top of this high mountain and I'm standing there all alone looking down. I've actually had a dream like that the past few nights."

"What is it you're doing at the top of this mountain?"

"I'm flapping my arms trying to fly."

"And can you?"

"At first I can, but pretty soon I get tired and I always fall in the end. And when I fall, everybody laughs."

"You know if you lose your nerve now, it's all over," said Neva.

"I know. But sometimes I wonder if it isn't already over and nobody bothered to tell me. Neva, I'm scared to death."

"I still don't see what of—of becoming famous overnight?"

"No, not that exactly. But it does bother me that I became famous almost by accident, as if I'd fooled everybody. It seems every other famous person got that way by scratching their way up for years and years; it doesn't matter if they're boxers or pop stars, they had to work for it. But not me; I didn't crawl or scrape or climb anything. I just sat around until a helicopter came along and gave me a ride to the top. This didn't happen because of anything I can do; I'm famous because I was born in a coin locker. It's not my singing that made me famous, it's Kiku shooting that woman on national TV. I feel like a fraud, and I find myself wondering how long I can keep up the act. All those people who had to work their way up, they

developed a kind of strength along the way, a kind of strength I just haven't got."

"Are you telling me you're worried about what's going to happen years from now? Hashi, sometimes you're really dumb. You keep on thinking like that and you'll end up like a crazy who sits around paralyzed by the idea of his own death."

Hashi climbed out of his bed and crawled in with Neva. Having put his fears into words, he felt a little calmer. She reached up and gently closed his eyelids with her fingers as she started telling him a story.

"Long ago there was this king of the Slavs named Fruksaz. But Fruksaz didn't start out as king; he was originally a cattle herder, who was so brave and wise that he was able to defeat every foe he faced until finally he was made king. Now the minute he became king, Fruksaz started doing things: he built an irrigation system and developed new methods for raising cattle and conquered the surrounding lands—all those kingly kind of things—and he was so good at it that everyone around him came to see him as a kind of superman. Well, one day this Fruksaz was having a chat with the queen of one of the countries he'd conquered, and she said it looked like he'd done just about everything there was to do and she was wondering what kind of goals or aspirations a man like him could still have. So what do you think Fruksaz said?… He said that his only goal was to get through the rest of that day. That's all."

At some point in Neva's parable, Hashi had stopped listening and started to stroke her side. Her flesh was slack and soft, as if her bones had been coated with gelatin and then covered with a fine layer of skin. He remembered something Toru had said a few days earlier about how men were reptiles but women were fruit, and when you took a little bite of some fruit, you could taste the roots, the deep, rich soil, the air and sunlight where it had ripened. A young woman was like firm, ripe fruit; it hadn't been so long since it was still hanging on the branch, and when you poked it with your finger it might dent a little, turn a bit red, but it bounced right back, as though it were somehow still connected to that faraway tree. Not so with older women; their flesh had lost that connection, as if the peach had been made into a peach cake, sticky with a little too much sugar and gelatin. Toru had finished by turning to him and saying: "I'm amazed how well you seem

to be doing with that lady of yours. Don't think I could forget about the sticky peaches and keep my mind on the job."

Neva had shifted around in the bed, and as her tongue went to work between Hashi's legs, her sugary buns shook lightly before his eyes. Suddenly, for no reason, he thought of the young woman who had shouted in the courtroom on the day of Kiku's sentencing. He remembered how firmly her breasts had stood out under the skintight white suit, and he wondered what it would be like to run his hands over her body. He imagined the brilliant red traces his fingernails would leave, and as he leisurely conjured up her body in his mind, his cock began to stiffen. Neva sighed with satisfaction, the gap between her fleshy thighs looking like a slice cut out of a peach cake. Perhaps, he thought, his victory over Kiku wasn't as complete as he'd imagined.

"That's it for me! Sorry, but you can count me out."

The rehearsals had barely entered their second week when suddenly one day the guitarist, Matsuyama, stopped in the middle of a number and threw his pick on the floor. Kitami tried to calm him down and start again from the top, but Matsuyama turned off the mike on his guitar.

"You're a big disappointment," he said, pointing at Hashi, and stalked out of the studio. No one tried to stop him. All of them, including Hashi, had seen something like this coming. After Neva's warnings, for several days Hashi had tried tinkering with the arrangements, even altering his vocal style, but with each change the sound grew even colder, more transparent, more fixed and faint.

"What now?" said Toru.

"For now, let's just take a break," Hashi muttered, staring at the floor.

"You know, Hashi," he said, wiping off his strings, "you're a nice guy, got real class, and you've been good to us. We feel you're pretty much one of us, and we think we have a pretty good idea of what you're trying to do here, what kind of sound you're looking for. More than that, we think we've been giving it to you; if we had wanted to do our own thing, we'd never have signed on for this gig. Way I understand it, you want to start with a real bright, soothing mood to put the audience at ease and then gradually build up these little shocks and jarring rhythms, like you're scattering around tiny seeds of pain, right? Eventually the audience wakes up from its

nice deep sleep to find they're staring into a warm, damp, gaping hole swarming with some sort of bug they've never seen before. Then they slowly realize all the exits have disappeared, that there's no way out, and only when they've got over their fright do they see that the bugs have turned into these beautiful, brilliant points of light. They follow these lights through an underwater cave to come out on a cliff looking down on the shining sea… Yeah? Anyway, it was something like that, you said, and I think we got the message; I think we dug where you were coming from. The sound's *there*, man; it's in that hole, waiting. We can all see that you're going crazy trying to figure out what to do, but we don't have any more of a clue than you seem to."

"Bullshit! Say it straight out, man. Problem's the vocal; it's just weak." Matsuyama had come back in during Toru's speech and loudly interrupted. In his left hand he was clutching a frog. Shimoda pulled a face. Shoving the frog up against the mike, Matsuyama pinched hard around its neck to make it croak. "An improvement, if you ask me," he laughed. "This dude's got a *voice*! He's gonna kill them," he said, squeezing harder and sending a green liquid dribbling from its mouth. Shimoda looked away until Matsuyama stopped. "Hashi, I'm not saying you can't sing; fact is, you're so good it's scary sometimes. I've never heard anybody who could create a mood with his voice the way you do. But it's not just that; it's more like your voice creates this vacuum inside people's heads, and the visions they see are made from little bits of their own memories that get sucked in. If that's the kind of song you're talking about, you're in a league by yourself; who else you ever heard could crawl inside people's heads and stroke their brains? You're like some kind of drug. But a drug's just not enough when it comes to getting an audience worked up. You need a bomb for that—a bomb that'll blow away all the daydreams your drug produces in a few seconds. And it's got to be your bomb; no matter how loud Shimoda bangs on those drums of his, no matter if Kitami blows his guts out and bites his reed in half, no matter if I blow out all the speakers, it still won't work. It's your vocal that's weak, like a baby crying." As he finished, he opened the window and threw the frog out.

"Let's face it, man," he continued, "when it comes to whipping up a crowd, you're a lightweight, you're froth. But don't take it too hard—we're pretty much the same ourselves. That's probably why I got so worked up…

I once heard this woman who could really wail, I mean *wail*. Seems she could remember once during the war crossing a river at night on her mother's back. Halfway across, her brother, who was crossing with them, lost his footing and was sucked under. There must have been some kind of river grass on the bottom because once he went under all she ever saw of him again was his hand sticking above the surface drifting slowly downriver. She'd tried to make her mother understand what was happening but the mother was dead tired and just went on walking in a daze. So she screamed, watching her brother's hand float off down the river while her mother trudged away; and she could remember that scream, she could call it back. It was always somewhere deep in her body. And it was listening to her I realized that there was nothing like that in me, never would be. But I thought maybe, you being born in a coin locker and all, you might have it in you, Hashi. Did you scream when you were in that locker? I thought maybe… but maybe I was wrong."

Hashi suddenly longed to be able to hear the strange sound that he and Kiku had once heard together. If he could only hear it one more time, just as it had been in that padded room…

"That's nothing to do with it," broke in Tokumaru at this point. "You're making the whole thing too complicated. The problem comes down to this: Hashi's voice is too pretty." Shimoda nodded.

"And what if I could rough it up a bit, make it less pretty?" said Hashi, looking around at each member of the band.

"Won't work," said Shimoda. "There was this German singer who tried doing something like that. She wanted to make her voice deeper and smokier so she had this operation where they fiddled with her vocal chords. Well, it worked at first, she sounded sort of whiskey-voiced, but after a couple of years she hadn't any voice left at all, none. All you could hear was this little wheeze."

"OK. I get the point," said Hashi. "And you've given me an idea. You all go home. Give me a week. If you still think my voice is a bust, then we'll break up the band and I'll go back to hustling for a living." Without waiting for an answer, Hashi turned and left the studio. He went back to his room and locked the door. When he heard Neva knocking on it, all he said to her was "Sorry but tonight I've got to be alone." The next day he sent everyone

away and even gave the cook and the rest of the staff a vacation, until at last there was nobody else in The Spaceship.

He had a little experiment in mind. He had read somewhere that Mick Jagger's voice had changed drastically after an accident he'd had, that it was actually only after this accident that he'd developed his peculiar, supersensual voice. Hashi decided to arrange the same sort of accident for himself. First he assembled his tools: a can of camping fuel, wads of gauze, clippings from an aloe plant, a glass, a bottle of vodka, and a large pair of scissors. Filling the glass with vodka, he dipped the tip of his tongue in it and left it to soak. While it was soaking, he lit the little burner and sterilized the scissors in the flame. As he watched his tongue swirling around in the vodka, he started to laugh. Why the hell, he wondered, am I doing this? It wasn't for the band, he knew that much. And it wasn't for Neva either. Mr. D? D could go fuck himself. Then why? He thought about the tour, but he knew it didn't matter; nor was it the music itself—he simply didn't care any more. If he screwed up his voice, who would give a shit? Certainly not he—Hashi—he was sick of the whole business. Then why? It was simply that he didn't like the thought of running away, nothing more. He'd skipped gym class to avoid the ordeal of the high bar; he'd even tried to conjure up a storm so the class would be rained out—all to avoid being laughed at. But it hadn't worked. The more you ran away, the more you played right into the hands of the enemy. Enemy? But who was this enemy? It was everybody who had ever tried to shut him in, lied to him, made him live a lie… But he would show them: he was done running, and he was done leaving things behind, losing what he'd fought to gain. He'd never give up anything again, not Träumerei, not Neva. He would show them he could handle a band, and an audience!

Suddenly he wondered what Kiku was thinking about at that moment. If he's thinking that I'm off somewhere living it up, stuffing myself with rice omelettes and sleeping like a baby, then he's dead wrong. I'm going through hell, but I'm not running away; I'm not curling up in a ball to die. I'm going to make it, and no one will ever make me feel small again. You'll see! You won't believe it, but you'll see! As soon as I've got my voice, a real concert voice, I'll come for that woman of yours, Kiku. I'll leave some pretty red claw marks on her pretty back.

He tried biting his tongue lightly, but it still wasn’t numb. The bite sent a faint throb of pain through his head. His jaw was getting tired so he slowly drew his tongue out of the glass. Sticking it out as far as he could, he tried to pinch the tip with his left hand, but it was too slippery for a good grip. He finally managed to get a firm hold by driving his fingernails into the spongy flesh as he fumbled for the scissors with his other hand. They were covered with soot from the flame of the camping fuel, but the metal underneath had been heated to a red glow. The minute he touched it to the tip of his tongue, a spasm shot through his body and he fell to the floor writhing and clutching at his mouth, yet he made no sound at all. He had knocked over the desk, breaking the glass that was on it. For a moment, the pain was so bad he couldn’t see. He started to sweat. Without getting up, he managed to retrieve the scissors from where they had scorched a hole in the carpet, and he sprinkled them with a little vodka from the bottle. He could smell the alcohol evaporating as it sizzled on the hot metal. He couldn’t stop crying. It occurred to him to wonder why he hadn’t screamed from the pain. Perhaps screams were involuntary calls for help that just seemed futile to your subconscious, which knew you were alone.

He stuck his tongue out again. When he shut his eyes he felt that his whole body had become a tongue. Opening the scissors as wide as they would go, he put the tip of his tongue between the blades. The cool metal soothed the burn. Among the stories the nuns had read him when he was a child at the orphanage was one about a sparrow. He remembered that an old woman had cut the sparrow’s tongue out and that afterward the bird had had its revenge, but he couldn’t remember exactly how. He tried for a moment to dredge up the memory. No luck. Next he tried to stop his jaw from trembling. Not much better. Watching his tongue twitch between the blades, he waited for it briefly to be still and then snapped the scissors shut. The little mound of slimy flesh slid along the blades beneath his nose, and when it dropped away blood began to gush. Hashi immediately stuffed his mouth with gauze. Blood was everywhere, flowing in great gouts that frightened him almost more than the pain. His whole body began to shake as he shoved piece after piece of gauze between his lips. Finally, his head so full of bloody cotton that he couldn’t breathe, Hashi staggered to his feet and spat the whole mass out onto the floor. He tried biting on an aloe leaf and dabbing the thick sap on his tongue, but the blood was still pouring out. He

noticed the scissors on the floor, the tip of the tongue he was now treating still resting on the blades. Suddenly he remembered how the sparrow got its revenge: the old woman was sent a box that appeared to be a present, but when she opened it there were hideous goblins inside. As he stood pressing the remaining gauze against his mouth, waiting for the bleeding to stop, Hashi thought long and hard about whom he would send a goblin box.

23

Anemone was waiting for the bus. It was the end of the working day and a long line had formed. In front of her was an old woman with a bandage over one eye; behind stood a woman with two small children in tow. Checking her watch against a timetable, the old woman turned to Anemone.

“Late, eh?” she clucked.

“Must be traffic at the station,” Anemone suggested. Nodding, the old woman fished out a cigarette case from her brown bag. The children, in a protracted battle for a model airplane, bumped into Anemone from time to time. When she looked around, the mother apologized. A shopping bag dangled from her arm, with a ball of wool and a shock of celery leaves protruding from the top.

“You smell good,” said the old lady. She lit a cigarette, then removed the bandage to wipe her eye with a square of gauze. The crusty, red-rimmed eye left an amber stain on the corner of the pad. “Like milk or something. You work in a dairy?” Anemone sniffed at her arm. “Won’t do any good. You can never tell what you smell like yourself. So which dairy?”

“It’s a bakery—the one next to the department store.” The old woman nodded again, tossing the gauze into a trashcan. The inflamed skin under the bandage had reminded Anemone of Gulliver on the highway. The police had scraped up what was left of him for Anemone to claim after the inquiry, but no crematory in the area had agreed to do anything with her garbage bags full of bits of crocodile. The Bronco had been too messed-up to keep, so she’d sold it to a junkyard, packed up her clothes and the diving gear to send on ahead, and bought a ticket on the next train north. Unfortunately, the train had hardly left the station when the plastic bags started to leak, sending blood and gore trickling down the aisle and leaving Anemone no choice but to get off at the next station, before the conductor came through and discovered the mess. She ended up taking a taxi the rest of the way to Aomori and tossing the bags of rotting crocodile off the end of a pier. On

the ferry from Aomori to Hakodate she came across an article in a newspaper that made her boil: “Giant Croc a Highway Headache.”

She stayed in a hotel the first night in Hakodate, but she was so jumpy she couldn’t sleep, and the next day she made a reservation to fly back to Tokyo. They wouldn’t let her see Kiku anyway, she told herself, so she might as well go home. But on her way to the airport the cab passed a long, high gray wall, and when the driver told her it was the Juvenile Detention Center, she asked to get out. She walked around the perimeter of the prison for a long while; Kiku, shoulders bent and head hanging, was behind that wall. She decided to stay at least another day.

Trembling slightly, Anemone approached a guard standing by the gate to ask about visiting privileges. The guard explained that she could apply at the warden’s office, so, screwing up her courage, she plunged into the ill-lit building. In the corridor, she passed a prisoner carrying a bucket of disinfectant. He stopped to stare at her, his shaven head glistening in the dim light.

“What do you think you’re doing?” a guard yelled at him, and he moved on.

The man in the warden’s office also stared at her, at the Chinese slippers, the leather pants, and the long crimson fingernails, before saying, “So you’ve no occupation and no fixed address at present. Is that correct?” His uniform smelled of sweat. “Unfortunately, given the circumstances, we could only permit a visit if you were a blood relative.”

“You mean I could see him if I got a job and a place to live?” The officer nodded.

The bus came at last, and the line of people waiting pressed forward to get on. In front of the old woman was a man with a suitcase that was so large it made him stagger when he lifted it. As he tottered back, he bumped the old woman who in turn grabbed Anemone to keep from falling, inadvertently planting her cigarette on her arm. Anemone screamed and her arm shot up, hitting the child behind her in the face, making him drop the model plane he was holding and breaking its wings. Stamping out the cigarette, the old woman apologized to Anemone, but as Anemone turned to get on, rubbing the sore spot on her arm, the mother behind her called out:

“Just a minute, lady.” One arm wrapped around her screaming child, the mother was holding out the shattered plane. “You broke it,” she was saying,

but Anemone ignored her and turned back to the line. “Wait! Where do you think you’re going?!” As Anemone hesitated, the rest of the people queuing up pushed past, including the old woman, who glanced back for a moment before disappearing inside. The driver revved the engine, filling the air with a cloud of exhaust. Anemone began to feel a bit sick.

“How much did it cost?” she asked. “I’ll pay for it.”

“I don’t want your money, I want an apology to this child.” At this point, the bigger boy kicked Anemone in the leg, and instinctively she raised her hand to hit him. It was the bus driver who caught her arm in midair.

“What the hell d’you think you’re doing? He’s just a kid,” he told her. By now the passengers were leaning out the windows of the bus.

“It was my fault! My fault!” piped the old woman, poking her head out through the door.

“What kind of person goes around breaking children’s toys?” the mother clucked. Leering, the driver was still holding tight to Anemone’s arm. Someone inside the bus shouted for them to get a move on, and the horn sounded.

“Don’t touch that horn,” the driver bellowed. Twisting out of his grip, Anemone pulled her wallet from her purse, extracted ten thousand yen, and held it out.

“What’s that supposed to be for?” the woman said, turning to the driver. “Can you believe her?”

“Must be crazy,” he agreed, beginning to laugh as he headed back to his seat.

“Say you’re sorry,” the boy who’d kicked her kept saying, until his mother grabbed his hand and pulled him on board.

“We’re going,” the driver yelled. “You getting on?” Anemone made no reply.

“Oh dear! It really was my fault. She didn’t do a thing. Dearie! I’m so sorry!” The old woman was still waving from the window as the bus drove away. Anemone walked home.

On her day off Anemone bought a sewing machine and some material: a print featuring cartoon crocodiles. She wanted to make some curtains. The machine took a bit of getting used to and she made several false starts, but she went on sewing through the night. At dawn, a faint pink line appeared

behind the hills across the harbor. It was the first time Anemone had been awake at this hour of the day. In the distance the surface of the sea merged with the sky in a seamless cast of gray. Beyond the long, low breakwater, the tiny ships' lights slid across the harbor, the wake dissolving the barest reflection of the clouds. As the dark sky faded to blue, the lights melted gradually into the day.

Anemone rubbed her eyes. Shafts of sunlight broke through the clouds, showering half the harbor in brilliance. As the day began to warm up and the sky turned white, she hung her curtains in the window. The hem may have been a little crooked, the pompoms slightly uneven, and here and there she had missed some wrinkles, but Anemone was delighted. With the sunlight streaming through the cream-colored fabric, she thought they were the cutest curtains in the world. Suddenly she wanted to show them to someone… to show them to Kiku. The wind ruffled them, revealing a stretch of silver roofs reaching down to the water.

Anemone thought she would go easy on her makeup for the occasion. It took, she knew, no more than fifteen minutes to reach the detention center even in some traffic, so she planned to leave her apartment at precisely 1:45; if she arrived early she would have to hang around in that dark, hateful building. She'd had some trouble deciding what to wear, but in the end had settled on a white silk blouse and a red flared skirt with a light coat to wear over the outfit. For shoes, she decided on gray flats. Everything had been bought recently, after a bit of careful study, to fit in with the other girls at the bakery. Kiku had never thought much of her other clothes anyway, telling her more than once that what she had on was loud or cheap-looking. His tastes seemed to run more in the direction of the uniforms bank tellers wore. This should suit him just fine, she thought, giving herself one last inspection in the mirror. The alarm clock, set for 1:43, went off. Anemone ran a comb through her hair and dabbed just a hint of perfume at the nape of her neck before charging out the door.

Fifteen minutes later, a young guard was ushering her into a dim-lit room divided down the middle by a rusty wire screen. On either side was a single metal folding chair.

"This is the second-class visitors' facility," said the guard apologetically. "Another year and he'll qualify for the first-class room—there's no screen

in there. Guess you can't do much kissing through this," he laughed, apparently trying to help her relax.

As soon as he'd gone, Anemone fumbled in her purse for a scrap of paper on which she'd written some notes: "If Kiku's smiling, say 'You're looking great'; if he's moody, just say, 'Hi, honey,' really sweetly; if he looks sad, don't say anything, just pat him on the shoulder." She hadn't figured on the screen and now found herself desperately trying to come up with something to say in case he looked sad. But everything that occurred to her sounded dumb; and anyway she could hardly concentrate when she knew that any minute now the steel door opposite her would open and Kiku would come through it. Her heart was pounding, her palms sweaty, and her throat had gone dry. As she sat twisting her handkerchief into knots, she reminded herself that she wouldn't be much use to him at all if she couldn't get a grip on herself. When she pictured him, she saw only the timid, hangdog figure in the courtroom.

She took a deep breath and tried again to calm down, deciding she would tell him to "cheer up," regardless of whether he was smiling or glum. Drawing a mental picture of Kiku seated across the way, shoulders drooping and eyes downcast, she began to rehearse quietly. "Cheer up, Kiku." No, it sounded forced; it needed a lighter touch. "Cheer up, Kiku." This time it came out a bit cold, schoolteacherish. "Cheer up, Kiku." That wasn't it either; she sounded like she was scolding a naughty child. No, she needed to sound warm and natural, yet firm, all at once. "Cheer…," she was just trying again when the door swung open, bringing with it a familiar smell of male sweat.

"Anemone!" Kiku cried, throwing himself against the screen and shaking it. Reddish dust showered down around them, and the wire creaked as though it might give way.

"Hey, get off there!" barked the guard who had followed him into the room.

"I can't believe it. I can't believe it," Kiku muttered, finally letting go of the wire and sitting down. Pressing his nose against the grill, he sat grinning at Anemone who was grinning back. He opened his mouth as if to say something, but nothing came out.

"You're looking great," she managed, fighting back tears. Kiku nodded slightly. "I made some curtains," she said, starting in on the first subject that

came to mind in order to keep from crying. “I got a job in Hakodate in a bakery called Guten Morgen—that’s German for ‘Good morning.’ Strawberry shortcake’s our biggest seller, but seems like people are finally getting tired of it; some days the kiwi or the peach shortcake does a lot better. I made a friend, a really nice girl called Noriko, we’ve been twice now to the movies together. She likes to read a lot and is always lending me books, but you know me and books—I fall right asleep. They’re all good ones, though, by famous writers, and one’s by the wife of this famous painter. What do you think, Kiku, you think I should be reading these books?” Anemone knew herself that she was talking nonsense, but she chattered on, afraid she might scream if she let herself just look at him. Kiku gazed at her and smiled. “Next door to the bakery is this department store and on the fifth floor there’s a watch shop. The son of the guy who owns it has been trying to hit on me. The guy’s a real creep, drives some lousy foreign car—even gets in it to go a few meters to our shop. He’s always rattling on about some dumb thing or other, how his father gave him half the stock in the company, how he has these three dobermans and the police are always giving him some certificate of merit, how he’s friends with a guy who’s a professional kick boxer, blah, blah, blah. He kept after me so long I finally agreed to go out with him once just to shut him up. We went to this cafe, and as soon as we got there I told him I had a boyfriend who was in jail and if he ever touched me I couldn’t be responsible for what would happen to him. What do you think he said? He told me I was a juvenile delinquent… I laughed right in his face.”

Kiku was still staring at her but he didn’t seem to be listening.

“How’s Gulliver?” he asked suddenly. “Still growing?” Anemone wet her lips.

“He’s dead,” she said, her voice almost inaudible.

“That so?” he muttered absently. “Poor baby.”

“Yeah. But it’s all right now.”

“What’s all right?”

“I mean, I’ve got used to it.” Again Kiku fell silent. He was studying her hair, her hands, her breasts.

“Kuwayama, you got another five minutes,” said the guard from the corner of the room.

“Yeah, yeah,” said Kiku without taking his eyes off Anemone.

She was looking at her watch, suddenly realizing that twenty-five minutes had passed and they hadn't really said anything.

"Anemone," he whispered, too low for the guard to hear, "could you do something for me? Could you stick the end of your tongue through the screen?" As soon as her tongue was through the hole in the wire, he fastened his mouth on it and stayed that way for several seconds. When he pulled away, a fine strand of saliva hung in the air between them. "I'm going to start training to be a sailor…" he started to say.

"Time's about up," announced the guard.

"Just a few seconds more," said Kiku, going on in a rapid whisper: "You still have some money?" Anemone nodded. "Then listen carefully. Before long I'm going to be going on this practice shakedown cruise for the sailing program. I'll write you somehow and let you know where we'll be heading. You just be sure to follow us on land and meet the boat when we put in to shore. You got that?" By now the guard had come too near for him to continue, but as he rose and walked away, Anemone just had time to shout after him:

"Kiku! You haven't forgotten about the DATURA, right?" He nodded and then was gone. Her eyes gleaming, Anemone swirled a few bits of gritty rust around in her mouth and spat them out on the floor.

24

More flowers were being delivered to the dressing room: roses. “Who from this time?” Toru yelled at the delivery boy.

“From a food company, canned tuna and crab…” the boy started to explain, but Toru was no longer listening. Matsuyama was standing in the middle of the room checking the tuning on his guitar for the hundredth time. For the occasion he had painted himself from head to toe—hair, skin, and all—lavender on one side and pink on the other. John Sparks Shimoda was submerged in a deep leather couch twirling a drumstick on the tips of his fingers as if rattling an invisible cymbal floating somewhere overhead. A cake arrived, and Matsuyama sent a roadie to find a knife.

“Let’s do it!” he shouted, attacking the cake.

“You can’t eat sweet stuff before you go on stage,” warned Toru, “you’ll throw up.”

“Who gives a shit? Don’t matter if I’m puking my brains out or half-unconscious, I can still kick ass on that guitar,” he said, taking a fistful of cake in one hand and a bottle of champagne in the other. Tokumaru stood in the corner with two smooth-skinned youths trying to tie his bow tie.

Hashi, in the meantime, was pacing in a tight circle, his face slightly flushed, and holding forth at full volume to a ring of reporters and photographers. “I’m going to save the world with my songs,” he was saying. “That’s all I’m here for: to bring comfort to the hungry, to those in pain and suffering who no longer even realize their need.” It was always like this before a concert. As he explained it, he had to empty himself of everything before he could get charged up again. And there were various ways of doing this; one, today’s, was to talk a lot of bullshit to a pack of journalists, inviting a barrage of stupid questions.

“So let me get this straight: you’re saying that your music is not just giving a bunch of Japanese kids a thrill but a way of saving the world’s starving masses?” Hashi charged around the room, eyes flashing, with two makeup people circling him, as if in orbit, to set his hair with egg whites.

“Does that make your music some kind of religion?” asked another reporter as a pair of video cameras swooped in, lights blazing, to catch a closeup of Hashi’s patent leather shoes. In the background, Kitami could be heard neighing his way through a B-flat scale. “It sounds to me like you’re calling it a religion,” the reporter persisted. “Is that fair to say?”

Neva’s voice on the intercom broke in at that point to announce five minutes to curtain. “There are fifty guards out there tonight, so no funny business and no stirring up the crowd like last time,” she warned them. Matsuyama smashed his champagne glass on the floor and ran a wet comb through his brilliant hair.

“A religion? Not at all,” said Hashi. “It’s more like an explosion in a subway station, with dead people blown all over the place and somebody’s ass hanging from the kiosk like a peach on a tree.” Hashi’s pace had speeded up.

“So you’re saying that to you salvation is an act of terrorism?” said another reporter, tapping Hashi on the shoulder to get his attention as he whirled by.

“Don’t *touch* me!” yelled Hashi. Shoving the reporter back on his heels, he ran over to Matsuyama, grabbed the cake, and hurled it against the mirrors that lined the room. Gobs of icing splattered in every direction just as Neva rang the buzzer to signal their entrance.

“Let’s do it!” shouted Toru, winding a vinyl scarf around his neck. Kitami stopped for a second to gargle with a little Coke, before they all followed Hashi on the run.

In the first days after the start of their concert tour, newspapers around the country printed reviews along these lines:

> *Bad taste at rock concerts is nothing new, but the current tour by Hashi and company raises it to new heights. It is difficult to find words to describe what goes on, but the reader might begin by imagining a wake at which someone drinks too much, makes a complete fool of himself, and then feels the usual self-loathing afterward. The “entertainment” begins with a slash-and-burn drum solo followed by Hashi’s interminable, painful renditions of standards such as “Meet You in Yurakucho” or “Love You Most of All.” In*

these, as in everything that follows, the sound is chilly, with a percussion line that is as raw as it is uninteresting. Meanwhile, Hashi himself slumps around the stage cracking a thick leather whip in an apparent, though vain, attempt to keep this death rattle going.

The most surprising, not to say shocking, thing about all this is how much Hashi's vocals have changed in the two short months since the appearance of his album, Brimstone Island. *The voice on the album might fairly be likened to that of an autistic youth recently kicked out of a church choir, while the Hashi now on tour sounds more like a seal in full rut. The "new" voice, if we can call it that, clings to you like a coating of oily sludge that refuses to be washed away in even the longest, hottest shower. We had the opportunity to question Hashi about the origins of this newfound tunefulness, but he declined to answer seriously, ascribing it to the fact that he had snipped off the end of his tongue with a pair of scissors.*

They say that interrogators during witch trials used to pour hot animal fat into the ears of their victims in order to extract confessions. Nothing could better describe the effect that Hashi and his band seem determined to have on their audience. The rhythm section runs mindlessly along, while the accordion, abetted by the empty wailing of the guitar and sax, grinds out some nauseating melody in the minorest of keys. We found ourselves imagining a tune sung by a dropout, hat in hand, and an old beggar wandering along a narrow alley sandwiched between a highway full of whizzing cars and a skyscraper being smashed to pieces by a wrecking ball and dynamite.

But to someone in the audience listening to the words Hashi always started with—"A sweet blues about love and waiting for you in the rain, about worrying you'll get wet, about waiting at a certain cafe"—it's like a nocturne played by a blind pianist in wartime London amid a hail of buzzbombs, about the pleasure of watching, bound hand and foot, as a pretty woman types away in a sunlit room, her skin glowing, just the faintest hint of sweat on the curve of her backside… From somewhere beyond the detonations of the rhythm section, Hashi's nocturne seems to rise out of nowhere, planting the seeds of terror in his ear. Terror. Not the

fear that the bombs will get through, penetrate deep into the ground, into his bomb shelter. No, not that at all; rather, the fear that he'll give in to the urge to see the rockets flash and go running out of the shelter into the night; the fear that he's about to do something horrible… rape and murder that woman sitting next to him, perhaps, or set fire to his seat; fear that begins to buzz around in his head the moment Hashi starts to sing. And once it gets to him, it won't let go, from the first scream, more shrill than feedback, a scream that gets right under his skin, that boils the hot animal fat inside his ears and sends it pouring from his eyes and nose and mouth… Soon, every last person in the hall jumps up, staring transfixed at the stage, as if Hashi were a hypnotist. Like some ingeniously lifelike mural, the gargantuan pig gets dissected again on the dome overhead, out-sized organs pulsing to the rhythm of the bass. Why should those ropes of crimson, undulating veins and muscles remind them of the sea? Not limpid depths inhabited by schools of angelfish—not that sea, but the turbid seas of Genesis, roiling up into a leaden sky pierced now and then by flaming meteors, those ancient oceans where shreds of carbon were sparked into the first signs of life. As they listen, undersea volcanoes dye the ocean floor scarlet with belch after belch of impervious flame.

"Come!" orders Hashi. "At my feet!" says the song. You know so little, though you think you know it all. Loosen those screws in your heads and let the fat flow in. Let your bodies shake; that's the first step, and soon you'll be walking down the rail tracks at dawn, waist deep in the bodies of stray dogs, the wind tugging at their entrails. Don't worry—the train will explode seconds before it runs you down, and lines of girls, dripping with amber-colored jewels, will greet you, their hair dusted with broken glass. You're king! To hell with that tired old scene you say makes you sick. It's a mirage, a lie, your own personal magic lantern show. You know what you've got to do: smash the projector, torch the whole show! You're inches away from this pale, thin membrane and, beyond, a scummy wall and, beyond and beyond, pig guts and, beyond them all, a rainy, fruit-juice universe.

His tongue clicking sharply into the mike, Hashi reeled off the names of the band members as shreds of glittering foil rained from the ceiling marking the end of the concert. "Thank you. Thank you," he murmured. "We couldn't do it without your love. Tonight I want you to pray with me for the

souls of three girls attacked in a park in Yokohama almost seventy years ago. A sailor on leave butchered them, gouged out their stomachs, and jerked off inside those hollow things. Tonight, let's pray for their souls; let's pray for love, as only love is going to save this world, my friends. Thank you." As Hashi finished, a line of club-wielding security guards with attack dogs flanked the stage and headed toward the front row of the audience while the band broke into their theme song.

"The story's just begun," Hashi sang, ratcheting up the already drum-tight atmosphere in the hall. Everyone was standing, straining, the front row on the verge of rushing the stage but held in check by the barking dogs. Then, in mid-phrase, Matsuyama launched his pick into the audience and the stage went black. The band disappeared, replaced by the guards, and in one instant the mirage vanished, bombs, pigs, animal fat and all, and the crowd, as if reluctant to be left alone with the aftermath, headed en masse for the exits, trading mindless smiles and platitudes with one another.

Hashi ran straight to the dressing room, where Neva was waiting to fold him in her arms. For a moment or so they sucked at each other's lips, then Hashi poured half a bottle of beer over his head, draining the rest in one gulp and smashing the bottle on the floor.

"How many times do I have to tell you?" someone shouted. "Excited is one thing, but you've got to stop acting like some dumb kid."

Matsuyama, after stripping to the waist, wandered over to Hashi and began licking at the beer and sweat dripping down his neck and jaw.

"So, whaddya think? Am I a genius or what?" Hashi asked him. "Have I got a throat like an aluminum bellows or what?"

Kitami was snickering as he poured a stream of beer over Shimoda, who had collapsed on the couch. Then he too smashed the bottle, adding to the layer of shards and suds that already covered the floor. When D came on the intercom to announce that he'd arranged a party in a suite on the top floor of their hotel, they made their way through the crush of groupies waving flowers and stuffed toys at them to a line of limousines waiting near the back entrance.

One of the first things D did when the schedule for a concert in some outlying area had been finalized was organize a party in honor of the local dignitaries and anyone rich enough to be worth asking. These affairs invariably started with speeches by the pols, bankers, or others of note. On

this particular occasion, an old man in a tuxedo said something about sports and culture being the lubricants for smooth interchange between the large metropolitan areas and the provinces, and then everyone drank a toast with champagne or whatever drink was handy. Some of the partitions and most of the furniture had been removed from the suite, and the walls were lined with soft, deep couches filled with the well-groomed wives of doctors and businessmen, each clutching a glass. Ice sculptures in the form of birds were ranged along the table that filled the center of the room.

"It's beyond me why a man would want to dye his hair at all," the old fellow in the tuxedo was saying to Matsuyama, "let alone such awful colors. Maybe you can explain it to me."

"I thought it would show up better on stage," Matsuyama said.

"Well, I think I should tell you that I know quite a few folks who would like to round up all the young people like you, shave their heads, shove 'em in the army, and give them a good dose of discipline," said the old man.

"The army, huh? That an interesting gig?"

"I doubt you'd find it very interesting. You have to follow *rules* in the army. If you don't they throw you in the guardhouse, and the next morning they take you out and stand you up in front of a firing squad."

"That so?…" muttered Matsuyama.

"I've never actually *been* in the army," the man continued, "but if I had, I wouldn't have minded being in charge of that."

"In charge of what?"

"The firing squad, of course. I've always liked the way they say 'Ready! Aim! Fire!' It looks so smart in the movies."

John Sparks Shimoda was discussing Ch'ing-dynasty ceramics with a woman in a red evening gown who was married to the boss of a porcelain factory, while Kitami was describing the two acts in the floor show that was about to begin to a bigshot in a local newspaper and broadcasting company.

"One of them is a foreign stripper, and the other—at least I think it's the same act—is this scrawny kid who shoots himself up with a muscle relaxant and then lets all comers fist him." The short, bespectacled captain of industry was stroking his shoulder with a sweaty hand.

"You know what the headline in the morning edition of my paper's going to be?" he asked. "'Concert Is Smash Hit.' That's what it's going to say."

Tokumaru was deep in conversation with the president of a tennis shoe company who was apparently an old friend. Their talk moved from the state of the economy to boxing to shared memories of a certain gay brothel in Rio by the name of Necropolis. And Toru, not for the first time, was complaining to D about being made to suck up to a bunch of old farts.

“I’ve got three groupies waiting for me back in the room. How much longer do I have to stick around and listen to this shit?”

D checked his watch. “Just be patient. It won’t go on forever,” he said, patting him on the cheek.

When the young foreign performer had removed a number of her clothes, it became clear that while she was quite pretty, her skin had begun to sag across her stomach and down her thighs. Hashi, meanwhile, was trapped on a couch, surrounded by three women in late middle age whose faces had little drifts of fine white powder filling their wrinkles. One was squeezing a slice of lemon over a cracker heaped with caviar. The champagne had turned her earlobes bright red, and she was stealthily rubbing her thigh against Hashi’s leg.

“When I heard you sing tonight, I suddenly wanted to take a knife to this bit of flab,” she said, taking his hand and pressing it against the flesh in question.

“Isn’t he stunning?” said another. “Just like a girl. I don’t think I’d be surprised if he grew breasts on that pretty chest of his.”

“Me either,” rasped the third woman, who had just had an operation on her throat. “He reminds me of a dirty movie I once saw in Hawaii where this Nazi doctor was doing experiments on live prisoners and he decided to attach a pair of tits and an ass to this beautiful young man. He ended up sewing soft skin all over his body, except around his privates. It was all a bit creepy, but he turned out looking *gorgeous* just the same.”

Hashi sipped at a strong drink, wondering why he was more or less content to be sitting there with these aging women pawing at him. D had asked them to be nice to the oldsters for PR purposes and to make sure they got permission to use the right concert halls, but in Hashi’s case the assignment was no trouble at all.

By now, the skinny boy with the armful of muscle relaxant was just finishing his act and acknowledging the applause; in the course of it he had

managed to fill himself with a solid gold dildo as big around as a newborn baby. And on that note the party broke up, a little after three in the morning.

As Hashi was heading back to his room, Toru called after him: “We’ve got a cute little thing coming upstairs later. Why don’t you join us?—once you’ve put Auntie to bed, that is.”

While he was showering, Hashi tried to think of a way to put Neva off if she crawled in with him. He’d just tell her he was tired, he decided, and hope she took three of her big, round sleeping pills. When he emerged from the bathroom, she was at the mirror removing her makeup.

“Hashi, there’s something I’d like to talk about,” she said.

“Could we make it tomorrow? I’m beat,” he told her, turning out the bedside light.

“Sure. Tomorrow,” she said, getting into the other bed.

“Neva, you been sleeping well lately?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Are you still taking those big sleeping pills?”

“No, not any more.”

“Well, good night,” he said, but Neva started talking in the dark.

“When I was a little girl, my grandmother would never let me go swimming. She thought the sea was dangerous and I didn’t swim well enough to go in by myself. She was sure I would drown. I always thought she was silly to worry like that, but lately I’ve begun to understand how she must have felt.”

“Neva, stop yacking and go to sleep.”

“Why did you cut your tongue?” she asked suddenly.

“I’ve told you, I wanted a new voice.”

“Hashi, promise me you’ll start playing it safe from now on. These past few weeks you’ve been crazy—trying to please everyone. You’ve got to figure out what you want and forget about other people.”

“But it’s me that’s calling the shots now. And besides, haven’t the concerts been a smash thanks to the change?”

“It won’t matter if you lose track of what you want and who you are,” said Neva.

“I don’t want to hear about it. Why don’t you take one of those nice fat sleeping pills and check out for a while?”

“But don’t you see? You’re famous now so everybody’s telling you something different, everybody wants something. They want you to sing louder, they want it more soulful, they want it easier to understand, more love songs, more this, less that… But none of that matters; you’ve got to do what you want to do.”

“Check. Understood. Now stop talking crazy and go to sleep,” said Hashi.

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to nag. I promise I’ll shut up. I just want to tell you what my grandmother said when she finally realized I wasn’t going to listen no matter how many times she told me not to go in the sea. What do you think she said?”

“How should I know?”

“She told me not to go in over my head.”

“OK, OK, now I’m really going to sleep.”

“Hashi?…”

“Unh.”

“You’re going to be a daddy.”

In the dark his eyes shot wide open. The sheet stretched dim and gray in front of him. “You’re… pregnant?” he murmured. He knew he should say something more, but he couldn’t think what and his throat had tightened in a knot. “A baby?” he managed at last. “Me? A father?” He suddenly remembered the way the rock-hard baby had rattled against the side of the box he’d carried before burying it. He knew nothing about how an egg grew for all those months in a woman’s belly, and so in his mind he pictured gestation in some dark, anonymous void, until the moment came and, miraculously, the baby emerged, kicking and screaming, from a woman’s crotch. But until that time, he thought you dangled in space somewhere, suspended from unseen wires. Maybe, if you could find the place and give it a shake, the babies inside would rattle too, just as the one in the box had.

“We’ll talk it all over tomorrow,” said Neva, rolling over to go to sleep. When he thought he’d given her enough time, Hashi slipped out of bed.

Toru’s room was unlocked. Inside it was dark, but Hashi managed to make out the shape of a young woman curled up on the floor in nothing but gold high heels. She was drooling slightly and smelled of alcohol. When he turned on the light, she rubbed her eyes.

“Noooo…” she groaned. Her face looked familiar… front row, hat… he remembered. When she finally realized there was someone else in the room, she struggled to her feet and lurched over to drape herself around Hashi’s neck. She was a lot taller than him, but he scarcely had time to notice before the high heels seemed to melt under her and she collapsed on the floor, taking him with her.

“Yur Hashi,” she slurred, her eyes peering from the narrowest of slits. “You really him?” He nodded, feeling her breasts pressing against him. “Come on,” she said. “Fuck me. I hate that foreplay shit. I like it shoved in me while I’m dry as a bone. Go on, baby, make it hurt,” she said, spreading her legs. Hashi began to undress, thinking this would be his first time with a woman whose skin didn’t wobble about when she lay down.

Since the wedding, Hashi had slept with three other women on the sly. All three, however, had been about the same age as Neva, and all three had been embarrassed to get undressed in front of him. Each time he had been made to shut his eyes, and each time he had crawled into bed next to a body with layers of slack flesh that seemed to have no relevance to the thighs and flanks and arms they hung from. It all rippled like slurry with too much water in it, and when you pinched it, it didn’t spring back. Yes, all in all, they had been oddly comforting bodies. But this young woman was different. The firm, molded flesh on her thighs and ass refused to quiver no matter how much he shook it, and she lay confidently before him, lights on, legs spread, reveling in herself.

After a few minutes of grappling, Hashi was still limp. Even after she sat up enough to get his cock in her mouth, it made no difference.

“Come on, honey, get hard for Momma,” she crooned as best she could with her mouth full.

“What did I tell you? He can’t make it with the young ones,” said Toru, standing in the doorway with Matsuyama. They were both grinning.

“Whew, thought my tongue would break off,” said the girl, sitting up. “Hashi, love, something tells me you’re *im-po-tent*.”

“You been watching all this time?” said Hashi. They nodded, still grinning, as Hashi rushed them. Dodging the punch, Toru grabbed his arm and threw him on the bed.

“Calm down, Hashi. We’ll show you how it’s done,” he said as Matsuyama turned the woman over on her hands and knees and unzipped

his fly. The buckle on his belt clanked in rhythm with the thrusting of his hips. “You know,” Toru continued, “Shimoda called it just right. He said that once a guy sells his ass, that’s the way it is. What he’s really selling is his shame. So no matter how much a kid like this waves her butt in his face, he’ll never get it up again. That Shimoda’s real smart. For a woman, they say, it’s all the same, but for a man, it means the end of this,” he said, winking at Hashi and walking over to prod the girl’s grinding thigh with the tip of his snakeskin boot. “Hashi, love, you’re an orphan,” he laughed. “You never knew your mother, and now all you want in a woman is some flabby tit to suck on—mmmmmmm.”

Hashi, white-faced, grabbed an ashtray from the nightstand and threw it as hard as he could, but Toru ducked and it shattered against the wall.

“Shut the fuck up!” he shouted, making another charge at him. This time Toru offered no resistance, allowing Hashi, who was much the smaller of the two, to punch him a few times in the chest. He had stopped laughing. Matsuyama, who by now had finished with the girl, pulled Hashi away.

“You’re an orphan faggot whore,” Toru said, his tone suddenly serious. “Today you might be a great singer, but not too long ago you were an orphan faggot whore, and there’s no way you’re ever going to forget it. But that’s exactly the point: you shouldn’t ever forget it—that’s what old guys like us learn from all these years of shit. It doesn’t make a piss of difference whether you can fuck a pig groupie…”

“Pig??!” muttered the girl, her tongue thick in her mouth.

“Yeah, pig!” said Toru, kicking her harder than before. “Hashi, there are plenty of assholes out there who go bad as soon as they get there hands on a little money. But those are the ones who forget where they came from and suddenly start thinking they were born in a limousine. We don’t want that happening to you now, do we? No matter how good the grub, no matter how plush the hotel, no matter who’s kissing your ass, don’t ever forget: you’re an orphan faggot whore. I guess we wouldn’t bother telling you this except we really dig backing you up. It’s not often you come across this kind of gig—together we’re pretty hot; we all think so. So don’t forget: orphan… faggot… whore. Don’t you go screwing it up.”

Hashi wanted to object, wanted to tell them they were wrong about him and older women. He wasn’t sure exactly what it was, but there was something soothing about those soft bodies, something that reminded

him… of that soothing room. He wanted them to know that the reason he was this way had nothing to do with being an orphan, or even with being a whore; it was that sound, the one he and Kiku had heard all those years ago in that rubber-padded room. He sang because he was looking for that sound; his songs were his way of getting close to it. And it was only in a padded room he could hear it, a room made of a woman's ample, bare body—walls, floor, furniture, all from the full inner thighs, a room gently contracting and expanding, pulsing in and out, endlessly, softly enclosing him—only there, inside, could he hear it.

From the window of his suite, the whole town was visible. Across the way, Hashi could see the remains of the party: ice birds melted into formless lumps, and the skinny young man, quite naked, asleep on a table. Hashi stared out into the night. It had begun to rain, and each light bristled with silver needles, but behind the panes of glass he could hear nothing, feel nothing. In high school, he remembered, he had stared out a window… to watch Kiku pole-vault. Suddenly, he could smell something… something familiar… what? Closing his eyes, he searched his brain until he knew: chalk dust, he thought to himself with a muffled laugh. After a particularly good jump, Kiku would smile and wave at him. "That's my brother," he would tell his classmates, pointing in his direction. Just as the far-off island and the sea now came floating up outside the window, the naked man across the way sat bolt upright and let out a silent scream. Hashi shuddered. His face in the glass was superimposed on the young man's body. Everything seemed to have become transparent, interchangeable; the body, the lights of the city beyond, the sea and the island in his mind—it was all the same thing, and for a moment he had no idea where he was. His face had slipped down somewhere in between these hazy images, and he was falling. He couldn't breathe; the impossibly thick, rain-spattered glass had cut him off from any air, had cut off everything. He pounded at it as hard as he could. No good. Suddenly he noticed that the man across the way was waving the enormous, solid gold dildo as he munched a piece of leftover bread. Try this, he seemed to be saying. This should do the trick.

25

On the day that Kiku, Yamane, Nakakura, and Hayashi joined the Nautical Training Unit and were transferred to a new cell-block, Yamane had had a terrible headache since early in the morning, and was covered with gooseflesh and clammy sweat.

“This damned plastic plate in my skull must be out of whack,” he told them. “If I pass out and go all stiff, don’t talk to me or try to move me. If you touch the plate in one or two places, there’s no telling what’ll happen.”

“You mean it could kill you?” Kiku asked.

“No, not that. Don’t suppose I’d mind that much,” said Yamane forcing a smile. “No, more likely it’d kill you.”

When they got to their new quarters, they were expected to pay their respects to the senior people there, but Yamane, in too much pain to talk, could only crouch by the door shaking. Kiku, who by now had a single silver stripe on his prison uniform, tried to cover for him, explaining that he had a bad cold, but the older inmates took offense all the same.

“The bastard’s got no manners,” somebody said.

To take their minds off Yamane, Nakakura hit on the idea of offering to give some of them a massage, but as soon as he started rubbing one man’s shoulders, somebody else gave a loud sniff.

“Buddy, you need a bath,” he said.

“Yes sir, I know, sir. Whenever I get sweaty…,” Nakakura started to explain, but his voice trailed off.

“Smells like a bitch in heat,” said one of the other prisoners. “Kinda makes you horny.”

Nakakura grimaced. Afterward he explained to Kiku that the comment had made him think of his mother: “In summer you could smell her from the next room. Most of the time it was OK, but you could always tell when she’d been with a man from the way she smelled.” As he went on prodding at the older fellow’s back, however, he merely smiled at Kiku and Hayashi and pretended for a second to be wringing his neck. It was just a gesture,

the lightest of jokes, but another guy standing behind him noticed and blew up.

“You fuckers got no respect. Rookies are supposed to be on their best behavior, but you assholes go monkeying around like I don’t know what,” he shouted, giving Nakakura’s back a light kick with his boot.

“Could you please shut up?” murmured Yamane, still crouching in the corner. “*Please*.” Kiku could tell that he was trying to focus on his son’s heartbeat. The immediate problem, though, was to find a way of cooling things down; but the more he apologized, the more indignant they became, until finally one of them gave a howl and slapped Nakakura across the face, accidentally hitting Yamane in the process.

“Stop it!” Yamane hissed; then, without any warning, he jumped to his feet, let out an odd soft of squawk, and drove his fist clean through the nearest wall, a solid plaster affair about five centimeters thick. “Just be quiet!” he wailed.

The rest of the room watched, slack-jawed. The men who a minute ago had been making all the fuss now sat silent and slightly pale as Yamane resumed his crouch, clutching his skull to ward off the pain.

“So how long would I have to train to get as strong as you?” Nakakura asked Yamane as he plotted a position on a set of mock nautical charts.

“Whaddya mean ‘strong as me’?” said Yamane, struggling with his own chart. The classroom part of the course, charts, compasses, and the rest, was his weak point. His massive torso and powerful arms seemed useless pushing a little ruler around a desk.

“You know what I mean: strong enough to punch my fist through a wall. How ’bout it? Five years? Something like that?”

“No way! Anybody can do that shit. You don’t have to practice to stick your hand through a wall.”

“Come on, don’t get humble, man,” laughed Nakakura.

“Nothing humble about it. I’m serious; all you’d need’s a hammer in your hand.”

“A hammer, huh? I’m not so sure I could do it even with a hammer. What do you think, Kiku?” Kiku was sitting at the next desk, calculating compass bearings. “I don’t see how a hammer’d make much difference.”

“I don’t see what the connection is between the hammer and training,” Kiku said. “How about it Yamane?” Yamane was busy trying to determine the point of intersection between the sightline from an imaginary lighthouse to an imaginary mountaintop and a line of imaginary buoys in an imaginary harbor. He looked up just long enough to tell them to wait while he checked the latitude and longitude against the figures Kiku had come up with earlier. They must have matched since he snapped his fingers happily as he turned to answer.

“The point of karate practice isn’t to toughen up your fists,” he said at last.

“Then what is it?” asked Nakakura.

“It’s all about speed. If you don’t think you could smash through the wall with a steel hammer, how would it help to have hands as hard as steel?…” Just then the bell rang and the instructor told them to turn in their answer sheets, so Yamane interrupted his explanation again to start furiously copying Kiku’s paper.

“Crime doesn’t pay, Yamane,” chirped the wizened instructor, catching sight of him. A ripple of laughter went through the class as he sheepishly handed in his work.

After lunch, Yamane took a single sheet of newspaper and held it out in front of Nakakura.

“See if you can punch a clean hole in this,” he said.

“A newspaper? You kidding?” But a dozen lunges later he was beginning to sweat while the newspaper just seemed to flutter aside, still intact. Finally Yamane had Kiku hold the paper. The squawk rose again from somewhere in his throat and a moment later his fist had opened a neat little hole almost without rustling the paper.

“If you think about punching a hole, you’ll never do it,” he said. “Suppose you’re trying to split a board; most people are going to start out thinking, ‘OK, now I’m going to split this board.’ But most people’d be wrong. You’ve got to think something like this: you following me?—‘I will now concentrate all my strength and all my willpower in this fist and then my fist will *be* on the other side of the board. My fist will slip through the board like the wind and just *be* on the other side.’ That’s what you’ve got to tell yourself. See what I mean?”

“It’s all concentration,” said Kiku. Yamane nodded.

“A good way to start is to try to remember the most dangerous moment you can think of, a time when a little slip would have meant the difference between life and death, and use the energy you felt then in your punch. Give it a try.”

“OK, here goes,” said Kiku, handing him a new sheet of paper. He closed his eyes and tried to breathe slowly and evenly. Suddenly, his eyes flicked open and his fist flew out, puncturing the newspaper. The hole was perhaps less perfect than Yamane’s but it was a hole nonetheless.

“You were thinking about pole-vaulting, weren’t you?” said Yamane. Kiku nodded, smiling broadly.

Next was Hayashi, whose style was slightly different; pumping himself up with little barks of encouragement, he swayed back and forth until he stopped, quite still, and struck. His hole was more of a tear, but he still managed to get through.

“What was that you were doing?” asked Kiku. “Water-skiing?”

Hayashi shook his head bashfully. “Actually, I was imagining I was shooting a goal in water polo. I used to play a lot, even though there wasn’t any money in it.”

Nakakura had watched the other two in silence, but at last he spoke up. “What’s a guy supposed to think about if he’s not exactly the athletic type?” he said, looking a bit put out. “I was a cook before they stuck me in here.”

“But you worked on a salvage boat, didn’t you? And you’re a professional diver,” said Hayashi.

“You don’t have to concentrate so much to scuba dive. It’s more a matter of just sticking it out.”

“Still, it doesn’t have to be a sport you think about,” Yamane told him. “The important thing is that you have the feeling of getting all your strength and all your willpower in the fist.”

“Hey! Wait! I’ve got it!” said Nakakura. For a moment he looked up, and then, nodding as if he’d remembered something, he licked his lips and addressed his newsprint opponent. His eyes grew wide and his breathing rough. “Die!” he screamed as his fist shot out. The hole was clean; the others clapped.

“Nice work. What were you thinking about?” said Kiku.

“Nothing,” Nakakura muttered, his head bobbing shyly.

Later, on the way back to navigation class, he tapped Kiku on the shoulder. “You know back there, I was thinking about my mother’s face. I saw her plain as day on the other side of the newspaper. Once I thought about slamming her in the puss, it was easy to concentrate.”

“*Btt, btt*.” Nakakura was leaning against the wall of the cell making a clicking sound with his lips. His neck was bent all the way to one side. “*Btt, btt*.”

“What the hell’s that?” asked Yamane.

“You can’t tell? Kiku, bet you know.” Kiku shook his head. “It’s the sound a cigarette lighter makes, but not some cheap piece of shit. It’s supposed to be the click of a Dunhill just like the one I got from a buddy of mine who went to Macau. You ever used a Dunhill? Fuckin’ heavy. You flick it, but the flame doesn’t come up right away. There’s like this little delay, till your thumb runs all the way around the wheel, and then ‘*btt*!’ Prettiest damn sound in the world. But there’s no way to explain it if you’ve never heard it, it’s one of a kind. It sounds just like… like *fire*, dammit. Cigarette even tastes better when you light it with one of those. I was just trying to remember the sound, but I can’t quite get it. It’s not ‘*btt*’ exactly; it’s more like ‘*shbtt, shbtt.*’”

On Sundays and holidays there were no vocational classes. If the weather was good, they played softball or soccer in the recreation area, but today it was raining. Some inmates still had club activities: art classes, guitar lessons, choir practice, and so on. Most of the others were in their cells reading. But Kiku and the rest of the Nautical Training Unit had time on their hands. The only one who had anything to do was Yamane, who had borrowed a book from the library: *The Secret of the Dragon King*. But he gave up trying to read it after a few minutes when Nakakura started babbling.

They had already killed part of the day with a round-robin arm wrestling tournament which Hayashi, surprisingly, won. Kiku, who had never lost a match himself, had thought he would make a good showing, but after barely managing to beat Nakakura, he was wiped out by both Hayashi and Yamane who were in a different class altogether. After the preliminary rounds, these two faced off in the finals, and even just watching, Kiku could tell there was an incredible amount of strength involved; at times he wondered if one of

their arms wasn't going to snap clean in two. Hayashi's arm was only about half as big around as Yamane's, but the muscles were supple and all the power seemed to be focused in the wrist. Their two arms were nearly motionless, apparently an equal match in strength, but the struggle could be seen below where the pillows that cushioned their elbows had been torn open and were spilling their stuffing around the room. In the end, the match came down to Hayashi's ability to withstand a series of aggressive moves by Yamane, who finally ran out of steam and gave in to superior stamina. When it was over, Yamane lay on his back for a while rubbing his arm.

"First time I ever lost," he marveled.

Hayashi's face was flushed. "When I was in high school, I could swim five thousand meters with just my arms and then ten thousand with just my legs. Swimmers get to be real flexible; not strong, just flexible."

"Wrong," laughed Yamane, getting to his feet. "That's *strong*."

Next, at Yamane's suggestion, they tried something called "seat wrestling": you sat on the ground and locked legs and then tried to flip your opponent over. Predictably, Yamane was by far the best at this, and the others quickly got tired of it. It was somewhere in the middle of this last contest that Nakakura had started in with "*btt, btt*."

"'*Shbtt, shbtt*.' No, that's not quite it either. Shit! How did it go? Something like '*bhao, bhao*.' Maybe '*jbha, jbha*.' '*Shba, shba*.' '*Subo, subo*.' '*Bot, hot*.' I can hear it, but I just can't figure out exactly what it was."

"Chugga, chugga, choo, choo!" Hayashi began to chant, and they all broke up. When the laughter had died down, it was very quiet.

"Shit, what wouldn't I give for a smoke," moaned Nakakura. His face was twisted into an attempted smile, but it wasn't quite working. In the end he actually seemed to have started crying.

Yamane went to open a window. The smell of damp spring leaves came drifting into the room along with the sound of the prison choir rehearsing. He was just about to say something to Nakakura when the little shutter of the peephole opened and a guard's face appeared. Nakakura stopped crying instantly.

"You're getting a little treat at four o'clock, so line up out in the hall," said the guard, closing the shutter when he was done.

"Something special on?" Hayashi asked.

“Some people from town coming to put on a play for you guys,” the guard said over his shoulder as he moved on down the corridor.

Not long afterward, all the inmates and nearly all the staff were assembled in the auditorium. There weren’t enough chairs, so some of the prisoners were sitting on the wooden floor. The assembly started with an address by the warden.

“Today we’re been honored with a visit from the drama club at Hakodate Commercial College. These nice people come here at about this time every year to help brighten up these rainy days when you can’t get out for sports and whatnot. This is their third visit, and I know that some of you out there who have seen their productions in the past have been looking forward to this day. So sit back, see a bit of the outside world for a change and, above all, enjoy the show.”

The curtain was raised to reveal a title card to one side of the stage with the words “Blue Nymph of the Alps: A Musical” written on it. A bent old man entered from stage left. The backcloth showed a hut, some trees, and snow-capped mountains, and birds could be heard chirping; then the music swelled and the old man’s hoarse voice suddenly burst into song.

Ah! Spring again!
Oh! Flowers bloom!
The snow will melt.
Bear cubs wake.
Fish will jump…

“Now where’s my daughter gone? Down to the village, I suppose.”

And what will she buy there,
Do you suppose?
Some candy she’ll buy there,
I suppose.
And what else will she buy there,
Do you suppose?
A fine red dress she’ll buy there,
I suppose.

“Who the fuck’s this old guy?” said Nakakura in a loud whisper.

“Shhhh!” said Hayashi, glancing nervously at a guard standing nearby.

“When do the babes come on?” Nakakura muttered, wrapping his arms around his legs.

“He said something about his daughter, so there’ll be some later,” Kiku whispered in his ear.

Unfortunately, the “babes” were slow to appear. Old Sahei had a string of visitors to the mountain hut—villagers, travelers, woodcutters, and trappers—but there wasn’t a woman among them.

The plot of the play went something like this: the girl raised by Sahei as his daughter was actually his granddaughter, abandoned by her mother, Torie, who had run off with a passing traveler soon after her husband’s death. Together Sahei and his granddaughter had endured the rigors of life in the mountain cottage, until one spring day when the girl was almost fourteen they were visited by a fine gentleman who introduced himself as her mother’s secretary, Torie now being the manager of four circus troupes, apparently. The visitor informed Sahei that Torie now wanted her daughter back, but the old man chased him away with a shower of abuse. It was at about this point that Yamane dozed off, but Nakakura was watching with rapt attention.

“Right on!” he muttered. “Serves her fuckin’ right for running off like that. He shoulda wasted her!”

Finally, the daughter made her entrance. Nakakura nearly jumped out of his seat, but Hayashi and Kiku each grabbed a handful of uniform to hold him down. The pair of legs below the girl’s short skirt drew a long ovation before she started her song and dance.

I am a child of the mountains,
These lovely mountains I call home.
The birds and other creatures are my friends.
Oh! How I love my mountain home!

“Yes, indeed, I love these mountains. And yet, do you suppose it could be true what I hear? That my mother still lives, and Father is, in truth, my grandfather? What am I to do? Whatever shall I do? O Queen Akebi, show me the way!”

A figure wrapped from head to foot in vines appeared on stage: Queen Akebi, spirit of the mountains, mistress of the wild things.

> "Dear child, what is it that you wish? Speak. You have always been a friend to the animals, and now, in your need, I will grant you anything you wish."

The girl, however, was at a loss for an answer.

> "*I know not what to say*," she sang.
>
> "Know not?!" cried the queen in a sudden rage. "Those who don't know what they want I turn into stone guardians of the high mountain pass."

The queen whirled the vines around her as a flash of magnesium and a billow of smoke obscured the stage, and while the prisoners in the front rows coughed, a statue of the girl appeared. Her voice could be heard sobbing from speakers offstage.

"Nasty," said Nakakura. "That's one nasty goddess, turning little girls into stone." The play, however, had a happy ending: unaware that her daughter has become a statue, Torie and her secretary reveal their evil intentions, the girl finally realizes that it's her grandfather who really loves her, and Queen Akebi restores her to life. In the last scene, the girl sang one more song.

> *How little I knew until I was stone,*
> *How little I knew.*
> *I hated the queen for making me stone,*
> *But how little I knew.*
> *The great wide world, and poor little me,*
> *But what did I know?*
>
> *(Chorus)*
> *So you've got to sit down…*
> *put on your thinking cap…*
> *and think!*

Don’t let these walls of stone get you down…
put on your thinking cap…
and soon it’s spring!

The play had a big effect on Nakakura, who talked about it all the way back to the cell.

“Still seems like a pretty crummy thing to do—turning that little girl to stone,” he said, his eyes misting over.

“Don’t you get it?” said Hayashi. “The story was meant for us; we’re supposed to sit it out here like good little statues and everything’ll be fine in the end.” Yamane was nodding in agreement.

“Bullshit,” said Nakakura firmly. “That bad mother who ran off with another guy was the whole point of it. Good thing the girl ended up with her grandfather.” Hayashi and Yamane looked at one another and laughed, so he tried to get Kiku to back him up. “What do you think? Bullshit or not bullshit?”

“Nah, I thought it was pretty interesting,” said Kiku, turning to look back at the others who were walking behind.

“Interesting? What was interesting?” said Yamane.

“The part where the girl got turned to stone.”

“What?!” said Nakakura. “That’s *cold*, man. That was the saddest part.” Kiku laughed.

“Not the way I look at it. Seems to me it would be just fine if people who don’t know what they want got turned to stone. That queen was right. People who don’t know what they want won’t get it anyhow, so they’re pretty much stone as it is. If you ask me, they should have just left that dumb girl a statue.”

26

Hashi had developed a strong aversion to anything that could reflect an image. Mirrors horrified him, as did windows at night, polished black marble, shiny chrome bumpers, or a still body of water.

The concert was over, and with a manic wave of his hand toward the audience, he made his way back to the dressing room, only to find a whole wall of mirrors there, and in them reflected the face of a man who had held sway over a band and several thousand people for the past two hours.

"Who the hell *are* you?" he muttered at his own reflection. He felt it wasn't Hashi staring back at him. Though bleached by hundreds of popping flashbulbs, a smile still played across the face, turning quickly to a look of phony rage, but the mouth hurried on as if the question were urgent: "Who *are* you? And what the hell are you doing in my body?… Yeah, ever since then… I used to hate myself, I was a creep, a puny little guy who spent all his time worrying what other people thought of him. But then I realized I'd never become a great singer like that. I was taught how to put on an act, and I was *good*. Anyone can act in front of a camera, but I was really *good*. And the act was to pretend I didn't give a damn what anybody else thought. Evade questions and just keep pounding away at my own opinions, rubbing their noses in bullshit and riddles. Once you've got that down, people have to start worrying about what *you* think… I don't remember exactly when, but at some point I started growing this other thing inside me, all so people would notice… all so they'd have to listen to what *I* think."

Hashi could remember a story the nuns had read to them back in the orphanage about a man who had made a bargain with a goblin. In exchange for success in business, he had agreed to swallow a horrible little egg that was almost too tiny to see. The egg stuck to the wall of his gullet and made a cocoon out of spittle, eventually becoming a tough little chrysalis that started giving the man the advice he needed to succeed in business: "Why don't you try holding your head up a little and sticking your chest out when you walk?" "Your best bet is to look the guy straight in the eye when you're

talking to him.” But when the chrysalis hatched and the bug itself began flying around inside the man, the suggestions turned to orders delivered in the bluntest terms.

That was when the thing living inside me first started giving orders, Hashi told himself: “Cut off your tongue,” it had said. But what is this thing I’ve got growing in there? Some little bug with wings… When I cut my tongue, the bug didn’t feel anything. And when I picked up the tip, it was just a bit of gristle. I remember the sound it made when I squeezed it in my fingers, kind of spongy, and it must have been right then that the bug’s shell cracked; the second I squeezed that bit of my tongue, the bug hatched, wings and all. And now it’s taking over, eating me away to change me from the inside out. It’s the bug that’s going to make the tour a success; that’s why it’s always talking to me, giving me orders. But whenever I ask it anything, there’s no answer, there’s no way for me to talk to it. All I get is a string of abuse from it, the bug telling me I’m weak, the bug promising to make me strong…

The night the group finished its last show in Kyushu, Hashi announced that he wanted to go home to the island, just for a day or so. Neva thought it was a good idea and wanted to go with him, but Hashi insisted on going alone. The band had a standing rule that off days were devoted to practice, so Neva was sent to make Hashi’s excuses, but instead of the objections she expected, she found that they also thought he needed a rest. It had become a visible strain for him to keep the manic concert atmosphere from overwhelming him, and he hardly answered any more when spoken to. Except for rehearsals, he stayed locked away in his own room, refusing to allow even Neva in to see him. Completely unable to sleep, he had apparently started taking her sleeping pills.

He wasn’t the only one suffering, however; between morning sickness and worrying about her husband, Neva’s nerves were also shot to hell. She found herself constantly calling in the doctor who had been hired to look after them and asking him about Hashi.

“Not to worry,” he told her. “Just about any performer will get a slight case of burnout over the course of a long tour. Add to that a natural fear of the responsibilities of becoming a father, and you’ve got a pretty normal reaction. He’ll be fine. You say he wants to take a look around his old stamping grounds? What could be better? That’ll fix him up in no time.”

Hashi took the train to Sasebo, where he had a longish wait for the bus that would drop him off at the ferry terminal. He decided to go and have a look around a certain department store: the one with the roof garden where he'd been hypnotized all those years ago. Just as he had always found before, Sasebo was a town where the sun never seemed to shine. Along the shadowless streets, he felt as if a wave were being generated by the people passing, the buildings, every feature of the scene. It was something he'd come across before in the other, nameless towns they had visited on tour; not sound or color, not a smell or some vague breeze, but a warping of the space between himself and the people and buildings as the distances that separated them continually expanded and contracted. Yet the city itself hadn't changed at all. He and Kiku had enjoyed walking along this wide street from the station to the shopping district. In the tinted windows of the dance halls that lined both sides, languid couples clung to one another as they swayed to the music, while flocks of birds wheeled in the air high above the spire of a nearby church. Wherever there was room, someone had set up a stand to peddle fruit or spices or something, and fishmongers pushed their carts between them. Nothing had changed in the cloudy city.

Hashi decided to make a detour through the market. Near the entrance he noticed a water tank that was writhing with hundreds of eels. He could remember how he used to watch a man wearing white gloves trying to scoop them out in his hands. The process had fascinated him, and he had stayed watching for as long as he was allowed. Once, the man had thrust an eel in front of the boys and the squirming, slimy body had slapped them both across the face. Their screams had sent the adults standing around them into fits of laughter. The eels today had all gathered in one corner and were lined up in the same direction, piled one on top of another, like a woman's long black hair floating in the bath. Hashi was sure the same thought had occurred to him the last time he'd looked into this tank.

Leaving the market, he passed a movie theater and then crossed the street. As he cut through a little park, he caught sight of the department store. Once inside, he took the elevator straight to the floor where the restaurant was and ordered a rice omelette, but it was disappointing when it came. Worse, one of the waitresses had started to stare at him, and no matter how hard he tried to avoid her, she was constantly craning her neck around to get a better view. Finally she called another waitress over and

whispered something as she pointed in his direction. When they approached his table, he could hear them egging each other on: “You say it.” “No, *you* say it.” Hashi stared resolutely at his plate.

“Uhhh, sorry to bother you, but you’re Hashi, aren’t you?” one of them finally managed, her face turning bright red. Hashi wanted to tell them they were wrong, wanted to send them away thinking they’d made a mistake, but he heard himself say something altogether different when he looked up.

“Yes, I’m Hashi. What can I do for you?” The two girls clapped their hands and jumped up and down.

“Oooooh! Ya *see*! I *told* you it was him!” By this time the other customers were looking. The waitresses had already produced autograph books, and the kitchen staff were peering out from behind the counter chattering among themselves.

“He looks shorter than he does on TV,” someone said. Hashi signed whatever was put in front of him with a practiced hand. A woman in a kimono came up with her child and spread out a handkerchief for him to sign.

“Would you mind shaking hands?” the woman asked. Hashi went one better; taking her hand, he gallantly kissed the back of it. At this, there was a general uproar, and the customers and employees—waitresses, cooks, manager and all—came pressing in around his table.

“Hang on, folks!” he called, standing up and smiling at the crowd. “I’m not going anywhere, so let’s just take our time. How about forming a line, and everybody’ll get a chance.”

“Do you like rice omelettes?” asked a shopgirl as she had him sign the back of her sweaty blouse. Hashi nodded, noticing his own warped face reflected on the back of his spoon. The face was laughing.

A business card was shoved under his nose and a man who introduced himself as a reporter from the local newspaper launched straight into a string of questions while a photographer’s flash went off in intermittent bursts.

“When will your new record be coming out?” the reporter wanted to know. A girl in a school uniform standing behind Hashi was trying to touch his hair, and the next person in the autograph line was a woman with a dye job who wanted him to sign a pair of panties she’d just bought.

“I’ll sign ’em for ya, honey,” yelled an old man who had been drinking. “My autograph good enough for you, baby?” Pushed by the crowd, a child started to fall, and its mother, trying to catch it, knocked into a table and sent dishes and bottles flying. One bottle burst as it hit the floor, and the reporter’s suit was ruined.

“Quit pushing!” someone yelled.

“So your trip here is strictly personal?” the man continued. The schoolgirls just behind him were taking turns touching Hashi’s hair, while the wall of people on all sides grew thicker. Somewhere a child was crying. Hashi went on signing: autograph books, scraps of paper, handkerchiefs, satchels, shopping bags, wrapping paper, underwear, blouses, hands, jewelry, socks, and so on. His table had begun to list to one side, and flashbulbs exploded again and again in front of his eyes. A pair of glasses fell from the face of one of the hair feelers, sending her diving down to retrieve them from under a crush of feet.

“Would you say there’s any connection between your concerts and culture in the provinces?” the reporter was asking as the table went into its final dive. The plate with what was left of the rice omelette, spoon still aboard, came sliding by, giving Hashi a final glimpse of that bulging face.

“Who are you?” he murmured at it.

“Whatda, whatda, whatda, whatda fuck’s goin’ on here?” roared a young drunk, wading onto the scene at this point. “Whatda… hey, waida minute. You really Hashi?” The funhouse face tumbled with the spoon to the floor where the girl was still groping about in a pool of ketchup for her glasses. “Heeeeeey! You really Hashi?!” the young man went on shouting. His feet squirming on bits of rice, ketchup, egg, and broken lens, Hashi nodded.

There were fewer ferry boats running to the island than there had been, and the little stand that sold soft drinks and snacks next to the bus stop had been torn down—the stand where long ago the welfare officer had bought Kiku and Hashi a half-melted ice cream. An old familiar sign showing a young girl licking a stick of candy lay buried beneath a layer of dust. The island crouched on the horizon like a sleeping animal.

Hashi’s reason for going home was simple: he wanted to see the dog. He wanted to see Milk, Kiku’s present to him as a child. He liked the idea that the dog wouldn’t know he was now a famous singer with over a million

records sold. He wondered whether Milk would remember him, how the dog would react if the bug inside him really had gained control and he was now someone else. If Milk barked and tried to bite him, then that would decide it: he would give in, become the bug's slave. But if Milk was the same old Milk, whimpering and rubbing against his leg, then perhaps they could go down to the beach and have a romp together. That was all he wanted; that would probably be enough for him to remember… whatever it was. Maybe he would recall some shining time, long before the bug was born. Maybe.

Aboard the ferry, nothing had changed: the oily smell you never got used to, the rusty rails, the frayed seat covers, the rumbling of the engine that shook you deep down. The island grew gradually larger until it filled the windows of the cabin, and Hashi came out on deck. The sea was calm, with only the gentlest swell and almost no spray where the bow cut the water. The breeze carried off the stench of oil and brought a salt sea smell in its place. The green lump on the horizon had gradually taken shape, slowly increasing in substance until now it dominated the whole scene. As it loomed nearer every second, with the engines humming in his gut, Hashi found himself groping for some much earlier memory, but what it was he couldn't think, and all he could call to mind was his first ride on this ferry with Kiku. For a moment, the sticky sensation of the ice cream melting in his mouth came back to him vividly, and his eyes misted over. The ship slowed, and a rope was thrown over to the pier. Halfway up a hill in the distance, the rows of abandoned apartment blocks were visible.

"I'm home," Hashi muttered just loud enough to be heard.

"Milk!" Hashi called as he neared the lane leading up to his foster father's house. The distance from the paved bus route seemed shorter than he remembered it, the slope less steep, but the left bank was still thick with clumps of canna lilies. At one spot where they had been cleared away, a telephone pole had been put up with a small streetlight attached. Hashi remembered that if you turned to look exactly three steps after the pole, you could see the ocean. He stood looking out over the water for a moment and then retreated to the road. On the right bank some white flowers were in bloom; though he could never remember what they were called, he did remember that just where the smell of these flowers was strongest you came

to a kumquat tree, and a little beyond it, if you called out “Milk,” a billow of white fur would come swooping around the corner ahead. Finding the spot, he stood and called the dog’s name again and again, but Milk did not appear. Maybe he’s tied up, Hashi thought to himself. But that wouldn’t stop him barking. Beginning to feel uneasy, he climbed the last few steps to the house.

The styrofoam press Kuwayama should have been running at this hour was silent. The garden was overgrown and littered with trash. And the doghouse he and Kiku had built was rotting, with ants nesting in the ruins, and Milk’s water dish was tipped on its side and covered with mud. Seeing this, and the fact that the house itself was tightly shuttered, it occurred to Hashi for the first time that Kuwayama had probably moved elsewhere. Still, the name-plate was hanging by the door, and he could see the little metal clips on the gas and electric meters that indicated a recent inspection. In the mailbox he found a notice saying the water supply was about to be cut off. So Kuwayama was still here; he would have to ask him what had happened to Milk. The door wasn’t locked, but when he opened it, the stench made him reel: five parts booze and five parts shit. Rows of empty bottles almost filled the hallway. Whiskey and grain alcohol. Inside, somebody was coughing.

“Who’s that?” It was Kuwayama’s voice.

“Me,” said Hashi. For a moment there was silence, and then Kuwayama appeared, headphones lifted from one ear only.

“Hashi? That really you?” Hashi nodded, and the little radio dropped from Kuwayama’s hand. “They just this minute mentioned your name on the radio. It was that Yumemaru who was talking about you. You two friends?”

“Who’s Yumemaru?” asked Hashi.

“He’s that young comedian. You know him?”

“Know him?—I’ve never heard of him.”

“Well, doesn’t matter. Come on in! Aren’t you coming in?” Retrieving the radio and turning it off, he took Hashi by the arm and led him into the house.

“Where’s Milk?” Hashi asked, but Kuwayama didn’t answer.

“My eyes have gone bad,” he said instead. “Hurts to go out in daylight.” The light in each room was limited to one tiny bulb that did little to dispel

the gloom. “Is it dark in here? We can turn on some lights. I’m OK if I wear these,” he said, putting on a pair of welder’s goggles as he switched on the light. For the first time Hashi could make out the contents of the rooms; Kuwayama’s bed was laid out in the inner room, and the family altar for Kazuyo had been set up in the parlor.

“Business got pretty bad there toward the end, but I had my pension coming to me, so I closed up the workshop a while back. Knew I wouldn’t get much for the press anyway, so I left it out there in the shed… Just the day before yesterday I went over to have a look at your mother’s grave. Bet that’s why you’re showing up here all of a sudden; bet she brought you here.”

“Where’s Milk gone?” Hashi interrupted.

“I gave him away.”

“Who to?”

“To a guy who works as a guard down at the salt factory. Said he’d make a perfect watchdog, so I gave him away.” Shedding the padded jacket and light kimono he was wearing, Kuwayama pulled a shirt and some pants from a chest and began dressing. “Now you just have a seat and wait for me a minute. I’m going to do some shopping and then I’ll be right back.” So saying he bustled out through the door, leaving Hashi staring at the old clothing spilling from the dresser drawer. He pulled out some things; familiar outfits of tiny shirts and tiny pants, two sets each. To avoid any hurt feelings, Kazuyo had always bought them both exactly the same clothes: two little summer shirts with sailboats on them, two checked cardigans, and two pairs of shorts, one with a large stain on the bottom—the shorts they had worn the day they’d been attacked by the dogs.

Hearing voices outside, he went to the hallway still holding the shorts. There he found a goggled Kuwayama pointing a finger in his direction.

“See, didn’t I tell you? There he is. The same Hashi you see on TV.” A dozen neighbors were crowded into the area behind him.

“Hashi? You sure have done yourself proud!” bellowed the old lady who ran the grocery store. Everyone laughed. Slowly they drew in closer: the young man who had opened a shoe shop next to Kazuyo’s beauty parlor, the fellow who ran the candy store on the main street, the stationer, the cab driver, and all their wives. After the shoe man had shaken Hashi’s hand, everyone else wanted a turn.

“Welcome home, Hashi.”

“The whole island’s proud of you!”

Kuwayama had soon distributed tea cups and was on his way back from the kitchen carrying a bottle of sake.

“Ain’t *that* the truth,” he was saying. “How do you figure it? Two brothers, and they couldn’t be more different. And *you* end up being the pride of the island. When we read all those write-ups in the magazines, it makes us feel like they were saying it about us.” With the exception of the taxi driver, they all began drinking. Even though it was broad daylight outside, with the shutters closed and the lights on, it seemed like nighttime.

“Have you seen Kiku?” the old lady from the grocery store asked quietly. Hashi shook his head. “They say he’s in prison,” she continued. “Should have stuck with those sports, if you ask me.” Though it was impossible to tell where Kuwayama was looking behind the dark glass of the goggles, he seemed to be listening to her. Suddenly he turned to her.

“Please—let’s not mention Kiku. He’s brought us nothing but shame. Nothing but shame!” he blubbered, emptying his cup in one gulp. Silence fell over the room except for the sound of Kuwayama’s coughing. The guests exchanged glances. Finally the shoe man spoke up as if trying to put a bit of life back into the party.

“Hashi… if it’s not rude to ask a pro like you in a place like this… d’you think you could sing something for us?” The guests studied Hashi’s face, gauging his reaction, then turned to Kuwayama to guess at the expression on his downcast, goggled face.

“I bet Kazuyo would have been tickled to hear Hashi sing,” said the stationer. Hashi too was looking at Kuwayama. He was thinner than he had been, with hollow cheeks and a bony chest, and he seemed somehow to have shrunk. He hadn’t much hair left either, and his scrawny limbs and neck were covered with blotches and protruding veins. Looks just like a bug, thought Hashi to himself. He was already wearing bulging goggles; if you stuck on some antennae and wings and covered him with scales, he’d probably fly straight off toward the nearest light bulb.

“How ’bout it, Hashi? Won’t you give us a song?” he said eventually, pushing aside the goggles for a moment to wipe something, tears or sweat or whatever, from his eyes. “How ’bout a song for Kazuyo? Imagine how happy it’d make her.” The others chimed in, and started to applaud.

“Sorry, I’m tired,” Hashi said, looking around at them. “And besides I just don’t feel like it.” As he spoke, Kuwayama had begun to nod deeply at each word.

“That’s just fine, boy. I’m sure your mother’s happy enough just to have you home, like the rest of us. You don’t have to sing a note if you don’t want to.” The guests nodded vaguely in agreement, and Kuwayama, looking down again, fell silent.

Hashi left them for a moment to go into the sitting room. Opening a drawer in the desk, he started rooting around for something. While he was gone, the old woman who ran the grocery stood up to go, and the others followed suit. A minute or two later, only the young man who owned the shoe store remained, half sitting and half standing, with an embarrassed look on his face.

“Uhhh,” he started when Hashi returned carrying a handful of cassette tapes. “Sorry about asking you to sing. Hope you’re not upset.”

“That’s OK. Like I said, I’m just tired and I don’t feel like it.” Looking somewhat reassured, the man bowed to Kuwayama and made his way to the door and back into the bright world outside. “This place is incredible,” Hashi told Kuwayama, who was watching him shove the tapes into his bag. “Not one thing’s changed since I left. Even the same stuff in the drawers.” Kuwayama poured some more sake into his teacup and gulped it down.

“I’m not one for messing in other people’s drawers,” he said. “So, you staying the night?”

“No, have to get back.”

“That so? ’Sa shame. So how’s Tokyo? You like it there?”

“Not particularly. To tell the truth, I came to see Milk. Once I’ve done that, I don’t want to miss the last ferry.” Kuwayama said nothing but staggered after him when Hashi rose and headed for the door. He caught up with him as he was slipping into his shoes.

“I guess I haven’t been much of a father,” he said.

“Why do you say that?” laughed Hashi, looking back over his shoulder. Kuwayama was rubbing at his eyes.

“Well, what I mean is… you with so much on your mind and all…” He waved as Hashi walked away. Hashi wondered what the eyes were doing behind the goggles. The hand, at any rate, waved feebly, like the leg of a

bug stripped of its wings and antennae, wriggling in a dark hole. “Take care of yourself now!” Kuwayama called. “Take care!”

As he walked down the hill, Hashi decided he really ought to send him a pair of sunglasses; those goggles must hurt after a while, he thought. He reached the main road and wandered along it looking for the lane leading to the salt works. The landmark was a building with a red tiled roof, the ruins of the warehouse used for storing explosives for the mines; next to it was the narrow road of reddish earth that led down to the sea. Halfway down the slope was a large pig shed and the dump for the lime left over from salt-making, which had seeped into a boggy area lined with shacks that had been built for the miners. Someone had surrounded part of the bog with barbed wire when it turned white from the dissolving lime, and Kiku and Hashi had once tried to crawl under it. They had wanted to see what had happened to the frogs that lived there. Hashi had maintained that everything must have died when the water turned a murky white. Kiku’s theory had been that the frogs themselves might have been dyed white and could then be sold as rarities. In the end, they had retreated without penetrating the barbed wire, not, of course, because of the “No Trespassing” sign but because of the terrible stink around there. No way a frog or a killifish or anything else could live in water that smelled like that, they’d reasoned. And if anything *is* living in there, Hashi had told himself at the time, I don’t want to see it. Even with the sun directly overhead, the chalky water gave back no reflection, catching every ray and sinking it in its depths.

The salt works were further down, at the edge of the water. They had been built during the summer of Hashi’s third year in junior high school, and he could still remember the day of the dedication ceremony. There had been fireworks and red-and-white rice cakes, and in the evening of that same day, Gazelle had died. Rode his motorbike off a cliff. He and Kiku had gone to see the bike while it was still burning. Some gasoline had dripped down on to the rocks where the waves were pounding, and a pale flame shivered in the surf. Kiku had been too sad even to eat any of the rice cakes.

Hashi stopped at the gate to ask where the watchman and his dog were, but was told they didn’t show up till six. Cutting through the grounds of the factory, he came out onto the beach; the tide was out. He walked along the damp rocks until he came across an old woman gathering seaweed. As he

looked at her a shudder ran through him: the woman was very much like the old beggar who he used to imagine was the woman who'd left him in the locker. She wore a pair of man's pants rolled to the knees and was holding a bamboo pole, frayed at one end, with which she was tugging at the seaweed. Her kimono, a thin, gray thing, had been discarded higher up on the rocks. Hashi assumed she was one of the people who lived on the small boats that had always been anchored in a cove on the far side of the island. He had often seen them when he was younger, these people from the boats, and they had always worn this type of kimono.

When he approached and greeted her the old woman gave a cackle, dropped her pole, and clutched at the kimono to cover herself. The pole began to slide off the rock into the water, but Hashi managed to catch it and hand it back. The wet seaweed still wrapped around the end glistened in a rainbow of colors that probably came from oil leaking down from the factory.

"You from Tokyo?" she asked him.

"How'd you know?"

"Oh, just seemed like it," she laughed, turning to thrust the pole back into the water.

"You know, I'm…" he yelled at her back, "I'm *crazy*! Raving mad!" The old woman turned and fixed him with a serious stare.

"People who are really crazy don't run around saying so," she told him.

Hashi found a dry place on the rocks and sprawled out on it. A brackish smell had sunk into the stone. Stretched out on his back, he yelled again, this time at the sky.

"I'm mad! My head's come off my body!" The old lady came closer and peered down at his face.

"You haven't swallowed a fly, have you, by any chance?"

"Huh?" said Hashi.

"My son-in-law started acting just like you are now."

"Crazy, you mean?"

"Yep. And that was what he always used to say: 'I swallowed a fly.'" In every ten thousand flies, she said, it seemed there was one that had a human-looking face, and these human-faced flies were attracted by the smell of people's vocal chords, so it happened occasionally that when someone was asleep they'd wander into his open mouth. The vocal chords,

apparently, were the sweetest meat on the whole human body. The trouble was, once these human-looking flies started chewing on them, the person would begin to go crazy from all that buzzing going on in there. And in the end he'd lose not just his voice but his mind as well, and the fly was running the whole show.

Hashi listened carefully to her story before asking: "Is there any cure?"

"Nope, none," said the woman.

"Then what do you do about these flies?"

"Be nice to them."

"The flies?"

"Sure. Get to know them, make friends. That's the only way to go," she laughed. In the distance, a dog began to bark. With a yell, Hashi jumped to his feet.

"Milk! Milk!" he called as a white speck appeared on a breakwater across the way. "Milk! Over here!" He started to run, slipping and staggering on the wet rocks. Held in place by a length of chain, the dog could only rise up on his back legs and bark, until finally the little man holding him let go. Long white fur billowing, Milk took off like a shot. Jumping from the breakwater to the rocks, he charged toward Hashi, barely skirting the spray. The white fur was ablaze in the setting sun. Hashi ran to meet him, arms outspread.

"That's right! It's me! Nothing's changed, nothing!"

27

The engines of the *Yuyo Maru* at its mooring in Hakodate harbor had been stopped for a bit of on-the-job training. The six trainees in the engineering section were doing some sort of technical inspection while the nine working toward becoming deck crew had been divided into two groups, taking turns with chart work, loran and radar readings, and an oral exam on maritime law. Offering guidance to these last two groups, in a near shout, was Captain Eda, the commander of the *Yuyo Maru*. Eda, a smallish, taciturn man who had had a career with the coast guard, was the sort of unassuming figure who, seen on the street, might have been taken for a rather run-down pensioner. Once he set foot on board a ship, however, he underwent an amazing transformation. The Eda who taught courses in the prison had heavy, sagging eyelids which he scratched continually with the end of his little finger; but with his feet planted on the deck of a ship, his eyelids seemed to snap up, revealing a piercing stare. His voice, too, was noticeably more powerful, though at times his body was unable to keep up with his enthusiasm for training his would-be crew. Apart from these training sessions, however, Captain Eda was hardly ever known to say a word.

With its engines cut, the ship was pitching about a fair bit. Kiku and the others were in the crowded wheelhouse gathered around a set of charts making practice entries for compass bearing, speed, actual and calculated position, course, sunrise and sunset, high and low tides, and tidal rates and currents. Desk work in a close, swaying room heightened the effects of seasickness, which Kiku and Yamane were already prone to. Before long, Yamane tossed aside his ruler and triangle and headed for the door to get some air, but he had only gone a few steps before the captain brought him up short.

“And where do you think you’re going, mister?”

“I was just going to have a look at cloud conditions, sir,” Yamane lied, his face pale.

“Forget it, pea brain. Back to the charts,” said the captain, who seemed to enjoy nothing more than watching Kiku or Yamane turn green around the gills. “If you concentrate on the charts, you won’t feel so bad. Besides, nobody ever died from getting seasick, but if you can’t read the charts, you could end up at the bottom of the ocean.”

“Try pretending the ship’s not moving,” suggested Nakakura, whose stint on the salvage ship seemed to make him immune. “The captain’s right, you know. Try concentrating on something else—women, getting out of stir, whatever—really concentrate and you won’t notice the roll.”

The first symptom of seasickness was a feeling of numbness around the temples, followed by a dry mouth and a sense that something was creeping up one’s throat. Fighting back the urge to puke, Kiku stared at the charts until he couldn’t bear it any longer and looked up with a groan. Staring out at the horizon, he waited for the sick feeling to pass. Hayashi, who was standing next to him calmly calculating the time of the next high tide, pointed out his distress to Nakakura, and they shared a laugh.

“Hey, Kiku,” Nakakura called out as Kiku stood there gazing out the window, still a shade of puke-green. Kiku looked vaguely in his direction. “What the hell’s ‘datura’?” Kiku frowned but did his best to look dumb. “That’s what you’ve been yelling in your dreams. Last night I could hardly sleep from all the racket. At first I couldn’t tell what the hell you were saying, but that’s what it was—‘datura,’ over and over again. What’s it mean? One of these?” he said, raising his little finger to indicate a woman. “If it’s a girl, sure is a weird name.”

Kiku looked down again at the traverse tables without answering. Traverse tables are used to read longitude and latitude by means of cruising distance and compass bearing. The problem at hand was to check the change in longitude and latitude of a ship cruising at eighteen and a half knots for forty-five minutes at a bearing of 119°.

“Come on, Kiku. What the fuck’s ‘datura’?” said Nakakura. Nakakura’s was the type of face that told even the most casual observer that there were certain people in the world who were capable of murder at the slightest provocation, the least change in temperament or physical condition. There was no saying why exactly, but it was that kind of face.

It had started to rain. During lunch, Nakakura and the others had kept after him to tell them what ‘datura’ was, so Kiku had lied and said it was, in

fact, a woman’s name.

“I don’t know myself if that was her real name. She used to be a model, so I suppose it could have been made up.”

“Back when I was teaching water-skiing, I once did it with a fashion model,” Hayashi put in, sounding rather pleased with himself. “Know what I found out? When you’re doing it, those long legs aren’t all they’re cracked up to be. If she sticks them up over your shoulders, they get too heavy, and if you do it doggie-style, the thighs are so long your dick’s too low to get it in.”

After a morning of training, the afternoon was devoted to practical application. In days gone by that had meant fishing for squid, but a sharp drop in the available catch had put an end to it four years earlier, and now the *Yuyo Maru* performed mass burials at sea. This didn’t mean dumping shrouded bodies into the waves; no, the bodies had been properly cremated on shore and the bones placed in square lead boxes, which were then dropped overboard. The service was aimed at people who couldn’t afford a burial plot on land, and as such it was something of a fad. For this part of the ship’s duties, there was one more man on board in addition to the captain, chief engineer, two guards, and Tadakoro, from Supervision: the prison chaplain.

The boxes, each bearing a number and a name carved in the side, were loaded one by one while the ship was still in dock. Then, putting to sea, they headed for Cape Ohana, the ship running low in the water with its cargo of lead. Just beyond the cape was the Public Maritime Cemetery, which consisted of a small watchman’s shed on shore and an area marked off on the water by yellow rope. The ropes were attached to four buoys, on each of which was a sign reading “Persons entering the marked area or abandoning objects without permission will be punished in accordance with municipal ordinances.”

After getting clearance from the watchman, the ship sailed into the cemetery, where Eda ordered them to drop anchor. Pulling on their rain gear, the trainees assembled on deck and began taking the boxes out of the hold. Each man would carry one box up on deck, place it at his feet, press his hands together in a brief imitation prayer, and then toss it in the drink. The chaplain, meanwhile, had begun to recite some real prayers, urging the occupant of each box to sleep peacefully, lulled by the sound of God’s own

voice—the waves—and cradled in the arms of Mother Sea, shining with the light of heaven.

Kiku and friends were having a competition to see who could throw his box furthest—a marine shot put, as it were. Predictably, Yamane was the winner. Kiku thought perhaps his raincoat was interfering with his form. The glassy surface of the sea sucked up the fine raindrops, and everything around had gone gray: the sky, the harbor in the distance, the fog rolling in, the smoke from the incense the guards had lit, the prisoners' coats, and the heavy boxes. The only relief was the white splash that each box made before vanishing beneath the waves.

When all the boxes had been disposed of and the guards had tossed some flowers in after them, the captain began barking orders: "OK, we're heading home! Start the engines, and get all these lubbers to stations." Kiku and Nakakura went to the bow to weigh anchor, and the ship moved out of the cemetery and back toward harbor.

As they approached the harbor, Kiku stood on deck and stared at the breakwater along the opposite shore. Suddenly, his hand shot up in a quick little wave, but not quickly enough to escape Nakakura's notice.

"What was that?" Kiku stuck out his little finger. "A woman?" He nodded. Now Nakakura was staring at the breakwater. "The red umbrella?" Kiku waved again, and Nakakura joined in as the figure on shore stood watching them through a pair of binoculars. It was Anemone. "So this babe of yours is in Hakodate?"

At this point Hayashi and Yamane came by carrying some old tires that were hung over the side to protect the hull while they were docking.

"Kiku's girl's come out to watch," Nakakura told them. "Let's all yell her name as loud as we can. Should give her a bit of a thrill." They nodded.

"You'll get us in trouble," said Kiku, trying to stop them, but it was too late. Waving their hands frantically, all three cried out at the top of their lungs:

"DATURA!"

The red umbrella waved merrily in response.

Kiku was writing a note.

Dear Anemone:

At long last we'll be leaving next week on our shakedown cruise. We're due to be gone nine days. I'm so excited I can hardly stand it. Our ports of call are the same as I wrote earlier. There've been no changes.

When he was finished he looked up, seeming to notice for the first time that there was sunlight streaming into the room. Hopping up and going to the window, he looked out on a world of bright light and deep shadows.

"Summer!" he shouted.

"Asshole," muttered Nakakura, sprawling on the floor. Hayashi and Yamane laughed. "Hadn't you noticed? It's been summer for weeks." Scratching his head, Kiku gave the wall a few kicks.

"Could you keep it down?" said Yamane looking at him a bit suspiciously. "What's all the excitement about anyway?"

"Nothing. Just that I'd forgot about summer. And I love it!"

Nakakura rolled over, his tongue clucking irritably. "Asshole," he repeated. "Summer in jail is hell, man. Look at these windows: no screens. At night you're soaked with sweat *and* covered with mosquitoes. Like I said: hell." Just then a guard opened the peephole in the door.

"Kuwayama, out—now! You've got a visitor."

"Visitor? Shit! She's here almost every week," grumbled Nakakura, getting to his feet. "That little Miss Datura is a sweetie, isn't she?" Kiku buttoned up his uniform and was about to leave.

"Seems it's your brother," said the guard.

"My brother? Hashi?" said Kiku, stopping short. The guard nodded.

"The same. I've seen his picture in magazines. Some kind of singer, isn't he?"

"I don't want to talk to him," said Kiku, heading back into the cell, but the guard grabbed his arm.

"You don't have to stay long. Seems he's sick."

When Kiku entered the visitors' room, there was no sign of Hashi, just a large woman with slanty eyes. Thinking they'd put him in the wrong room, he was turning to go when the woman spoke.

"Uh, I'm…. Hashi's…," she said, stopping him in his tracks. He suddenly remembered the woman he'd seen with Hashi on TV, the one he'd

married. He turned back to look at her but didn’t sit down. “He was here till just a minute ago,” she told him in her deep voice. She rubbed her lips together to smooth the dark red lipstick, looking up at Kiku and motioning him into the chair. “I tried to make him stay, but when he heard you coming down the hall, he ran off saying he had to go to the bathroom. He’s scared stiff of seeing you.” When she moved, the smell of cigarette smoke and perfume wafted from her body. Kiku said nothing. Neva sat, hands clasped under her purse, darting glances at the ceiling or door from time to time. She seemed glad there was a rusty screen between them, making the suffocating closeness a bit easier to take.

“Who are you?” Kiku asked. Neva gave herself a little shake before meeting his gaze.

“I’m Hashi’s wife,” she said, calmly and clearly. Up to this point she had been on the verge of tears, but the words seemed to restore her composure. “Hashi is exhausted,” she went on. “He began acting a bit strange a few weeks ago. He’s been on tour without a break for months, but till recently there was no sign of any problem as long as he was on stage. Then some of the staff began to notice that he wasn’t calming down after the concerts, and he’d stopped talking almost completely. He seems on edge most of the time. When we were in Kyushu, he suddenly decided he wanted to pay a visit home, and he came back from the island in much better shape. But it wasn’t long before he began complaining of insomnia again and he was taking more sleeping pills than before. The doctor said he should take a break from work and have a thorough checkup, and I suggested we cancel the few shows left on the tour and go away somewhere, but he wasn’t interested. He wanted us to book more dates for the tour; he said it was only the concerts that were keeping him alive. And it’s true: when he was on stage he was the same old Hashi, but the rest of the time he just shut himself in his room and sat in the corner talking to himself. When I went in to try to talk to him, it was like he didn’t even know I was there. The last few days he’s taken to sticking black paper over the windows to make the room dark.”

“What does he do in his room?” Kiku asked.

“He listens to tapes,” said Neva. “And usually that wouldn’t matter—it’s part of his job—but the stuff he listens to is weird—animal cries, helicopters, water dripping, the wind, things like that. He brought them back with him after his trip home, and he bought a bunch of sound-effect

tapes to add to them. That's all he listens to. Then, the day before yesterday, he suddenly decided he wanted to come see you. He wouldn't tell me why —not that he tells me much of anything any more…"

As she finished speaking, Neva noticed Kiku's eyes shift slowly from her face to the door behind her and she turned to look. Hashi, white-faced, in a white ostrich feather jacket, was standing there with a little cellophane bag of white pills he'd just taken from one pocket. Neva gave a shout when she saw him tear it open and raise it to his mouth. One of the little capsules fell to the floor as she tried to pry the others loose, and Kiku watched it roll away like a fat grain of rice. Then, while the two of them were still wrestling together, he walked to the door, knocked on it for the guard, and left the room without even glancing back. If he hadn't knocked over his chair when he stood up, Neva wouldn't have seen him go.

"All done?" asked the guard. Kiku nodded in silence and set off down the corridor, trying to forget what he'd just seen. He tried to drive from his mind the image of Hashi's ghostly face as he struggled with the woman. There was only one thing like it he'd seen before: the look on Kazuyo's face, of blood about to come oozing out from the eyes and nose and mouth of a body whose arms and legs had gone stiff and cold—a look he never wanted to see again as long as he lived. He was just thinking how thin Hashi's arms had looked when a voice called out behind him.

"Kiku!"

"Dumb shit," Kiku muttered as he walked on. "It's his own fault he looks like that."

"He's calling you," said the guard.

"Kiku!" Hashi yelled again. His clipped little shout seemed to rattle the doors of the one-man cells that lined the corridor, as though a Hashi clone sat shrieking in each cell he passed. Kiku stopped and the voice broke off. A vision took shape in his head of Hashi's body lying stiff as a board with blood leaking from his eyes and nose and mouth, and with a shudder he ran back toward the visitors' room. Don't die, Hashi, he thought, running as fast as he could. It took the guard a moment to unlock the door, but when Kiku burst into the room, he found Hashi plastered limply against the wire screen, hanging like a monkey in a zoo. His eyes were wild and staring, his jaw working as he chewed at something. Kiku caught a glimpse of a white paste in his mouth: the pills he and Neva had been fighting over. Neva was

standing to one side, her face buried in her hands, and Hashi suddenly jerked his head in the direction of the door, signaling her to leave. For a moment she hesitated, looking back and forth between them.

“Get out!” Hashi screamed, sending a stream of chalky spit toward her face. Her shoulders heaved as she wiped the stuff away. When she glanced in his direction, Kiku was instantly reminded of two other women: Kazuyo and the one who had left him in the locker, the person he had killed. He had seen this pained expression on their faces, too.

“Get out!” Hashi repeated, but Kiku shut him up by punching him hard through the wire barrier, sending him sprawling back against the wall. Neva was about to go and help him when Kiku stopped her.

“Sorry, but you’d better leave us alone for a bit,” he said. Hashi lay on the floor rubbing flecks of rust from his eyes, then eventually staggered to his feet. He wiped his lips with his jacket sleeve, leaving an ostrich feather stuck to the corner of his mouth, and slumped onto a stool.

“Why’d you hit me?” he asked.

“Since when did you start playing Mr. Tough Guy with women?” Kiku countered.

“You didn’t hurt me, you know. I’m too spaced out for that.” Hashi still hadn’t raised his eyes, and they remained firmly fixed on his lap as he continued. “So, you’re looking pretty fit. You know, this is the first time you’ve ever hit me. I’ve seen you hit plenty of other people, but never me… until now… Kiku, I wanted to see you.” He stopped suddenly and looked up, his eyes pleading. It was an old trick, one he had learned in dealing with adults long ago at the orphanage; he would begin talking, voice low, and then slowly, timidly, look up to catch their expression. In that instant he could judge the other person’s attitude: was he liked, was he loathed, would they treat him kindly, or were they going to hurt him in some way. “Kiku, what kind of person was I? I don’t know any more myself; what was I like?”

“Forget that for a minute. What I want to know is why you’ve come,” said Kiku.

“I’ve changed, I’m not the same as I was… Hey, you remember the time we went to check the results of the entrance exams for high school? Kazuyo wanted to go with us, but her low blood pressure used to make her a bit sluggish when she took a bath in the morning, so we went without her. You

remember? The bus was really late, so the guy with the jeep from city hall gave us a ride. You remember all that?"

"You've been back to the island, haven't you?" said Kiku.

"Did Neva tell you?"

"How was Milk?"

"Fine. And he remembered me. I'm sure he still remembers you too. I ran into the old lady who had that grocery store; she said I'm the pride of the island. Said you put them to shame."

Kiku was quiet as he watched a smile curl the corners of Hashi's mouth.

"You know, I thought you'd look worse than this," Hashi continued. "Surprised me to see you looking so good. You looked like hell during the trial, and I thought maybe if you were still having a rough time, it might help to think through together this problem I've been working on. It's that sound; you know the one. The doctors played it to us in that room. You don't remember?"

"I remember."

Hashi looked up again, startled. "You do?"

Kiku nodded.

"Then what was it? What was the sound?"

"I've forgotten."

"But when did you remember that they were playing a sound for us?" Hashi pressed him.

"After I shot that woman. I heard the same sound for a long time after that, but it's gone now." Hashi began to tremble as Kiku spoke. His eyes opened wide and he started to fidget, thrusting his hand in his pocket for more pills, which he tossed in his mouth and chewed up.

"Kiku, I'm scared," he said. "I look in the mirror and I don't recognize the face staring back at me. It's like my body's split down the middle and the two halves aren't always doing the same thing. You know what it is? It's this fly; you see, in every ten thousand flies, there's one that has a face like a human being, and somehow I swallowed one of them. I figured it out: these human-looking flies are people who did such godawful things in a previous life that they have to come back as flies. That's what's buzzing around inside my head trying to tell me what to do… That's it," he said, as if suddenly working something out, "yes, I'm sure of it: it's got to be murder… You see, I've only heard that sound once since then. It was in a

public toilet down by the river in Sasebo. There was this pervert who was messing with me, and I hit him on the head with a brick; knocked his brains out—I heard it then, but not since.

"Now there's this fly inside me telling me to do all these bad things; things like cutting off my own tongue, or sticking a chain up some girl's ass, or grabbing the mike stand and flattening people who climb up on stage. The weird thing is, the more I do this stuff, the better things seem to go, the more famous I get, the more money I make. But I can't get away from this feeling that I'm splitting in two, this pain in my head… So that's why I have to hear that sound again. And it was the fly that told me how I could: it said I had to kill the person I loved most in the whole world and then I'd hear it. I had to sacrifice that person and then it'd grant me anything I wished. I know what it said's the truth; the proof is I heard it when I killed that pervert. I killed him while he was sucking me off; I must have loved him more than anybody else right at that moment, right when he was blowing me, right when I slammed that brick into his skull. That's when I heard it. And it was the same with you. That woman was your mother, and you heard the noise too when you killed her. I knew it! The fly wasn't lying. You've got to kill the one you love! Don't you see? That stuff about God being kind and good was bullshit; this world's being run by the biggest sinner of them all, so when you've got a favor to ask, you've got to do something terrible to make it happen. That's it! That's why I've got to kill Neva. You see, Neva's pregnant, and I'm the father, so if I kill her, I'll be killing *two* people. And I'll hit the jackpot; I'll hear the sound again! That's got to be it. Right, Kiku? Right?"

Just at this point the guard poked his head in. "Time's up," he said as Hashi rose and headed for the door.

"Thanks, Kiku," Hashi said. "It's all clear now."

"Time," the guard repeated. Kiku sat in a daze, rooted to his chair.

"Bye, Kiku. Take care of yourself," said Hashi, and he was gone.

"Wait! Hashi, wait!" Kiku called after him, jumping to his feet, but the guard caught his arm.

"Your time's up, Kuwayama," he said. "You've had thirty minutes." Kiku realized he should try to get hold of the woman, but he couldn't remember her name.

“Ma’am! Ma’am!” he tried yelling, and to his surprise she appeared in the doorway. The guard was tugging on his arm. “Lady, what’s happened to him? He’s crazy, you know, stark raving mad. Who did this to him? Who made him crazy?” But two more guards came in and, grabbing Kiku by both arms, dragged him away. Neva stood staring after him, utterly bewildered.

Hashi was at it again, he thought, on his way back down the hall; as fucked up as ever. It made him want to spit with rage. The same old story: armies of assholes, total strangers, telling them lies. Nothing had changed, not one thing—not since he’d let out that first scream in the coin locker. The locker was bigger, maybe; the new one had a pool and gardens, with a band, people wandering about half-naked, and you could keep pets—yes, this one had all kinds of shit: museums, movie theaters, and mental hospitals—but it was still a huge coin locker, and no matter how many layers of camouflage you had to dig through if you felt like digging, in the end you still ran up against a wall. And if you managed to scramble up the wall, there they were with those sneering faces ready to kick you back down. Knock you down and knock you out, and when you wake up it’s back to jail, back to the bughouse. It’s all cleverly hidden behind potted palms and sparkling pools, behind cuddly puppies and tropical fish, movie screens and exhibitions and layers of smooth lady-skin, but behind it all there’s always the wall, the guards prowling around, the high watchtower. Whenever the gray fog lifts for a second, there they are: the wall, the tower. They scare you stiff, they make you mad, but there’s less than nothing you can do about them; and when you can’t stand it any more and the fear and rage get you moving, get you started doing something, there they are again, waiting for you: the prison, the nuthouse, the lead box for your bones. There’s only one solution, one way out, and that’s to smash everything around you to smithereens, to start over from the beginning, lay everything to waste…

Kiku stopped and turned as if he’d just remembered something.

“Hashi!” he shouted, making a break back in the direction of the visitors’ room. The guards stopped him. “Hashi! That sound! It’s a heartbeat! Do you hear? Hashi! It’s your mother’s heartbeat!” His voice echoed up and down the hall.

“Looks to me like *you’re* the crazy one,” a guard said, laughing.

Anemone stood on the breakwater staring through her binoculars at the *Yuyo Maru* leaving the harbor. She was wondering how he was going to escape.

Two days earlier, she had quit the bakery. Noriko had cried, saying she would miss her, and four of the girls from the shop had given her a going-away party. They had rented a room in a restaurant and each one had bought her a present; hankies, a key holder, that kind of thing. Noriko had given her a book wrapped in some bright paper.

“The girl in here reminds me of you,” she’d said. “She’s the wife of this writer who gets to be really rich and famous while he’s still young, and they run all over the place partying until she starts to go crazy. Her name’s Zelda.”

“And what’s it about her that’s like me?” Anemone had asked. “I may not be so bright, but I’ll tell you one thing, I’m not going crazy. So what is it?” Noriko had thought for a moment.

“Well, first of all, you’re both good-looking. And even though you say you’re not smart, I think you really are, smart and pretty. But sometimes it seems like there’s something missing, something important—like a shortcake where somebody forgot to put in the vanilla extract.” Noriko took a bite of her jello.

“But that goes for everybody,” one of the other girls put in. “Nobody’s perfect; everybody’s missing something somewhere.” They all nodded.

“That’s not what I mean,” said Noriko, sucking in a mouthful of green jello before continuing. “You know how there are some girls who you think are a mess and are going to end up having a hard time but secretly, deep down, you envy them anyway? Well, that’s the kind of girl I think Anemone is; that’s the kind of girl I’d like to be.”

“Thanks,” Anemone had said, vaguely sensing that she’d been paid a compliment. “Thanks, but I’m still not going crazy.”

She had done everything just as Kiku had told her to. First, she’d bought some clothes for him and hidden them in a spot he could easily find near the docks in the town where the ship was to pay a visit. Then she got hold of a motorboat—a big one—and had it tied up at a marina they both knew near Tokyo, filling it with food, water, and diving equipment.

And now, watching the *Yuyo Maru* disappear into the distance, she pulled a key from the pocket of her sweaty blouse and spun it on her finger as she headed back to her car: a red, four-wheel-drive Landrover with “DATURA” painted on the side. But how was he going to escape, she wondered, as she started the engine and set out for the ship’s first port of call.

She opened the windows but the sweat had already soaked her underwear. The countryside shimmered in the air above the steamy asphalt. It was the season when crocodiles thrashed their tails in the water with glee, the season she had first met Kiku: summer. The book Noriko had given her lay on the seat next to her. Bored with waiting for Kiku’s ship to finally leave the harbor, she’d thought she might have a look at it, but the small print had made her eyes ache and she’d given up almost immediately. Now, as she drove, the pages flipped open in the wind, and when she stopped at a light, a line caught her eye. She liked the sound of it and whispered it to herself as she waited: “There’s nothing attractive about a serious girl, and so I have no desire to become serious.”

28

Neva had started going to a Yoga for Pregnancy class. Hashi had fallen into a serious depression during a three-week break between the end of the concert tour and the beginning of recording sessions for his next album, and the strain of looking after him had exhausted Neva to the point that she was afraid of losing the baby. The yoga class was her way of coping with the stress and sleeplessness without resorting to drugs.

Hashi's new routine was to spend whole days doing absolutely nothing, sprawled out on a couch he had dragged into his darkened room. "Someone's after me," he would announce from time to time. "But it won't do any good to run, they'll catch me sooner or later." For the time being, though, his behavior seemed harmless enough; he'd done nothing violent so far and there were no signs that he was suicidal. He was even eating a little, and Neva, as far as possible, clung to the idea that it was all brought on by exhaustion. D, however, was in favor of putting him in a mental hospital.

"We could do a TV show from the hospital," he suggested, his mind apparently on the boost that news of Hashi's insanity might give to his slowing record sales.

It took a visit from two members of the band to get Hashi to leave his room. Toru had brought a present with him: a harmonica.

"Music is the best cure for anything," he said. Hashi seemed to perk up and immediately started playing a blues in G. Matsuyama got a guitar they had hanging on the wall, Toru picked up some bongos lying on the floor, and suddenly they had a jam session going. Neva was thrilled as she watched Hashi play; his eyes were closed, and there was a contented look on his face she hadn't seen in a long time. If playing really has this effect on him, we ought to book more concerts right away, she thought.

Piggybacking on the blues they'd been playing, Toru started a song about a down-and-out musician riding the rails.

Deserted station, the dead of night,

and I’m tossing down this tattered bag.
The train roof’s high, the platform’s low,
gently does it, go easy now.

Gently does it, treat it nice,
that’s a clarinet I’ve got inside.
Crack in the mouthpiece cuts like a knife,
take my music and you take my life.

Without it I’m a broken man,
standing there without a hope.
Lights go flying away in the dark,
red one’s my lover, blue one’s my heart…

Neva’s applause drew an embarrassed laugh from Toru.

“Hashi, since when did you start playing harmonica?” he asked. Hashi, however, was still going strong and didn’t seem to hear.

“You’ll have to do something with it for the next tour,” said Matsuyama. This time there was the vaguest of nods from Hashi as he continued to play a riff from “Midnight Rambler” at an incredibly fast tempo. Watching him sitting hunched over the harmonica, Neva recognized a feeling that she had all but forgotten, the feeling she’d had the first time she’d heard him sing, the one she’d felt the first time he took her in his arms. She had felt she could now forgive herself, free herself, be good to herself. She remembered how she had resisted the idea that a man so much younger than her could have such power over people. She remembered thinking that he had come out of nowhere, survivor of some early trauma she could only begin to imagine, and that the waves he gave off when he sang were his attempt to soften the memory of that time. But she didn’t believe that any more; Hashi’s hell wasn’t behind him, it was still there inside him, like a malignant growth, and he sang to get this torment out of him, to spread it around, so as to retain some sort of balance.

“I’m beat,” Toru said finally, and Matsuyama nodded.

“I’ll make some tea,” said Neva, hurrying into the kitchen. As she was waiting for the water to boil, she heard first the drums, then the guitar, stop playing. She listened to Hashi’s harmonica playing on alone, thinking how

happy she was. But just as the apple tea had finished brewing, Matsuyama came into the kitchen looking worried.

“What’s wrong with Hashi?” he asked.

“He’s been a bit tired lately, but your visit’s done him wonders. I haven’t seen him look so good in ages,” said Neva.

“Look so good? He looks like hell, like he’s out of his mind. Go take a look. He’s playing so hard his lips are all bloody. Toru told him to cut it out, but he doesn’t seem to even hear.” When they went back into the room, Toru was sitting with both hands held out above him in a gesture of despair. A bright red smear was spreading from Hashi’s mouth.

“Hashi!” Neva shouted, but there was no response.

“You want us to stop him?” Toru asked. “If we don’t do something, he’ll cut himself to shreds.”

“Please,” she whispered. Toru moved in on him, but as he reached out to take the harmonica Hashi’s leg snapped out, catching him in the stomach. With Matsuyama circling behind him, Hashi edged over to the window keeping his back to the wall, but Toru jumped him, grabbing him by the hair and throwing him to the floor. Even on the ground, though, he kept the harmonica pressed tightly to his lips, playing as best he could as Matsuyama tried to pry it from his hands. Neva covered her ears to shut out the screeching chords that, combined with Hashi’s voice, were like the squeal of an animal being strangled. Finally, Matsuyama managed to extract the bloodstained harmonica from Hashi’s grip.

“You dumb fuck! What the hell do you think you’re doing?” he wailed, trying to wipe Hashi’s lips with his handkerchief. “You’ve got to try to keep a lid on it, man. We can’t have you looking like a crazy.”

“Isn’t that what being a pop star’s all about?” Hashi muttered through his tattered lips, eyes staring at the ceiling.

Later that evening, he sat looking out the window as Neva tried to make up her mind about putting him in a hospital. Both Matsuyama and Toru were in favor of some sort of therapy, preferably abroad, but Neva knew that no matter where they went D would find them and send teams of reporters and photographers after them. The fact was that she was the only one who could help him, but she wondered if she was strong enough to join him in his fight, to face up to all the horrors he carried around inside. She

knew it would mean not only having to fight with Hashi but against him if he was to keep his balance when he stood right on the brink like this.

Hashi was staring at something down in the road below, a grayish blotch that was apparently a dog or a cat that had been flattened by traffic; judging from the shape, it was probably a cat. He stared at the spot for a long time, then abruptly left the room. Neva knew exactly what he had gone to do: he was going out into the street to scrape up what remained of the animal and bury it somewhere. She knew because he had a habit of burying dead moths and cockroaches and mice whenever he came across them. After a while he returned, face white as a sheet, but Neva ignored him and went into the bedroom, where she soon fell asleep over a book on pregnancy.

She awoke some time later with a strange feeling. The sight of Hashi standing beside the bed startled her and she almost cried out. His whole body was shaking. Screwing up what courage she could, she looked straight at him.

“Neva, how’s the baby doing?” he asked quietly. “Seems to me the kid would be better off dead, you know. I just can’t see me setting it a good example, I’d never know what to tell it… Neva, I’ve been wanting to tell you: I’ve got a fly inside my head, one with a human face, and it’s giving me these orders. ‘Kill Neva,’ it keeps saying… You see, there’s this sound, one I’ve just got to hear, and the price you pay to hear it—Kiku knows this too—is doing something awful, killing somebody… somebody you love. I can’t help it, I was born to hear that sound… I buried that cat out in the flower bed, and those moths—I buried them in the flower pots—so when I kill you and the baby, maybe they’ll go easy on me… I’m sure of it: this kid of mine would be better off dead.” Gooseflesh rose on his neck as he slowly lowered his eyes to Neva’s swollen belly.

“I don’t want to do it,” he said, shaking uncontrollably, “I really don’t, but I won’t ever hear that sound otherwise. And I’ll wind up”—his bloodshot eyes were bulging—“as a man with A FLY’S FACE.”

Neva was struggling not to lose control. Again she wanted to cry out, but her throat was dry as dust and the sound died before it could emerge. Maybe it *would* be better if both of them were dead, she thought, the baby and herself. And suddenly she knew she no longer loved this man. She realized too that up to then her fear had not been for her own safety but that Hashi would become a murderer. The thought made her feel much lighter,

and with it came the feeling that he was ugly! Something caught deep down in her chest, then pushed its way up her throat and out of her mouth:

"Your kid is *not* going to die!" she yelled, as Hashi's body stiffened. "Even if you dug it out of me, even if it was the tiniest embryo and got flushed down the drain, it would survive. You forget: this kid's father made it out of a coin locker. So it's going to *live*, and grow, and come looking for you. You'll be a fly by then, but you won't be able to hide, and it'll crush you underfoot—this kid who's *going to live*!"

29

The *Yuyo Maru* was following a southerly course along the Pacific coast of Honshu. On board were twenty-two men: fifteen trainees and a crew of seven that included the captain, the chief engineer, the first mate, a radio officer, someone from Supervision, and two guards. The nine prisoners in the deck crew section were taking turns at the helm, with six men at any one time crowded into the little wheelhouse: Captain Eda, the radio officer, the trainee at the helm, another watching the radar screen and the other instruments, and two more reading navigational charts. On the second day out, it was Kiku's turn at the wheel, while Yamane watched the radar, and Nakakura and Hayashi studied the charts.

One of the exercises on their agenda was an open-sea rescue drill. Captain Eda had just asked Nakakura for their position—142°39' east by 40°44' north—when the loudspeaker announced:

"Man overboard on the starboard side."

"Man overboard," Kiku shouted, throwing the lever into neutral and turning the wheel hard right. The aim, he'd been taught, was to try to approach the man in the water without cutting him to ribbons in the propeller; thus the stern of the ship had to be kept at a distance. Once the turn was completed, the ship proceeded, slow ahead, until visual contact was made and a life preserver could be thrown in his direction. Then, keeping the person constantly in sight, they approached from the leeward side within twenty to thirty meters, when the engines were stopped again and the boat was allowed to drift slowly in. For the purposes of the drill, a red beach ball was standing in for the fellow in the water, which was just as well since it didn't quite go as planned. Kiku failed to take into account the roughness of the open sea, which changed the maneuver completely from the practice they'd had in calmer harbor waters. Out here, it was vital to position the ship so the port side took the brunt of the waves, but Kiku had come around so that the starboard was facing the weather, and he could

only watch as they drifted away from what would soon have been a drowned sailor.

“What’s the matter, Kuwayama? Too tough for you?” laughed the captain.

“I didn’t realize how rough the sea was,” said Kiku defensively. Eda then asked Hayashi for a reading from the latest weather map.

“There’s a stable high pressure system in the direction of the Bonin Islands. Wind’s out of the south. Looks as though a cool high pressure system is developing over Southern Siberia and will spread south.” Captain Eda nodded as he listened to his summary.

“Under these conditions, what do we have to be on the lookout for?” he asked.

“Squalls,” Nakakura almost shouted as the radio officer started giving the local maritime weather forecast.

“A small typhoon has developed, but it’s expected to fizzle out somewhere south of Okinawa without making landfall.” Outside there was a hint of a breeze, with an occasional school of flying fish breaking the surface of the sea, but the wheelhouse was stifling. Sweat dripped in steady streams onto the charts, and Kiku’s arm rose at regular intervals to wipe his forehead with his sleeve as he stared at the gyrocompass.

The third night, they put in at Shichigahama in Miyagi Prefecture, anchoring against a seawall lined with drab-looking warehouses. Once the mooring lines had been secured, there was a buzz of excitement among the prisoners; this was the night they were allowed to have visitors. Those whose family and friends had applied in advance were given an hour with them after dinner. As the sun set, the visitors gathered on the road that ran along the breakwater while the guards checked names and numbers against their list. Finally, they began calling the prisoners’ names one by one until everybody except Kiku had gone ashore. Yamane was met by a woman holding a baby, presumably his wife; a young couple, a brother or sister and spouse, had come to see Hayashi; and Nakakura had his mother. When his name was called, Nakakura had hesitated, a less than happy look on his face. The streetlights behind had turned this scene of muffled reunions into a cluster of shadows, though Kiku could just make out Yamane holding his child overhead.

“Feeling a little lonely?” asked the captain, coming up beside him as he stared across at the laughing shapes. Kiku turned and for a long moment studied the captain’s sunburned profile.

“Seems like they’re enjoying themselves,” he said at last.

“They tell me you’re an orphan,” said the captain, the reflection of the town’s lights playing on his face. “Must be tough, in a lot of ways.” The lights formed a shimmering pattern that made it seem as if his expression was constantly changing too. “I’ve known two orphans in my life,” he continued. “Both of them had a rough time of it when they were young. It used to be, in the old days, guys like that couldn’t even get a job in a big company, just because they had no parents. So my two friends, both of them, ended up getting pretty messed up. I’ve heard it said there are two types of orphans: guys who spend their whole lives fighting against everything with all they’ve got, and guys who are always trying to put one over on everybody. How about it, Kuwayama? Which kind are you?” The captain’s deep, rasping voice was somehow reassuring. The salt breeze had begun to cool Kiku’s overheated body and soothe the fatigue from the day’s sailing.

“You got me,” he said.

“Fair enough. No reason for you to know yourself. And anyway, I imagine both types get lonely just the same.” Kiku said nothing. “You see that?” the captain went on, pointing at the silhouettes lined up on the seawall. “That’s family. I’ve got two daughters myself, and a grandchild on the way. Now I know you may have come this far all on your own, but that’s no reason you can’t make yourself a family in the future. Kuwayama, my boy, that’s what you need to do: make yourself a family—a family that starts with you.”

Kiku was trying to make out Yamane, Nakakura, and Hayashi among the shadows. Eventually he noticed Hayashi sitting with his legs dangling over the wall, holding a scrap of paper that appeared to be a photograph up to the light. Yamane, his baby riding on his shoulders, was waving in Kiku’s direction.

“Hey, Kiku! Come here a minute!” he called.

“Go on,” said the captain, patting him on the shoulder. Yamane met him as he came ashore.

“This is my son,” he said, proudly holding out the baby for his inspection. “I’m going to make a *real* sailor out of him. Kid’s not even a year old yet and already he can swim.” There was an enormous grin on Yamane’s face. Kiku leaned down and pressed his ear against the little chest. Startled, the baby began to wail.

“Could you hear it?” asked Yamane. Kiku nodded, as his friend swung the boy about and broke into song:

I’m a child of the sea,
Here among the pines,
By the sounding sea…

The song drifted over those around them, bringing a smile to the captain’s face as he stood listening on the deck. After a few bars, he joined in loudly, and Kiku too began to sing, though more quietly. There was a round of applause when the song was over.

Kiku noticed two beams of bright light running along the road; the headlights swept over the warehouses, bringing the gray walls into focus for a moment and deepening the shadows on the seawall before disappearing again. He caught just a glimpse of a red Landrover as it sped past, sending a crimson ripple through the damp gray harbor night. Anemone! he told himself, thinking of her warm, slippery, and delicately tapering tongue somewhere nearby.

The trainees were assigned to simple bunks that had been rigged, for the purposes of the voyage, in the ship’s hold. The hold, barely four meters square, was crammed with five tiers of these bunks in three rows, leaving the occupants no room even to roll over in bed. The rest of the crew slept above deck, with the two guards standing alternate watches over the hatch to the hold. This night, however, almost no one was asleep below, thanks to the heat and the excitement of seeing their family for the first time in a while. The hatch had been left open, but what little breeze there was had no chance of reaching them. The prisoners lay as they were, underwear and bedding soaked through, with the breath from fifteen pairs of lungs adding to the humidity minute by minute. Somewhere in the hold, a muffled weeping could be heard. Kiku, third bunk, middle row, felt Yamane, who was next to him, tap him on the shoulder. He was pointing down at

Nakakura, bottom bunk, right side. Nakakura's face was buried in his little plastic pillow, and he, apparently, was the one crying.

"His grandma died," Yamane whispered. "He was real close to her; he had some kind of fight with his mother just now. Poor guy." Kiku, however, cut him short, claiming that Nakakura's troubles didn't interest him and that he was sleepy.

"It may seem like it's too hot to sleep, but if we don't get some shut-eye, tomorrow's going to be hell," he said, eliciting a nod from Yamane. Nakakura went on crying for quite a while.

Shichigahama was the end of the line for the *Yuyo Maru*. From here they would turn back toward their home port, so if there was going to be an escape, this was his best chance. According to the plan, Anemone would have cars hidden in three separate spots between here and Tokyo. All he had to do now was wait until everyone was asleep. Soon he could hear deep, regular breathing all around him in the dark. Then, just when he was about to get up, he saw Nakakura dart furtively from his bunk. As he went by, Kiku reached out and clapped his hand on his shoulder.

"Where are you going?" he whispered.

"To take a piss," Nakakura said, but when Kiku let him go he bypassed the head and shot up the stairs that led to the deck. Beginning to feel nervous, Kiku shook Yamane awake.

"Yamane! Nakakura's making a break; we've got to stop him." As quietly as he could, he hopped down from his bunk and made for the hatch. With only his head poking through, he could see Nakakura, crouching in the shadow of the bridge, watching the guard on the seawall chatting with the cop from the policebox in the street beyond. They were fishing as they talked to help pass the time. Now and then the guard would glance in the direction of the ship. As Kiku watched, Yamane stuck his head up beside him.

"Nakakura, *don't do it*," he hissed. Merely being discovered on deck would be treated as an attempted escape, meaning, at the very least, that he would automatically lose the right to sit for his seamanship test. Even at a distance, they could see his back was heaving. There was clearly no way to climb up the seawall without attracting the guard's attention, and the only other option—slipping over the side into the water—would involve hanging from the rail on the port side, which the captain might notice if it made

them roll a bit. Just then Kiku heard a car engine race. Shit! he thought. He knew Anemone had been watching from a building somewhere nearby, and as soon as she saw Kiku come up on deck she was supposed to create some sort of diversion. She must have mistaken Nakakura for him. The Landrover pulled up on the far side of the seawall, and he could hear her voice.

“Excuse me! There’s some kind of fight going on at the seaman’s club,” she said, and soon Kiku could hear two sets of feet hurry off. While he was debating what to do, Anemone came running back.

“The officer says he’d like you to give him a hand,” he heard her tell the guard, knowing that she would do her best to drag him off to the phony fight without giving him time to wake the other guard on board. So he should probably get a move on and just take Nakakura along with him, but then again…

Anemone’s footsteps, still running, were joined by the sound of the guard jumping down into the road. Kiku made up his mind: to hell with Nakakura, if he didn’t go now there might not be another chance. But just as he was about to sneak out on deck, Nakakura leapt up and—with an “Aaaaaaaaiiii!”—dived over the rail into the water. Kiku ducked his head back down as lights in the wheelhouse came on. A moment later, the captain and the supervisor burst through the door, and the guard reappeared on the wall. Nakakura, making a hell of a racket, was frantically kicking the water.

“That’s fucked it,” Kiku muttered, coming up on deck. A searchlight had come on, and the supervisor was pointing it over the rail at Nakakura. By this time Yamane and Hayashi had also emerged from the hatch, but, seeing them standing around, the guard came running up, nightstick waving, and told them to get down below. As he was heading back to the hatch, Kiku saw Anemone’s pale face appear above the sea wall. Realizing that Kiku wasn’t the guy in the water, she checked the deck, just in time to see him wave her off before he disappeared down the ladder. She lowered herself back onto the road and started the engine, and as the guard clapped the hatch shut over Kiku’s head, he heard the Landrover roar away, with the captain’s voice bellowing in the background: “Nakakura! Grab the fucking hook!”

The ship was four hours late leaving port the next day due to the inquiry into Nakakura's little adventure and the obligatory report for the detention center. In the end, they decided to postpone a ruling on his punishment until they were back in Hakodate, though in the meantime he was to be confined to the hold.

"You know, I wasn't really planning to escape," he told Kiku when he brought him his dinner. He had always loved his grandmother, he explained, and the whole thing had started yesterday when his mother, a former nurse with dyed hair and body odor whom he hated and who had always been mean to Granny, had told him, with a disgusting grin on her face, that the old woman had been killed in a traffic accident. With the insurance and a little out-of-court settlement, she and her boyfriend had been able to go to Hawaii, she'd said, laughing. He wasn't going to escape last night; he was just going to kill his mother and come straight back to the ship. Kiku had to restrain the urge to club him over the head as he told his story, staring at his plate. Thanks to you, asshole, there's no way I can escape now, he thought. From here on in, they'll watch us like hawks.

The *Yuyo Maru* was heading home under a full head of steam, partly to make up for lost time and partly because the typhoon that was supposed to die out south of Okinawa had changed course. The ship's radio continuously monitored the weather forecast as they made for the next scheduled port, which Captain Eda seemed determined to reach despite their late start. Given the sort of crew they had on board, he knew it would be difficult to find anchorage and shelter anywhere else.

It hadn't yet started to rain, and the heavy dome of clouds made it all the hotter. Hanging low over the ship, the sky looked like a huge metal lid, dull with rust and decaying plankton, from which no reflection could escape. The first sign of the storm was the wind that seemed to duck through the narrow gap between sea and cloud and blow over them, churning the waves white. Heated by the swollen clouds, the wind felt warm on their faces. After the first few gusts, it grew in strength until it whipped the flags about, threatening to shred them, and plucked up the trainees' uniforms drying on the deck and tossed them over the stern. But when it died down for a moment, the men could feel the first signs of seasickness, a sense that the warm, clammy tingling on their skin was sinking into their bodies.

With the wind came swells, and for the first time on the voyage the captain took the wheel himself. As he steered the ship into the waves, he pointed behind him: a leaden wall was moving fast toward them. Then the squall overtook them, and the ship lurched violently. The wind lashed the waves into a frenzy, leaving a trail of foam behind.

At last it started to rain, and in no time at all the deck was awash. The rain seemed to fall sideways, blowing up under the crew's rain gear, soaking the clothes underneath, and flailing at what felt like bare skin. Each time the ship bobbed up on a big wave, Kiku felt a numbing at the base of his neck. The captain ordered the deck anchor readied, and the first mate told the trainees to get below. In the hold, they found Nakakura rolling around moaning on the floor, clutching his hands to his chest. The smell of vomit hit them as soon as they set foot inside. The order was to get in their bunks and secure themselves, but the pitching of the ship made it impossible even to climb up. As they lurched about, someone slipped in Nakakura's puke and fell, while hot, heavy air cascaded down the hatch. Kiku held tight to the bed frame and concentrated on working out the numbness in his neck.

The breath of fifteen trainees crammed into the hold soon mixed with the stink already there to form a gas that seemed to cling to their skin, sapping all feeling from their bodies. Before long, the numbness at the base of Kiku's neck had crawled up over his face and from there invaded his whole head, leaving him without any sensation from the neck up or anywhere on the surface of his body. Only his muscles and his insides seemed to be working. One after another, the trainees were being thrown to the floor, clutching at the sheets they'd peeled from the bunks and stuffing them in their mouths. Kiku managed to hold on, but he had the feeling that his head had become a magnet, drawing the other parts of him toward it. Something seemed to be stuck in his throat, and if he opened his lips the least bit, sour spittle dribbled down his chin. He found himself staring as hard as he could at the ceiling, afraid his stomach would pop into his mouth if he so much as glanced down. A bare light bulb was swinging in violent arcs directly overhead, leaving a deep orange afterimage in its wake. One strange orange curve piled up on the next until they had traced a star, and the star then twirled above Kiku until it gradually faded, to be replaced by another. He was aware that someone was retching at his feet; the floor

sucked at the soles of his shoes. And when the man grabbed his ankle and let fly, the colored patterns on his retina ran together like bright vomit, making him wish that he could sever all connection with his head—cut it off and leave the rest of him in peace.

Just then, he realized someone was calling him. A voice from the hatch was yelling names.

“Kuwayama! Yamane! Hayashi! Get up to the wheelhouse!”

Keeping a firm grip on the bunks, Kiku climbed over the backs of his fallen comrades and made his way to the hatch. Other than Kiku, only Hayashi, Yamane, and two of the engineering trainees were still on their feet. When they had crawled across the deck to reach the wheelhouse, they found the first mate unconscious, with a gash on his head.

“Ah, you made it,” said the captain, ordering one of them to watch the radar while the others used the loran to check their position. Wave after wave rose up in front of the ship, and as each reached its highest point, the wind would shred the crest into strands of glass and blow them off to leeward. The fine spray from this made it impossible to tell whether the drops hitting the windows of the wheelhouse were rain or seawater. Still, the trainees who’d made it outside were sure they were better off here, wind, waves, and all, than down in the filthy hold. The feel of the storm on their faces had even relieved their seasickness a little.

“What a bitch,” the captain muttered. The ship seemed to be making almost no headway, it being all he could do to avoid being broadsided by incoming waves. The radio reported that a small-craft warning had been issued urging ships to seek shelter at the nearest port. The captain ordered Hayashi to find the closest harbor.

“Ishinomaki!” Hayashi answered after a moment. The radio officer tried to raise the coast guard station, but their frequencies were apparently overloaded since there was no response. Next he tried the fishing co-op in Ishinomaki, asking for permission to make an emergency call and for a guarantee of anchorage. The co-op reported that fishing boats were fast filling up all their space, and they should get a move on if they wanted one of the remaining berths.

The sea was churned snow-white, and the foam from the waves skittered across the surface ahead of the wind. Yamane shouted that there was a blip on the radar that seemed to be dead in the water, just as an S.O.S. began

coming in on the radio. An eight-ton fishing boat was sinking; present location, 142°18’ east by 38°58’ north.

“They need help,” said the radio officer, “and they’re just 0.8 nautical miles to the northeast.” The captain, however, ignored the report, paying no attention to the shocked looks they all gave him.

“We’ll maintain this course,” he announced. “The storm’s picking up and we’ve got no time to lose on a rescue. They want us in Ishinomaki by 1905 hours. Anyway, the coast guard will be out after them; get on the radio and let them know about this, and if they’re still not answering, ask the fishing co-op to contact them.”

“Let’s go help them,” Yamane blurted out, but even this failed to get a rise out of him. A minute later word came back from Ishinomaki that all available coast guard boats were already out on rescue missions.

“Captain, sir,” Yamane spoke up again. “It seems to me we’ve got to go save that ship,” he said, adding a crisp bow, only to be told to shut the fuck up.

“Three minutes more on this course and we’ll be at our nearest approach to the vessel,” said Hayashi, looking up from the charts.

“They’ve stopped transmitting the S.O.S.,” the radio officer shouted. At this point, three more trainees joined them in the wheelhouse. It turned out they were all fishermen, and when they heard the situation they also begged the captain to do something.

“Now listen up, you bastards,” Captain Eda howled. “You’re *prisoners*, or have you forgotten? And you’ve got no business chasing around saving people.”

“But we’re fishermen first, sir. And there’s no way a little boat like that is going to make it in this storm.”

“And just how the hell do you think we’d go about it? The mate’s out cold, and I’ve got to steer. Who’s going to do the rescuing?”

“We will,” said Yamane, feeling that the captain was beginning to relent.

“There they are!” Hayashi cried, as a plume of orange smoke became visible off the bow. The captain called Yamane over and began shouting in his ear. Yamane nodded several times, then turned to ask Hayashi to fetch some metal cable they had stored below.

“And while you’re at it, round up five or six guys who look like they can still stand up,” he added as Hayashi went off in search of the cable. When

he came back, the first thing they did was tie one end of the safety line around their waists and the other to the bridge, then Kiku and Hayashi split up, one going to the bow and the other to the stern. Hayashi was able to hold on to the rail and keep his feet, but Kiku was almost instantly tossed up by the wind and dropped onto the deck, only managing to cover the distance by crawling along hand over hand. As he went, he ran out the cable, securing it first to the windlass and then the mooring winch. When the lines were in place, the rest of the rescuers followed them out, forward and aft, in four pairs, each man being belayed to the fixed line. Kiku, armed with a boat hook, was lashed together with Nakakura who seemed to have recovered somewhat from his seasickness. When the fishing boat was at last in sight, they could see that it had capsized and the crew were clinging to a red buoy, bobbing up on one wave and then plunging out of sight before the next. As the *Yuyo Maru* approached, hands started waving all over the buoy. Once the ship was in position, Kiku tried to use the boat hook to catch onto their life preservers and drag the men to the ladder hung over the stern. He reached the end out toward a young man who was shouting something, teeth bared, but just as he was about to grab it, a huge wave engulfed the ship. Kiku and Nakakura managed to ride it out clinging to the rail, though for a moment they thought they were done for, but the man in the water was lifted bodily on the crest of the wave and slammed down head first on the deck. Kiku was able to snag his collar with the hook and haul him over, bleeding and unconscious. The man was a foreigner.

“Pirate fishermen,” Nakakura mumbled as he got a good look at the sailor’s face. He was, it appeared, from somewhere in Southeast Asia. When he was close enough, Nakakura wrapped his arms around the man; the hard lump in the hip pocket of his camouflage pants turned out to be a gun.

The only lights to be seen were the signal buoys marking the entrance to the harbor at Ishinomaki and the revolving beacon of an unmanned lighthouse further out on the cape. There had been two searchlights on the seawall inside, but the typhoon had already toppled them, shattering the lenses; the shards of glass had clung to the concrete for a time before being washed up by the enormous breakers and swept into the black sky by the wind. The rest of the town appeared to be blacked out.

As the *Yuyo Maru* was being made fast to the seawall, four policemen in heavy blue raincoats came out to meet them, followed by the men from the fishing co-op who formed a circle some distance behind them. The prison supervisor went ashore to discuss accommodation for the trainees and spent a long time huddled with the cops. Apparently, the phone lines were down in town and they were keeping in touch by walkie-talkie. To make things worse, the co-op's meeting hall was already full of men from fishing boats sheltering from the storm, and the other likely place—an elementary school—had been ruled out by the principal, who didn't want a bunch of criminals staying there. In the end, the only possibility the police could suggest was a warehouse in the fish market, and the supervisor's argument that the state had responsibility for the men and they deserved better treatment seemed to fall on deaf ears. While these negotiations were going on, the men in question were kept locked up in the hold until at last a compromise was struck: the supervisor agreed to having them sleep on the floor of the warehouse provided they were each given a change of clothes and a blanket. When the deal was done, he explained that they were all exhausted and urged moving them as soon as possible, but with only four officers in town, the police were in favor of waiting until reinforcements arrived from the prefectural station.

"Don't forget," said the officer in charge, "your lads aren't the only problem we've got to deal with, there's also the matter of those illegals you rescued; they've got to be kept in custody as well."

They had managed to pull seven crew members from the pirate fishing boat, all of whom were now huddled shivering in one corner of the hold, making the limited space more cramped than ever. Nearly all of them had an injury of one sort or another. The bunk frame in the center of the hold had collapsed at some point from the pitching of the ship and the weight of the men, leaving them nowhere to sit. Thus, the entire group had been standing knee-deep in a fragrant stew of oil, salt water, and puke while the powers-that-be argued about their fate. Nor did being anchored to the seawall stop the rocking in the hold. At first, the excitement of the rescue had kept spirits high, but as time went by, fewer and fewer voices answered when the captain or the guards came to yell encouragement down the hatch. The rocking went on, milder but still inescapable, punctuated now and then by a tremendous lurch. For what it was worth, they held on to what

remained of the bunk frame, but several men had slumped to the floor from exhaustion, settling into the soup. Their faces, peering up from a pool of bilge, might at one time have been funny, but nobody felt much like laughing. Sealed off from the outside, the hold was like a hermetic globe with its own tepid, nauseating ebb and flow.

“Fuck this! Give me solitary any day,” Yamane groaned. He was suffering from another headache, this one apparently the result of a blow from the winch during the rescue operation. Kiku, however, was busy coping with his own nausea, trying to distract himself by building bit by bit a picture in his mind: the picture that had hung on the wall of the chapel at the orphanage. The man with the beard was still hoisting the newborn lamb, lifting it up to heaven. Kiku could see him, this person he’d been told was his father, standing on the cliff overlooking the sea, a sea he suddenly realized had been stormy. And for the first time he had the feeling there might have been, somewhere off in the corner of the picture, a tiny, foundering ship. He *had* been in the picture after all, he realized: he was aboard that ship. Yeah!—he told himself—I’m going to make it! And when I get out of here, the guy with the beard will probably be waiting for me up on that cliff, all shining and glorious!

“OK! Everybody out! We’ve got you a place to stay,” he heard the supervisor shout just then, as if in answer to his thoughts.

As they climbed on deck, cheering and hugging one another, they came face to face with their welcoming party: a jeep equipped with a spotlight, two rows of policemen, and a small crowd of fishermen who were staring, pointing, and whispering among themselves. They were then herded onto a truck where each of them was given a blanket, while the foreign fishermen climbed into the jeep and were driven off elsewhere. But the truck stayed put, delayed apparently by the man in charge of them complaining that they hadn’t received the change of clothing they’d been promised.

“If these guys are really sailors, it’s not going to kill them to sleep in a little puke,” shouted one of the fishermen. The supervisor ignored the applause this drew from the other spectators and continued to press his point until finally someone yelled from the truck: “He’s right! We don’t give a shit about the clothes!” Just then, a gust of wind blew through, ripping the canopy off the truck and leaving the prisoners sitting in the rain

and the glare of the spotlight. One of them, covered like the rest from head to toe with oil and worse, stood and faced the crowd.

“You think we want any fuckin’ thing from you?” The other inmates began to get to their feet, but the police immediately surrounded them, fingering their billy clubs. By this time, the rain had soaked the thin blankets, making them limp and heavy, and one man began to slam his on the bed of the truck.

“Fuck you cops! You don’t scare us!” he shouted. Several clubs came sliding out of their belt loops, though before things got really out of hand, people on both sides were told to simmer down.

The entrance to the warehouse, a gray building at one end of the harbor, was too low to pass through without bending over, yet the interior was the size of several gymnasiums. Most of the space, however, was stacked to the ceiling with bags of cement, leaving them only enough room in one corner, next to a row of forklifts, to spread some newspaper and lie down. As they settled in, Kiku noticed that Yamane was sweating heavily, and though his skin usually looked like a sheet of plastic, it was wrinkled with pain.

Lying on the floor, listening to the wind and rain which showed no sign of letting up, Kiku realized that the rocking of the ship’s hold had followed him to the warehouse. In the darkness of that enormous room, lit by just five candles, he felt his body sway with the lingering sea, his outer self still while his gut rocked on. After a while, the guards brought in some rice balls and hot tea, earning a cheer from everyone except Yamane who barely managed to sip a little tea. Kiku, on the other hand, practically inhaled his three rice balls.

“You know, seasickness is weird,” he said to Hayashi who nodded between bites.

“Doesn’t matter how sick you feel, you can still eat. Maybe getting some food in your gut helps calm it down,” Hayashi laughed.

“You better believe it,” said Nakakura, overhearing them. “If you stop eating, you’re done for.” But as he spoke they all found themselves casting worried looks at Yamane who was bent double, pressing his head in his hands.

With their stomachs full, the excitement of the storm seemed to come back to the group as a whole. There were various retellings of the flooding

in the engine room, the puking in the hold, and the details of the rescue. Eventually, the captain joined them and was just beginning a more formal account of it all when the doors of the warehouse opened—not the child-sized door through which the prisoners had entered, but the main doors used by the forklifts, crane, and other machines—and the wind blew in, sweeping up the newspapers lining the floor and blowing out the candles. Then, right behind the wind, came a silver, windowless bus with a large light mounted on top. Kiku had seen this kind of bus before: it was just like the one that had been parked in the alley that snowy Christmas Eve. Flanking the bus were a dozen or so guards and as many more men in the yellow helmets and gaudy overalls of the Disaster Relief Squad, and from among this crowd appeared a man in a suit carrying a mike stand. Behind him was a battery of TV cameras. Someone who seemed to be a producer came over to talk to the prisoners' supervisor.

"We'd like to tape an interview with the trainees who rescued the foreign fishermen," he said, beginning to bluster a little, "and we already have permission from the Juvenile Detention Center back in Hakodate."

As a result, the lights came on and the interior of the warehouse, which until then had been buried in shadow, rose into view. The men who had taken part in the rescue were made to sit with their backs to the cameras, so that only their numbers were showing. The man in the suit was on the air.

"We're coming to you from a warehouse in the port of Ishinomaki. As we've been reporting, Typhoon No. 12 has made rapid northerly progress, causing extensive damage and injuries along the Pacific coast of central and northern Japan and provoking criticism of overly optimistic forecasting by the National Weather Bureau. But in the midst of this emergency, we have a rather unusual, and heartwarming, human drama to report to you: a training ship for a Juvenile Detention Center on a practice cruise has rescued—or should we say 'captured'—the crew of a sinking Thai fishing boat operating illegally. This evening we're here to talk to the trainees themselves, who are still recovering from their ordeal with the storm and the perilous rescue at sea. But before we begin, we should explain that in order to protect the privacy of these men, their faces will be concealed and their voices altered, and we'll be referring to each of them by number rather than name.

"Well then, No. 3, could you tell us what you're feeling like at the moment?"

“Tired,” said No. 3, who was Hayashi.

“And well you might!” gushed the announcer. “And No. 1, how about you?”

“Guess I’m pretty tired myself,” he said. “The adrenalin kept me going during the storm, but as soon as we got into port, I realized how whipped I was.”

“Spoken like a true sailor: he finds coming ashore more tiring than being at sea! Well then, No. 6, could you tell us if you knew right away that the vessel you were rescuing was a pirate fishing boat?” No. 6 was Kiku, who said nothing in reply. The bank of lights behind him was hot on his back, and the man holding the reflecting panel directly in front of him was chewing gum and staring at him. “… Well, it’s quite understandable that you’re at a bit of a loss for words after what you’ve been through. No. 5, how about it—could you tell right away?”

“What is this, some kind of quiz show?” muttered No. 5, slumping forward in embarrassment. The image in the sheet of metal facing Kiku showed Yamane curled up on the floor hugging one of the cement bags. The supervisor had said there was no need to take him to a hospital, that he’d be fine if they just let him sleep peacefully, and after some aspirin he seemed to be doing just that. At least, that is, until one of the many thick camera cables snaking across the floor leapt up and slapped him lightly on the side of the head. First, both legs twitched spastically and his hands shot to his head as a low moan came from his throat. Then, shaking himself, he sat up, and as the moan rose to a karate squawk, he lunged at the bag of cement, using his hand like a bayonet. In the space of a few seconds, everyone—guards, TV crew, prisoners—was looking at Yamane, and even the lights swung around to focus on him as he stabbed at the bag in a series of thrusts.

“What the *fuck*?” said the gum-chewing technician. “What the hell you think you’re doing? We’re in the middle of a show here.” But Yamane paid no more attention to him than he did to the circle of guards who had closed in on him as he punched the bag to pieces. He now sat very still, hands on his chest, eyes shut tight, biting his lip as if fighting to control himself. Kiku alone knew he was probably trying to remember the sound of his son’s heartbeat.

“Hey, buddy, what’s the problem?” said one of the guards, an older man, laying his hand on Yamane’s shoulder. Yamane opened his eyes and,

pressing his palms together as though in prayer, looked up at him.

“Please—be—quiet,” he said through clenched teeth, with that peculiar moan of his starting up again.

“Is he…?” said the producer, twirling his finger beside his head, just as a young guard went up behind Yamane and prodded his shoulder with his billy club.

“*Stop* that—please!” Yamane said, hands clasped to his chest while his head bounced about.

“Hey! Buddy!” said the guard, continuing to poke at him. “What’s with you? You’re bothering the TV people, so cut it out. You hear? Put a lid on it.” Kiku heard Yamane mumble “It’s no use,” but he had no clear picture of his movements after that; all he knew was they were fast. Apparently Yamane hopped lightly to his feet, did a spin in the air, and lashed out with the heel of his hand. A second later, anyway, the older guard was covered with cement dust and rolling on the floor with a broken jaw. Immediately, the other guard took a swing at Yamane with his club, but he dodged right and swept his leg around to land a kick at the back of the man’s neck. There was a sound of bone breaking. The guard stumbled forward, bumping into a light stand and sending it flying. The big light bulb burst, and the announcer sank to his knees moaning that he’d got some glass in his eyes, but as he crouched there rubbing at them Yamane kicked him under the chin, snapping his neck and sending him tumbling backward. At this, the TV people turned and fled without a word.

“Hit the floor! Now!!” one of the guards bellowed at the other prisoners and the TV crew, as they went for their guns. The man who gave this command, though plainly frightened, ran at Yamane with his own gun drawn, but he never got a shot off; Yamane had pounced forward, meeting him halfway and planting a finger in each of his eyes when they came together. The fingers made a squishy sound as they dug to the base of the sockets, and the gun went clattering to the floor. Just as it hit the ground, however, the thing went off, and by the time the bullet had buried itself in a sack of cement after ricocheting off the bus, every gun in the place was trained on Yamane.

“Stop!” the captain yelled, running forward, but as Yamane turned toward him, two guards fired at his legs, pitching him onto the floor clutching his thigh. Even then, though, he managed to wheel about and

bring down two more light stands, one of which he used to fell incoming guards. The guards approached cautiously, crouching and making little skipping jumps to avoid the stand, while Yamane, still holding his wounded leg, was doing his best to get back on his feet.

“Don’t shoot!” the captain yelled again, but he had competition from one of the cameramen, who was shrieking “He’s fuckin’ crazy, kill the bastard!” from the top of the bus. Yamane, shivering and teeth clenched, was still trying to get up, using the light stand as a crutch. One of the guards got close enough to kick it out from under him, but just as he lost his balance and started to fall, he lurched forward and grabbed him by the belt. The man let out a scream that faded to a hiss as he brought the butt of his pistol down on Yamane’s face, but before he could land another blow, Yamane jabbed hard with his open palm at the other’s knee. The guard collapsed, covering Yamane with his body and briefly pinning him, giving the remaining guards the chance they needed.

“Shoot him in the arms,” someone ordered, and there were three shots almost simultaneously. One tore into Yamane’s right arm.

“You motherfuckers!” muttered Hayashi from where he lay on the floor. But Yamane was still trying to stand up. Kneeling on his left leg, which was bleeding heavily, he pulled himself up with his right leg and left arm. As he did so, some of the TV staff hiding nearby switched on the remaining lights and flooded the area around him. His hips twitched in a last effort to stand upright, but now a guard had got in close and every time he moved he was beaten down. Yamane didn’t so much as flinch at the blows. Eyes wide and chest heaving, the guard took a heavy swing at his neck that landed on his shoulder. There was a thud, but Yamane merely stared at him without moving. When the man started beating him in earnest, Kiku couldn’t take it any more. He jumped to his feet. Fortunately, with all the lights trained on Yamane, the rest of the place was dark and no one noticed him until he was quite close. He grabbed the guard by the collar and threw him to the ground, and when someone behind him slammed him on the ear, Hayashi, Nakakura, and two more prisoners piled into the fight. As the fight spread, another guard standing on the sidelines pointed his pistol at the ceiling and fired, only to be tackled and brought down by Kiku. The two wrestled for the gun, but just as Kiku had managed to gain the upper hand, riding the fellow’s back, he found himself staring down the barrel of another service

pistol. A shot rang out, and blood splattered on Kiku's face: the guard who had been aiming at him clutched his leg and fell over backward. Out of the corner of his eye, Kiku noticed Nakakura had a gun, and almost before he could take this in, Nakakura had grabbed one of the television crew and shoved the barrel against his head.

"OK, folks, drop your guns," he said.

The silver bus was driving through the storm, headed for Uranohama, with Nakakura at the wheel and Kiku and Hayashi alongside. Uranohama had been the last scheduled port of call for the *Yuyo Maru*, and Anemone would be waiting there. When they were still a couple of kilometers outside the town, they abandoned the bus. The rain had stopped, and after a short walk they found a red Landrover with "DATURA" painted on the side in the parking lot of a business hotel near the docks. They used the phone in the lobby to call Anemone who, when she appeared, briskly introduced herself to the other two as Kiku's girlfriend, then told them all to get into the car and drove off. Around the time the police had finished setting up roadblocks on all the roads in Miyagi Prefecture, the Landrover was a safe distance to the south.

By the following day, when Kiku, Hayashi, and Nakakura had made the most-wanted list and the cops were busy stopping cars on every major road in northern Japan and searching every hotel and inn, room by room, the foursome, clad in snow-white yachting clothes, had already made a refueling stop at Hachijo Island. Their Hatteras cruiser, powered by two 260-hp engines, was passing Oshima, heading for Garagi Island at full speed under the fiercely blue skies that follow a typhoon.

30

My sheep, my sister,
My ship, my garden:
My eyeball stolen from my head.
My precious eye, I've searched for you,
Since a fly's wings separated us—
Nevermore to have you, ball to socket,
Nevermore to touch the things I see
Nor see the things I touch.

My eyeball sits atop a tower,
A tower that forever watches me.
The tower has a master:
Master Fly.
The tower is my father
Whose face I've never seen.

Hashi finished reading the poem aloud and then asked Neva what she thought, but she went on sketching designs for an angel's costume without looking up. The angel she had in mind wasn't Hashi but the baby in her belly.

"What do you think?" Hashi asked again, louder this time. When she still didn't answer, he picked up a plate of potatoes and bacon left on the table and threw it at her. The plate, barely missing her head, shattered on the wall, but the food came to rest in a greasy mess on her white blouse. After calmly picking it off and dropping it piece by piece in an ashtray, she went into the bedroom to change her blouse and finish cleaning up. Then, just as calmly, she pulled a new suitcase down from the closet—the one she'd bought to use on their honeymoon in Canada and Alaska—and began to fill it with underwear, dresses, cosmetics, and several books. While she was doing this, she caught a whiff of bacon grease on her neck, so she dabbed a

little perfume behind her ears. She had combed her hair and was tying it in a scarf—the one with a design of deer stepping on some sparrows—when she caught sight of Hashi in the mirror. She smiled at his staring face, then, bag in hand, walked past him and out of the room without a word. That was the last he saw of her for several days.

At first, Hashi was happy she had gone. Without her around, he thought, the overwhelming urge to kill her might begin to go away. But he soon realized he was wrong, that the longer Neva was gone the more likely he was to do something the next time they met. He didn't want to kill her; in fact, there was nothing he wanted less to do… yet that, he feared, was exactly why he had to do it. And fear was what seemed to control Hashi, not a run-of-the-mill fear of death or starvation, but a more basic, paralyzing one: the fear of time. It was something he knew instinctively, remembered in his cells, the way a baby does. Hashi had spent thirteen hours in that coin locker, thirteen summer hours. Thirteen hours of dogs barking, loudspeakers announcing the name of the station, bicycle bells, vending machines, a blind man tapping his cane, trash blowing about, music from a radio in the distance, children jumping in a pool somewhere, an old man's cough, a bucket being filled from a faucet, brakes screaking, the chirp of birds building a nest, women scratching, voices laughing… The feel of wood, plastic, steel, a woman's soft skin, a dog's tongue; the smell of blood, sweat, shit, medicine, perfume, oil; and every sensation linked to the next by fear, by fear alone. Hashi was listening to a voice his cells remembered. You are unwanted, it told him. Nobody needs you.

The black woman was giving D a massage on the roof of his building. The roof featured a tennis court carpeted in pink astroturf and a trellis covered with wisteria blossom, in whose shade D was lying. The bright sun as Hashi emerged from the elevator made him reel, and he quickly put on a pair of dark glasses—ones he had bought to send to Kuwayama. The sun and a few wispy clouds floating west turned the glass towers surrounding D's place into long waterfalls of light. Hashi looked at the orange rim of the clouds, thinking that if Kuwayama were ever dragged out here, his eyes would be wrecked almost right away. He slipped under the arch of wisteria, not a drop of sweat on his pale, powdery skin, though a few seconds of sun had

made it begin to tingle. Despite the heat, a man and woman dressed only in bathing suits were out on the tennis court hitting the ball back and forth.

"Hashi! You heard? That brother of yours has escaped, flown the coop. He's nothing but trouble, that one," said D, thumbing through the newspaper lying at his side. Hashi read only the parts written in bold type: **Desperate Escape, Whereabouts Still Unknown, Five Dead, Man Injured in Shootout Dies in Hospital, Were There Outside Accomplices?, Well-Planned Operation, Say Investigators.** "Go on, read it. You get a mention as brother of one of the escapers. Looks like we could sell some records thanks to your Kiku."

"Why'd you call me?" asked Hashi.

"Why'd I call you?" He gave a hoot of disbelief. "What's the matter with you?! Who do you think you are, putting off the recording sessions a month? And where are the songs you're supposed to be writing? You got them?" The black woman wiped the sweat from his back with her long, thin fingers and sprinkled him with a gray powder before beginning the massage. The powder smelled of peppermint.

"They're not done yet, but I'm writing poetry," said Hashi, taking a scrap of paper from his pocket and beginning to read.

My sheep, my sister,
My ship, my garden:
My eyeball stolen from my head…

"OK, OK, I get the idea," said D, stopping him. Behind him, the couple on the tennis court snickered. The woman, who was a good deal taller than Hashi, wore her hair brushed perfectly smooth on her head. Her pointy breasts pushed up into a thin fiberglass bra.

"'Eyeball stolen from my head…' I mean, wow!" said the woman. Hashi noticed a little pool of sweat collecting in her navel. Still, it hurt to have her laugh at him, and when she stared in his direction he wanted to disappear, vanish—gold lamé shirt, gray corduroy pants, snakeskin boots and all. Her tennis partner brought her a glass of Perrier.

"Hashi, your contract's up soon," D was saying as the masseuse climbed on his back and began crawling around on her elbows and knees. Barely restrained by the shorts, her ass bounced high in the air, as sweat trickled

from her thighs onto D's hips. "I've been meaning to ask you what you're going to do. Thinking of re-upping? I can tell you right now, without Neva you're up shit creek."

The building to the right of D's cast a deep, oblong shadow across one side of the roof. Hashi suddenly forgot why he was standing on this blazing roof, with this couple in bathing suits, a black woman, and his boss, all talking apparently at random. For a moment, he was seized with the idea that the hot, flat square and the great towers beyond were just a mirage that had popped up before him, as if something from somewhere in his body—a tube in his inner ear, perhaps—had poked out of his eye and begun sucking in air, swelling up until this rooftop square had formed.

"Hashi! What the hell's going on? I told you to bring a copy of the contract. Hey! You hear what I'm telling you? What are you doing here?"

Hashi reached for the glass of water sitting on the table. Lines of bubbles floated to the surface as he held the glass to his forehead and cheeks. It was only slightly cool, but he drank it down in one gulp.

"Hey!" said the man in the bathing suit, "—that's mine." Hashi had hardly had anything to eat, and the lukewarm water had a viscous, stringy feel as it ran down into his stomach. Suddenly he felt sick and clutched his hands to his throat. The glass fell and broke, the hot concrete sopping up the foaming liquid. Hashi caught the man and woman exchanging looks and it occurred to him that everyone must think he was a pain. He started muttering to himself.

"I may creep around like a stray but I'm not begging… No. I'm an embarrassment—they make it pretty obvious… That big black woman—bet the sweat under those arms is sour… I may never have had trendy drinks in high places without making a mess, or seen a play, or been to a museum or a stadium, but what's wrong with that? Why does everybody look at me that way?…"

"Hashi! What's the matter? Hashi!" D had wrapped a towel around himself and come over to give him a good shake.

"Oh, it's you," he mumbled. "D, tell me something: am I any use to you? Do you really need me?"

"What the hell are you talking about? Stop talking crap and get a grip on yourself."

“But it’s important,” said Hashi. “I’ve got to know. Do you think anybody out there needs me? That they’re happy because of me? That’s all I want; I don’t need any of the rest of it, D, really—I don’t want the money, I just want people to smile. When I ride around in that big car Neva bought, everybody looks at me like they’re envious, but I’m really not that happy. D, why do you suppose people aren’t nice to me? I’m just trying to make them happy, but they all seem to be avoiding me. Neva’s gone off and left me, and Kiku too. Kuwayama’s turned into a bug; Matsuyama and Toru bugged out. Kazuyo’s dead, and the nuns have this sad look, and I seem to be nothing but a bother for everybody. I just want them to *like* me, that’s all. I want them to tell me they really enjoy just being with me. It’s not too much to ask. But I never had a chance—they threw me out at the very start, left me in this great big coin locker.”

Hashi was clinging to D, sweat pasted to parched skin.

“Let go of me!” said D. “You’re gross—let GO!” But Hashi held on, beginning to tremble.

“Somebody’s gone a bit screwy,” the woman in the swimsuit said to the masseuse with a you-know-who look.

“What’s the matter with you, man? You can’t hear what I’m saying to you?” said D, roughly pushing him away. As Hashi stumbled out into the sunlight, the bottle of sleeping pills fell from his pocket and rolled glinting across the roof before he caught it at the edge. His vision warped, the thirteen towers seemed poised to fall on him, and he longed for somewhere to go home to. Dumping three pills into his hand, he shoved them in his mouth, but as he began to chew them, he coughed up a yellowish liquid that dribbled onto the hot concrete. He was vaguely aware that D and the tennis players were watching him. The black woman walked toward the elevator and disappeared inside.

“He’s completely nuts,” he could hear D saying.

I am not. He chewed the pills up and swallowed a mouthful of chalky spit. I am *not* nuts—just sad that everybody hates me.

The streets, crowded during the summer holidays, smelled of melting rubber in the heat, making Hashi feel as if heavy, glutinous strings were stretching out behind his feet—as if everyone he passed in this canyon of glass and steel and concrete was trailing these strings, weaving a great

white chrysalis. The whole town was a shiny chrysalis, wrapped around the heat radiating from the earth, and slowly swelling; but when would the giant butterfly emerge? He knew at least that when it did, it would float up into the sky and there its belly would split open, releasing millions of flies with human faces that would bury the city. He could already hear the buzzing of their wings.

He was walking under a bridge painted red, just as a train passed overhead. The bridge seemed to wheeze from the weight and heat. Each breath left a film of steamy air on his throat. The faces of those he passed wobbled in the haze, and the road itself seethed like a river of slow-moving sludge. As he flopped down on a bench outside a tropical plant garden, the tramp sitting cross-legged at the other end asked if he had a cigarette. The man had bread crumbs in his beard and one eye was bloodshot. A milk bottle filled with whiskey hung by a cord from his belt, and he wore mittens on his hands despite the heat. Hashi laid a ten thousand yen bill on the man's gloved hand and leaned over to whisper in his ear.

"I'd like you to suck me off and then let me hit you on the head with a brick. There's another ten thousand in it for you when we're done." The tramp, looking down into his lap, began to nod and laugh.

"You've got yourself a deal, buddy, but first how about buying me some ice cream?" A few minutes later, he set out across the garden licking a green popsicle and beckoning Hashi to follow him. They entered a maze of alleys and made several quick turns, coming out at last on a street lined with bars and small night clubs, all of which were closed. Piles of moldering garbage lay on the sidewalk, empty kerosene cans full of fish heads with running eyes, overturned liquor bottles oozing nameless brown liquids. The tramp slipped into a tight passageway between two bars and, stopping in front of a tiny public toilet, pointed with a laugh at a pair of feet visible under the broken wooden door. A woman in a flesh-colored slip emerged and studied them for a moment before disappearing down the alley. They went in.

"Could you wait a second? I have to go find a brick to hit you with," said Hashi, and he was just about to leave when the tramp grabbed him by the hair.

"What the fuck d'you mean? Brick? Your kind's fucking filthy, man. Fucking vermin!" he said, shaking him about. "Repeat after me, ten times:

‘I’m filth.’ I want you to confess your sins right here in front of me. Your kind’s no better than dogs or pigs—disgusting! You know that?” Suddenly, Hashi was frightened as it dawned on him that this bearded guy was not at all like the one he’d met in that other toilet long ago, was not conjured up out of air, not the reincarnation of some big, gentle dog. “The wrath of heaven be upon you!” the man was shouting. “The Flood is coming, and only those like myself who’ve got nothing to lose will be saved. Sinners like you will meet your doom in the wild, your skulls strewn across the earth for rats to nest in. You faggot filth!” Hashi tried to get away, but this time the man hit him hard in the stomach, banging him up against the wall, where he slid to the floor. The tramp then searched his pockets for money and took his shoes. “This, pigfucker, is your penance. I want you to thank me for it. You may still go straight to hell, but with my prayers you’ll at least be allowed to pluck out your own tongue, that *evil* thing. So pray, pervert! Shed your own blood and pray!” The tramp left the toilet counting ten thousand yen bills.

“Pray!” he yelled over his shoulder again before he vanished.

That night, Neva came home for the first time in four days and apologized to Hashi for walking out on him.

Hashi knew he would have to screw up his courage, have to stir up other parts of himself, if he was ever to go through with it. The voices he heard, the ringing in his ears, the pulse of blood through his veins, the Hashi who stared back from the mirror, the phantom Hashi who lurked in window panes—all of these would have to be called upon. And he would find them, he realized, in the little rubber and glass soundproof chamber he had built in order to search for that sound. The rubber portion of the walls of Hashi’s chamber had been fitted with speakers, and the thickness of the glass insured that not even the faintest unwanted noise could get in from outside. As he always did, Hashi entered the room, closed the door, and crouched in the cramped space listening for the sound; the only difference now was that there was nothing coming from the speakers. He was listening for the roar inside his own head, the sounds that arose in the absence of sound. I have to kill Neva, he thought, and that’s a terrifying thing; give me the courage to overcome that fear and suffering. In the pitch darkness, he closed his eyes, sensing the blackness spread out around him, as if heavy velvet curtains had

been drawn across his retina and he were receding into some inner distance, receding to the far limits of darkness beyond which gray dots began to appear. The spots collected in long, thin furrows and then slowly began to take on color, growing in number as they deepened in tone. Rather than cells dividing and dividing again, the new dots seemed like previously hidden lights suddenly switched on, the whole process being sustained by the color changes in existing spots, as if he were watching a film of fireworks played backward. Gradually, the spots grew denser until they resembled a field of glowing tomatoes, or tuberculosis germs teeming on a slide under a microscope, glittering brighter than the powder rubbed from a moth's wings, undulating like the muscles in the chest of a dissected cat, multiplying like gold dust lying dormant in a riverbed until a volcano sends lava streaming down to boil the gold to the surface. Then, as always happened, just as the spots were gathering into a great mass for the final eruption, each one separately began to glow with rage, each one in the swarm was brandishing a torch. Soon the torches would go out one by one and the whole galaxy would be transformed into the sea at noon. But this time there was one difference: there was no other sound, only the high ringing in his ears like a steam whistle in the distance. A huge jet was streaking across the sea, its shadow passing in the space of a second from the glittering waves to the cliff from which, just at that moment, he was falling. Hitting the water, he floated briefly and then started to sink. Beneath the surface, the sea had a sticky, slimy feel to it, and as he drifted down toward the bottom, the water around him grew redder and redder. His legs got tangled in a kind of seaweed with human fingers, binding him fast to a crag jutting from the ocean floor.

Suddenly, a powerful shudder went through him and he opened his eyes. He had heard the sound: the sound of blood pumping through his own body, through the veins in his arms; little waves, spaced out at even intervals. Straining to catch the sound, he muttered: "That's the one. That's the one that will help me kill her, the one that'll give me the strength: the beating of my heart." Hashi burst out of the chamber and went looking for Neva. Finding her discarded clothes in the dressing room, he realized she must be in the shower. A moment later, in the kitchen, as he wrapped his fingers around the handle of a large knife, his heartbeat began to play a frantic tune, and a wave of bliss swept through him as he started back toward the

bathroom. He squeezed the handle, sniffing at a strange smell like burning flesh. Through the steamed-up glass door of the bathroom, he could see Neva's silhouette, stomach bulging nicely, and he knelt before the door giving thanks to the beating of his heart. With the sound thundering inside him, radiating out to rattle the floor, the room, the whole building, he opened the door. There stood Neva, water beaded over her body, and as he raised the knife to strike, for one fleeting second he found himself wondering whose heartbeat it was that they had heard long ago at the hospital. Still, the thought didn't keep him from finishing the stroke and, taking aim at the bulge of Neva's belly, he plunged the knife in. At the moment he did so, the beating stopped, and with it came a shock: Hashi's bliss had, in a fraction of a second, been traded for terror. A moment too late he wished he could stop his arm, the very instant the tip of the blade came to rest in Neva's side.

31

At last, thought Anemone, the Kingdom of the Crocodiles! They had been cruising for hours, and now suddenly the sun seemed to have grown enormous, fierce. A moment or two out on deck would turn one's skin the color of nicely braised rabbit. A new piece of jewelry adorned the tanned ring finger of her left hand: a coral band Kiku had bought for her on Ogasawara. They had been married, with Nakakura officiating, in a small chapel left over from the American Occupation. Afterward the four of them had gone swimming in a quiet lagoon, their first dip in the ocean they'd been racing over. The break was also an opportunity for Nakakura to teach the rest of them some of the finer points of diving, picked up from his days on a salvage ship, and for Hayashi to show off his amazing speed in the water—the latter while they were poking around a mass of table coral jutting out from a rocky ledge. Suddenly, Hayashi darted away, chasing something at a furious pace, leaving the others to stare after him as they hovered at the bottom. The oval shape he was pursuing made for the surface and then plunged into the darkness of a deep spot. As it went by they could see the beautiful shell of a sea turtle. Making full use of his flippers, Hayashi gave chase and nearly managed to grab the thing, but each time he closed in, it would change course at the last moment and dodge away. After a few minutes of this, however, Hayashi was getting tired and launched what seemed to be his final effort: allowing the turtle to get some distance ahead, he sank down ten meters or more below its level. Then, like a rocket, he kicked off the bottom, angling up behind it, and just as the turtle sensed his approach and started to escape, Hayashi's hands clamped down firmly on either side of the shell. Holding it ahead of him, he spurted to the surface, the speed carrying him out of the water almost to his knees, and like a water polo player with a shot at goal, he tossed the thing far up on the beach.

"Let's eat it," Anemone said before they were even out of the water. "A friend once told me how you cook a turtle. First, we need to light a fire."

They used dried seaweed as kindling, adding broken lengths of driftwood until the embers were smoldering bright red. When the fire was ready, Anemone let the end of a branch burn until it glowed and then, turning the creature on its back, started rubbing it against its belly. As sweat dripped from the end of her nose into the sand, she stood above the turtle applying the hot stick up and down its underside. The turtle paddled its legs in slow motion, its neck craning far out of the shell, as if it meant to leave its burning body behind and run off on its own. A smell like burning wool filled the air as it began to hiss, its cry almost indistinguishable from the sound of the surf being sucked into sand at the water's edge.

"Sort of cruel, this," whispered Nakakura. Hayashi nodded, gulping audibly.

"What are you muttering about?" Anemone said loudly, looking up at them. "That's the law of the jungle: you get caught, you get cooked and eaten." She added an "assholes" to herself as she went on rubbing, by now having softened the turtle's belly but not yet killed it. The hissing still came from its leathery mouth as it opened and shut, until finally Anemone flipped it over and told the others to peel the shell away.

"Kiku, come on—if you aren't quick about it, it'll cool down and it won't come off," she said.

"You do it," said Kiku, shoving Nakakura forward. But Nakakura looked over at Hayashi.

"Shouldn't the guy who caught it do it?"

"Sorry, but you can count me out," said Hayashi. "I've never killed anything in my whole life, not even a bug… I mean… except for that old barber I offed during the robbery, but that was the first and last time… so don't look at me." Anemone stood glaring from one to the other, but when she turned back to the turtle, she let out a yelp. It was gone, flapping across the sand toward the water, its shell gleaming in the sun. They set out in pursuit, but just as Hayashi reached out to grab it, a wave washed over it. The hiss of sea-water on hot shell startled him, and he drew back his hand as the turtle, in cool relief from pain, paddled slowly out to sea. No one made a move to stop it.

"Look at that motherfucker," Hayashi murmured. "Just goes to show, even when they've got you half roasted, you shouldn't give up." The others nodded solemnly.

Later, on the beach, Kiku and Anemone watched an enormous sun sink below the horizon. The coconut and mango trees crowding the shore were dyed deep green by the dazzling orange light, and slowly the incandescent foam on the waves burst, bubble by glowing bubble, as the silhouette of the two lying on the sand darkened. With this subtropical summer sunset, little ice-cold crystals seemed to form just beneath their scorched skin, spreading as the shadows deepened and making them acutely aware of their sunburn.

Anemone stuck her tongue in Kiku's ear, tasting the salt and feeling the roughness of some sand. Better than wire mesh, she thought.

"I was right, wasn't I?" she whispered, blowing in his ear. "The Kingdom of the Crocodiles is here, under my tongue: all hot and slippery, like melted ice cream. And the studio walls are snow-white again."

"What are you talking about?" Kiku laughed, gently peeling a patch of skin from her thigh. The moist new layer underneath glistened in the moonlight and the glow from the phosphorescent tide.

At dawn, the boat left Ogasawara, engines roaring and bow bucking against the waves. Anemone stood on the deck pointing toward the horizon. The Kingdom! she thought. A black speck had appeared: Io Island. As they approached, a crag jutting out of the sea near the island came into view, with smoke trailing from it, and they recognized the vent of an undersea volcano. The rocks were lined with hundreds of cracks from which sulfurous gas leaked into the air, mixing with the morning haze that hung low over the water.

To navigate past the island, they had to slow down and pick their way through a maze of visible reefs. Kiku climbed out on the bow to give directions as they drifted in clouds of smoke belching from the rocks and the sea itself. Large bubbles formed on the still surface, swelling with murky gas into shallow domes which ruptured with a loud pop. Released into the air, the gas combined with water vapor to form layers of color that changed according to the angle of the light: direct light dyed the smoke yellow, shadows were red, and backlighting left it a milky white. The gas hung low, trapping the heat beneath it like an impermeable membrane.

They had slowed to a crawl in order not to run aground. In front of the others, Anemone had tried to ignore the overpowering smell of rotten eggs, but finally she couldn't stand it any longer and retreated into the cabin,

holding her nose and clutching at her chest. The yellow smudge hid the sun, and Kiku was finding it almost impossible to keep his eyes open. He tried using a diving mask, but the sulfur still burned his throat, so he asked Hayashi to bring him a tank and regulator. After that he could breathe. Confined under the cloud, the heat seemed to become palpable and heavy, pressing against their skin like a mound of hot mud.

Suddenly, they heard a sharp knock against the hull and a shudder passed through the deck. Nakakura went pale and cut the engine dead.

“Kiku! What the hell are you doing out there?” he yelled. “If we get stuck here, we’ve had it.” Hayashi was already circling the rail with a boat hook.

“It wasn’t a reef,” said Kiku, mostly for his own benefit. “We were nowhere near a reef.” With the engine stopped, the boat rocked and drifted slowly backward. In the quiet, the sound of the sulfur escaping seemed almost ominous: gases burbling beneath the surface, bubbles popping, the spray falling back into the sea, and the clefts in the rocks hissing out evil-smelling fumes.

“Look!” said Hayashi, pointing off the starboard bow at a large silver fish floating on the surface. It was a barracuda that had probably drifted into the poisonous waters while asleep. The fish was still alive, and its tail fin twitched when they poked the pale, distended belly. A row of jagged teeth peeped out from its jaw.

“Start her up!” Kiku called to Nakakura. “Nothing to worry about; it was just a barracuda.” As the screw began to turn, the boat drifted slightly to the right and the fish was sucked into the propeller. From the deck they could hear the sharp blades grinding the flesh and bones, and they left a trail of bright red chum floating on the yellow surface.

Miruri Atoll, consisting of some forty tiny islands and about two kilometers of offshore territory, was privately owned by a man of Japanese descent who had retired as head of an airline he had founded in the islands of Southeast Asia. On what had been a deserted stretch of land, he installed a small desalination plant and an electric generator powered by the soil from the smallest of the islets—a refined sort of peat that resembled diatomite in color.

Having used more fuel than planned by stopping and starting the engine in the sulfur clouds, and not knowing what lay ahead at Garagi, Kiku

decided they would have to make a stop at Miruri, and so, once again, they picked their way through a web of narrow channels between the innumerable keys. The islands, sandwiched as they were between South Io and Garagi, enjoyed a prevailing southerly breeze and heavy rainfall, and as a result were thickly matted with banana and mangrove trees and coconuts. There were no charts for these waters, the atoll being outside any ferry routes, so they were forced to feel their way along. It soon felt as if they were creeping through a tropical swamp, with the horizon obscured by islands of various and fantastic shapes and the surface of the sea covered with slimy algae.

Kiku remembered reading somewhere that the man who owned Miruri had upward of a dozen boats at his disposal, including a hydrofoil, a glass-bottomed job, and even a small submarine. With all that, he reckoned, there was bound to be some extra fuel lying around; the only question was whether they'd be allowed to buy any of it. Anemone, however, wasn't thinking about fuel, absorbed instead in the sight of all these tree-choked islands that seemed to her the living image of the Kingdom come.

After they had cleared Io, a Self-Defense Force patrol plane had trailed them for quite a way, hailing them on the radio and demanding to know their destination. When they answered that they were headed for Garagi, the plane asked what they planned to do there, and when they said they were just going to sightsee, they were told to turn back. Garagi, it seemed, had no accommodation for guests at present, and swimming was prohibited on almost all the beaches. It was obviously no place for tourists, and the pilot urged them in the strongest possible terms to choose another destination. Kiku, however, paid no attention, continuing to cruise at full throttle, and eventually the plane abandoned its pursuit. Watching it bank and head for home, Hayashi and Nakakura exchanged a worried look.

Somewhere deep in the maze of waterways that was Miruri Atoll, they spotted a jetty on the beach of a small lagoon. It was a fairly impressive structure made of reinforced concrete, and it was backed by a small wooden shed and a paved road leading into the jungle. As they brought the boat into shore, they could see a canoe that had split in half and been abandoned on the sand. Stuffing a gun into his belt, Nakakura jumped onto the jetty to catch the bowline that Hayashi threw over. Kiku was packing some rice and

vitamin pills he hoped to trade for fuel, while Anemone sprayed herself all over with insect repellent, and together they went ashore.

There was no sign of life in the shed, just a lot of old equipment: water skis, tin drums, scuba tanks, tattered fishing nets, and rope. Everything was rusty or rotting, full of holes or coming to pieces. In one corner of the damp floor there was a nest of crabs. While Kiku stood looking at this mess, he realized that the whole place gave off a familiar odor: the smell of wood and metal half crumbling into dry, cracked earth, with just a hint of mildew growing on shaded concrete.

The asphalt sucked at the soles of their shoes as they set off down the road. A hack or two at the undergrowth on either side revealed traces of old mango and pineapple groves. Reaching the top of a small hill, they could look out over the whole island, which proved to be an oval perhaps two or three kilometers around. They also discovered a clearing containing a heliport, a gray hangar, a small generator and fuel refinery, a house with a banana-thatch roof and a terrace, and a volleyball court, but no people. Both the generator and the refinery were silent, the only sounds being the screeching of birds in the jungle and the waves breaking on the shore beyond.

“Nobody’s home,” Anemone murmured, but just then Nakakura, who had been checking out the hangar, called them over.

“Come take a look!” he said, pointing through a broken window. Inside they saw two helicopters covered with dust. “No, up there,” said Nakakura, directing their attention to the ceiling where several thousand bats hung sleeping in the gloom. As they stood looking at them, a hinge creaked loudly behind them and they turned with a start, Nakakura slipping the pistol from his belt. The door of the house had swung open and slammed shut and open again in the wind. A black mountain goat appeared, went clattering across the wooden deck and, after bleating several times, jumped down into the garden to crop the grass.

“Scared the shit out of me,” said Nakakura, shoving the gun back in his belt, but just as he did this, Anemone let out a scream. She was staring at a window, and a face, pressed up against the glass, was staring back. And not just staring—the old man in the window was grinning and waving at them.

Before long, they were being served cups of strong coffee next to an enormous tank of Napoleon fish. The rest of the decor consisted of a few

pieces of rattan furniture, a shelf lined with seashells and sharks' teeth, a stuffed blue marlin, two parrots, and an old phonograph.

"Hot?" the man asked. His guests glanced at one another and shook their heads. A breeze was blowing in from the terrace, and, having escaped the sun, they were in fact feeling cooler. Their host was wearing frayed cut-offs and a white linen shirt. The coffee was not only strong but incredibly sweet. Finally Kiku spoke up.

"We were wondering if you could spare some fuel," he said. "We'll pay for it, or we've got some rice and vitamins we could trade." The old man told them there was another jetty on the opposite side of the island, and they could take as much as they liked from a fuel tank there.

"And it's free of charge," he added. "Don't even need to thank me. Where you kids headed, anyway?"

"Garagi," said Nakakura. The man nodded, stealing a glance at the pistol butt sticking out of Nakakura's pants, then went over to a glass-topped rattan table and selected a volume from a stack of photo albums. He brought the album to Anemone, pointing out a picture of himself in the pilot seat of a small jet.

"I used to fly all the charters for candidates campaigning for the Malaysian National Assembly," he said proudly.

"That's great," said Anemone, getting up. "Listen, I'm sorry, but we're in a bit of a hurry. The coffee was fantastic. I love it rich and dark like that. Thanks a lot." The old man looked a little disappointed, but he shut his album and offered to see them back to the boat.

With the goat trotting along beside them as they walked between rows of trees loaded with ripe and rotting mangoes, the man pointed at Nakakura's gun.

"Who you planning to shoot with that?" he asked.

"Bad guys," said Nakakura, aiming his index finger and firing at the sun. The old man laughed.

"You all are the first visitors I've had since I started living here alone," he said. "You're welcome to stop in on your way back from Garagi," he added, patting the goat.

"You know what I've been wondering," said Hayashi, speaking up at last, "is how you manage when you get sick."

“Well, there was one time when I got bit by a moray eel and the wound got infected. My leg swoll up like a balloon and I was fresh out of penicillin, so I figured there was nothing to do but amputate—it was that bad. Trouble was, I couldn’t think how to go about it, but finally I came up with the idea of a guillotine. I had the blade: a big steel thing I use for cutting peat; it just had to be given a good sharp edge. I got a frame assembled, and I rigged it so I could pull the blade up and drop it. I even had enough wood left over to make a pair of crutches and a little coffin for the leg. The toughest part was carving out the track to keep the blade on line; if it was too narrow, I was afraid it wouldn’t drop smooth enough, and if it was too wide, it’d just wobble around and not cut clean. But I got it fixed, and decided to do it on a Sunday. Then it rained, so I put it off a day and checked all my preparations again: bandages, drugs to stop the bleeding, disinfectants, everything. When the day finally came, I tied my thigh right under the blade; it was so black and puffy by then—like a tree trunk almost—and I had so little feeling left in it that I guess I wouldn’t have been too sorry to see it go. It was my right leg, and about the most painful thing was bending the left one out of the way…”

“But you’ve still got your right leg,” Nakakura interrupted.

“Sure do,” said the old man. “The thing was a washout; the blade stopped at the bone. I thought I’d sharpened it good, but it didn’t cut through. You’d be surprised how tough bones are—hard as anything.”

“It must of hurt terribly,” Anemone put in.

“Naw, not so bad. And the good part was that all the pus came spurting out all over the place; except I nearly got it in my eyes and I was scared it’d blind me… I guess for me it wouldn’t have been so bad being lame, but I’d be in pretty deep trouble if I wound up blind.”

“Why’s that?” Anemone asked.

“Well, you see, young lady, I’m a pilot, and while you can probably manage to fly a plane with one leg, there’s no way in creation you can fly when you’re blind.”

A snake with yellow and black stripes cut across the road in front of them. The old pilot rolled up his shorts and showed them the scar. He then asked Nakakura if he could have a go with his gun and, aiming at nothing in particular, fired off into the trees. A flock of birds rose as one body into the air.

“You come back and see me now,” he said again when they were back on board and preparing to leave. Kiku looked up at him as he stood there on the wharf.

“Do those helicopters still fly?” he asked. The old man nodded.

“Might take an hour or so to get them into shape, but with a little work they’ll take you anywhere you want to go.” The shadow of the birds still circling overhead passed across the weed-choked channel. The goat flicked its tail at a horsefly and bleated as they pulled away.

Garagi Island, which they were finally approaching, was shaped rather like a woman’s shoe.

A squall blew up as they were busy sorting out the diving gear, and soon afterward the engine began making an odd sort of noise. Hayashi, who was at the helm at the time, shut it down, while Kiku and Nakakura went below to see what was wrong. The engine room smelled of burning oil, and they checked the fuel injection pump, the exhaust system, oil pressure, and so on; but in the end they discovered that the problem was some seaweed clogging the intake for the cooling system. The filter screen was torn, and some of the green muck from Miruri must have found its way inside. They would have to clean the whole tube by running seawater through it under pressure.

The engine room was muggy and cramped, and both of them, already badly sunburned, had begun to drip with sweat. As they were removing the broken filter, Nakakura asked Kiku a question that had been on his mind for some time.

“So, supposing we do come up with this stuff you’re looking for, what then? You really planning to dose Tokyo with it?” Kiku was poking a wire brush about inside the intake valve. “You should think about saving some for Chiba,” Nakakura added, slipping a small bolt into his shirt pocket before starting to install the new filter. “I’d love to do Chiba.”

“That because your mom’s there?” Kiku asked with a chuckle. Nakakura nodded. Kiku’s bare chest was covered with oil and bits of seaweed that slipped down his skin on streams of sweat. The brush came out dripping with a mass of bright green sludge. “Why did Hayashi come along with us?” he went on as he sluiced it away through the bilge hole. “Doesn’t he

have any family or anything?” The thin, oily fronds seemed to have tiny hairs all over them.

“He just didn’t have anywhere else to go,” said Nakakura. “And anyway, they’re bound to catch us sooner or later, so the bottom of the sea’s about as good as anywhere else.” Kiku reached out to remove a strand clinging to Nakakura’s forehead.

“They’re not going to catch me,” he said, replacing the cover on the intake tube.

“But what happens if there’s no DATURA?” Nakakura asked as Kiku wiped some grime off the wings of the supercharger.

“Then it’s on to the Marianas or the Marshalls to look some more.” He gave the big engine of the Hatteras a pat. Just then they heard the sound of a plane overhead and went back up on deck. It was the Self-Defense Force patrol again telling them not to land at Garagi. Kiku radioed back that they were doing some repairs, but just as soon as they were through they would head back for Ogasawara. The plane circled a while longer, then veered off, but Kiku waited until it was completely out of sight before starting the engine. Anemone napped in the cabin while Nakakura double-checked the pressure in the scuba tanks. Hayashi read charts. As the sun dipped toward the horizon, Garagi Island loomed directly ahead.

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If Garagi were a high-heeled shoe, Uwane reef would be tucked in somewhere between the heel and the arch. Just after dark, the boat pulled into the cove at Uwane, engine running quietly, lights out. The gentle waves in the cove scattered the moonlight lingering on the surface as the boat dropped anchor a few meters short of the reef.

Kiku and Nakakura went down first, circling the reef to look for the fissures opened by the underwater earthquake. Several fish wandered through the narrow beam of a flashlight as it played over the rocks. Nakakura, who had told Kiku to stick close behind him, crawled along the crags hand over hand, feeling out the currents, which were swift in certain places and at certain depths; once a diver was caught in one, there was no telling where he might end up. The reef stuck straight up from the seabed, as if a tall building had been sunk leaving only the penthouse exposed. At the deepest spot—the base of the reef on the seaward side—the depth gauge read thirty-eight meters. Kiku and Nakamura were swimming at a depth of about twenty meters, stopping every now and then to shine their lights on the rocks nearest them. In the dark, any deep shadow seemed to be a crack.

Just when their air was beginning to get low, Nakakura pointed in front of them where a tiger shark three meters long was drifting up into the light. Kiku raised his spear gun, but Nakakura stopped him, turning off his flashlight as the shark slowly circled them. Now only a smooth gray shadow, the fish abruptly stopped circling and moved toward them. Kiku leveled the spear gun again, firing straight at its jaws but missing badly. Nakakura grabbed Kiku’s light and, pairing it with his own, flashed both into the shark’s eyes, turning it aside less than two meters away. While it studied them, he went on flickering the lights in its eyes until at last it gave up and moved off.

Not long after this, a glint on the face of the rock alerted Kiku to the location of the cave’s entrance. The beam of the flashlight had glanced off some aluminum bars and thick wire mesh that sealed the opening. The tank

gauges by now read zero, so they decided to leave a marker buoy tied to one of the bars before returning to the boat.

Anemone had made some spaghetti on the hotplate in the cabin, and they ate while Nakakura ran through the diving procedures one more time. Anemone was going to stay in the boat; she'd wanted to go with them, but gave up on the idea after hearing about sharks. Nakakura went down first to unhook the gear they lowered on the anchor line: three underwater scooters, a battery to run two electric drills, twelve reserve tanks, six spear guns, and quantities of rope. By the time Hayashi and Kiku joined him, he was busy cutting through the wire mesh. The mesh, which formed a double seal with the grating of aluminum bars, was bound tightly to the rock and heavily rusted. The wire had resisted the claws of the cutter when he tackled it head-on, but he had managed to pry some of it loose with a knife in order to cut it from the side. Despite this, the work was going slowly, and they still had the metal piping to deal with, which had been set in concrete. So Nakakura decided to go ahead and use the drill. He signaled Kiku to plug it in, and with a series of muffled blasts he set to work. The drill stirred up a cloud of fish, darting from every shadow in the rock, but it had much less effect on the concrete. Soon Nakakura had Hayashi take over, checking his air supply and letting Kiku know that even twelve tanks wouldn't be enough if they wasted too much time on this.

Above them, Anemone's eyes drifted back and forth from sea to sky. She could hear the faint sound of rock being hammered down below her feet, like the jackhammers she'd heard sometimes on construction sites but cushioned by the dark water. The only motion on board was a gentle rocking from the breeze. Suddenly, she saw something flashing on the surface. Whatever it was, it seemed to be dodging between the waves, and its numbers were increasing rapidly. Anemone instinctively closed one hand around the pistol Kiku had given her and the other around a spear gun. The bright streaks moved through the water at a good pace, flickering on and off as they were hidden by waves, until finally they were near enough for Anemone to see that they were dolphins, glowing from the phosporescent plankton that covered their backs.

"Dolphins!" she nearly shouted with relief. One after another, they skimmed the surface, turning the sea a pale blue as they headed for open water. Like a show at an amusement park, she thought to herself, half

expecting to see a laughing Santa Claus on water skis bringing up the rear. She wished Kiku were there to see it too, these sleek things slipping out to sea, leaving behind faint, shimmering lines on the surface of her eyes. There had been something she'd wanted to show him while he was in prison; what was it? She searched her memory. Oh yes: the curtains she'd made all by herself. Well, from now on they would be able to see everything together.

Below, the three divers had managed to break through, and Nakakura, holding the drill in one hand, was guiding his scooter inside with the other. Hayashi was trailing six of the spare tanks bundled together with an elastic tether, while Kiku towed the battery and the spear guns behind him. With only the dim headlights on the scooters to show them the way, they moved further in, noting that the passage widened as they went. Finding some large groupers and parrot fish lurking in the shadows, they realized there must be another entrance somewhere besides the one they had just come through. The floor was covered with a fine, soft silt, and they had to move carefully to avoid stirring it up and clouding the water. Besides the fish, they shared the passage with countless moray eels which bared their fangs and looked menacing when caught in the light. Weighed down as they were with equipment, it would have been difficult even to turn and run had one of the morays actually attacked. Hayashi seemed particularly afraid of them.

At one point, an eel as thick as a man's arm reared its head from the shadows and lashed out at Nakakura's leg, catching and shredding his fin instead. Hayashi gestured that he wasn't going any further, and the other two had to spend a while demonstrating that the morays didn't attack from the safety of their nests before he would agree to go on. The tunnel meandered on, bending to the right and left or up and down, with Nakakura leaving a small marker light at each corner; and Kiku was reminded of the abandoned mine shafts he and Hashi had once explored, remembering how scared Hashi had been of the bats that hung from the ceiling, particularly their red eyes and that uncanny squeak.

Without any warning, Nakakura turned and signaled for them to drop to the bottom of the tunnel, and almost instantly he switched off the motor of his scooter, threw the drill aside, and floated down to lie flat on his belly. As Kiku and Hayashi followed suit, they noticed that the gray surface of the rock ahead had begun to move toward them and realized that it was actually a huge school of parrot fish bearing down on their lights. Kiku sensed

danger. It wasn’t them the fish were scared of; on the far side of that living wall was something far more frightening. Nakakura was signaling him to hand out the spear guns, and a moment later the three of them were aiming into the cloud of fish that had engulfed them. Here and there were fish with their guts ripped out, swimming as best they could through a shower of gray scales.

Up ahead a mottled shark appeared in the circle of a flashlight beam. It was on the small side, but the teeth lining its open mouth were sharp enough. Nakakura fired his spear gun, hitting the thing at the base of the neck, but as it began to writhe and thrash, three more appeared behind it. One of them immediately fastened onto the pale belly of the wounded shark, while the other two headed in their direction. Kiku fired next but missed, and the sharks kept coming, teeth bared. As he bent to draw the knife strapped to his ankle, the lower jaw of one shark brushed his back, snagging his hose; and with a flick of its tail it arched away, taking the hose with it and stirring up the muck on the floor of the tunnel. Momentarily blinded, Kiku could only guess that the swishing sound he heard was a spear from someone’s gun, but soon he could see a plume of green blood and a shark squirming on the bottom, its snout half buried in the silt. It wasn’t until he noticed bubbles gushing out above him, though, that he realized that his hose had been cut, that no air was coming through his mouthpiece. He looked around for the spare tanks, but vision was badly restricted in the narrow passage. About the only thing he could see in the wildly spinning beams of the three flashlights was a mist of fine sand, with bits of fish guts and patches of green shark’s blood floating in it, and the bubbles belching from his tank. It was getting hard to breathe, but Kiku told himself to stay calm. He was sure that Hayashi had been carrying the extra tanks, so he would go and look for him. He should swim toward the other lights, he decided, his head beginning to pound.

At that instant a shark appeared right before his eyes. Apparently oblivious to the harpoon planted in its back, it made straight for him. At the last moment, though, he had the presence of mind to aim the jet of bubbles from his severed hose into the shark’s eyes, making it twist its neck up just far enough to allow him to stick his knife in deep. The effort, however, made him swallow a good deal of water; in fact, water seemed to pour into his nose as well, choking him and bringing him close to panic. Knowing he

was done for if he couldn’t stop the flood, he steadied himself and tried to block his nose and mouth. By now the pain was so bad it felt as though his chest would burst. Got to find the tanks, he thought, but as the word “tanks” trailed off in his mind, he realized he no longer knew where he was or what he was doing. Why all this pain? The foul air in his lungs seemed to be expanding, threatening to rip his whole body open right down the middle. His vision darkened and his jaw went slack. Abandoning himself to the darkness and pain, he took his first full breath of water, a breath that brought relief. He could hear the water rushing in to fill his insides. So this is what it’s like to die, he thought to himself. Not bad at all; not so painful anyway… just numb. But a corner of him still held out, that part where he could feel his heart still beating, beating wildly, furious that he should make his peace with death. He struggled for a moment, but it wasn’t any use. His chest was moving on its own now, sucking at the sea. He tried unsuccessfully to raise his hand, realizing at last that it was over. And then, just as he was settling back again, someone shoved a new regulator in his mouth and a rush of air poured into him. The instant he stopped swallowing water, though, the pain returned with a vengeance, as if every cell in his body were being stuck with its own needle. He couldn’t help it: he wanted to rip the regulator out, wanted to tear apart whoever was forcing this air down his throat. Suddenly, someone began pressing hard on his chest, clearing his lungs to allow the new, dry air to flow in. The new air too was like stinging needles, but Kiku could feel each tiny air sac gasping for it. He breathed out again, and slowly things began to take shape around him. Nakakura and Hayashi were peering into his mask. You OK? they signaled. Kiku nodded weakly.

There in that pool stained green with blood, he had learned two things: one was that all the pain stopped when you stopped fighting death; and the other was that as long as you could still hear your heart beating, you had to keep fighting back.

They waited for Kiku to recover, and then continued down the tunnel, moving cautiously around two remaining sharks that were feeding on the three they’d killed. Nakakura and Hayashi had finished one tank apiece and gone on to a second. They made steady progress for a while, with only the motors of the scooters humming in the water; then Nakakura stopped and pointed ahead. Half buried in the silt were two human bodies, with patches

of flesh still clinging to the bones. Nearby was a rusty diver's knife. A school of butterfly fish was using one of the skulls as a nest. Beyond a waving field of lavender seaweed, they could see a broad, dark area, a black cavern too deep for any light to penetrate. Nakakura revved the throttle on his scooter and moved off toward the darkness.

Passing through the fringe of seaweed, they found themselves on a rocky shelf rising out of the water, and Nakakura immediately gave the signal they had agreed on: do not remove your regulator. The shelf was, in fact, already occupied—by hundreds of large lobsters whose shells were flame-red in the artificial light, their antennae waving wildly above them like massed conductors at a silent concert. In one corner was a cluster of blind morays, and a lion-fish that fluttered off like a swallowtail when startled by the light. A sea snake striped like a tiger slithered past, and a spiny fish with what appeared to be yellow threads dangling from its mouth puffed up so large when caught in the light that it seemed ready to explode.

The cavern was like the nave of a cathedral, with the ledge lined with lobsters as an altar, and ribbed columns rising above it. The curtain of pale purple seaweed was a canopy hanging over the blind eel priests who sat listening to confessions from a congregation of multicolored fish. And beyond, where a tall cross would have been, were three black fissures in the rock. Cautiously Nakakura approached and flashed a light deep into each of them, and after peering into the middle one, he turned to wave to Kiku and Hayashi. The middle crack was an entrance to another branch of the cave that sloped sharply down from the opening. Nakakura was pointing at the base of the slope where the light revealed an outcrop that was clearly different in color from its surroundings, with what looked like a flat surface, as if someone had sliced off the rock with an enormous blade. Nakakura checked the depth gauge; they were currently at twenty-nine meters, so the suspicious gray block of stone would be at about forty meters, he estimated. He then did a quick calculation with the decompression computer to see if their air would last. How long would the work take them at a depth of forty meters? Six minutes, he guessed, holding up six fingers. Quickly they agreed that Nakakura and Kiku would go down the slope secured with a safety line which Hayashi would hold from above in case of an emergency. Clutching one of the drills and a battery, they lowered themselves over the edge.

Unlike the tunnel up to this point, the bottom of this branch of the cave was not silt but dead coral covered with a thin coat of laver. As they descended, the water pressure made their bodies feel heavier, as if the sea had suddenly become sticky, clinging, like molasses. The bleached coral reminded Kiku of bones. Bones: he thought of the bone from Kazuyo's funeral that he'd delivered to Hashi, and the memory, together with the sticky water, made him queasy for a moment, queasy and somehow numb, as though his blood were clogging in his veins. Watch it, he told himself. At forty meters, the least sense of uneasiness could balloon almost instantly into full-blown terror, unchecked in this total isolation from sound and smell. If you so much as let yourself consider the idea that your air could somehow be cut off, the next thing you knew you were shaking with fear, or puking, or making a sudden dash for the surface. Kiku did everything he could to avoid the thought. He conjured up images of Anemone's tongue, her underarms, her cunt. He imagined the sunburned skin on her thighs, and over the dark pit in which he was swimming he superimposed a picture of the Kingdom of the Crocodiles, tracing its outline with his fingertip.

The depth gauge read thirty-eight meters as Nakakura flashed his light down on the gray pile of rock. It was covered with seaweed and shells, but there was no mistaking a flat lump of concrete, out of place as it was at the bottom of the ocean. There were cracks here and there in the surface from which whitish, coral-like arms protruded. Nakakura plugged the drill into the battery and set to work on the spot where the cracks were largest. As he hit the switch, tropical fish shot out from the rocks and coral where they'd been sleeping. At first, the drill seemed to have almost no effect, but Nakakura worked patiently, checking his watch from time to time, and eventually the crack began to widen. At one point he stopped and held his palms about thirty centimeters apart, indicating his guess at the thickness of the concrete. Chips flew off the rock, sketching graceful arcs in the water before sinking away, and when enough were gone, he had succeeded in joining two of the largest cracks into a single rift. After that, he concentrated on the point where they came together, and before long he had carved a hole the size of a fist. Getting down on his belly, he peered in with the aid of his flashlight, then turned to shake his head at Kiku. Kiku took a look himself but couldn't see much other than bits of coral, so Nakakura went back to work, increasing the power on the drill until he had managed

to open up an area as large as a manhole. Finally, almost a third of the concrete simply caved in with a thud, taking Nakakura with it and sending up a cloud of debris. Shining his flashlight in front of him, Kiku followed.

Inside, Nakakura was floundering about in a mixture of stringy seaweed and rubble. Kiku pulled on the rope to get him upright and then took stock of their surroundings. The concrete dome actually seemed to be a pillbox with placements for guns in three directions. It was floored with soft mud. Kiku cleared aside what he could of the rubble until he turned up two large clumps of brain coral. The sight reminded him of something Yamane had once said: that when they had done the operation to insert the plate in his skull, he had been able to look right into his own brain, and it had looked exactly like a lump of tofu.

“Tofu and brain coral,” Kiku muttered into his face mask as he picked up the drill, flipped the switch, and started pulverizing the soft coral; but before he’d gone too far Nakakura stopped him, pointing through the haze of white dust. Something shiny could be seen in the gap Kiku had opened up. Nakakura grabbed the drill from him and carefully dug away the rest of the coral to reveal a silver tube: a gas cylinder made of molybdenum steel. And then several more, until they were floating above a stack of sixteen cylinders each as big around as a person’s thigh. Thick plastic sheeting had been packed between the tubes, and a chain, secured in concrete, was wrapped around the pile. Nakakura cut free the end of the chain, and the cylinders rolled gently apart.

They decided they would carry out one load of three cylinders apiece, lashing them together to make them easier to manage. At a tug on the rope, Hayashi began hauling them up the steep slope. A faint light shone from where he was waiting for them, like a lamp in a second-story window on a dark street. Several times the rope caught on a sharp piece of coral, but at last Hayashi himself came into view, pulling on the rope for all he was worth. Kiku and Nakakura had left the drill and battery behind, each clutching instead only his bundle of three cylinders. About halfway up the slope, Kiku disturbed two lion-fish hiding in the rock, and they shot out right beside his face. Things started to happen fast right after that.

He heard a muffled scream and the sound of bubbles escaping, and when he turned, Nakakura was tumbling back down the slope. His regulator had come out of his mouth and he was clutching his forehead with one hand,

though he'd somehow managed to keep hold of the cylinders. Baffled as to what could have happened, Kiku signaled Hayashi and was lowered back down to help. When he reached the bottom, he found Nakakura lying on the pillbox still holding his forehead. As Kiku floated down to him, he looked up and pointed at a lion-fish swimming nearby: he had been stung by one of the beautiful but lethal spines that lined the tail fin, and his whole body was going numb. The wound itself must have been horribly painful, but Nakakura, in desperation, managed to pantomime that he wanted Kiku to piss on his forehead. Kiku thought he remembered reading somewhere that the poison was acidic, and urine would counteract the effect. Still, he hesitated, but before he had time to think he found the front of his wet suit being undone for him and his penis dragged out. Leaning over to place the tip of it on the sting, Nakakura squeezed his groin encouragingly. Kiku tried to comply, but the sight of Nakakura there between his legs with his dick on his forehead made him want to laugh, and the more he tried to pee, the more he choked up. Nakakura, unaware of Kiku's problem, rubbed the pink end around expectantly, while Kiku fought off laughter and concentrated.

Then, abruptly, Nakakura just let go. Puzzled, Kiku peered into his mask to find his eyes shut tight and his face beginning to contort. His jaw was trembling, and his teeth had drawn blood from his lips. The arm still clinging to Kiku's thigh had become as hard as steel, and it was this that made him remember: when Nakakura was stung, the regulator had come out of his mouth. He looked over at the cylinders Nakakura had been carrying and noticed that the valve on one of them was bent; fine green bubbles were leaking from it, bursting almost instantly under the pressure and dissolving in the water. When he looked back at Nakakura, he saw that his eyes were now open, the eyeballs bloodshot yet dry and creased like withered fruit. Then, again quite unexpectedly, just when the hand on Kiku's thigh seemed about to snap the muscle there, he released his hold, opened his mouth, and gave a wail of pale green foam, half scream, half manic laugh. Ignoring the numbness in his thigh, Kiku tried to swim up the slope, but Nakakura stopped him with the rope. Kiku hacked through it with his knife and, signaling for Hayashi to haul him up, began kicking frantically away, but the numbness and the heavy water slowed him down. From somewhere came the thought that he'd had this dream before, any

number of times: somebody pursuing him with murder in mind, and his body getting heavy, slow.

Even without the rope, Nakakura was still managing to follow him up the channel, screaming his uncanny scream, as if he were gargling and laughing all at once. Hayashi kept pulling from above, and Kiku was at last able to crawl up onto the ledge, but the exertion, difficult to judge in the cool half-weightlessness, had been too much for him. For a moment, everything went black and he could feel himself slipping away, but he knew that if he lost consciousness he would have problems with the regulator. Crouching over, he tried to force as much air as possible into his lungs, willing himself, ordering himself to breathe. He could hear his heart. Breathe in! Out! In! Out! His heart kept beating. Hesitantly he opened his eyes, coming face to face with a lobster waving its antennae. He could hear breathing behind him and turned just in time to see Hayashi reaching out to help Nakakura up over the edge. He tried to yell at him to stop, but the yell died in a glub-glub of bubbles as Nakakura caught hold of Hayashi’s hand. Behind the mask, Kiku could see Hayashi’s face twist with pain as he tried to free himself. Nakakura had drawn his knife, and as he drove it into Hayashi’s stomach, Kiku took aim with his spear gun. The silver harpoon shot across the space between them and buried itself deep in Nakakura’s throat.

33

Hashi was sitting by the bathtub. Finally, noticing that his fingers were spongy and wrinkled, he reached up, still holding the kitchen knife, to turn off the shower. Blood was spiraling down the drain. Thinking nonetheless that he must have dreamed that he stabbed Neva, he stumbled, soaking wet, into the bedroom. He called her name, but she was nowhere to be found. He then went methodically from room to room looking for signs that she had been there: ash in the ashtrays, wrappers from the caramels she liked to eat, makeup on the nightstand, her shoes in the hall, dirty dishes. He put the knife back on a shelf in the kitchen, but failed to turn up any evidence of her. It must have been a dream, he told himself.

Still, for a dream, it had left an amazingly vivid image in his head of Neva's bulging white stomach with the knife sticking out of it and a smear of dark blood. He could hear D's voice saying he was nuts, and anxiously began to wonder if he wasn't right. Having dreams you couldn't distinguish from reality—that was a sure sign, wasn't it? He remembered the old woman he used to see picking through the garbage back on the island. She was nuts; she used to point at an empty sky, yell "Plane!" and throw herself flat on the ground. That's how I'll end up, he thought. But why? He must have guessed right all those years ago: that batty old woman really was his mother. Or maybe it was his punishment for having cut his tongue; maybe everything he saw was invisible to other people, and everything other people saw was somehow twisted out of shape for him.

He took an ice cube from the refrigerator and gripped it in his hand until the numbness began to hurt. Then he turned on a burner on the stove and thrust his palm into the flame, giving a yelp of pain. He scribbled a few numbers in a column on a sheet of paper and tried adding them up. Finally he opened the newspaper and read aloud from the obituaries: "Yoshio Gyoura, 83, calligrapher, died at 2:25 A.M. on the eleventh of heart failure at Matsuyama Memorial Hospital. The funeral will take place at the Gyoura Academy of Writing Arts, 9–3 Honcho, Matsuyama City, with the widow,

Yoshie Gyoura, of 3–4 Kamiiricho, Matsuyama, as chief mourner.” He could still read, at least. Seems normal enough, he thought to himself.

A clear plastic bag in the kitchen sink caught his eye, with something red inside that, seen from closer up, turned out to be a wad of bloodstained cotton. There it was—the evidence he’d been looking for—and he could feel the hair on his arms prickling at the sight. The police were probably on their way right now to arrest him, and there’d be a trial, and he’d end up just like Kiku, shut away in a gray building somewhere behind bars and wire and a high wall. I’m weak, he thought; there’s no telling what would happen to me in a place like that.

Just then, there was a knock at the front door, and he nearly fainted with fright; but then he thought this might be a good chance to see whether or not he really was crazy. After the second knock, he looked out through the peephole and, sure enough, he could see two police uniforms. He unlocked the door and waved them in, expecting them to grab him and slap on the handcuffs. Instead, they bowed.

“Sorry to bother you at this time of night, with your wife and everything,” the older one said, “but we have to ask you a few questions, if you don’t mind.”

“I see. Come in, then,” said Hashi, though he didn’t see at all.

“It must have been a shock,” said the other, looking carefully around the room. Hashi nodded, smiling forlornly. The cop soon found the knife on the shelf in the kitchen.

“Was this what she used to try to kill herself?” he asked, showing it to Hashi. Again he nodded. “Pretty old-fashioned,” the man added. “By the way, how come there’s no blood on it?” Hashi stood up and faced him.

“I washed it off,” he said, his voice a bit too loud.

“And what was it exactly that you were fighting about? Another woman?”

“Sort of,” Hashi managed. “You see… there was this groupie who was always showing up, saying I was getting it on with her, all sorts of lies, but Neva believed her and she got furious.” He was beginning to get the hang of it. The rules were the same as for an interview: even when you had no idea what you were being asked, you just looked the questioner in the eye and answered with a wistful little smile.

“I get you,” said the cop. “Must be tough being famous. Looks great on TV but I guess you people have your troubles, too. It says here that your wife’s pregnant. That right? It also says she said you told her she should get an abortion and that made her suicidal…”

Hashi took a bottle of orange juice out of the refrigerator and poured them each a glass. When he asked them if they’d like to sit down, they seemed to loosen up a bit, and one of them confessed he was dying to know what it was like being a star.

“Well,” said Hashi, “I know this one singer, you’d know the name, who has to fart like hell to relax herself during rehearsals.” The tidbit seemed to tickle the two cops. Hashi laughed along to keep them company, though while he was laughing he began to feel his original notion had been right: that none of this was real. The laughter soon died away, and after smoking a couple of cigarettes apiece, the men got up to leave. As he was seeing them to the door, Hashi couldn’t help saying:

“Tell me I’m dreaming, will you?… But where do you people go when you’ve finished in this dream? Do you just vanish—poof?” The cops stood scratching their heads and grinning.

“That’s it,” one of them chuckled, “—and let’s hope it’ll be a better one next time.” They bowed again and started to shut the door.

“Wait a second,” Hashi called after them. When they turned back, he stepped up to the nearest one and touched his cheek. “This *is* a dream, right? Honestly, I need to know. And if that’s all it is, then my stabbing Neva’s not really a crime.” The policemen exchanged a quick glance.

“Now let me get this straight,” said one of them. “You’re saying that you stabbed your wife?”

“No, I don’t know,” he said, shaking his head as they moved in on either side of him. “That’s what I’m asking you.” His voice by now was very small. They had a short whispered conference, and Hashi reached up again to touch their cheeks. No doubt about it: skin, grease, and sweat. When a dream cop was this real, how did you go about getting rid of him?

“It’s getting a bit late for little jokes, sir,” they said eventually. “Anyway, at least your wife’s injuries don’t seem to have affected the baby. What we suggest is that you go pay her a visit in the hospital.”

Hashi shut the front door and stood for a moment stroking its hard metal surface. Wondering if he had lost the feeling in his hands, he bent down to

touch the rug, catching dust balls between his fingers. He rubbed his hand across the table, then picked up the bottle of orange juice and licked at one sour drop that had fallen on the back of his hand. He thought of King Midas who had turned everything he touched to gold. It must have been sad not to be able to feel anything you touched as something living. His throat tightened as he remembered that Midas had ended up as the last living soul on earth. Probably just the heat, he thought, switching on the air conditioner. It came to life with a rumble, and an oily draft blew into his face. He laid his cheek against the window pane, seeking the soothing coolness of the glass, but it clouded over and quickly warmed to the temperature of his skin.

He thought about when he was small, when he and Kiku had lived on the island, and it seemed somehow that the surface of his body had been far more sensitive back then. His skin had always been tingling somehow, like the raw pink flesh of a wound or sunburn, and the slightest change in the wind or the angle of the sun had triggered a response from his whole being. Since then, his skin seemed to have acquired a coating of some kind—thin vinyl or powder or oil—piled layer upon layer to cut him off from the outside world. He couldn't be sure any longer of what he was feeling; his eyes and ears and nose were no longer even part of him. He had to wake himself up, make his skin tingle again and escape this dream. And abruptly it occurred to him that the only way out was to die inside it, to die in the dream.

Closing his left hand into a fist, he picked up the knife on the table and drew it across his wrist. A crimson line opened in the white skin, and blood spurted out. Instantly, Hashi was terrified, not because of the blood but because he couldn't feel a thing; it seemed even a dream death wouldn't return him to the living world.

He ran out of the apartment and jumped into the elevator. As soon as it was moving, he punched the button on the emergency intercom, stopping the elevator between floors and bringing a voice squawking from the box:

"Hello?… Hello?… Hello?… What's going on up there?"

"Just get me out of here," Hashi screamed, punching the button again and again. "I'll pay you anything you want."

"You gotta fire in there? Power outage? What? What's the problem?"

“This elevator’s trying to take me somewhere! The door’s going to open in hell! Get me out!” Hashi was kicking the wall.

“You’ve got to tell me what’s happened. You’re between the eleventh and twelfth floors. Listen carefully: is the light working?” Hashi flailed at the box, trying to smash the voice, the little man inside it talking to him. Before long the elevator started down again. When the door opened on the ground floor, he was greeted by two men with fire extinguishers and tool boxes.

“What the hell?!” one of them said when he saw Hashi’s wrist. “Where’d you do that?” Ignoring them, Hashi stumbled past and out into the street where he started to run. The bleeding showed no sign of stopping, so he found a doctor’s clinic and rang the buzzer. The lights were off and there was no answer, but he stood pounding on the door until a young man stuck his head out of a second-story window.

“What do you want?” he yelled.

“I’ve cut myself,” said Hashi, holding up his bloody wrist.

“That so?” said the man in the window. “Well, too fucking bad.” The window slammed shut.

His vision was beginning to blur, but as he staggered down the middle of the road he could see the thirteen towers in the distance, like tall cocoons woven by some great shiny bug, spitting out its thread until one day—though who knew when?—it all became so heavy it fell apart. He lay down in the median strip that separated the lanes of the boulevard. Headlights flashed through the bushes and then vanished. He sniffed at the earth, but there was hardly any smell, only a dry barrenness. Sleep! he told himself. Something was seething inside him, and as he drifted off to sleep, he felt he would like to cut himself open, scoop out whatever it was, and hurl it at this fat maggot of a city.

Kiku was digging a hole in the sand. Next to him on the beach was a stiff body in a wet suit. When the hole was deep enough, he rolled the body into it while Anemone, holding a red plastic umbrella, said a quiet prayer. A breeze came up as Kiku began to fill the hole with sand, and Anemone pressed her hands over her eyes. When the funeral was finished, Kiku broke off a thick branch from one of the mangrove trees hanging down over the beach and began whittling away the smaller twigs. He measured the pole

against his own height, and then, sticking it in the sand, bent it to test its strength. As he worked, the old man and the black goat appeared at the top of the bank and picked their way down to the beach. Scooping up some wet sand, he rubbed it between his hands to wash away the oil, leaving a rainbow film that spread out on the water.

“The repairs are done,” the old man announced, and Anemone stood up.

“Kiku!” she called. “Time to go bomb Tokyo!” Kiku held his arm up as if to say he’d be ready in a minute.

“What’s that all about?” the old man muttered, more or less to himself, as he stood watching. The goat’s teats were swollen, and from time to time a milky drop fell on the hot sand.

“He’s going to jump with that pole,” Anemone said. The sweet smell of the milk drew a swarm of flies as Kiku checked his grip.

“Kiku! Jump over me!” Anemone called, standing, umbrella high over her head, where the waves were lapping at the sand. Kiku stared at the red plastic dome and started his sprint, aiming straight for the nearly naked Anemone in its shadow. A streak of taut muscle, a wake of dancing white sand, and the waves of heat rising placidly from the beach were left unsettled for a moment. The leaves of the mangrove trees rustled and sweat streamed from Kiku’s body. When she could almost feel his breath on her—that hot breath she’d felt so often in her ears or against her side—she closed her eyes, opening them just as the thick pole was planted in the sand in front of her. A cool puff of air played over her skin, as if the sweat had been briefly frozen, and the umbrella was swept from her hand. It rolled down the beach, a crimson whirl on the white sand, then out over the water above the reef. She stood for a long while staring at the shrinking dot of red plastic as it spun across the deep green sea…

The bats began to stir. Their black bodies covered the walls and ceiling of the hangar, and when their wings began to flutter, it was as if the whole building were shifting and shivering. The engine of the helicopter groaned to life and the rotor turned. As Kiku dragged open the doors of the hangar, bright, dusty light streamed in and a cloudburst of black bats fell from the ceiling. The sound of small, soft bodies hitting concrete mixed with their unnerving squeaks.

The helicopter began to move slowly forward over a carpet of bats, and the speed of the blades increased, sending clumps of them spinning against

the walls. The survivors huddled in the corners of the hangar, clawing their way into what was left of the damp shade. Outside, the helicopter soon rose slowly into the sky, leaving behind patches of twitching black wings.

“Hold on, Hashi,” Kiku murmured. An image of Hashi beset by demons of some kind floated into his mind. “I’m coming!”

In the courtyard of the building they brought him to, a young woman in a bathrobe was knitting in the shade of a cherry tree. The men in pajamas playing volleyball stopped to stare at him as he was carried past. So did the women gathered around a harmonium. As they cut across the courtyard, a mixture of sweat and drool ran down his chin. The sun rocked back and forth in the sky in time with the steps of the white-coated attendants, until they passed through a barbed-wire fence at one end of the yard. It was dark inside, but he could make out a mannequin by the entrance: a child in a school cap and knapsack holding a plastic card that read “Mommy, Daddy, don’t worry, I’m fine—and waiting for you!” Little cracks ran through the smooth brown plastic of the mannequin’s face and arms.

He was carried into a room with white walls and ceiling and set down on a bed. The straps around his thighs were unfastened, and a pair of scissors glided past his face, followed by the sound of his pants being cut away. He felt something soft and cool on his hip, a drop from the end of the needle, and then the injection. Warmth spread through his body, and his jaw went slack. He found he could no longer distinguish between the rubber gag in his mouth and his own tongue and teeth. He could feel himself sinking deep into the bed as he studied the one broken tube among the line of fluorescent lights on the ceiling. It blinked feebly on and off, a pale, jagged shadow keeping it company. Hashi could hear someone undoing the rest of the buckles on his straps, then saw a hand removing the black gag, its surface dripping with saliva.

Lifting him off the bed and setting him on his feet, the men in white half dragged him down a hall lined with barred cells. When they came to his, he was tossed in onto some damp floor matting. The only other furnishing was a pile of blankets in one corner. An old man was staring at Hashi from the cell across the way, his skin covered with blotches and his open robe revealing a diaper.

“Are you a Good Person?” the stranger asked. Hashi raised himself on one elbow, at which the old man gave a little yelp and shrank back into one corner. Hashi looked around his cell and was startled to see some toes poking out under the pile of blankets. On further investigation, he found, in addition, the hair, forehead, and left hand of a woman, the rest of whom was covered by the blankets. He decided it had to be a woman from the white skin and the slender hands and feet.

“Her head’s messed up,” the old man explained, his courage returning. “She’s neither a Good Person nor a Bad Person: she’s just a Cabbage. Slightly rotten Cabbage at that, so don’t try eating her.” The Cabbage wore a small gold ring on the little finger of her left hand. There were no windows in the cell, and Hashi wondered whether she was hot under all those blankets. He could hear the sound of ventilator fans at each end of the corridor, but not even the faintest breeze reached them. He propped himself against the wall and continued his inspection. It was very humid, yet the Cabbage didn’t seem to be sweating. The shadow cast by the lampshade covering the yellowish light bulb overhead just reached her left hand, and the ring seemed to be glinting at regular intervals. Hashi looked up at the ceiling. Neither the bulb nor the shade was swaying, so it had to be a tiny motion of her hand that was catching the light at certain angles. Sure enough, a closer look revealed that the finger was wagging slightly, but quite regularly, above the blanket.

An attendant brought dinner, or some mushy stuff in tubes that passed for dinner: milk, rice, powdered vegetables, and salt. Hashi watched as he put the tip of a tube into the Cabbage’s mouth and squeezed the food down her throat, but he could see almost nothing of her face due to the strange mask she was wearing: something not unlike the gas masks he’d seen in the deserted mines on the island, with a corrugated rubber snout hanging down in front. The attendant loosened a valve at the end of the snout and stuck the tube into the dark hole, and judging from the movements in her throat, the Cabbage seemed to be eating.

When the meal was over, the blankets were peeled back to reveal that this was, in fact, a woman. The attendant changed her diaper, wiping her bottom and giving her a liberal sprinkling of talcum powder, but no matter what was done to her she remained as still as a block of wood. Only when the blankets were replaced did she give a low moan.

“The head of this here Cabbage has been cleaned out nice and neat,” the attendant told Hashi, “just like yours’ll be pretty soon now.” When he was gone, the slight twitching in the Cabbage’s finger started again. As Hashi studied the movement, he caught an occasional whiff of talcum powder sent his way, apparently, by a tiny draft created by the pulsing finger. He approached her, and as his feet moved over the damp matting, the movement of her finger changed, reminding him, for some reason, of the sad man in the park in Toxitown who suffered from convulsions. How many hours had he spent practicing his singing in the company of the man who danced as if someone were firing a machine gun at his feet? How many thousands of tunes had come into his head back then? Worming his way across the floor, he had come close enough to touch the Cabbage. The dry brown foot protruding from the blankets was swollen, probably due to poor circulation. Gently, he touched it. No response. He tried pinching it. Her skin felt like a rubber sack heavy with liquid, as if she would shrivel up if he pricked her with a pin. He remembered the drifter who had ministered to him in the toilet by the river in Sasebo. Then a new idea occurred to him: this sad creature might once have been a dog, the handsome black dog that had saved him from the coin locker, and for that he owed her a real debt of gratitude. But what could he do for her here? About the only thing he had to give her, he thought, was a song; and so, facing in the general direction of the head that must be somewhere under the blankets, he began to sing, pitching his voice to sound like a wind instrument playing in the deeper registers.

At first there was no reaction from the Cabbage, and Hashi wondered whether she wasn’t deaf. But gradually he changed his song, shifting from a horn resounding through a thick forest to leaves drifting down onto a lake, then to rings of water spreading out to lap against a sandy shore, and finally —with his mouth closed—the first few bird trills in “The St. Vitus’s Blues.” Soon Hashi noticed that the blanket had begun to stir, and when he increased the volume her fingers began to twitch faster and beads of sweat formed on her palms. But before he could go on, he heard a voice behind him shout:

“Come on, put a little life in it!” Hashi turned to find a line of faces pressed against the bars of the cells across the way. It was the old man who had shouted. “Hey, so it really was you,” he said when Hashi fell silent. “I

was sure it wasn’t the radio since they didn’t come on with the weather forecast. You being a Good Person and all, how about singing a bit louder, though? How about a hiking song or ‘Happy Birthday’? Hey, is the girl dead? Could be that little dirge of yours. Cabbage there, she hates that kind of thing. The weaker you sing, the weaker she gets.”

With the song over, the fingers had resumed their former movement. Perhaps the old man was right.

“Hey, Goody! You sick?” the man called again. A line of anxious faces stared at Hashi through the bars. “If you want, I’ll get the doctor for you. He could give you a shot.”

“Doesn’t anybody like my singing?” Hashi asked the patients staring at him. The men looked at one another until the old fellow spoke up for them.

“Well, you see, I’d like it a little cheerier myself,” he said, a bit reluctantly.

“OK, I get it,” Hashi murmured, moving away from the Cabbage and lying down on the opposite side of the cell. The others stood looking at him for a time, then slowly withdrew their faces from the bars, retreating to corners where the light couldn’t reach, until finally only the old man remained to keep watch over Hashi with a worried look.

“Good night,” said Hashi eventually, sitting up to peer across the corridor, and then the old man also disappeared, a look of pleasure spreading on his face.

“Put a little life in it?” said Hashi to himself. Come to think of it, he didn’t know any songs that could be called lively. “No fucking way,” he muttered, laughing out loud. The Cabbage was stirring again under her blankets, and the thought crossed his mind that he should try another song, but he stopped himself. He realized that he was sick and tired of the old sounds, that he’d just as soon forget the whole thing. Closing his eyes, he cast about in his head for the makings of a new tune, but first he decided he had to clear out all the memories linked with his old repertoire. The drifter, a pair of bloody scissors, duck fat, a woman’s soft skin, the dank air in the old mines, the smile on Kiku’s sweaty face—every person and place, every smell and sensation had to go. He lay there a long time, slaying memories, but in the end there was always one image that remained behind his blank eyes, the one he’d seen earlier in some broken glass as he lay down to sleep: his own face, frightened, frozen, him. And for some reason, though

he couldn’t have said why, he had the feeling that it was this face that would open its mouth and sing the new song. Naked, nameless, senseless, stripped of everything though it was, he decided then and there that he would follow this face. No matter what happened, he would never lose sight of it again. No man-faced fly inside his head could ever make him forget it. And no one could make him hate this craven, tearful face; for, search as he might, where else would he ever find himself?

The sound of a helicopter could be heard in the distance: a highspeed whirlybird with dried bat blood on its skids. A grinning, elderly pilot sat at the controls as it sliced across the summer sky.

“Sheee-it! Been four years since I’ve flown this thing,” he said as he set the chopper down at a landing pad on a spit of reclaimed land in Tokyo Bay. Taking a bag full of metal cylinders with them, Kiku and Anemone got out and had a Coke in one corner of the cavernous hangar. The pilot seemed to know the two mechanics there, who started telling him about a new helicopter with a retractable rotor.

“It’s a jet, man, when you lock that rotor in. It’ll do Mach 0.8.” During a pause in the conversation, Kiku interrupted.

“We’ve got a few things to do but we’ll be right back,” he told the pilot. The old man nodded.

“Don’t be late,” he said. “The control tower’s fussy about these things. I’ll be heading back to Miruri in four hours’ time.” Kiku and Anemone were already walking away, hand in hand.

“Four hours is plenty,” said Kiku without looking back.

They walked in silence along the almost deserted harbor road. Summer was hanging on in the city, and Tokyo was as hot as the islands had been. The difference was the smell of gasoline in the air and the wall of sound that reached them from a distance: millions of human voices merging together. As they made their way through a long, straight tunnel lined with sheets of metal, enormous trucks passed by from time to time with a moan that built to an explosive whoosh. Anemone thought of the pieces of Gulliver that had flopped around on the highway, and for a moment she wished it had been raining that day, then shook her head, knowing that wishful thinking got you nowhere. Reaching over to touch Kiku’s back, she found that his shirt was soaked with sweat.

At the end of the tunnel, they came to an intersection, and on the cross street they found a small motorcycle repair shop marked only by a weathered, peeling sign. When Kiku and Anemone walked in, deeply tanned and dressed in white linen, the mechanic, a young man with his hair dyed red, gave them a long stare. There were two secondhand bikes in the frosted display window, and Anemone, having looked them over, pointed at the more powerful one, a 250cc off-road job.

“We’ll take that one,” she said. “Would you mind starting it up for me?” After listening to the engine for a moment, she climbed on, linen dress and all, and rode out into the street. She had gone about ten meters when she let go of the handlebars and rode on no-handed.

“That’s some chick you got there, buddy,” the mechanic said to Kiku. “She’s checking the balance; just what you’re supposed to do with a used bike.”

While Anemone was fishing around for her license and signing the necessary papers, Kiku fastened the bag to the luggage rack on the bike.

“That’s a mean tan you guys have got,” the mechanic said as he counted the money. “Bet you’re surfers. The white suits are a sure giveaway. Surf City Babies—must be nice.”

“I’m afraid not,” said Kiku, doing up the strap on his helmet. “Us? We’re Coin Locker Babies.”

The freeway traffic was bumper to bumper, but Anemone made good time riding between the cars until they came up behind two trucks that wouldn’t let her through. As they crept along beside a taxi, Kiku studied a “Wanted” poster inside until he realized he was staring at his own face and, next to it, those of Nakakura and Hayashi. Under the pictures, in large lettering, were instructions for “anyone knowing the whereabouts of these men.” The picture of him was one the police had taken on Christmas Day, the morning after he had killed that woman; they’d had to drag him from the cell, where he’d been lying on the floor weeping and screaming, pleading with them not to touch him, pleading with someone for forgiveness. You could see something of what he’d been through in the photo: his eyes were blank, his mouth halfopen with a few teeth showing.

“Pathetic,” Kiku muttered at the face in the cab. “Get a grip,” he advised it. “One false step and it’s all over; they’ll have you under glass, trapped like a bug.”

The traffic cleared just as they passed a wrecked milk truck that had been blocking one lane. The tank on the truck had been damaged in the accident, and a sticky white puddle had formed along the road. Taking advantage of the opening, the cab with Kiku's picture in it roared off, puffing milk-sweet air in their faces and revealing, where it hadn't been a moment before, a view of the thirteen towers. On top of one, an orange light blinked in the hazy heat, though it was almost invisible in bright sunlight. From a distance, the towers seemed to be leaning toward one another, panting in the hot summer sky, their stone walls and metallic windows softer than that turtle's belly. A line of boxes half melting in the heat, the smell of milk… and suddenly Kiku thought of babies locked away inside, and reached for the bag at the back of the bike, checking the cylinders, ready to undo the straps. Anemone opened the throttle, moving out into the fast lane which seemed to suck them along the elevated highway straight toward the towers. Nothing ever changes, he thought. Everybody's still trying to break out of themselves, hoping for that new wind to blow through and shake their hearts awake. But for us, for all the babies who slept their first sleep in those muggy boxes, who heard that sound, the only sound there was until the air first touched our skin—the sound of our mothers' hearts—nothing ever changes. How could it? How could any of us forget—a sign that came to us in the dark, endlessly, ceaselessly, with just one message, over and over and over again?… He reached back and his hand closed around the DATURA. It was time now: the hatching of the babies, asleep in their summer boxes, spun from glass and steel and concrete.

Hashi could hear glass breaking down the hall, and then an attendant shouting "Bring him down here! In the cell, quick!" The door of their block flew open and a man in a straitjacket was carried down the hall and thrown in with Hashi. The whole building seemed to shake when he hit the floor, as if a bronze statue had been dropped from the ceiling. Startled, the Cabbage groaned and burrowed deeper into the blankets, the snout of her gas mask flipping about. Several doctors and attendants pinned the man to the floor while one of them prepared a thick, dripping syringe. As he fought them, veins bulged on his head, and his bloodshot eyes seemed ready to pop from their sockets. The dark, congested areas above and below the red eyes made Hashi think of eyeliner. Suddenly, the man bucked so violently, straitjacket

and all, that the attendant by his shoulder went flying against the wall. Hashi, who hadn't been able to move so much as a finger in his jacket, knew what sort of strength this must have taken. From up and down the corridor, the other patients lining the bars gave a cheer.

"There's one that's still alive," cried the old man. "Fight them. Don't let them stick it to you." An attendant broke away to yell at him, but a shout from the doctors brought him back. The man had bent his body into an arch, a wrestling bridge, making the leather straps bulge along the muscles in his chest; and as they reached their limits, the straps began to tear with an awful grating sound. The teeth inside the man's head were grating too, until Hashi thought they might snap off at the roots; but suddenly the belts gave way, one after another, with loud cracks. One of the attendants went rolling across the floor, apparently hit in the eye by a buckle, drawing even louder cheers from the hall. Hashi, however, was more interested in the strange smell that seemed to be coming from the man's mouth, a smell like burning flesh. Somehow, he found it disturbing, and then remembered that he'd smelled it before, in the bathroom where he had stabbed Neva. But before he could give it much thought, the old man across the corridor had launched into a wild tirade.

"He wakes! The steel giant wakes! Long, long ago he rose from the sea, with the blood of life streaming from his belly. And then they buried him with thunder… and… carrots… at Stonehenge. But now he wakes again. The Age of Rotten Fish is over; the Age of Steel and Bombs is upon us. And he has come to give us life and strength, to free us from these cells, to restore us once again to baseball and pingpong! Sent by God from the Great Beyond!!!"

Meanwhile, the doctor holding the needle was looking for a chance to use it; but just as he was about to jab it into the man's neck, an arm burst free from the straitjacket and grabbed one of the attendants by the throat. The attendant groaned as the fingers dug right in, but he managed to draw a hard rubber sap he was carrying and take a good swing with it. There was a thud, then a sort of gargling, laughing sound from deep inside the jacket. With the arm still in front of him, the doctor decided to plant the needle in it right away, but no matter how hard he pressed it wouldn't penetrate, until it finally bent in half. By this time, some yellowish-looking stuff was beginning to trickle from the nose and mouth of the choking attendant; his

tongue, Hashi noticed, had turned white and hung limply at his chin. Working as fast as he could, the doctor prepared a thicker needle, which he then aimed at the artery bulging in the man's neck. This time it broke the skin, but the pressure underneath was so great there was no way to pump the sedative in.

"What the hell's going on?" he muttered, shaking his head, but his voice was drowned out by the other patients' cheers.

In the commotion, Hashi slipped out of the cell and trotted off down the hall. The linoleum floor of the examination room was sticky with a soup of medicines spilling out of broken bottles as he picked his way through. There was debris everywhere: stethoscopes, a blood-pressure cuff, a muzzle, I.V. tubes, white jackets, tweezers, and an assortment of pills.

Outside it was midday. He passed unchallenged through the barbed-wire fence and cut across the courtyard. Nobody around. He headed for the gate, passing beds full of sunflowers that were swarming with bugs. The humming of wings was the only sound in the deserted yard. For some reason he found himself thinking that a mental hospital without patients was very like a prison yard being prepared for an execution, and wondered who the condemned man might be. He went up to an oval pool with a fountain playing in it. He wanted a drink, wanted to wash away the burning feeling in his throat left by the smell from the steel giant's mouth. Glancing about him, he scooped up a handful of water and held it to his lips; but as he opened his mouth, he gave a little scream. The water was black with dead insects.

The iron gate that led to the outside world stood wide open. In the street beyond, a car had been abandoned, its windows shattered. There were no dents or other signs of an accident, yet when he looked inside, Hashi found that the back seat was covered with blood and one door had been nearly ripped from its hinges. He set off down a road sandwiched between a large apartment complex and a fireworks factory, noting a strong smell that the wind seemed to blow in from time to time. It was so sharp that it stung his eyes as he walked along, and he could barely keep them open. Still, he was grateful for the smell, since he felt that it was somehow responsible for his being able to walk on and on with nobody to stop him. Eventually, though, when he realized that there was no sign of life in either the factory or any of the apartments, he began to wonder whether his mind wasn't playing tricks

on him. Crazy or not, however, he was all alone, so he might as well use this stench to keep him moving. Who knows, he thought, without it he might just be standing here exhausted, unable to go on.

He came to an intersection where several cars were standing, but no one was inside. Here, too, there was no sign of an accident, and the traffic light seemed to be working normally, blinking from red to green and back again in pointless repetition. The keys had been left in one of the cars, so Hashi switched on the radio and spun the dial. At the first station, he turned up the volume to find a man's voice slowly repeating the same message as though reading a weather report.

"Please shut off your main gas valve. When evacuating, do not take any personal belongings with you. Children under six years of age and women more than eight months pregnant will be given priority on all evacuation routes. Only these groups will be provided with armored escorts… Please shut off your main gas valve. When evacuating, do not take any personal…" He tried other channels, but it was the same on every one. He got out of the car and walked on, following the smell. His steps took him across an empty school playground that seemed somehow familiar, until he remembered that Kiku and he had played in a place just like it back on the island. The yard was littered with tiny shoes and gym clothes and backpacks still filled with schoolbooks. The limer for drawing lines on the volleyball court had stopped halfway through the job, after completing only a right angle.

Leaving the school, he passed down a narrow street lined with shops. The stink of rotting meat rose from a bag of groceries someone had left in front of a bank, and a hamburger, dropped on a restaurant counter, still had a fork stuck in it. An empty turntable revolved in the window of a record shop, and the slimy mess of trampled grapes, pears, and bananas attracting flies in front of a fruit stand had not yet dried.

At last he came to the source of the smell: it seemed to be coming from a layer of white powder that had been spread over a park bordered with bamboo. As he was crossing the park, hand over his nose, he realized that beneath the powder about half the area was covered with blue plastic sheeting. The flies were as thick as they had been at the fruit stand. He cautiously lifted one flap of the plastic, then stepped back, shoving his hand in his mouth to stifle a scream: a human foot was visible. He was too

frightened to notice the faint smell of burning flesh that clung to his hand. Hearing cicadas singing in the bamboo grove and thinking he might be better off there himself, he made a dash in that direction, fighting the urge to puke.

Perhaps because the thick leaves blocked out the sunlight, it was humid in the grove and the soft earth sucked at his shoes, making walking difficult. When he reached a clearing, he found the body of a dog, its head split wide open. He stopped, thinking he should bury it; he would dig a deep, deep hole, and while he was digging, perhaps the nausea would go away, letting him calm down enough to think clearly about what he'd seen. The soft earth made for easy digging, and he found himself thinking of the time he had buried the dead child in Toxitown. A breeze rustled the bamboo overhead. He had been right: he was feeling better; even his throat felt less parched. In fact, as he worked, he noticed that his whole body seemed to be growing lighter. A warm, pleasant sensation spread from his throat down through his belly, and he began to feel positively cheerful. That smell. Burning flesh again. This time it was too strong to miss. Feeling a bit light-headed, he had finished the hole and grabbed the dog by one leg when it hit him: a sense of burgeoning power swept through him, and with it an overwhelming urge to tear the dog to bits. The feeling took him completely by surprise. He could feel it exploding in his body, and closing his eyes and shaking his head did nothing to stop it. He tried to drop the dog on the ground, but his hand resisted him, and a searing pain shot through his head. Despite himself, he held the dog in a tighter grip, and the pain receded. He then found that he'd picked up another of its legs, hearing a voice from somewhere say: "Tear it to bits." Startled, Hashi looked around, but there was no one else in sight. "Rip it up. Tear it to bits," the voice said again. Hashi clenched his teeth as gooseflesh rose on his body. It was his own voice. Maybe he really was crazy. Again he tried to let go of the dog, but his head threatened to split open; it was as if someone had cut a hole in it and poured boiling oil over his brain. "Tear it to bits." The voice spilled out of his mouth of its own accord. "That doesn't make sense," he managed to reply. "Years ago, a dog saved me from a coin locker. Why would I want to mangle a poor dead dog?" With a yell, he flung the thing down and staggered away, driven by the pain in his head. His eyes wouldn't open, and about the only thing he could be sure of, and that vaguely, was the way the asphalt burned beneath

his feet. He felt around on his skull, searching for the hole, the one through which the hot oil was pouring in… or was it animal fat? Whatever, it made his blood race, coating his flesh and rotting his muscles as his whole body stiffened. Realizing that his thighs were hot, too hot to bear, he broke into a run, bumping into one obstacle after another with his eyes still shut: a poplar tree, garbage bags, a cinderblock wall, a telephone booth, lampposts, a car's bumper. From the wet blood running down his face, he could tell that he must have cut his head, but there was no pain. Each time he collided with something, his muscles just grew harder. Finally, he stumbled and fell into a narrow ditch; but no sooner had he come to rest in the warm, murky water that had collected in it than he realized somehow there was someone else nearby. Opening his eyes just a crack, he saw a leg dangling in the ditch, and once again the impulse he had felt before swept over him. His eyes opened wide. He found himself on a tree-lined street, ripples of heat rising from the pavement. Close by, a woman in a polka-dot dress sat with one leg in the ditch, her eyes glassy and unfocused. From a corner of his own mouth something greenish dribbled down. He had the weird sensation that he'd become a giant—that he could kill her with his little finger. He drew nearer and discovered that the woman was pregnant. She seemed to have hurt her left shoulder. She sat stirring the dirty water with her foot, then, noticing Hashi standing there, smiled weakly at him.

"Hey, Doc. Once the morning sickness passes, they say it's OK to have a beer. But not me; I've hardly felt sick at all, but I've been laying off the beer anyway." As she chattered on, he came a step closer, the muscles in his cheeks relaxing as he did so. In his mind, he could see himself putting one hand on either side of her mouth and tearing her head apart like a ripe fruit. Rip her open, he said to himself. Rip her! He noticed the way her throat bobbed as she swallowed, and he could hear himself laughing—a rasping, gargling laugh. A wave of excitement broke over him and he reached for his groin, spraying a wad of cum almost instantly, merely from the pleasure that surged up in him from the hot pavement. But this wasn't any old climax: this time it didn't stop, as if gushing up from every pore in his body. He ran his fingers through the woman's hair and then, closing them into a fist, pulled her out of the ditch. Before she could cry out, he shoved his right hand into her mouth. Sour bile leaked from the back of her throat and her tongue curled into a tight ball as he let go of her hair and wrapped his

left hand around her jaw. It was only then that his orgasm subsided, and he felt a soft, cool breeze touching him. But it was more than a breeze: a sense of bliss. Beside himself, he went on pulling, but just as the corners of her mouth began to tear, a shudder ran through his body. He'd heard it: the sound of a heart beating! It seemed to come from far away. Of course! It had to come, the heartbeat, surrounding him, enfolding him at the peak of pleasure, as he put this woman heavy with an unborn child to death. The heartbeat! But… whose? His own? This woman's? Hashi peered deep down into the dark throat in front of him, and somewhere beyond the web of veins and sinews, at the deepest place of all, he could just make out a thin, clear membrane covered with white spots. And there, on that tissue, an image began to take shape, something familiar, something he knew from long ago: a bird spreading its tail against a background of falling snow—a peacock—the one he had seen that Christmas Eve when Kiku had shot the woman. And in the shadow of those green and silver wings stood a sick old woman smiling calmly. Then the madness took hold of him, and he reached out to rip away the old writer's skin, only to find another woman concealed within, one he had never seen before. But suddenly he knew: "It's you. You're the one who left me in that locker," he whispered, reaching out again to tear her chest open. In he dived, pushing aside other organs until he came to a warm, slippery, twitching red lump: her heart.

"At last!" he shouted. "This was the heart! My mother's! The sound I heard every second of my life until the day I was born!" He gave thanks, thanks to that heart, that sound which had filled his own heart with joy, with the strength to grow, and as he did so, all trace of anger vanished. How could he hate that sound? How could he not forgive his mother? He thanked the old writer and her peacock; and as his mind retreated, back through the maze of veins, back up the dark hole, past the rigid tongue, he realized he no longer wanted to kill the woman he held in his hands. Please, he pleaded, drain this strength from my body, drain every last drop of blood; wrap me back up in a straitjacket, but please don't let me kill her. Frantically, he searched every corner of himself for some organ, some part of him that hadn't been affected by that smell, that couldn't be made to do the bidding of the burning oil. He pleaded with himself, every atom of him from the tips of his toes to the end of each hair, but the oil seemed to have power over every cell. Then, at the last moment, something somewhere gave a twitch.

His mind ran desperately through his body once again, searching until he found it: his tongue. But not the part that remained; the last free bit of Hashi's body was the memory of the tip he had cut off his tongue a long time ago. At once, the memory began probing the spaces between his clenched teeth, then further inside, little by little regaining control over the rest of the tongue. I won't give in, he chanted to himself. I won't kill this woman. I won't stop the beating of her heart. As the mutinous tongue forced its way out, his teeth bit down, trying to sever it, but the pain slowly spread through his mouth, gradually dissolving the oil that coated his vocal chords. Hashi knew then that the madwoman's heart was still sending its message, the same message as always, still reaching the child deep inside her. He took a deep breath, soothing his tongue and throat with the cool air. The message that the heartbeat carried to the child within was one that never changed. He drew another breath, feeling it refresh his lips, and then a sound emerged—the cry of a newborn baby. Never, he told himself, will I forget what my mother's heart was telling me. Live! it said. You shall not die! Live! Yes, live! Each beat drummed out the message, imprinting it on my muscles, and veins, and on my voice.

Hashi let his hands fall from the woman's mouth. Leaving her, he walked into the heart of the deserted city, his cry melting into a song.

"Can you hear?" he whispered to the towers in the distance. "Can you hear? It's my new song."

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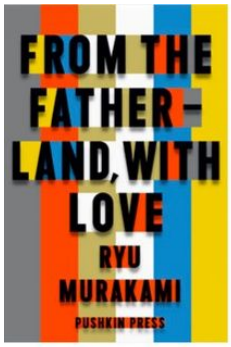

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About the Author

Born in 1952 in Nagasaki prefecture, RYU MURAKAMI is the *enfant terrible* of contemporary Japanese literature. Awarded the prestigious Akutagawa Prize in 1976 for his first book, he has gone on to explore with cinematic intensity the themes of violence and technology in contemporary Japanese society. His novels include *Coin Locker Babies, Sixty-Nine, From the Fatherland, with Love* and *Popular Hits of the Showa Era*, all published by Pushkin Press, as well as *Audition* and *In the Miso Soup*. Murakami is also a screenwriter and director; among his films are *Tokyo Decadence, Audition* and *Because of You*.

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