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# Embers

**Ezra Kyrill Erker**

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# EMBERS

Love and Loathing in Japan

by 画面 *Ezra Kyriell Erker*



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**Ezra Kyrill Erker**

## Publisher's Foreword

*Embers* centres on a private girls' high school in central Japan and covers a school year, following the tribulations of pupils and teachers from spring blossoms to the winter fire festival. The growing pains mirror the maturation of the country, a transformation as pronounced as what the West experienced in the late '60s and early '70s but with fewer cinematic convulsions, so that in popular culture the new millennium straddles a generation gap rather than a revolution. The repercussions and social changes, however, are still being felt.

Although the coming-of-age story is rooted in a strong sense of place and time and is movingly personal – describing a non-idealized Japan that actually exists – the evocations are disturbing but universal. Unlike stereotypical Western takes on the country, *Embers* is written – through Ezra's lucid, sharp and poetic prose – from a Japanese point of view. The various narrative threads weave to form an intricate tapestry.

Beneath the tapestry are the 'embers of innocence', glimmering as students lose their sexual innocence, Moniwa his emotional naivety, as Sister Takeishi prevaricates on the innocence of faith and Japan itself lies in an intermediary era when cultural and societal innocence is slowly embering, on the cusp of dimming to ash.

**With warm regards,  
Arthorn Techatada,  
Praphansarn Publishing**

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# Contents

Snow White and the Seven Samurai .....	9
Koji of Oz .....	43
And the Rain .....	72
Nikko Nights .....	102
Home Fires of Bon .....	138
Staker, Breaker, Hostess Maker.....	172
Walking the Banana.....	202
Kiss of the Vampire .....	232
Barry the Barbarian .....	270
Trial by Fire .....	306
Colour of Truth.....	338
Blooms .....	362

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## 花見

### Snow White and the Seven Samurai

—

In the darkness he thought about firefly season; when they emerged this year he should seek out their luminous trajectories along the waterways. Arms around a married woman, he didn't speak, thinking they could go together, threading starlight. Bach played lightly on the stereo in the other room, but their stillness was significant, and though it wasn't the same for her she recognized his mood.

She raised the clock and angled it towards the light in the other room until she could read the face. She looked at his eyes looking in hers.

'I have to go.'

If she had to go, he thought, she should do it without words, and he could let music mingle with the remaining warmth in her empty half of the bed.

On the morning of the earthquake, Moniwa Koji entered the school, passing the sign outside. 栃木県松本市聖心女学院高

等学校 *Sacred Heart in Tochigi*. In his mind every morning, a personal joke he never shared, the school was reduced to its English acronym, and girls arrived at SHiT in waves of cheerfulness that never failed to seem odd to him. Fukunishi Miho, a second year, brightly said good morning. He reprimanded her for a high hemline. She wrinkled up her nose and complained that girls from other schools laughed at the fashion here. He shrugged. The school held up a traditional dress code in the face of accessorizing, sparkling, skirt-hiking fads, and it was among his responsibilities to make sure the navy skirts descended below the knee. In a world full enough of predation there was no need to encourage it.

During the morning roll call, jaw aching at the movement whenever he spoke, the thirty-seven faces of his homeroom blurred, became indistinguishable as Fuyumi hovered, her face burned into the back of his thoughts. The image clouded his creativity and today's lesson, the first of the school year, came straight out of the government-recommended textbook. 'Thank you for the meal means *gochisosamadeshita*,' he told them, to begin a chapter on the kitchen, and they copied the translation into their notebooks, thirty-seven hands gripping automatic pencils with two fingers or four pressed into a point, then looking up at him with eyes open waiting for the next revelation of English, that clumsy, inscrutable language they somehow seemed able to manage.

It was a mild one, magnitude 5.1 (4 on the Shindo scale), that began while he was naming appliances and lasted around ten seconds. The windows rattled as he said refrigerator. The pupils uttered a collective ooohhh, and he worried he might have uttered something vulgar. It took a moment to realize the rattle wasn't caused by a gust of wind or a passing truck on the road; as he said microwave oven it dawned on him the ground was moving,

wavering and threatening to break, to open and cast a building of schoolgirls into the depths of the earth.

By the time he remembered emergency procedures the earthquake had passed. He continued talking but the students were no longer listening, chattering on excitedly on subjects from earth-shaking to heart-throbs, Brad Pitt abbreviated as far as BraPi.

Had he believed in omens he would have thought it a bad one that the school year began with a wavering. It would end with a snowmelt.

—

The seven-member English department had its own row in the expansive faculty office. Yesterday's post-earthquake buzz had passed. Teachers sat working at their desks, stood in classrooms or passed through corridors on their way to meetings or copy rooms.

Konoshi Yukako, a long-legged second year, stood massaging the shoulders of Noguchi on the other end of the faculty office. Noguchi leaned back in his chair, his desk piled high with papers, Yukako digging deep with her thumbs.

The desk beside Moniwa's belonged to Barry, the new assistant English teacher from Winnipeg. The AET was one of three new faculty members at Sacred Heart but to Moniwa did not count as such. Barry Randall Edmonston had arrived straight out of university, recruited as a classroom tape recorder whose inflections, articulations and emphases the girls could repeat. Barry had no qualifications or teaching experience, or much experience of life, knew no Japanese and was arrived from the Canadian urban tundra due to a contentious sister-city scheme.

'No earthquakes in Manitoba?' said Moniwa.

'They happen often here?'

‘Now and then.’

‘Do I start teaching today, Koji?’

‘Maybe tomorrow.’

Moniwa was responsible for incorporating Barry into the various English classes but knew that Barry, like the last AET, would semi-doze in a corner while the teachers struggled to incorporate him. And he resented the dictate for native speakers in classrooms when his own English he considered adequate.

‘What should I do today then?’

‘Study your Japanese.’

Uehara Madoka, president of the English Language Club, arrived in the doorway with the class list for this year’s play and Moniwa took the names from her. The ELC produced a play every year, usually a Disney version of a Brothers Grimm fairy tale in which the students dressed up and rendered memorized lines in unintelligible English. They loved princesses and queens, handsome princes, true love, happy endings. No one wanted to play an ogre or stepmother or pirate. This year it was *Snow White*, decided democratically by yesterday’s vote. In past years Moniwa had directed a successful *Peter Pan* (large cast, numerous action and fight scenes) and a disastrous *Alice in Wonderland* (word plays and unreality lost on all). Casting was inevitably a problem, and this year he had left it up to Madoka and the club. If they thought he favoured one over another or considered one prettier or smarter, it might play on their neuroses, and Sister Takeishi assured him the girls could handle the responsibility of casting themselves.

Naeko had been chosen for the lead, he saw. This was a relief, as she resembled the character, with deep black hair and pale skin and an uncomplaining gentleness. Without the school’s dress code Naeko might have coloured her hair, followed trends and sparkles, and it would have hidden her traditional charm. She was an ideal

*Schneewittchen*, lacking only a lacquer of lipstick to resemble the storybook. She had the diligence to study and the intelligence to remember her lines, and she wasn't one of his homeroom students, so no one could accuse him of favouritism.

One problem with casting was Yamagishi Chika, to play the hunter. Now in her third and last year at the school, she couldn't be excluded from the speaking roles, but she was an awkward girl who couldn't act her way into friendship circles – how could she play a medieval hunter? In his homeroom her voice wouldn't carry and no matter what she answered he had to tell her to speak up. Her eyes were unresponsive and her brain, when presented with the same problems as others, seemed to reach alternate conclusions.

Another problem was two of the dwarfs. Miho and Yukako, to play Dopey and Sleepy, held an antipathy for each other dating back to middle school. One was long-limbed, one short and round-faced, but in character they seemed similarly selfish, brighter than most, more confident and noisy than classes full of the studious and self-conscious. If they carried their feud into their roles, atmosphere at rehearsals would suffer.

He looked up at Yukako still massaging her rotund homeroom teacher. He decided that rather than separate their roles he would bring Yukako and Miho closer by interweaving their dwarf dialogues, combining their hi-hos. Forcing them to act side by side. Whatever pettiness had caused their falling out might through collaboration be left in the past.

After the day's classes he sat tidying his desk, sorting papers for those he needed to take home. Barry had long since left for a bar.

When he looked up, a student from his English class two years

ago stood there, watching, though her name escaped him. She had deep eyes and an arresting but elusive face, like that of someone spotted for an instant in a public space then lost in the crowd, features already fading in the mind. Her shoulders were narrow, neck thin, making the head more pronounced, a kind of question mark with no answer.

‘I want to go to America,’ she said.

He noticed one of her eyes rested slightly lower on the face than the other, so to compensate her head tilted slightly to one side – or was that just the impression he got from the misaligned eyes? Pronounced ears spread out slightly, but her face had a seamlessness to it that made it look like a mask, on which was carved an expression designed to obscure the underlying feelings. When lips moved the mask maintained its seamlessness. Hers seemed an unusual beauty hidden behind carved features.

‘What’s your name?’ he said at the same moment he remembered. She had once seemed a little more adult than the rest of her first-year class, and he remembered feeling sympathy for the depth in her eyes, which more than most carried a drop of something like understanding, or loneliness.

‘Urushibata Sayaka.’

She was offended that he hadn’t remembered. Maybe he had hundreds of students each term but was she so unmemorable? Not very vocal in class, was she as quiet in the corridors of memory?

‘If that’s what you want to do, Sayaka, then why not?’

‘Oe-sensei says I’m not ready.’

Oe, also an English teacher, taught 3 Murasaki, the purple thread representing her homeroom. A natural pedagogue, Oe made an effort to attend every regional teacher’s workshop, conference or book fair, brought back from these ideas and materials, published in journals his findings from what he’d applied in the



classroom – yet was possibly the worst teacher in the school. His statistics came from asking the wrong questions, his inferences and generalizations from not listening to what students told him. In a dispute he could point to his numbers, to Cambridge studies of Yemeni language school students or Slovenian immigrants in Britain, to his personal statistics and feel superior. Yet Moniwa suspected, without numbers or studies to back his claim, that the girls learned more from his own chaotic, ill-prepared lessons than Oe's pedagogic latticework.

'Did you ask Sister Takeishi?'

'No.'

'Your parents?'

'Mother said it might be better to go to college in Tokyo first, and then go to America later, when I'm more ready.'

'That's a good plan,' Moniwa said. 'But if you think you're ready to start next year, then you can work to make that happen.'

'I want to go as soon as possible.'

'If you can convince your parents, then what Oe-sensei thinks doesn't matter. If you can't, you should follow Sister Takeishi's advice. She'll have some ideas.'

Sayaka nodded. For a moment, looking at her face, he felt a shudder of consequences. Without his input she would accept the advice of Oe and her mother and not go to America, or go years later. But his opinion, because it was what she wanted to hear, might have just changed the course of her life. In America she would study and explore and love and be unlucky in love. The things she considered important would change. She might marry and never live in Japan again. Or while abroad she might suffer an accident or trauma, some abuse that would scar her, the consequences eternal, the guilt eternally his.

He could say to a student, go, and she went; to another, come,

and she came. How could the power to change the lives of others come with such a simple job? But now that he had been entrusted with it and grasped its blade in both hands – what better use than to sever shoots from their roots, so they could rampage freely over earth.

‘I’d also like to join the English Language Club,’ she said.

‘You should have signed up last month. It might,’ he reconsidered, ‘help your English. As a third year, you’d have to act in the play.’

‘Madoka said the roles are filled.’

‘I can write you in another one. The king, maybe. Before he dies a horrible death.’

‘I can do that.’

‘Good. Come to practice every week on Friday.’



Half a kilometre down the road Sayaka retrieved her bicycle from its hiding place alongside the Matsuki City Tax Office. Deemed dangerous and unladylike by Sacred Heart was the pedalling of bicycles, and to be spotted on one while in uniform meant demerits and theology lessons.

From the tax office to the station was a steady downhill, and Sayaka’s hair streamed and threaded behind like her thoughts in the cool air.

It would be a great year, she knew. Madoka had agreed to help her through Noguchi’s geometry, and she would concentrate on English so she could go to the US. Since primary school she had always been a member of the basketball club, but she would sacrifice the sport she loved for the sake of the future. In the third and last year, with entrance exams to study for, it would be too

difficult to participate in two clubs. This was the first year of the best part of her life, now that she finally knew what she wanted. Now that she had a plan.

Sayaka walked her bicycle through the station, where she had to navigate around groups of teenage boys who often tried to chat up schoolgirls. One recognized her uniform and brushed her skirt with his fingertips. Another stood on his own, hands in pockets. She recognized him; they had made eye contact before. He had orange hair and a scrawny look with sharp features, trousers belted low, plaid boxers pulled high. She saw him coming and moved to avoid him.

‘What’s your name?’ He placed an unlit cigarette between his lips and followed.

‘None of your business.’

‘A cute girl like you?’

‘My boyfriend could beat you up.’

‘I’m a better fighter than him.’

‘You don’t know him.’

‘You don’t know me.’

She raised her hands in exasperation. ‘What do you want?’

‘To have a coffee together.’

‘Why?’

‘You’re cute.’

‘I don’t drink coffee.’

‘Tea, then. Whatever. Whisky. Milk.’

He lit the cigarette and shifted and for the first time looked nervous. Sayaka liked nothing about the boy but the glimmer of nervousness in his eye, which rendered his arrogance an act. Instead of walking away, she humoured him.

‘No tea with the likes of you.’

‘How many boyfriends do you have?’

‘That’s not something you’ll get an answer to.’

‘So many?’

‘None of your business.’

‘So few?’

‘Do you harass everyone who passes? Don’t you have anything better to do?’

He smiled at her anger. ‘Have you ever even had a boyfriend?’

‘Of course.’

‘Did you put him in your mouth?’

She should have punched him. His trousers were too low, his breath stank of coffee and smoke.

‘Maybe.’

‘Did you like it?’

‘Why would I?’

‘Girls like that.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yeah.’

‘You’re pretty fixated on one thing.’

‘You’re not?’

‘No. Who taught you how to talk to girls this way?’

‘My brother.’

‘And is he married?’

‘He’s ... in jail.’

‘You see?’

To extricate herself she gave the boy, Nobuyuki, her phone number, regretting it as she continued home thinking of earthquakes.

Her bedroom was bare now. She had hung maps, travel posters of sunny places she’d never heard of, images of basketball stars

she'd hoped to emulate with her lay-ups – Jason Kidd, Tabuse Yuta – but now with basketball abandoned she had taken them down to prepare for a new interest, one she was still hoping would find her. Her bookshelf, though, remained untouched. When her personal world was bombarded by questions and confusion, books offered reassurance. Besides the odd romance novel she used to like girls' manga like *Hana Yori Dango* and *Ouke no Monshou*. Or boys' manga like *Slam Dunk*, which had spurred her interest in basketball. She owned every published Miyazawa Kenji poem, and they carried vivid landscapes into her dreams. Stories by Tanizaki, Dazai, Akutagawa. Many unfinished novels – one day she would read them all. The textbooks from previous years she might never open again. And a row of DVDs. The Ghibli fantasy world with its Totoros, dragons, Chihiros. When characters entered her dreams she wrote about them in her diary. Too often, though, her dreams were ordinary, of family or ice cream. Too ordinary to write about. Sometimes *tengu* goblins stopped by to have a chat. Serpents swam through the eyes of her friends.

She also wrote of passing moments of romance, a flutter of the heart or atmosphere. It wasn't the usual things she found attractive – conventional handsomeness or bulges in jeans or cinematic lines, not muscles or status and money – but eye contact that left an imprint, a hand that moved carefully, a manner that withheld more than it revealed, a comment which took a moment to realize was clever, a mystery behind an inscrutable expression. But just as quickly and easily she became annoyed by stolidity of posture or something irrelevant spoken, distanced by a cliché.

She wasn't like her friends who were too shy to talk to boys they liked – she talked to them but then wished she hadn't. The banalities they spoke. Why were the prettiest boys so insufferable?

Nobuyuki as well, she thought, might once have been

interesting but had watched too much television and thought arrogance and aggressiveness were the ways to win over women. She mustn't reinforce his assumptions. If he called, she would hang up. If he turned up at the station again she'd walk on by.

She wished she had a boyfriend to write letters to, though. Expressions played out in her mind. She would use English words like darling. She would address her letter to Ocean and sign her name as Fish.

In middle school she used to daydream of game-ending jump shots that won the national championship; now she had romantic reveries that clashed with her ideals. She didn't write these in her diary – she would be mortified if anyone found it – but she remembered the details. There were four or five she liked to play out in the imagination, some passive, some brutal. She assumed they would fade once she found real love. In one she lay face down, unsuspected by a soft pillow. Wearing only white socks and underwear. Her eyes were held in the dark but her body was awake. Confident hands touched her bare back, fingertips lightly running down, slipping beneath the elastic of her underwear. She tried to reach behind, to feel more of him with her hands and resist, but he took her arms and placed them on the tatami again. He unclasped her bra. Carefully he guided her arms through the straps, then traced the edges of her breasts with his fingertips as her skin hummed. He bent one leg and then the other, angling her toes towards the ceiling and pulling her socks off. He kissed her feet, scratching as he did his facial stubble against her soles. She wanted to turn around, to raise her lips to his or to push him back, but his weight held her the way she was, face in the depths of down. She breathed quickly, flushing as he slid his body along the length of hers.



Matsuki City, Tochigi Prefecture, was a town of 190,000, elevation 750 metres, an hour from the shrines of Nikko and two and a half by train from the bustle of Tokyo. Summer was hotter than Singapore's and winter rivalled Vladivostok's. Hooked streets spiralled away from the double moat surrounding the central castle grounds. The fact no two streets in the entire Old Town ran parallel was carefully planned in order to confuse invading armies. Even storming the castle would have disoriented them as stairs lay on opposite ends of each storey and ascending meant passing armoured closets where snipers could pick invaders off one by one. And between the fourth and fifth stories was a secret level, unseen from outside, where artillery was stored and the last stand would be waged.

It never happened. With the martial connections of nearby Nikko – and the force of Edo behind it – the age of wars came and went, passing Matsuki by without a battle.

From the upper level you could see all the way to the Japan Alps and, it was said, on a perfectly clear day the distance to the Pacific Ocean.

The town was known – as every town in Japan was known for something – for its soba noodles, large yams and freshwater fish. The Ayame River, feeding downstream into the Kinu, bisected the town but had been dammed at intervals upstream, so the *nijimasu* trout that were the symbol of the town were either farmed or fished from rivers and lakes at higher altitudes, where the *iwana* once swam.

Sacred Heart stood behind the castle on a small hill, and Moniwa passed the castle, as he usually did after work, without a lingering glance. It was a common journey, today tinged with feelings new to him. A school year had begun, time and buildings

had shaken, and along his commute the torment of love followed.

Moniwa looked into eyes of women he passed at the station, imagining connections made, potential love found in a passing glance. A new interest might give him the strength to move past Fuyumi. He boarded his train and sat across from a young woman and next to an old man asleep with a can of beer in his hand. He hoped two strangers sitting opposite each other might meet in an electricity of eyes, an exchange of deflected glances. That of all eras and places, out of the millions of daily commuters, he might meet one operating on the same level of consciousness. And the connection would strike with a chill and unlike most of life's contingencies be impossible to shrug off.

The woman, however, took no notice of him. Light blue-black bruises crawled amoeba-like across her face. Was she beaten by a lover? Her lips were thin, not the kind to utter defiant obscenities and drive a drunken thug to violence. But the skin over both cheekbones crackled with broken blood vessels. Ah, the hands! Knuckles swollen, black, skin rubbed away in places, calluses in others. She was a fighter, then, a martial artist. Her skirt was short but the legs were white and smooth, unblemished. Not a martial art that involved kicking, then, which ruled out most. She was probably a judoka. Her small bruised fists would grab his embracing arms and fling him over her back. He almost felt obliged to try it. Her hair was thin and brown, eyes cloudy. She was reading a book, its jacket shrouded by the bookshop wrapper. She looked young but the age was unplaceable – anywhere between eighteen and thirty. Why did she ride the train, where was she going? Was she ignoring her book and clandestinely studying him? Did she feel the same bond, could he ask her about her bruised hands, crack a joke, call her a brawler – or would it bring forth only pain, memory of self-defence from abuse? If he leaned over, covered her small



mouth with his, would she launch him to the floor or would her eyes descend into love?

The news ticker on the train gave the preseason baseball scores, then forecast snow to fall higher in the mountains. The old man still slept holding his beer, dreaming of drinking it. The bruised girl didn't look up from her book. Moniwa got off at Matsuki-Shinmachi. He found his bicycle from among the hundreds and slowly cycled home. He moved his jaw a little on the way. A tooth and surrounding gums had been bothering him for a few days now.

Should he call Fuyumi again? Her name meant beautiful winter, and if one winter was fading to spring why couldn't the other come to him? It was her turn to call, though. In fact, she never called. She would only submit, join him for yakiniku dinner because the smoke of meat masked his smell on her before she went home to her husband, or make a day trip to Nikko to see the shrines, to Utsunomiya for shopping, to Ebisu in Tokyo for a photography exhibition – all maybe because he wanted her to and it was easier to agree than keep saying no. He wondered if she thought of him, if she ever missed him when in the arms of her husband.

At home he slid his legs under the heated kotatsu table. I shouldn't be calling, he told himself as he rang her mobile phone. Her home number was out of the question; *he* might answer. It was her turn to keep this going, or her move to end it.

Fuyumi liked packages, he thought. She liked films with familiar faces and endings where girl and boy made up after a misunderstanding and lived happily. She liked music if it was fashionable. Even having a lover fit some prescribed notion of what people could do if allowed by circumstances, like an absent husband or an inflated sex drive. If circumstances or trends changed

the lover might have to go.

Ten rings before she picked up.

‘I missed you,’ he said, then wished he could retract it. The more obvious his need for her, the less she answered her phone.

‘You’ve been working hard,’ she spoke absently. Music played in the background, perhaps one of the CDs he had bought her. Probably not.

‘You’re at home?’

‘Mmm.’

‘Alone?’

He saw her face in his mind. Not heavily made-up, beautiful but not striking, withholding, and this presence, the idea that she felt things but kept them to herself, made her more beautiful. Her voice came to him now as it did when they were together – when she was naked beside him, full-hipped, small-breasted – and this association was arousing.

‘Kubo will be working late.’

‘I can see you, then?’

‘It’s better if today we don’t.’

‘Twenty minutes?’

‘Kubo will worry if I’m not here, and I’m tired ... of lying.’

‘When?’

‘Maybe tomorrow. Or next week.’

‘You’ll call me?’

‘I’ll try.’

Before hanging up she added, ‘Thanks for calling,’ but the absence in her voice was almost audible, insincerity drowning out the words. He had used those words himself, when he had no intention of calling back. Thanks for calling meant stop bothering me.

## 五

‘Marriage is selfishness,’ Kobayashi Bunzo began as he refilled Moniwa’s glass.

Moniwa had never mentioned Fuyumi to him but his best friend found a connected topic anyway. He had wanted not to be alone, had called up Bunzo for a drink, but now felt more insecure in the face of his friend’s confidence. Bunzo wasn’t particularly tall, he thought, or rich or conspicuous in handsomeness, yet never seemed at a loss for a date. He had an unforced liquidity with women, a receptiveness to the unspoken communications that passed between human beings.

Friendships in provincial Japan were usually forged in middle school, in high school or in the company. Bunzo was an exception. A car insurance salesman, he shared few of Moniwa’s interests but was loyal as a friend and occasionally interesting. The ease with which he shrugged off setbacks, though, irritated Moniwa, when his own losses and failures invariably dragged him down with them.

‘A compromise you make,’ Bunzo continued, ‘in order to be a little less lonely – contracting yourself to another human for the rest of your sorry life. You don’t go into marriage out of love for another person, only love for yourself, out of an ego that needs flattering by parading a possession, having the security of someone to listen to the nonsense you speak every day.

‘No,’ he concluded, ‘not for me. When there are so many choices, why restrict yourself to one?’

Moniwa took a drink. ‘When all you want is one, why go for lesser women?’

‘I even lie to them,’ Bunzo continued as if he hadn’t heard, ‘and tell them I have a girlfriend. They have much less problem with me cheating on some stranger with them than they have with me cheating on them with a stranger. And if I tell them I’m single

they either wonder what's wrong with me or start thinking of what kind of father I'd make. Keep everything else honest – what you love about them, how beautiful they are – and it's surprising what they'll accept.'

'The same is true for men.'

'I wouldn't put up with that sort of non-committal bullshit!'

'Some do.'

'Only fools.'

## 六

Barry had begun his assistant duties in the classrooms, but was unsure of his role, and why he sat around doing little most of the day. He was overpaid and underworked, overweight and lonely without the surroundings of family, fraternity or hockey team, and spent hours at his desk staring at a Japanese dictionary or checking his email for the fifth time that morning, fulfilling his contract through a presence only really needed for a few minutes a day. Even the daily crises of rebellious or fallen students that rippled around the office only passed over him. Not entrusted with lesson planning, testing or grading, he grew into a nervousness that seemed incongruous with the boisterous character other teachers assumed was his real one. A few times Barry had already come to work late, red-eyed, hair dishevelled, stale waft of alcohol emanating from mouth and pores. There were other foreigners in Matsuki and it hadn't taken Barry long to meet most of them and find a few drinkers.

For all of Barry's uselessness it annoyed Moniwa that the girls loved him. With nothing to commend him other than foreignness, they giggled words Barry couldn't understand but meanings he could guess. They would goad the more intrepid into trying out

their English, and the offerings of ‘How old are you?’ or, for the bravest, ‘Do you need a girlfriend?’ left, through the darkening facial hair, a grin on Barry’s round face for the rest of the day.

It also annoyed Moniwa that Barry called him Koji while he called other teachers by their titles or surnames. Knowing Moniwa had lived in Australia, perhaps Barry considered him more like himself than the others, whom he treated with a confused, bumbling respect as one would for alien creatures.

And why, Barry complained, couldn’t he be Barry-sensei rather than the laborious Mr Edmonston, which since he was Canadian most people assumed was a misspelling for Edmonton? Sister Takeishi wanted formalities of title retained, so that’s how Moniwa introduced his colleague to the class, for good measure with North American intonation rather than the staccato, syllabic *edumonsuton*.

For Moniwa, Barry was inescapable. Barry was mostly assigned to his classes, so when Moniwa was free Barry was as well. His living and registration needs were also Moniwa’s responsibility, and, already a homeroom teacher, he resented having the responsibility of surrogate father to a grown Canadian as well as his thirty-seven homeroom pupils.

With the staff party later, today’s play rehearsal would be a short one. The students had been rummaging through the school’s storage for old costumes from previous years. First-year English Language Club students were responsible for set design and wardrobe, and they dove into their task without much prompting. Open boxes lay strewn around room 21 and pink gowns, paper trees, plastic crowns and sceptres cluttered the floor. Moniwa was tired of their reverence for feudal Europe and wistful daydreams

of Love's First Kiss. What did any of that have to do with Japan?

'I have an idea,' he said.

They looked up. Yamagishi Chika, against school rules, held a phone in her hands. He called over the senior cast members. Their eyes narrowed as they listened, and he kept speaking in order to explain himself.

'Instead of ridiculous European kings and queens, why not set this Snow White in Japan? We can call her Shirayuki-hime and the Seven Samurai! Instead of dresses and robes you can wear yukata, happi and kimono ... We can place it in the time of the shogunate, before the Meiji Era, and it would be a kind of criticism against feudalism, with the seven samurai bickering for power and the lord ready to find them to have them executed, and Shirayuki, a fallen woman who had been trained in sword arts by her father, becoming the leader of their rebellion...'

The girls looked at him with screwed-up eyes as if he had just proposed they perform the play naked. They turned to each other, mouths opening, wondering if he had lost his mind.

Chika from his homeroom still sat fingering the phone, whose red foldable design intrigued her. She turned it over, stroking its length with one finger, opening it and closing it. Naeko, the phone's owner, was proud at first, saying 'It's a third-generation Foma, it can...' But Chika's captivation became unsettling.

'Cool,' Chika said, staring at the phone in a nervous way, as if communication had failed her and it was safer to address a piece of technology than the person it belonged to.

Moniwa sighed. While Chika's English was good, and an unusual brand of intelligence occasionally shone in her, there were some problems with the way she configured herself in the world – as if she were always answering a question that hadn't been asked while leaving the asked one unanswered. She spoke too quietly or

too loudly, either made too much eye-contact or none at all. He could call her name from right beside her and she wouldn't hear it. Teachers could accuse her of being in love, on drugs or caught in family problems – but in her case it was simply a case of having been born in the wrong era, or the wrong country, and elsewhere in time and place there might be others like her, just not here. She couldn't guard herself, and spoke self-incriminating things that the other girls, recently graduated to the joys of spite and maliciousness, took advantage of. Her dad frolics with whores, her mother has a foreign lover, she slept with a thirty-five-year-old businessman, were fragments of Chika's life. Moniwa had heard passed from one girl to another. Whether they were exaggerations or complete untruths, they were so easily believed that Chika found herself without friends, although she was smart, interesting, kind-hearted.

Naeko looked at Moniwa for help in retrieving her phone but he pretended not to see, until so many girls were looking on at what he would do that he cleared his voice and called Chika over for the third hunter scene, which he hadn't planned on rehearsing until next month.

'Put the phone down,' he snapped, 'and read your line!'

She looked at him with shock in her face. No hostility had been intended but she wasn't wrong in hearing it. She looked down at the paper and stared at the lines. None of it registered, the words floated away before she could catch them, she concentrated on one and her mouth opened but that was it.

'Stand up!' he said. 'Just read off the script! No, Chika, that's page four.'

She took the script he gave her, her lines marked in pencil, with face bowed and a nervous smile. As she walked towards the front of the room her head wobbled as if it were too heavy for her neck.

‘Repeat after me!’

His irritation was rising. Had he not known her he would have accused her of being drunk. But she was one who compensated for her differences by exaggerating them. She was silent. He spoke again:

‘Here – is – the – heart – of – Snow – White – my – Lady!’

In the face of his mounting exasperation, though the whole club was looking on, she said nothing. Moniwa gave her a few more seconds. Silence. He threw up his hands and called an end to rehearsal.

‘Practise your lines,’ he shouted as they left, ‘or rehearsal is a waste of time! And Chika,’ he added, ‘pay more attention!’

When they had gone Moniwa felt, although the irritation remained, also a little ashamed. When it conspired to make his work more difficult, strangeness was a threat. The stabbing pain in the depths of his jaw burned the patience out of him. He collected his scripts and papers into an angry pile.

A quiet voice spoke behind him.

‘Was there practice today? I had a doctor’s appointment...’

He turned to see Urushibata Sayaka just arrived. The mask of her face now looked more subtle, merging into her features and moving with them.

‘Not any more,’ he said wearily. ‘Next week.’

At least he didn’t have to wait in the office for the inefficient to finish their day’s work. Today the entire school shut down at six, with dinner and speeches being held in town in honour of the school year just begun.

## 七

The staff party began as a predictable procession of ten-minute



speeches from every department head, then introductions for new faculty members. Barry attempted a low bow that embarrassed most, and the new mathematics teacher, Ms Wada, won the biggest applause from the men. There were announcements on curriculum changes for the year, on new guidelines from the ministry, new goals and standards, a new assessment policy... It all seemed tediously familiar. Shimizu, a biology teacher, had suggested another *Kimigayo*, and it wasn't until after the anthem that the first toast was made and those attending could finally dig into plates of stir-fries, fish and seafood, slurp soups – and move on from beer to nihonshu and whisky.

Three hours later the function was winding down and a drunk minority huddled to discuss the after party. This involved – with the swaying addition of Barry – the same group of karaoke singers as last year. Noguchi chose the venue, a so-called snack bar he went to every week.

The seven teachers and administrators were served by two long-haired Thai hostesses and a large local proprietress with a beautiful singing voice.

Barry shouted 'Sawasdi krap! Kawp khun kraaap!' – the only Thai phrases he knew, picked up in a Winnipeg curry shop – but it surprised Moniwa that as drunk as he was and as unabashed in everything else, Barry was too shy to take the microphone to sing *Hotel California* or any other song.

One hostess sat in Noguchi's lap, in a feigned shocked schoolgirl voice calling him my teacher, my sensei, as he grinningly massaged her breasts.

Nakahara, like Koike a member of the administrative staff, had accompanied the teachers out of obligation, and sat uncomfortably and formally, refilling everyone's drink when the Thai women weren't doing it and speaking only when asked a

question.

Shimizu predated in English on one of the Thais. Ms Koike fell asleep against the wall, and her plump bare legs relaxed beneath her black skirt.

Moniwa, a mediocre singer at best and suffering from pain in the jaw, emotionally attempted *Yosaku*, an enka song. A slurring Noguchi programmed in the next four songs for himself and the hostess on his lap. Moniwa looked from Nakahara – stiff posture, painful sobriety, refilling Noguchi’s beer – to Barry, who looked eager to share his latest revelations on Japan with him. He picked Nakahara to talk to, but their conversation quickly turned to school matters: whether in anticipation of a hot summer the winter uniforms should be replaced with the lighter, cooler version two weeks earlier than usual, and when the new language lab would be ready – and it was all so tiresome that Moniwa moved between Hojo and Barry. The latter had by then been coerced by the hostesses into singing – woefully off-key – a Def Leppard song, for which he apologized between verses.

‘Cheer up!’ Moniwa told Hojo, who sat in a dour mood.

‘I don’t drink to be happy, only not to despair.’

‘POUR SOME SU-GAR ON ME!’ Barry screamed.

Hojo’s was a comical sort of misery, Moniwa thought. The history teacher had been a sort of communist in his youth, involved in student uprisings at a time when the left was a force, now just a member of the faculty who – every school had one – refused to acknowledge the flag or anthem at ceremonies. The school tolerated his lack of patriotism because he had passion for a subject few found interesting and fewer still were qualified to teach.

Moniwa had once seen a picture of Yasser Arafat in Hojo’s desk drawer, though what association the former Palestinian leader had with the Japanese Red Army was beyond him. Hojo’s

conspiracies were cerebral and shadowy, manipulated by figures who crouched in darkness.

Though he drained his shochu, it didn't lighten Hojo's misery. People talked around him, unable to peer into his gloom and so avoiding his eyes. Noguchi and Shimizu joked about him in his hearing. To think they could revel in the frivolous and not consider the inequities, the grievous lies being told at that same moment in their own country and around the world! All they had to do was teach teenagers something they didn't know and most failed even in that. Hojo could no longer stand it. Nakahara was still filling glasses that were full, even Koike's, though she hadn't moved in an hour. Noguchi was screeching out Mini-Moni's *Love Machine*, holding the breast of a hostess for balance, while Shimizu, asking if it wasn't superior to the Thai article, was flashing the other his penis. Barry grinned in hazy, brow-dewing contentment at a scene that reminded him of his university fraternity and made him feel, for the first time in Japan, somewhat at home.

Hojo stood up with a flushed face. 'You should be ashamed to call yourselves teachers!' Anger coloured and stiffened him.

The singing stopped while the music played on, as if whatever ensued would have to be argued in song. Barry, not understanding, thought it the ritualized commencement of the next phase of festivities. Koike woke up and pressed her legs together.

The party ended. Noguchi as the senior member paid the bill, and they separated at the door. Or rather, Hojo marched away and Shimizu hailed the only taxi in sight, so they could guide Koike into it and send her home.

'Why don't you go with her?' Noguchi whispered to Barry.

Barry laughed, unsure if it was a joke. Koike was in her mid-forties and hardly spoke a word of English, but the thought had occurred to him. She was cute in an alcoholic sort of way.

When the taxi drove away they stood there undecided if home was where they wanted. Stopping at a convenience store to buy more beers, they instead made their way to the castle grounds. It was half past three in the morning but inebriated university students and businessmen sat under the falling petals. The castle was reflected by moonlight in the still moat waters, surrounded by blooming cherries. They found a dewy but clean patch of grass and spoke little as they drank. Moniwa sat pondering Hojo's outburst, and Barry, Noguchi, Shimizu and Nakahara, who had already forgotten it, were gazing up at the soft white and pink blossoms against black boughs.

## 八

He bit into a convenience store burrito – wincing as pain shot up the root of his molar. Another bite, another spasm travelling along his trigeminal nerve. The burrito had been a bad idea. Hot cheese coated his gums and he felt the swelling grow.

The drinking had depressed his immunities; now he couldn't close his jaw because of the swelling or open it for pain, and in trying to flush out the taste of metal he spat blood. Luckily it was one of two Saturdays a month without classes; facing the girls would have been agony.

He knew only one dentist in the neighbourhood and had already branded him a quack. Taking the train downtown, he picked a new clinic at random, the window bearing *Kato Confidential* in Roman letters alongside a more prosaic 齒医者. The receptionist gave him a form to fill out. Three pages in small print with questions on medical history, immunization record, medications, allergies, past bone breaks, current lifestyle – smoking, exercise. Only one question about his teeth.

He waited fifty minutes and was led in to Kato, who had a look at the form and asked many of the same questions again – allergies? medications? exercise? Moniwa shook his head.

‘Open.’

He had a narrow face like a rodent with small eyes close together and no facial hair except below the ears. ‘There is an inflammation,’ said Kato looking into his small circular mirror.

‘That’s why I’m here.’

‘Why do you still have your wisdom teeth? We’ll need to do some extractions.’

‘How many?’

‘Four.’

‘All of them?’

The narrow face nodded. ‘But not today.’

‘Why not?’

‘Your gums are like balloons! I can’t cut through all that. I’ll give you an injection, some amoxicillin to reduce the swelling and do the extractions on Monday or Tuesday.’

‘But ... work.’

‘You’d better get this over with.’

‘And the next few days?’

‘I’ll prescribe something for the pain.’

Gums throbbed but he didn’t feel their heat. He felt little. The pain had kept him human; now he didn’t know what he was. Fuyumi took off his shirt. He took off hers and found some solace in the soft white contours of her breasts.

Their liaisons rotated around sex and in its absence they would have been at a loss. So he attempted an erection, somewhat successfully, and they had a sort of sex, less successfully, and then

he lay there, lymph glands swelling, in a codeine haze wondering what on earth they had in common.

After Fuyumi left he thought of Sayaka wanting to go to America next year. His own year in Australia had been great and horrible in equal measure. He had thought of it as an escape from family, a simple alternative to Tokyo, never dreaming how it would change him from the person he might have otherwise become. Without the exposure of that year he would not have later travelled through Asia, never would have considered marrying a Korean, never failed at photography and painting. He would be more ignorant of the world now, and possibly happier.

## 九

‘Mr Moniwa won’t be in today,’ Sister Takeishi told Barry on Monday morning. ‘The rest of us can cover his classes today except fourth period, just before lunch.’

‘Isn’t there a substitute?’

‘A substitute what?’

‘I guess not!’

‘We were hoping you could manage it. Supervise them for fifty minutes as they read on their own?’

‘I could teach something!’

‘That’s a thought,’ she mused. ‘Fifty minutes talking about Canada. Show them pictures and maps.’

‘I don’t have any photos here. Why don’t I continue the textbook?’

‘You think you can do that?’

‘Why not?’

Sister Takeishi smiled. A lesson that went over the heads of the students wasn’t a bad thing. Left on their own to study, they

probably wouldn't; she might as well let Barry do something, since Moniwa seemed intent on shielding him from responsibility.

For the next two hours, hunched at his desk, Barry prepared a plan for his first lesson as a teacher.

With Moniwa absent, Oe came to Sister Takeishi to speak about his colleague. Moniwa was, he said, still inexperienced in teaching and in the way schools were run – or perhaps his time in Australia had confused him so he couldn't tell what was important.

Urushibata Sayaka, Oe continued, one of his homeroom students, whom Moniwa didn't know as well as he did, had been – after he had discouraged it due to the girl's impressionable nature – applying to universities in, of all places, America, simply because that was where the girl fancied going next year. Not only was Moniwa's advice potentially disastrous but it undercut his, Oe's, authority with his homeroom students, and if the girls didn't trust his judgement then what was the point of education?

Oe was politely furious, trembling before the nun. She said she would talk to Moniwa about the matter, which relieved the English reading and grammar teacher somewhat. In truth, she knew she probably wouldn't talk to Moniwa. He would say what was the point of teaching without encouraging dreams, what was the point of a classroom education without context of the world where the real life lessons were learned? She had heard it before and even agreed up to a point, but also sympathized with Oe that most of their girls had grown up sheltered and loved, and if released into the world too early could be picked to the bones by its vultures, who swooped upon the innocent and kind.

Instead she decided to speak to Sayaka herself, and advise her again to compromise: spend two years in a Tokyo, American-run

college and then transfer credits to a nice Christian college in Fresno, California, where she could finish her degree in additional two or three years. That might accommodate the wishes of everyone involved, and offend none of them.

Sometimes she felt she was not teacher, administrator or even nun, but mediator between warring parties on the bloodied battlefield of education.

In the classroom it was difficult for Barry to gauge what the students understood, but they seemed to pay attention. In his nervousness he spoke too quickly for them to pick out the words. They snickered but made an attempt to write in their notebooks the conversation sample he wrote on the board.

‘Now try it with a partner!’ he said.

They looked down at the model conversation in their texts, then at each other and giggled. He gave them time to figure things out so they started chatting.

‘I don’t hear any English!’ he shouted, and they laughed.

Yukako in the back row had wanted to speak to Moniwa about changing her role in *Snow White*, getting away from Miho, the little bitch. But the day she had made up her mind he was absent, and instead of the normal boring class here was one that was a joke.

After the bell rang and the girls streamed out, Yukako saw Barry sitting vacantly at Moniwa’s desk and had an idea. She pointed to his Japanese texts under their English one.

‘Studying?’

‘Yeah!’ Barry looked up. If she was speaking to him, the lesson hadn’t been a complete disaster.

‘When you meet Japanese girl you like,’ said Yukako, ‘you know what you say?’



‘Herro!’

‘To say what is your name, say *Etchi suru?*’

‘*Etchi sudu?*’

‘Yes. To say how are you, you should say *Ore to yaranai?*’

Barry repeated. This was Japanese more useful than in his textbook. Fukunishi Miho, though, who had paused on her way out, burst out laughing. And Yukako’s smile held more mockery than could be explained by his accent. He would have to try out his new phrases with Koji before attempting them on the women at the pub.

Kato handed him a liability waiver, which worried him as he signed. The dentist called for his hygienist, a young woman with glasses over a triangular face. Moniwa wondered if she had slept with her boss. If she had, that would ruin his day more than any surgery – as the rodent leaned over him with a syringe.

‘This will hurt a little.’

It hurt even before the pain came.

‘Give it ten minutes, and we’ll begin.’

Moniwa looked over the tray of instruments. He rinsed and spat and looked at the ceiling. Rather than feeling pain subside, he felt numbness encroach. Besides the oral surgeon and his assistant, a pair of dental students, clipboards in hand, now looked on from the foot of the chair.

To remove one tooth, with its root curving under the next, it had to be cracked into three pieces, and though he felt only numb pressure, the slicing into his gums and cracking with an array of implements seemed medieval in cruelty. The shrill drill was followed by a screwdriver that tore into his enamel and with a twist of the dentine caused fracturing to echo through his skull. He had

no great secrets to divulge, but if he had he would have already admitted to anything – his fugitive grandmother’s hiding place, state secrets, absurd lies – to release himself of this.

‘Does it hurt?’

His response was muffled by the implements of torture. The shriek of the drill resumed, followed by deep cracking in his jaw.

When it was over he sat in his chair, blood dripping from gauzed gums, stunned in the way one feels having lost a love, a job and a future, or four teeth.

It was the first day of classes he had missed in five years at Sacred Heart. Gums blown up around holes in his jaw, Moniwa made dinner in a blender and spooned it into his mouth a slurp at a time. It was too much for his immune system, and a cold he had been battling for a week, caught from runny-nosed students, was now winning. He wondered, lying in bed clearing his nose tending his headache sipping his meal, if this combination was much different from dying. He watched television and tried to blank his mind of thought, to will time to move faster and heal him.

Fuyumi called, but her get-well-soon made him scowl. Set phrases lost all meaning. Little that was spoken didn’t sound unreal to him in one way or another. Even hello. Goodbye. Nothing he spoke or Fuyumi spoke or the people on TV spoke was worth saying.

‘If you look as bad as you sound you must be a walking death!’

But her grasp at cheeriness missed.

She took his bad mood personally, hanging up in exasperation, and even his thought that it might have been for the last time, that Beautiful Winter might never lie next to him again, couldn’t deepen his pain.



Moniwa thought his don't-talk-to-me signals were obvious. Barry, though, leaned over to him from the next desk.

'Aren't the girls ever absent?'

'What?'

'They always seem to be at school, eh?'

'Where else would they be?' he mumbled through a swollen mouth.

'Don't they get sick?'

'They come unless they can't.'

'We would use any sniffle as an excuse to stay home!'

You still do, Moniwa thought.

'And they always seem happy!'

'The girls?'

'Where's the adolescent angst? You'd think Matsuki girls didn't have a care in the world!'

What was Barry talking about? As homeroom teacher, Moniwa knew about the pressures and worries students faced, and could read anxiety, intimidation, even cruelty in faces, and wondered why Barry couldn't. Or maybe the girls really were happier than elsewhere. He doubted it.

'It's Motz-key,' he said.

'What?'

'Our town. You keep calling it Matsoooki.'

Barry wasn't put off. 'Let's go drinking sometime!'

Moniwa gave a mumbled answer, which should have resolved matters and been non-binding. But Barry followed it up with a pressing, 'How about tonight?'

'I had four teeth pulled yesterday!'

'Is that why you've been absent? I thought you just had a long hangover from the school party!'

Yamagishi Chika looked in the mirror with hollowness verging on disgust. She saw a chubby girl without any distinguishing beauty or brains or personality, who didn't understand herself, who always said the wrong thing, whose presence made no one happy and whose every action seemed to be a mistake. Whose entire life was a mistake.

She wanted to curtain the mirror, turn it off like her reading light, and not be reminded of insufficiencies that brought only anguish.

In the dark she tried to think of happier times, but came up blank.

# 黄砂

## Koji of Oz

—

The yellow sand came every year, strongest in spring, this year worse than usual. It quickly coated washed cars with a sallow film. White laundry hung out to dry turned a barely perceptible urine colour. Dust clung to the skin and hung in the air into the yellow distance, irritating eyes, drying throats. People said it came from the expanding Gobi Desert or Kazakhstan, that it consisted of the finest desert sands mixed with sulphur and metal by-products of Chinese industrial combustion, that the particles imbedded themselves in the lungs, poisoning tissue.

Seen through the dust-washed windows of the car, the world resembled a sepia photograph imperfectly colorized through technology or, at times, a fairy tale. When his memories wandered into his daydreams he was back in Jaisalmer, moving through the Thar Desert of western Rajasthan, during his travels through Asia in a time not so long ago but so distant it seemed as if in another life.

In his black Toyota Starlet they drove to the Japan Sea coast near the border between Niigata and Yamagata, as Golden Week

had brought a string of national holidays. Not returning to the family home like much of the country, he had convinced Fuyumi to take a two-day trip with him. Her husband had to help his company get a camera model on the market in time, so it became possible for her, by conjuring the right lie, to head into the unknown. The drive took several hours and was, he realized, the longest they had ever spent together. For once he didn't mind the Golden Week traffic. They had a chance to talk. He had a chance to wonder why he loved.

Fuyumi was his age, at a similar stage in life. Though she had married young, they were both a decade out of high school, moving in a world that changed less now and had stripped away the impetus of youth.

In conversation he tried to dangle carrots of other girls, but Fuyumi never took a jealous bite. That she continued to spend her nights with her husband didn't bother him as much as the fact she didn't care how he spent his nights, whom he might use to buffer his love for her. And it didn't matter if he loved her or not, or rather, she seemed to prefer if he didn't. Or the idea that he might love her hadn't occurred to her.

What irked Fuyumi was that he didn't, in their sporadic meetings, observe the usual conventions, the Hello, I'm home, I'm leaving, I'm eating now, That was a good meal – set phrases of politeness around which society rotated. 'Said too often they become meaningless!' he protested. 'There's enough meaninglessness in the world without my contribution.'

'No,' she would say, 'you're just being rude.'

She liked to follow articles in magazines with statistics on the sex lives of couples in other countries. 'The Greeks have twice as much sex as we do,' she once complained.

'That's because I only see you a few times a month.'

‘Not *us*. The Japanese.’

‘The Greeks brag more when answering surveys. We’re the honest ones, so the numbers are skewed against us.’

‘I wonder, if I’d married a Greek, if we’d be having sex twice a day.’

‘He’d repulse you after a month of it!’

Moniwa had booked a room in a small ryokan atop the cliffs, overlooking tumultuous waters in a fishing village of three hundred people – over half of them retired – with a hot spring and a lighthouse. Here no one could possibly know them. They could finally, in public, act like a couple. The only problem, they realized on arrival, was that visitors were rare enough that they would be remembered for the lifetime of the villagers.

The azaleas were in bloom in the front garden, their deep red speaking to an emotion that spoke in him. Fuyumi, though, was uncomfortable and unresponsive, so the first hour he stared out at the surge and ebb of water below. The ocean’s blue overpowered the air’s off-yellow and coated it blue, and he felt a belonging to continuity, a connection to the world in the knowledge that everything would be all right.

In the evening light, he wandered along the cliffs. The smell of the sea salted the inside of his skull as he peered at the dark reds and blues of sky and sea stretching into the distance.

When he returned, she was the one at sea, complaining there was nothing to *do*, no use for the bikini she had bought, nothing to eat except whatever fish the hotel had caught that day, no other guests to talk to, that there were creaking noises at night, that cracks in the door might be wide enough to accommodate an eyeball, the curtains failed to block out the moon, the ocean surges scared her,

that an earthquake would send them crashing down the face of the cliff and her husband would find out everything when the bodies were recovered.

‘If you’re dead, would it matter that he knows?’

‘Yes.’

‘Ever wonder if he’ll hire a private investigator to corroborate your stories?’

‘He wouldn’t. Not that he isn’t jealous, he just doesn’t have that kind of imagination.’

‘I once had a friend who worked at an investigation agency,’ he offered. ‘All they did was check the family histories of potential mates or the fidelity of spouses. Women usually wanted evidence they could use as leverage in divorce settlements. And when they suspected infidelity, they were right ninety-five per cent of the time. When men suspected their wives, they were only right seventy per cent of the time.’

Fuyumi was silent for a moment. ‘Does love always have to take the same road?’

‘There’s no trusting people, is there.’

‘No.’

She was recalling moments of her past, and that ponder made him feel a little lonely. How many infidelities was she recalling?

When she spoke, though, it was of a logic puzzle. ‘There’s a village somewhere,’ she began. ‘Let’s say it’s this one. On the coast, with few visitors, few people leaving, and a sense of community so strong that privacy is an abstract concept. There are some conditions, though, that make it a magical place yet also true of the world at large.’

‘Okay.’

‘Let’s say there are one hundred couples in the village. That’s probably close to accurate here. And of those hundred men, every



single one of them has been unfaithful to his wife.’

‘What about the wives?’

‘They’re all faithful, of course.’

‘That’s impossible.’

‘Anyway, that doesn’t matter.’

‘It matters to the hundred men!’

‘Listen. In this village every woman knows instantly if another man has been unfaithful to his wife, yet she’s too discreet to tell his wife. And in the village no woman knows if her own husband has been unfaithful.’

‘That’s more like the truth. The last to know...’

‘There’s also a law that every woman who can prove her husband has been unfaithful must kill him before the next morning. Since every wife knows only of the philanderings of others, there haven’t yet been any executions. But one day the lord rides into town, and the daimyo by his semi-divine status can’t ever be wrong. He comments to the village that he knows for certain *at least one* husband has been unfaithful to his wife. The puzzle is this: what happens next?’

Moniwa thought for a minute. ‘All the women,’ he mused, ‘already know ninety-nine men have been unfaithful. If the lord says at least one was unfaithful, it doesn’t change anything. Nothing happens.’

‘Think about it some more,’ she said with a gleam in her eye. ‘I’ll tell you if you’re right on the trip home.’



Miho sat outside the station looking at boys wondering if any might be worth calling boyfriend. With nothing at risk but embarrassment, she didn’t know how much longer she could wait.

She would avoid the orange-haired boys trying to chat up schoolgirls – they didn't appeal to any aspect of her desire – and walk up to a bookish boy and say hello. Would he understand that it wasn't madness, wasn't personal – would he understand the force behind it? Would he reject her? Would she have to slink home defeated, to again melt the steel of her desire in a hot bath?

How could she word it? Excuse me, it may sound strange, but I'd like to go to a love hotel together.

Would that work? It would have to.

She sat spying out men who were too old or boys too immature and travelling in packs. She wanted her boy to be by himself, maybe nineteen or twenty, with short hair, tall, a university student type, someone who played soccer or volleyball at weekends but studied hard during the week. She wanted to uphold some sort of standards but saw no boys who matched the ones of her imagination.

For a moment she reconsidered her target. The news reports were full of company employees or husbands or judges sleeping with sixteen-year-olds. Surely some man would find her pretty? Every old man, though, just reminded her of her grandfather. Every man in a suit reminded her of her father or uncle. Every university student seemed like her older brother. How was she supposed to meet any boys? Why had her parents locked her away in a girls' school run by nuns, to be consumed by the fires of her own urges? If she could hike up her skirt like the girls at other schools she'd get the same attention from boys at the station, the libidinous businessmen. No man looked twice at the long navy skirts of Sacred Heart, and though she didn't want to be the object of lechery, in some ways she might consider it. What was the difference between lust and romance? As with many distinctions in life, she suspected it was a thin one.

Today being part of the Golden Week holidays, she was free

to wear what she wanted, and had donned a loose skirt, hiking it high. Her white blouse was vaguely translucent, and the more discerning boys would notice the shape of her breasts beneath the bra, and of course they could see her smiling face, her shining legs.

She got up to approach a man who was slightly overweight, hair crisp over the ears, in a casual suit. She said hello and he looked confused. Was she selling something? No, too young. Was she his neighbour, someone who had served him in a hostess bar – someone who knew what he'd been doing last night?

Seeing the man's confusion, his mild terror, Miho sighed and went home.

Her bedroom was, for once, clean. Walls bore a few small posters of boy-band members or soccer players whom if she ever met, and if they asked, she had promised herself she would submit to.

Miho undressed for bed, but instead of donning flannel she slipped out of her underwear to glimpse herself in the mirror. And while the proportions seemed wrong compared to the long-legged girls in magazines, her legs too tapered, breasts too small, she was impressed by the beauty of her own body. If she were a boy, she thought, she would find herself pretty. Even if she were another girl, hers would be a nice body to touch, to wrap around and kiss. When she touched her skin it felt good.

Steps sounded in the hall. She went to block the sliding door, but already her younger brother was opening it.

'*Chibi Maruko-chan* is on TV...'

'Not now!'

But the door was open. Her younger brother there, she before him naked. He turned and fled. She closed the door and sighed.

She went to bed early, hugging her imagination. Not yet tired, she leafed through a women's magazine, stopping at the sex advice, continuing to photos of models. Turning out the light, she pulled the blanket over herself and curled up in the darkness, feeling her skin with both hands. She rubbed her legs together, sliding her right hand along her inner leg. When desire became palpable, she tried to draw it out, touch herself just enough to keep arousal rising, and finally her fingers entered the warmth. Slowly she ground upon her fist, writhing around her fingers, and her body teetered on the edge of pleasure, until she felt it slipping from her. She thrust upon herself harder, biting her lower lip, but release instead seemed further and further away, out of reach, until her hand began to hurt and she got tired and gave up. She sat upright, breathing and sighing, wiping her fingers on the sheets, wondering if it would be better with a man.

Yukako knew how to talk to boys, how to attract them. Two years ago it had made Miho envious, but maybe now it was time to put her pride aside and ask her classmate for advice.

### 三

Fuyumi returned from the hot spring wearing a yukata. She turned on the television, lay down on the futon and, relaxed by the hot waters, fell asleep. Moniwa watched the rhythm of her breathing, the rise and fall, surprised by her beauty. Her bare legs distended at different angles, and he looked between the folds of the robe at the nakedness underneath. Gently he loosened the belt and parted the yukata in the front. She stirred a little and turned her sleeping face from one side to the other. He moved her legs further apart and kissed them, lips barely brushing their softness. When Fuyumi's eyes opened he leaned over and kissed her neck.

Her lips opened and she exhaled.

‘I just took a bath.’

‘You can take another one.’

Her eyes rounded. Arms around the back of her knees, he guided them to her chest. The soles of her feet pointed to the ceiling, and he put his lips around her toes, her ankles, calves, kissed the warmth between her legs, cradled her buttocks with his hands and lifted her towards him.

It was rare to spend an entire night together. He woke early in the morning with a body beside him, when he usually woke trying to convince himself there had been a woman with him and not just in a dream. Now when held the body beside him seemed to have an infinite capacity for keeping him warm.

When she woke, she curled her nakedness against him. ‘You’re a teacher,’ she mumbled in a scratchy morning voice. ‘Teach me something I don’t know.’

He covered her body with his warmth. He put his lips to her ear and into it lightly breathed the truth.

‘I love you.’

‘No,’ she answered. ‘I knew that.’

‘You don’t love me.’

She considered. ‘Maybe that’s something I didn’t know.’

They drove back to Tochigi slowly, taking in the curves of the coast, then the slopes of the mountains, and it was all gentle geometry in blue and green. The banality of things she spoke – her dog at home that would be missing her, a young TV and pop celebrity who was pregnant – saddened him. Her words held no

truth personal to herself. Yesterday she reached the middle of a novel before realizing she had read it three years ago.

It was a mistake, he thought, to conflate happiness and love. The terms were inversely proportional, and the more he loved Fuyumi, the more he hated life. When she held out her hand, he took it like a defeat.

They stopped at a hillside along the way, for the sole purpose of laying her clothes upon the grass, as if sex were something carried in clothing like cigarette smoke, that the sun would rinse clean.

‘That puzzle,’ he said. ‘At least one man was unfaithful. So what? All the wives already know that. I can’t see the daimyo’s statement making any difference.’

‘No,’ she agreed. ‘On the day he came to town, nothing happens.’

‘And later it does?’

‘Think about it. If only one husband had been unfaithful, he would have been killed before the next morning, because his wife would have known of no other philanderers, so the *at least one* husband must have been her own. That information would have hit her with all the force of an execution order. The law says she must kill him before the next day.’

‘But one hundred husbands were unfaithful!’

‘Yes, and on the second day there were still no killings. And if there were three unfaithful husbands they would have, through the process of elimination, been killed on the third day. But every woman knows there are ninety-nine philanderers. On the ninety-ninth day she will be waiting for a bloodbath, as all the other wives realize their husband’s dishonour. The fact there isn’t will come as a shock. There can only be one explanation: her own husband was also unfaithful. On the hundredth day every wife

comes to the same conclusion. In every household she draws the katana and cuts off the head of her sleeping husband. The gutters of the village flow with blood.’

He dropped Fuyumi off several train stations away from home, so she could arrive on schedule, back from a class reunion in her hometown in Akita prefecture, an excuse now exhausted for another year.

#### 四

It was called the May illness. While in Europe or North America counsellors and clinics braced for the November rush of depressives and disaffected as they realized the long reality of the coming winter – in Japan the great seasonal trauma came in May. May was a month of blossoms and long light, past the deep freeze of winter and before the muggy rainy season. Yet because school and work years began in April it took a month for the ideals of the year to fade, for the reality to set in – the bleakness of the routine. The realization that the next ten months would be more of the same – and, by extension, subsequent years would consist of the same drudgery – was more than many could bear.

The origin of Yukako’s dislike for Miho was becoming less vivid, conviction fading around the edges as recollection lost its power. But there was a point to her hatred, it meant something and wasn’t childishness but conviction. In her last year of middle school Yukako had played around with a boy already out of high school and apprenticed at a beverage company. Only Miho had seen them together. Then the school administration had known, had received a note that a girl in school uniform, with Konoshi labelled on her book bag, had been seen entering the apartment of a known degenerate nineteen-year-old. Who but Miho could

have told them?

Yukako had been lectured, suspended, grounded – and a humiliation like that didn't fade with time. Still she refused to sit near Miho in classrooms, to speak about her without venom, to acknowledge her in the halls, to pass the ball to her in sports games. Miho had responded in kind, and their feud, rather than abating over two years, remained firmly in place.

It ended when Miho saw a pack of cigarettes in Yukako's bag. She asked for one. Together they escaped around the back. They spoke about their teachers – moody Moniwa and crazy Hojo and stiff Oe and creepy Shimizu and funny Barry and friendly Noguchi their homeroom teacher and pretty Wada. They had similar tastes in music and in boys. Where in middle school that had been a problem, now it was a point that drew them closer. Miho could ask her questions on matters of conquest, and Yukako could pretend she had the answers.

'Can you stop wagging your damn head?'

Moniwa had given a short explanation on the iambic nature of recited English, and while they ignored him in most lessons they seemed to have listened to this one. As Chika spoke the lines of the hunter her head bobbed up and down with each accented syllable like a vertical metronome.

Again the irritation in his comment wasn't intended but everyone heard it; the watching girls all laughed. Chika looked at him and for the first time he noticed something strange about her eyes. When one eye looked straight, the other wandered a little in its socket. It didn't matter which eye, its partner never followed suit. It wasn't obvious but gave Chika's face a dazed appearance. Neither eye reached him so he looked at her nose, which was



spotted and looked squashed and so he smiled and she was offended because she was thinking about dying.

‘And where are my dwarfs? Where’s the king?’

‘Chieko has a basketball game.’

‘Sayaka went to the doctor again.’

‘Where are Miho and Yukako?’

No one knew. Miho and Yukako were, after Naeko, the prettiest girls in the play but also the most troublesome. Known enemies, they were often lumped together in his mind. They scoffed at school regulations from hemlines to hair colouring, and chatted in his classes until he told them off, after which they dozed. On his tests, though, they excelled, even though he spent the entire term warning his classes that only by paying close attention would they amount to anything.

‘We only have one rehearsal a week. Let’s take it seriously!’

He sent two of the first years to find Miho and Yukako, and when they returned twenty minutes later all four smelled of cigarette smoke. Reporting them for smoking would be a hassle – them denying, him meeting Sister Otsuki the school head, filing the report, faculty meetings on the subject – as well as disrupt the play now that he finally had roles for everyone. And he realized he didn’t really care. If Miho and Yukako had engaged in a disobedience together, it would be their first joint action since enrolling at Sacred Heart.

‘Where were you?’

‘Miho has cramps,’ said Yukako.

‘Whatever. Let’s run through scene two, with only five dwarfs. Where is the mirror now? Yukako, you need to be happier! Miho, look like you need to sneeze! I don’t know, bow your head and put your hand over your mouth. Go ahhh-chooo! Kaori, you’re too happy. Look angry! You want to switch dwarfs with Yukako?’

They continued. Bashful was still gregarious, Sneezy allergy-free, Doc not a medic but a grinning schoolgirl, Sleepy was wired on sugar and coffee, Dopey likewise crystal sharp, Happy looked premenstrual and Grumpy was laughing. The evil queen smiled sweetly to hear there was one fairer in the land.

‘Weep, damn it! Weep!’ he yelled at Naeko. Her father had died, her hated jealous stepmother had taken over, and she was, mop in hand, looking like someone who had never known such dreamy joy.

Exiting the school and walking down the hill, Chika didn’t know what to do, or understand why it bothered her so much. She had followed instructions, practised her lines, paid attention and come on time. And the teacher had yelled at her anyway. She hadn’t lost the sequence of the script, hadn’t stumbled over the difficult words. For once she felt satisfied no one could think she was completely brainless – and it wasn’t enough. Still people threw up their hands at her stupidity, groaned that she was there, exasperated by her existence.

She passed the decrepit old man who usually sat on the bench leering at schoolgirls, and avoided his eyes, which looked as vacuous as she felt. She felt like a soul that had withered, festered, been reduced to waste by worms of doubt, maggots of anxiety. Where could she find someone who understood? Not in her family, which had other worries. Her mother had too many feelings – she trembled and shook – and believed small pains were precursors to big ones, that a bit of bad luck was an omen for catastrophes to come, that Chika’s weight gain meant she could never marry, give birth or be happy in life, that her son’s poor exam results meant he could never provide for her in old age or for his future family. What

was a bit of sadness in her daughter when there were so many other things to worry about? Her father, meanwhile, had no passions – he worked long hours and at the end of them stroked his chin and grimaced and read the paper and was disappointed when he'd read it all. He ate his dinner and said it's good and sat in the bathtub and watched some television before sleep and was easily amused by the variety shows but rarely laughed out loud. Her brother was a juvenile version of her father, who kept his imaginations, those he had, to himself, who generally applied himself to learning but with few results, and who barely spoke to his sister.

Miho and Yukako passed her on the trail through the castle grounds. Yukako turned around and said hi and giggled. There was whispering and complicity between them. Chika stopped to let them walk by, looking at her shoes, but Miho stopped and sniffed at the air. Eyes dancing and lips curled, she looked at Chika.

'Can you answer a question for me? It's been bothering us for a while.' As Miho spoke, Yukako behind her held her nose and screwed up her eyes.

'Okay...'

'Why are you so stinky?'

Chika closed her eyes against the question's slap. When she opened them again, the girls were gone but their laughter still lingered in the cherry trees.

## 五

Barry sat in the staff room studying Japanese, waiting for Moniwa to finish. It was seven o'clock and the latest he had ever been at the school. He was amazed all the teachers were still here. What in hell were they all doing?

When Moniwa sat down, Barry leaned over.

‘Koji, you’ve been promising to go drinking with me.’

Moniwa sighed.

‘How about now?’

An hour later Moniwa found himself in a faux-Irish pub incongruously called *Égalité*. Barry had claimed it as his local watering hole. Staff knew him by name as well as his usual drink – imported Moosehead Beer – and snack – small discs of crusty pizza that came out of the freezer and then the toaster oven and which Barry dug into with relish. The Irish tricolour, Welsh lion and Scottish cross hung on dark walls above plastic ferns, large scented candles and various prints along no theme other than Western culture. A small photo of Audrey Hepburn from *Roman Holiday* hung opposite an enlargement of the Beatles’ *Abbey Road* album cover. Next to the intermittently noisy electronic darts machine was a poster of the Rules of Darts and a monthly 2006 calendar with pictures of German castles, and though it was May the calendar showed Neuschwanstein, the castle for March. At weekends the television showed sporting events but now was turned off.

Conversation floundered. Barry downed Mooseheads one after another because drink gave him ideas on things to say. Girls at university parties who had met his drunken incarnation – giddy, bulging-eyed, inspired – on accepting a date were amazed at how dull he was in sobriety. Stiff, monotonous, awkward in conversation, comfortable only when talking of himself, his friends or hockey. For Barry, social life had consisted of parties followed by first dates that almost never carried over into a second. This had been his prime source of frustration in life. Though this was just an after-work drink with an uncommunicative colleague, Barry wished he had ordered a cocktail so he could stir it. There was nothing you could do with a bottle of beer except pick at the label, or drink it

at varying speeds.

‘Do you play darts, Koji?’ he said.

‘No.’

‘What do you do, then?’

‘What do I do?’

‘Any hidden talents?’

‘In school I played soccer and trombone.’

‘Soccer? Maybe you can teach me. On the track after school, or at the park. With the World Cup this year. I haven’t played for fifteen years.’

‘Okay. I don’t have so many classes on Tuesdays.’

‘*Chewsda-i.*’ Barry mocked his accent. It took Moniwa a moment to realize that the Japanese awkwardness with diphthongs caused him to exaggerate an Australian intoning he shuddered to think he had assimilated.

## 六

English for young Koji had never been a career choice. His year of high school in Australia had been an escape rather than a destination, his parents involved in an acrimonious divorce he had forced the issue of. His father’s betrayals were obvious even to a sixteen-year-old, and his accusations weren’t appreciated by either of his parents, who for years had continued a habit of marriage involving more resignation than love. The situation might have continued indefinitely without Koji’s paroxysm in the living room, flinging receipts, photos, office calendar pages at his mother who refused to look at them. He had invested time and emotion in his sleuthing but it brought nothing but anger, a three-way slinging of insults so fierce the neighbours called the police. But his mother couldn’t ignore the slap his father delivered to his face and neither

could the two policemen, who asked enough questions to force his mother to admit truths she had kept from herself for two decades.

Separation had preceded divorce, and when Koji plotting his escape had told his mother he wanted to go to America for a year she told him to ask his father, who now lived with a twenty-three-year-old fresh out of beauty college, making it an awkward reunion after four months.

‘America?’ his father asked. ‘What for?’

‘Cool!’ said the beautician, who had an extended lower jaw and high brow that made her face quite long. She was, in fact, a long girl. On her own she seemed nice enough and he couldn’t hold his father’s infatuation for her against her, but when held up against his mother she was nothing, he thought, a creature all façade and no substance.

His father was annoyed by her use of language that placed her closer to his son’s generation than his own.

‘My school can organize an exchange there.’

‘There’s no way I’m sending you to a country of guns and drugs and whores. Why don’t you go somewhere peaceful ... Germany?’

‘I’m not studying German, I’m studying English.’

‘Who decided English should be the world language? I’m not spending that much just so you can go be corrupted by American greed!’

‘Canada?’

‘It’s the same thing, just colder.’

‘How about Australia?’ said the beautician. ‘There are the cute little animals and that big rock. And the great reef thing...’

His father’s eyes narrowed.

‘I don’t know if my school can organize an exchange there,’ Koji said. ‘But England...’

‘Australia! It’s closer. See if it can be done.’

His homeroom teacher was able to find a school and home-stay family in Melbourne, Victoria, and his father couldn’t back out, with his girlfriend finding it a great opportunity, while his mother – now alone in the old Ikebukuro house they had all once shared – still found it impossible to contradict the man she was in the process of divorcing, and it was done. The next term Moniwa found himself in New Park, a suburb south of the Yarra River, bullied by Stavros, tormented by Belinda, mocked by host brother Harry.

## 七

Along with the rest of Japan, Matsuki was growing old. The young were more vocal and conspicuous than ever but they were fewer and thought more of instant pleasures than marriage, childbearing or stopping the slow population decline. The young looked at their parents’ and grandparents’ lives and decided they had other ideas and other needs, and the old could only look on and no longer understand them.

Schools in the prefecture were suffering declining enrolment, loosening discipline, closures. Sacred Heart was forced to accept nearly every applicant. Whereas before the threat of being ostracized was enough to keep students attentive and behaved, now verbal threats often fell on deaf ears. There was less chance of a parent or grandparent at home. The role of the teacher had expanded, more was expected, and a child’s failure was becoming the teacher’s rather than the family’s.

Moniwa had to visit each of his homeroom students at their home once a year, a short chat with their families to find out what they faced in their home lives. It was a relic of a former time in the

education system, and he tried to space out the visits – one or two or three a week – and so they took months to complete. On talking to the parents it always surprised him how the idea that their daughter could be a bully, or an inattentive student, or not a virgin, seemed not to occur to them. Perhaps he knew the girls in packs as much as individually, at their malicious peak, an age where human nature hadn't had time to disguise itself, while the parents had watched them grow but were always snagged by nostalgia, so a seventeen-year-old in their eyes was barely twelve.

He remembered his own peers while in high school, in Melbourne or Tokyo, as harbouring reserves of cruelty. Perhaps at times he had also been cruel. Would that memory fade once he had his own children? Would he forget that the young could also inflict wounds?

The girls were expected to be popular and attractive, and also expected to preserve their innocence, while their brothers were given less instruction and fewer guidelines, and it was such a jumble of mixed and clashing information that it was a wonder they all didn't come through adolescence as walking bundles of neurosis.

In their homes his pupils looked different from their incarnations at school. Yumi sat on the floor, one hand behind her propping her up, poring over a manga. Asuna held her head at a awkward angle, puzzled. Minako patted her hair down and readjusted her legs. Takako wore a thick layer of make-up while her mother had just emerged clean-faced from the bath.

Many of the girls weren't great students and they looked the part. Others like Madoka, whose home he was now visiting, had intelligent faces. The glasses framing the depth of the eyes, the way the brow furrowed, the way she nodded at his explanations in class – all pointed to great understanding. Yet when he asked



something and she tried to answer, there was little comprehension at all. Such things surprised him. One would think students who looked sharp would be sharp. Until books were opened they couldn't be read; covers were just disguises for complexities within.

'Your daughter,' he began, as Madoka's mother, softened by years of waiting at home, served him tea. He wondered if she had had other lovers, and doubted it. She wiped the teapot so not a drop spilled. 'Your daughter has been hiking up her skirt too high.'

'Yes,' said the mother with a chuckle. 'You teachers like the girls in short skirts, don't you!'

'The school head, Sister Otsuki, asked me to remind you and your daughter it's against the school dress code.'

'It's just the fashion...'

'Not at our school.'

The mother chuckled again. Madoka was nowhere to be seen, possibly nearby eavesdropping. Madoka's younger sister, around twelve, sat at the kotatsu in the other room, back straight, legs folded under her skirt, absorbed in her kanji homework, with an adult bearing and focus he had never seen in her sister.

## 八

Orange-haired Nobuyuki liked to sit on the wooden bench in the department store below the stairs. Here he could snack while watching schoolgirls and office ladies climb the escalators. Despite their lightness and high hemlines, the skirts revealed meadows of skin but only on rare occasions what lay beneath. How agonizing – the twittering rears, the see-through blouses, the beauty!

At the station a few girls wandered, staring at the ground or their phones, in an aimless way that demanded he speak to them.

They didn't know how to answer, had never been approached like this, but a few acknowledged what he was after and a handful were flattered.

'You have a boyfriend?' he asked.

'A few.'

'Need another?'

'Not really.'

'You might think that, but only because you don't know.'

'And you're here to tell me what I don't know?'

'Yeah.'

And that might be enough to tip their interest, and while usually nothing came of it but irritation, once in a while he would succeed.

This week and last and the one before he'd had no luck. So he called one of the girls from a month ago. He didn't think Sayaka, in a private school uniform, was the type, but to his surprise, with a bit of persuasion, she agreed to meet him.

As a child Sayaka had possessed great clarity. If smoking is unhealthy, then don't smoke. If driving is bad for the earth, don't drive. If a man cheats on you, leave him and don't look back because he'll cheat again. The logic was impeccable but the result of a deficiency in life. Now her convictions wavered. She had since tried cigarettes and could see herself becoming a smoker at some point in life. She liked going on drives with her mother. She might even become wife to an unfaithful man, and if she suspected her husband she couldn't be sure she would act on her suspicions. She might fall in love with two men at the same time. Even three. Anything could happen in life. If someone had asked her then at what age she wanted to marry, she would have answered

twenty-two. Now even thirty-two seemed far too soon.

In another of her romantic reveries, occasionally replayed in her mind, she lay on an oversized bed. The pillows large and square. She was surrounded by furniture in an antique style, as if somewhere in Europe, in an earlier century. She wore a blue-and-white dress and remembered the last time he came, when his arms had reached around her, chest pressing against hers, hands touching her where she wanted to be touched, his body hair, feather-like, caressing her skin. Recollection made her toes curl and legs slide against each other. She tried to distract her mind with other thoughts; instead she groaned in impatience and pulled her dress up higher. Sliding her hands over her legs, she tried to recreate the effect his hands had, but it wasn't the same.

Then came the light knocking. The handle moved, and he was in the room, taking off his shirt, moving towards her. They didn't have much time. He stood at the foot of the bed. She put her hands out, helped him out of his trousers as he slid his hands up under her dress, then down again to cup her rear before pulling down her underpants. They held an embrace; as he kissed her neck her legs went weak, and his erection pressed against her as he eased her to the bed.

## 九

Sayaka thought she would be dreading the approach of her meeting with Nobuyuki, but the opposite was more true. She didn't like him but she appreciated the attention even if it was an act. She had come early to the game arcade so she could be composed when he arrived. But by six o'clock he wasn't there.

At half past six she tried to pick out a bunny with a crane for five hundred yen but failed. She tried not to look at the entrance

for who was coming and going, but when footsteps sounded behind her, her heart also quickened.

He didn't show. At eight, halfway home, she got a phone call but didn't answer, though when it rang again five minutes later she did.

'I'm sorry.'

'Whatever.'

'The police gave me a skateboarding ticket at the park and drove me home. I couldn't get away.'

'You poor thing.'

'It's true.'

'You could have called.'

'I wasn't alone until now.'

Though she didn't believe him she agreed to meet him again the next day, then was angry with herself for not taking a tougher stand regarding the principles of punctuality.

The next morning, after tumultuous dreams, she texted him again and cancelled. What on earth had she been thinking?

Bunzo was a closer, his friend thought. He sold insurance without deception or pressure, by being his amicable self. Similarly he chatted girls up, got phone numbers, kissed on the first date, brought them home on the second. He didn't lie much, wasn't overtly lecherous, and women could see where he was taking them and, maybe because of his charm, his forthright answers, they went along for the ride.

And in his way he was a nice guy. He had a talent for being able to read interest, to see potential in the eyes and the twitches of their hands or angles of the knees. He never tried too hard, never worked to create an atmosphere that didn't exist, he simply caught

favourable currents and followed them, aiding the flow by gentle nudges on the shoulder, a brush of contact, a passing glance that left an imprint.

‘I had a white girl last night,’ he said.

Moniwa sighed. ‘How did you meet a white girl?’

He wasn’t interested in Bunzo’s latest conquest. As always, he sat in the middle of his own options. To kill a dying affair or keep loving, to keep teaching or take a civil servant exam, to live and die this way or to stop now and travel and paint. The variety of options in life meant he followed none but this one. Teach because he was teaching. Keep loving because he couldn’t stop. Do nothing because the somethings were too bewildering to choose from. Stay or go. Be or not. Do or just dream of doing. If he put it all off long enough things would be taken out of his hands by death. While his friend spoke enthusiastically of the irrelevant.

‘She was my second white girl. To get the *inkan* stamp to renew the car insurance policies I go to people’s homes. My colleague is scared of foreigners so usually I go to those houses. And if it’s a married couple often just the wife is at home. And she’s charmed by my struggles with the dictionary and later makes use of my business card to send me an email. And we go for a lunch or dinner that ends at my house. They’re lonely in Japan and want some attention.

‘They’re different,’ he added. ‘Western women.’

‘Oh?’

‘I’m sure you remember from your year in Australia. They smell.’

‘They smell?’

‘Not in a bad way. Just strong.’ Bunzo sniffed his fingers. ‘I took a shower but I can still smell her. Musky. Human.’

Or maybe a little less than human, Bunzo felt like adding.

He wasn't drunk enough to speak about looking into the blinking grey-blue eyes wondering how much lay beyond them. The soft pink skin. The roundness of the breasts. The explosion of rust-coloured pubic hair. The demands. The conversation even during the act. Grabbing his hand and showing him where to place it. Grabbing his penis and squeezing. He couldn't help how he felt – as if they were somehow slightly less principled. Less feeling, less thinking, more troubled, less understanding. The first Western lover, a wide-hipped Oregonian, had phoned him up, screamed at him in English, then burst out sobbing and he'd been shocked that she could feel.

Bunzo finished his beer, ordered another for each of them, then a plate of whale meat, another of horse, and continued speaking on the beautiful inconsistencies of white women.



In his shoe locker on leaving the school, Moniwa found a letter addressed to him. The way the characters were written was distinctly girly. He sighed. It wouldn't be the first time he received a love letter from a student. Many of the girls had grown up sheltered and their closest contact to a male outside the family was often to him. Though the school policy on such matters was to ignore them, he had graded the first love letter, from a dreamy girl called Maiko, as if it were a composition and given it back to her. Her dreaminess had solidified to steel and for weeks her eyes burned at him in silent fury.

Moniwa put the unopened letter in his briefcase as he switched his house shoes for street shoes. Nodding at the janitor, he made his way home.

Chika ran the bath, the water temperature set at forty degrees. She undressed in front of the mirror. Her thighs were getting bigger but her breasts were not, one of those infuriating aspects of life which would no longer matter. A box cutter in the middle of her trembling right fist. Her fingers seemed childlike things, her legs as short and plump as a child's.

She stepped into the bath one toe at a time. Her heart pounding. Why was she nervous? She had made her decision and this should be the easy part. Resolve and traces of hatred and shame guided her. She sat in the tub, splashing some water onto the floor, trying to bring to mind beautiful things, reasons to change her mind. She wanted only freedom from agony. That should be anyone's right. Shimizu-sensei had taught them that ninety-five per cent of rabbits in the wild died before reaching maturity. Eaten by predators. It was natural that those less strong made way for the survivors. Humans tried and tried to put a halt to the way of nature. She would let it take its course. Help it along, as predator and prey.

She wanted to justify herself in such terms, but mainly she wanted release. From anger, apology, apprehension, pain. Extending the blade of the cutter, she locked it in place. She tested the blade with the opposite index finger and cut her fingerprint in half. Yes, there was sharpness to the blade. A drop of blood formed. See how easy? She flexed her hands and exposed her wrists. Blue veins branched out like trees of deep ocean. If she sliced along their length the coasts would be breached and those lines of sea carry her away to a place that could only be happier than here. Even if the place was nowhere in a land of nothing.

She turned her hands and watched her wrists with fascination. So fragile, the human body, soft and meltable, poisonous, sliceable. Under the water, she placed the edge of the blade against the vein. She tilted the blade so it would angle deeply, irrevocably.

Yes, this was easy. No telephone rang, no one banged on the bathroom door. She was alone, silence reigned in the house. The blade began to enter like a scythe descending into white clouds of life and shredding them. Her heart began to settle, no longer rattling around like a furiously boiling kettle but like embers cooling. If she were braver she could have followed the wives of samurai. Bound her legs to keep herself dignified, placed a sword against her neck and quickly turned her throat into the sharpness ... Not sat here feeling weak and wounded and icky.

The waters turned a deeper red, like a sky at dawn before the rainclouds.

Moniwa at home unpacked his briefcase and came across the letter again. With trepidation he opened it, but it wasn't a love letter. It was written in English, and it was horrifying.

*Dear Mr Moniwa Im sorry could'nt behave well in club. Should'nt have joined. I have'nt been in this much strong depression for long time, feel like juniar high school time with bully. My emotion telling me to die but my brain still fighting with that. I had so much chance to do it, should have killed myself long time ago. Almost nothing have been ever fair to me, I think its not will change, and dont have enagy anymore. Im so sorry for bothering you. Now I know what do. Goodbye. Chika*

He looked through the student phone directory and called the girl's house, then the police. But he was already too late.

Life and the power to stop the flow of blood were leaving Chika at the same rate. Calm had dimmed into numb worry, then a panic so distant it hardly registered. It could have been the



telephone ringing and ringing. Its disrespect for this moment of serenity. She remembered unfinished homework. Moniwa would be angry at her laziness again. Even if she did it well he'd be angry at her wrong answers. In life was never a victory. Only defeat after defeat. And the thought of the girls still snickering behind her back beyond death infuriated her. She would be found naked and fat in a tub of blood. Anger overcame even the growing sleepiness. In one numb motion she rose out of the red ripples of concentric circles. Out onto the tile floor, chequered black and white, splashing red. Fading.

What's black and white and read all over? went the old joke in English class.

A newspaper. A harpooned zebra, the girls had added. The tile floor of this bathroom. Pain.

She tried to wrap her wrists in a white towel but could barely stand. Queasy. Another towel around her waist but it wouldn't stay. Staggered to the living room, trailing rivulets of blood. Sleepy. Swiping at the phone, knocking it off the hook. Stopping it from ringing. Peace. Tying the towel. Before, wet, leaking blood, emotions breaking against thoughts crumbling like dust. Slowing, fading. Falling to the floor, enveloped by the dark, and dying.

## 梅雨

### And the Rain

—

Moniwa ordered a sandwich + coffee set and was asked what kind of sandwich. He repeated Milano and was given his total, so he reminded the woman he wanted coffee. Then came a choice of sizes and flavours that made it difficult not to get angry.

‘Just a coffee,’ he said, ‘like in the set.’

‘Hot or iced?’

‘Just a normal, hot coffee!’ he snapped, while she answered with a placid look decrying a job that had to deal with such arseholes.

He was charged the combined cost of a sandwich and coffee rather than a set. He sighed and accepted the loss of fifty yen, tired of being the villain.

Upstairs in the smoking section he found Bunzo. Wanting not to be alone, he had asked to meet, but then reconsidered when he saw his friend. Bunzo launched into an idea he had been mulling over since he heard Moniwa’s news about his homeroom student.

‘A man’s lover is brutally killed,’ he began. ‘He vows revenge for his loss, though the killer isn’t found. It takes thirty years,

broken heart never healing, fury never abating, but finally he gets his revenge. He tracks the killer down, looks him in the eye, says you ruined my life so I'm ending yours, and stabs him three times in the heart. There's something a bit romantic and poetic in that, isn't there? A justified death to bring closure to tragedy.'

Moniwa was lost among winding avenues of other thoughts.

'Another man suffers through his entire life,' Bunzo continued. 'Death and injustice affect him personally, harsh words pain him, innocence stolen from the young offends him, and he knows it's all too much to bear for the duration of a lifetime. One day, sooner or later, he knows he's going to die by his own hand. So he lives and he suffers deeply and finds certain fleeting joys in life and one night, at the age of sixty-seven, he swallows every pill in his cupboard with a bottle of whisky and is finally at peace. Isn't there something romantic and poetic about that as well?'

'We're a land of the lonely, the bullied, the overworked and unwanted,' Moniwa said quietly.

'It could be worse. We could be a nation of war-mongering barbarians.'

'We've probably been that, too.'

'Maybe it's the other side of the same coin.'

'Even our faces are melancholic.'

'Not mine.'

Moniwa laughed. 'No, not yours.'

'We were raised to respect responsibilities, that's all. Makes us probably the only people in the world who don't talk too much.'

'Doesn't stop you from talking too much.'

'No,' Bunzo conceded with a laugh.



It was a singularly Australian phenomenon that those who had never been to Japan – or had perhaps passed through Tokyo once on their way to London or Rome – would not only tell sixteen-year-old Koji what Japan was like but would expect his concurring gratitude at their revelations on his own culture. And what they told him came straight out of the kind of magazine that only reinforced stereotypes they had already established, and which sounded as foreign to him as Melbourne was.

Japanese have an enduring code of honour, they told him. Death is their way of preserving it. The Japanese never divorce, just stay in loveless marriages without sex for the benefit of the children. A housewife will kill herself for not having dinner ready on time. Schoolgirls will have sex with you for a Prada handbag. Japanese girls abroad go wild at suddenly having so much freedom. The boys don't do that because they have greater responsibilities and inferiority complexes.

So many Australians spoke to him of samurai and suicide, sword and honour, that he sometimes wished he had learned such art, the courage to remain unshaken by earthquakes and laugh in the face of storms. Instead he was quaking with fears and anxieties and poorly controlled urges, and felt shamed by all of them.

While Australia's was the least pure of cultures – descendants of penal colonists, gold-rush opportunists, other immigrants and marginalized aboriginals – Australians chided him for his own country's impurities. It struck them as odd that the Japanese drank whisky, a drink of the West, while they sat sipping their morning tea, a drink of the East they considered quintessentially English. Or they mocked the nonsense sentences emblazoned on the T-shirts of young Tokyoites, snapshots of which found their way into Australian magazines, while their own children sported kanji

characters they couldn't read. Belinda, one of Koji's classmates, on his first day had shown off a tattoo on her hip, 安, whose meaning she had been told meant peace, while in Japanese on its own it meant cheap. He didn't tell her, because what did the nuances of meaning matter when the half-truth was an inspiration for her. Belinda was short like a Tokyo girl and he would have considered her cute. Cute as a button. He didn't understand the expression. He thought it might be alliterative somehow. It rolled off the tongue in a nice rhythm. But then why not cute as a kitten, cute as a corn cob, cute as a canary, cute as cancer?

When he looked at Belinda, he understood. He couldn't explain it – the pointed nose? – but she was cute as a button. And he was uneasy that she would continue to speak to him.

'Are you a swimmer?'

'Me? Swimmer? No.'

'You're a girl then? You hardly have any hair on your legs!'

Belinda laughed, and it was a biting laugh, teeth cutting through flesh and gnashing on bone. An innocent cruelty, one that copied other people's cruelties and didn't yet know it could open wounds.

There were other classmates, like Stavros, who were equally ignorant of Japan but hadn't yet cultured their ignorance, assuming all societies functioned in the same way as theirs, that Japanese meals were just as likely to consist of potatoes and barbecues, legs of lamb or flake and chips, that Japan likewise held more sheep than people and that Tokyo's Greek population must be comparable to Melbourne's.

Stavros reminded Koji several times he was Greek, not a bloody Aussie, yet seemed exactly like the Australians he derided, a jersey-wearing supporter of the North Melbourne Kangaroos, speaking with a local drawl, an athletic build, sour sarcasm, quick

judgement and deep-set intolerance. Hands in pockets, wearing a tracksuit and trainers, shoulders hunched, Stavros sauntered then swaggered in a motion of walking that seemed alien to Koji. He would lurch down the long corridor and, sneezing ‘Nipper!’, coughing ‘Jap!’, knock Koji into a locker at the end of it.

There were tensions between his host parents. Kate would fuss over Mike’s dishevelled hair, the unpaid overtime he worked, their diminishing sex life, the neighbours’ noisy home renovations, her fleshening hips, Harry’s poor school marks, the state of the economy, any criminals released from prison, the new Lolly character on *Neighbours* – and Mike would try to change the subject, then grimace and watch the cricket on television.

The Raynors had been steered towards the home-stay system out of pragmatism. Kate had wanted another presence in the house to divert focus from individual insufficiencies. They might learn something new about the world beyond their own city. They received 600 dollars a month from Koji’s father. They had been assured that Japanese guests were rich and generous. So Koji was a bit of a disappointment; he was too quiet to divert their feuds or enlighten them and had brought no gifts and seemed worse off than they were.

On Koji’s second Saturday in New Park, breakfast erupted. Koji and Harry stared at their toast while Kate shouted across the table. ‘I did it for you! I thought you’d like it!’

‘Why would I want my wife,’ said Mike slowly, ‘looking like a nine-year-old with a Hitler moustache?’

‘Molly did it too!’

‘What a horrible image you’ve just put in my head!’

‘She said Brian loved it. Everyone’s doing it. It’s the fashion these days to be smooth and youthful!’

Mike gave a laugh. ‘Because your magazines say it’s the rage

doesn't mean it won't be ridiculous in ten years!'

'It started as a bikini wax' – Kate released each word carefully so the sentiment behind them wouldn't ignite – 'then I thought I'd surprise you and got the rest waxed.'

'Well, not all of it. It looks ludicrous!'

She stood up and walked out of the house. They heard the Holden Astra start up in the drive and move off down the road. Mike avoided the boys' eyes and wished Kate would have just thrown her coffee at him; rages burned themselves out within a day or two while her ice ages could last weeks. The weekend after next things should be back to normal but that was little use to him now.

Harry shrugged and left for footy practice. Koji dove into his English texts wondering if Australians always played out their battles so openly.

Kate was nearly a decade younger than Mike, a redhead with a freckled tan who sunbathed topless at the beach and felt reassured when old men and teenage boys gawked at her freckled athletic legs, her slightly drooping breasts. On their next beach excursion she waited until Harry was in the water before stripping her top in front of Koji – where to rest his eyes? – and stretching out while asking him questions so he would have a pretence for looking at her as he answered.

To cool down he joined host brother Harry in the water, but he was a poor swimmer and swallowed mouthfuls of seawater as he flailed about while Harry laughed shouting, 'Oi, look at the Nip take a dip!'

Harry was a year below him at New Park High and not much support, mocking the careful way he ate spaghetti at lunchtime, the way he pulled his socks up, the way he stumbled over words.

Koji after three weeks wondered if he would always hate his

new country, his new city, school and classmates. As he rode the tram home strangers looked him over, lips curled at the edges. At the beach strangers said friendly hellos to each other, or turned vitriolic if someone blocked their way. In street-side cafes people spoke mockingly of people they knew, then when they arrived made a great show of standing, hugging, kissing, complimenting a red dress or silver earring. The sun scorched skin to leathery toughness, the skies were too tall, the air too dry, though sometimes rains came furiously without warning. There could be a twenty-degree temperature shift from one day to the next. Even more turbulent, Kate could be humming and dancing in the kitchen one day and throwing dishes at Mike the next. Harry took in the changes with barely a raised eyebrow, moving indoors if it rained, shifting to his bedroom when his mother was in a rage.

三

At a party of Matsuki foreigners Barry was quickly drunk. For an hour he enjoyed himself, the foreign faces reminding him of home. Then he had a seventh tequila shot and stood off to the side so he could observe the room as it wobbled. Not a single Japanese except one language school teacher's girlfriend. Toby, bongo in his lap, was saying Radiohead was the greatest band in history. Patty was rubbing against walls. Zat and Aaron growling at each other over an imagined offense. The Japanese girlfriend was calling Sheena Ringo Japan's sexiest pop singer. Dan countering that it was irrelevant – no true note had been struck in music since 1978. Toby went on again about Radiohead. Todd and Francis were gauging Japan's chances against Brazil in the World Cup and agreeing the game against Australia had been a blip and Ronaldinho had no chance against the might of Nakata.



Sliding past him with a drink, Patty, a blonde Canadian, touched his shoulder. In reflex Barry extended a hand behind him to return the contact, palm landing flat on her rear. To atone for the mistake, he gave it an apologetic squeeze.

She spun around, eyes fired up but glossy in the confusion of alcohol. 'You touched my ass!'

He wanted the sibilant hiss of her voice to stop, but it repeated itself. 'You grabbed my ass!'

Complete sentences beyond him, he could only shrug, in a gesture that only confirmed his chauvinism and lechery. The host came and asked what the problem was.

'He grabbed my ass!'

'What's it to you?' Barry managed.

Friends gathered around. He wasn't asked to leave but was annoyed that people who knew him didn't defend him. He had touched his compatriot's rear, he supposed, but his hand hadn't been guided by intention. He shrugged again.

'Maybe you should go,' said someone finally. 'Just to calm things down.'

What was the big deal? Their collective opinions could be swayed by a single blonde he had no interest in. They should know who he was without needing to hear his defence.

Barry grabbed a can of Sapporo beer from the fridge as he left. It was a thirty-minute walk to the Nakamachi entertainment district, and in that time he finished his beer plus a small bottle of whisky bought at a convenience store. It began to drizzle.

As he neared Égalité he stumbled into a group of young men, some with tattoos or short haircuts, and one snarled as Barry staggered into him with an apologetic elbow.

'You from America?' the tattooed man spat with a trace of Southern Californian intonation beneath his Japanese accent.

‘Canada!’ said Barry loudly, pleased not to be alone.

‘You like soccer?’

‘Yeah, man!’

‘What team you like? No Canada at World Cup.’

Barry remembered there was an ongoing tournament, that he had spent the previous night at *Égalité* – during a horrific Australian comeback – chanting *Nip-pon!* with the crowd, and he started to say *Nippon* but then wondered if he shouldn’t be staying in one language and saying *Japan* and stopped halfway into the word, and then finished the sentence, pleased that drunkenness hadn’t prevented him from stringing words together.

‘What you say?’ shouted the man.

‘The Nip team! The Japs!’

Barry repeated what he had been trying to say, not remembering it was only half of the intention, then clarifying for his own benefit. Then he wondered why the man looked angry and wondered if there was an insult in what he had said and if the man would have understood the English enough to think there was.

The man’s fist in his jaw answered Barry’s internal questions. Others came and gave kicks to his ribcage and stomach as he lay in the street.

‘Stop!’ he said weakly. The kicks continued, his hands and arms struggling to shield his head. One right boot landed in his face. He tasted blood. Did he have any words to make them stop? A pointed white leather shoe stabbed into his abdomen. What had Yukako taught him? A sharp heel glanced off the back of his head. He screeched out, ‘*Etchi suru? Ore to yaranai?*’

The blows paused. One man launched one more kick into him before the others erupted into laughter. The laughter became a contagion, and people along the street who had heard, and many who hadn’t, were laughing at his twitching body.

When he stood up a trickle of sweat ran from his armpit down the side of his body like a tear. A few more people from their bars came to look, but not seeing much blood returned to their conversations inside.

Barry walked away, spitting blood. Men pulled their girlfriends in closer, young women switched to the other side of the street, others averted their eyes. More now than ever he felt like a barbarian, an alien whose bloodied visage evoked only nervousness in those with something to protect.

#### 四

The frail beauty of the blossom season blended into the damp green swish of the rainy season, which washed the dust from China out of the skies. After a few kissed hints came the embrace, the enveloping wetness of sky that lingered for a time, then left clear vistas for a day before the rains began again. Skin was sticky to touch and wood and paper houses smelled of damp. Sunshine dazzled through windows. Shade contained pockets of reflected gold light.

Chika woke not in heaven or hell but Tochigi University Hospital. She felt only pain and distance, though she remembered dying. An eternity of darkness had preceded her waking. But pain was a bodily thing, and it had forced her back into life. Had she or doctors or God decided she hadn't yet served out her sentence? Some spiteful other-world judge rescinding her probation?

Chika knew her name and other details of her past, but knew them as if through a pane of glass, not touching. If a strange woman appeared at her bedside claiming to be her mother, she would have to accept it. If told she had a sister rather than a brother, or had always been an orphan, it wouldn't be hard to believe. Given a

frame to return to, she would have tried to fit it as well as her clumsily shaped body allowed.

Her life, at least the past ten years of it, had been a kind of death. Now she had simply been revived into the former death. She needed real life or, failing that, needed her death to be more utter and complete. All she had accomplished was physical pain to accompany all the other pains.

In her hospital bed his student was unrecognizable. Her face held no colour, her body no mass. She was half alive. But also, despite the physical shock and loss of blood, she looked like a teenager who suffered and joked and loved and had friends and studied for exams. Not the girl who had exasperated him with a wandering eye and wandering mind. The girl who thought of colours when he asked about English grammar.

He had condemned her without bothering to find out who she was, without considering that he might be contributing to her pain.

Her eyes were open but didn't seem to see. In case she might be able to focus, he stood up and left.

Outside he passed a doctor speaking to Chika's mother, holding a printout of suicide statistics.

'Your daughter falls into this age group here.'

'What does it mean?'

'Thirty per cent will try again within a month, and over two-thirds will make another attempt within six months, with nearly half of those attempts successful.'

'That's horrible! Can you prescribe something? Medicine, counselling?'

'We're a hospital, not a psychiatric clinic. The best you can do is remove the causes of her unhappiness.'

‘But ... I don’t know what they are!’

‘You’ll just have to ask her.’

News came from the nurse that Chika was awake. As she went in and saw her face, she very much doubted her daughter would be able to verbalize her pains, or that she would know how to soften them if she did. She was a mother who had almost lost her own daughter and had no idea how to atone.

## 五

Yukako on the way to meet Miho remembered the hatred she had once felt for her new friend. The conviction she had felt then, now that things were different, had faded, and the way she remembered events was changing. There was one conversation, though, two years ago, that she remembered clearly. She had seen Miho with a boy – a chance encounter outside the station, it could even have been a family friend or brother – and later it had made her spiteful.

‘Your boyfriend is a moron,’ Yukako said to her.

‘I happen to like morons.’

‘It’s all in the cock, isn’t it?’

‘I wouldn’t know.’

The reason for her spite, she remembered now, was that she was already suspended. Since her three-week suspension for having an affair with a beverage company apprentice, she was jealous of boys in the lives of her classmates. She had gone to his apartment after school, still in uniform, and a neighbour must have spotted the chequered red skirt and white blouse and red tie and promptly phoned the middle school of its diminished reputation. Afterwards Yukako, stripped of mobile phone privileges and allowance and computer access, had to sign a register when she arrived at school

or left, compared with a similar one held at home by her parents. Any minutes unaccounted for would result in greater curtailments to her freedom. All this had been suggested by the school head and agreed to by her embarrassed father. And she'd had to blame someone. And she had seen Miho, and somehow reversed cause and effect in her mind, and had invented a feud she was now relieved was over.

'Excuse me!' a stranger said to interrupt her thoughts. This was always a bad start. The man was shorter than she was, wearing sunglasses, pointed snakeskin shoes, hair slicked back. A wave tattoo snaked out from under his sleeve and a fraction up over his collar. She moved to avoid him. It was already early evening, and the station area was not busy.

'I work for a modelling agency,' the man continued nevertheless, walking alongside. 'It's called Atelier, maybe you know it?'

'I've heard of it.'

'We're opening a new branch in Matsuki and are looking for models.'

'I see.'

'And if you don't mind my saying so, you have striking features and a very beautiful face. I can't promise anything, but I think if you came for a portfolio shoot we could get you some high-paying engagements.'

Yukako was sceptical, but after a bit of thought it made sense. She was the second-tallest girl in the class, and had been assured by her mother she could be considered beautiful to a certain category of men.

'Here's my card,' the man said. 'Call me if you're interested.'

Yukako stopped to look at the bilingual card. *AAMA Atelier Acting and Modelling Agency. Hatakeyama Kenta,*

*managing director.*

Yukako liked the *acting* part of it. Maybe doing a photo shoot could lead to roles in film. She could become the next big idol. But the card seemed a little flimsy, only two colours, and contact information was limited to a single mobile phone number. She put the card in her bag, nodded at Hatakeyama and continued on to her rendezvous with Miho. She would have to think about it.

Miho looked at the card Yukako showed her, felt a slight shudder of envy and shrugged. ‘What do you have to lose?’

Yukako took a smug drag of Mild Seven Menthol. Of all the girls on the street, she had been his choice as model.

‘I heard,’ Miho said in an undertone, ‘that Yamagishi Chika isn’t just sick. The sisters have been lying.’

‘What is she then?’

‘She’s in hospital.’

‘She caught the strangeness disease?’

The girls giggled into the swirling smoke. ‘No,’ said Miho, ‘she caught that a long time ago. It’s incurable!’

## 六

A meeting was convened to discuss faculty and curriculum concerns. Ms Koike recorded the minutes and Nakahara looked on uncomfortably, not sure why he was there. Even when asked about administrative matters, attendances, utilities costs, gross income, progress of the new language lab, he felt out of his depth; whenever presented with multiple worries he was unsure over which to worry first. Ms Wada took notes and paid attention but without challenging her reputation among the men as being aloof.

Chika's situation, put off until the day before her release from hospital, was now the most pressing issue. Sisters Takeishi and Otsuki were in favour of notifying the parents that the school was giving Chika an additional three weeks' leave to recover and seek counselling.

'It's the same as a suspension,' Moniwa countered. 'It's making her feel ostracized for being sad.'

'It's best to ask her parents what they suggest,' said Hojo.

For Hojo, who had once lost an older sister to suicide, the matter was raw and personal. After years of pondering such a finality, it had shocked him that anyone in the family could beat him to it. If not for a quirk of weather, and then his girlfriend Kaede, he wouldn't have found his way through the darkness of that loss.

'If they knew what to do as parents,' said Shimizu, 'their daughter wouldn't be in this position in the first place.'

Oe nodded. Noguchi pursed his lips. Moniwa clicked a pen in and out, thinking Shimizu never had much imagination. Sister Maki shook her head. A resident of the Sacred Heart convent situated on the northern fringe of the school grounds, and part-time counsellor at the school, Sister Maki was a relatively young nun, and the one who wondered most actively if the omnipotence of God was of a constrained variety. More than once she had been accused of wavering in her faith.

'Sadness,' she said, 'can be beyond the ability of others to control.'

'What the girl has,' continued Sister Takeishi, 'is an insufficiency caused by deviating from the Lord's path. Father Nakasako would be a good start. He can talk to her, start her on the road to spiritual recovery. If there are suicides, it's because the country hasn't accepted the sin of it, and a Christian education



would put everything in its proper perspective – that in view of the bigger picture it’s better to suffer a moment of pain than eternity in torment. That we are here not to serve ourselves but our Lord.’

‘Ninety-five per cent of the students are non-Christian,’ Sister Maki pointed out. ‘It would set a bad precedent to start preaching, even in this case. Our directive is education through example, not proselytizing.’

‘We can’t ignore her cry for help!’

‘Maybe we can learn from it. Create an environment where this doesn’t happen again. Sometimes bad events, in the greater context, become forces for good.’ Without the crucifixion, she thought to herself, there could have been no resurrection, perhaps not even Christianity. We owed Jesus’ suffering for that – and perhaps even those who betrayed him. Did that mean Judas Iscariot was Jesus’ chosen disciple? The only one he could trust to make the necessary treachery? Imagine committing such a betrayal, out of love, and going down in history, your name synonymous with treason and ignominy. There might be no one with greater claim to sainthood.

‘There’s nothing good in suicide. Even the attempt is a sin!’

‘She’s my homeroom student,’ Moniwa inserted to avoid a theological argument. ‘She’s my responsibility. I’ll ask her what she wants to do.’

The others looked relieved to wipe their hands of a discomforting decision.

‘There is another,’ said Sister Takeishi, ‘who is your responsibility, and who is absent for the second straight day.’

‘I could have used him in class today,’ added Oe. ‘The textbook went into Vancouver and Toronto. Studies have shown that students remember more when shown examples, and living examples are, of course, ideal.’

‘I’m sure it’s a legitimate illness,’ Moniwa said in Barry’s defence. ‘He sounded miserable when he called. It will take him a few months to adjust to the food and climate and lifestyle. Homesickness doesn’t help the immune system.’

Although this excuse was well received, Moniwa wasn’t at all sure Barry had a good reason for his absence. A legitimate hangover, perhaps. He was angry that foreign AETs always assumed their actions didn’t reflect on others. People had to cover for Barry and make excuses and it was a selfish position to put them in by not bothering to show up.

‘One more item.’

Sister Otsuki, an old and plump nun with grey wrinkled face and a wrinkled body under her habit, put the most contentious matter upon the table. ‘As you know,’ she said, ‘there will be curriculum changes from next year. The Ministry of Education has become the Ministry of Sports, Technology, Education, Science and Culture and – to counter a modern shortfall of knowledge in crucial areas – the new ministry has asked for...’ She picked up the top page and read off the main developments. ‘More English. More national language, more patriotism. More mathematics and key science subjects. Cuts in peripheral sciences, history, home economics and other electives. This means next year’s schedule will have to be juggled, and teachers with reduced loads, such as in history, will have to compensate by ... perhaps teaching subjects in a different field.’

She had expected an outburst by Hojo and wasn’t disappointed.

‘Cuts in history? History has everything!’ Hojo said. ‘Every thought, movement, action or reaction has occurred before. The students already know almost nothing of the past. Reducing it further would be disastrous! Study history and you can begin to understand the present. Study more mathematics – apologies to

Wada-sensei – and you still understand nothing of life!’

‘Unless the basis of life,’ said Wada, ‘is mathematical.’

‘If it were, history would have revealed that to be the case!’

‘There are many things in the natural world still undiscovered.’

‘Maybe, but nothing yet unconceived.’

‘And I’m sorry to tell you this,’ Sister Takeishi added to Hojo, ‘but from next term you’ll have to use one of the government-approved texts.’

Hojo was the only teacher who never used a textbook, who instead collated articles from various sources and, with a ‘Fuck the copyright’, printed them up for his students.

‘There are no textbooks that are any good,’ he muttered.

‘None of them touch much on our imperialist past, for example.’

‘You could write your own, then seek to get it approved.’

‘It would be too full of the truth to ever find a publisher! Lies are so much more saleable.’

‘How can you define truth in terms of history?’ said Shimizu.

‘Seems impossible to distinguish from a lie. The girls need a national identity that can’t come if they’re taught Chinese propaganda about rapes and pillages! We’re a proud nation that saved Asia from Western colonialism, with a noble history that our education should reflect. The ministry doesn’t go far enough.’

‘The truth is what happened,’ said Hojo quietly, ‘and any other interpretation is a lie. Our students deserve to be exposed to a bit of truth. There should be an objective international body to write history, but then it wouldn’t take long even for that to be corrupted!’

## 七

Chika’s father, shoes and trouser cuffs wet from the rains, sat

silently by her bedside. Yamagishi Tetsuo had worked hard for his family, still worked sixty-hour weeks, had put his daughter in the safest, most expensive school in Tochigi Prefecture and wanted to know why it wasn't enough. Weren't his sacrifices sufficient to keep his daughter happy enough to stay alive?

He wanted to take her hand but worried it would come across as forced and false. Her pallid face gazed at the far wall. Why did you do that? he wanted to ask. To tell me you hate me?

Chika was thinking back on her time in the bath. For a few minutes she had thought everything was finally being made good, and that knowledge had brought a measure of peace. What had changed? What had driven her out of the bathtub?

Something had happened. The phone ringing. Her mind creating pictures of people she used to know, the pictures speaking to her. As she got weaker, those images were speaking through her. And after that it was as if they were her. She became what her mind thought. That was all she was. Those thoughts used her body's vessel. Those pictures in different colours picked her up. Against her will they raised her up and knocked a phone off of its hook to silence the siren, but it was another siren from outside that came, with knocking on the door she heard at the back of a dream. At the very last moment life was still possible, they found her and refused to let her die. Why?

'Your homeroom teacher,' her father spoke. 'Moniwa-sensei ... he wants to know when you want to return to school.'

Chika didn't change her expression, or move her focus from the far wall.

'You can take lessons by correspondence for a while. It's up to you.'

When Moniwa walked into the café a young woman recognized him. He knew her face, but vaguely. Former student, spoke his memory. First year. Oral English ... Aka class, red thread, five years ago. She was the one who on the first day of class had rearranged the name cards, and he – the new teacher – had called out the wrong names to a chorus of giggles. She had stopped being friendly when he returned her love letter with grammar corrections. Then two years later she had graduated and he hadn't seen her since. What was her name again?

'Takezawa-san!' he called out the instant he remembered. He had always liked Takezawa Maiko the prankster. She sat with a young woman at a large circular table, and he was taken aback at how much she resembled the child he'd once taught and yet was entirely an adult, flicking her hair back and readjusting the purse on her lap.

'How have you been, Moniwa-sensei?'

'Okay. You ... Maiko?'

He could see she was pleased that he remembered her name. The woman with her was a colleague at the same clinic, pale with a pout as her face angled at him in mistrust. They were dental hygienists just off work. Maiko had grown taller, he thought, with perceptive eyes, thin lips and sharp cheekbones, eyebrows untrimmed. The minimal make-up suited her. Her fifteen-year-old face, though, kept imposing itself over the present one.

'We should go drinking sometime,' she said with open eyes. 'Catch up.'

'Yes,' he said. She said she liked to go drinking with old friends, and again he nodded. He couldn't look at her and in her new beauty not see the girl he had taught. He couldn't hook himself on the barb of that smile, the sandy face, smooth nose, mouth moving in ellipses as she spoke.

She wound down her self-introduction. ‘We have to go,’ she said, indicating with her eyes her fidgeting friend.

‘It was nice to see you again,’ he said.

‘Yes.’

She sat a moment longer as her pale friend stood up. Then Maiko’s purse moved to her shoulder, and the dental hygienists were standing, lingering a little uncomfortably.

‘See you,’ she said.

‘See you.’

They went out the door with a last turn back, a last half-smile, before venturing out into the drizzle. Moniwa sat in silence and sipped his cappuccino. He tried to do some paperwork but was unable to concentrate. He thought of ordering another cup but it would be more caffeine than he could stomach. Five years ago he had admired this girl’s childish spunk, her deep but misdirected passions, and now she was a grown-up. He should have tried to find out more about her current life.

Three minutes later she returned, droplets of moisture clinging to her hair. ‘Forgot something,’ she said as she retrieved a shopping bag from under the table. She paused, standing before him, her smart navy trousers and beige blouse now dotted with raindrop spots, holding her bag in front of her like a low shield, and he nodded.

‘So, see you,’ she said.

‘Take care,’ he said nervously, looking at her until she had gone again. Though he sat there another hour she didn’t appear a third time. How would he find her again? He didn’t know her number, her address, her dental clinic, she’d vanished into the city and become indistinguishable from it.

## 八

‘There’s nothing like a young woman,’ said Bunzo.

They sat in the hot-spring waters at Biwa-no-yu, a public sulphuric-smelling onsen in the hills outside of Matsuki. A few middle-aged men also sat around in the green waters or stretched out on the rocks, covering themselves with small white towels. On the drive he had told Bunzo about his meeting with Maiko and how adult this former pupil had become.

‘They’re selfish! They come over when they want to, not when you want them to. When you need them most – when you’re ill, lonely, depressed – they stay away because you’ll bring them down. They want to have a good time, can’t cook much, don’t clean anything, don’t tidy up after you or even after themselves, don’t listen to your advice. They don’t sleep, just thrash about all night waiting for you to wake up again. Or they sleep so deeply nothing can wake them. They have lots of friends and go off on trips to festivals or concerts without telling you, have drunken parties they can’t remember, forget your birthday, forget dinner dates, and let you pay for everything. You become a cross between lover and sugar daddy.

‘And yet,’ Bunzo continued, ‘when you have them trembling, and they’re yours ... In that moment they’re kissing you, it’s sincere. In that moment when they love you, they do love you, and it’s enough to add years to your life. For types like us, proximity to youth itself can keep us young. When she leaves in the morning I’m still giddy. Young eyes, smooth skin, insatiable appetite for love...’

Bunzo sat looking at the hot green sulphuric waters, blinking, mesmerized by the memory of a former nineteen-year-old girlfriend.

‘The funny thing,’ he said, ‘is that I didn’t understand a word

she said sometimes. Even funnier was that it didn't matter.'

'Why did it end, you and Azusa?'

'Oh, we never really broke up, or had a fight, she just must have found someone or other ... slowly faded, and then she was gone.'

'Kawabata,' Moniwa said morosely, 'once wrote that innocence must die young if it isn't to kill the hearts of men.'

'What are you on about? Did you get that girl's number?'

'No.'

'You didn't even give her your card?'

'It's all up to fate now.'

'The idea of fate,' Bunzo spoke, 'is just a fantastic and convenient way to avoid responsibility for what happens.'

'Sometimes I believe in fate.'

'Then fate delivered to you a former student who for some reason wasn't disgusted by the idea of you and her having a drink together and you told fate to get lost! You don't deserve another chance.'

'Anyway, it's a bit ... sordid, isn't it?'

'She's an adult. If the half-plus-seven rule says it's okay, you have no worries.'

'Half plus seven?'

'You're twenty-nine...'

'Almost thirty.'

'Half twenty-nine, rounding down, makes fourteen, add seven, so ... any girl twenty-one and up is okay for you.'

'Maiko would be twenty now.'

'It's a stretchable rule.'

He hadn't seen Fuyumi for three weeks. At first it was because



of Chika's hospitalization and his work, his new guilt couldn't accommodate a reminder of the old, but Fuyumi had begun to be distant before that. This week she hadn't answered his texts. Firefly season was here, a week or two each rainy season which seemed shorter and less impressive every year. This year, though, the fireflies were back in greater numbers. *They might not be around long!* he texted again, then went to bed feeling unloved.

In his dream Maiko was waiting for him, dressed so elaborately he could hardly recognize her. Blinking at him in the café, giving him another chance.

You were once a student of mine?

Yes.

I thought you were some stranger flirting with me!

Who says I wasn't flirting with you?

For the rest of the month he would make an effort to return to the same café at the same day of the week and time as when they had run into each other, to re-enact that day on its original stage, with the original players. But Maiko never performed again, her only reappearances were illusory, and the words she spoke were the same ones as on that day, still lingering. With his leading lady missing there was nothing for Moniwa to do but pantomime a romance progressing, climaxing into fruition, when in fact he held in his arms nothing but a dream, and pressed his lips to nothing but loneliness.

## 九

A note from her mother secured her an early release from school. *Sayaka has a doctor's appointment at 3:30.* Sister Takeishi frowned on classes missed but lauded good health. Oe, the homeroom teacher, couldn't object. So Sayaka was allowed to

leave at a quarter past two, getting her out of Japanese and chemistry, two classes she was happy to avoid.

There was something slightly wrong with her, for several weeks now, beyond normal fatigue. She didn't *feel* healthy. She needed to prepare to study in America but a normal day of school exhausted her. English Language Club was beyond her. Shoulders and lower back ached, the legs she was normally proud of were covered in bruises. She felt feverish, fighting various infections and colds. Her period had come early in a sheet-staining rush of rust-coloured blood, and in the morning she had also woken up with a bleeding nose.

'Probably a virus,' had said her worried mother, who scheduled another appointment with Dr Doi, the family doctor. Sayaka knew that pains came and went, that these were as likely to fade on their own as every other in a person's lifelong series of pains. A worrying combination of health complaints, though she wasn't one to worry. But if it put her mother at ease she would have herself prodded, twisted, for the sake of a diagnosis that was unlikely to have any effect on recovery.

'Hey Koji!' Barry said, looking up from his newspaper.

Moniwa grunted. Parts of Barry's face still looked discoloured, as if covered in bruises, but they could have been shadows.

'I've been thinking about my role here. I was hoping I could do more ... teaching.'

'You're doing fine.'

'Yes, but when you were absent a few weeks ago, I filled in and ... well, it was only one class. But I enjoyed it! Maybe not at the time, but later, thinking about it.'

Moniwa screwed up his eyes. 'I'd love to give you more

responsibilities, Barry, it would help me out. But at this stage of the year, from now it's all about the exams. First and second years have their big terms exams, and third years have the Center Test and their university entrance exams – everything we teach them has to be geared for those.'

'I could help.'

'Next year – if you're still here – when you know the system, we can involve you more in the curriculum. Now, the parents would never forgive us.'

Barry returned to the *Daily Yomiuri* but he wasn't convinced. What he'd been doing in English classes had little to do with any exams. It was the same textbook lessons of odd grammar and peculiar vocabulary and situations the girls would never encounter in real life. If that was what they were being tested on then the tests were useless at assessing English. But then, after three months in the country, he was becoming used to systems operating perfectly functionally in the absence of logic. When contradictions were pointed out, people said, 'That's how it is.' As if the way it is was necessarily the best way it could be. Going through the right motions, he suspected, might be as important as the right result.

'What seems to be the trouble this time?'

'Something's still wrong with my body.'

Sayaka looked at Dr Doi, who seemed a little impatient with her answer.

'You'll have to describe your condition in more detail if you want me to help you.'

'It's ... not easy to describe.'

'Is there pain?'

'Yes!'

‘Where?’

‘Well, it’s sort of vague and dull, everywhere, like it’s in my bones.’

‘For how long?’

‘A few days. I’ve felt weak longer. It comes and goes. I bleed and bruise easily. I feel like I have a fever. Or a flu.’

Dr Doi asked questions and seemed dissatisfied with her answers. He took her heart rate, blood pressure, temperature, a blood and a urine sample, and said he would have the hospital run some tests. It frustrated her that she wasn’t able to defend herself better. He might be taking her for a hypochondriac.

‘I’ll prescribe you something to stimulate the immune system, and if you sleep right and drink tea and soup and eat well balanced, healthy meals, you should be fine in a few days.’

Her mother was already home when Sayaka walked in the door. Etsuko was shimmering, gliding around the small kitchen.

‘How did the doctor go? You look tired.’

‘He did some tests. I’ll find out next week.’

‘Everything will be fine.’

‘I’m not worried.’

‘Good.’

‘But where were you last night?’

‘Me?’ Etsuko smiled. ‘I was out ... with a man.’

‘Do I know him?’

‘I hope not. He’s ... a businessman. Busy, always working, but sweet.’

‘How did you meet?’

Etsuko seemed ashamed. ‘Internet ... dating site...’

‘How modern of you!’

‘Well, I can’t be alone the rest of my life. And ... it’s so hard to meet people, you know?’

‘I know. I go to an all-girls’ school!’

‘You’re still young, and the boys these days only want one thing.’

‘And the girls don’t?’

‘Saya-chan!’



The rainy season sweltered. The mounting heat didn’t subside, or rather the rains didn’t cool. They steamed and turned the world sticky and damp, glazed the grey world with a glistening film. Sometimes it drizzled for two days, other days the sun appeared, the light threatened to last long into the evening – and then the skies erupted again in sheets of water.

Moniwa, caught in an early evening torrent, stepped back under the eaves. His collapsible umbrella was useless; the raindrops smashed the pavement and bounced up, swirling with the wind. With no reply from Fuyumi he had wanted to go see the fireflies on his own but in this weather there was no point; he would once again just have to wait until next year.

He had taken refuge in front of a legitimate-looking massage parlour. *Thai Massage* was written on the window; ¥5000/hour. The interior was too dark to make out through the glass. He didn’t really like the idea of massages. The awkwardness, the sticky oils.

Just when it seemed the rains might weaken, they descended with renewed vigour. He was trapped. Opening the door cautiously, he stepped in.

‘You’d like a massage?’ spoke a small dark young woman with long black hair. Her face and hands were small, and Moniwa hoped she wasn’t the masseuse – she didn’t look strong enough to untie the knots in his muscles. The shop had a high sloping ceiling

but was cool and damp. Little light entered from outside. He wondered if she was half Thai, or even full Thai. Her Japanese, though, seemed flawless.

‘Yes.’

He was given a loose pair of cotton shorts and shirt to change into. She turned on another light but it had little effect on the general dimness. She placed his feet in a shallow bucket of warm water and proceeded to wash them. Never in his adult life had anyone done this, and the water and brush felt good around his toes but the situation uncomfortable.

‘Lie down.’

He complied, on the futon she indicated, but she said ‘Face up!’ and redirected him, until he was looking at her leaning over him. Now he was terrified.

She began kneading his feet, one then the other. Her small fingers had a steel grip, digging deeply, then straightening the toes at each joint with an audible crack. She bent one leg at the knee and pressed hard at each pressure point along the calf, the thigh, climbing up his leg. It would have felt good if not for the pain. She pressed the vein below the pelvis with her full palm, brushing his balls below the fabric. He would have apologized for his sudden erection, but she only dug into the thigh with her elbow, the hurt dampening his desire. The process was repeated on the other leg, culminating in a gasp. She pushed, poked, pulled and stretched. She turned him over and wedged her small sharp knee into his back. Hands slipped under his shirt to rub camphor and tiger balm over his skin, into his melting muscles, and to his horror his erection poked against her through the fabric again. She had him sit up and sat behind him, pulling him against her with only a pillow separating them. She rubbed his shoulders, his scalp, the pressure points of his skull. Then she pushed him forward, stretching his

leg muscles, and angled herself behind him, twisting his torso in a series of spine cracks that made him cry out in shock more than pain. She twisted the other way and then up, with her knees the fulcrum around which his back was stretched.

When it was over he lay still for a few minutes, recovering from pain that had exhausted him. Then came a current like electricity running through the cleared channels of his body, and he couldn't wipe the smile from his face.

'Don't take a shower and don't get wet,' she said quietly. 'You'll stop the positive flow of energy and the release of toxins.'

'It's pouring outside!'

'You should wait here.'

No other customers came, so he chatted with the masseuse for an hour. There had been enough intimacy in her poking and stretching that it felt like the talk in bed after making love. For the Japanese, he thought, human touch could feel like a revelation.

The young woman was from Fukuoka in Kyushu. Her brother had died in an accident driving her car, and she had gone travelling and landed in Thailand for six months where she decided to study massage. Her uncle had once owned a sake shop here, until the supermarkets came, and he had offered her the space. She had moved to Matsuki last year and it was lucky she didn't have to pay rent or she would never break even. As it was, it wasn't such a bad life.

When Moniwa smelled the air of the shop, it did seem to have a lingering trace of alcohol. The rain had eased into a light drizzle.

Stepping out into the crepuscular dampness, he thought it had been a very long time since he'd felt this content with the way that life had formed and was shaping him.

In post-millennial Japan an innocent faith in the collective good, in continuity, is being replaced by cynicism, sexual curiosity and a crumbling of social foundations. For a group of high school students and their teachers, for Sayaka, battling illness, and Koji, struggling through loss, it is a test of tragedies threatening to derail the future – as rage, humour, eroticism and hope interweave to tell a story of modern Japan in whose reflections we see ourselves.

