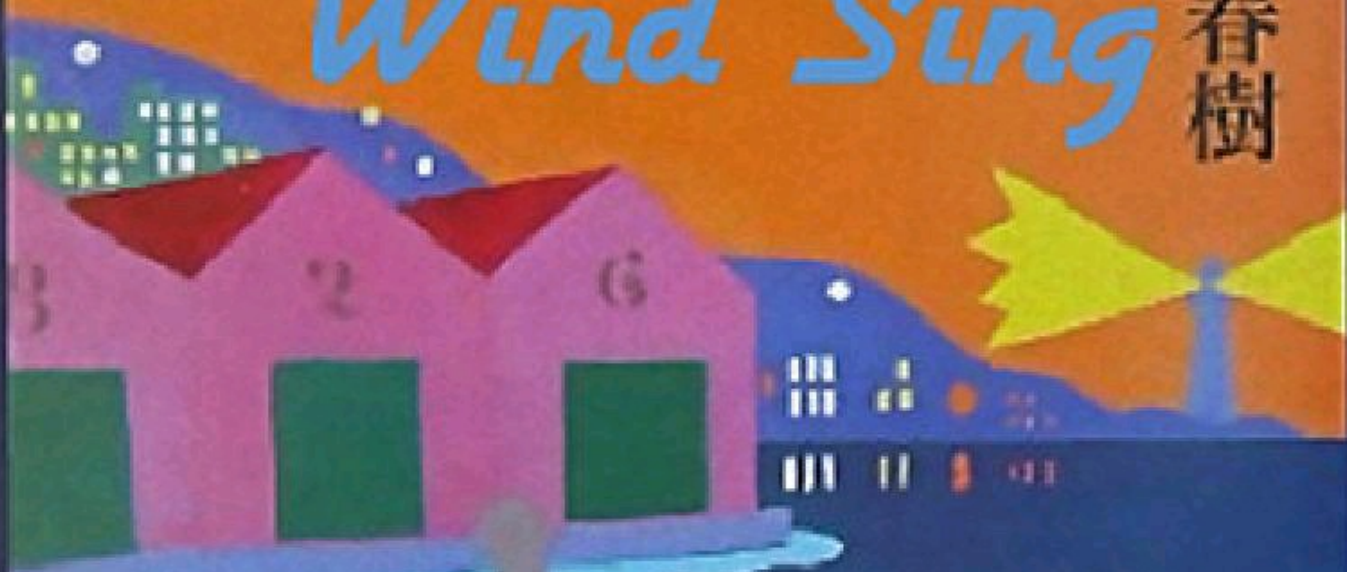


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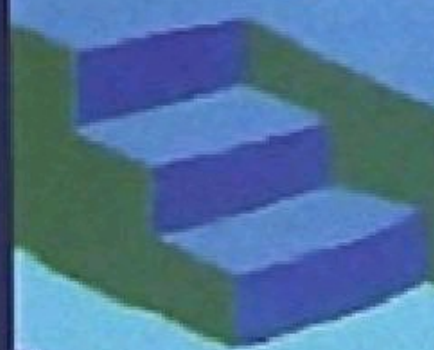
Hear the Wind Sing

村上春樹

風の歌を聴け



Haruki
Murakami



Hear the Wind Sing

by Haruki Murakami

1

“There’s no such thing as perfect writing. Just like there’s no such thing as perfect despair.”

A writer I happened to meet when I was in college told me this. It was a long time before I finally understood what those words meant, but just knowing them was a kind of comfort that put me at ease. There’s no such thing as a perfect writing style. However, in spite of that, the thought of actually writing something always filled me with a sense of hopelessness, because the things I was able to write about were fairly limited. For example, if I were to write about elephants, I’d have had no idea what words to use. That’s what it was like.

I struggled on with this dilemma for eight years. Eight years—that’s a long time.

Of course, there’s a limit to how much you can try to learn about things, but it’s not as painful as being old. At least, that’s what they say.

From the time I turned twenty, I strived to live my life this way. Thanks to this, I took painful blows from others, I was deceived, misunderstood, and I also had many strange adventures. Lots of people came around to tell me their stories, and their words flew over my head as if crossing a bridge, and they never came back. During that time, I’d keep my mouth shut, not telling anybody anything. And that’s how I came to the end of my twenties.

Now, I think I’ll tell a story.

Of course, there’s not a single solution to the problem, and once the story’s over, things will probably still be just as they were. In the end, writing a story isn’t a means of self-therapy, it’s nothing more than a meager attempt at self-therapy.

But, telling a story honestly is extremely difficult. As much as I try to be honest, the words I’m looking for always seem to sink into dark depths.

I’m not trying to make excuses. At least what I’m writing here is the best I can do. There’s nothing else to say. Still, here’s what I’m thinking: way before you’re good at it, maybe years or decades before you’re good at it, you can save yourself, I think. And when you do, the elephant back on the plains will be able to tell his story with words more beautiful than your own.

* * *

I learned a lot about writing from Derek Hartfield. Almost everything, I should say. Unfortunately, Derek Hartfield himself was the embodiment of a ‘simple’ writer. If you read his work, you’ll understand what I mean. His writing was hard to read, his plots were haphazard, and his themes were childish. However, in spite of all that, among the few extraordinary writers who brandished their writing as a weapon, he was unique. Hemingway, Fitzgerald, the other writers of his time, even compared to them, the militancy of his writing has never wavered, in my opinion. Unfortunately, even at

the very end, Hartfield could never get a clear grasp of the shape of his own enemy. When it was all said and done, it was a very simple affair indeed.

Eight years and two months, that was how long his own simple battle lasted, and then he died. In June of 1938, on a sunny Sunday morning, clutching a portrait of Hitler with his right hand and an open umbrella in his left, he jumped off the roof of the Empire State Building. The singular manner of his life, nor that of his death, ever became a subject of great intrigue.

I had the good fortune to receive a copy of Hartfield's already out-of-print first novel during the summer vacation of my third year of middle school, while I was laid up with a skin disease that had taken over my crotch. The uncle who'd given me that book came down with bowel cancer three years later, had his body cut into ribbons from head to toe, and with plastic tubes jammed into his bodily entrances and exits, died upon their painful removal. The last time I saw him, his shriveled up, reddish-brown features had contracted severely, his body resembling that of a sly monkey.

* * *

In all, I had three uncles, but one of them died in a suburb of Shanghai. Two days after the war ended, he stepped on one of the land mines he'd buried himself. The third uncle, the sole survivor, became a magician and went around touring all of Japan's hot springs.

* * *

On the subject of good writing, Hartfield said something that went like this:

"The writer who writes literature, that is to say the writer who ensconces himself in his work, always checks his distance. The important thing isn't what he perceives, it's the ruler he uses." -If it Feels Good, What's the Problem?, 1936

I stared at the ruler I held timidly in my hand the year Kennedy died, and from then it was fifteen years later. In those fifteen years I'd found that I'd really given up a lot. Like an airplane with an engine on the fritz, expelling luggage, seats, then finally the sorry stewardesses, in those fifteen years I discarded every possible thing, but I'd gained almost nothing in the way of wisdom.

As a result of that, and I don't know if I'm right about this or not, I've lost all my convictions. Even if it makes things easier, my worst fear is that when I get old and I'm facing death I'll wonder what the hell I've got to show for any of it. After I'm cremated, I doubt even a single bone will remain.

"People with dark souls have nothing but dark dreams. People with really dark souls do nothing but dream," went a favorite saying of my late grandmother.

The night she died, the very first thing I did was to reach my arms out and softly close her eyes. As I did this, the dream she'd held for seventy-nine years ended the way a summer shower stops falling on pavement, and after that there was nothing left.

* * *

I'll write about writing once more. This is the last thing I have to say about it.

For me, writing is a terribly painful process. Sometimes I spend a month unable to write a single line, other times, after writing for three straight days and nights I realize everything I've written is all wrong.

Nevertheless, in spite of all that, writing is also a fun process. Compared to the difficulties of living, with writing it's a lot easier to find meaning. Maybe it was in my teens when this fact finally hit me, and I was surprised enough to be dumbfounded for a week. If I could lighten up just a little, the world would move according to my whims, the value of everything would change, the flow of time would be altered...that's how I felt.

The problem with that, as I realized, would come much later. I drew a line in the middle of a piece of notebook paper, filling up the left side with things I'd gained, and in the right side listing things I'd lost. The things I'd lost, trampled to pieces, things I'd given up on long before, things I'd sacrificed, things I'd betrayed...in the end I just wasn't able to cross these out and cut my losses.

The things we try our hardest not to lose, we really just put create deep abysses in the spaces between them. No matter how long your ruler is, it's an immeasurable depth. The most I can do in writing it down is merely to make a list. Not even with short stories or literature, not even through the arts. Just a notebook with a line drawn down the middle of its first page. There might be some kind of a small lesson in this.

If you're looking for fine art or literature, you might want to read some stuff written by the Greeks. Because to create true fine art, slaves are a necessity. That's how the ancient Greeks felt, with slaves working the fields, cooking their meals, rowing their ships, all the while their citizens, under the Mediterranean Sun, indulged in poetry writing and grappled with mathematics. That was their idea of fine art.

Those people digging around in the refrigerator at 3am, those are the only people I can write for. And that, is me.

2

This story begins on August 8th, 1970, and lasts for eighteen days, meaning it finishes on August 26th of that same year.

3

"All those rich fuckers can just go to hell!"

The Rat had his hands on the counter, looking depressed as he shouted this to me.

Or maybe he was shouting at the coffee grinder behind me. The Rat and I were sitting next to each other at the bar, and he had no reason to shout at me like that. But, at any rate, when he was finished yelling, he drank his seemingly delicious beer wearing an expression of contentment.

Naturally, nobody in the vicinity paid any attention to his shouting. The small bar was overflowing with customers, and each and every one of them were shouting at each other the same way. It was like being on a sinking ship.

"Parasites," he said, shaking his head in what looked like revulsion. "Those guys can't do shit. I look at those guys acting all rich, and it just pisses me off."

With my lips on the thin rim of my beer glass, I nodded in silence.

On that note, the rat shut his mouth and gazed at his hands on the counter, turning them over and gazing at them intently, again and again, as if they'd been in a bonfire. I gave up and looked up at the ceiling. He inspected each of his fingers in turn, and we couldn't start our next conversation. It was always like this.

Over the course of that summer, like men obsessed, we drank enough beer to fill a 25-meter swimming pool and our peanut shells would have carpeted the floor of J's Bar at a depth of five centimeters. If we hadn't done so, the tedium of the summer would have been unbearable.

On the counter of J's Bar was a picture smeared by tobacco-stained fingers, and at those times when I was bored out of my mind, I never grew tired of staring at that picture for hours on end. Its pattern made it look like it was made to be one of those inkblot pictures they used in Rorschach tests, and to me it looked like two green monkeys pitching tennis balls that had fallen out of the sky.

When I said as much to J, he stared at it for a minute and nonchalantly said yes it did, when I put it that way.

"What do you think it is?" I asked.

"The monkey on the left is you, the monkey on the right is me. I toss out bottles of beer, and you toss me the money to pay for them."

I drank my beer in admiration.

"They piss me off."

After the Rat finished gazing at all his fingers, he said it again.

This wasn't the first time I'd heard the Rat badmouthing the rich, and again, he really did hate them. The Rat's own family was fairly rich, but when I pointed that out to the Rat, he'd say, 'It's not my fault.' At times (usually when I'd had too much to drink) I'd say, 'It is your fault,' and afterwards I'd feel pretty bad about it. Because he did have a point.

"Why do you think I hate rich people?"

Said the Rat one night, continuing his argument. It was the first time our conversation had advanced this far.

I shrugged my shoulders as if to say I didn't know.

"I'll just come right out and say it, rich people have no imagination. They can't even scratch their own asses without a ruler and a flashlight."

'Coming right out and saying it' was how the Rat often prefaced his statements.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. They can't think about anything important. They only pretend like they're thinking about things...why do you think that is?"

"No idea."

"They don't need to. Sure you need a little brainpower to get rich, but to stay rich you don't need any at all. The way satellites in space don't need gasoline. It's okay just to keep going round and round in the same place. But that's not me, and that's not you. We have to keep thinking if we want to survive. From the weather tomorrow to the stopper in the bathtub. Don't you think?"

"Maybe that's just how it is."

Having said his piece, the Rat took a tissue out of his pocket and blew his nose loudly. I honestly had no way of knowing if he'd really said all he wanted to say.

"Still, in the end, we all die just the same," I said, testing him out.

"Oh yeah, oh yeah. Everybody's gotta die sometime. But until then we've still got fifty-some odd years to go, and a lot to think about while we're living those fifty years, and I'll just come right out and say it: that's even more tiring than living five thousand years thinking about nothing. Don't you think so?"

That's how it went.

* * *

I'd first met the Rat three years before, in the spring. It was the year we both entered college, and the two of us were completely smashed. Why in

the hell he were, at sometime after four in the morning, stuck in the Rat's black Fiat 600, I almost can't remember. We probably had some mutual friend. Anyway, we were sloppy drunk, and as an added bonus the speedometer was pointing at eighty kilometers-an-hour. Thanks to all that, we broke through the park's immaculately-trimmed hedges, flattened a thicket of azaleas, and without thinking, not only smashed the car into a stone pillar, but came away without a single injury, which I can't call anything but a stroke of luck.

Awakened by the shock, I kicked away the broken door and climbed out. The hood of the car was knocked ten meters away, coming to rest in front of the monkey cage, and the front end of the car bore the giant imprint of a stone pillar. The monkeys seemed to be terribly upset at being jarred awake by the noise.

The Rat, with his hands still on the steering wheel, was leaning forward, not because he was hurt, but because he was vomiting onto the dashboard the pizza he'd eaten just an hour before. I clambered up onto the roof of the car and peered through the sunroof onto the driver's seat.

"You okay?"

"Mm, but I might've drank too much. You know, with the throwing up and all."

"Can you get out?"

"Pull me up."

The Rat cut the engine, took his pack of cigarettes from the dashboard and put it in his pocket, then slowly seized my hand and climbed up onto the roof of the car. Sitting side-by-side on the roof of the Fiat, we looked up at the dawning sky, silently smoking who knows how many cigarettes. For some reason, I was reminded of a tank movie starring Richard Burton. I have no idea what the Rat was thinking about.

"Hey, we're pretty lucky," said the Rat five minutes later. "Check it out, not a scratch on us. Can you believe it?"

I nodded. "The car's busted, though."

"Don't worry about that. I can always buy another car, but luck I cannot buy."

I stared at the Rat, shocked. "What are you, rich or somethin'?"

"Something like that."

"Well, that's great."

To this, the Rat said nothing, just shaking his head a few times as if unsatisfied. "Still, anyway, we're lucky."

"Yep."

The Rat crushed out his cigarette under the heel of his tennis shoe, throwing the butt towards the monkey cage.

"Say, how about the two of us become a team?"

Together, we could do just about anything."

"What should we do first?"

"Let's drink beer."

We went to a nearby vending machine and bought a half-dozen beers, then we walked to the beach. We layed ourselves down on the beach, and when we were finished drinking our beer, we gazed out at the ocean. It was incredibly good weather.

"You can call me 'Rat,'" he said.

"How'd you get a name like that?"

"I forget. It was a really long time ago. Back then I used to hate being called that, but now I don't care. For some reason I've gotten used to it."

After we tossed our empty beer cans into the ocean, we leaned against the embankment, putting our duffel coats under our heads as pillows and sleeping for an hour. When I woke up, my body was pulsing with some kind of mysterious energy. It was a really strange feeling.

"I feel like I could run a hundred kilometers," I told the Rat.

"Me too," he said.

However, in reality, what we ended up doing was paying off the damage to the park in installments to the municipality over three years.

* * *

The Rat never read books. He never ran his eyes across anything more than the sports pages or his junk mail.

Sometimes, when I'd be killing time by reading a book, he'd peek at me curiously like a fly looking at a flyswatter.

"Why do you read books?"

"Why do you drink beer?"

After eating a mixed mouthful of pickled horse mackerel and vegetable salad, without making eye contact, I asked him again. He thought it over for a long time, but it took him five minutes to open his mouth.

"The good thing about beer is that it all comes out as piss. Like a double play with one out to go, there's nothing left over."

Having said that, he watched as I continued to eat.

"Why are you always reading books?"

After washing down my last mouthful of horse mackerel with beer and cleaning my plate, I grabbed the copy of *L'Education sentimentale* I'd been reading and started flipping through the pages.

"Because Flaubert's already dead."

"You don't read books by living people?"

"Living authors don't have any merit."

"Why's that?"

"Dead authors, as a rule, seem more trusting than live ones."

I said this as I was watching the rebroadcast of Route 66 on the portable television in the middle of the counter. The Rat thought about my answer for a minute.

"Hey, how about living authors? Aren't they usually trusting?"

"How should I put this...I haven't really thought about it like that. When they're chased into a corner, they might become that way. Probably less trusting."

J came over and set two cold beers in front of us.

"And if they can't trust?"

"They fall asleep clutching their pillows."

The Rat shook his head, looking upset.

"It's strange, I'll give you that. Me, I have no idea."

So said the Rat.

I poured the Rat's beer into his glass, and with his bottle half-empty he sat there thinking.

"Before this, the last time I'd read a book was last summer," said the Rat, "I don't remember who wrote it or what it was about. I forget why I even read it. Anyway, it was written by some woman. The protagonist was this thirty year-old fashion designer girl, and somehow she starts to believe she's come down with some incurable disease."

"What kind of disease?"

"I forget. Cancer or something. Is there something more terminal than that? Anyway, she goes to this beach resort and masturbates the whole time. In the bath, in the forest, on her bed, in the ocean, really, all kinds of places."

"In the ocean?"

"Yeah...can you believe it? Why write a story about that? There's so much else you could write about."

"Beats me."

"Sorry for bringing it up, that's just how the story went. Made me wanna throw up."

I nodded.

"If it were me, I'd write a completely different story."

"For example?"

The Rat ran his finger along the edge of its beer glass as he thought it over.

"How about this? The ship I'm on sinks in the middle of the Pacific.

"I grab a life preserver and look at the stars, floating all alone in the night sea. It's a quiet, beautiful night. From nearby, clinging to another life preserver like mine, a young girl comes swimming over."

"Is she cute?"

"Oh yeah."

I took a swig of beer and nodded.

"It's a little ridiculous."

"Hey, listen. So we're still floating in the ocean together, chatting. Our pasts, our futures, our hobbies, how many girls I've slept with, talking about TV shows, what we dreamed about the night before, stuff like that. Then we drink beer together."

"Hold on a sec, where the hell did you get beer?"

The Rat considered this for a moment.

"It's floating there. It's beer in cans, floating over from the ship's mess hall. Together with the canned sardines. Is that okay?"

"Sure."

"During that time, the sun comes up. 'What are you going to do now?' she asks, then adds, 'I'm going to swim to where I think an island should be.'

"But it doesn't look like there's any islands. What's more, if we just float here drinking beer, an airplane will definitely come to rescue us,' I say. But she goes off swimming by herself."

The Rat pauses to catch his breath and drink beer.

"For two days and two nights, the girl struggles to make her way to some island. I stay there, drunk for two days, and I'm rescued by an airplane. Some years later, at some bar on the Yamanote, we happen to meet again."

"And then the two of you drink beer together once again?"

"Sad, don't you think?"

"Sure," I said.

6

The Rat's stories always follow two rules: first, there are no sex scenes, and second, not one person dies. Even if you don't acknowledge it, people die, and guys sleep with girls. That's just how it is.

* * *

"Do you think I'm wrong?" she asked.

The Rat took a sip of beer and shook his head deliberately. "I'll just come right out and say it, everybody's wrong."

"What makes you think so?"

"Hm," the Rat grunted and licked his upper lip. He made no effort to respond.

"I thought my arms were going to fall off with how hard I swam to get to that island. It hurt so much I thought I was going to die. Over and over I kept thinking about it. If I'm wrong, then you must be right. I struggled so hard, so why were you able to just float on the ocean's surface doing nothing?"

When she said this, she laughed a little, looking depressed with her eyes crinkling at the corners. The Rat bashfully dug around randomly in his pocket. For the last three years he'd wanted so much to smoke a cigarette.

"You'd rather I died?"

"Heh, a little."

"Really? Only a little?"

"I forget."

The two of them were silent for a moment. The Rat felt compelled to say something.

"Well, some people are just born unlucky."

"Who said that?"

"John F. Kennedy."

When I was little, I was a terribly quiet child. My parents were worried, so they took me to the house of a psychiatrist they knew.

The psychiatrist's house was on a plateau overlooking the sea, and while I sat on the waiting room sofa, a well-built middle-aged woman brought me orange juice and two donuts. I ate half a donut, carefully, as if trying not to spill sugar on my knees, and I drank the entire glass of orange juice.

"Do you want some more to drink?" the psychiatrist asked me, and I shook my head. We sat facing each other, just the two of us.

From the wall in front of me, a portrait of Mozart glared at me reproachfully, like a timid cat.

"Once upon a time, there was a kind-hearted goat."

It was a spectacular way to start a story. I closed my eyes and imagined a kind-hearted goat.

"This goat always had a heavy gold watch hanging around his neck, and he always walked around panting heavily. What's more, this watch was not only heavy, but it was also broken. One time, his friend the rabbit comes along and says, 'Hey goat, why are you always lugging around that broken watch? It looks so heavy, don't you think it's useless?'

'It really is heavy,' said the goat. 'But, you know, I've gotten used to it. Even though it's heavy, even though it's broken.'

The psychiatrist paused and took a sip of his own orange juice, then looked at me, grinning. I said nothing, waiting for him to continue his story.

"So one day, it's the goat's birthday, and the rabbit brings a small box with a pretty ribbon as a present. It was a shiny, glittering, very light, and yet stillworking new watch. The goat was incredibly happy and hung it around his neck, then went around showing it to everyone."

The story suddenly ended there.

"You're the sheep, I'm the rabbit, and the watch is your soul."

Feeling tricked, all I could do was nod. Once a week, on Sunday afternoon, I rode a train and then a bus to the psychiatrist's house, eating coffee rolls and apple pies and pancakes and croissants topped with honey while receiving my treatment. It took an entire year, but thanks to all those sweets, I got stuck going to the dentist. With civilization comes communication, he said. Whatever can't be expressed might as well not exist. Nil, nothing. Suppose you're hungry. You say, 'I'm hungry,' and even that short phrase will suffice. I'll give you a cookie. You can eat it. (I was now holding a cookie.) If you say nothing, there's no cookie. (The psychiatrist then hid the plate of cookies under the table with a sadistic look on his face.) Nothing. You get it? You don't want to talk. But you're hungry. Without making words, you can't express your hunger. Here's a gesture game. Come watch this. I grabbed my stomach like it was hurting. The psychiatrist laughed. I had indigestion.

Indigestion...

After that, the next thing we did was 'free talking'.

"Tell me about cats. Say whatever pops into your head."

I pretended to think about it, then shook my head back and forth.

"Anything you can think of."

"They're animals with four legs."

"So are elephants."

"Cats are much smaller."

"What else?"

"They live in the house, and they can kill mice if they want."

"What do they eat?"

"Fish."

"How about sausage?"

"Sausage, too."

That's how it went.

What the psychiatrist said was true. With civilization comes communication. Expression and communication are essential; without these, civilization ends. *Click*...OFF.

The spring when I turned 14, an unbelievable thing happened: as if a dam had burst, I suddenly began talking. I don't really remember what I talked about, but it was like I was making up for lost time, talking non-stop for three months, and when I stopped talking in the middle of July, I came down

degree fever and missed school for three days. After the fever, I wasn't completely silent, nor was I a chatterbox; I became a normal teenager.

8

I woke up at six in the morning, probably because I was thirsty. Waking up in someone else's house, I always feel like I'm in someone else's body with someone else's soul stuffed inside. Eventually collecting myself, I rose from the narrow bed, and from the sink next to the door, like a camel, I drank glass after glass of water before returning to bed. From the open window, I could see just a tiny sliver of the ocean. The sunlight glimmered above the tiny waves, and I gazed upon the who-knowshow-many rusty freighters going nowhere in particular. It looked like it was going to be a hot day. All the nearby houses were sleeping quietly, and every once in a while the squeaking of the trains on the rails could be heard, and I thought I detected a faint trace of a radio playing the melody for morning calisthenics.

Still naked, I was leaning against the bed and, after lighting a cigarette, I let my eyes wander over to the girl sleeping next to me. From the southward-facing window, rays of sunlight illuminated the full spread of her body. She was sleeping with her bedsheets pushed down to below her knees. Occasionally, she would struggle when taking a breath, and her wellshaped breasts would jiggle up and down. Her body was well tanned, but over time, the dark color had begun to change, and with the clear tanlines of her swimsuit leaving those areas looking strangely white, she looked like her flesh was decaying.

Ten whole minutes after finishing my cigarette, I made an attempt to remember the girl's name, but it was useless. First off, I couldn't even remember if I'd known her name to begin with. I gave up, yawned, then went back to gazing at her body. She was a little younger than twenty, and she was a little on the slim side. I spread out my fingers and measured her from head to toe. She was eight handspans long, with a remainder of a thumb. Somewhere in the

neighborhood of 158 centimeters, I'd say.

Under her right breast was a birthmark the size of a nickel, and on her abdomen a thin happy trail of pubic hair had sprung up like weeds along a river. As an added bonus, she only had four fingers on her left hand.

From then, it was still three whole hours before she woke up. After that, it took her five minutes to become fully cognizant. During that time, I hunched my shoulders together and looked out towards the east, at the thick clouds changing shape over the horizon of the ocean.

A short time later, when I looked back, she had the covers pulled up to her neck. She was struggling with the whiskey vapors rising from the pit of her stomach, staring at me without any expression.

"Who are you?"

"Don't you remember?"

She shook her head just once. I lit a cigarette and tried to offer one to her, but she ignored me.

"Explain."

"Where should I start?"

"At the beginning."

For starters, I had no idea where the hell to begin, and what's more, I didn't have any idea how to tell the story so that she'd understand. I wasn't sure whether it would go over well or not. After thinking about it for ten seconds or so, I started to speak.

"It was hot, but it was a nice day. I swam all afternoon, then went home and, after an afternoon nap, I had dinner. Now it's after 8pm. Then I got in my car so I could go somewhere and go for a walk. I parked my car on the road near the shore and listened to the radio while I looked at the ocean, like I always do.

"After thirty minutes of this, I all of a sudden got to feeling like talking to people. Whenever I look at the ocean, I always want to talk to people, but when I'm talking to people, I always want to look at the ocean. I'm weird like that. So then I decided to go to J's Bar. I wanted to drink beer, and I usually can meet up with my friend there. But my friend wasn't there. So I decided to drink by myself. In just one hour I drank three beers."

I paused for a moment to ash my cigarette into the ashtray.

"By the way, have you ever read *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*?"

She didn't answer, wrapped in her sheet she looked like a mermaid who washed up onto a beach as she glared up at the ceiling. Undeterred, I went back to my story.

"What I mean is that I'm always reminded of that play whenever I'm drinking by myself. Like a little switch that goes off and lets me relax or something. But in reality, it didn't go so well. I didn't even hear the click. After awhile, I got sick of waiting and called up his apartment. I was going to invite him to come out and have a drink with me. However, some girl answered his phone. It made me really uneasy. He's just not the type to let that happen. Even if he'd had fifty girls in his room and was dead drunk, he'd still answer his own phone. You know what I mean?"

"I pretended I had the wrong number, apologized, and hung up. After that call, I started to feel bad. Of course, what I did was ridiculous. Still, that's just how I am. I finished my beer and called J over so I could pay the check, thinking about going home and listening to the baseball scores on the news. J told me to go and wash my face. You could drink a case of beer, and he'd still that that washing your face would make you okay to drive.

There was nothing I could say to that, so I headed to the washroom to wash my face. To tell you the truth, I didn't really plan to wash my face. Just to pretend to. Because the drain in the sink there is usually clogged up. So I didn't really want to go in there. But last night, strangely, there wasn't any water filling up the sink. Instead, it was you, all balled up on the floor."

She sighed and shut her eyes.

"And?"

"I sat you up and carried you out of the bathroom, then took you around to all the customers in the bar and asked them if they knew you. But nobody knew you. Then, J and I treated your wound."

"My wound?"

"When you passed out, you must've hit your head on a corner or something. It wasn't a major injury or anything."

She nodded and drew her hand from under her sheet, then lightly touched her fingertip to her forehead.

"So then I consulted with J. What we should do about you. In the end, we decided that I should take you home. I emptied your bag and found a key holder and a postcard addressed to you. I paid your tab with the money in your wallet, and following the address on the postcard, brought you here, opened the door with the key, and laid you out on your bed. That's it. I put the receipt from the bar in your wallet."

"Why'd you stay?"

"Hm?"

"Why didn't you just buzz off after bringing me home?"

"I had a buddy who died from alcohol poisoning. After gulping down whiskey and saying goodbye and leaving, he went home feeling well enough, brushed his teeth, put on his pajamas and went to bed. When the morning came, he was cold and dead. It was a spectacular funeral."

"So you were going to nurse me all night?"

"Really, I was planning to go home at 4am. But I fell asleep. I thought about leaving when I woke up. But I gave up on that."

"Why?"

"At the very least, I thought I should explain to you what happened."

"You did all this out of the goodness of your heart?"

Feeling the venom laced in her words, I shrugged my shoulders and let them pass over me. Then I looked at the clouds.

"Did I...did I talk about anything?"

"A little."

"What did I say?"

"This and that. But I forget. Nothing too terribly important."

She closed her eyes and a grunt escaped the depths of her throat.

"And the postcard?"

"I put it back in your bag."

"Did you read it?"

"No way!"

"Why not?"

"There was no reason to."

I said this in a bored way. Something about her tone was irritating me. Even more than that, she stirred up some kind of familiar sentiment within me. Something old, from a long time ago. If before this hellish encounter we'd have met under different circumstances, we'd probably have had a slightly better time together. That's how I felt. However, in reality, what those 'better circumstances' might have been, I really couldn't remember.

"What time is it?" she asked.

Breathing a little sigh of relief, I stood up, looked at my digital watch on the desk, put some water in a glass, and came back to bed.

"It's nine."

She nodded weakly, then got up, leaned on the wall and drank all the water in one gulp.

“Did I really drink all that much?”

“Absolutely. If it were me, I’d be dead.”

“I feel like I’m dying.”

She took her cigarettes out from under her pillow and lit one, sighing as she exhaled the smoke, then suddenly pitched the match out the window towards the harbor.

“Hand me something to wear.”

“Like what?”

With her cigarette still in her mouth, she closed her eyes yet again. “Anything. I ask you to get me something, don’t ask questions, just do it.”

Facing the bed was a large wardrobe. I opened its door feeling a little confused, but finally chose a sleeveless blue dress and handed it to her. Not bothering to put on underwear, she slipped it completely over her head and pulled it down, zipping up the back all by herself and sighing once again when she finished.

“I have to go.”

“Where?”

“To work.”

She spit those words out, stumbling out of bed. Sitting on the edge of the bed, I looked on, uninterested, as she washed her face and brushed her hair.

The room was tidy, but even with things being neatly arranged, there was an air of something like resignation, and it was weighing heavily on my spirits.

Her room was just six mats in size, and after taking into account the cheap furniture it was stuffed with, there was barely enough space left over for one person to lie down. She was standing in this space brushing the knots out of her hair.

“What kind of work?”

“That’s none of your business.”

And that’s how it was.

For the time it takes to smoke an entire cigarette, I kept quiet. With her back to me, she was pushing her bangs, which hung down to below her eyes, into position with her fingertip.

“What time is it?” she asked once more.

“It’s been ten minutes.”

“Time to go. You’d better hurry up and get dressed and go home,” she said while spraying perfume under her armpits, “you do have a home, don’t you?”

“Yeah, sure,” I said, pulling my t-shirt over my head. Still sitting on the edge of her bed, I went back to gazing out the window.

“Where is your work?”

“Close to the harbor. Why?”

“I’ll drive you. You won’t be so late.”

Clutching the handle of her brush, she looked at me as if she were about to burst out in tears. This’ll be fun if she cries, I thought to myself. But she didn’t cry.

“Hey, just remember this: I drank too much, and I was drunk. So if anything bad happened, it’s my own fault.”

Saying that, she tapped the handle of the brush in her palm a few times in an almost entirely businesslike manner. I was silent while I waited for her to continue.

“Don’t you think?”

“Sure.”

“Still, a guy who sleeps with a girl who’s passed out...that’s low.”

"But I didn't do anything."

She was quiet, looking like she was trying to keep her emotions in check.

"Hmm, well then, why was I naked?"

"You took your own clothes off."

"Yeah right."

She tossed her brush onto her bed, then carefully stuffed her shoulder bag with her wallet, lipstick, aspirin, and the like.

"Hey, can you prove that you really didn't do anything?"

"You can check for yourself."

She definitely seemed to be genuinely pissed off.

"I swear."

"I don't believe you."

"You have to believe me," I said. I started to feel bad after I said it.

She gave up on any further attempt at discussion and kicked me out of her room, locking her own door behind her.

Without exchanging so much as a word, we walked down the avenue running along the river until we came to the parking lot.

While I wiped the dust off the the windshield with a piece of tissue paper,

and after walking a slow, suspicious lap around the car, she fixed her gaze upon a picture of a cow's face drawn on in white paint. The cow had a huge nose ring, and one white rose in its mouth, smiling. It was a really vulgar smile.

"Did you paint this?"

"Nah, the last owner did."

"Why'd he paint a cow of all things?"

"Who knows?" I said.

She walked back and stared at the cow again, looking as if she regretted saying too much to me, then kept her mouth shut as she got into the car. It was incredibly hot inside the car, and all the way to the harbor she didn't say a word, wiping off her dripping sweat with a towel while she chain-smoked. After lighting a cigarette, she'd take three puffs and stare at the lipstick on the filter as if inspecting it, then snuff it out in the car's ashtray and light another.

"Hey, about last night, all the other stuff aside, what the hell did I say?"

"This and that."

"Well, just tell me one thing I said. C'mon."

"You were talking about Kennedy."

"Kennedy?"

"John F. Kennedy."

She shook her head and sighed.

"I don't remember a thing."

When I dropped her off, without a word she tucked a thousand-yen note in behind my rearview mirror. **10**

It was an extremely hot night. Hot enough to softboil an egg. I pushed open the heavy door to J's Bar with the back side of my body, as I always did, and the air conditioner had filled the place with pleasantly cool air.

The inside of the place smelled like cigarettes and whiskey and French fries and armpits and sewage, the smells stagnating on top of each other just like a layer cake.

As always, I sat at the seat on the end of the bar, scanning the place with my back to the wall. Wearing unfamiliar uniforms, there were three French sailors with two girls they'd brought, and a couple who must've just turned twenty, and that was it. And no Rat.

After ordering a beer and a corned beef sandwich, I pulled out a book and decided to take my time waiting for the Rat.

Just ten minutes later, a thirty year-old woman with breasts like grapefruits and a flashy dress entered the bar and sat a seat away from me, scanning the surroundings just like I'd done and ordering a gimlet. After taking just one sip of her drink, she got up and made a painfully long phone call, then came back and grabbed her purse before going to the bathroom. In forty minutes, she ended up doing this three times. Sip of gimlet, long phone call, purse, toilet.

J came over to me, looking bored, and asked if my ass wasn't getting tired. He was Chinese, but his Japanese was better than mine.

Returning from her third trip to the toilet, she looked around for someone and then slid into the seat next to me, talking to me in a low whisper.

"Hey, you wouldn't be able to lend me some change would you?"

I nodded and dug the change out of my pocket, then set it all on the counter. There were thirteen ten-yen coins in all.

"Thanks a lot. If I ask the bartender to make change for me again he'll be sore at me."

"No problem. Thanks to you my pockets are lighter."

She smiled and nodded, nimbly scraping up the change and disappearing in the direction of the pay phone.

Getting tired of reading my book, I had J bring the portable television over to my place at the bar and began watching a baseball game while drinking my beer. It was a big game. In just the top of the forth, the pitcher gave up two homeruns and six hits, an outfielder collapsed from anemia, and while they switched pitchers there were six commercials. Commercials for beer and life insurance and vitamins and airline companies and potato chips and sanitary napkins.

After seeming to have struck out with the girls, with his beer glass in hand, one of the French sailors came up behind me and asked me, in French, what I was watching.

"Baseball," I answered in English.

"Base-ball?"

I gave him a simple overview of the rules. This guy throws the ball, this other guy hits it with a stick, running one lap around is one point. The sailor stared fixedly at the screen for five entire minutes, but when the commercials started he asked me why the jukebox didn't have any Johnny Hallyday.

"Cause he's not popular," I said.

"What French singers are popular here?"

"Adamo."

"He's Belgian."

"Michel Polnareff."

"Merde!"

Saying this, the French sailor went back to his table.

At the top of the fifth, the woman finally came back.

"Thanks again. Let me buy you a drink."

"Don't worry about it."

"I feel like I have to return favors—it's a character trait of mine, for better or worse."

I tried to smile, but it came out all wrong, so I just nodded and said nothing. She called J over with her finger and said a beer for this guy, a gimlet for me. J

nodded exactly three times and disappeared from the other side of the bar.

"The person I was waiting for never came. You?"

"Same story."

"Waiting for a girl?"

"A guy."

"Same as me. We've got something in common, then."

There was nothing I could do but nod.

"Hey, how old do you think I am?"

"Twenty-eight."

"Liar!"

"Twenty-six."

She laughed.

"But I don't mind. Do I look single? Do I look like a girl with a husband?"

"Do I get a prize if I guess right?"

"We might be able to work something out."

"You're married."

"Yeah...you're half-right. I got divorced last month. Have you ever talked to divorced woman like this?"

"Never. Though I did once meet a cow with neuralgia."

"Where?"

"In college, in a laboratory. We could only fit five people in there at one time."

She laughed like she was having a good time.

"You're a college student?"

"Yeah."

"I was a college student too, once, back in the day. Maybe around '60. Those were the good old days."

"How so?"

She didn't say anything, she just giggled and took a sip of her gimlet, checking her watch as if suddenly remembering something.

"Gotta make another phone call," she said, grabbing her purse and standing.

With her gone and my question still unanswered, the dust whirled around in the air for a moment. I drank half my beer and then called J over and paid my check.

"Running away?" J asked.

"Yeah."

"You're not into older women?"

"It's got nothing to do with her age. Anyway, if the Rat shows up, tell him I said hey."

I left the bar just as she finished her phone call and stepped into the bathroom for the fourth time. On my way home, I whistled the whole way. It was a song I'd heard somewhere before, but the name of it somehow managed to escape me. A really old song. I stopped my car along the beach, staring at the dark, nighttime ocean while trying my best to remember the name of it.

It was the Mickey Mouse Club theme song. I think these were the lyrics:

"Come along and sing a song and join the jamboree, M-I-C-K-E-Y M-O-U-S-E!"

They probably really were the 'good old days'. **11**

ON

Good evening everybody, how're you doing out there? I'm feelin' really excited tonight! Almost good enough to give everybody half of what I'm feeling!

It's time for NEB's world-famous Pop Music Requests! From now until 9pm we've got a

wonderful two hours lined up for you on this Saturday night, blasting the coolest hot tunes your way! Old favorites, songs that bring back memories, fun songs, songs that make you wanna get up and dance, boring songs, songs that make you wanna puke, anything goes, so hit those phone lines! You know the number. Yeah, make sure you get that number right! You run up your phone bill and upset your neighbors if you misdial, you know. By the way, since we opened up our phone lines at six, all ten lines to our station have been ringing off the hook. Hey, can we get a mic on those ringing phones for a second? Isn't it amazing? It's great, just great! Dial

'til your fingers break! Last week, you guys called us so much our lines blew a fuse, but that won't happen this week.

Even if our station staff goes crazy, there's no way you guys can blow that fuse! Isn't it great? Great! Today was too hot to do anything, but we can still have a good time rockin'! Yeah? That's what good rock music is made for! Same as pretty girls. Okay, here's our first song: Brook Benton with Rainy Night in Georgia.

OFF

...man...what's with this heat? Phew...

...hey, can you turn up the air conditioner?

...hot as hell in here...hey you, cut that out, I'm sweatin', sweatin' bullets...

...yeah, that's how I get...

...hey, I'm thirsty, can someone bring me a Coke? ...yeah, good. No, I don't have to piss! My bladder is like, super-strong...yeah, my bladder...

...thanks, Mi, this is great...yeah, frosty cold...

...hey, there's no bottle opener...

...don't be stupid, I can't use my teeth! ...hey, the record's ending. I got no time, quit screwing around...hey, the bottle opener!

...shit...

ON

This is great, isn't it? Now this is music. Brook Benton's Rainy Night in Georgia. Didn't it make you a little lonely? Anyway, do you know what today's high temperature was? Thirty-seven degrees Celsius, thirty-seven degrees. Too hot, even for summer. Like an oven out there. At that temperature, it's lonelier snuggling with your girl than hanging out all alone. Can you believe it? Okay, let's cut out all the talking and start playin' some records. Here's Creedence Clearwater Revival with Who'll Stop the Rain. Here we go, baby.

OFF

...hey, no, that's okay, I got it open with the edge of the mic stand...

...man, that's good...

...nah, I'm good. Just feel like I've gotta hiccup. You worry too much, yeah, you too...

...hey, what's happening with the baseball game? ...are they broadcasting it on another station?...

...hey, wait just a second! You're telling me that in this whole radio station we don't have a single radio?

That should be a crime...

...nah, I heard it. We should drink a beer to that sometime soon. Ice-cold...

...ah, shit, I can feel one coming on...

...*hiccup*...

12

At 7:15 the phone rang.

It happened while I was lying on a wicker chair in the living room, in the midst of gobbling down cheese crackers.

"Hey, good evening! This is Radio NEB's Pop Music Requests. Are you listening to the radio?"

Inside my mouth, the confusion of the moment sent the beer and the remnants of a cheese cracker down my throat.

"The radio?"

"Yeah, the radio. The machine representing the cumulative efforts of...*ahem*... civilization as we know it. More advanced than the electric vacuum cleaner, smaller than a refrigerator, cheaper than a television. What were you doing?"

"Reading a book."

"Tsk tsk, that's no good. You've gotta listen to the radio. Reading books just makes you lonely, don't you think?"

"Yeah."

"Books, those're things you read with one hand to kill time while you're spaghetti's boiling. You got that?"

"Yeah."

"Great... *hiccup*... now that that's straightened out, we can talk. You ever talked to a radio announcer who can't stop hiccupping?"

"Nope."

"Well, we're breaking new ground. It's a first for our listeners at home as well. Anyway, do you have any idea why I called you during a live broadcast?"

"Nope."

"Well, to tell you the truth, there's this girl... *hiccup*... who requested a song for you. Do you know who that could be?"

"Nope."

"She requested the Beach Boys song California Girls, we remember that one, don't we? Got a guess who she might be?"

I thought it over for a moment, then told him I had no idea.

"Yeah... well, that's a problem, then. If you can guess who she is, you'll get a special-edition T-shirt sent to you, so think hard!"

I thought it over once more. I had an idea, but I felt as if there were something stuck, blocking me from getting to the nook in my brain where the memory was stored.

"California Girls... Beach Boys... does that ring a bell?"

"When you put it that way, there was this girl in my class five years ago who let me borrow that record."

"Tell us more."

"Well, we were on a field trip and this girl's contact lens fell out and I helped her look for it, so as a reward she let me borrow that record."

"A contact lens, huh? Hmm. Anyway, you gave the record back to her, right?"

"Nope, I lost it."

"That's no good. Even if you had to buy a new one, you should've returned it. A girl lends you something... *hiccup*... you return it, understand?"

"Yes."

"Great! So the girl from five years ago who lost her contact lens on a field trip, she's definitely listening, yeah? So... uh... what's her name?"

I told him the name I'd finally remembered.

"Well, it looks like he's going to be buying a copy of that record and returning it to you. Great! ... anyway, how old are you?"

"Twenty-one."

"That's a good age. You a student?"

"Yes."

"... *hiccup* ..."

"Hm?"

"What's your major?"

"Biology."

"Mm... you like animals?"

"What do you like about them?"

"That they don't laugh."

"Hm? Animals don't laugh?"

"Horses and dogs laugh a little."

"Wow, when?"

"When they're having a good time."

For the first time in years, I felt myself getting angry.

"Well... *hiccup* ...maybe we'll start seeing more canine comedians."

"You mean you're not one of those?"

"Hahahaha!"

13

California Girls

Well East Coast girls are hip

I really dig those styles they wear

And the southern girls with the way they talk They knock me out when I'm down there

The mid-west farmers' daughters really make you feel

alright

And the northern girls with the way they kiss They keep their boyfriends warm at night

I wish they all could be California

I wish they all could be California girls

14

The T-shirt came in the mail three days later, in the morning.

It looked like this:

(ebook editor's note: image not available) **15**

The next morning, I put on that brand-new, scratchy shirt and wandered around the harbor for a while, when my eyes fell upon a tiny record shop with the door open. There weren't any customers to speak of, just a girl sitting at the counter looking bored as she went over the receipts while drinking a soda. I stared at the record shelves for a while before I came to a realization about the girl behind the counter: she was the girl from the week before, the one with the missing finger who was passed out in the bathroom. I said hey. She looked a little surprised when she saw me, looked at my T-shirt, then drank the rest of her soda.

"How'd you find out I work here?" she said, sounding irritated.

"Just a coincidence. I came to buy a record."

"Which one?"

"A Beach Boys album with California Girls on it."

Looking deeply suspicious of me, she got up and took long strides over to the record shelf, then brought it over to me like a well-trained dog.

"How about this one?"

I nodded, looking around the store with my hands in my pockets.

"I also want Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 3."

She was silent this time, coming back holding two records.

"We've got Glenn Gould and Backhaus, which one do you want?"

"Glenn Gould."

She set one record on the counter, then took the other one back to the shelf.

"What else?"

"A Miles Davis album with Girl in Calico."

She took a little longer this time, but finally returned with the record.

"And?"

"That's it. Thanks."

She lined up the three records on the counter.

"You're gonna to listen to all of these?"

"Nah, they're presents."

"You're a generous guy."

"Seems that way."

She shrugged her shoulders uneasily, five thousand five hundred and fifty yen, she said. I paid her and took the records.

"Well, anyway, thanks to you, I was able to sell three records before lunch."

"That's great."

She sighed and sat in the seat behind the counter, starting to look through her pile of receipts.

“Are you always working in this store all by yourself?”

“There’s another girl. She’s out to lunch right now.”

“And you?”

“When she comes back, we switch off.”

I took a cigarette from the pack in my pocket and lit it, watching her work.

“Say, if it’s okay, how about we go out to lunch together?”

She shook her head without looking away from her receipts.

“I like to eat lunch alone.”

“Me too.”

“Really?”

She deprioritized her receipts, looking annoyed, and lowered the needle onto a new record from Harper’s Bizarre.

“So...why’d you invite me, then?”

“Just wanna shake things up once in a while.”

“Shake ‘em up by yourself.”

She went back to working on the receipts at hand.

“Forget about me, already.”

I nodded.

“I think I said it once already, but I think you’re a complete sleazeball,” having said that, with her lips still pursed, she flipped the receipts through her four fingers.

16

When I entered J’s Bar, the Rat had his shoulders on the bar and his face grimaced while reading a telephone book-sized, incredibly long Henry James novel.

“Is that a good read?”

The Rat looked up from his book and shook his head from side to side. “Still, I’ve been reading it very carefully, ever since our talk the other day. ‘I love splendid deception more than the drab reality,’ you know it?”

“Nope.”

“Roger Vadim. A French Director. And this one, too: ‘The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.’”

“Who said that one?”

“I forget. You think it’s true?”

“It’s a lie.”

“Why?”

“You wake up at 3am, you’re hungry. You open the fridge and it’s empty. What do you do?”

The Rat thought it over, then laughed in a loud voice. I called J over and ordered beer and French fries, then pulled out a wrapped record and handed it to the Rat.

“What’s all this?”

“It’s a birthday present.”

“But my birthday’s not ‘til next month.”

“I won’t be here next month, so I’m giving it to you now.”

With the record in his hand, he was still thinking.

"Yeah, well, I'll be lonely once you're gone," he said as he opened the paper, pulled out the record and looked it over.

"Beethoven, Piano Concerto Number 3, Glenn Gould, Leonard Bernstein. Hmm...I've never heard this. Have you?"

"Never."

"Anyway, thank you. I'll just come right out and say it, I'm really happy."

17

For three days, I kept trying to find the girl's phone number. The girl who lent me the Beach Boys record, that is.

I went to the office at our high school and looked up the register for our graduating class, and I found it. However, when I tried calling it I got a recorded message telling me the number was no longer in service. When I called Information and gave them the girl's name, the operator searched for me, and at the end of five minutes, she told me there was no number listed in their directory under that name. That was the good thing about the girl's name, it was unique. I thanked the operator and hung up. The next day, I called up a bunch of our former classmates and asked if they knew anything about her,

but nobody knew anything about her, and most of them only vaguely recalled her existence from our school days. The last person I asked, for some reason I didn't understand, said, 'I don't have a damn thing to say to you,' and hung up on me.

On the third day, I went back to the high school and got the name of the college she'd gone on to attend. It was the English department of a second rate girl's school. I called their office and told them I was a quality control manager from McCormick's Salad Dressing and had to ask her something from a survey she'd filled out and that I needed her current address and phone number. I apologized and told them it was very important that I speak to her. They asked if I wouldn't call back in fifteen minutes after they'd had time to look it up. After drinking a bottle of beer, I called them back and the person in the office told me that she'd dropped out of school in March. The reason she'd quit was to recover from an illness, but they didn't have the slightest idea why a girl who was well enough to eat salad wasn't back enrolled in classes again.

When I asked if they had a contact address for her, telling them even an old one would be okay, he checked for me. It was a lodging house near the school. When I called there, a matronly-sounding lady said she didn't know where the girl went after moving out, then hung up on me, as if to say, 'you don't want to know anyway.'

That was the end of the last line thread connecting us.

I went home and drank beer by myself, listening to California Girls all the while.

18

The phone rang.

I was lying atop a wicker chair, half-asleep while gazing at a book I'd left open. The sudden evening rainstorm was comprised of big drops of water that wet the leaves of the trees in the yard before it passed. After the rainstorm was gone, the sea-smelling southerly wind began to blow, shaking the leaves of the potted plants on the veranda just a little, then went on to shake the curtains.

"Hello," she said. Her voice was dark and controlled; she spoke as if her words were settling on a thin glass table. "You remember me?"

I pretended to think about it for a minute.

"How's the record business?"

"Not so good...it's like there's a recession or something. Nobody's listening to records."

"Uh huh."

She tap-taped her nail on the receiver.

"It was really hard work getting your phone number."

"Yeah?"

"I asked around at J's Bar. I had the bartender ask your friend for me. A real tall, weird guy. He was reading Moliere."

"Doesn't surprise me."

Silence.

"Everyone looked sad. You didn't show up there for a week, so they were saying you must be sick or something."

"I never knew I was so popular."

"Are you...mad at me?"

"For what?"

"For saying all those terrible things to you. I wanted to apologize for that."

"Hey, you don't have to worry about me. You care about me, you might as well be feeding beans to pigeons."

She sighed, and I could hear the flicker from her cigarette lighter coming through the receiver. After that, I could hear Bob Dylan's Nashville Skyline. She must've been calling from the record store.

"I'm not really worried about your feelings. I just feel like I shouldn't have talked to you like that," she said quickly.

"You're pretty hard on yourself."

"Yeah, I'm always thinking about the kind of person I'm trying to be."

She was silent for a moment.

"You wanna meet up tonight?"

"Sure."

"How about 8 o' clock at J's Bar. That okay?"

"Got it."

"...um, I've been having a rough time lately."

"I understand."

"Thank you."

She hung up.

19

It's a long story, it happened when I was twentyone. Still a lot of youth left, but not as young as I once was. If I wasn't happy with that, the only choice I had was to jump off the roof of the Empire State Building on a Sunday morning.

I heard this joke in an old movie about the Great Depression:

'You know why I always have my umbrella open when I walk by the Empire State Building? 'Cause people are always falling like raindrops!'

When I was twenty-one, at least at this point I wasn't planning to die. At that point I'd slept with three girls.

The first girl was my high school classmate, and when we were seventeen we got to believing that we loved each other. Bathed in the lush twilight, she took off her slip-on shoes, her cotton socks, her thin seersucker dress, her weird underwear she obviously knew didn't fit her, and then after getting a little flustered, took off her wristwatch. After that, we embraced each other atop the Sunday edition of the Asahi Shimbun.

Just a few months after we graduated from high school, we suddenly broke up for some forgettable reason. After that, I never saw her again. I think of her every now and then, during those nights when I can't sleep. That's it.

The second girl I slept with, I met her at the Shinjuku station on the subway. She was sixteen, flat broke, and had nowhere to sleep, and as an added bonus she was almost nothing but a pair of breasts, but she had smart, pretty eyes. One night, when there were violent demonstrations sweeping over Shinjuku, the trains, the busses, everything shut down completely.

"You hang around here and you'll get hauled off," I told her. She was crouched in the middle of the shutdown ticket-taker, reading a sports section she'd taken from the garbage.

"But the police'll feed me."

"That's a terrible way to live."

"I'm used to it."

I lit a cigarette and gave one to her. Thanks to the tear gas, my eyes were prickling.

"Have you eaten?"

"Not since this morning."

"Hey, let me get you something to eat. Anyway, we should get out of here."

"Why do you want to get me something to eat?"

"Who knows?" I don't know why, but I pulled her out of the ticket-taker and we walked the empty streets all the way to Mejiro.

That incredibly quiet girl's stay at my apartment lasted for all of one week. Every day, she'd wake up after noon, eat something, smoke, absent-mindedly read books, watch television, and occasionally have uninterested sex with me. Her only possession was a white canvas bag which held inside it: a thin windbreaker, two T-shirts, one pair of blue jeans, three pairs of dirty underwear, and one box of tampons; that's all she had.

"Where're you from?"

Sometimes I asked her this.

"Someplace you don't know."

Saying that, she refused to elaborate. One day, when I came back from the supermarket clutching a grocery bag, she was gone. Her white bag was gone as well. A number of other things were gone as well. Some loose change I'd scattered atop the desk, a carton of cigarettes, and my carefully washed T-shirt. On the desk there was a torn piece of paper like a note, bearing the simple message: 'rat bastard'. It's quite possible that was a reference to me.

My third partner was a girl I'd met at our university's library, she was a French Lit major, but in the spring of the following year she was found in a small forest past the edge of the tennis courts, hanged. Her corpse hung there unnoticed until past the beginning of spring semester, for an entire two weeks it dangled there, blown around by the wind. Even now, nobody goes in those woods after the sun goes down.

20

She was sitting at the counter of J's Bar looking ill at ease, stirring around the almost-melted ice at the bottom of her ginger ale glass with a straw.

"I didn't think you'd show."

She said this as I sat next to her; she looked slightly relieved.

"I don't stand girls up. I had something to do, so I was a little late."

"What did you have to do?"

"Shoes. I had to polish shoes."

"Those sneakers you're wearing right now?"

She said this with deep suspicion while pointing at my shoes.

"No way! My dad's shoes. It's kind of a family tradition. The kids have to polish the father's shoes."

"Why?"

"Hmm...well, of course, the shoes are a symbol for something, I think. Anyway, my father gets home at 8pm every night, like clockwork. I polish his shoes, then I sprint out the door to go drink beer."

"That's a good tradition."

"You really think so?"

"Yeah. It's good to show your father some appreciation."

"My appreciation is for the fact that he only has two feet."

She giggled at that.

"Sounds like a great family."

"Yeah, not just great, but throw in the poverty and we're crying tears of joy."

She kept stirring her ginger ale with the end of her straw.

"Still, I think my family was much worse off."

"What makes you think so?"

"Your smell. The way rich people can sniff out other rich people, poor people can do the same."

I poured the beer J brought me into my glass.

"Where are your parents?"

"I don't wanna talk about it."

"Why not?"

"So-called 'great' people don't talk about their family troubles. Right?"

"You're a 'great' person?"

Fifteen seconds passed as she considered this.

"I'd like to be one, someday. Honestly. Doesn't everyone?"

I decided not to answer that.

"But it might help to talk about it," I said.

"Why?"

"First off, sometimes you've gotta vent to people. Second, it's not like I'm going to run off and tell anybody."

She laughed and lit a cigarette, and she stared silently at the wood-paneled counter while she took three puffs of smoke.

"Five years ago, my father died from a brain tumor. It was terrible. Suffered for two whole years. We managed to pour all our money into that. We ended up with absolutely nothing left. Thanks to that, our family was completely exhausted. We disintegrated, like a plane breaking up mid-flight. The same story you've heard a thousand times, right?"

I nodded. "And your mother?"

"She's living somewhere. Sends me New Year's cards."

"Sounds like you're not too keen on her."

"Yes."

"You have any brothers or sisters?"

"I have a twin sister, that's it."

"Where is she?"

"About thirty thousand light-years away."

Saying this, she laughed neurotically, pushing her glass to the side.

"Talking bad about one's family is definitely no good. Makes me depressed."

"Don't worry too much about it. Everyone's got some burden to bear."

"Even you?"

"Sure. I'm always grasping cans of shaving cream and crying uncontrollably."

She laughed happily at this, looking as if she hadn't laughed that way in who knows how many years.

"Hey, why are you drinking ginger ale?" I asked,

"Did you swear off drinking?"

"Yeah, well, that was the plan, but I think it's okay now."

"What'll you have?"

"Chilled white wine."

I called J over and ordered another beer and a glass of white wine.

"Hey, what's it like to have an identical twin?"

"Well, it's kinda strange. Same face, same IQ, same size bra, you're aggravated all the time."

"People mix you up a lot?"

"Yeah, 'til the time we were eight. That was the year I lost a finger; after that, nobody mixed us up again."

Saying that, like a concert pianist concentrating, she set her hands down on the counter, her fingers lined up neatly. I took her left hand, and gazed at it carefully in the light from the recessed lighting. It was a small hand, cool as a cocktail glass, looking completely natural, as if it'd been that way since birth, four fingers lined up happily. That naturalness was almost a miracle, at least it was more charming than if she'd had six fingers.

"My pinky was cut off by a vacuum cleaner's motor when I was eight years old. Popped right off."

"Where is it now?"

"Where's what?"

"Your pinky."

"I forget," she said, laughing, "you're the first one to ever ask me that."

"Doesn't it bug you, not having a pinky?"

"Yeah, when I put on gloves."

"Other than that?"

She shook her head.

"I'd be lying if I said I never worried about it. Still, I'm only as worried about it as other girls are about the thick hairs growing on their necks."

I nodded.

"What do you do?"

"I'm in college. In Tokyo."

"You're visiting home."

"Yeah."

"What're you studying?"

"Biology. I like animals."

"Me too."

I drank the rest of the beer in my glass and nibbled on a few French fries.

"Hey...there was this famous panther in Bhagalpur, India who, over three years, managed to kill 350 people."

"And?"

"So they called this panther hunter, an Englishman, Colonel Jim Corvett, and he shot that panther and one hundred twenty-five panthers and tigers. Knowing that, you still like animals?"

She snuffed out her cigarette, then took a sip of her wine and gazed at my face as if admiring it.

"You're definitely a little strange, you know?"

21

Half a month after my third girlfriend died, I was reading Michelet's *La Sorciere*. I knew that book well. In it, there's a line that goes something like this:

"In the Lorraine region, there was a prominent Judge Remy who burned eight hundred witches, and was jubilant in his 'Purge of Witches'. He'd say, 'My justice is widespread, the other day we caught sixteen persons, and without hesitation we drowned them posthaste.'"

-Shinoda Ichiro, Translator

If I say my justice is widespread, it might be better to say nothing at all.

22

The phone rang.

My face was sunburned from my trip to the pool, and I was in the midst of cooling it off with calamine lotion. After letting it ring ten times, I brushed the checkerboard of neatly cut cotton strips off my face and rose from the chair to take the receiver.

"Afternoon. It's me."

"Yeah," I said.

"You in the middle of something?"

"Nope, nothing at all."

I took the towel draped over my shoulders and wiped my stinging face.

"I had fun yesterday. Most fun I've had in a long time."

"That's great."

"Hm, yeah...you like beef stew?"

"Yep."

"I made some, but it'd take me a week to eat all this all by myself. Wanna come over and eat some?"

"If it's all right."

"Okay, be here in one hour. If you're late, I'm pitching it all into the garbage. Understand?"

"Yes..."

"I just hate waiting, that's all."

Saying that, she hung up before I'd had a chance to open my mouth.

I lied back down on the sofa and stared at the ceiling for about ten minutes, listening to the Top 40

on the radio, then I took a shower and shaved my face cleanly with hot water, then put on a shirt and Bermuda shorts just back from the dry cleaner's. It was a pleasant-feeling evening.

Watching the sun set parallel to the beach as I drove, I stopped at a place by the highway on-ramp to buy chilled wine and two cartons of cigarettes. She'd cleaned the table, and in the space between the shining white dishes, I was using the edge of a fruit knife to wrest the cork out of the bottle. The moist steam from the beef stew made the room humid.

"I didn't think it'd get this hot. It's like Hell."

"Hell is much hotter."

"Sounds like you've been there to see it."

"I heard it from someone. As soon as you're about to go crazy from the heat, they move you somewhere cooler. As soon as you recover a little, they toss you back into the heat."

"Just like a sauna."

"It's like that. But sometimes, when people go crazy, they don't put them back in."

"What do they do with them?"

"Drop 'em off in Heaven. Then they make 'em paint the walls. After all, the walls always have to be perfectly white. They get real upset if there's even a single spot. Hurts their image."

"Thanks to the constant painting from morning 'til night, these guides usually ruin their windpipes."

She didn't ask any more after that. After carefully picking the debris from the cork from the inside of the bottle, I poured us two glasses.

"Cold wine, warm heart," she said when we toasted.

"What's that from?"

"A television commercial. Cold wine, warm heart. You ever seen it?"

"Nope."

"You don't watch television?"

"I watch it a little. I used to watch it all the time. My favorite was Lassie. The original Lassie, I mean."

"You really do like animals."

"Yeah."

"If I had the time, I'd watch it all day. Anything. Yesterday, I was watching this panel discussion with biologists and chemists. You see it?"

"Nah."

She took a sip of wine and then shook her head slightly, as if remembering something.

"You know, Pasteur had a lot of scientific intuitiveness."

"Scientific intuition?"

"...what I mean is, normal scientists think this certain way. A equals B, B equals C, so it follows that A equals C, you know what I mean?"

I nodded.

"But Pasteur was different. He already had A equaling C in his head, is what I mean. No proofs or anything. But the correctness of his theories was proven by history; during his life he made countless useful discoveries."

"The smallpox vaccine."

She set her wineglass on the table and narrowed her eyes at me.

"Um, wasn't Jenner the one who made the smallpox vaccine? You sure you're in college?"

"...rabies antibodies, then pasteurization, yeah?"

"Bingo."

She managed to laugh without showing her teeth, a seemingly practiced skill, and then she drank her glass dry and poured herself a new one.

"On that panel discussion show, that's where they called it 'scientific intuition'. Do you have it, too?"

"Almost not at all."

"Don't you wish you did?"

"It'd probably come in handy for something. I'd probably use it when there's a girl I wanna sleep with."

She laughed and went into the kitchen, then came back with the pot of stew and a bowl of salad and some rolls. Little by little, a cool breeze finally started to blow in through the open window.

We took our time eating while we listened to her record player. During that time she mostly asked me about college and my life in Tokyo. Nothing too terribly interesting. About the experiments where we used cats (of course we don't kill them, I told her. mostly just psychological experiments, I said. However, in truth, in eleven months I killed thirty-six cats, large and small.), and the demonstrations and strikes. Then I showed her the scar from when the riot policeman knocked out my front tooth.

"You ever wanna get him back?"

"Not really," I said.

"Why not? If I were you, I'd find him and knock out a few of his teeth with a hammer."

"Well, I'm me, and it's the past now, for everybody involved. More importantly, all those guys looked the same, so there's no way I'd ever find him."

"So you're saying there was no reason for any of it?"

"Reason?"

"The reason for going so far as to get your tooth knocked in."

"None."

She grunted boredly and took a bite of her beef stew.

We drank our after-dinner coffee, washed and stacked the dishes in her tiny kitchen, then went back to the table and lit cigarettes as we listened to Modern Jazz Quartet.

Her shirt was so thin I could clearly make out the shape of her nipples, her cotton pants hung comfortably around her hips, and as an added bonus our feet kept bumping underneath the table. When this happened, I would blush a little.

"Was it good?"

"It was great."

She bit lightly on her lower lip.

"Why don't you ever say anything unless you're answering a question?"

"Just a habit, I guess. I'm always forgetting to say important things."

"Can I give you some advice?"

"Go ahead."

"If you don't fix that, it'll end up costing you."

"You're probably right. Still, it's like a junky car. If I fix one thing, it'll be easier to notice something else that's broken."

She laughed and changed the record to Marvin Gaye. The hour hand was almost pointing to eight.

"Is it okay if you don't polish the shoes tonight?"

"I polish them at night. Same time I polish my teeth."

She rested both of her skinny elbows on the table, then with her chin resting pleasantly on top of them, she sneaked peeks at me as we talked. This made me pretty flustered. I pretended to look out the window as I lit a cigarette, constantly trying to avert her gaze, but then she gave me an extra-strange look.

"Hey, I believe you."

"Believe what?"

"That you didn't do anything to me that night."

"What makes you think so?"

"You really wanna hear it?"

"No," I said.

"That's what I thought you'd say," she laughed and poured wine into my glass, then looked out the dark window as if thinking about something.

"Sometimes I think it would be wonderful if I could live without getting in anyone else's way. You think it's possible?" she asked.

"I'm not sure."

"Am I getting in your way?"

"You're okay."

"This time?"

"This time."

She gently reached her hand across the table and set it on my own, and after leaving it there for a while, she drew it back.

"I'm going on a trip tomorrow."

"Where you going?"

"I don't know yet. I want to go somewhere quiet and cool, for about a week."

I nodded.

"I'll call you when I get back."

* * *

On my way home, sitting in my car, I was suddenly reminded of the first girl I ever went on a date with. It was seven years before.

The whole time we were on this date, from beginning to end, I feel like I kept asking, 'Hey, isn't this boring?' over and over.

We went to see a movie starring Elvis Presley. The theme song went something like this:

We had a quarrel, a lovers spat

I write I'm sorry but my letter keeps coming back So then I dropped it in the mailbox

And sent it special D

Bright in early next morning

It came right back to me

She wrote upon it:

Return to sender, address unknown.

Time flows pretty quickly.

23

The third girl I slept with, she called my penis my

'raison d'etre'.

* * *

I once tried to write a short story with the theme being each person's raison d'etre. In the end, I never finished the story, but for a while I kept thinking about people's various reasons for living, and thanks to that it went from a strange habit to an obsession. It was a habit that had absolutely no effect on anything. This impulse stuck with me, chasing me for roughly eight months. Riding the train, the first thing I did was to count all the passengers, I counted the stairs in the stairwell, and if I'd had enough time I'd have counted my heartbeats. According to my records of that time, from August 15, 1969 to April 3, I went to three hundred fifty-eight lectures, had sex fifty-four times, and smoked six thousand, nine hundred and twenty-one cigarettes. During that time, when I counted everything, I seriously considered telling someone about my habit. So I told as many people as I could, giving them what I thought were very reliable numbers. However, naturally, the number of cigarettes I smoked, stairs I climbed, and the size of my penis were things nobody was interested in. So, without losing sight of my own raison d'etre, I became very lonely.

* * *

Thanks to all that, I know that when I found out about her death I was smoking my six thousand, nine hundred and twenty-second cigarette.

24

That night, the Rat didn't drink a drop of beer. It wasn't a good sign. Instead, he drank five Jim Beams on the rocks in a row.

We drank in a dark corner of J's Bar, killing time with the pinball machine. We fed who knows how much change to the machine to purchase this slaughtered time; a perfect waste. However, the Rat was as earnest as ever, and because of that it was nearly a miracle that I managed to win two of the six games we played.

"Hey, what happened?"

"Nothing," said the Rat.

We went back to the counter and drank beer and Jim Beam.

Saying almost nothing, we listened absentmindedly to records playing one by one on the jukebox. Everyday People, Woodstock, Spirit in the Sky, Hey There, Lonely Girl...

"I have a favor to ask you," said the Rat.

"What is it?"

"There's someone I want you to meet."

"...a girl?"

Looking a little confused, the Rat finally nodded.

"Why me?"

"Who else is there?" he said quickly as he took the first sip of his sixth glass of whiskey.

"You have a suit and a necktie?"

"I do, but..."

"Tomorrow at two p.m." the Rat said, "Hey, what the hell do you think girls eat to survive?"

"The soles of their shoes."

"No way," said the Rat.

25

The Rat's favorite food was pancakes. He'd pile a bunch of them up on a deep plate and cut them neatly into four sections, then pour a bottle of Coca Cola on top of them.

The first time I visited the Rat's house, beneath the soft sunlight of May, he had them out on the table and was in the middle of shoveling that odd concoction into his stomach.

"The great thing about this food is," the Rat said,

“it’s food and drink rolled into one.”

The overgrown yard was full of trees, and birds of many shapes and colors were gathered there, eagerly pecking at the white popcorn scattered on the grass. **26**

I’ll tell you about the third girl I slept with. It’s really difficult to talk about dead people, but it’s even harder to talk about dead young women. It’s because from the time they die, they’ll be young forever.

On the other hand, for us, the survivors, every year, every month, every day, we get older. Sometimes, I feel like I can feel myself aging from one hour to the next. It’s a terrible thing, but that’s reality.

* * *

She wasn’t what anyone would call a beautiful girl. However, saying ‘she wasn’t a beauty’ probably isn’t a fair way to put it. ‘She wasn’t as beautiful as she could have been’ seems like an accurate way to describe it, I think.

I have only one picture of her. The date is written on the back, August 1963. The year Kennedy was shot in the head. She’s sitting on a seawall, a beach seemingly near some summer resort, smiling slightly uncomfortably. She’s wearing a short, Jean Seburgstyle hairdo (no matter what anybody says, it reminds me of Auschwitz), wearing a long-edged gingham one-piece dress. She looks clumsy, beautiful. It’s a beauty that could pierce the most delicate regions of the heart of the viewer.

Her thin lips pressed together, her tiny, upturned nose looking like a dainty insect’s antenna, her bangs looking as if she’d cut them herself, dangling carelessly across her wide forehead, her slightly bulging cheeks, upon which tiny pockmarks, remnants of pimples can be seen.

When she was fourteen years old, that was the time in her twenty-one-year lifetime when she was the happiest. And then she disappeared so suddenly, is all I can think. For what purpose, what reason such a thing could be possible, I have no idea. Nobody does.

* * *

She said once, seriously (I’m not joking), “I entered college to have a heavenly revelation.”

This was before four a.m., both of us naked in bed. I asked her what kind of heavenly revelation she was expecting.

“How should I know?” she said, but added a moment later, “Maybe something like angels’ feathers falling from the sky.”

I tried to imagine the spectacle of angels’ feathers falling onto the university’s courtyard, and from afar it looked much like tissue paper.

* * *

Nobody knows why she killed herself. I have a suspicion that maybe she herself may not have known.

27

I was having a bad dream.

I was a big black bird, flying west across the jungle. I had a deep wound, the black blood clinging to my wings. In the west I could see an ominous black cloud beginning to stretch out, and from there I could smell rain.

It was a long time since I’d had a dream. It had been so long that it took me a while to realize it was a dream.

I got out of bed, washed the horrible sweat off my body, and then had toast and apple juice for breakfast. Thanks to the cigarettes and the beer, my throat felt like it was full of old mothballs. After washing and putting away the dishes, I put on an olive green cotton jacket, a shirt I’d ironed as best I could, chose a black tie, and with the tie still in my hand I sat in the air conditioned parlor.

The television news announcer proudly declared that it was likely to be the hottest day of the summer. I turned off the television and went into my older brother’s room, picked a few books from his enormous pile of books, then took them back to the parlor where I plopped onto the sofa and stared at the words printed within.

Two years before, my brother left his roomful of books and his girlfriend and took off to America without so much as a word. Sometimes she and I ate together. She told me I was just like him.

“In what way?” I asked, surprised.

“In every way,” she said.

I probably was just like him. It was probably due to the ten-plus years of our polishing those shoes, I think.

The hour hand pointed to twelve, and after milling about and thinking about the heat outside I fastened my tie and put on my suit jacket.

I had lots of time to kill. I drove around town for a bit. The town was almost miserably long and narrow, starting at the sea and climbing into the mountains. River, tennis court, golf course, rows of estates lined up, walls and more walls, some nice little restaurants, boutiques, an old library, fields of primrose, the park with the monkey pen, the town was the same as ever. After driving around for a while on the road that wound its way into the mountains, I drove along the river towards the ocean, then parked my car at the mouth of the river and dipped my legs in the water to cool them

off. Two well-tanned girls on the tennis court, hitting the ball back and forth, wearing their white hats and sunglasses. The rays of the sun bringing the afternoon suddenly increased in intensity, and as they swung their rackets, their sweat flew out onto the court.

After watching them for five minutes, I went back to my car, put down my seat, and closed my eyes and listened to the sound of the waves mixing with the sound of the ball being hit.

The scent of the sea and the burning asphalt being carried on the southerly wind made me think of summers past. The warmth of a girl's skin, old rock n' roll, button-down shirts right out of the wash, the smell of cigarettes smoked in the pool locker room, faint premonitions, everyone's sweet, limitless summer dreams. And then one year (when was it?), those dreams didn't come back.

When I arrived at J's Bar at exactly two o'clock, the Rat was sitting on a guardrail reading Kazantzakis' Christ Recrucified.

"Where's the girl?" I asked.

He silently closed his book, got into his car, and put on his sunglasses and said, "She's not coming."

"Not coming?"

"Not coming."

I sighed and loosened my necktie, pitched my jacket into the backseat, and lit a cigarette.

"So, where are we going?"

"The zoo."

"Great," I said.

28

Let me tell you about the town. The town where I was born, raised, and slept with my first girl. Ocean in front, mountains in back, and next to it is a large port city. It's a small town. Speeding back from the port city, you decide not to smoke, because by the time you light a match you'd blow right by the town.

The population's a little over seven thousand. This number has hardly changed after five years. Most of them live in two-story houses with yards, own cars, and more than a few of them even have two cars. This number isn't my vague recollection, it was the number published by the municipal census bureau at the end of the fiscal year. It's nice to live in a place with two-story houses.

The Rat lived in a three-story house which went to far as to have a hothouse on the roof. Set into the hillside was a garage, with his father's Benz and the Rat's Triumph TR III lined up snugly inside. Strangely, the part of the Rat's house that emanated the homelike atmosphere the most was this garage. The garage was large enough that it seemed like a small airplane would fit right in it, and inside there was a collection of things that had fallen into disuse or were replaced by newer things inside the house: televisions and refrigerators, a sofa, a table and chairs, a stereo system, a sideboard; with all of these things arranged neatly in the garage, we had a lot of good times sitting out there drinking beer. As for the Rat's father, I know very little about him. I never met him. When I'd ask about him, 'He's a guy, and he's much older than me,' was the Rat's answer.

According to rumor, the Rat's father used to be incredibly poor. This was before the war. Just before the war started, he scraped together enough money to acquire a chemical plant and sold insect-repelling ointment. There was some question as to its effectiveness, but as the front lines expanded southward, it practically flew off the shelves. When the war ended, he put the ointment in a warehouse, and shortly after that he sold dubious vitamin powder, which, after the Korean War ended, he repackaged as household detergent. Everyone seems to agree on this point. It seems quite possible. Twenty-five years ago, the insect repelling ointment-slathered bodies of Japanese soldiers piled up like mountains in the jungles of New Guinea, and now toilet cleaner stamped with the same insignia lies toppled in the bathrooms of houses everywhere. Thanks to that, the Rat's father was loaded. Of course, I also had friends who were poor. One kid, his dad was a bus driver for the town. There're probably rich bus drivers out there, but my friend's dad wasn't one of them. His parents were almost never home, so I hung out there quite a bit. His dad would be driving the bus, or maybe at the racetrack, and his mom would be out all day at her part-time job.

He was in the same grade as me, but our friendship began with a chance occurrence. One day, on my lunch break, I was taking a piss and he came over and stood next to me and unzipped his jeans. We pissed together in silence, then went to wash our hands when we were finished.

"I've got something you might wanna see," he said as he wiped his hands on the ass of his jeans.

"Yeah?"

"You wanna see it?"

He pulled a picture from his wallet and handed it to me. It was a naked girl with her thighs completely spread out, a beer bottle jammed up inside.

"It's great, yeah?"

"Sure thing."

"If you come over to my house, there's even better ones," he said.

That's how we became friends.

The town is home to many different kinds of people. In my eighteen years there, I learned lots of things. The town really took root in my heart, and most of my memories are tied to it. However, when I left town to go to college, I was relieved from the bottom of my soul.

For summer vacation and spring break I go back there, but I usually just end up drinking too much beer.

29

In just one week, the Rat's condition worsened. Partially due to the onset of autumn, probably also due to some girl. The Rat didn't breathe a word about any of it.

When the Rat wasn't around, I grabbed J and tried to shake him down for a little information.

"Hey, what's up with the Rat?"

"Well, you know as much as I do. It's just because it's the end of the summer."

With the start of autumn, the Rat's spirits always fell. He'd sit at the counter and stare at some book, holding up his end of our conversation only with oneword answers. When the evening came and that cool wind blew, and the smell of fall could be felt, the Rat stopped drinking beer and started gulping down bourbon, feeding limitless amounts of coins into the jukebox and kicking the pinball machine until the TILT light lit up and J got flustered.

"He probably feels like he's being left behind. You know how that feels," said J.

"Yeah?"

"Everyone's leaving. Going back to school, going back to work. Aren't you headed back yourself?"

"Yeah."

"So you know what I mean."

I nodded. "And the girl?"

"It's been awhile, so I don't remember so well."

"Did something happen between them?"

"Who knows?"

J mumbled something and went back to his work. I didn't press the issue any further. I went over to the jukebox, put some change in it, picked a few songs, then went back to the counter to drink beer. Ten minutes later, J came back over and stood in front of me.

"Hey, the Rat really didn't say anything to you?"

"Nope."

"Weird."

"You think so?"

He kept polishing the glass in his hand as he thought it over.

"He really seemed like he wanted to talk to you about it."

"So why didn't he?"

"It's hard for him. He feels like you'll give him a hard time."

"I wouldn't do that."

"It just seems that way. He's felt that way for a long time. He's a real easy-going kid, but when it comes to you, there's something there...I'm not saying anything bad about you or anything."

"I know that."

"Anyway, I've got twenty years on you, and in that time I've seen quite a bit. 'Cause of that, this is, well, it's just..."

"You're worried."

"Yeah."

I laughed and drank my beer.

"I'll try and talk to him."

"I think that'd be good."

J put out his cigarette and went back to work. I got up from my seat and went to the washroom, washed my hands, and looked at my face lit up in the mirror. Then I went back and spaced out as I drank another beer.

30

Once upon a time, everybody was preoccupied with being cool.

When I finished high school, I resolved to say only half of what I was really thinking. I don't know why, but that was the plan. Over the course of a few years, I was able to stick to this. Then one day I discovered that I was no longer the kind of person who could just say half of what he was really feeling.

I don't know what that had to do with being cool. However, if you could call an old refrigerator in desperate need of defrosting cool, that was me. In that vein, I was caught in the ebb and flow of time, and when my consciousness begged for sleep, I kickstarted it with beer and cigarettes to keep on writing like this. I took lots of hot showers, shaved twice a day, and listened to old records ad infinitum. Right now, behind me, those old-fashioned Peter, Paul, and Mary are singing:

"Don't think twice, it's alright."

31

The following day, I invited the Rat to the pool at the hotel on the mountainside. Summer was almost over, traffic was rough, and there were only ten other guests at the pool. Of them, half were swimming and the other half were contentedly-sunbathing Americans staying there.

The hotel was a remodeled nobleman's estate spanned by a splendid lawn, the pool and the main wing partitioned by a hedge rising up a slightly inclining hill, with a clear view of the ocean, the town, and the harbor below.

After racing the Rat back and forth down the length of the twenty-five meter pool, we sat in the deck chairs and drank cola. I caught my breath and then in the time it took to take one hit of my cigarette, the Rat was all alone, his gaze fixed absently on an American girl swimming beautifully.

In the brilliant sky, a few jet trails could be seen, stuck to the sky as if frozen there.

"I feel like lots more planes used to fly by when I was a kid," said the Rat as he looked up.

"They were mostly US Air Force planes, though. Twin-fuselage propeller planes. You've seen 'em?"

"Like the P-38?"

"Nah, transport planes. Much bigger than P-38s. They'd be flying really low, and you could see the emblems painted on the side...also I saw a DC-6, a DC-7, and a Sabrejet."

"Those are really old."

"Yep, back from the Eisenhower days. The cruisers would enter the bay, and the town would be full of sailors. You ever seen an MP?"

"Yeah."

"Times change," he sighed. "Not that I particularly like sailors or anything..."

I nodded.

"The Sabres were really great planes. They were only used to drop napalm. You ever see an airplane drop napalm?"

"Just in war movies."

"People really think up a lot of things. And napalm is one of them. After ten years, you'd even start to miss the napalm, I bet."

I laughed and lit my second cigarette. "You really like airplanes, don't you?"

"I thought I wanted to be a pilot, back in those days. But my eyes were bad, so I gave it up."

"Yeah?"

"I like the sky. You can look at it forever and never get tired of it, and when you don't want to look at it anymore, you stop."

The Rat was silent for five minutes, then suddenly spoke.

"Sometimes, there's nothing I can do, I just can't stand it any longer. 'Cause I'm rich."

"I can't pretend to know how you feel," I said resignedly, "but it's okay to run away. If you really feel that way."

"Probably...I think that would be the best thing to do. Go to some town I don't know, start all over again. Wouldn't be too bad."

“You won’t go back to college?”

“I’m done. There’s no way I can go back.”

From behind his sunglasses, the Rat’s eyes followed the girl who was still swimming.

“Why’d you quit?”

“I don’t know, ‘cause I was bored? Still, in my own way, I tried my best. More than even I could believe. I thought about other people just as much as myself, and thanks to that I got punched by a policeman. But, when the time comes, everybody goes back to their own routine. I just had nowhere to go back to. Like a game of musical chairs.”

“So what are you going to do?”

He wiped his legs with a towel as he thought this over.

“I’m thinking of writing novels. What do you think?”

“Of course I think it’s a great idea.”

He nodded.

“What kind of novels?”

“Good ones. By my standards, anyway. Me, I don’t think I have talent or anything. At least, I think that my writing has got to be the result of some epiphany or it won’t have any meaning. Don’t you think?”

“I agree.”

“I’ve got to write for myself...or maybe for the cicadas.”

“Cicadas?”

“Yep.”

The Rat fiddled around for a moment with the Kennedy half-dollar hung around his neck as a pendant.

“Some years back, me and this girl went to Nara. It was a terribly hot summer afternoon, and we’d been walking on these mountain trails for three whole hours. During that time, to give you an idea, we had for company: the shrieking of wild birds shooting out of the trees, these monster cicadas buzzing across the paths between the rice fields, and the like. ‘Cause it was hot as hell, you know.

“After walking for a bit, we sat on a hillside covered thick with summer grass, and there was a nice breeze blowing the sweat off our bodies. There was a deep moat stretching out below the hill, and on the other side was this mound, covered with trees, looking like an island. It was a burial mound. For some Emperor from a long time ago. You ever seen one?”

I nodded.

“Looking at that, I started thinking, ‘why did they make such a huge tomb for him?’ Of course, every grave has meaning. Like they say, everybody dies sometime. They teach you that.

“Still, this was just too big. Bigness, sometimes it changes the very essence of something into something else entirely. Speaking practically, it was like this didn’t even look like a tomb. A mountain. The surface of the moat was covered with frogs and water plants, and the whole edge of it was covered with cobwebs.

“I stared at it in silence, the wind from the water clearing my ears. What I felt at that time, I really can’t even put into words. No, wait, it wasn’t really a feeling. It was its own completely-packaged sensation. In other words, the cicadas and frogs and spiders, they were all one thing flowing into space.”

Saying this, the Rat drank the last sip of his already-flat cola.

“When I’m writing, I’m reminded of that summer afternoon and that overgrown burial mound. Then I think this: the cicadas and frogs and spiders, the summer grass and the wind, if I could write for them, it would be a wonderful thing.”

Finishing his story, the Rat folded both his arms behind his head and stared quietly up at the sky.

“So...have you tried writing anything?”

“Nope, I can’t write a single line. I can’t write anything.”

“Really?”

“‘Ye are the salt of the earth.’”

“What?”

“But if the salt hath lost its savor, wherewith shall it be salted?”

So said the Rat.

When the evening sun started to dim, we left the pool and went into the hotel’s small bar, which was filled with Mantovani’s Italian mood music, and drank cold beer. Through the large windows, we could clearly make out the lights of the harbor.

“What happened with the girl?” I’d made up my mind to ask.

The Rat wiped the foam off his mouth with the back of his hand, then gazed at the ceiling as if suddenly remembering something.

“I’ll come right out and say it, I wasn’t going to say anything to you about that. Because it was stupid.”

“But you tried once, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. But I thought it over all night and gave up on the idea. There are some things in the world you just can’t do anything about.”

“For example?”

“Cavities, for example. One day your tooth just starts hurting. Someone comforting you isn’t going to make it stop hurting. When that happens, you just start to get mad at yourself. Then you start to get really pissed off at the people who aren’t pissed off. Know what I mean?”

“Kind of,” I said, “still, think about this. Everyone’s built the same. It’s like we’re all riding together on a broken airplane. Of course there are lucky people, there are also unlucky people. There’re tough people, and weak people, rich people, and poor people. However, not a single person’s broken the mold with his toughness. We’re all the same. Everyone who has something is afraid of losing it, and people with nothing are worried they’ll forever have nothing. Everyone is the same. The sooner you realize that, the sooner you’ll want to get stronger. Even if you’re just pretending. Don’t you think?”

There aren’t any real strong people anywhere. Only people who can put on a good show of being strong.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

I nodded.

“You really believe all that?”

“Yeah.”

The Rat was silent for a moment, fixing his gaze on his beer glass.

“You sure you’re not bullshitting me?” the Rat said earnestly.

After I drove the Rat back to his house, I dropped by J’s Bar.

“You talk to him?”

“I did.”

“That’s good.”

Saying that, J set a plate of French fries in front of me.

32

In spite of Derek Hartfield’s large volume of work, when it came to the subjects of life, dreams, love, and the like, he was an extremely rare writer. Comparatively serious (‘serious’ meaning stories without appearances by spacemen and monsters) was his 1937 semi-autobiographical book *Halfway ‘Round the Rainbow*, in which, through all the irony, jokes, insults, and paradoxes, he revealed just a little bit of his true feelings.

“My most sacred books are in this room, and by that I mean the stack of alphabetized phonebooks on which I swear to tell the whole truth and nothing but. The truth is this: life is empty. However, help is available. If you know that from the outset, it’s almost as if life’s not really meaningless at all. We’ve really worked tirelessly to build it all up, and then tried with all our might to wear it down, and now it’s empty. No matter how hard you work, or how hard you try to bring it down, none of that’ll be written here. ‘Cause it’s a real pain in the ass. For those of you who really want to know, you can read about it in Romain Rolland’s novel *Jean-Christophe*. It’s all there, written out for you.”

The reason Hartfield was so terribly enamored with *Jean-Christophe* is, quite simply, because it diligently outlined the life of one person from birth until death and, moreover, it was a terribly long novel. In his opinion, a novel could present information even better than graphs, chronologies, and the like, and he thought the accuracy was comparable as well.

He was always critical of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*.

‘Of course, I have no problem with the length of it,’

he noted. ‘It’s that it lacks a clear conceptualization of outer space, and the author has given the reader a mishmash of impressions.’ The phrase

'conceptualization of space,' the way he uses it, usually meant 'sterility.'

The novel he liked the most was A Dog of Flanders.

'Hey, you. Can you believe a dog died just for a picture?'

During an interview, a newspaper reporter once asked Hartfield this:

"Your book's protagonist, Waldo, has died twice on Mars, and once on Venus. Isn't this some kind of contradiction?"

Hartfield's reply was this:

"Do you know how time flows in the void of space?"

"No," he responded, "but nobody knows that."

"If writers only wrote about things everybody knew, what the hell would be the point of writing?"

* * *

Out of all of Hartfield's works, one story, The Wells of Mars stands out, almost suggesting a hint of Ray Bradbury's future appearance on the writing scene. It was a long time ago when I read it, and I forget most of the details, so I'm only going to give you the most important points.

This story is about the countless bottomless wells dug into the surface of Mars and the young man who climbed down into one. These wells were dug by the Martians tens of thousands of years ago, and that's well-known, but the strange thing is that all of them, and I mean all of them, were dug so they wouldn't strike water. So the question of why the hell they bothered to dig them is something nobody knew. As for the Martians themselves, aside from these wells, there wasn't a trace of them left. Their written language, their dwellings, their plates and bowls, metallic infrastructure, their graves, their rockets, their vending machines, even their shells, there was absolutely nothing left. Just those wells. And the Earthlings had a hell of a time deciding whether or not you could even call that civilization, but those wells were definitely really well made, and all those tens of thousands of years later there wasn't even so much as a single brick of a ruin.

To be sure, a few adventurers and explorers went down into those wells. They descended with their ropes in hand, but due to the depth of the wells and length of the caves, they had to turn back for the surface, and of those without ropes, not a single soul ever returned.

One day, there was this young guy wandering around in outer space, and he went into one of the wells. He was sick of the utter hugeness of space, and he wanted to die alone, without anybody around. As he descended, the well started to feel like a more and more relaxing and pleasant place, and this uncanny, familiar power started to envelop his body. After going down an entire kilometer, he found a real cave and climbed into it, and he continued to walk along, following its winding paths along intently. He had no idea how long he was walking along. This is because his watch stopped. It could have been two hours, but it just as easily could have been two days. It was like he couldn't feel hunger or exhaustion, and the previously-mentioned strange power continuing to encase his body just as before. And then, all of a sudden, he felt sunlight. Turns out the cave was connected to a different well. He clambered up out of the well, and once again he was above ground. He sat on the edge of the well and stared at wasteland ahead of him free of any obstacles, and then he gazed at the sun. Something about it was different. The smell of the wind, the sun...the sun was in the middle of the sky, an orange twilight sun that had become an enormous orange blob.

"In 250,000 years, the sun is going to explode.

Click...OFF. 250,000 years. Not such a long time,"

the wind whispered to him.

"Don't worry about me. I'm just the wind. If you want to call me that, or call me a Martian, that's okay, too. I'm not an evil echo. But then, words don't mean anything to me."

"But, you're speaking."

"Me? You're the one talking. I'm just giving your spirit a little hint, a little prodding."

"What the hell happened to the sun?"

"It's old. It's dying. Me, you, there's nothing either of us can do."

"How'd it happen so quickly...?"

"Not quickly at all. In the time it took you to get out of that well, fifteen hundred million years have passed. As your people say, time flies. That well you came from was built along a distortion in spacetime. To put it another way, we wander around through time. From the birth of the universe 'til its death. And so we never live, and we never die. We're the wind."

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Ask away."

"What have you learned?"

The atmosphere shook a little, and the wind laughed. And then, the stillness of eternity once again covered the surface of Mars. The young man pulled a revolver out of his pocket, put the muzzle to his temple, and pulled the trigger.

33

The phone rang.

"I'm back," she said.

"Let's meet up."

"Are you free now?"

"Of course."

"Pick me up in front of the YWCA at five."

"What do you do at the YWCA?"

"French lessons."

"French?"

"Oui."

After I hung up the phone, I took a shower and drank a beer. When I finished it, the evening rain started in like a waterfall.

When I made it to the YWCA the rain had almost completely lifted, but the girls coming out of the gate looked distrustfully up at the sky as they opened and closed their umbrellas. I parked on the side of the road facing the gate, cut the engine, and lit a cigarette. Soaked by the rain, the gateposts looked like two tombstones in a wasteland. Next to the dirty, gloomy YWCA building were newer buildings, but they were just cheap rentals, and stuck to the rooftop was a giant billboard showing a refrigerator. A thirty year-old seemingly telling the world that she was, indeed, anemic, was slouching, but still looking as if she were having a good time opening the refrigerator door, and thanks to her, I could take a peek at the contents inside.

In the freezer, there were ice cubes, a liter of vanilla ice cream, and a package of frozen shrimp. On the second shelf was a carton of eggs, some butter, camembert cheese, and boneless ham. The third shelf held packs of fish and chicken, and in the plastic case at the very bottom were tomatoes, cucumbers, asparagus and grapefruit. In the door, there were large bottles of cola and beer, three of each, and a carton of milk.

While I waited for her, leaning on the steering wheel, I thought about the order in which I would eat the food in the refrigerator, but, at any rate, one liter was way too much ice cream, and the lack of salad dressing for the lettuce was lethal.

It was a little after five when she came through the gate. She was wearing a pink Lacoste polo shirt and a miniskirt with white stripes. She had her hair up, and she was wearing glasses. In just one week, she had aged almost three years. It was probably due to the hair and the glasses.

"What a downpour," she said as she got into the passenger seat, nervously fixing the hem of her skirt.

"You get wet?"

"A little."

From the backseat, I pulled out a beach towel I'd had there from my trip to the pool and I handed it to her. She used it to wipe the sweat off her face, then patted her hair with it a few times before she gave it back.

"When it started pouring, I was having coffee near here. It was like a flood."

"Still, it really cooled things off."

"Yeah."

She nodded, then put her arm out the window to check the temperature outside. Between us, I sensed a different vibe than the last time we'd met, something in the atmosphere was a little off.

"Did you have fun on your trip?" I asked.

"I didn't really go on a trip. I lied to you about that."

"Why'd you lie to me?"

"I'll tell you later."

34

Sometimes I tell lies.

The last time I told a lie was last year. Telling lies is a really terrible thing. These days, lies and silence are the two greatest sins in human society, you might say. In reality, we tell lots of lies, and we often break into silence.

However, if we were constantly talking year-round, and telling only the truth, truth would probably lose some of its value.

* * *

Last autumn, my girlfriend and I were naked, having climbed into bed together. And then we got really hungry.

“Don’t you have anything to eat?” I asked her.

“I’ll go and check.”

She rose from the bed, naked, opened the refrigerator and took out some old bread she’d found, made some simple sandwiches with lettuce and sausage, then brought them back to bed with some instant coffee. Being October, it was a really cold night, and when she crawled back into bed her body was completely chilled, like canned salmon.

“There wasn’t any mustard.”

“Mmm...delicious.”

Wrapped up in blankets in her futon, we munched on sandwiches as we watched an old movie on television.

It was *The Bridge on the River Kwai*.

In the end, when the bridge was bombed, she groaned for a little while.

“Why’d you go through all that just to build a bridge?” she said with her finger pointed to the dumbfounded, petrified Alec Guinness.

“So they could keep their pride.”

“Hmph,” she said with her mouth stuffed full of bread, as she thought for a moment on the subject of human pride. It was always this way, but I had no idea what the hell was going on inside her head.

“Hey, do you love me?”

“Sure.”

“You wanna get married?”

“Now? Right away?”

“Sometime...someday.”

“Of course I’d like to marry you.”

“But until I asked you about it, you’ve never breathed a word about it.”

“I forgot to tell you.”

“Hmm...how many kids do you want?”

“Three.”

“Boys? Girls?”

“Two girls and a boy.”

She washed down the bread in her mouth with some coffee and then fixed her eyes upon my face.

“LIAR!”

She said.

However, she was mistaken. I only lied once. **35**

We went into a small restaurant near the harbor, finished a simple meal, and ordered a Bloody Mary and a bourbon.

“You wanna know the truth?” she asked.

“Last year, I dissected a cow.”

“Yeah?”

“When I ripped open its stomach, there was only a handful of grass inside. I put that grass in a plastic bag and took it home,

then set it on top of my desk. When I'm feeling bad about something, I stare at that lump of grass and think about this: why do cows take this unappetizing, miserable-looking food and reverently eat it, chewing their cud?"

She laughed a little, pursing her lips, then gazed at my face.

"I understand. I won't say a word."

I nodded.

"There's something I want to ask you. Can I?"

"Go ahead."

"Why do people die?"

"Because we're evolving. One individual can't withstand all the energy of evolution, so we go through the alternation of generations. Of course, that's just one theory."

"Even now, we're evolving?"

"Little by little."

"What's the point of evolving?"

"There are many opinions about that. One thing that's for sure is that the universe itself is evolving. Putting aside the question of whether or not it's some kind of trend or willful intervention, the universe is evolving, and in the end, we're merely a small part of that." I pushed away my glass of whiskey and lit a cigarette.

"Where that energy comes from, nobody knows."

"Really?"

"Really."

Spinning the ice around in her glass with her fingertip, she stared at the white tablecloth.

"Hey, after I die, a hundred years later, nobody'll remember I even existed."

"Looks that way."

Leaving the restaurant, in the midst of a strangely vivid twilight, we walked slowly along the quiet lane of warehouses. Walking together, I could sense the smell of her hair conditioner. The wind, shaking the leaves of the willow trees, made me think just a little bit about the end of the summer. After walking for a while, she grabbed my hand with her five-fingered hand.

"When are you going back to Tokyo?"

"Next week. I've got a test."

She was silent.

"I'll be back in the winter. It's just until around Christmas. My birthday's on December 24th."

She nodded, but she seemed to be thinking about something else.

"You're a Capricorn?"

"Yeah, you?"

"Me too. January 10th."

"Feels like an unlucky star to be born under. Same as Jesus Christ."

"Yeah," saying that, she grabbed my hand again.

"I'm feeling like I'll get lonely once you're gone."

"We'll definitely see each other again."

She didn't say anything to that.

One by one, the warehouses were really starting to look old, a deep greenish, smooth moss clinging there in the spaces between the bricks. There were sturdy-looking iron bars set into the high, dark windows, on each heavily-rusted door hung the nameplate bearing the name of the trading company. The distinct smell of the ocean could be felt throughout the vicinity, interrupted by the row of warehouses, and then ended like a row of

willow trees, or a pulled-out tooth. We crossed the overgrown harbor railroad tracks, sat on the steps of a warehouse storing concrete water-breakers that had fallen into disuse, and stared out at the ocean.

There were lights on at the dock in front of the shipbuilding company, next to that a Greek freighter unloading cargo with its waterline rising, floating there like it was abandoned. The white paint of the deck was red with rust, the sides of it encrusted with shells and resembling an injured person's scabs. For a really long time, we stared in silence at the ocean and the sky and the ships. The evening wind crossed the ocean, and while it shook the grass, the darkness slowly replaced the faint night, and a few stars started to twinkle above the dock.

After the long silence, she made left hand into a fist, and nervously tapped her right palm over and over. She kept tapping it until her palm was red, and then she stared at as if she were disappointed.

"I hate everybody," she spat out.

"You hate me too?"

"Sorry 'bout that," she said, blushing, and then as if pulling herself together, she set her hands back atop her knees.

"You're not such a bad person."

"That's it?"

As if smiling slightly, she nodded, and making a series of small, shaking movements, lit a cigarette. The smoke flew on the ocean breeze, slipped through the sides of her hair, and then disappeared into the darkness.

"Keeping myself all alone, I could hear lots of people coming along and talking to me...people I know, people I don't know, my father, my mother, my high school teachers, lots of people."

I nodded.

"Usually, they say nothing but terrible things.

'Fuck off,' and other filthy things..."

"Like?"

"I don't wanna say."

She took just two drags of her cigarette before stamping it out under her leather sandal, then gently rubbed her eye with her fingertip.

"Do you think I'm sick?"

"Hard to say," I said, inflecting it the way I'd say 'I don't know,' and shook my head.

"If you're worried, you should go see a doctor."

"I'm okay. Don't worry about me."

She lit her second cigarette, then tried to laugh but couldn't quite pull it off.

"You're the first person I've talked to about this."

I grasped her hand. Her hand was forever shaking slightly, her fingers and the spaces between oozing cold sweat.

"I really didn't want to lie to you."

"I know."

We once again descended into silence, and as we listened to the small waves crashing against the breakers, we didn't speak. It was a long time, longer than I can remember.

When I finally regained my senses, she was crying. I ran my finger along her tear-soaked cheek and then put my arms around her shoulders.

It'd been a long time since I'd felt the scent of summer. The smell of the ocean, the distant steam whistle, feeling the skin of a girl's hand, the lemon scent of her conditioner, the evening wind, faint hopes, summer dreams...

However, like a piece of tracing paper slipping away, everything had, little by little, become irreparably different than it had been in the past. **36**

It took us a half hour to walk back to her apartment.

It was a pleasant-feeling night, and after she finished crying, she was frighteningly cheerful. On the way home, we popped into a few stores and shopped intently for things we didn't really need. Things like strawberry-scented toothpaste and gaudy beach towels, some kind of puzzle made in Denmark, six ballpoint pens, clutching these things we walked uphill, occasionally pausing to look back towards the harbor.

"Hey, your car's still parked over there, yeah?"

"I'll go back and get it later."

"Would you mind waiting until tomorrow?"

"I don't mind."

And then we took our time walking the rest of the way.

"I don't want to be alone tonight."

She was looking at the pavement on the street below as she said this.

I nodded.

"But you won't be able to shine your dad's shoes..."

"He should shine them himself once in a while."

"Think he'll do it, himself?"

"Yeah, he's a man of integrity."

It was a quiet night.

She turned over slowly in her sleep, pushing her nose against my right shoulder.

"I'm cold."

"You're cold? It's eighty-six degrees!"

"I don't know, but I'm cold."

I grabbed the blanket that had been kicked down past our feet and pulled it up to our necks and then held her. Her body was rattling a little as she shook ever so slightly.

"Are you feeling well?"

She shook her head a little.

"I'm scared."

"Of?"

"Everything. You're not scared?"

"Not particularly."

She was silent. It was a silence as if she were taking my answer by its hand to confirm its existence.

"You want to have sex with me?"

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry. I can't today."

Still embracing her, I nodded, saying nothing.

"I just had the operation."

"A baby?"

"Yes."

She lessened the pressure with which she was moving her hand around on my back, using her fingers to make small circles behind my shoulders over and over again.

"It's strange, I don't remember a thing."

"Yeah?"

"The man. I've completely forgotten him. I can't even remember his face."

I patted her hair with my palm.

"I felt like I could really fall for him. For just a short instant...you ever fall in love with someone?"

"Yeah."

"Can you remember her face?"

I tried to imagine the faces of the three girls from before, but it was strange, I couldn't bring even one of them clearly into mind.

"Nope," I said.

"Strange. Why do you think that is?"

"Probably because that would be too easy."

With the side of her face pressed to my chest, she nodded silently a few times.

"You know, if you really want to do it, we can probably do something else..."

"Nah, don't worry about it."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

She once again increased the pressure behind the hand she was moving around on my back. I could feel her breasts on the center of my stomach. I really wanted to drink a beer.

"Starting quite a few years back, I've failed at lots of things."

"How many years, do you think?"

"Twelve, thirteen...the year my father got sick. I don't remember a single thing before that. Just a bunch of bad stuff. There's always an unlucky wind blowing above my head."

"The winds can change direction."

"You really think so?"

"It's gotta happen sometime."

She was quiet for a moment. In the midst of the dryness of that desert-like silence, she took a second to soak up my words, leaving only bitterness in her mouth.

"I've tried many times to believe that, but it's never worked out. I've tried to get close to people, tried to be more patient, but..."

Without saying another word, we put our arms around each other. She put her head on my chest, her lips nestled lightly on my nipple and was still for a lone time, as if asleep.

For a long time, a really long time, she was silent. Half-dozing, I gazed up at the dark ceiling.

"Mom..." she murmured softly, as if in a dream. She was sleeping.

37

Hey, how's it going? This is Radio NEB's Pop Music Requests. Saturday night has come around once again. For the next two hours, we've got lots of great music for you to listen to. By the way, summer is drawing to a close. How was it? Did you have a good summer?

Today, before I start playing records, I'd like to tell you about this letter I received. I'd like to read it for you. Here's the letter:

How are you?

I enjoy listening to your program every week. Time goes by quickly; this fall will mark my third year of living in this hospital.

Time really does go by before you know it. Of course, gazing at a little bit of the scenery from the window of my air-conditioned hospital room, the change of the seasons holds little meaning for me, but still, when one season ends, another comes calling, and that really does make my heart dance.

I'm seventeen now, for these last three years I've been unable to read a book, unable to watch television, unable to walk...no, I'm unable to rise from bed, and it's gotten to the point where I can't even shift the positions in my sleep. My sister, visiting me, is the one kind enough to write this letter for me. She stopped going to college so she could look after me. Of course, I'm incredibly grateful to her. What I've learned during my three years of lying in this hospital bed is that even from whatever miserable experience you might have, there is something to be learned, and it's because of this that I can find the will to keep on living.

My illness appears to be related to nerve damage in my spinal cord. It's a terribly debilitating disease, but there is, of course, a chance of recovery.

It might only be three percent...but my doctor (a wonderful person) gave me an example illustrating the rate of recovery from my illness. The way he explained it, the odds are longer than a pitcher throwing a no-hit, no-run game against the Giants, but not quite as unlikely as a complete shutout.

Sometimes, when I think I'm never going to recover, I get really scared. So scared I want to scream out.

I feel like I'm going to spend my whole life like this, like a stone, lying on my back staring at the ceiling, unable to read a book, unable to walk in the wind, unable to be loved by anyone, growing old here for decades and decades, and then die here quietly, I think of this and I just can't stand it and I get so sad. When I wake up at 3am in the middle of the night, I feel like I can hear the bones in my spine dissolving. In reality, that's probably what's happening. I won't say any more about that unpleasant business. So, like my sister coming here every day, hundreds of times over, to encourage me, I'm going to try to only think positive thoughts. And I'll be able to fall sound asleep at night. Because the worst thoughts usually strike in the dead of night. From my hospital window, I can see the harbor. Every morning, I get out of bed and walk to the harbor and take deep breaths of the ocean air...at least, I imagine that I do. If I could do this just once, just one time, I think I could understand what the world is all about. I believe that. And if I could comprehend just that little bit, I think I'd even be able to endure spending the rest of my life in this bed. Goodbye. Take care.

The letter is unsigned.

It was yesterday, a little after 3pm, when I received this letter. I was sitting in the break room, reading it as I drank coffee, and when my work finished in the evening, I walked down to the harbor, looking up towards the mountains. If you can see the harbor from your hospital room, I expect I can see your hospital room from the harbor. I could see quite a few lights when I looked at the mountains. Of course, I have no idea which of the lights was your hospital room. One thing I saw was the lights of a rundown-looking house, and I could also see the lights of a big mansion. There were hotels, schools, also company buildings. Really just many different kinds of people living their various lives, I thought. It was the first time I'd really thought about it like that. Thinking that, I burst out in tears. It was the first time I'd cried in a really long time. But hey, it's okay, I wasn't crying because I felt sorry for you. What I want to say is this. I'm only going to say it once, so listen up: I love all of you.

Ten years from now, this show and the records I played, and me, if you still remember all this, remember what I told you just now.

I'll play the song she requested. Elvis Presley's Good Luck Charm.

After this song, we've got one hour and fifty minutes left, and we'll go back to the same old lowbrow comedy routine we always do. Thank you for listening.

38

The evening of my return to Tokyo, with my suitcase in hand, I peeked my head into J's Bar. It wasn't open yet, but J let me in and gave me a beer.

"I'm taking the bus back tonight."

Facing the potatoes for the French fries, he nodded a few times.

"I'll be sad to see you go. Our monkey business is finished," he said as he pointed to the picture on the counter. "The Rat is sad, too."

"Yeah."

"Tokyo seems like a lot of fun."

"Anyplace is the same as any other."

"Perhaps. Since the Tokyo Olympics, I haven't left this town even once."

"You like this town that much?"

"You put it best: any place is as good as any other."

"Yeah."

"Still, after a few years go by, I'd like to go back to China one time. I've never been there even once...I think about it when I go down to the harbor and look at the ships."

"My uncle died in China."

"Yeah...lots of people died there. Still, we're all brothers."

J treated me to a few beers, and as a bonus he threw some French fries into a plastic bag and gave them to me to take.

"Thank you."

"No big deal. Just something I felt like doing...hey, you kids grow up so fast. First time I met you, you were still in high school."

I laughed and nodded and said goodbye.

"Take care," J said.

On the bar's calendar, the aphorism written under August 26th was:

“What you give freely to others, you will always receive in turn.”

I bought a ticket for the night bus, went to the pickup spot and sat on a bench, gazing at the lights of the town. As the night grew later, the lights started to go out, leaving only the streetlights and neon signs. The sea breeze blew over the faint sound of a steam whistle.

There were two station workers, one on each side of the bus door, taking tickets and checking seat numbers. When I handed over my ticket, he said,

“Number twenty-one China.”

“China?”

“Yeah, seat 21-C, it’s a kind of phonetic alphabet. A is America, B for Brazil, C for China, D for Denmark. You’ll be upset if you hear me wrong and end up in the wrong seat.”

Saying that, he pointed to his partner, who was in charge of consulting the seating chart. I nodded and boarded the bus, sat in seat 21-C, and ate my stillwarm French fries. Things pass us by. Nobody can catch them. That’s the way we live our lives.

39

This is where my story ends, but of course there’s an epilogue.

I’m twenty-nine, the Rat is thirty. Kind of an uninteresting age. At the time of the highway expansion, J’s Bar was remodeled and became a nice little place. Going in there, you can see J every day, same as ever, facing his bucket of potatoes, and you can hear the regulars complaining about how much better things used to be as they keep on drinking their beers.

I got married, and I’m now living in Tokyo. Whenever a new Sam Peckinpah movie comes out, my wife and I go to the movie theatre, stop at Hibiya Park on the way back and drink two beers each, scattering our popcorn for the pigeons. Out of Peckinpah’s movies, my favorite is Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia, and she says she likes Convoy the best. Of non-Peckinpah movies, I like Ashes and Diamonds, and she likes Mother Joan of the Angels. Live together long enough, and I guess your interests start to coincide.

Am I happy? If you asked me this, I’d have to say,

‘Yeah, I guess.’ Because dreams are, after all, just that: dreams.

The Rat is still writing his novels. He sends me copies of them every year for Christmas. Last year’s was about a cook in a psychiatric hospital’s cafeteria, the one from the year before that was about a comedy band based on The Brothers Karamazov. Same as ever, his novels have no sex scenes, and none of the characters die.

The first page is always a piece of Japanese writing paper bearing this message:

“Happy birthday,

and a

White Christmas.”

Because my birthday is December 24th. The girl with only four fingers on her left hand, I never saw her again. When I went back to the town that winter, she’d quit the record store and vacated her apartment. Then, in a flood of people and in the flow of time, she vanished without a trace. When I go back to the town in the summer, I always walk down the street we walked together, sit on the stone stairs in front of the warehouse and gaze out at the sea. When I think I want to cry, the tears won’t come. That’s just how it is.

That California Girls record, it’s still on my record shelf. When summer comes around I pull it out and listen to it over and over. Then I think of California and drink beer.

Next to the record shelf is my desk, and above my desk hangs the dried-out, nearly mummified remains of the clump of grass. The grass I pulled out of that cow’s stomach.

The picture of the dead girl from the French lit department, it got lost when I moved.

The Beach Boys put out their first new record in a long time.

I wish they all could be California I wish they all could be California girls...

40

Let’s talk one last time about Derek Hartfield. Hartfield was born in 1909 in a small town in Ohio, the same town where he was raised. His father was a taciturn telegraph engineer, his mother, a plump woman, cooked up horoscopes and cookies. During his gloomy youth, he had not a single friend, and when he could find some free time, he’d leaf through comic books and pulp magazines, and eating his mother’s cookies and continuing in the aforementioned manner, he graduated from high school. After graduating, he tried working in the town’s post office, but it didn’t suit him for very long, and from this point forward he believed that his path led only in the direction of being a novelist. He sold his fifth short story to Weird Tales in 1930, getting twenty dollars for the manuscript. For the next year, he spouted out 70,000 word manuscripts at the rate of one per month, the following year his pace increased to 100,000 words, and before he died he was up to 150,000 words. He had to buy a new Remington typewriter

every six months, or so the legend goes.

His books were mostly adventure novels and bizarre stories, and he skillfully unified both those themes in his Waldo the Young Adventurer series, which became his biggest hit, totaling 42 stories in all. Within those stories, Waldo died three times, killed five thousand of his enemies, and (including Martian women) slept with 375 women. Out of those stories, we can read a few of them in translation. Hartfield despised a great deal of things. The post office, high school, publishing companies, carrots, women, dogs...the list goes on and on. However, there were only three things he liked. Guns, cats, and his mother's cookies. To fend off Paramount studios and FBI researchers, he had the biggest, most complete gun collection in the United States. Everything short of antiaircraft and antitank guns. His favorite gun of all was his .38 special revolver with its pearl-inlaid handle, and though it could only hold one bullet at a time, 'With this, I can revolve myself anytime I want,' was one of his favorite sayings.

However, when his mother died in 1938, he took a trip to New York City, climbed the Empire State Building, and jumped off the roof, splattering on the pavement like a frog.

His tombstone, in accordance with his will, bears the following Nietzsche-esque quotation:

"In the light of day, one can comprehend the depths of night's darkness."

Hartfield, once again... (instead of an afterword) To say that if I hadn't come across a writer called Derek Hartfield I wouldn't have started writing, no, I wouldn't go that far. Still, my path to getting here would have probably been completely different. When I was in high school, in a secondhand bookstore in Kobe, looking as if they'd been put there by foreign sailors, there were some Hartfield books, and I rounded them up and bought them. One book was fifty yen. Had the place not been a bookstore, I wouldn't have even recognized them as books. Riding on some freighter, or atop the bed of some junior officer's bunk in a destroyer, these books had made the trip across the Pacific Ocean, and from far across time, they made their way to the top of my desk.

* * *

A few years later, I went over to America. It was a short trip; I went only to see Hartfield's grave. I learned where it was from a letter sent to me by a Mr. Thomas McClure, the enthusiastic (and only) researcher of Derek Hartfield. 'The grave is as small as the heel of a high-heeled shoe. Be sure not to overlook it,' he wrote.

From New York I boarded a Greyhound bus resembling a giant coffin, and it arrived in that small town in Ohio at 7am. Not a single other passenger got off the bus with me. Crossing the fields outside of town, there was the graveyard. It was bigger than the town itself. Above my head, a bunch of skylarks were going round in circles while singing their flight songs. I spent a long hour searching for Hartfield's grave. After plucking some dusty wild roses from nearby and placing them on his tombstone as an offering, I put my hand to the grave, sat down, and smoked a cigarette. Beneath the soft May sunlight, I felt that life and death were just as peaceful. Facing the sky, I closed my eyes and spent a few hours listening to the singing of the skylarks.

This story began there, at that graveyard. Where it eventually ended up, I have no idea.

"Compared to the complexity of the universe,"

Hartfield says, "our world's like the brain tissue of an earthworm."

I'd like to see it, that's my request as well.

* * *

We've come to the end, but in regards to Hartfield's diary, the aforementioned Mr. Thomas McClure's laboriously-written work (The Legend of the Sterile Stars: 1968) provided me with many quotes. I am grateful.

May, 1979

Murakami Haruki