

Socrates

in

Love



Kyoichi Katayama

Translated by Akemi Wegmüller

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Socrates in Love

part

1

THAT MORNING I woke up crying, as usual. I didn't know anymore whether I was sad or not—my feelings had flowed away with the tears. I lay there listlessly in bed until my mother came in and told me to get up.

It wasn't snowing, but the road was frozen white. Half of the cars we saw had their chains on. My dad drove, while Aki's father sat beside him. Aki's mother and I sat in back. The men up front kept talking about the snow. Would we make it to the airport in time? Would the plane take off on schedule? Aki's mom and I hardly said anything at all. I stared out the window at the passing landscape. The fields on either side of the road were covered in snow as far as the eye could see. Rays of sunlight cut through the clouds, coming down on a distant mountain ridge. Aki's mother held the small urn containing ashes in her lap.

The snow got deeper as we neared the crest of the hill. My father stopped the car, and he and Aki's father went out to put chains on the tires. To pass the time, I went for a short

walk. On the other side of the parking area was a grove of trees. Untrampled snow covered the undergrowth, while snow that had piled up in the treetops fell to the ground with a dry sound. When I looked back, beyond the guard-rail, I could see the winter ocean. It was calm and gentle, utterly blue. No matter what I looked at, my memories would suck me in. I closed the lid on my heart and turned my back to the ocean.

The snow in the woods was deep. There were broken branches and hard, stump-like growths that made it hard to walk. Suddenly, somewhere in the grove, a wild bird let out a sharp cry and flew off. I stopped and listened for other noises, but it was as quiet as if the world had nobody left in it. When I closed my eyes, though, I could hear the chains of cars on the nearby road, like the sound of bells. I started not to know where I was or who I was. Then I heard my father calling me.

After we got over the hill, the rest of the drive went smoothly. We arrived at the airport on time, checked in, and headed to the gate.

"Thank you for everything," my father said to Aki's parents.

"We should be thanking you," Aki's father answered, smiling. "I'm sure Aki's very happy to have Sakutaro coming with us."

I glanced at the small urn in Aki's mother's hands. That urn, nestled in its beautiful brocade bag . . . was Aki truly in there?

After the plane took off, I fell asleep and had a dream. It was about Aki when she was still healthy, and in the dream

she was smiling, with that slightly embarrassed smile of hers. She called out to me—"Saku-chan." Her voice lingered in my ears. I wished the dream were real, and this reality a dream. But that wasn't the case. And that was why, whenever I woke up, I'd be crying. It wasn't because I was sad. When you return from a happy dream to sad reality, there's a chasm you have to step across, and you can't cross it without shedding tears. It doesn't matter how many times you do it.

The place we'd left was covered in snow, but the place we landed was a city scorching under the summer sun: Cairns, a beautiful town on the Pacific Ocean. A promenade of palm trees and choking tropical vegetation spread their greenery around luxury hotels facing the bay. Large and small cruise ships waited at the wharf. The taxi taking us to our hotel followed the shore, where strolling tourists were out enjoying the sunset.

"It's like Hawaii," Aki's mother said.

To me, the place was cursed. Nothing about it had changed from four months ago, except for the seasons. Australia had gone from early spring to midsummer. That was all. That was all that had happened.

We were going to spend the night at a hotel and take a morning flight the next day. There was hardly any time difference, so the time when we'd left Japan had just continued its flow. After dinner, I sprawled out on my hotel bed and stared up at the ceiling. And I told myself that Aki wasn't here.

When I'd come to Cairns four months ago, Aki hadn't

been here, then, either. Our class had come for our high school graduation trip and left her in Japan. We'd flown from a Japanese city close to Australia, to an Australian city close to Japan. That was the only nonstop route, and for this odd reason, this city had entered my life. I'd thought it was a beautiful place. Everything was strange and new and interesting, because everything I'd looked at, Aki was looking at with me, *through* me. But now, no matter what I looked at, I felt nothing. What was I supposed to look at here?

That's what it meant for Aki to be gone, what it meant to lose her. I had nothing to look at anymore, whether in Australia or Alaska, the Mediterranean or the Antarctic. No matter where in the world I went, it would be the same: no landscape could move me, nothing beautiful could please me. The person who'd given me the ability to see, know, and feel—the will to live—was gone. She wasn't with me anymore.

Four months. Everything had happened in the time for one season to change to the next. In that time, one girl had disappeared from this world. If you thought of it as one person out of six billion, it didn't mean a thing. But I wasn't there with the six billion. I was in a place where one death had wiped out every emotion. That was where I was. I didn't see anything, hear anything, or feel anything. But was that where I really was? If not, then where was I?

Two

THE FIRST TIME AKI AND I were in the same class together was our second year of junior high. Until then I'd never even heard of her, but by chance we ended up in the same class, out of nine, and by chance our teacher appointed us male and female class representative.

As class representatives, our first job was to go to the hospital to visit a classmate named Oki, who'd broken his leg the first day of school. On the way there, we bought cookies and flowers with the money we'd collected from our teacher and classmates.

Oki was lying on his back in bed, with his leg in a huge plaster cast. I hardly knew anything about him, so I kept quiet while Aki, who'd been in the same class with him the year before, did the talking. I stared out the fourth-floor window at the town. A flower shop, fruit market, candy store, and other businesses formed a small shopping area along the bus route. Beyond that, I could see Castle Hill. Its white tower peeped out from behind the trees, which were bright with new leaves.

"Hey, Matsumoto." Oki suddenly turned toward me. "Your first name's Sakutaro, right?"

"Yeah." I turned from the window.

"Must drive you nuts, huh?" he said.

"What drives me nuts?"

"I mean, it's because of Sakutaro Hagiwara, right?"

I didn't answer.

"Know what *my* first name is?"

"Yeah. Ryunosuke."

"Because of Ryunosuke Akutagawa."

I understood what Oki was getting at.

"They should make it illegal to name your kids after famous writers," he said, nodding. He seemed pleased with himself.

"Actually, it was my grandfather," I said.

"Your grandpa picked your name?"

"Yeah."

"Thanks a lot, huh?"

"Hey, Ryunosuke isn't so bad. Coulda been worse."

"Like what?"

"What if they'd named you Kinnosuke?"

"Kinnosuke? Why?"

"That's Soseki's real first name."

"Huh. I didn't know that."

"Think about it. If your parents' favorite book'd been *Kokoro*, you'd be Kinnosuke Oki now."

"No way," he said, laughing. "Come on, nobody would name their kid Kinnosuke."

"Hey, just suppose. Suppose your name *was* Kinnosuke Oki. You'd be the laughingstock of the entire school."

Oki's expression darkened.

I went on, "You'd blame your parents, run away from home, and become a pro wrestler."

"A pro wrestler? How come?"

"What else could you do with a name like Kinnosuke Oki?"

"Yeah, you're right!"

Aki put the flowers we'd brought into a vase. Oki and I opened the box of cookies and dug in while we kept on

about our oh-so-literary parents.

"Hey, come back soon," Oki called out as we were going. "It gets boring, lying around here all day."

"Don't worry. All the kids from class are gonna start taking turns coming by to fill you in on what you're missing."

"That I could do without."

"Sasaki said she'd drop by to help you study," Aki said, referring to the cutest girl in class.

"Lucky ducky, Oki," I said.

"Yeah, yeah. Okey-dokey," he said, laughing at his stupid pun.

On the way back from the hospital, I asked Aki if she wanted to climb Castle Hill. It was too late to make it back in time for club activities at school, but too early to go straight home. She said all right.

Two paths wound up the hill, one on the north side and one on the south side. The north side was the main approach. We climbed up the trail on the south side, which most people never used because it was so steep and narrow. About halfway up was a park where the two paths met. We made our way up slowly, not talking much.

"You're into rock, aren't you, Matsumoto?" Aki asked.

I glanced at her. "How'd you know?"

"I've seen you trading CDs with your friends."

"What about you, Hirose?"

"That stuff just jumbles up the inside of my head."

"What, rock music?"

"Yeah. My brain gets like those curried beans they serve at lunch."

"Hmm."

"And you're in the kendo club, right?"

"Yeah."

"Don't you have practice today?"

"I told Coach I couldn't make it."

Aki thought this over for a while and then said, "Kinda weird. A kendo guy who's into rock. The two just don't go together."

"Why not? In kendo, when you whack a guy on his face guard, it feels good. That's what listening to rock is like."

"So you don't feel good most of the time?"

"Do you?"

"I don't know what you mean by 'it feels good.'"

I didn't really know either.

Since we were just a couple of junior high classmates, we'd been keeping a reasonable distance from each other. Even so, a faint, sweet scent, maybe her shampoo or conditioner, wafted toward me. It sure was a big difference from the smell of a sweaty face guard. Maybe if you lived with this scent enveloping you year in and year out, you wouldn't feel like listening to rock or whacking people with a bamboo sword.

The edges of the stone steps we were climbing were worn smooth and had patches of green moss growing on them. The earth around the steps was red clay that had a damp look all year round. Aki came to a sudden halt.

"Hydrangeas."

Between the trail and the precipice on its right was a thick clump of hydrangeas. The bushes were covered with baby flowers the size of ten-yen coins.

"I love hydrangeas," she said with a dreamy look. "Let's come back here together when they're blooming."

"Sure," I said. And then added a little hastily, "We're almost at the top."

Three

MY HOUSE stood on the grounds of the public library. It was a two-story, white Victorian and looked like something from the heyday of Westernization a hundred years ago. The house had actually been designated a historic landmark, and whoever lived there couldn't make repairs without permission. "Historic landmark" might sound special, but there was nothing special about living there. In fact, my grandfather had declared it wasn't comfortable for an old man and promptly moved into his own apartment. A house that isn't comfortable for an old man isn't comfortable for anybody. But my father was eccentric in this way, and my mother went along with it. For their kid, it was just annoying.

I didn't know exactly what had brought us here. Aside from my father's eccentricity, it probably had something to do with the fact that my mother worked at the library. Or maybe my grandfather, who used to be a Diet member or something a long time ago, had pulled some strings. Either way, I wasn't particularly interested in our unsavory past with regard to this house, so I'd never bothered to ask. The

house and the library, at their closest point, were only about three meters apart. So if someone was reading a book by the window, I could look over their shoulder from my bedroom on the second floor. Well, almost.

Around the time I entered junior high, I started helping out my mother at the library when I didn't have kendo practice. On busy Saturday afternoons, Sundays, and holidays, I would scan barcodes at the lending counter or pile returned books onto a cart and take them to the stacks. Of course, since I was not doing this strictly out of filial devotion, I got paid for my services. Most of the money went into CDs.

After the day at the hospital, Aki and I saw a lot of each other as the class representatives. But even though we were often together, I didn't really think of her as a *girl*. Maybe it was because we were too close that I didn't notice how attractive she was. She was pretty cute, actually, with a good personality, and really smart as well. She had a lot of admirers among the guys in class. And before I knew it, I was feeling their enmity. When we played basketball or soccer for gym, somebody would always crash into me on purpose or kick me in the shins. It was pretty clear some guys had it out for me, but at first I didn't get what was going on. I just thought these guys hated me for some reason, which really bothered me.

One day, however, something happened that cleared it all up for me. In the second term, each class of second-year students had to put on a play for the Culture Fair. The girls' block vote carried the day, and our class ended up

with *Romeo and Juliet*. Aki was chosen for Juliet, thanks to the unanimous support of the girls. Romeo, following the unwritten rule that stuff nobody wants to do falls to the class representative, went to me.

The girls took the lead and rehearsals moved forward. The window scene, where Juliet says "O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo? Deny thy father and refuse thy name! Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love" was funny because Aki, serious by nature, played it so earnestly. And the part where the principal, making a special appearance as the Nurse, had to say "Now, by my maidenhead at twelve year old, I bade her come" exactly as it goes in the script, always made everyone burst out laughing. In the morning scene in Juliet's bedroom where Romeo whispers "More light and light—more dark and dark our woes" and leaves, we had to kiss. Juliet, not wanting him to go, and Romeo, wanting to stay, gaze at each other and exchange a kiss over the balcony railing.

One day, two guys in our class suddenly blocked my path.

"Don't get too hoochy-koochy with Hirose, all right?" said one.

"Just because you get good grades doesn't make you a hotshot," said the other.

"What're you talking about?" I said.

"Shut up." One of them punched me in the stomach.

It was more of a threat than anything, and I'd braced myself, so it didn't hurt much. Maybe that satisfied them, because they threw back their shoulders and stalked off. Instead of the humiliation I expected, I felt exhilaration.

When you add the right quantity of acid to a phenolphthalein solution that's red from reaction with a base, it becomes neutralized and turns transparent. In the same way, the world became perfectly clear: those guys were jealous of me.

As for Aki, the object of all this, there were rumors that she had a boyfriend who was in senior high. I didn't know if it was true, and never heard it directly from Aki. I simply overheard the girls in class talking about it sometimes, saying he was tall and good-looking and played volleyball. Give me a break, I thought, real men do kendo. Kendo!

At the time, Aki had a habit of listening to the radio while she studied. I even knew which was her favorite program. Basically, guys and girls—none of them exactly intellectuals—would send postcards to the show and get all excited if the fast-talking disc jockey read them out loud. For the first time in my life I wrote a song-request postcard, don't ask me why. Maybe it was because of the high school guy, or all the troubles I'd suffered because of her. But most of all, though I wasn't conscious of it yet, it foreshadowed my love for her.

For Christmas Eve, the show would be featuring the ghastly-sounding "special Holy Night request hour for lovers." Naturally, I could assume the competition would be tight. To make absolutely sure that my postcard would be read on the air, I had to write something that would really grab them.

And now for our next postcard. This is from Romeo of class four, second year. "Today I'd like to write about my classmate, A.H.

She's a quiet girl with long hair. Her face is like a frail version of Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind. She has a bright personality and was class representative for a long time. For the Culture Fair in November, our class put on Romeo and Juliet. She was supposed to play Juliet, and I was supposed to play Romeo. But soon after we started rehearsals, she got sick and was absent a lot. So we had to get a substitute, and I acted in Romeo and Juliet with another girl. Afterwards, we found out that A.H. had leukemia. She's still in the hospital receiving treatment. According to my classmates who visited her there, all of her long hair has fallen out, and she's lost so much weight you can hardly recognize her. She's probably spending this Christmas Eve in her hospital bed. Maybe she's listening to this show on the radio. So for A.H., who couldn't play Juliet at the Culture Fair, please play 'Tonight' from West Side Story."

"What was that about?" Aki said the next day, waylaying me at school. "That request yesterday, that was you, wasn't it?"

"What're you talking about?"

"Oh, don't even pretend. Romeo of class four, second year, come on. Leukemia? All my hair had fallen out and I'd lost so much weight you could hardly recognize me? How could you even come up with a lie like that?"

"Hey, I said some nice stuff."

"A frail Nausicaä, right." She sighed. "Look, Matsumoto. I don't care what you write about me. But there really are people out there with leukemia, okay? Even if it's a joke, using someone like that for attention isn't right. I really hate that."

Though I bridled at her self-righteous tone, I liked Aki's anger. A cool feeling like a breeze spread through me.

Besides a new appreciation for Aki, it carried with it a sense of satisfaction, with myself. For the first time, I was seeing her as a *girl*.

Four

AKI AND I were in different classes our third year of junior high. But we were both still class representatives, so once a week we saw each other at after-school meetings. Also, around the end of the first term, she started studying at the library now and then. Once summer vacation started, she came every day. After the city tournament was over I didn't have kendo practice anymore, so I was devoting more time to wage-earning labor. I'd also started studying for my senior high entrance exams, spending my mornings in the library's air-conditioned reading room. We ran into each other a lot, and when that happened we would study together or eat ice cream and talk during our breaks.

"Somehow I don't feel any pressure, you know?" I said. "It's summer vacation, and I can't get into studying."

"It's not like you have to work that hard anyway. You'll pass for sure."

"That's not the issue, see. I read this thing in a science magazine the other day that around the year 2000, an asteroid's going to crash into the earth and totally mess up the ecosystem."

"Oh really?" Aki licked her ice cream with the tip of her tongue.

"What do you mean, 'Oh really'?" I went on, serious. "The ozone layer's full of holes, tropical rainforests are shrinking . . . By the time you and I are grandparents, the earth might not be able to support life anymore."

"Wow."

"You don't sound very wowed, actually."

"Sorry," she said. "It's just hard to feel like it's really happening. Does it feel real to you?"

"Well, if you ask me like that . . ."

"No, right?"

"Okay, but that's beside the point. It's going to happen anyway."

"So then fine, why worry about it?"

I had the feeling she might be right.

"There's no point worrying about something so far ahead."

"It's only about ten years ahead, actually."

"We'll be twenty-five, won't we?" Aki said. With a faraway look she added, "But who knows what'll happen to either of us before then?"

I suddenly remembered the hydrangeas on Castle Hill. They must have bloomed twice since our walk that day, but we hadn't gone to see them together. With school and everything else that was going on, I'd forgotten all about them. I figured Aki had, too. And in spite of all my talk of crashing asteroids and ozone layer destruction, I had the feeling that in the early summer of the year 2000, the hydrangeas would bloom on Castle Hill. And there would be no reason for us

to hurry to see them, because we could do it whenever we liked.

That's how summer vacation went by. I would get depressed about the future of the earth's environment while memorizing stuff like "375 A.D., Great Barbarian Invasion" and "1642, Cromwell and the English Civil War." I solved simultaneous equations and quadratic function problems. I went fishing with my father once in a while, I bought some new CDs, and I talked to Aki while eating ice cream.

"Saku-chan."

When Aki called me that out of the blue, I gulped the ice cream I'd been holding in my mouth.

"What's that, all of a sudden?"

"That's what your mother calls you, Matsumoto." Aki smiled.

"You're not my mother."

"Yeah, but I decided. I'm going to call you 'Saku-chan' from now on."

"Do me a favor? Don't do stuff like that without asking me."

"I've already made up my mind."

This was how Aki decided everything for me, until finally I didn't really know who I was anymore.

Sometime into the second term, she appeared in front of me at lunchtime.

"Here," she said, thrusting a notebook onto my desk.

"What is it?"

"A joint diary."

"Uh-huh."

"You don't know what that is, do you, Saku-chan?"

I glanced around and said, "Don't call me that when we're at school, all right?"

"Didn't your parents have one, Saku-chan?"

Was she listening to me?

"See, a joint diary is where a boy and girl write down things that happened during the day, or things they thought or felt, and they trade it back and forth."

"That sounds like a pain in the butt. Get someone in your class to do it with."

"You don't do this with just anyone."

Aki seemed slightly miffed.

"But you have to sit down and write that stuff, right? With a pen or something."

"Yes, or colored pencils."

"You can't just use the phone?"

Apparently not. Aki clasped her hands behind her back and appraised me and the notebook in turn. When I started to open it, she stopped me hastily.

"Read it after you get home. That's the rule with joint diaries."

The first page was a self-introduction. Aki had written down her date of birth, her astrological sign, her blood type, her hobbies, favorite foods, favorite colors, and an analysis of her personality. On the next page, there was a picture of a girl, ostensibly herself, drawn in colored pencil with the word "secret" in the three places indicating her breast, waist, and hip sizes. *Wow. Too much*, I whispered to myself, the notebook still open on my lap.

Aki's homeroom teacher died at Christmas in our third year of junior high. She'd seemed fine on our school excursion at the end of the first term, but she'd stopped coming to school starting with the second term. Aki told me she was ill. Cancer, apparently. She was only fifty.

Her funeral was the first day of the winter holiday, and everyone from Aki's class as well as all the third-year class representatives attended. The students couldn't all fit into the main hall of the temple, so we stood outside. It was a bitterly cold day, and the chanting of the monks seemed to go on forever. We huddled outside, jostling each other in an effort not to freeze to death.

Finally the funeral rites were over, and it was time for everyone to pay their last respects. The principal and a few others gave eulogies. One of these was Aki. We stopped jostling and stood still, listening. She spoke calmly, never choking up. What we heard of course was not her natural voice, but what was coming through the speakers. Though the sound was distorted, I could tell right away the voice was Aki's. Only, because it was tinged with grief, it sounded more mature than usual, as if she'd left the rest of us behind, childish forever, and was going ahead alone. It made me feel a little lonely.

Prompted by something like desperation, I looked over the rows of heads in front of me, darting this way and that, searching for Aki. Finally she came into view. She was looking downwards as she read her eulogy in front of a stand-up microphone at the entrance to the main hall. I was seized by a sense of awakening. Dressed in the school uniform I knew so well, she looked like a different person. It was definitely

Aki, but something about her was changed. I heard almost nothing of her speech. I simply couldn't take my eyes off of her.

"You can always count on Hirose," said a person standing near me.

"Yeah, she doesn't look it, but she's got guts," someone replied.

Just then a ray of light broke through the thick clouds overhead. It lit up Aki, still reading, and made her standing figure emerge clearly from the shadow of the dark temple. This was the Aki I knew: the Aki who exchanged that silly diary with me, the Aki who called me "Saku-chan" like we were childhood pals. She, whose constant nearness had made her almost transparent to me, stood there, a girl who was becoming a woman. It was as if a rock crystal I'd left on my desk had, just by looking at it from a different angle, begun radiating a beautiful brilliance.

I was seized by an impulse to run. Joy flooded my body, and I was conscious, for the first time, of myself as one of the many boys who carried a torch for Aki. I understood the jealousy my classmates had shown me. Not just that, but now I was even jealous of myself, for so easily being close to Aki and for spending so much time with her without a second thought. I was filled with a jealousy that made my heart clench.

Five

JUNIOR HIGH ENDED, high school began, and the two of us were once again in the same class. By then, I couldn't deny my feelings for Aki. Being in love with her was as self-evident as me being myself. If someone had said, "You have a crush on Hirose, don't you?" I'm sure I would have answered, "Well, obviously." Aside from homeroom, there were no seat assignments in class, so we pushed our desks together and sat side by side. Now that we were in senior high, though, no one teased us or seemed jealous of our closeness. The two of us as a couple became a part of the classroom environment, like the blackboard and flower vase. If anything, it was the teachers who would butt in with the occasional, "My, aren't we cozy?" I would smile and answer, "Yes we are," while wishing they would mind their own business.

We had begun the classic folktale *Taketori Monogatari* in April at the start of the school year and were now at the climax of the story. To prevent the messengers from the Moon from taking the Shining Princess back with them, the emperor surrounds the old man's mansion with soldiers. But the princess is taken, and all that remains for the emperor is a letter and the elixir of life. The emperor, however, does not want eternal life in a world where the princess is gone. So he orders that the elixir be burned on the highest mountaintop in the land, closest to the Moon. This is the passage that tells of how Mount Fuji, which means "immortal," got its name. After that the story ends.

While the teacher explained the background of the work, Aki kept her eyes on the text and seemed to be pondering

the story. Her bangs fell forward, brushing the bridge of her nose. Her ear was half-hidden by her hair, and her lips were gently pursed. Every part of her was formed by subtle lines that could never be drawn by a human hand, and as I gazed at her, I was filled with wonder at how all of these parts converged to make up this girl I knew as Aki. And this beautiful person was in love with me!

Suddenly, I felt a terrible certainty that no matter how long I lived, I could never hope for greater happiness than I had now. And that all I could do was try to preserve this happiness forever. If each person in the world is given a fixed amount of happiness, then perhaps I was trying to squander my whole life's worth in that one moment. Someday, the messengers from the Moon would take her away, and all that would be left for me would be time as endless as immortality.

I broke out of my thoughts and saw Aki looking at me. I must have looked serious, because the smile forming on her face vanished.

"What is it?"

I shook my head. "Nothing."

Every day after school we went home together. We walked as slowly as possible, sometimes taking detours. Even so, we always reached the place we parted in no time. It was strange. If I walked the same route by myself, it was boring and took forever. Yet ambling along, talking to Aki, I wished it would never end, and the weight of my bag, stuffed with books, didn't bother me at all.

Maybe our lives are like that too, I thought many years later. A life lived alone simply feels long and boring. But a

life shared with someone you love reaches the place of parting in no time at all.

Six

MY GRANDFATHER LIVED at our house a short while after my grandmother died before moving into his own apartment. He came from a farming family, which until my great-grandfather's time had owned a lot of land. But the old families were ruined with the agricultural reforms, and my grandfather, with nothing left to inherit, went to Tokyo to try his luck in business. He took advantage of the chaos in the postwar years and made money, which he used to start a food processing plant back home. He was in his thirties. He married my grandmother, and my father was born. As my mother told it, the company grew steadily throughout the 1950s and '60s, and the family enjoyed an affluent lifestyle. After my father graduated from high school, my grandfather entered politics, handing over the company he'd built from scratch to one of his underlings. He was elected to the Diet, where he remained for ten years, and most of his fortune disappeared into campaign funds. By the time my grandmother died, he had virtually nothing besides his house. He left politics soon after and now was living alone in comfortable retirement.

In junior high, I started visiting him once in a while, thinking I was performing a charitable service. I'd talk

about what was happening at school or join him in front of the TV with a beer to watch sumo. Sometimes, my grandfather would tell me stories from his youth. That's how I learned that he'd been in love with someone when he was seventeen or eighteen, someone he'd wanted to marry, but couldn't.

"Her lungs were diseased," he said, sipping his red Bordeaux as usual. "These days, tuberculosis can be cured with drugs, but back then the best you could do was eat good food and stay in bed somewhere with good, clean air. Women in those days had to be really sturdy, or they weren't considered fit for marriage. No electrical appliances, remember. Cooking and laundry were extremely hard work, harder than you could imagine. Plus, the young men of my generation expected to fight for our country in the war. To give our lives. I was no exception. So even though we were in love, we couldn't be married. Both of us knew that. It was a difficult time."

"So what happened?"

"I was drafted into the army and spent several years in service," my grandfather continued. "I didn't think we'd ever see each other again. I thought she'd die while I was gone, and I didn't think I'd come back alive either. So right before we parted, we promised each other that in the next world, at least, we would be together." My grandfather stopped speaking for a moment and let his gaze wander. "But fate is an ironic thing, and when the war was over, both of us had survived. When you think you have no future, it's strange how pure you can become; but when you find yourself alive, you start to have desires again. I wanted to marry her, no

matter what. And that's why I tried to make money. If only I had money, then it didn't matter if she had tuberculosis or anything else; I could take her and look after her."

"And that's why you went to Tokyo?"

My grandfather nodded. "Tokyo was burnt-out, a wasteland. There was terrible inflation and almost no food. It was close to anarchy. People went around with murder in their eyes. I was no different. I was desperate to make some money. I did all kinds of shameless things. I never killed anybody, but other than that I did practically everything. But wouldn't you know it, while I was slaving away like that, they developed a wonder drug for tuberculosis. Streptomycin, it's called."

"I've heard of it."

"So she was cured."

"She was cured?"

"It was good that she was cured. But once she was healthy, she could get married. And of course, her parents wanted to marry her off before she was over the hill."

"But what about you?"

"I didn't meet their requirements."

"Why not?"

"I was involved in shady business dealings. I'd even gone to jail. Her parents seemed to know about that."

"But it was all so you could be with her."

"From my perspective, yes. But that's not how they saw it. They wanted a respectable husband for their daughter. I think the man they found was an elementary school teacher."

"That's crazy."

"That's the way it was." He laughed lightly. "It may sound stupid today, but in those days children couldn't go against their parents' wishes. She was from an old family, and she'd been sick a long time. She was a burden to her parents. To reject the man they had chosen for her and say she wanted to marry someone else was something she simply couldn't do."

"So what happened?"

"She got married. And I married your grandmother, and we had your father. I have to say, he's a hard nut to crack, that one."

"Yeah, but did you get over her?"

"I thought I did. And I think she felt that way, too. We just weren't meant to be together. In this lifetime."

"But you didn't really, did you? Get over her?"

My grandfather narrowed his eyes and looked straight into my face. After a long moment, he said, "I'll tell you the rest of this story another time. When you're a little older, Saku."

By the time my grandfather felt like telling me the rest of the story, I was already in senior high. The summer vacation of my first year had just ended, and the second term begun. I stopped by my grandfather's apartment after school one day. We sat in front of the television with a beer, watching sumo.

"How about staying for supper?" my grandfather said, when the sumo was over.

"No thanks. Mom's expecting me at home."

Dinner at my grandfather's house consisted mostly of canned food—corned beef or sardines or beef stew. Even the

vegetable would be canned asparagus, and the meal would be rounded out with instant miso soup. This is what my grandfather ate every day. Once in a while my mother would come over to cook for him, or he would go to our house to eat, but basically my grandfather lived on canned food. He claimed that old people shouldn't worry about nutrition so much as eat the same thing at the same hour every day.

"I was thinking we could order some eel today," he said as I got up to leave.

"Why?"

"What do you mean, why? I don't know of any law saying you can't eat eel."

My grandfather phoned in two orders of grilled eel on rice. While we waited, we drank another beer in front of the TV. As usual, he opened a bottle of wine. He would leave it for thirty minutes to an hour and then start drinking it after dinner. His habit of having half a bottle of Bordeaux every day was one he'd already had when he lived at our house.

"I have a favor to ask you today, Saku," my grandfather said in a serious tone.

"A favor?" Lured by the eel into staying, I now wondered what the price might be.

"Yeah. Well, it's a long story."

My grandfather brought some sardines in oil from the kitchen—canned, of course. We ate the sardines with our beer, and then the grilled eel arrived. We ate it and drank the eel's liver consommé that came with it, and still my grandfather hadn't finished with his story. We started drinking the wine. At this rate, by the time I was legal at twenty, I'd be a full-fledged alcoholic. I must have had a high tolerance,

because I didn't feel drunk. Hard to believe I was the son of a man who felt sick after eating one slice of a *narazuke* pickle.

By the time my grandfather finished telling his story, the bottle of wine was almost empty.

"You're getting to be a real drinker, Saku," my grandfather said with an air of satisfaction.

"I'm your grandson, after all."

"But your father's my son, and he can't drink a drop."

"It must be what they call an atavism."

"I see," my grandfather said, nodding. "So what do you say? Will you do me this favor?"

Seven

THE NEXT DAY my head ached, and I wasn't in any shape for trigonometry or indirect speech. I spent the morning hiding behind textbooks, trying not to throw up. After getting through gym class in fourth period I finally started to feel better. I ate my lunch in the courtyard with Aki. The spray of the fountain made me feel like I would be sick again, so we moved the bench and sat with our backs to the pond. I told her my grandfather's story.

"So your grandfather was in love with that woman all the time," Aki said. I thought I saw tears in her eyes.

"Yeah, I guess so." I nodded. I had mixed feelings. "He tried to get over her, but he just couldn't forget her."

"And she couldn't forget your grandfather, either."

"Wacky, right?"

"Why?"

"Come on, we're talking about half a century. A species can evolve in that time."

"It's wonderful. That they could stay in love with one person for such a long time," Aki said with a faraway look.

"All organisms get old, okay? Every cell, except the reproductive ones, is subject to aging. Your face, Aki, is going to get more and more wrinkled."

"What are you trying to say?"

"Even if you're twenty when you meet, after fifty years you're seventy."

"So?"

"So staying madly in love with a seventy-year-old grandma is kinda gross, isn't it?"

"I think it's beautiful." Aki seemed angry.

"So what, once in a while they'd go to a hotel or something?"

"Stop it." She glared at me.

"Grandpa's totally capable of doing something like that."

"You're the one, Saku-chan, who'd do something like that."

"No way."

"Yeah, you would."

We took our argument into science class after lunch. The biology teacher was talking about how the DNA of human beings was 98.4 percent identical to that of chimpanzees. He said the genetic difference between us was smaller than

the genetic difference between chimpanzees and gorillas, so the chimpanzees' closest relatives were not gorillas, but ourselves. At this, the whole class burst out laughing. What was so funny, I thought. Stupid idiots.

Aki and I sat at the back of the classroom.

"Would it count as adultery, you think?" I said.

"Of course not. It's platonic."

"Yeah, but both Grandpa and the woman were married."

Aki seemed lost in thought for a while. "From their spouse's point of view it might be adultery, but for the two of them it was pure love."

"So what, it can be adulterous or platonic depending on the perspective?"

"Something like that."

"What do you mean?"

"Adultery is a concept defined by society, right? It changes with the times. Like in a polygamous society, the meaning would be totally different. But to stay in love with one person for fifty whole years—that transcends culture and history and stuff."

"Does it transcend species?"

"Huh?"

"You think a chimpanzee might stay in love with another chimp for fifty years?"

"I don't know about chimpanzees."

"So pure love is greater than adultery."

"I don't think 'great' is the right word."

Just then, the teacher told us we'd been chattering long enough.

As punishment, we were made to stand at the back of

the classroom. This is what power was all about, I thought. It was okay to talk about the possibility of interbreeding between human beings and chimpanzees, but it wasn't okay to talk about love between a man and woman that transcends time. We picked up our discussion in whispers.

"Do you believe in another world after this?"

"Why?"

"Because Grandpa and that woman promised each other they'd be together in the next world."

Aki thought for a while. "No, I don't."

"But you pray every night before you go to bed, don't you?"

"I do believe in God," she said firmly.

"How are the two any different?"

"Doesn't 'the afterworld' seem like something people made up to feel better about death?"

I thought about this.

"So they can't be together in the next world, then, either."

"That's just what I believe," Aki said. "Your grandfather and that woman must've seen it differently."

"God could've been made up to make people feel better, too. I mean, when do people turn to God for help, after all?"

"That's different from my God."

"What, are there lots of Gods? Or different kinds?"

"Even if you don't believe in Heaven, you can still be in awe of God. That's why I pray every night."

"Please spare me from your divine wrath—that kinda thing?"

We were finally sent out into the hall where we kept up our discussion until class was over. Then we were called to the faculty office and chewed out by the biology teacher and our homeroom teacher. It was all very well to be so close, they said, but in class we should devote ourselves more to listening to the teacher.

It was close to dusk by the time we left school. We walked in silence toward Daimyo Park. We passed a playing field and a history museum as well as a coffee shop called "Castle Town." We had gone in there once on the way home from school, but the coffee was so lousy we'd never been back. We walked past an old sake brewery and came to the small river that flowed through town. Aki waited until we'd crossed the bridge to start talking.

"But they never got to be together, after all," she said. "After waiting fifty years."

"They were supposed to get together after her husband died." I'd been thinking about it, too. "Grandpa's been alone, ever since Grandma died."

"How long?"

"About ten years. But she died before her husband did. It just didn't work out."

"It's a sad story."

"It's a pretty ridiculous story too, if you ask me."

The conversation broke off. We kept walking, looking down. Once we passed the grocery store and the tatami maker's, and turned the corner at the barber's, we'd almost be at Aki's house. "Help him, Saku-chan," she said, as if aware that we were running out of time.

"Easy for you to say. We're talking about robbing someone's grave."

"Are you scared?"

"Hell, yeah. What d'you think?"

"You're no good with that kind of stuff, are you, Saku-chan?" She was laughing.

"What's so hilarious?"

"Oh, nothing."

Finally her house came into view. I would turn right on the street just before it and cross the road to get home. There were about fifty meters left. Without either of us taking the lead, our pace grew slower until we were standing in place, talking.

"It's a crime, right?" I said.

"Is it?" She looked up, perplexed.

"Of course it is."

"What would they charge you with?"

"Probably a sexual offense."

"Oh, please."

As she laughed, the hair brushing her shoulders swayed and made the whiteness of her blouse stand out. Our shadows stretched long, the top halves bent and thrown onto a concrete wall ahead.

"Either way, if they catch me I'm suspended from school."

"Then I'll come visit you."

Was that supposed to be encouragement?

"You're so darn easygoing," I muttered with a sigh.

Eight

I TOLD MY PARENTS I was sleeping over at my grandfather's. It was a Saturday night. For supper we ordered sushi; my grandfather splurged and got us the deluxe combination. Even so, I couldn't tell the difference between the tuna and the sea urchin, and the abalone might as well have been rubber. No beer or Bordeaux this time. We drank tea with the sushi while watching baseball on TV, and after that we had coffee. The broadcast ended in the middle of the game.

"About time we got going," my grandfather said.

The woman's grave was east of town, at a temple dedicated to the wife of a feudal lord. We got out of the taxi near the temple. This area was in a hilly district, where the water supply was turned off first during summer shortages. It was still September, but the night air was cold.

A small two-story gate stood next to the stone steps leading to the main building. We passed through it, and a path of red earth stretched straight to the cemetery. On our left was a white plaster wall, the other side of which seemed to be the priest's quarters, but there was no sign of life. Only one dim light shone in the window of what may have been the bathroom. On our right side were old graves, probably dating back to the feudal era. Tilted dagobas and chipped headstones appeared to float in the moonlight. The ancient cypresses and cedars growing on the mountain slope hung over the path, all but obscuring the sky. Straight ahead at a turn in the path was the mausoleum of the feudal lord's wife. I could see through the darkness a line of oddly shaped

gravestones, combinations of cubes and spheres and cones. We skirted the stones and turned left, going deeper into the cemetery. We didn't use the flashlight we'd brought, for fear of drawing attention. We walked on with the moonlight as our guide.

"Where is it?" I asked my grandfather, who was trudging in front of me.

"Further ahead."

"Have you been there before?"

"Yeah." He wasn't in a talkative mood.

I wondered how many graves there were in this place. The gentle slopes of the ravine were practically covered with headstones. Each grave didn't necessarily contain just one person. If the average tomb held the ashes of two or three bodies, I couldn't even begin to figure how many dead were buried in the entire cemetery. I'd been to graveyards during the day, lots of times, but this was the first time I'd ever come to one so late. At night, the presence of the dead—a kind of breathing, almost—was intensely palpable. Looking up, I saw a few bats flying around the tops of the huge trees covering the sky.

Then the trees parted and the sky leapt into view. Stars seemed to rain down on us. Gazing up in spite of myself, I walked into my grandfather's back.

"Is it here?"

"Yes, it's here."

I saw a perfectly ordinary tomb, somewhat aged.

"What now?"

"First, let's pay our respects."

I thought it was rather strange to pay your respects when

you've come to rob the grave, but my grandfather lit the incense sticks he'd brought and made an offering. Kneeling, he placed his palms together and became very still. I stood behind him and placed my palms together too. I decided to think of it as an apology to the other dead in the tomb.

"Now," my grandfather said. "Let's move this aside."

Together we lifted the stone incense burner and moved it to the side.

"Shine the flashlight inside, will you?"

A stone slab was fitted into the tomb. My grandfather wedged the screwdriver he'd brought between the slab and the surrounding stone, and tried to lever the slab out, sliding the screwdriver back and forth around the edges. The slab inched forward, until finally, using his fingertips, my grandfather managed to pull it out. Inside was a spacious chamber, long and deep. Crouching, an adult could easily fit inside it.

"Give me that."

My grandfather took the flashlight. Lying flat on his stomach, he stuck the upper half of his body into the chamber. I pressed down on the backs of his legs to keep him from tumbling into the tomb. After searching a while, he handed me the flashlight and carefully, using both hands, brought out a ceramic urn. I watched him work in silence. He shone the flashlight onto the bottom of the urn to check the name written there. Then he removed the cord placed over it and slowly lifted the lid. Her ashes were in there. A long time passed. When I finally called to him, I noticed his shoulders shaking slightly in the moonlight.

My grandfather took a small pinch of ashes from the urn

and put them in a little wooden box he'd brought. I wanted to say, don't be so modest after all this trouble, take a whole handful! He stared into the urn for a moment, then replaced the lid and pulled the cord back over it. Once again, I held down his legs while he returned the urn to the tomb. I was the one who put the stone slab back in place. All around the edges, it was marked with scratches from my grandfather's screwdriver.

It was almost midnight by the time we got back to the apartment. We toasted each other with cold beer. I felt a sense of accomplishment, but also, a sort of loneliness.

"I kept you up late today, Saku, with all this bother," my grandfather said.

"That's okay," I said, pouring beer into his half-empty glass. "I'm sure you could've managed fine without me, though."

He put the glass to his lips, a distant look on his face. Finally he stood up and took a book down from the shelf.

"You've learned how to read classical Chinese poetry, haven't you, Sakutaro?" he said, opening the yellowed book. "Try reading this poem."

The title was "Ge Sheng," or "Kudzu Grows." I glanced through the Japanese translation below the Chinese text.

"Do you understand what it's about?"

"Basically it's saying when we die let's be buried together, right?"

My grandfather nodded silently, and recited the last part of the poem from memory. "Summer days, winter nights, after a hundred years, to that abode shall I return."

"More or less what it means is, long summer days and

long winter nights, you are resting here. After a hundred years, I too will rest here with you. So wait in peace for that day.”

“The person he loves has died?”

“In spite of all the progress we seem to have made, human emotions stay the same. Deep inside our hearts, we don’t change very much. This poem was written two thousand years ago or more. It’s from a time long before the quatrains and other formal styles you’ve learned in school were established. And yet, even today, we can understand the feelings of people from that time. You don’t need education or scholarship for that. These feelings can be understood by anybody, I think.”

The little wooden box sat on the table. Someone who didn’t know would see it and think it contained an umbilical cord or a medal. It was a weird feeling.

“You hold on to this for me,” my grandfather said suddenly.

“When I die, I want you to scatter my ashes together with hers.”

“Wait a minute,” I said.

“Take about the same amount of ashes from me and mix them together. Then scatter them wherever you like, Saku.” My grandfather repeated the request as if it were his last.

Belatedly, I became aware of my grandfather’s scheme. If all he’d wanted was to steal her ashes, he could have done it alone. Taking his grandson into his confidence and making him—me!—his accomplice in the crime had all been done for a purpose.

“You promise me, right?” he said.

"I can't make that kind of promise."

"Please. Grant a wretched old man his wish." He sounded as if he'd start crying any minute.

"But, come on, Grandpa. I just don't know."

"Why? It's such a simple thing."

Only now I remembered hearing my father complain to my mother about my grandfather's self-centeredness. That's right, my grandfather was selfish. He was the type who, if he wanted something, did not take into account the trouble he was causing others.

"Are you sure you can leave something that important to me?" I tried to change his mind.

"Who else could I ask?" Old people were so stubborn.

"My dad, for one," I said. "He is your son. Plus he'd be in charge of your funeral, you know, as head of the family."

"That straight arrow? He doesn't understand people like us."

"Like us?"

I sat there dumbfounded. He said, "Of course. You and I have always hit it off," and moved right along with his bargaining. "I knew you would understand, Saku, and that's why I was waiting for you to grow up."

I got the feeling this had all started long before the night I fell for the grilled eel. From the time I was a little kid, my grandfather had been pursuing his project behind the scenes, rearing me for this day. I felt like the child Murasaki, falling into Prince Genji's hands in *The Tale of Genji*.

"When are you going to die, though, Grandpa?" My voice, in spite of myself, was neutral.

"That would be when my time comes, I suppose." He

didn't seem the slightest bit concerned by my change of tone.

"So when's that?"

"I said 'when my time comes' because I don't know. If we knew, life would just be a plan."

"Then how do I know if I'll be around when you die, Grandpa? If I'm not there when you're cremated, I can't sneak a pinch of your ashes."

"If that's how it is, all you have to do is rob my grave, like we did tonight."

"You want me to do this again?"

"Please." His voice was urgent. "You're the only one I can ask."

"Maybe so, but still."

"Listen, Sakutaro. It's very sad when the person you love dies. This grief . . . it doesn't have shape. No matter what you do. That's why, perhaps, we want to give it shape. Like the poem we just read, it's hard to be parted, but we can be together again. Please, make our wish come true."

I'd always had respect for the elderly, but on top of that, I think it was that "our" that got me.

"Okay," I said. "Scatter the ashes, right?"

"So you'll grant an old man's wish?" My grandfather's face shone.

"What choice do I have?"

"I appreciate it," he said, looking down.

"But 'wherever I like' doesn't wash, okay? You need to tell me exactly where."

"Sure, I can do that." His face somewhat meditative, he said, "But we don't know what'll happen to the place by

the time I die. Say I tell you to scatter them around the roots of a tree—ten years later, there might be a highway over that spot.”

“If that happens, you can always change it.”

My grandfather thought for a while, then said, “No, I’m going to leave it up to you after all. Use your good judgment.”

“I’m saying I don’t want to do that. Okay fine, give me a general idea: mountain, sea, or sky?”

“Hmm. Maybe the sea.”

“The sea?”

“But not anyplace where the water is dirty.”

“Fine, then. I’ll find a clean place and scatter them there.”

“Hang on. If it’s the sea, the tide’ll come and carry us off in different directions.”

“Maybe.”

“So let’s make it the mountains.”

“Mountains, then?”

“Someplace where the developers won’t come.”

“I’ll do it really high up, where no one goes.”

“It would be nice if there were some wildflowers nearby.”

“Wildflowers, fine.”

“She loved violets.”

I folded my arms and fixed my eyes on my grandfather.

“What?”

“That’s a pretty detailed order.”

“Oh, sorry.” He seemed lonely as he looked away. “I wish you’d think of it as an old man’s self-indulgence.”

I heaved a big sigh, loud enough for my grandfather to hear.

"So, scatter the ashes up in the mountains, where hardly anyone ever goes, and where wild violets are growing."

"You sound like you're getting fed up."

"I'm not."

"All right."

Nine

THE NEXT DAY, I GOT HOME a little before noon and called Aki. She already had plans for the afternoon but said she could get together later. We agreed to meet up at five o'clock for about an hour.

There was a Shinto shrine about the same distance from both of our houses. From my house, you followed the road south along the river for about 500 meters and crossed the bridge, coming to a big archway that was the shrine's main entrance. Beyond it was a parking lot of dusty earth, and after that, a long stone stairway that led up to the middle of a small hill. The shrine was at the top of those stairs. Looking east from there you could see a narrow road threading through a residential neighborhood before coming to the main road. Across the main road, tucked into one of the streets behind the police station, was Aki's house. I liked getting to the shrine early to watch Aki making her way over. The sooner I could spot her, the happier I'd be.

Not knowing that I was watching her, Aki would come pedaling along on her bicycle, bent slightly forward. She would park her bicycle at the bottom of the hill on the eastern side and trot up a different set of narrow stone stairs from the ones I had climbed.

"Sorry I'm late," she said, her shoulders heaving.

"You didn't have to run."

"We don't have much time," she said, with a big sigh.

"You have plans later?" I asked, glancing at my watch.

"No. Just a bath and dinner."

"So we do have time."

"But it'll be night."

"What do you plan on us doing?"

"I don't know." She laughed. "You're the one who wanted to meet, Saku-chan."

"This won't take much time."

"So I guess I didn't have to hurry."

"Yeah, that's what I was saying."

"Well anyway, let's sit down."

We sat at the top of the stairs. The town spread out below us. The fragrance of sweet osmanthus flowers came floating on the breeze.

"So what's this about?"

"The sky's already dark in the east."

"Huh?"

"We'll see a UFO tonight."

"What did you want?"

"Here."

I took the little wooden box out of my jacket pocket. There was a thick rubber band around it so the lid wouldn't

come off. Perhaps sensing what was inside it, Aki shrank back a little.

"You did it?"

I nodded.

"When?"

"Last night."

I removed the rubber band and gently raised the lid. On the bottom of the box were whitish fragments of bone. Aki peered inside.

"There's not much there."

"I know. That's all he took. Don't know if he got humble or shy or what."

She paid no attention to what I said. "Why do *you* have something so important?"

"I'm holding on to it for him. When he dies he wants me to mix his ashes with these and scatter them somewhere."

"Is that like a last request?"

"Sort of."

I told her about the Chinese poem.

"It's about wishing for eternal togetherness or something."

"Eternal togetherness?"

"Yeah, which basically means 'let's be buried together when we die.' If you don't tell yourself you'll be together again someday, you can't stand it. You know, losing the person you love. Grandpa said people have always felt that way. From time immemorial."

"But then don't they have to be buried together in the same grave?"

"I guess that wouldn't work in their case because they

were both married to other people. Which is probably why he came up with this idea. Talk about a pain in the butt."

"It's a lovely story."

"If he wants to be together with her so much, he should just eat this."

"The ashes?"

"Might be a lot of calcium there."

Aki giggled.

"If I died, would you eat my ashes, Saku-chan?"

"Yeah."

"No!"

"There's nothing you could do about it. I'd go rob the grave, like I did last night, get your ashes, and eat a little bit every night . . . It'd be my health regimen."

She laughed again, then stopped. "I think I'd want my ashes scattered somewhere, too. Somewhere with a beautiful view," she said, with a distant look. "Graves are so dark and damp."

"We weren't talking about something that would actually happen, okay?"

Instead of laughing we were quiet. We looked at the ashes in the box.

"Creepy?"

"No." She shook her head. "Not at all."

"I didn't really want to hold on to it at first. But looking at it with you, it kind of makes me feel peaceful."

"Me too."

"Weird, isn't it?"

The sun had set, and it was getting dark. A man in a white *hakama* skirt, probably the shrine's priest, came up the

stairs. We said good evening. He returned our greeting in a deep voice.

"What are you doing?" he asked, smiling.

"Just talking," I replied.

"Put the lid back on," Aki said when the priest was out of sight.

I closed the box, wrapped the rubber band around it, and stuck it back in my jacket pocket. She eyed the bulge in my pocket for a while and then looked up at the sky.

"The stars are out," she said. "Don't you think they're prettier lately?"

"It's because of chlorofluorocarbons. The ozone layer's being destroyed, so the air's thinner and the stars are brighter."

"Really?"

We gazed up at the sky in silence.

"No UFOs tonight."

Aki laughed as if embarrassed.

"Wanna head home?"

"Yes." She gave a small nod.

We kissed, just as the last light faded from the sky. Our eyes had met in unspoken agreement, and before we knew it our lips were touching. Aki's lips smelled of fallen leaves. Or maybe that smell had been brought by the priest, who'd been burning leaves in the garden. Aki placed her hand on my pocket over the wooden box and pressed her lips once more to mine. The smell of fallen leaves grew stronger.

part 2

I TOOK A COLA out of the refrigerator and drank it standing up. Outside the window was an expanse of red desert. Here in the desert, a new year came around every single day: at noon the earth would bake under the heat of midsummer, yet at night the temperature would drop to near freezing, in a twenty-four-hour cycle of the seasons, skipping spring and fall.

The thermostat in the room was set too low, and it was almost cold. It was hard to believe that the air beyond this single pane of glass was over fifty degrees Celsius. I stared out at the desert for a long time. Around the hotel there were tall eucalyptus trees and some sparse patches of grass, but beyond that, nothing. My gaze had nowhere to stop.

Aki's parents had gone off in a tour bus. They said that since their daughter hadn't been able to see the desert sights, they would see them for her. They asked me along, but I stayed behind. I wasn't in the mood. What I was seeing now was something Aki hadn't seen. She hadn't seen

it in the past, and she would never see it in the future. Where was this place, I asked myself. Of course it was possible to specify the latitude and longitude, or the geographical name. But that had little meaning, because wherever this place might be, it was nowhere.

To me, everything looked like desert—green fields and mountains, sparkling oceans, city streets bustling with people. I didn't need to come all the way here. Aki had died, and the whole world had turned into a wasteland. She had run away to someplace beyond the end of the earth. As I ran after her, my footprints were erased by the wind and sand.

Down in the hotel restaurant, tourists in shorts and T-shirts sat eating their meals.

"How was the desert?" I asked Aki's parents.

"Hot," said her father.

"Did you climb Ayer's Rock?"

"This man is so out of shape," Aki's mother replied. "He's got even less stamina than I have."

"You've got too much stamina."

"Maybe you ought to quit smoking."

"I think about it all the time."

"But you don't do it."

"It's not that easy."

"That's because you aren't really serious. You just say you want to quit without meaning it."

I heard Aki's parents' conversation without really listening. How could they talk so normally? I knew they were making the effort for my sake. But still, Aki wasn't there. There was nothing to talk about anymore.

When we got off the bus, a huge mountain of rock

towered in front of us. The surface was jagged, with humps like a camel's. Many, many similar boulders formed a colossal mass. A number of tourists climbed single file, holding on to a chain. Here and there around the mountain were caverns hollowed out over time by the wind. Aboriginal rock art covered the walls.

The path was steeper than I expected. Soon I was sweating, and my head pounded. The lumps of rock above looked like muscles in some giant's arm. After climbing for about ten meters, the trail evened out. We entered the up-and-down of the summit, going over one small hill after another. Then the gentle ridge of boulders ended, and the ground dropped straight down. The transparent sunlight highlighted the ancient layers of rock.

A strong breeze blew across the summit, making the heat bearable. In the distance the boundary between land and sky was a hazy white, the horizon indistinct. It was the same view in every direction. Light filled the cloudless sky. The subtle gradation of blue, from ultramarine to pale turquoise, was all there was.

At the cafeteria at the bottom, I burnt my tongue on a meat pie. A Cessna flew over the mountain of rock. No matter where you went here, it was by plane. People just moved from airport to airport. Out on the desert, we'd seen broken-down cars and small planes. The nearest garage was often hundreds of kilometers away, so there was little choice but to abandon them.

From where I sat I could see the bluff I had just climbed. The round surface of the rock was creased with countless deep folds.

"It's like a human brain," someone said.

"Stop it!" shrieked a girl at the same table.

But Aki hadn't been there to hear that conversation, so I wasn't there either. And neither was I here, now. I had wandered into a place that wasn't past or present, life or death. I didn't know how I'd gotten there. I was just there.

"Wouldn't you like to eat something?" Aki's mother asked.

Aki's father took the menu that was standing at the edge of the table and handed it to his wife. She spread it out in front of me.

"Why do they have such a large selection of seafood in the middle of the desert?" she asked suspiciously.

"They fly everything in," her husband replied.

"Well, I don't want to eat kangaroo or buffalo meat, so . . ."

A waiter came to our table. I hadn't spoken, so they ordered marinated Tasmanian salmon and some rock oysters. From the wine list they chose a reasonably priced white wine. None of us said anything while we waited for the food to arrive. Aki's father poured a glass of wine for me, too. The waiter brought our food. I asked him for some water. I was terribly thirsty.

I drank a mouthful of water from the glass, and suddenly, I couldn't hear any of the sounds around me. It was different from having water stuck in your ears. The silence was total: people's voices, the clink of knives and forks against the dishes—I couldn't hear a thing. Aki's parents seemed to be talking soundlessly, just moving their mouths.

All I could hear was the sound of someone nibbling on a

cookie. It seemed to come from far away and yet right by my ear at the same time. Crunch, crunch, crunch . . .

At the time, I didn't think Aki's illness was very serious. Death was something that happened to old people, not us. Sure, we got sick sometimes. We'd catch the flu, or break an arm. But death was something else entirely, something far in the future, which came after you'd lived for decades. It was a white road stretching straight ahead, disappearing into a dazzling light far, far in the distance. You didn't know what lay beyond that. Some said it was nothingness, but no human being had actually seen it.

"Wish I could've gone," Aki whispered.

I had brought her a wooden doll carved by an Aborigine artist as a gift from our graduation trip. She thanked me and clutched the doll in her lap.

"I hardly ever caught a cold, even. Ever since I was little. And now, of all the times to get sick."

"We can go again, whenever you want," I said. "Cairns is only seven hours away by plane. It's like going to Tokyo on the bullet train."

"That's true." Aki still looked sad. "I just wish I could've gone with everybody else."

I took some snacks out of a convenience store bag. Her favorites, custard pudding and chocolate cookies.

"Want some?"

"Thanks."

We ate the pudding in silence. After we finished the pudding, we ate the cookies. If I stopped chewing and listened, I'd hear the sound of Aki nibbling a cookie with her front

teeth. Crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch—almost as if she was nibbling on me.

“We can go there on our honeymoon,” I said after a while.

Aki, who’d been sitting with a blank look, turned toward me questioningly.

“To Australia. We can go there on our honeymoon.”

“Yeah,” she said, as if her heart wasn’t really in it. Then, coming back to herself, she asked, “Who?”

“‘Who?’ You and me, right?”

“You and me?” She laughed out loud.

“You got someone else in mind?”

“No,” she said, and stopped laughing. “But it’s weird.”

“What is?”

“Going on our honeymoon.”

“Which part?”

“What do you mean?”

“Going to Australia? Or getting married?”

Aki thought for a while. “Getting married, I guess.”

“What’s so weird about that?”

“I don’t know.”

I picked a cookie out of the box. The chocolate layer on top had started melting. The weather was still that warm.

“You’re right, it is weird.”

“Isn’t it?”

“Yeah. You and me, newlyweds.”

“Makes you laugh, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah. It’s like saying, guess what? Madonna’s actually a virgin.”

“What’s that mean?”

"I don't know."

The conversation broke off there. We'd gone on nibbling cookies, as if nibbling away at time. Crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch . . .

Everything felt like it had happened a long, long time ago.

Two

SUMMER WAS APPROACHING, and the days were getting longer. We took lots of detours on our way home from school to make the most of it staying light so late. The smell of new leaves was everywhere. We'd meet at the shrine and walk along the embankment, all the way upstream. The riverbank was thick with summer grass, and fish would jump at the water's surface. At dusk, we heard frogs. And every now and then, when nobody was around, we kissed, just lightly touching our lips together. I loved those stolen kisses. I felt like the world had given me a fruit, and I was snatching its most delicious part.

That day, too, we had walked upriver and returned to the shrine. Sitting on the stone steps, we planned an outing for the holidays in May. Aki wanted to go to the zoo, but our town didn't have one. The nearest zoo was in the regional capital, where the airport was. That was about two hours away by train, a round-trip journey of four hours. I thought going to the beach or the mountains somewhere closer by

would be good enough, but Aki had decided on the zoo and was already making plans. She said if we left early we'd have five hours there.

"Let's bring our own lunch," she said. "I'll make one for you too, Saku-chan. That way we'll save money."

"Thanks. So that just leaves the train fare."

"You think we can do it?"

I did have money saved up from my library work. All I had to do was go without a few CDs I wanted.

"What about your family?"

"Family?"

"What are you going to tell them?"

"That I'm going to the zoo with you. That's what we're doing, right?"

It was, but I didn't see the need to be so explicit. It made the whole thing feel like an elementary school outing.

"The word explicit comes from the Latin for unfolded, or set forth. Did you know that?"

She narrowed her eyes. "What are you planning?"

"Nothing. I was just wondering how your parents see me."

"What do you mean?"

"You think they see me as their daughter's future husband?"

"As if that would even cross their minds," Aki laughed.

"Why not?"

"Why not? We're only sixteen."

"So, round that off and we're twenty."

"What kind of math is that?" I looked at her shins, which stuck out from under her skirt. In the dim light of dusk, the

white of her socks was dazzling.

"I just want to hurry up and get married."

"Me too," she said lightly.

"Because I want us to be together forever."

"Yes."

"If we both feel that way, then wherefore is that not possible?"

"Wherefore that wherefore?"

Ignoring her question, I went on. "Because marriage is the union of two independent and consenting individuals. So what about people who can't become independent? Like if they're sick or something. Shouldn't they be allowed to marry?"

"Here we go again," said Aki with a sigh.

"What d'you think it means to be independent?"

She thought for a while. "Working and earning money by yourself, I guess."

"So what does earning money mean?"

"I don't know."

"It means playing your role in society according to your capabilities. The reward for doing that is money. So if it's someone's talent to be in love, why shouldn't they give full scope to that capability and get paid for it?"

"I think it has to be something that helps society at large."

"I can't think of anything that helps society at large more than being in love with someone."

"I'm actually planning to marry someone who says things like this as if they were perfectly reasonable."

"Look, most people go through life thinking only of

themselves, right?" I continued. "So long as they're eating good food and buying the things they want, they don't care about anybody else. But when you fall in love with someone, that person becomes more important to you than yourself. If we only had a little bit of food, I'd give mine to you. If we didn't have much money, I'd get you what you wanted and not buy anything for me. If something tasted good to you, that'd be enough for me. Because if you're happy, I'm happy too. That's what it means to love someone. What could be more important than that? Nothing. I think that someone who's found the ability to love has made a greater discovery than anything anyone's ever won a Nobel Prize for. And if people don't get that, or don't want to, then the human race can just go to hell. Go crash into another planet or something. And the sooner the better."

"Saku-chan," said Aki, trying to calm me down.

"People who think they're better than everyone else just because they're a little smarter are morons. They can just spend their whole lives studying, I say. Making money's the same thing. People who're good at making money should just go ahead and make money every day. And then they should use that money to take care of us."

"Saku-chan."

After the second time she called my name, I finally shut up. Aki's face, with that slightly bashful smile, peered into mine. She cocked her head a little and said, "How about a kiss?"

The zoo was like any zoo. The lion was asleep, the aardvark rolled in mud, and the giant anteater was eating ants.

The elephant walked around its cage producing enormous droppings. The hippo yawned in the water. The giraffe stretched its long neck as if looking down on people and ate leaves from a tree. Aki was nuts about animals and pushed through the crowds to get a better look. Watching a lemur she said, "Look at how cleverly it uses its tail!" And peering at a green iguana through a glass window, she actually called out to it: "Over here, come over here."

What was so fun about shelling out money to look at giraffes and lions? If you asked me, zoos stank, and that was about it. I was interested in environmental issues, but that didn't make me a naturalist or an ecologist. I just wanted to live happily ever after with Aki. And for that, I wanted rain forests and the ozone layer to be preserved. That was all. I was for protecting animals too, but more out of anger at the arrogant cruelty of human beings than pity for the animals. Aki appeared to misunderstand this and thought I was a kind and gentle animal-lover. And that was why she'd said, "Let's go to the zoo on our next holiday, Saku-chan! The zoo!" Like I'd enjoy looking at raccoons and pythons. *Give me a break. Let me kiss you, let me at least touch your breasts* was the reply I gave in my head, but not out loud. Didn't have the guts.

We ate our lunch near the lowland gorilla's cage. The gorilla sat in a corner, scratching its armpit. Once in a while it put its nose there. As far as I could tell, it was pretty concerned by its own body odor. It kept repeating the same movements over and over, until I thought it might be neurotic.

"That woman that your grandfather loved, do you still

have her ashes?" We had finished eating and were drinking canned oolong tea when Aki asked me this.

"Yeah, I have them. It's what Grandpa wants."

"That's right." She smiled.

"What about it?"

She thought a minute. "Your grandfather married someone else, not her."

"Uh-huh. Thus creating a remote cause for me being born."

"I wonder what kind of couple they were."

"Grandpa and Grandma?"

She nodded.

"Grandma died pretty early, so I don't know for sure. But I think they were, you know, an ordinary couple. I think they got along fine. I mean, look at what a fool's paradise they had for a son."

"A fool's paradise?"

"You know my dad. If the parents didn't get along, their kid would be a little more messed up, right? Or at least more sensitive."

"I wonder which would be better."

"Which what?"

"Living with the person you love, or staying in love with the person you love while living with someone else."

"That's easy. Living together."

"But if you live together, you start seeing the bad stuff about that person too. Or you get into fights over stupid little things. And when that happens every day, after twenty or thirty years, you'd probably feel nothing for that person anymore. No matter how much in love you were at first."

She spoke with conviction.

"You're such a pessimist."

"Don't you ever think about stuff like that, Saku-chan?"

"Sure, but I'd put a better spin on it. Let's say you're crazy about the other person now. Ten years later, you love them even more. You even love the things about them that bugged you at first. A hundred years later, you've come to love every single hair on their head."

"A hundred years later?" asked Aki, laughing. "You plan on living that long?"

"That thing you hear about couples getting tired of each other after being together a long time, I bet it's a lie. I mean, look at us. We've been going out for almost two whole years, and we aren't the least bit sick of each other."

"Yeah, but we don't live together."

"What would be different?"

"You'd see all my bad sides."

"Like what?"

"I'm not telling."

"They're so bad you can't tell me about them?"

"Yes, they are." She looked down and said, "You probably wouldn't like me anymore."

I felt rejected for some reason.

"You know that myth about how the love of two people moved the earth?" I said, pulling myself together. "There was a couple, totally in love, but they were forced to break up. Her father, or maybe her brothers, got in their way."

"And then?"

"They were separated. He was sent off to some island, too far out to visit in a little boat. But their love was really

strong. So the island, which was kilometers out there, slowly moved toward the mainland until it actually joined it. It was their love that pulled the island over."

I stole a glance at Aki, who was looking down and seemed to be thinking.

"People in ancient times must've thought that love is really powerful," I went on. "I mean, strong enough to move an island. They must have seen that power around them, or felt it. But at some point, they stopped using it."

"Why, do you think?"

"Maybe because it caused a lot of headaches. I mean, if you have islands moving around every time a couple falls in love, mapmakers'd go crazy keeping up. And imagine what would happen when two people fought over the same person. A battle between island-movers. Could get ugly. Their own bodies probably couldn't take it either."

"That's true." She nodded.

"They must've decided to cut back on that stuff and put more energy into hunting and gathering."

"You sound like a guidance counselor," she said, laughing.

"I do?"

Aki assumed a deep voice. "Hirose, boys are all very well, but how about concentrating some more on your studies? You can't go to college if you fail your math tests."

"What's that about?"

"Watch out for that Matsumoto, in particular. Spend too much time with him, and he could end up ruining your life. He's the kind of guy who'll become so infatuated, he'll pull islands to the shore without a thought of the conse-

quences.” Then, returning to her normal voice, she said, “We have midterms soon.”

“Yeah, tomorrow it’s back to the books.”

Aki nodded gloomily.

“Until then, though, let’s live for love,” I said.

On our way from the train station to the zoo, we’d walked along a narrow back street to avoid the crowds. I’d instantly noticed a hotel, and what kind of hotel it was. Out of the corner of my eye I’d noted the green vacancy sign and memorized the price of a “rest.” I compared that to the amount of money left in my pocket, minus our train fare home.

We took the same street on the way back. There was still some time until sundown, and the green vacancy light was on as before. We grew quiet as we got close. Our steps seemed to grow heavier. By the time we were in front of the hotel, we were hardly moving.

“Would it bother you to go inside a place like this, Aki?” I asked, without turning my head.

“What about you, Saku-chan?” she said, keeping her face down.

“I don’t really care one way or another.”

“Don’t you think it’s too soon?”

Silence.

“How about just checking it out? We’ll go in, and if it’s yucky we’ll come right out again.”

“Do you have enough money?”

“Yeah.”

The thick door was like a high-class restaurant’s. We pushed it open and stepped into the building. I was so

nervous I thought I might throw up the lunch we'd eaten, but I pictured the lowland gorilla sniffing its armpit and somehow managed to keep it down. Unlike what I'd expected, the hotel lobby was bright and looked clean. Nobody was around.

"Gosh, it's quiet."

At the front of the lobby was a machine like the coin changers they have in game centers. From what I could tell, you were supposed to put your money in there and push the button for the room of your choice, and the key would fall into the dish below. This way, you could use the facilities without having to meet anybody. I was fishing for my wallet when Aki spoke.

"I don't want to," she said in a small voice. "I don't like places like this."

I let go of the wallet and smacked my back pocket.

"Yeah, you're right."

"Let's go."

We stepped into the narrow street and started walking toward the train station. Neither of us spoke for a long time. Twilight was falling fast.

"I guess it was kinda yucky," I said when the station came into view.

"Let's hold hands," was all she replied.

Three

FOR MY SUMMER VACATION book report, I read *The Departure Never Came* by Toshio Shimao. The story takes place in the final stages of the Pacific War, and the protagonist, the captain of a kamikaze unit, receives the command from headquarters to prepare for attack. Bracing himself for what he knows will be the last day of his life, he waits with his comrades for the order to take off. The order, however, never comes. Suspended between life and death, the protagonist is notified that Japan has surrendered unconditionally.

Our relationship didn't show much progress over the vacation, either. We saw each other almost every day, but hardly ever even kissed. How was I going to move us to the level of "carnal relations"? Not knowing what to do, I mumbled, "Will departure never come?" In the novel, the protagonist looks back and says, "After our takeoff was averted, it was the heaviness of the everyday, more than anything, that was so hard to take." That was exactly how I felt. I kept thinking of that day in May when we'd gone to the zoo. We'd actually gone into the hotel, only to leave without doing anything. Now this felt like something set in stone. I thought of myself as a dying species. Back before human beings were rational creatures, weak-willed males like myself no doubt died without leaving any descendants.

While I flopped around in misery, half the vacation sped by. Every couple days I'd go to school in the afternoon to swim. I knew a lot of the guys who hung out there. We would race fifty-meter lengths and the loser would treat everyone to hamburgers at McDonald's on the way home.

I met Oki at the pool one day. I didn't talk to him much anymore since he was in a different program at school. He was still doing judo, which he'd started back in junior high. Now he was built like Arnold Schwarzenegger.

After swimming awhile together, we sat in the sun by the pool. A big camphor tree grew nearby. I lay at the roots of the tree and watched a line of worker ants carrying food back to their nest.

"You gonna swim?" Oki asked.

"Tell me, what do you think makes life enjoyable for an ant?"

"If you're not, I'm going in by myself."

"What d'you think an ant likes to do?"

"Well, eat dead bugs . . . and weak bugs, I guess."

I couldn't help laughing at how seriously he said this.

"What?" he said, sounding hurt.

"You like judo?"

"Sort of." I thought he would just get up and go, but Oki paused before saying, "You're going out with Hirose, aren't you?"

"Uh-huh."

"One of the guys on the judo team's after her, so watch out."

"What's his name?"

"Tachibana."

"What a clueless idiot."

"You'll get yourself killed," Oki said, as though I didn't know what I was talking about. "At the summer festival the other day, these guys from another school picked a fight with him at the movie theater. He left three of them

half-dead.”

“That’s scary,” I said.

The pool’s surface glittered in the sun. On the blue-painted bottom, transparent rings of light opened and closed. The lines of black tile marking distance seemed to sway. If you tuned out, you heard none of the sounds around you, just the quiet lapping of the water.

“So hey, how far have you gone with her?” Oki said.

“How far where?”

“You know, have you done it?”

“You judo people are so crude,” I said with my eyes closed.

“I’m just looking out for you, all right?” His voice sounded glum.

“What d’you mean?”

“Just hurry up and do it if you haven’t already.” Was this all he could think about? Well, it was all *I* could think about too, actually. “Then probably Tachibana won’t make a pass at her.”

How dumb, I thought. Make a pass at her? Guys who went around bragging about “my woman” or “my girlfriend” made me sick. If this Tachibana moron liked Aki so much, why didn’t he just go ahead and tell her? Not making a pass at Aki because I’d “done it” with her—what kind of reasoning was that? Aki didn’t belong to anyone but herself.

“You judo people are so simple-minded,” I said.

“You’re pissing me off,” Oki said, sounding halfway there already.

“Don’t get pissed off.”

He sighed. “Look, if you want, I can set it all up for you.”

"Set what up?"

"I know a good place. For a date. If you take her there, I can guarantee you'll go all the way."

I narrowed my eyes and said, "You judo people are very kind, aren't you?"

"Whaddya mean?"

"Why're you doing this?"

"Remember when I broke my leg that time, and you and Hirose came to the hospital to see me?" Oki said. "You really made my day."

"That sure was a long time ago."

I remembered walking up Castle Hill with Aki that day. Now both of us were feeling sentimental. Oki spoke again.

"You wanna hear about it or not?"

"Sure, let's hear it."

"I don't know about right here," he said, glancing around.

"How about going to McDonald's?"

"McDonald's?"

"Kinda hungry anyway."

"I'm not."

"Well I am," Oki said.

I instantly recovered from my feelings of nostalgia. "Didn't someone say these are tragic times, when friendship is bought and sold for money?"

"Never heard it," he said. Standing up, he added, "A Big Mac and a large order of fries and it's a deal."

Four

OKI'S HOUSE WAS BY THE SEA, and his parents were pearl farmers. Back in junior high, he used to pedal the five kilometers to school on his bicycle every day. Now he took the bus, saying judo practice was tough. I'd been to Oki's house a few times with some friends. On the water out in front of the house floated an oyster raft the size of a tennis court. His parents let us swim there. The far end of the raft was over ten meters from shore, so we couldn't see the bottom at all. We would run along the raft's gangplank and jump into the water, over and over. No matter how far we jumped, or how deep we dove, the sea went on and on, endless. When we got hungry, we'd go to the fishing co-op to buy bread and milk, and eat back on the raft. Then we'd swim again. All kinds of little fish swam beneath the raft. We would pry off the mussels sticking to the sides, break them open with rocks, and use their flesh as fishing bait. Fearless filefish and rockfish would bite and become our supper.

Every family involved in fishing or pearl farming owned boats, usually four or five of them, and at any given time at least one of the boats would be idle. As Oki told it, pearl farmers were busiest between April and June, when the seed grain is inserted into the oysters, and fairly laid-back after that. If we borrowed one of his family's boats for a few hours without permission, it wouldn't be a problem. He claimed nobody in his house would even notice it was missing.

About one kilometer out to sea from Oki's house was a small island called Yumejima. Ten years earlier a local

company had begun development on it to build a recreational resort featuring a swimming beach, amusement park, and hotel. The bank financing the project started having troubles, though, and pulled out midway. The company had to put the plans on hold, but then it went bankrupt itself, and the project came to a total standstill.

"Most of the things are already built," Oki said, stuffing his mouth with french fries. "You can see the Ferris wheel and roller coaster from my house."

"Some other company should take it over." I was drinking coffee and wondering when Oki would get to the point. "I mean it's almost done, right?"

"Yeah, but if it opened for business, they'd lose hundreds of millions of yen every year," Oki said. That made sense.

I thought of the buildings and rides, left there to ruin. When I was in elementary school, there was a Yumejima picture contest every year. The kids would draw their vision of the island, and a panel of judges including the mayor and the president of the development company would select the best ones. The winners received expensive prizes like bicycles and video game consoles. We would draw futuristic pictures of the island and send them in.

"But . . . there's a use for everything," Oki said as he bit into his Big Mac. "Especially hotels."

So he *was* getting to the point. Seeing my interest, he nodded meaningfully.

"These days, the island is where the guys with boats take their girlfriends. They sneak over there on Friday and Saturday nights, and do it on the hotel's beds."

"Are you sure?" I leaned forward.

"One time I went fishing there with some guys from the judo team. We went exploring inside the hotel. There was a bunch of used condoms in every single room."

"Hmm," I grunted, sipping my lukewarm coffee.

"So you can take Hirose over to the island and make it with her."

"In a room filled with used condoms?"

"Pretty hot, huh?"

Aki had passed up a clean, decent-looking place that was actually a functioning hotel. Would she understand the allure of the island? If I took her there, wasn't it likely she would not only pass up the opportunity, but pass out? So should I make it with her while she was passed out?

"Can you just go over there and let yourself into the buildings and stuff?"

"I guess it's private property, but it's not like there's a guard or anything."

"I wouldn't want to run into any of the guys who go there."

"No problem. They just go there on the weekends. You can go on a Tuesday or Wednesday."

"And you'll take us over there?"

"Uh-huh. Just pay me for the fuel."

"Allow me to call you Boatman Ryunosuke from this day forth."

"We got a deal, lover boy?"

"Oh please, captain, I ain't no lover boy."

Even while I joked around with Oki, I was already thinking about how I was going to get Aki to come to the island with me.

Five

I LEFT THE HOUSE around six in the morning and met Aki at the bus stop. I had told my parents I was going camping, at a good spot near my friend's house where we could fish and swim. I also handed them a slip of paper with Oki's phone number on it, telling them they could reach me there in an emergency. So long as I let my parents know where I was going, they never asked a lot of detailed questions. And what I had told them was not exactly a lie. I *was* going camping near Oki's house.

"Who's Oki's girlfriend?" Aki asked when we were on the bus.

"I dunno. I think she's in the same program with him at school."

"I wonder why he invited us."

"Remember back in junior high? We visited him in the hospital."

"You mean when he broke his leg?"

"Uh-huh. We really made his day, apparently."

"And he's showing his appreciation *now*?"

By the time the bus reached our destination, however, Oki's girlfriend had suddenly become unable to join us on our camping trip.

"That's too bad," I said, pretending to be very disappointed.

"Yeah, it really is," said Oki.

"We're already here, though. You wanna go anyway, just the three of us?"

"Yeah, let's go."

We piled our things into a boat tied to the pearl raft.

"Where's your stuff, Oki?" asked Aki.

I glared at Oki.

"Huh? Uh, I . . ."

"I packed everything he needs," I interrupted quickly.

"He's letting us use his boat, so we decided I'd take care of the rest."

"Yeah, that's right. I'm in charge of the boat."

After loading up, we took turns climbing in. It was a fiberglass boat seating four people and had a battered outboard motor on its stern.

"Off we go!" said Oki.

"Aye, aye, Cap'n," I said.

Aki sat in the middle of the boat, looking unconvinced. It was still early morning and a white mist covered the bay. Through it, we could see more rafts and plastic buoys. The prow of our boat sliced the surface and scattered sprays of water to the left and right that sparkled in the morning light. Further out, the mist lifted. A kite circled overhead, cutting large arcs in the sky. Once in a while we'd pass returning fishing boats, and every time, Aki would wave at them. The fishermen always waved back. Oki, operating the outboard motor, squinted against the sun and watched her.

The Ferris wheel grew larger and larger the closer we drew to the island. In front of the amusement park was the swimming beach. We could see beach huts and shower stalls. Every structure was worn and rusted, going to rot from the rain and salt air. The sun was high by then, illuminating the red of the Ferris wheel's peeling support column.

The dock was to the left of the amusement park, and behind it on a small hill stood a white hotel. The pier, too, was rust-red. There was no levee or breakwater. Because the island stood in an inland sea, it was generally calm unless a storm or typhoon struck. Oki eased the throttle on the outboard motor and slowly steered the boat toward the pier. Peering over the edge of the boat, I could see groups of small fish, blue and yellow, swimming around in the bright, sunlit water. A little further away floated a bunch of white jellyfish.

Oki reached out to grasp the post, and I clambered onto the pier. I moored the boat with the rope Oki tossed me and lent Aki a hand. We unloaded our gear, and finally Oki climbed onto the dock. I asked Aki if she'd like to walk out toward the beach.

"What about Oki?"

"I, uh . . ." He hesitated and glanced at me.

"Wanted to go fishing, right?" I answered at once.

"Yeah, I'll be fishing."

"This is a guy who enjoys his solitude."

The beach was on the island's south side. The sun beat down mercilessly, and there was no shade whatsoever. A short distance from where the waves broke, sea lilies were growing in the sand. Once in a while we'd hear the cries of a bird from the hill, but otherwise the only sound was the crash of waves hitting the shore.

The beach huts were so dilapidated we couldn't use them. Their iron frames were rusted reddish-black and the wooden planks of their floors were rotted through in places. On top of that, there were swarms of sea roaches inside. We decided

to take turns changing behind the shower stalls.

Aki was a good swimmer. Keeping her face out of the water, she swam quickly and easily on her side. With my goggles on, I could see little fish of every color darting about. There were lots of starfish and sea urchins as well. At a place where I could just touch my toes to the bottom, I handed the goggles to Aki. It was too deep for her to stand, though, so I supported her body in the water while she put the goggles on. Her breasts were right in front of my eyes. Her white skin, wet with the sea water, glistened in the sun.

We swam out further, where neither of us could stand. Aki had her face in the water, gazing down through the goggles. Treading water, she took them off and handed them over.

"Wow," she said.

I put the goggles on and looked underwater. Below us, the sea floor dropped down in an inverted cone. The steeply sloping sides grew more and more indistinct the deeper they went, until finally they were swallowed by darkness. It was frightening.

"Ugh," I said.

Aki smiled. I tried to snatch a kiss from those lips, but it didn't work. We both ended up swallowing a ton of salt water and gagging. We choked and spluttered and laughed out loud. Holding my hand, Aki floated on her back. I did the same and closed my eyes. The inside of my eyelids was bright red. A small wave washed over me and broke on the shore. When I opened my eyes and looked to the side, I saw Aki's long hair spread out on the water, as if someone had emptied a pot of ink there.

At noon we returned to the dock, where Oki was waiting for us. As we'd planned, he said he'd just heard over the boat's radio that his mother was feeling ill, and that he needed to go home for a little while.

"We'll go back too," Aki said considerately.

"Nah." Oki grimaced and said, "You guys stay here and do some fishing or something. You came all this way, after all. I'll be back later. It's nothing serious. My mom's always had high blood pressure. She just needs to take her medicine and lie down. She'll be fine."

"Okay then, you take care," I said.

"Don't you think we should go back too and see how she is?" Aki said, still with that look of concern. "If she's fine we can always come back. But if she's really ill, it'll be a bother for Oki's family if we're still here."

"You think?"

With this lame response, I turned to my accomplice, silently pleading. Large beads of sweat started to run down his forehead.

"My brother's coming home from work around six. Then I can come back. Hey, I've been looking forward to this camping trip too, you guys. I'm gonna be a good boy all afternoon, so let me have some fun tonight."

"Well, if that's what he says . . ." Without completing the sentence, I looked at Aki.

She seemed moved somewhat by Oki's impassioned performance.

"All right. I guess we'll stay."

Oki and I couldn't help exchanging glances. His face wore a look of relief, but his eyes said "you bastard." Making sure

Aki wouldn't see, I pressed my palms together in front of my chest to show my gratitude.

Our actions after that were unnaturally brisk. Oki just wanted to get away from the island. And I wanted to pack him into the boat and send him off before Aki changed her mind.

"Room 305," Oki whispered while untying the mooring.

"This'll cost you big time."

"Thanks, I really appreciate it." I placed my palms together again.

When the boat was gone from sight, we decided to eat our lunch on the pier. Aki had on a white T-shirt over her bathing suit, while I wore only my swim trunks. Suddenly, it hit me: nobody was on the island besides Aki and me. Oki would not be returning until noon the next day. I felt a rush of desire rising up within me.

I could hardly tell what we were eating. I was dizzy from the enormity of the freedom I'd been given. For the next twenty-four hours I could be a wolf if I wanted, or a lamb—anything from Dr. Jekyll to Mr. Hyde. The possibilities of who I was, who I could be, had expanded endlessly. Choosing just one out of that whole spectrum daunted me, because Aki would see only that me, and all the rest would vanish. As I considered this, my initial desire faded and was replaced by an odd feeling of responsibility.

After lunch, we did some fishing with the gear Oki had left behind. We baited the hooks with grubs. Wrasse and large-scale blackfish snapped at them moments after we threw the lines in. We had planned to catch some for dinner, but they bit so naively that we felt sorry for them

and threw each one back after taking it off the hook. After a while this turned into a pain, so we stopped fishing.

The thick planks of the pier had absorbed the heat of the sun. Sitting there, we felt a pleasant drowsiness. A cool wind blew in from the sea, so we didn't get at all sweaty. We rubbed sunblock on each other's bodies. Once in a while we'd jump down from the pier to wade in the water and splash each other.

"I wonder if Oki's mother is all right," Aki said.

"It's not too serious. Just high blood pressure."

"But they radioed him, so it must've been."

The lie we'd told Aki was becoming more and more of a burden. Now that I was alone with her, I didn't care so much about "carnal relations" and all that. Here on the brink of its success, the scheme I'd hatched with Oki seemed childish and silly. I felt like I was seeing myself, childish and silly as I was, from somewhere far in the distance.

Aki took a transistor radio out of her backpack and turned it on. It was the hour for "Afternoon Pops." I recognized the voices of the disc jockeys, a man and a woman.

My my, it's hot every day, isn't it? Yeah, well, it is summer! So today we're bringing you a special program devoted to songs you'd want to hear on the beach.

That's right! And we're taking telephone requests too, so bring on the calls! Everyone who calls in a request today gets their name put into a raffle, and the ten lucky winners get specially designed T-shirts!

Why don't we start out by reading a postcard?

All right! Here's one from 'Yoppa' in Kazemachi. "Hello Kiyohiko, hello Yoko." Hello to you, too! "I'm in the hospital right now with

a stomach problem.” Uh-oh. “They do all these tests on me every day and I’m getting really tired of it.” I bet you are. “I may need to have an operation right in the middle of my summer vacation! Still, I have a long life ahead of me, so I guess one summer like this isn’t too bad.” Wow, what a great attitude! I know what that’s like. I had to have an operation myself, back in high school. It was appendicitis, and I was in the hospital for three days. I know it can be scary, but don’t worry, the whole thing’ll be over before you know it.

Says someone who’s been through it himself. Well, that was only appendicitis. Let’s hope Yoppa’s stomach problem isn’t too serious, either. We really hope you get better soon, Yoppa! And now, since you asked for it, here’s “Midsummer Fruit” by the Southern All-Stars!

“Remember that time you sent in a song request for me, Saku-chan?” Aki said in the middle of the song.

“Yeah.” I wished she hadn’t brought it up.

“Back in the second year of junior high,” she went on. “It was ‘Tonight,’ wasn’t it? You wrote the craziest lie, too.”

“And you let me have it the next day.”

“But now it’s a good memory. I mean, you made up that story just so they’d read your postcard and play your request, right?”

“Sort of,” I said. “You were dating some high school guy at the time.”

“Dating?” Her voice sounded a little shrill. She turned to look at me.

“Some gorgeous volleyball player.”

“Oh,” she said. “But how did you know about that, Saku-chan?”

“I heard the girls talking in class.”

"Oh, geez. I just had a crush on him."

"A crush?"

"Yeah. I was just a kid. I didn't know anything about love."

"Hmm."

She searched my face.

"Don't tell me you're jealous, Saku-chan?"

"Anything wrong with that?"

"Come on, I was in junior high!"

"Hey, I even get jealous of your bra, all right?"

"Stop it!"

Billows of clouds were forming over the mainland. The tops were shining white, the midsections grey, but the undersides were almost completely black. We could hear the rumbling of thunder far away. A warm, humid wind blew in from the sea. The clouds slowly moved toward us, covering the entire sky. The sea, which had been a deep blue, was now grey.

"Oki doesn't seem to be coming back," Aki said anxiously.

I very nearly told her the truth. I wanted to apologize and get rid of that oppressive feeling, but just then a large drop of rain fell from the sky. At first the drops came slowly, but like an out-of-control metronome, the tempo of the rain grew faster and faster until finally it was like white noise.

"This feels wonderful," Aki said. She raised her face to the sky so that the rain hit her forehead. "You planned it like this, didn't you?"

I turned to look at her. Rain spattered her cheeks.

"First, four of us are supposed to go camping. Then Oki's

girlfriend suddenly can't come. Then Oki's mother gets sick. And we're left alone on the island."

I thought I was done for.

"I'm sorry." I faced Aki straight on and bowed my head.

The rain seemed stronger. The waves washing the pier grew higher. She remained as she was, with her eyes closed and her face held up to the rain.

"For goodness' sake," she eventually said, sounding like my mother. "When's the boat coming?"

"Around noon tomorrow."

"So we still have a lot of time."

"Um, I swear we won't do anything you don't want to do."

She didn't answer and only gazed at our wet backpacks and the cooler with our food in it.

"Well, let's take our stuff somewhere anyway," she said and finally stood up.

Six

FROM A DISTANCE the hotel had looked new, but up close we could see the paint flaking off of what was practically a ruin. A huge sago palm stood at the gate, and beyond it a gentle slope led to the entrance. We stopped and looked up. The four-story hotel could easily have served as a location for a horror movie. Boards were nailed over the automatic doors, but a section had been ripped out, making an

opening just large enough for a person to enter. It looked more like a site for drug transactions or a hideaway for fugitives than a lovers' tryst.

The first floor, apart from the lobby and lounge, had a restaurant and kitchen. Stacks of tables and chairs stood in one corner of the restaurant. We passed through the lobby and slowly climbed the stairs. The second floor and up were all guest rooms. The doors, slabs of dark brown wood with handles, lined one side of the corridor. A lot of fine sand had collected in the halls and stairways, making a gritty sound as we walked along in our sandals.

Oki had said room 305. In other words, that was the room he had cleaned up for us while we swam in the sea—so that Aki wouldn't have to see used condoms and such. Of course, I had promised to pay him. We hadn't decided on the price yet, but I assumed that a Big Mac and a large order of fries wouldn't cover it. I felt like a small business owner, up to his ears in debt to a loan shark.

A tree growing on the hillside behind the hotel had pushed its way through a broken window halfway down the corridor. The tree's branches spread across the ceiling, thick with bright green leaves. It was just a matter of time before vegetation swallowed up the entire hotel.

I opened the door to room 305. The first thing we saw was the gigantic double bed, right in the center of the room. We turned our eyes away as if we'd seen something forbidden. Aside from the bed, the room was empty. We both gazed at the floor and then the ceiling, not knowing where else to look. Paralyzed by the silence, I couldn't think of anything to say. Even the sound of swallowing was too loud.

"Why don't we just leave our stuff here and walk around the hotel?" I finally managed.

Aki nodded with relief.

"Yes, let's."

We went down to the kitchen on the first floor. There too, plants from the hill behind had invaded and were growing in bunches here and there. Both of us were sticky with salt-water—the rain had not been enough to wash it all off. We tried the faucets, but no water came out.

"Without water we can't even make dinner," Aki said.

"Oki said there's a well out back," I answered defensively.

The back door was missing. The rain had stopped, and the evening sun threw feeble shadows on the kitchen floor. The hillside pressed up close to the hotel, its slope choked with weeds so thick and high they hid the ground beneath. The weeds, vines, shrubs, all of it, teemed against one another.

Above the tangle of wild roses, mugwort, and *dokudami*, a pair of swallowtail butterflies flitted around chasing each other. An old stone cistern was half buried in foliage, easily missed if you weren't looking carefully. A plastic pipe stuck out from the grass, and clear water spilled from its mouth. I supposed it was spring water and plunged my hand into the cistern. The water was pleasantly cold.

"Let's get cleaned up," I said.

Aki was still wearing a T-shirt over her bathing suit.

"I'll go get our towels."

"Okay." She looked around as if embarrassed.

I went up to our room and grabbed our towels and fresh clothes. When I got back, Aki was standing naked beside the cistern with her back to me. The setting sun was

hidden behind the crest of the hill, and her pure white form emerged hazily from the murky profusion of weeds. As though in a dream, I gazed at her awhile.

"What are you doing?"

"Well," she said, keeping her back to me, "I don't have a towel."

"You took off your clothes without thinking about afterwards?" Laughing, I draped her bath towel over her shoulders.

"Thank you."

Aki dried off quickly, then wrapped the towel around herself. It came down to the tops of her thighs.

"Don't look at me so much," she said.

The cistern was filled with brownish-green water plants, which swayed like thin bunches of hair. I dipped my washcloth in the water and washed myself. I wrung out the washcloth and was wiping myself with it when I noticed Aki watching me from the kitchen entrance.

"I didn't know you were there."

She lowered her eyes.

"I thought you'd need a bath towel."

"Thanks." I kept my back to her as I took her towel.

I had borrowed a camping stove, pot, and spoon set from my father, an outdoors enthusiast. The menu was "Killer Eel-and-Egg Bowl." First, you boil water and heat the pouch-packed rice. While it's cooking, slice the burdock root and put it in water, then chop the green onion and grilled eel. Drain the burdock root, lay it on the bottom of the pot and add water and seasoning. When it boils, add the

eel and green onion. After a while, pour beaten eggs over that, turn off the fire and cover the pot to let the eggs set. Scoop this onto the rice, and voilà! Accompanied by instant miso soup, you have a respectable meal.

Aki made vegetable sticks and a fruit salad. Considering all the work involved, it wasn't the sort of food that made you appreciate the delights of outdoor cooking. It was getting dark, so I lit the lantern I had also borrowed from my father. While we ate, we tuned the radio to an FM station. It was another request show, this one devoted to Western bands with long names: The Red Hot Chili Peppers, Everything But the Girl, Afrika Bambaataa & Soul Sonic Force.

After dinner, we wiped the dishes with toilet paper and put all our garbage in a plastic bag. We took the lantern and climbed up to our room. Maybe because we'd seen each other naked, this time we weren't so uncomfortable. And with a full stomach, thinking wicked thoughts was too much trouble. Leaning back against the headboard, we decided to quiz each other on English vocabulary. One of us would say a Japanese word, and the other would have to give the English equivalent. If the other person couldn't answer but you could, you got a point.

"*Meishin*," Aki said.

"Superstition," I answered immediately.

"Was that easy?"

"Kind of. Okay, *ninshin*."

"*Ninshin*?" Aki looked at me with her eyes wide.

"Don't know?"

"Nope."

"Conception."

"Oh, yeah."

"Your turn, Aki."

"Umm . . . *dōjō*, *kyōkan*."

"Sympathy." Again, I responded right away. "Are you studying words that start with *s*?"

"Yeah. But gosh, Saku-chan, you sure know a lot of words."

"Those both come up in rock song titles. Got them from Stevie Wonder and the Rolling Stones."

"Hmm."

It was my turn again.

"*Bokki*."

"What?"

"Like I said, *bokki*. How do you say *bokki* in English?"

"First *ninshin*, now *bokki*? Who needs to know how to say that in English?"

I remained calm and explained, "'Conception' also means an idea, not just getting pregnant. And *bokki* is 'erection.' If you spell it with an *l* instead of an *r*, it means a vote. So a 'general election' is where the whole country votes, and a 'general erection' is where an army commander has a hard-on. See, I don't want you to make embarrassing mistakes like that, Aki."

"Where do you learn these things?" Aki asked, still sounding doubtful. "Conception and erection and stuff."

"I look them up in the dictionary."

"Do best what you like best, as the saying goes."

"That's not the case, actually."

"I think that's exactly the case, actually."

Not wanting to quarrel, we stopped talking and looked

out the window. It was pitch dark outside and we couldn't see a thing.

"Wonder what we'll be when we grow up, after studying all these English words and stuff," Aki said, as if talking to herself. "I heard that the increase in the number of women attending university is directly proportional to the rise in the divorce rate. Don't you think something's wrong if the more you study, the less happy you become?"

"Getting divorced doesn't necessarily make you less happy."

"I guess that's true." After a moment, she said, "The whole point of living is to find happiness. We study and we work because we want to be happy."

On the radio, the program featuring bands with long names was still going on. They'd gone further back in time, and were playing Quicksilver Messenger Service, Creedence Clearwater Revival, and Big Brother & the Holding Company.

Later that night, the rain started again. It struck the windows and eaves, making a lot of noise. We lay on top of the bed, listening to it. Closing my eyes and concentrating on the sound, I noticed that smells grew more intense. The smell of the rain, the smell of the earth and plants on the hillside, the smell of dust heaped in piles on the floor, the smell of peeling wallpaper seemed to wrap us up in layer after layer of smell.

We should have been tired, but no matter how late it got, neither of us felt sleepy. We decided to take turns telling stories from our childhoods. Aki went first.

"When we finished kindergarten, we made a time capsule

and planted it in the play yard. We put a newspaper inside and a photo of the whole class and little compositions that we wrote. The subject was 'What I want to be when I grow up.'"

"What did you write?"

"That's the thing. I don't remember," she said.

"A bride, maybe?"

"Yeah, maybe," she said with a small laugh. "I wish I could dig it up and read it."

Then it was my turn.

"Back when my grandma was still alive, there was this masseur who'd come over once in a while. He was about sixty, and he'd been born blind. So one day, he asks me, 'Hey little boy, does rain come down in drops, or in long lines like thread?' He'd never seen it, so he didn't know."

"Uh-huh." Aki nodded as if that made sense. "So what did you tell him?"

"I told him it comes down in drops. And he goes, 'So it's drops, is it?' He seemed really moved. He told me he'd been wondering about it ever since he was a kid. And then he said, 'Thanks to you, little boy, I'm a little wiser today.'"

"That's like *Cinema Paradiso*."

"Yeah, but when I think back on it now, it's weird."

"Why?"

"I mean, if it bothered him for such a long time, why didn't he ask someone before? Why'd he wait until he was sixty years old? And why'd he ask me, of all people?"

"He probably looked at you and suddenly remembered being a kid and wondering about the rain."

"Or maybe he went around asking people that same

question, every time it rained.”

The rain was still falling.

“Hope our families aren’t worried about us,” Aki said.

“Maybe they’ve asked the police to look for us by now.”

“What did you tell your parents, Saku-chan?”

“That I was going camping near a friend’s house. What about you?”

“I said camping, too. I used a friend as an accomplice.”

“Can you trust her?”

“I think so. But I hate this kind of thing. You inconvenience so many people.”

“I know, you’re right.”

Aki lay down and turned toward me. She kissed me lightly on the lips.

“Let’s take our time growing into each other. No need to hurry.”

Wrapped in each other’s arms, we closed our eyes. Under the cotton blanket we’d spread in place of a sheet, grains of sand made a rustling noise.

When I woke up in the middle of the night, the radio was blaring static and the lantern was out. I stood up and turned off the radio. The room was stuffy, so I opened the window and cool air, smelling of the sea, flowed in. It didn’t look like it would be light for a while. The rain had stopped, and the sky, clear now, was filled with stars. Maybe because there were no lights nearby, the stars were so close I felt I could poke them with the tip of my fishing rod.

“I can hear the waves.” It was Aki’s voice.

“You’re awake?”

She came to the window and looked outside. Across the dark sea, we could see lights twinkling on the opposite shore.

"I wonder where that is."

"Koike, maybe, or Kokubo."

We could hear the waves approach and recede, back and forth. They tossed the stones onto the beach, and as they receded the stones made a rumbling sound.

"Do you hear a phone ringing?" Aki said.

"As if."

I listened.

"You're right."

I picked up the flashlight from the table. The corridor was completely dark, and the flashlight's beam lit the far wall a fuzzy yellow. The sound of ringing seemed to come from a room near the end of the hall. We walked slowly, as quietly as we could. The phone was still ringing. We should have been getting closer to the room, yet the sound did not get any louder.

The ringing abruptly stopped, as though the person calling had decided we were out and hung up. We looked at each other without speaking. I waved the flashlight around. We were right at the place where the tree had intruded through the broken window. Over our heads, a thick branch covered by vines was green with leaves. When I shined the flashlight on it, we saw a beetle crawling over the bark. I stuck my head out of the broken window and pointed the flashlight's beam outside. The hillside was a mere four or five meters away.

"Fireflies," Aki whispered.

Following the direction of her gaze, I saw a small light in the grass. At first I saw only one, but looking intently I began to see more of them shining here and there. As we watched, their numbers continued to grow.

The lights of hundreds of fireflies flickered in the weeds and bushes, glowing and resting again and again. One that was stopped on a leaf would float up, flit in company with two or three others, then hide again in the grass. Though there were so many, their flight was soundless. It sometimes seemed as if the entire group was floating along on the breeze.

"Turn off the light," Aki said.

And then we were with them, in the same darkness. I saw a firefly detach itself from the rest and fly toward us, emitting its faint light. Just outside the window it stopped in mid-air. I extended my hand, palm up. The firefly backed away, as if wary of me, then paused on a leaf of the invading tree. We waited. When it finally took flight again, the firefly circled Aki, and then, like a single snowflake falling, landed gently on her shoulder. It was as if the firefly had chosen her. It glowed two or three times, as though it were sending her some kind of signal.

Holding our breaths, we watched the firefly. After glowing a few times, it rose from her shoulder. This time, without the hesitation of its approach, it flew straight back toward the bushes. I strained my eyes to follow it. Soon it had rejoined its companions and was swallowed up among the many tiny lights there, and I lost it.

part 3

BY THE TIME WE GOT BACK from our class trip to Australia Aki's condition had a name: *aplastic anemia*. Her doctor said that her bone marrow's functioning had deteriorated, and she seemed to believe him. Of course, I had no reason to doubt this explanation either.

To prevent infection, I was instructed by a nurse in "gown technique." First, I had to take a gown and mask from a locker in the hallway and put them on. Then I had to change out of my shoes and put on special slippers. After disinfecting my hands at the entrance to Aki's room, I was finally allowed to enter.

Every time she saw me in my mask and gown, she would fall over herself in bed with laughter.

"I can't help it, you look so funny!"

"What can I do?" I said. "Blame it on your bone marrow. It's too lazy to make blood cells properly, so I get stuck looking like this."

"How's school?" she asked, changing the subject.

"Same old."

"Isn't it almost time for midterms?"

"I guess so."

"Are you studying?"

"Yeah."

"I wish I could go back to school soon," she said, gazing out of the window.

A nurse poked her head in through the doorway and asked Aki if everything was all right. She smiled at me and said hello. I came to visit every day, so most of the nurses knew me. Testing and other procedures took place in the morning, mostly, so things were quiet until dinnertime.

"She's checking on us to make sure we aren't kissing," Aki said in a low voice when the nurse had gone. "The head nurse warned me the other day. She said no kissing with that boyfriend of yours who's here every day. Because you'll give me germs."

For a moment, I had a vision of germs swarming around in my mouth.

"Kinda gross, when you put it like that."

"You want to?"

"It's okay."

"We can, you know."

"But what about all my germs?"

"There's a medicated mouthwash I use over there by the sink. If you rinse your mouth really well with that, it'll be okay."

I lowered my mask to my chin, took a swig, and swished the iodine solution around my mouth. I sat down on the edge of the bed facing her. I remembered the first time we'd ever kissed. Venturing a kiss in sterile conditions was far

more nerve-racking. We touched our lips together.

"You taste like mouthwash," she said.

"If you come down with a fever tonight, they'll blame me for it."

"I'm glad we did it, though."

"How about one more?"

Once again, we touched our lips together. After rinsing my mouth with iodine, and wearing a pale-green gown like a surgeon's, the kiss felt like a solemn ritual.

"Next June, let's go see the hydrangeas on Castle Hill," I said.

"The promise we made back in junior high," Aki said, squinting slightly as if looking far away. "It's only been three years, but it feels like such a long time ago."

"A lot's happened since then."

"Yeah, really."

Aki appeared lost in thought. She whispered, "June is still more than half a year away."

"You just take your time getting better until then."

"Mm." She nodded. "But it's such a long time. If we'd known this was going to happen, we should've gone when I was still healthy."

"You're talking like you won't be healthy again."

Instead of answering, Aki just gave a forlorn smile.

One day when I got to the hospital Aki was asleep, and her mother, who was often with her, wasn't there. I watched Aki's face from the side of the bed. Because of the anemia it was very pale. The cream-colored curtains at the window were drawn, and Aki, her eyes closed, faced away

from the window as if shunning the outside light. The sunlight flowing through the curtains flitted around the room, shimmering like butterfly wings. It fell on Aki's face, adding a gentle shadow to her expression. With the feeling I was seeing something rare, I continued gazing at her while she slept. Suddenly I was seized with the anxiety that from within this tranquil sleep, a death so small you could barely see it would come floating up like a poppy seed. It was like sketching outdoors in art class, when I'd stare down at white paper under bright sun until it seemed to be covered with tiny black dots.

"Aki."

I called her name, several times. Finally she stirred a little. She moved her head from side to side as if shaking something off. Whatever had been covering her face fell away, layer by layer. Life returned, faint at first, and then like the twittering of a bird, her eyes opened.

"Saku-chan," she whispered in surprise.

"How do you feel?"

"I slept a bit, so a lot better."

She sat up and took her cardigan from where it was draped on the back of a chair. She put it on over her pajamas.

"I was really depressed this morning," she said. Her eyes held a trace of desolation. "Thinking about dying and stuff. I was wondering what would happen to me if I found out I would have to say good-bye to you forever."

"Silly. That's not something you should be thinking about."

"I guess." She sighed and said, "I suppose I'm losing heart or something."

"Is it lonely here in the hospital?"

"Yes." She gave a small nod.

The silence felt heavy when we stopped talking.

"I can't even imagine what it means, for me to be gone from this world," Aki eventually said, as if talking to herself. "It's a strange feeling, to think your life is going to end at some point. It's only natural that it will, of course, but usually you live your life without thinking about things like that."

"You have to think only about fun stuff. Like when you're cured . . ."

"Like us getting married?" Her tone cut the conversation short.

"I think I'll go rinse my mouth," I said, and finally got her to smile.

Every time I visited, we would sneak kisses behind the nurses' backs. For me, it was a way of proving I was alive. Aki never developed a fever or other sign of infection, so I intended to keep it up as long as she was there.

"Lately, a lot of my hair comes out when I wash it," she said.

"Is that a side effect of your medicine?"

Aki nodded silently.

"It kinda makes me sad."

I took her hand without thinking. I didn't know what to say.

"I'll love you even if you're bald," I blurted.

She stared at me, eyes wide.

"Do you have to be so explicit about it?"

“Sorry,” I said. And then rather lamely added, “The word *explicit* comes from the Latin for unfolded, or set forth. Remember?”

Aki pressed her face against my chest and started bawling like a small child. It was so unexpected that I was taken aback, at a complete loss. It was the first time I’d ever seen her cry. I didn’t know if it was the disease or the drugs she was taking that made her so emotional. But it was then that I began to realize how serious her illness was.

Two

AKI’S FACE BECAME THINNER. She couldn’t eat anything for nausea. She felt sick all day and couldn’t stand the sight or even the smell of food. When it was really bad, hearing the sound of the meal cart was enough to make her retch. She’d been prescribed some anti-nausea medicine, but it didn’t seem to help. It was clear they were giving her some very strong drugs, but that didn’t jibe with “anemia.” So what could they be treating her for?

I looked up *aplastic anemia* in a medical dictionary. It was defined as anemia arising from a failure of the bone marrow to produce blood cells. That fit with Aki’s doctor’s explanation. As I was reading about the treatment options—blood transfusions and doses of steroid hormones—my eye was caught by an entry on the next page. *Leukemia*. I remembered the song-request postcard I’d sent in, back in junior

high. Could that callous joke I'd played have come back to haunt Aki? I pushed away this irrational thought and began to read the description in the medical dictionary. But a remorse that seemed to be echoing back from the future took hold of my heart.

As Aki had feared, her hair started falling out. Because it was long, the places where it came out were all the more noticeable. She grew more and more despondent as her treatment wore on.

"I'm really worried the medicine isn't working," she said. "I mean, if the side effects are this bad and it's not working, that means there *is* no medicine that'll cure what I have."

"These days, they can cure just about anything," I said, thinking about the description I'd read in the medical dictionary. "Especially when the patient's a child."

"Seventeen is a child?"

"You're still sixteen."

"Almost seventeen."

"Either way, that's about halfway between child and adult."

"So I have a fifty-fifty chance."

There was a short silence.

"Maybe they're still looking for the right drugs for you."

"I wonder," she said, looking doubtful.

"Back in grade school, I was in the hospital for a while with pneumonia. And that time, too, the medicine they gave me didn't work for the longest time. They kept trying different drugs on me, and finally they found one that worked. But until they did, my parents were really worried that I was going to die."

"Well, I hope they find the right one for me really soon. At this rate, my body's going to fall apart first."

"I wish I could take your place."

"If you actually went through what I'm suffering, I don't think you'd be able to say that."

It was like a crack had raced through the air in the room.

"I'm sorry," Aki said, her voice muted. "Maybe what I should be most afraid of is not that I won't recover, but that being sick will warp my personality. If I stop being who I always was, and you start to hate me, I really don't know what I'd do."

The next day, Aki greeted me wearing a pink knit cap.

"What's with that cap?"

She removed it with an impish grin. I gasped in spite of myself. She'd cut her hair short—in one evening, she'd gone from having long hair to something close to a crew cut. She looked like someone else.

"I asked them to do this." Aki spoke first. "Once the treatment's over it'll grow in again, they said, and I can have long hair like before. So, I guess that's how it is. Until then, I'll just have to concentrate on getting better."

"So you've decided to fight this thing."

"Even if I lose all my hair, will you still love me?"

"As if I wouldn't."

Aki was silent, as if my tone had made her lose her nerve.

"You know how there are convents," she said after a while.

"What, for nuns you mean?"

"I was thinking about this before I got sick. That if you

died before me, I'd enter a Buddhist convent."

"This is the kind of stuff you think about?"

"I just can't imagine myself getting married, having kids and being a mom, and getting old with anyone besides you."

"I can't imagine getting married and having kids and being a dad with anyone besides you, either. That's why you have to get well again."

"You're right." She rubbed her hands over her hair. "Does this look okay on me?"

Aki's nausea started to subside after that. Maybe her body had become accustomed to the drugs. Or maybe it was her positive attitude. Although she still couldn't eat whole meals, she could have fruit, jelly, orange juice, and small amounts of bread. She also began reading books again, a little at a time. She developed an interest in the Aborigines.

"Before picking a plant, they always hold their hands over it," she told me. "And then they just know. Like, this one's still growing so it's too soon to eat it, or this one's ready so you can have it."

I held my hands in front of Aki's face.

"This one's still growing, so it's too soon to eat it."

"Hey, I'm being serious."

"What do you think Aborigines eat?"

"Birds and fish . . . and nuts and fruit and plants . . ."

"I don't think I'd want to eat things like kangaroos and lizards. Or snakes and crocodiles and caterpillars."

"What're you trying to say?"

"If you became an Aborigine, you wouldn't get to eat stuff like custard pudding and cookies."

“Why do you always have to think about material things like that?”

“Aborigines didn’t look to me like they’re all such wonderful people, the way you seem to think.” I was remembering what I’d seen on our trip. “Some of them looked kinda dirty and unhealthy. They’d sit around drinking alcohol all day and try to bum money from tourists.”

This made Aki angry. “That’s because they’ve been oppressed,” she said. And then she wouldn’t talk to me for a long time.

Aborigines weren’t the issue, I realized after I left the hospital. She looked at their traditional way of life as a sort of utopia, something against which to measure her own existence. Or else they gave her hope—a meaning to her life.

“They believe that everything on this earth exists for a reason,” she told me another time. “Everything in the universe has a purpose, so things we call mutations or coincidences actually aren’t. Because there are no such things. We just see it that way because we don’t have enough awareness. We don’t have the wisdom to understand it all.”

“So an anencephalic baby was born that way for a reason?”

“What’s that?”

“A baby born without a brain. I heard there’s some plan to use their hearts for transplants, to children with serious heart problems. So does that mean we’ve discovered the reason these anencephalic babies were born?”

“I think that’s a little different. Understanding is not the same thing as using.”

Because she still had the anemia, Aki’s face was pallid.

She was continuing to receive blood transfusions and most of her hair had fallen out.

"Do you think people die for a reason, too?"

"Yes."

"So if there's a good reason or purpose for it, why do people try so hard to avoid it?"

"Because we don't really understand death yet."

"Remember that time we talked about Heaven? You said you didn't believe in Heaven or the next world."

"I remember."

"But if a person's death means something, then you have to have Heaven or an afterworld, or it doesn't make any sense."

"Why not?"

"Well, because when you die, it's all over, right? If there's nothing afterward, how can death have any meaning?"

Aki looked out the window. The white tower peeped through the dense growth of trees on Castle Hill. Several kites flew above it.

"See, I believe that what is here now contains everything." She seemed to be choosing her words carefully. "Everything is here and nothing is missing. That's why there's no need to ask God for things you don't have, or to turn to Heaven or another world after this one. Everything is already here. So I think finding what you want *here* is more important." She paused, then added, "I think that what isn't here now won't be there after you die, either. Only what is here now will remain, even after you die. It's hard to explain."

"My love for you is here now, so it'll still be here after we're dead," I said, taking up her thread.

"Right, exactly." Aki nodded. "That's what I wanted to say. So there's no need to be sad or scared."

Three

FROM THE WINDOW in the hospital's coffee shop, I could see the sky with its grey, low-hanging clouds. I sat across from Aki's mother, feeling a little nervous. Two cups of coffee sat on the table, already lukewarm.

"About Aki's illness." Her mother, who'd been chatting about this and that, broached the subject somewhat abruptly. "Do you know about a disease called leukemia, Sakutaro?"

I nodded. My heart started pounding. Something icy cold made its way through every blood vessel in my body.

"Well then, I guess you have the general idea," she said, and took a sip of water from her glass. "You may already have guessed, but Aki has leukemia. Right now they're attacking the diseased cells with drugs. That's the reason she was feeling nauseous and losing her hair."

Aki's mother glanced up at me as if to check my reaction. I nodded in silence. She sighed and went on.

"Thanks to the drugs, they've managed to eliminate a lot of the bad cells. The doctor says she'll get better for a while, and even check out of the hospital. But they can't get rid of all the bad cells at one time. The drugs they're using are very strong, for one thing. So they need to repeat the same

treatment many times. This will take at least two years. Maybe as long as five."

"Five years?" The words sprang out of my mouth. This misery was going to continue for another five years?

"So, and this is something we've discussed with the doctor, we're thinking of taking Aki to Australia when she gets out of the hospital. You know she was so looking forward to your class trip, and then she couldn't go. If the leukemia recurs, she'll have to go back into the hospital for intensive treatment. So we'd like to take her there before that if we can."

She stopped speaking and looked at me.

"And that's what I wanted to talk to you about. I think it would make Aki very happy if you would come with us. What do you say? Of course, if you agree to come, we would go see your parents to ask their permission."

"I'll go," I answered right away.

"Oh, good. Thank you." She seemed relieved. "I'm sure Aki will be very happy. Oh, and please don't tell her what she has for the time being. This is the doctor's opinion too, but we'd like her to keep thinking that it's aplastic anemia. Of course, the time will come when we have to tell her what she really has, because she's going to be fighting it for a long time. But we'd like to wait until we have a better idea of her prospects."

I used the library's computer to search out every book that mentioned leukemia and looked through them all. No matter which book I consulted, the symptoms and treatment described matched Aki's. The side effects she'd

had were the result of chemotherapy, which attacked the leukemia cells but destroyed healthy white blood cells as well, making her susceptible to infection. Now I understood why I'd been instructed in "gown technique." One book said that these days, seven out of ten cases of leukemia went into remission, with cases of complete recovery "not unknown." So did that mean that even today, full recovery was rare?

On the way home from school, I saw clouds lit a brilliant white by the winter sun. Standing in the middle of the street, I looked up at them for a long time, remembering the clouds we'd seen from the island during summer vacation. Aki's glistening skin and healthy body now belonged in the past. For a while I couldn't think. The sound of a bicycle bell coming up behind me finally brought me back to myself. When I looked up at the sky again, the angle of the sun had deepened the shadows on the clouds. How swiftly, how tragically time flowed on. Happiness was like those clouds, changing its appearance from one minute to the next—shining golden, then sinking into grey, never in the same state for more than a moment. Like a passing fancy, even the most radiant hour passed quickly away.

I took up the habit of saying a prayer before going to bed. I didn't think anymore about whether God existed or not. I simply needed something like God as the object of my own personal prayers. Maybe *bargaining* was a better word. I wanted to bargain with an all-powerful being who was beyond human understanding: if Aki recovered, He could take me instead. Thought for myself paled to insignificance next to my concern for Aki, like the stars that are eclipsed by the light of the sun.

Every night I would go to bed praying, yet every morning I would wake up healthy and Aki was the one who was sick. No matter how much I wanted to share it, her suffering was hers alone. Mine was nothing more than an attempt to experience what she was going through. I was not Aki, and her suffering was not mine to feel.

Four

AKI'S CONDITION seemed to improve, then worsen, over and over. In tandem with that her mood went up and down as well. Some days she would talk cheerfully about all kinds of things, while other days I could hardly get a word out of her. On days like that, I had the feeling that Aki didn't need me anymore, and the time spent in her hospital room felt like a painful duty.

I wondered if she wasn't responding to the chemotherapy, comparing what I saw to what I had read in all those books. If this treatment didn't work, then barring a bone marrow transplant, there was no hope of recovery. When Aki was feeling fine, we would look through travel guides and talk about Australia, but both of us doubted whether she'd really be able to go. I hadn't heard of any actual plans from her mother either, since that time she'd talked to me.

"If my treatment is this horrible, I must have something really bad." Aki was in bed, her eyes shut in pain.

"Even if it is, they're giving you this horrible treatment

because there's a chance it'll cure you." I did all I could to put things in the best light. "If there was no chance of recovery, they'd just give you stuff to make you feel better."

Aki ignored me and said, "Sometimes I just want to escape from here. Every day, I'm afraid I'll get fed up with this and not want to continue the treatment anymore."

"I'm here with you."

"When you're with me, I'm okay. But after you leave, Saku-chan, and we have dinner and it's almost time for lights out, I start to feel really desperate, like I just have to get out of here."

Aki developed a high fever, and for a few days I couldn't go to see her. An infection had set in due to the decrease in her white blood cells, and though she was receiving antibiotics, her temperature just wouldn't come down. By this time I had started to question the hospital's treatment. As Aki's mother had said, chemotherapy often leads to remission, and once this happened with Aki, the plan was to take her on the trip. But no matter how long the treatment lasted, there was no talk of her leaving the hospital, and this meant they hadn't succeeded in bringing the disease under control. Whether Aki's leukemia was a tough case, or her doctor's treatment program was ineffectual, either way, if things went on like this Aki's body would give out before the treatment was finished.

"I think it's all over for me." When I finally saw Aki again, she said this with lips that were red with the vestiges of fever.

"That's not true."

"I can just tell."

"You can't lose hope like that," I said, unintentionally raising my voice.

"Even you're yelling at me now, Saku-chan." She looked down, forsaken.

"I'm not yelling at you," I said. Thinking it over, I asked, "Is somebody giving you a hard time?"

"Everybody," she said. "They're always telling me I have to fight harder and eat all my food and get stronger. If I say I can't eat anything, they scold me for not taking the nausea medicine. But I feel so sick I can't swallow anything."

By then, Aki seemed to know what she had. Even if nobody told you these things, you figured it out.

"I still can't imagine myself dying. But even so, death's already right there in front of me."

"Why do you have to look at things like that?" I said.

"The doctor explained the results of my blood test to me this morning," she said, as if trying to prove her pessimism was well founded. "He said I still have a lot of bad cells, so they're going to attack those with drugs. I just know those bad cells are leukemia cells."

"Did you ask the doctor that?"

"No way. It's too terrifying."

She went on, her voice pensive. "They've given me all kinds of drugs so far, and none of them managed to destroy all the bad cells. So to kill the cells that're left, they're going to have to use something stronger. But I swear, I just can't take this anymore. The drugs will kill me before the disease does."

"I think it's more about whether they're right for your condition, not how strong or weak they are. So if the doctor

says they'll try another drug, that doesn't necessarily mean the side effects will be worse."

"I wonder."

Aki thought awhile, then sighed as though she hadn't reached a conclusion.

"Yesterday, I still believed I'd get better. But now, I feel like I couldn't stand living even one more day."

Walking home from the hospital, a premonition that I might lose Aki seeped into my head like ink. I had a sudden impulse to keep walking until I was far away, someplace where I could forget about everything. Here I was walking alone on a road that a mere few months ago I had walked with Aki. And the thought that I would never walk this road with her again felt to me like the ineradicable future.

The new drug they started using on Aki did have strong side effects. When her nausea finally subsided she still couldn't eat anything, this time because of mouth sores. She had to go back on an IV drip.

"I don't care anymore," she whispered, as if to herself.

"About what?"

"Whether I get cured or not. I've decided to learn from the Aborigines. If everything has a reason, then there must be some real reason for why I'm sick."

"The reason people get sick is so they can conquer it and become stronger."

"It's okay." She closed her eyes. "It's okay. I'm tired of this, of the pain and of thinking about this disease all the time. I wish I could go off with you to some land where sickness doesn't exist."

Her voice held no hope at all. It spurred me on.

"If it comes to that, we'll go together."

Aki opened her eyes and looked at me. She seemed to be asking where. I didn't know the answer to that myself. Maybe what I'd said was just a fantasy, but the moment I put it into words, I became possessed by the idea. The words that had popped out of my mouth seemed to mark the way to our future.

"I promise I'll take you away from here," I said, and then said it again. "If it really turns out there's no hope, then that's what we'll do."

"How?" Aki asked hoarsely.

"I'll figure out a way. I don't want to end up like Grandpa."

"Your grandpa?"

"Yeah, making my grandson go rob your grave."

I saw doubt in her eyes, so I named a destination.

"We'll go to Australia together. I'm not letting you die alone in a place like this, Aki."

She lowered her eyes and seemed to be thinking. When she eventually raised her face, she looked me straight in the eyes and gave a small nod.

Five

AKI BECAME WEAKER day by day. By now she was almost completely bald. Purple stigmas covered her body, and her hands and feet had become swollen. There was no time for hesitation. I began to think seriously about Australia and started gathering information. Luckily, the passports and visas we'd gotten for our class trip were still valid. At first I thought the best bet was a package tour with a guide, as that seemed the safest and surest way to go. But the application procedure was complicated, so we wouldn't be able to leave right away. And the pamphlet said participants under twenty would need a signed agreement from their guardian.

Arranging plane tickets was a real headache. With Aki so ill, discount tickets would be too dangerous, but full fare would cost 400,000 yen per person. Choosing a departure date was also difficult. I couldn't very well ask her doctor when would be best, and I couldn't predict what her condition would be in a week or two.

"I want to go as soon as possible," Aki said. "The nausea should go away once I'm off my medication. But I'll just get weaker the longer we wait. I want to go when I still have a little strength left."

After looking at all the options, I decided on a special deal offered by an Australian airline. We would pay 180,000 yen per person and for a small fee could cancel at the last minute. That way if the date came and Aki couldn't travel, we could get our money back and wait for another chance.

The biggest problem, though, was money. I would have

to pay for the tickets when I reserved the seats, but all I had in savings was about a hundred thousand yen—not nearly enough. How to come up with the rest? And right away, at that? I could think of only one solution.

“Five hundred thousand?” My grandfather’s eyes widened when he heard the sum.

“Please, Grandpa. I’ll work real hard and pay you back.”

“What do you need that kind of money for?”

“Don’t ask me the reason, just lend me the money.”

“You know I can’t do that.”

My grandfather poured Bordeaux into two glasses and offered me one. Amiably, he said, “Hey, Sakutaro. You know my secret. I entrusted you with my final wish. And yet you won’t share your secret with me?”

“I’m sorry, but I just can’t.”

“Why not?”

“The woman you loved is dead, right? It’s all right to talk about someone who’s already dead. But if the person’s still alive, you can’t.”

“So it’s something amorous, is it?”

“It’s nothing like that!”

The moment I said that, everything I’d been holding back came flooding out. My grandfather watched me in dismay. I wept out loud for a long time, and when I finally stopped, I took a sip of wine. My grandfather didn’t ask me any more questions, and we drank our wine in silence.

I must have fallen asleep on the sofa. When I woke up, there was a blanket over me and it was close to eleven o’clock.

“Your mother called,” my grandfather said, looking up

from the book he was reading. "She's very worried. You want to spend the night here?"

"No, I'll go home." I was still somewhat dazed. "I have school tomorrow."

My grandfather watched me with a thoughtful look. Finally he stood up, brought a bankbook from the next room, and placed it on the table.

"The PIN code is Christmas Eve."

"My birthday?"

"I planned to give this to you after you started college. But there's a right time for everything. I don't know what you need that money for, Sakutaro. If you don't want to tell me, that's fine. But I just want to ask you one thing. Are you sure that if you don't do this now, you'll regret it?"

I nodded.

"All right, then," my grandfather said. "In that case, you go ahead and take this. There should be about a million in there."

"Is it okay?"

"Just don't do anything too crazy, hear?" he said. "Because this isn't only about you, Sakutaro."

I found out whatever I could about Australia. I read guidebooks, called travel agencies, and requested faxes from travel information centers. Aki and I went over our plan whenever her parents were not around.

"I've booked us tickets for December 17th," I said.

"My birthday?"

"Yeah, I thought it might be a lucky day for it."

She smiled and thanked me in a weak voice.

"It's a night flight," I explained. "So we'll have to leave here in the early evening. It'll be right around the time they're serving dinner, so it should be easy to slip out. We'll take a taxi to the station, and once we're on the train, we're home free."

Aki closed her eyes and seemed to be picturing the scene in her mind.

"We'll spend the night on the plane and get to Cairns early in the morning. We'll find somewhere to rest, then we'll take a domestic flight out to Ayer's Rock. The town has lodge-type hotels too, so I think we can stay for cheap. If you don't feel like coming back, we can stay there as long as you want."

"I'm starting to feel like we can really do this," she said, opening her eyes.

"Of course we can. I promised you we would."

I used the passbook from my grandfather to take out money and paid for the plane tickets at the travel agency. I bought travel insurance at the same time. Buying traveler's checks in Australian dollars was more trouble than I thought it'd be, since it turned out most banks didn't carry them. I called every bank in town until I finally found one where I could purchase some.

There was one last stumbling block, but it was a crucial one. I somehow had to sneak Aki's passport out of her house.

"I can't exactly ask your folks to bring it here for us."

"If I had a brother or sister, we could ask them." Like me, Aki was an only child.

Her passport, she said, was in her desk drawer. We could

count on it being there since she hardly ever used it. I'd been to Aki's house several times, so if I could just get inside, it would be easy enough to get the passport out. The problem was, we couldn't come up with a plausible excuse for a visit.

"I guess I'll have to steal it, then," I said.

"Yeah, I suppose we have no choice."

"So how do I sneak in?"

"I'll draw you a plan of the house."

She drew a floor plan in a notebook and guided me through how to carry out the theft.

"You know, it feels like I'm always doing stuff like this," I said, remembering my trip to the graveyard.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"And I used to be such an upright young man."

After visiting Aki the next day, I sat in a coffee shop across the street from the hospital and waited for her father to arrive from work. The coffee shop was on the second floor, and I had a clear view of the parking lot from my table by the window. I knew his car, so there was no chance I'd miss it. Sure enough, after an hour it passed through the front gate. It was a little before seven. I made sure I saw him get out of the car, and then I left the coffee shop.

I raced my bicycle to Aki's house, an old wooden structure that had been in the family since her grandfather's generation. At the entrance, where you removed your shoes, a wooden screen shielded the interior. Behind it a set of creaky stairs led down to Aki's room, which faced the pond. If you entered from the street, her room seemed to be in the

basement. But if you looked from the garden it was on the first floor because the house stood on an incline.

Aki had instructed me to start at the back hedge. I was to enter the garden there and break into the shed next to the pond. At the back of the shed was a passageway, blocked by an old chest of drawers. If I moved the chest and followed the passage, I'd end up in a closet in the main house. The closet was right across from Aki's room.

The hinges on the shed door were falling off, so it was easy to break in. I managed to push aside the old chest of drawers, and entered the passage. Aki had warned me about the clutter. I moved things out of my way as I advanced, until I emerged in front of a familiar room. Quietly, I slid open the door. It was pitch-dark inside, and along with a whiff of mold, there was a nostalgic smell. I turned on the flashlight I'd brought and searched through her desk. I found her passport right away. As I was closing the drawer, I noticed a small stone on the desktop. I closed it in my fist, and its cool texture warmed against my skin. I wondered if Aki sometimes held it in her hand like this.

Moving the curtain aside, I could see the pond with its many colorful carp, bathed in the fluorescent lights of the garden. I had stood here once with Aki, staring out at the pond. We had watched in silence as the carp swam leisurely around. I closed the curtain and looked around Aki's room once more. Across from the window stood a bureau, where she had told me I'd find her bankbook in the top drawer. The money she'd been saving up for the class trip should still be in her account, untouched. Instead of opening that drawer, however, I opened another one. It was filled with

Aki's blouses and T-shirts, all neatly folded. I took one in my hand and pressed my face against it. Her scent mingled faintly with the smell of detergent.

Time just passed. I knew I had to get out of there quickly, but my body wouldn't move. I wanted to stay there forever, taking each of her belongings into my hands one by one, laying my cheek against them, breathing their smell. The scent of Aki that lingered here stirred my memories, and I was overcome with a blinding joy. For a moment, I was caught up in the elation of our first kiss, our first embrace. But the next moment, that sweet rapture was sucked into a dark abyss, and I stood stunned in the dim room, still holding Aki's shirt in my hands. My sense of time had come loose. I had the illusion that Aki was already gone, and I'd come to her room to go through her effects. The illusion was eerily vivid, as if I were remembering the future. Shaking off Aki's scent, which had seeped into every cell of my body, finally, I left the room.

I told Aki I had her passport.

"Now all we have to do is leave," she said.

"Almost everything's ready. I just have to buy a bunch of little stuff and pack. That's it."

"Sorry for all this trouble, Saku-chan."

"Don't be weird."

"Sometimes I have strange thoughts." Aki went on. "Like, if I really am sick. I mean, I know I am. But I lie here and think about you, so it's like we're always together and I don't feel sick anymore."

I had to clench my teeth.

"And here you were complaining you couldn't eat anything, just a little while ago."

"I know." She gave a small laugh. "Right now I feel really strange. My mind's full of my illness, but I can't think about it clearly. I was so desperate to get away from here. Now I don't even know what it was I wanted to run away from."

"We're not running away, we're setting out."

"Yeah." She nodded and closed her eyes. "I dream about you a lot these days, Saku-chan. Do you ever dream about me?"

"I see the real thing every day, so I don't need to."

Aki opened her eyes. I saw that they held no shadow of fear or anxiety. Instead they were filled with serenity, like a lake deep inside a dense forest. Her voice, when she spoke, was equally serene.

"What about when you can't see the real thing anymore?"

I didn't answer. I couldn't answer. That possibility was beyond the limits of my imagination.

Six

DINNER WAS AT SIX O'CLOCK, and visitors aside from family had to leave. A little before six, meal carts would be lined up in the hallways. The patients picked up their own trays and ate inside their rooms. Some of them would stop at the lounge and fill their teapots and teacups from the large

kettle there. During this flurry of activity Aki would slip out of the hospital.

After my usual visit, I crossed the street and went up to the second-floor coffee shop. In a while Aki emerged, mixed in with the departing visitors. She wore a cardigan over her pajamas and, as always, her wool cap. I left the coffee shop and stopped a passing cab just as Aki stepped up. She got in and I told the driver where to go, ignoring the doubtful look on his face.

"It went okay?"

"I pretended I had to make a phone call, and then I just kept walking."

"How do you feel?"

"Well, not exactly perfect."

I'd stashed our luggage in a couple of coin lockers at the station: one large bag, two carry-ons, and a shopping bag with Aki's clothes. When they were all out, we had quite a pile.

"First, we have to get you out of those," I said, looking at Aki in her pajamas. "Your stuff's in here."

"You got my things together, Saku-chan?"

"I snagged the blouses and T-shirts from your room. The jeans and sweaters in there are mine, though. They might be a little big for you."

Aki went to the restroom to change and came out after a few minutes.

"Not bad," I said.

"This smells like you," she said with her nose against the sleeve of the sweater.

"You might be cold, but just until we get on the train. In

Australia it's summer."

I had the tickets ready. We went through the turnstiles and stood on the platform. I was jittery until the train pulled in, worried that Aki's parents would come rushing into the station. When we finally got on the train and found ourselves seats, I felt like I'd accomplished an enormous task.

"I feel like I'm dreaming."

"Well, you aren't, okay?"

I'd bought a cake while waiting for Aki, and now I took it out of its box. It was small, but it was a proper birthday cake.

"For me?"

"I've got candles, too. They said the thick one counts for ten years."

I set the cake on Aki's lap and stood the thick candle in center. Forming a ring around it, I placed seven thin ones.

"Now it'll be full of holes."

Aki said nothing and smiled. I lit the candles with a disposable lighter. Nearby passengers turned their heads toward the smell.

"Happy Birthday."

"Thank you."

The candle flames were reflected in the dark window.

"Now blow them out."

Aki raised the cake in front of her face. Once wasn't enough—she had to blow a second and third time before all eight candles were extinguished. She looked tired from the effort.

"Let's just dig in. We don't have a knife."

I handed her a clear plastic spoon, the same kind we always used for her favorite custard pudding. I ate exactly half, starting from one side and stopping at the middle. Aki just took a taste and didn't touch the rest.

"It's weird, though, isn't it?"

"What is?"

"*Aki*, when it's December 17th. That's way too late to count as autumn."

She looked at me as if she didn't understand what I was talking about.

"They should've named you after winter. Like, Fuyuko or Fuyumi or something."

"Saku-chan, you thought my name was *Aki*, like the season?"

We stared at each other.

"I don't believe it," she said. "That means you've had it wrong the whole time."

"Had it wrong?"

"My *Aki* is taken from *Hakuaki*," she explained. "The Cretaceous Period. That's a period in the Mesozoic Era when all kinds of new life-forms sprang up. Like ferns and dinosaurs. My parents named me that hoping I would thrive like they did."

"Thrive as big as a dinosaur, huh?"

"You really didn't know?"

"I always thought it was *Aki* like the season."

"But you must've seen my name written in the roll at school."

"When I first met you, I thought, oh, autumn—persimmon season."

"Once you get something in your head, I swear," she said, laughing. "But it's okay, if that's how you thought of me. We can let it be our own private name for me. Though it does kind of feel like somebody else."

The train sped toward the city where the airport was, stopping at various stations along the way. This was the first time we'd been on this train together since going to the zoo in May. That time, our journey had a destination. This time too, you could say we were headed somewhere. But I wasn't sure anymore if that place existed anywhere on earth.

"I just realized something really important."

"Now what?" Aki turned her head from the window.

"Your birthday is December 17th, right?"

"Yeah, and yours is December 24th."

"That means that ever since I was born, there's never been a single moment that you weren't here."

"I guess so."

"I was born into a world that had you in it, Aki."

She furrowed her brow as if troubled.

"A world without you is unknown to me. I don't even know if it exists."

"Don't worry. Even if I'm not here, the world will still exist."

"How do I know that?"

I looked out the window. It was completely dark, and I couldn't see anything. The leftover cake on the small seat-back table was reflected in the dark glass.

"Saku-chan?"

"It was that postcard, I know it was," I said. "It's because I wrote that stuff. I brought this on you, Aki."

"It makes me sad to hear you say things like that."

"It makes me sad, too."

Again, I turned to look out the dark window but saw nothing. Not the past, and not the future. Only the ruins of Aki's birthday cake.

"I was waiting for you to be born, Saku-chan," Aki said in a calm voice. "I was in a world without you, all alone, waiting for you."

"That was only for a week. How long do you think I'll have to go on living without you, Aki?"

"Is how long it lasts really an issue?" she asked, sounding very grown-up. "The time I spent with you was short, but really happy—so happy I can't imagine anything more than that. I think I was happier than anybody else in the entire world. Even now, this very moment . . . So that's enough. Remember that time we talked and I said that what's here now will be here forever, even after I die?"

I sighed. "You're too easy to satisfy, Aki. You should be greedier."

"I *am* greedy," she said. "Because I don't intend to let go of this happiness. I plan to take it with me wherever I go, forever and ever."

The station was far from the airport, which was on the edge of town by the sea. We didn't have time to wait for the bus, so we took a taxi. For a long time we sped through the dark streets. All the memories we'd created together seemed to flash past the window, one after the other. Racing toward the future like this, I couldn't find any hope at all ahead of me. Instead, the closer we got to the airport, the greater my despair grew. I didn't know where the past had gone, why

the present was so painful. I couldn't even believe such pain was real.

"Saku-chan, do you have some tissue?" Aki asked, a hand pressed up against her nose.

"What's the matter?"

"Nosebleed."

I searched my pockets and took out a packet of tissues I'd been handed on the street. It advertised a lending service.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm sure it'll stop soon."

But when we got out of the taxi, her nose was still bleeding and the tissue was soaked through. I took a towel out of our luggage, and Aki held it against her nose. She sat down on a sofa in the airport lobby.

"Should we go back?" I said, uneasy. "We can still cancel, you know."

"No, take me," Aki said. I could hardly hear her.

"We don't have to go now. We can go another time."

"If we don't go now, we'll never go. Ever."

Her face was ashen. The thought of her getting on the plane like this filled me with dread. What if her condition worsened on board?

"No, let's go back."

"Please."

Aki grabbed my hand. Her own was swollen and flecked with purple stigmas. When I squeezed it back, my fingers left a bruise.

"Okay. I'll go check us in, then, so you wait here."

"Thank you."

I started walking toward the check-in counter. I decided

I would cast off everything and go to Australia with Aki. I was no longer afraid of anything. I couldn't envision a future anymore—only the present stretched on ahead of me for eternity.

Just then, I heard from behind me the sound of something falling. When I turned around, Aki was lying on the floor in front of the sofa.

“Aki!”

By the time I got to her, people were already gathering around. Her nose and mouth were red with blood, and she made no response when I called her name. Too late, I thought. Too late for everything—for getting married to Aki, for having children with her. Too late for this one dream we had left.

“Help her,” I said to the people standing around us. “Please help her. Please.”

An airport official came over and said someone was calling an ambulance. But where did they plan to take her? There was no place we could go. We would be riveted to this spot forever.

“Please.”

My voice grew fainter, until the word was a just a whisper directed toward the unconscious Aki. I wasn't appealing to Aki, or to the people around us. I was pleading with a much greater being, in a voice only I could hear, over and over—help Aki, save her, save us both, take us away from here. But my prayer wasn't answered. We didn't go anywhere. Only the hours kept moving as the night wore on.

Seven

IT WAS PAST MIDNIGHT when Aki's parents and my father arrived at the hospital where Aki had been brought. Aki's mother glanced at me, then turned her face away and collapsed in tears. Holding his wife in his arms, Aki's father looked at me over her shoulder and gave a small nod. The two of them talked to the doctor in the hallway and then went into Aki's room. My father took a seat beside me on the sofa and placed his hand on my shoulder. He said nothing.

Time passed. At one point my father brought me some coffee in a paper cup.

"It's hot," he said.

But I couldn't feel the heat. I held the cup gingerly in my hands and waited for the coffee to cool down. If I didn't do that, I'd have burnt my tongue.

A half hour later, Aki's parents came out of her room. Her mother, pressing a handkerchief to her eyes, turned to me.

"Please go in and see her," she said.

Following the nurse's instructions, I changed into a sterile gown and donned a cap and mask. Aki had been put in an isolation ward. There was an intravenous drip in one arm and an oxygen mask on her face. When I took her free arm, she opened her eyes quietly. The two of us were alone in the room.

"So it's good-bye," she said. "But don't be sad, Saku-chan."

I nodded.

"Aside from my body going away, there's nothing to be

sad about." After a pause, she went on. "I have a feeling Heaven does exist, after all. I'm starting to feel like this is already Heaven."

"I'll join you soon," I managed to say.

"I'll be waiting." Aki's smile was fleeting. "But you don't have to come too soon. Even if I'm not here anymore, I'll always be with you."

"I know."

"Find me again, okay?"

"I'll find you right away."

Her breathing grew labored and she struggled to control it.

"Good," she finally said. "Because I know where I'm going."

"You're not going anywhere, Aki."

"No, I'm not." She closed her eyes as if in agreement. "That's what I was trying to say."

She was receding from me, little by little: her voice, the expression on her face, even her hand that I was holding in mine.

"Remember that summer day?" Her voice seemed like the last glow of a dying ember. "Floating on the sea in that little boat..."

"I remember."

Aki started to say more, but it stayed in her mouth. She's going away, I thought. Leaving only a memory like a towering pane of glass, she was going away.

My head was filled with an expanse of deep blue summer sea. Everything was contained there. Nothing was missing. But if I tried to touch that memory, my hand would be

covered with blood. I wished we could float there forever. I wished I could join Aki and become part of it, a sparkle of light on the water.

Eight

THE PIER AT THE BOAT LANDING appeared to float up out of the fog. We could hear the waves gently washing the pebbles on the shore. Birds chirped on the hill behind us. From the sound of it, there were several kinds of them.

“What time is it?” Aki asked from the bed.

“Seven-thirty,” I said, looking at my watch. “It’s foggy out, but it should lift pretty soon. Bet it’s gonna be another hot one.”

We went downstairs with our things and washed our faces with water from the cistern out back. Then we ate a simple breakfast of bread and fruit juice. We still had three hours until Oki came for us, so we decided to go for a walk on the beach.

The previous night’s rain had cooled the air. The road down to the beach was paved with concrete, now crumbling to pieces. Weeds jutted from the cracks, still wet from the rain. We ambled up the beach without talking much. Drops of rain were caught in the spider webs on the beach huts and they glistened in the sunlight.

Aki picked up a small stone at the water’s edge.

“Look, it’s shaped like a cat’s head.”

"Let's see."

"Here are the ears. This is the mouth."

"You're right. Wanna take it home?"

"Yes. It'll be a souvenir."

Later we sat on the pier, watching the sea. Oki's boat approached at the appointed time.

"Sorry guys, my mom was worse than I thought," he said, tossing up the mooring.

"It's okay, Oki."

"What's okay?"

Oki looked at Aki. She blushed and looked down.

"Let's go," I said.

An enormous cloud billowed in the eastern sky. The top of the cloud was round and smooth, and bathed in sunlight it shone like a pearl. With Oki at the helm, the boat moved swiftly along. On our left we could see the swimming beach, along with the Ferris wheel and roller coaster tracks. The hill, washed by the rain and hit by the summer sun, blazed with brilliant, dense greenery. The sea was very calm, with almost no waves, and its surface was thick with jellyfish. The boat's prow pushed them aside as we advanced.

"Don't you hear something?" Aki said.

The boat was at the northern tip of the island. Huge boulders leaned out toward the sea, and around them pointy black rocks peeped out as well. We listened, but heard nothing.

"Turn the engine off," I shouted at Oki.

"What?" he said, and eased the throttle.

When the boat's engine had quieted, we heard a low booming sound. It recurred at regular intervals in the same

pitch. It was a creepy sound, unlike anything I had ever heard before.

"I wonder what it is," Aki said.

"A cave," Oki replied. "There's a cave right off the island."

Oki turned the throttle and started moving the boat out, but a minute later we could hear the motor's rotations slowing down. Finally, with a hiss, it stopped completely. Oki pulled the cord sticking out of the outboard motor to restart it, but no matter how many times he tried, it just made a whining sound and refused to turn over.

"I'll pull it. You keep your hands on the throttle."

I braced my legs against the bottom of the boat and pulled hard on the cord. After a few tries, the motor stuttered and started to come back to life, but when Oki turned the throttle to rev it, it made that whining sound and died again.

"It's hopeless," Oki said.

"I'm sorry. It's because I said I heard something."

"It isn't your fault, Hirose."

"I know, how about calling for help on the radio?"

"This thing never had a radio," Oki replied.

The boat was carried along on the tide. Yumejima was now small and far away. Oki took a screwdriver out of the toolbox and removed the cover on the outboard motor, but we couldn't tell which part was the problem.

"It doesn't look like anything's wrong," Oki said, tilting his head.

"Out of oil?"

"No, there's oil in there."

"What do we do?" Aki said, looking helpless.

"Oh, another boat'll pass by sooner or later," Oki said.

A little past noon it started raining. We raised our faces to the sky and let the raindrops hit us. The rain stopped almost immediately, and once again the summer sun beat down. We saw no sign of any islands in the direction we were drifting.

"When you look at it like this, the sea looks a little curved." Aki's chin rested on the side of the boat. She narrowed her eyes at the horizon.

"Well yeah, because the earth is round," I said.

"If the horizon's curved, how come horizontal means straight across?"

"You got a point there."

"I guess it comes from the time people thought the earth was flat like a tray, and the ocean flowed over the edge like a waterfall."

For a while, we continued to gaze at the shining horizon. Then Oki yelled, "A boat!" We looked back and saw a fishing boat approaching us. We stood and waved our arms, and the boat slowed down and came closer. When it was about five meters away, the elderly fisherman called out to Oki.

"That you, Ryunosuke?"

"You know him?" I asked Oki under my breath.

"His name's Hotta. He's a neighbor of ours."

When Oki explained what had happened, Hotta threw us a rope. Oki tied it to the rudder. Towed by the fishing boat, we slowly started moving.

"Phew," said Oki.

"Look!" Aki called out joyfully.

Looking in the direction she pointed, I saw a large rainbow where the rain clouds met the blue sky. It faded out toward the bottom and didn't quite form a complete arch. I stared hard at it, and as I did so each of the colors in the rainbow seemed to separate, so that between the red and the yellow, and between the blue and the green, I could see that countless colors had been dissolved. These were peeled away by the graceful nails of the wind, like skin on a sun-burnt back at the end of summer. The sun's light was dissolved into the air, and the sky glittered like countless tiny fragments of glass had been scattered in it.

part 4

AKI'S FUNERAL WAS HELD ON a cold day at the end of December. Grey clouds hung low in the sky from morning, and there was no sign of sun. Students and teachers from school came to pay their respects. I remembered that other funeral in the third year of junior high, when Aki's homeroom teacher had died around Christmas. Aki had read a eulogy that day, exactly two years earlier. I couldn't quite grasp what two years of time was. It felt neither long nor short. I had lost my sense of time altogether.

During a student delegate's eulogy it started hailing violently. It caused a little stir in the room, but the eulogy was read through to the end. Many of the girls were crying. Then it was time to offer incense, and like everyone else, I lit the incense in front of the altar and bowed, placing my palms together. When I raised my head, I saw Aki's photograph right in front of me. The Aki pictured there was a flawless young beauty, and nothing like the real Aki. At least, it wasn't the Aki I knew so well.

Most of the mourners bade farewell to the coffin at the temple gate, but I was given permission to accompany it to the crematory. I got into the funeral company's minivan with Aki's relatives. We followed the hearse making its slow way ahead of us. Sleet came down now and then, and each time the driver turned on the windshield wipers. The crematory stood among a group of hills outside town. The bus climbed a lonely mountain road lined with cedars. We passed a chicken farm and a bunch of scrapped cars that had been dumped by the side of the road. I thought of Aki, who was being brought to this desolate place to be cremated and turned into ashes.

In my mind's eye was the healthy Aki. I'd walked her home one day at dusk, the fall of our first year in high school. Her hair brushing her shoulders had made the whiteness of her blouse stand out. I remembered our shadows thrown onto the concrete wall. I remembered her floating on her back beside me the summer before, her eyelids shut tight against the sun, her hair spread out on the water, the glistening white skin of her wet throat. I could hardly bear the thought of that body, Aki's body, being cremated and turned to ashes. I opened the car window and turned my face to the cold air. Drops of sleet hit my face and melted. There were so many things I wished I had done for her. They would pop into my mind and vanish like the sleet hitting my face.

While her body was being cremated, the adults were served *sake*. I walked around to the back of the building by myself. The hillside rose up behind it, covered with brown grass. Black ashes had been tossed onto a small rubbish

heap. The surroundings were quiet, with no human voices or birdsong. In the stillness, I could hear the faint sound of the furnace that was burning Aki. Startled, I looked up at the sky and saw a red brick chimney with smoke coming out of its sooty, square mouth.

It was a strange feeling, watching smoke from the burning body of the person I loved most in the whole world rising into the winter sky. For a long time I stood there and followed the smoke with my eyes as it kept coming, sometimes black, sometimes white. When the last of the smoke merged with the grey clouds and became indistinct, I felt as if my heart had been emptied.

The year turned, and the days Aki and I had spent together were tossed away with the old calendars. I spent the first week of the new year in the living room, watching TV. I hardly left the house, not even for the traditional New Year's shrine visit. On TV there were celebrities dressed up in fancy clothes, singing songs and playing games. I didn't recognize their faces or their names. It was a color television, but all I saw were shades of grey. The throng of people cheering and roaring with laughter was just a lump of black and white. Eventually the scene made no sense at all.

Living each day was like suicide and resurrection, over and over. Before bed each night, I wished that I would never wake up again. Not to a world without Aki. But when morning came, I always awoke to a cold, empty, Aki-less world. Like Christ, I would be resurrected. I ate my meals and talked to people. If it rained, I'd use an umbrella and dry my clothes if they got wet. But none of this had any meaning. It was

like the noise of piano keys struck at random.

I had a recurring dream, in which Aki and I were in a boat, floating on a tranquil sea. She was talking about the horizon, saying it was probably called that from a time when the earth was believed to be flat, and the ocean flowed over the edge like a waterfall. I answered that even if the ocean flowed down like a waterfall, the edge of the earth was far away, far beyond where a boat could go, so it might as well not exist. As we talked, I glanced behind me and saw the sea plunging just a few meters away, with colossal amounts of water being sucked furiously downward without a sound.

Urging Aki ahead of me, I jumped into the water and started swimming in the opposite direction of the cascade. A powerful current pulled the water that had looked so calm from the boat. We struggled against it, flailing our arms and legs. After I swam hard for a while, the tug of the current lessened and I realized I'd escaped. But when I looked beside me, Aki wasn't there.

I heard a scream and looked back. Aki was getting sucked toward the waterfall. Pounded by the raging flow of water, her body spun around and around like a top. Shrieking, she beat the surface with her hands, while behind her, the water plunged down. The perfect soundlessness made the sea seem all the more cruel. I started to swim back, but I knew it was too late. I'm always too late, I thought.

Aki's voice reached me from far away. I shouted her name over and over. But the current was swallowing her hands, her face, her hair spread out on the water. The last I saw of her were her eyes, wide with terror, before she was sucked down with the blue water and vanished from sight.

The emptiness stayed with me even when school started again. My classmates weren't much of a diversion or a solace. I could pretend I enjoyed chatting with them, but to me our conversations didn't mean a thing. The words I spoke barely seemed real. I felt false in front of my friends, and the voice I used didn't sound like mine. Their presence became a burden, so I started avoiding places with people. I had lost the sense of existing together with others. I felt like the only person in the world.

When I got home, I would spread out reference books and worksheets and study. I could immerse myself for hours. Solving difficult calculus problems and looking up English words in the dictionary wasn't the least bit painful, because there was no room for emotion. It was easier than most things, but even so, something would once in a while catch me unawares. I might be reading a passage in English and come across the phrase "raining cats and dogs" and remember a day when Aki and I had walked outside in the pouring rain. She was the one who had brought an umbrella. The two of us had huddled beneath it and walked along the path we always took. We were both drenched by the time we reached her house. Aki got out a bath towel for me, but I said I'd just get wet again anyway and walked home with her umbrella. Every time a memory like this came back to me, my heart stung like sunburnt skin in summer.

Every day seemed cut off from the day before it. Time had stopped flowing for me. The sense that something was lasting, or could grow and change, was lost to me. To live meant to exist from moment to moment. I could find no view of the future, and the past was littered with

memories that cut me if I touched them. Bleeding, I would pick them up and look at them. I told myself the blood would eventually clot and form a hard scab. And I wondered if, when that happened, I would be able to touch my memories of Aki and feel nothing.

Two

I WAS WATCHING a variety show on TV one day at my grandfather's house. A famous author came on and started talking about the afterworld. Human beings exist as a fusion of flesh and consciousness, he said. When we die, we throw off our robes of flesh. And then the consciousness takes flight from the dead person like a butterfly from its chrysalis and heads to the next world where loved ones, who've already died, wait. He said the afterworld sends us all kinds of signs, but we've become too accustomed to rationalist thought to notice them. We need to be alert so as not to miss those signs, he said. It just didn't sit right with me.

"What do you think, Grandpa?" I asked when the show was over. "Do you think the afterworld exists? Somewhere you can be reunited with the people you love?"

"It would be nice if it did," he answered, his eyes still on the television.

"Well, I don't think it does."

"That would be sad, wouldn't it?"

"If someone dies they stay dead, and you never get to see

them again. Everyone knows that.”

My grandfather looked troubled. “You’re overly pessimistic, Saku.”

“I’m thinking about it all the time, why people came up with things like Heaven and the next world.”

“Why did they?”

“Because someone they loved died, that’s why.”

“Ah.”

“People invented Heaven and the afterworld because so many people they cared about died. I mean, the one who dies is always the other person, not yourself, right? So the ones who were left behind came up with these ideas as a way to save the ones who died. But I think it’s all a crock. Heaven and the next world are just human conceptions, that’s all.”

My grandfather picked up the remote control from the table and turned off the TV.

“To die in our world is a hard thing, isn’t it, Sakutaro?” he said. “There’s nothing afterwards, you don’t get to be reborn or anything . . . Death is simply a void, nothing else. That’s terribly hard to contemplate, isn’t it?”

“But that’s the way it is, so what choice do we have?”

“I suppose that’s one way of looking at it.”

“When I read about Christians and people saying death is beautiful and nothing to be afraid of, it really pisses me off. It’s stupid and arrogant. Death isn’t beautiful. It’s just awful and empty, that’s all. And there’s nothing you can do about it.”

My grandfather stared up at the ceiling for a while. He continued looking up when he finally spoke.

"It's said that Confucius did not discuss Heaven, but when a favorite disciple died, he cried, 'Alas! Heaven is destroying me!' and mourned him excessively. And Kukai, who preached of nirvana, is also said to have wept in spite of himself at the death of one of his disciples." He turned toward me and asked, "Why is it so painful to lose someone you love?"

When I didn't respond, my grandfather went on.

"I think it's because you already love that person. It's not the parting or their absence itself that's sad. You love them, and that's why saying good-bye breaks your heart. That's why you search for reminders of them and never really stop mourning them. So aren't grief and mourning nothing more than one facet of your love? Just one expression of the feelings you have for that person?"

"I don't know."

"Well, think about what it means for someone to be gone. If it's someone you never knew or cared about, it means nothing to you, right? That doesn't even count as an absence. It's only because you don't want someone to be gone that you notice when they are. You love them, so their absence becomes an issue for you. You love them, so their not being there makes you grieve. And that's why grief always brings you to the same conclusion: it's hard to be parted, but someday we'll be together again."

"Do you think you can be together with that woman again?"

"When you talk about being together, Sakutaro, do you mean as two human beings?"

I didn't answer.

"If we believe there is nothing else besides what can be seen, meaning what has physical form, doesn't it make life incredibly dull?" my grandfather said. "No, I don't think the person I loved will ever appear in front of me again in the same form I knew before. But she and I have always been together. These last fifty years, there never was one moment when we weren't together."

"But that's just in your mind. It's a belief."

"Of course it's a belief. What's wrong with that? Take any branch of science, it's just a set of beliefs. Anything human beings do using their minds involves belief, it can't be otherwise. It's only a question of how strong those beliefs are. Scientists try to prove what they believe using telescopes and microscopes and things like that. But we aren't scientists, so I don't see why we can't use something else. Like love, for instance."

"What did you just say?"

"Love, I said. Love. Don't you know what love is?"

"Of course I do, but hearing *you* say it, Grandpa, makes it sound like something else."

"That's because the love I'm talking about, Sakutaro, and what passes for love in this world, are about alike as chalk and cheese."

I thought this was just an old man's nonsense. After Aki died, the sympathy and condolences of grown-ups had just seemed fake and empty to me. If something didn't feel real to me, I couldn't take it in. I couldn't accept any logic that didn't correspond with the only real feeling I had, that she was gone.

"At the very end, she didn't ask to see me," I said, voicing

the thought that had been weighing on me ever since. "It even seemed like she didn't *want* to see me. Why do you think that was?"

"So neither of us got to be there when the woman we loved died."

"But why didn't she want me with her until the very end?"

"You know, Sakutaro," my grandfather said. "People meet with all kinds of farewells, yet strangely enough, you and I ended up having similar experiences. Neither of us got to spend our lives with the woman we loved or be there when she died. Believe me, I know what you're going through. But even so, Saku, I think life is a good thing. I think it's a beautiful thing. That might not fit with what you feel right now, but that's what I feel. I have a very real sense that life is beautiful."

He seemed to be absorbed by what he'd just said. Then he turned to me and asked, "What do you think beauty really is?"

"Pass," I said curtly.

"There are things that come true in life, and things that don't," he said. "The things that actually happen, people forget about right away. But the things that never come true stay in our hearts forever. I'm talking about the things called dreams and longings. I think it's our feelings for these that sustain the beauty of life. All the things that didn't happen *have* come true, as beauty."

I picked up the remote control and turned on the TV. As though tired out by all the New Year's extravaganzas, all the shows seemed dull and lifeless.

"If I just flip through the channels like this, I get the feeling that Aki might appear," I said, using the remote control to change channels one after the other. "And then if we got to talk, it'd be nice."

"Like some manga character's magic gadget?"

"I guess."

"I don't know, though. If some gadget like that was invented to let us talk to people who've died, it might make us worse people."

"Worse people?"

"When you think about someone who's died, Sakutaro, doesn't it make you feel purer, somehow?"

I stayed quiet.

"You can't be selfish or calculating towards someone who's dead, or wish them ill. It seems that's just the way we're made. Look at the feelings you have for Aki, Sakutaro. Sadness, regret, compassion . . . For you now, these are hard to bear. But they aren't bad feelings, not a single one. Every one of them will nourish you as you grow older. Why do the deaths of those we love make us better people? I think it could be because death is strictly cut off from life. The dead don't accept any overtures from the side of the living. And that's why a person's death can nurture us as human beings."

"I think you're just trying to make me feel better."

"No, that's not what this is about." He smiled. "I'd like to make you feel better, but that isn't possible. Nobody can make you feel better, Sakutaro. This is something you're going to have to get over by yourself."

"How did you get over it, Grandpa?"

"I decided to think about how it would've been the other way."

My grandfather squinted, as though looking far into the distance. "How it would've been if I'd died first. If that had happened, she would have had to feel the grief I was feeling. And I can't really imagine her doing something like robbing my grave to get my ashes. For one thing, I don't know if any of her grandchildren are as understanding as you are, Sakutaro. And when I thought about it that way, I felt that by being left behind, I've been able to take over her suffering. This way, I didn't have to put her through the pain of losing me."

"Hmm."

"It's the same for you, Sakutaro. You're suffering on her behalf. Because she's dead, she can't mourn what's happened to her. So you're grieving for her, in her place. And by doing that, Sakutaro, maybe you're living for her."

I thought about this.

"It still sounds like words."

"That's fine," my grandfather said, chuckling. "That's what thinking is, after all. There's nothing in the world that can be thought through completely. Even if you think you've exhausted a subject, after a while you start feeling you haven't. And then you can think about it some more. Eventually, your thoughts gain a reality. That's how it works."

We stopped talking and listened to the sounds outside. A wind had started blowing, and strong gusts rattled the windows facing the veranda as if trying to rip them off.

"Go to Australia," my grandfather said. "Go look at the

desert and the kangaroos with her.”

“Her parents want to scatter her ashes over there.”

“Well, there are all kinds of ways to bury the dead.”

“When she was still healthy, I told her about going with you to steal those ashes.”

“You did?”

“We even opened the box and looked at the ashes together.”

I glanced over to see his reaction. My grandfather sat still with his arms folded and his eyes closed.

“Does that upset you?”

He slowly opened his eyes and smiled.

“I gave that to you to keep, Sakutaro, so you do whatever you like with it.”

“After we looked at the ashes, we kissed for the first time. I don’t know why. We didn’t plan to or anything, it just sort of happened.”

My grandfather was silent for a while.

“It’s a nice story,” he said.

“Yeah, but now the girl I kissed is just ashes herself.”

Three

THE OUTBACK GRANTED to the Aborigines was a barren desert, and the Northern Territory was a land of cliffs and shrubs. Our Land Cruiser shook violently on the dusty rutted track, which followed a riverbed. A telegraphic relay station

built of stone came into view, and beyond that was a plain with no houses and only sparse vegetation. We passed some fields planted with melons. The road stretched straight ahead with no end in sight. The paving had run out soon after we left town, and we could hardly see behind us for the tremendous clouds of dust the car raised. After a while the fields disappeared and we passed a ranch. Herds of cattle ranged on either side of the road. Dead cattle were just left there on the pasture, and their bodies, bloated from the heat, were covered with crows.

We arrived in a small town, like someplace you'd see in a Western. It was hot and dusty. A pub-style restaurant stood next to the gas station, so we decided to stop there to eat and rest. Right inside the door a few men were playing darts. The interior was gloomy. Truck drivers and construction workers, all of them with tattoos on their Popeye-like arms, drank beers with their meat pies. The hairy legs that protruded from their shorts were almost as thick as my waist.

"Was Aki's name taken from *Hakuaki*, the Cretaceous Period?" I asked Aki's mother, who sat next to me, staring in front of her.

Startled out of her thoughts, she turned toward me. "Uh, yes. My husband came up with it. Why do you ask?"

"I'd always thought it was *Aki*, like the season, ever since I first met her. And she never used kanji when she wrote her name. She always signed her letters to me phonetically in katakana."

"She's just a lazybones, that girl," Aki's mother said. "Even the kanji for *hiro* in Hirose is actually this one."

She used her finger to write out the more complicated version of the kanji character on her palm.

"If you write her full name using kanji, that's a lot of strokes. So she always used the simplified version of *hiro*, and katakana for her first name. I guess she got the habit in grade school."

Aki's father had spread a map out on the counter and was looking at it with the guide we had hired in Cairns.

"About fifty kilometers south of here is a place that's a sacred site to the Aborigines," explained the guide in fluent Japanese. He had lived in Japan for a while. "It's forbidden to enter it, but I've obtained a special permit."

"Can we go there by car?" Aki's father asked.

"We'll probably have to walk the last stretch."

"I wonder if I'll be able to," said Aki's mother.

The guide smiled. "So you're going to scatter your daughter's ashes there?"

"Isn't that odd?" Aki's mother replied. "Right before she died, she kept repeating it over and over, like she was delirious. I think she was a little mixed up, but even so, it got under my skin. We just feel we have to grant her this final wish. It's as much for ourselves. We don't want any regrets."

I looked out the window. A middle-aged Aborigine with a beard sat in the shade of an acacia, drinking wine from a brown paper bag. Small groups of black youths wearing cowboy hats walked past him. Even here in Australia, I couldn't grasp that Aki had died. I kept getting the feeling that she was around somewhere, that I'd catch a glimpse of her.

A waiter set down an enormous hamburger and a bottle of cola in front of me. How absurd it was, eating things all the time when I didn't have the slightest appetite.

A brown plain spread before us as far as the eye could see. There were almost no trees anywhere, just some weeds clinging to the parched earth. At the top of a hill we could see a stand of eucalyptus trees. Here and there lay huge boulders said to have been blown over in a volcanic eruption. There was almost no sign of animal life. The guide told us that during the heat of daytime, animals rested in holes and under rocks. The paving had ended long before, and the car's wheels would occasionally start spinning in the soft red earth. We passed several kangaroo carcasses, one of which was already nothing more than a skin flattened against the side of the road. When I looked back at it, it was covered by dust.

After about an hour on the road, we came upon a lush wood with a small river running in front of it. There was little water in it, and from its bed sprouted a pale eucalyptus tree. A camper was parked on the bank, and a couple families of white people were having a barbecue, sitting on the ground and drinking beers. Our guide got out of the car and walked toward them. He asked them something in a cheerful voice, and they pointed toward the river, holding on to their paper plates.

"They say it's on the other side of this river," he came back and told Aki's father, who was sitting in the driver's seat. "I'll guide you."

He stepped into the water without removing his trekking shoes, and directed the Land Cruiser toward a shallow

section where the riverbed was firm. The picnicking families watched our progress. When the car had made it across, our guide got back into the passenger seat.

"Let's go, then."

A sandy track extended through the dim woods. Aki's father steered the car forward cautiously through the faint light. It was getting toward dusk. The pale sky showed through tiny gaps between the trees.

"I still don't have a very good understanding of this dreaming business," Aki's father said.

"Well, dreaming has several meanings," the guide replied. "One is the mythical ancestor of a tribe. For example, if a tribe's dreaming is the wallaby, the wallaby is their ancestor."

"By wallaby, you mean the animal?" Aki's mother asked.

"No, in this case the wallaby is the dreaming, that is to say, their mythical ancestor. This ancestor created the animal wallaby and their tribe. So they and the animal wallabies are descended from the same ancestor."

"So the wallaby tribe and the animal wallabies are brothers?"

"Yes. And that's why the wallaby tribe can't kill and eat wallabies. They'd be killing and eating their own brothers."

"Fascinating," Aki's father said, sounding impressed. "So that's what totemism is."

"Then there are personal dreamings," the guide continued.

"What are those?" Aki's father asked.

"Something that is seen or dreamed by the mother at someone's birth, usually an animal or a plant, will share

that person's soul and be his personal dreaming. These dreamings are never told, but remain each person's secret object of worship."

"So each tribe has a dreaming and each individual has a personal dreaming."

"That's right."

It had become difficult to distinguish the shapes of objects. The landscape lost its depth, or rather, lost perspective altogether. Things that should have been distant looked close by, while things that should have been near seemed so far we would never reach them.

"They say Aborigines bury their dead twice," our guide went on. "The first time, they bury them in the ground like we do. Then, after two or three months have passed, they dig up the remains and collect the bones. They arrange the bones on a piece of bark exactly the way they were when the person was alive, from the head down to the toes. And then they place that inside a hollowed-out log."

"I wonder why they do that?" Aki's mother said.

"It's believed that the first burial is for the flesh and the second burial is for the bones."

"I see. That makes sense," said Aki's father.

"Eventually, the bones are washed by rain and return to the earth. All the blood and sweat in the dead person's body seeps back into the earth and heads toward a sacred underground spring. The soul follows it there, where it lives on as a spirit."

The trees grew closer together the further we went. When we could no longer drive between them, we got out of the car. The wood had turned into a thicket, with spindly

branches twisted in a knotty jumble. Through it wound a narrow trail. All we heard were our own footsteps. Once in a while something would move in the nearby bushes, but we never saw any animals.

We passed a clump of plants with long sharp thorns, like giant porcupines, and emerged onto a golden-brown grassland. Out here, there were no landmarks of any kind. Aside from a single grove of eucalyptus, all we could see was the vast, dry, grassy plain. Nobody spoke. The sky was still light. It felt like we'd been walking for hours, but it may have been no more than thirty minutes. My lips were cracking in the dry air. I wished I could drink some cold water, but at the same time, my thirst felt like somebody else's problem.

Eventually the ground beneath us turned into sand and rock. There was an enormous round boulder with something like a sago palm growing next to it. A large brown bird circled high up in the sky. We clambered up a steep, crumbly slope to reach a plateau. The few trees were bare of leaves, their grey barks wrinkled like an old woman's skin. A bird I didn't know hooted. A lizard crawled over the dry rock.

"Here should be fine," our guide said.

"This is the place?" Aki's mother asked, as though this was not quite what she had expected.

"This whole area is."

"Let's do it, then," Aki's father said.

"You do it," her mother said, and thrust the urn toward her husband.

"Why don't all three of us do it?"

The white powder felt cool in my palm. What it was, I

couldn't understand. Maybe my mind could, but my heart refused comprehension. If I took it in, I would fall apart. Like a frozen flower petal given a snap of the fingers, my heart would shatter to pieces.

"Good-bye, Aki," I heard her mother say.

I released the ashes from my hands. Carried by the wind they dispersed and scattered over the red desert. Aki's mother was crying. Her husband put his arm around her shoulder, and the two of them slowly began making their way back along the path. I couldn't move. I felt like what had blown out onto the red earth were fragments of myself, as though I had been scattered there, beyond hope of ever being gathered together again.

"Shall we go?" the guide prompted. "It'll be dark in no time. You don't want to be out in the desert at night."

Four

WHEN I GOT BACK from Australia, it was nearly spring. Once final exams were over, classes were like those baseball games when the league championship is already decided. I started looking up at the sky a lot on my way to and from school and between my boring classes. Sometimes I would spend a long time just staring at it, wondering if she was up there. In the last of the winter light and in the soft sunshine of spring, in everything that came from the sky, I sensed Aki's presence. Now and then while I was gazing

upward, clouds would form out of nowhere and pass over me. Every time the clouds came and went, I could feel the season changing over.

One warm Sunday in the middle of March, Oki took me out to the island. When I explained why I wanted to go, he had willingly agreed to pilot the boat. After we moored at the pier, I walked along the beach alone. Oki waited for me by the boat. The water was cold and clear. The balmy sunshine sparkled on the waves that washed the pebbles on shore. A crab the same color as the stones scrabbled along the shallows then fled toward deeper water. Sea anemones extended their brilliantly colored feelers from between the rocks, and tiny sea snails clung to the larger stones. I seemed to notice only little things.

Further inland, where the waves didn't reach, a lot of pink bindweed flowers were blooming. Above them flitted a single white butterfly. I remembered seeing a pair of swallowtail butterflies behind the hotel when we were here the summer before. The events of that night raced around in my head like dazzling bits of light. Every memory from that night, no matter how tiny, was precious, and each one glittered so brightly that it didn't seem possible they could have really happened.

A step above the shore there was an embankment that extended to the cliff behind. On it was an old stone figure of the *Jizo* deity. I wondered who could have put it there and why. Maybe someone had died at sea and it was guarding that person's spirit? The deity had been given no shrine to shelter him and was exposed to the elements. Of course there were no offerings of flowers or coins, either. The salty

air blowing in from the sea had worn away the deity's eyes and mouth. All that was left was his nose, a small bump in the center of his face. The deity's softened features made him look very kind.

I sat down on some dry gravel near the *Jizo* and gazed out at the sea, a sweep of blue like the wide stroke of a paintbrush. Countless glints of light twinkled in it. The greenery of the headland jutting out to my left side was bathed in sunlight, and I could clearly see each and every branch of the pine trees clustered there. It was so beautiful it seemed a waste to be seeing it alone, and I wished Aki could see it with me. I seemed to be spending every day of my life like this, wishing for things that would never happen.

I softly called her name. My lips alone, out of all there were in the world, were shaped just right for calling her name. But picturing her face took a few moments, and each time I tried it seemed to take longer. After a while, remembering her face might be like locating a single picture in an old photo album. Would Aki's memory become eroded in my mind like that featureless seaside deity, so that finally, after many years, all that remained of her would be her name? Would her name, which I had for so long believed wrongly to mean "autumn," be the only thing left of her?

I lay down on the gravel and closed my eyes. The inside of my eyelids was bright red, just like that time the summer before when we swam in this sea. It was a strange feeling, thinking that red blood was flowing through me now, as it had been then.

I must have fallen asleep. The next thing I knew someone was calling my name. I opened my eyes. Oki was peering

into my face.

"What happened?" I asked, sitting up.

"That's what I want to know," he said. "You never came back, so I thought I'd better come find you."

Oki sat down beside me, and we stared out at the sea together. The wind carried a rich smell of salt. The sun had rounded the headland on our left and was almost directly over the sea in front of us.

"I keep feeling like she's still around," I said. "Here, there... everywhere. Wherever I am, she's there. You think it's a delusion?"

"Uh... I don't know," Oki mumbled.

"I guess most people would."

We both fell silent. Oki picked up a small stone and threw it toward the water. He did it a few times more.

"You ever dream you were flying?" I asked.

He glanced at me like he didn't get what I was after. "You mean, like in a plane or something?"

"No, you yourself are flying. You know, like Ultraman."

"So long as it's a dream," he said, cracking a grin, "dream whatever you want. That's your business."

"Yeah, but don't you ever have dreams like that? Where things happen that aren't possible in real life?"

"I don't think so."

He picked up another stone and threw it toward the sea. The stone made a flinty sound when it hit the beach before bouncing into the water.

"So what's all this stuff about dreaming that you're flying?"

"You can't do it in real life, right?" I said. "Logically, it

can't happen, right?"

"Right," he said slowly.

"But in the dream, you're doing it. You're actually flying. It isn't possible in real life, but when you're dreaming, it doesn't seem that way. You aren't flying through the air thinking 'this is an irrational dream.' And even if you were thinking that, you're doing it. You're looking down at towns and stuff, and you can really feel that you're flying. That's not a delusion."

"Yeah, but it's a dream."

"That's right, it's a dream."

"So what're you saying?"

"Aki died. Her body was cremated and turned to ashes. I scattered those ashes, with my own hands, over the desert. And even so, she's here. She's here. It isn't a delusion. It's a real feeling, and I can't do anything about it. I can't deny that she's here. Even if I can't prove it, my feeling that she's around is a fact."

When I stopped talking, Oki was looking at me pityingly.

"Am I dreaming?"

While we were making our way back to the pier, I spotted a glittering stone at the water's edge. When I picked it up, I saw that it wasn't a stone at all, but a piece of glass that had been buffeted by waves until its edges were completely smooth. In the water, the piece of glass had looked like a green jewel. I put it in my jacket pocket.

"You don't want to go up to the hotel?" Oki asked when we got close to the pier. "It's got memories for you, right?"

For a second, it felt like the inside of my chest had frozen

solid. Instead of answering, I heaved a deep sigh. Oki said nothing more.

I took a small transparent glass jar out of my jacket pocket. The contents were white and sand-like.

"These are her ashes."

"You going to scatter them?" Oki asked uneasily.

"I'm not sure."

I had intended to scatter Aki's ashes in the sea. It was the reason I had asked Oki to bring me here. But—

"I don't know, it kind of feels like a waste. Not that carrying them around is doing me any good."

"Hold on to them, if you aren't sure," Oki said. "If you scatter them and regret it, it's too late. Once you've figured out how you feel, you can do it then. I'll bring you here again, whenever you want."

The tide was going out. The boat had drifted far down the pier. The sea was calm and so blue it could make you cry.

"You ever hear Hirose sing?" Oki suddenly asked. "You know how back in junior high, they'd give us those singing tests in music class? Where they'd make us sing all these dumb songs? Well, when Hirose had to sing, her voice was so tiny you couldn't hear a thing. I'd be in the front row, and I couldn't even tell what song it was."

"One time, someone yelled, 'I can't hear you!' in the middle of it."

"Yeah, that's right. And then her voice got even smaller, and her face got real red so you felt sorry for her, and she sang the rest looking down."

"You remember all that, huh?"

"Huh? No, no, that's not what it is," Oki said, flustered. "I

didn't like her or anything. I mean, of course I liked her, but not the way you did. You know."

I was thinking about Aki singing, too. Not during music class, but the night we stayed at the hotel on the island. I had left to get something from our room while we were making dinner. When I came back with it, Aki was chopping vegetables and singing in a small voice. I stopped in the doorway of the kitchen and listened to her. Her voice was so tiny I could hardly make out the melody, let alone the lyrics, but her singing was happy. It made me think that at home, when she was cooking, she must always sing like this. If I called out she would stop, so I stayed in the doorway and just listened to her.

"I think I'm going to hold on to this after all."

I put the jar back into my pocket and stood up.

"Okay," Oki said and nodded, looking somewhat relieved.

In my pocket, something cool touched my hand. When I took it out, it turned out to be the piece of glass I'd picked up earlier. The surface had turned a cloudy white. So beautiful and gemlike in the water, now it was just a piece of glass. I threw it toward the sea as hard as I could. It traced a clean arc in the air and fell into the water with a small splash.

"You wanna head back, lover boy?"

Lover boy turned around.

"Aye, aye, Captain."

part 5

THE TREES AND SHRUBS ON Castle Hill were full and green. The tower had been restored, and the whiteness of its walls stood out brilliantly. We walked up the trail from the north gate. The dense woods that had shrouded it before were cleared away. A brand-new structure, a folk museum, stood there.

From the castle tower you could look out over the whole town. To the east were mountains, and to the west was the sea. With all the development of the past ten years, the town had encroached on the bay. The sea looked much smaller to me now.

"What a beautiful view," she said.

"There's not much to see in town," I said. I sounded a little defensive without meaning to. "I never know what else to show someone I bring here."

"That's no different from anywhere else. How many towns are filled with sightseeing spots? And I really enjoyed that temple. I wish I could've met your grandfather before he died."

"I think you and he might've gotten along well."

"Really?"

We both turned to the view of the bay. The cape enclosing the sea, and the islands too, were dotted with the pale pink bloom of wild cherry trees.

"I half thought you were making it up," she admitted. "I mean, it was too perfect . . . too romantic. But today, after actually seeing the grave and all, I suppose I have to believe you."

"It could be an elaborate lie."

She shot me a mischievous look.

"Yeah, it could. It might be dangerous to believe it a hundred percent. And that goes for everything about you."

"Sometimes, I'm not sure myself if things happened as I remember. If they're a dream or reality. Even if I knew someone really well, if they die and a long time passes, I start to wonder if that person ever really existed in the first place."

The trail on the south side was not as developed as the north side path. It was still very steep and narrow, and we met almost nobody on it. The stone steps with moss growing on them and the exposed red earth hadn't changed at all. A while into our descent, I found the thick clump of shrubs I'd been looking for.

"What is it?"

"Hydrangeas."

She glanced at the bush, and looked at me as if to say, *are hydrangeas so unusual?*

"They won't bloom for a while, though," I said lightly and started walking again. Deep in my heart, there was a slight trembling.

"This part hasn't changed very much," I said a little further on.

"Did you come here a lot?" she asked.

"No, just once."

I started laughing.

"That sounded like you came here all the time."

"I feel like I did, but it was just once."

Back in the car, I drove toward the junior high school. Violas filled the flowerbeds in front of the gate. It was almost the end of March.

"This is my old junior high," I explained.

"Really?" She lowered her window. "Let's go in."

The building looked drab and shabby. The concrete block wall, blackened by rain, leaned toward the road. It was nearing dusk, and the grounds were hushed. It was the spring holiday, and the field, where kids were always in the middle of baseball or soccer practice, was empty as well.

We entered through a side gate.

"This place has really gone to seed." My voice felt far away.

"I can't remember the last time I came to a junior high!" she said and skipped over toward the monkey bars, leaving me behind.

This is where it all started, I tried telling myself. This is where I first met Aki. It felt like decades ago, like something that had happened in another time, in a distant world. Feeling like Rip Van Winkle, I looked around me and saw that the cherry trees were in full bloom. Back then, I had never looked at the cherry blossoms. I had graduated without ever noticing there were cherry trees. Yet they

looked so beautiful.

Deep in my heart, a hole as small as a pinprick opened, and like a black hole, it swallowed up everything—the cherry trees, the school, all the time that had passed. As I was sucked into a past that had seemed so far away, Aki's voice came back to me.

"I loved wiping off the desks when we had to clean the classroom. I'd read all the stuff people had written. There'd be old stuff left by people who'd graduated years before, and hearts and arrows where people had carved the names of their crushes. Some of them, I wished I didn't have to wipe away . . ."

She spoke right by my ear, in that bashful voice I loved. Where had she gone? All the sweetness, the beautiful and good and fragile things that had formed the person called Aki, where had they gone? Were they speeding on under the bright stars, like a train through a snowy field at night? Racing on and on along a course unmeasurable by the standards of this world?

It happened that sometimes, one morning, something you had lost long ago would unexpectedly turn up in the place you had put it. It would look exactly as it had before, yet newer to you than when you lost it. It would be as if someone had carefully put it away for you. Would Aki's spirit come back here like that one day?

I took a small glass jar from my jacket pocket. I had intended to carry it on me for the rest of my life—but surely I didn't need to do that. In this world, there are beginnings and endings. Aki was at both. I had the feeling this was enough.

Looking to a corner of the field, I saw a young woman trying with all her might to reach the top of a climbing pole. In her skirt she encircled the pole with her legs and put one hand over the other, lifting her body higher a little at a time. I watched her through the deepening dusk. Soon she would be lost from sight, among the trees and playground equipment in the dark. Once upon a time, I had watched Aki from here. In the light of the setting sun, she had clambered up a pole in the corner of the field . . . But I didn't know anymore if this was an actual memory.

A wind blew, scattering cherry blossoms at my feet. I looked at the glass jar in my palm. A slight misgiving flitted through me—would I regret this? Maybe I would. But right now I was inside a beautiful flurry of petals.

Slowly I twisted the lid of the jar. And then, I didn't think anymore. With the jar's open mouth facing the sky, I swept my arm in a wide arc across the blue. White ashes danced in the twilight like springtime snow. Another gust of wind scattered more flower petals. Aki's ashes became part of the flurry and disappeared from view.

Afterword

SOCRATES IN LOVE is the title I originally gave to this novel, but for various reasons it was published under a different title in Japan. The phrase “Socrates in love” itself, however, is not my original creation, but appears in *What Is Philosophy?* by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. In their work, the authors state that love is a form of violence that forces you to think. This was my point of departure in developing the character of Sakutaro, the protagonist of this novel.

Human history has been, in a sense, the history of want. From the material, such as food, clothing, and shelter, to the intangible, such as freedom and equality, we have been exposed to all sorts of wants in our time here on earth. In the past few decades, however, Japanese society appears to have become sated. We have everything we need, and more. It could be said that we have, indeed, achieved “happiness.” But strangely enough, just when our society seems to have achieved “happiness,” it appears that goodness—a good way of living, a good life—is vanishing in an inverse ratio to affluence. This, I daresay, is the greatest problem facing Japanese society today.

What is goodness? I believe that having a generous sense of receptivity to others, including animals and the dead, is an important prerequisite. There is not much to think about in living for oneself alone—making money and staying healthy, at most. That means that seeing only oneself is equivalent to seeing nothing. Only through another do we start thinking about all kinds of things—not just about the other person, but about ourselves as well, and about this world, which we share.

Above all, when that other person is facing death, thinking truly becomes a form of coercive violence. What can you do and what should you do for them? Thinking about these things, of course, will not save the other person's life. But I believe without a doubt that such thoughts leave something lasting—both in the one who is passing on and the one who remains behind—and that this makes us, little by little, better people.

—Kyoichi Katayama

May 30, 2005

Socrates in Love

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