

HARUKI MURAKAMI

"Evocative, entertaining, sexy and funny;
but then Murakami is one of the best writers around"

OMER ALI, *Time Out*

Preview from Notes
Page 1 of 3



Norwegian Wood

HARVILL

第 1 章

I was 37 then, strapped in my seat as the huge 747 plunged through dense cloud cover on approach to Hamburg airport. Cold November rains drenched the earth, lending everything the gloomy air of a Flemish landscape. The ground crew in waterproofs hung atop a squat airport building, a BMW billboard. So - Germany again.

Once the plane was on the ground, soft music began to flow from the ceiling speakers: a sweet orchestral cover version of the Beatles' "Norwegian Wood". The melody never failed to send a shudder through me, but this time it hit me harder than ever.

I bent forward, my face in my hands to keep my skull from splitting open. Before long one of the German stewardesses approached and asked in English if I were sick.

"No," I said, "just dizzy."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Thanks."

She smiled and left, and the music changed to a Billy Joel tune. I straightened up and looked out of the window at the dark clouds hanging over the North Sea, thinking of all I had lost in the course of my life: times gone for ever, friends who had died or disappeared, feelings I would never know again.

The plane reached the gate. People began unfastening their seatbelts and pulling luggage from the overhead lockers, and all the while I was in the meadow. I could smell the grass, feel the wind on my face, hear the cries of the birds. Autumn 1969, and soon I would be 20.

a kick to some part of my mind. *Wake up*, it says. *I'm still here. Wake up and think about it. Think about why I'm still here.* The kicking never hurts me. There's no pain at all. Just a hollow sound that echoes with each kick. And even that is bound to fade one day. At Hamburg airport, though, the kicks were longer and harder than usual. Which is why I am writing this book. To think. To understand. It just happens to be the way I'm made. I have to write things down to feel I fully comprehend them.

Let's see, now, what was Naoko talking about that day?

Of course: the "field well". I have no idea whether there was such a well. It might have been an image or a sign that existed only inside Naoko, like all the other things she used to spin into existence inside her mind in those dark days. Once she had described it to me, though, I was never able to think of that meadow scene without the well. From that day forward, the image of a thing I had never laid eyes on became inseparably fused to the actual scene of the field that lay before me. I can describe the well in minute detail. It lay precisely on the border where the meadow ended and the woods began - a dark opening in the earth a yard across, hidden by grass. Nothing marked its perimeter - no fence, no stone curb (at least not one that rose above ground level). It was nothing but a hole, a wide-open mouth. The stones of its collar had been weathered and turned a strange muddy-white. They were cracked and chunks were missing, and a little green lizard slithered into an open seam. You could lean over the edge and peer down to see nothing. All I knew about the well was its frightening depth. It was deep beyond measuring, and crammed full of darkness, as if all the world's darknesses had been boiled down to their ultimate density.

"It's really, *really* deep," said Naoko, choosing her words with care. She would speak that way sometimes, slowing down to find the exact word she was looking for. "But no one knows where it is," she continued. "The one thing I know for sure is that it's around here

somewhere."

Hands thrust into the pockets of her tweed jacket, she smiled at me as if to say "It's true!"

"Then it must be incredibly dangerous," I said. "A deep well, but nobody knows where it is. You could fall in and that'd be the end of you."

"The end. Aaaaaaaah! Splat! Finished."

"Things like that must happen."

"They do, every once in a while. Maybe once in two or three years. Somebody disappears all of a sudden, and they just can't find him. So then the people around here say 'Look, he fell in the field well!'"

"Not a nice way to die," I said.

"No, it's a terrible way to die," said Naoko, brushing a cluster of grass seed from her jacket. "The best thing would be to break your neck, but you'd probably just break your leg and then you couldn't do a thing. You'd yell at the top of your lungs, but nobody would hear you, and you couldn't expect anyone to find you, and you'd have centipedes and spiders crawling all over you, and the bones of the ones who died before are scattered all around you, and it's dark and soggy, and high overhead there's this tiny, tiny circle of light like a winter moon. You die there in this place, little by little, all by yourself."

"Yuck, just thinking about it makes my flesh creep," I said.

"Somebody should find the thing and build a wall around it."

"But nobody *can* find it. So make sure you don't go off the path."

"Don't worry, I won't."

Naoko took her left hand from her pocket and squeezed my hand.

"Don't *you* worry," she said. "You'll be OK. *You* could go running all around here in the middle of the night and you'd *never* fall into the well. And as long as I stick with you, I won't fall in, either."

"Never?"

"Never!"

"How can you be so sure?"

along the path.

"I'm sorry," she said, taking my arm and shaking her head.

"I didn't mean to hurt you. Try not to let what I said bother you. Really, I'm sorry. I was just angry at myself."

"I suppose I don't really understand you yet," I said. "I'm not all that smart. It takes me a while to understand things. But if I do have the time, *I will* come to understand you - better than anyone else in the world."

We came to a stop and stood in the silent forest, listening. I unrolled pinecones and cicada shells with my toe, then looked up at the patches of sky showing through the pine branches. Hands in pockets, Naoko stood there thinking, her eyes focused on nothing in particular.

"Tell me something, Toru," she said. "Do you love me?"

"You know I do."

"Will you do me two favors?"

"You can have up to three wishes, Madame."

Naoko smiled and shook her head. "No, two will do. One is for you to realize how grateful I am that you came to see me here. I hope you'll understand how happy you've made me. I know it's going to save me if anything will. I may not show it, but it's true."

"I'll come to see you again," I said. "And what is the other wish?"

"I want you always to remember me. Will you remember that I existed, and that I stood next to you here like this?"

"Always," I said. "I'll always remember."

She walked on without speaking. The autumn light filtering through the branches danced over the shoulders of her jacket. A dog barked again, closer than before. Naoko climbed a small mound, walked out of the forest and hurried down a gentle slope. I followed two or three steps behind.

"Come over here," I called towards her back. "The well might be around here somewhere." Naoko stopped and smiled and took my arm. We walked the rest of the way side by side. "Do you really

fathom. Next to the common building stood a third dormitory, also three storeys high. Broad green lawns filled the quadrangle, and circulating sprinklers caught the sunlight as they turned. Behind the common building there was a field used for baseball and football, and six tennis courts. The complex had everything you could want.

There was just one problem with the place: its political smell. It was run by some kind of fishy foundation that centered on this extreme right-wing guy, and there was something strangely twisted - as far as I was concerned - about the way they ran the place. You could see it in the pamphlet they gave to new students and in the dorm rules. The proclaimed "founding spirit" of the dormitory was "to strive to nurture human resources of service to the nation through the ultimate in educational fundamentals", and many financial leaders who endorsed this "spirit" had contributed their private funds to the construction of the place. This was the public face of the project, though what lay behind it was extremely vague. Some said it was a tax dodge, others saw it as a publicity stunt for the contributors, and still others claimed that the construction of the dormitory was a cover for swindling the public out of a prime piece of real estate. One thing was certain, though: in the dorm complex there existed a privileged club composed of elite students from various universities. They formed "study groups" that met several times a month and included some of the founders. Any member of the club could be assured of a good job after graduation. I had no idea which - if any - of these theories was correct, but they all shared the assumption that there was "something fishy" about the place.

In any case, I spent two years - from the spring of 1968 to the spring of 1970 - living in this "fishy" dormitory. Why I put up with it so long, I can't really say. In terms of everyday life, it made no practical difference to me whether the place was right wing or left wing or anything else.

Each day began with the solemn raising of the flag. They played the

callisthenics with the rest of the nation.

I was used to reading late at night and sleeping until eight o'clock, so even when he started shuffling around the room and exercising, I remained unconscious - until the part where he started jumping. He took his jumping seriously and made the bed bounce every time he hit the floor. I stood it for three days because they had told us that communal life called for a certain degree of resignation, but by the morning of the fourth day, I couldn't take it any more.

"Hey, can you do that on the roof or somewhere?" I said. "I can't sleep."

"But it's already 6.30!" he said, open-mouthed.

"Yeah, I *know* it's 6.30. I'm still supposed to be asleep. I don't know how to explain it exactly, but that's how it works for me."

"Anyway, I can't do it on the roof. Somebody on the third floor would complain. Here, we're over a storeroom."

"So go out on the quad. On the lawn."

"That's no good, either. I don't have a transistor radio. I need to plug it in. And you can't do radio callisthenics without music."

True, his radio was an old piece of junk without batteries. Mine was a transistor portable, but it was strictly FM, for music.

"OK, let's compromise," I said. "Do your exercises but cut out the jumping part. It's so damned noisy. What do you say?"

"J-jumping? What's that?"

"Jumping is jumping. Bouncing up and down." "But there isn't any jumping."

My head was starting to hurt. I was ready to give up, but I wanted to make my point. I got out of bed and started bouncing up and down and singing the opening melody of NHK's radio callisthenics. "I'm talking about *this*," I said.

"Oh, *that*. I guess you're right. I never noticed."

"See what I mean?" I said, sitting on the edge of the bed. "Just cut out that part. I can put up with the rest. Stop jumping and let me sleep."

there. She led a spare, simple life with hardly any friends. No one who had known her at school could have imagined her like this. Back then, she had dressed with real flair and surrounded herself with a million friends. When I saw her room, I realized that, like me, she had wanted to go away to college and begin a new life far from anyone she knew.

"Know why I chose this place?" she said with a smile. "Because nobody from home was coming here. We were all supposed to go somewhere more chic. You know what I mean?"

My relationship with Naoko was not without its progress, though. Little by little, she grew more accustomed to me and I to her. When the summer holidays ended and the new term started, Naoko began walking next to me as far as the most natural thing in the world to do. She saw me as a friend now, I concluded, and walking side by side with such a beautiful girl was by no means painful for me. We kept walking all over Tokyo in the same meandering way, climbing hills, crossing rivers and railway lines, just walking and walking with no destination in mind. We forged straight ahead, as if our walking were a religious ritual meant to heal our wounded spirits. If it rained, we used umbrellas, but in any case we walked.

Then came autumn, and the dormitory grounds were buried in zelkova leaves. The fragrance of a new season arrived when I put on my first pullover. Having worn out one pair of shoes, I bought some new suede ones.

I can't seem to recall what we talked about then. Nothing special, I expect. We continued to avoid any mention of the past and rarely spoke about Kizuki. We could face each other over coffee cups in total silence.

Naoko liked to hear me tell stories about Storm Trooper. Once he had a date with a fellow student (a girl in geography, of course) but came back in the early evening looking glum. "Tell me, W W-Watanabe, what do you talk about with g-g-girls?" I don't remember how I answered him, but he had picked the wrong person to ask. In July,

somebody in the dorm had taken down Storm Trooper's Amsterdam canal scene and put up a photo of the Golden Gate Bridge instead. He told me he wanted to know if Storm Trooper could masturbate to the Golden Gate Bridge. "He loved it," I reported later, which prompted someone else to put up a picture of an iceberg. Each time the photo changed in his absence, Storm Trooper became upset.

"Who-who-who the hell is doing this?" he asked.

"I wonder," I said. "But what's the difference? They're all nice pictures. You should be grateful."

"Yeah, I s'pose so, but it's weird."

My stories of Storm Trooper always made Naoko laugh. Not many things succeeded in doing that, so I talked about him often, though I was not exactly proud of myself for using him this way. He just happened to be the youngest son in a not-too-wealthy family who had grown up a little too serious for his own good. Making maps was the one small dream of his one small life. Who had the right to make fun of him for that?

By then, however, Storm-Trooper jokes had become an indispensable source of dormitory talk, and there was no way for me to undo what I had done. Besides, the sight of Naoko's smiling face had become my own special source of pleasure. I went on supplying everyone with new stories.

Naoko asked me one time - just once - if I had a girl I liked. I told her about the one I had left behind in Kobe. "She was nice," I said, "I enjoyed sleeping with her, and I miss her every now and then, but finally, she didn't move me. I don't know, sometimes I think I've got this hard kernel in my heart, and nothing much can get inside it. I doubt if I can really love anybody."

"Have you ever *been* in love?" Naoko asked.

"Never," I said.

She didn't ask me more than that.

When autumn ended and cold winds began tearing through the city,

and while she was putting on her stockings she'd say something like, "I hope you used one last night. It's the worst day of the month for me." Then she'd sit in front of a mirror and start grumbling about her aching head or her uncooperative make-up while she redid her lipstick or attached her false eyelashes. I would have preferred not to spend the whole night with them, but you can't worry about a midnight curfew while you're seducing women (which runs counter to the laws of physics anyway), so I'd go out with an overnight pass. This meant I had to stay put until morning and go back to the dorm filled with self-loathing and disillusionment, sunlight stabbing my eyes, mouth coated with sand, head belonging to someone else.

When I had slept with three or four girls this way, I asked Nagasawa, "After you've done this 70 times, doesn't it begin to seem kind of pointless?"

"That proves you're a decent human being," he said. "Congratulations. There is absolutely nothing to be gained from sleeping with one strange woman after another. It just tires you out and makes you disgusted with yourself. It's the same for me."

"So why the hell do you keep it up?"

"Hard to say. Hey, you know that thing Dostoevsky wrote on gambling? It's like that. When you're surrounded by endless possibilities, one of the hardest things you can do is pass them up. See what I mean?"

"Sort of."

"Look. The sun goes down. The girls come out and drink. They wander around, looking for something. I can give them that something. It's the easiest thing in the world, like drinking water from a tap. Before you know it, I've got 'em down. It's what they expect. That's what I mean by possibility. It's all around you. How can you ignore it? You have a certain ability and the opportunity to use it: can you keep your mouth shut and let it pass?"

"I don't know, I've never been in a situation like that," I said with a

That winter I found a part-time job in a little record shop in Shinjuku. It didn't pay much, but the work was easy - just watching the place three nights a week - and they let me buy records cheap. For Christmas I bought Naoko a Henry Mancini album with a track of her favourite "Dear Heart". I wrapped it myself and added a bright red ribbon. She gave me a pair of woollen gloves she had knitted. The thumbs were a little short, but they did keep my hands warm.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said, blushing, "What a bad job!"

"Don't worry, they fit fine," I said, holding my gloved hand out to her.

"Well, at least you won't have to shove your hands in your pockets, I guess."

Naoko didn't go home to Kobe for the winter break. I stayed in Tokyo, too, working in the record shop right up to the end of the year. I didn't have anything especially fun to do in Kobe or anyone I wanted to see. The dorm's dining hall was closed for the holiday, so I went to Naoko's flat for meals. On New Year's Eve we had rice cakes and soup like everybody else.

A lot happened in late January and February that year, 1969.

At the end of January, Storm Trooper went to bed with a raging fever. Which meant I had to stand up Naoko that day. I had gone to a lot of trouble to get my hands on some free tickets for a concert. She had been especially eager to go because the orchestra was performing one of her favourites: Brahms' Fourth Symphony. But with Storm Trooper tossing around in bed on the verge of what looked like an agonizing death, I couldn't just leave him, and I couldn't find anyone stupid enough to nurse him in my place. I bought some ice and used several layers of plastic bags to hold it on his forehead, wiped his sweating brow with cold towels, took his temperature every hour, and even changed his vest for him. The fever stayed high for a day, but the following morning he jumped out of bed and started exercising as though nothing had happened. His temperature was completely

I picked up my clothes and dressed. The chest of my shirt was still damp and chilly. It had Naoko's smell. On the notepad lying on the desk I wrote: *I'd like to have a good long talk with you once you've calmed down. Please call me soon. Happy*

Birthday. I took one last look at Naoko's shoulder, stepped outside and quietly shut the door.

No call came even after a week had passed. Naoko's house had no system for calling people to the phone, and so on Sunday morning I took the train out to Kokubunji. She wasn't there and her name had been removed from the door. The windows and storm shutters were closed tight. The manager told me that Naoko had moved out three days earlier. He had no idea where she had moved to.

I went back to the dorm and wrote Naoko a long letter addressed to her home in Kobe. Wherever she was, they would forward it to her at least.

I gave her an honest account of my feelings. There was a lot I still didn't understand, I said, and though I was trying hard to understand, it would take time. Where I would be once that time had gone by, it was impossible for me to say now, which is why it was impossible for me to make promises or demands, or to set down pretty words. For one thing, we knew too little of each other. If, however, she would grant me the time, I would give it my best effort, and the two of us would come to know each other better. In any case, I wanted to see her again and have a good long talk. When I lost Kizuki, I lost the one person to whom I could speak honestly of my feelings, and I imagined it had been the same for Naoko. She and I had needed each other more than either of us knew. Which was no doubt why our relationship had taken such a major detour and become, in a sense, warped. *I probably should not have done what I did, and yet I believe that it was all I could do. The warmth and closeness I felt for you at that moment was something I have never experienced before. I need you to answer this*

Maybe this firefly was on the verge of death. I gave the jar a few shakes. The firefly bumped against the glass walls and tried to fly, but its light remained dim.

I tried to remember when I had last seen fireflies, and where it might have been. I could see the scene in my mind, but was unable to recall the time or place. I could hear the sound of water in the darkness and see an old-fashioned brick sluice gate. It had a handle you could turn to open and close the gate. The stream it controlled was small enough to be hidden by the grass on its banks. The night was dark, so dark I couldn't see my feet when I turned on my torch. Hundreds of fireflies drifted over the pool of water held back by the sluice gate, their hot glow reflected in the water like a shower of sparks.

I closed my eyes and steeped myself in that long-ago darkness. I heard the wind with unusual clarity. A light breeze swept past me, leaving strangely brilliant trails in the dark. I opened my eyes to find the darkness of the summer night a few degrees deeper than it had been.

I twisted open the lid of the jar and took out the firefly, setting it on the two-inch lip of the water tank. It seemed not to grasp its new surroundings. It hobbled around the head of a steel bolt, catching its legs on curling scabs of paint. It moved to the right until it found its way blocked, then circled back to the left. Finally, with some effort, it mounted the head of the bolt and crouched there for a while, unmoving, as if it had taken its last breath.

Still leaning against the handrail, I studied the firefly. Neither I nor it made a move for a very long time. The wind continued sweeping past the two of us while the numberless leaves of the zelkova tree rustled in the darkness.

I waited for ever.

Only much later did the firefly take to the air. As if some thought had suddenly occurred to it, the firefly spread its wings, and in a moment

romantic company? New women in far-off places." "Romantic? Now I *know* you've got me wrong. How's a guy with a sleeping bag on his back and his face all stubbly supposed to have romance?"

"Do you always travel alone like that?" "Uh-huh."

"You enjoy solitude?" she asked, resting her cheek on her hand.

"Travelling alone, eating alone, sitting by yourself in lecture halls ..."

"Nobody likes being alone that much. I don't go out of my way to make friends, that's all. It just leads to disappointment."

The tip of one earpiece in her mouth, sunglasses dangling down, she mumbled, "'Nobody likes being alone. I just hate to be disappointed.' You can use that line if you ever write your autobiography."

"Thanks," I said.

"Do you like green?"

"Why do you ask?"

"You're wearing a green polo shirt."

"Not especially. I'll wear anything."

"Not especially. I'll wear anything.' I love the way you talk. Like spreading plaster, nice and smooth. Has anybody ever told you that?"

"Nobody," I said.

"My name's Midori," she said. "'Green'. But green looks terrible on me. Weird, huh? It's like I'm cursed, don't you think? My sister's name is Momoko: 'Peach girl'."

"Does she look good in pink?"

"She looks *great* in pink! She was *born* to wear pink. It's totally unfair."

The food arrived at Midori's table, and a guy in a madras jacket called out to her, "Hey, Midori, come 'n' get it!" She waved at him as if to say "I know".

"Tell me," she said. "Do you take lecture notes? In drama?" "I do."

"I hate to ask, but could I borrow your notes? I've missed twice, and I don't know anybody in the class." "No problem," I said, pulling the notebook from my bag.

"Great food," I said.

"And cheap, too. I've been coming here since school. My old school's just down the street. They were so strict, we had to sneak out to eat here. They'd suspend you if they caught you eating out."

Without the sunglasses, Midori's eyes looked somewhat sleepier than they had the last time. When she was not playing with the narrow silver bracelet on her left wrist, she would be rubbing at the corners of her eyes with the tip of her little finger.

"Tired?" I asked.

"Kind of. I'm not getting enough sleep. But it's OK, don't worry," she said. "Sorry about the other day, something important came up and I just couldn't get you to it. All of a sudden, in the morning, I thought about calling you at the restaurant, but I couldn't remember the name, and I didn't know your home number. Did you wait long?"

"No big deal. I've got a lot of time on my hands."

A lot?"

"Way more than I need. I wish I could give you some to help you sleep."

Midori rested her cheek on her hand and smiled at me. "What a nice guy you are."

"Not nice. I just have time to kill," I said. "By the way, I called your house that day and somebody told me you were at the hospital. Something wrong?"

"You called my house?" she asked with a slight wrinkle forming between her eyebrows. "How did you get my number?"

"Looked it up in the student affairs office. Anyone can do that."

She nodded once or twice and started playing with the bracelet again.

"I never would have thought of that. I suppose I could have looked up your number. Anyway, about the hospital, I'll tell you next time. I don't feel like it now. Sorry."

"That's OK. I didn't mean to pry."

"No, you're not prying. I'm just kind of tired. Like a monkey in the

"Thanks," I said.

It suddenly dawned on me that I had left the daffodils downstairs. I had set them aside while unlacing my shoes. I slipped back downstairs and found the ten bright blossoms lying in the gloom. Midori took a tall, slim glass from the cupboard and arranged the flowers in it.

"I love daffodils," said Midori. "I once sang 'Seven Daffodils' in the school talent contest. Do you know it?" "Of course."

"We had a folk group. I played guitar."

She sang "Seven Daffodils" as she arranged the food on plates.

Midori's cooking was far better than I had expected: an amazing assortment of fried, pickled, boiled and roasted fishes using eggs, mackerel, fresh greens, aubergine, mushrooms, radishes, and sesame seeds, all cooked in the delicate Kyoto style.

"This is *great*," I said with my mouth full.

"OK, tell me the truth now," Midori said. "You weren't expecting my cooking to be very good, were you - judging from the way I look?"

"Not really," I said honestly.

"You're from the Kansai region, so you like this kind of delicate flavouring, right?"

"Don't tell me you changed style especially for me?"

"Don't be ridiculous! I wouldn't go to that much trouble. No, we always eat like this."

"So your mother - or your father - is from Kansai?"

"Nope. My father was born in Tokyo and my mother's from Fukushima. There's not a single Kansai person among my relatives. We're all from Tokyo or northern Kanto."

"I don't get it," I said. "How can you make this 100 per cent authentic Kansai-style food? Did somebody teach you?"

"Well, it's kind of a long story," she said, eating a slice of fried egg.

"My mother hated housework of any kind, and she almost never

ever of some part of my adolescence. But what that meant, and what would come of it, were far beyond my understanding.

I sat there for a long time, watching the campus and the people passing through it, and hoping, too, that I might see Midori. But she never appeared, and when the noon break ended, I went to the library to prepare for my German class.

Nagasawa came to my room that Saturday afternoon and suggested we have one of our nights on the town. He would arrange an overnight pass for me. I said I would go. I had been feeling especially muddled-headed for the past week and was ready to sleep with anybody, it didn't matter who.

Late in the afternoon I showered and shaved and put on fresh clothes - a polo shirt and cotton jacket - then had dinner with Nagasawa in the dining hall and the two of us caught a bus to Shinjuku. We walked around a lively area for a while, then went to one of our usual bars and sat there waiting for a likely pair of girls. The girls tended to come in pairs to this bar - except on this particular evening. We stayed there almost two hours, sipping whisky and sodas at a rate that kept us sober. Finally, two friendly-looking girls took seats at the bar, ordering a gimlet and a margarita. Nagasawa approached them straight away, but they said they were waiting for their boyfriends. Still, the four of us enjoyed a pleasant chat until their dates showed up.

Nagasawa took me to another bar to try our luck, a small place in a kind of cul-de-sac, where most of the customers were already drunk and noisy. A group of three girls occupied a table at the back. We joined them and enjoyed a little conversation, the five of us getting into a nice mood, but when Nagasawa suggested we go somewhere else for a drink, the girls said it was almost curfew time and they had to go back to their dorms. So much for our "luck". We tried one more place with the same result. For some reason, the girls were just not coming our way.

the events had undoubtedly happened to me. The beer glasses were still sitting on the table, and a used toothbrush lay by the sink.

I ate a light lunch in Shinjuku and went to a telephone box to call Midori Kobayashi on the off chance that she might be home alone waiting for a call again today. I let it ring 15 times but no one answered. I tried again 20 minutes later with the same results. Then I took a bus back to the dorm. A special delivery letter was waiting for me in the letterbox by the entry. It was from Naoko.

第 5 章

Thanks for your letter, wrote Naoko. Her family had forwarded it *here*, she said. Far from upsetting her, its arrival had made her very happy, and in fact she had been on the point of writing to me herself.

Having read that much, I opened the window, took off my jacket and sat on the bed. I could hear pigeons cooing in a nearby roost. The breeze stirred the curtains. Holding the seven pages of writing paper from Naoko, I gave myself up to an endless stream of feelings. It seemed as if the colours of the real world around me had begun to drain away from my having done nothing more than read a few lines she had written. I closed my eyes and spent a long time collecting my thoughts. Finally, after one deep breath, I continued reading.

It's almost four months since I came here, she went on.

I've thought a lot about you in that time. The more I've thought, the more I've come to feel that I was unfair to you. I probably should have been a better, fairer person when it came to the way I treated you.

This may not be the most normal way to look at things, though. Girls my age *never* use the word "fair". Ordinary girls as young as I am are basically indifferent to whether things are fair or not. The central

that, in a sense, what I was feeling was right, that we are in here not to correct the deformation but to accustom ourselves to it: that one of our problems was our inability to recognize and accept our own deformities. Just as each person has certain idiosyncrasies in the way he or she walks, people have idiosyncrasies in the way they think and feel and see things, and though you might want to correct them, it doesn't happen overnight, and if you try to force the issue in one case, something else might go funny. He gave me a very simplified explanation, of course, and it's just one small part of the problems we have, but I think I understand what he was trying to say. It may well be that we can never fully adapt to our own deformities. Unable to find a place in our selves for the very real pain and suffering that these deformities cause, we come here to get away from such things. As long as we are here, we can get by without hurting others or being hurt by them because we know that we are "deformed". That's what distinguishes us from the outside world: most people go about their lives unconscious of their deformities, while in this little world of ours the deformities themselves are a precondition. Just as Indians wear feathers on their heads to show what tribe they belong to, we wear our deformities in the open. And we live quietly so as not to hurt one another.

In addition to playing sports, we all participate in growing vegetables: tomatoes, aubergines, cucumbers, watermelons, strawberries, spring onions, cabbage, daikon radishes, and so on and on. We grow just about everything. We use greenhouses, too. The people here know a lot about vegetable farming, and they put a lot of energy into it. They read books on the subject and call in experts and talk from morning to night about which fertilizer to use and the condition of the soil and stuff like that. I have come to love growing vegetables. It's great to watch different fruits and vegetables getting bigger and bigger each day. Have you ever grown watermelons? They swell up, just like some kind of little animals.

We eat freshly picked fruits and vegetables every day. They also serve meat and fish of course, but when you're living here you feel less and less like eating those because the vegetables are so fresh and delicious. Sometimes we go out and gather wild plants and mushrooms. We have experts on that kind of thing (come to think of it, this place is crawling with experts) who tell us which plants to pick and which to avoid. As a result of all this, I've gained over six pounds since I got here. My weight is just about perfect, thanks to the exercise and the good eating on a regular schedule.

When we're not farming, we read or listen to music or knit. We don't have TV or radio, but we do have a very decent library with books and records. The record collection has everything from Mahler symphonies to the Beatles, and I'm always borrowing records to listen to in my room.

The one real problem with this place is that once you're here you don't want to leave - or you're afraid to leave. As long as we're here, we feel calm and peaceful. Our deformities seem natural. We think we've recovered. But we can never be sure that the outside world will accept us in the same way.

My doctor says it's time I began having contact with "outside people" - meaning normal people in the normal world. When he says that, the only face I see is yours. To tell the truth, I don't want to see my parents. They're too upset over me, and seeing them puts me in a bad mood. Plus, there are things I have to explain to you. I'm not sure *I can* explain them very well, but they're important things I can't go on avoiding any longer.

Still, you shouldn't feel that I'm a burden to you. The one thing I don't want to be is a burden to anyone. I can sense the good feelings you have for me. They make me very happy. All I am doing in this letter is trying to convey that happiness to you. Those good feelings of yours are probably just what I need at this point in my life. Please forgive me if anything I've written here upsets you. As I said before, I am a far

to the Ami Hostel. A woman receptionist answered and asked my business. I asked if it might be possible for me to visit Naoko the following afternoon. I left my name and she said I should call back in half an hour.

The same woman answered when I called back after dinner. It would indeed be possible for me to see Naoko, she said. I thanked her, hung up, and put a change of clothes and a few toiletries in my rucksack. Then I picked up *The Magic Mountain* again, reading and sipping brandy and waiting to get sleepy. Even so, I didn't fall asleep until after one o'clock in the morning.

Preview from Notes
Page 108 of 1

directions. It was not immediately clear to me why our bus had had to wait for the other one, but a short way down the other side of the mountain the road narrowed suddenly. Two big buses could never have passed each other on the road, and in fact passing ordinary cars coming in the other direction required a good deal of manoeuvring, with one or the other vehicle having to back up and squeeze into the overhang of a curve.

The villages along the road were far smaller now, and the level area under cultivation even narrower. The mountain was steeper, its walls pressed closer to the bus windows. They seemed to have just as many dogs as the other places, though at the arrival of the bus would set off a howling commotion.

At the stop where I got off, there was nothing – no houses, no fields, just the bus stop sign, a little stream, and the trail opening. I slung my rucksack over my shoulder and started up the track. The stream ran along the left side of the trail, and a forest of deciduous trees lined the right. I had been climbing

the gentle slope for some 15 minutes when I came to a road leading into the woods on the right, the opening barely wide enough to accommodate a car. AMI HOSTEL PRIVATE NO TRESPASSING read the sign by the road.

Sharply etched tyre tracks ran up the road through the trees. The occasional flapping of wings echoed in the woods. The sound came through with strange clarity, as if amplified above the other voices of the forest. Once, from far away, I heard what might have been a rifle shot, but it was a small and muffled sound, as though it had passed through several filters.

Beyond the woods I came to a white stone wall. It was no higher than my own height and, lacking additional barriers on top, would have been easy for me to scale. The black iron gate looked sturdy enough, but it was wide open, and there was no one manning the guardhouse. Another sign like the last one stood by the gate: AMI HOSTEL

my question. "The first thing you ought to know is that this is no ordinary "hospital". It's not so much for treatment as for convalescence. We do have a few doctors, of course, and they give hourly sessions, but they're just checking people's conditions, taking their temperature and things like that, not administering "treatments" as in an ordinary hospital. There are no bars on the windows here, and the gate is always wide open. People enter and leave voluntarily. You have to be suited to that kind of convalescence to be admitted here in the first place. In some cases, people who need specialized therapy end up going to a specialized hospital. OK so far?"

"I think so," I said. "But what does this "convalescence" consist of? Can you give me a concrete example?"

Reiko exhaled a cloud of smoke and drank what was left of her orange juice. "Just living here is the convalescence," she said. A regular routine, exercise, isolation from the outside world, clean air, quiet. Our farmland makes us practically self-sufficient; there's no TV or radio. We're like one of those commune places you hear so much about. Of course, one thing different from a commune is that it costs a bundle to get in here."

A bundle?"

"Well, it's not ridiculously expensive, but it's not cheap. Just look at these facilities. We've got a lot of land here, a few patients, a big staff, and in my case I've been here a long time. True, I'm almost staff myself so I get concessions, but still ... Now, how about a cup of coffee?"

I said I'd like some. She stubbed out her cigarette and went over to the counter, where she poured two cups of coffee from a warm pot and brought them back to where we were sitting. She put sugar in hers, stirred it, frowned, and took a sip.

-You know," she said, "this sanatorium is not a profitmaking enterprise, so it can keep going without charging as much as it might

never plays it unless I request it."

**Preview from Notes
Page 132 of 1**

"Every now and then," said Reiko, now looking at her left hand. "Every once in a while she'll get worked up and cry like that. But that's OK. She's letting out her feelings. The scary thing is not being able to do that. When your feelings build up and harden and die inside, then you're in big trouble."

"Did I say something I shouldn't have?"

"Not a thing. Don't worry. Just speak your mind honestly. That's the best thing. It may hurt a little sometimes, and someone may get upset the way Naoko did, but in the long run it's for the best. That's what you should do if you're serious about making Naoko well again. Like I told you in the beginning, you should think not so much about wanting to help her as wanting to recover yourself by helping her to recover. That's the way it's done here. So you have to be honest and say everything that comes to mind, while you're here at least. Nobody does that in the outside world, right?"

"I guess not," I said.

"I've seen all kinds of people come and go in my time here," she said, "maybe *too* many people. So I can usually tell by looking at a person whether they're going to get better or not, almost by instinct. But in Naoko's case, I'm not sure. I have absolutely no idea what's going to happen to her. For all I know, she could be 100 per cent recovered next month, or she could go on like this for years. So I really can't tell you what to do aside from the most generalized kind of advice: to be honest and help each other."

"What makes Naoko such a hard case for you?"

"Probably because I like her so much. I think my emotions get in the way and I can't see her clearly. I mean, I really like her. But aside from that, she has a bundle of different problems that are all tangled up with each other so that it's hard to unravel a single one. It may take a very long time to undo them all, or something could trigger them to come unravelled all at once. It's kind of like that. Which is why I can't be sure about her."

it in hot water, taking a few days off from practice: nothing worked. So then I got scared and went to the doctor's. They tried all kinds of tests but they couldn't come up with anything. There was nothing wrong with the finger itself, and the nerves were OK, they said: there was no reason it should stop moving. The problem must be psychological. So I went to a psychiatrist, but he didn't really know what was going on, either. Probably pre-competition stress, he said, and advised me to get away from the piano for a while."

Reiko inhaled deeply and let the smoke out. Then she bent her neck to the side a few times.

"So I went to recuperate at my grandmother's place on the coast. But I thought I'd forgotten about that particular competition and really relax, spend a couple of weeks away from the piano doing anything I wanted. But it was hopeless. Piano was all I could think about. Maybe my finger would never move again. How would I live if that happened? The same thoughts kept going round and round in my brain. And no wonder: piano had been my whole life up to that point. I had started playing when I was four and grew up thinking about the piano and nothing else. I never did housework so as not to injure my fingers. People paid attention to me for that one thing: my talent at the piano. Take the piano away from a girl who's grown up like that, and what's left? So then, *snap!* MY mind became a complete jumble. Total darkness."

She dropped her cigarette to the ground and stamped it out, then bent her neck a few times again.

"That was the end of my dream of becoming a concert pianist. I spent two months in the hospital. My finger started to move shortly after I arrived, so I *was* able to return to the conservatoire and graduate, but something inside me had vanished. Some jewel of energy or something had disappeared - evaporated - from inside my body. The doctor said I lacked the mental strength to become a professional pianist and advised me to abandon the idea. So after graduating I took

the window. She had drawn her knees up and was resting her chin on them, looking like a hungry orphan. I searched for the watch I had left by my pillow, but it was not in the place where I knew it should be. I guessed from the angle of the moonlight that the time must be two or three o'clock in the morning. I felt a violent thirst but I decided to keep still and continue watching Naoko. She was wearing the same blue nightdress I had seen her in earlier, and on one side her hair was held in place by the butterfly hairslide, revealing the beauty of her face in the moonlight. Strange, I thought, she had taken the side of her head before going to bed.

Naoko stayed frozen in place, like a small nocturnal animal that has been lured on by the moonlight. The direction of the glow exaggerated the silhouette of her lips, seeming utterly fragile and vulnerable, the silhouette pulsed almost imperceptibly with the beating of her heart or the motions of her inner heart, as if she were whispering soundless words to the darkness.

I swallowed in hopes of easing my thirst, but in the stillness of the night the sound I made was huge. As if this were a signal to her, Naoko stood and glided towards the head of the bed, gown rustling faintly. She knelt on the floor by my pillow, eyes fixed on mine. I stared back at her, but her eyes told me nothing. Strangely transparent, they seemed like windows to a world beyond, but however long I peered into their depths, there was nothing I could see. Our faces were no more than ten inches apart, but she was light years away from me.

I reached out and tried to touch her, but Naoko drew back, lips trembling faintly. A moment later, she brought her hands up and began slowly to undo the buttons of her gown. There were seven in all. I felt as if it were the continuation of my dream as I watched her slim, lovely fingers opening the buttons one by one from top to bottom. Seven small, white buttons: when she had unfastened them all, Naoko slipped the gown from her shoulders and threw it off completely like an insect shedding its skin. She had been wearing

"He's a little strange up here," said Reiko, touching her head.

He had been right about the weather, though. The sky was a fresh-swept blue, with only a trace of white cloud clinging to the dome of heaven like a thin streak of test paint. We walked beside the low stone wall of Ami Hostel for a time, then moved away to climb a steep, narrow trail in single file. Reiko led the way, with Naoko in the middle and me bringing up the rear. Reiko climbed with the confident stride of one who knew every stretch of every mountain in the area. We concentrated on walking, with hardly a word among us. Naoko wore blue jeans and a white blouse and carried her jacket in one hand. I watched her long, straight hair swaying right and left when I met her shoulders. She would glance back at me now and then, smiling when our eyes met. The trail continued upwards so far that it was almost dizzying, but Reiko's pace never slackened. Naoko hurried to keep up with her, wiping the sweat from her face. Not having indulged in such outdoor activities for some time, I found myself running short of breath.

"Do you do this a lot?" I asked Naoko.

"Maybe once a week," she answered. "Having a tough time?"

"Kind of," I said.

"We're almost there," said Reiko. "This is about two-thirds of the way. Come on, you're a boy, aren't you?" "Yeah, but I'm out of shape."

"Playing with girls all the time," muttered Naoko, as if to herself.

I wanted to answer her, but I was too winded to speak. Every now and then, red birds with tufts on their heads would flit across our path, brilliant against the blue sky. The fields around us were filled with white and blue and yellow flowers, and bees buzzed everywhere. Moving ahead one step at a time, I thought of nothing but the scene passing before my eyes.

The slope gave out after another ten minutes, and we gained a level plateau. We rested there, wiping the sweat off, catching our breath and drinking from our water bottles. Reiko found a leaf and

radios in our rooms, so if I don't come here once in a while, I don't have any idea what's playing out there."

"Do you sleep in this place?" I asked the girl.

"No way!" she laughed. "I'd die of loneliness if I spent the night here. The pasture guy drives me into town and I come out again in the morning." She pointed at a four-wheel drive truck parked in front of the nearby pasture office.

"You've got a holiday coming up soon, too, right?" asked Reiko.

"Yeah, we'll be shutting up this place soon," said the girl. Reiko offered her a cigarette, and they smoked.

"I'll miss you," said Reiko.

"I'll be back in two days, enough," said the girl with a laugh.

Cream came on the radio with "White Room". After a commercial, it was Simon and Garfunkel's "Scarborough Fair".

"I like that," said Reiko when it was over.

"I saw the film," I said.

"Who's in it?"

"Dustin Hoffman."

"I don't know him," she said with a sad little shake of the head. "The world changes like mad, and I don't know what's happening." She asked the girl for a guitar. "Sure," said the girl, switching off the radio and bringing out an old guitar. The dog raised its head and sniffed the instrument.

"You can't eat this," Reiko said with mock sternness. A grass-scented breeze swept over the porch. The mountains lay spread out before us, the ridge line sharp against the sky.

"It's like a scene from *The Sound of Music*," I said to Reiko as she tuned up.

"What's that?" she asked.

She strummed the guitar in search of the opening chord of "Scarborough Fair". This was apparently her first attempt at the song, but after a few false starts she could play it through without hesitating.

again. I'll always stay twisted like this and grow old and waste away here. I get so chilled it's like I'm all frozen inside. It's horrible ... so cold. .. "

I put my arm around her and drew her close.

"I feel like Kizuki is reaching out for me from the darkness, calling to me, 'Hey, Naoko, we can't stay apart.' When I hear him saying that, I don't know what to do." "What do you do?"

"Well ... don't take this the wrong way, now." "OK, I won't."

"I ask Reiko to hold me. I wake her up and crawl into her bed and let her hold me tight. And I cry. And she strokes me and the ice melts and I'm warm again. Do you think it's nice?"

"No. I wish I could be Reiko to hold you though," I said.

"So hold me. Now. Right here."

We sat down on the dry grass of the meadow and put our arms around each other. The tall grass surrounded us, and we could see nothing but the sky and clouds above. I gently lay Naoko down and took her in my arms. She was soft and warm and her hands reached out for me. We kissed with real feeling.

"Tell me something, Toru," Naoko whispered in my ear.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Do you want to sleep with me?"

"Of course I do," I said. "Can you wait?" "Of course I can."

"Before we do it again, I want to get myself a little better. I want to make myself into a person more worthy of that hobby of yours. Will you wait for me to do that?"

"Of course I'll wait." "Are you hard now?"

"You mean the soles of my feet?" "Silly," Naoko giggled.

"If you're asking whether I have an erection, of course I do." "Will you do me a favour and stop saying 'Of course'?" "OK, I'll stop."

"Is it difficult?" "What?"

"To be all hard like that." "Difficult?"

"I mean, are you suffering?"

dining hall.

"Is he a doctor or a patient?" I asked Reiko. "Which do you think?"

"I really can't tell. In either case, he doesn't seem all that normal."

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

"Yeah," said Reiko, "but I bet he's the craziest one here." "Mr Omura, the gatekeeper, is pretty crazy, too," answered Naoko.

"True," said Reiko, nodding as she stabbed her broccoli. "He does these wild callisthenics every morning, screaming nonsense at the top of his lungs. And before you came, Naoko, there was a girl in the business office, Miss Kinoshita, who tried to kill herself. And last year they sacked a male nurse, Tokushima, who had a terrible drinking problem."

"Sounds like patients and staff should swap places," I said.

"Right on," said Reiko, waving her fork in the air. "You're finally starting to see how things work here."

"I suppose so."

"What makes us most normal," said Reiko, "is knowing that we're not normal."

Back in the room, Naoko and I played cards while Reiko practised Bach on her guitar.

"What time are you leaving tomorrow?" Reiko asked me, taking a break and lighting a cigarette.

"Straight after breakfast," I said. "The bus comes at nine. That way I can get back in time for tomorrow night's work."

"Too bad. It'd be nice if you could stay longer."

"If I stayed around too long, I might end up living here," I said, laughing.

"Maybe so," Reiko said. Then, to Naoko, she said, "Oh, yeah, I've got to go get some grapes at Oka's. I totally forgot."

"Want me to go with you?" asked Naoko.

"How about letting me borrow your young Mr Watanabe here?"

"Fine," said Naoko.

"Good. Let's just the two of us go for another nighttime stroll," said Reiko, taking my hand. "We Yesterday. Let's go all the way tonight."

"Fine," said Naoko, tittering. "Do what you like."

were almost there.

The night air was cool. Reiko wore a pale blue cardigan over her shirt and walked with her hands shoved in her jeans pockets. Looking up at the sky, she sniffed the breeze like a dog. "Smells like rain," she said. I tried sniffing too, but couldn't smell anything. True, there were lots of clouds in the sky obscuring the moon.

"If you stay here long enough, you can pretty much feel the weather by the smell of the air," said Reiko.

We entered the wooded area where the staff houses stood. Reiko told me to wait a minute, walked over to the front door of one house and rang the bell. A woman came to the door - no doubt the lady of the house - and stood there chatting and chuckling with Reiko. Then she ducked inside and came back with a large plastic bag. Reiko thanked her and said goodnight before returning to the spot where I was waiting.

"Look," she said, opening the bag.

It held a huge cluster of grapes.

"Do you like grapes?"

"Love them."

She handed me the top bunch. "It's OK to eat them. They're washed."

We walked along eating grapes and spitting the skins and seeds on the ground. They were fresh and delicious.

"I give their son piano lessons once in a while, and they offer me different stuff. The wine we had was from them. I sometimes ask them to do a little shopping for me in town."

"I'd like to hear the rest of the story you were telling me yesterday," I said.

to go on with her story.

"Well, anyway, I enjoyed teaching her for a good six months. Sometimes I'd find something she said a little surprising or odd. Or she'd be talking and I'd have this rush of horror when I realised the intensity of her hatred for some person was completely irrational, or it would occur to me that she was just far too clever, and I'd wonder what she was really thinking. But, after all, everyone has their flaws, right? And finally, what business was it of mine to question her personality or character? I was just her piano teacher. All I had to care about was whether she practised or not. And besides, the truth of the matter is that I liked her. I liked her a lot.

"Still, I was careful not to tell her anything too personal about myself. I just had this sixth sense that I'd better not talk about such things. She asked me hundreds of questions - she was dying to know more about me - but I only told her the most harmless stuff, like things about my childhood or where I'd gone to school, stuff like that. She said she wanted to know more about me, but I told her there was nothing to tell: I'd had a boring life, I had an ordinary husband, an ordinary child, and a ton of housework. "But I like you so *much*," she'd say and look me right in the eye in this clingy sort of way. It sent a thrill through me when she did that - a *nice* thrill. But even so, I never told her more than I had to.

"And then one day - a day in May, I think it was - in the middle of her lesson, she said she felt sick. I saw she was pale and sweating and asked if she wanted to go home, but she said she thought she'd feel better if she could just lie down for a while. So I took her - almost carried her - to the bedroom.

We had such a small sofa, the bed was the only place she *could* lie down. She apologized for being a nuisance, but I assured her it was no bother and asked if she wanted anything to drink. She said no, she just wanted me to stay near her, which I said I'd be glad to do.

"A few minutes later she asked me to rub her back. She sounded as

and saying "There there,' and she's got her arms around me and she's stroking my back, and soon I'm starting to feel very strange, my whole body is kind of hot. I mean, here's this picture-perfect beautiful girl and I'm on the bed with her, and we're hugging, and her hands are caressing my back in this incredibly sensual way that my own husband couldn't even begin to match, and I feel all the screws coming loose in my body every time she touches me, and before I know it she has my blouse and bra off and she's stroking my breasts. So that when it finally hits me that she's an absolute dyed-in-the-wool lesbian. This had happened to me once before, at school, one of the sixth-form girls. So then I tell her to stop.

"Oh, please,' she says "just a little more. I'm so lonely, I'm so lonely, please believe me, you're the only one I have, oh please, don't turn your back on me,' and she takes my hand and puts it on her breast - her very nicely shaped breast, and, sure, I'm a woman, but this electric something goes through me when my hand makes contact. I have no idea what to do. I just keep repeating no no no no no, like an idiot. It's as if I'm Paralyzed, I can't move. I had managed to push the girl away at school, but now I can't do a thing. My body won't take orders. She's holding my right hand against her with her left hand, and she's kissing and licking my nipples, and her right hand is caressing my back, my side, my bottom. So here I am in the bedroom with the curtains closed and a 13-year-old girl has me practically naked - she's been taking my clothes off somehow all along - and touching me all over and I'm writhing with the pleasure of it. Looking back on it now, it seems incredible. I mean, it's insane, don't you think? But at the time it was as if she had cast a spell on me."

Reiko paused to puff at her cigarette.

"You know, this is the first time I've ever told a man about it," she said, looking at me. "I'm telling it to you because I think I ought to, but I'm finding it really embarrassing."

"I'm sorry," I said, because I didn't know what else to say.

and I was hearing things, and I couldn't sleep. So he suggested that I leave first, go somewhere by myself, and he would follow after he had taken care of what had to be done.

"No," I said, "I don't want to go alone. I'll fall apart if I don't have you. I need you. Please, don't leave me alone." He held me and pleaded with me to hang on a little longer. Just a month, he said. He would take care of everything - leave his job, sell the house, make arrangements for kindergarten, find a new job. There might be a position he could take in Australia, he said. He just wanted me to wait one month, and everything would be OK. What could I say to that? If I tried to object, it would only scare me even more.

Reiko sighed and looked at the ceiling light.

"I couldn't hold on for a month, though. One day it happened again: *snap!* And this time it was really bad. I took sleeping pills and turned on the gas. I woke up in a hospital bed, and it was all over. It took a few months before I had calmed down enough to think, and then I asked my husband for a divorce. I told him it would be the best thing for him and for our daughter. He said he had no intention of divorcing me. 'We can make a new start,' he said. 'We can go somewhere new, just the three of us, and begin all over again.' 'It's too late,' I told him. 'Everything ended when you asked me to wait a month. If you really wanted to start again, you shouldn't have said that to me. Now, no matter where we go, no matter how far away we move, the same thing will happen all over again. And I'll ask you for the same thing, and make you suffer. I don't want to do that any more.'

"And so we divorced. Or I should say I divorced him. He married again two years ago, though. I'm still glad I made him leave me. Really. I knew I'd be like this for the rest of my life, and I didn't want to drag anyone down with me. I didn't want to force anyone to live in constant fear that I might lose my mind at any moment.

"He had been wonderful to me: an ideal husband, faithful, strong and patient, someone I could put my complete trust in. He had done

I'd make lots of babies for you as tough as little bulls. And we'd all live happily ever after, rolling on the floor."

I laughed and drank my third vodka and tonic.

"I guess you don't really want lots of babies as tough as little bulls yet," said Midori.

"I'm intrigued," I said. "I'd like to see what they look like."

"That's OK, you don't have to want them," said Midori, eating a pistachio. "Here I am, drinking in the afternoon, saying whatever pops into my head: 'I wanna dump everything and run off to some where.' What's the point of going to Uruguay? All they've got there is donkey shit."

"You may be right."

"Donkey shit everywhere. Here a shit, there a shit, the whole world is donkey shit. Hey, I can't open this. You take it." Midori handed me a pistachio nut. I struggled with it until I cracked it open. "But oh, what a *relief* it was last Sunday! Going up to the laundry deck with you, watching the fire, drinking beer, singing songs. I don't know *how* long it's been since I had such a total sense of *relief*. People are always trying to *force* stuff on me. The minute they see me they start telling me what to do. At least you don't try to force stuff on me."

"I don't know you well enough to force stuff on you."

"You mean, if you knew me better, you'd force stuff on me like everyone else?"

"It's possible," I said. "That's how people live in the real world: forcing stuff on each other."

"You wouldn't do that. I can tell. I'm an expert when it comes to forcing stuff and having stuff forced on you. You're not the type. That's why I can relax with you. Do you have any idea how many people there are in the world who *like* to force stuff on people and have stuff forced on them? *Tons!* And then they make a big fuss, like 'I forced her', 'You forced me!' That's what they like. But I don't like it. I just do it because I have to."

"I was just curious," she said. "Besides, he'd get angry if I asked him about stuff like that. He'd say girls aren't supposed to ask all those questions."

"A perfectly normal point of view, I'd say."

"But I want to know. This is pure curiosity. Do guys think about particular girls when they wank?"

I gave up trying to avoid the question. "Well, I do at least."

I don't know about anybody else."

"Have you ever thought about me while you were doing it?"

Tell me the truth. I won't be angry."

"No, I haven't, to tell the truth," I answered honestly. "Why not? Aren't I attractive enough?"

"Oh, you're attractive, all right. Your cutesy and sexy outfits look great on you."

"So why don't you think about me?"

"Well, first of all, I think of you as a friend, so I don't want to involve you in my sexual fantasies, and second - "

"You've got somebody else you're supposed to be thinking about."

"That's about the size of it," I said.

"You have good manners even when it comes to something like this," Midori said. "That's what I like about you. Still, couldn't you allow me just one brief appearance? I want to be in one of your sexual fantasies or daydreams or whatever you call them. I'm asking you because we're friends. Who else can I ask for something like that? I can't just walk up to anyone and say, "When you wank tonight, will you please think of me for a second?" It's *because I* think of you as a friend that I'm asking. And I want you to tell me later what it was like. You know, what you did and stuff."

I let out a sigh.

"You can't put it in, though. Because we're just friends. Right? As long as you don't put it in, you can do anything you like, think anything you want."

"I really can't say until the time comes," said the doctor. "Wow, that's some short skirt you're wearing!"

"Nice, huh?"

"What do you do on stairways?" the doctor asked.

"Nothing special. I let it all hang out," said Midori. The nurse chuckled behind the doctor.

"Incredible. You ought to come and let us open *your* head one of these days to see what's going on in there. Do me a favour and use the lift while you're in the hospital. I can't afford to have any more patients. I'm way too busy as it is."

Soon after the doctor's rounds it was lunchtime. A nurse was circulating from room to room pushing a trolley loaded with meals. Midori's father was given pottage, fruit, boneless deboned fish, and vegetables that had been ground into some kind of jelly. Midori turned him on his back and raised him up using the handle at the foot of the bed. She fed him the soup with a spoon. After five or six swallows, he turned his face aside and said (No more>.

You've got to eat at least this much." Midori san <Later> he said.

"You're hopeless - if you don't eat properly, you'll never get your strength back," she said. "Don't you have to pee yet?" <No> he said.

"Hey, Watanabe, let's go down to the cafeteria."

I agreed to go, but in fact I didn't much feel like eating. The cafeteria was packed with doctors, nurses and visitors. Long lines of chairs and tables filled the huge, windowless underground cavern where every mouth seemed to be eating or talking - about sickness, no doubt, the voices echoing and re-echoing as in a tunnel. Now and then the PA system would break through the reverberation with calls for a doctor or nurse. While I laid claim to a table, Midori bought two set meals and carried them over on an aluminium tray. Croquettes with cream sauce, potato salad, shredded cabbage, boiled vegetables, rice and miso soup: these were lined up in the tray in the same white plastic dishes they used for patients. I ate about half of mine and left the rest.

bed and held it by the tip of his penis. Afterwards I emptied the jar into the toilet and washed it out. Then I went back to the sickroom and finished my tea.

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

<My. ... head> he said.

"Hurts?"

<A little> he said with a slight frown.

"Well, no wonder, you've just had an operation. Of course, I've never had one, so I don't know what it's like." <Ticket> he said.

"Ticket? What ticket?"

<Midori> he said. <Ticket>.

I had no idea what he was talking about, and just kept quiet. He stayed silent for a time, too. Then he seemed to say <Please>. He opened his eyes wide and looked at me hard. I guessed that he was trying to tell me something, but I couldn't begin to imagine what it was.

<Ueno> he said. <Midori>.

"Ueno Station?"

He gave a little nod.

I tried to summarize what he was getting at: "Ticket, Midori, please, Ueno Station," but I had no idea what it meant. I assumed his mind was muddled, but compared with before his eyes now had a terrible clarity. He raised the arm that was free of the intravenous contraption and stretched it towards me. This must have been a major effort for him, the way the hand trembled in mid-air. I stood and grasped his frail, wrinkled hand. He returned my grasp with what little strength he could muster and said again <Please>.

"Don't worry," I said. "I'll take care of the ticket and Midori, too." He let his hand drop back to the bed and closed his eyes. Then, with a loud rush of breath, he fell asleep. I checked to make sure he was still alive, then went out to boil more water for tea. As I was sipping the hot liquid, I realized that I had developed a kind of liking for this little man on the verge of death.

make people get really vicious all of a sudden. It was the same with my mother. What do you think she said to me? "You're not my daughter! I hate your guts!" The whole world turned black for me for a second when she said that. But that kind of thing is one of the features of this particular sickness. Something presses on a part of the brain and makes people say all kinds of nasty things. You know it's just part of the sickness, but still, it hurts. What do you expect? Here I am, working my fingers to the bone for them, and they're saying all this terrible stuff to me-

"I know what you mean," I said. Then I remembered the strange fragments that Midori's father had murmured to me.

"Ticket? Ueno Station?" Midori said. "I wonder what that's all about?"

"And then he said, *Please*, and *Midori*." "Please take care of Midori?"

"Or maybe he wants you to go to Ueno and buy a ticket. The order of the four words is such a mess, who knows what he means? Does Ueno Station mean anything special to you?"

"Hmm, Ueno Station." Midori thought about it for a while. "The only thing I can think of is the two times I ran away, when I was eight and when I was ten. Both times I took a train from Ueno to Fukushima. Bought the tickets with money I took from the till. Somebody at home made me really angry, and I did it to get even. I had an aunt in Fukushima, I kind of liked her, so I went to her house. My father was the one who brought me home. Came all the way to Fukushima to get me - a hundred miles! We ate boxed lunches on the train to Ueno. My father told me all kinds of stuff while we were travelling, just little bits and pieces with long spaces in between. Like about the big earthquake of 1923 or about the war or about the time I was born, stuff he didn't usually talk about. Come to think of it, those were the only times my father and I had something like a good, long talk, just the two of us. Hey, can you believe this? - my father was smack bang in the middle of Tokyo during one of the biggest earthquakes in history and he

worry, I'd take care of both you and the ticket."

"You promised my father that? You said you'd take care of me?" She looked me straight in the eye with a dead-serious expression on her face.

"Not like *that*," I hastened to correct her. "I really didn't know *what* he was saying, and - "

"Don't worry, I'm just kidding," she said with a smile. "I love that about you."

Midori and I finished our coffee and went back to the room. Her father was still sound asleep. If you leaned close you could hear his steady breathing. As the afternoon deepened, the light outside the hospital window changed to a soft, gentle colour of autumn. A flock of birds rested on the electric wire outside, then flew on. Midori and I sat in a corner of the room, talking quietly the whole time. She read my palm and predicted that I would live to 105, marry three times, and die in a traffic accident. "Not a bad life," I said.

When her father woke just after four o'clock, Midori went to sit by his pillow, wiped the sweat from his brow, gave him water, and asked him about the pain in his head. A nurse came and took his temperature, recorded the number of his urinations, and checked the intravenous equipment. I went to the TV room and watched a little football.

At five I told Midori I would be leaving. To her father I explained, "I have to go to work now. I sell records in Shinjuku from six to 10.30."

He turned his eyes to me and gave a little nod.

"Hey, Watanabe, I don't know how to put this, but *I really* want to thank you for today," Midori said to me when she saw me to reception.

"I didn't do that much," I said. "But if I can be of any help, I'll come next week, too. I'd like to see your father again."

"Really?"

"Well, there's not that much for me to do in the dorm, and if I come

"Or is it that you don't like being with me? You want to go back to your room as soon as possible, is that it?" she said with a playful smile.

"No way," I said.

"All right, then. Don't stand on ceremony. It's a short walk."

Hatsumi's flat was a 15-minute walk from Shibuya towards Ebisu. By no means a glamorous building, it was more than decent, with a nice little lobby and a lift. Hatsumi sat me at the kitchen table and went to the bedroom to change. She came out wearing a plain cotton hooded sweatshirt and cotton trousers - and no more gold earrings. Setting a first-aid box on the table, she undid my bandage, checked to see that the wound was still healed, put a little disinfectant on the area and tied a new bandage over the cut. She did all this like an expert. "How come you're so good at so many things?" I asked.

"I used to do volunteer work at a hospital. Kind of like playing nurse. That's how I learned."

When Hatsumi had finished with the bandage, she went and fetched two cans of beer from the fridge. She drank half of hers, and I drank mine plus the half she left. Then she showed me pictures of the other girls in her club. She was right: some of them were cute.

"Any time you decide you want a girlfriend, come to me," she said.

"I'll fix you up straight away."

"Yes, Miss."

"All right, Toru, tell me the truth. You think I'm an old matchmaker, don't you?"

"To some extent," I said, telling her the truth, but with a smile. Hatsumi smiled, too. She looked good when she smiled.

"Tell me something else, Toru," she said. "What do you think about Nagasawa and me?"

"What do you mean what do I think? About what?"

"About what I ought to do. From now on."

"It doesn't matter what I think," I said, taking a slug of cold beer.

situation conducive to sexual excitement. My nose was resting on her head and her short-cut hair would tickle every now and then.

"Come on, *say* something to me," Midori said, her face buried in my chest.

"What do you want me to say?"

"Anything. Something to make me feel good." "You're really cute," I said.

" - Midori," she said. "Say my name."

"You're really cute, Midori," I corrected myself. "What do you mean *really* cute?"

"So cute the mountains crumble and the oceans dry up." Midori hid her face and looked shy. "You have this special way with words."

"I can feel my heart softening when you say that," I said, smiling.

"Say something even nicer."

"I really like you, Midori. A lot."

"How much is a lot?"

"Like a spring bear," I said.

"A spring bear?" Midori looked up again. "What's that all about? A spring bear."

"You're walking through a field all by yourself one day in spring, and this sweet little bear cub with velvet fur and shiny little eyes comes walking along. And he says to you, 'Hi, there, little lady. Want to tumble with me?' So you and the bear cub spend the whole day in each other's arms, tumbling down this clover-covered hill. Nice, huh?"

"Yeah. *Really* nice."

"That's how much I like you."

"That is the best thing I've ever heard," said Midori, cuddling up against my chest. "If you like me *that* much, you'll do anything I tell you to do, right? You won't get angry, right?"

"No, of course not."

"And you'll take care of me always and always."

„Of course I will," I said, stroking her short, soft, boyish hair. "Don't

shovelling snow when there was time. Doctor Miyata popped over to our table at dinner to explain why people's middle fingers are longer than their index fingers, while with toes it worked the other way. The gatekeeper, Omura, talked to me again about Tokyo pork. Reiko enjoyed the records I brought as gifts from the city. She transcribed a few tunes and worked them out on her guitar.

Naoko was even less talkative than she had been in the autumn. When the three of us were together, she would sit on the sofa, smiling and hardly say a word. Reiko seemed to be chattering away to make up for her. "But don't worry," Naoko told me. "This is just one of those times. It's a lot more fun for me to listen to you two than to talk myself."

Reiko gave herself some chores that took her out of the flat so that Naoko and I could get in bed. I kissed her neck and shoulders and breasts, and she used her hands to bring me to climax as before. Afterwards, holding her close, I told her how her touch had stayed with me these two months, that I had thought of her and masturbated. "You haven't slept with anybody else?" Naoko asked. "Not once," I said.

"All right, then, here's something else for you to remember." She slid down and kissed my penis, then enveloped it in her warm mouth and ran her tongue all over it, her long, straight hair swaying over my belly and groin with each movement of her lips until I came a second time.

"Do you think you can remember that?" she asked.

"Of course I can," I said. "I'll always remember it."

I held her tight and slid my hand inside her panties, touching her still-dry vagina. Naoko shook her head and pulled my hand away. We held each other for a time, saying nothing.

"I'm thinking of getting out of the dorm when term ends and looking for a flat," I said. "I've had it with dorm life. If I keep working part-time I can pretty much cover my expenses. How about coming to

I went to a phone box and dialled her number. The woman who answered was probably her sister. When I gave her my name, she said "Just a minute", but Midori never came to the phone.

Then the sister, or whoever she was, got back on the line. "Midori says she's too furious to talk to you. You just moved and never said a thing to her, right? Just disappeared and never told her where you were going, right? Well, now you've got her boiling mad. And once she gets mad, she stays that way. Like some kind of animal."

"Look, could you just put her on the phone? I can explain."

"She says she doesn't want to hear any explanation."

"Can I explain to *you*, then? I have to do this to you, but could you just listen and tell her what I said?"

"Not *me*! Do it yourself. What kind of man are you? It's *your* responsibility, so *you* do it, and do it right."

It was hopeless. I thanked her and hung up. I really couldn't blame Midori for being angry. What with all the moving and fixing up and working for extra cash, I hadn't given her a second thought. Not even Naoko had crossed my mind the whole time. This was nothing new for me. Whenever I get involved in something, I shut out everything else.

But then I began to think how I would have felt if the tables had been turned and Midori had moved somewhere without telling me where or getting in touch with me for three weeks. I would have been hurt - hurt badly, no doubt. No, we weren't lovers, but in a way we had opened ourselves to each other even more deeply than lovers do. The thought caused me a good deal of grief. What a terrible thing it is to wound someone you really care for - and to do it so unconsciously.

As soon as I got home from work, I sat at my new desk and wrote to Midori. I told her how I felt as honestly as I could. I apologized, without explanations or excuses, for having been so careless and insensitive. I miss you, I wrote. *I want to see you*

as soon as possible. I want you to see my new house. Please write to

A letter came from Midori on 6 April. She invited me to meet her on campus and have lunch on the tenth when we had to enroll for lectures. *I put off writing to you as long as I could, which makes us even, so let's make up. I have to admit it, I miss you.*

I read the letter again and again, four times all together, and still I couldn't tell what she was trying to say to me. What could it possibly mean? My brain was so fogged over, I couldn't find the connection from one sentence to the next. How would meeting her on enrollment day make us "even"? Why did she want to have "lunch" with me? I was really losing it. My mind had gone black, like the soggy rest of a subterranean plan. But somehow I knew I had to get up out of it. And then those words of Nagasawa's came to mind. "I don't feel sorry for yourself. Only arseholes do that."

"OK, Nagasawa. Right on," I heard myself thinking. I let out a sigh and got to my feet.

I did my laundry for the first time in weeks, went to the public bath and shaved, cleaned my place up, shopped for food and cooked myself a decent meal for a change, fed the starving Seagull, drank only beer, and did 30 minutes of exercise. Shaving, I discovered in the mirror that I was becoming emaciated. My eyes were popping. I could hardly recognize myself.

I went out the next morning on a longish bike ride, and after finishing lunch at home, I read Reiko's letter one more time. Then thought seriously about what I ought to do next. The main reason I had taken Reiko's letter so hard was that it had upset my optimistic belief that Naoko was getting better. Naoko herself had told me, "My sickness is a lot worse than you think: it has far deeper roots." And Reiko had warned me there was no telling what might happen. Still, I had seen Naoko twice, and had gained the impression she was on the

mend. I had assumed that the only problem was whether she could

regain the courage to return to the real world, and that if she managed to, the two of us could join forces and make a go of it.

Reiko's letter smashed the illusory castle that I had built on that fragile hypothesis, leaving only a flattened surface devoid of feeling. I would have to do something to regain my footing. It would probably take a long time for Naoko to recover. And even then, she would no doubt be more debilitated and would have lost even more of her self confidence than ever. I would have to adapt myself to this new situation. As strong as I might become, though, it would not solve all the problems. I knew that much. But there was nothing else I could do: just keep my own spirits up and wait for her to recover.

Hey, there, Kizuki, I thought. Unlike you, I've chosen to live - and to live the best I know how. Sure, it was hard for you. What the hell, it's hard for *me*. Really hard. And all because you killed yourself and left Naoko behind. But that's something I will never do. I will never, ever, turn my back on her. First of all, because I love her, and because I'm stronger than she is. And I'm just going to keep on getting stronger. I'm going to mature. I'm going to be an adult. Because that's what I have to do. I always used to think I'd like to stay 17 or 18 if I could. But not any more. I'm not a teenager any more. I've got a sense of responsibility now. I'm not the same person I was when we used to hang out together. I'm 20 now. And I have to pay the price to go on living.

"Shit, Watanabe, what happened to *you*?" Midori asked. "You're all skin and bones!"

"That bad, huh?"

"Too much you-know-what with that married girlfriend of yours, I bet."

I smiled and shook my head. "I haven't slept with a girl since the

ago. My sister helps out there three times a week. Otherwise, she's studying cookery, going on dates with her fiancé, going to the cinema, vegging out, and just enjoying life.

Midori then asked about my new life. I gave her a description of the layout of the house, and the big garden and Seagull the cat, and my landlord.

"Are you enjoying yourself?" she asked. "Pretty much," I said.

"Could have fooled me," said Midori.

"Yeah, and it's springtime, too," I said.

"And you're wearing that cool pullover your girlfriend knitted for you."

With a sudden snort, I glanced down at my wine-coloured jumper.

"How did you know?"

"You're as honest as they come," said Midori. "I'm guessing, of course! Anyway, what's wrong with you?"

"I don't know. I'm trying to whip up a little enthusiasm." "Just remember, life is a box of chocolates."

I shook my head a few times and looked at her. "Maybe I'm not so smart, but sometimes I don't know what on earth you're talking about."

"You know, they've got these chocolate assortments, and you like some but you don't like others? And you eat all the ones you like, and the only ones left are the ones you don't like as much? I always think about that when something painful comes up. 'Now I just have to polish these off, and everything'll be OK.' Life is a box of chocolates."

"I suppose you could call it a philosophy."

"It's true, though. I've learned it from experience."

We were drinking our coffee when two girls came in. Midori seemed to know them from university. The three of them compared enrolment cards and talked about a million different things: "What kind of mark

the works of Tennessee Williams and their place in American literature), and when it was over, I did a long count to three and turned around. Midori was gone.

April was too lonely a month to spend all alone. In April, everyone around me looked happy. People would throw off their coats and enjoy each other's company in the sunshine - talking, playing catch, holding hands. But I was always by myself. Naoko, Midori, Nagasawa: all of them had gone away from where I stood. Now I had no one to say "Good morning" to or "Have a nice day" or even missed Storm Trooper. I spent the whole month with this hopeless sense of isolation. I tried to speak to Midori a few times, but the answer I got from her was always the same: "I don't want to talk to you now" - and I knew from the tone of her voice that she meant it. She was always with the girl with glasses, or else I saw her with a tall, short-haired guy. He had these incredibly long legs and always wore white basketball shoes.

April ended and May came along, but May was even worse than April. In the deepening spring of May, I had no choice but to recognize the trembling of my heart. It usually happened as the sun was going down. In the pale evening gloom, when the soft fragrance of magnolias hung in the air, my heart would swell without warning, and tremble, and lurch with a stab of pain. I would try clamping my eyes shut and gritting my teeth, and wait for it to pass. And it *would* pass - but slowly, taking its own time, and leaving a dull ache in its path.

At those times I would write to Naoko. In my letters to her, I would describe only things that were touching or pleasant or beautiful: the fragrance of grasses, the caress of a spring breeze, the light of the moon, a film I'd seen, a song I liked, a book that had moved me. I myself would be comforted by

letters like this when I would reread what I had written. And I would feel that the world I lived in was a wonderful one. I wrote any number

of letters like this, but from Naoko or Reiko I heard nothing.

At the restaurant where I worked I got to know another student my age named Itoh. It took quite a while before this gentle, quiet student from the oil-painting department of an art college would engage me in conversation, but eventually we started going to a nearby bar after work and talking about all kinds of things. He also liked to read and to listen to music, so we'd usually talk about books and records we liked. He was a slim, good-looking guy with much shorter hair and a cleaner clothes than the typical art student. He never had a lot to say, but he had his definite tastes and opinions. He liked French novels, especially those of Georges Perec and Boris Vian. For music, he preferred Mozart and Haydn. And, like me, he was looking for a friend with whom he could talk about such things.

Itoh once invited me to his flat. It was not quite as hard to get to as mine: a strange, one-floored house behind Inokashira Park. His room was stuffed with painting supplies and canvases. I asked to see his work, but he said he was too embarrassed to show me anything. We drank some Chivas Regal that he had quietly removed from his father's place, grilled some smelts on his charcoal stove, and listened to Robert Casadesu playing a Mozart piano concerto.

Itoh was from Nagasaki. He had a girlfriend he would sleep with whenever he went home, he said, but things weren't going too well with her lately.

"You know what girls are like," he said. "They turn 20 or 21 and all of a sudden they start having these concrete ideas. They get super-realistic. And when that happens, everything that seemed so sweet and loveable about them begins to look ordinary and depressing. Now when I see her, usually after we do it, she starts asking me, 'What are you going to do after you graduate?'"

"Well, what *are* you going to do after you graduate?" I asked him.

Munching on a mouthful of smelt, he shook his head. "What *can* I do? I'm in oil painting! Start worrying about stuff like that, and *nobody's*

"I've been really lonely these past two months," I said.

"Yeah, I know. You told me in your letters," Midori said, her voice flat. "Anyway, let's eat. That's all I can think about now."

We finished all the little fried and grilled and pickled items in the separate compartments of our fancy lacquered half-moon lunch boxes, drank our clear soup from lacquered bowls, and our green tea from those white cups. Midori followed lunch with a cigarette. When she had finished smoking, she stood up without a word and took her umbrella. I also stood up and took mine.

"Where do you want to go now?" I asked.

"The roof, of course. That's the best stop when you've had lunch in a department-store restaurant."

There was no one on the roof in the rain, no clerk in the pet department, and the shutters were closed in the kiosks and the children's rides ticket booth. We opened our umbrellas and wandered among the soaking wet wooden horses and garden chairs and stalls. It seemed incredible to me that there could be anywhere so devoid of people in the middle of Tokyo. Midori said she wanted to look through a telescope, so I put in a coin and held her umbrella over her while she squinted through the eyepiece.

In one corner of the roof there was a covered game area with a row of children's rides. Midori and I sat next to each other on some kind of platform and looked at the rain.

"So talk," Midori said. "You've got something you want to say to me, I know."

"I'm not trying to make excuses," I said, "but I was really depressed that time. My brain was all fogged over. Nothing was registering with me. But one thing became crystal clear to me when I couldn't see you any more. I realized that the only way I had been able to survive until then was having you in my life. When I lost you, the pain and loneliness really got to me."

"Don't you have any idea how painful and lonely it's been for *me*

The fourth thing I have to say is that you have been such a great source of strength for Naoko that even if you no longer have the feelings of a lover towards her, there is still a lot you can do for her. So don't brood over everything in that super-serious way of yours. All of us (by which I mean all of us, both normal and not-so-normal) are imperfect human beings living in an imperfect world. We don't live with the mechanical precision of a bank account or by measuring all our lines and angles with rulers and protractors. Am I right?

My own personal feeling is that Midori sounds like a great girl. I understand just reading your letter why you would be drawn to her. And I understand, too, why you would also be drawn to Naoko. There's nothing unattractively about it. Things like that happen all the time in this great big world of ours. It's like taking a boat out on a beautiful lake on a beautiful day and thinking both the sky and the lake are beautiful. So stop eating yourself up. Things will go where they're supposed to go if you just let them take their natural course. Despite your best efforts, people are going to be hurt when it's time for them to be hurt. Life is like that. I know I sound like I'm preaching from a pulpit, but it's about time you learned to live like this. You try too hard to make life fit your way of doing things. If you don't want to spend time in an insane asylum, you have to open up a little more and let yourself go with life's natural flow. I'm just a powerless and imperfect woman, but still there are times when I think to myself how wonderful life can be! Believe me, it's true! So stop what you're doing this minute and get happy. *Work* at making yourself happy!

Needless to say, I do feel sorry that you and Naoko could not see things through to a happy ending. But who can say what's best? That's why you need to grab whatever chance you have of happiness where you find it, and not worry about other people too much. My experience tells me that we get no more than two or three such chances in a lifetime, and if we let them go, we regret it for the rest of our lives.

The wind tore along the sand beach as we sat there drinking. He told me that he had lost his mother when he was 16. Never healthy, she had worn herself out working from morning to night. I half-listened to him, sipping my sake and grunting in response every now and then. I felt as if I were hearing a story from some far-off world. What the hell was he talking about? I wondered, and all of a sudden I was filled with intense rage: I wanted to strangle him. Who gives a shit about your mother? I've lost Naoko! Her beautiful flesh has vanished from this world! Why the hell are you telling me about your fucking mother!?

But my rage disappeared as quickly as it had flared up. I closed my eyes and went on half-listening to the fisherman's endless tale. Eventually he asked me what I had eaten. No, I said, but in my rucksack I had bread and cheese, a tomato and a piece of chocolate. What had I eaten for lunch? he asked.

Bread and cheese, tomato and chocolate, I answered. "Wait here," he said and ran off. I tried to stop him, but he disappeared into the darkness without looking back.

All I could do was go on drinking my sake. The shore was littered with paper flecks from fireworks that had been exploded on the sand, and waves crashed against the beach with a mad roar. A scrawny dog came up wagging its tail and sniffing around my little campfire for something to eat but eventually gave up and wandered away.

The young fisherman came back half an hour later with two boxes of sushi and a new bottle of sake. I should eat the top box straight away because that had fish in it, he said, but the bottom box had only nori rolls and deep-fried tofu skins so they would last all tomorrow. He filled both our glasses with sake from the new bottle. I thanked him and polished off the whole top box myself, though it had more than enough for two. After we had drunk as much sake as we could manage, he offered to put me up for the night, but when I said I would rather sleep alone on the beach, he left it at that. As he stood to go, he took a folded ¥5,000 note from his pocket and shoved it into the

"You're leaving the sanatorium?"

"It's the only way I can come and see you, isn't it? Anyway, it's about time for me to get out of this place. I've been here eight years, after all. If they keep me any longer, I'll start to rot."

I found it difficult to speak. After a short silence, Reiko went on: "I'll be on the 3.20 bullet train the day after tomorrow. Will you meet me at the station? Do you still remember what I look like? Or have you lost interest in me now that Naoko's dead?"

"No way," I said. "See you at Tokyo Station the day after tomorrow at 3.20."

"You won't have any trouble recognizing me. I'm the old lady with the guitar case. There aren't many of those."

And in fact, I had no trouble finding Reiko in the crowd. She wore a man's tweed jacket, white trousers, and red trainers. Her hair was as short as ever, with the usual clumps sticking up. In her right hand she held a brown leather suitcase, and in her left a black guitar case. She gave me a big, wrinkly smile the moment she spotted me, and I found myself grinning back. I took her suitcase and walked beside her to the train for the western suburbs.

"Hey, Watanabe, how long have you been wearing that awful face? Or is that the 'in' look in Tokyo these days?"

"I was travelling for a while, ate junk all the time," I said. "How did you find the bullet train?"

"Awful!" she said. "You can't open the windows. I wanted to buy a box lunch from one of the station buffets."

"They sell them on board, you know."

"Yeah, overpriced plastic sandwiches. A starving horse wouldn't touch that stuff. I always used to enjoy the boxed lunches at Gotenba Station."

"Once upon a time, before the bullet train."

"Well, *I'm* from once upon a time before the bullet train!"

On the train out to Kichijoji, Reiko watched the Musashino landscape passing the window with all the curiosity of a tourist.

"Has it changed much in eight years?" I asked.

"You don't know what I'm feeling now, do you, Watanabe?" "No, I don't."

"I'm scared," she said. "So scared, I could go crazy just like that. I don't know what I'm supposed to do, flung out here all by myself." She paused. "But 'Go crazy just like that.' Kind of a cool expression, don't you think?"

I smiled and took her hand. "Don't worry," I said. "You'll be OK. Your own strength got you this far."

"It wasn't my own strength that got me out of that place," Reiko said.

"It was Naoko and you. I couldn't stand it there without Naoko, and I had to come to Tokyo to talk to you. That's all. If nothing had happened I probably would have spent the rest of my life there."

I nodded.

"What are you planning to do from now on?" I asked Reiko.

"I'm going to Asahikawa," she said. "Way up in the wilds of Hokkaido! An old college friend of mine runs a music school there, and she's been asking me for two or three years now to help her out. I told her it was too cold for me. I mean, *I finally* get my freedom back and I'm supposed to go to Asahikawa? It's hard to get excited about a place like that - some hole in the ground."

"It's not so awful," I said, laughing. "I've been there. It's not a bad little town. Got its own special atmosphere." "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. It's much better than staying in Tokyo."

"Oh, well," she said. "I don't have anywhere else to go, and I've already sent my stuff there. Hey, Watanabe, promise me you'll come and visit me in Asahikawa."

"Of course I will. But do you have to leave straight away?"

"Can't you stay in Tokyo for a while?"

"I'd like to hang around here a few days if I can. Can you put me up? I

she'd be fine, so they called a taxi and the mother left. We weren't worried at all because Naoko seemed to be in such good spirits. In fact, until then I had been *very* worried. I had been expecting her to be depressed and worn out and emaciated. I mean, I knew how much the testing and therapy and stuff they do at those hospitals can take it out of you, so I had some real doubts about this visit. But one look at her was all it took to convince me she'd be OK. She looked a lot healthier than I had expected and she was smiling and joking and talking much more normally than when I had seen her last. She had been to the hairdresser's and was showing off her new hairdo. So I thought there would be nothing to worry about even if her mother left us alone. Naoko told me that how time she was going to let those hospital doctors cure her once and for all, and I said that that would probably be the best thing to do. So then the two of us went out for a walk, talking all the time, mainly about the future. Naoko told me that what she'd really like was for the two of us to get out of the sanatorium and live together somewhere."

"Live together? You and Naoko?"

"That's right," said Reiko with a little shrug. "So I told her it sounded good to me, but what about Watanabe? And she said, 'Don't worry, I'll get everything straight with him.' That's all. Then she talked about where she and I would live and what we'd do, that kind of thing. After that we went to the aviary and played with the birds."

I took a beer from the fridge and opened it. Reiko lit another cigarette, the cat sound asleep in her lap.

"That girl had everything worked out for herself. I'm sure that's why she was so full of energy and smiling and healthy-looking. It must have been such a load off her mind to feel she knew exactly what she was going to do. So then we finished going through her stuff and throwing what she didn't need into the metal drum in the garden and burning it: the notebook she had used as a diary, and all the letters she had received. Your letters, too. This seemed a bit strange to me, so I asked

I felt myself reddening. "I'm just saying what I really think." "Sure, I know," said Reiko, smiling. When the rice was done soon after that, I oiled the pan and arranged the ingredients for sukiyaki.

"Tell me this isn't a dream," said Reiko, sniffing the air.

"No, this is 100 per cent realistic sukiyaki," I said. "Empirically speaking, of course."

Instead of talking, we attacked the sukiyaki with our chopsticks, drank lots of beer, and finished up with rice. Seagull turned up, attracted by the smell, so we shared our meat with her. When we had eaten our fill, we sat leaning against the porch pillars looking out the moon.

"Satisfied?" I asked.

"Totally," she grinned. "I've never eaten so much in my life."

"What do you want to do now?"

"Have a smoke and go to a public bath. My hair's a mess. I need to wash it."

"No problem. There's one down the street."

"Tell me, Watanabe, if you don't mind. Have you slept with that girl Midori?"

"You mean have we had sex? Not yet. We decided not to until things get sorted out."

"Well, now they're sorted out, wouldn't you say?"

I shook my head. "Now that Naoko's dead, you mean?"

"No, not that. You made your decision long before Naoko died - that you could never leave Midori. Whether Naoko is alive or dead, it has nothing to do with your decision. You chose Midori. Naoko chose to die. You're all grown up now, so you have to take responsibility for your choices. Otherwise, you ruin everything."

"But I can't forget her," I said. "I told Naoko I would go on waiting for her, but I couldn't do it. I turned my back on her in the end. I'm not saying anyone's to blame: it's a problem for me myself. I do think that things would have worked out the same way even if I hadn't turned my back on her. Naoko was choosing death all along. But that's beside

one you can find."

I brought out an economy-size box of kitchen matches and sat down next to her.

"Now what I want you to do is lay down a match every time I play a song, just set them in a row. I'm going to play every song I can think of."

First she played a soft, lovely rendition of Henry Mancini's "Dear Heart".

"You gave a recording of this to Naoko, didn't you?" she asked.

"I did. For Christmas the year before last. She really liked that song."

"I like it, too," said Reiko. "So sweet and beautiful ..." and she ran through a few bars of the melody one more time before taking another sip of wine. "I wonder how many songs I can play before I get completely drunk. This'll be a nice funeral, don't you think - not so sad?"

Reiko moved on to the Beatles, playing "Norwegian Wood", "Yesterday", "Michelle", and "Something". She sang and played "Here Comes the Sun", then played "The Fool on the Hill". I laid seven matches in a row.

"Seven songs," said Reiko, sipping more wine and smoking another cigarette. "Those guys sure knew something about the sadness of life, and gentleness."

By "those guys" Reiko of course meant John Lennon, Paul McCartney and George Harrison. After a short breather, Reiko crushed her cigarette out and picked up her guitar again. She played "Penny Lane", "Blackbird", "Julia", "When I'm 64", "Nowhere Man", "And I Love Her", and "Hey Jude".

"How many songs is that?"

"Fourteen," I said.

She sighed and asked me, "How about you? Can you play something - maybe one song?"

"No way. I'm terrible."