

Haruki Murakami

*The Wind-Up Bird Chronicles*

The Lost Chapters

*The Wind-Up Bird Chronicles* was translated into English by Jay Rubin in 1997. Alfred A. Knopf instructed Rubin that the translation must be significantly shorter than the Japanese original. A total of sixty-one pages were cut from the English translation. The most significant omitted passages are translated here.

The appropriate name; the things burned with salad oil; an incorrect metaphor

Book 2, Chapter 15

(after p. 313 in the Knopf edition)

In the morning, Creta Kano had lost her name.

Dawn had begun to break when she raised herself gently in the bed. I opened my eyes and saw the first light of the day penetrating the room through the drapes. Then I saw her by my side looking at me. She was wearing one of my old t-shirts instead of pajamas. Her pubic hairs gleamed weakly in the half-light.

“Mr Okada! I no longer have a name,” she said.

She had stopped being a prostitute, stopped being a visionary, and ceased equally to be Creta Kano.

“Ok, you are no longer Creta Kano.” (I rubbed my eyes with the ends of my fingers.)

“Congratulations! You are a new person. One more thing. What should I call you in the future, if you have no name? It is now difficult, isn’t it, to call you—when one is behind you, for example.”

She—the one who was Creta Kano until the night before—responded by shaking her head.

“I don’t know. I will have to find another name. Before, I had the name that was given to me at birth. When I became a prostitute, I no longer wanted to have that name. When I stopped selling my body, Malta Kano gave me the name ‘Creta Kano’ as a seer. Being neither one nor the other, I think that I need a completely new name for my new life. Don’t you have any idea, Mr. Okada? You don’t see a name suited to what I am now?”

I thought for a moment, in vain.

“You must, without question, discover it for yourself. You are someone else now, an independent person. And even if it takes you some time, I am certain that it is better for you to find your name for yourself.”

“But it is difficult to find for yourself a name that is good enough.”

“Certainly,” I admitted, “it is not easy. Since the name represents the whole of the person. Perhaps it would be better for me also. I should have a new name also, like you.”

Seated on the bed next to me, Malta Kano’s sister touched my left cheek with a fingertip. The mark of the infant’s hand was apparently still there.

“If you should no longer have your present name, Mr. Okada, what should I call you?”

“Wind-up bird. It is the only imaginable new name for me.”

“Mr. Wind-up bird,” she repeated, echoing me, after letting the syllables float in the air in order to admire them. “It is a magnificent name, but what is this bird?”

“The wind-up bird actually exists. I don’t know what it is like. I have never seen it. The only thing that I know about it is its cry: ki, kii, kiii! It perches on a branch and rewinds the world’s clock regularly. Without its intervention, the world could not function. The whole world ignores it. People believe that the world functions correctly thanks to a gigantic, complex, and splendid mechanism. Well, no. In fact, the wind-up bird presents itself in all sorts of places, and there where it is, it turns little by little the small cogs that make the world work. It is a very simple bird, in the form of a mechanical toy. But its mechanism is specific to the wind-up bird.”

“The wind-up bird,” she repeated again. “Mr. Wind-up bird rewinds the world’s clock.”

I raised my head to look around me. It was certainly my accustomed room, the one in which I had slept for the last five years. But it seemed strangely empty and vast.

“Unfortunately, “I said, “I don’t know where the bird is. Nor do I know what it is like.”

Creta Kano drew a small circle on my cheek with her fingertip.

Stretched out on my back, I stared for a long time at a small mark on the ceiling. Precisely above my pillow. It was the first time I had noticed its presence. Since when had it been there? Who knows. Perhaps it was there before I moved in with Kumiko. And during our loving frolics in bed, it remained glued to the ceiling, just above us, silent, holding its breath. Then one day I suddenly noticed its presence.

Against me, I felt the warm breath of ex-Creta Kano. I could smell her sweet body odor. She continued to trace small circles on my cheek. I would have loved to put out the light again, but was this the best time? Difficult to judge. The bonds between events and people become too difficult to disentangle. I gave up on it, then, and remained still, looking at the ceiling in silence. The sister of Malta Kano finished by leaning over me and placing a kiss on my right cheek. At the contact of her sweet lips on my cheek, a kind of torpor swept over me.

I closed my eyes to listen to the sounds of the world. The song of a dove held my attention. Rlou, rlou, rlou, it repeated tirelessly, filled with confirmation of its good intentions for the world. It blessed the spring morning and announced to men the beginning of a day. But if it were only that, I thought, it would not be sufficient. It is necessary that someone rewind the world.

“Wind-up bird,” said ex-Creta Kano, “you will find that bird one day. I am sure of it.”

With closed eyes, I asked:

“If what you say is true and I do find it, would I have the power to go back, will life return to normal around me?”

She gently shook her head, her expression masking an imperceptible sadness, similar to the shadow of a cloud which is outlined exactly above in the sky.

“I don’t know,” she answered.

“No one knows,” I said.

“There are things on earth that it is better not to know,” Lieutenant Mamiya had said.

Malta Kano’s sister said she wanted to go to the hairdresser. Since she had no money (she had arrived literally naked), I loaned her money. She wore a shirt, a skirt, sandals of Kumiko’s, and took herself to the hairdresser’s near the station.

After she left, I ran the vacuum cleaner on part of the floor that needed cleaning and refilled the washing machine with accumulated dirty linen. Then, I opened all the drawers of my desk and emptied their contents into a box. I intended to select those things that were essential, and to burn the rest, but in fact there was nothing indispensable. Their contents were, for the most part, useless, an old diary, letters that I had not touched for an eternity in spite of my intention to respond, an old notebook filled with notes on minor projects, an address book in which names of people who had passed through my life lined up, notes from journals and magazines—all yellowed—, a membership card for the local pool, instructions and a guarantee for the tape recorder, a half dozen used pens and pencils, a leaf of paper with a telephone number (I no longer remembered whose). I also decided to burn the set of letters saved in a box put away in a cupboard. Nearly half of them were from Kumiko. We had exchanged many before our marriage. The envelopes bore lines of characters in her minute and neat handwriting. It had not changed in seven years. Just as the color of the ink remained the same.

I took the box into the garden, sprinkled it generously with salad oil, before setting fire to it with the help of a match. The box burst into flame easily, but it took more time than I expected before all was reduced to ashes. It was a windless day. The white smoke rose directly into the summer sky. One could have said that a tremendous tree raised itself almost above the clouds, as in “Jack and the Beanstalk.” If I climbed to the top of the tree, I could perhaps reach my old circle of friends who were gathered peacefully up there. Seated on a stone in the garden, I looked in the direction taken by the smoke, rising in great streams. The hue of the morning sky foreshadowed a day that would be still warmer. My t-shirt clung to my skin. In old Russian novels, letters are generally burned in a fireplace on a winter evening. And not by salad oil in a garden on a summer day. But in our world of wicked realism, it happens that, covered with sweat, one burns letters on a day in the summer. On earth, one cannot make difficulties about the choice of season and the rest. It is sometimes impossible to delay business until winter.

When the letters had almost finished burning, I went to look for water, in a bucket, and poured it on the fire to extinguish it. Then I crushed the last of the cinders with the soles of my sandals.

Having sorted out my affairs, I went to Kumiko’s side of the room to examine the contents of her dresser. When she left the house, I had not dared to search in her possessions. It seemed to me that that could not be done. But since Kumiko had said herself that she would not return, she could hardly complain about my opening her drawers.

Obviously, she had done some serious tidying up before leaving, since they were nearly empty. Save for a pad of paper and new envelopes, a box of paper clips, a ruler, scissors, a half dozen ball point pens and pencils, impersonal things of that order. Perhaps she had put her affairs in order in advance, in order to be ready to leave whenever she liked. Nothing remained to remind me of her presence.

What had she done with my letters? She possessed about as many as I and must have saved some of them. But I did not find them. Then I went to the bathroom, and emptied a box of makeup products: lipstick, cream and cotton for removing makeup, perfume, lotions, and other silly items. I threw them all out. There was not so much, finally. Kumiko was not the type to waste her time putting on makeup. Finally, I threw out her toothbrush and toothpaste.

This cleaning operation exhausted me. I sat down in the kitchen and drank some water. As to Kumiko's remaining belongings, I would have to dispose of a few books and her clothes. The books I hoped to sell to a used bookstore. But the clothes? Kumiko had written telling me to do what I chose with them, since she had no intention of taking them. But she did not say in what manner to dispose of them. Should they be sold to a second-hand shop, stuffed into a plastic bag and thrown in the trash, given to someone who wanted them, or donated to the Salvation Army? None of these solutions seemed really appropriate. Okay, there is no urgency, I told myself. For the moment, I can keep them without deciding anything. Creta Kano (the former Creta Kano) might perhaps wear them, or Kumiko might change her mind and come back to get them. It seemed impossible, but who could say? What will happen tomorrow? No one knows. And the day after tomorrow, even less! And to begin with, no one even knows what will happen in the afternoon.

The former Creta Kano returned from the hair salon late in the morning. Her new cut was incredibly short, her longest hairs measured at most three or four centimeters. She had plastered them to her head with a kind of hair cream. And since she had removed all her makeup, I almost did not know her. In any case, she no longer looked like Jacqueline Kennedy.

I complimented her on her new haircut.

“It is much more natural like that; you seem younger. But most of all, I feel that you have become someone else.”

“That's because I am really a new woman now,” she said with a smile.

I invited her to have lunch with me, but she refused. “There are many things that I must do only in the future,” she said.

“Mr. Okada ... Mr. Windup Bird. I believe that in adopting this new hairstyle I have taken my first steps as a new person. I return home now, I talk peacefully with my sister, then I prepare to leave for Crete: I take my passport, I reserve a plane ticket, I pack my bags. I'm not used to these things at all, so I do not know how to do it. So far, I've never been away on a trip! Not even a trip to Tokyo.

“You still plan to go to Crete with me?” I asked.

"Of course," she said. "That will be the best thing for you, Mr. Okada, as for me. Therefore, think about my proposal, please. It is very important."

"I'll think about it."

After she left, I pulled on some clean pants and a polo shirt, hiding my spot under sunglasses. Then I walked to the station under the blazing sun, and took an empty train in the afternoon to Shinjuku. At the Kinokuniya bookstore, I bought two guides to Greece and made the acquisition of a medium-sized suitcase in the luggage department of an Isetan store. When I had done so, I decided to have lunch in a restaurant that had attracted my attention. The waitress was dreadfully unpleasant, in a very bad mood. I thought I knew how unpleasant a waitress could be, but this one was the sourest I have ever seen. Neither my person nor my order seemed to please her. As I read the menu and thought about what I was going to eat, she stared at my mark with the look of someone who was about to pull out a piece of paper containing gloomy predictions of the future. I continued to feel her eyes on my cheek. I ordered a small bottle of beer, but it was a large bottle that she brought me after a long wait. However, I did not complain. I thought I should instead be grateful to her for bringing me a cold beer with my mousse. If there were too much, I had only to drink half and leave the rest.

Until the arrival of my dish, I read the guides while drinking beer. Crete is the closest Grecian isle to Africa. There are no railroads, travelers usually move there by bus. The main city is called Heraklion, located near the remains of the famous temple of Knossos. The main product is olive oil; the wine also enjoys a good reputation. The island is swept by the wind in many places, where many windmills stand. For various political reasons, its independence from Turkey came later than in other parts of Greece, so that the atmosphere and customs of this island differ slightly from those of the rest of the country. Endowed with a strong fighting spirit, the population became famous during the Second World War because of its fierce resistance to the German army. It is in this island that Kazantzakis placed the story of his novel *Zorba the Greek*. The information that I was able to obtain about Crete from the guides was of this sort only. How did ordinary people live there? I had no way of knowing. Well, that was perhaps predictable; the guides are written for tourists, and in any case are not written for people who decide to settle and to remain as foreign visitors.

I tried to imagine myself in Greece with the former Creta Kano. What kind of life would we take up there? In what kind of house would we live, what food would we eat? What would we do after waking up in the morning, what would we talk about all day? And how many months, how many years would our life there last? No picture worthy of the name came to my mind.

But no matter, I thought, I can go to Crete without knowing anything about it. I can leave for that island and live with the former Creta Kano. I glanced at the two guides on the table, and the new suitcase at my feet. These objects made the possibility of leaving concrete. In order to make this notion palpable, I had traveled to the city especially to buy guides and a suitcase. The more I looked at them, the more seductive it seemed to me to travel. I had only to abandon everything and leave here on the spot, a suitcase in my hand. It was simple.

All I could do while staying in Japan was wait patiently for Kumiko's return, cloistered at my home. She would not come back. She had written that clearly in her letter: do not wait for me, do not look for me. She might say, I had the right to continue to wait for her. But, acting in this way I was likely to waste away quickly. And become even more lonely, even more lost, unlucky. The problem is that no one needed me here.

Perhaps I had to go on the adventure in Crete with the sister of Malta Cano. She had said: this will be the best thing for me as well as for her. I once again looked at the suitcase. I tried to imagine myself holding it as I stepped into Heraklion's airport with the sister of Malta Kano. I also imagined my life in a peaceful village where I was eating fish, swimming in the blue sea. But while these idyllic visions ran through my mind, even more beautiful than the pictures on postcards, a thick and heavy cloud spread over my heart. And in this quarter of Shinjuku, packed with people, where I was walking with my new suitcase in my hand, I had a suffocating crisis. I felt that my arms and legs would not function properly.

I was walking down the street after leaving the restaurant, when my suitcase hit the leg of a passerby who was coming at full speed in the opposite direction. It was a very well-built young man in a gray t-shirt, a baseball cap on his head, walkman earphones in his ears. "Please forgive me," I said. The man adjusted his cap without saying anything, stretched his arm to my chest and pushed me violently. The suddenness of this completely unexpected blow made me fall. I fell backwards, my head knocking against the wall of a building. After having noted that I was knocked to the ground, the man continued on his way. For a minute, I wished to throw myself into his pursuit, but I changed my mind. What good could it do? I raised myself with a sigh and brushed off my trousers. Then I took my suitcase. An old woman picked up my book and gave it to me. Petite, she was wearing a round hat without an edge and with a very strange shape.

In handing me the book, she shook her head slightly, without saying anything. At the sight of the hat and the compassionate air of that woman, I do not know why, I suddenly thought of the wind-up bird. The wind-up bird, somewhere back in the woods.

My head hurt for a moment, but I had no wound. Just a little bump on the back of my head. Instead of dawdling in this kind of place, I told myself, you would be better off going home fast. To return to your peaceful lane.

To calm down, I bought a newspaper and some lemon drops at the station's newsstand. Then I directed myself towards the ticket office, my paper under my arm, when a voice rang out behind me.

"Hey! you!" she cried. "You there, with a spot on your face!"

It was the newsstand shop assistant. It did not make sense, but I turned around.

"You are forgetting your change," she said while giving me back my change of a thousand yen.

I took it and thanked her for her kindness.

"I'm sorry for drawing attention to you," she added. "I did not see how to call you otherwise, it just slipped out."

I reassured her with a nod, succeeding more or less in striking a cheerful note.

She looked at me. "But you are out of it ... are you sure you're ok? You are not suffering?"

"It's just the heat," I replied, "I perspired a lot while I was walking. Thank you."

I got on the train and read the newspaper. I realized all of a sudden that it had been an eternity since I had bought one. We were not subscribers to any daily paper. On her way to the office, Kumiko bought the morning edition at the station, on the days she had the time, and brought it back to me in the evening. I thus read the previous day's edition on the following morning. To look at the job market. With Kumiko gone, no one bought me the paper.

I read it from the first to the last page but saw nothing capable of interesting me. Absolutely nothing essential. I folded the paper and looked in turn at the various excerpts from the weeklies reprinted by the cartload as advertising, when my eyes halted on the name of Noboru Wataya. It was written in large letters: The candidacy of Mr. Noboru Wataya is stirring up the political world. I paused for a long time with my eyes focused on his name. He was not, in the end, joking. He wants to become a politician for good. If only for that reason, I thought, it's worth leaving Japan.

Once at the station, I took the bus, my empty suitcase in my hand, and returned home. It was like living death, but I was still relieved to be back home. I rested a moment, then went to take a shower. There remained no trace of Kumiko in the bathroom. Toothbrush, bathing cap, makeup products, all had disappeared. Her stockings and panties were no longer hanging out to dry, her special shampoo was no longer there.

While wiping myself with a towel, I asked myself suddenly if I did not have to buy the weekly when it was a question of Noboru Wataya. What could have been written about him? The question worried me more and more. And then, after all, if Noboru Wataya wanted to become a politician, he would do it. Every man has the right to do so in this country, if he wants to. Anyway, with the departure of Kumiko, relations between her brother and me were in fact exhausted, and I laughed at a fate that reserved the future for him. Just as he laughed at my future. That was fine. It had been that way from the beginning.

But I could not get the headline from the weekly out of my head. I tidied cupboards and the kitchen for the rest of the afternoon, but my attention had been fully aroused. A persistent image of the name of Noboru Wataya in large print floated in front of my eyes. Like the distant sound of a telephone in a neighboring apartment, audible through the wall. A phone that kept ringing, without anyone coming to answer. I tried to force myself to believe that it did not exist. I tried to pretend I did not hear it. In vain. I resigned myself to put up with it and went to the local supermarket to buy the newspaper.

Sitting in the kitchen, I read the article while drinking iced tea. It was stated that Mr. Noboru Wataya, well-known economist and critic, was seriously considering the possibility of running for the next House of Representatives elections for the Niigata constituency of the prefecture. The newspaper also published his detailed curriculum vitae: degree courses, writings, activities of recent years in the media. His uncle, Mr. Yoshitaka Wataya, was a member of the Niigata

House of Representatives. He had expressed the desire to withdraw from the next election for health reasons, and since he was not seen to have any successor as influential as his nephew, it seemed increasingly clear that Noboru Wataya would be his replacement in that district election, if all took place as expected. And in this case, said the article, thanks to the powerful political organization of the current representative Wataya, to the youth vote, and to the celebrity of Mr. Noboru Wataya, this at last would certainly take place. A “power” in the region reported that: “There is ninety-five percent chance that Mr. Noboru will run. The precise terms of his candidacy depend on the negotiations under way, but since Mr. Wataya essentially seems disposed to run, things should follow their course.”

There was also an interview with the person involved. A text that was quite long enough. “I have not officially made the decision to run,” he said. “It is true that it is seriously being considered. But I also have my personal opinion, and I will not run simply because others tell me to run. There may be a gap between what I am looking for in the political world and what this world expects of me. That is why there will be more and more discussions, and adjustments must be made. But if we reach agreement and I make the decision to run for the House of Representatives, I intend to be elected at all costs and not to be a subordinate. I am only thirty-seven years old, and if I must choose the path of politics, a long career will open before me. I have a clear vision, and the capacities to present it to the public. I will act on the basis of a long-term perspective and a precise strategy. My goals extend out over the next fifteen years. During the end of this century, I intend to expose my vision as a politician determined to strengthen the identity of the Japanese nation before the twenty-first century. That is my main goal. I plan to bring Japan out of its peripheral situation and to move it towards the position of a political and cultural model. In other words, I intend to reconstruct the framework of the nation. I intend to drive out hypocrisy and take logic and ethics for our foundation. What is needed is not an incomprehensible discourse nor sterile rhetoric, but a clear vision that can be easily explained.

We are in a period where we need a clear vision and what we ask the politicians of today is to set about creating a national consensus. The politics without ideas that Japan is currently conducting will turn the country into a kind of big jellyfish tossed by the currents. I am not interested in ideals or dreams. I'm talking about "what needs to be done" at all costs. I have a practical political plan to achieve it, which will gradually become clear in the future as matters develop.

The article was rather kind to Noboru Wataya: Mr. Wataya is a competent and intelligent political and economic critic. His eloquence is well known. He is young, from a good background, his political future is full of hope. In this sense, the long-term strategies of which he speaks have a reality that cannot be described as a mere dream. His political candidacy is greeted with enthusiasm by many voters. In a conservative constituency, being divorced could be a problem, but his young age and competence are enough to compensate for this negative point. It can be expected that he will attract a fairly large number of female votes. The article, however, concluded in a somewhat severe manner: the fact that Mr. Wataya stands as an alternate candidate on his uncle's territory might suggest that he is taking advantage of the politics “without principles” of which he is a leading critic. His lofty political notions are plausible, but

how effective would they be in real politics? We can only judge this by observing his future course.

After reading the article, I threw the weekly in the trash. And I began to collect the things I needed for a stay in Crete. I did not know for certain whether Crete was cold in the winter. According to the map, the island adjoins Africa. But even on that continent, there are regions where the winter season is relatively cold. I put my jacket on the suitcase. Then two sweatshirts and two pants. Two long sleeved shirts and three short-sleeved shirts. A tweed jacket. T-shirts and underpants. Ankle socks and briefs. Hat, sunglasses. My bathing suit, towels. A travel kit for toiletries. Once everything was in order, my suitcase was still half empty. But apart from these things, I could not find anything to add. My suitcase closed, I really felt like I was leaving Japan. I was about to leave this house and this country. Continuing to suck lemon drops, I looked at my new suitcase. I suddenly realized that Kumiko had not even taken a suitcase away. She had left here on a beautiful summer's morning, with her little bag slung over her shoulder and her two pieces of clothing from the laundry. She had taken even fewer things than I.

And I thought of jellyfish. Such a policy without ideas and without principles will turn this country into a kind of big jellyfish tossed by the currents, said Noboru Wataya. Had he watched real jellyfish closely? No, probably. I had, reluctantly, in an aquarium. I had seen all possible and imaginable jellyfish. Kumiko remained for hours without talking in front of each fish tank, fascinated by their subtle and quiet movements. It was our first date, but she seemed to have completely forgotten my presence. She was fascinated by these creatures of all shapes and sizes. It was as though I had invited her to an encyclopedic work on jellyfish.

Noboru does not seem to know it, but some jellyfish are endowed with bone and even muscles. They breathe oxygen, even have sperm or eggs. With their umbrella and their tentacles, they move about with grace, and do not let themselves simply be whirled around by the currents. Not that I want to play the advocate, but they too in their own way are endowed with a vital force.

Listen, Noboru Wataya, I said inwardly. You are free to become a politician. It's your business, I do not have to interfere. But let me tell you one thing: it is a mistake to humiliate jellyfish by using them for an incorrect metaphor.

At nine o'clock the telephone suddenly sounded. My first response was not to pick up the receiver. Eyes on the device that rang on the table, I asked myself who it could be. And what they wanted from me this time.

I understood. It was the woman *of the telephone*. I don't know why, but I was sure of it. She had been looking for me since that strange and dark room. Where a heavy scent of flowers hovered. Where, still, her violent sexual desire fluttered. "I'll do anything you want. Things that even your wife would not do to you." I did not pick up the receiver, finally. The phone rang ten times, stopped, then resumed ringing. Ten more times. Then nothing. This silence was much heavier than before the ringing. My heart was beating loudly. I looked at the end of my fingers for a long time. I saw blood expelled by the heart circulating for a long while in my body before reaching the end of my nails. I buried my face in my hands and gave a long sigh.

Only the sound of the clock ticking resounded in the silence. I went to my room, sat on the ground and looked at the new bag inattentively. Creta? Why not, I thought. Sorry, but I'm going to Crete in the end. I'm tired of living here under the name Toru Okada. As ex-Toru Okada, I'm going to Crete with ex-Creta Kano. I say that aloud. But I did not know who my words were addressed to. Even I did not know. It was *someone*.

The clock continued to mark the time. Tic toc tic toc ... Its sound was consistent with the beats of my heart.

Book 2, chapter 17 (beginning)

The simplest thing; revenge in a sophisticated form; the thing in the guitar case

(p. 327 in the Knopf edition)

The next morning, I had a photo taken for my passport. When I sat on the chair in the shooting studio, the photographer looked at me with a professional eye and withdrew to the back of the room to bring back a kind of white powder which he applied to the spot on my right cheek. Then he drew back and carefully adjusted the angle and intensity of the light to make the mark invisible. Facing the lens, I kept a sort of vague smile on my lips, according to the photographer's instructions.

- You can come the day after tomorrow in the afternoon, he said, the work will be ready.

When I got home, I phoned my uncle and informed him of my intention to leave the house in a few weeks. I apologized for talking to him about it so suddenly, but admitted that Kumiko had suddenly left me. And that, from the letter she sent me, she probably wouldn't come back, and that, for my part, I wanted to get away from this place for a while - but I didn't know yet exactly how much. When I had finished briefly explaining the situation, my uncle remained silent, as though engaged in deep meditation at the other end of the line.

--All the same, you seemed to understand each other rather well until now, Kumiko and you, he said after a slight sigh.

Truth be told, that's what I thought as well.

You don't have to answer me if you don't want to, but is there a specific reason for her departure?

Kumiko has a lover, I think.

It's just an idea that you have supposed, isn't it?

Not at all. She herself wrote it in her letter.

I see, my uncle said. In that case, well, it must be true.

- Certainly.

He sighed again.

- But that's how it goes, I say in a bright voice as if to console him. I just want to get away from here for a little while. I would like to go to a different place to change my views, and also to think quietly about what I am going to do in the future.

- Do you have a place to go?

- Greece. I have friends who live there and invited me some time ago to come and see them, I say, and this lie caused me some discomfort.

But whatever one might think of it, it was impossible for me to explain now to my uncle, in an

understandable and precise manner, everything that had actually happened. A lie was still preferable.

Good, he said. You can leave your things, because I, anyway, do not intend to rent it to anyone else, this house. You're still young, you can start your life over, and it's not bad that you should go far from your worries for a while. Greece... that must be good for you, I assume!

--Thank you for all of that, I say. But if for some reason, you decide to rent the house during my absence, you can get rid of what's in it as you wish. There is not much, anyway.

- It's okay, it's okay, don't worry. I'll think, I'll take care of it. But, those expressions like "the current stagnation," etc, that you mentioned last time on the telephone. Did they relate to Kumiko?

--Yes. A little. That has also worried me, you know.

My uncle seemed to ponder my words.

--Can I come and look in soon? I would like to see how you are for myself. I haven't been there for a long time.

- You can come whenever you want, I have nothing to do,

After hanging up, I suddenly felt exhausted. The strange current of the last few months had carried me so far. Between the world where I was and that of my uncle stood a thick and high wall, invisible to the naked eye. My uncle was on one side, and I on the other.

My uncle came to the house two days later. He saw the stain on my face, but made no comment. No doubt he did not know what to say about it. He just narrowed his eyes in a slightly puzzled look. He brought me a good bottle of scotch, and an assortment of *kamaboko* bought in Odawara. We sit on the veranda to eat and drink.

- It is very pleasant, after all, a veranda, says my uncle. Obviously we don't have one in our apartment, and I miss this kind of place sometimes. Truly, when on a veranda, one gets a special feeling.

My uncle looked at the moon that was emerging above him. A thin white crescent moon just sharpened by someone, it seemed. I found it rather strange that such an object could still float in the sky.

- By the way, this mark, when did you get it, and where? asked my uncle casually.

"I don't really know," I said. (I drank some beer.) When I suddenly noticed it, it was already there. Maybe a week ago? I wish I could give you better explanations, unfortunately I can't say anything more.

--Have you seen a doctor?

--Not at the moment.

- There is one more thing that I do not quite understand: is there any connection whatsoever between the fact that Kumiko is gone and this mark?

- I do not know. In any case, it appeared after her departure. Chronologically, that is when it appeared. But that's all I can say, I don't know if there is a cause and effect relationship.

- I have never heard of a spot that suddenly appeared on a face.

- Neither have I. I cannot explain it well, but I seem to be gradually getting accustomed to its existence. Of course, when it first appeared, I was surprised and rather shocked. The mere sight of it disgusted me, and I wondered what I was going to do if such a horror was to remain on my cheek all my life. But as the days went by, I didn't care much about it. For what reason? I do not know. It even seemed to me that it might not be such a bad thing. And why did I think that? Again, no idea.

Mm. . . yeah, said my uncle. (He looked at my spot on my right cheek for a long time, with something suspicious in his gaze.) Well, since you talk about it like that, I don't insist. It's your problem after all. But if necessary, I could introduce you to a doctor.

- Thanks. But I have no intention of going to see a doctor yet. I think it would accomplish nothing.

My uncle crossed his arms and lifted his head. The stars were still invisible above us. Only the crescent moon stood out clearly in the sky.

- It's been a long time since I quietly chatted with you. In fact, it's because I thought you two got along well, Kumiko and you, without needing me to take care of you. I don't like to meddle in the affairs of others.

I told him that I understand what he means. He kept his glass in his hand for a moment, rattling the ice cubes, but put it down immediately after taking a sip.

- What is going on around you, in this place? I wonder: a stagnant current, the orientation of the house, stories of waves, Kumiko who is no longer there, this spot appears as if by magic on your face, you are going to Greece for a while? Okay, that's enough of that. It is your wife who left you, it is on your face that there is a mark. It's a bit rough to say this, but it's not about my wife or my face. That is correct, eh? So if you don't want to give me detailed explanations, forget it. It's none of my business. But, listen, this is what I believe: you should think again very seriously about what is most important to you.

- I think about it a lot, you know. But things are so complicated, and so entangled, that I can't unravel them to make them independent of each other. I don't know how to do it.

My uncle smiled.

-There is a trick to getting there. Since most people don't know it, they make bad decisions. After failing, they complain about this or that, or attribute their failure to others. I've seen this sort of thing happen until it made me sick, and, to be frank, I don't like it very much. So, I'm going to take the liberty of making an important point, the trick, you know, is to start with the less important things. That is to say, if you want to put everything in order from A to Z, you start with X, Y, Z, and not with A. You say that things are so complicated and tangled that you cannot grasp them. But you see, it's probably because you're trying to solve everything from the top. When you want to make an important decision, it's best to start with the really insignificant details. Idiotic details understandable by all, to which it is necessary to devote a lot of time.

--My business is not very important, of course. I have just four, five establishments in Ginza. In the

eyes of society, it is rather mediocre, there is nothing to boast about. But if I am focused on this question: will I succeed or not? I never know failure. And that is because I applied this kind of trick. Everyone else simply rushes past the point of focusing on simple and comprehensible details, and want to move forward as quickly as possible. I am different. I spend more time on stupid things. The more time you spend on them, the better it will go. (My uncle drank a little more whiskey.) For example, imagine that you want to set up an establishment somewhere, a restaurant, a bar, whatever you like. There are several possible locations. You have to choose one. So what are you going to do?

I think quickly:

- I would do rough calculations for each case. In such a place, the rent would be so much, the loans so much, the repayments so much per month. I study the number of seats in the room, the turnover of the clientele. I calculate the price of consumption per customer, personnel costs, the difference between profit and loss, etc.

- That's why most people fail, because they do that, said my uncle laughing. I'm going to explain to you what I do. If a place looks good, you spend three or four hours a day there per day, for several days, and you simply observe the faces of passersby. You do not need to calculate anything, you just have to look at the style and the facial expressions of the people who walk on the street. Well, it will take at least a week. During this time, you will have to look at three or four thousand faces. It can take longer too. But one day, you finally understand. As if a fog suddenly lifted: what is the kind of place, and what does it need? And if its needs are completely different from what you are looking for yourself, then it is over. You go elsewhere and you repeat the same thing. But if, between the needs of this place and yours, there is an overlap or a compromise, then you have hold of the basis of success. Then you just have to hold it firmly, and don't let go. But to grasp it, you have to sit there like a fool, including rainy or snowy days, and watch the faces pass by. You can do the calculations later, as much as you want. I am more realistic, you know. I can only believe in what I have seen with my two eyes. The reasoning, the boasting, the calculations, the ideologies, the theories, all that is for those who are unable to observe reality with their own eyes. And the vast majority of the inhabitants of this planet are incapable of it. I do not know why, but it is so. It does not matter if they have good intentions.

--It's not just the magic touch, then.

- There is that too, smiles my uncle. But that's not all. You have to start by thinking about the simplest things. Stand at the corner of a street and watch the passers-by, day after day. You don't have to make a hasty decision. It can be painful, but there are times when you have to know how to stay there patiently.

- That means I have to spend a little more time here.

- No, I am not telling you: go to such a place, or do not move, that is not my intention. If you want to go to Greece, I think you only have to go there. And if you want to stay here, I think you only have to stay here. It's up to you to put everything in order and make decisions. I just thought it was a good thing that you married Kumiko, and vice versa. And why it is suddenly spoiled in this way, I do not understand at all. And you either, you must not have understood it?

- Indeed.

- So, until this something becomes clearly understandable to you, you would do well to train yourself to look with your eyes. Don't be afraid to spend time. Spending a lot of time on something is in some ways the most sophisticated revenge.
- Revenge, I say a little surprised. Revenge against whom?
- Well, you will understand in the end, said my uncle with a smile.

In the end, we stayed a little over an hour sitting on the veranda drinking alcohol. Then my uncle got up and left, almost apologizing for staying so long with me. Once alone, I leaned against the pillar and looked with a distracted eye at the garden and the moon. For a long time, I could breathe deeply the air of realism left behind by my uncle. And I felt relieved, as I had not felt for a long time.

But, after a few hours, this air dissipated, and the environment was covered with a veil of sadness. Finally, I found myself in my world, while my uncle was in his.

He had told me to think of the simplest details. But what was simple? And difficult? Impossible to distinguish. The next morning, after rush hour, I took the train to Shinjuku. And decided to stand there, literally watching the faces of passersby. I didn't know if it would be useful, but it was surely better than doing nothing.

Book Two, chapter 18

Message from Crete; what fell from the end of the world; good news is announced in a half-voice

(after p. 338 in the Knopf edition)

I thought a great deal, up to the last moment, but finally I did not go to Crete. Exactly one week before her departure, ex-Creta Kano came to my apartment, a big bag of food in her arms, and made dinner for me. During the meal, we exchanged several words of no importance. Once the table was clear, I announced that I had in fact decided that I could not accompany her to Crete. My words scarcely seemed to surprise her. She even accepted the decision with enthusiasm. She ran her fingers over her forehead through her very short cut hair and said:

--I am very sorry that you will not come, Mr. Okada, but it can't be helped. Don't worry, I will go there alone. Do not be uneasy.

--You are ready to leave?

--I think that I have done almost everything necessary: passport, ticket reservations, travelers checks, and my suitcase. But I don't have anything large to take.

--What does your sister think about it?

--We are extremely close. It is very difficult being far from one another. But Malta Kano is strong and intelligent, and she understands perfectly that this is good for me. (With a calm smile on her lips she looked at me.) You prefer to stay here alone?"

--Yes, I responded. (I rose and put water up to boil for coffee.) I suddenly realized that I could leave here, but I cannot run away. One may want to run, but there are things from which one cannot escape. I think you are doing the right thing in leaving for Crete. You are going to bury your past and begin a new life. But that is not possible in my case.

--You are speaking about Kumiko?

--Perhaps.

--You intend to wait patiently for her to return?

Turning my attention to the sink, I waited for the water to boil. She waited.

--To tell you the truth, for the moment, I myself have no idea what I should do. I am beginning to understand little by little. Simply waiting for Kumiko to return will achieve

nothing. If I want her to return, I must bring a number of things to light through my own means.

--You don't know what you need to do? Not yet, you mean.

--Exactly. I see that something is taking shape around me. Everything is still very blurred, but there are certainly connections between a number of elements. But I cannot take hold of them or make them become clear. I am therefore obliged to wait until things become a bit more clear.

Malta Kano's younger sister moved her hands from side to side on the table, and she thought for a minute about my last words.

--This is not easy to understand.

--Certainly not, I said. And it will probably be harder than I can imagine at present. It is tiresome merely to wait, alone here, overwhelmed by problems to sort out, so that I am not even sure of seeing the end. To admit my feelings frankly, I would prefer it if it were possible to abandon it all and travel with you for Crete. I would love to forget it all and begin a new life. That is why I bought a suitcase, had a passport photo taken, and arranged my affairs. I truly planned to leave Japan. But I absolutely cannot free myself from the feeling that something is required of me *here*. When I say 'I cannot run away', I am referring to that.

Malta Kano's sister silently nodded her head.

--On its face, it is a stupid story; my wife took a lover, she left me. She asked for a divorce. As Noboru Wataya said, this kind of business is very common in society. I perhaps owe it to myself to go willingly with you to Crete, without useless reflection about things, and forget everything in order to begin a new life. But *in reality*, it is not as simple as it seems. I know it. Don't you as well? Equally, Malta Kano. Noboru Wataya, as well, undoubtedly. Something has been hidden from me. I would love to bring it to light, one way or another.

I gave up on the idea of making coffee, put out the light under the kettle, sat down at the table, and looked at Malta Kano's younger sister.

--And then, I would love to get Kumiko back. To bring her back to *this world*, through my own means. Otherwise, the being that I am will continue to lose itself. I am beginning, little by little, to understand it all. Although it is still confused.

Malta Kano's younger sister looked at her two hands on the table, then she raised her eyes towards me. She had kept her lips entirely without makeup. She finally opened her mouth.

--This is precisely why I wanted to take you to Crete.

--To stop me from doing this?

She gently nodded her head.

--And why would you want to stop me?

--Because it is dangerous, she said in a calm voice. You put yourself in a dangerous position. You could still change your mind. Let's go to Crete together. You will be safe there.

While I looked quietly at the entirely new face of Creta Kano, without eye shadow or other makeup, for a fraction of a second, I became incapable of saying where I was. A thick fog had enveloped my consciousness without announcing its arrival. I even lost the sense of myself. Who am I, I asked myself. What am I doing here? Who is this woman? Suddenly, reality returned; I was seated at my kitchen table. I wiped away the sweat on my forehead with dry hands. I felt a light vertigo.

--Is that the way it will be, Mr. Okada? asked ex-Creta Kano, with a worried air.

--That is it, yes.

--Mr. Okada, I don't know if you will get Kumiko back one day. But suppose that you do find her; will the two of you be happy as you were before? Nothing guarantees it. Kumiko may very well no longer resemble the person she was originally. Have you thought about that?

I placed my hands over my face, then removed them. There was no sound around us. Once again, I familiarized myself with the being who was me.

--I have thought about it. It may be that all that is already definitively lost. And I have considered carefully the possibility that I may not be able to restore things as they were. It may be that the probability of failure is greater. But, don't you see, many things have nothing to do with probability.

The younger sister of Malta Kano stretched out her arm and lightly touched my hand on the table.

--If you want to stay here with the knowledge that your cause is just, perhaps you must act in this way. It is for you to decide at present. If you do not want to come to Crete, that is too bad for me, but I understand your state of mind. I believe that many experiences await you, but do not forget me, I implore you. Is that agreed, Mr. Okada? Whatever happens to you, you will think of me. As I will think of you.

--That is a promise, I said.

The ex-Creta Kano with the new lips searched for words for a long time before continuing in a very calm voice:

--As you know, Mr Okada, we live in a violent and bloody world. If one does not become strong, one does not survive. But at some times, it is important to remain calm, ear on the watch, in order not to allow the least sound to escape. You understand? Good news is often announced in a half-voice. Remember that.

--Understood.

-I hope that you find your winding mechanism, wind-up bird, said ex-Creta Kano. Goodbye.

Towards the end of August, I received a postcard from Crete. A Greek seal was stamped on it. No doubt was possible: the ex-Creta Kano had sent it. Who else would have sent to me from there by post? But the name of the sender did not appear. Her name was undoubtedly not yet determined, I thought. A human being lacking a name cannot sign a card. There was only one line of text: my name and address written by a blue ball-point pen, in the same hue as the Cretan postal stamp. The photo presented a Cretan beach: a narrow band of white sand surrounded by a rocky mountain where a young woman showed her naked breasts, taking a solitary sun bath. The sea was dark blue; in the sky floated clouds so white that they seemed artificial. Clouds appearing so solid that one would almost be able to walk on them.

The ex-Creta Kano had arrived in Crete, apparently. I was delighted for her. There, she would certainly find a new name. And with that name, a new 'me', a new life. She had not forgotten me, however. The silent postcard from Crete told me that.

To kill time, I wrote her a letter. But I did not know her address, nor even her name. It was, then, a letter I had no intention of sending. I had only wanted to write to someone:

--It has been a long time since I have had news of Malta Kano. She also seems to have simply disappeared from the world. One could say that people to whom I belong fall over the side of the world, one by one. They all advance without stopping, and suddenly disappear. There must exist a sort of final boundary of the world. I continue to lead a banal everyday existence. In the absence of particularity, the difference between yesterday, today, and tomorrow is less and less apparent. I do not read the newspaper, do not watch television, and virtually do not go out. To be fair, I do sometimes swim in the pool. My unemployment compensation will terminate before long. At present, I eat cheaply, but I do not need much money to live (although living may be more expensive in Crete) and--thanks to a small inheritance left by my mother, I am certain that I could keep both ends together for some time still. My great work has still not advanced. But to be frank, the more that time passes, the less it bothers me. If I must live in the future with that, well, I must live. I do not know why, but I understand myself only vaguely. In every way, I pay calm attention to the sounds here.

I sometimes remember the night passed with Creta Kano, but the memory is strangely unclear. I held her tight in my arms, we made love several times. That was an undoubted fact. But after several weeks, the sensations that I felt in that reality were faded. I could no longer remember her body exactly. Nor could I remember the way in which I had made love to her. Rather, as the memory of that night receded, that of my earlier relations with her in my consciousness--in unreality--revealed itself infinitely more vividly. The image of Creta Kano, under me in, in that mysterious hotel room, dressed in Kumiko's robe, emerged before my eyes again and again. She wore a pair of matching bracelets on her left wrist that jangled. I remember the sensation of my hardened penis. It had become

harder and larger than ever. She had taken it in her hand, made it slide inside her, and begun a slow rotation of her hips turning very slowly as if to trace circles. I still remember clearly the feel of the bottom of Kumiko's robe which stroked my skin. But an unknown, enigmatic woman had suddenly substituted herself for Creta Kano. This mysterious woman, who had telephoned me repeatedly, now found herself astride me, in Kumiko's robe. It was no longer sex with Creta Kano, but with her. I felt a difference of temperature and of skin. As if I had entered a different scene. "Don't forget. You're asleep, you're dreaming, you are lying in warm mud." And I had ejaculated.

This clearly meant something. For this memory remained vivid, greatly surpassing reality, but I was still unable to understand its meaning. I kept my eyes closed, focused on these images which reappeared incessantly, and sighed.

At the beginning of September, the owner of the dry-cleaner at the station called me. He told me that the clothes were ready, and requested that I come get them.

--The clothes, I asked. I have not left any with you.

--All the same, they are certainly here. Please stop by and pick them up. It is already done, you just have to collect them. Am I definitely speaking to Mr Okada?

--Definitely, I responded.

I took myself to the store, half incredulous. The owner returned a shirt, all the while listening to the music on the radio. In the small world of the dry-cleaning shop, there was no place for change. No fashion, no development here. No front-guard, no rear-guard. No progression, no regression. No praise, no abuse. Nothing appeared, nothing disappeared. The music spread a feeling of nostalgia over this moment. *The Road to San Jose*.

On my entry into the shop, the owner looked at me as though he had lost his bearings, the iron in his hand. I did not understand why he looked at me that way. But I realized that is was because of the mark on my face. But what was there surprising, if a mark appeared suddenly on a familiar face?

--I've had a small accident, I explained.

--For sure, you don't have good luck, he said in a compassionate and sympathetic tone. After looking for a minute at the iron that he held in his hand, he placed it gently on the table. As if he were not certain if this really were his iron. "And how long will it last?"

--I don't know.

He gave me a shirt and a skirt of Kumiko's in a plastic bag. I recognized these as the ones that I had offered to Creta Kano.

--Was it a woman with very short hair who left these, I asked. "With hair of this length," I said, indicating 3 cm between my thumb and index finger.

--No, no, it was a bit longer than that, he responded, putting his hand at the level of his shoulder. She wore a maroon suit and a red vinyl hat. She settled the bill and told me to call you when it was ready.

I thanked him and returned to the house with the clothes. I had offered these to Creta Kano as the 'price' of her body, and she had returned them to me, only I did not know what to make of it. Why had Creta Kano taken the trouble to bring these clothes to be pressed? That seemed incomprehensible to me. In any case, I folded them up and put them away with Kumiko's other clothes in the closet.

I wrote to Lt. Mamiya with a general description of what had been happening to me. My personal secrets might, perhaps, embarrass him, but I could not think of anyone else to write to. I set out to him first an apology. Then I explained that Kumiko had left me the day of his visit to me, that she had been sleeping with another man, that I had spent close to three days thinking at the bottom of a well, that I had lived alone since then, and that the bequest from Mr. Honda had been nothing but an empty whisky box.

A week later, I had a response from him:

--To tell you the truth, you have been in my thoughts to an almost strange degree since we last met. I left your home feeling that we really ought to go on talking, to "spill our guts" to each other, so to speak, and the fact that we did not has been no small source of regret to me. Unfortunately, however, some urgent business had come up, which required me to return to Hiroshima that night. Thus, in a certain sense, I was very glad to have had the opportunity to receive a letter from you. I wonder if it were not Mr Honda's intention all along to bring the two of us together. Perhaps he believed that it would be good for me to meet you and for you to meet me. The division of keepsakes may well have been an excuse to have me visit you. This may explain the empty box. My visit to you itself would have been his keepsake.

--I was utterly amazed to hear that you had spent time down in a well, for I, too, continue to feel myself strongly attracted to wells. Considering my own close call, one would think that I would never have wanted to see another well, but quite the contrary, even to this day, whenever I see a well, I can't help looking in. And if it turns out to be a dry well, I feel the urge to climb down inside. I probably continue to hope that I will encounter something down there, that if I go down inside and simply wait, it will be possible for me to encounter a certain something. Not that I expect it to restore my life to me. No, I am far too old to hope for such things. What I hope to find is the meaning of the life that I have lost. By what was it taken away from me, and why? I want to know the answers to these questions with absolute certainty. And I would go so far as to say that if I could have those answers, I would not mind being even more profoundly lost than I am already. Indeed, I would gladly accept such a burden for whatever years of life may be left to me.

--I was truly sorry to hear that your wife had left you, but that is a matter on which I am unable to offer you any advice. I have lived far too long a time without the benefit of love or family and am thus unqualified to speak on such matters. I do believe, however, that if you feel the slightest willingness to wait a while for her to come back, then you probably

should continue to wait there as you are now. That is my opinion, for what it is worth. I realize full well how hard it must be to go on living alone in a place from which someone has left you, but there is nothing so cruel in this world as the desolation of having nothing to hope for.

--If possible, I would like to come to Tokyo sometime in the near future and see you again, but unfortunately I am having a little problem with one leg, and the treatment for it will take time. Please take care and be well.

May Kasahara did not reappear quickly. She came back to see me only at the end of August. She entered the garden, leaping in her usual way over the wall. Then she called me. We sat together on the veranda to talk.

--Do you know, Mr. Wind-up Bird, that, since yesterday, they are in the process of demolishing the empty house. The famous Miyawaki house.

--Someone has bought it, then,

--That, I don't know.

We went down the alley to reach the back of the empty house. The demolition work had begun. Six workers, protective helmets on their heads, removed the shutters, the windows, took away the sinks, the electrical appliances. We watched them for some time. They seemed used to this kind of work, and carried it out in a mechanical manner, speaking little. Above, in the sky, the wind swept away several completely white clouds, heralds of autumn. What was this season like in Crete? Did they have clouds like this there?

--Do you think that these characters will destroy the well, May Kasahara asked.

--Certainly, what good would it do to leave it, it serves no purpose.

--Perhaps there is someone inside, she said in a knowing tone.

At the sight of her tanned face, I remembered distinctly my feelings when she had licked the mark on my face, in the garden soaked with intense heat.

--Well, you didn't go to Crete after all?

--I decided to stay here and wait.

--But you said that Kumiko would not come back. Didn't you say that?

--That is another problem, I replied.

May Kasahara looked at me through narrowed eyes. As she did this, her eyes fell.

--Why did you sleep with Creta Kano, Wind-up Bird?

--Because I had to.

--That also. Is that another problem?

--Yes,

--Goodbye, Wind-up Bird. Until next time.

--Goodbye.

--You know, Wind-up Bird, she said after a slight hesitation, I think I am going back to school.

--You want to go back, then?

She shrugged her shoulders.

--But in another school, of course. I absolutely refuse to go back to the old one. This one will be further from here. So I won't be able to see you for some time, Wind-up Bird.

I nodded and took a lemon drop from my pocket. May Kasahara looked around her, then slid a cigarette between her lips and lit it.

--Is it fun to sleep with a lot of different women, Wind-up Bird?

--That is beside the point.

--I've heard that before.

--Hm, I mumbled. I did not know what else to say.

--Oh, it's all right. But you know, it is because of meeting you, Wind-up Bird, that I want to return to school. That is true, you know.

--But why?

--Yes, why. May Kasahara looked at me, again wrinkling the corners of her eyes.

--I no doubt want a return to a more normal world. Listen, it's been a lot of fun being with you. That is no joke. You are very normal, but you do things that are not normal. How can I say it? You are unpredictable. One is never bored with you. Not being bored means not having to think about useless things, doesn't it? So, for that reason, it has truly been good that you have been around, I think. But, frankly, it has been hard from time to time.

--In what sense?

--Well, when I look at you, I sometimes have the feeling that you are using all of your strength against something *for me*. It is so strange, but when I think of that, I sweat heavily as though I were alongside of you. Do you understand? You are always so with it, so calm, as though whatever happens has nothing to do with you. But that is not really true. You use your strength in your way, even if that is not visible to the eyes of others. Otherwise, you would not have gone down into the well. Does that make sense? But of course it is not for me, but to get back Kumiko, that you wrestle with I don't know what in this ridiculous way and fall over yourself. So, I have no reason to sweat for you, I know that; but in spite of everything, I sometimes think that you use your strength for me, Wind-up Bird. You are fighting for Kumiko, but at the same time you are fighting equally

for loads of other persons. That is why you truly seem stupid sometimes. But listen, when I see you that way, I get tense. Truly tense. Because you seem to have no hope of succeeding. If I had to put money on one of the two possibilities, sadly I would bet that you are going to lose, Wind-up Bird. I like you a lot, but I don't want to go broke.

--I understand very well.

--I don't want to see you destroy yourself, and I don't want to sweat so much. I would therefore like to return to a world that is more normal. But, do you see, Wind-up Bird, if I had not seen you in front of the empty house, I would not—without doubt—be this way. I would never have thought about returning to school. I would still remain in places that are not so normal. In this sense, then, it is thanks to you, Wind-up Bird. You see, you are not completely useless.

I nodded my head. It was the first time in a long while that someone had complimented me.

--Don't you want to shake hands, she asked.

I took her little tanned hand. And took note of her extreme smallness...One would have said a street urchin.

--Goodbye, Wind-up Bird, she repeated. Why didn't you go to Crete? Why didn't you leave this place?

--Because I could never choose where to set my stake.

May Kasahara took back her hand and looked at me a long while as though she were looking at something very rare.

--Goodbye, Wind-up Bird, see you again one day.

After a dozen days, the empty house had been completely demolished. It was no more than plain flat ground. No trace of the house—which seemed never to have existed—remained, and the well had also completely disappeared. Flowers and trees had been uprooted, the stone bird taken and—no doubt—thrown someplace. For it, that was perhaps preferable. The simple hedge separating the garden from the alley had been replaced by a tall and solid fence that hid the house from view.

One afternoon in October, I was swimming alone in the municipal pool when I had a sort of hallucination. They always played background music, but at this time it was Frank Sinatra. One of those old songs like "Dream" or "Little Girl Blue." While listening absent-mindedly, I did several slow laps in the 28-meter pool. It was then that I had the hallucination. Or something that resembled a revelation.

I was at the bottom of an immense well. And I was swimming—not in the municipal pool, but at the bottom of the well. The water around me was heavy and warm. I was alone, and the rippling water created an odd and unusual echo. I stopped swimming, floated

quietly in the water while looking all around me, then I turned on my back to look above. The water was so buoyant that I could float without any effort. A thick darkness wrapped all around; all I could see was a cleanly cut circle of light overhead. But, strangely, I was not afraid. It seemed completely natural that there was a well here and I floated at its bottom. It seemed surprising that I had not been aware of all of this until now: it was one of the innumerable wells of the world; and I was one of the many “myselfs” of the world.

In the circle of light in the sky, many stars sparkled distinctly, as if the universe itself had broken into splinters and was transformed into tiny particles. The stars piercing with their light existed in a dark ceiling made up of many strata. I could hear the sound of the wind which blew above the well. And in the wind, someone called me. That, I had heard it before a long while ago. I longed to raise my voice to respond to it, but nothing came out of my lips.

The well had to be breathtakingly deep. I had my eyes fixed on its mouth, when—after a moment—up and down reversed themselves in my head; and I felt as though I were seeing the opposite end from the height of a chimney. But I felt serene and calm, in a way that I had not in a long time. I extended my limbs slowly in the water, and breathed deeply several times. My body warmed from within, and became light as if someone were supporting me discreetly from below. I am surrounded, supported, protected, I told myself.

Then, after I don't know how many hours, daybreak came finally and noiselessly. Violet and blurred rays of light appeared at the edge of the circle and slowly extended their territory, causing a nuanced change in tints while the stars progressively lost their sparkle. Only the brightest remained visible at the mouth of the well, but they also finally lost their brilliance and disappeared. Stretched out on the buoyant water, I motionlessly watched the sun. It was not blinding. As though equipped with sunglasses, my eyes were protected from the fierce sunlight by an unknown force.

A bit later, at the moment the sun hung directly over the well, this gigantic sphere underwent a change—soft, but very clear. After that, there was a strange moment, as though the axis of time itself had trembled at its foundations. I held my breath and stared wide-eyed to see what was happening. I saw, to the right of the sun, a small black mark. Little by little, it obscured the sun, as though suddenly a new sun had absorbed the darkness of the moon. It was a solar eclipse, I thought. An eclipse was presenting itself before me.

Not a solar eclipse in the precise sense of the term. For the black mark clearly suspended its action at the exact moment when it had covered half of the sun. And then the mark did not have the clear outline that one sees in ordinary eclipses. Finally, I did not know how to describe this phenomenon. Like the moment that one finishes a Rorschach test, I tried—my eyes screwed up—to find a meaning for the form of the mark. In fixedly watching this thing, I was less and less certain that it existed. I breathed deeply several times to slow down my heart beat, moved my fingers in the dense water, and again confirmed my existence among the shadows. Certainly, I exist. I am at the bottom of a

well and—at the same time—in the municipal pool, witness to a solar eclipse that is not a solar eclipse.

I closed my eyes. With my lids closed, I detected a suffocated sound in the distance. At first, it was very feeble, hardly perceptible. Similar to the sound of a conversation muffled and heard through a wall. But then it took on clear contours, little by little, as when one adjusts the channels of a radio. *Good news is announced in a half-voice*, ex-Creta Kano had said. I concentrated to the maximum, ear extended to hear the words distinctly. But it was not human voices. Only the shrill braying of horses, who seemed excited by something in the gloom. They blew with their nostrils, striking the ground noisily with their hooves. Through their screams and all of their various movements, they seemed to want urgently to convey some message to me. But I did not understand it. Why would there be horses in such a place? And what were they trying to tell me?

I had no idea. Keeping my eyes closed, I tried to imagine the way the horses looked. All those that I was able to visualize were stretched out next to a barn, their lips frothing, suffering atrociously. Something was making them suffer this way.

Horses die during solar eclipses! This piece of information shot into my head. Solar eclipses kill horses. I had read it in a newspaper, and spoken about it to Kumiko the night she had come home late and I had thrown out dinner. Horses are terribly disturbed when the sun disappears, they are afraid. Certain that they are about to die.

When I opened my eyes, the sun had disappeared, and there was neither anything or anyone there. There was only an empty space opening far above my head, confined within the form of a circle. For the moment, silence enveloped the bottom of the well. A silence so strong and deep that it absorbed everything that I found around me. A bit later, I began to gasp, and I breathed in deeply. I sensed an odor around my chest, the odor of flowers. The scent that is given off by a mass of flowers in the shadows. A fleeting perfume, like a fugitive sensation from a dream, struck me powerfully. But a moment later, in my lungs, the perfume had a violent effect, the consequence of a powerful catalytic action, and it took effect with impressive speed. Tiny needles of pollen passed through my mouth and nostrils and stung my insides.

It was the same odor, I thought, that wafted through the darkness of room 208. The perfume of the flowers in the large vase set on the table, mingled with the smell of whiskey poured into the glass. And that strange woman—"You have a blind spot." I looked around myself by reflex. I saw nothing in that thick darkness. But I felt...the presence of something that had been here up to this moment, but that was no longer here. For a brief instant, she had shared the darkness with me, then had left and let the perfume give me a hint of her presence.

I held my breath and continued to float silently on the water that continued to support my weight. As if it implicitly encouraged my existence. I crossed my hands quietly on my chest. Then I closed my eyes again and concentrated. Deafening heartbeats reverberated near my ears. They seemed to be someone else's heartbeats. But they were in fact mine. I seemed to see myself from the outside. You have a blind spot, she had said.

Yes, I have a blind spot.

That was surely a woman I knew well.

And suddenly I understood, as if something had suddenly knocked me down. All of this occurred in a fraction of a second. Things were so clear, so simple in this light. I breathed in slowly, then exhaled. My breath had the heat of a stone in the sun. I understood: that woman was Kumiko. How had I not understood that before? I shook my head violently in the water. On reflection, it was even obvious. From that strange room, Kumiko desperately sent me a message: "Please find my name."

Kumiko was imprisoned in this darkness and called for help. Only I could save her. In the whole world, I was the only one who had that right. Because I loved Kumiko and she loved me. If only I had discovered her name *at the moment that she called*, I would without doubt have been able to save her from this darkness. But I had not recognized her. In the outside world, I had even ignored the ringing of the telephone that she used to call me. Perhaps I would not have a second chance to save her.

A bit later, the excitement that made my body tremble left my body quietly, and was replaced by fear. The water quickly lost its warmth, and strange viscous *things*, like a layer of jellyfish wrapped themselves around me, little by little. My heart beat loudly in my ears. I could remember with clarity everything that had happened in that room. The hard, precise knock at the door remained seared into my memory. The white flash that went through the darkness still made my flesh creep. All of that probably constituted the hidden face of Kumiko. And that dark room, the zone of shadows that Kumiko carried within her. I swallowed and heard a hollow sound as if someone knocked in the emptiness. I had as much fear of this emptiness as of that which filled it.

But this fear fled—I do not know where—as rapidly as it had come. I expelled the cold air slowly from my lungs and breathed slowly a new air. The water around me progressively regained its warmth, and I felt rising from deep in my heart a feeling that resembled joy. I will undoubtedly never see you again, Kumiko had said. I did not know why she had suddenly and resolutely left me, but she had not abandoned me. On the contrary, she had a desperate need for me. On her own, she could not express this need, for a reason I did not know. This was why she was trying desperately to transmit to me something that had the appearance of an important secret, expressing it in various forms.

This idea warmed my heart. Many frozen things in me loosened and melted, I felt it. Many memories, thoughts, and sensations welled up in me, sweeping over me, and a kind of mass of feelings was enflamed by this current. All blended quietly with the water, forming in the darkness a delicate film that enveloped my body. This thing chose to be there, I thought. It placed itself there and waited until I held out my hand to it. I did not know how much time that had taken. Nor how much energy it had required. But I must continue. And find a way to hold out my hands in the external world. This was what I had to do. *When it is necessary to wait, one must wait*, that was what Mr. Honda had said.

I heard a muted sound in the water. Someone came near me and slid along like a fish. Then it took my body in strong arms. It was the manager of the pool. He had come to exchange several words with me.

--Is everything all right, he asked.

--Yes, everything is fine, I replied.

I was no longer at the bottom of a deep well, but in the municipal pool, 25 meters in length. The smell of chlorine, and the sound of splashes in the water which were reflected by the ceiling forced me to return to myself. Several people at the side of the pool looked in my direction as though to ask what had happened. I explained to the manager that I had suffered a cramp in my foot. And it was for that reason that I remained floating quietly. The man helped me to leave the pool, and advised me to rest a moment by the side of the pool.

I seated myself, leaning on the side of the pool, and closed my eyes calmly. In me, the happiness caused by this hallucination had condensed into a sort of sunny area where I dreamed: this thing chose to be there. Everything had not collapsed because of me. Everything had not been thrown back into darkness. There, something of warmth, beautiful and precious, is preserved. *This thing chose to be there.* I know it.

Perhaps I will lose. Or lose myself. Or finally, I may get nowhere. Perhaps, despite my desperate efforts, everything is so damaged that I cannot fix it. Perhaps I am scooping in vain the ashes of a ruined house, and I am the only one who does not know it. Perhaps no one will bet on my side. "I don't mind," I say in a low but determined voice, to someone who is there. "I can at least say this. There are things I must wait for, and things I must seek."

I slowed my breathing and listened. Trying to hear the small voice that I believed chose to be there. And my ear perceived the almost imperceptible sound, behind the laughter, the music, the splashing. Someone was calling for help. With a voice that was not a voice. With words that were not words.

Book III, chapter 24 (conclusion)

(after p. 498 in the Knopf edition)

I called Ushikawa at his desk. He picked up quickly.

--Mr. Okada! What a fortunate coincidence. Imagine—I am just returning from a business trip. I have just arrived from the Haneda airport. I took a taxi, but you know how it is, with traffic jams...I barely had time to catch my breath, I have to grab my files and set off again; my taxi is waiting for me downstairs. Your phone call brought me up short.

When I heard the phone ring, I said to myself: "Oh, oh, who can be the little devil who is calling me?" And, in this connection, to what do I owe the honor of a call from you?

- Could I use the computer again to have a direct conversation with Noboru Wataya, this evening for example?

- With the professor? Ushikawa said falling into a tone that was suddenly suspicious.

- Yes. We will be more comfortable than on the telephone. I do not think he will refuse.

--You seem very sure of yourself.

--I am sure of nothing.

At the other end of the line, Uchikawa remained silent for a moment, he needed to think. It was a good sign; he had not easy to silence him.

--Mr. Uchikawa? Are you still there?

--Yes, yes, certainly, I am here, I am here, like a stone dog guarding the door of a sanctuary. Whether it rains or whether the wind blows, I am there, I guard the box of offerings in the temple.

He returned to his usual tone:

- Well, I will try to convince the professor. But, tonight, do not count on it. On the other hand, tomorrow, I can surely arrange it for you. Yes, this old bald Ushikawa promises it to you: tomorrow night at 10:00, I'll have the professor sit on a cushion in front of his computer, will that work for you?

"It suits me perfectly," I said after a small pause.

- So this old Ushikawa ape takes the necessary measures. You know, Mister Okada, I don't say this to complain, but what you ask me, it's as difficult as stopping a high speed train in a country station. The professor has a busy schedule, with an appointment every ten minutes, a TV show, an article to write, an interview, a meeting, an assembly, a lunch or a dinner. . . Everyday it's a real upheaval. He is busier than a harassed foreign minister. So when I tell him that he has to sit at his computer and wait for a call tomorrow at ten o'clock, I doubt that he will respond: Ah, Ushikawa, what a pleasure. I will wait for the call while drinking a cup of tea."

'I do not think he will reject the idea,' I repeat.

'So much the better, so much the better, that warms my heart, you encourage me,' said Uchikawa in a cheerful voice. "Well, it is decided, we meet tomorrow at 22:00 hours. Don't forget the password, eh. Now excuse me, I have to go, my taxi is waiting for me. I didn't even have time to blow my nose! Excuse me!"

After hanging up, I put my fingers on the computer keyboard again, trying to imagine what was there, behind the darkness of this blank screen. I would have liked to communicate with Kumiko once again, but before that, I absolutely had to speak to her brother "face to face". As had been predicted once by the visionary Malta Kano, who had evaporated I don't know where, Noboru Wataya and I could not spend our lives ignoring each other. I asked myself suddenly if she had made me even one prediction that was not truly sinister. But I could no longer remember everything that she had said to me. My memories of her were so distant that a whole generation separated us.

Book 3, chapter 26

The One Who Harms; the Ripe Fruit

(after p. 504 in the Knopf edition)

At 9:50 PM, I settled in front of Cinnamon's computer and turned it on. I opened the access points one after the other, thanks to the passwords, and turned on the communication program. I entered the number of my correspondent on the screen and requested a collect call. I received the consent after a few minutes. I was finally ready to face Noboru Wataya through an interposed screen. Our last conversation dated back to the previous summer, when we met in a hotel in Shinagawa in the presence of Malta Kano and spoke about Kumiko. We each left that meeting full of deep aversion for the other and have not spoken to each other since. At that time, he was not yet a politician, and I did not yet have the mark on my face. It seemed to me as though it had all happened in another life.

I took a deep breath, calmly put my hands on the keyboard, as if I were preparing for my first serve during a tennis match. I started typing:

I was told that you wanted me to give up this property, and that if I let you buy it, you would convince Kumiko to return home. Is this true?

Then I tapped the back arrow to indicate the end of my message.

The answer does not take long. The characters appear rapidly on the screen.

Let's start by correcting a misunderstanding: Kumiko's decision to return to you or not does not depend on me. My sister will judge for herself what to do. As you could verify for yourself when you communicated with her the other day, she did not return here against her will. As a family member, I simply offered her a place to rest and temporary protection, that's all. The only thing that I can convince her to do is to agree to speak with you again. It was I who set up your last conversation by computer with her. In concrete terms, that's all I can do.

My turn to type:

My conditions are very simple. If Kumiko returns, I will withdraw from my current activities at the residence. If she doesn't come back, I continue. This is my first condition.

Noboru Wataya's answer is also very simple:

I may seem to be repeating myself, but this is not a transaction. You are not in a position to set conditions. We are talking about simple "contingencies". I can't guarantee that Kumiko will come home if you let go of the residence. Kumiko is adult and independent, I can't force her to do anything. On the other hand, it is certain that if you continue your little comings and goings, she will disappear from your life forever. I guarantee that.

I type in my turn in response:

Useless to assure me what would happen. I know perfectly well what you think. You want me to leave the residence, but even if I do that, you have no intention of persuading Kumiko. From the beginning, you have never wanted to give her up.

The answer is quick to come.

You are free to think what you want; I can't stop you.

Exactly. I'm free to think what I want. I start typing:

Let it be clear: you are not in a position to dictate conditions to me. Right now, you must be asking yourself precisely what I am doing in this residence. And as you have no idea, this irritates you to the greatest degree. Am I right?

This time, the answer is slow, as if Noboru Wataya wanted me to get impatient. I am certain that it's intentional.

I think you misunderstand your position. To be more precise, you give yourself an exaggerated importance. I do not know what you are doing in this residence, and I have no desire to know. But I have a social status to maintain, and, if possible I would like not to be involved in shady affairs. If you refuse my proposal, I don't particularly mind. Simply, I will cut off all relationship with you, so this will be your last opportunity to communicate with me, and you will no longer hear about Kumiko either. If we can't go any further in this conversation, we might as well stop right away. I have a meeting later.

*Wait a minute, I'm not done with you, Noboru Wataya.*

The conversation is not over. I have already said this to Kumiko the other day, but I am getting close to the heart of things. During the year and a half since she left, I have never stopped asking myself why she did this. During that time, you have become a prominent politician, while I have built supposition upon supposition during a calm and secluded retirement. I studied various possibilities, working through various assumptions. I think reasonably slowly, as you know. But I had all the time I needed, I could consider many possibilities. And I have reached a conclusion: underlying Kumiko's departure, there is a secret that escapes me. As long as I have not discovered the original cause of the crisis in our life, Kumiko will not return. And I think it is you who hold the key to this secret. I already told you last summer: I know what your mask hides, and only I can shatter it. Frankly, what I have said to you now has been impulsive and without definite foundation. I have aimed only to shake your self-confidence. But I am not wrong. Little by little, I am approaching the truth, and you must feel it. That is why I am certain that you are worried, you ask yourself what I am doing here, and you are ready to buy this property, even if it costs you dearly. Am I wrong?

I fold my arms and wait to see his answer unfold on the screen.

I do not understand what you are trying to imply. We don't speak the same language, you and I. I have already told you: Kumiko had had enough of you, she found someone else and left you. She wants to divorce. It is sad, but banal. But you, you are constructing bizarre theories to place your slant on matters. It is a waste of time for you as for me. Anyway, there is no longer any question of my buying your property.

You can forget my offer, unfortunately for you. I imagine that your information is up to date: a second article is coming out today. This spot is beginning to attract a little too much attention to interest me. And according to the news reports, your activities do not need to be interrupted. It seems that you receive disciples or customers, call them what you will, that you give them something and that they pay you in exchange. But they doubtless will not come back to see you now, it has become too dangerous. And if people no longer come, you will no longer have a cash flow. Moreover, you must pay your debt service each month. Sooner or later, you will have to give up this place. Me, I will wait until the ripe fruit falls from the tree. All I need to do is wait, don't you agree?

It is my turn to let a little time pass before answering. I drink a glass of water, reread the message from Noboru Wataya; then my fingers begin to move on the keyboard.

Actually, I do not know if I will manage to keep this house. You are perfectly right. But I still have quite a long time before I start to exhaust my capital. And by then, a lot can happen. Things about which you have no idea. And there, I weigh my words. To give you an example: haven't you had nightmares recently?

Noboru Wataya's silence crosses the screen like a magnetic current. I stare at the computer, trying to capture, however little this can be, the emotions that vibrate on the other side of this screen, but it is impossible. Soon, a message appears:

Your threats don't take me in. Write down this kind of nonsense rather in your notebook to repeat to your disciples. They will have cold sweats and pay you large sums of money, I am sure. Finally,

if they come back one day. Well and good, useless to waste more time. I am going to cut the connection. I am very busy, as I have already told you.

I hastened to respond this way:

Listen first to what I have to say to you. My proposal is not uninteresting, you have nothing to lose by listening to it, there is always plenty of time to refuse. Listen: I can free you from your nightmares. It is to achieve that that you have undertaken these transactions with me. Me, all I want in exchange is that Kumiko returns. It is a rather honest compromise, isn't it?

I understand your desire to ignore me, I understand that you do not want to have any business transactions with me. "You are free to think what you want; I cannot prevent it." From your point of view, my existence is close to worthless, I know it, but, unfortunately for you my existence is not so easily reduced to nothing. You are more powerful than I am, I recognize the fact. But it is necessary for you to sleep at night, that you dream. And you cannot choose your dreams. Tell me, I have a question for you: how many times per night do you need to change sweat-soaked pajamas? Can your house-keeper keep up with your laundry?

I stopped typing for a moment, inhaled and then breathed out slowly. I looked for words to follow. In the darkness behind the screen, I feel something silently swarming at the bottom of a canvas bag. Through the computer, I get closer to this presence.

Now I'm starting to get a feel for what you did to Kumiko's older sister before she died. I know that I am right. Until now, you have harmed a lot of people, and you will no doubt continue to do so. But your nightmares will not leave you. Then, send Kumiko to me, that will be better for you, and I, that is all that I ask. No need to pretend with me. That accomplishes nothing, because I am very close to breaking through to the secret that hides behind your mask. And that must make you afraid, down to your foundation. Do not try to deceive me, then, that will not work with me.

I tapped the back arrow to send my message and, almost simultaneously, Noboru Wataya cut off the connection.

(after p. 533 in the Knopf edition)

On the fifth day, towards noon, I went to the café of the Pacific Hotel, the place where—the previous summer—I had met Malta Kano and Noboru Wataya. I felt no nostalgia for this past, and I did not particularly like this café any longer. It is almost thoughtlessly, without purpose and without reason, that I take the Yamamoto line to Shinjuku and come down to Shinagawa. I crossed the footbridge for pedestrians, entered the hotel, and placed myself at a table near the window, ordered a beer and a light lunch. Then I remained there, to watch with vague surprise the continuous procession—unceasing and absurd—of pedestrians on the footbridge.

In looking at the clothes worn, I saw—at the back of a packed café—a red vinyl hat: Malta Kano wore precisely the same hat last year. Almost in spite of myself, I directed myself towards that table, but in approaching it, I settled for myself that it was not Malta Kano at all, but a stranger, larger and younger than Malta. And her hat was in leather and not in vinyl. I paid my bill and left.

My hands driven into the pockets of my navy blue car coat, I walked for some time without direction. I wore a hat the same color as my coat and dark glasses so that others might not too easily notice my mark. Animation typical of December governed the streets, the commercial center in front of the station abounded in customers, it was a peaceful afternoon in winter. The light of the sun was alive, I had the impression that the noises of the city were shorter and shriller than usual.

I was waiting for the train on the Shinagawa station platform before I spotted Ushikawa on the opposite platform. Dressed in his normal way, a loud tie around his neck, he was absorbed in a magazine, and his bald and misshapen cranium tossed restlessly under the influence of an emotion stimulated by his reading. If I had picked him out so easily in the crowd, it was because he was on the basis of all the evidence *different from others*. Until now, I had only seen him in my kitchen, at night, and when we were alone; [832] he had given me the impression of unreality. But even in full day, on a train platform, in the middle of a banal crowd, he created a similar effect, and separated himself strangely from all that surrounded him. An air of strangeness decidedly incompatible with the atmosphere of reality floated around him.

I cut through the crowd, jostling many who turned towards me in protest, descended the escalator, rushing down the steps four at a time, and mounted back up to the other platform, where I set about feverishly to find his silhouette. I no longer knew on what part of the platform I had seen him. The station is very large, the crowd very dense. At this juncture, a train arrived, the doors opened, an anonymous crowd was coughed up onto the platform while other silhouettes all equally anonymous surged to its place. The bell for departure had sounded before I found Ushikawa again. I decided to get on the train headed to Yurakucho and to go up and down all of the cars until I fell over him. I found him in the second car, near the door, absorbed by the reading in his magazine. I waited a moment standing in front of him with nothing to say, regaining my breath, without which it seemed he would not notice my presence.

Mr. Ushikawa, I called.

He raised his head from his magazine, looked at me over the top of his thick glasses frames, as though dazzled. He seemed exhausted, seen in this manner up close in the cruel light of day. Fatigue oozed from his head like an unhealthy sweat that it was impossible to hold back. His eyes resembled ponds of stagnant water, the few hairs that he still had on his head resembled crazy grass between the tiles of a ruined house. The teeth that appeared between his thick and curled

up lips were even more yellow and misaligned than in my memory. His jacket was also wrinkled as if he had spent the day curled up in a hangar and had just gotten up. To further reinforce this impression, he had dust residue on his shoulders. I took off my hat, put my dark glasses in my pocket.

-Ah, Mr. Okada, Ushikawa exclaimed.

Then he straightened up as if he were trying to regain his composure, adjusted his glasses on his nose, coughed.

- Mister Okada! Wow! What a surprising place to meet! Uh, so you are not there today?

I shook my head in silence.

"I see," said Ushikawa, without asking for more.

He spoke much more slowly than usual, and his characteristic eloquence had disappeared. Could he use his energy only at night? Or was he really exhausted? While we were chatting, standing side by side in this train car, I had every opportunity to observe him from top to bottom. I had a bird's-eye view of his skull, which reminded me of a tropical fruit that had stayed too long on the tree and gradually lost its shape. I imagined someone breaking this skull with a baseball bat. It would surely open in two like a ripe fruit. I wanted to stop thinking about it, but these images presented themselves against my mind, with extraordinary precision.

- Say, Mr. Ushikawa, I would like to talk quietly with you. Would you be willing to get off the train and go have a drink somewhere?

Ushikawa made a hesitant grimace and raised a short arm to look at his watch.

- I too, very sincerely, Mr. Okada, would like to chat with you quietly. But I'm on my way to a date I absolutely cannot put off...

-Then, another time, if you will agree. I know that it is not very polite on my part, but what do you say, another time, eh—agreed?

I shook my head curtly.

- Listen, it will not take long, I said, looking him straight in the eye. I know that you are very busy, but something tells me that another opportunity will not present itself if we do not talk now. Am I not right?

Ushikawa nodded briefly as though to himself, stuffing the newspaper into the overcoat pocket. He seemed to weigh the pros and cons for about thirty seconds.

- Very well, you are right. Let's get off at the next stop, and let's go have a coffee somewhere for half an hour. As for my appointment, I will manage. Since I met you in this manner, it seems that matters must go this way.

We left the train at Tamachi, and entered the first cafe which presented itself as we came out of the station.

"To be honest, I thought I would never see you again," Ushikawa began as soon as the waitress brought us our coffees. "I'm done with all this."

- What do you mean?

- I presented my resignation to Professor Wataya a few days ago. I had been thinking about doing it for a while.

I took off my hat and my pea coat, put them on a chair next to me. Despite the heat in the cafe, Ushikawa kept his coat on.

- Is that why when I called your office the other day, no one answered?

- Yes, I terminated the line, I no longer have an office. When one leaves, you see, it is better to hurry. I don't like to dawdle. Anyway, now I no longer have an employer, I am a free man. Freelance, or unemployed, it depends on how you see things.

He smiled, but as usual his gaze remained cold. He put cream and sugar in his coffee, slowly turned the spoon in the cup.

- So, Mister Okada, I'm sure it was about Madame Kumiko that you wanted to question me. Where she is, what she does. I am wrong?

- No, I replied. But before that, I would like to know the reasons for your sudden resignation.

-Do you really want to know?

-Yes, that interests me.

He took a sip of his coffee, frowned a bit, then looked at me.

- Of course, if you're interested, I can tell you, but it's not very amusing, you know. Originally, I was first in the service of Professor Wataya's uncle, as I believe I have already told you, and when the young Professor Wataya was induced to become a candidate, I was chosen to assist him. I found that quite positive, this young professor has a future, I thought to myself. However, I have never been ready to follow him no matter what. It may be strange, but I have no feeling of loyalty towards him, yet I do know what loyalty is. The professor's uncle treated me like the last of the last, hit me, kicked me. In comparison, Professor Noboru Wataya was much nicer to me, but however, see, Mr. Okada, how strange life is, with the old professor, I took everything in silence and I wouldn't have let him down for anything in the world, whereas, with the youngster, I was unable to hold out. And do you know why, Mr. Okada?

I shook my head.

-Well, because Professor Noboru Wataya and I are basically similar to each other.

Ushikawa paused for a few minutes to take out his pack of cigarettes and light one. He took several deep puffs before resuming:

-What I say may seem absurd because of course, we do not have the same appearance, nor the same level of intelligence. And yet, however, once we have taken away the superficial appearances, we are of the same species, he and I. I understood him at first glance, as soon as I met him. Oh, oh, I thought, this man gives himself the air of an intellectual, but it may be that he is a *jean-foutre*, an impostor of the first rank. I do not say that the impostors do not have good luck in politics. I have already seen vulgar ambitions generate magnificent successes. And the opposite too: high moral integrity sometimes leads only to negative results. Honestly, I cannot say what is better. Politics, Mr. Okada, is not a matter of logic, only the results count. But this Mr. Noboru Wataya, even I was surprised to see how bad he was. I was beaten in advance with him.

Between people of the same world, we recognize each other, you see. You will excuse the vulgarity of this example, but it is like the guys who have a big cocks.

- Say, Mr. Okada, when you hate someone, do you know what is worst? To see whoever you hate take over with disconcerting ease something you dream of and you cannot get. For example, watching this guy through his good looks step into a world where you can't even hope to set foot. And the closer this person is to you, the more violent your hatred. For me, that man was Professor Wataya. He would no doubt be stunned to hear me speak this way. You yourself, Mr. Okada, have you already experienced this kind of hatred? I hated Noboru Wataya, of course. But my way of hating him did not meet Ushikawa's definition. I shook my head negatively.

- One day, the professor called me to ask me to take care of Ms. Kumiko. Think if I was grateful to him for entrusting me with this role! He did not explain to me in detail the complicated circumstances that brought Ms. Kumiko to him. He just told me that her marriage was not going very well, and that she had decided to live alone, and also that she was in poor health. I, for a while, obeyed mechanically the orders that the professor gave me. I transferred money to Ms. Kumiko's account to pay for the furniture in her apartment, found a housekeeper for her, it was necessary to do unimportant tasks like that, you see. I was pretty busy elsewhere and then, at the beginning, I was not particularly interested in Madame Kumiko. I spoke to him from time to time on the phone to sort out some details, and that's it. In any case, Ms. Kumiko was rather taciturn. She gave the impression of someone who spends his time locked up, motionless in the corner of a room.

Ushikawa paused for a drink of water, glanced at his watch, lit another cigarette.

- But things did not stop there. All of a sudden, you came on the scene, Mr. Okada. You know the story of the hanging house. The professor was worried about the article in the newspaper and instructed me to do a little investigation to see what you had to do with it. He knew that to investigate discreetly, you can trust me. But I can say that what I discovered astonished me. I thought that there were political schemes involved, but I didn't expect to hook a big fish like that. You go fishing for shrimp and you find a sea bream, see. But I kept all that to myself and didn't say anything to the professor.

- And you used what you discovered to change your mount, is that it? Ushikawa blew the smoke from his cigarette towards the ceiling, then looked at me.

For the first time, I had a glimmer of amusement in his eyes.

- You have intuition, Mr. Okada. That is precisely right. I said to myself: my old friend Ushikawa, if you want to change your workplace, it is now or never. In short, for the moment I am unemployed, but basically, I already know where my next post will be. I have to wait a little while the business cools down. I also need a little rest.

Ushikawa took a package of Kleenex from his pocket. took one, blew his nose noisily, then rolled it up into a ball and put it back in his pocket.

- And who took over to take care of Kumiko?

- Ah yes, that's true, Ms. Kumiko. Well, I'm going to tell you something, Mr. Okada: I have never seen Ms. Kumiko, I have not had the honor of meeting her in the flesh. I only spoke to her on the phone. And it's not just me, Mr. Okada: no one has ever seen her. I do not know if she had discussions with Professor Wataya or not, that remains an enigma, but I can assure you that she saw absolutely no one, not even him. Even the cleaning lady never met her, it was she herself who

told me. Madame Kumiko left her a list of what had to be done, and, other than that, managed to avoid her. I tried to visit your wife in her apartment to find out what was going on. I'm sure she is there, but I did not hear any noise inside. Total silence. I asked the neighbors: no one had ever met her. It has been over a year that she has been shut away in this apartment, cut off from all contact. One year and five months, precisely. She must have good reasons for not showing herself for so long.

- Would you give me the address?

Ushikawa shook his head quickly.

- No, I'm really sorry, but we live in a small world, you see, everything ends up being known, and if people learned that I have disclosed certain secrets, this could cast a shadow on the confidence of my future employers towards me.

- But do you have any idea what could have happened to her to make her hide herself like that?

Ushikawa seemed to hesitate for a moment. I looked him in the eye, without adding anything. It seemed to me that time was passing in slow motion. Ushikawa blew his nose again. He gave the appearance of getting up, then fell back into his chair, sighing.

- Listen, what I am going to tell you is only what I imagine, but, in my opinion, this is a problem that has been present for a long time in the Wataya family. In concrete terms, I don't know what it is, but Ms. Kumiko has been aware of this from the start, which is why she wanted to leave her family. She meets you, you love each other, you get married, you live happily ever after. . . Wonderful, wonderful! Well, it could have been, only things did not happen like that. Professor Wataya, for some unknown reason, did not want to let his sister go. What do you think? Does that seem logical to you, as a scenario?

- - Certainly, yes.

Then - all this is only the product of my imagination, naturally -, the professor tries to bring back Ms. Kumiko to his side. It is possible that at the time that she married you, he did not mind it that much, but, with time, he realized how essential her presence was to him. He then decided to get her back at any cost, and in fact succeeded, I do not know by what means. In any case, I imagine that because of all this tugging, Ms. Kumiko lost something that existed in her formerly. A kind of inner strength, which had supported her until then in her life, broke in two at once. These are just guesses, but. . .

I kept quiet. The waitress came to fill our glasses with fresh water, removed our empty coffee cups. Meanwhile, Ushikawa was smoking, looking vaguely at the wall in front of him. I stared at him:

- Do you mean that you suspect a sexual relationship between Kumiko and Noboru Wataya? I asked.

- "No, no, I didn't mean that at all," Ushikawa protested, waving his lit cigarette in the air. "I have *no idea* what there is or is not actually between them. And my imagination doesn't go that far. But I feel that there is something abnormal in their relationship. And I also know that Professor Wataya's wife, who divorced him, complained of not having normal sexual relations with him. Finally, after all, these are rumors but. . ."

Ushikawa took a sip of water, then placed a hand on his stomach.

- My stomach is not doing well these days. Not well at all. It's from my family, you know. In my family, everyone has stomach problems. It is a question of DNA, it seems. Me—all I have inherited have been problems: baldness, tooth decay, bad stomach, short-sightedness. The fairies who leaned over my cradle only threw curses at me. I do not even go to see the doctors anymore, for fear of what they will tell me.

“Mr. Okada, I may be mixed up with what doesn't concern me, but it might not be so easy to snatch Ms. Kumiko from the hands of Professor Wataya, you know. To begin with, as things stand, Ms. Kumiko will not express the desire to return to you. She may no longer be the woman you knew. You will find her changed. And then, forgive my rudeness, but supposing that you found her and brought her home tomorrow, would you be in a position to welcome her, to take her under your charge? You can't do things by halves. It is perhaps even for this reason that Ms Kumiko does not wish to return to your home for the moment.

I remained silent.

--In any case, Mr. Okada, I am glad to have seen you again. You have a curious personality, you know. Shall we leave each other and each return to his own side, now, what do you say?

Leaning against his chair with an air of fatigue, Ushikawa shook his head several times.

- Ah, I think I have talked too much. I'm sorry, but if you could pay for my coffee too. . . I am unemployed right now, what do you want from me? Having said that, you are too, it is true. Finally, let us be conciliatory towards each other. I wish you to be happy. You too, make the same wish for me.

With that, Ushikawa stood up heavily and, turning his back on me, left the cafe.