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Kafka on the Shore

Haruki Murakami

Translated from the Japanese by Philip Gabriel

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The Boy Named Crow

"So you're all set for money, then?" the boy named Crow asks in his typical sluggish voice. The kind of voice like when you've just woken up and your mouth still feels heavy and dull. But he's just pretending. He's totally awake. As always.

I nod.

"How much?"

I review the numbers in my head. "Close to thirty-five hundred in cash,

plus some money I can get from an ATM. I know it's not a lot, but it should be enough. For the time being."

"Not bad," the boy named Crow says. "For the time being."

I give him another nod.

"I'm guessing this isn't Christmas money from Santa Claus."

"Yeah, you're right," I reply.

Crow smirks and looks around. "I imagine you've started by rifling drawers, am I right?"

I don't say anything. He knows whose money we're talking about, so there's no need for any long-winded interrogations. He's just giving me a hard time.

"No matter," Crow says. "You really need this money and you're going to get it—beg, borrow, or steal. It's your father's money, so who cares, right? Get your hands on that much and you should be able to make it. For the time being. But what's the plan after it's all gone? Money isn't like mushrooms in a forest—it doesn't just pop up on its own, you know. You'll need to eat, a place to sleep. One day you're going to run out."

"I'll think about that when the time comes," I say.

"When the time comes," Crow repeats, as if weighing these words in his hand.

I nod.

"Like by getting a job or something?"

"Maybe," I say.

Crow shakes his head. "You know, you've got a lot to learn about the world. Listen—what kind of job could a fifteen-year-old kid get in some far-off place he's never been to before? You haven't even finished junior high. Who do you think's going to hire you?"

I blush a little. It doesn't take much to make me blush.

"Forget it," he says. "You're just getting started and I shouldn't lay all this depressing stuff on you. You've already decided what you're going to do, and all that's left is to set the wheels in motion. I mean, it's your life.

Basically you gotta go with what you think is right."

That's right. When all is said and done, it is my life.

"I'll tell you one thing, though. You're going to have to get a lot tougher if you want to make it."

"I'm trying my best," I say.

"I'm sure you are," Crow says. "These last few years you've gotten a whole lot stronger. I've got to hand it to you."

I nod again.

"But let's face it—you're only fifteen," Crow goes on. "Your life's just

begun and there's a ton of things out in the world you've never laid eyes on. Things you never could imagine."

As always, we're sitting beside each other on the old sofa in my father's study.

Crow loves the study and all the little objects scattered around there.

Now he's toying with a bee-shaped glass paperweight. If my father was at home, you can bet Crow would never go anywhere near it.

"But I have to get out of here," I tell him. "No two ways around it."

"Yeah, I guess you're right." He places the paperweight back on the table and links his hands behind his head. "Not that running away's going to solve everything. I don't want to rain on your parade or anything, but I wouldn't count on escaping this place if I were you. No matter how far you run. Distance might not solve anything."

The boy named Crow lets out a sigh, then rests a fingertip on each of his closed eyelids and speaks to me from the darkness within.

"How about we play our game?" he says.

"All right," I say. I close my eyes and quietly take a deep breath.

"Okay, picture a terrible sandstorm," he says. "Get everything else out of your head."

I do what he says, get everything else out of my head. I forget who I

am, even.

I'm a total blank. Then things start to surface. Things that—as we sit here on the old leather sofa in my father's study—both of us can see.

"Sometimes fate is like a small sandstorm that keeps changing directions," Crow says.

Sometimes fate is like a small sandstorm that keeps changing directions. You change direction but the sandstorm chases you. You turn again, but the storm adjusts.

Over and over you play this out, like some ominous dance with death just before dawn.

Why? Because this storm isn't something that blew in from far away, something that has nothing to do with you. This storm is you. Something inside of you. So all you can do is give in to it, step right inside the storm, closing your eyes and plugging up your ears so the sand doesn't get in, and walk through it, step by step. There's no sun there, no moon, no direction, no sense of time. Just fine white sand swirling up into the sky like pulverized bones. That's the kind of sandstorm you need to imagine.

And that's exactly what I do. I imagine a white funnel stretching up vertically like a thick rope. My eyes are closed tight, hands cupped over my ears, so those fine grains of sand can't blow inside me. The sandstorm draws

steadily closer. I can feel the air pressing on my skin. It really is going to swallow me up.

The boy called Crow softly rests a hand on my shoulder, and with that the storm vanishes.

"From now on—no matter what—you've got to be the world's toughest fifteen-year-old. That's the only way you're going to survive. And in order to do that, you've got to figure out what it means to be tough. You following me?"

I keep my eyes closed and don't reply. I just want to sink off into sleep like this, his hand on my shoulder. I hear the faint flutter of wings.

"You're going to be the world's toughest fifteen-year-old," Crow whispers as I try to fall asleep. Like he was carving the words in a deep blue tattoo on my heart.

And you really will have to make it through that violent, metaphysical, symbolic storm. No matter how metaphysical or symbolic it might be, make no mistake about it: it will cut through flesh like a thousand razor blades.

People will bleed there, and you will bleed too. Hot, red blood. You'll catch that blood in your hands, your own blood and the blood of others.

And once the storm is over you won't remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won't even be sure, in fact,

whether the storm is really over. But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm you won't be the same person who walked in. That's what this storm's all about.

On my fifteenth birthday I'll run away from home, journey to a far-off town, and live in a corner of a small library. It'd take a week to go into the whole thing, all the details. So I'll just give the main point. On my fifteenth birthday I'll run away from home, journey to a far-off town, and live in a corner of a small library.

It sounds a little like a fairy tale. But it's no fairy tale, believe me. No matter what sort of spin you put on it.

Chapter 1

Cash isn't the only thing I take from my father's study when I leave home. I take a small, old gold lighter—I like the design and feel of it—and a folding knife with a really sharp blade. Made to skin deer, it has a five-inch blade and a nice heft. Probably something he bought on one of his trips abroad. I also take a sturdy, bright pocket flashlight out of a drawer. Plus sky blue Revo sunglasses to disguise my age.

I think about taking my father's favorite Sea-Dweller Oyster Rolex. It's a beautiful watch, but something flashy will only attract attention. My cheap plastic Casio watch with an alarm and stopwatch will do just fine,

and might actually be more useful.

Reluctantly, I return the Rolex to its drawer.

From the back of another drawer I take out a photo of me and my older sister when we were little, the two of us on a beach somewhere with grins plastered across our faces. My sister's looking off to the side so half her face is in shadow and her smile is neatly cut in half. It's like one of those Greek tragedy masks in a textbook that's half one idea and half the opposite. Light and dark. Hope and despair. Laughter and sadness.

Trust and loneliness. For my part I'm staring straight ahead, undaunted, at the camera.

Nobody else is there at the beach. My sister and I have on swimsuits—hers a red floral-print one-piece, mine some baggy old blue trunks. I'm holding a plastic stick in my hand.

White foam is washing over our feet.

Who took this, and where and when, I have no clue. And how could I have looked so happy? And why did my father keep just that one photo? The whole thing is a total mystery. I must have been three, my sister nine. Did we ever really get along that well? I have no memory of ever going to the beach with my family. No memory of going anywhere with them. No matter, though—there is no way I'm going to leave that photo with my

father, so I put it in my wallet. I don't have any photos of my mother. My father threw them all away.

After giving it some thought I decide to take the cell phone with me.

Once he finds out I've taken it, my father will probably get the phone company to cut off service.

Still, I toss it into my backpack, along with the adapter. Doesn't add much weight, so why not. When it doesn't work anymore I'll just chuck it.

Just the bare necessities, that's all I need. Choosing which clothes to take is the hardest thing. I'll need a couple sweaters and pairs of underwear.

But what about shirts and trousers? Gloves, mufflers, shorts, a coat? There's no end to it. One thing I do know, though. I don't want to wander around some strange place with a huge backpack that screams out, Hey, everybody, check out the runaway! Do that and someone is sure to sit up and take notice. Next thing you know the police will haul me in and I'll be sent straight home. If I don't wind up in some gang first.

Any place cold is definitely out, I decide. Easy enough, just choose the opposite—a warm place. Then I can leave the coat and gloves behind, and get by with half the clothes. I pick out wash-and-wear-type things, the lightest ones I have, fold them neatly, and stuff them in my backpack. I also pack a three-season sleeping bag, the kind that rolls up nice and tight, toilet

stuff, a rain poncho, notebook and pen, a Walkman and ten discs—got to have my music—along with a spare rechargeable battery. That's about it. No need for any cooking gear, which is too heavy and takes up too much room, since I can buy food at the local convenience store.

It takes a while but I'm able to subtract a lot of things from my list. I add things, cross them off, then add a whole other bunch and cross them off, too.

My fifteenth birthday is the ideal time to run away from home. Any earlier and it'd be too soon. Any later and I would have missed my chance. During my first two years in junior high, I'd worked out, training myself for this day. I started practicing judo in the first couple years of grade school, and still went sometimes in junior high. But I didn't join any school teams. Whenever I had the time I'd jog around the school grounds, swim, or go to the local gym. The young trainers there gave me free lessons, showing me the best kind of stretching exercises and how to use the fitness machines to bulk up. They taught me which muscles you use every day and which ones can only be built up with machines, even the correct way to do a bench press. I'm pretty tall to begin with, and with all this exercise I've developed pretty broad shoulders and pecs. Most strangers would take me for seventeen. If I ran away looking my actual age, you can

imagine all the problems that would cause.

Other than the trainers at the gym and the housekeeper who comes to our house every other day—and of course the bare minimum required to get by at school—I barely talk to anyone. For a long time my father and I have avoided seeing each other. We live under the same roof, but our schedules are totally different. He spends most of his time in his studio, far away, and I do my best to avoid him.

The school I'm going to is a private junior high for kids who are upper-class, or at least rich. It's the kind of school where, unless you really blow it, you're automatically promoted to the high school on the same campus. All the students dress neatly, have nice straight teeth, and are boring as hell. Naturally I have zero friends. I've built a wall around me, never letting anybody inside and trying not to venture outside myself. Who could like somebody like that? They all keep an eye on me, from a distance. They might hate me, or even be afraid of me, but I'm just glad they didn't bother me. Because I had tons of things to take care of, including spending a lot of my free time devouring books in the school library.

I always paid close attention to what was said in class, though. Just like the boy named Crow suggested.

The facts and techniques or whatever they teach you in class isn't

going to be very useful in the real world, that's for sure. Let's face it, teachers are basically a bunch of morons. But you've got to remember this: you're running away from home. You probably won't have any chance to go to school anymore, so like it or not you'd better absorb whatever you can while you've got the chance. Become like a sheet of blotting paper and soak it all in. Later on you can figure out what to keep and what to unload.

I did what he said, like I almost always do. My brain like a sponge, I focused on every word said in class and let it all sink in, figured out what it meant, and committed everything to memory. Thanks to this, I barely had to study outside of class, but always came out near the top on exams.

My muscles were getting hard as steel, even as I grew more withdrawn and quiet.

I tried hard to keep my emotions from showing so that no one—classmates and teachers alike—had a clue what I was thinking. Soon I'd be launched into the rough adult world, and I knew I'd have to be tougher than anybody if I wanted to survive.

My eyes in the mirror are cold as a lizard's, my expression fixed and unreadable. I can't remember the last time I laughed or even showed a hint of a smile to other people.

Even to myself.

I'm not trying to imply I can keep up this silent, isolated facade all the time.

Sometimes the wall I've erected around me comes crumbling down. It doesn't happen very often, but sometimes, before I even realize what's going on, there I am—naked and defenseless and totally confused. At times like that I always feel an omen calling out to me, like a dark, omnipresent pool of water.

A dark, omnipresent pool of water.

It was probably always there, hidden away somewhere. But when the time comes it silently rushes out, chilling every cell in your body. You drown in that cruel flood, gasping for breath. You cling to a vent near the ceiling, struggling, but the air you manage to breathe is dry and burns your throat. Water and thirst, cold and heat—these supposedly opposite elements combine to assault you.

The world is a huge space, but the space that will take you in—and it doesn't have to be very big—is nowhere to be found. You seek a voice, but what do you get? Silence.

You look for silence, but guess what? All you hear over and over and over is the voice of this omen. And sometimes this prophetic voice pushes a secret switch hidden deep inside your brain.

Your heart is like a great river after a long spell of rain, spilling over its banks.

All signposts that once stood on the ground are gone, inundated and carried away by that rush of water. And still the rain beats down on the surface of the river. Every time you see a flood like that on the news you tell yourself: That's it. That's my heart.

Before running away from home I wash my hands and face, trim my nails, swab out my ears, and brush my teeth. I take my time, making sure my whole body's well scrubbed. Being really clean is sometimes the most important thing there is. I gaze carefully at my face in the mirror. Genes I'd gotten from my father and mother—not that I have any recollection of what she looked like—created this face. I can do my best to not let any emotions show, keep my eyes from revealing anything, bulk up my muscles, but there's not much I can do about my looks. I'm stuck with my father's long, thick eyebrows and the deep lines between them. I could probably kill him if I wanted to—I'm sure strong enough—and I can erase my mother from my memory. But there's no way to erase the DNA they passed down to me. If I wanted to drive that away I'd have to get rid of me.

There's an omen contained in that. A mechanism buried inside of me.

A mechanism buried inside of you.

I switch off the light and leave the bathroom. A heavy, damp stillness lies over the house. The whispers of people who don't exist, the breath of the dead. I look around, standing stock-still, and take a deep breath. The clock shows three p. m., the two hands cold and distant. They're pretending to be noncommittal, but I know they're not on my side. It's nearly time for me to say good-bye. I pick up my backpack and slip it over my shoulders. I've carried it any number of times, but now it feels so much heavier. Shikoku, I decide. That's where I'll go. There's no particular reason it has to be Shikoku, only that studying the map I got the feeling that's where I should head. The more I look at the map—actually every time I study it—the more I feel Shikoku tugging at me. It's far south of Tokyo, separated from the mainland by water, with a warm climate. I've never been there, have no friends or relatives there, so if somebody started looking for me—which I kind of doubt—Shikoku would be the last place they'd think of. I pick up the ticket I'd reserved at the counter and climb aboard the night bus.

This is the cheapest way to get to Takamatsu—just a shade over ninety bucks. Nobody pays me any attention, asks how old I am, or gives me a second look. The bus driver mechanically checks my ticket.

Only a third of the seats are taken. Most passengers are traveling

alone, like me, and the bus is strangely silent. It's a long trip to Takamatsu, ten hours according to the schedule, and we'll be arriving early in the morning. But I don't mind. I've got plenty of time. The bus pulls out of the station at eight, and I push my seat back. No sooner do I settle down than my consciousness, like a battery that's lost its charge, starts to fade away, and I fall asleep.

Sometime in the middle of the night a hard rain begins to fall. I wake up every once in a while, part the chintzy curtain at the window, and gaze out at the highway rushing by. Raindrops beat against the glass, blurring streetlights alongside the road that stretch off into the distance at identical intervals like they were set down to measure the earth. A new light rushes up close and in an instant fades off behind us. I check my watch and see it's past midnight. Automatically shoved to the front, my fifteenth birthday makes its appearance.

"Hey, happy birthday," the boy named Crow says.

"Thanks," I reply.

The omen is still with me, though, like a shadow. I check to make sure the wall around me is still in place. Then I close the curtain and fall back asleep.

Chapter 2

The following document, classified Top Secret by the U.S. Department of Defense, was released to the public in 1986 through the Freedom of Information Act. The document is now kept in the National Archives in Washington, D.C., and can be accessed there.

The investigations recorded here were carried out under the direction of Major James P. Warren from March to April 1946. The field investigation in [name deleted] County, Yamanashi Prefecture, was conducted by Second Lieutenant Robert O'Connor and Master Sergeant Harold Katayama. The interrogator in all interviews was Lt. O'Connor. Sgt. Katayama handled the Japanese interpreting, and Private William Cohen prepared the documents.

Interviews were conducted over a twelve-day period in the reception room of the [name deleted] Town town hall in Yamanashi Prefecture. The following witnesses responded individually to Lt. O'Connor's questions: a female teacher at the [deleted] Town [deleted] County public school, a doctor residing in the same town, two patrolmen assigned to the local police precinct, and six children.

The appended 1:10,000 and 1:2,000 maps of the area in question were provided by the Topographic Institute of the Ministry of Home Affairs.

U.S. ARMY INTELLIGENCE SECTION (MIS) REPORT

Dated: May 12, 1946

Title: Report on the Rice Bowl Hill Incident, 1944

Document Number: PTYX-722-8936745-42213-WWN

The following is a taped interview with Setsuko Okamochi (26), teacher in charge of the fourth-grade B class at the public school in [deleted] Town, [deleted] County. Materials related to the interview can be accessed using application number PTYX-722-SQ-118.

Impressions of the interviewer, Lt. Robert O'Connor: Setsuko

Okamochi is an attractive, petite woman. Intelligent and responsible, she responded to the questions accurately and honestly. She still seems slightly in shock, though, from the incident. As she searched her memory she grew very tense at times, and whenever this happened she had a tendency to speak more slowly.

I think it must have been just after ten in the morning when I saw a silver light far up in the sky. A brilliant flash of silver. That's right, it was definitely light reflecting off something metal. That light moved very slowly in the sky from east to west. We all thought it had to be a B-29. It was directly above us, so to see it we had to look straight up. It was a clear blue sky, and the light was so bright all we could see was that silver, duralumin-like object.

But we couldn't make out the shape, since it was too far up. I assumed that they couldn't see us either, so we weren't afraid of being attacked or having bombs suddenly rain down on us. Dropping bombs in the mountains here would be pretty pointless anyway. I figured the plane was on its way to bomb some large city somewhere, or maybe on its way back from a raid. So we kept on walking. All I thought was how that light had a strange beauty to it.

—According to military records no U.S. bombers or any other kind of aircraft were flying over that region at the time, that is, around ten a.m. on November 7, 1944.

But I saw it clearly, and so did the sixteen children in my class. All of us thought it had to be a B-29. We'd all seen many formations of B-29s, and those are the only kind of planes that could possibly fly that high. There was a small airbase in our prefecture, and I'd occasionally seen Japanese planes flying, but they were all small and could never fly as high as what I saw. Besides, the way duralumin reflects light is different from other types of metal, and the only planes made out of that are B-29s. I did think it was a little strange, though, that it was a solo plane flying all by itself, not part of a formation.

—Were you born in this region?

No, I was born in Hiroshima. I got married in 1941, and that's when I came here.

My husband was a music teacher in a junior high school in this prefecture. He was called up in 1943 and died fighting in Luzon in June of 1945. From what I heard later, he was guarding an ammunition dump just outside Manila when it was hit by American shells and blew up, killing him. We have no children.

—Speaking of children, how many were you in charge of on that outing?

Sixteen all together, boys and girls. Two were out sick, but other than that it was the entire class. Eight boys and eight girls. Five of them were children who'd been evacuated from Tokyo.

We set out from the school at nine in the morning. It was a typical school outing, so everyone carried canteens and lunches with them. We had nothing in particular we were planning to study; we were just going up into the hills to gather mushrooms and edible wild plants. The area around where we lived was farmland, so we weren't that badly off in terms of food—which isn't to say we had plenty to eat. There was a strict rationing system in place and most of us were hungry all the time.

So the children were encouraged to hunt for food wherever they could

find it. The country was at war, after all, and food took priority over studying. Everyone went on this kind of school outing—outdoor study sessions, as they were called. Since our school was surrounded by hills and woods, there were a lot of nice spots we used to go to. I think we were blessed in that sense. People in cities were all starving. Supply routes from Taiwan and the continent had been cut off by this time and urban areas were suffering terribly from a lack of food and fuel.

—You mentioned that five of your pupils had been evacuated from Tokyo. Did they get along well with the local children?

In my class at least they did. The environments the two groups grew up in, of course, were completely different—one way out in the country, the other in the heart of Tokyo. They spoke differently, even dressed differently. Most of the local kids were from poor farming families, while the majority of the Tokyo children had fathers who worked for companies or in the civil service. So I couldn't say they really understood each other.

Especially in the beginning you could sense some tension between the two groups.

I'm not saying they bullied each other or got into fights, because they didn't. What I mean is one group didn't seem to understand what the other group was thinking. So they tended to keep to themselves, the local kids

with other local kids, the Tokyo children in their own little group. This was only the first two months, though. After that they got along well. You know how it is. When kids start playing together and get completely absorbed by whatever they're doing, they don't care about things like that anymore.

—I'd like you to describe, in as much detail as you can, the spot where you took your class that day.

It was a hill we often went to on outings. It was a round hill shaped like an upside-down bowl. We usually called it "Owan yama." [Note: "Rice Bowl Hill."] It was a short walk to the west of the school and wasn't steep at all, so anybody could climb it.

At the children's pace it took somewhere around two hours to get to the top. Along the way they'd search the woods for mushrooms and we'd have a simple lunch. The children, naturally, enjoyed going on these outdoor sessions much more than staying in our classroom studying.

The glittering airplane we saw way up in the sky reminded us for a moment of the war, but just for a short time, and we were all in a good mood. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, no wind, and everything was quiet around us—all we could hear were birds chirping in the woods. The war seemed like something in a faraway land that had nothing to do with us. We sang songs as we hiked up the hill, sometimes imitating the birds we heard.

Except for the fact that the war was still going on, it was a perfect morning.

—It was soon after you observed the airplane-like object that you went into the woods, correct?

That's correct. I'd say it was less than five minutes later that we went into the woods. We left the main trail up the hill and went along a trampled-down path that went up the slope of the woods. It was pretty steep. After we'd hiked for about ten minutes we came to a clearing, a broad area as flat as a tabletop. Once we'd entered the woods it was completely still, and with the sun blocked out it was chilly, but when we stepped into that clearing it was like we were in a miniature town square, with the sky bright above us. My class often stopped by this spot whenever we climbed Owan yama. The place had a calming effect, and somehow made us all feel nice and cozy.

We took a break once we reached this "square," putting down our packs, and then the children went into the woods in groups of three or four in search of mushrooms. I insisted that they never lose sight of one another. Before they set out, I gathered them all together and made sure they understood this. We knew the place well, but it was a woods, after all, and if any of them got separated and lost we'd have a hard time finding them. Still, you have to remember these are small children, and once they start hunting mushrooms they tend to forget this rule. So I always made sure that as I

looked for mushrooms myself I kept an eye on them, and a running head count.

It was about ten minutes or so after we began hunting mushrooms that the children started to collapse.

When I first spotted a group of three of them collapsed on the ground I was sure they'd eaten poisonous mushrooms. There are a lot of highly toxic mushrooms around here, even ones that can be fatal. The local kids know which ones not to pick, but a few varieties are hard to distinguish. That's why I always warned the children never to put any in their mouths until we got back to school and had an expert check them. But you can't always expect kids to listen, can you?

I raced over to the spot and lifted up the children who'd fallen to the ground.

Their bodies were limp, like rubber that's been left out in the sun. It was like carrying empty shells—the strength was completely drained from them. But they were breathing fine. Their pulses were normal, and none of them had a temperature. They looked calm, not at all like they were in any pain. I ruled out things like bee stings or snakebites. The children were simply unconscious.

The strangest thing was their eyes. Their bodies were so limp it was

like they were in a coma, yet their eyes were open as if they were looking at something. They'd blink every once in a while, so it wasn't like they were asleep. And their eyes moved very slowly from side to side like they were scanning a distant horizon. Their eyes at least were conscious. But they weren't actually looking at anything, or at least nothing visible. I waved my hand a few times in front of their faces, but got no reaction.

I picked up each of the three children in turn, and they were all exactly the same.

All of them were unconscious, their eyes slowly moving from side to side. It was the weirdest thing I'd ever seen.

—Describe the group that first collapsed.

It was a group of girls. Three girls who were all good friends. I called out their names and slapped them on the cheek, pretty hard, in fact, but there was no reaction.

They didn't feel a thing. It was a strange feeling, like touching a void. My first thought was to send somebody running back to the school for help.

There was no way I could carry three unconscious children down by myself. So I started looking for the fastest runner in the class, one of the boys. But when I stood up and looked around I saw that all the children had

collapsed. All sixteen of them had fallen to the ground and lost consciousness. The only one still conscious and standing was me. It was like... a battlefield.

—Did you notice anything unusual at the scene? Any strange smell or sound—or a light?

[Thinks about it for a while.] No, as I already said, it was very quiet and peaceful.

No unusual sounds or light or smells. The only thing unusual was that every single pupil in my class had collapsed and was lying there unconscious. I felt utterly alone, like I was the last person alive on Earth. I can't describe that feeling of total loneliness. I just wanted to disappear into thin air and not think about anything.

Of course I couldn't do that—I had my duty as a teacher. I pulled myself together and raced down the slope as fast as my legs would carry me, to get help at the school.

Chapter 3

It's nearly dawn when I wake up. I draw the curtain back and take a look. It must have just stopped raining, since everything is still wet and drippy. Clouds to the east are sharply etched against the sky, each one framed by light. The sky looks ominous one minute, inviting the next. It all

depends on the angle.

The bus plows down the highway at a set speed, the tires humming along, never getting any louder or softer. Same with the engine, its monotonous sound like a mortar smoothly grinding down time and the consciousness of the people on board. The other passengers are all sunk back in their seats, asleep, their curtains drawn tight. The driver and I are the only ones awake. We're being carried, efficiently and numbly, toward our destination.

Feeling thirsty, I take a bottle of mineral water from the pocket of my backpack and drink some of the lukewarm water. From the same pocket I pull out a box of soda crackers and munch a few, enjoying that familiar dry taste. According to my watch it's 4:32. I check the date and day of the week, just to be on the safe side. Thirteen hours since I left home. Time hasn't leaped ahead more than it should or done an unexpected about-face. It's still my birthday, still the first day of my brand-new life. I shut my eyes, open them again, again checking the time and date on my watch. Then I switch on the reading light, take out a paperback book, and start reading.

Just after five, without warning, the bus pulls off the highway and comes to a stop in a corner of a roadside rest area. The front door of the bus opens with an airy hiss, lights blink on inside, and the bus driver makes a

brief announcement. "Good morning, everybody. Hope you had a good rest. We're on schedule and should arrive in our final stop at Takamatsu Station in about an hour. But we're stopping here for a twenty-minute break. We'll be leaving again at five-thirty, so please be sure to be back on board by then."

The announcement wakes up most of the passengers, and they silently struggle to their feet, yawning as they stumble out of the bus. This is where people make themselves presentable before arriving in Takamatsu. I get off too, take a couple of deep breaths, and do some simple stretching exercises in the fresh morning air. I walk over to the men's room and splash some water on my face. I'm wondering where the heck we are. I go outside and look around. Nothing special, just the typical roadside scenery you find next to a highway. Maybe I'm just imagining things, but the shape of the hills and the color of the trees seem different from those back in Tokyo.

I'm inside the cafeteria sipping a free cup of hot tea when this young girl comes over and plunks herself down on the plastic seat next to me. In her right hand she has a paper cup of hot coffee she bought from a vending machine, the steam rising up from it, and in her left hand she's holding a small container with sandwiches inside—another bit of vending-machine gourmet fare, by the looks of it.

She's kind of funny looking. Her face is out of balance—broad forehead, button nose, freckled cheeks, and pointy ears. A slammed-together, rough sort of face you can't ignore. Still, the whole package isn't so bad. For all I know maybe she's not so wild about her own looks, but she seems comfortable with who she is, and that's the important thing. There's something childish about her that has a calming effect, at least on me. She isn't very tall, but has good-looking legs and a nice bust for such a slim body.

Her thin metal earrings sparkle like duralumin. She wears her dark brown, almost reddish dyed hair down to her shoulders, and has on a long-sleeved crewneck shirt with wide stripes. A small leather backpack hangs from one shoulder, and a light sweater's tied around her neck. A cream-colored miniskirt completes her outfit, with no stockings.

She's evidently washed her face, since a few strands of hair, like the thin roots of a plant, are plastered to her broad forehead. Strangely enough, those loose strands of hair draw me to her.

"You were on the bus, weren't you?" she asks me, her voice a little husky.

"Yeah, that's right."

She frowns as she takes a sip of the coffee. "How old are you?"

"Seventeen," I lie.

"So you're in high school."

I nod.

"Where're you headed?"

"Takamatsu."

"Same with me," she says. "Are you visiting, or do you live there?"

"Visiting," I reply.

"Me too. I have a friend there. A girlfriend of mine. How about you?"

"Relatives."

I see, her nod says. No more questions. "I've got a younger brother the same age as you," she suddenly tells me, as if she'd just remembered.

"Things happened, and we haven't seen each other for a long time.... You know something? You look a lot like that guy. Anybody ever tell you that?"

"What guy?"

"You know, the guy who sings in that band! As soon as I saw you in the bus I thought you looked like him, but I just can't come up with his name. I must have busted a hole in my brain trying to remember. That happens sometimes, right? It's on the tip of your tongue, but you just can't think of it. Hasn't anybody said that to you before—that you remind them of somebody?"

I shake my head. Nobody's ever said that to me. She's still staring at me, eyes narrowed intently. "What kind of person do you mean?" I ask.

"A TV guy."

"A guy who's on TV?"

"Right," she says, picking up her ham sandwich and taking an uninspired bite, washing it down with a sip of coffee. "A guy who sings in some band. Darn—I can't think of the band's name, either. This tall guy who has a Kansai accent. You don't have any idea who I mean?"

"Sorry, I don't watch TV."

The girl frowns and gives me a hard look. "You don't watch at all?"

I shake my head silently. Wait a sec—should I nod or shake my head here? I go with the nod.

"Not very talkative, are you? One line at a time seems your style. Are you always so quiet?"

I blush. I'm sort of a quiet type to begin with, but part of the reason I don't want to say much is that my voice hasn't changed completely. Most of the time I've got kind of a low voice, but all of a sudden it turns on me and lets out a squeak. So I try to keep whatever I say short and sweet.

"Anyway," she goes on, "what I'm trying to say is you look a lot like that singer with the Kansai accent. Not that you have a Kansai accent or

anything. It's just—I don't know, there's something about you that's a lot like him. He seems like a real nice guy, that's all."

Her smile steps offstage for a moment, then does an encore, all while I'm dealing with my blushing face. "You'd resemble him even more if you changed your hair," she says. "Let it grow out a little, use some gel to make it flip up a bit. I'd love to give it a try.

You'd definitely look good like that. Actually, I'm a hairdresser."

I nod and sip my tea. The cafeteria is dead silent. None of the usual background music, nobody else talking besides the two of us.

"Maybe you don't like talking?" she says, resting her head in one hand and giving me a serious look.

I shake my head. "No, that's not it."

"You think it's a pain to talk to people?"

One more shake of my head.

She picks up her other sandwich with strawberry jam instead of ham, then frowns and gives me this look of disbelief. "Would you eat this for me? I hate strawberry-jam sandwiches more than anything. Ever since I was a kid."

I take it from her. Strawberry-jam sandwiches aren't exactly on my top-ten list either, but I don't say a word and start eating.

From across the table she watches until I finish every last crumb.

"Could you do me a favor?" she says.

"A favor?"

"Can I sit next to you until we get to Takamatsu? I just can't relax when I sit by myself. I always feel like some weird person's going to plop himself down next to me, and then I can't get to sleep. When I bought my ticket they told me they were all single seats, but when I got on I saw they're all doubles. I just want to catch a few winks before we arrive, and you seem like a nice guy. Do you mind?"

"No problem."

"Thanks," she says. "'In traveling, a companion,' as the saying goes."

I nod. Nod, nod, nod—that's all I seem capable of. But what should I say?

"How does that end?" she asks.

"How does what end?"

"After a companion, how does it go? I can't remember. I never was very good at Japanese."

"In life, compassion," I say.

"In traveling, a companion, in life, compassion," she repeats, making sure of it.

If she had paper and pencil, it wouldn't surprise me if she wrote it down. "So what does that really mean? In simple terms."

I think it over. It takes me a while to gather my thoughts, but she waits patiently.

"I think it means," I say, "that chance encounters are what keep us going. In simple terms."

She mulls that over for a while, then slowly brings her hands together on top of the table and rests them there lightly. "I think you're right about that—that chance encounters keep us going."

I glance at my watch. It's five-thirty already. "Maybe we better be getting back."

"Yeah, I guess so. Let's go," she says, making no move, though, to get up.

"By the way, where are we?" I ask.

"I have no idea," she says. She cranes her neck and sweeps the place with her eyes. Her earrings jiggle back and forth like two precarious pieces of ripe fruit ready to fall. "From the time I'm guessing we're near Kurashiki, not that it matters. A rest area on a highway is just a place you pass through. To get from here to there." She holds up her right index finger and her left index finger, about twelve inches apart.

"What does it matter what it's called?" she continues. "You've got your restrooms and your food. Your fluorescent lights and your plastic chairs. Crappy coffee.

Strawberry-jam sandwiches. It's all pointless—assuming you try to find a point to it.

We're coming from somewhere, heading somewhere else. That's all you need to know, right?"

I nod. And nod. And nod.

When we get back to the bus the other passengers are already aboard, with just us holding things up. The driver's a young guy with this intense look that reminds me of some stern watchman. He turns a reproachful gaze on the two of us but doesn't say anything, and the girl shoots him an innocent sorry-we're-late smile. He reaches out to push a lever and the door hisses closed. The girl lugs her little suitcase over and sits down beside me—a nothing kind of suitcase she must've picked up at some discount place—and I pick it up for her and store it away in the overhead rack. Pretty heavy for its size. She thanks me, then reclines her seat and fades off to sleep. Like it can barely wait to get going, the bus starts to roll the instant we get settled. I pull out my paperback and pick up where I'd left off. The girl's soon fast asleep, and as the bus sways through each curve

her head leans against my shoulder, finally coming to a rest there. Mouth closed, she's breathing quietly through her nose, the breath grazing my shoulder at regular beats. I look down and catch a glimpse of her bra strap through the collar of her crewneck shirt, a thin, cream-colored strap. I picture the delicate fabric at the end of that strap. The soft breasts beneath. The pink nipples taut under my fingertips. Not that I'm trying to imagine all this, but I can't help it. And—no surprise—I get a massive hard-on. So rigid it makes me wonder how any part of your body could ever get so rock hard. Just then a thought hits me. Maybe—just maybe—this girl's my sister. She's about the right age. Her odd looks aren't at all like the girl in the photo, but you can't always count on that. Depending on how they're taken people sometimes look totally different.

She said she has a brother my age who she hasn't seen in ages.

Couldn't that brother be me—in theory, at least?

I stare at her chest. As she breathes, the rounded peaks move up and down like the swell of waves, somehow reminding me of rain falling softly on a broad stretch of sea. I'm the lonely voyager standing on deck, and she's the sea. The sky is a blanket of gray, merging with the gray sea off on the horizon. It's hard to tell the difference between sea and sky. Between voyager and sea. Between reality and the workings of the heart.

The girl wears two rings on her fingers, neither of which is a wedding or engagement ring, just cheap things you find at those little boutiques girls shop at. Her fingers are long and thin but look strong, the nails are short and nicely trimmed with a light pink polish. Her hands are resting lightly on the knees thrust out from her miniskirt.

I want to touch those hands, but of course I don't. Asleep, she looks like a young child.

One pointy ear peeks out from the strands of hair like a little mushroom, looking strangely fragile.

I shut my book and look for a while at the passing scenery. But very soon, before I realize it, I fall asleep myself.

Chapter 4

U.S. ARMY INTELLIGENCE SECTION (MIS) REPORT

Dated: May 12, 1946

Title: Report on the Rice Bowl Hill Incident, 1944

Document Number: PTYX-722-8936745-42216-WWN

The following is a taped interview with Doctor Juichi Nakazawa (53), who ran an internal medicine clinic in [name deleted] Town at the time of the incident. Materials related to the interview can be accessed using application number PTYX-722-SQ-162 to 183.

Impressions of the interviewer Lt. Robert O'Connor: Doctor Nakazawa is so big boned and dark skinned he looks more like a farm foreman than a doctor. He has a calm manner but is very brisk and concise and says exactly what's on his mind. Behind his glasses his eyes have a very sharp, alert look, and his memory seems reliable.

That's correct—at eleven a.m. on November 7, 1944, I received a phone call from the assistant principal at the local elementary school. I used to be the school doctor, or something close to it, so that's why they contacted me first.

The assistant principal was terribly upset. He told me that an entire class had lost consciousness while on an outing in the hills to pick mushrooms. According to him they were totally unconscious. Only the teacher in charge had remained conscious, and she'd run back to school for help just then. She was so flustered I couldn't grasp the whole situation, though one fact did come through loud and clear: sixteen children had collapsed in the woods.

The kids were out picking mushrooms, so of course my first thought was that they'd eaten some poisonous ones and been paralyzed. If that were the case it'd be difficult to treat. Different varieties of mushrooms have different toxicity levels, and the treatments vary. The most we could do at

the moment would be to pump out their stomachs. In the case of highly toxic varieties, though, the poison might enter the bloodstream quickly and we might be too late. Around here, several people a year die from poison mushrooms.

I stuffed some emergency medicine in my bag and rode my bike over to the school as fast as I could. The police had been contacted and two policemen were already there. We knew we had to get the unconscious kids back to town and would need all the help we could get. Most of the young men were away at war, though, so we set off with the best we had—myself, the two policemen, an elderly male teacher, the assistant principal and principal, the school janitor. And of course the homeroom teacher who'd been with the kids. We grabbed whatever bicycles we could find, but there weren't enough, so some of us rode two to a bike.

—What time did you arrive at the site?

It was 11:55. I remember since I happened to glance at my watch when we got there. We rode our bicycles to the bottom of the hill, as far as we could go, then climbed the rest of the way on foot.

By the time I arrived several children had partially regained consciousness. Three or four of them, as I recall. But they weren't fully conscious—sort of dizzily on all fours.

The rest of the children were still collapsed. After a while some of the others began to come around, their bodies undulating like so many big worms. It was a very strange sight. The children had collapsed in an odd, flat, open space in the woods where it looked like all the trees had been neatly removed, with autumn sunlight shining down brightly. And here you had, in this spot or at the edges of it, sixteen elementary-school kids scattered about prostrate on the ground, some of them starting to move, some of them completely still. The whole thing reminded me of some weird avant-garde play.

For a moment I forgot that I was supposed to treat the kids and just stood there, frozen, staring at the scene. Not just myself—everyone in the rescue group reacted the same, paralyzed for a while by what they saw. This might be a strange way of putting it, perhaps, but it was like some mistake had occurred that allowed us to see a sight people should never see. It was wartime, and I was always mentally prepared, as a physician, to deal with whatever came, in the remote possibility that something awful would occur way out here in the country. Prepared as a citizen of Japan to calmly do my duty if the need arose. But when I saw this scene in the woods I literally froze.

I soon snapped out of it, and picked up one of the children, a little girl.

Her body had no strength in it at all and was limp as a rag doll. Her breathing was steady but she was still unconscious. Her eyes, though, were open, tracking something back and forth. I pulled a small flashlight out of my bag and shined it on her pupils. Completely unreactive. Her eyes were functioning, watching something, yet showed no response to light. I picked up several other children and examined them and they were all exactly the same, unresponsive. I found this quite odd.

I next checked their pulse and temperature. Their pulses were between 50 and 55, and all of them had temperatures just below 97 degrees.

Somewhere around 96 degrees or thereabouts, as I recall. That's correct—for children of that age this pulse rate is well below normal, the body temperature over one degree below average. I smelled their breath, but there was nothing out of the ordinary. Likewise with their throats and tongues.

I immediately ascertained these weren't the symptoms of food poisoning. Nobody had vomited or suffered diarrhea, and none of them seemed to be in any pain. If the children had eaten something bad you could expect—with this much time having elapsed—the onset of at least one of these symptoms. I heaved a sigh of relief that it wasn't food poisoning. But then I was stumped, since I hadn't a clue what was wrong with them.

The symptoms were similar to sunstroke. Kids often collapse from this

in the summer. It's like it's contagious—once one of them collapses their friends all do the same, one after the other. But this was November, in a cool woods, no less. One or two getting sunstroke is one thing, but sixteen children simultaneously coming down with it was out of the question.

My next thought was some kind of poison gas or nerve gas, either naturally occurring or man-made. But how in the world could gas appear in the middle of the woods in such a remote part of the country? I couldn't account for it. Poison gas, though, would logically explain what I saw that day. Everyone breathed it in, went unconscious, and collapsed on the spot. The homeroom teacher didn't collapse because the concentration of gas wasn't strong enough to affect an adult.

But when it came to treating the children, I was totally lost. I'm just a simple country doctor and have no special expertise in poison gasses, so I was out of my league.

We were out in this remote town and I couldn't very well ring up a specialist. Very gradually, in fact, some of the children were getting better, and I figured that perhaps with time they would all regain consciousness. I know it's an overly optimistic view, but at the time I couldn't think of anything else to do. So I suggested that we just let them lie there quietly for a while and see what developed.

—Was there anything unusual in the air?

I was concerned about that myself, so I took several deep breaths to see if I could detect any unusual odor. But it was just the ordinary smell of a woods in the hills. It was a bracing scent, the fragrance of trees. Nothing unusual about the plants and flowers around there, either. Nothing had changed shape or been discolored.

One by one I examined the mushrooms the children had been picking. There weren't all that many, which led me to conclude that they'd collapsed not long after they began picking them. All of them were typical edible mushrooms. I've been a doctor here for some time and am quite familiar with the different varieties. Of course to be on the safe side I collected them all and took them back and had a specialist examine them. But as far as I could tell, they were all ordinary, edible mushrooms.

—You said the unconscious children's eyes moved back and forth, but did you notice any other unusual symptoms or reactions? For instance, the size of their pupils, the color of the whites of their eyes, the frequency of their blinking?

No. Other than their eyes moving back and forth like a searchlight, there was nothing out of the ordinary. All other functions were completely normal. The children were looking at something. To put a finer point on it,

the children weren't looking at what we could see, but something we couldn't. It was more like they were observing something rather than just looking at it. They were essentially expressionless, but overall they seemed calm, not afraid or in any pain. That's also one of the reasons I decided to just let them lie there and see how things played out. I decided if they're not in any pain, then just let them be for a while.

—Did anyone mention the idea that the children had been gassed?

Yes, they did. But like me they couldn't figure out how it was possible.

I mean, no one had ever heard of somebody going on a hike in the woods and ending up getting gassed. Then one of the people there—the assistant principal, I believe it was—said it might have been gas dropped by the Americans. They must have dropped a bomb with poison gas, he said. The homeroom teacher recalled seeing what looked like a B-29 in the sky just before they started up the hill, flying right overhead. That's it! everyone said, some new poison gas bomb the Americans developed. Rumors about the Americans developing a new kind of bomb had even reached our neck of the woods. But why would the Americans drop their newest weapon in such an out-of-the-way place? That we couldn't explain. But mistakes are part of life, and some things we aren't meant to understand, I suppose.

—After this, then, the children gradually recovered on their own?

They did. I can't tell you how relieved I was. At first they started squirming around, then they sat up unsteadily, gradually regaining consciousness. No one complained of any pain during this process. It was all very quiet, like they were waking up from a deep sleep. And as they regained consciousness their eye movements became normal again. They showed normal reactions to light when I shined a flashlight in their eyes. It took some time, though, for them to be able to speak again—just like you are when you first wake up.

We asked each of the children what had happened, but they looked dumbfounded, like we were asking about something they didn't remember taking place. Going up the hill, starting to gather mushrooms—that much they recalled. Everything after that was a total blank. They had no sense of any time passing between then and now. They start gathering mushrooms, then the curtain falls, and here they are lying on the ground, surrounded by all these adults. The children couldn't figure out why we were all upset, staring at them with these worried looks on our faces. They seemed more afraid of us than anything else.

Sadly, there was one child, a boy, who didn't regain consciousness.

One of the children evacuated from Tokyo. Satoru Nakata, I believe his name was. A small, pale little boy. He was the only one who remained

unconscious. He just lay there on the ground, his eyes moving back and forth. We had to carry him back down the hill. The other children walked back down like nothing had happened.

—Other than this boy, Nakata, none of the other children showed any symptoms later on?

As far as any outward signs at least, no, they displayed no unusual symptoms. No one complained of pain or discomfort. As soon as we got back to the school I brought the children into the nurse's room one by one and examined them—took their temperature, listened to their heart with a stethoscope, checked their vision. Whatever I was able to do at the time I did. I had them solve some simple arithmetic problems, stand on one foot with their eyes closed, things like that. Physically they were fine. They didn't seem tired and had healthy appetites. They'd missed lunch so they all said they were hungry. We gave them rice balls to eat, and they gobbled them up.

A few days later I stopped by the school to observe how the children were doing.

I called a few of them into the nurse's room and questioned them.

Again, though, everything seemed fine. No traces remained, physically or emotionally, from their strange experience. They couldn't even remember

that it had happened. Their lives were completely back to normal, unaffected by the incident. They attended class as usual, sang songs, played outside during recess, everything normal kids did. Their homeroom teacher, however, was a different story: she still seemed in shock.

But that one boy, Nakata, didn't regain consciousness, so the following day he was taken to the university hospital in Kofu. After that he was transferred to a military hospital, and never came back to our town again. I never heard what became of him.

This incident never made the newspapers. My guess is the authorities decided it would only cause unrest, so they banned any mention of it. You have to remember that during the war the military tried to squelch whatever they saw as groundless rumors.

The war wasn't going well, with the military retreating on the southern front, suicide attacks one after the other, air raids on cities getting worse all the time. The military was especially afraid of any antiwar or pacifist sentiment cropping up among the populace.

A few days after the incident the police came calling and warned us that under no circumstances were we to talk about what we'd seen.

The whole thing was an odd, unpleasant affair. Even to this day it's like a weight pressing down on me.

Chapter 5

I'm asleep when our bus drives across the huge new bridge over the Inland Sea. I'd seen the bridge only on maps and had been looking forward to seeing it for real. Somebody gently taps me on the shoulder and I wake up.

"Hey, we're here," the girl says.

I stretch, rub my eyes with the back of my hand, and look out the window. Sure enough, the bus is just pulling into what looks like the square in front of a station. Fresh morning sunlight lights up the scene. Almost blinding, but gentle somehow, the light is different from what I was used to in Tokyo. I glance at my watch .6:32.

"Gosh, what a long trip," she says tiredly. "I thought my lower back was going to give out. And my neck's killing me. You aren't going to catch me on an all-night bus again. I'm taking the plane from now on, even if it's more expensive. Turbulence, hijackings—I don't care. Give me a plane any day."

I lower her suitcase and my backpack from the overhead rack. "What's your name?" I ask.

"My name?"

"Yeah."