

MURAKAMI



KAFKA
ON THE SHORE

VINTAGE

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About the Author

Haruki Murakami was born in Kyoto in 1949 and now lives near Tokyo. He is the author of many novels as well as short stories and non-fiction. His works include *Norwegian Wood*, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, *Kafka on the Shore*, *After Dark* and *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*. His work has been translated into more than forty languages, and the most recent of his many international honours is the Jerusalem Prize, whose previous recipients include J.M. Coetzee, Milan Kundera, and V.S. Naipaul.

ALSO BY HARUKI MURAKAMI

Fiction

After Dark

After the Quake

Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman

Dance Dance Dance

The Elephant Vanishes

Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World

Norwegian Wood

South of the Border, West of the Sun

Sputnik Sweetheart

A Wild Sheep Chase

The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle

1Q84

Non Fiction

Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche

What I Talk About When I Talk About Running

Haruki Murakami

KAFKA ON THE SHORE

TRANSLATED FROM THE JAPANESE BY
Philip Gabriel

VINTAGE BOOKS
London



The Boy Named Crow

“SO YOU’RE ALL set for money, then?” the boy named Crow asks in his characteristic sluggish voice. The kind of voice you have 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 ¥400,000 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 out 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 15-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 starting out 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 have to 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 grown a whole lot stronger. I’ve got to hand it to you.”

I nod again.

“But let’s face it – you’re only 15,” 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 about 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.

“OK, picture a terrible sandstorm,” he says. “Get everything else out of your head.”

I do as he says, get everything else out of my head. I forget who I am, even. I’m a total blank. Then things begin 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 direction,” Crow says.

Sometimes fate is like a small sandstorm that keeps changing direction. 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* 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 pulverised bones. That’s the kind of sandstorm you need to imagine.

And that’s exactly what I do. I imagine a white funnel stretching vertically up 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 rests a hand softly on my shoulder, and with that the storm vanishes.

“From now on – no matter what – you’ve got to be the world’s toughest 15-year-old. That’s the only way you’re going to survive. And in order to do that, you’ve got to figure 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 15-year-old,” Crow whispers as I try to fall asleep. As if he were 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.

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 for skinning 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 torch from a drawer. Plus sky-blue Revo sunglasses to disguise my age.

I think about taking my father's favourite Sea 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 photograph 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 one 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 idea. 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's 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 mobile phone with me. Once he finds out I've taken it, my father will probably get the phone company to cut it off. Still, I toss it in my backpack, along with the adapter. Doesn't add much weight, so why not. When it doesn't work any more I'll just throw it away.

Just the bare necessities, that's all I need. Choosing which clothes to take is the hardest thing. I'll need a couple of sweaters and pairs of underwear. But what about shirts and trousers? Gloves, scarves, 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 was bound 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,

toiletries, 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 shop.

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 lot of other things and cross them off, too.

My fifteenth birthday is the ideal point 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 practising judo in the first couple of 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 17. If I ran away looking my actual age, you can imagine all the problems that would cause.

Apart from 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 hardly 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 as 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 as 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 any more, 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 work out what to keep and what to unload.

I did what he said, as I almost always do. My brain like a sponge, I focused on every word said in class and let it all sink in, worked out what it meant and committed everything to memory. Thanks to this, I hardly had to study outside the classroom, 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 or 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 as 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 another person. Let alone

myself.

I'm not trying to imply I can keep up this silent, isolated façade 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 realise what's going on, there I am – naked and defenceless and utterly 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 study my face in the mirror. Genes I inherited from my father and mother – not that I had any recollection of what she looked like – created this face. I can do my best not to 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 definitely 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 want to drive that away I'd have to get rid of *me*.

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

A mechanism buried inside 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 3 p.m., the two hands cold and distant. They're pretending to be non-committal, but I know they're not on my side. It's nearly time for me to say goodbye. 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 a long way 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 doubt they will – Shikoku would be the last place they'd think of.

I pick up the ticket I'd booked at the counter and climb aboard the night bus. This is the cheapest way to get to Takamatsu – just a little more than ¥10,000. 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 of the passengers are travelling 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.

Some time 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 street lights alongside the road that stretch off into the distance at identical intervals as if they'd been set down to measure the earth. A new light rushes up close and in an instant fades away 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 to sleep.

THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENT, classified Top Secret by the US 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, DC, 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 2nd 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 Pte William Cohen prepared the documents.

Interviews were conducted over a twelve-day period in the reception room of the [name deleted] 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-722-8936745-42216-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. There 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 reckoned 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 10 a.m. on November 7, 1944.

But I saw it clearly, and so did the 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 plane flying all by itself, not part of a formation.

Where 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 had no children.

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

Sixteen altogether, boys and girls. Two were off 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 regard.

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 a long 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 in 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. 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 expeditions 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 only 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 walked 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 been going for about ten minutes we came to a clearing, a broad area as flat as a table top. 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 as if we were in a miniature town square, with the sky bright above us. My class often stopped at 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 wood, 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 one 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 ran over to the spot and lifted 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 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 snake bites. The children were simply unconscious.

The strangest thing was their eyes. Their bodies were so limp it was as if they were in a coma, yet their eyes were open, seeming to be looking at something. They'd blink every once in a while, so it wasn't as though they were asleep. And their eyes moved very slowly from side to side, as if they were scanning a distant horizon. Their eyes at least were conscious. But they weren't actually looking at anything, or at least nothing I could see. 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 16 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, as if 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.

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 dripping wet. 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 ploughs down the highway at a steady pace, the tyres 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, towards 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 take 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, get 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 20-minute break. We'll be leaving again at 5.30, so please be sure to be back on board by then."

The announcement wakes up most of the passengers, and they struggle wordlessly 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 toilet and splash some water on my face. I'm wondering where the devil 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 colour 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 plonks herself down on the plastic seat next to me. In her right hand she has a paper cup of hot coffee she bought in a vending machine, the steam rising 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 she's not so wild about her look herself, 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 crew-neck shirt with wide stripes. A small leather backpack hangs from one shoulder, and a light sweater's tied around her neck. A cream-coloured 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 can't come up with his name. I must have busted a hole in my brain trying to remember. That happens sometimes, doesn't it? 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 broken 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 that 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 really nice guy, that’s all.”

Her smile steps offstage for a moment, then does an encore, and all the 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?”

Another 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 little.”

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 favour?” she says.

“A favour?”

“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 40 winks before we arrive, and you seem like a nice guy. Do you mind?”

“No problem.”

“Thanks,” she says. “‘In travelling, a companion’, as the saying goes.”

I nod. Nod, nod, nod – that’s all I seemed 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 travelling, 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 5.30 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 highway rest area is just a place you pass through. Getting 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 toilets 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 all 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 pair 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 next to me – a nothing kind of suitcase she must've picked up at some discount place. I pick it up for her and store it in the overhead rack. Pretty heavy for its size. She thanks me, then reclines her seat and fades off to sleep. As if it can hardly 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 crew-neck shirt, a thin, cream-coloured 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 making any effort 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 completely 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 the deck, and she's the sea. The sky is a blanket of grey, merging with the grey 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 varnish. 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, strangely fragile.

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