HEAR THE WIND SING

1

“There’s no such thing as a perfect piece of writing. Just as there’s no such thing as perfect despair.” So said a writer I bumped into back when I was a university student. It wasn’t until much later that I could grasp his full meaning, but I still found consolation in his words—that there’s no such thing as perfect writing.

All the same, I despaired whenever I sat down to write. The scope of what I could handle was just too limited. I could write something about an elephant, let’s say, but when it came to the elephant’s trainer, I might draw a blank. That kind of thing.

I was caught in this bind for eight years—eight years. A long time.

If one operates on the principle that everything can be a learning experience, then of course aging needn’t be so painful. That’s what they tell us, anyway.

From the age of twenty on, I did my best to live according to that philosophy. As a result, I was cheated and misunderstood, used and abused, time and again. Yet it also brought me many strange experiences. All sorts of people told me their stories. Then they left, never to return, as if I were no more than a bridge they were clattering across. I, however, kept my lips zipped tight. And so the stories stayed with me until I entered this, the final year of my twenties.

—

Now I think it’s time to tell my story.

Which doesn’t mean, of course, that I have resolved even one of my problems, or that I will be somehow different when I finish. I may not have changed at all. In the end, writing is not a full step toward self-healing, just a tiny, very tentative move in that direction.

All the same, writing honestly is very difficult. The more I try to be

honest, the farther my words sink into darkness.

Don't take this as an excuse. I promise you—I've told my story as best I can right now. There's nothing to add. Yet I can't help thinking: if all goes well, a time may come, years or even decades from now, when I will discover that my self has been salvaged and redeemed. Then the elephant will return to the veldt, and I will tell the story of the world in words far more beautiful than these.

*

I learned a lot of what I know about writing from Derek Hartfield. Almost everything, in fact. Unfortunately, as a writer, Hartfield was sterile in the full sense of the word. One has only to read some of his stuff to see that. His prose is mangled, his stories slapdash, his themes juvenile. Yet he was a fighter as few are, a man who used words as weapons. In my opinion, when it comes to sheer combativeness he should be ranked right up there with the giants of his day, Hemingway and Fitzgerald. Sadly, however, he could never fully grasp exactly what it was he was fighting against. In the final reckoning, I suppose, that's what being sterile is all about.

Hartfield waged his fruitless battle for eight years and two months, and then he died. In June 1938, on a sunny Sunday morning, he jumped off the Empire State Building clutching a portrait of Adolf Hitler in his right hand and an open umbrella in his left. Few people noticed, though—he was as ignored in death as he had been in life.

I came across a copy of Hartfield's long-out-of-print first book during my last summer vacation of junior high, a time marked in my memory by a terrible case of crotch rot. The uncle who gave me the book died in agony three years later of intestinal cancer. The last time I saw him, the doctors had hacked him up so badly that he bristled with plastic tubes ferrying fluids in and out of both ends of his body. He was shrunken and his skin had turned reddish brown, so that he resembled a crafty old monkey.

*

I had three uncles in total. One died just outside Shanghai two days after the end of the Pacific War when he stepped on a land mine he himself had laid. My sole surviving uncle works as a magician on the Japanese hot springs circuit.

*

Hartfield says this about good writing: “Writing is, in effect, the act of verifying the distance between us and the things surrounding us. What we need is not sensitivity but a measuring stick” (from *What’s So Bad About Feeling Good?*, 1936).

I began fearfully scanning the world around me with a measuring stick in hand the year Kennedy was shot, which was fifteen years ago now—fifteen years spent jettisoning one thing after another. Like an airplane with engine trouble, I started by pitching out the cargo, then the seats, then, finally, the poor flight attendants, getting rid of everything while taking on nothing new at all.

Was this the right way? How the hell should I know! Sure, life is easier like this, but I get scared when I imagine what it will be like to be old and facing death. I mean, what will be left after they incinerate my corpse? Not even a shard of bone.

My late grandmother used to say, “People with dark hearts have dark dreams. Those whose hearts are even darker can’t dream at all.”

The night she died, the first thing I did was reach out and gently close her eyes. And in that moment, all the dreams she’d seen in her seventy-nine years vanished without a sound (poof!), like a summer shower on hot pavement. Nothing left.

*

One last thing about writing.

I find the act of writing very painful. I can go a whole month without managing a single line, or write three days and nights straight, only to find the whole thing has missed the mark.

At the same time, though, I love writing. Ascribing meaning to life is

a piece of cake compared to actually living it.

I was in my teens, I think, when I discovered this, and it so completely blew my mind that I couldn't talk for a week. If I could just keep my wits about me, I felt, I could force the world to conform to my will, overturning whole systems of values, and altering the flow of time.

Sadly for me, it took ages to see that this was a trap. When at last I caught on, I took a blank notebook and drew a line down the middle; then I listed all that I had gained from this principle on the left-hand side and all that I had lost on the right. It turned out that I had lost so much—things long abandoned, trampled underfoot, sacrificed, betrayed—I couldn't even write them all down.

A gulf separates what we attempt to perceive from what we are actually able to perceive. It is so deep that it can never be calculated, however long our measuring stick. What I can set down here is no more than a list. It's not a novel or even literature, nor is it art. It's just a notebook with a line drawn down the middle. It may contain something of a moral, though.

If it's art or literature you're interested in, I suggest you read the Greeks. Pure art exists only in slave-owning societies. The Greeks had slaves to till their fields, prepare their meals, and row their galleys while they lay about on sun-splashed Mediterranean beaches, composing poems and grappling with mathematical equations. That's what art is.

If you're the sort of guy who raids the refrigerators of silent kitchens at three o'clock in the morning, you can only write accordingly.

That's who I am.

▸ 2

This story begins on August 8, 1970, and ends eighteen days later—in other words, on August 26 of the same year.

3

“Eat shit, you rich bastards!” the Rat shouted, glowering at me, with his hands resting on the bar.

Maybe it wasn’t me he was bellowing at but the coffee grinder behind me. Since we were sitting side by side, he really didn’t have to raise his voice like that. Whatever the cause, he seemed to have become his old self again. He took a satisfied swig of beer.

No one in the bar gave a damn about the Rat’s shouting. Fact was, the place was so packed everyone and his cousin was yelling. It looked like the *Titanic* just before it sank.

“Leeches!” the Rat spat out, shaking his head. “The bastards can’t do a damn thing for themselves. Looking at their faces makes me want to puke.”

I nodded back without taking my lips from the rim of my glass. Rant ended, the Rat began contemplating his slender fingers, turning them back and forth on the bar, as if warming them over a fire. I studied the ceiling and waited. He would have to examine each finger before our conversation could resume. So what else was new?

The Rat and I had spent the whole summer as if possessed, drinking enough beer to fill a twenty-five-meter pool and scattering enough peanut shells to cover the entire floor of J’s Bar to a depth of two inches. We were bored out of our skulls that summer, and surviving the only way we knew how.

When the boredom grew too much to bear, I contemplated the nicotine-stained print hanging behind the bar. It was the kind of picture you’d find on a Rorschach test: from where I sat, it resembled two green monkeys tossing deflated tennis balls back and forth. I spent hours looking at it.

When I told J the bartender what it reminded me of, he just shrugged. “Yeah, I guess I can see that,” he said, after studying it for a moment.

“But what do you think it symbolizes?” I persisted.

“The monkey on the left is you,” he replied. “And the one on the right is me. I’m throwing you a beer and you’re tossing me back the money.”

Far out, I thought, taking another swig of beer.

—

“Makes me want to puke,” said the Rat, his finger inspection complete.

The Rat was always running down the rich—he out-and-out despised them. Yet his family was loaded. Whenever I pointed that out, his reply was always, “Ain’t my fault.” There were times (usually when we were smashed) when I said, “Sure it is,” but to say that only bummed me out. I knew there was some truth in what he said.

—

“Know why I hate the rich so much?” the Rat continued. This was the first time he’d gotten past the puking part.

I shook my head no.

“To be blunt, ’cause they don’t have a goddamn clue. They can’t scratch their own asses without a flashlight and a measuring tape.”

“To be blunt” was one of the Rat’s signature phrases.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. They’re totally in the dark, the whole lot of them. They only pretend to think about important stuff…Know why?”

“No, why?”

“’Cause they don’t need to, that’s why. Sure, they have to use their brains a little to get rich in the first place, but once they make it, it’s a piece of cake—they don’t need to think anymore. Like an orbiting satellite doesn’t need gas. They just keep going round and round, always over the same damn place. But I’m not like that, and neither are you. We have to use our brains to survive. We think about everything, from tomorrow’s weather to the size of the bathtub plug. Right?”

“Right,” I said.

“That’s where things stand.”

The Rat looked bored. He pulled out a tissue and blew his nose. He’d said everything he wanted to say, but how seriously was I supposed to take him? I had no idea.

“In the end we all die anyway,” I said, trying to feel him out.

“Yeah. We all die. But it’ll take another fifty years. And, to be blunt, fifty years spent thinking is a helluva lot more exhausting than five thousand years of living without using your brain, right?”

No argument there.

4

I had met the Rat three years earlier. It was the spring of our first year in college, and both of us were flat-out wasted. In fact, for the life of me, I can’t remember how we met or how I ended up in his shiny black Fiat 600 at 4 a.m. Maybe we had a mutual friend.

Anyhow, there we were, smashed, flying down the road. Which explains why we went merrily crashing through the park fence, bulldozed the azaleas, and wrapped ourselves around one of the stone pillars. It was a frigging miracle neither of us got hurt.

When I recovered from the shock, I kicked my way out through the busted car door and surveyed the damage. The front grill had assumed the exact shape of the pillar, while the hood had flown off and landed some ten yards away, in front of the monkey cage. Judging by the sounds they were making, the monkeys did not appreciate being awoken in such a rude fashion.

With both hands still on the wheel, the Rat was bent over vomiting the pizza he’d eaten an hour before all over the dashboard. I scrambled up onto the car and looked down at him through the sunroof.

“Are you okay?” I called to him.

“Yeah, but I guess I overdid the booze. Puking like this.”

“Can you get out?”

“Yeah. Just give me a boost.”

The Rat cut the engine, stuck the pack of cigarettes he’d left on the dashboard into his pocket, grabbed my hand, and calmly climbed up onto the car roof. There we sat side by side, smoking one cigarette after another in silence as the sky began to lighten. For some reason, I started thinking about a Richard Burton war movie, that one where he plays a tank commander. I have no idea what was on the Rat’s mind.

“Hey,” he said after about five minutes. “We’re a lucky pair, don’t you think? I mean, just look at us—not a scratch. Can you believe it?”

I nodded. “But the car’s a write-off,” I said.

“Don’t sweat it. I can always buy a new one. But you can’t buy luck.”

I gave the Rat a closer look. “Are you rich or something?”

“Looks like it.”

“That’s good.”

The Rat shook his head in disgust. “Whatever. But at least we’ve got luck on our side.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

The Rat ground out his cigarette with the heel of his sneaker and flicked the butt toward the monkey cage.

“Hey, how about we team up? We could have a blast.”

“What should we do now?”

“Drink more beer.”

We bought a half-dozen cans from a nearby vending machine and carried them down to the ocean, lay on the beach, and drank. When we’d drained them all we just looked at the water. The weather was perfect.

“You can call me Rat,” he said.

“How’d you get a name like that?”

“Don’t remember. Happened a long time ago. It bugged me at first, but not anymore. A guy can get used to anything.”

We chucked the empty cans into the ocean, propped our backs

against the embankment, pulled our coats over our heads, and took an hour-long nap. When I woke I was filled with an intense sense of being alive. It was weird—I had never felt that kind of energy before.

"Man, I feel like I could run sixty miles!" I told the Rat.

"Me too," he said.

—

But what we had to do in reality was make payments over the next three years, with interest, to city hall for the cost of repairing the damage to the park.

5

The Rat is a virtual stranger to books. In fact, the only things I've seen him read are sports newspapers and junk mail. Still, he's always curious about the books I read to kill time, peering at them with the curiosity of a fly staring at a flyswatter.

"Why do you read books?" he asked.

"Why do you drink beer?" I replied without glancing in his direction, taking alternate mouthfuls of pickled herring and green salad. The Rat saw this as a very serious question.

"The good thing about beer," he said about five minutes later, "is that you piss it all out. Like a one-out, one-on double play, nothing's left over."

He studied me as I ate.

"So why do you read books all the time?" he asked again.

I washed down the last piece of herring and set the plate aside. Then I picked up my copy of *A Sentimental Education* and flipped through the pages.

"It's because Flaubert's already dead."

"So you don't read books by living writers?"

“No, I don’t see the point.”

“Why not?”

“I guess because I feel like I can forgive dead people,” I said, shifting my attention to the *Route 66* rerun on the portable TV behind the bar. “As a rule, that is.” That sent the Rat back to thinking.

“So then what about people who are alive and breathing?” he said a few minutes later. “As a rule, you can’t forgive them?”

“I wonder. Haven’t given it much thought. But if you backed me into a corner then I’d have to say, yeah, it’s possible. Maybe I can’t forgive them.”

J came and set two fresh beers on the counter in front of us.

“So then what would you do?”

“I’d go to bed and hug my pillow,” I answered.

“That’s too weird for me,” the Rat said, shaking his head.

I poured beer in the Rat’s glass, but he just sat there hunched over, lost in thought.

“The last book I read was last summer,” he said presently. “Can’t remember the title or the author’s name. Forget why I read it, too. Anyway, it was by a woman. The main character is this fashion designer, a woman about thirty, who’s obsessed with this idea that she’s got an incurable disease.”

“What kind of incurable disease?”

“I dunno, maybe cancer. Is there any other kind?...So she goes to a seaside resort where she spends all her time masturbating. In the bath, in the woods, on the bed, in the ocean, that’s all she does, masturbates everywhere you can imagine.”

“In the ocean?”

“Yeah...Can you believe it? Why would anybody put that in a novel? There’s plenty of other things to write about, right?”

“You’d think so.”

“A novel like that’s not for me. Makes me want to puke.”

I nodded.

“If it were my novel, I’d do it differently.”

“Like how?”

The Rat fiddled with the rim of his glass and thought.

“Okay, how about this? I’m on a boat in the middle of the Pacific, see, and it sinks. So I grab a life preserver, and there I am floating around in the water all by myself, looking up at the stars. It’s a beautiful, quiet night. And then I see this young woman paddling toward me, clinging to her own life preserver.”

“Is she hot?”

“You bet.”

I took a sip of my beer.

“Sounds pretty lame,” I said, shaking my head.

“Hold on, I’m not done. So then the two of us start talking, floating right there in the middle of the ocean. We talk about all kinds of stuff—the past and the future, our hobbies, how many girls I’ve slept with, what TV shows we like, what we dreamed the night before, that sort of thing. Then we start drinking beer.”

“Wait a minute there. Where does the beer come from?”

The Rat thought for a moment. “It’s drifting in the water,” he said. “Cans of beer that floated out from the ship’s kitchen. Cans of sardines, too. Does that work?”

“Okay.”

“After a while it grows light. ‘What’ll you do now?’ the girl asks. ‘I’ve got a hunch an island is nearby; I think I’ll swim in that direction.’ But I know her hunch may be wrong. So I tell her, ‘Let’s just keep floating here and drinking beer. An airplane is sure to come and rescue us in the end.’ But she swims off alone.”

The Rat sighed and took a swig of beer.

“She swims for two days and two nights and finally reaches an island. True to form, I’ve got a major hangover by the time the airplane finds me. Then, years later, the two of us bump into each other in a little neighborhood bar.”

“And you start drinking beer again, right?”

“Doesn’t it make you want to cry?”

“Yeah, sure,” I said.

6

The Rat’s novel had two good things about it. First, there were no sex scenes; second, no one died. Guys don’t need any encouragement—left to themselves, they still die and sleep with girls. That’s just the way it is.

*

“Do you think I was wrong?” the girl asks.

The Rat takes another swig of beer. “To be blunt,” he says, slowly shaking his head, “we’re all wrong, every one of us.”

“Why do you think that?”

The Rat sighs and licks his upper lip. There’s no way to answer her.

“I swam and swam toward that island until I thought my arms would fall off. It hurt so much I thought I would die. And you know what I kept thinking as I swam? That maybe you were right and I was wrong. I kept asking myself, how could you just float there not doing anything when I was suffering?”

The girl gives a small, sad laugh and presses the corners of her eyes with her fingertips. The Rat squirms and fishes about in his pockets. Three years without a cigarette, but now he’s got to have one.

“Did you wish I were dead?”

“A little.”

“Really just a little?”

“…I forget what I felt.”

They both fall silent. The Rat senses the need to say something.

“All men are not created equal, you know.”

“Who said that?”

“John F. Kennedy.”

7

I was a very quiet child. So quiet, in fact, that my worried parents took me to see a friend of theirs who was a psychiatrist.

This doctor’s house was perched on a bluff overlooking the ocean. I sat on his sofa in a bright, sunlit drawing room while an elegant middle-aged lady served me cold orange juice and two doughnuts. I drank the juice and ate half of one of the doughnuts, taking care not to spill any of the sugar on my knees.

“Want some more juice?” the doctor asked. I shook my head. Just the two of us were there, sitting face-to-face. On the opposite wall hung a portrait of Mozart. He glared at me in reproach, like a timid cat.

“Long ago,” began the doctor, “there lived a friendly goat.” It was a great opening. I closed my eyes and imagined a friendly goat.

“The goat carried a heavy gold watch on a chain around his neck that made him huff and puff when he walked. Not only was this watch an awful burden, its hands no longer moved. One day, the rabbit, a friend of the goat, came to see him. ‘Why lug that useless watch around everywhere?’ he asked the goat. ‘It doesn’t work, and it looks very heavy.’ ‘You’re right, it is heavy,’ answered the goat. ‘But I’ve grown used to it. To its weight, and the fact that its hands don’t move.’ ”

The doctor took a sip from his own glass of orange juice and smiled at me. I sat there and waited for him to continue.

“One afternoon, on the friendly goat’s birthday, the rabbit showed up carrying a small box tied with a beautiful ribbon. Inside was a glittering, lightweight new watch in perfect working order. The goat happily hung the watch from his neck and ran around to show it to all of his friends.”

The story abruptly broke off there.

"You are the goat," said the doctor. "I am the rabbit, and the watch is your heart."

I felt helpless, as if I had been tricked. All I could do was nod.

After that we began meeting every Sunday afternoon. I had to take a train and then a bus to reach the doctor's home, where, each visit, I was treated to muffins, apple pie, syrupy pancakes, honeyed croissants, and other sweets. These treatments lasted a whole year, after which I was stuck paying regular visits to the dentist.

—

"Civilization is communication," the doctor said. "That which is not expressed doesn't exist. Understand? A big fat zero. Let's say you want something to eat. All you need to do is say the words, 'I'm hungry.' Then I give you cookies. Go ahead, take them. [I grabbed a cookie.] If you don't speak, then there are no cookies. [As if to be mean, the doctor snatched the plate of cookies and hid it under his desk.] Zero. Got it? You don't want to talk. But you're hungry. So you want to tell people without using words. Like a game of pantomime. Try it."

I grabbed my stomach and made a painful face. The doctor laughed. "You look like you've got a stomachache," he said.

A stomachache…

—

We went on from there to free association.

"Say something about a cat. Anything."

I slowly rotated my head, pretending to be thinking.

"Whatever comes to mind."

"It has four legs."

"So does an elephant."

"It's a lot smaller."

"What else?"

“It lives in people’s homes and kills mice when it feels like it.”

“What does it eat?”

“Fish.”

“How about sausages?”

“Sausages too.”

We carried on in that vein.

The doctor was right. Civilization is communication. When that which should be expressed and transmitted is lost, civilization comes to an end. Click…OFF.

In the spring of my fourteenth year, without warning, a torrent of words came gushing from my mouth. It was as if a dam had broken. I have no memory of what I said, but for the next three months I talked nonstop, as if trying to fill in the void of the previous fourteen years. When the flood of words ended in mid-July, I developed a high fever and had to stay home from school for three days. Once the fever subsided, I was no longer a chatterbox, nor was I tongue-tied. I was just an ordinary kid.

8

I woke before 6 a.m. feeling very thirsty. Whenever I wake up in someone else’s home, I feel like I’m stuck in another body inhabited by someone else’s spirit. It took every ounce of energy just to drag myself out of the narrow bed and walk to the sink by the door, where I drank like a horse, draining glass after glass of water before staggering back to bed.

Through an open window, a thin slice of ocean was visible, its ripples glittering in the early-morning sun. If I looked hard I could make out several grimy, tired-looking freighters floating far offshore. All signs pointed to another scorcher of a day. The whole neighborhood was asleep, the only sounds the occasional creak of the train tracks and the faint melody of a radio calisthenics broadcast.

Still naked, I propped myself against the headboard, lit a cigarette, and studied the girl lying beside me. Since the window faced south, her whole body was in direct sunlight. She was sound asleep with the terry-cloth blanket pushed down to her ankles. Every so often her breath would quicken, and her well-shaped breasts would rise and fall. She had a deep tan, but the sheen had dulled with time, and the white patches left by her swimsuit looked almost rotten.

I finished my smoke and then wasted the next ten minutes attempting to recall her name. The problem was I couldn't remember if she'd mentioned it in the first place. Giving up, I yawned and took another look at her body. She was on the skinny side, probably a year or two shy of twenty. Using my open hand, I measured her from head to toe. Eight hand lengths, with a thumb left over for her heel. It added up to precisely five feet three inches.

There was a coin-sized mark the color of Worcestershire sauce below her right breast. Her delicate pubic hair reminded me of river grass after a flood. To top things off, her left hand had only four fingers.

9

It took her about three hours to wake up and another five minutes to become aware of her surroundings. All that time I sat there with my arms folded, watching the thick clouds on the horizon change shape as they headed east.

The next time I checked, she had pulled her terry-cloth blanket up to her neck and was looking up at me with a vacant expression. She seemed to be fighting the fumes of what whiskey remained in her belly.

"Who…are you?"

"You don't remember?"

She gave a quick shake of her head. I lit a cigarette and offered her

one, which she ignored.

"Explain."

"Where should I begin?"

"At the beginning."

The beginning? I hadn't a clue where that was, or how to explain things in a way she could accept. It might work, but then again it might not. It took me ten seconds to put my thoughts in order.

"It was a balmy day," I began. "I spent the afternoon swimming at the pool, then went home, took a nap, and had dinner. By then it was after eight. I got in my car and went for a drive. I stopped along the coast road and looked at the ocean while listening to the radio. It's a habit of mine.

"After about half an hour of that I started feeling like I wanted some company. Looking at the ocean makes me miss people, and hanging out with people makes me miss the ocean. It's weird. Anyway, I decided to go to J's Bar. A cold beer was calling me, and I figured my buddy would be there. He wasn't, though. So I drank alone. Three beers in just an hour."

I broke off to flick my ash into the ashtray.

"By the way, did you ever read *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*?"

She didn't reply, just lay there glaring at the ceiling and clutching her blanket like a beached mermaid. No big deal. I went on with my story.

"See, I always think of that play when I'm drinking alone. As if I'll reach a moment when something will click in my head and all my problems will disappear. But it never works that way. Nothing ever clicks. Anyway, after a while I got tired of waiting for my buddy, so I phoned his apartment. Figured I'd invite him out for a few drinks. But a girl answered the phone…Freaked me out. I mean, he's not that kind of guy. There could be fifty girls there with him totally sloshed, but he'd still answer his own phone. Know what I mean?

"I pretended I'd dialed the wrong number and hung up. Still, the call made me feel kind of low. Don't know why exactly. So I had another beer. But it didn't cheer me up. Sure, I was acting like an idiot. But,

hey, what else is new? I finished my beer and called J over so I could pay my tab. Figured I'd head home, listen to the baseball scores, and go to bed. But he tells me to go to the washroom and wash my face. J believes you can drink a case of beer and still drive as long as you splash water on your face first. So I head off in the direction of the washroom. To tell you the truth, though, I wasn't really planning to wash up. I was just going to fake it. J's sink is usually backed up, with water in the basin. I don't like going in there. But last night, for a change, the sink was fine. But you were sprawled out on the floor."

She sighed and closed her eyes.

"And then?"

"Then I hoisted you off the washroom floor and lugged you back to the bar, figuring I could find someone who knew you. But no one did. Then J and I patched up your wound."

"Wound?"

"You whacked your head when you fell. Just a little cut."

Nodding, she drew her hand from the blanket and passed it across the cut on her forehead.

"So J and I talked it over. To decide what to do about you. In the end, I brought you home in my car. We went through your bag and came up with a change purse, a key holder, and a postcard with your name and address on it. I took money from the change purse to pay your tab, drove to the address on the postcard, and used your key to let us in. Then I put you to bed. End of story. The receipt for the bar bill is in your purse."

She took a deep breath.

"So why did you crash here?"

"?"

"Why didn't you just take off once you'd put me to bed?"

"A friend of mine died of alcohol poisoning. He chugged some whiskey, said goodbye, walked home, brushed his teeth, put on his pajamas, and went to bed. Next morning he was stone cold. Fine funeral, though."

"…You mean to say you nursed me all night?"

"I planned to head home around four. But I fell asleep. I thought of leaving when I woke up too. But I decided to hang around."

"Why?"

"I figured you should at least know what happened."

"*A real gentleman, huh?*"

Her words were as poisonous as she could make them. I shrugged and let them pass. Then I went back to watching the clouds.

"Did I…say anything?"

"A little."

"Like what?"

"Like a few things. I've forgotten what. No big deal."

She groaned without opening her eyes.

"The postcard?"

"It's in your bag."

"Did you read it?"

"Give me a break."

"Why not?"

"Why would I?"

I was getting fed up. Something about her tone pissed me off. At the same time, though, I have to admit she was making me feel a little nostalgic. For something in the distant past. If we'd had the good fortune to meet under more normal circumstances, we might have spent our time together more pleasantly. Or so it felt. Yet for the life of me I couldn't remember what it was like to meet a girl under normal circumstances.

"What time is it?" she asked.

Somewhat relieved, I got out of bed and checked the electric clock on her desk, then filled a glass with water and brought it back to her.

"Nine o'clock."

She gave a weak nod, sat up, and drained the glass with her back against the wall.

“Did I drink a lot?”

“Quite a bit. I would have died.”

“I feel half dead right now.”

She took a cigarette from the pack next to the bed, lit it, and let out a sigh with the first puff. She flipped the match out the open window toward the harbor.

“Grab me something to wear.”

“Like what?”

She closed her eyes again, the cigarette still dangling from her lips. “Any old thing. And cool it with the damn questions.”

I went to the wardrobe across the room, opened the doors, and, after some hesitation, took out a sleeveless blue shift and handed it to her. She pulled it over her head without bothering to put on panties, and zipped the back up herself. Then she let out another sigh.

“Gotta run.”

“Where to?”

“Work,” she spat out, staggering to her feet. I sat there on the edge of the bed watching her as she washed her face and passed a brush through her hair.

She kept her room neat but only to a degree, as if to make it any nicer wasn’t worth the effort. Resignation hung heavily in the air.

The room was ten feet square and packed with cheap furniture, leaving enough space to lie down and no more. She stood there brushing her hair.

“What kind of work?”

“None of your business.”

No argument there.

I kept silent for the interval it took a cigarette to burn itself out. She was peering in the mirror with her back to me, massaging the dark lines under her eyes with her fingertips.

“What time is it?” she asked again.

“Ten after nine.”

“We’ve got to go. Put on your clothes and go home,” she said, spraying her armpits with an aerosol can of eau de cologne. “You do have a home, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” I replied, pulling on my T-shirt as I sat there on the bed. I took a long last look out the window. “Where are you headed?”

“Near the harbor. What’s it to you?”

“I’ll give you a lift. That way you won’t be late.”

She stared at me, hairbrush in hand, looking as if she would burst into tears any minute. She’ll feel better if she does, I thought. But she didn’t.

“Look, let’s get one thing clear. I drank too much, more than I could handle. Whatever happened after that is my responsibility.”

She was slapping the handle of the brush against her hand in an almost businesslike manner. I didn’t say anything, waiting for her to go on.

“Am I right?”

“Sure.”

“But a guy who’ll take advantage of a girl who’s passed out…you can’t get any lower than that.”

“But we didn’t do anything.”

A moment passed. I could see her struggling to control her anger.

“Oh yeah? Then why was I naked?”

“You took your own clothes off.”

“Fat chance!”

She hurled the brush on the bed and began hurriedly stuffing things into her shoulder bag. Wallet, lipstick, aspirin.

“Can you prove we didn’t do anything?”

“Why don’t you check and see?”

“How the hell could I do that?” She was seriously pissed off.

“You have my word of honor.”

“I can’t trust you.”

“You have no choice.” Now I was in a foul mood too.

Giving up on our conversation, she pushed me out of her room, followed me through the door, and locked it.

—

We walked along the asphalt path bordering the river to the vacant lot where my car was parked without so much as a single word.

I wiped the dust off the windshield with a tissue while she slowly circled the car, eyeing it with suspicion. She stopped to stare at the big white bull's head painted on the hood. The bull had a huge ring through his nose and a white rose between his teeth. He was smiling a lewd smile.

"Did you paint that?"

"No, the previous owner did."

"Why a bull?"

"Beats me."

She took two steps back to study the bull some more, then got in the car with her lips clamped shut, as if regretting having talked too much.

The car was stifling hot, but she smoked one cigarette after another in silence all the way to the harbor, mopping her sweat with a towel as she smoked. She would light one up, take three puffs, examine the lipstick stain on the filter, and then butt it out in the car's ashtray before firing up another.

"Hey, about last night. What did I say?" she exclaimed, when we reached our destination.

"All kinds of stuff."

"Like what? Tell me."

"Like about Kennedy, for example."

"Kennedy?"

"Yeah, John F. Kennedy."

She shook her head and sighed.

"I can't remember a thing."

—

When she got out of the car, she tucked a single thousand-yen bill behind my rearview mirror.

10

It was a real scorcher of a night. Hot enough to soft-boil an egg.

The chill of the air-conditioning met me when I backed my way as usual through the heavy door of J's Bar, the stale aroma of cigarettes, whiskey, French fries, unwashed armpits, and bad plumbing all neatly layered like a Baumkuchen. I took my usual seat at the end of the bar, back against the wall, and surveyed the scene. There were three French sailors in an unfamiliar uniform, two girls they had brought with them, and a young couple who looked about twenty years old. That was it. No sign of the Rat.

I ordered a corned beef sandwich and a beer, pulled out my book, and leaned back to wait.

Ten minutes later, a thirtyish woman in a gaudy dress, with breasts like grapefruits, entered the bar and took a seat two down from mine. She scanned the room just as I had done and ordered a gimlet. When the drink came, she took one sip, got up, walked over to the pay phone, and made a call that seemed to go on forever. When the call was over, she grabbed her purse and disappeared into the toilet. This pattern repeated itself three times over the next forty minutes. Gimlet, long phone call, purse, toilet.

J the bartender came down to my end of the bar. "She'll wear her ass out at this rate," he muttered, a disgusted look on his face. J may be Chinese, but his Japanese is a hell of a lot better than mine.

When the woman came back from the toilet a third time, she glanced around the room and then slid into the seat beside me.

"I hate to ask," she said in a low voice, "but could you lend me some change?"

I dug the change out of my pocket and laid it on the counter. There were thirteen ten-yen coins in all.

“You’re a doll. If I asked the bartender to break another bill, he’d just give me a dirty look.”

“No problem. I feel a lot lighter now, thanks to you.”

Smiling, she whisked the coins off the bar and disappeared in the direction of the phone.

So much for reading. I had J move the portable TV set to the counter and settled back with a beer to watch the baseball game. Some game, too. It was only the top of the fourth inning, but in that half inning two pitchers gave up six hits, including two home runs, and one outfielder collapsed from the strain. When the new pitcher was brought in, they ran six commercials: for beer, life insurance, vitamins, an airline, potato chips, and sanitary napkins.

The sailor, the one without a girl, I figured, came over to stand behind me, beer glass in hand.

“What are you watching?” he asked in French.

“Baseball,” I replied in English.

“Beizeball?”

I gave him a simple breakdown of the rules. That guy throws the ball, that guy tries to whack it with his stick, and if he makes it all the way around the bases it counts as one run. The sailor watched for five minutes, but when a commercial began he asked why there were no Johnny Hallyday records on the jukebox.

“ ’Cause nobody likes him, that’s why,” I said.

“Then what French singers do people like here?”

“Adamo.”

“He’s Belgian.”

“Okay, then Michel Polnareff.”

“Merde,” he swore, and headed back to his table.

—

It was the top of the fifth inning when the woman finally returned.

"Thanks," she said. "Let me buy you a drink in return."

"Don't sweat it."

"No, really. I'm a girl who likes to give back what she gets. For better or worse."

I tried to smile back but it didn't work, so I just nodded in reply. The woman summoned J with a raised finger and ordered a beer for me, another gimlet for herself. J gave three crisp nods and disappeared behind the end of the counter.

"Looks like I'm being stood up. You too?"

"Seems so."

"Is it a girl?"

"No, a guy."

"Then we're in the same boat. Gives us something to talk about."

I could only nod back.

"Tell me, how old do I look?"

"Twenty-eight."

"No, seriously."

"Okay, then twenty-six."

"What a bullshit artist! But you're nice," she said, laughing. "Do I look single? Or like I've got a husband?"

"Do I get a prize if I guess right?"

"Sure, why not."

"Okay, then I guess you're married."

"Mmm, you're half right. I got divorced last month. Ever talk to a divorcée before?"

"No, but I met a neuralgic cow once."

"Oh yeah? Where?"

"In the school lab. Took five of us to push it into the classroom."

The woman gave a hearty laugh.

"Then you go to college?"

“Yep.”

“I was a college student once upon a time. Around 1960. Those were the good old days.”

“How so?”

She chuckled to herself and took a sip of her gimlet. Then, as if suddenly remembering something, she looked at her wristwatch.

“Got to make another call,” she said, standing up, purse in hand.

My unanswered question hovered in the air after she was gone.

I drank half the beer and asked J for my bill.

“Hightailing it, huh?” J said.

“Yeah.”

“Not into older women, are you.”

“It’s got nothing to do with age. Give the Rat my best if he stops by.”

When I left the bar, the woman was just embarking on her fourth visit to the toilet.

—

I found myself whistling in the car on the way home. It was a tune I had heard somewhere before, but I couldn’t place it. A real oldie. I pulled over to the side of the road and sat there staring out at the ocean under the night sky, trying my best to remember.

Then I got it. It was “The Mickey Mouse Club Song.”

Come along and sing a song and join the jamboree,
M-I-C, K-E-Y, M-O-U-S-E.

Maybe those really were the good old days.

11

ON

Hey, all you out there. How're you feeling this evening? I'm feeling great myself, flying high, in fact. And I'm gonna try to bring you up to join me for the next two hours on your favorite program, *The Greatest Hits Request Show*, right here on NEB Radio. Yep, until nine o'clock on this beautiful Saturday night I'll be cranking out all those hot tunes you love to hear. Songs to warm your heart, songs to bring back memories, fun songs, songs to make you get up and dance. Songs you're sick of, songs that'll make you wanna puke—you name it, we play it. So keep those calls pouring in. You all know the number. Just remember: "Dial it wrong, you lose your song; dial it right, you cruise all night." Three syllables short of a haiku, but you can dig what I'm saying. Our lines opened at six, and for the last hour the phones have been ringing off the desks, all ten of them. You don't believe me? Here, get an earful of this…Far out, huh? Yessirree, we're cookin' now. Dial till your finger falls off. Got to apologize for last week, though. So many calls came in, we blew a fuse. But we're back in business now with a special cable they installed yesterday. Thing's as thick as an elephant's leg, let me tell you. "An elephant's calf, looks bigger by half, beside a giraffe." Darn, two syllables short this time! But you know where I'm coming from. Just lay back and let your fingers do the walking. Dial till you freak. Our staff here at the station may go nuts, but our fuse won't blow this time. Right? So here we go. Today was hot enough to bum anyone out, a real downer, so let's blow all those bad feelings away with the rock sounds you love to hear. After all, that's what great music is for, isn't it? Just like a dynamite chick. Okay, our first song of the evening. This one you can just sit back and enjoy. A great little number, and the best way to beat the heat. Brook Benton's "Rainy Night in Georgia."

OFF

Whew…I'm boiling in here, no kidding…Hey, can't the air conditioner do any better than this?…It's hotter than hell…Give me a

break, okay? I sweat like a pig, you know that…

Yeah, yeah, that's better…

Hey, I'm thirsty, can someone bring me a nice cold Coke?…No, don't worry, I won't have to take a leak. My bladder's like a steel drum… Blad-der, you've got it…

Thanks, Mi-chan. You're tops, babe…Aah, that bottle's nice and cold…

Hey, where's the freakin' opener?…

That's crazy. No way I can open this with my teeth…Quit horsing around—the record's ending. We haven't got time…Opener!

Shit!

ON

Brook Benton's "Rainy Night in Georgia." Great song. Feeling a bit cooler now? Guess how hot it got out there today, folks. Ninety-nine degrees! I don't care if it *is* summer, it's still too hot. A damn oven, is what it is. Ninety-nine means it's cooler to get it on with your girlfriend. Try to get your head around that one. Okay, I've talked enough. Let's spin another record. "Who'll Stop the Rain," by Creedence Clearwater Revival. Let's rock, baby!

OFF

…Hey, no sweat, I opened it with the corner of the mike stand…

…Whew, that hits the spot…

…Relax, I won't start hiccupping. You're kinda uptight, you know.

…What's the score of the baseball game?…It's on another station, right?…

…What? You've got to be kidding! This is a radio station, and we

don’t have a single radio? That’s a criminal offense!…

…Okay, forget it. I’ll take a beer instead. Make it nice and cold…

…Hey, I feel a hiccup coming on. Oh shit!…

…*Hic!*…

12

The phone rang at 7:15. I was stretched out on my rattan chair in the living room, drinking a can of beer and popping cheese crackers into my mouth.

“A good evening to you, my friend. This is *The Greatest Hits Request Show* on NEB Radio. Are you listening to your radio?”

I took a hasty slug of beer to wash the remnants of the cheese crackers down my throat.

“Radio?”

“Yes, your radio. The greatest invention…*hic*…of modern civilization. More precise than a vacuum cleaner, smaller than a refrigerator, cheaper than a TV. And what are you doing right now, my friend?”

“Reading a book.”

“That’s a real no-no. You should be listening to your radio. Reading will just make you lonely. Catch my drift?”

“Uh-huh.”

“A book is good for killing time when you’re cooking spaghetti. Takes only one hand, get it?”

“Uh-huh.”

“All right, then…*hic*…now we can talk. Ever hear a DJ with hiccups before?”

“No.”

“Then it’s the first time. Same as for all you listeners out there. So do you know why we’re calling you now, in the middle of our broadcast?”

"No."

"Because, my friend, it just so happens…*hic*…a young lady has asked us to dedicate a song to you. Can you guess who she is?"

"No."

"She has requested that blast from the past, 'California Girls,' by the Beach Boys. Ring a bell?"

I thought for a moment, but nothing popped into my head.

"C'mon now, you've got to do better than that. Guess right and you'll receive a special T-shirt in the mail."

I thought again. This time I could feel an infinitesimal something tugging at a corner of my memory.

" 'California Girls'…the Beach Boys…any luck?"

"Come to think of it, about five years ago a girl in my high school class lent me that record."

"What kind of girl?"

"I helped her find her contact lens on one of our school trips. So she thanked me by lending me the record."

"Contact lens, huh?…So did you return the record?"

"No, I lost it somewhere."

"Big mistake. You should have bought her a new copy. With women it's okay if they owe you…*hic*…but not if you owe them. Got it?"

"Yes."

"All right then. So that girl whose contact lens you found on a school trip five years ago is listening in right now, aren't you, baby? Can you give me her name?"

Finally, the name popped into my head. I told him.

"So there you go, young lady. It looks as if he's finally going to return that record. Made your day, I bet…By the way, how old are you?"

"Twenty-one."

"Great age. Student?"

"Yes."

"…*hic*…"

“Huh?”
“And what are you majoring in?”
“Biology.”
“So you’re into animals?”
“Uh-huh.”
“What is it about them that you like?”
“Maybe it’s because they don’t laugh.”
“Ah, animals don’t laugh?”
“Well, dogs and horses do a little.”
“Like when?”
“When they’re happy.”
I could feel myself getting mad for the first time in years.
“So then…*hic*…a dog could be a stand-up comic, couldn’t he.”
“You’re proof of that.”
“Hahahahaha.”

13

Well, East Coast girls are hip,
I really dig those styles they wear,
And the Southern girls with the way they talk
They knock me out when I’m down there.

The Midwest farmers’ daughters
Really make you feel alright,
And the Northern girls with the way they kiss,
They keep their boyfriends warm at night.

I wish they all could be California girls…

14

The T-shirt arrived in the afternoon mail three days later. It looked like this.

15

The following morning, I put on the scratchy new T-shirt and strolled the streets of the harbor town. Spotting a small record shop, I pushed open the door and went in. No other customers were there, just a very bored-looking young woman at the counter sipping a can of Coke as she checked sales slips. It took several minutes of shuffling through the record shelves before I realized I had seen her before. She was the girl with no little finger, the one I had found passed out on the bathroom floor a week earlier. “Hey,” I said. Startled, she looked at me, then at my T-shirt, then drained the rest of her Coke.

“How’d you find out where I worked?” she asked in a voice steeped in resignation.

“Pure chance. I came to buy records.”

“What’re you looking for?”

“The Beach Boys LP with the song ‘California Girls.’ ”

She nodded a skeptical nod, got up, strode over to the shelves, grabbed a record, and brought it back like a well-trained dog.

“This is it, right?”

I nodded. With my hands still jammed in my pockets, I scanned the store.

“I’d also like Beethoven’s Piano Concerto number 3.”

This time she came back carrying two records.

“We’ve got Glenn Gould and Backhaus. Which do you want?”

“Glenn Gould.”

She put one record on the counter and returned the other to the shelf.

“Anything else?”

“The Miles Davis album that has ‘A Gal in Calico.’ ”

This took a little extra time, but she came back with the record.

“Next?”

“That’s it. Thanks.”

“Are these all for you?” she asked, lining up the three records on the counter.

“No. They’re presents.”

“A bighearted guy, huh?”

“So it would seem.”

She shrugged uncomfortably and added up the bill: 5550 yen. I paid and took the parcel.

“Well, anyway, thanks to you I was able to sell three records before noon.”

“My pleasure.”

She sat back down behind the counter with a sigh and resumed going through the sales slips.

“So are you always here by yourself?”

“Another girl works with me. She’s at lunch right now.”

“And you?”

“I’ll go eat when she comes back.”

I pulled out my cigarettes, lit one, and stood there watching her work.

“Hey,” I said. “How about we have lunch together?”

She shook her head. “I like eating alone,” she said, her eyes never leaving the slips.

“I’m the same way.”

“Really?” She set the sales slips down with a weary sigh, put the new Harpers Bizarre album on the turntable, and lowered the needle. “Then why do you ask?”

“I try to change things up every once in a while.”

“Change by yourself.” She pulled the stack of slips closer and went back to work. “Now please leave me alone.”

I nodded.

“I told you this once before, but I think you’re scum.” Pursing her lips, she went back to flipping through the slips with her four fingers.

16

When I entered J’s Bar, the Rat was already there, his elbows propped on the counter and a frown on his face, plowing through a Henry James novel as thick as a telephone directory.

“Is that any good?” I asked.

The Rat raised his face from the book and shook his head no. “Still,” he said, “I’ve been reading a lot. Since the last time I saw you. Know who said, ‘I love a magnificent falsehood more than an impoverished truth’?”

“Nope.”

“Roger Vadim. French director. How about, ‘The test of a first-rate intelligence is its ability to function while holding two opposite ideas at the same time’?”

“Who said that?”

“I forget. But do you buy it?”

“I think it’s bull.”

“How come?”

“Let’s say you wake up starving at 3 a.m. You check the fridge but it’s empty. So what do you do?”

The Rat pondered this for a moment, then burst out laughing. I called J over and ordered a beer and some fries, pulled out a package containing one of the records, and handed it to the Rat.

“What the hell is this?”

“Your birthday present.”

“That’s not till next month.”

“I’ll be gone by then.”

The Rat sat there thinking, the unopened package in his hand.

“Yeah, it’s going to be lonely without you around,” he said, taking out the record and looking at it. “Beethoven’s Piano Concerto number 3, Glenn Gould, Leonard Bernstein. Mmm. Haven’t heard it. Have you?”

“Nope.”

“All the same, I really like this! To be blunt.”

17

I tried to track down her phone number for three days. The number of the girl who lent me the Beach Boys record, that is.

The first day, I visited the office of our old high school and found a listing for her in the registry of graduates. When I called, though, all I got was a recording saying that the number was no longer in service. I dialed information and gave the operator her name, but after searching for five minutes she came back on the line to announce that no party by that name was listed in the directory. I liked the ring of “no party by that name.” I thanked her and hung up.

The second day, I began phoning other members of our class to see if they knew where she was, but not only did none of them know

anything, most had forgotten she even existed. For some unknown reason, the last person I called snapped, “I don’t have time to talk to a shit like you,” and slammed down the phone.

The third day, I went back to our high school office and asked them to look up the name of the college she’d attended after graduation. It turned out she had enrolled in the English department of a second-rate school in central Tokyo. I phoned their office and told them that I ran the information desk at the McCormack Salad Dressing Corporation, and that I needed to find out her correct name and address to contact her about a survey we were doing. I hated to bother them, I added politely, but it was, after all, a very important matter. The guy said he would look, and asked me to call back again in fifteen minutes. I had a beer while I waited, but when I called back he told me that she had officially withdrawn from school in March. The reason, he said, was to recuperate from illness, but he had no knowledge of what the illness was, whether she had recovered to the point she could eat salad, or why she had chosen to drop out instead of taking a leave of absence.

Even an old address might help, I told him, so he checked their records for me. The number he gave me was that of a boardinghouse not far from the college. When I phoned, a person who sounded like the landlady answered: the girl had left in the spring for goodness knows where, she said, and then hung up. The way the line went dead made it clear she didn’t want to know, either.

That severed the last link between the girl and me.

I went home, opened a beer, and sat back to listen to “California Girls” by myself.

▸ 18

The phone rang. I was half asleep on my wicker chair, gazing with bleary eyes at the open book in my lap. An evening shower had come and gone, leaving the trees in the garden dripping. Then came a south

wind that smelled of the ocean. It shook the leaves of the potted plants on the balcony and ruffled the curtains.

"Hello," said a woman. She spoke like someone trying to balance a very fragile glass on a very wobbly table. "Remember me?"

I pretended to be trying to place her for a moment.

"How's the record business?" I asked.

"Not so hot. Business is bad all over, I guess. People just aren't into records."

"Oh yeah?"

I could hear her tapping her nails against the receiver.

"I had a hard time finding your number."

"Oh yeah?"

"I had to go to J's Bar. The guy who works there asked your friend for me. You know, tall guy, kind of weird. He was reading Molière."

"No kidding."

Silence.

"Everyone's wondering where you disappeared to the past week. They're all worried you're sick or something."

"I didn't realize I was so popular."

She paused. "Are you angry with me?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I said some really mean things. I just wanted to apologize."

"Look, I don't need your sympathy. If it's bothering you, go to the park and feed the pigeons."

She sighed. I could hear her lighting up a cigarette at the other end of the line. Then came the sound of Bob Dylan's *Nashville Skyline*. She was probably phoning from work.

"Your feelings aren't the problem. I just shouldn't have spoken to you like that." She was talking very quickly.

"You're pretty hard on yourself."

"Yes, I try to be."

She was quiet for a moment.

“Any chance I could see you tonight?” she said finally.

“Sure.”

“Eight o’clock at J’s?”

“Got it.”

Another pause. “Listen, I’ve had a rough time recently.”

“I understand.”

“Thanks.”

She hung up.

19

To keep it short and sweet: I’m twenty-one years old. Still plenty young, but not as young as I used to be. If that bothered me, my only option would be to take a flying leap off the Empire State Building some Sunday morning.

Here’s a joke I heard in an old movie about the Great Depression: “Every time I pass the Empire State Building, I open my umbrella. I mean, it’s raining people there.”

So, like I said, I’m twenty-one. No plans to die yet. I’ve slept with three girls so far.

The first was a high school classmate. We were both seventeen, and we believed it was true love. We found a spot in the bushes one evening; then she removed her brown loafers, her white wool socks, her pale green seersucker dress, her odd underwear (I could tell right away they didn’t fit), and last of all, after a moment’s hesitation, her wristwatch. Then we made love on the Sunday edition of the *Asahi* newspaper.

We broke up all of a sudden just a few months after graduation. I can’t remember why now—the reason was that trivial. Haven’t laid eyes on her since then, either. I think of her sometimes at night when I can’t fall asleep. End of story.

The second girl I slept with was a hippie chick I bumped into in the Shinjuku subway station. She had nowhere to stay and was flat broke (her chest was pretty flat too), but she had beautiful, intelligent eyes. The most violent antiwar demonstration Shinjuku had ever seen was raging that night, and the trains, buses, and everything else were completely shut down.

"If you hang around here you're going to get busted," I told her. She was squatting inside the chained subway entrance reading a sports newspaper that she'd plucked from the garbage.

"At least they'll feed me."

"It won't be pretty."

"I'm used to it."

I lit a cigarette and gave one to her. My eyes were smarting from all the tear gas.

"Have you eaten anything today?"

"Not since this morning."

"Let me buy you something. We can't hang around here any longer."

"Why would you want to treat me?"

I didn't know the answer to that one myself, but I dragged her out of the subway, and we walked down the deserted streets all the way to Mejiro.

For the next week, this quiet girl crashed in my apartment. She would wake up after noon, eat, smoke, dawdle over a book, watch some TV, and sometimes have half-hearted sex with me. Her only possession was a white canvas bag that held a thick windbreaker, two T-shirts, a pair of jeans, three soiled pairs of underwear, and a box of tampons.

"Where are you from?" I asked her once.

"No place you've ever heard of," she answered, and clammed up.

When I came back from the supermarket one day carrying a bag of groceries, she had vanished. Her white bag had vanished too. Not to mention a number of other things. Like the few coins I had left scattered on my desk, a carton of cigarettes, and my freshly laundered

T-shirt. A sheet torn from one of my writing pads sat on the desk, an apparent farewell note. It consisted of a single word—"Asshole." I guess she meant me.

The third girl I slept with was a French literature major I met in the school library, but the following spring vacation she hanged herself in the shabby grove of trees by the tennis courts. Her body wasn't discovered until vacation ended and the new school year began—she had been swinging in the wind for two whole weeks. Even today no one goes near that grove after the sun goes down.

20

She was sitting at the counter of J's Bar, looking uncomfortable and stirring what little was left of the ice in her glass of ginger ale with a straw.

"I thought you weren't coming," she said, sounding a bit relieved.

"I don't stand people up. I just had something to do before I left."

"What kind of something?"

"Shoes. I was polishing a pair of shoes."

"Those sneakers?" she said in a skeptical voice, pointing at my basketball shoes.

"Fat chance. No, my father's shoes. It's one of the rules of our house. He believes that children should polish their father's shoes."

"Why?"

"Beats me. I guess he sees it as a symbol of something. At any rate, he comes home every night at eight, like clockwork. So before then, I polish his shoes and then run off to grab a beer."

"That's a nice habit."

"You really think so?"

"Yeah. You should be grateful."

"I'm grateful he only has two feet."

She giggled.

"You must come from a respectable family."

"Yeah, right. Respectable *and* broke. Makes me so happy I could cry."

"But," she said, still stirring her watery ginger ale with the tip of her straw, "my family was a lot poorer."

"How can you tell?"

"By smell. Just like the rich can smell the rich, the poor can sniff out who's poor."

I poured the beer J had given me into my glass.

"So where are your parents these days?"

"I don't feel like talking about it."

"How come?"

"Respectable people don't talk to strangers about family problems. Isn't that so?"

"Are you a respectable person?"

She pondered this for a full fifteen seconds.

"I'm hoping to be. Trying my best, anyway. Isn't everyone like that?"

I chose not to answer.

"Still, you should talk about that stuff," I said.

"Why?"

"For one thing, you'll have to tell someone at some point anyway; for another, if you tell me, I'll keep my mouth shut."

She smiled, lit a cigarette, and took three drags on it while she studied the grain of the wood-paneled bar.

"Five years ago," she began, breaking the silence, "my father died of brain cancer. It was awful. He suffered for two whole years. All the money we had in the world was spent on his illness. It left us flat broke. Then, to make things even worse, the family fell apart. We were just too worn out. Those things happen, right?"

I nodded. "So, what happened to your mother?"

"She's living somewhere. She sends me New Year's cards."

“Sounds as if you don’t like her very much.”

“Yeah.”

“Any brothers or sisters?”

“I have a twin sister. That’s all.”

“Where’s she?”

“Thirty thousand light-years away.”

She gave a nervous laugh and pushed her ginger ale to the side.

“It’s never a good idea to bad-mouth your family,” she continued. “Only leaves you down in the dumps.”

“Don’t let it get to you. Everybody’s carrying stuff like that around.”

“You too?”

“Yeah, every morning I clutch my can of shaving cream and weep.”

She laughed happily. It sounded as if she hadn’t laughed in years.

“So how come you’re drinking ginger ale?” I asked. “I can’t see you being on the wagon.”

“Mm, that was the idea. But I’ll have a drink now.”

“So what’ll it be?”

“White wine, the colder the better.”

I called J over and ordered a glass of wine for her and another beer for me.

“So what’s it like having a twin sister?”

“It feels kind of weird. I mean, you’ve got the same face, the same IQ, the same bra size…it’s a real turnoff.”

“Did people confuse the two of you a lot?”

“Until we were eight they did. Once I was down to nine fingers, though, they didn’t make that mistake anymore.”

She placed both hands on the bar, neatly lining her fingers up like a concert pianist preparing to play. I took her left hand in mine and examined it closely under the recessed lights. It was small and as cool as a cocktail glass, the three fingers and thumb complete and natural, as if they’d been that way from birth. Indeed, their naturalness seemed almost miraculous, a lot more convincing than six fingers would have

been anyway.

“I got my little finger caught in a vacuum cleaner when I was eight. It popped off just like that.”

“Where is it now?”

“Where is what now?”

“Your little finger.”

“I forget,” she said, laughing. “You know, you’re the first person to ever ask that.”

“Does it bother you to be missing your little finger?”

“It does when I’m wearing gloves.”

“Any other times?”

She shook her head. “I’d be lying if I said never. But it’s no worse than girls who worry about fat necks or hairy legs.”

I nodded.

“So what do you do?” she asked.

“I go to college. In Tokyo.”

“Home for vacation.”

“Yeah, you got it.”

“What are you studying?”

“Biology. I love animals.”

“Me too.”

I drained my glass of beer and grabbed a handful of fries.

“Hey…there was a famous leopard in Bhagalpur that killed and ate three hundred and fifty Indians in just three years.”

“Really?”

“An Englishman, Colonel Jim Corbett, who was known as the leopard exterminator, shot one hundred and twenty-five tigers and leopards, including that one, in eight years. So do you still love animals?”

She stubbed out her smoke, took a sip of wine, and studied my face for a moment. “You know,” she said, looking impressed, “you really are a little nuts.”

21

Half a month after my third girlfriend killed herself, I was reading Jules Michelet's *La Sorcière*. A great book. Anyway, I came across this passage:

> In the work he dedicated to the Cardinal of Lorraine in 1596, the prosecutor M. Remy owns to having burnt eight hundred witches, in sixteen years. "So well do I deal out judgements," he says, "that last year sixteen slew themselves to avoid passing through my hands." (tr. Lionel James Trottier, 1863)

For some reason, I find the phrase "So well do I deal out judgements" cool in the extreme.

22

The telephone rang. I was in the midst of applying calamine lotion to my face, which was sunburned from my daily trips to the local pool. After ten rings, I gave up, peeled off the neat checkerboard of cotton squares, and rose from my chair to answer it.

"Hey there. It's me."

"Ah, so it's you."

"Whatcha doing?"

"Nothing much."

I patted my stinging face with the towel that was wrapped around my neck.

"I enjoyed myself last night. First time in a long while."

"Glad to hear it."

"So…do you like beef stew?"

“Uh-huh.”

“I just made a whole pot. More than I could put away in a week. Want to come over and help me eat it?”

“Sounds good.”

“Okay. Come in an hour. If you’re not here by then, I’ll chuck it all in the garbage. Got it?”

“But…”

“I hate waiting. See ya.”

She hung up before I could open my mouth.

I lay on the sofa for the next ten minutes, staring at the ceiling and listening to the Top 40 on the radio. Then I took a shower, shaved myself smooth and clean under the hot water, and put on a pair of Bermuda shorts, and a shirt just back from the cleaners. It was a pleasant evening. I watched the sun set as I drove along the coastal road, stopping to buy two bottles of chilled white wine and a carton of cigarettes before getting on the highway.

—

She cleared the table and laid out white plates and bowls, while I pried the cork from a bottle of wine with a fruit knife. The room was steaming from the bubbling stew.

“I didn’t know it would get this hot,” she said. “It’s hot as hell.”

“Hell is hotter.”

“Sounds like you’ve been there.”

“I heard it from someone. They make it hotter and hotter till you think you’ll go crazy; then they move you someplace cooler for a while. Then when you’ve recovered a little they move you back again.”

“So hell is like a sauna.”

“Yeah, more or less. But a few can’t recover and go totally bonkers.”

“So what happens to them?”

“They get sent up to heaven, where they’re forced to paint the walls. You see, the walls in heaven have to be kept a perfect white. The

slightest smudge is unacceptable. It's an image thing. As a result, they have to keep painting from dawn till dusk every day. It messes up their respiratory systems big time."

She stopped asking questions after that. I carefully scooped out the bits of cork that had fallen into the bottle and poured us each a glass.

"To cold wine and warm hearts," she toasted me.

"Say what?"

"It's from a TV commercial. Cold wine and warm hearts. You haven't seen it?"

"Nope."

"Don't you watch TV?"

"Once in a while. I used to watch a lot. My favorite was *Lassie*. The one with the original dog, that is."

"That's right, you love animals."

"Uh-huh."

"I can watch all day long when I've got the time. You name it, I watch it. Yesterday, I saw a debate between a biologist and a chemist. Did you catch that one?"

"No."

She took a swallow of wine and gave a small shake of her head, as if remembering the moment.

"You know, Pascal had what they call scientific intuition."

"Scientific intuition?"

"Like, an ordinary scientist thinks: A equals B, B equals C, therefore A equals C. QED. Right?"

I nodded.

"But Pascal's mind worked in a different way. He just thought, A equals C. He wasn't interested in proof. But time confirmed his theories, and he came up with all kinds of valuable discoveries."

"Like vaccines."

She put her wine down and looked at me, appalled.

"Vaccines? Wasn't that Jenner? How'd you pass the college entrance

exams, anyway?”

“Then, maybe antibodies for rabies, and low-temperature sterilization?”

“Ding-dong.”

She gave a self-satisfied smirk, drained her glass, and refilled it herself.

“In the TV debate, they called that ability ‘scientific intuition.’ Think you might have it?”

“Hardly.”

“Think you’d like some?”

“It might come in handy. Like when I’m in bed with a girl.”

She laughed and headed off to the kitchen, returning with a pot of stew, a bowl of salad, and some rolls. At last a cool breeze reached us through the wide-open windows.

—

We sat back and ate a relaxed dinner while listening to her records. She asked me lots of questions, mostly about my school and my life in Tokyo. Pretty boring stuff. I told her about the cat experiments we carried out. (Of course, I lied that we never killed them. That we were just testing their brain functions. In fact, over the course of a mere two months, I was solely responsible for snuffing out the lives of thirty-six cats of all sizes and shapes.) I told her about the demonstrations and the student strikes. I showed her where a riot cop had knocked out one of my front teeth.

“Don’t you want to get even?”

“Are you kidding?”

“Why not? If it were me, I’d track down that cop and knock out a whole bunch of his teeth with a hammer.”

“Well, I’m me, and as far as I’m concerned it’s over and done with. I wouldn’t know who to go after anyway—all those riot cops look the same.”

“So then there’s no meaning, right?”

“Meaning?”

“No meaning to having your tooth knocked out.”

“Nope.”

She let out a weary groan and took another bite of stew.

—

After dinner, we drank a cup of coffee, washed the dishes side by side in the tiny kitchen, went back to the table, lit a cigarette, and listened to the MJQ on her record player.

I could see her nipples clearly through her thin blouse, and her cotton shorts were loose around her hips. To make matters even worse, our legs kept colliding under the table. My face grew redder each time they touched.

“Was dinner good?”

“It was delicious.”

“Then why didn’t you say so sooner?” she said, biting her lower lip.

“It’s a bad habit. I always forget the important stuff.”

“Can I let you in on something?”

“Sure.”

“If you don’t change that habit you’re gonna be the loser.”

“I know. But I’m like an old jalopy. Fix one thing and another breaks down.”

She laughed and put Marvin Gaye on the turntable. The clock said almost eight.

“No shoes to be shined today?”

“I do that before I go to bed. When I brush my teeth.”

She was peering into my eyes as she talked, her slender elbows propped on the table, her chin cupped in her hands. Her gaze was starting to get to me. I tried to escape it by lighting up cigarettes and pretending to look out the window, but that only added to her amusement.

“So I guess I can believe you,” she said.

“Believe what?”

“That you didn’t mess with me the other night.”

“How so?”

“You really want me to tell you?”

“No.”

“I knew you’d say that,” she said, giggling. She filled my glass, then looked out the darkened window, as if considering something. “Sometimes, I imagine how great it would be if we could live our lives without bothering other people. Think it’s possible?”

“I wonder.”

“So tell me, am I bothering you?”

“I’m okay.”

“So far, you mean.”

“Yeah, so far.”

She reached across the table and laid her hand on mine, left it there for a moment, then withdrew it.

“I’m taking a trip tomorrow,” she said.

“A trip to where?”

“Haven’t decided yet. Some place quiet and cool, that’s the plan anyway. For about a week.”

I nodded.

“I’ll call you when I get back.”

*

In the car on my way home, I suddenly remembered my first date. Seven years before.

Now, it feels like I never stopped asking the girl, “Sure you’re not bored?”

We had gone to see an Elvis Presley movie. The lyrics of the theme song went like this:

We had a quarrel, a lovers’ spat,

I write I'm sorry but the letter keeps coming back.
She wrote upon it:
Return to Sender, Address Unknown,
No Such Number, No Such Zone.

Time goes by so damn fast.

23

The third girl I slept with liked to call my penis my *"raison d'être."*

*

A while before that, I had tried writing a short story whose theme was the meaning of life. I never finished it, but the process of thinking about people's *raison d'être* produced a strange frame of mind, a kind of obsession, in fact, that compelled me to convert everything in my life into numbers. This condition lasted for about eight months, during which I had to count the number of people in the car the moment I boarded a train, the number of steps of each staircase I climbed, even my own pulse if I had the time. According to my records, from August 15, 1969, until April 3rd of the following year, I attended 358 lectures, had sex 54 times, and smoked 6,921 cigarettes.

I believed in all seriousness that by converting my life into numbers I might be able to get through to people. That having something to communicate could stand as proof I really existed. Of course, no one had the slightest interest in how many cigarettes I had smoked, or the number of stairs I had climbed, or the size of my penis. When I realized this, I lost my *raison d'être* and became utterly alone.

*

And so, when the news of her death reached me, I was smoking my

6,922nd cigarette.

24

The Rat didn't touch a drop of beer that night. Not a good sign, for sure. Instead he knocked off five Jim Beams on the rocks in quick succession.

We were in the dim innermost corner of J's Bar, killing time at the pinball machine, that piece of junk that offers dead time in return for small change. The Rat, though, was the kind of guy who took everything seriously. So it was almost a miracle that I beat him in two of the six games we played.

"What's with you tonight, anyway?"

"Nothing," the Rat answered.

—

Back we went to the bar for more beer and Jim Beam.

We sat there in sullen silence, listening to one song after another on the jukebox: "Everyday People," "Woodstock," "Spirit in the Sky," "Hey There Lonely Girl."

"Got a favor to ask," the Rat said.

"What kind?"

"I want you to meet someone."

"A girl?"

The Rat hesitated before nodding yes.

"Why ask me?"

"Anyone else around?" the Rat shot back, launching into his sixth Jim Beam. "Oh yeah, do you own a suit and tie?"

"Sure. Still…"

"Then it's tomorrow at two," the Rat said. "Hey, what do girls eat to

stay alive, anyway?"

"Shoe soles."

"Get out of here," the Rat said.

25

The Rat's favorite food was pancakes, hot off the griddle. He would stack several in a deep dish, cut them into four neat pieces, then pour a bottle of Coke over the top.

The first time I visited the Rat's home, he had pulled a table out into the balmy May sunlight and was hard at work shoveling this concoction into his mouth.

"This meal's outstanding feature," he said, "is the perfect way it blends solid food and drink."

Wild birds of every shape and hue had gathered in the big wooded yard and were intently pecking at the white popcorn strewn across the lawn.

26

Now I'm going to tell you about the third girl I ever slept with.

It's hard enough to talk about the dead under normal circumstances, but it's even harder to talk about girls who have died young: by dying, they stay young forever.

We, on the other hand, advance in age every year, every month, every day. There are times when I can even feel myself aging by the hour. The scary thing is, it's true.

*

She was no beauty. Yet to say “no beauty” may not be fair. It would be more proper to say, “Her beauty did not reach the level that did her justice.”

I have just one photograph of her. Someone jotted the date on the back—August 1963. The same year Kennedy took a bullet in the head. It seems to have been snapped at a summer resort, and shows her perched on a sea wall smiling a somewhat uncomfortable smile. Her hair is clipped short à la Jean Seberg (a style I somehow connected with Auschwitz then), and she is wearing a long red gingham dress. She looks a bit awkward, and lovely. It is a loveliness that touches the heart.

Her lips are slightly parted, her nose is pert, like a delicate antenna, the bangs she seems to have cut herself fall artlessly over a broad forehead, and there are the faint remnants of pimples on her full cheeks.

She was fourteen then, and it was the most beautiful moment in her twenty-one years on this planet. Then, suddenly, that moment vanished. That’s all I know. I have no way of understanding why, or what possible purpose it may have served. No one does.

*

She said, in all seriousness—no joke—that she had come to college in order to receive a divine revelation. She told me this a little before four in the morning, when we were lying naked in bed. I asked her what a divine revelation was like.

“How the heck would I know,” she said. A minute later she added, “But whatever it is, it flies down from heaven like a pair of angel wings.”

I imagined a pair of angel wings descending on the central square of our school. Viewed from a distance, they looked like tissue paper.

*

No one knows why she chose to die. I doubt somehow that she did

either.

27

I had an unpleasant dream. I was a big black bird flying westward over a thick jungle. I was badly wounded, my feathers caked with black blood. Ominous dark clouds were gathering in the western sky, and there was a whiff of rain in the air.

I hadn't dreamed for a long time. So long, in fact, that it took a while to realize what had just happened.

I got out of bed, showered off the nasty sweat, and had a breakfast of toast and apple juice. Beer and cigarettes had left my throat feeling stuffed with old cotton. I chucked the dirty dishes into the sink and selected an olive-green cotton suit, the most neatly pressed shirt I could find, and a black knit tie. I carried them out to the front room and sat down beside the air conditioner.

The TV news was predicting, in triumphant tones, that this might be the hottest day of the summer. I switched off the set and went into my older brother's room next door, chose a few books from the massive pile, took them to the front room, and stretched out on the couch.

Two years earlier, my brother had taken off for America without a word of explanation, leaving behind a roomful of books and a girlfriend. She and I still got together for a meal every so often. According to her, my brother and I were very similar. This came as something of a shock.

"Like where exactly?" I asked.

"Like everywhere," she said.

Maybe she was right. After all, we'd been taking turns shining the same shoes for more than ten years.

—

When twelve o'clock rolled around, I fastened my tie, put on my jacket, and headed out the door, already fed up with the heat awaiting me.

I had time to kill, so I decided to cruise around. Our town occupied a pitifully long and narrow strip running from the ocean up to the foot of the mountains. It never changed: a river and a tennis court, a golf course, a lengthy row of large houses, walls upon walls, a handful of tidy restaurants and boutiques, an old library, fields filled with evening primrose, a park with a monkey cage.

I drove the streets that snaked through the hilly residential area before taking the river road down almost to the ocean, where I stopped to cool my feet in the fresh water. Two girls wearing white hats, sunglasses, and deep tans were batting a ball back and forth on the tennis court nearby. The midday sun was scorching, and each swing of their rackets sent a spray of sweat flying across the court.

I watched them for five minutes, then returned to the car, put the seat back, closed my eyes, and listened to the whack of balls mingled with the sound of the surf. The whiff of ocean on the southern breeze and the smell of burning asphalt carried with them memories of summers past. It had seemed as though those sweet dreams of summer would last forever: the warmth of a girl's skin, an old rock 'n' roll song, a freshly washed button-down shirt, the odor of cigarette smoke in a pool changing room, a fleeting premonition. Then one summer (when had it been?) the dreams had vanished, never to return.

—

When I drove up to J's Bar at 2 p.m. on the dot, the Rat was sitting on the guardrail engrossed in a copy of Kazantzakis's *The Last Temptation of Christ*. "So where is she?" I asked.

The Rat closed the book and slipped into the seat beside me. He put his sunglasses on. "It's a no go," he said.

"No go?"

"Yeah, I gave it up."

I sighed, loosened my tie, tossed my jacket in the backseat, and lit

up a smoke.

"So where are we headed?"

"The zoo."

"Sounds good to me," I said.

28

Now I'll talk about the town. I was born and raised in it, and it was there that I slept with my first girl.

The ocean is in front of the town, with mountains to the rear and a giant port next door. It is a tiny place. I quit trying to light up on my way home from the port because by the time I struck the match I had missed the highway turnoff.

The population is slightly over seventy thousand, a number that's not likely to change in the next five years. Most families live in two-story homes with attached gardens, and they own one car, though quite a few have two.

I didn't pluck these figures out of the air—rather, they are officially announced at the close of each year by the statistics office at city hall. Their attentiveness to the number of two-story homes is a nice touch.

The Rat's home had three stories topped off by a glassed-in roof garden. The Rat's father's Mercedes-Benz and the Rat's Triumph TR3 sat grill to grill in a basement garage carved into the slope. Strangely, the garage had the most homey feel of the entire place. It was big enough to accommodate a Piper Cub and was packed with old televisions and refrigerators, a sofa and coffee table set, stereo equipment, sideboards, and anything else that had been replaced by newer, more up-to-date models. The Rat and I spent many pleasant hours there drinking beer.

I knew almost nothing about the Rat's father. We never met. When I asked the Rat what he was like, all I got was the flat statement "Someone a whole lot older than me—also male."

Rumor had it that the Rat's father had been penniless before the war. On the eve of hostilities, though, he had managed, after much difficulty, to lay his hands on a small chemical factory, where he began producing insect repellent cream. There was considerable doubt as to its effectiveness, but, fortunately for him, the war spread to the South Pacific at that juncture, and the stuff flew off the shelves.

When the war ended, the Rat's father moved his stock of ointment into warehouses and began marketing a sketchy health tonic; then, toward the end of the Korean War, in an abrupt move, he shifted to household cleaners. Rumor has it that the ingredients were identical in all cases. Not inconceivable.

In other words, the same ointment slathered on the heaped bodies of Japanese soldiers in the jungles of New Guinea twenty-five years ago can today be found, with the same trademark, gracing the toilets of the nation as a drain cleaner.

Thus did the Rat's father join the ranks of the wealthy.

—

Of course, I had poor friends too. One of them had a father who drove a city bus. Now, there may be rich bus drivers, but my friend's father was one of the poor ones. I hung out at his house a lot since his parents were rarely there. His father would either be driving his bus or at the racetrack, while his mother worked part-time jobs all day long.

He and I were in the same high school class, and one particular incident made us friends.

I was taking a leak during our lunch break one day when he slipped into the next spot and pulled down his fly. We didn't talk, but we finished up at the same time and washed our hands together.

"Hey, I've got something here that'll knock your socks off," he said, wiping his hands on the seat of his pants.

"Oh yeah?"

"Wanna see?"

He pulled a photograph from his wallet and passed it to me. It

showed a woman with her legs spread wide plunging a beer bottle into herself.

"Pretty wild, huh?"

"No kidding."

"I've got even better stuff at home if you want to come over."

And so it was that the two of us became friends.

—

The town was home to many kinds of people. In the eighteen years I lived there I learned a great deal. My emotional roots are there, and almost all my memories are connected to the place. Nevertheless, the spring I entered university, I heaved a deep sigh of relief when I left.

I still come back for spring and summer vacation, but basically all I do is drink beer.

29

The Rat had been in the pits for about a week. The approach of autumn probably had something to do with it, and perhaps the girl he had asked me to meet did too. The Rat didn't have anything to say on the subject.

I tried prying some information out of J when the Rat wasn't around.

"What do you think has got the Rat down?" I asked him.

"I can't figure it out either," he said. "Maybe it's because summer's ending."

The Rat's mood darkened as autumn approached. He sat at the counter glancing at some book or other, and if I tried to talk to him, all I got in response was a half-assed crack of some kind. When the evening breezes turned cool and the first whiff of autumn rose in the air, he gave up beer for a steady diet of bourbon on the rocks,

shoveling coins into the jukebox beside the counter and kicking the pinball machine around until the Tilt sign flashed, much to J's alarm.

"I guess he feels he's being left behind," J said. "I can see why."

"How so?"

"Everybody's heading off someplace. Back to college or back to work. You too, right?"

"I see what you mean."

"Think how he feels."

I nodded. "And the girl?"

"Believe me, he'll forget her before long."

"Did something bad happen?"

"You got me," J said, and went back to his work. Swallowing my questions, I went over to the jukebox, chose a few tunes, and returned to the bar and my beer.

J came back about ten minutes later.

"Hey," he said. "Didn't the Rat tell you anything?"

"Nope."

"That's strange."

"Really?"

J stood there for a minute, polishing the glass in his hand.

"I bet he wants to talk to you about whatever it is."

"Then why doesn't he?"

"He's afraid. That you'll make fun of him."

"I would never do that."

"Still, it looks like that sometimes. That's how I've always seen it, anyway. You're a sweet kid, but part of you seems—how should I put this?—above it all, like a Zen monk or something…It's not really a criticism."

"No offense taken."

"But, you know, I'm twenty years older, and I've been through a lot more. So I get sort of…"

"Old-womanish."

“Yeah.”

I smiled and took another swig of beer.

“I’ll talk to the Rat.”

“Good idea.”

J stubbed out his smoke and went back to work, and I made a trip to the john. While washing up, I peeked at my face in the mirror. That bummed me out so much I had another beer.

30

There was a time when everyone wanted to be cool.

Toward the end of high school, I decided to express only half of what I was really feeling. I can’t recall the initial reason, but for the next several years this was how I behaved. At which point I discovered that I had turned into a person incapable of expressing more than half of what he felt.

I don’t know what that has to do with being cool. But if a fridge that has to be defrosted all year round can be called cool, then that’s what I was.

And so I continue writing this, plying my consciousness with cigarettes and beer to prevent it from sinking into the sludge of time. I take one hot shower after another, shave twice a day, listen to the same old records over and over again. In fact, the out-of-date sounds of Peter, Paul, and Mary are playing behind me right now.

“Don’t think twice, it’s all right.”

31

The following day, I invited the Rat to the swimming pool of the hillside hotel at the top of the town. It was the end of summer, and the

pool was somewhat hard to get to, so only about ten people were there, half of them American guests more intent on soaking up the rays than on doing any real swimming.

The hotel had originally been the villa of a prewar aristocratic family. It boasted a beautiful garden with a sprawling lawn, and if you walked up the slope, along the rose hedge that set the pool apart from the main building, you came to a small hill that provided a striking view of the ocean, the harbor, and the town.

The Rat and I raced a few lengths in the twenty-five-meter pool before settling back in deck chairs with a pair of cold Cokes. I caught my breath and lit up a smoke, while the Rat watched a little American girl paddling around by herself in the water.

The sky was clear and blue, and crisscrossed by the frozen white trails of jets that could still be seen on the horizon.

“Feels like there used to be more airplanes when we were young, doesn’t it,” said the Rat, looking up at the sky. “Of course, most were American military planes. Like those twin-fuselage propeller jobs. Remember?”

“You mean P-38s?”

“No, the ones I’m talking about were transport planes. A lot bigger than P-38s. Sometimes they’d fly so low you could see the Air Force insignia…And I can remember DC-6s, DC-7s, even Sabre jets.”

“That’s really going back.”

“Yeah, back to Eisenhower’s time. When a U.S. Navy cruiser came into port the whole town crawled with sailors and MPs. You ever see an MP?”

“Yeah.”

“So many things have disappeared. Not that I cared much for the soldiers.”

I nodded.

“The Sabres were great planes. Except they dropped napalm. You ever see what napalm does?”

“In war movies.”

“Humans come up with all kinds of stuff. Really well-made stuff, too. Who knows, in another ten years we may be feeling nostalgic about napalm.”

I laughed and lit a second cigarette. “You into planes?”

“I used to dream of being a pilot. My eyes are bad, though, so I had to give it up.”

“Really?”

“I love the sky. I could look at it forever, but when I don’t want to I don’t have to.”

The Rat fell silent for five minutes. Then all of a sudden he started up again.

“Sometimes I feel I can’t take it anymore,” he said. “The whole thing about being rich. I just want to escape. You know the feeling?”

“How the hell would I?” His naïveté was astonishing. “Still, you should get out. If you really want to, that is.”

“That could be the answer, you know. Find some town I’ve never heard of. Start all over from scratch. Not a bad idea.”

“What about school?”

“I dropped out. Couldn’t go back if I wanted to.”

From behind his sunglasses, the Rat’s eyes were following the little girl, still paddling happily by herself in the pool.

“Why’d you quit?”

“I guess I was fed up with the whole thing. But I gave it my best shot. Surprised myself, really. I learned to think about people other than me, but in the end I just got kicked around by a cop. The way I see it, sooner or later everyone returns to his post. Except yours truly. For me, it was a game of musical chairs—there was no place I could call my own.”

“So what’ll you do now?”

The Rat toweled off his feet.

“I might write a novel,” he said a moment later. “What do you think?”

“I think it’s a great idea.”

The Rat nodded.

"What kind of novel?"

"A good novel. From where I stand, anyway. I doubt I have any special talent for writing, but if I stick with it at least I can become more enlightened. Otherwise, what's the point, right?"

"Right."

"So the novel will be for myself. Or maybe for the cicadas."

"The cicadas?"

"Yeah."

The Rat toyed with the Kennedy half-dollar pendant dangling on his bare chest.

"I went to Nara a few years ago with a girl. It was scorching hot, and we were hiking in the hills for about three hours. We didn't bump into any people, just wild birds that flew away screeching. There were big brown cicadas shrilling on their backs on the paths between the paddy fields—that sort of place. It was so hot.

"Anyway, we found a nice breezy place to stop, a grassy slope where we could sit and mop off the sweat. There was a broad, deep moat at the foot of the slope, and beyond that a round, tree-covered hill that looked like an island. It was an ancient burial mound, the grave of an emperor. Ever seen one of those?"

I nodded.

"It set me to thinking. Like, why build something so enormous? Of course, all graves mean something. Everyone dies, and so on. We learn from them. But this tomb was just too big. When something is that huge it changes everything around it. To be blunt, it didn't look like a tomb at all. It was a small mountain. The surface of the moat was covered with frogs and weeds, and the fence was a mass of spider webs. So I was sitting there looking at the burial mound and listening to the breeze coming across the water. And I felt this emotion I can't put into words. No, emotion isn't right. It's more like an awareness of being enveloped by something. It's as if the cicadas and frogs and spiders and wind and everything else were one single entity flowing through the cosmos."

The Rat paused to swallow the last of his by-now-flat Coke.

"So whenever I write, I keep that summer afternoon and the tree-covered burial mound in mind. And I think, what could be cooler than writing something for the cicadas and frogs and spiders, and the summer grasses and the wind?"

His story complete, the Rat folded his hands behind his head and looked up at the sky.

"So then, have you tried writing anything?"

"No, not a line. Can't write a damn thing."

"Really?"

"Ye are the salt of the earth."

I was silent.

"But if the salt have lost its savor, wherewith shall it be salted?" the Rat intoned.

—

When evening came and the shadows lengthened, the Rat and I moved from the pool to the small hotel bar, where they were playing Mantovani's versions of Italian folk songs, and we drank cold beer. The lights of the harbor sparkled in the big windows.

"So what's the story with the girl?" I finally worked up the nerve to ask him.

The Rat wiped the foam from his mouth with the back of his hand and studied the ceiling as if pondering something.

"To be frank, I decided not to share that with you. It's just a load of crap."

"But you did try to talk to me about it before."

"That's true. But I changed my mind. There are things in this world you can't do a damn thing about."

"Like what?"

"Like a rotten tooth, for example. One day it just starts aching. No one can ease the pain, no matter how hard they try to comfort you. It

makes you furious with yourself. Next thing you know you're furious with them because they aren't pissed off with themselves. See how it escalates?"

"Sort of," I said. "But try to think it through a little further. All of us are laboring under the same conditions. It's like we're all flying in the same busted airplane. Sure, some of us are luckier than others. Some are tough and some are weak. Some are rich and some poor. But no one's superman—in that way, we're all weak. If we own things, we're terrified we'll lose them; if we've got nothing we worry it'll be that way forever. *We're all the same.* If you catch on to that early enough, you can try to make yourself stronger, even if only a little. It's okay to fake it. Right? There are no truly strong people. Only people who pretend to be strong."

"Can I ask one question?"

I nodded.

"In all honesty, do you believe what you just said?"

"Sure I do."

The Rat studied his glass for a minute.

"Do me a favor and tell me you're lying," he said, in all seriousness.

I dropped the Rat off at his house and continued on alone to J's Bar.

"Were you able to talk to him?"

"Yeah, I talked to him."

"I'm glad," J said, putting a plate of fries in front of me.

▸ 32

Derek Hartfield was a prolific writer; yet despite his massive body of work, he seldom spoke of life, dreams, or love. In his semi-autobiographical *One and a Half Times Around the Rainbow* (1937)—one of his more serious efforts (in that it featured no aliens or monsters)—Hartfield seems to have little in mind beyond jokes,

sarcasm, paradox, and vitriol. Yet there is a brief passage that reveals something of what he felt in reality:

> I swear with my hand on this room's most sacred book, the alphabetized telephone directory, to speak the honest truth. Namely, that human existence is a hollow sham. And that, yes, salvation is possible. In the very beginning our hollowness was incomplete. It is we who completed it through unstinting effort, piling one struggle on top of another until every last shred of meaning was worn away. I have no intention of using my writing to detail each painstaking step in this erosion. That would be a waste of my time. Those of you who want to read about that should turn to Romain Rolland's *Jean-Christophe*. It is all written there.

Hartfield's staunch admiration for *Jean-Christophe* was based on two things: first, that it provided a strict chronological and detailed record of the life of a single man, from birth to death; and second, on top of that, that it was dreadfully long. In Hartfield's cherished opinion, literature should be understood as information, quantifiable through graphs, chronological charts, and the like; its accuracy was therefore proportionate to its volume.

Hartfield was always critical of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Its length, he wrote, could hardly be faulted. Yet its failure to incorporate what he termed Cosmic Ideas gave him an impression of incoherence. We can take "Cosmic Ideas" to mean "sterility."

Hartfield's favorite book was *A Dog of Flanders*. "Can you believe," he is quoted as saying, "that a dog would really give up its life for a painting?"

—

Hartfield was asked the following in a newspaper interview.

"In your most recent novel, your hero, Waldo, dies twice on Mars and then once again on Venus. Isn't that contradictory?"

“Are you familiar,” Hartfield replied, “with how time flows in cosmic space?”

“No,” the reporter answered. “But then no one else is, either.”

“What would be the point of writing a novel about things everyone already knows?”

*

The short story “The Martian Wells” stands apart from Hartfield’s other works, setting the stage for the emergence of Ray Bradbury. I read it a long time ago, so many of the details escape me, but here is a rough summary:

“The Martian Wells” tells the story of a young man who explores the many bottomless wells of the planet Mars. Although it is known that the wells were dug tens of thousands of years ago, strangely, the Martians took care to ensure that none had any contact with water. What, then, was their purpose? No one knows. The wells were all the Martians left behind—nothing else remains. No written language, no dwellings, no eating implements, no metal, no graves, no rockets, no cities, no vending machines, not even a seashell. Only the wells. Earthling scientists debate whether or not the Martians possessed anything that could be termed a civilization; yet their wells were so finely constructed that even after tens of thousands of years, they remain in perfect shape, not a brick out of place. Adventurers and scientific explorers attempt to investigate these wells. Yet those who use ropes retreat when they find the wells too deep and their side passages too extensive, while those who venture down without ropes never make it back to the surface.That is, until the young man appears. A cosmic wanderer, he has wearied of the vastness of outer space and desires only to die an anonymous death. As he descends into one of the wells, however, his state of mind improves, and a curious power takes hold of his body. About half a mile down, he finds a promising tunnel and decides to follow its twisting path to wherever it may lead. On his way, he loses track of time. His watch has stopped. He may have been walking for two hours or two days. Yet, embraced by the

strange power, he feels neither hunger nor fatigue.

Then, all of a sudden, he feels the light of the sun. His tunnel has intersected with another well. He scrambles to the surface. Sitting on the well's rim, he gazes out over an unbroken wilderness, then up at the sun. Something has changed. The smell of the wind, the sun…the sun is above his head, yet it looks as if it were setting, a huge orange lump suspended in the sky.

"In another 250,000 years the sun will explode," a voice whispers. "Click…OFF! 250,000 years. Not so far away, you know."

It is the voice of the wind.

"Don't mind me. I'm just the wind. You can call me Martian if you wish. The word has a nice ring to it. Not that words mean anything to me."

"But you're speaking."

"Me? No, the words are yours. I'm just sending hints to your mind."

"But what has happened to the sun?"

"It got old. It's dying. There's nothing either of us can do about it."

"But it's so sudden…"

"Sudden? Hardly. One and a half billion years passed while you were down the well. As you earthlings say, time flies. The tunnels you passed through run along a time warp—that's why we dug them as we did. They allow us to wander across time. From the creation of the universe to its final demise. We exist in a realm outside life and death. We are the wind."

"May I ask one question?"

"Certainly."

"What have you learned?"

The air around him shook as the wind laughed. Then eternal silence descended once more to the Martian plain. The young man took a revolver from his pocket, placed it to his temple, and squeezed the trigger.

33

The telephone rang.

"I'm back," she said.

"Can I see you?"

"Are you free right now?"

"Sure."

"Okay, then make it five o'clock, in front of the YWCA."

"What're you doing at the YWCA?"

"French class."

"French?"

"*Oui!*"

I hung up, took a shower, and had a beer. I was polishing it off when it began to pour outside.

The rain had stopped by the time I reached the YWCA, yet the girls leaving the front gate regarded the sky with deep suspicion, opening and closing their umbrellas as they emerged. I pulled up across the street, cut the engine, and lit a cigarette. The gate's rain-drenched columns loomed like a pair of black gravestones in a wasteland. An office building had been thrown up next to the dingy YWCA; its newness made it appear even cheaper, and an enormous sign advertising refrigerators was perched on its roof. It showed a thirtyish, apron-clad, anemic-looking woman stooping to open the door of her fridge with what appeared to be great delight, providing a view of its contents.

The freezer compartment contained an ice tray, a quart of vanilla ice cream, and a package of frozen shrimp; the next section down held a carton of eggs, a box of butter, Camembert cheese, and a boneless ham; the level below that contained fish and chicken legs; the plastic crisper at the very bottom was stocked with tomatoes, cucumbers, asparagus, lettuce, and grapefruit, while arranged on the inside of the door were three bottles each of cola and beer, and a carton of milk.

I sat there leaning on the steering wheel, imagining the best order in which to polish off all that food. I was thwarted by the ice cream, far more than I could possibly manage, and the fatal absence of salad dressing.

She came out of the gate just after five. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail and she was wearing a pink Lacoste polo shirt, a white cotton miniskirt, and glasses. She looked as if she had aged three years in a week. Maybe it was the new hairstyle and the glasses.

“Darn that rain!” she said, sliding into the passenger’s seat and nervously straightening her skirt.

“You get wet?”

“A little.”

I grabbed the beach towel that had lain untouched on the backseat since my last trip to the swimming pool and handed it to her. She wiped the sweat from her face and patted her wet hair a number of times before handing it back to me.

“I was having coffee just around the corner when the rain started. It was a real downpour.”

“At least it cooled things off.”

“Yeah,” she nodded, sticking her arm out the window to test the temperature. There was a new awkwardness between us.

“Have a good trip?” I asked.

“There was no trip. I lied to you.”

“Why would you do that?”

“I’ll tell you later.”

34

I do tell lies on occasion. The last time was a year ago.

Lies are terrible things. One could say that the greatest sins afflicting modern society are the proliferation of lies and silence. We lie through

our teeth, then swallow our tongues.

All the same, were we to speak only the truth all year round, then the truth might lose its value.

Last year, my girlfriend and I were snuggling together in bed. We were famished.

“Is there anything to eat?” I asked her.

“Let me check.”

She walked naked to the fridge, found some sausage, lettuce, and stale bread, and threw together two sandwiches, which she brought back to bed with two cups of instant coffee. It was a chilly night for October; by the time she slipped back under the covers she was as cold as a can of salmon.

“No mustard, I’m afraid.”

“Fine by me.”

We curled up together and watched an old movie on TV as we munched on the sandwiches.

It was *The Bridge on the River Kwai.*

She was moved by the scene at the end, where they blow up the bridge.

“Then why did they work so hard to build it?” she sighed, pointing at Alec Guinness, who was standing transfixed by the sight.

“Out of pride.”

“Mmph,” she responded, her cheeks stuffed with bread, as she contemplated the nature of human pride. Then, as always, I had no idea at all what was going on inside her head.

“Do you love me?”

“Sure I do.”

“Enough to marry me?”

“Right away?”

“Someday. In the future.”

“Sure I want to marry you.”

“But you never said anything until I asked.”

“It slipped my mind.”

“How many kids do you want?”

“Three.”

“Boys? Girls?”

“Two girls and a boy.”

She took a swallow of coffee to wash down the rest of the bread, and looked me square in the eye.

“LIAR!” she said.

But she was wrong. I had lied only once.

35

The girl with nine fingers and I went to a small restaurant near the port for a simple meal, followed by a Bloody Mary and a bourbon.

“Do you want to know what actually happened?” she asked.

“You know, last year we dissected a cow.”

“For real?”

“When we cut open its abdomen all it contained was a single cud. So I put the cud in a plastic bag, took it home, and set it on my desk. Since then, whenever things get rough, I look at that lump of half-digested grass and wonder, why would a cow take such pains to regurgitate and chew such an unappetizing, pathetic thing over and over again?”

She pursed her lips in a half smile and studied my face for a moment.

“I get it,” she said. “I won’t say another word about it.”

I nodded.

“There’s something I wanted to ask you,” she said. “Is that okay?”

“Go ahead.”

“Why do people die?”

“Because of evolution. An individual organism can’t sustain the

amount of energy that evolution requires; evolution has to work its way through generations. That's just one theory, of course."

"So are we still evolving?"

"Bit by bit."

"Why is that necessary?"

"Opinions are divided on that, too. The only thing we know for sure is that the universe itself is evolving. We can't tell if it's heading in any particular direction, or if some greater force is intervening, but we do know that evolution is for real, and that we are only a part of the process." I set my bourbon down and lit a cigarette.

"No one knows where that energy comes from," I said.

"Really?"

"Really."

She stirred the ice in her drink with her finger and studied the white tablecloth.

"I guess a hundred years after my death no one will remember I ever existed."

"Probably not," I said.

—

We left the restaurant and strolled along the quiet street past the row of warehouses. It was twilight, and everything was strangely vivid. As I walked beside her, I caught the faint fragrance of her shampoo. The wind that shook the leaves of the willow trees had a trace of the end of summer. We had not been walking long when she reached down and took my hand in hers. It was the hand with five fingers.

"When are you going back to Tokyo?"

"Next week. I've got to take a test."

She remained silent.

"I'll be back in the winter. Before Christmas. My birthday's on December 24th."

She nodded. She seemed to have something else on her mind.

“So you’re a Capricorn?” she said.

“Yes. How about you?”

“The same. January 10th.”

“Not the best sign to be born under, huh? Like Jesus Christ.”

“That’s true,” she said, adjusting her grip on my hand. “I think I’ll miss you when you’re gone.”

“We’ll meet again for sure.”

She said nothing.

The warehouses we passed looked quite old, the cracks between the bricks slick with green moss, the darkened windows high above covered by sturdy iron grating. A sign with the name of the trading company was attached to each of the rusted doors. Where the line of warehouses broke off, the full aroma of the ocean hit us and the row of willows abruptly ended, as if teeth had been knocked from their sockets. We continued across the overgrown tracks of the harbor line and onto the deserted pier, where we sat on the stone steps of one of the warehouses facing the ocean.

The lights of the shipyard dock were straight ahead, illuminating a Greek freighter whose cargo had already been unloaded, judging from the high waterline. The freighter looked abandoned; its white-painted deck was rusted red by the salt wind, and its flanks were caked with barnacles, like a sick man’s scabs.

We sat there for a very long time, just looking at the ocean, the evening sky, and the ship while the sea breeze blew through the trembling grass. As the dusk softened to night, a handful of stars began to twinkle above the dock.

She was the one who broke the silence, pounding her left fist into her right hand again and again until the palm was quite red. She stared at it with dull eyes, as if she’d lost all interest all of a sudden.

“I hate everybody.” The words hung in isolation.

“Even me?”

“Sorry.” Blushing, she returned her hands to her knees, as if trying to pull herself together. “I don’t hate you.”

“Not so much anyway, right?”

She nodded and gave me a faint smile. When she lit her cigarette I could see her hands tremble. The smoke rode the ocean wind past her hair and vanished in the darkness.

“When I’m sitting alone, all these voices start speaking to me,” she said. “All sorts of people—ones I know, ones I don’t know, my father, my mother, my teachers.”

I nodded.

“Most of what they say is awful. They tell me to drop dead, or say really filthy things.”

“What kind of things?”

“I can’t repeat them.”

She crushed the cigarette she had just lit with her leather sandal, and gently pressed her eyes with her fingertips.

“Do you think I’m sick?”

“It’s hard to say.” I shook my head to show her that I really had no idea. “If you’re worried you should go see a doctor.”

“Don’t worry—I’ll be okay.”

She lit a second cigarette and tried to laugh, but couldn’t pull it off.

“You’re the first person I’ve ever told about this.”

I took her hand in mine. It was quivering, and a clammy sweat oozed from between her fingers.

“I really didn’t want to lie to you.”

“I know.”

We fell quiet again, listening to the soft sound of the waves lapping against the pier. Time went by, more time than I can recall.

Before I knew it she was crying. I traced the line of her tear-soaked cheek with my finger and wrapped my arm around her shoulder.

—

It had been a long time since I felt the fragrance of summer: the scent of the ocean, a distant train whistle, the touch of a girl’s skin, the

lemony perfume of her hair, the evening wind, faint glimmers of hope, summer dreams.

But none of these were the way they once had been; they were all somehow off, as if copied with tracing paper that kept slipping out of place.

36

It took us half an hour to walk to her apartment. The night was perfect, and crying had left her in a surprisingly good mood. We stopped at several shops on the way and bought a whole bunch of useless stuff—strawberry-flavored toothpaste, a gaudy beach towel, jigsaw puzzles made in Denmark, a six-color ballpoint pen, and so on—all of which we toted up the slope, pausing every so often to look back at the harbor.

"Is it okay to leave your car back there?"

"I'll get it later."

"Can't it wait till morning?"

"No problem," I said. We continued our stroll up the flag-stone path.

"I really don't want to be alone tonight," she said to the flagstones.

I nodded.

"But you won't be able to polish your father's shoes."

"He can polish them himself every once in a while."

"But will he?"

"Sure. After all, he's a man of principle."

—

It was a quiet night.

She rolled over to face me, her nose touching my shoulder.

"I'm cold."

“Cold? It’s ninety degrees!”

“I don’t care. I’m still cold.”

I drew the terry-cloth blanket we had tossed near our feet over our shoulders and embraced her. She was shaking like a leaf.

“Are you feeling sick?”

She shook her head.

“I’m scared,” she said.

“Of what?”

“Of everything. Aren’t you?”

“Not particularly.”

She fell quiet. She seemed to be weighing my answer in the palm of her hand.

“Do you want to have sex with me?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I can’t tonight. I’m sorry.”

I nodded, my arms still around her.

“I just had an operation.”

“An abortion?”

“Yes.”

Her arms slackened around my body, and her fingertips began to describe circles on my shoulder.

“It’s weird. I can’t remember a thing.”

“About what?”

“About him. The father. Can’t even remember what he looked like.”

I ran my palm over her hair.

“I thought I loved him. For a moment, anyway.” She paused. “Have you ever been in love?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Can you remember what she looked like?”

I tried to call to mind the faces of the three girls I had slept with, but, strange to say, I couldn’t form a clear picture of a single one.

“No,” I said.

“Weird, huh? Why is it like this?”

“Probably because it makes it easier.”

She nodded several times, her face lying sideways, in profile, on my bare chest.

“You know, if you’re too horny we can find another way to…”

“No. I’m okay.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

Her arms tightened again around my back. I could feel her breasts pressing against the pit of my stomach. I was dying for a beer.

“For years now, a lot of things haven’t gone right for me.”

“How many years?”

“Twelve, thirteen…since my dad got sick. I can’t remember a single thing before that. Everything is screwed up. It’s like I’m caught in an ill wind.”

“Winds change direction.”

“You really think so?”

“If you wait long enough, yes.”

She said nothing. Her silence was as dry as a desert; it swallowed my words, leaving a bitter taste in my mouth.

“I tried to believe that,” she said. “But it never worked. I tried to fall in love, and I tried to hang on and be patient. But still…”

We didn’t attempt to talk after that, just held on to each other. She lay there motionless, as if fast asleep, her head on my chest, her lips grazing my nipple.

Her silence lasted a long time. A very long time. I lay there in a half-conscious state, gazing at the dark ceiling.

—

“Mama,” she murmured, as if in a dream. She was fast asleep, no question about it.

37

Hey, all you out there. How're you feeling tonight? It's Saturday evening again, time for your *Greatest Hits Request Show*, right here on NEB Radio. For the next two hours we're going to play all your favorite tunes. But first, the end of summer is right around the corner. How about it, guys—was your summer a good one?

I'm gonna shake things up a little tonight, read you a letter I just received from one of our listeners before we start the music. So here goes.

> How are you?
>
> I love your program and look forward to it every week. Everything moves so fast—this fall marks my third year here in the hospital. How quickly time passes! Of course, the change of seasons doesn't mean very much for someone like me, who lives in an air-conditioned room and can barely glimpse what lies outside her window, but all the same it fills me with delight to imagine the season passing and a new one coming to take its place.
>
> I am seventeen years old, and for the past three years I have been unable to read a book or watch TV or go out for a walk…or get out of bed or roll over, for that matter. In fact, I am dictating this letter to my older sister, who has been with me all this time. She dropped out of university to look after me. Of course I am very grateful to her. What lying here in bed for the past three years has taught me is that, however miserable your situation, there is always something to learn, and that helps me go on living one day at a time.
>
> I am told my illness is a neurological disease affecting the spinal cord. It's a real downer, but of course there is hope for a cure. Still, the odds are low, just three percent… According to my doctor (a really cool guy), that is the figure

one gets looking at the recovery rate of others with the same disease. He says this means my chances are better than a rookie pitching a no-hitter against the Tokyo Giants, but not as good as him shutting them out.

It terrifies me to think what might await me. So much so that sometimes I feel like screaming. To lie like a rock in this bed staring at the ceiling for decades—never reading books or walking in the wind, never being loved by anybody—and then to die alone, an old woman. It is just too sad. Sometimes, when I wake at three in the morning, I think I can hear my spine melting away bit by bit. It may not be my imagination, either.

No more unpleasantness. As my sister reminds me hundreds of times a day, I must try to think only positive thoughts. That and sleep well at night. Night is when the bad thoughts tend to visit.

The harbor is visible from my window. Every morning I picture how great it would be to get out of bed, walk down to the waterfront, and fill my lungs with ocean air. If I could do that even once, perhaps then I could begin to understand why the world is as it is. That's the way I feel. And if I could gain even a shred of that understanding, maybe I could bear the idea of dying in this bed.

All the best.

She didn't sign her name.

I received this letter a little after three o'clock yesterday afternoon, and read it while having my coffee in our studio lounge. In the evening, I walked down to the harbor after work and looked up at the mountains. Listen, my young friend, you say the harbor is visible from your window, so I should be able to see your window from the harbor too. So many lights were shining up there on the mountainside. I couldn't tell which one of them was yours, of course. Some lights shone from poor people's houses, some from the mansions of the

wealthy. There were the lights of hotels, of schools, of companies. So many people, so many ways of life. I had never thought about it like that before. It brought tears to my eyes. I hadn't cried in a dog's age. But don't get me wrong, my young friend. I wasn't crying out of sympathy for you. No, it was for another reason. Listen, all of you, I'm only going to tell you once. This is it:

I love all you kids out there!

If you remember anything about this program in ten years—the songs I played for you, perhaps, or maybe even yours truly—then please remember that.

So here's her request. Elvis Presley's "Good Luck Charm." When this song is over, I'll go back for the next one hour and fifty minutes to being your canine stand-up comedian, as always.

Thanks for tuning in.

38

The evening I left for Tokyo, I stopped by J's Bar, suitcase in hand. It was before opening time, but J let me in and gave me a beer.

"I'm taking the night bus," I told him. He nodded several times as he peeled the potatoes for that evening.

"It's going to be lonely around here with you gone. You and the Rat made quite a team," he said, pointing at the print above the counter. "He'll miss you too."

"Yeah."

"You like Tokyo?"

"One place or another—it's all the same to me."

"I guess so. I haven't left this town once since the Tokyo Olympics."

"You like it here?"

"As you said. It's all the same."

"Yeah."

“I’d love to go back to China in a few years’ time, though. Not that I’ve ever been there, of course. Crosses my mind every time I go down to the harbor and see the ships.”

“My uncle died in China.”

“I see. All kinds of people died there. Still, we’re all brothers.”

—

J treated me to a few more rounds. Then to top it off, he gave me a plastic bag of fries fresh from the fryer to take with me.

“Thanks.”

“My pleasure. You guys grew up so fast. First time I saw you, you were in high school.”

I smiled and nodded.

“Goodbye,” I said.

“Take care,” J said.

—

The daily proverb for August 26 on the calendar in J’s Bar read, “He who gives freely shall receive in kind.”

I bought my ticket for the night bus and sat down on a bench in the waiting area where I could see the town’s lights. As the night deepened, the lights went out one by one until at last only the streetlights and neon signs were left. A distant foghorn brought with it a faint sea breeze.

—

The bus door was flanked by two workers checking tickets and seat numbers. When I handed one my ticket, he announced, “Row 21, China.”

“China?” I asked.

“That means 21C. We go by the first letter. America is ‘A,’ Brazil is ‘B,’ China is ‘C,’ and Denmark is ‘D.’ If my partner doesn’t catch what

I'm saying," he said, pointing to the other guy who was ticking off the numbers, "then we've got a problem."

Nodding, I boarded the bus, found my seat, and settled back to enjoy my still-warm fries.

—

All things pass. None of us can manage to hold on to anything.

In that way, we live our lives.

▸ 39

This is the end of my story. Of course there is a sequel.

—

I've already turned twenty-nine, the Rat thirty. Getting up there. J's Bar was renovated when they widened his street, turning it into a thoroughly chic café. Nevertheless, J still peels a bucket of potatoes every day and passes his time sipping beer and grumbling about how much better the customers were back in the old days.

I got married, and we live in Tokyo.

My wife and I are big Sam Peckinpah fans; we go see his films when they come out and then drink two beers each and feed popcorn to the pigeons in Hibiya Park on the way home. My favorite is *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*, hers is *Convoy*. Of the films not by Peckinpah, I like *Ashes and Diamonds*, while she likes *Mother Joan of the Angels*, both Polish films. I guess your tastes come to resemble each other's when you've been living together a long time.

If someone asked me if I was happy, I guess I would have to say yes. Dreams are like that in the end.

The Rat is still writing novels. He sends me photocopies each Christmas. Last year it was the story of a cook working at a mental

hospital; the year before, it was about a comic band that modeled themselves on the Brothers Karamazov. As always, there is no sex, and none of the characters dies.

On the first page he always writes:

"Happy Birthday
and
White Christmas"

That's because my birthday is December 24th.

—

I never saw the girl with four fingers on her left hand again. When I returned to the town that winter, she had quit the record shop and vacated her apartment. She vanished without a trace, swept away by the flow of time and its flood of people.

When I go back to the town in summer, I walk the same streets we did and sit on the stone steps of the same warehouse and look at the ocean. Sometimes I want to cry, but the tears don't come. It's that kind of a thing.

—

"California Girls" still sits in the corner of my record shelf. When summer comes I dust it off and play it over and over again. I sit back, have a beer, and think about California.

Adjacent to my record collection is my desk, above which hangs a dried hunk of mummified grass. The cud I took from that cow's stomach.

My photograph of the French literature major who died got lost in the shuffle when I moved.

The Beach Boys came out with a new album, their first in a long time.

I wish they all could be
California girls...

40

To wrap up, let me talk a little more about Derek Hartfield.

Hartfield was born (in 1909) and raised in a small Ohio town. His father was a quiet man who worked as a telegraph opera- tor, his mother a plump woman who loved astrology and baked delicious cookies. Hartfield himself was a gloomy, friendless child who spent his free time absorbed in reading comic books and pulp magazines, and eating his mother's cookies. After graduating from high school, he tried working at the post office in his hometown, but quickly gave that up to concentrate on what he had come to realize was the only path for him, his true vocation—writing novels.

He sold the fifth story he wrote to *Weird Tales* for the sum of twenty dollars in 1930. During the subsequent year he wrote at a clip of 70,000 words per month, a pace he raised to 100,000 words the following year and to 150,000 by the year before his death. Legend has it that he had to buy a new Remington typewriter every six months.

Almost everything Hartfield wrote was either an adventure or a horror story; his biggest hit, the series *Waldo, Boy Adventurer*, an inspired mixture of the two, totaled forty-two volumes. In the course of the series, Waldo died 3 times, killed 5,000 enemies, and made love to a total of 375 women, including one Martian. A number of the Waldo stories can be read in Japanese translation.

Hartfield detested so many things: post offices, high schools, publishing houses, carrots, women, dogs—the list is endless. There were only three things that he liked, namely, guns, cats, and his mother's cookies. Apart from Paramount Pictures and the FBI testing center, he seems to have owned the most extensive gun collection in the United States. The only firearms he didn't collect were anti-aircraft

and anti-tank weapons. His most prized piece was a .38 revolver with a pearl-studded handle. He kept just a single bullet in its chamber, and liked to boast, “I’ll use this baby to revolve myself someday.”

Yet when his mother died in 1938, he traveled all the way to New York to jump off the Empire State Building, flattening himself like a frog on the pavement below.

—

Following his wishes, this quote from Nietzsche was carved on his gravestone:

> How can those who live in the light of day possibly comprehend the depths of night?

MAY 1979