

森見登美彦

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夜行



小学館

Night Train

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Prologue

Having finalized plans to attend the Kurama Fire Festival with friends from the English conversation circle I had attended in my college days, I departed Tokyo for Kyoto in late October.

I set out from Tokyo before noon, and arrived in Kyoto at around 2 P.M.

A stroll through downtown brought me from Kyoto Station to Shijō Kawaramachi, where I boarded a bus heading towards Demachiyangi Station. As the bus crossed the Kamo Bridge, I saw black kites wheeling through the archetypically clear autumn sky.

The ticket gates for the Eizan Railway were already choked with tourists. I was leaning against a column and thinking about how early I had arrived when I heard someone shout from the other side of the crowd, "Ōhashi!" I looked over to see Nakai walking my way and waving.

"You sure are early!"

"So are you, Nakai."

"I just hate being late. Besides, I wanted to check out the school before we all gathered here."

"Is it still there?"

"You bet. Really brought back memories."

The English conversation school is housed in a wooden single-story building, tucked away in a side street off the main road between Demachiyangi Station and Hyakumanben crossing. Classes with the teacher, a foreigner, would last about an hour. Being located near Kyoto University, most of the students there were undergrads or researchers. I started attending during my second year of college, and Nakai had been in the same class every night. At the time he had been working toward his master's.

"I got here yesterday with my wife," he told me. Last night they had stayed at a hotel in Kawaramachi, and this morning his wife had met up with a friend to tour some of the temples before heading back to Tokyo a little early. I had met his wife several times before, having been to their wedding reception as well as the occasional social call to their apartment in Suidobashi.

We stood there shooting the breeze, waiting for the rest of our companions to show up.

"I can't believe we're actually getting together," Nakai ruminated.

"...It's been ten years, after all."

It's hard to say whether these ten years had been long or short. Living in Tokyo, everything that had happened in Kyoto had seemed like a very long time ago. But now that I had come to Kyoto and was talking with Nakai again, it felt like hardly any time had passed at all.

"I'm glad you reached out. I doubt I would ever have come back here otherwise."

As Nakai made this remark, I saw Takeda emerge at the top of the stairs leading down to the Keihan Line. He was the youngest out of all of us; I had met him when he was still a first year. Seeing us standing here he jogged over, a huge smile on his face.

"Hey guys. It's been too long!"



Back when I was enrolled in the English conversation school, Nakai had been the nucleus of our group. He was a welcoming fellow, always inviting people to meals. It was because of him that I had gotten to know people from the other classes. We had all been students, the six of us who had ridden the Eizan line to the Kurama Fire Festival that autumn ten years ago, and Nakai had been our center.

Takeda joined us, and while we caught up with one another, Fujimura showed up. She was the same age as Takeda, and this time around she was the only woman on our trip to Kurama. When she saw us there she laughed out loud.

"It feels like it was just yesterday!"

"That's funny, for me it feels like it was forever ago," said Takeda. "But that's because I've changed a lot. I'm a bigger person now."

"Really?"

"You'll see, eventually."

"All right, folks," announced Sakai. "Let's head over to the hotel in Kibune."

Tanabe, the oldest in our group, was going to be late because of work, so we all proceeded through the ticket gates and boarded an Eizan train.

The train moved off through the city, heading north.

As a student, I held a sort of fascination with the Eizan Railway. Running along through the city in the twilight, it looked as if it were bound for Wonderland. Whenever I rode it I always felt as if I was embarking on a long, long journey. As I stared out the window, Fujimura, who was standing next to me, broke in on my thoughts.

"Thanks for calling me, Ōhashi!"

"I'm just glad your number still worked."

You should come by my gallery when you go back to Tokyo. Don't you work nearby?"

"Well, I'm not much of a connoisseur."

"That doesn't matter. You should come by anyways."

She looked out the window and fell silent. Perhaps she was thinking back to her student days.

After a while she addressed me again. "So, what made you think of calling us all again?"

"That's a good question."

"Any reason in particular?"

"Not really. I just thought it was about time."

"...That's fair. I think you're right." Fujimura nodded and looked back out the window.

Ten years ago, six friends from the English conversation school went to see the Kurama Fire Festival. That night, one of those friends disappeared.

If you look in the newspapers of the time, you'll find a small article with little substance. The authorities came up empty handed, and no clues were ever found. It was as if she had vanished into thin air. At the time of her disappearance, Hasegawa had been a second year, just like me.

A thought suddenly occurred to me. Maybe I called everyone here, because she is calling me. As the train continued ever deeper into the mountains I looked out the window, and fancied that somewhere in the darkness among the pine trees by the track stood the disappeared Hasegawa.

My thoughts turned back to the art gallery I had visited earlier.



I had arrived at Kyoto Station in the afternoon, but with time to kill before the meetup I left Shijō and took a walk through the shopping district.

The Jidai Festival was tomorrow, so the streets on this autumn weekend were filled with tourists, foreign and domestic. To avoid the crowds on the main thoroughfare I turned down a side street and headed north up Takakura Street. From down in this urban canyon I looked up and saw the serene, unclouded autumn sky, and reminisced about how I had looked up at the very same sky back when I was a student.

I was walking along when my attention was drawn to a woman walking in front of me. There was something transcendent about her. Her posture was erect, and her black hair glimmered under the autumn sunlight. I felt like I had seen her before, though I didn't know when or where.

As I tried to figure out why she was so familiar, the woman walked into a shop on Takakura Street. I caught a fleeting glimpse of her face, and realized that she looked exactly like Hasegawa.

"It can't be her," I thought, but my heart thudded in my chest and my pace quickened to a half-run.

The shop was a cramped art gallery, and the copper signboard out front pronounced it to be Yanagi Gallery. The display in the window was covered in bronze-colored cloth, and on top of it was a plate that said, "Kishida Michio - Solo Exhibition", alongside a single copperplate engraving. There was something strangely enthralling about the engraving. On the far side of a grove of trees, the blazing lights of a train made their way through the pitch-black night. A lone woman stood looking at the train, her right hand raised as if she was calling out to it. Her back was turned to the viewer, so that I couldn't see her face. It was entitled Night Train——Kurama.

I opened the glass door and entered the gallery.

The confines of the long gallery were dim, and the faint odor of burning incense drifted in the air. The mezzotints hanging on the milk-white walls were all darkly colored, like rectangular windows bored into the wall that opened out onto a world of night. The thick glass doors insulated the interior from the hustle and bustle of the streets outside, and the gallery was stifled in an almost otherworldly silence.

The woman was nowhere to be seen.

As I stood there, bewildered, a man in a suit emerged from the shadow of the partition at the back of the gallery. Though he looked to be only in his late 30's, I assumed he was the proprietor of the gallery.

"Welcome."

"Did a woman just come in here?"

The owner eyed me warily. "...Not that I am aware."

I must have been mistaken, I thought to myself. My apprehension at coming back to the Kurama Fire Festival after ten years must be making me see things that weren't there. I had called everyone here to the festival as a way of making a clean break, but somehow I just couldn't seem to shake the conviction that somewhere out there, Hasegawa was still alive.

I was too self-conscious to just leave, and there was still some time before the meetup, so I decided to stay and look at the engravings. In an unflappable tone the young proprietor explained everything from the technique of mezzotint to the life of Kishida Michio, the artist.

Kishida had dropped out of art school in Tokyo, and after apprenticing in England and polishing his own skills, he had returned to Japan and set up a studio in Kyoto, his hometown. That would have meant that he would have been living in Kyōto while I was a student in Tokyo. But he had died in the spring seven years ago, and the ownership of his works had passed to the Yanagi Gallery, which he had previously associated with.

“There are 48 works in total in the series entitled Night Train.”

The landscapes, created only from blinding white against a backdrop of velvet darkness, brought to mind an neverending night. Each of the works portrayed a lone woman. All of them had neither eyes nor mouth, and their heads were inclined like smooth white mannequins. Onomichi. Ise. Nobeyama. Nara. Aizu. Okuhida. Matsumoto. Nagasaki. Aomori. Tenryūkyō. As I looked at the engravings one by one, I had the strange sensation that they all portrayed the same night, spilling out endlessly.

“Why Night Train?” I murmured.

The proprietor smiled and tilted his head. “Maybe it refers to an ordinary train...or maybe, he was referring to a train of demons, parading through the night.”¹



The inn where we were staying was on the Kibune River among a row of other inns, a trip of ten minutes up the mountain road in the courtesy car from Kibuneguchi Station. The room was partitioned in two by a sliding screen, filled with the rushing sound of the Kibune River and the familiar scent of tatami. The clamor of Kurama over the mountain didn't reach us here, and all around us was still.

While we bathed and waited for Tanabe to arrive, drops of rain began to patter down outside. Takeda stuck his head out the window and looked up at the sky.

“They wouldn't cancel the festival because of rain, would they?”

“I don't think a little rain would be enough to stop it,” chuckled Nakai, stretched out on the tatami. “I'm pretty sure the torches still burn even in the rain.”

We heard footsteps clomping loudly up the stairs.

“Sorry, sorry!” Tanabe was saying as he entered the room, wearing a full 5 o'clock shadow. He stood in the doorway and looked down at us all. “Well look at you all, kicking back and relaxing. Don't you know we're here for a festival?”

With the five of us finally assembled, we gathered around a boar stew, as the rain came down harder and harder. The inn was enveloped by the pounding of the rain on the eaves and the rushing of the stream; the chill of the mountain village seeped through the glass windows and permeated the room.

“It's really coming down,” I said, pressing my ear to the fogged up glass.

We had a lively time there crowded around the warm pot. I still saw Nakai in Tokyo from time to time, but it had been years since I had seen any of the others. Now we all had

¹ Hyakki Yagyō (百鬼夜行), a procession of demons that comes out at night, spiring away anyone they come across.

our own jobs, our own lives. While we spoke at length about those, none of us touched on the topic of Hasegawa. It was like we were all keeping our sixth member at a distance.

While I absentmindedly listened to the rain, the face of the woman who had gone into the gallery drifted to the front of my mind again. At the time I had been so sure that she was Hasegawa, but now the face was blurred and uncertain in my memory.

"You're awfully quiet, Ōhashi," Nakai remarked from across the pot. "Why the long face?"

"This afternoon, I thought I saw Hasegawa—" I blurted out.

The room instantly fell into a startled silence.

"I mean, of course I was just seeing things," I hastily added. After all, when I followed her into the gallery she was nowhere to be found.

Trying to ease the tension, I started talking about the strange mezzotints I had seen at the gallery. But when I mentioned they were by someone called Kishida Michio, Tanabe looked at me in amazement.

"You went to that gallery? Yanagi Gallery, right?"

"Yeah, that's what it was called."

"I went in there too. We must have just missed each other."

"I didn't know you were into art galleries, Tanabe."

"Well, just a little bit."

Here Tanabe went quiet.

He sounded like he was being evasive, which struck me as odd. I glanced at Takeda and Fujimura, who both looked like they knew something about that artist as well.

But it was Nakai who broke the silence.

"I've seen his pictures too. There was one hanging in the hotel lobby when I went to Onomichi."

"Onomichi?"

"Have you been there? It's in Hiroshima prefecture."

"What were you doing there? Were you on vacation?" asked Fujimura.

Nakai chuckled ruefully in reply. "It's kind of complicated..."

And he began to relate what had happened in Onomichi. The rain continued to fall over the dark mountain village as we listened to his tale.

The First Night — Onomichi

"I went to Onomichi five years ago. It was in the middle of May, a weekend, and the weather made it feel like it was already summer," Nakai began.

As I've already mentioned, Nakai was a grad student when he was attending the English conversation school. Even after I departed from Kyōto and lost contact with everyone else, he was the one person I still kept in touch with. I'd even gone to his apartment in Suidobashi for dinner and had his wife's cooking a few times before.

"The reason I was going all the way over there was to bring back my wife. She'd...changed."

What follows is Nakai's story.



It started two weeks before I went to Onomichi.

When I came home from work the lights were out, and the hallway leading to the living room was as dark as a tunnel. It all felt very ominous. My wife had just quit her job so she was home most of the time, and she always let me know if she was going to go out at night. But I didn't find anything resembling a note in the living room.

I tried calling her, but her phone just kept ringing.

I hope she didn't get in some sort of accident, I thought with a shiver of suspense, waiting until, at last, someone picked up.

"Hello?" came a small voice.

A wave of relief went through me when I heard that voice, but when she said she was in Onomichi I was taken aback. She informed me, sounding distinctly irritated, that she had left Tokyo in the afternoon and found lodgings in Onomichi.

"I'm going to be here a while," she said.

I was shocked. "What are you doing in Onomichi?" I asked, but there was only silence from the other end. Pressing my ear harder to the phone, I faintly heard the sound of water dripping into a washbasin.

A sudden wave of fury swelled within me. I had a responsibility to her as her husband. How could she just leave home without a word of explanation? And what was I supposed to tell my in-laws if they called?

When I said all this to her, she sighed. "Responsibility? Who cares?"

And then she hung up.

I stayed there dumbfounded for a while, but at the same time another part of me was thinking, *I knew it*. Honestly, I'd started to feel something was off about her demeanor since the middle of April.

I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but every so often a cold look would come across her face. It was like she wasn't quite there, and if I tried to ask her anything she would give only the vaguest of answers. If I left her alone she would eventually pop back to her usual self. Every time I asked her if I had said something wrong, she just looked at me in confusion. I couldn't tell if she really hadn't noticed what had happened, or if she was just playing dumb.

Still, there was something that felt very wrong about that cold look on her face. For a moment, it felt like there was a completely different person sitting there. I asked her if she was feeling alright, which she claimed she was. But I was convinced that there had to be a reason for that look on her face.

"If something's bothering you, why don't you just tell me?"

My wife seemed hurt that I would ask her such a thing. "If you keep feeling something's off, maybe it's just you?"

"It can't just be me!"

"But how do you know that for sure?"

She was convinced that it was my problem, and I was convinced that it was hers. The more we argued about it, the more she retreated into her shell. I knew there was a problem, but I couldn't quite grasp what it really was. It infuriated me to no end.

So it went, until my wife left home.

At first I was furious. *Have it your way!* I thought. But after having a little time to cool off, I began to reflect on the way I had acted. Thinking about it calmly, my wife had a point. Why had I been so quick to interrogate her like that? Hadn't I just been taking out my own frustrations on her?

For two weeks, she and I continued our exchanges over the phone, and I started to feel like the warmth was returning to my wife's voice.

"I've slept so well ever since I came here," she told me. "I really think that coming here was the right thing for both of us."

"You might be right."

"You should try to get enough rest too. You've been kind of strange lately. Though what I would really recommend is taking a trip somewhere far away."

"How much longer are you going to be there?"

"...I don't know. I don't want to rush things."

My wife was staying at a house on a hill, helping out at a general store run by a woman she knew. Apparently, from her room on the second floor she had an uninterrupted view of the city of Onomichi as well as the islands out in the Seto Inland Sea.

"Where did you meet her?" Whenever I asked about the woman, my wife was always noncommittal. That troubled me. I had never heard so much as a word about my wife knowing anyone in Onomichi.

"If you're so worried, why don't you come here and see for yourself?"

"...You'd be okay with that?"

"You've never been here before, right?"

"I guess not," I immediately lied.



Onomichi is a city in Hiroshima prefecture that lies on the coast of the Seto Inland Sea.

I exited the ticket gates and walked into the plaza outside the station. Across the water cranes loomed over the shipyards on Mukaishima, and boats went back and forth over the sparkling ocean waves. I had been born and raised in a town far away from the sea, so I felt like I had come a very long way from home.

I looked out at the ocean for a while longer, before crossing the train tracks of the Sanyō Line and heading into the hills.

My wife was supposedly working at a general store called The Seabreeze Company. The online homepage was extremely rudimentary, and judging from the timestamp it hadn't been updated in a long time. I had my doubts whether it was even still in business, but just in case I printed out the map and brought it along.

The maze of sloped streets was already perfused with the scent of summer.

Onomichi is a strange town. From the seaside it looks small, but beyond the hills are more hills, and each path branches off into many other little paths. The deeper in you go, the more it feels like you are wandering into a labyrinth.

Amidst this diorama of alleys threading behind houses, stone steps overgrown with grass, and old drain spouts, only the campaign posters for the lower house elections stood out as bizarrely vibrant.

"Was it like this before?" I wondered to myself.

Contrary to what I had told my wife, I had been to Onomichi just once before.

It was during summer vacation in grad school. After going home to Kyushu, I hopped off the train at Onomichi on my way back to university and spent half a day wandering around. Obon had just ended, and the heat was stifling. Broiling sunlight beat

down on the long path up the hill, and even the sea breeze that swayed the trees in Senkōji was parched. It was like being in a daydream. There was something unreal about my memory of that August afternoon, and strangely enough, even though I was back in Onomichi not the slightest hint of nostalgia welled up within me.

I wasn't sure if the map was simply poorly made, or whether it was just my terrible sense of direction, but I went the wrong way and ended up taking a very roundabout path. After walking for about twenty minutes, I finally found a path that was marked on the map. It was a steep road that led up past a cemetery. On the right was a grove of trees, and on the left were houses lined up like a giant staircase. I hoped fervently that I wouldn't have to keep climbing further once I reached the top of this path.

On my way up I ran into a strange man.

He was dashing madly down from the top of the hill. Very nearly running into me, he caught himself and stopped dead, his mouth open in surprise. Even in this heat, he had on a proper concierge's uniform. His bulging eyes were opened wide, and his face was slick, as if he had splashed water on it. As I bowed slightly and passed by him, he turned his body to the side and murmured in a low tone, "Excuse me." He smelled rather unpleasant.

After we had passed each other, I turned back to see the man dashing down the slope again. It was like he was chasing something, or maybe running away from it. There was something arresting about that pitiful sight, and I stopped there on the slope for a while, watching him until he disappeared before resuming my climb up the hill.

The general store that I eventually reached looked nearly deserted.

The building was a blue-roofed house, and next to the frosted glass sliding door was a carved wooden sign that said, "The Seabreeze Company". Yet there were no signs that anybody lived there. Fallen shingles were scattered underfoot, and the potted plants lined up by the door were as dry as a desert. I reached out and slid the door open with a snap. A dusty, sandy smell came wheezing out. Inside I could see a dim corridor and a staircase, but frankly it resembled a grotto more than it did any kind of place where humans would dwell. From somewhere deep within, I faintly heard the sound of water dripping into a washbasin. Was this really where my wife was staying?

"Hello?" I called with trepidation, feeling like I had just dropped a pebble into a deep, deep hole. "Is anyone there?"

I strained my ears, and at last from the darkness at the top of the staircase I heard a breezy voice reply, "Coming!"

White, delicate feet pattered down the worn wooden staircase, and a familiar, pale-skinned face appeared in the gloom. My wife was wearing a white summer dress that I had never seen before.

"Hey there, stranger. You wouldn't believe how much trouble I had finding you," I mumbled, suddenly bashful.

But she just frowned at me.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

My wife tilted her head quizzically and asked, "...Who are you?"



After talking with the woman at the entrance, it turned out that she indeed was not my wife.

Yet the resemblance was so close that I couldn't believe it was pure coincidence. Maybe they were related by blood in some way.

But the woman said she didn't know anything about my wife. In fact, the store was no longer even in operation.

"It's been closed for about half a year already," she said.

I was quite surprised when I heard that.

"Do we really look that alike, your wife and I?" she giggled. She didn't seem to doubt my story at all.

Apparently she had used to run The Seabreeze Company, selling handmade goods. Her husband worked at a business hotel by the station, and she had decided to open up this store to bring in some extra income, though few customers ever came by. When I heard that, I couldn't help but think of the concierge I had met coming up the slope.

None of it matched what my wife had described. "I'm pretty sure this is the only Seabreeze Company around here," said the woman.

I tried calling my wife, but her phone wasn't on.

"Has your wife ever been to this store before?"

"I don't know."

"That's funny."

"Well look, I'm sorry for raising all this fuss."

"Hold on," said the woman as I turned to go. "Since you're here, why don't you take a look at my goods? There's still a lot of it left."

She lightly took hold of my arm. "I know it's a mess, but why don't you come on up?"

The way her words came out so briskly was just like my wife. The flow swept me up, and before I knew it I was walking through the front door.

I put on slippers and padded through the dim corridor, reaching a dining room. Beyond it was a ten-tatami room containing a dresser and a television. The doors to the garden veranda had been left wide open. In contrast to the rest of the house this room was

bright, like a shoal rising amidst the murky deep. Up here on the hill, I had a sweeping view of the city and the sea beyond the blooming azaleas.

"I'm sorry, I haven't tidied up at all," she said, not sounding particularly sorry. "Wow, you've really worked up a sweat! Let me get you something to drink."

I sat in the room drinking tepid barley tea.

"This your first time in Onomichi?"

"Yeah, that's right."

For some reason I found myself telling the same lie again.

The woman brought in a cardboard box and laid out some goods in front of me to peruse. They were all simple, artless crafts, the kind of things you might find at a Saturday flea market: flower-shaped coasters, shopping bags, each still with a faded price tag attached.

"They're cute," I managed to say.

"How about a gift for your wife?" she coaxed, looking into my face.

The resemblance with my wife was just too uncanny. The way she knit her eyebrows as she poured the barley tea, the way her eyes turned up to look into my face, it was all exactly the same. It felt as if my wife had come with me to Onomichi and we had snuck into an old house to play at teatime. I couldn't possibly have forgotten what my wife looked like after just two weeks. Maybe she really was my wife, pretending to be someone else to test me. That was how similar they looked.

But I said nothing, and at her suggestion purchased a brooch.

"Oh no, I'm out of change!"

"That's alright," I said, waving it off.

"Sorry," she apologized, her tone cajoling.

We talked idly for a little while.

"This house seems like it's got a lot of history."

The woman looked around the room. "That's why we can rent it so cheaply. Lucky for us, really."

She told me that this house had belonged to an old couple. After the husband passed away, the wife had moved in with her married daughter on Mukaishima and rented out the old house. The old woman was still quite healthy, and occasionally took a boat over from the island to inspect the house. Whenever they chatted over tea she would always bring up her granddaughter. Apparently when she had still lived in this house, her granddaughter, who had been in high school, often came here from Mukaishima to play. To the old woman, that was a dear, unforgettable memory.

"She told the same story every time. Almost like time had stopped for her."

"That's what happens when the years start coming on."

"It felt like time might stop for me, too."

Suddenly she turned to the veranda, listening carefully.

"Hey, do you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"There's a train coming through."

And just as she said, I could hear the faint reverberation of a train in the distance.

"At night I turn out the lights on the second floor and open the window. You can see the lights of the trains running along the ocean. It's beautiful. Sometimes freight trains come through, all blacked out...those are kind of scary."

"I'm sure the view here at night must be incredible."

Lowering her voice conspiratorially, the woman whispered, "I mostly stay on the second floor."

"Why's that?"

"Whenever I come out on my own, my husband gets mad. He gets this ugly look on his face if he even sees me come down to the first floor. That's partially why I had to close the store. Whenever I see him coming back from work, I run and hide on the second floor and try not to breathe too loud."

At first I thought she was joking, but her face was dead serious. It was a strange tale, and feeling very unsettled I said nothing.

I became aware of another weird sound. It was the sound of bubbling water, like someone gargling water in their mouth.

"Do you hear that funny sound?"

"Funny sound?" She suddenly rose to her knees and glared out at the azaleas in the garden. Her expression was like a mask, and on seeing that look I became very uncomfortable. It was the same look that had been bothering me since April, the same look I had seen on my wife's face.

"Excuse me for a second," the woman muttered, rising to her feet and stalking out of the room. In a moment I heard creaking coming from the staircase to the second floor. The footsteps were heavy, like they belonged to some sort of monster. As I listened, the footsteps suddenly ceased, and the house went quiet.

I passed the time admiring the azaleas.

But no matter how I waited, the woman did not return.

After fifteen minutes had passed, I got tired of waiting and carried the tea tray to the dining room. The table there was large enough to seat four people, and was covered with a dirty tablecloth with a large brown stain. The shade of the lamp hanging from the ceiling was covered in dust. In spite of that, the cupboard along the wall was still filled with plates and bowls. Next to the cupboard was a black old-fashioned rotary phone. When I

attempted to wash the cup, though, I noticed the rusty sink was also covered in dust and completely dry, and when I wrenched open the faucet handle not a single drop of water came out. A shiver of horror ran through me.

“No one could possibly be living here!”

I tiptoed through the corridor to the front entrance.

The staircase to the second floor bent to the right, and the wood-paneled walls were swallowed up in the dim light. I called out, but no reply came, like I was casting my voice into a bottomless void. What was she doing up there? In fact, did she even exist at all? It was utterly silent, as if I had been alone in that house from the start.

It was in that moment that I suddenly awakened to how rotted this house truly was.



I fled from the house and ran up the slope. After putting in a little distance I turned and saw the blue-roofed house. Part of the roof was collapsed, curving inward like an antlion nest, and in the middle of that pit was a black hole. The sight disgusted me; I had never seen anything like it. I kept walking, and this time I didn't look back. It was already half past four.

The path led up to Senkōji Park. The azaleas in the park were in full bloom, and the wind rustled through the green leaves of the trees. Twilight was creeping into the sky over the modern-looking city art museum and the adjacent restaurant. Here the tourists were plentiful, and I felt like I had returned to reality at last.

I went into the restaurant on the hill and ordered a cup of coffee.

I called my wife again, but her phone was still off. It just didn't add up. Why would she purposefully turn off her phone on the weekend that she knew I was coming? Was she trying to avoid me? Yet she had been the one to invite me here. Where could she be? If I couldn't call her, then I was lost.

“Wasn't it like this that summer too?” I reminisced, thinking back to what had happened five years ago. That summer I had visited Onomichi and drank coffee in this same restaurant, and waited for someone who I couldn't reach.

That person had been Hasegawa.

Just before summer break, Hasegawa and I had gotten to talking after English class one day. She had mentioned that she came from Mukaishima, and that her grandparents lived in a house in Onomichi. Her stories fascinated me: the way Onomichi looked like a mysterious island from the pier on Mukaishima, how the old town in Onomichi was like a maze, and so on. I decided to stop off at Onomichi on my way from Kyushu back to Kyoto. Hasegawa also told me that she would be going home for Obon.

"If you're free, why don't we go out for tea?" I suggested.

"Sure thing!" she cheerfully agreed.

I called Hasegawa the morning I set out from Kyushu, and we made plans to meet at the restaurant in Senkōji Park. But after I arrived in Onomichi and reached the restaurant, Hasegawa didn't show up. I called her, but no one picked up. Later on I learned that she had forgotten her phone at home. She was helping out at her grandparents' home when she realized that she was late for our appointment. Messing up like that wasn't like her at all.

She was painfully apologetic when she finally arrived, thirty minutes late. She had run all the way here under the blazing sun and was soaked in sweat like she had just come from working in the fields. As she dejectedly wiped herself off with a towel, I thought to myself that she looked very different from the reliable Hasegawa that I was used to seeing in class on Friday nights.

"I'm so sorry," she kept apologizing. Somehow the novelty of the whole thing made me happy.

"Hey, don't worry about it. It's not like I had anything better to do today."

"How could I be so stupid!"

"You were probably just relaxed, being back at home. It happens."

"But still, I'm really sorry. Never again, I promise!" she said, giggling like a little girl.

We talked for a while at the restaurant before taking a walk around Senkōji. From the temple we looked down on the town below us and watched the tourist-filled cable cars go up and down the ropeway. Cicadas trilled in the lush summer foliage below us.

Hasegawa plopped down on a bench next to the bell tower and said, "Kind of makes you feel small, doesn't it?" There was a slight hint of petulance in her voice. Here in her hometown under the sweltering heat, Hasegawa seemed looser than I had ever seen her in Kyoto.

"You live on Mukaishima, right?"

In reply she raised a slender arm and pointed at the island.

"Right around there. You get over by ferry."

"What's it like?"

"It's just like any old suburb."

After sitting on the bench for a while admiring the view of the ocean, we slowly made our way down the long slope from Senkōji. Hasegawa saw me to the gates at Onomichi Station.

"See you in September!" she called. The sight of her standing on the other side of the gates played over and over in my mind all the way until I reached Kyoto.

That was two months before she disappeared.

I had taken her disappearance hard, and what made it even more unbearable was that I had no idea what had happened that night in Kurama. It was so painful that I had done all I could to forget everything involving her, including that night in Kurama and my previous visit to Onomichi.

Five years on, and here I was again in Onomichi. Remembering Hasegawa was making my mind go down all kinds of dark paths. Hasegawa and my wife had always resembled each other. If the hole that swallowed Hasegawa was still open, then maybe it had swallowed my wife too...

Don't be stupid! Flustered, I shook those thoughts out of my head.

Paying my bill and leaving the restaurant, I exited through the main gate of Senkōji and went down the hill. It was the same path that Hasegawa and I had taken. Red and blue banners fluttered along the guardrail, each bearing an entreaty to Thousand-Armed Kannon. Below me I saw the city, fresh sprouts of greenery poking out between the roofs of the houses and temples. The Seto Inland Sea sparkled silver beneath the intense sunlight, and the silhouette of the distant islands were hazy and blurred.

It felt like a scene from a dream.



I took the ropeway down the mountain, then walked through the long shopping district, heading for my hotel. I wasn't planning on giving up until I had talked to my wife.

The hotel was along the stretch of downtown that was built along the Sanyō Line, in a little nook surrounded by hole-in-the-wall bars and diners. The train tracks ran right behind the dingy business hotel, and freight trains rumbled on interminably.

The lobby was deserted, and there was no one behind the reception desk. In front of the desk was a cart piled high with local specialties like *kamaboko* and dried foods, as well as an assortment of handcrafted goods. The faded price tags all said, "The Seabreeze Company".

I kept calling, but the concierge did not appear, so I gave up and sat down on the sofa.

Beside the sofa was a potted plant, but given that most of its leaves were black and drooping, its presence only made the lobby feel even gloomier. The effect was heightened by the dark, moody landscapes hanging on the wall. Among them, one of them resembled a black hole in the wall.

I rose from the sofa and approached it.

It seemed to be a copperplate engraving. Below it was a white plaque with the title and artist written in magic marker: *Night Train—Onomichi*, by *Kishida Michio*. It was

composed entirely of white in startling relief against a velvet black background, depicting an uphill path going by a row of darkened houses. Halfway up the path burned a single lantern, and under its light stood a faceless woman, waving her right hand as if calling out to me. Looking at it made me feel like I would be sucked into the picture, and for reasons that I didn't understand it was both unsettling and yet somehow familiar.

"Do you like it?" said a voice behind me.

It was the concierge. Wearing a uniform that resembled a musty scarlet rug, he peered intently into my face with his large eyes. His face was slick with sweat. I soon realized that this was none other than the man I had passed by earlier on the hill.

"It is a very striking piece. I've been intrigued by it too, ever since it was hung up in this lobby." Here he seemed to snap back to himself. "I apologize for the wait. This way, please."

As he checked me in, every so often he glanced up at my face.

"Do you come to Onomichi often?"

"No, this is my first time," I lied, again.

"I beg your pardon," he said, lowering his gaze again. "I had a feeling that I'd seen you somewhere before..."

"That's probably from when we passed each other earlier. I saw you running you down the hill."

The concierge nodded slightly. "I see. So that was what it was."

I pointed at the cart in front of the desk. "Those crafts there, are they from a local shop on the hill?"

"Yes, exactly. My wife ran a shop, as a sort of hobby."

So the woman in that house really did exist. I was suddenly ashamed of myself for having run out of there like I had seen a ghost. But I still couldn't believe that anyone could live in that house on the hill.

"I visited the shop just a little while ago."

"Oh, did you?"

"I'm afraid I was very rude to your wife. I just left without saying goodbye..."

Upon hearing my apology the concierge frowned at me. "My wife?"

"Yes, I met her at the house."

"...There is no one in that house."

"Oh, come on now. She was showing me all of her handicrafts."

The concierge peered at me with those big eyes of his. It was an unnerving look, like I was staring into a deep grotto.

"There is no one in that house," he repeated, forcing the words out. He seemed to be afraid of something. The light reflecting on the sheen of sweat made him look drenched,

and his unpleasant odor prickled at my nose. "My wife has gone. I am the only one who lives in that house."

The tone in his voice made me uneasy. "...My mistake, then."

"Yes, it must have been. I am quite sure of it," he quickly replied, looking closely at my pallid face.



The air was hot and stifled inside the narrow hotel room. The wallpaper was faded, the furniture all outmoded.

I took a shower to wash off the sweat and then sat on the bed, exhausted as though I had just gone hiking in the mountains. Then again, I had just gone walking up and down the hills of this town under the early summer sun.

I took out the brooch from my bag and stared at it. It was inside a small, clear pouch, with a sticker that said "The Seabreeze Company". I had bought it from the woman in that house on the hill, and so it was the only irrefutable evidence I had of what had happened in there.

Still, nothing had made any sense since I had arrived in Onomichi. A woman living in a ruined house on a hill, who resembled my wife so much they could have been twins. Her husband, who insisted that no one was in that house. And my wife, around whom all this revolved, who was still unreachable and whose location I still did not know.

I called my wife once more, but her phone was still off

Lying down on the bed I stared at the smudged ceiling, and tried to remember what my wife had been like in Tokyo. But it was no use: for some reason all I could think of was the face of the woman in that house, and the way she had acted.

"Maybe she really was my wife," I thought to myself.

For two weeks my wife had been living in that house. Then why would the concierge have told me such a baldfaced lie when he said that no one was there? Why would he try to muddy the waters like that? He had to be hiding something. And likewise, my wife had to be hiding something as well. That was the only way anything made sense.

Once that thought passed through my mind I couldn't take it anymore.

I got up and threw open the heavy curtain, looking down on the Sanyō Line which passed behind the hotel. As I stared down at the train tracks, I remembered the time my wife and I had taken a night train. It had been at the beginning of April that year, and on our way from Kyushu to Tokyo we must have passed along the tracks that lay below my window, speeding along in the dead of night.

We had been returning from a Buddhist memorial service in Kyushu. It had been a pleasant time, and my wife had been in good spirits, as she normally was. "I want to feel like we're really traveling!" she implored me, and so we took the night train.

That night we turned out the lights in our room and stared out at the night sky through the window. Black mountain silhouettes and lonely village lights flowed by, and each time we passed through another unfamiliar station my wife's face was bathed in pale light. As we listened to the clacking of the wheels over the rail joints, it was like we were passing through the bowels of night.

Looking out at the solitary streets passing by, my wife said, "It feels like dawn will never come."

Now those words seemed like an omen of what was to come.



It happened about a week after we returned on that night train from Kyushu.

I returned home late one night to find that my wife had already gone to bed. Making as little sound as possible, I showered, then lay down softly next to her.

As I was drifting off, I was suddenly assaulted by the sensation of my face being pushed into a basin full of water. Struggling to breathe, I tried to fight off whatever it was before sitting straight up in the futon, gasping in the light of the room.

I looked at my wife beside me. She was sleeping just like a doll, and her eyes were shut tight, but I could hear a strange sound coming from between her lips. Her tongue seemed to be clicking in her mouth, making a sound like the sound of dripping water. That must have been what caused my dream.

Listening closely, I noticed that in between her tongue clicking I could hear sounds that resembled words. She seemed to be talking to someone in her dream. The words grew gradually louder, almost like she was cursing at someone, and I felt a sudden pressure come over the room.

"Hey, you okay?" I said, putting a hand on her shoulder.

Immediately she growled like a beast and sat up, reaching out to grab me. The look on her face was like that of a completely different person. With a gasp she snapped back to her senses and leaned back in shock, staring at my face without blinking. We sat there for a while holding onto each other's arms, in utter disbelief. Finally my wife sighed and covered her face with both hands.

"I was having such a terrifying dream!"

The dream went like this.

My wife was sitting in a six-tatami room, lit by a tiny lightbulb. The room was as bare as a prison cell, containing only a small bureau and a large washbasin.

She felt like she had to get out of that room, fast. Yet impatient to leave as she was, she found that she was unable to move at all.

She was sitting on the tatami, her eyes fixed on a half open sliding screen. Beyond it she could see a staircase leading down, which must have meant she was on the second floor of a house. To get outside she needed to go down those stairs, but there was something frightening about looking at that stairway, and she couldn't bring herself to stand up.

In a little while she heard the sound of someone slowly creeping up the stairs on all fours. It was a horrible, lingering sound, the sound of someone slapping and peeling off their hands and feet from each step, one by one. My wife laboriously dragged her heavy body over to the side of the bureau. She knew that there was no point in hiding. Then the horrible sound abruptly stopped, and a nocturnal hush stifled the room.

No one came.

My wife let out a breath of relief.

But in the next moment she became aware someone was watching her from the darkness of the staircase.

The person was staring directly at her, only his head visible above the top stair. The face looked slick and shiny, as if it was dripping with water. My wife let out a scream of terror, but the person's expression didn't change, and he only cocked his head to the side and continued to stare.

"That face...it looked exactly like yours!" said my wife, before going quiet.

Following that incident my wife started to have frequent nightmares. Many times I was woken by the sound of her moaning in the throes of a dream. But she never spoke of what she saw in those dreams again.

I suggested to her that the unknown issue she refused to talk about was what was giving her those dreams. But her view was exactly the opposite of mine. She said it was because I was always talking about this nonsense that she was having nightmares.

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I eventually fell asleep on the bed.

When I woke up it was dark outside the window, and I struggled for a few seconds to remember where I was. Right, the hotel in Onomichi. I turned on the lights and looked at the clock, whose hands were just passing 7 P.M. The nap had left me feeling a little calmer.

My cell phone rang. I expected it to be my wife, but I didn't recognize the number, and when I picked up the other end was silent.

"Who's this?" I asked impatiently.

But I didn't hang up right away. I had a feeling that it was my wife that was on the other end of the line, not speaking. For some reason I imagined her sitting on the tatami in a dark room somewhere with the shutters closed. Maybe I was just being reminded of the dream my wife had seen. Finally, from the speaker I heard a faint, petrified whisper.

"It's me. We met this afternoon...do you remember?"

"At The Seabreeze Company?"

"Yes. That was me."

It was the concierge's wife. I couldn't imagine my wife pretending to be someone else over the phone.

"I need your help."

"What do you mean? Help with what?"

"I'm scared of my husband," she whispered. "I've been locked on the second floor all this time."

"But that's..."

"Will you help me?"

"Why are you asking me?"

"Because I feel like I can trust you."

"If you feel like you're in danger, you should go to the police. I don't want to be rude, but I don't think this is something I can help with."

"So you're going to run away?"

"This has nothing to do with running or not running."

"...I need your help. It has to be you."

As she said those words I heard a pounding at my door.

"Just a second. Someone's at my door."

"It's my husband."

"Surely not..."

I walked to the door and looked through the peephole.

Standing in the corridor was the concierge. He was so close to the door he was practically stuck to it, and the fisheye effect of the peephole made his head bulge out like some kind of ghastly monster. His thinning hair was plastered to his head with sweat. He looked like he was about to cry, and it was his own head he was using to strike the door, producing that dull pounding sound. What was the matter with him? I pushed on the door with my left hand, holding my breath as I continued to look through the peephole.

On the phone the woman said, "Hello? Is everything okay?"

She must have been calling from the second floor of that house on the hill. The darkness in that room was almost oozing out of the speaker. I suddenly froze.

How did she know my number?

She had to be my wife after all. This had to be some kind of scheme of hers, pretending to be a stranger. But there was no point in trying to hash it out over the phone. I needed to meet her face to face and get it out of her.

In the calmest tone I could muster I said, "What do you want me to do?"

"There's a sushi place called Kitsune downtown by the station. Go there and wait for me. I'll come down the mountain."

"Got it. I'll be there."

I hung up and looked again through the peephole, but the concierge had vanished. I got dressed and cautiously exited my room, but I made it through the corridor and down the elevator without seeing any sign of him.

The lobby on the first floor was dark and still, and only the lights at the front desk continued to blaze. As I crossed the lobby the phone at the desk began to ring, but the concierge did not appear. I had a feeling that ringing phone was a very ominous sign.

My eyes fell on the copperplate engraving hanging on the wall.

I don't know if humans see things differently at night, but something had changed on the engraving. Something had appeared that I hadn't seen there during the day, like it had been painted with invisible ink.

At the top of the slope I noticed a house. It looked just like that house on the hill, and in a darkened window on the second floor was something that resembled the shape of a person. I put my face up close up but couldn't quite make it out. Maybe it was nothing more than an accidental smudge.



Onomichi's downtown is an antiquated, old-fashioned shopping arcade that stretches along the tracks of the Sanyō Line. Most of the shops were already shuttered for the night, and I passed only a handful of people along the way.

I walked along, conscious of my echoing footsteps, until I saw a sign on my left that said "Kitsune". The front of the shop was very narrow, and the interior very deep. I sat on the tatami section and ordered sashimi and beer. The clock said it was just past eight.

Some time passed, and still my wife did not show up.

I sipped my beer and waited. Of course I was angry, yet part of me was secretly relieved. It had been very irritating being dragged this way and that and having to fumble my way through the mist, but now I could put my thoughts together. I didn't know what

series of events had brought my wife and the concierge together, but it was now evident to me where the problem I needed to solve lay.

While I drank alone, the door slid open with a clatter.

"Good evening," said the aproned chef.

I glanced over, and my mood immediately turned sour.

Standing there was the concierge. His large, rolling eyes fixed on me, and he beelined right over and sat down cross-legged across from me.

"Thank you for waiting."

"I wasn't waiting for *you*."

We scowled at each other, not saying a word. It was like looking in a mirror. Without warning the concierge reached out and grabbed my glass, poured it full of beer, and downed it in one go.

"Aren't you on the clock?" I asked. "You sure you should be drinking?"

"That's not of any concern," he replied, wiping his mouth and exhaling.

What was he doing here? Had my wife told him to come talk it over with me? His wits did seem to be frazzled. But the longer I observed him, the more likely it seemed that it wasn't me that he was frightened of. Every so often he would look over his shoulder, keeping an eye on anyone passing outside on the street. It was like he was some kind of fugitive on the run.

After draining the glass the concierge didn't say anything.

Impatiently, I pressed him, "What's going on between you and her?"

"Her? Her who?"

"My wife!"

The concierge breathed out. "I'm not acquainted with your wife."

"You're telling me there's nothing fishy going on?"

"Could I trouble you to keep it down? Please?"

The tables on the tatami and the counter were all crowded, but somehow the room was very quiet, like everyone was listening in on our conversation. The waiter placed another cup and bottle of beer in front of the concierge, who poured himself another drink before leaning forward and whispering, "Are you sure you haven't made some kind of mistake?"

The pacifying tone in which he said this irritated me. "Then why are you here?"

"I was worried about you, sir."

"You were standing in front of my door earlier, weren't you?"

"And you pretended not to notice? That was not very kind of you." His face arranged itself into a sort of half-smiling, half-crying expression.

My patience was being stretched thin. He was just spouting gibberish and making a fool of me. "Let's just get to the bottom of this!"

"Why, certainly."

"There's no one in that house. That's what you said, isn't it?"

"Yes. There couldn't possibly be anyone there."

"Then who's the woman who's been holed up there for the past two weeks? Don't try to pull anything over me."

"That's it, that's exactly it," said the concierge, sounding agitated. "That's precisely why I am here."

"Then spit it out!"

"Allow me to ask you something. Did you really see her?"

"See—"

"The woman on the second floor."

"Of course I did. She's my wife."

"Come now, that's absolutely ridiculous—" he chortled, his laughter grating on my ears.

But his face had gone deadly pale.



The concierge nursed his beer as he regaled me with his tale.

"We moved into that house three years ago."

The details matched what the concierge's wife had told me in that house on the hill during the day. The concierge worked at the hotel by the station, while his wife opened a store in the parlor of the house.

For a while their lives went on uneventfully. But last year the concierge had become concerned about his wife's behavior. Some days she would open the store, some days she wouldn't. And when the concierge wasn't there she often went out somewhere.

"It seemed strange to me."

"Did you have any proof that something funny was going on?"

"None at all. But I knew. We were a married couple, after all."

Perhaps renting that old house had been a mistake. Everything was always covered in dust, and there was a constant dripping sound emanating from somewhere inside the house. A rotten smell pervaded the air, and yet when the concierge mentioned how strange everything was, his wife would not hear of it.

"It's just you that's being strange," she would say dismissively, which led to them arguing more and more often.

When she was angry his wife barricaded herself on the second floor, and refused to come down no matter how he pleaded with her. The house was usually dark when he returned from work. He would creep up the stairs on all fours to find his wife in the room on the second floor with the room with all the shutters closed. But at least knowing that she was at home gave the concierge some peace of mind.

"But in April..." The concierge's voice faltered. "One night I told her that I wouldn't be coming home. But late that night I snuck back. I needed to be sure. I went around to the back porch, and when I got inside I heard someone walking around upstairs. It didn't sound like my wife's footsteps. I went up the stairs slowly, and heard my wife talking with someone."

But when the concierge peeked up through the doorway, both the voices and the footsteps ceased. The room flickered in the illumination of the small lightbulb. His wife was shrinking into the shadow of the bureau next to the wall, staring at him motionlessly. There was a strange gleam in her eyes.

"Was someone here? I heard voices."

"Of course not," his wife said, letting out a cackle. "This place is empty."

Those words sent a tremble through the concierge.

His wife suddenly sprang out from the shadows, knocking him aside, and flew down the stairs with terrific speed. The concierge rushed after her, but when he reached the front door it had been thrown wide open, and his wife was nowhere to be seen. She hadn't even put on her shoes, and so the concierge ran out barefoot as well. For a brief moment he caught a glimpse of her white silhouette whirling by the light halfway down the slope. Through the sleeping streets his wife dashed, quick as the wind.

She wove in and out of his vision as he chased her. Reaching the path leading down from Senkōji to the Sanyō Line, he stopped a moment to catch his breath and looked down towards the bottom. His wife was flying down the winding path, approaching the railroad crossing.

"That was when the train came," said the concierge. I felt a shiver go down my spine. "She stood in front of the tracks and looked back at me. I'd never seen such a cold look on her face, not once. It didn't look human."

The concierge wiped a bead of sweat away.

"And then she jumped."

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"So your wife killed herself?" I asked in a low voice, but the concierge chuckled scornfully.

"Who can say?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"The train never stopped, and after it passed there were no remains. In other words I was the only person to see her jump. Who would believe me? My wife disappeared then, and the house has been empty ever since. That's why I was so surprised when you talked about my wife. It just couldn't possibly be true."

After the concierge finished talking I found myself feeling extremely vexed. Was he really telling me the truth?

"Do you live alone in that house?"

"How could anyone live in a house like that?"

"But didn't you go there this afternoon?"

"I just wanted to check. I had a feeling that maybe, just maybe, my wife had come back."

"...Did you look on the second floor?"

The concierge shook his head fearfully. "The shutters are all closed in that room. It's dark, empty. Just thinking about that bureau in the corner gives me the willies. I can practically hear my wife cackling again. I don't nearly have the courage to go up those stairs," he said irritably, before going silent again.

What in the world was going on here? Why was he telling me his story so urgently? The number of customers had dwindled, and the silence in the restaurant had changed. Now it was a sort of silence that made me think of being locked in that dark room on the second floor of that house.

"Why are you telling me all this?"

"Why indeed?"

"I'm not interested in your household affairs."

"Yet you were listening so very carefully," he retorted. "You've worked up a pretty good sweat there."

I realized that I was in fact perspiring very disagreeably, just as he was.

The concierge put a grubby handkerchief to his mouth and looked at me pointedly. "Sir," he said. "You wouldn't happen to know where my wife would be?"

A great loathing filled me as I stared back at this creepy man. I was beginning to think that he was the source of all this trouble. Every word that came out of his mouth was rubbish.

"I know exactly where your wife is."

The concierge flinched at my response. "Where do you mean?"

"You know damn well where I mean. The second floor of that house."

"That's impossible. There is no one up there."

"You're right, no one lives there anymore."

"Then..."

"Your wife is dead. You killed her."

"What are you talking about?"

"Are you telling me I'm wrong?"

"Then who was it that jumped in front of the train?"

"You know the answer to that, too."

Unable to find a reply, the concierge wheezed, his large eyes widening. His face turned white as a sheet before my eyes, and I wouldn't have been surprised if he had passed out right then and there.

After a moment he stood up and staggered out of the restaurant.



I thought back to the night my wife and I had taken the night train.

"It feels like dawn will never come."

No sooner had my wife spoken those words than the train passed through Onomichi Station. Lights burst forth around us, outside the window the deserted platforms whizzed by, bathed under fluorescent light.

"Have you ever been to Onomichi?" asked my wife, reading a sign with the station name as it went by.

"Nope, never," I lied, for some reason.

Past Onomichi Station, the Sanyo Line passed through an old neighborhood of shops and houses, built almost right up to the tracks. I saw stone steps leading up to temple gates, and narrow paths creeping in between the houses. In a moment the slope was gone, but the sight stayed in my mind, like a mystical tunnel leading to an unfamiliar land.

We stared out at the city going by outside our windows, but as the train passed by the bottom of the long slope leading up to Senkōji, I saw a woman standing by the signal lights at the crossing. It lasted no more than a split second, but it seemed to me that she had been waving at me.

An image flashed into my mind, of a slope bathed in August sunshine. I was remembering that one summer in grad school when I had stopped in Onomichi to see Hasegawa.

After looking around Senkōji, we had walked down the hill. The path zig-zagged through old neighborhoods, the bright sunlight reflecting off of it almost blinding. The sky

over the Seto Inland Sea was a shade of almost dizzying blue, and it felt as hot as a sauna. Hasegawa's pale face and shoulders floated in the shade of her parasol, almost ethereal.

As we descended the slope, we talked about what we planned to do when we got back to Kyoto, and gossiped about our classmates. Hasegawa told me she wanted to go back as soon as she could and start studying.

"That makes sense. Undergrad exams are in September, right?"

"I just can't help slacking off when I'm back here."

"That doesn't sound like you at all."

"Really?"

"You always seem like you're on top of things."

"I don't like it when people say that. I'm actually not on top of things at all. I just keep it hidden."

"Why?"

"That's just how I've always been."

"So you try to keep things hidden?"

"That's right. So when I was late today...I still can't believe myself."

"I don't think it would be a bad thing to show that side of you," I said, trying to sound lighthearted. "If you ever want to talk, I'm all ears."

"I don't know. I do have a lot on my plate." Halfway down the slope she stopped walking. She was looking at the town spreading along the coast, towards Mukaishima, from which she had crossed the sea to get here. But it felt like she wasn't really looking at that seascape, but rather at something else. I stood there, unsure how to react, until her mouth curled into a smile.

"But you're only interested in problems you can solve, anyways," she remarked, starting back down the slope.

Maybe she had just blurted the words out as they popped into her head; maybe there wasn't any deep meaning behind them. After all, she was just a twenty year old college student I had only known for six months. But right then I felt that she had seen right through me, and I almost stopped dead in my tracks.

"Maybe part of me is like that." It was all I could do to admit that. And I went down that long, burning slope after her.

I think that I'd always been dimly aware of that side of me, but was scared that someone would point it out. It felt like Hasegawa was telling me, *you're the kind of person that runs away at the first sign of trouble, the kind of person that shrinks away when you're needed the most.*

I snapped out of my reverie in the train car, to find my wife with her forehead pressed silently against the windowpane. Her expression was oddly cold, and I felt like the

person in front of my eyes was a stranger. She didn't respond when I called out to her, and it was only when I reached out and shook her shoulder that she seemed to realize where she was.

"What?"

"You okay? You were really out of it."

"What? Really?"

"Yes, really."

But she continued to stare out the window with a slightly puzzled expression. Faint city lights washed over her face, and were gone.

The train ran on and on through the blackness of the night.

I looked out the window once again. Who was that woman standing by the crossing at the bottom of the slope? It had only been a brief glimpse, but she reminded me of Hasegawa. But that was impossible. Hasegawa had disappeared at Kurama five years ago, and was still missing to this day.

My wife abruptly broke into my thoughts. "You didn't see anything scary out there, did you?"

"Scary?"

"A woman," said my wife. "She was standing at a crossing. You didn't see her?"

"...No, I didn't notice anything," I replied, shaking my head. "What was scary about her?"

My wife thought for a moment before answering.

"...It was almost like I was looking at myself."

○

I hurriedly paid my bill and left the sushi restaurant.

The shopping district was still, and the concierge was nowhere in sight.

I ran into an alley leading through the buildings and emerged onto a street. Across the roadway was the Sanyō Line, and on the other side of the crossing stone steps led up to the temple gates, and from there up through the houses on the hillside.

I need your help. Her words echoed in my ears.

I no longer cared why my wife had changed, or what it had to do with the concierge. The important thing was that my beloved wife was asking for my help. I needed to rescue her from the second floor of that house, and take her away from Onomichi as soon as I could. I should have come to this town earlier. I should never have let go of my wife.

I'm not a person who runs away from trouble, I thought to myself. *I'm not.*

I quickly ran over the crossing and through the deserted temple.

The hillside neighborhood felt nothing like it did during the day. The lamplit stone steps and crossroads were like the gloomy corridors of an aquarium. Only my footsteps echoed loudly through the silence.

As I proceeded ever closer to that house on the hill, I began to notice the ruins. It was easy to tell them apart, because they were empty voids where no lamplight could reach. Blue sheets hid the crumbling walls, and old roof tiles were piled before the doors. The more of them there were, the darker the streets became.

After walking for a while I looked back and saw the darkened coast spreading out beneath my eyes. In that moment I knew the night as I had never known it before. It felt like the dawn would never come.

When I arrived at the path leading up to that house on the hill, an inky silhouette came oozing out of the shadow of the ruins. It was the concierge.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to the house."

"Please don't. There is no one in there."

"I'm going to get my wife."

The instant those words left my lips he hurled himself at me.

The next thing I knew, I was being pinned down on the road. The concierge was straddling me, his hands wrapped around my throat. His enraged face was mere inches from my own, and drops of his sweat fell onto my brow. But I wasn't afraid. What I felt was not fear, but fury. It was a fury that I had never known before, a fury that spread like fire from the lightless depths of my soul, transforming my entire being.

I reached out with my right hand and felt a heavy shard of broken tile. Wrapping my fingers around it, I smashed it against the concierge's temple. The feeling was indescribable. I heard a groan. I hit him a second time, a third, until the groans stopped. He went limp. I pushed his motionless body aside and sucked in a violent breath.

After a time I willed myself to get to my feet.

The concierge was lying by the side of the road, his body curled up, his eyes shut. The look on his face was miserable, and I almost expected him to burst into tears. Just to be sure, I bashed his head in one more time. The only response was a sound like a sigh, that quickly vanished into the darkness.

I tossed aside the tile, and looked down at my bloodsoaked hands.



I walked up towards the house on the hill.

The lights had been extinguished in the houses on the left side of the path, and on the right side all was dark in the forest. A lantern glinted in the middle of the path, but beyond it was only a lightless tunnel.

In the darkness I looked at my hands, wet with blood.

It played over in my head again: the physical feeling of smashing his head in, and the last sigh that had escaped him. It had sounded almost like a sigh of my own. At that moment I was finally sure of it—that my wife's transformation had also been my own.

I looked up toward the top of the path and saw the figure of a woman in a white summer dress appear in the midst of the gloom. She was waving her right hand beneath the light, smiling at me. It was my wife. She had been waiting for me.

"You came for me. C'mon, let's go home."

She started walking up the slope beside me.

Yes, I realized, we were going home to that house.

"You were on the second floor, weren't you?"

"Yeah, I was there the whole time. It was so dark in there, like a locked room."

"You don't need to worry anymore. I took care of him."

"Serves him right!" she chuckled to herself, before raising her head and looking up.

"Oh, there, I can hear it."

"Hear what?"

"The train, running along. You can see it from the second floor."

I heard the clanging of the crossing at the foot of the mountain—

The night train was coming through.

Why had I been so worried about bringing my wife back? What a fool I had been. I hadn't understood a thing. But at least I hadn't run away. As those thoughts went through my mind, a gentle sorrow welled up within me, and I stopped in my tracks.

My wife looked back at me. "What's wrong? Can't walk anymore?"

"I was just feeling sad."

"It's only a little bit farther, come on!"

"Yes, you're right. Let's go home."

I reached out my bloodstained hand, and my wife took it. And when she did, all of my sorrow melted away. The black night enveloping us felt like a sweet, familiar blanket. I squeezed my wife's hand tight, and this time I didn't intend to let go.

And hand in hand we went home, to the house on the hill.

The Second Night—Okuhida

“For me, it’s not so much about the journey as it is the people I travel with. When I travel with people, it feels like we’re all locked in a room together.”

Takeda was the second to speak.

He was a year younger than me, just a first year in college when I met him at the English conversation school. Though he looked shy on the outside, he could be surprisingly bold, and he’d hit it off with Nakai and Tanabe pretty quickly. “Takeda’s such a suckup,” Hasegawa had once said of him, and it was true that he did have a tendency to brown-nose.

After graduating, he’d gotten a job at a science publishing house in Tokyo, working on textbooks and books for the general public.

What follows is Takeda’s story.



This story happened in the fall four years ago, when I went to Hida.

There’s a man in his thirties named Masuda where I work. He was in the same section and showed me the ropes when I first started working there. We’re in different departments now, but we still eat and hang out together when we’re off work.

Near the end of October, Masuda invited me to a meal and asked me, “How’d you like to go to Hida for three days in November?” Beside me and him, there were going to be his girlfriend, Kawakami Miya, and her little sister Ruri.

To be honest, I already knew this wasn’t going to be some relaxing getaway. I’d hung out with them a few times, so I was familiar with how their relationship worked. At work they acted the part of picture-perfect grownups, but when they were together they turned into squabbling children who were always butting heads. Ruri lived in Miya’s apartment and commuted to college in the city, but she was timid and pretty much the opposite of her big sister, so she just did whatever Miya told her to do. I knew if things blew up on the trip she’d be no use at all.

“So that’s why you’re inviting me, huh?”

“Be a pal!” Masuda wheedled, laughing.

Well, I don’t really mind being the peacekeeper, so I told him, “All right, I’m in,” and in November we all set off.

The first half of the trip went smoothly, thanks in large part to my own efforts.

We met up at Shinjuku Station and took the Limited Express Azusa to Matsumoto, where we spent the day walking around the castle town and stayed at a hotel in the city.

We were planning to rent a car the next day and drive through the mountain pass to Hida Takayama. In the hotel room Masuda spread out a map.

"In the old days Route 158 used to be called the Nomugi Highway," he informed us. Apparently female workers had climbed this road to reach the silk factories deep in the mountains.

Listening to Masuda's share his vast wealth of knowledge as we all peered at the map was part of the fun of the journey. *Tomorrow's going to be a breeze*, I thought. In a way it almost felt like a letdown.

But the next morning the metaphorical weather took a turn for the worse, the reason being that Miya was in an incredibly foul mood.

The atmosphere in the car was like being crushed in a tin can.

Miya sat in the passenger seat with her face turned away, while Masuda gripped the wheel mutely. At times like these, there was nothing that Masuda could do to improve her mood. In the back seats, Ruri sat like a statue beside me, not moving a hair. She always got like this when her big sister was angry. For a while I tried to keep the mood light, but in the end I had to give up, and after I threw in the towel no one said a word.

Route 158 led west through the city and delved deep into the mountains. After a while it split off from the old Nomugi Highway and headed towards the Abō Pass. Okuhida lay at the end of a long tunnel, and if all went smoothly going down the mountain roads after that, we would reach Hida Takayama around eleven.



We met the old woman as we were coming down near Hida Takayama.

The first thing we saw was a minivan parked at the side of the road. A man in a suit was standing by the van, waving his arms frantically, trying to flag us down. A shiver went up my spine when I saw him. The cream-colored minivan looked common enough, and he seemed like a nice enough guy, so I had no idea where that feeling had come from.

I heard Miya snap from the passenger seat. "Don't stop."

"I can't just ignore them," Masuda said in a soothing tone, applying the brakes.

Parking behind the minivan, he opened the door and got out. In the silence he left behind Miya clicked her tongue loudly. Through the front windshield I saw the man in the suit explaining something and pointing at the minivan.

Wanting some fresh air myself I got out and walked towards the two men. The autumn air was brisk and chilly, carrying the smell of damp leaves and dirt.

The man had been taking his aunt to Hida Takayama, but they'd run into car trouble and he wasn't sure when it'd be fixed. To make matters worse, his aunt was supposed to be giving a small lecture in the city, and the start time was already fixed; if we were heading in that direction, couldn't we give his aunt a ride? It seemed like an unusually unexpected turn of events, but that would explain why he was so frantic.

"Sure, why not. I'll give her a lift," said Masuda.

I quickly took him aside and whispered, "Hold on a sec. Where is she supposed to sit?"

"We'll just get Miya to move to the back seat. You three can fit back there, right?"

"You're just asking for trouble. Miya's going to be *pissed!*"

This just seemed like a way for him to get back at Miya. Knowing that she'd take the news better if it came from me, I scurried back to the car. Miya arched her eyebrows at me.

"So what's he taking his sweet time for over there?"

"The minivan's broken down. The guy's asking us to take someone to Takayama...you wouldn't mind sitting in the back for just a little bit, would you?"

"Hell no. Who made him boss?"

"He's already said yes. Come on, Miya, you've been in a mood all morning, too. Masuda's just trying to get back at you."

"You're saying this is *my* fault?"

"Okay, Masuda's kind of being a jerk too."

"I know, right? Can you believe him?"

"Just try to think of it as doing a good deed, huh?"

An old woman got out of the minivan, smiling as she walked over. She looked like any old granny you might find hobbling around your neighborhood shopping district, not someone who would cross over the mountains to give a lecture, yet I felt another shiver go up my back. Miya seemed to share my unease.

"I don't like this," she muttered.

○

The old woman introduced herself as Mrs. Mishima when she got in the car.

As we traversed the mountain roads towards Hida Takayama, Mrs. Mishima talked animatedly in the passenger seat. Masuda was relegated to listening, but I had a feeling that even if he hadn't shown the slightest sign of interest in what she was saying she would have kept talking all the same. Compared to the awkward silence from earlier it was a

welcome relief. Miya glared out the window and pouted silently, while Ruri sat crammed between the two of us making herself small.

"Heavens, what could I be worried about?" Mrs. Mishima replied, after Masuda brought up how uncomfortable it must be to be sitting in a stranger's car. "I could tell just by looking at your face."

"Am I that handsome?"

"I've got a knack for reading people, you see."

"Are you from around here?"

"Oh, I was born in Okaya, but ever since I married I've lived in Matsumoto."

Her great-grandfather had managed a silk factory, and the Mishimas had once been a prominent family in Okaya, but by the time she got married the fortunes of the family had taken a turn for the worse. Her husband was a longtime employee of a regional bank, and they had three children. The eldest son ran a restaurant in Matsumoto, their daughter worked at a local craft furniture company, and their youngest son had a job in Tokyo. Soon after retirement her husband had fallen ill and died, and now she lived alone in a house near her oldest son. She would sometimes help at his restaurant and watch her grandchildren, and with her own work to keep her busy she hardly had time to feel lonely at all. Today her nephew had been taking her to give a lecture in Hida Takayama.

"Keeping busy is the secret to health," she claimed.

"What's your lecture about?" I inquired.

The answer she gave was very mysterious. "You all might not be so interested in this sort of thing, but I can see the future. There are a lot of people out there who take a lot of interest in that."

"You mean palm readings, astrology, things like that?"

"Oh, I'm not quite clever enough for difficult things like those," she laughed. "Mine is quite simple. All I do is look at the person's face. All sorts of things come to me when I look at people's faces. A face expresses many things. It shows you everything that's been, and things that are to come, more or less. All I do is tell them what I see."

Ruri suddenly piped up unexpectedly. "What do you see in my face?"

"Let's not bother her with that," Masuda said in an admonishing tone. "It's her work, after all."

"That's quite alright," said Mrs. Mishima, smiling gently. "But I warn you, not everything I see will be pleasant. Once I see something it can't be unseen."

"I don't believe in stuff like that," Miya interjected, her voice scathing. I bet she just wanted to say something snippy.

Mrs. Mishima turned around and drew her contemptuous gaze across our faces. Her glance was sharp as a sweeping halberd. I was taken aback, and Miya and Ruri seemed just as startled. The only one who failed to notice anything was Masuda, the driver.

"C'mon, don't—don't be like that," he chastised us, turning to Mrs. Mishima and saying, "I'm awfully sorry about that."

"I'm not offended," said Mrs. Mishima calmly, turning to face forward again. "In this line of work, people say all kinds of things about you. It doesn't bother me one bit."

And then she went quiet too.

What *was* that look she had just given us? Of course, I didn't believe in the occult, or seeing into the future. But there had really been something weird about the look in her eyes. All the way to Hida Takayama, I occasionally stole glances at her reflection in the side mirror. She seemed to be engrossed in scribbling in a notebook, preparing for her lecture.

Eventually I started to see shops and old stone walls pop up on the sides of the highway, and we entered the town of Hida Takayama. From the hotel in Matsumoto the sky had looked cold and aloof, but here in Takayama it seemed to have a kind of softness, like its color changed depending on what town you were in.

Mrs. Mishima's lecture was being held in the cultural center to the west of the JR Takayama Station, which was a surprisingly grand, modern-looking building. After thanking us and getting out of the car in the parking lot, she began to walk away, but after a few seconds she turned and trotted back to us. This is what she said.

"Go back to Tokyo."

"Of course, we're going back tomorrow."

On hearing Masuda's reply Mrs. Mishima shook her head vigorously.

"If you don't return now it will be too late."

We all looked at each other, wondering what she was talking about. But her face was perfectly serious, not the slightest hint of humor in her expression.

"Two of you have the shadow of death."

It took us some time to realize what she had said. Leaving us sitting there bewildered, the old woman scurried away and vanished into the cultural center.



The shadow of death appears in the faces of those who, due to some illness, find themselves on death's doorstep. The first thing that popped into my head when I processed her words was the face of my grandpa, right before he died in his hospital bed. In my child's eyes, his face had looked so shrunken, and the color of his skin had changed. He didn't seem like the grandpa I knew at all. Was that what she had meant?

I looked around at everyone, but obviously I didn't see any shadow of death in their faces.

Miya got out and moved up to the passenger seat. "Well that's one way to say goodbye. That's what we get for being good Samaritans."

Masuda made a long thoughtful humming noise, his hands glued to the steering wheel.

We all debated over those parting words, but there was really only one conclusion we could have come to. We weren't about to abandon our trip just because some old lady we met along the way told us to.

For starters, Miya would never have allowed it. One of her old acquaintances from art school ran a crafts store here, and she was really looking forward to visiting. That acquaintance had also been the one to show us the inn we were planning to stay at tonight.

"Remember how I said something to her earlier? She was just trying to get revenge on me!"

"Well, that could be it."

"It just pisses me off so much. That's why I told you not to let her on!"

If all Mrs. Mishima had been trying to do was ruffle our feathers, I had to admit her plan was a wild success.

We had lunch at a local ramen joint, but Miya just would not let up. She kept needling Masuda about giving Mrs. Mishima a ride. At first Masuda just kept apologizing, but as time went his own temper started to fray; knowing how angry she was, he deliberately started being obnoxiously polite until he no longer sounded sincere.

The whole time this was going on, Ruri just silently ate her ramen. Here I noticed in her face an abnormal look of fear.

"Are you worried about what Mrs. Mishima said?"

"Um, yeah, just a little..."

"There's a lot of funny people out there. Don't worry too much about it."

A half-smile came to her face. "Are you sure?"

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing. It's nothing."

And she quietly went back to her ramen.



This was my first time visiting Hida Takayama.

The ramen place was near the station, at the mouth of a little alley just off the main street where tiny little shops lined up side by side. The neighborhood had that typical small-city stillness, and I saw more than a few closed shops with their shutters rolled down. Overhead, the autumn sky was bright, but down in the hemmed-in streets the air was chilly, and the entire town felt kind of gloomy.

Once we reached the middle of the town where the river flowed towards the north, the sky opened up and everything felt brighter, and I started to feel a sense of history from the town. With the mass of tourists crowding the narrow streets of the preserved castle town, the whole place felt like a festival.

Miya led the way, a dashing red muffler wrapped around her neck. She wasn't speaking to Masuda anymore. More than likely she was thinking about her college acquaintance, who we were going to meet.

The crafts store was hidden in a cranny of the town. From the outside, the two-story wooden building looked like an Edo period merchant's villa, but the inside was all sparkling and modern, like an interior design store. There were all sorts of things, from simple handcrafts to large furniture, and there was even a café space in a corner of the store. An employee went to call Miya's acquaintance, who came out from the back. He was a tanned, good-looking guy.

"Took you long enough! I was expecting you to come way sooner. I contacted you like forever ago!"

"It's just so far, though!" said Miya fawningly.

"Come on man, how far could it be? Tokyo's right there!"

The man led us over to the café. His name was Utsumi, and he seemed like a fun, easygoing type of guy. After graduating from art school in Nagoya, he'd worked in Tokyo for a little bit before coming back to Hida Takayama, his hometown, to run the crafts store. His deep tan could be traced back to all the marathons he ran; he'd started a running group with some of the local shop owners, and this year they'd even participated in a 100km ultramarathon.

"Getting along with your neighbors is important, y'know?" he chuckled.

Getting along was one thing, but to me running 100km for the sake of getting along sounded absolutely insane.

"Looks like business is booming," Miya commented.

"Yeah, well, we're doing alright."

"I thought you'd be lonely out here, but I guess I was just wasting my energy worrying. I'm actually sort of disappointed!" Miya beamed, as if she hadn't been pouting the entire morning.

It felt like she was doing this in order to spite Masuda, too: there was something intentional about the way she was being so familiar with Utsumi. Masuda didn't even try to join the conversation. He sat there staring into space, taking minuscule sips of coffee. He could have at least tried to force a smile or something.

After a few minutes of listening to Miya and Utsumi swap stories about their school days, Masuda abruptly stood up and announced, "I'm going to get some air," and before any of us could react he had left the store.

Utsumi seemed kind of stunned. "Guy's kinda moody, huh?"

"Ugh, he's *such* a bore."

Utsumi suppressed a smile. "So, how long have you two been going out?"

Miya just snorted.



We were surprised to learn that Utsumi actually knew Mrs. Mishima.

"You gotta be talking about Mishima Kuniko." She was fairly well known around the area, and some of his marathon buddies even believed in her powers. "She looks like a regular old granny, but every so often she says some real shocking stuff."

He wasn't a fan of her himself, but he had to admit she had this sort of charisma about her. According to local rumor, she'd awakened to her power right after her husband died. A few days before he died, she'd looked into his face and seen the shadow of death. In other respects he was perfectly healthy, but when she saw his face at the doorway of their house it had appeared small and shrunken.

Miya had only brought Mrs. Mishima up because Utsumi had prodded her into talking about the ongoing rift between herself and Masuda. She had probably expected him to say, "What, that's all?" and laugh it off. But unexpectedly he looked very serious when he heard what Mrs. Mishima had said to us about the shadow of death.

Miya laughed in his face. "You're not seriously worried about that, are you?"

"No, I mean, I don't believe in that. But you gotta admit, it kinda makes your hair stand on end..." Utsumi said haltingly.

Miya looked at him incredulously.

Ruri was probably the most frightened out of all of us. She looked like she was holding her breath, and her already pale skin was white as a sheet.

Seeing that made Miya angry. "Stop taking it so seriously!" she ordered Ruri. "And you need to stop being silly too, Utsumi!"

The fact that Masuda still hadn't come back was starting to worry me.

After a while, Ruri stood up and said, "I'll go look for him."

"Just wait here, or else he's going to come back while you're out looking for him!" Miya snapped.

But for once, Ruri decided to stand up to her. "I want some fresh air," she said, before leaving the store.

It felt like the air had been sucked out of the room, and the mood became very subdued.

Something occurred to Utsumi. "You're staying at Hiraya hot springs, right?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"It's gonna surprise you, the inn. You'll see when you get there. Snow's probably piled up over in Okuhida. The road'll be slippery, so you'll wanna be careful—" Utsumi stopped halfway through his sentence, aghast.

It was like no matter what we talked about we couldn't get away from Mrs. Mishima's prophecy.

A weird thought occurred to me. Mrs. Mishima had said, "Two of you." Why two? Why not one, or all four of us?

And which two had she been talking about?

○

Masuda and Ruri didn't return, so Miya and I left the store.

It was just past two in the afternoon, but evening was already creeping into the streets of the castle town, and the shadows of people walking by stretched long and dark. I was surprised how quickly the sun went down in autumn.

Utsumi saw us off at the front of the store.

"The castle ruins are thataway."

"See ya then, Utsumi. Thanks for everything."

"I want to see you around here more often. How does once a week sound?"

There was a big smile on Miya's face as she briskly strode off. I looked back as we went and saw Utsumi standing in front of the shop, watching us go. There was something melancholy about the way the autumn sun shone down on him in the old streets. He wanted to tell us, "You should go back to Tokyo," I was positive of that. But Miya didn't turn around once as she walked away.

I struggled to keep up with her.

"Where do you think they went?"

"Who cares? Let's just keep walking." Pulling the muffler up over her mouth, Miya grabbed my hand to lead me along.

Buying *senbei* from a shop along the way, we went all through the old castle town, before wandering towards the gentle slopes and stone walls of residential streets. The further away we got from the tourist areas the quieter everything became, until I could distinctly hear the sound of Miya nibbling away at her *senbei*.

"Here," she said, handing its half-eaten remains to me. The familiar aroma of the *senbei* brought back feelings of nostalgia.

I remembered walking with Miya like this before. I'd spent some time alone with her before, and she'd always been playful and carefree. Sometimes I thought to myself, *Why isn't she like this with Masuda?*

"Utsumi's different now."

"I thought he was fun to be around."

"He's like, superstitious now. It's kind of lame."

"Oh, you mean how he seems afraid of Mrs. Mishima?"

"He didn't used to be like that in school. He was more of a stud, you know? I think he just turned into a wimp when he moved back home."

Where and what were Masuda and Ruri up to? It felt odd that neither of them had contacted us once since they ran out of Utsumi's store.

"Should we call Masuda?"

"...Wouldn't want to disturb them now, would you?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Miya scowled. "You're just gonna play dumb?"

"What are you talking about?"

Miya told me what had happened last night.

She and Ruri had gotten into an argument when they were talking before bed at the hotel in Matsumoto. Ruri had unexpectedly confronted Miya about the way she treated Masuda, and refused to drop the subject.

"I couldn't believe her!" That explained why Miya had been in such a terrible mood all morning.

"She definitely has a thing for him," Miya declared.

I didn't say anything, but I had had my suspicions.

Masuda had gotten Ruri a part-time job at our company for a little while. It was tedious but undemanding stuff, making preparations for a magazine article database. I was part of the editorial department, while Masuda was the system manager, so I got to chat with her from time to time. Her personality was nothing like it was when she was with Miya. Maybe she just felt free to be herself when her sister wasn't there. Oftentimes she stayed behind even after her work was done, talking to Masuda every chance she could get. I

assumed that they were talking about work, or career advice—but of course I wasn't going to bring any of that up to Miya.

"Are you sure you're not just reading too much into it?"

"I know that already, okay?"

"Ruri's pretty straightforward. I think she was just worried about you."

"Now you're going to start bullshitting me too?"

"Come on, don't take it out on me!"

The conversation went back and forth as we threaded our way over the narrow mountain path. An old wooden fence followed the path on the left side. Through the planks I could see trees growing in the garden, their leaves red as though they were stained with blood. At the top of the hill the path turned to the left, leading past a timeworn European-style café.

Miya suddenly stopped in her tracks, looking through the bay window of the café. "Look who I found." She pointed through the window.

I looked inside and saw Masuda and Ruri, leaning forward and whispering to each other.

When Masuda saw us he got to his feet. Ruri stayed sitting, her head hanging low.

"Let's go," said Miya, pulling open the door to the café.

We sat down with Masuda and Ruri, but everyone was silent. Miya asked no questions, Masuda said nothing, and Ruri just sat there looking down. *This isn't good*, I thought, looking at the wall behind Miya.

A single copperplate engraving hung there on the wall. On a plate below the engraving was the artist's name, Kishida Michio, and the title of the work: *Night Train—Okuhida*. The clinking of the café grew far away as the picture drew me in.

It was a dark, mystical-seeming piece. It depicted a highway cutting through a dark mountain valley and vanishing into the mouth of a tunnel. A tall woman was standing in front of that dark opening, raising her right hand as if beckoning me. She didn't have eyes or a mouth, like a mannequin, and yet I felt like I had seen her before.

—She reminded me of Miya.

A sudden shiver went up my spine.

For some reason I felt like someone else had followed Miya and me and slipped into the café.

○

I mentioned at the beginning that traveling is like being in a locked room.

The trip to Hida with Masuda and the rest was a perfect example. We'd come a long way from Tokyo, yet everything felt like it was getting tighter and more claustrophobic. Of course Masuda had predicted it all along which was why he had invited me, and I'd come along knowing that would be the case.

But somewhere along the way it felt like things had spiraled out of my control. The lights were going dim in the room we were locked in, and it was getting harder and harder to see what was going on in the shadowy corners. The appearance of Mrs. Mishima had been an omen, but you could probably say the same about the way Masuda and Miya and Ruri were acting.

Just to be clear, that applied to me as well. Even I have one or two things that I keep hidden.

In the café, Miya came up with a weird proposal.

"Let's split into two groups. I bet it'll be fun that way!"

The Takayama Line heads towards Toyama from the station in Hida Takayama. Around the halfway point is Inotani Station, which rests on the border of Gifu and Toyama prefectures. The trip from Takayama Station takes about an hour. If you're going to Inotani Station by car instead of train, you can get there by taking Route 41.

Miya suggested that the guys take the train, while she and Ruri would go by car, and we would all meet up at Inotani Station. There were scenic spots aplenty to take in the crimson autumn leaves, whether by car or by train.

Ruri was a good driver, so there wouldn't be any issues on that end. I heard that she often picked Miya up from work, or just went cruising on her own.

"I don't mind," she said.

It was pretty obvious from the get-go what Miya was gunning for. By splitting me and Masuda off, she would have all the time she wanted to chat with Ruri alone, girl to girl. I didn't like it, but Masuda sided with Miya, so that was that.

We parted at Takayama Station.

"Just take it safe and slow. We'll be waiting for you at Inotani Station," Masuda said at the ticket barrier. Ruri nodded dutifully.

So Masuda and I headed for Inotani. To be honest, forget splitting into groups, I just wanted to go back to Tokyo.

Of course I didn't believe Mrs. Mishima's prophecy, and I thought this stuff about the "shadow of death" was ridiculous, but I had to admit feeling a little apprehensive about facing the oncoming night. It felt like things were getting out of my control.

Masuda was sitting across the train car. "Sorry about dragging you into all this awkwardness."

"You're telling me," I said, not bothering to mince my words. Masuda deserved it. "Couldn't you at least try to make Miya feel better?"

"I just wait until the storm's blown over."

"I think you're just being a coward."

"There it is," he chuckled ruefully. "But I guess it's my fault for being a sorry excuse for a human being."

"I don't know how I'm going to get through tonight. Maybe I'll just go home first."

"Come on, don't say depressing stuff like that!"

I doubted that an hour alone would be enough to improve Miya's mood. It might even make it worse.

The light was fading fast outside, and the abundant colors of autumn looked forlorn and lonely to me as the train sped past. Looking out the window mutely, I thought about the rental car that was going down the highway on the other side of the mountains. What were Miya and Ruri talking about, there in that locked room? I bet they were rehashing the argument from last night in that hotel in Matsumoto.



By the time we reached Inotani Station, the sun had almost set.

Masuda and I shivered in the cold air as we walked up the platform. Mountains surrounded us on all four sides, white ribbons of snow capping their black peaks. Railroad lines ran parallel with the deserted platform, and across the tracks I saw the station building and mining company dormitories. Everything was so silent it felt like we had come to the edge of the world, making me wonder whether we really should have gotten off in a place like this. We came out of the station building, but Ruri and Miya hadn't arrived yet.

"They're just taking it slow."

"Yeah, but I can't help but worry."

"No use in that, we'll just have to be patient and wait."

Inside the station building we drank canned coffee while we passed the time, but the rental car wasn't showing up. It got steadily darker outside, like the shadows of the surrounding mountains were pressing down on us. The cold seeped into my bones.

"What do you think about Mrs. Mishima's prophecy?" Masuda mumbled, sitting on a bench. His face was washed in dreary fluorescent light as he studied his coffee can.

"Obviously I don't believe it."

"Same here."

"So, what were you doing with Ruri in that café anyways?"

"Oh, there's not much to tell."

According to Masuda, he'd gotten so fed up with Miya's attitude that he left Utsumi's store and took a walk toward the castle ruins. After he went into that café to take a break, he'd gotten a call from Ruri, who after learning where he was came there by herself.

"That's all that happened."

"You looked like you were discussing something pretty heavy with her though."

"Nothing that important, just Mrs. Mishima's prophecy," he said, his eyes fixed on the can.

"Why do you think it scares her so much?"

"It didn't exactly leave me feeling chipper, either."

"Yeah, but I feel like she's just way more scared of it than she should be. What could it be? She is kind of timid, but I always saw her as being more rational than that."

"She's got a lot on her mind, I guess."

The sun had gone down completely, and outside the station was complete darkness.

As I sat on that lonely bench in that lonely place, a strange mood came over me, and I was overwhelmed with the premonition that I would never see Miya and Ruri again.

Maybe it was because of the memory of that disappearance back when I was in college that was slowly resurfacing in the back of my mind. It'd been six years since Hasegawa vanished at the Kurama Fire Festival.

I barely remembered her at all: what her face was like, what she sounded like, it was all a blur to me. But once I remembered that night, I couldn't shake this uneasy feeling, like somewhere there was a void in the world. Surrounded by these black mountains, it felt like the tracks led from Inotani Station directly into the Kurama Station from that night.

It had been an hour since we arrived at the station.

"This is taking way too long," Masuda muttered, going outside.

I remembered the story Utsumi had told us. Mrs. Mishima had awakened to her powers after seeing the shadow of death on her husband, supposedly. But it hit me then. What if she hadn't predicted the future at all? What if Mrs. Mishima's husband had died so that her prophecy would be fulfilled? It was a crazy thought, sure, but at the same time it felt unnervingly plausible.

I stepped outside the station and found Masuda standing in a parking space, still as a pole. He was looking out at the little road leading out to the highway. It was so dark I could barely make anything out.

I stood beside him and looked at the darkness beyond that road.

"Is Ruri in love with you?"

Masuda looked at me, his expression shocked. "The hell did that come from?"

"I heard that you were arguing about it yesterday."

"From who?"

"Miya."

"She's just messing with you. You're too trusting."

"Am I?"

"Sure are."

"You can be really irresponsible sometimes."

"What did I do this time?" he pouted, just as a dazzling pair of headlights appeared and I heard the crunching of tires on the road. A familiar-looking rental car was coming towards us.

Ruri and Miya had finally arrived.

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Masuda took over the wheel from Ruri, and we set off for the hotel in Okuhida. Checking the map, he reckoned that we just needed to retrace the 41 back to Kamioka-chō and get on Route 471.

"It'll take maybe an hour to get there."

"Look how dark it is already."

"I'll drive safe. You help me keep an eye out."

It was almost impossible to tell where the mountains began and the sky began now, and the red foliage was impossible to make out. As we wended our way through an endless series of curves and tunnels, it felt like we were burrowing into the very darkness itself.

I could hear Miya breathing softly from the back, asleep.

"She must have been tired."

"As long as it keeps her quiet."

I snuck a glance at Ruri in the rearview mirror. She was staring out through the dark window, not saying anything. In her pale face I saw complete exhaustion.

Neither Miya nor Ruri would give us a good reason why they had taken so long to arrive at Inotani Station. They'd probably been arguing so fiercely they had to stop the car. From the way they both looked when they got to the station I guessed that they'd really been going at each other. But that might also have let them vent excess steam. Miya was already asleep, and Ruri looked like she might nod off any second now. It looked like things would be nice and peaceful until we reached Okuhida.

"Don't fall asleep on me now. If you drift off my eyes are gonna start closing too."

"For some reason I just feel super exhausted right now."

"Well you were pretty worried about them."

"I would really love to be relaxing in a hot spring right about now."

The only things I could see in front were the headlights illuminating the paved road, and the red taillights of the car in front of us. In the side mirror I saw a car behind us, keeping the exact amount of distance away from us as the car in front. *Where did they come from, and where are they going?* I wondered. The sight felt dreamlike, beckoning me to sleep.

I eventually started to nod off.

An unknown length of time later I was suddenly awoken by the sound of someone screaming right beside me. I jerked up. The car was silent, and all I heard was Miya's quiet breathing in the back. The car was parked on the side of the road.

I thought we'd arrived at the hot spring hotel, but I didn't see any lights that would indicate that. Masuda wasn't in the driver's seat. The headlights of another car washed over the interior, and red taillights receded into the distance ahead. I turned around and saw Masuda and Ruri outside, seemingly rummaging in the trunk of the car.

I turned back around and let my mind wander.

The highway stretched through the pitch-black mountain valley. Pairs of red taillights continued on their way in front of us, before being swallowed one by one into the maw of a lightless tunnel.

As I watched them go, I noticed something white fluttering by the mouth of the tunnel. I sat up, wondering what it was. It looked like a person. *That can't be safe, what are they doing there?* I thought, squinting my eyes when a shiver went up my spine.

The person standing next to the tunnel looked like Miya. She was wearing a white dress, waving at me.

I turned around in panic, to see that Miya was still sleeping in the back. Then what was that person? I faced front again, but there was no longer any trace of that weird figure standing by the tunnel.

I thought about the mezzotint I had seen at the café in Hida Takayama. It had also depicted a woman standing in front of a tunnel. Maybe I had just been seeing things, unknowingly affected by that image. Even so, an inexpressible sense of unease remained in my mind.

Masuda and Ruri finally came back inside the car.

"What's up?"

"She said her stomach wasn't feeling well. We were looking for medicine in the back."

"I'm sorry," Ruri murmured behind us. Her face really did look pale.



It was a little past seven when we arrived at Hirayu Onsen in Okuhida. After traversing the lightless mountain roads, the lights of the many *ryokan* lining the streets seemed unnaturally bright, like we'd blundered into a mystical hidden village. The snow sparkled and gleamed under the lights, and gratings in the road exhaled steam up through the air. It didn't look anything like it had when we had passed through during the day on our way from Matsumoto to Okuhida.

The inn Utsumi had recommended to us was a weird little place.

The first thing that caught my eye was the huge number of taxidermied animals that were on display. A glass case took up an entire wall of the lobby, filled with mounted animals. While Masuda talked to the man at the desk, Miya looked at all the animals, transfixed. Maybe the nap in the car had refreshed her, because she was looking much better, and even her tone of voice had softened.

"I can't believe they're all dead. It almost feels like you can hear them calling, doesn't it?"

"It's got an impact, for sure."

Miya pointed at a lean-bodied specimen. "What's this one?"

"I think that's a civet."

Yasuda finished checking us in and came over, and an employee of the inn led us to our room. As we walked along the long corridors, I saw a separate building across the courtyard. Bright light blazed from the windows, but I didn't see signs of anyone moving in there. The corridors were completely silent.

Our room was pretty typical of a hot spring inn: large, tatami floor, desk, TV, a safe for valuables. In the spacious veranda by the windows were two rattan chairs facing each other, and on the glass table there was an ashtray. The only weird thing about the setup was that there was a taxidermied animal in the decorative alcove.

"You've got to be kidding me," Miya muttered, sinking into the rattan chair.

"Anyone up for a bath?" I suggested, pulling out *yukata* from the wardrobe.

Facing out through the windows, Miya said, "I'm going to rest for a little bit."

"What about you, Ruri?" asked Masuda.

Ruri scowled at the taxidermy and mutely shook her head.

"Then we'll be right back."

Masuda and I left the room.

The open air baths were down the stairs at the end of the longest hallway. There was no one there but us. The rising vapor skimmed the bare stone and drifted thickly upwards into the dark sky. As the hot water soaked into my body I felt a wave of relaxation come over me.

"Great bath," Masuda sighed.

"Life is wonderful," I sighed back.

"...Shadow of death, huh?" Masuda muttered. "Awful thing to say."

"You see anything in my face?"

"You don't look like you're going to drop dead to me, at least. You're practically sparkling."

Here in the warm bath, the threat of Mrs. Mishima's sinister words seemed thin and far away.

"It feels like those two have calmed down, doesn't it?"

"You noticed too, huh?"

"Miya's been pretty gentle since we got to the inn."

"I guess they must have gotten it all out between them. It's like I've been saying, Ruri doesn't pull her punches. If they want to explode, you just gotta let them explode."

"Trying to let yourself off the hook again?"

"What can I say, I am a man of peace."

I didn't get why Masuda and Miya didn't just break up. I liked to think that I would be able to control Miya, but I wasn't going to wade into it any deeper. If I did, I'd just end up like Masuda, and I'd probably even lose the amount of influence over her that I had right now.

I watched the steam rise and disappear into the darkness of Okuhida. My head was starting to feel light. It felt so comfortable that I wouldn't have been surprised if I even forgot I was soaking in a bath.

"It's like the storm's passed," said Masuda, reaching out his hand toward the snow piled up on the stone.



When we came back to the room we found dinner for four waiting for us.

What surprised me, though, was that Ruri was still sitting in the exact same spot, with her bag still sitting in the same place on the floor, glaring at the alcove in the exact same way, like she was frozen in time. The only differences were that her eyes were brimming with tears, and Miya, who we had left sitting in the chair by the window, was gone.

"What's wrong? Did something happen with Miya?" asked Masuda, sounding worried. The sound of his voice snapped Ruri out of her daze, and she blinked and rubbed the tears away. But she refused to say what had happened, and just stared at Masuda.

"Did Miya go to the baths?"

Ruri nodded wordlessly.

We waited for Miya to come back, but in vain. Even considering the fact that she'd headed to the baths after us, it was still taking way too long.

Masuda sat in the rattan chair and spaced out, while I lay on the tatami looking up at the ceiling, and Ruri sat in the corner looking pale. In the distance I heard an ambulance, sounding like it was getting closer then farther, closer then farther away. The inn was so quiet that I couldn't help but follow that sound with my ears. I wondered how it could be going on for such a long time.

"Miya's sure taking her time," I muttered.

Out of nowhere Ruri opened her mouth and declared, "My sister's not coming back."

"Why not?"

"Something's happened to her, something bad."

"What do you mean, bad?" Masuda interjected forcefully.

Ruri straightened her back and placed her hands in her lap. There was something unusual about the look on her face. She looked up and glared at Masuda. "My sister's dead. She had the shadow of death!"

Masuda was taken aback. "You're not still worried about Mrs. Mishima's prophecy, are you?"

Looking perturbed, Ruri replied, "Don't you think it's already being fulfilled?"

"You're tired. You should get some rest," Masuda replied, picking up the telephone receiver to call reception to lay out a futon. I put a cushion on the floor for Ruri to use as a pillow, and to my surprise she meekly lay down on the floor and shut her eyes.

After a little while Masuda put down the phone and stood up. "It's not going through. I'm going up to reception, maybe see if I can find Miya on the way."

Flustered, I grabbed onto the sleeve of his *yukata*. "What are you trying to do?"

"Ruri's just scared."

"Does that look like 'just scared' to you?"

"What, do you think I know what's going on any better than you do? All I know is there's no way Miya's dead!" snapped Masuda, before storming out of the room.

I sank down in the chair that Miya had been sitting in.

After twenty minutes, Masuda still hadn't returned. I was starting to get worried. What was taking him so long? It shouldn't have been that much trouble to get reception to come lay out the futons. And surely he wouldn't be ransacking every room in the inn looking for Miya?

"I'm going out to take a look," I whispered to Ruri, before heading out myself.

While I was making my way towards reception, I couldn't help but notice again just how bizarrely silent the whole inn was. The silence felt like it was pinning me down, keeping me from moving, just like those taxidermied animals in the glass case. Come to think of it,

this oppressive silence had been weighing down on us ever since we had arrived at the inn. I hadn't run into a single other guest. It was very hard to believe that we were the only ones staying at such a large inn.

The gloomy lobby was deserted, and no one came out when I called out at the reception desk. Masuda was nowhere to be seen. I glanced into the shoebox and noted that Masuda's shoes were gone.

"He went outside," said a voice behind me.

I jumped, whirling around to find Ruri standing there.

"Masuda's left," she said again, almost as if she knew where he had gone.

I looked through the glass doors into the parking lot, lit by a solitary lamp. Snow had begun to swirl around under that soft illumination.

None of it made any sense. I couldn't believe that Masuda would have just left us there and gone outside. How could anyone walk around in this weather wearing nothing but a flimsy *yukata*?

Ruri took my arm. "Let's go back to the room."

Maybe it was just the cold, but she was shivering.

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Neither Miya nor Masuda were back when we returned to the room.

Ruri and I sat in the rattan chairs facing each other, waiting for them to come back. There was a look of resignation on her face as she stared fixedly out the dark window.

The lights of the hot spring town seemed to have gone out, and outside the window there was only darkness as far as the eye could see. The outlines of the mountains melted in the blackness, and without lights the entire town of Okuhida was smothered in a darkness so thick it felt like you could reach out and touch it. I felt that if I were to open the window, the darkness would come oozing in.

It was like Miya and Masuda had been swallowed up by the darkness, and when I thought of that my mind was transported back to Kurama.

"A friend of mine went missing, six years ago. Never found 'em, even to this day," I said to Ruri. "It was the night we went to see the Kurama Fire Festival.

"Did your friend die?" asked Ruri.

"I sure hope not," I responded. "Just disappeared. But disappeared isn't the same as dead, you know. I think she's still alive, somewhere."

"Your friend was a girl?"

"Yeah."

"Were you in love with her?"

"...I couldn't really say."

I tried to remember Hasegawa's face but it wouldn't come up. It was just smooth and featureless, like that girl from the mezzotint in the café. Hasegawa had been attractive, sure, but it had been hard to get close to her. Maybe she was just shy. Whenever I tried to worm my way into her confidence she would flat out reject me. We'd still interact like normal classmates, but it felt like she always had her guard up around me.

"Let's change the subject. This feels like an unlucky topic." I knew that I had brought it up in the first place, but it was starting to feel uncomfortable. "So anyways, we're heading back to Tokyo tomorrow."

"...You really think so?" Ruri looked back at me with listless eyes.

The look on her face reminded me a lot of Miya. The way she sat there so loosely, like there were no secrets between us. Miya looked at me that way a lot. It wasn't much of a stretch that two sisters would resemble each other, but it still took me by surprise. Ruri was always on edge, always careful not to show me what she was really feeling.

For a second it felt like I was sitting face to face with Miya. We'd done this many times before. But no one knew that except she and I.

"You're so careless, Takeda," Ruri suddenly remarked, startling me.

"Ouch, so that's what you really think of me?"

"...And the way you try to dodge things by laughing them off, just like this."

"I'm not trying to dodge anything. I don't know what you're talking about. Why don't you tell me exactly what you mean?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter anymore."

"It doesn't seem like it doesn't matter."

"You're all so careless, Masuda and my sister and you. You just make a mess of everything around you and hope that someone will come along to clean it up. And until they do you just have this indifferent look on your face, like nothing's wrong. You're just pretending to be grownups, when really you're pushing it all on me."

"I think you're tired."

"If I'm tired it's because you all tired me out."

Ruri slumped down in her chair and closed her eyes.

She was right, I really am careless. I don't expect forgiveness just because I recognize that. Whether you realize it or not doesn't change the fact that you're hurting someone else. Even after the chewing out I had just gotten, I was only pretending to sympathize with her as lip service. What I was really thinking was, *What a pain in the ass*. I felt like I was holding my own cruelty in my hand, observing it dispassionately.

"My sister's dead. What a shame," she uttered coldly.

I tried to be a little more forceful. "Cut it out!"

"Mrs. Mishima was right, don't you see?"

"Why would I believe what some crazy old lady says? You're not being yourself!"

"You don't know the slightest thing about who I am." There was an atypical hardness in her voice. "When she left the room, Miya said something to me very gently: 'I'm sorry.' That was when I knew. It's just like Mrs. Mishima said. That wasn't my sister. My sister is already dead."

"Yeah, Miya was being kind of weird, but I think she was feeling better after her nap in the car."

"Those mountain roads were pretty dark," said Ruri. "Where do you think they led us? Do you really think we're in Okuhida right now, Takeda?"

She curled up into her chair. It looked like she was holding back laughter, but I soon realized that she was in pain. Sweat was beading on her forehead.

I scrambled for the phone next to the TV. But when I put the receiver up to my ear there was only static. Somewhere behind that noise I heard someone screaming. It sounded like Ruri. But how could she be on the other end?

Snatching the phone away from my ear, I whirled around to find the room silent as the grave.

Ruri's chair was empty.



Time passed; how long, I don't know.

Alone I walked down the long corridor and went into the hot spring.

As I soaked in the bath, images from the trip flashed through my mind: the minivan parked by the side of the road on the way to Okuhida Takayama; the café with that strange copperplate engraving; the procession of red tail lamps weaving their way over the mountain highway in the dark. I sure had seen a lot of things.

Above the open-air bath the sky was jet black, and not a star could be seen. Thick coils of white steam rose up, disappearing into the infinite darkness.

A tremendous loneliness came over me.

It was like the way I felt as a kid, when my eyes sometimes snapped open in the middle of an afternoon nap. The house felt cold and unfamiliar, and my family was nowhere in sight. No one was there to tell me where I was. Something big was going on, and I was the only one that had been left behind. That was exactly the way I felt now.

Where did we go wrong? I pondered.

All of a sudden I saw someone stand up at the edge of the rock wall around the bath. The slender curves of her body emerged gradually from the steam. Water dripped from her slick body as she walked over to me. I saw her face and was happy.

"So this is where you were, Miya."

"I was here the whole time."

"I was waiting for you for a long, long time."

Miya said nothing and sank into the water beside me. She put her head on my shoulder and closed her eyes. It had been such a long time since we had cuddled together like this.

The Third Night — Tsugaru

“This happened in February three years ago, when I went to Aomori.”

Fujimura was the third to speak.

I still remembered how she used to doodle in her college-lined notebooks whenever there was downtime in English class. Her intent scribbling piqued my interest, and when I looked over it was to see a landscape of the Kamo Bridge, drawn entirely from memory. I was extremely impressed, but she only muttered, “I just liked drawing when I was a kid.”

Apparently she wasn’t quite as fervent about it as she had used to be. “I’m more into the appreciating side of it now,” she told me.

After graduating she had gone to work at an art gallery in Ginza, which didn’t surprise me.

What follows is Fujimura’s story.



My husband likes trains, and once or twice a year he goes on a train trip with his friends. I usually join them if my schedule happens to line up. My dad used to subscribe to train magazines, so I guess trains were always in my blood. My husband says that I must have iron tracks for veins. When it comes to the travel plan I’m strictly hands-off though, and where we go is up to my husband and his friends.

I heard that their trips used to be like forced marches, sticking to strict timetables and focusing only on the train rides, but after I started coming along they eased things up a little. Kojima always joked to my husband, “You’re going soft, man!”

Kojima is one of my husband’s coworkers. He always comes on these trips, and even arranges all the tickets and lodging. He comes over to our place a lot, always with a bottle of his favorite wine in hand, and even comes to my gallery to see exhibitions from time to time. He’s like a little brother to me.

One day the three of us were sitting around drinking, when the topic of night trains came up.

“You’ve never ridden a night train before, Reiko?” Kojima asked, sounding surprised. “That’s too bad.”

“We can’t let that slide,” my husband declared.

Kojima nodded. “For night trains, you just gotta start from Ueno.”

"That's the one. *The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country...*"

"It's winter or nothing, and winter means Akebono."

All of this went completely over my head. "What are you guys talking about?" I giggled.

Kojima explained, "Akebono's the name of a sleeper train."

Akebono runs between Ueno and Aomori. It departs from Ueno Station at 9 P.M., passing north through Echigo-Yuzawa along the coast of the Sea of Japan, and arrives in Aomori at around 10 the following morning. Now was the time to ride it, my husband and Kojima urged me, because the long-running route was due to be abolished. In other words, they just wanted to ride it themselves.

"Let's do it then," I replied.

"Kojima, count on you for the tickets?" asked my husband.

"Affirmative!" Kojima said back.

That was how they always were.



One early February night, my husband and I went to Ueno Station.

A desolate air hung around Ueno Station at night. The lights on the platform felt dim, and a chill wind was blowing into the station from the darkness of night beyond the tracks.

When I at last I saw the blue, old-fashioned sleeper train slide into the station, a terribly forlorn feeling took hold of me. It felt as though I wasn't in Tokyo anymore, but was standing alone in some remote village in the north.

"Why does this make me feel so lonely?"

"That's the awesome thing about night trains," my husband said happily. "The traveling feeling is just the greatest!"

But I didn't think this loneliness was the same thing as the traveling feeling my husband was describing. It felt more raw than that. It was more like the shadows that stretched over the dirt path along the reservoir on the long way home, back when I was in grade school. I didn't understand why I was feeling this way. My mood clouded over for some time, but when Kojima appeared on the platform, the usual bottles of wine swinging from his hand, the lonely feeling lifted from me and vanished.

It appeared he'd come straight from work; beneath his coat he was still wearing a suit.

"If it'd taken any longer I might have missed the train!"

But the fact that he'd still remembered to get wine to drink on the train was so like him. He'd bought the wine at a liquor store near his workplace and stowed them with his travel bag in a locker.

As we boarded the train and looked for our room, Kojima said, "How about you and me switch rooms, Reiko? Mine is much better, it's on the side where you can see the ocean."

So we swapped tickets.

At 9:15 the train left the station. We were only passing through Tokyo, but from inside the train the scene felt completely different. The three of us gathered in Kojima's cramped room and clinked wineglasses together as we looked out the windows.

"Tomorrow we're riding the Tsugaru Railway all the way to the end."

I asked him what was at the end, but Kojima just said, "Uh, I dunno?"

"Hell if I know," my husband shrugged.

This happened a lot, but still I could never help feeling incredulous.

"Riding to the last stop is an act of great significance," Kojima argued. "You can't just snooze your way through life and wake up when you get to the end of the line. I refuse to live my life that way!"

"Bravo, Kojima, bravo!"

"Thank you, thank you. So, how early do we get up tomorrow?"

Kojima and my husband excitedly peered at the timetable.

Whenever we were on these trips, these two were always finding excuses to look into the timetable. I loved seeing them like that, and sometimes I'd jump in and say, "Let's try a different route," or "I want to spend more time here!" Whenever I did, the boys would always look kind of bewildered, but they always looked so happy to bury their noses in the schedule and rejigger the itinerary.

Tomorrow we'd ride the steam train down the Tsugaru Railway, and once we arrived in Aomori we'd visit the Sannai-Maruyama ruins before checking into the hotel. When we finally looked up from making our plans, the train had already passed Ōmiya Station and was heading for Takazaki. We turned out the lights inside the room and watched the gorgeous lights of the unfamiliar streets stream by outside the window. I felt the loneliness from Ueno Station return.

My husband took a sip of wine and sighed, "Night trains always make you feel like you're going far away."

Pale streetlight gently washed across our faces.



"The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country. The earth lay white under the night sky."

These are the famous opening lines to Kawabata Yasunari's *Snow Country*.

"The earth lay white under the night sky: that's a fantastic line. Great description," my husband mullered as we passed through the tunnel to Echigo-Yuzawa.

By that time we had already emptied two bottles of Kojima's wine. Fatigue seemed to have set in; my husband was yawning constantly, and even Kojima was unusually quiet. The tunnel walls pressed in close outside the window, and the pitch black room felt suffocating.

My husband suddenly touched my hand. "Any second now."

The train came out of the long tunnel. The earth lay white under the night sky.

The change in the scenery was so abrupt, like we had wandered into another world, that I sucked in my breath. The countryside that unfolded on the other side of the window was dressed all in white. The houses were buried in snow, their lights twinkling like illustrations from a fairy tale storybook, and even behind the thick windows of the train I could almost feel the wintry silence that enveloped the mountain village. Light reflected from the snow through the windows, bathing the car in pale light, and for a moment everything felt magical.

"I'd love to be standing out there myself," I sighed, looking out at the snowy landscape. "I'll just have to watch it go by today, but someday..."

"In my experience, wishes like that tend to come true," Kojima said. "Whenever you think 'I wonder if I'll ever stop at this station', or 'What was that thing I saw from the train?', you inevitably end up going there afterwards. Even the places that you think you'll never pass by again. It's very strange, almost like fate is pulling you there."

"Kojima's such a damned romantic."

"I'm sure I'm not the only one."

"Sounds like someone's got iron train tracks for veins!" I teased, and my husband and I looked at each other and laughed.

That was when it happened.

The room was suddenly illuminated bright as midday. The pale light streaming through the window vanished, and Kojima's stunned face was flushed with light red as a kidney bean. It only lasted for a moment, and all my husband and I saw as we looked back through the window was a blazing conflagration throwing up sparks through the darkness of the forest as it receded into the distance. Once it vanished completely, the car was again steeped in the pale light reflected from the snow.

"What was that?" my husband muttered.

"It looked like a house fire," Kojima gasped, his eyes wide.

He told us that as the train went by a break in the trees, he had seen a burning house in the snow-covered clearing.

"It seemed so peaceful for there being a fire," he reflected. With the red light flickering over the snowy field and the barren trees, it had all seemed like a dream. "There was a woman standing by the house. I think she was looking this way and waving."

"Stop that, Kojima!" For some reason a shiver went up my spine. How could anyone possibly be standing there waving at a passing night train with their house burning right in front of them? Then again, maybe she had been trying to get help.

But my husband wasn't having any of it. "He's just got women on the brain again."

"Come on, not in front of Reiko," Kojima grumbled. "I am a gentleman."

"Even gentlemen let their minds wander now and then."

"My thoughts are purely virtuous, I assure you."

"Why would anyone try to get help from a train in the middle of the night, anyways? If you've got time to wave at a train, you've got time to call the fire department."

"It didn't look like she was waving for help. It was like—" Whatever Kojima meant to say died in his throat. "Ah, forget it," he muttered.

Not long after that we all retired to our individual rooms. Not being used to the swaying of the night train, I had a hard time falling asleep. As I tossed and turned in the confined bed, the image of the burning house looming in the darkness replayed over and over in my mind, as vividly as though I had seen it with my own eyes.

Eventually I gave up and got out of bed, watching the nighttime landscape streaming past my window. I drank from a bottle of water I had bought at Ueno Station. Classical music was playing quietly from a speaker on the wall, mingling with the monotonous sound of the wheels going over the rails.

At around 2 A.M. I went to use the restroom.

After washing my hand I was going back to my room when I saw Kojima. He was standing near the train coupling, staring outside through the small window. His eyes were glazed over, like he wasn't fully awake.

"What're you doing there, Kojima?"

"I was feeling a little suffocated, is all. Must have had too much to drink." His eyes were strange as he looked at me. "Just can't get to sleep. Every time I close my eyes I see that house."

"You mean, the one that was on fire?"

"You really didn't see it at all?"

"I was looking at you two, and it flew by so quickly."

“Your husband doesn’t believe me at all, but I know what I saw. There was a woman standing beside the burning house. Waving at me just like this, like she was beckoning me or—” He sighed, and trying to play it off as a joke said, “Man, what was in that wine?”

“If you’re really not feeling well let us know.”

“Thank you. I’ll be fine, I think.”

Before I went into my room I looked over one last time at Kojima. He was leaning against the juddering wall looking lost, like an abandoned child.



We arrived at Hirosaki Station on the Ōu Line just past 9 the following morning. The Tsugaru Railway is a local line that links Goshogawara Station to Tsugaru-Nakasato Station, passing the birthplace of famed author Dazai Osamu. The journey from Hirosaki to the start of the line in Goshogawara would take about half an hour. We hurriedly debarked the sleeper train and boarded a normal train on the Gonō Line.

As the train swayed along my husband kept yawning. For all his love of night trains, he couldn’t actually fall asleep on one.

“It’s plenty fun staring out the window, that’s all,” he said, refusing to admit defeat.

I’d eventually managed to fall asleep, so I was feeling refreshed. Then there was Kojima, who looked surprisingly nonchalant as if he had forgotten what had happened the previous night.

We got off the train at Goshogawara Station and moved to the Tsugaru Railway platform. Standing there, the chill of the northern morning and the snow dancing in the wind blew away whatever remained of our drowsiness. On the other side of the fence, the town of Goshogawara looked as if it were being squashed down beneath the grey clouds. A lone young station worker holding a signal flag stood in the ditch by the tracks, his long boots crunching the snow beneath them as he gazed intently at the approaching stove train. Taking in the sight from up there on the frozen platform, I could practically feel the cold of the north seeping into my bones.

“Feel that cold? We’re really in Aomori now!” my husband said happily, as if we couldn’t tell that for ourselves.

The train cars were all old-fashioned, almost like we had gone back in time. The wooden floor slats were damp with slush, and flakes of snow drifted in from the gaps in the ancient window frames. But around the coal stove the air was hot enough to make your face go red. We took the seats by the stove and bought a small bottle of sake from the train

attendant, passing it around. Day drinking is one of the pleasures of traveling, my husband remarked with satisfaction.

Departing from Goshogawara Station, the train crossed through endless fields of white. Snow fell continuously from the ashen sky above, and with the snow that the train was heaving into the air it looked as though we were traveling through a blizzard. Beyond that silvery veil, dull houses and factories hugged the earth, like matches strewn across the countryside. Half-buried farm sheds and sluice gates passed by the window.

Staring out at that landscape, Kojima mumbled, "What was the deal with that burning house, anyways?"

I started in surprise. "You're still going on about that, Kojima?"

"It wasn't so much the house as that woman waving her hand."

"That too."

"Well according to your little theory, Kojima, we're going to end up going back there, ain't that right?"

"No, well, I don't know about this one. I can't see us ending up going to a lone house somewhere in the mountains of Echigo-Yuzawa. And anyways, that house has probably burned to ashes by now." Kojima directed his gaze outside the window. "But that woman was beautiful."

"...I knew that was what it was."

"When it comes down to it, I'm just a dreamer."

The conductor came walking down the aisle and wordlessly added more coals to the stove. My face was burning with the heat of the stove and flushed from the alcohol. I put it up to the window and smelled something like frozen dew, taking me back to my childhood days.

Tsugaru-Nakasato, the terminus of the line, was a small station, and it was but a few of us who straggled out of the train.

In the waiting room past the ticket barrier, two diminutive old women were sitting on the benches that surrounded the stove. In their long boots and shawls, they looked like two peas in a pod. Their black silhouettes stood out in sharp relief against the dazzling light streaming through the frosted glass doors.

"Let's take the next train back. That'll give us about thirty minutes," Kojima suggested. "Why don't we do a little walking?"

So we all went down the long path stretching out from the front of the station.

Passing in front of the town hall, here and there we saw little stores and barber shops and pachinko parlors. I saw an old estate with trees growing grandly in the garden, and thought to myself that this must have been a flourishing town, once upon a time. But there was hardly anyone out and about. Only trucks blanketed in grey snow drove by, and

the town was so silent that all we could hear was the sound of our footsteps and breathing. Dirty snow was crusted up on the side of the wet asphalt, and the fluttering snow was starting to come down harder now.

My husband brushed off snow from his head and scarf like a little boy.
It felt like we were walking through a dream.



"Let's go down this way," Kojima announced. "Come on, over here!"

Kojima hurried ahead into the mouth of an alley by an old-fashioned, long abandoned barbershop. We followed behind, my husband wearing a suspicious look on his face. There was something kind of strange about the way Kojima was acting. This was supposed to be his first time visiting this town, but it almost seemed like he was walking with a specific place in mind.

The alley led between houses and apartment buildings into an empty lot covered with snow.

"The hell's he up to?" my husband wondered, sounding exasperated.

Kojima was heading towards a house on the other side of the lot. It was a very typical sort of house for these parts, two stories with a gabled roof. The green roof tiles were faded, and on the white walls there was a large stain like the shadow of a giant. Thick curtains were drawn over the many windows, and it didn't show any signs of being lived in. It looked like a long-shuttered mountain bed and breakfast, and no sooner had that thought occurred to me than a sudden shiver went down my spine.

"I've seen this house before."

I didn't know what made me think that. My husband didn't seem to have noticed my consternation though, and he approached Kojima, who had come to a standstill, calling out, "What's wrong?"

Kojima turned around, a dull look in his eyes. It was the same look that I had seen on his face last night. He wasn't even bothering to brush away the snow that was piling up on top of him. He studied our faces without saying anything, then turned to face that mysterious house once again.

"Reiko, don't you remember this house?" he asked. "It's that night house."

A shock went through me.

A memory came back to my mind, of the art gallery near the end of last year.

The gallery I worked at was putting on an exhibition featuring a copperplate engraver, Kishida Michio. We were displaying *Night Train*, a series he had produced holed up in his Kyoto studio, but the man himself had been dead for three years. His works were

managed by Yanagi Gallery, also of Kyoto. Our manager had had a close relationship with this gallery since the days of the previous owner, which also explained why this exhibition was being held in Tokyo. I was put in charge of making the arrangements with Yanagi Gallery. Among that series of works called *Night Train* was a mezzotint entitled *Tsugaru*. The house in front of me now looked exactly like the house in that picture.

I remembered now that on the last night before the opening of the exhibition Kojima had come to visit the gallery, and we had looked at that engraving together.

"Why did you come here, Kojima?"

"Just because."

Kojima kept looking up at the house, not moving a muscle.

My husband and I went under the boxlike concrete garage to escape the falling snow. We looked around as we brushed off the snow, but it was almost empty. Along the damp walls sat a rusting child's bicycle and an oil drum with cinders at the bottom.

"Makes you want to light a bonfire, doesn't it?" My voice echoed off of the dreary walls. "Do you think it's abandoned?"

"Looks that way. But that's not important right now," replied my husband, his voice terse. "What's wrong with Kojima? What was he talking about earlier?"

My husband frowned when I explained about the mezzotint. "That's some coincidence there."

"That's why I've been feeling odd, ever since I saw this house."

"So that artist must've come here before. Don't know why you'd want to draw a house like this, though."

A pounding sound came from the direction of the front door. We looked outside the garage only to find that Kojiro wasn't standing there anymore. He must be trying to talk to whoever lived here.

"The hell's he doing?" muttered my husband.

My mind went back to that beautiful engraving once again.

On a backdrop of velvet darkness that evoked an endless night was a house with a gabled roof, drawn in shades of white. A faceless woman leaned out one of the windows on the second floor, waving her hand. It was almost as if she was calling out to me from within the engraving.

My husband suddenly spoke up urgently. "Doesn't that sound funny to you?"

At his words I became aware that Kojima's knocking had gotten strangely loud. The heavy thumping reverberated all the way over here in the garage. What was he doing? That sound was the sound of someone who had gone off the rails, like he was being driven by fear into trying to break the door down.

"What's the matter with him?"

As soon as we flew out of the garage, the pounding sound stopped abruptly. Around the house with the gabled roof, silence reigned once again. The heavy curtains at the windows hadn't moved in the slightest, and the whole edifice reminded me of someone staring out at the falling snow with their eyes shut. The front door remained closed, and Kojima was nowhere to be found.



We circled around the house, calling Kojima's name. Behind the house there was an empty field buried in snow which might have been a vegetable plot or a backyard, and beyond a fence there were houses interspersed among copses. The house looked the same from the rear as it did from the front, almost like it had neither back nor front. Curtains were drawn tightly across the windows, and there was no sign of anyone in there. We completed our circuit around the house and came back to the front entrance.

Brushing the snow off my hair, my husband mulled, "Kojima was pounding the door right up until we came out of the garage. There shouldn't have been enough time for him to hide."

"Then did he go inside?"

"It's possible the door wasn't locked. He might have realized that and gone inside, and watched us circling the house looking for him."

"Isn't that trespassing?"

"It doesn't seem like something he would do." My husband approached the door and tried the knob. It was locked. We called Kojima's phone, but it was powered off.

"Hellooo, is anyone there?" shouted my husband, knocking on the door.

"Guess it's really empty. I don't understand."

We exchanged glances, completely befuddled.

Things didn't seem urgent enough to report anything to the police just yet. Kojima must have had his reasons. But we couldn't wait around aimlessly in the falling snow for him either. "Let's go back to the station," my husband suggested, to which I quickly agreed. Inside the station we could warm ourselves by the stove and enjoy hot beverages while we waited.

"Sooner or later we should be able to get in touch with Kojima." My husband led the way into the falling snow.

As I followed behind him, my legs suddenly stopped.

I couldn't quite explain it, but I had a feeling that I had overlooked something very important. But what was it? Something was drawing me in. I turned, went up to the front

door, and knocked a few times, listening close. After a moment, there was a *click* from inside the house.

I reached out a hand and grasped the doorknob. Something was whispering inside my head, telling me that the door was no longer locked. But I couldn't summon the courage to open it. It felt like something was holding its breath in the darkness of the house, waiting for me to open the door so that it could catch me. I stood there with my hand on the doorknob, as if paralyzed.

All of a sudden someone grabbed my shoulder, pulling me away from the door.

"Hurry up, let's get out of here!" came my husband's voice, and before I knew what was happening, I was being led away, leaving the house behind. From what he told me later, I had been standing there in a daze holding the doorknob, unresponsive to his calling. I thought it had lasted for only a moment, but apparently it had been for much longer.

As we trudged through the snow, I turned to look at the house with the gabled roof as it receded into the distance. Through the veil of snow, the house appeared to have shut its eyes and returned to its slumber.

There was over an hour left before the next train, and Tsugaru-Nakasato Station was deserted. While I warmed my hands by the stove, my husband went over to the vending machine and bought us canned coffee. I felt warmth slowly spread throughout my body. My husband paced back and forth in the waiting room, brooding.

"We shoulda been on the first train out of here."

"...It's all gotten so strange."

"What's up with that house, anyways? What was Kojima doing, taking us there?"

I thought about Kojima, standing there last night on the train. Ever since that moment it was like he'd changed. I could still see the lost look on his face vividly in my mind, the way he looked like an abandoned child.

"There was something real funny about that house," my husband mused. "When I turned around and looked at it from far away, that was the only house that didn't have any snow piled up on top. You'd think there'd be a little at last, from the way it's been coming down. Maybe it's got some sort of heating in the roof. But then again it didn't look like anybody was living there, either..."

He kept talking out loud to himself like this for a while, before trailing off with a final thought: "...Where'd Kojima disappear to?"

At that moment, I remembered the incident that happened during my college days.

I thought of the Fire Festival in Kurama that I had gone to with my English school friends, and of Hasegawa, who had disappeared that night.

Hasegawa had been one of my closest friends.

We hung out everywhere, not just in English school. I wasn't bothered that she was a year ahead of me in school. She was majoring in Japanese literature, but she loved art just like me, so we'd often go around the city art museum on weekends, and sometimes we'd even venture out to Osaka or Kobe. At the time she was the only person that I felt free to be myself around. It was like we'd known each other since we were kids, that's how close I felt.

Of course I was shocked when she disappeared. But I won't deny that at the same time I had always thought to myself privately that something this like might happen with her.

As close as we got, there was always something mysterious about her. It was like at the heart of her lay a darkness black as night, and everything—her air of disquietude, the kindness she showed to everyone, the sharpness that felt like she could see right through you—came from that place of darkness. Her fondness for taking walks at night might have had something to do with it too. She'd invited me multiple times to join her on those "nocturnal adventures" of hers, and whenever we were on these walks she seemed so alive.

While going through my recollections, I realized that I had been avoiding thinking of her all this time.

While we waited in Tsugaru-Nakasato Station for Kojima to contact us, I thought of Hasegawa's disappearance in Kurama, and began to wonder whether the hole that had swallowed her up that night still lay there in wait.



We returned on the Tsugaru Railway to Goshogawara Station, and walked to a two-story café at a nearby intersection to have lunch before we headed to Aomori city. Plants and antiques bedecked the interior and soft music was playing; the clinking of plates in the sink and the rustling of voices around me soothed my nerves.

My husband looked disgruntled, but that was of course understandable. Kojima had finally called us while we waited at Tsugaru-Nakasato, only to inform us that he was inside that house with the gabled roof.

When my husband asked him why, he only said, "I'll tell you later," and quickly hung up. If he was telling us the truth, that meant that the whole time we were circling around looking for him, he had been quietly biding his time inside the house. It was just so unexpected of him. My husband suspected that he might have gotten entangled in some sort of trouble, which didn't seem an unreasonable conclusion.

But Kojima had only laughed off my husband's concern. "I'll catch up with you later. Say hello to Reiko for me," he had said, before hanging up.

The entire time on the way back to Goshogawara, my husband had a look of disbelief on his face. I sipped an after-meal coffee, pondering, "I hope he hasn't been in an accident."

"He's been a little off since last night, wouldn't you say?"

I told him about what had happened last night on my way back from the bathroom. My husband thought for a while, then murmured to himself, "A burning house, huh?"

I froze. In my mind's eye I saw a house on fire in the middle of a snowy lot, as vividly as if I had seen it in real life.

Seeing my face stiffen, my husband took my hand. "You alright?" he asked. "That house looked like it did something to you, too."

"When I was about to open the door, I suddenly just got so scared."

The pounding echoed in my ears again. Had that really been Kojima knocking on the door? I had this feeling that he had already been shut in the mysterious house by then, and that the pounding sound was him trying to get out—but of course that was all my imagination, just unfounded speculation.

"Looks like it's just going to be the two of us for now. Once Kojima catches up I'm really gonna let him have it," said my husband, trying to cheer me up.

We returned to the front of Goshogawara Station and made arrangements at a taxi company for a ride to the Sannai-Maruyama ruins. Since we'd learned that a bus ran from the ruins back down to Aoyama Station, we'd made reservations for a hotel right next to the station.

It took 40 minutes for the taxi to get to the ruins. Passing through the streets of Goshogawara and emerging onto an elevated expressway, I saw through the fogged up windows rolling fields and apple orchards covered in snow, and on the right in the distance I could just make out the silhouette of Mount Iwaki.

As I listened to the patter of conversation between my husband and the taxi driver, I began to nod off. My intermittent slumber was fretful. Fragments of everything that had happened since last night drifted into my head and disappeared just as quickly. I knew there had to be a connection between them all, but I just couldn't grasp what it was.

I awoke with a jolt to my husband shaking my shoulder.

"We're here," he said.

The taxi had stopped in front of a large, snow-covered building. The piercing air felt wonderful when I stepped outside. Inside the deserted reception area we changed into long boots and set out into the ruins.

An older gentleman in a yellow raincoat guided us through the park. Across the snow fields we saw the mounds of pit-houses rising up like igloos. Few people visited during the winter, and we were the only people walking around in the fluttering snow.

"Maybe we should've come in the summer," my husband frowned.

"Not at all," said our guide, sniffing up snot. "I enjoy winter as well. There's a good view of Mount Hakkōda over there, covered in white. It's very pretty."

We saw cracks in the earth that were filled with shattered earthenware, and ruins where you could hear groundwater pumping beneath, and at last we came to the base of a strange tower constructed with thick chestnut tree trunks.

Here my husband brought up an unexpected topic. "How did we end up taking a night train again?"

"I don't remember anymore."

"It was near the end of last year, wasn't it? Kojima came over to visit. Weren't you the one who started talking about night trains?"

"Was I?"

"Don't you think there must have been a reason?"

My husband must have been trying to piece the events together too as he walked around the ruins.

"I don't remember anything." When I said that he fell back into quiet introspection again.

On our way back after the tour was over, I cast my eyes into a grove of cedar trees across the snow and noticed human figures there. There were two of them, a young man with a little girl, and at first I thought they must be parent and child.

"There's people walking over there." I pointed.

"Where?" my husband asked, looking puzzled.

"They're right there!" I pointed at the cedar grove, but my husband only continued to squint.

"There's no one there."

Yet I could see them as plain as day. They were stopped and looking over here. I was suddenly taken aback. From this distance it was a little hard to make out, but the man looked like Kojima.

"Isn't that Kojima? Who's that little girl?"

"I don't see anything."

"What are you talking about? Don't you see them there?" I waved and shouted, "Kojima!"

The man waved back at me, as did the little girl beside him. I could distinctly see the red coat she was wearing.

I heard my husband ask our guide, "Do you see anything?"

"Weel, I don't see anything."

I walked forward into the snow, shouting Kojima's name. But he just kept his hand raised, not replying or showing any signs of coming this way. And who was that girl with him? Eventually the two stepped back and vanished into the depths of that dark cedar grove.

"What was that all about? Didn't he hear me calling?" I muttered to myself, when a vivid image flashed into my mind, of a reservoir embankment dyed by the setting sun. Atop that embankment walked a grade-school me, a long shadow trailing behind. Beside me walked another girl.

That girl was Kana.



When I was a kid I lived overseas because of my dad's work, until the spring of my third year in elementary school when I moved to a Tokyo suburb. I spent the rest of my childhood in that town until I went to college in Kyoto.

My house was at the end of a sprawling new residential development on a hill, overlooking a large reservoir. It was an old reservoir that had been there before they developed the area; in summer countless turtles swam laps there, and in winter migrating birds made it their encampment. The thick reeds growing at the water's edge were a little creepy, and I heard whispered rumors about the ghost of a drowned child that would appear there at sunset.

A little path ran along the top of the embankment, and that was the path I would take on my way home from school.

We were forbidden by the teachers from taking that path to and from school, but the approved route was just too long and roundabout. I'd never been a goody-two-shoes, and I always went home alone anyways. I'd just come back from overseas, so maybe I just wasn't used to school in Japan yet. That path was where I met my classmate Kana for the first time.

I think what brought us together was how isolated we both were. Kana refused to talk to anyone she didn't like, including the teacher. With my frustrations at being in an unfamiliar school, I looked up to Kana's aloofness.

On top of that, we both had a shared love of drawing. Yet Kana didn't seem to have any interest whatsoever in joining the art club, or being praised in art class. The only person she would show her drawings to was me. I took that as a point of pride.

Kana's house was below the embankment. It was a cheerful house that stood alone in a lot surrounded by trees, exactly the type of place that I would expect Kana to live.

I used to come over to her house and draw pictures with her. Her room was on the second floor. It was just like an artist's studio with its wooden floor, and it was nice and cool even in the summer. She would strip off her uniform and throw herself down on the floor to draw, so I did the same. I felt like doing that made my pictures better. The room felt wonderfully cool like we were underwater, and from the window came the wind blowing over the reservoir, carrying with it the cries of cicadas.

Lying there resting her drawing hand, Kana looked like a gorgeous mermaid.



We took the bus from the Sannai-Maruyama ruins back to Aomori Station.

Swaying on the bus, I thought about the figures I had seen on the other side of that snowy field. The girl holding hands with Kojima had looked exactly like Kana. But that was impossible. It had been nearly twenty years since I had played with her. And neither my husband nor the man guiding us had been able to see them.

"Just what was that?" I thought to myself. It was such a hazy story that I was hesitant to tell it to my husband.

After doing some shopping at a souvenir shop near Aomori Station, we checked in to the hotel. Kojima hadn't arrived there yet. Around five, the streets of Aomori were already getting dark.

My husband looked out the window anxiously and murmured, "How did this happen?"

Lying on the bed, I felt an indescribable loneliness. It was the same loneliness that had overtaken me at the start of the journey, when I was waiting for the train at Ueno Station. *I wouldn't be feeling this way, if only Kojima was here*, I thought. We'd be going out to dinner, talking about our plans for tomorrow...

My husband walked over from the window and lay down on the other bed. We both stared up at the ceiling, neither of us speaking. I was starting to nod off, when my husband mumbled, "That house in Tsugaru-Nakasato."

"Hmm?"

But my husband didn't continue. I turned over in bed to see him glaring at the ceiling, his forehead creased.

"What's wrong?"

"...Nothing. I must have seen it wrong."

"Don't just bottle it up on your own, talk to me!"

"All right, I'll say it. Did you see someone looking out from the windows?"

I shuddered and sat up. "Why would you say something so scary?"

"You didn't see it?"

"I didn't see anything!"

"It was when we were leaving that house in Tsugaru-Nakasato—"

My husband had been walking away when he realized that I wasn't with him. When he turned around, it was to see me standing at the front door with my hand on the doorknob, not moving. As he hustled back, he thought he saw a curtain move at one of the second floor windows. It was almost like the sleeping house had cracked an eye open. And when he looked up and squinted at the window, he saw a figure between the curtains.

"Was it Kojima?...no, of course it wasn't." If it had been Kojima, then my husband wouldn't have been so worried. He would simply have opened the door and gone with me to get answers from Kojima.

"It wasn't Kojima. I think it was a girl."

"A girl?"

"...I think so."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"The curtain closed pretty quickly, and I couldn't get a good look. And you were acting all weird. It was so creepy, all I could think of was getting away from that house as fast as I could."

He seemed to be hiding something, though. It felt like he had actually gotten a good look at the person at the window, and just wasn't telling me about it. The way he was talking so haltingly, like there was something stuck at the back of his throat, wasn't like him at all.

Right then his cell phone rang.

He swiftly got up from the bed and grabbed it. "Where are you?" he asked. A beat later I heard his voice rising as he demanded, "What are you doing?"

I got up and listened in on him going back and forth with Kojima, and realized that Kojima was still in the house in Tsugaru-Nakasato. Finally my husband hung up, his expression clouding over.

"He's not getting here until nighttime."

"He's still over there?"

"That's what he told me."

That meant that the figure I saw at the ruins hadn't been him. That was a small relief. But I still had no clue why he was still at the house, or what he was doing there.

"What about dinner?"

"He said for us to go ahead and eat."

"What's his deal, anyways?"

"He didn't explain anything. I never knew he could be so inconsiderate. *Catch up with you tonight, my ass.*"

"Don't be so angry."

"I'm just mad because I'm hungry. Let's go get dinner."



The Japanese restaurant that Kojima had made a reservation for was on a small street branching south from the main boulevard going east from Aomori Station. The trampled snow underfoot was frozen solid, and my husband was there to support me whenever I was on the verge of slipping. We gingerly waddled through the backstreet, and it was with a sense of relief that we finally reached the restaurant.

The food was delicious, but with Kojima weighing on our minds the conversation was lethargic. We needed to make plans for tomorrow, but just couldn't get in the mood. My husband seemed to be shouldering a burden all of his own. But the same could be said for me; even after learning that the figure that I saw at the ruins couldn't have been Kojima, in my mind I saw the little girl disappearing into the cedars over and over. Before I knew it I found my thoughts gravitating towards Kana, my childhood friend from school.

Kana was a mysterious child.

Something that mystified me, now that I was thinking about it, was that I had no memory of ever having met her family. It was almost as if she lived in that house all by herself. Whenever I asked about her family, she would silently leave the room and hide somewhere. That always made me feel very downhearted. And when I was about to cry, Kana would come back unexpectedly, plant a kiss on my cheek, and go back to drawing. I was scared of upsetting her, and so I learned not to ask any unnecessary questions.

The other mysterious thing was that the other kids in class called her a liar. As far as I knew, though Kana was a capricious girl, she had never told a lie. When I asked the other kids what she had lied about, they would only chant, "Liar, liar, pants on fire!" I secretly stewed on her behalf.

My husband broke in on my thoughts. "What's on your mind right now?"

"Something from a long time ago."

"How long?"

"From elementary school. I used to have this mysterious friend."

"You mean Kana?"

His reply took me by surprise. "How did you know?"

"I probably heard it from your mother."

"Why would she tell you about that? My mom hated Kana."

“That’s not the way I heard it.”

I couldn’t quite put it into words, but my mom had always opposed me playing with Kana. Now that I thought about it, forcing me into art class had probably been her way of separating us.



My mom had found an art school for kids by the station, and told me I was going to start attending classes there. I resisted, but she had already done the legwork and enrolled me there. That was the first and only time that she had ever done anything like that without consulting me.

In the end I unwillingly began to attend the school.

Kana didn’t like that at all. “You’re just trying to get better than me! You’re just trying to brag!” she would say, and things gradually got awkward between us. More and more often Kana started hiding when I came over to play. It made me feel so lonely. On the other hand, some of the other girls from school attended that same art class, and making friends with them helped me start to enjoy going to school a little more.

As I settled into school, Kana started being absent more and more frequently, and eventually she stopped coming at all. I was worried, but didn’t go visit her house, afraid that she would say something hateful to me. I started walking home the long way with my other classmates, and I no longer took that path along the embankment of the reservoir.

The last time I visited Kana was on a winter’s day.

The embankment was buried in snow. I dug in my feet firmly step by step as I walked along, careful not to slip and fall. Surrounded by withered trees, the lot was undisturbed even by a single footstep, and at the end of it was that house. A tingle went up my back, and my feet suddenly refused to take another step.

There was nothing cheerful about the house anymore.

Those green gables looked loathsome, under the snow falling from the grey sky. The giant-shaped mark on the white walls seemed ghastly, and thick curtains were drawn over the bizarrely numerous windows.

It looked like Kana's house had its eyes shut, slumbering.



I was dumbfounded when the memory of that winter’s day came flooding back. How could I have forgotten about that all this time?

When I regained my senses, my husband was staring at me with concern. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I was just remembering something."

"I'm feeling kind of bloated. Why don't we go out for a walk?"

"Good idea."

We walked out into the cold nighttime streets.

The back streets were still and quiet beneath the fluttering snow, and the lights of the bars and *izakaya* glistened on the frozen ground. As we plodded along we looked up and saw icicles the size of a small child hanging from the eaves of an abandoned house.

"One of these things falls, they could kill you," my husband said in a chipper tone, his voice echoing through the dark tunnel-like alleyway.

Walking through the frozen streets, there was still a mystery I couldn't get out of my head. The house in Tsugaru-Nakasato where Kojima had disappeared looked exactly like Kana's house.

We passed by shuttered shops and old mixed-use buildings on our way through the street. The snow piled up at the side of the road soaked up the light of the orange street lamps. A bus went by, filling the street with the crunching of snow chains over the icy road. The snow brushing my cheek reminded me of that winter day, and my last visit to Kana's house.

What happened after that? The question flitted through my brain.

Why couldn't I remember? Had I gone inside the house that day? Why didn't I see Kana after that ever again?

"So, what did my mom tell you?"

"About what?"

"Kana."

"Eh, not much. Just that she was kind of weird."

"You're sure that's all?"

"Snow's coming down harder," my husband remarked, looking up at the dark sky.

"The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country—"

When I heard those words, I clearly saw the scenes from the night train flash before my eyes again. A snowy landscape, straight from the pages of a fairy tale storybook. And a ball of flame passing by in an instant, throwing up brilliant sparks in the midst of the darkness. I could picture the burning house Kojima had spoken as if I had seen it myself.

That was because it was the same thing I had seen in elementary school.

That winter's day, the embankment of the reservoir had stretched out long and pale before me. I ran up it pell-mell and turned around to see the trees lit up in the darkness. Kana's house was burning, throwing up countless sparks into the pitch black sky. Flames

frolicked behind the glass windows as though they were alive. I stood there on the embankment, panting heavily, watching the house burn.

I was the one that set that house on fire. As that realization spread through me, I unconsciously came to a halt.

We were passing by a large building that looked like some kind of market. There was a sign that said "Aomori Gyosai Center", and light was leaking out beneath the half-closed shutters. When I looked into the market, I saw a girl running down the passageway.

"Kana?"

Hearing my whisper, my husband turned around in astonishment.

○

I ducked under the shutter into the market.

Shops lined both sides of the passage like festival booths. Business had long since ended for the day, and none of the shopkeepers were to be seen, let alone customers. The old fluorescent lights cast their cold light on the damp concrete floor and the tarp-covered counters. I called her name once more.

"Kana?"

There were any number of places to hide in the darkness behind the counters. My eyes flicked left and right as I slowly walked forward. From banners to hand drawn depictions of tuna, all sorts of advertisements dangled from the ceiling. But in the dimmed lights of the market, all this gaudy paraphernalia looked on the contrary ominous and eerie.

My husband caught up to me, and his voice echoed against the low ceiling. "What's the matter?"

"There was a little girl here."

"There are little girls everywhere."

"It was Kana."

My husband sighed and looked around the market. "First Kojima starts spouting all that crazy stuff, now you. Gimme a break. Explain to me how exactly your friend from elementary school could have appeared looking exactly the same?"

"I'm the one who set fire to Kana's house."

When I said that my husband closed his mouth. Yet he didn't seem terribly surprised to hear me say that. A moment later he asked, "Is that what you really think?"

He stood there on the path looking at me. The look in his eyes was composed, and it felt like he was looking straight into my soul. He said, almost pleadingly, "There was no burning house."

"How can you say that?"

"Kana was just a figment of your imagination. She's just another part of you."

I didn't understand what my husband was saying.

"Your mother told me that you were having trouble fitting in at school. Kana was an oddball, proud, good at art: in other words, she was you. The kid everyone else in class called a liar? That was you."

In shock I mumbled, "I don't believe it."

"The reason Kana disappeared was because you didn't need her anymore. All of that happened in your own fantasy world. Just think about it. How could some grade schooler set fire to her friend's house without anyone realizing it?"

In the chill emanating from the wet concrete, I felt like my body was freezing to the core. My husband seemed to be doing his best to calm my fears. But still I wasn't satisfied.

"No, you don't understand anything!"

I recalled Kana's room. The summer breeze blowing through the window ruffled the curtain as Kana and I drew pictures, lying with our bellies against the cool wooden floor. It was a precious, beautiful scene, from a sweet world all our own. I understand the logic of what my husband was saying, but I couldn't let that logic erase Kana, lying in that room like a gorgeous mermaid. That would be like killing her twice for me.

"How do you explain that house in Tsugaru-Nakasato?" I challenged him. "That was Kana's house!"

"That's impossible. That must be your own projection."

"Why did Kojima disappear?"

My husband grimaced, like the question had taken him by surprise. "I don't see what that's got to do with it."

"Then what about the figures I saw at the ruins? It was Kojima and Kana holding hands. If that house is Kana's house, then they must be in there with each other!"

My husband's face was growing steadily paler and more strained. "W-what are you trying to say? You don't mean..."

"Someone was looking out the window after Kojima disappeared. You saw who it was, didn't you?"

"I already told you, I didn't get a good look."

"Don't lie to me."

"I'm not lying!"

"You *are* lying. Who was it?"

"But...but it's impossible. It's not possible!" My husband wrung out his words. "It was you looking out the window!"

From behind me I suddenly heard the sound of boxes toppling.

When I turned around, Kana was standing at the end of the passage. She hadn't changed a bit from the way she looked in school. Her drenched red coat glistened under the fluorescent lights. She smiled and waved a hand at me, before sliding open a door and dashing out the rear of the market.

"Kana, wait!" I shouted, running after her.

Behind the market was an empty lot buried in snow. It looked like the site where a demolished building had once stood, like a gaping white hole in the town. At the center of the lot stood a house with a gabled roof, every single window blazing with light. That light shook me to the core like the crash of a cymbal.

It was Kana's house.



Last December we had finished up preparations for the exhibition of Kishida Michio's *Night Train* at my gallery. The artworks had been shipped over from Yanagi Gallery in Kyoto, and the delivery and placement had been finalized. Outside the windows the Ginza backstreet was dark, but the interior of the gallery was flooded by an almost otherworldly brightness. The mezzotints hanging on the milk-white walls brimmed with the mysterious aura of night.

Kojima came walking in.

"Evening, Reiko."

"Oh, Kojima!"

"I got off work early, so I went shopping in Yūrakuchō. Thought I'd drop in while I was at it. Senpai's going to be late tonight, something about trouble at one of the branches..." He chattered away, peering at the engravings, before folding his arms and exhaling. "Pretty mysterious images, aren't they? I like it."

"They're by Kishida Michio. He passed away though, three years ago."

If you looked at those engravings for a long time a strange feeling would come over you. It was like beyond those rectangular holes bored into the milky walls lay a world of endless night. There were forty-eight works in the *Night Train* series, and according to Yanagi of Yanagi Gallery, this exhibition in Tokyo was the first time they had all been displayed together. Onomichi. Ise. Nobeyama. Nara. Aizu. Okuhida. Matsumoto. Nagasaki.

"Did you ever meet Kishida, Reiko?"

"I've heard a lot about him, but I never met him. He seemed pretty eccentric."

"And he spent his whole career creating this series?"

When Kojima asked me that, I recalled the anecdote that I had heard from Yanagi of Yanagi Gallery a few days earlier.

As a matter of fact, Kishida Michio had created a counterpart to the *Night Train* series in secret, entitled *Dawn*. If *Night Train* was a depiction of eternal night, *Dawn* portrayed a single morning, according to Kishida Michio himself. But Kishida had never actually shown *Dawn* to anyone before he passed away.

Sounding fascinated, Kojima wondered, "Where is that series now?"

"I don't know. After Kishida died, the gallery organized his belongings, but they didn't find anything related to *Dawn*."

"So he was lying?"

"To this day no one knows."

"Sounds like he really was eccentric, this Kishida Michio guy."

As Kojima and I looked through each engraving in turn, I found my feet rooted to the floor when I came to one in particular. It was entitled *Night Train*—*Tsugaru*.

It depicted a house with a gabled roof on a stark white background. A faceless woman leaned out one of the windows on the second floor, waving her hand. Of all the forty-eight works on display this one felt the most homey, and at the same time the most unsettling. As I stared at it I began to feel like I was suffocating, and yet I couldn't tear my eyes away.

Kojima looked at me with concern. "Something wrong?"

"This picture just really grabs me for some reason. I don't know why."

"Looks kinda like a mountain villa, doesn't it? Do you think it really exists somewhere in Tsugaru?"

"Want to know another secret about Kishida?"

"What is it?"

"All of these pictures are scenes from a journey, but actually, Kishida never went to any of these places."

"Seriously?"

"He didn't travel."

"That sounds unbelievable. He even titled them after places and everything," Kojima said incredulously. "So there is no house like this in Tsugaru, then."

"I don't know. Coincidences happen."

I reached out and traced my finger along the outline of the house. The faceless woman leaned out of the window.

"Kishida always went to bed before sunrise and woke up after the sun went down. He would only meet his friends at night. He lived in a world of continuous nights, and put what he saw into his work...that's why it's called *Night Train*."

"A world of night, huh?" Kojima muttered, sounding almost impressed. He looked like he wanted to add something else, but in the end refrained, and continued just to stand next to me looking at the engraving.

"Why does this look so familiar?" I murmured, staring straight at the picture. "Maybe this house is built in my own world of night."



I dashed over the snow, heading for that house.

From far away I could hear my husband's voice ringing in the air, but I didn't look back.

I saw a window on the second floor swing open from the inside and a female figure lean out. The light that issued forth from the window was so blinding that I saw her only as a black shadow. But even so I knew that it was Kana. She threw her arms open to me, welcoming me into the house.

That was when I finally realized.

Kana had been calling out to me since the moment I saw that mezzotint in the gallery in Ginza. The night train that had departed in the dead of night from Ueno Station had been bound for this house. Now, Kana's house had come back to life, shining brilliantly in the darkness of the night. All the curtains were thrown open, every window blazed with light.

It was as though it was burning from the inside.

The Fourth Night — Tenryūkyō

“This was back in spring two years ago, on the Iida Line.”

Tanabe was the fourth to speak.

He was the oldest among us, about two years older than Nakai. The year Hasegawa disappeared, Tanabe had already graduated college, and was a member of a theater company started by one of his friends.

Outwardly he was fearless, but he also had his sensitive side.

Takeda and Nakai often swung by his boarding house for drunken carousing. I'd shown up a fair few times too when they invited me. The year after Hasegawa disappeared, Tanabe steadily got busier with work and theater, and eventually I stopped seeing him at conversation school.

After the theater company broke up several years later, he'd worked in Tokyo for a few years before going home to Toyohashi to work at his family's furniture store.

What follows is Tanabe's story.



My aunt lives with her husband in Ina.

She'd been hounding me to come visit, so I stopped by on a business trip. I had my colleagues go back first by car, while I stayed the night at my aunt's place. The next was all sorts of busy too, what with having lunch with my cousin and her family, and by the time I got to Inashi Station to go back to Toyohashi, dusk had already fallen.

Apparently this was when all the high schoolers went home, and both carriages on the train were packed.

Through the window I could see Komagatake and the rest of the Central Alps, snow still lingering on the peaks. With each stop at a station the number of passengers dwindled, until at last I was able to plop down in a booth seat. The Central Alps were on the other side of the train, so from my window I saw endless acres of open farmland and the Southern Alps standing out in sharp relief against the setting sun.

Before too long my interest was piqued by the conversation between the pair sitting in the booth across from me. One of them was a hick of a high schooler with a red muffler wrapped around her neck and a small Snoopy plush dangling from her backpack. The other was a middle aged monk, his head shaved, clad all in black and carrying a leather traveling

bag. At his feet there was a flat, cloth-wrapped package. The two had been chumming it up since I saw them on the platform at Inashi Station, and I assumed them to be a local monk and one of his parishioners.

Unexpectedly the girl called out to me. "Where're you headed?"

"I'm going to Toyohashi."

"Really? All the way to the end of the line?"

I looked over to see her leaning towards me, an almost pleading look in her eyes. The monk smiled faintly and turned away. "There's a long way to go yet."

Now that I had entered the conversation, the girl looked somewhat relieved. Maybe she'd actually been feeling trapped by the monk.

Just then the train hit a curve and entered the shadow of the mountains. The inside of the train became dark, as if we were passing through the bottom of a pool of water. The monk cast a sharp glance my way, almost like a glare.



The light of the setting sun pierced through the windows as we left the shadow, shining on the girl and the monk. The girl put her face on the armrest, her cheeks puffing out like a futon drying in the sun. In contrast, the monk's face was red as a salamander resting on a riverbed.

The girl was a second year at a high school in Ina. From her perspective, the idea of being rattled around on a train for another few hours probably sounded like pure torture.

"Are you one of those train geeks?" she asked.

But you didn't need to be a train geek to take trips like this. "When you're on the move, you can just zone out and forget about everything," I explained.

"So you've got, like, issues and stuff?"

"I have my share of problems, you could say."

"Huh."

"Don't you have problems of your own?"

The girl giggled. "I don't know. I do have a lot on my plate."

Her smile wormed its way straight into my heart.

We continued to talk across the aisle. Outside the windows, gently sloping terraced fields and the first blooms of red-blossomed plum trees and glinting amber-colored tile rooftops sped by. It put me in a pleasant mood, like basking in the sunshine on a farmhouse porch.

The entire time the monk hadn't said a word. He sat by the window with a bulky travel-size book of train timetables laid on his lap, looking like he was brooding about something. I wondered where the girl was going. We were already an hour out of Ina.

"Pretty long commute you've got."

"I know, right?" the girl complained, looking down and squeezing the Snoopy plush. "It's so not cash money. I usually study on the train, but I'm just not feeling it today."

The train came to a halt at a tiny station.

A blast of cold air came rushing in when the door slid open, and a stillness wrapped around us, like we were frozen in time.

The girl got off the armrest and twisted around towards the window. She'd taken off the red muffler, exposing the back of her graceful neck. Stretching her arm out she pointed out the window.

"There's a shop over there. See it?"

When I leaned over, the monk turned to look too.

Past the ticket barrier was a small plaza, and beyond that was a line of older buildings. Among those buildings was the shop she was talking about, sporting a faded billboard that said "Yamazaki Bakery". Out front there was an ice cream freezer and a vending machine. The gloom under its eaves reminded me of twilight; I could almost smell the mildewy dirt floor inside. The rain shutters on the second floor were shut for some reason, and onions were strung up from the roof like prayer beads. It was a common sight out in the country, these stores on the verge of going out of business.

Looking out the window the girl said, "I see it every day, so it started to get my attention. Like why is it always so dark in there, and why don't I see anyone there, and why are the rain shutters always closed? Once something gets my attention, I just can't stop looking. The more I look at it, the weirder it gets. You know what I mean, right? Like is it just me?"

For me the view out the window was uncommon, but the girl saw it every day. But just because it was an everyday occurrence, didn't mean it was ordinary. Maybe seeing something every day made the strange things stand out even more. I had to admit that you really couldn't judge a book by its cover. This girl was more of a dreamer than she appeared.

"If it bothers you, why don't you get off the train and see?"

"I had a dream that I got off here, once," she said, continuing to prattle on. "I have a lot of those dreams, where I visit places that I see on the train. They're so realistic, like sometimes I start to believe that I really went there, I'll see some place going by and I'll be like, 'I was there last week!' and then after a while I'll kind of wake up and be like, oh wait, that was a dream, and...sorry, this is kind of weird."

“So you’ve never actually been there for real?”

The girl looked at me seriously and answered, “Probably not.”

I looked over the ticket barrier one more time into the store. Now that she had told me all this it did feel a little odd to me. And when I looked, I thought for a second I saw something move in the darkness over the counter. In the next moment the train started to move off, leaving only the impression that I had seen someone get up wearily there in that gloom.

The tired light of evening speckled the train.

“Where are you getting off?” I inquired, to which the girl replied feistily, “Where do you think I’m getting off?”

There was a certain allure in the look in her eyes. It was like getting a fleeting glimpse of a beautiful fish rising from the river depths to the water’s surface. While I sat there taken aback, the girl looked off into space, before suddenly addressing the monk by the window. “Hey mister, if you don’t guess it soon we’re going to arrive!”

The monk looked up from his timetable. He muttered to himself, looking my way. Surprisingly I saw a vague look of unease on his face.

“You’ve got me, miss. I give up.”

○

I wasn’t sure right off the bat what they were talking about.

“Oh, that quick?”

A smile flitted around the girl’s lips, in contrast with the monk’s uncertain expression. They seemed to have been playing some sort of game.

The conductor came up from the rear carriage, walking through the aisle between us up to an old woman accompanying two children who had boarded at the last station. The train had emptied out considerably. Including us three there were only six passengers in the car, and there didn’t seem to be many people in the rear carriage either. *Should be about another 30 minutes to Tenryūkyō*, I thought to myself.

The girl leaned towards me and whispered, “This monk’s a psychic!”

Startled, I looked at the monk, who smiled wryly and shook his head. “No, no, nothing so grand as that.”

“But you can read people’s minds, can’t you?”

“I fear I can’t live up to what you’re expecting of me,” replied the monk, looking at her and chuckling.

On further explanation the monk was younger than he seemed. He had trained as a monk in Kyoto, and was currently serving as the head monk at an impoverished temple in

Takatō. He and the girl had only met by chance on the platform in Ina. But the word that the girl had used, “psychic”, bothered me. There was something fishy about him. He claimed that he was going to Toyohashi for a conference, but it seemed odd that he would leave this late in the day from Ina on the Iida Line. Then again I was hardly in any place to criticize him there.

“I used to live in Kyoto myself,” I mentioned, trying to feel him out. “Where did you do your training?”

“Oh, here and there.” He didn’t miss a beat as he sidestepped my question. Inside he was probably annoyed that I’d come along out of nowhere to spoil his fun spouting all sorts of nonsense to this wide-eyed provincial high schooler.

“So what’s the game?”

“I wanted him to guess what station I’m getting off at to see if he can really read minds.”

That explained why the monk had been wordlessly scowling at the timetable all this time. He could blow all the smoke he wanted, but when someone demanded a concrete answer out of him he was stuffed.

“That sounds interesting.”

“No, well...”

“Can you really read minds?”

“Strictly speaking, I don’t ‘read’ them, I ‘see’ into them. For instance—” He pointed out the window. We had passed the Central Alps, and scenes of a provincial town flew by the window: houses and factories, hospitals and schools, all draped in the fading light. “When you look out through the window at the landscape, try putting words to everything you see. All these things that you normally let pass without a second glance: use all the words you have to describe them. It is vital that you press yourself. Throw every word you have at the landscape until the words cease to flow forth. If you do so you will find that your very being becomes exhausted, emptied of words. Your words will not be able to keep up with the scenes that pass before your eyes. When that happens, things will jump out from the scenery into your mind, things that you had not noticed before. Those things are what I ‘see’.”

I was wondering when he’d go off the rails, I thought.

“So we’re looking out the windows, but we’re not. Have I got that right?”

“Well, you could put it that way. But let me add that there’s nothing wrong with that. In order for man to live he must close his eyes to a great many things. Words make us blind. Look out the window, and you will see many things. But though you do not realize it, you are seeing words.”

The girl snickered. “I’ve never felt that way in my life!”

"And that, miss, is how you stay sane."

I was starting to get irritated. "And what does any of that have to do with mindreading?"

"They are one and the same. We see faces, and we do not. Angry, sad, suspicious; we only see the hackneyed phrases we lay upon them. Tilting at windmills, to use a phrase. But just as the scenery stretches out infinitely, so too does the face of man. If you can look at someone without relying on those words, then naturally you will become able to see things that you could not see before. However this does not mean you will see what you wish to see. Does that make sense?" After unleashing this torrent of words the monk coughed and looked at the girl. "That is why it is not very suited for guessing things."

"Kinda sounds like an excuse to me."

"That I cannot help. This is what my seeing entails."

Right then the flat package by the monk's feet fell over with a thump. "My my," said the monk, his movements slow and measured as he stooped over and picked it up, setting it on the seat across from him.

The girl suddenly piped up, "Hey, so what does this guy look like?"

The monk scrutinized my face. "You said you had been to Kyoto, did you not?"

"That's right," I nodded. I bet he was going to try to wriggle out of this one by making some ambiguous prediction that you could interpret any way you wanted. So I was completely caught off guard by how definite his next statement was.

"I see a house of night," the monk intoned, narrowing his cold eyes. "It is the house where lives one who has captured your heart...your visits were always at night. A lover, or perhaps a dear friend. And the memory of that house has clouded your life ever since."

He smiled wanly. "What do you think?"

I was momentarily thunderstruck. I couldn't believe it. "Are you...are you talking about Kishida Michio?"

"...I have merely told you what I saw," the monk replied, his expression serene.



Kishida Michio was a mezzotint artist whose studio was in Kyoto.

At the time we met, he and I had still been in our twenties. It had been several years since he had returned from his studies abroad, and while the owner of Yanagi Gallery expected great things from him, to the general public he remained unknown. This was long before the *Night Train* series was released into the world.

He had constructed his studio in a house left to him by his parents on the banks of the Kamo River, but he also worked part-time in a furniture store on Ebisugawa Street. That

store was operated by a friend of my father, and so I was a frequent visitor when I was living in Kyoto. That meant that I often saw Kishida. I hadn't known that he was a copperplate engraver. He didn't exactly give off the most approachable vibe.

"At the time I was still laboring in obscurity, you see. So I was somewhat dejected," Kishida told me some time afterward.

Eventually Kishida quit the job, and I no longer saw him in the store.

The next time I saw his face was in Kiyamachi, near the close of the very same year that Hasegawa had disappeared at the Kurama Fire Festival. That night he came ambling into one of my regular bars. *This guy looks familiar*, I thought to myself, and after exchanging words on some pretext I came to the realization that he was indeed the same Kishida I had known.

We talked idly as we drank. I was feeling down after what had happened to Hasegawa, and Kishida seemed to be in search of someone to talk to. That night was when I learned that he was an engraver.

He mentioned that he'd read about the incident in Kurama in the papers. "I was in Kurama that night too. Right shock it was, when I read about it in the papers later. So they've yet to find any clues?"

"They're all baffled."

I hadn't been particularly close to Hasegawa. We had attended different English classes, and the closest our interactions got was some light conversation whenever Nakai would invite us to a gathering. But I'd always felt that she had a mysterious charm about her.

Whenever I talked with her, it felt as though she could see right through me. But she never said anything too forward. She was more reserved, if I had to say, almost like she was concealing a world of night within her. I always liked that about her.

I told all this to Kishida.

"A most intriguing person," he mused. "She sounds like the type of person who might be spirited away."

"You're telling me she was carried off by *tengu*?"

"Well, she would have been in the right place. And on a festival night, no less."

"I don't believe in any of that stuff."

"Of course, I was simply voicing a hypothesis."

Still, it seemed to me an ill-considered thing to say.

Hasegawa seemed to have more of a presence now than she had before she disappeared. Her face drifted into my mind, her profile lit by torchlight that night in Kurama. I couldn't help but think that she was still there, still in that night, even though I knew that was no more than a fantasy.

After discussing the incident in Kurama, I started to talk about my activities in the theater company. I wasn't the most sociable of people, but with Kishida listening I felt like I could talk about anything. Parts of him resembled Hasegawa in a way. She had also lended a willing ear whenever you needed one, and didn't talk much about herself.

"What're you up to?" I inquired.

He told me that he was working on a new series. "That's why my days have switched places with my nights."

He had gotten the idea for his series, *Night Train*, the year after he came back from his studies in England. Believing himself not up to the task, he hadn't started work on it immediately. Working on other projects to improve his skills, saving up money at work, he waited for the right time to challenge *Night Train*. And after three years of preparation, he had begun his journey this winter on *Night Train*. I was very impressed with his meticulous preparation.

Finding kindred spirits in one another, we went barhopping until it was nearly light.

"You should come around my studio sometime," he said, before making his way home, almost as if he was fleeing the dawn. From that night on, I started to pay regular visits to his home.

I always called on him at night. His house was at the foot of an embankment by the Kamo River, and there was always light leaking out from his windows. He had many other visitors, people spending sleepless nights who had been drawn to the light of his house. These gatherings were called the Kishida Salon.

Kishida Michio enjoyed listening to other people's stories. An avid listener, you might call him. Whenever I talked to him it felt like he was drawing out words from deep within me. He left his works strewn all over the house, and was willing to talk about them, but he was particularly interested in hearing what other people had to say about them. And whatever your opinion was, he always listened and took it to heart. It seemed to me that all the people who visited the Kishida Salon were drawn there by that gracious quality of his.

The darkness of night that lay outside was an indispensable element of the Kishida Salon. As we talked in the house, it would sometimes feel like we were floating in a world of midnight. All the people there with me felt like old friends with whom I had been reunited by chance in some far off town. I doubt I would have felt the same if I had run into them during the day.

Those had been unhappy days for me, what with the infighting in the theater company and my debts and the friction with my parents, but whenever I thought about the Kishida Salon, the world at that time in my life seemed strangely profound. The aroma of coffee in the living room, the words exchanged in front of engravings, the midnight walks

along the Kamo River...though my student days had long been over at that point, it was like stumbling upon an isolated exclave of youth. And it was all thanks to Kishida.

But that was all a long time ago. By the time I boarded that train on the Iida line, Kishida Michio had already been dead for five years.



Is mindreading really possible?

When I was a child, I read a story about a *satori*, a mountain apparition. A woodcutter was spending the night in a hut on a mountain, when a *satori* came to call. The woodcutter thought to himself, *What a mess I'm in!* only for the *satori* to reply, "What a mess I'm in," says you!" Whatever thought came into the woodcutter's head after that, the *satori* would immediately guess out loud.

As a kid that story made me shiver, but after thinking about it for a second it really wasn't so strange. It's pretty obvious what's going through a frightened person's head, and even more so when you're talking about some hick woodcutter living in a hut. A reasonably sharp person could bluff their way through without much trouble.

But what the monk had said was no bluff.

"Did he get it right?" asked the girl, to which I nodded. When she saw that little movement of my head she looked with amazement at the monk by the window. "Whoa. I knew it was real!"

"If he says I was right, then I suppose it must be so."

"You know, I kind of thought you were lying. I'm sorry."

"But I was telling the truth when I said I could see nothing in your face." An odious little smile came to the monk's face. "Strange, indeed. I wonder why that is."

"I bet it's 'cause I'm just zoning out and stuff. Like, seriously zoning out. Sometimes my friends get mad at me too. Like, they say I'm daydreaming and stuff. 'Scuse me for a sec."

The girl stood up and walked down the passage towards the rear carriage. Perhaps she was going to the toilet.

The monk turned to watch her go. For just a moment, I saw another brief flicker of unease cross his face. Even I could do that kind of mindreading. He eventually turned back around and looked at me with a meaningful glance.

"A strange girl, would you not agree?"

"Her?"

"She interests me, has done so ever since we boarded the train together."

"Because your little mindreading trick doesn't work on her?"

The monk snorted. "So you do not believe."

"Not a bit. I just can't explain it, that's all."

"The world is full of mysterious folk. It is good to be suspicious," he grinned. "And as I say it, that girl is one of those mysterious folk."

"She looks like a normal high schooler to me."

"Is that really what you think?"

There was no denying that for a high schooler from the sticks, she had a lot of pluck. She was downright fearless facing up with two itinerant, potentially shady middle-aged men. She didn't seem like your average hick.

Broodingly the monk said, "I feel as if I've met that girl somewhere before."

"Doesn't sound like too farfetched if you're local."

"I am no local."

"Didn't you say you were the head of some temple in Takatō?"

"I am not a real monk."

I'd had my suspicions, but even so I was surprised at getting such an open confession. Yet he seemed to think nothing of having admitted this to me. He turned his eyes to the window and muttered, "We are nearly two hours out of Ina. Where is that child going?"

"Beats me. You can ask her yourself." Feeling out of sorts, I averted my eyes and looked out the window to the left.

The train was passing along the top of a plateau, and below I saw country towns sinking into the indigo twilight. In between the lights flickering on one by one I caught glimpses of the Tenryū River glinting dully. It was only a little further to Tenryūkyō Station. After passing through the tourist-friendly boating areas and hot springs, we would enter the most rugged, inaccessible section of the Iida Line. In less than an hour we would be overtaken by night.

The girl didn't come back from the bathroom.

Before long the Tenryū River floodplain lay outside the window. My gaze wandered the landscape, before coming to rest on a single cherry tree on the opposite bank of the river. Its blooms appeared to be floating in the twilight, almost as though its very petals were shedding light. But my eyes were glued to it. Unlike the rest of the scenery streaming across the window, that blooming cherry tree stayed rooted to the exact same spot, unmoving. I let out a gasp.

Behind me, the monk recited in a sing-song voice, "*In my dream I saw the spring wind gently shaking blossoms from a tree—*"²

I had heard that poem before.

² Adapted (with apologies) from Prof. William LaFleur.

When I turned around the monk had kicked off his sandals and was sitting cross-legged, his body sagged against the window. He seemed to have tired of keeping up the monk charade. There was a small bottle of whisky in his hand.

"It was a long time ago, when I was in Kyoto," he finally said. "I was an insomniac at the time, but there was a man who was very kind to me. Strange fellow, by the name of Kishida Michio."

A mocking grin came to his face.

"I was at the salon too. Don't you remember yet?"



All sorts of people came and went at the Kishida Salon.

There was no need to make an appointment, nor were there fixed visiting days. Sometimes Kishida would be out on one of his "nocturnal adventures", but he never locked the door. Visitors would just sip coffee and wait for his return. It sounded careless, but to my knowledge there had never been any trouble of any sort.

It was awkward at first whenever I ran into other visitors while Kishida was out, but in no time at all we'd be chatting like old buddies. I ran into art college students, a lady who ran a secondhand goods store in Ichijoji, and even a researcher who had come all the way from Europe. The owner of Yanagi Gallery in Shijō was close to my age, and we soon hit it off. He lived behind Shōkokuji, near my apartment, and after talking until the break of dawn we'd often walk off towards home together.

But there was one man among the visitors to the Kishida Salon who I just could not bring myself to like. His name was Saeki.

"I am a spirit medium," he proclaimed, chuckling flippantly, the first time we met in the studio. I didn't like him from the very first moment we laid eyes on each other. He had been wearing a flashy open-collared shirt, and his hair and stubble were unkempt. Any time he spoke of what he did for a living, it was always some fishy swindler's tale. According to Yanagi, he was a lackey for some cult operating out of Hida, and was involved in an attempt to take over some unaffiliated temple.

"You should be cautious of him," Yanagi warned me.

After we had run into each other several times, Saeki asked me straight out, "You don't like me, do you?"

"No, I don't."

He chortled. "I like honest people. I'm honest myself, you see."

The monk with whom I was sharing a train car was that very same Saeki.

I felt like a kid who had just learned the secret behind a magic trick. He hadn't read my mind at all, because he had known me in Kyoto. But there was no shame either in not having noticed it was him earlier. He hadn't crossed my mind once since I left Kyoto, and anyone would look like a stranger with their head shaved, wearing a monk's robes. Now that I knew that the monk before me was really Saeki, I recognized that flippant smirk on his face.

At the time, I hadn't known that he was suffering from insomnia. He was always so jovial. But it was a facetious joviality that got on your nerves. His patter was very swift. And as you might expect from someone who claimed to be a spirit medium, he seemed to know a lot about religions and their histories, if only superficially so. That piqued Kishida's interest, so whenever Saeki showed his face around there, the conversation often turned to the history of Buddhism and talk of enlightenment.

I remembered that he had spoken of something called the *makyō*.

Some college student had claimed it was impossible to see the truth of the world with our eyes, and that it was the role of the artist to peel away that which obscures our sight and reveal the glimpses of the true world—something like that, anyways. But Saeki sneered, "That's merely *makyō*."

Makyō is a false enlightenment experienced by novice monks.

Saeki told us that there was a story in the *Konjaku Monogatari*, about the priest Sanshu and his meeting with a *tengu* on Mount Ibuki.

Long ago, there lived a virtuous monk named Sanshu on Mount Ibuki. He chanted the sutras with all his heart, praying to be reborn into Paradise. One day, he heard a voice from heaven saying, "Unto you I shall bestow guidance to Paradise." Filled with joy and gratitude, he chanted the sutras and waited, until in the western sky appeared the goddess Kannon, shining brilliantly, who took his hand and led him into the sky. Thus he departed for Paradise, but seven days later, he was found tied to the top of a tall cedar tree, chanting sutras. His disciples tried to help him down, but he shouted, "Why do you interfere in my passage to Paradise!" He had been deceived by a *tengu*. His disciples brought him back and cared for him, but he remained delirious, and three days later drew his last breath.

"If you ask me, artists are no different from that monk," laughed Saeki.

Saeki didn't recognize the worth of Kishida's work, much less my own. He prided himself about not letting himself get tricked by anything. I didn't get why Kishida would be friendly with a guy like that, and I told him so on a few occasions.

But Kishida only chuckled calmly. "You run into all sorts out there," he said. "And if you listen to what he says, he's always got a point."



Saeki held out the bottle of whisky. "Odd coincidence, running into each other on a train. Almost like Kishida's guiding us from the other side."

"I never thought I'd see you again."

"You mean you were hoping you'd never see me again, no?"

"The thought of you never even crossed my mind." I took a swig of cheap whisky. Maybe Kishida really was guiding us.

I didn't believe in spirits, and Saeki was probably the same. But there was no logical reason for him to have tailed me onto the Iida Line. Call it a coincidence, or guidance from the dearly departed, those were just two names for the same thing.

I handed back the whisky bottle. My eye fell on the cloth-wrapped package on the seat across from Saeki.

A sudden thought sprang to mind: wasn't that one of Kishida's works?



I remember it well, because it happened the spring Kishida died.

It was late at night when I called at Kishida's house. Both the studio and the living room blazed with light, and the aroma of coffee drifted all the way to the front entrance, yet inside all was quiet. It was like being on a ghost ship, where the crew and the passengers had all vanished.

Kishida must have gone out on one of his nighttime strolls.

I sat on the couch, drinking cold, stale coffee and staring out at the garden. It was hardly kept at all, and the vegetation was so overgrown it was practically a jungle. I had started to doze off when I suddenly jolted awake. I felt like I had heard something.

The sound seemed to have come from a small inner room. The room was a little space about 4½ tatami in size, at the end of a corridor facing the garden. Kishida called it the darkroom, and as the name implied the windows had all been plastered over so that no light could get in. I knew that he sometimes shut himself in there when he was deep in thought. Maybe he was in there now. But that seemed odd. Kishida only ever shut himself in there after his visitors had gone home.

I walked to the room to find the door slightly open. The light from the living room didn't reach inside, and all I saw through the crack was darkness. I strained my ears but heard nothing.

"Kishida, are you in there?" I called out just to make sure, but no reply came.

I returned to the living room and sat down on the sofa once more. For some reason I was agitated. Convinced that some unknown person was sitting in the darkroom, I kept

my ears pricked. All was silent. What was this dread I was feeling? When the clock on the wall struck two the sound nearly made my heart jump out of my throat. Unable to bear being in that house alone any longer, I went out to the Kamo River. Kishida was probably walking along the riverbank.

I walked up the stone stairs from the residential street to where the embankments stretched out from both sides of the road. It was the witching hour, and few cars passed by. Darkened houses lined the bank on the opposite shore over the black expanse of the Kamo River, and far beyond them rose the silhouettes of the Higashiyama mountains.

I headed north along the embankment.

This night continued on forever—or so it felt.

All over the world, in far flung cities and towns, millions and millions of people were dreaming, enveloped by the same night through which I was wandering at this very moment. This obvious fact seemed to me now very profound. I had never felt night so strongly as when I was attending the Kishida Salon. This was the vastness of the world of night which Kishida had shown me.

A cherry tree stood on the bank of the Kamo River, its petals in full bloom, and underneath it sat two men. One was Kishida, and the other was Saeki.

When I saw those two, the unease I had felt in Kishida's house and that feeling of the vastness of night both disappeared. In its place my heart burst with jealousy. I wanted to ask what he was doing taking a stroll at night with Saeki. *What does Saeki know? I'm the only one who truly understands your loneliness!* I was surprised at myself at the ardor of my envy. What irritated me the most was how Saeki had seen through me to that jealousy. He smirked as I approached them.

Kishida looked over and called, "Hey!" waving his skinny arm.

"I didn't know the cherry trees were blooming at night now," I said, sitting next to Kishida. "I waited at your house, but you were taking too long to come back."

"I'm sorry about that. I was just enthralled by the cherry blossoms."

"Pretty, aren't they, Tanabe?" said Saeki. "Even a blackguard like me feels cleansed."

White petals fluttered through the air, blown by the chilly nighttime spring breeze.

Looking up at the resplendent boughs, Kishida murmured, *"In my dream I saw the spring wind shaking blossoms from a tree—"*

"What's that?" interrupted Saeki, but Kishida continued on.

"—And even now, though I'm awake, there's still a fluttering in my chest."

A *tanka* by Saigyō, explained Kishida, his face just as pale as the cherry blossoms. He looked like he was wasting away. That was because since the previous winter he had been throwing himself into his work with an unusual zeal.

"Do you understand what it means?" asked Kishida. "This is *Night Train*."



The girl returned when we pulled into Tenryūkyō Station.

I was pressing my face into the window on my left, staring at the lights of the hotel on the opposite bank of the river. Only a little light remained in the ultramarine sky, and the reflection of Saeki's face overlapped my own against the dark landscape.

"We'll be overtaken by the night soon."

The moment that thought crossed my mind, I saw the face of a girl in the window. She was as pale and beautiful as a cherry blossom in the night. I felt that I had seen her somewhere before. As I stared, enthralled, she burst into laughter. I jumped and turned around to find the girl standing there.

"Guess who's back!" she chirped, plopping down into the seat facing me. I stared at her face, dumbfounded. Something about her features seemed to have changed. She looked at Saeki and laughed. "Looks like you're making yourself at home, huh?"

"Hello again. I thought you'd gotten off without telling me."

"Of course I wouldn't do that!"

"How far will you be going?"

"...As far as it takes me," she answered, giggling.

The train pulled out of Tenryūkyō Station and entered the mountains.

On our left the Tenryūkyō River flowed darkly along the bottom of the valley, white gravel lining the beach on the opposite side. It was difficult to tell where the mountains ended and the sky began. It seemed as if the night grew deeper each time we passed through a tunnel. When we at last came to a halt at a deserted station, we were wrapped up in a silence so deep it felt like the train would never leave the station again. The only ones riding forth on that train car were the three of us, and the crush that had filled the train when we left Ina seemed a very long time ago indeed.

Observing the two of us trading swigs of whisky, the girl asked, "So are you guys like, best friends now?"

"Not even close." I told her about how we had met at the Kishida Salon. When I mentioned how his "mindreading" was a load of bunk, Saeki said, "Hey, come on," with a tight smile. But the girl didn't fixate on his scamming ways at all. Rather, she was more intrigued about what a coincidence it was that two acquaintances from Kyoto would have met all the way out here on some local train.

"That's such a crazy coincidence, right?"

"It's not a happy one, let me tell you."

The girl thought for a second before saying, "This Kishida guy was an artist, right?"

"That's right," I nodded.

Hearing this the girl pointed at Saeki's cloth bundle. "Is that one of Kishida's paintings?"

The smile disappeared from Saeki's face like water being sucked into sand. His glowering stare was unnerving, but the girl showed no fear whatsoever. I wasn't sure if she was just stupid, or if she had nerves of steel.

"It is, isn't it?"

Saeki forced a smile onto his face, rubbing his bald pate. "Looks like I'm not the only mindreader here."

"I just kind of thought it might be."

"You're right, that is one of Kishida's paintings. He gave it to me before he died. I don't know the first thing about art, but I respect the way he lived. That's why I carry it with me."

"Such friendship!"

"I don't know if I would call it that. I don't know if it's such a nice thing as that."

What was Saeki doing carrying around one of Kishida's artworks?

I'd never bought any of Kishida's works myself. True, I had been penniless, but I also knew that if I had tried to buy anything Kishida would have just given it to me as a gift. Knowing the tribulations he had gone through in order to create his world, I couldn't just saunter up and ask to buy one of his mezzotints. That was the least I could do to show my devotion to my Kishida. And yet seeing Saeki—the same Saeki who had scoffed at Kishida's art—carrying around that picture roused my indignation.

Saeki reached out and set the package on his lap. "Want to see?"

The picture that he unveiled was, without a doubt, one of Kishida's copperplate engravings.

A river flowed along the bottom of a dark valley. Light glittered eerily on the surface of the river, issuing from seemingly nowhere. Two things drew my eye: a white gravel beach on the other side of the river beneath the mountains thrusting into the black sky; and a cherry tree in full bloom, covered in sparkling blossoms. At the foot of the tree stood a lone, faceless woman, raising her right hand as if beckoning to me.

In my dream I saw the spring wind gently shaking the blossoms from a tree—

"This is *Tenryūkyō*, part of the *Night Train* series."

"It's so mysterious. Like it's from a dream."

"All he ever drew was this kind of thing," Saeki smiled. "He was always touched in the head."

"So like, is that why you came all the way out here?"

"That is part of it. I wanted to see if the landscape in this picture really exists." He sounded sincere, and maybe he was.

The girl put her face close to the engraving, poring over it keenly. "There's a woman here. Who's she?"

"The girl of his dreams."

"Girl of his dreams?"

"Kishida drew these pictures so that he could meet her."

"Don't just make things up if you don't know," I sniffed. "He would never have drawn these for something as shallow as that."

"You don't know anything, do you?"

According to Saeki, Kishida had spoken many times about the woman in the picture coming to life. His fascination with that idea had started from an old mezzotint belonging to his master in England, and the ghost story that surrounded it. But Kishida had never talked about anything of the sort to me. I suspected it was just a half-baked story that Saeki had made up to disparage Kishida.

Saeki sneered, "That girl in the picture haunted and killed him. I'll wager he was happy, too, that he finally got what he wished for."

We were all reflected in the blackness of the pitch-black window. The girl's face caught my eye. She was smiling at me from the other side of the window. Her face looked grown up, almost like it belonged to another person entirely.



It was true that each installment of *Night Train* depicted an enigmatic woman.

But Kishida didn't like explaining his own works. I had asked him who the woman was before, but he had never given me an answer.

"I found her in the darkroom."

He might have said that, once.

Kishida always woke up after sundown and began his work. After laboring until late at night, he would take a nocturnal stroll, or converse with the patrons of the Kishida Salon. However, his visitors were required to leave before daybreak. After the visitors had all gone, Kishida would enter the darkroom and begin to think.

He got all his ideas for *Night Train* in the darkroom. The room was equipped with an armchair and a side table, as well as a desk with a small sketchbook and a pencil. He would sit there and wait in the darkness, rapidly sketching whatever images appeared to him in the darkness. After that he reviewed his sketches, arranged them together, and finally produced his artworks. Sometimes, even locked in that room, nothing would appear to him

at all. Even then he would spend a certain amount of time in there, before leaving and going up to his bedroom on the second floor to sleep, not having glimpsed the sun once. He observed these peculiar working habits strictly, almost monastically.

I had warned him a few times, concerned about his well being.

"Every time I see you your face gets paler!"

"Does it? I've never felt better."

"You really should get some rest."

"Maybe you're right. Once I find a good point to stop—"

That point was his own death.

He managed to complete 48 works in *Night Train* before he died. He had given them all place names, like Onomichi and Okuhida and Tsugaru, but he didn't actually travel to all of these places. All of his inspiration for each of these locations came from the nocturnal visitors of the Kishida Salon.

I had fond remembrances of the nighttime scenes of the Kishida Salon. The wooden floor of the living room always gleamed with a warm light, and the aroma of coffee drifted through the air. Sometimes Kishida even treated his visitors to his home cooking. As we conversed and looked at his engravings, we would all begin to speak of our own travels. Saeki had been no exception, and neither was I. Our travels had taken us to Ise, Tonami, Nagasaki. Kishida listened eagerly to his visitors' tales. It was the intertwining of his visitors' stories and his meditations in the darkroom that brought each work of *Night Train* to life.

I had gone into the darkroom with Kishida only once.

When I closed the door I was surrounded with a darkness so deep I couldn't see my own hand in front of me. It felt very strange. I was reminded of the *Tainai Meguri*³ in Kiyomizu-dera. I couldn't even hear Kishida's breathing, even though he was right beside me.

"You're still there, right, Kishida?"

"I couldn't say. Where do you think we are?"

Kishida's voice sounded like it was coming from far away, and the darkness that engulfed me suddenly felt vast and unbounded.

"This darkness is connected to everything," Kishida intoned.



Sitting cross-legged, Saeki stared at the engraving leaned up against the opposing seat and ruminated, "Real oddball, he was."

"Not arguing there," I agreed.

³ A lightless chamber beneath Zuigu-dō, meant to represent the darkness inside a woman's womb.

"He was trapped by *makyō*. Nothing anyone said would've changed that," he said wistfully, taking a swig of whisky. His voice had a ring of honesty to it. Maybe, in his own way, Saeki missed those nights in the Kishida Salon.

"Have you ever seen *Dawn*?" Saeki said unexpectedly.

I looked up, surprised. "You mean the series?"

"Have you seen it?"

"No, never."

I had heard Kishida mention it before. *Dawn* was the counterpart to *Night Train*. Whereas *Night Train* depicted an endless night, *Dawn* portrayed a single morning—or so Kishida said. But even Yanagi, the gallery owner, had never laid eyes on it. I was convinced that it was all a product of Kishida's fevered imagination.

"Have you seen it?"

"No," answered Saeki. "Relieved?"

I scoffed. He was right about that, at least.

Staring back at the mezzotint, Saeki murmured, "Kishida should have created it, don't you think? He should never have let himself be held captive by pictures like these." I detected a hint of emotion in his voice.

The girl got up and sat beside Saeki. Staring at the picture, she pointed at the faceless woman. "Kishida was in love with her, wasn't he?"

"...I don't know if you could call that love, miss."

"It doesn't matter if she's inside a picture, love is love!"

"That's very open-minded of you," Saeki laughed, looking into her face. "But looking at this picture puts the fear in me. What if this was the picture that took Kishida? Do you know why he titled the series *Night Train*? He meant the *Hyakki Yagyō*, the train of demons. All of the women he painted are demons. That's why they have no face. They're all monsters born of his *makyō*, and in the end they crawled out of his pictures and devoured him. And in the end, maybe that's what he was hoping for."

After Saeki finished speaking, his eyes turned to the window.

We all listened to the creaking of the coupling between the carriages.

The train ran on through the darkness. Cutting through a grove of trees, it passed by a transformer substation by the side of the river. Soon the lights of houses began to pop up on the other side of the window, and the train arrived at a station at a village nestled in the mountains.

"People really can live anywhere," Saeki observed.

It felt like it had been days since I boarded this train in Ina. Part of that had been my flashing back to my days in Kyoto, brought on by this most unexpected reunion with Saeki, but another part of it had to do with the changing landscape beyond the window, so

different from it had been at the start of the journey. When the train set off again, the twinkling lights of the village were swallowed up once more into the darkness of the night.

Shortly afterwards, I saw a row of wooden buildings that looked like boathouses, lined up in the dark foothills. They protruded out onto the Tenryū River, and lights on the piers shined down on the boats tied up alongside.

The girl asked Saeki, "How do you think he died?"

"He died alone," Saeki answered. "His heart stopped in the middle of the night. Not unexpected, I should think."

"Did you feel sorry for him?"

"Hah. Death is the end. That is all there is to it."

Beside him the girl stared at his face intently.

"What?" he blurted out, disconcerted.

"Is that why you took the picture?"

As soon as he heard those words, Saeki's face went pale.

"What do you mean, miss?"

"He looked just like he was sleeping, didn't he?"

"H-hold on..." stammered Saeki.

Not heeding his protests, the girl continued. "You reached out and touched his cheek. Such a soft touch, like the touch of a lover."

In disbelief, Saeki whispered, "...How did you know?"

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"I warned him, over and over," said Saeki.

Beginning the autumn of the year before he died, Kishida had thrown himself into his work with unusual fervor. He seemed to have been in a hurry because he had sensed his impending death, but that same frenzied urgency may have only hastened it.

Saeki had worried over Kishida's health. He felt that Kishida was trapped in a dark room called *Night Train*. Forget the art. All these people who frequented the Kishida Salon were just a coterie of irresponsible hangers-on, staying around solely to witness Kishida's ruin.

"How about you just forget about art for a while and go traveling? I'll look it all up for you. You can see all the places you've been drawing in *Night Train*." Time and again Saeki had put forth the invitation.

And Kishida had shown some signs of interest. "Yes, perhaps after I complete fifty pieces in this series."

But that spring night, Saeki had visited Kishida's house to find the artist slumped on the sofa, his head drooped. He reached out and brushed Kishida's cheek. He looked as though he was sleeping, but his body was already cold. Saeki realized immediately there was nothing that could be done.

"It felt like the world had ended," he reflected, rising from his seat and picking up the engraving. "I immediately thought of leaving Kyoto that night. It felt awful leaving Kishida like that, but it's not like he could feel anything, on account of being dead. I wasn't gonna let anyone pin this on me, and you all were gonna find him soon enough anyways. I was just about to hightail it outta there when this picture caught my eye. Kishida'd left it on the table. I never gave a crap about his art, but for some reason I just felt like I had to make this one mine. Maybe I just wanted something to remember him by."

"So you just swiped it, then?"

Saeki looked at the engraving and frowned when I said that. He looked like he was trying to remember something.

"After that...what did I do after that?"

Saeki heard the chiming of the wall clock in the living room. With the engraving on the table in his hands, he froze like a deer in the headlights, straining his ears. After the chiming ceased, the surroundings fell into an even deeper silence than before. Any second now someone might come calling to the Kishida Salon.

Things will get ugly if someone sees me here—he was well aware of that, yet his body would not move.

From the living room he could see into the garden, which was submerged in a viscous darkness; reflected in the glass he saw Kishida slumped on the sofa, and himself holding the mezzotint. Both Kishida and he looked like ghosts. Why was it so quiet? It seemed as if the night went on forever.

A sound came from the end of the corridor.

Saeki knew that the only thing there was the darkroom, with its windows all plastered over. *Is that Kishida?* Involuntarily the thought came to his head, but he shook it out promptly, feeling jarred. What kind of idiocy was that? Wasn't that Kishida dead right in front of him?

But stilling his breathing he listened, and indeed he heard the sounds of someone moving inside the darkroom. If someone had seen him there would be trouble later. He had to be certain, now.

He began to creep down the dark hallway towards the darkroom.

"And then—" Saeki whispered, before his voice died.

"And then?" I prompted him, but he didn't say another word.

The train arrived at a deserted station among the mountains.

Saeki picked up his bag and stood up, pushing aside the girl and walking down the aisle. He seemed to be getting off.

It all seemed very sudden.

"Hey, hold up! Is this where you're supposed to get off?" I got to my feet and shouted after him.

Saeki turned and faced me, his face a mask. "It was her that killed him—!"

His voice was almost a shriek.

He nearly fell out onto the empty station. The train finally began to move, and his corpse-like face vanished into the darkness of the night.



I sat down across from the girl.

She was smiling. "There he goes, I guess."

"Was that where he was planning to get off, do you think?"

"Poor thing."

I looked at her face under the carriage lights.

The longer I looked, the more it seemed to draw me in. I knew now that she wasn't just an ordinary high schooler. She was an enigma. Yet I didn't fear her. On the contrary, a sweet nostalgia was welling up within me.

The girl cast her eyes out the window, staring into the darkness.

"I've been to many places, in this dream of the night..."

"What sorts of places?"

"I can go anywhere. There's no place that night doesn't touch."

I looked out the window, as if she was guiding me.

Where the trees ended I saw the black current of the Tenryū River. The long white beach faced away from the looming black forest behind it.

I saw there a cherry tree in full bloom, its boughs laden with petals. Each one of those petals shed a cold light into the bowels of the night. Beneath the cherry tree stood a woman, her hand raised as if calling to me. It was the very scene that Kishida had depicted in the mezzotint.

"There's no place that night doesn't touch," the girl said, her voice a whisper. *"In my dream I saw the spring wind gently shaking blossoms from a tree—"*

I took my eyes away from the window and looked at the girl sitting across from me.

In her black hair there was a cherry blossom petal. Beyond her pale, transparent face I saw the face of Kishida. I reached out and plucked away the petal. That was when I

understood at last. This girl was a demon that Kishida had met during his sojourn in the *makyō*.

I thought about what Kishida had said to me in the darkroom.

It would be very rational to believe that the role of the artist is to unveil the hidden, true world in his art. Nothing could be more rational. But I refuse to believe such a rational, elegant explanation. There is no such thing as the true world. I believe that the world is the ungraspable, infinite makyō. You understand this, Tanabe, I know. If my scenes of night that I draw are makyō, then the cherry blossoms that stirred the heart of Saigyō are also makyō. We are enclosed in the immeasurable makyō of night.

All the world's in perpetual night.



That spring night, I had gone to visit Kishida's house.

I left my apartment by Goryō Shrine and walked through the residential streets under cover of night. The night air was cold, the darkness opaque.

The path from my apartment to Kishida's house was winding; one moment you might be passing by chic residences, the next among dilapidated ruins, and sometimes the odd small garden plot. As I walked along the narrow path my feet suddenly stopped, and I saw cherry blossom petals begin to fall in the illumination of a streetlight.

At that moment I was thinking of leaving Kyoto.

After a series of troubles piling on one after another, my theater company had ceased operations last fall. I started to think there was no point in trying to tough things out anymore. My parents were telling me to come home to Toyohashi. This might be the right time for me to wash my hands and make a clean break of it all. The only reason I was still in Kyoto was Kishida.

Kishida's house was glowing in the darkness of the night, as it always did. But I didn't hear a sound.

I entered the living room and found Kishida. He didn't respond when I called out, or when I shook his shoulder. He was already dead. A cold cup of coffee was sitting on the table. I placed a call for an ambulance, feeling surprisingly calm.

I sat down beside Kishida. He looked as though he were sleeping, and there was even a hint of a smile still on his face. As I looked at his face my mind went through the time I had spent at the Kishida Salon.

"I get it now, you'd already set off on your journey." Inside my head I started to speak to Kishida.

I don't have an artistic bone in my body. Maybe I don't have the right to love your art. But I always looked up to you, even if those long nights only ever brought me to makyō. I'm going to leave Kyoto now, and I know that whatever the future brings, they'll never compare to the nights I spent here with you.

I heard then a noise come from the darkroom at the end of the corridor.

I must have stood up and gone down the hallway to the darkroom, but my memories are blurred after that point. The ambulance must have come, but I don't remember talking to them. The only thing I can remember clearly is the moment I opened the door to the darkroom and entered that viscous darkness. Small, tender things were fluttering through the darkness. They looked like cherry blossom petals.

Here I suddenly felt how vast was the darkness that enveloped me.

"All the world's in perpetual night," a voice whispered to me.



The train continued to run through the darkness.

I took a petal in my palm and gazed at it.

I realized that I had been in the darkroom ever since that night.

Ever since I had lost Kishida, I had felt that I wasn't where I belonged. The things I saw with my eyes didn't reach my spirit. Now I finally understood why that was so. The time I had spent in Tokyo and Toyohashi had only been dreams reflected in the windows as the train rolled on.

We were enclosed in the immeasurable *makyō* of night.

"This is that darkroom, isn't it?"

"That's right. We've been together the entire time," the girl said with a smile.

I sank down deep into the seat and let out a sigh of relief.

The Final Night — Kurama

The rain falling on the inn in Kibune gradually subsided to a drizzle.

"We should get going soon," Nakai murmured, almost as if he was talking to himself.

The waitstaff looked dubious as they tidied up the remains of the stew. It wasn't exactly unwarranted. We had told them we were here to see the Kurama Fire Festival, yet here we were, hardly looking as if we were making ready to go out.

Takeda and Tanabe unfolded a horse racing form and made their predictions for tomorrow's Kikuka-shō, while Fujimura lay down in the next room to sober up. I suspected that at this rate the festival might end before we got there, yet I couldn't bring myself to get up. Maybe everyone else felt the same.

Nakai took a beer bottle and poured it into my glass. "You liked Hasegawa, didn't you?"

"Didn't we all?"

"...Yes, I suppose that's true. Of course it's true," Nakai admitted, with a smile.



When we all got up at last, the rain had stopped.

The staff drove us down to Kibuneguchi, where we boarded an Eizan railcar. There were scant few passengers, but the floor was extremely muddied up and the air inside the cars stagnant. While we had been gathered around the stewpot at the inn in Kibune, this little railcar had been busy carrying vast hordes of tourists.

By the time we reached Kurama Station the festival was over.

"Looks like we missed the party," Takeda said.

There was a long line of tourists in Kurama Station for the return train, and the normally sleepy mountain station was filled with a feverish air. As we made our way along we came across police officers directing tourists through town. Dampened torch cinders lay scattered on the asphalt, rustling mournfully as we tread them underfoot. We stood at the foot of the stone steps of Kuramadera for a while, watching the bustle of the festival ebb away. The atmosphere was like that of a burden being lifted from your shoulders. Nobody said it, but it felt like while we listened to the rain back in the inn, we had been waiting for the festival to end.

Finally, Nakai proposed, "Why don't we take a stroll back to Kibuneguchi?"

"Will the weather hold up?" Fujimura glanced up at the sky. Not a star was visible in the sky.

"But you saw how crowded the trains are," pointed out Takeda.

Tanabe nodded in agreement. "Personally, I'd rather not get squashed like a sardine in a tin can."

"Then let's get walking!"

We started off, following behind Nakai.

Gift shops and houses lined the road through the temple town. Kids played around little bonfires lit in braziers by the entrances, and for a while the festival fervor lingered in the air. But five minutes down the road the houses grew sparse, and the bustle of Kuramadera died away. Nighttime chill oozed out from the cedar grove on the left side of the path. Owing to the festival traffic restrictions there were no cars, and the asphalt road was deserted.

"Pretty quiet road here, huh?" Fujimura muttered.

What if this nighttime road leads to another world, and what if Hasegawa is living there? I wondered. In the ten years since she had disappeared at the Kurama Fire Festival, her whereabouts had remained completely known. It felt like the dark hole that had swallowed her up still yawned somewhere here in Kurama.

Before I realized it Nakai was walking beside me.

"Tomorrow, why don't we all go to see Kishida Michio's engravings?"

"Sounds good to me."

"Pretty crazy coincidence, huh?"

I thought about the stories that everyone had told at the inn in Kibune.

It had all started with Nakai's story about the picture drawn by Kishida Michio that he had seen in the business hotel in Onomichi. Everyone had come out with remembrances of their own travels: Onomichi, Okuhida, Tsugaru, Tenryūkyō. They had all been common, unremarkable travel stories. Unremarkable, that is, except for the curious fact that they all revolve around the engravings of Kishida Michio's *Night Train*.

In Nakai's case, he had gone chasing after his wife who had left home, but stories like that weren't so uncommon these days. Takeda, Fujimura, Tanabe, they'd all come back without incident from their travels.

But there was a chance that they wouldn't, whispered a voice inside me.

A hole might open up unexpectedly in the midst of a journey and swallow you up. That possibility was always there.

Just like Hasegawa had been swallowed up that night—

An Eizan railcar came through on the other side of a cedar copse flanking both sides of a mountain stream. We all stood at the side of the road, transfixed at the sight of the

train running through the depths of the night. The high pitched clickety-clack of the wheels mixed with the sound of the rushing stream before receding into the distance.

It felt like a scene out of a dream, and it reminded me of the engraving by Kishida Michio that I had seen earlier in the day in the window of the gallery.



Earlier in the afternoon, I had heard a strange tale from Yanagi, the owner of the gallery.

“Kishida had a mysterious, unpublished work.”

Kishida Michio started the *Night Train* series ten years ago, the same year that Hasegawa had disappeared. And in the following two and a half years until his death, he produced forty-eight works.

When he had still been alive, Kishida had intimated to Yanagi of the existence of an unpublished series. It was a counterpart to *Night Train*, a series of copperplate engravings entitled *Dawn*.

Where *Night Train* depicted an endless night, *Dawn* portrayed a single morning, Kishida had supposedly said.

“The patrons of the salon were most eager to view it.”

“Salon?”

“At the time, Kishida’s home played host to a number of people who would gather there late at night. That gathering was called the ‘Kishida Salon’. Of course, I was one of that number.”

“So, has anyone ever seen *Dawn*?”

“Not a single person.” Yanagi smiled.

After the Eizan railcar passed by on the other side of the cedar trees, the area became quiet once more. We started to walk again.

This *Dawn* intrigued me. *Night Train* was already a lengthy series at 48 pieces, so its counterpart, *Dawn*, must be pretty substantial itself. However, Yanagi told me that even after going through all of his possessions they had failed to find a single trace of *Dawn* among them. Had Kishida been fibbing and poking fun at them? Or had he secreted them away somewhere in a hidden studio?

I approached Tanabe. “About Kishida...”

When I asked about *Dawn* he laughed, scratching his stubbly chin. “I’m fairly sure that was just a joke of his.”

“So he was just pulling everyone’s leg?”

“Real odd character, he was.”

Bit by bit, Tanabe described the nights he had spent at the Kishida Salon. There was a tenderness in his voice. A vision filled my eyes, of people gathering at a house and conversing happily until it was nearly dawn. And at the center of it all, Kishida Michio—that strange copperplate engraver, on his neverending journey through the night.

There was a darkroom in Kishida's house, and that's where he waited on ideas for *Night Train* to fall upon him. Strange, isn't it?"

"It sounds almost like developing film."

"I went in there with him once. It was the most bizarre feeling. That little room gradually started to feel bigger and bigger. And eventually I didn't even know where I was anymore."

From behind us we could hear the cheery laughter of Nakai and the rest. Tanabe took a brief glance backward, scowling jokingly, "Do they mind?" But when he looked forward again his expression was serious.

"I feel like I'm still in that darkroom," he said. "Just every so often."

"I think I know what you're talking about."

We came to a place where the road split in two. The splashing of the mountain stream echoed around us. The path to the left led down towards the city of Kyoto, and down the path to the right was Kibuneguchi Station. Without hesitation Tanabe and I took the right-hand fork and walked towards Kibuneguchi Station. After a short distance, Tanabe turned around and frowned, "Huh? Why aren't they following us?"

I looked at the red lamp on the fire station.

Ten years ago—

We had lost sight of one another amid the throngs of the Kurama Fire Festival. I recalled the torches throwing off embers, the men in loincloths and their feverish zeal. Thick smoke drifted up through the air. The darkness of the night felt even deeper once I passed beyond the torchlight. How had I lost sight of Hasegawa? I had been staring straight at her, had been so sure that we had been holding hands. *I feel like I'm still in that darkroom*—the feeling Tanabe had expressed, I knew that feeling too.

I suddenly snapped out of it. "Why don't we call the inn and ask them to pick us up?" I suggested.

But Tanabe didn't reply.

I turned around to find the asphalt road empty beneath the streetlamps. The only thing I could hear was the loud rushing of the stream.

I kept waiting, but my friends did not show up.



Passing under the elevated Eizan railway track, I ventured towards Kibuneguchi Station.

Up a short stairway was a path leading to the ticket barrier, illuminated in glowing fluorescent white. On a bench before the shuttered kiosks sat several young men and women, whispering in hushed tones. They resembled us from ten years ago. They looked my way with suspicion, before eventually boarding a courtesy car from one of the inns that had come to pick them up. Once they left, the station became as quiet as an abandoned ruin.

The darkness of the mountains pressing in around me unsettled me more and more. I continued to wait, and not a single one of Nakai or any of the others showed up.

"What is going on?" I sat on the bench and called Nakai. The ringing tone sounded as though it was coming from another world.

"Yeah, hello?"

I almost felt let down when I heard Nakai pick up, his voice booming cheerily. He seemed to be drunk. I could hear tinny music and whispering voices coming through the receiver. It reminded me of a low-key hotel bar. The sounds were entirely out of place here in the midst of these dark mountains. *It's not possible*, I thought to myself in confusion. He'd been walking with me just a little while ago.

"Nakai, where are you right now?"

"Who's this?"

"What do you mean? It's Ōhashi."

"...Ōhashi?"

"I've been waiting for you guys in front of the station."

The moment I said that Nakai went quiet on the other side. His silence was buried in the soft background noise of the bar. It almost felt like he'd put the phone down and gone away somewhere, but pressing the phone to my ear I could make out his shaky breathing.

After a while, I heard him mutter uncertainly, "You said Ōhashi?"

"Yes, Ōhashi. Who else would it be?"

"...This isn't funny," he said, before abruptly hanging up.

The buzz of the bar vanished, and I was left alone in the silent station.

I stared at the phone in my hand, dumbfounded.

Pulling myself together I dialed Tanabe's number, which didn't go through. After that I tried Fujimura. The tone kept ringing for a long time. Just as I was about to give it up, I heard a soft voice answer, "Hello?"

"Fujimura?"

"Who is this?"

"Where are you right now?"

"I'd like to know who this is first."

"Look, you guys got me, alright? It's Ōhashi."

As soon as she heard my name Fujimura sucked in her breath.

"...Ōhashi? You're really Ōhashi?"

"What are you talking about? We came to Kurama together, didn't we?"

Fujimura didn't say anything. The line went as silent as the station. The silence brought to mind an empty hallway in a spacious apartment. Fujimura's face came to mind, the same face that had just been with me: cheerful, and yet somehow weary.

A moment later I heard her again, her breathing irregular. "What are *you* talking about? That was all the way back when we were in school. Ōhashi, where were you all this time?"

I had no idea what she was talking about either.

"Ōhashi? Can you hear me?"

"I hear you."

"Where are you right now?"

"Kurama. I'm in Kurama."

When next she spoke, there was a tinge of fear in her voice. "...Are you really Ōhashi?"

Suddenly unnerved, I cut the line. Still squeezing the phone I stared at the grey floor underneath the fluorescent lights. Even if I called Takeda it'd just be the same thing, I thought. Just in case I called the inn, but was informed that there were no reservations that night under the name Ōhashi. I mumbled something back and hung up. It was like even the trip to Kurama had been erased.

I stood up from the bench and went outside the station.

Around me I heard only the eerie rushing of the stream. I went back underneath the train tracks, but there was no trace of any of them. In a little while I heard the sound of wheels on the track coming from the direction of the city, and an empty Eizan railcar came into view. The train stopped briefly at Kibuneguchi Station, then lurched off for Kurama. Its bright windows passed behind the gloomy trees.

I watched the train go, feeling utterly lost.



From Kibuneguchi Station I took the train back to Demachiyanagi.

It was hot and stuffy inside the carriage, which was fully loaded with tourists on their way back, and my head felt fuzzy as though it was filled with cotton wool. Looking at the

dark windows I saw a pale face loom out from the passing cedar trees. It took some time before I realized that it was my own face reflected in the window.

I thought that by going somewhere, anywhere that was bright and crowded, I might be able to recover a semblance of reality. Maybe I'd get a room at some hotel in the city, or drink the night away at the first bar I saw, and tomorrow I'd be telling everyone about the funny dream I'd had. That forlorn hope was all I had to cling to.

Arriving at Demachiyana I walked off towards the Kamo River.

At the confluence of the Takase and Kamo Rivers is a sandbank known as the Kamo Delta. I sat down at the very tip and gazed at the Kamo Bridge and the lamps that illuminated it along the guardrail. The night was getting on and there were few pedestrians, but it was a welcome change from the mountains of Kurama.

A young couple hopped along the stepping stones across the river.

I had done that with Hasegawa, once. That night Nakai had taken us out to Kiyamachi.

At the time Nakai often took us out to eat after English class. We usually stuck to the neighborhoods around Demachiyana or Hyakumanben, but that night we had taken a rare outing to Kiyamachi, where we whiled away the time until the wee hours of the morning at a bar where one of Nakai's acquaintances worked. On our way home from the bar Hasegawa and I strolled along the Kamo River. The rest of our companions probably stayed behind to keep drinking.

From Shijō Bridge we walked north along the river.

"Whaddya say we walk it off?" It had probably been Hasegawa who had suggested that.

As we walked further on and the clamor of Shijō faded into the distance, it began to feel like we were descending, she and I, into the depths of the night. We told each other silly jokes, gossiped about our English school classmates, and talked about books we had read and movies we had watched. I was surprised at how close Hasegawa felt to me that night. When I first started attending the school, I wasn't very comfortable around her, though she was in the same class. We were both shy, and once class ended we treated each other like perfect strangers. I was almost more used to hearing her speak in English than in Japanese. But that night, I didn't feel any of that distance at all.

That night she told me about the cosmonaut.

The Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin once famously said, "The earth was blue." These days pictures of the Earth aren't uncommon, and we take that blue-ness for granted. But what the cosmonaut claimed really took him by surprise was the blackness of space beyond. It was impossible to understand how black, how empty was that darkness unless you saw it with your own eyes. Gagarin's words really referred to that bottomless void.

Whenever Hasegawa thought about that profound darkness, that darkness that couldn't be conveyed in a photograph, she felt both frightened, yet also enthralled.

"All the world's in perpetual night," she said.

We eventually made it all the way to the Kamo Bridge. I watched as she crossed the stepping stones over the river. *The night is ending*, I thought to myself. Nothing had happened in particular, but that night I finally realized that I had fallen for her.

This was in September, and the Kurama Fire Festival had been the month after. Who was it that suggested we all go together? I wondered if it had perhaps been me.

When I snapped out of it, the couple had crossed the river and were gone. There was no one else around me. I stared vacantly at the lights of downtown far off downriver.

My phone rang. It was Nakai.

I answered resolutely and heard a voice calmly say, "Ōhashi, wasn't it?"

"That's right."

"...Where are you right now?"

"I'm by Demachiyanagi."

What are you doing there, we're all at Kibuneguchi Station waiting for you! For a second I let myself hope that those words would burst out of his mouth. But that wasn't to be.

"Well, do you think you can come by Karawamachi Sanjō then?"

Nakai told me the name of the hotel he was staying at, and to meet him at the bar on the first floor.

"You make sure to be there. I'll be waiting."

○

I took the Keihan Line from Demachiyanagi down to Sanjō.

"You make sure to be there. I'll be waiting."

There had been something in Nakai's voice that had brooked no refusal.

He'd given that impression to people ever since his student days. That forcefulness made him feel reliable, but now that I thought about it he'd only been a grad student at the time. There'd been something forced about it, like he was trying too hard to act like a reliable mentor. His behavior after Hasegawa disappeared only confirmed that suspicion. It was like something had snapped inside him, and afterwards that confident demeanor had never come back.

The hotel he was staying at was just up the boulevard from Kawaramachi Sanjō.

Entering the lobby, I was blinded by the light of a dazzling chandelier. I knew that I had ridden the trains on the Eizan and Keihan lines to get here, but that didn't stop me from feeling now like I had been abducted from those mountains by a *tengu*. It was like part

of me had been left behind in those mountains. At the end of the lobby, at a dim, cavern-like bar, Nakai was drinking alone. When I saw his large, rounded back, I let out a relieved sigh. It felt like everything was okay now.

"Nakai!" I called. "Thanks for waiting."

When he saw me, Nakai looked dumbfounded.

"You're really Ōhashi?"

"Who else would I be?"

"I didn't believe it when I heard you on the phone. It's like I've run into a ghost."

"Weren't you just with me in Kurama?"

"...That was ten years ago."

I shut up.

Both Nakai and Fujimura had said the same thing.

"Well, why don't you just take a seat. What'll it be?"

I gave my order to the bartender. Nakai had traveled here with his wife two days ago. His wife had gone to bed early in their room.

"So you're telling me that you haven't been to Kurama once?"

"Since the incident, I haven't been once," he replied, looking at me carefully. "Where were you? What have you been doing for the past ten years?"

"Ten years?"

"Yeah, it's been ten years."

"...Mind telling me what's going on?"

"Now hold on. It's me that asked for an explanation."

"Look, I have no idea what's happening."

Nakai sighed, and began to explain what happened ten years ago.

One night ten years ago, Nakai had gone with his friends from English school to see the Kurama Fire Festival. They took the Eizan Railway to Kurama and were engulfed by the crowds swarming in the temple town, watching men with torches go by.

At some point in the proceedings, Nakai lost sight of me. At first it didn't worry him. He assumed that I had snuck off with Hasegawa to rest somewhere. But after the festival ended and the human tide began to go out, he caught sight of Hasegawa, frowning and looking around the area. Eventually Fujimura and the others also began to murmur, "Ōhashi's not here!"

Everyone went with Nakai to the station, waiting patiently for me to show up. But I didn't. As the lines for the Eizan Railway dwindled, the din of Kurama went quiet.

"In the end, you never showed up."

With no other choice, they went to the police.

Their slim hopes that perhaps we had merely missed each other on the road evaporated the next day. Notified of what had happened by the university, my family came to Kyoto. The disappearance was reported in a tiny corner of the newspaper. But no leads turned up. They discovered no motive for me to disappear, found no clues. And just like that, Ōhashi disappeared.

"You've been missing for the last ten years."

○

I put my elbows on the counter and buried my face in my hands.

"But that's completely different from what I know."

"How does your story go?"

"It should have been Hasegawa that disappeared."

Nakai looked at me, confounded. "Hasegawa came back with all of us. She never stopped worrying about you."

"How's she doing now?"

"I haven't talked to her in years," Nakai mused. "I'm sure she'll be thrilled to know you're back."

"...Am I back?"

"Well of course you are! You've come back." He sounded like he was pacifying a child. "These ten years I've felt like there was a part of me that was missing. Why on earth did you disappear? I'd never been able to figure it out. Tell me, please, what happened?"

But I had no answer to give him.

Had everything that had happened in the last ten years been a dream? Everything that followed Hasegawa's disappearance—the remaining days I spent in Kyoto, the years I worked in Tokyo, my reaching out to everyone to visit the Kurama Fire Festival for the first time in ten years—had all of that been an illusion?

That was impossible. Just a short while ago both he and I had been in that inn in Kibune. I could still pull up his face in my mind quite vividly, talking about his trip to Onomichi.

"Has your wife ever left home?" I asked.

He looked astonished when he heard that. "Come on now, where'd that come from?"

"Have you ever gone after her to Onomichi?"

There was fear in his eyes as he looked at me. "...How do you know about that?"

"Tonight we all gathered at an inn in Kibune," I said. "We were here to see the Kurama Fire Festival for the first time in ten years. You told us about what happened in Onomichi."

"I couldn't have! I was here in the hotel." He tapped on the counter.

"Then how do I know about Onomichi?"

I repeated to him in detail what he had said at the inn. As he listened his face became stiff.

"How could you know all of that?" It was his turn to put his elbows on the counter. He propped up his head on his hands and stared at the row of bottles on the other side. I had seen that expression many times when I was in school, and I expected that all sorts of theories were whirling through his mind.

"Something very strange is going on here."

"Yeah, that's for sure."

"Why did you call me in the first place?"

"When we were coming back from Kurama, everyone disappeared on the road. I don't understand it myself."

I suddenly remembered the clacking of the train wheels through the mountains, and closed my mouth. The Eizan train had been passing by the other side of the cedar trees, and I had been standing there watching it on that dark mountain road. In my mind the scene resembled a copperplate engraving. The picture in the window of Yanagi Gallery had been entitled *Night Train—Kurama*.

"Hey Nakai. Ever heard of an artist called Kishida Michio?"

○

I told Nakai about Kishida Michio.

About his studio in Kyoto. About the series of engravings he had created called *Night Train*. About the way he lived, his days and nights reversed. About the nightly visitors to his studios, the Kishida Salon.

"But I just don't get it. This Kishida guy is already dead. And you never even met him. How could he possibly be involved?"

"Either way, I'm going to that gallery one more time."

"Do you know how late it is already?"

"Someone could still be there. At the very least, I'll be able to get another look at the picture in the window."

Nakai thought for a moment before saying, "All right, then I'll go with you."

"Are you sure you should leave your wife here?"

"Ah, she's sleeping in our room anyways. It'd be worse for me to let you go off alone. Can't have you disappearing on me again."

We left the hotel and went through the famous Sanjō arcade. I thought about the times I had walked the sleeping streets with Nakai in my student days, just like this. As we walked between the darkened buildings, I began to feel like the road was heading straight into that October night ten years ago.

When I said that, Nakai chuckled, sounding pleased. "Doesn't it? I was just thinking the same thing. How very strange."

"It's all so mysterious."

"Almost like we've gone ten years back in time."

We came to an intersection featuring the brickwork cultural museum and turned south down Takakura Street. A hush lingered between the small shops and apartments, and here and there streetlamps twinkled along the stretch of road. There I found Yanagi Gallery, just as I had remembered. A closed sign hung on the glass door, but behind it I still saw light blazing brilliantly within. The owner must still be inside.

When I looked into the window I was struck with astonishment.

The picture on display was certainly one of Kishida Michio's works, but it was a far cry from the picture I had seen during the day. The black-and-white color palette had been swapped, and the overall tone of it was bright. An Eizan railcar was running on the other side of a grove of trees under the morning sunlight. Standing on the near side of the trees was a woman, looking at the passing train with her right hand raised. The plaque beside the picture read *Dawn*—*Kurama*.

Nakai peered into the window. "Doesn't exactly look like the picture you were talking about."

"That's because it isn't the same picture."

I opened the glass door and stepped inside the gallery.

The long interior was bathed in a soft light, and the faint scent of incense lingered in the air. Each of the mezzotints that were hung on the white walls at intervals was bright. They were like rectangular windows that opened out into a world soaked in morning sunshine. It didn't resemble at all the gallery I had visited in the daytime.

Yanagi, the owner of the gallery, emerged from behind a partition.

"I'm terribly sorry, but we are closed for the..."

"Sorry," I said. "I visited this gallery earlier today. I don't suppose you remember me?"

Yanagi studied me, perplexed. It seemed very odd to me that he somehow could have forgotten me despite the long conversation we had had. But stranger still was the fact that all of the pictures on display in the gallery had been swapped out.

I pointed at the pictures hanging on white wall and asked, "Have you changed out the pictures since this afternoon?"

"No, nothing of the sort has happened."

"That's funny. When I came here earlier, all of the pictures were from *Night Train*. You told me a lot about Kishida Michio."

"*Night Train* has never been displayed here."

"That can't be true. I saw them, right here."

"I'm afraid not," replied Yanagi with a forced smile.



"Our apologies for coming in so late," said Nakai, clapping my shoulder. "Let's go, Ōhashi. You're still not quite thinking right. Get some rest. You can think it over tomorrow."

But I wasn't ready to give up just yet. Resisting Nakai's attempts to drag me out, I looked at the mezzotints hanging on the white wall. "This series is *Dawn*, right? And there are 48 works in all?"

"Yes, that is correct. The series was created by Kishida Michio."

The monochromatic black-on-white landscapes reminded me of radiant morning sunshine. A lone woman was depicted in each of the engravings. All of them had neither eyes nor mouth, and their smooth white mannequin-like heads were inclined to the side.

Onomichi. Ise. Nobeyama. Nara. Aizu. Okuhida. Matsumoto. Nagasaki. Tsugaru. Tenryūkyō. As I looked at each work in turn, I felt a strange flow, a rhythm. It was like morning spreading to each of these far-flung cities in Japan, and a woman lingering in each.

I remembered the story Yanagi had told me during the day—the rumor of Kishida Michio's mysterious posthumous work. The series whose existence Kishida had intimated to Yanagi, but which had never been shown to anyone. The counterpart to *Night Train*, the series of copperplate engravings: *Dawn*.

Night Train and *Dawn*.

It was then that I finally realized.

Dawn and *Night Train* were two sides of the same coin. In my world what had been *Night Train* was in this one *Dawn*. When I had lost sight of my friends on our way back from the Kurama Fire Festival, I had stumbled into the world of *Dawn*. If *Night Train* didn't exist in this world, then obviously it wouldn't be put on display.

But who would believe such a story?

"Kishida Michio would understand," I murmured.

"But isn't he dead?" Nakai objected.

"That certainly cannot be the case," Yanagi interrupted. "I just spoke to him today."

Nakai and I looked at each other.

Kishida Michio was alive.

"Could you get in contact with him?" I asked.

Yanagi frowned. "It is already quite late..."

I couldn't blame him being wary of us.

I pleaded with him to believe me, to at least connect us through the phone, and at last he relented. I heard him talking on the phone from behind the screen.

"This is Yanagi. I'm terribly sorry to be calling you at this hour."

It seemed to have been Kishida's wife who had answered. I caught bits and pieces of the conversation. Yanagi continued to explain the situation for some time. When he eventually brought up the names of Nakai and me, he seemed taken aback by the response from Kishida's wife.

"Is something the matter?" he asked, sounding concerned, and there was a brief silence. At last his head popped out from behind the screen, a perplexed look on his face.

"His wife wishes to speak with you."

I took the receiver and put it to my ear. Kishida's wife spoke in a whisper, and to my surprise, her voice was quavering.

"...Ōhashi?"

I had heard that voice before.

"It's me. It's Hasegawa. Do you remember me?"

○

The taxi drove through the night, heading north up Karasuma Street.

Looking through the window Nakai mused, "Something very strange is going on here."

Even as he accompanied me through the night, Nakai's thoughts seemed to be in a jumble. That was quite understandable. For me it was as though I had tumbled down the rabbit hole. The worlds of *Dawn* and *Night Train* seemed to have begun to careen into one another.

"It's been ten years since I heard her voice."

"How did it feel?"

"Very strange. It doesn't feel like it's been ten years."

Still staring out the window Nakai said, "You liked Hasegawa, didn't you?"

"Didn't we all?"

"...Yes, I suppose that's true. Of course it's true," Nakai admitted, and I could almost hear him smiling.

The lights of downtown faded into the distance as we continued on, the long wall of the Kyoto Gyoen National Garden on our right. At Dōshisha University the taxi turned right onto Imadegawa Street, eventually approaching the dark embankments of the Kamo River. It was around 1, and there were few cars on the road. Coming to the end of shadowy trees along the street ended we saw the river spreading out below us, its banks lonely and deserted; on the other side twinkled the lights of the houses across the river.

"Must be around here," muttered the driver, peering at his GPS.

We got off the taxi at the end of Izumoji Bridge.

Kishida Michio's residence-cum-studio was in the residential neighborhood on the embankment to the west. Among the other darkened houses on those sleeping streets, that house alone was still throwing off lights from the windows. The sight of those lights streaming forth from that house filled me with relief, like a weary traveler coming into view of an inn after wandering the wilderness.

The building was timeworn, but its exterior and the trees around it were well kept. Around the front door was a border of small green tiles. After Nakai pushed the buzzer we heard footsteps pattering inside, and a thin man opened the door.

"We apologize for calling on you at such a late hour. "I'm Nakai, and this is Ōhashi. Would you happen to be Kishida?"

"That's me. I've been waiting for you." His voice was composed as he beckoned us inside. "Come, they've arrived!" he called up to the second floor.

The stairway light came on.

In a moment white, delicate feet pattered down the worn wooden staircase, and a familiar, pale-skinned face appeared. Standing there was none other than Hasegawa. She stopped halfway down the stairs, looking down on us with shock.

Sounding bashful, Nakai murmured, "Hey there, Hasegawa. It's been a while."

"Nakai! I wasn't expecting you."

"Sorry for dropping in on you so late. I'm pretty shocked myself. Here, look who I brought with me."

"It's been a long time, Hasegawa," I said.

Hasegawa still looked like she didn't quite believe her eyes.

"...Ōhashi?"

It didn't feel like it had been ten years since we had last seen each other. She hadn't changed a bit, and I didn't feel like I'd changed a bit either.

"Well, come up," Kishida urged us.

From the room next to the foyer came a vinegary, medicinal smell. Kishida bustled over, turning the lights on and showing us inside.

"Here is where I keep my studio." It looked like he'd done a total conversion of the room. At first glance it resembled a small workshop. Tools lay scattered around the roughly ten-tatami space underneath cold fluorescent lights. In the shelves along the wall were sheaves of paper and tools and medicine bottles, and the old workbench was just as crowded. In the center of the room stood a heavy-looking machine with a large handle attached. Lines extended out from it, several newly pressed mezzotints dangled from them like laundry hung out to dry.

"Come, this way," said Kishida, inviting us into the living room.



The cozy living room was filled with warm light and the aroma of coffee. From the kitchen Kishida chortled, "Almost like a party, isn't it? How nice it is, having midnight visitors."

"Tomorrow's a holiday. Stay up as long as you want," said Hasegawa in a singsong voice.

I sat down on the sofa that faced the garden. Watching the married couple preparing coffee in the kitchen a strange feeling came over me. Maybe it was the peculiar atmosphere that Kishida and Hasegawa cast. Nakai also seemed to be getting comfortable. Accepting his cup of coffee he said, "I don't know why, but it doesn't feel like this is our first meeting."

Kishida seated himself on the sofa and grinned. "I hear that quite often. Perhaps I am simply openhearted."

"It's because you're so absentminded."

"Or because I'm so absentminded."

"No, that's not all it is. Doesn't it seem like we've had gatherings here like this before?"

"A cozy feel, then?"

"A Kishida Salon, you might call it."

Kishida smiled at my words. "I like that. I may have to hang up a sign."

Everyone seemed to take the fact that I had returned after ten years in stride. As I sipped piping hot coffee alongside them, I suddenly felt quite at home here in this world.

"What're you up to these days, Hasegawa?"

Hasegawa had had ten years of her own. After graduating college she'd spent time working as a substitute teacher at a local high school, before being hired on as the Japanese teacher.

"And then five years ago I married him."

"And you're still a teacher?"

She nodded. "Of course."

I accepted those ten years of hers without question. They had existed, just as surely as my own ten years existed.

"So what about your last ten years?"

At Hasegawa's prompt I finally began to tell my story: about Hasegawa's disappearance ten years ago in Kurama; my life in Kyoto after that; how I had gotten a job and moved to Tokyo; and all the strange things that had happened in Kurama after visiting with everyone for the first time in ten years. The only thing I left out was that Kishida had died.

Every so often Hasegawa and Nakai interjected with questions, but Kishida listened silently until the very end.

"An interesting tale," he said thoughtfully once I had finished. "So that is why you think that my works hide some secret. And that is why you have come here."

"I know it sounds like there's some sort of magic in your pictures."

"But I'm afraid I can't use magic. I will admit, that I have on occasion thought about *Night Train*—" He paused and pondered for a moment before continuing. "In the place you come from, my wife disappeared, yes? Was I living in this house alone then?"

"Yes, that's right."

"How terribly lonesome. I can hardly imagine it."

I didn't understand how I had come to pass through the works called *Night Train* into this world. Kishida had done nothing more than create these artworks. But I wondered how *Night Train*, how *Dawn* had come to be in the first place. When I inquired, Kishida said, "Just a moment," and got up.

He returned shortly from his studio carrying a single mezzotint.

"This is the first work in *Dawn: Onomichi*."

It depicted a hillside town in the light of morning. From the second story of a house on a hill, a single woman was leaning out a window and waving her hand. She seemed to me to be fairly young.

"It was in Onomichi that I first met my wife. That would be, oh, thirteen years ago now."

And Kishida began to tell us the tale of his trip to Onomichi thirteen years ago.



This happened in February, about half a year after I had come back from my studies abroad.

My mother had passed away in hospital at the end of the year, and I was feeling terribly down. I had been so fired up, so convinced that my career was about to begin in earnest, which only made the blow worse.

For the first month of the new year I put my hand to nothing, but around the second month I began to remodel the house that my parents had left me, and slowly but surely was recovering my ambitions.

At that time an acquaintance of mine, an art professor at a college in Onomichi, extended an invitation for me to come visit. A token of his concern, I assume, for my despondent spirits. He had been a mentor to me in art school, and I had heard that he returned to his hometown around the same time that I had left for England.

"There's an art museum at Senkōji Park in Onomichi. I'm holding my students' graduation exhibition there," he told me over the phone.

Going to Onomichi might be nice, I thought to myself. Between my part-time job and my mother's hospitalization, I hadn't had the chance to leave Kyoto since I came back to Japan, and I hadn't seen my friend in some years.

I at once set off for Onomichi. My friend met me outside the ticket barrier at the station.

Both of our lives had changed greatly, so there was no shortage of things to talk about. We spent the afternoon at the art museum and walked around Senkōji, and in the evening we chatted over dinner at a *ryōtei* by the sea.

"When I was a kid my grandpa would always take me here whenever there was something to celebrate," my friend reminisced fondly.

With the window open, the dark, lapping ocean waves seemed as if they might slosh inside. I remember it being a rather mysterious *ryōtei*.

When we had exhausted the usual topics of conversation, my friend asked suddenly, "So what were you talking with her about?"

I understood immediately what he meant.

We had been going around the museum exhibition in the afternoon. There were few visitors besides ourselves, and the museum was hushed and still. In each exhibition room college students sat on metal folding chairs and held their breaths. We walked around before them, looking up at the exhibits with a vague air of solemnity.

Entering the Nihonga exhibition room, we came across a lone high school girl standing in front of a large painting. The painting was a self-portrait in front of a long window; through the window was a detailed starry sky, as though it faced out into outer space. A red muffler was wrapped around the girl's shoulders, and a Snoopy plush dangled from her bag. We weren't supposed to interfere with visitors, so taking care not to enter her line of sight we tiptoed around the exhibit hall.

Before too long we heard a strange voice going, "Ah, ah, ah!"

Turning around to see what it was, we espied one of the art students halfway out of her chair.

"What's wrong?" asked my friend, to which she pointed a trembling finger towards the floor of the room. Sitting there was a lean, grey cat. It was right beside the girl who was looking at the painting, like they were peacefully contemplating it together.

"W-what do I do, professor?"

"Just chase it out, go on!"

At this point the high schooler looked down at her feet and let out a small yelp, finally noticing the cat's presence. The cat's gaze remained fixed on the painting.

"Friend of yours?" I asked.

The girl giggled. "Nope, first time."

"Then we'll just have to pursue it from the room," my friend declared, and together with the student he began to chase it from the room. After chasing it round the room for a while the two of them went after it as it escaped into the corridor, leaving only me and the high schooler in the room.

It was starting to feel awkward when the girl asked uncertainly, "Are you a professor?"

"No, I'm not. The other guy was. I'm just his friend."

"A friend?"

"Yeah. What about you? Do you know one of the students?"

"Not really, I just kinda wandered in here. I was going over to my grandma's house to visit when I saw they were having an exhibition."

She went back to staring at the painting.

"You're really into this painting, huh?"

"Well, not exactly..."

She told me about an interview with a cosmonaut she had read.

The Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin once famously said, "The earth was blue." These days pictures of the Earth aren't uncommon, and we take that blue-ness for granted. But what the cosmonaut claimed really took him by surprise was the blackness of space beyond. It was impossible to understand how black, how empty was that darkness unless you saw it with your own eyes. Gagarin's words were really referring to that bottomless void. Whenever the girl thought about that profound darkness, that darkness that couldn't be conveyed in a photograph, she felt both frightened, yet also enthralled.

"All the world's in perpetual night," she murmured.

What a strange girl, I thought to myself.



I told all this to my friend at the *ryōtei* by the sea.

"She enchanted you, is that it?"

"Nothing of the sort."

"Did you get her name? Where is she from?"

"She said she lives on Mukaishima. Her grandmother's house is in the hills of Onomichi."

Outside the window was the darkened sea, and beyond it could be seen the lights of Mukaishima. *All the world's in perpetual night*. Her words were caught in my mind. They were the kind of words that wormed their way into your mind on a quiet night in an unfamiliar town, alone with your thoughts.

After leaving the *ryōtei* I parted with my friend in front of Onomichi Station, crossing the tracks and heading up into the hills. The inn I was staying at was by Senkōji Park.

It was very late now, and the hillside was entirely quiet. I walked alone, through the stone-floored alleys lit by orange lanterns and across the deserted temple grounds. Onomichi was an old town, and it felt like the dark depths of its tangled slopes and alleyways led to another world. My breath puffed out white before me, and as I climbed the slope the seaside town receded far behind me, and the night sky approached steadily overhead.

I came up to a long slope.

The inn should have been right up that slope, but in stark contrast to its daytime semblance it was permeated now in a darkness so thick I doubted whether I could make it through. It was lit only by a single lamp halfway up.

After climbing for a time, I looked up and thought, "Oh my."

Beyond the light stood a white figure in the darkness. Though difficult to make out, the face seemed to be that of a woman. Suspicion crept into my mind. The mysterious figure stood still in the darkness, staring directly at me. I stared back resolutely, and shortly after, the figure turned nimbly and vanished into the darkness.

I stood there petrified, a sudden shiver going up my spine.

What on earth was that?

I scanned the darkness but saw nothing. It was all horribly unnerving. But the inn lay at the top of the slope, so I had no choice but to continue. After grappling with indecision for a moment, I set off fearfully once again up the path, but met no one.

At last, seeing the lights of the inn come into view, I let out a sigh of relief. I turned around to see the lights of Onomichi glimmering below.

Far away in the distance I heard the rumble of a train passing through.

A strange feeling abruptly came over me. It felt like I was suspended in the air, in a world of midnight. I had never felt the night to be so deep, so vast, as I did at that moment. All over the world, in far flung cities and towns, untold multitudes of people were dreaming, enveloped by the same night through which I was wandering at this very moment. Perhaps this eternal night was the true form of the world.

It was then that the phrase popped into my mind: *Night Train*.



I spent a sleepless night in the inn, unable to shake off a feeling of desolation.

Tossing and turning in the futon, I seemed to recall that strange figure I had seen on that dark slope whispering something to me. I was quite sure it had been a woman. The moment when she swiftly turned and vanished into the darkness played over and over again in my mind. That sense of unease reminded me of an engraving I had seen in England.

It was an antiquated work that hung in a black frame in the office of the master to whom I was apprenticed. It depicted a manor house, and had been created around the turn of the 19th century. My master's father had been employed at a firm that specialized in topographical paintings, and had bought it up from a local dilettante on one of his collection trips into the English countryside. At first glance it seemed ordinary and unremarkable in composition, depicting a manor and its garden; in the foreground was a gazebo, standing inside it, a lone young woman.

"This, Kishida, is a painting of a ghost."

What my master told me was another of those commonplace tales of haunted paintings.

Long ago, a young lady who lived in this manor had gone missing. After several years, her father, the lord of the manor, commissioned another noble, one of his friends, to create this piece. This noble was somewhat well known as an amateur copperplate engraver. But something curious happened the day after he completed the piece: the moment the noble laid eyes on it he shrieked, "The girl!" and fell into a swoon. He had only drawn the manor and the garden, and yet there in the mezzotint the girl had made a most unexpected appearance. Nobody quite believed his tale, but the artist never recovered his senses, and he died babbling deliriously to himself. According to those who attended his deathbed, he had confessed to harboring a forbidden love for that girl, claiming that in the throes of passion he had murdered her himself.

“Twas the ghost of the girl what showed up in that engraving of his. You let her take your heart, they say, she'll begin to turn her head, slowly, slowly. And the poor chap that sees her face, well, into the picture he goes. You'd best be careful, eh?”

And my master winked.

Of course, I didn't believe in tales of that sort. But I couldn't help but wonder every time I saw it in his office. I would always check that she wasn't looking this way. The girl in the mezzotint,, turning her head towards you ever so slowly. Eventually she would spirit me away into the picture.

That night in the inn, the story of the haunted engraving seemed to me to have a strange ring of truth to it.

Eventually I began to nod off.

I dreamed that I was in my house in Kyoto.

I was sitting on the sofa, just as I am doing now. I looked out into the dark garden, holding my breath, waiting. I don't know what I was waiting for. As I listened, I heard a door open at the end of the hallway. From inside that dark room a person came oozing out, hiding their footsteps as they tiptoed down the hallway. It was the girl I'd seen at the museum who showed up in the living room. She came up right next to me, sat down, and whispered:

All the world's in perpetual night.

And then I realized that I was dead.



When I woke up from that unhappy dream, my heart was pounding so hard it actually hurt. The loneliness, the elation I felt when that girl came next to me still lingered in my mind. I got out of the futon. Outside the window the sky had begun to turn pale.

Making up my mind to go for a morning stroll, I slipped out of the silent inn.

In the bracing morning air, the town which had seemed so dead the previous night now was coming back to life. Stray cats were stirring in the abandoned courtyards, and I saw elderly women making early morning temple visits. The sky was slowly becoming brighter, and the buildings were silhouetted in sharp detail as though they were rising up from the bottom of the sea. The streetlamps, still glowing in the morning fog, were especially beautiful. They were like the last vestiges of a night that was being harried and hunted down.

I returned to the long slope that led back to the hotel.

Halfway up, I heard the familiar sound of shutters being opened, so I stopped in place. I was before an old house with a blue tiled roof. It was a window on the second floor

that was being opened, and a young woman leaned out from it exuberantly, looking out at the early morning sea. The dawn that illuminated the town suffused her cheeks with gorgeous color.

"It's her," I thought.

It was the same high schooler with whom I had conversed at the museum the previous afternoon.

I had never felt the morning the way I felt it now. The disquietude of night, the threatening phantom women, they all melted away, leaving only the face of the girl leaning out from that second-story window. As I stared up at her in amazement, she perceived me standing on the slope, and called out with a grin, "Good morning!"

And I thought to myself—

Daybreak had arrived.



Kishida pointed at the engraving on the table.

"This is what I created when I returned from Onomichi."

He had thought that he would never see that girl again.

But as time went on, he started to lament that it had ended with them only having exchanged a few words. Even as he continued his solitary labors in his Kyoto studio, the morning in Onomichi was always in a corner of his mind. That longing only increased each time he looked at that engraving, *Onomichi*.

The owner of Yanagi Gallery was impressed with the work, suggesting, "Why not title it *Dawn*?"

The light of a single morning, washing over the town.

But he had not yet come to the decision of creating a series.

And after a gap of three years had passed, he was reunited with the girl once again.

"It was at the Kurama Fire Festival. I spotted her standing in the crowd, and I knew that I couldn't afford to lose sight of her again."

That night, Kishida had gone into those dark mountains to see the festival, just as we had done. I could see the scene before me as clearly as if I had been there. Torches spitting sparks, dyeing Hasegawa's cheeks red in their light. The night Kishida found Hasegawa was also the night we lost her. That was the night that *Dawn* began, and the beginning of *Night Train*.

"After that I began work on *Dawn*."

I looked once more at the engraving on the table.

“How many years has it been now?” mused Kishida. “Since that time I’ve traveled to many places with my wife.”

“We really have been all over the place haven’t we?” Hasegawa’s eyes were misty with remembrances. “All sorts of places...”

She started to list off the places they had been together.

Mornings in bustling port towns, in austere moorlands, in still samurai estates, in forests surrounded by the dripping of melting snow. Not one of those mornings had been alike.

As I listened to her reminisce about her travels, I glanced at the glass door leading to the garden. There I saw our reflections, seated around the table and chatting away. Hasegawa’s smile was so vibrant, and Kishida and Nakai were in high spirits themselves. It was like I was looking at the window of a train. It was like we were riding the night train. No matter how dark and vast the night that lay outside the window was, inside the train was warmth, friends, and light. Where were we headed, traveling through this long, bottomless night?

With those thoughts going through my head I returned my gaze to the table, to notice that the mezzotint in front of me was changing. As though the frozen stream of time was thawing, the radiant morning light was fading. The depicted landscape of Onomichi sank into twilight, and then the darkness of night. I looked up at the other three, but it seemed that the only one who could see the changes in the engraving was me.

Like it was reflecting the changes in the engraving, the living room also sank into darkness. Nakai and Hasegawa continued to talk happily, but their voices no longer reached me. Dazed, I could only watch these changes take place.

The last thing I heard was the voice of Kishida Michio.

“Just a single morning—”



When I came to, I was sitting in the living room alone.

The warm scene that had been there just moments ago had completely changed. The shutters were drawn over the glass door, the room was in darkness, and the only light was a pale light coming from the window of the kitchen. A layer of dust covered the furniture in the living room, and the ambience in the house was that of a ruin.

A single engraving was set on the table in front of me: *Night Train—Onomichi*.

The town of Onomichi was sunken into a velvet darkness. The house on the hill had transformed into a black shadow, and the girl who had raised her hand to the rising sun was nowhere to be found. Instead, my eyes were drawn to the single lamp that shone

brilliantly in the middle of the long slope. Underneath that light stood a faceless young woman, her right hand raised as if calling to me. The sight brought to mind a neverending night.

After staring at that engraving for a little while, I looked around the deserted living room one more time.

Kishida and Hasegawa were still living in this house. That I could no longer see them was only because their world was hidden from my eyes, and my world was hidden from theirs. Only Kishida's *Night Train* and *Dawn* had opened the window.

Treading softly, I went outside through the front door.

The pre-dawn air was cold as winter.

At the gate I turned around. The sight of Kishida's ruined house pained me; piles of refuse were dumped by the entranceway, and the untended trees grew thick and tangled. The roof and the walls were stained and dirty. No one lived here now.

Standing on the road looking up at the house, I began to hear sounds from the surrounding neighborhood. The scraping of dishes on the table, the hiss of showers turning on, the rumble of motorbikes going by, the footsteps of people walking to work, the chirping of birds, the wailing of infants.

How strange that I had never heard them before, these sounds of a briskly stirring morning.



I went up the stone steps of the embankment and walked toward the Kamo River.

Here were people walking their dogs or jogging, their breaths puffing out white as they passed by along the riverbank. I sat down on the dirt, still wet with dew, and looked on in amazement. Breathing in the chilly morning air, I looked up at the sky, so beautiful and bright it looked as if it had been washed clean.

I doubted I would see Hasegawa again. But after meeting her again for the first time in ten years, I could recall so well the way she talked, the way she moved. Time was passing for her, just as it was passing for me.

I thought now about the four friends who had assembled with me in Kurama for the first time in ten years. Assuming that it had been me who had disappeared on the way back from the festival, not them, they had to have been worried sick the whole night. I had to let them know I was all right.

I stood up and dialed Nakai's number. I was unsure whether the call would go through, but after it rang for a moment he picked up, his voice filled with concern.

"...Ōhashi?"

The sound of that voice seemed so dear to me now. I took a deep breath and said,
“Good morning.”

I’d never felt morning so strongly as I did in that moment.

Just a single morning—

Remembering those words I squinted at the sky above Higashiyama. It was so
dazzling it almost brought tears to my eyes.

From over the mountains came the light of dawn.