

FICTION

# YESTERDAY

HARUKI MURAKAMI



As far as I know, the only person ever to put Japanese lyrics to the Beatles song “Yesterday” (and to do so in the distinctive Kansai dialect, no less) was a guy named Kitaru. He used to belt out his own version when he was taking a bath.

Yesterday  
Is two days before tomorrow,  
The day after two days ago.

This is how it began, as I recall, but I haven’t heard it for a long time and I’m not positive that’s how it went. From start to finish, though, Kitaru’s lyrics were almost meaningless, nonsense that had nothing to do with the original words. That familiar lovely, melancholy melody paired with the breezy Kansai dialect—which you might call the opposite of pathos—made for a strange combination, a bold denial of anything constructive. At least, that’s how it sounded to me. At the time, I just listened and shook my head. I was able to laugh it off, but I also read a kind of hidden import in it.

I first met Kitaru at a coffee shop near the main gate of Waseda University, where we worked part time, I in the kitchen and Kitaru as a waiter. We used to talk a lot during downtime at the shop. We were both twenty, our birthdays only a week apart.

“Kitaru is an unusual last name,” I said one day.

“Yeah, for sure,” Kitaru replied in his heavy Kansai accent.

“The Lotte baseball team had a pitcher with the same name.”

“The two of us aren’t related. Not so common a name, though, so who knows? Maybe there’s a connection somewhere.”

I was a sophomore at Waseda then, in the literature department. Kitaru had failed the entrance exam and was attending a prep course to cram for the retake. He’d failed the exam twice, actually, but you wouldn’t have guessed it by the way he acted. He didn’t seem to put much effort into studying. When he was free, he read a lot, but nothing related to the exam—a biography of Jimi Hendrix, books of shogi problems, “Where Did the Universe Come From?” and the like. He told me that he commuted to the cram school from his parents’ place in Ota Ward, in Tokyo.

“Ota Ward?” I asked, astonished. “But I was sure you were from Kansai.”

“No way. Denenchofu, born and bred.”

This really threw me.

“Then how come you speak Kansai dialect?” I asked.

“I acquired it. Just made up my mind to learn it.”

“Acquired it?”

“Yeah, I studied hard, see? Verbs, nouns, accent—the whole nine yards. Same as studying English or French. Went to Kansai for training, even.”

So there were people who studied Kansai dialect as if it were a foreign language? That was news to me. It made me realize all over again how huge Tokyo was, and how many things there were that I didn’t know. Reminded me of the novel “Sanshiro,” a typical country-boy-bumbles-his-way-around-the-big-city story.

“As a kid, I was a huge Hanshin Tigers fan,” Kitaru explained. “Went to their games whenever they played in Tokyo. But if I sat in the Hanshin bleachers and spoke with a Tokyo dialect nobody wanted to have anything to do with me. Couldn’t be part of the community, y’know? So I figured, I gotta learn Kansai dialect, and I worked like a dog to do just that.”

“That was your motivation?” I could hardly believe it.

“Right. That’s how much the Tigers mean to me,” Kitaru said. “Now Kansai dialect’s all I speak—at school, at home, even when I talk in my sleep. My dialect’s near perfect, don’t you think?”

“Absolutely. I was positive you were from Kansai,” I said.

“If I’d put as much effort into studying for the entrance exams as I did into studying Kansai dialect, I wouldn’t be a two-time loser like I am now.”

He had a point. Even his self-directed putdown was kind of Kansai-like.

“So where’re you from?” he asked.

“Kansai. Near Kobe,” I said.

“Near Kobe? Where?”

“Ashiya,” I replied.

“Wow, nice place. Why didn’t you say so from the start?”

I explained. When people asked me where I was from and I said Ashiya, they always assumed that my family was wealthy. But there were all types in Ashiya. My family, for one, wasn’t par-

ticularly well off. My dad worked for a pharmaceutical company and my mom was a librarian. Our house was small and our car a cream-colored Corolla. So when people asked me where I was from I always said “near Kobe,” so they didn’t get any preconceived ideas about me.

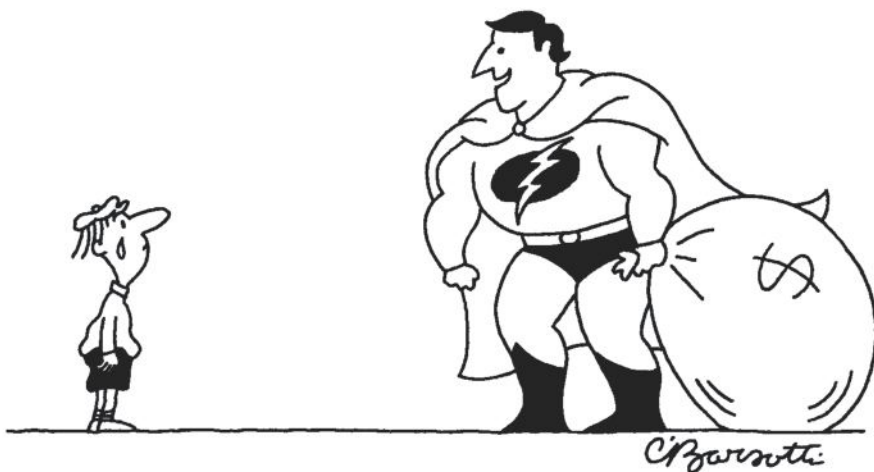
“Man, sounds like you and me are the same,” Kitaru said. “My address is Denenchofu—a pretty high-class place—but my house is in the shabbiest part of town. Shabby house as well. You should come over sometime. You’ll be, like, *Wha’? This is Denenchofu? No way!* But worrying about something like that makes no sense, yeah? It’s just an address. I do the opposite—hit ’em right up front with the fact that I’m from *Den-en-cho-fu*. Like, how d’you like *that*, huh?”

I was impressed. And after this we became friends.

Until I graduated from high school, I spoke nothing but Kansai dialect. But all it took was a month in Tokyo for me to become completely fluent in Tokyo standard. I was kind of surprised that I could adapt so quickly. Maybe I have a chameleon type of personality. Or maybe my sense of language is more advanced than most people’s. Either way, no one believed now that I was actually from Kansai.

Another reason I stopped using Kansai dialect was that I wanted to become a totally different person.

When I moved from Kansai to Tokyo to start college, I spent the whole bullet-train ride mentally reviewing my eighteen years and realized that almost everything that had happened to me was pretty embarrassing. I’m not exaggerating. I didn’t want to remember any of it—it was so pathetic. The more I thought about my life up to then, the more I hated myself. It wasn’t that I didn’t have a few good memories—I did. A handful of happy experiences. But, if you added them up, the shameful, painful memories far outnumbered the others. When I thought of how I’d been living, how I’d been approaching life, it was all so trite, so miserably pointless. Unimaginative middle-class rubbish, and I wanted to gather it all up and stuff it away in some drawer. Or else light it on fire and watch it go up in



*"There's a life lesson here, kid. Not all bad guys look like bad guys, and not all good guys look like good guys."*

smoke (though what kind of smoke it would emit I had no idea). Anyway, I wanted to get rid of it all and start a new life in Tokyo as a brand-new person. Jettisoning Kansai dialect was a practical (as well as symbolic) method of accomplishing this. Because, in the final analysis, the language we speak constitutes who we are as people. At least that's the way it seemed to me at eighteen.

"Embarrassing? What was so embarrassing?" Kitaru asked me.

"You name it."

"Didn't get along with your folks?"

"We get along O.K.," I said. "But it was still embarrassing. Just being with them made me feel embarrassed."

"You're weird, y'know that?" Kitaru said. "What's so embarrassing about being with your folks? I have a good time with mine."

I couldn't really explain it. What's so bad about having a cream-colored Corolla? I couldn't say. My parents weren't interested in spending money for the sake of appearances, that's all.

"My parents are on my case all the time 'cause I don't study enough. I hate it, but whaddaya gonna do? That's their job. You gotta look past that, y'know?"

"You're pretty easygoing, aren't you?" I said.

"You got a girl?" Kitaru asked.

"Not right now."

"But you had one before?"

"Until a little while ago."

"You guys broke up?"

"That's right," I said.

"Why'd you break up?"

"It's a long story. I don't want to get into it."

"She let you go all the way?"

I shook my head. "No, not all the way."

"That's why you broke up?"

I thought about it. "That's part of it."

"But she let you get to third base?"

"Rounding third base."

"How far'd you go, exactly?"

"I don't want to talk about it," I said.

"Is that one of those *embarrassing things* you mentioned?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Man, complicated life you got there," Kitaru said.

The first time I heard Kitaru sing "Yesterday" with those crazy lyrics he was in the bath at his house in Denenchofu (which, despite his description, was not a shabby house in a shabby neighborhood but an ordinary house in an ordinary neighborhood, an older house, but bigger than my house in Ashiya, not a standout in any way—and, incidentally, the car in the driveway was a navy-blue Golf, a recent model). Whenever Kitaru came home, he immediately dropped everything and jumped in the bath. And, once he was in the tub, he stayed there forever. So I would often lug a little round stool to the adjacent changing

room and sit there, talking to him through the sliding door that was open an inch or so. That was the only way to avoid listening to his mother drone on and on (mostly complaints about her weird son and how he needed to study more).

"Those lyrics don't make any sense," I told him. "It just sounds like you're making fun of the song 'Yesterday.'"

"Don't be a smart-ass. I'm not making fun of it. Even if I was, you gotta remember that John loved nonsense and word games. Right?"

"But Paul's the one who wrote the words and music for 'Yesterday.'"

"You sure about that?"

"Absolutely," I declared. "Paul wrote the song and recorded it by himself in the studio with a guitar. A string quartet was added later, but the other Beatles weren't involved at all. They thought it was too wimpy for a Beatles song."

"Really? I'm not up on that kind of privileged information."

"It's not privileged information. It's a well-known fact," I said.

"Who cares? Those are just details," Kitaru's voice said calmly from a cloud of steam. "I'm singing in the bath in my own house. Not putting out a record or anything. I'm not violating any copyright, or bothering a soul. You've got no right to complain."

And he launched into the chorus, his voice carrying loud and clear. He hit the high notes especially well. I could hear him lightly splashing the bathwater as an accompaniment. I probably should have sung along to encourage him, but I just couldn't bring myself to. Sitting there, talking through a glass door to keep him company while he soaked in the tub for an hour wasn't all that much fun.

"But how can you spend so long soaking in the bath?" I asked. "Doesn't your body get all swollen?"

"When I soak in a bath for a long time, all kinds of good ideas come to me," Kitaru said.

"You mean like those lyrics to 'Yesterday'?"

"Well, that'd be one of them," Kitaru said.

"Instead of spending so much time thinking up ideas in the bath, shouldn't you be studying for the entrance exam?" I asked.



"Jeez, aren't you a downer. My mom says exactly the same thing. Aren't you a little young to be, like, the voice of wisdom or something?"

"But you've been cramming for two years. Aren't you getting tired of it?"

"For sure. Of course I wanna be in college as soon as I can."

"Then why not study harder?"

"Yeah—well," he said, drawing the words out. "If I could do that, I'd be doing it already."

"College is a drag," I said. "I was totally disappointed once I got in. But not getting in would be even more of a drag."

"Fair enough," Kitaru said. "I got no comeback for that."

"So why don't you study?"

"Lack of motivation," he said.

"Motivation?" I said. "Shouldn't being able to go out on dates with your girlfriend be good motivation?"

There was a girl Kitaru had known since they were in elementary school together. A childhood girlfriend, you could say. They'd been in the same grade in school, but unlike him she had got into Sophia University straight out of high school. She was now majoring in French literature and had joined the tennis club. He'd shown me a photograph of her, and she was stunning. A beautiful figure and a lively expression. But the two of them weren't seeing each other much these days. They'd talked it over and decided that it was better not to date until Kitaru had passed the entrance exams, so that he could focus on his studies. Kitaru had been the one who suggested this. "O.K.," she'd said, "if that's what you want." They talked on the phone a lot but met at most once a week, and those meetings were more like interviews than regular dates. They'd have tea and catch up on what they'd each been doing. They'd hold hands and exchange a brief kiss, but that was as far as it went.

Kitaru wasn't what you'd call handsome, but he was pleasant-looking enough. He was slim, and his hair and clothes were simple and stylish. As long as he didn't say anything, you'd assume he was a sensitive, well-brought-up city boy. His only possible defect was that his face, a bit too slender and delicate, could give the impres-

sion that he was lacking in personality or was wishy-washy. But the moment he opened his mouth this over-all positive effect collapsed like a sandcastle under an exuberant Labrador retriever. People were dismayed by his Kansai dialect, which he delivered, as if that weren't enough, in a slightly piercing, high-pitched voice. The mismatch with his looks was overwhelming; even for me it was, at first, a little too much to handle.

"Hey, Tanimura, aren't you lonely without a girlfriend?" Kitaru asked me the next day.

"I don't deny it," I told him.

"Then how about you go out with my girl?"

I couldn't understand what he meant.

"What do you mean—*go out* with her?"

"She's a great girl. Pretty, honest, smart like all getout. You go out with her, you won't regret it. I guarantee it."

"I'm sure I wouldn't," I said. "But why would I go out with your girlfriend? It doesn't make sense."

"'Cause you're a good guy," Kitaru said. "Otherwise I wouldn't suggest it. Erika and I have spent almost our whole lives together so far. We sort of

naturally became a couple, and everybody around us approved. Our friends, our parents, our teachers. A tight little couple, always together."

Kitaru clasped his hands to illustrate.

"If we'd both gone straight into college, our lives would've been all warm and fuzzy, but I blew the entrance exam big time, and here we are. I'm not sure why, exactly, but things kept on getting worse. I'm not blaming anyone for that—it's all my fault."

I listened to him in silence.

"So I kinda split myself in two," Kitaru said. He pulled his hands apart.

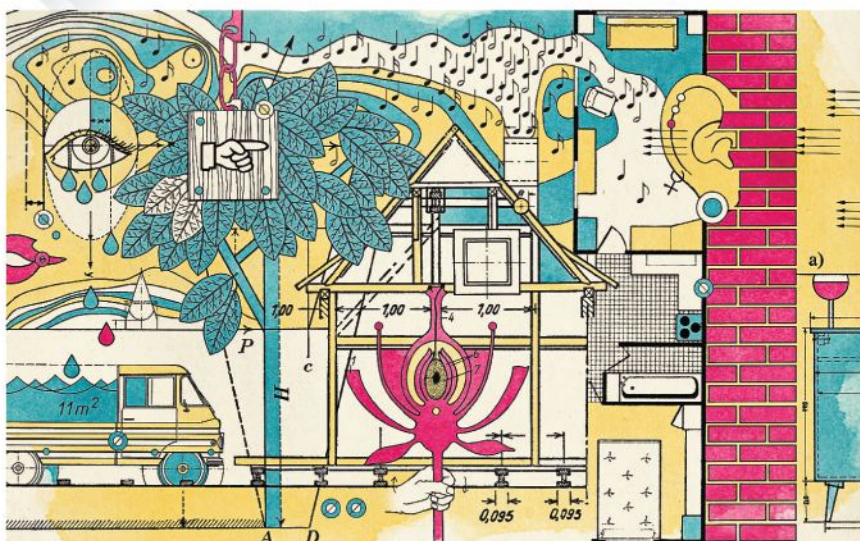
"How so?" I asked.

He stared at his palms for a moment and then spoke. "What I mean is part of me's, like, worried, y'know? I mean, I'm going to some fricking cram school, studying for the fricking entrance exams, while Erika's having a ball in college. Playing tennis, doing whatever. She's got new friends, is probably dating some new guy, for all I know. When I think of all that, I feel left behind. Like my mind's in a fog. You know what I mean?"

"I guess so," I said.

"But another part of me is, like—





One looked like a woman but was too tall, or maybe it was just that the other one was so small, like a little boy. I saw them around Portland all the time that summer. Were they young or old? Couldn't tell. Were they from the present, or another era; i.e., time-travellers? Wasn't sure. They were in black and white, neckties and knickers. A little dirty. Always leaning on each other.

Their house was the one with the big wooden sign on the porch—a blue finger pointing thataway. I began to hang around. Not comfortably or with any panache—I just couldn't seem to stay away from the finger, and those strange people, especially the little one, TV. She, if she was a she, was every boy from every childhood book: Christopher Robin, Huck Finn, Gilbert Blythe in “Anne of Green Gables.” I had searched for these boys in real life, but they always turned out to be assholes. Here, finally, was one who really understood the magic of boyishness, from a girl's point of view: snub-nosed, gallant, and full of *aw shucks*. She also had a kind of enormous Misfits tattoo on her arm.

Usually I just sat on their porch swing, hoping the right one would come out. One evening, the taller one sat down and looked me over, her whiskery face narrowing. I was wear-

ing the swimsuit of an obese lady from the twenties; it hung from my shoulders like a floppy barrel.

“Are you scamming on my girlfriend?” she asked flatly.

My face turned red; I felt slapped. And awakened. They were *girl-friends*. And I could be, too. My lust was catalyzed with a silent *boom*.

“No,” I whispered.

My college break ended; I went back to California and pined for TV, day in, day out. A full year passed. Then one night Bikini Kill came through town—and guess who their roadie was? She was single now. When the band rolled on, TV stayed—in a grand apartment. She'd been hired to paint the living room yellow; another girl and I volunteered to help. I still have pictures from that night, from the hours and then minutes before our consummation. I'm wearing a drum-major uniform; TV looks like a newsie. The friend is too cute; I was worried about that. But, in the end, the cute friend slept on the couch and it was I who shared the queen bed with TV. We lay like chaste logs, apart and awake. After about forty-five minutes, I very, very, VERY slowly sent my hand on the long trek across the sheets. My fingers grazed her arm. In an instant she whipped around and pulled me to her.

I'm pretty sure I overcompensated for my lack of experience. I may have fisted her. I did. I fisted her as if I fisted vaginas every day of the week and twice on Sundays. It was probably awful for her. We kissed a lot. In the morning I awoke with a new understanding of life. Pain and loneliness were in the past now: I had someone.

I tried to go back to college—but why? Why do something that makes you miserable when you could have exquisite joy every second? By Christmas, I had dropped out and was living with TV in Portland.

It wasn't an easy life. We didn't have money or health insurance, and I had problems with my eyes. Also, TV and her friends never let me forget how sexist, classist, and racist I was. It was inherent, and anything I might say in my defense only proved my guilt. I cried a lot and made sure to lob the same accusations at my parents. Every relationship dynamic was brand-new to me; when TV needed some alone time, I had to try really hard not to die of sadness. When I needed alone time, I questioned her value as a human. Maybe I had been brainwashed, maybe everyone in a couple is brainwashed—is it better to resist or to give in and perhaps lose your soul? That kind of thing. But we would always be together, obviously. We were part of a feminist revolution. We were in a band with our housemate, Carla. We had built a recording studio in our basement. We were on the cusp of radicalizing everything.

TV broke up with me in a van, right before we stepped into a party. I was crying too hard to go in, so I just stayed there, incoherent with disbelief. She moved back in with her grandparents, who had brought her up. I took three buses to get to their house, only to stand silently in front of her, tears streaming, before walking back to the bus stop. The idea of playing it cool had simply not been introduced to me at this juncture. TV had conceived me, given birth to me,

and now she was abandoning me, before I even knew how to walk or care for myself.

Meanwhile, Carla and I were having trouble paying our rent. As far as we could see, the only solution was for one of us to go downtown immediately, strip, and come back with some cash.

"It can't be me, because I wear glasses," Carla said, pointing to her face. It was true, I had never seen a stripper with glasses. Or a stripper, for that matter. Taking my clothes off for money didn't really solve anything, but it gave me some external obstacles that passed the time. I moved into a tiny studio and Carla moved next door, into a much bigger and more wonderful corner apartment. I was jealous of my friend, but the worst was yet to come.

"I want to fuck Heather" was how she put it. Not TV, but my true love's real name. (I've changed the names here.)

"Do you love her?" I asked, trembling.

"Not yet."

But love was coming. Before long, TV moved in with Carla, and we shared a wall. My eye condition had worsened; I couldn't go outside in daylight now. So I lay in bed, high on stolen Vicodin, Portishead throbbing in my Walkman. It was never loud enough to block out their inconceivably loud sex. It sounded as though they were hitting each other with a stick. And in fact, when they finally moved out and I stumbled into the beautiful, vacant corner apartment, there were just three objects left behind: two wineglasses and a bamboo cane. I threw them in a dumpster. It was my apartment now. I traced the entire perimeter of my new home with one finger while chanting the lyrics to what would become my first album. It was a spell of self-protection; this space was just for me and the furious, jaw-dropping, vengeful art I planned to make in it. Now I was ready to begin. ♦

relieved? If we'd just kept going like we were, with no problems or anything, a nice couple smoothly sailing through life, it's like... we graduate from college, get married, we're this wonderful married couple everybody's happy about, we have the typical two kids, put 'em in the good old Denenchofu elementary school, go out to the Tama River banks on Sundays, Ob-la-di, Ob-la-da... I'm not saying that kinda life's bad. But I wonder, y'know, if life should really be that easy, that comfortable. It might be better to go our separate ways for a while, and if we find out that we really can't get along without each other, then we get back together."

"So you're saying that things being smooth and comfortable is a problem. Is that it?"

"Yeah, that's about the size of it."

"But why do I have to go out with your girlfriend?" I asked.

"I figure, if she's gonna go out with other guys, it's better if it's you. 'Cause I know you. And you can gimme, like, updates and stuff."

That didn't make any sense to me, though I admit I was interested in the idea of meeting Erika. I also wanted to find out why a beautiful girl like her would want to go out with a weird character like Kitaru. I've always been a little shy around new people, but I never lack curiosity.

"How far have you gone with her?" I asked.

"You mean sex?" Kitaru said.

"Yeah. Have you gone all the way?"

Kitaru shook his head. "I just couldn't, see? I've known her since she was a kid, and it's kinda embarrassing, y'know, to act like we're just starting out, and take her clothes off, fondle her, touch her, whatever. If it were some other girl, I don't think I'd have a problem, but putting my hand in her underpants, even just thinking about doing it with her—I dunno—it just seems *wrong*. You know?"

I didn't.

"I can't explain it well," Kitaru said. "Like, when you're jerking off, you picture some actual girl, yeah?"

"I suppose," I said.

"But I can't picture Erika. It's like doing that's wrong, y'know? So when I do it I think about some other girl.

Somebody I don't really like that much. Whaddya think?"

I thought it over but couldn't reach any conclusion. Other people's masturbation habits were beyond me. There were things about my own that I couldn't fathom.

"Anyway, let's all get together once, the three of us," Kitaru said. "Then you can think it over."

The three of us—me, Kitaru, and his girlfriend, whose full name was Erika Kuritani—met on a Sunday afternoon in a coffee shop near Denenchofu Station. She was almost as tall as Kitaru, nicely tanned, and decked out in a neatly ironed short-sleeved white blouse and navy-blue miniskirt. Like the perfect model of a respectable uptown college girl. She was as attractive as in her photograph, but what really drew me in person was less her looks than the kind of effortless vitality that seemed to radiate from her. She was the opposite of Kitaru, who paled a bit in comparison.

"I'm really happy that Aki-kun has a friend," Erika told me. Kitaru's first name was Akiyoshi. She was the only person in the world who called him Aki-kun.

"Don't exaggerate. I got tons of friends," Kitaru said.

"No, you don't," Erika said. "A person like you can't make friends. You were born in Tokyo, yet all you speak is Kansai dialect, and every time you open your mouth it's one annoying thing after another about the Hanshin Tigers or shogi moves. There's no way a weird person like you can get along well with normal people."

"Well, if you're gonna get into that, this guy's pretty weird, too." Kitaru pointed at me. "He's from Ashiya but only speaks Tokyo dialect."

"That's much more common," Erika said. "At least more common than the opposite."

"Hold on, now—that's cultural discrimination," Kitaru said. "Cultures are all equal, y'know. Tokyo dialect's no better than Kansai."

"Maybe they are equal," Erika said, "but since the Meiji Restoration the way people speak in Tokyo has been the standard for spoken Japanese. I mean, has anyone ever trans-



lated 'Franny and Zooey' into Kansai dialect?"

"If they did, I'd buy it, for sure," Kitaru said.

I probably would, too, I thought, but kept quiet.

Wisely, instead of being dragged deeper into that discussion, Erika Kuritani changed the subject.

"There's a girl in my tennis club who's from Ashiya, too," she said, turning to me. "Eiko Sakurai. Do you happen to know her?"

"I do," I said. Eiko Sakurai was a tall, gangly girl, whose parents operated a large golf course. Stuck-up, flat-chested, with a funny-looking nose and a none too wonderful personality. Tennis was the one thing she'd always been good at. If I never saw her again, it would be too soon for me.

"He's a nice guy, and he hasn't got a girlfriend right now," Kitaru said to Erika. "His looks are O.K., he has good manners, and he knows all kinds of things. He's neat and clean, as you can see, and doesn't have any terrible diseases. A promising young man, I'd say."

"All right," Erika said. "There are some really cute new members of our club I'd be happy to introduce him to."

"Nah, that's not what I mean," Kitaru said. "Could *you* go out with him? I'm not in college yet and I can't go out with you the way I'd like to. Instead of me, you could go out with *him*. And then I wouldn't have to worry."

"What do you mean, you wouldn't have to worry?" Erika asked.

"I mean, like, I know both of you, and I'd feel better if you went out with him instead of some guy I've never laid eyes on."

Erika stared at Kitaru as if she couldn't quite believe what she was seeing. Finally, she spoke. "So you're saying it's O.K. for me to go out with another guy if it's Tanimura-kun here? You're seriously suggesting we go out, on a date?"

"Hey, it's not such a terrible idea, is it? Or are you already going out with some other guy?"

"No, there's no one else," Erika said in a quiet voice.

"Then why not go out with *him*?"

It can be a kinda cultural exchange."

"Cultural exchange," Erika repeated. She looked at me.

It didn't seem as though anything I said would help, so I kept silent. I held my coffee spoon in my hand, studying the design on it, like a museum curator scrutinizing an artifact from an Egyptian tomb.

"*Cultural exchange*? What's that supposed to mean?" she asked Kitaru.

"Like, bringing in another viewpoint might not be so bad for us..."

"That's your idea of cultural exchange?"

"Yeah, what I mean is..."

"All right," Erika Kuritani said firmly. If there had been a pencil nearby, I might have picked it up and snapped it in two. "If you think we should do it, Aki-kun, then O.K. Let's do a cultural exchange."

She took a sip of tea, returned the cup to the saucer, turned to me, and smiled. "Since Aki-kun has recommended we do this, Tanimura-kun, let's go on a date. Sounds like fun. When are you free?"

I couldn't speak. Not being able to find the right words at crucial times is one of my many problems.

Erika took a red leather planner from her bag, opened it, and checked her schedule. "How is this Saturday?" she asked.

"I have no plans," I said.

"Saturday it is, then. Where shall we go?"

"He likes movies," Kitaru told her. "His dream is to write screenplays someday."

"Then let's go see a movie. What kind of movie should we see? I'll let you decide that, Tanimura-kun. I don't like horror films, but, other than that, anything's fine."

"She's really a scaredy-cat," Kitaru said to me. "When we were kids and went to the haunted house at Korakuen, she had to hold my hand and—"

"After the movie let's have a nice meal together," Erika said, cutting him off. She wrote her phone number down on a sheet from her notebook and passed it to me. "When you decide the time and place, could you give me a call?"

I didn't have a phone back then (this was long before cell phones were even a



Maya Angelou, the poet,

POSTSCRIPT



*memoirist, calypso singer, actress, civil-rights activist, and teacher, photographed at the Algonquin Hotel, in 1987.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRIGITTE LACOMBE



glimmer on the horizon), so I gave her the number for the coffee shop where Kitaru and I worked. I glanced at my watch.

"I'm sorry but I've got to get going," I said, as cheerfully as I could manage. "I have this report I have to finish up by tomorrow."

"Can't it wait?" Kitaru said. "We only just got here. Why don't you stay so we can talk some more? There's a great noodle shop right around the corner."

Erika didn't express an opinion. I put the money for my coffee on the table and stood up. "It's an important report," I explained, "so I really can't put it off." Actually, it didn't matter all that much.

"I'll call you tomorrow or the day after," I told Erika.

"I'll be looking forward to it," she said, a wonderful smile rising to her lips. A smile that, to me at least, seemed a little too good to be true.

I left the coffee shop and as I walked to the station I wondered what the hell I was doing. Brooding over how things had turned out—after everything had already been decided—was another of my chronic problems.

That Saturday, Erika and I met in Shibuya and saw a Woody Allen film set in New York. Somehow I'd got the sense that she might be fond of Woody Allen movies. And I was pretty sure that Kitaru had never taken her to see one. Luckily, it was a good movie, and we were both feeling cheerful when we left the theatre.

We strolled around the twilight streets for a while, then went to a small Italian place in Sakuragaoka and had pizza and Chianti. It was a casual, moderately priced restaurant. Subdued lighting, candles on the tables. (Most Italian restaurants at the time had candles on the tables and checked gingham tablecloths.) We talked about all kinds of things, the sort of conversation you'd expect two college sophomores on a first date to have (assuming you could actually call this a date). The movie we'd just seen, our college life, hobbies. We enjoyed talking more than I'd expected, and she even laughed out loud a couple of times. I don't want to sound like I'm bragging, but I seem to

have a knack for getting girls to laugh.

"I heard from Aki-kun that you broke up with your high-school girlfriend not long ago?" Erika asked me.

"Yeah," I replied. "We went out for almost three years, but it didn't work out. Unfortunately."

"Aki-kun said things didn't work out with her because of sex. That she didn't—how should I put it?—give you what you wanted?"

"That was part of it. But not all. If I'd really loved her, I think I could have been patient. If I'd been sure that I loved her, I mean. But I wasn't."

Erika nodded.

"Even if we'd gone all the way, things most likely would have ended up the same," I said. "I think it was inevitable."

"Is it hard on you?" she asked.

"Is *what* hard?"

"Suddenly being on your own after being a couple."

"Sometimes," I said honestly.

"But maybe going through that kind of tough, lonely experience is necessary when you're young? Part of the process of growing up?"

"You think so?"

"The way surviving hard winters makes a tree grow stronger, the growth rings inside it tighter."

I tried to imagine growth rings inside me. But the only thing I could picture was a leftover slice of *Baumkuchen* cake, the kind with treelike rings inside it.



"I agree that people need that sort of period in their lives," I said. "It's even better if they know that it'll end someday."

She smiled. "Don't worry. I know you'll meet somebody nice soon."

"I hope so," I said.

Erika mulled over something while I helped myself to the pizza.

"Tanimura-kun, I wanted to ask your advice on something. Is it O.K.?"

"Sure," I said. This was another

problem I often had to deal with: people I'd just met wanting my advice about something important. And I was pretty sure that what Erika wanted my advice about wasn't very pleasant.

"I'm confused," she began.

Her eyes shifted back and forth, like those of a cat in search of something.

"I'm sure you know this already, but though Aki-kun's in his second year of cramming for the entrance exams, he barely studies. He skips exam-prep school a lot, too. So I'm sure he'll fail again next year. If he aimed for a lower-tier school, he could get in somewhere, but he has his heart set on Waseda. He doesn't listen to me, or to his parents. It's become like an obsession for him. . . . But if he really feels that way he should study hard so that he can pass the Waseda exam, and he doesn't."

"Why doesn't he study more?"

"He truly believes that he'll pass the entrance exam if luck is on his side," Erika said. "That studying is a waste of time." She sighed and went on, "In elementary school he was always at the top of his class academically. But once he got to junior high his grades started to slide. He was a bit of a child prodigy—his personality just isn't suited to the daily grind of studying. He'd rather go off and do crazy things on his own. I'm the exact opposite. I'm not all that bright, but I always buckle down and get the job done."

I hadn't studied very hard myself and had got into college on the first try. Maybe luck had been on my side.

"I'm very fond of Aki-kun," she continued. "He's got a lot of wonderful qualities. But sometimes it's hard for me to go along with his extreme way of thinking. Take this thing with Kansai dialect. Why does somebody who was born and raised in Tokyo go to the trouble of learning Kansai dialect and speak it all the time? I don't get it, I really don't. At first I thought it was a joke, but it isn't. He's dead serious."

"I think he wants to have a different personality, to be somebody different from who he's been up till now," I said.

"That's why he only speaks Kansai dialect?"

"I agree with you that it's a radical way of dealing with it."

Erika picked up a slice of pizza and bit off a piece the size of a large postage

stamp. She chewed it thoughtfully before she spoke.

"Tanimura-kun, I'm asking this because I don't have anyone else to ask. You don't mind?"

"Of course not," I said. What else could I say?

"As a general rule," she said, "when a guy and a girl go out for a long time and get to know each other really well, the guy has a physical interest in the girl, right?"

"As a general rule, I'd say so, yes."

"If they kiss, he'll want to go further?"

"Normally, sure."

"You feel that way, too?"

"Of course," I said.

"But Aki-kun doesn't. When we're alone, he doesn't want to go any further."

It took a while for me to choose the right words. "That's a personal thing," I said finally. "People have different ways of getting what they want. Kitaru likes you a lot—that's a given—but your relationship is so close and comfortable he may not be able to take things to the next level, the way most people do."

"You really think so?"

I shook my head. "To tell the truth, I don't really understand it. I've never experienced it myself. I'm just saying that could be one possibility."

"Sometimes it feels like he doesn't have any sexual desire for me."

"I'm sure he does. But it might be a little embarrassing for him to admit it."

"But we're twenty, adults already. Old enough not to be embarrassed."

"Some people might mature a little faster than others," I said.

Erika thought about this. She seemed to be the type who always tackles things head on.

"I think Kitaru is honestly seeking something," I went on. "In his own way, at his own pace. It's just that I don't think he's grasped yet what it is. That's why he can't make any progress. If you don't know what you're looking for, it's not easy to look for it."

Erika raised her head and stared me right in the eye. The candle flame was reflected in her dark eyes, a small, brilliant point of light. It was so beautiful I had to look away.

"Of course, you know him much better than I do," I averred.

She sighed again.

"Actually, I'm seeing another guy be-



*"O.K.—let's get our stories straight, and our characters sympathetic and well drawn."*

• •

sides Aki-kun," she said. "A boy in my tennis club who's a year ahead of me."

It was my turn to remain silent.

"I truly love Aki-kun, and I don't think I could ever feel the same way about anybody else. Whenever I'm away from him I get this terrible ache in my chest, always in the same spot. It's true. There's a place in my heart reserved just for him. But at the same time I have this strong *urge* inside me to try something else, to come into contact with all kinds of people. Call it curiosity, a thirst to know more. It's a natural emotion and I can't suppress it, no matter how much I try."

I pictured a healthy plant outgrowing the pot it had been planted in.

"When I say I'm confused, that's what I mean," Erika said.

"Then you should tell Kitaru exactly how you feel," I said. "If you hide it from him that you're seeing someone else, and he happens to find out anyway, it'll hurt him. You don't want that."

"But can he accept that? The fact

that I'm going out with someone else?"

"I imagine he'll understand how you feel," I said.

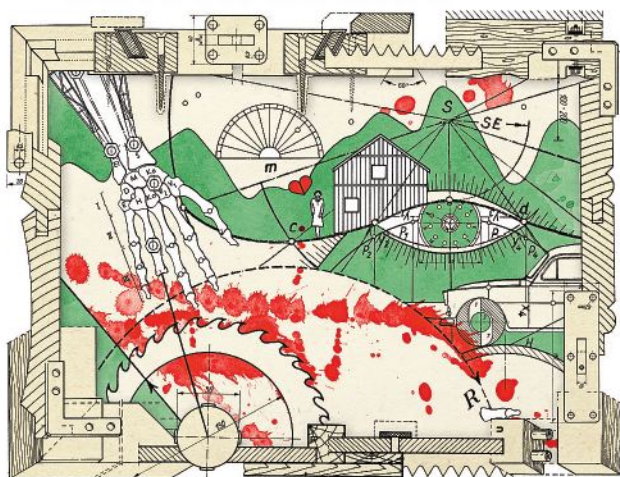
"You think so?"

"I do," I said.

I figured that Kitaru would understand her confusion, because he was feeling the same thing. In that sense, they really were on the same wavelength. Still, I wasn't entirely confident that he would calmly accept what she was actually doing (or *might* be doing). He didn't seem that strong a person to me. But it would be even harder for him if she kept a secret from him or lied to him.

Erika stared at the candle flame flickering in the breeze from the A.C. "I often have the same dream," she said. "Aki-kun and I are on a ship. A long journey on a large ship. We're together in a small cabin, it's late at night, and through the porthole we can see the full moon. But that moon is made of pure, transparent ice. And the bottom half of it is sunk in the sea. 'That looks like the moon,'

# BEAUTIFUL GIRL



When I was fifteen, I cut off the last joint of my left ring finger during a woodshop class. I was laughing at a joke while cutting a board on a table saw. The bite of the blade sent a great shock through me, and I didn't dare look down, but the bleached faces of the other boys told me just how bad it was.

They didn't reassemble bodies in those days. Later, I heard that one of the guys in the class had picked up the joint, complete with dirty fingernail, and scared some girls with it. No surprise, no hard feelings; it was the kind of thing I would've done, and not only because I was a jackass. The girls around me were coming into glorious bloom, and my way of pretending not to be in awe of them was to act as if we were still kids—to tease and provoke them.

I'd never had a girlfriend, not really. In sixth grade, in Seattle, my friend Terry and I used to meet his cousin Patty and another girl at the Admiral Theatre on Saturday nights. Patty and I sat in the back and made out for two hours without exchanging a word, while Terry did the same with Patty's friend. After the movie, Terry and I left by the side exit so his aunt wouldn't see him when she picked the girls up. Never a dance, never a soda with two straws.

That winter, I moved to a village in the Cascades. The elementary school had four rooms, where four teachers taught the eight grades. Of the ten kids in my class, nine were boys. Nevy drove us crazy, favoring this one, then that one. I had her attention for a while when I was new, and never again. Anyway, she was into horses, not boys.

The high school was in Concrete, thirty-two miles downriver. When we finally got there, we found girls, all right, but the pretty ones in our class got picked off by juniors and seniors, and the older ones wouldn't look at us.

That was the situation as I woke one afternoon with two-thirds of a finger and a bandage as big as a boxing glove to find a beautiful girl smiling down at me from the foot of my bed. By then, I'd been in the Mount Vernon Hospital

for almost a week, because my stump had got infected and there was a danger of gangrene. I was floating on a morphine cloud and could only stare. "Hi," she said. "See, Daddy—just like Dr. Kildare!"

"That's my girl, Joelle," the man in the next bed said. There were five others on the ward, all men. Joelle sat on my bed and offered me a candy bar. She said that I looked exactly like Dr. Kildare. I didn't speak, just listened to her husky voice. She had dark-red hair held back from her high brow by pink barrettes. Her skin was pale, pearly, with a few freckles across her cheeks. Her eyes were green, her lips red with lipstick. The other men watched us with amusement. They must have seen that I was in love.

When she came back the next day, she sat beside me again and talked and talked. An unfair grade. An argument with another girl. Before she left, she wrote her telephone number in the book I was reading. I felt embarrassed that she had done this in front of her father, but I needn't have been. When I was discharged and was saying goodbye, her father said, "You call Joelle, now, hear?"

I called Joelle every day. She talked and I agreed, and sympathized, and waxed indignant as required. She wanted me to come visit, and one Saturday I hitchhiked the many miles to her house. She was waiting for me on the front steps of a small white house just off the road. The day was warm and she wore cutoff shorts and a sleeveless blouse. Her whiteness was dazzling. She led me inside to say hello to her father, who was lying on the couch in his bathrobe, watching TV, then she announced that we were going for a walk.

She took my hand, and we climbed the grassy hill behind the house, and sat on a fallen tree. She was quiet now, for the first time, facing me. I understood that she was waiting. That I had come to the moment I'd dreamed of, alone with a girl I liked, a beautiful girl, who liked me, and wanted me to kiss her. And I didn't. Couldn't. Instead, I started talking. I'd been mute before, but now I was babbling, asking her questions about school, her parents, which TV shows she liked. Here she was, with her beautiful green eyes and beautiful red mouth that she wanted me to kiss, and I could only make noise. I was in despair. Finally, she turned away and watched the traffic on the road below. "I wish I had a car," she said.

We walked down the hill, Joelle well ahead of me. She stood by the back door and said, "Bye. Nice to see you."

I called her the next day. I had to do all the talking. When I asked her questions, she said, "Yes," "No," "I guess."

Later, it all seemed like something I'd dreamed up. Why would a beautiful girl give me her number, and hold my hand, and want me to kiss her? Me—a boy without a car, who cut off his own finger?

And I didn't really look like Dr. Kildare. ♦



Aki-kun tells me, 'but it's really made of ice and is only about eight inches thick. So when the sun comes out in the morning it all melts. You should get a good look at it now, while you have the chance.' I've had this dream so many times. It's a beautiful dream. Always the same moon. Always eight inches thick. I'm leaning against Aki-kun, it's just the two of us, the waves lapping gently outside. But every time I wake up I feel unbearably sad."

Erika Kuritani was silent for a time. Then she spoke again. "I think how wonderful it would be if Aki-kun and I could continue on that voyage forever. Every night we'd snuggle close and gaze out the porthole at that moon made of ice. Come morning the moon would melt away, and at night it would reappear. But maybe that's not the case. Maybe one night the moon wouldn't be there. It scares me to think that. I get so frightened it's like I can actually feel my body shrinking."

When I saw Kitaru at the coffee shop the next day, he asked me how the date had gone.

"You kiss her?"

"No way," I said.

"Don't worry—I'm not gonna freak if you did," he said.

"I didn't do anything like that."

"Didn't hold her hand?"

"No, I didn't hold her hand."

"So what'd you do?"

"We went to see a movie, took a walk, had dinner, and talked," I said.

"That's it?"

"Usually you don't try to move too fast on a first date."

"Really?" Kitaru said. "I never been out on a regular date, so I don't know."

"But I enjoyed being with her. If she were my girlfriend, I'd never let her out of my sight."

Kitaru considered this. He was about to say something but thought better of it. "So what'd you eat?" he asked finally.

I told him about the pizza and the Chianti.

"Pizza and Chianti?" He sounded surprised. "I never knew she liked pizza. We've only been to, like, noodle shops and cheap diners. Wine? I didn't even know she could drink."

Kitaru never touched liquor himself.

"There are probably quite a few things you don't know about her," I said.

I answered all his questions about the date. About the Woody Allen film (at his insistence I reviewed the whole plot), the meal (how much the bill came to, whether we split it or not), what she had on (white cotton dress, hair pinned up), what kind of underwear she wore (how would I know that?), what we talked about. I said nothing about her going out with another guy. Nor did I mention her dreams of an icy moon.

"You guys decide when you'll have a second date?"

"No, we didn't," I said.

"Why not? You liked her, didn't you?"

"She's great. But we can't go on like this. I mean, she's *your* girlfriend, right? You say it's O.K. to kiss her, but there's no way I can do that."

More pondering by Kitaru. "Y'know something?" he said finally. "I've been seeing a therapist since the end of junior high. My parents and teachers, they all said to go to one. 'Cause I used to do things at school from time to time. Y'know—not *normal*/kinda things. But going to a therapist hasn't helped, far as I can see. It sounds good in theory, but therapists don't give a crap. They look at you like they know what's going on, then make you talk on and on and just listen. Man, *I* could do *that*."

"You're still seeing a therapist?"

"Yeah. Twice a month. Like throwing your money away, if you ask me. Erika didn't tell you about it?"

I shook my head.

"Tell you the truth, I don't know what's so weird about my way of thinking. To me, it seems like I'm just doing ordinary things in an ordinary way. But people tell me that almost everything I do is weird."

"Well, there are some things about you that are definitely not normal," I said.

"Like what?"

"Like your Kansai dialect."

"You could be right," Kitaru admitted. "That is a little out of the ordinary."

"Normal people wouldn't take things that far."

"Yeah, you're probably right."

"But, as far as I can tell, even if what you do isn't normal, it's not bothering anybody."

"Not right now."

"So what's wrong with that?" I said. I might have been a little upset then (at what or whom I couldn't say). I could feel my tone getting rough around the edges. "If you're not bothering anybody, then so what? You want to speak Kansai dialect, then you *should*. Go for it. You don't want to study for the entrance exam? Then don't. Don't feel like sticking your hand inside Erika Kuritani's panties? Who's saying you have to? It's your life. You should do what you want and forget about what other people think."

Kitaru, mouth slightly open, stared at me in amazement. "You know something, Tanimura? You're a good guy. Though sometimes a little *too* normal, y'know?"

"What're you gonna do?" I said. "You can't just change your personality."

"Exactly. You can't change your personality. That's what I'm tryin' to say."

"But Erika is a great girl," I said. "She really cares about you. Whatever you do, don't let her go. You'll never find such a great girl again."

"I know. You don't gotta tell me," Kitaru said. "But just knowing isn't gonna help."

About two weeks later, Kitaru quit working at the coffee shop. I say quit, but he just suddenly stopped showing up. He didn't get in touch, didn't mention anything about taking time off. And this was during our busiest season, so the owner was pretty pissed. Kitaru was owed a week's pay, but he didn't come to pick it up. He simply vanished. I have to say it hurt me. I'd thought we were good friends, and it was tough to be cut off so completely like that. I didn't have any other friends in Tokyo.

The last two days before he disappeared, Kitaru was unusually quiet. He wouldn't say much when I talked to him. And then he went and vanished. I could have called Erika Kuritani to check on his whereabouts, but somehow I couldn't bring myself to. I figured that what went on between the two of them was their business, and that it wasn't a healthy thing for me to get any more involved than I was. Somehow I had to get by in the narrow little world I belonged to.

After all this happened, for some

reason I kept thinking about my ex-girlfriend. Probably I'd felt something, seeing Kitaru and Erika together. I wrote her a long letter apologizing for how I'd behaved. I could have been a whole lot kinder to her. But I never got a reply.

I recognized Erika Kuritani right away. I'd only seen her twice, and sixteen years had passed since then. But there was no mistaking her. She was still lovely, with the same lively, animated expression. She was wearing a black lace dress, with black high heels and two strands of pearls around her slim neck. She remembered me right away, too. We were at a wine-tasting party at a hotel in Akasaka. It was a

black-tie event, and I had put on a dark suit and tie for the occasion. She was a rep for the advertising firm that was sponsoring the event, and was clearly doing a great job of handling it. It'd take too long to get into the reasons that I was there.

"Tanimura-kun, how come you never got in touch with me after that night we went out?" she asked. "I was hoping we could talk some more."

"You were a little too beautiful for me," I said.

She smiled. "That's nice to hear, even if you're just flattering me."

But what I'd said was neither a lie nor flattery. She was too gorgeous for me to be seriously interested in her. Back then, and even now.

"I called that coffee shop you used to work at, but they said you didn't work there anymore," she said.

After Kitaru left, the job became a total bore, and I quit two weeks later.

Erika and I briefly reviewed the lives we'd led over the past sixteen years. After college, I was hired by a small publisher, but quit after three years and had been a writer ever since. I got married at twenty-seven but didn't have any children yet. Erika was still single. "They drive me so hard at work," she joked, "that I have no time to get married." She was the first one to bring up the topic of Kitaru.

"Aki-kun is working as a sushi chef in Denver now," she said.

"Denver?"

"Denver, Colorado. At least, according to the postcard he sent me a couple of months ago."

"Why Denver?"

"I don't know," Erika said. "The postcard before that was from Seattle. He was a sushi chef there, too. That was about a year ago. He sends me postcards sporadically. Always some silly card with just a couple of lines dashed off. Sometimes he doesn't even write his return address."

"A sushi chef," I mused. "So he never did go to college?"

She shook her head. "At the end of that summer, I think it was, he suddenly announced that he'd had it with studying for the entrance exams and he went off to a cooking school in Osaka. Said he really wanted to learn Kansai cuisine and go to games at Koshien Stadium, the Hanshin Tigers' stadium. Of course, I asked him, 'How can you decide something so important without even asking me? What about me?'"

"And what did he say to that?"

She didn't respond. She just held her lips tight, as if she'd break into tears if she tried to speak. I quickly changed the subject.

"When we went to that Italian restaurant in Shibuya, I remember we had cheap Chianti. Now look at us, tasting premium Napa wines. Kind of a strange twist of fate."

"I remember," she said, pulling herself together. "We saw a Woody Allen movie. Which one was it again?"

I told her.

"That was a great movie."



*"He looks so natural."*

I agreed. It was definitely one of Woody Allen's masterpieces.

"Did things work out with that guy in your tennis club you were seeing?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No. We just didn't connect the way I thought we would. We went out for six months and then broke up."

"Can I ask a question?" I said. "It's very personal, though."

"Of course."

"I don't want you to be offended."

"I'll do my best."

"You slept with that guy, right?"

Erika looked at me in surprise, her cheeks reddening.

"Why are you bringing that up now?"

"Good question," I said. "It's just been on my mind for a long time. But that was a weird thing to ask. I'm sorry."

Erika shook her head slightly. "No, it's O.K. I'm not offended. I just wasn't expecting it. It was all so long ago."

I looked around the room. People in formal wear were scattered about. Corks popped one after another from expensive bottles of wine. A female pianist was playing "Like Someone in Love."

"The answer is yes," Erika said. "I had sex with him a number of times."

"Curiosity, a thirst to know more," I said.

She gave a hint of a smile. "That's right. Curiosity, a thirst to know more."

"That's how we develop our growth rings."

"If you say so," she said.

"And I'm guessing that the first time you slept with him was soon after we had our date in Shibuya?"

She turned a page in her mental record book. "I think so. About a week after that. I remember that whole time pretty well. It was the first time for me."

"And Kitaru was pretty quick on the uptake," I said, gazing into her eyes.

She looked down and fingered the pearls on her necklace one by one, as if making sure that they were all still there. She gave a small sigh, perhaps remembering something. "Yes, you're right about that. Aki-kun had a very strong sense of intuition."

"But it didn't work out with the other man."

She nodded. "Unfortunately, I'm

just not that smart. I needed to take the long way around. I always take a round-about way."

*That's what we all do: endlessly take the long way around.* I wanted to tell her this, but kept silent. Blurting out aphorisms like that was another one of my problems.

"Is Kitaru married?"

"As far as I know, he's still single," Erika said. "At least, he hasn't told me that he got married. Maybe the two of



us are the type who never make a go of marriage."

"Or maybe you're just taking a roundabout way of getting there."

"Perhaps."

"Do you still dream about the moon made of ice?" I asked.

Her head snapped up and she stared at me. Very calmly, slowly, a smile spread across her face. A completely natural, open smile.

"You remember my dream?" she asked.

"For some reason, I do."

"Even though it's someone else's dream?"

"Dreams are the kind of things you can borrow and lend out," I said.

"That's a wonderful idea," she said.

Someone called her name from behind me. It was time for her to get back to work.

"I don't have that dream anymore," she said in parting. "But I still remember every detail. What I saw, the way I felt. I can't forget it. I probably never will."

When I'm driving and the Beatles song "Yesterday" comes on the radio, I can't help but hear those crazy lyrics Kitaru crooned in the bath. And I regret not writing them down. The lyrics were so weird that I remembered them for a while, but gradually my memory started to fade until finally I had nearly forgotten them. All I recall now are fragments, and I'm not even

sure if these are actually what Kitaru sang. As time passes, memory, inevitably, reconstitutes itself.

When I was twenty or so, I tried several times to keep a diary, but I just couldn't do it. So many things were happening around me back then that I could barely keep up with them, let alone stand still and write them all down in a notebook. And most of these things weren't the kind that made me think, Oh, I've got to write this down. It was all I could do to open my eyes in the strong headwind, catch my breath, and forge ahead.

But, oddly enough, I remember Kitaru so well. We were friends for just a few months, yet every time I hear "Yesterday" scenes and conversations with him well up in my mind. The two of us talking while he soaked in the bath at his home in Denenchofu. Talking about the Hanshin Tigers' batting order, how troublesome certain aspects of sex could be, how mind-numbingly boring it was to study for the entrance exams, how emotionally rich Kansai dialect was. And I remember the strange date with Erika Kuritani. And what Erika—over the candlelit table at the Italian restaurant—confessed. It feels as though these things happened just yesterday. Music has that power to revive memories, sometimes so intensely that they hurt.

But when I look back at myself at age twenty what I remember most is being alone and lonely. I had no girlfriend to warm my body or my soul, no friends I could open up to. No clue what I should do every day, no vision for the future. For the most part, I remained hidden away, deep within myself. Sometimes I'd go a week without talking to anybody. That kind of life continued for a year. A long, long year. Whether this period was a cold winter that left valuable growth rings inside me, I can't really say. At the time I felt as if every night I, too, were gazing out a porthole at a moon made of ice. A transparent, eight-inch-thick, frozen moon. But I watched that moon alone, unable to share its cold beauty with anyone.

Yesterday  
Is two days before tomorrow,  
The day after two days ago. ♦

*(Translated, from the Japanese,  
by Philip Gabriel.)*