

# TOKYO INFERNO



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関東地獄

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人生は地獄よりも地獄的である  
*Life is more hellish than hell itself*  
—Ryūnosuke Akutagawa



Part One

鬼畜

The Demon

“KICHIKU”

One  
Inferno

地  
獄

THOUSANDS OF FEET BELOW HIM, the whole of the Kantō plain<sup>1</sup> rippled and began to crumble, like a map drawn on sand now being erased by the wind.

There was no sound, but he could feel tremors coming up from deep within the earth and hammering at the hollow of his chest. He could not make himself look down at what was spread out below his feet; but he could not look away entirely, either. He stared out at the horizon but it too shook, making the whole of the city shimmer and become as insubstantial as the ripples created by heat-haze.

I *do* hear something, he thought; my ears were just so full of that noise that I couldn't single it out. Like the faint shrill sound you hear in an empty room when you plug your ears . . .

This distant buzz changed as he opened his ears to it, revealing itself to be made of thousands, millions of individual voices, all shrilling one on top of the other. It was the sound of the dead and dying, raising their voices for the last time and leaving their echo in him.

The roaring mounted and mounted, and covering his ears did nothing—in fact, it only seemed to make things all the worse. The roar—or rather, the scream—was not coming from anywhere

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<sup>1</sup> *Kantō*: The area which includes Tokyo and which is used to refer to it colloquially, in much the same way “New York” is used to refer to Manhattan Island as well as the five boroughs.



outside. It seemed to emerge from within him, battering his heart as it did so, as if pushing that part of him out of the way so that it could fire itself into his head.

He forced himself to look at the horizon again, to concentrate on where the sky met the sea in the bay. To bring at least one of his senses to bear on something that was not a great, ringing cry of pain—if I don't do that, he thought, I might well go mad here.

And then: —But where is “here”?

The horizon rippled and shook again. There, churning and black, a massive wave approaching from out at sea—not just any wave, but a full-blown tsunami.

The storm winds pressed him back against something. He was not being blown about in the sky, but was instead pinned to some great wall that held him in place over the collapsing city.

He forced himself to look down and saw the octagonal sides of a towerlike building directly below his feet. Some part of him thought it possible to float down there—to touch his feet to the top of that tower, and in doing so be reattached once again to the earth and to all living things. And then from there he could run down the stairs and out into the street . . .

The tower's top half slid and bent to one side like the severed head of an execution victim, folding up into itself as it fell to the ground below. With nowhere else to turn, he threw his head back, shot up into the darkening sky, and opened his mouth to cry out—a cry that, for once, sprung from within him and nowhere else.

**ON A DAY THIS LOVELY, HE THOUGHT,** how could it be possible that there were tears anywhere in the world?

He was lying on his back, alongside the stone steps that led up to the Ishibashi residence. He'd pulled the bill of his cap down low to keep the sun out of his eyes, but it had somehow slid back of its own accord, and now the cloudless sky offered itself to him. Under his buttoned jacket, next to his chest, he could feel the stiffness of a few pieces of paper sandwiched against each other. He slid a finger between the buttons of his jacket and felt the sides of the pages—one was a photograph, the other a letter folded over several times. The thick edge of the photo slid under his fingernail

and ran back and forth there; it felt strangely reassuring to feel it that way.

Somewhere next to him, nestled in the grass, was a pack of cigarettes. He closed his hand over the pack without looking, drew one out, and put it to his mouth. When you're fifteen, he thought, there's a whole world of things that are best done when no one else is looking. Back in his room he had a pipe hidden in the back of a dresser drawer, but that he only took out on the most special of occasions. The cigarettes weren't nearly as fragrant—it was like swilling some rot-gut yam whiskey instead of real Scotch. The former would get you drunk in short order, a headlong plunge into a seething pool; the latter was a languorous bath at a hot-spring resort. Both he had also drunk in secret.

Such a day. Cloudless, not too warm, and with only him about to watch over the Ishibashi household. The master and his wife had left for the opera house in Asakusa, and the cook and butler were also off. That left him, Ryūichi, in charge of everything—something that didn't happen often at all, but he had in time earned enough of the household's trust to be able to do this for a whole day at a time. After his morning's chores he headed to school, came back in the late afternoon to help finish up anything that still needed a spare pair of hands, and ate his meal. For his work he earned a few sen, enough pocket change to buy an occasional indulgence like a meal at an oden<sup>2</sup> bar (and cigarettes, on the sly).

Dinner finished, he'd retire to his room upstairs, curl up in his futon and open his books under an oil lamp until his eyes were too heavy to stay open. The room was spare but comfortable enough, even if it smelled of moth flakes no matter how many times he aired it out. Through all of its cleanings, the oil lamp somehow retained a similarly perpetual patina of soot that dimmed its light.

There was little more that Ryūichi needed—something that had become clear to him in his first conversation with Mr.

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<sup>2</sup> *Oden*: Stew-like concoction. *Sen*: 1/100<sup>th</sup> of a yen.

Ishibashi. It had been on a warm day much like this one, out on the veranda, with tea served in elegant-looking china that Ryūichi was almost afraid to pick up lest it slip from his fingers and go to pieces on the tiles under his feet.

“It could be said that I owe your father everything.”

Mr. Ishibashi had said those words while looking down into his lap—almost regretfully, as if admitting some shameful family secret. But the small, warm smile on his face was hint enough that there was no shame here, just quiet pride and sincere thanks.

“You don’t remember him at all, do you?” Mr. Ishibashi asked a moment later. He put his teacup down with a faint click while Ryūichi found the right words.

“I remember a few things,” Ryūichi said, “but I can’t tell if they were things *I* remember, or things people told me. I remember him once doing a . . . a sort of a trick with this swagger stick that he had, a cane.”

“That was his army sword,” Mr. Ishibashi said, smiling. “He was very drunk one night, about a week before he was to return to Mukden<sup>3</sup>. Came into his house and we toasted to him returning, and . . . ah, this is very embarrassing for me to say about him!—he took his saber out and started doing this—” The sight of Mr. Ishibashi attempting to depict the dance in his seat, with only his hands, caused both of them to laugh. He smiles a great deal, Ryūichi thought; he smiles more than anyone else I’ve known who was his age.

“And then it flew out of his hands and went under a sofa!—But that was the last time I saw him, you see. No, rather, that was the last time I saw him as he was like that. He was wounded and sent home, and at first it wasn’t so bad, but not long after you were born, it . . .”

Another bow of the head.

“I know the rest of the story,” Ryūichi said quietly. “He was already quite sick by the time I was two years old.”

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<sup>3</sup> *Mukden*: A critical theater of battle in China during the Russo-Japanese War.

Which means, he thought, there was no way I could have ever seen him doing that dance. It must have been something someone told me. Maybe even Mr. Ishibashi himself,

“More than anything else, I think,” Mr. Ishibashi said, putting a fresh rush of decisiveness into his voice, “I owe it to your father to continue what he began. He was adamant that you weren’t to be ‘spoiled’. His words. Well, I won’t spoil you. But I won’t ignore you, either.”

“Thank you,” Ryūichi replied quickly, bowing to the other man from his seat. The conversation was over. And somehow Ryūichi knew that for whatever reason there would be no more talk of his father between them ever again.

That was how he had lived in the Ishibashi household: neither spoiled nor neglected, drifting back and forth from one day to the next on a cloud of contentment. Behind that cloud, though, there was a strangely dark sky that peeped through between one moment and the next—when he placed his foot on the top stair, or when he closed his hands around the handle of the ax he was using to split wood for the fireplace. For a long time, that dark sky did not attract the proper words to describe it—it was simply a sense of gloom that undercut everything. Finally one day the right turn of phrase came to him up in his study, while he was turning the pages of a dictionary.

*How long before all this disappears?*

There had been no end of poets who had said the same things, and what they had set down in verse somehow did not match this feeling. A leaf breaks loose from the tree and falls; ah, how impermanent everything is! There was no schoolboy who didn’t know such verses. This new feeling, however, had far more heft to it; it was like every action and thought was being conducted at the point of a gun being held by someone just out of sight. There was nothing about it that made him want to compose poetry—nothing remotely *romantic* about it, just an ugly heaviness that stayed with him like a bad cold.

I’m happy here, he thought, no question about it. But that happiness feels thin, like a sheet on a bed that doesn’t keep out the cold. And I haven’t the faintest idea what to do about it.

It's just a feeling, he told himself. It doesn't have to have anything to do with anything.

It was not long before this line of thinking fell through as well.

Some days his peace was disturbed by something else that he could not describe properly, neither to himself nor to anyone else—not that he would have attempted to describe it to anyone else. In the space between one thought and the next, when there seemed no need to summon anything immediately to mind, something great and dark uncoiled inside of him. He had never experienced anything he could have described as a “vision” before, but to call it a vision fit best. It was an image that came into his mind unbidden, like a stranger entering a deserted house, and with each successive visitation it stayed all the longer and became all the more persistent in its presence.

At first the vision had no real form; it was shapeless, and did not invite comparison to anything. Eventually, Ryūichi came up with the words “a cloud seen at sunset” to describe what he saw—a red, undulating mass that glowed from within. It seemed impossible to judge its size, or if it was even something that could be said to have an earthly size at all. Only after having seen it three or four times did he begin to understand its full scope. It was not a cloud in the sky; it *was* the sky. There was nothing below it; all that would have been below it was covered by it.

With each return of this vision he forced himself to peer into its redness all the more deeply. The red was fire, that much he was sure of—but it was not yet clear what was burning. Beyond the red haze he could, in time, make out the familiar shapes of rows of low buildings—was it Tokyo that was burning? It seemed that way, but again the scope of the thing seemed to leave the whole of Tokyo far behind. *Japan is burning*, he thought, or: *No—the whole world is burning*. The concept came to him impulsively, almost sinfully—as if to think such a thing was a dare, an insult thrown into the heart of the redness as a way to curse it away, to exorcize it and be done with it.

But it was more like a joke that once inadvertently turned out to be the vulgar truth, and no longer funny after being told.

The more he stared into that boiling fire, the more he could see the remnants of what it had consumed—things too far-flung to be Tokyo alone, or even Japan alone. And somewhere else in that fire, things were being burned that seemed impossible to burn. There was a giant, crackling red coal that at first he thought might be the whole of the earth, but was far too large. The sun itself, he thought: this fire has even set the sun ablaze and charred it as well.

So this is how it will all disappear, he thought. Everything, even the fires themselves, will be burned away. And here is where it will all begin. It will begin here and spread outwards, a red spiral drawn on the face of the world and then more than the world.

He opened his eyes and found that the cushion he was sitting on was cold and foul with his sweat. There did not seem to be a drop of warm blood left anywhere in his body, and despite the heavy summer night's air he shivered.

**LYING ON THE GRASS ONCE AGAIN**, he opened one of the middle buttons of his jacket and slid his hand all the way in to feel the piece of paper nestling there. Its edges crinkled easily; it wouldn't slide under his fingernail like the photo. It was the fourth version (fifth? he couldn't recall) of a letter that had he'd only been able to produce by sacrificing two days' worth of time normally devoted to his studies. Each time he sat down to work on it, he had been unable to think about anything else for the whole of the day—and in the end he had torn the still-unfinished letter in two and spent the rest of the evening wrapped in his futon and lying flat on his stomach, his unlit pipe twirling between cold fingers. There seemed to be no point in reading or writing anything else until he could complete it.

He had finally completed the letter after what felt like a week of going back and forth over it, and when he was done he rolled over—almost squashing his dictionary—and stared at the strange shapes on the ceiling made by the dim light coming through the window. Whatever sense of accomplishment was supposed to be in the offing did not come—just a kind of exhaustion that he felt so deeply it was painful. Sleep came at some point, but it did not refresh him, and he spent most of the next day dozing on and off

through classes and blearily stumbling around the Ishibashi household.

Now here he lay on the lawn, expecting to doze once again but instead feeling entirely awake. It wasn't the cigarette that had invested him with such strength, but a budding sense of certainty. These last few days of work *would* pay off, he told himself. That much work would not just evaporate like so much steam escaping from an uncovered stewpot.

He was still feeling the soft edges of the page when he heard the churning of an engine from an automobile coming up the drive. Somehow, in the space of only a couple of seconds, he managed to leap to his feet, crush out his cigarette against one of the treads of his geta<sup>4</sup>, and close up the open button on his jacket. At the very least he could make it not seem like he had been wasting his time. There were no fresh logs to split for the fireplace, but he could certainly grab up the broom and sweep off the steps.

It's too early for Mr. Ishibashi to be back, he told himself. That means it ought to be . . .

Don't say it! If it's *her*, then you want to face that without thinking about it. The less you think about it, the easier it will be to just hand her the letter and run off to the kitchen and busy yourself with something while she reads it.

That was the image he had in mind of how all this was meant to unfold.

The engine grumbled and died as Ryūichi stepped into what he believed to be full view. Saigo, their butler and chauffeur, stepped out and plucked open the rear door to the car with a white-gloved hand. Ryūichi backed up to one side of the steps and pretended to attack a particularly stubborn pile of wind-blown dirt with the broom, all the while peeping over the tops of the hedges just in front of the drive to see if it was her.

It was her.

Yoshiko was only fifteen as well, but already had the poise and air of a grown woman. Mr. Ishibashi had always referred to

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<sup>4</sup> *Geta*: Wooden clogs.

her as “my dear niece”—almost never by name, as if the name itself shouldn’t be spoiled through overuse. She stayed at the house from time to time in between attending classes at the Tokyo Women’s High Normal School<sup>5</sup>. Each time she had visited, her mere presence had crowded everything else out of Ryūichi’s mind, so much so that he had barely been able to say hello. He had stood just inside the swinging kitchen door and watched her sitting on the sofa in the Western-style drawing room, her hands folded across her knees. Later, he’d chinned himself on the window in his room and watched as she was escorted back to the car, her parasol hiding the entire top half of her body. Only briefly did the pink of her legs peep out from just above the tops of her white socks as she walked. When he closed his eyes and rolled over in the futon he put out a hand in the dark and curled his finger, pretending he was reaching into the spot where the strap of her geta divided her toes. The arch of her foot, her ankle, the bottom of her thigh all had been mapped out onto the contours of his futon by the movements of his hands, again and again.

Something about her mere presence made the air around him—not her, but him—seem charged to explode, like gunpowder blown about in a closet. Yoshiko’s real reason for visiting was above and beyond simply being social with Mr. Ishibashi. She was here to make Ryūichi complete, to catalyze some part of him that was not even named yet. He was confident this was the truth.

All this and more, he had written down in the letter that he now reached for once again. He leaned the broom against the inside of the outer fence for the house, then bowed attentively as Yoshiko came up the steps.

“Ryūichi,” Yoshiko said, smiling at him. “Am I interrupting anything?”

“Not at all!”

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<sup>5</sup> *Tokyo Women’s High Normal School*: Originally established in 1874 as the Tokyo Women’s Normal School, but still exists today as Ochanomizu University in Otsuka, Bunkyo-ku (northeast of the Imperial Palace).



He slid his hand back out of his jacket, but the letter did not come out with it. Not here, he thought; not in front of Saigo. The butler was a tall, gloomy-looking man whose entire lower half of his face seemed to be drowning in his muttonchop whiskers. Unlike Mr. Ishibashi, Saigo seemed to merely tolerate Ryūichi's presence, neither favoring nor condemning him.

Saigo led the boy and the girl up the steps, his gait as slow and measured as a samurai retainer entering the castle of a nobleman. It wasn't as if there were archers at every window of the household that would cut them down if they showed the first sign of violence. But having Yoshiko simply stand next to Ryūichi—it created inside the young man a manic energy that boiled up through him from the bottom of his belly. That fire made him want to take her hand and run, despite the unspoken danger of even considering such a thing.

"You're always so busy with something," Yoshiko went on, "that I almost feel bad for saying hello. I never want to keep you from what you need to do."

"It's never anything that requires *all* of my attention." The click of her geta sounded so much more delicate compared to the clomp-clomp of his own, he thought. "That and Mr. Ishibashi would probably not be happy if one of us interrupted the other. He doesn't show it when he gets angry, but I've learned to tell. — That and he thinks of you as something irreplaceable." He blurted out this last knowing full well it was more a product of his own mind than Mr. Ishibashi's.

Yoshiko laughed and covered her mouth. "Don't say things like that!"

Saigo's eyes seemed to say *I agree with her completely, young man* as he held the front door open for both of them.

Through the open doorway, the inside of the house seemed far darker than it ought to have been—like peering into a cup that normally held water, only to find it was filled with ink. Even the light through the windows seemed strangely dim and distant, and Ryūichi was worried that one of them would stumble into a piece of furniture—or into each other, and his heart shook at the thought.

“I’d forgotten that Mr. Ishibashi was away today,” Yoshiko said, with a touch of sadness. “He wanted to bring me with him to the opera, but we miscommunicated with each other. But he’s promised to take me again someday, when I don’t have class.”

She seated herself on the sofa. Ryūichi realized that Saigo was nowhere to be seen; in fact, apart from the faint creaking of Yoshiko’s body on the sofa, there were no sounds of anyone else. Normally he would have been able to hear Saigo’s ponderous steps somewhere. He peered out one of the oddly dim windows, but did not see Saigo returning to the car, either.

The only thing in the room that seemed to give off any light at all was Yoshiko herself. If Ryūichi had not known any better, he might have thought she was as much as ten years older, by the way she held herself. When she spoke—and especially when she smiled, as she had when coming up the steps—those ten years came and went like clouds hiding and revealing the moon. This dark room is the night, he thought, and she’s that very moon, the only light to be had anywhere.

Ryūichi seated himself in the chair across from her—a chair he had never sat in before, now that he thought about it. Mr. Ishibashi himself habitually sat in that chair whenever he was in this room, and for that reason Ryūichi’s own skin prickled with hesitation when he sat in it. He reached into his jacket and touched the edge of the letter—no, not the letter, but something with edges far sharper, somehow; sharp enough to slice into the skin under his fingernail, to bite deeply enough to make him yelp.

He pulled out his hand and stood up, ignoring Yoshiko’s stares as he undid the top button of his jacket and removed whatever it was that had sank its teeth into his finger.

It was the photo, the stained, creased and sepia-toned photo of his father in his full military dress uniform. Blood had crept from the underside of his fingernail and drawn a red margin along one edge of the picture. His fingers stuck to that margin of blood and left muddy smears when he moved them.

“What did you do to yourself?” Yoshiko stood up but came no closer.

“I haven’t ‘done anything’ to myself.” Ryūichi’s voice was testy

despite him trying not to make it so. “It’s—”

The blood on the edge of the picture moved. It spread through the veins and ribs of the photo paper like a lava flow encompassing the countryside. The photo itself thrashed about between his fingers, and Ryūichi let out a yelp and snapped his hands open without thinking.

The picture fluttered circled the room like a blind bird—bashing against the ceiling, walls, windows and draperies, arcing over their heads and at one point spearing through the space right under Ryūichi’s upraised arm. He ran to the fireplace and seized up a small brass shovel that stood next to the poker in its little stand.

Yoshiko ran for the door. The thing flapped towards her, smacked her in the back of the head, and knocked her over like a bowling pin; she shrieked and fell to the carpet, but lashed out anyway with her hands. The thing was now the size of a beachball, a fluttering, gray, mothlike mass that seemed to be trying out and discarding a whole multitude of different shapes.

“Get away from it!” Ryūichi raised the shovel and prepared to smash it.

Yoshiko managed to get to her feet, but stopped in the doorway and let out another shriek. She was staring at something just beyond, but Ryūichi could not yet turn his attention to it; he was too busy staring at what was happening in front of him.

The tornado of gray expanded and opened outwards—gray wings, maybe, or a flower made of some ugly sackcloth. He swung at it but the shovel merely glanced off, bending two of his fingers back and leaving them suddenly numb. The shovel itself flew out of his hand and clattered in a corner.

The fluttering stopped. Slowly, the great gray wings descended and closed. They were not in fact wings at all, but the folds of a great cape, covering an army officer’s jacket. The bill of an officer’s cap also protruded from the top of the whirlwind as it ceased, and in the shadow of that bill could be seen a long and deeply-lined face.

Ryūichi took two blind steps backwards and found himself with his back to the china cabinet in the corner. Over the man’s

shoulder, at the other side of the room, he could see Yoshiko—her arms now pinned tightly to her body by another man in an army outfit. In place of most of the skin on the left side of his head was something dark and striated and leathery-looking, and where his left ear should have been was nothing but a black, wrinkled hole.

Other figures, similarly dressed and similarly wounded, now stood everywhere around the room. Missing eyes and hollow sleeves pointed at Ryūichi as if they were the mouths of guns.

“Well, now . . .” the man closest to Ryūichi whispered. He seemed the least injured of all of them, with only a few faint scars cracking one side of his chin and neck.

“ . . . this . . . is . . . a delight, isn’t it? Here we are, together at last. And yet you’re not very pleased to see me.”

Ryūichi forced his attention away from Yoshiko and back to his father’s face before him. The face did not seem significantly older than the face in the photo—even the scars did not make him seem older, exactly. Just more sharpened, that much more dangerous.

“Father,” he said, almost too softly to be heard. Then, again, louder: “Father.”

“—This is your *father*?” Yoshiko’s voice was choked up and tiny, but Ryūichi could still hear her as if she were whispering right into his ear.

“And this is my son,” the man said. He looked down at Ryūichi and seemed to be lost in those words for a moment. “I thought once that I might never say those words again, *my son*. That to just say them would be too much.”

Ryūichi wanted to blurt out that he felt the same way, but nothing came when he tried to speak. That faded and blotchy photo had been the only thing in his world that seemed to have the name “father” attached to it—no deeds, nothing with flesh on its bones, nothing truly human. And this apparition that had formed in front of him seemed even further removed from anything else he could call with the same name.

“Then again,” the apparition said, turning and taking slow steps towards Yoshiko, “it’s hard for me to look at you and think of you as my son. Just as you probably look at me and think ‘that’s

not my father'. That's entirely your privilege, of course. I only saw you twice before they sent me back to China. You could have fit into a lunchbox then. And what you saw of me then, you probably don't even remember."

So he thinks the same way, Ryūichi thought. I'm as strange to him as he's strange to me.

The older man paused in front of Yoshiko, his head turned to address Ryūichi sidelong.

"You don't have to call me 'father' if the term shocks you," he added. "You can just call me 'Captain' and be done with it."

"Very well," Ryūichi managed to say. "'Captain', it is."

"You see these other men around you?" the Captain gestured. "They called me Captain as well, right up until the end—or, rather, what I thought was going to be the end."

"You were killed," Yoshiko said, in a voice that shuddered a good deal less than Ryūichi thought it might. "In Manchuria?"

The Captain seated himself on the very chair Ryūichi had been on moments ago.

"I suppose that is how you and everyone else would describe it," he said, measuring out the words like spoonfuls of something deadly. "Words do not work so well to sum up what I have experienced. Not the words we all carry around, anyway. So much as they invent new words to describe these new weapons, I suppose it falls to me to find new words to describe these things as well."

"You were killed," Ryūichi repeated. Stating a fact; not asking a question.

"I *was* killed." The Captain was smiling. "Now, I am—you might say—killed no more."

# Two

## The Captain

隊長

THE WORDS THE CAPTAIN HAD USED—*I am killed no more*—expanded until they filled the whole of Ryūichi's head, letting no other thoughts dwell there. And yet Ryūichi opened his mouth and began to speak anyway; it was a choice between speaking or simply standing there and seething.

“So are you dead or not?” Ryūichi demanded.

“Do you want to play word games,” the Captain replied, “or do you want to find out why a man's spirit might be compelled to reject something as complete as death?”

The Captain lifted his officer's sword and placed it across his knees. Its scabbard was bruised here and there, its tassel fraying and the wrapping on the pommel quite threadbare, but it imparted the same looming, pregnant power to the room that Yoshiko's presence had also radiated. Where Yoshiko had been a seed ready to bloom, this was a bomb primed to explode.

“I think *anyone* would not want to die.” Feeble as that sounded to Ryūichi's own ears, it was at least that much more for him to say.

“I'm not talking about that alone. These soldiers—” The Captain gestured at the tattered men around them. “—all of them said they were willing to die, but you have to shout those words very loudly into your own ears when a bullet has just torn through you. Very loudly indeed. Put death in front of a man and you take away all his words about death. All that's left is: what is to be done?”

He pulled at the scabbard and removed the blade with a grainy, slithering sound.

“And when death comes to you slowly, in inches at a time—that’s a special privilege. Then you have the chance to think quite deeply about what you are about to leave behind . . .”

The scabbard thumped onto the rug. The blade seemed to catch more light than there was in the room to be caught by such a thing.

“ . . . and what you might be willing to do to keep it.”

Fifty different possibilities of action, fifty different temptations, all piled on top of each other within Ryūichi. Hurl himself at the Captain and wrench the sword out of his hands; grab the scabbard from the floor and slam it into the other man’s stomach; seize Yoshiko in his arms and run out the back of the house; scream as loud as he could . . . No question that the Captain intended to do something with that weapon, and that Ryūichi had to be the first to act. The already-explosive air in the room was now smoldering that much more.

Over in the other corner, Yoshiko blinked, letting tears wet the front of her kimono.

“I found the most surprising thing awaiting me after ‘death,’” the Captain said, resting the blade on his shoulder. “It is not an end to anything, nor is it a beginning of anything else. It is all that there is and all there ever could be, all at once. Imagine an orchestra playing—but not playing any melody. Just every instrument at full volume, holding every possible note, forever.”

Madman, Ryūichi thought; he’s not come anything close to death, just lost all of his senses and come back to scare me with all of it. If he had experienced anything like death it would have claimed him completely by now.

All this Ryūichi told himself in blind defiance of the way the man and his minions had entered the room.

“Why have you come here to tell me all this?” Ryūichi stood his ground and said the words he had been biting back. “Just to frighten the two of us and see a few woman’s tears, is that it?”

“I’ve come to show death to all who will have eyes to see,” he said, and his voice somehow sounded both perfectly reasonable and perfectly horrible. “So that I might have a little company.”

The Captain greeted Ryūichi’s growing incredulity with a

smile.

“Death? You’ve already peered into it yourself. It’s what led you to me, and me to you. You saw flame and devastation opening its wide mouth—and before it consumed you, too, you fled from it. Fled back ‘here’, to a place where you thought you would be safe. Do you even know what this place truly *is*? You’ve helped *create* it.”

I’m not going to listen to this drivel anymore, Ryūichi told himself, and took two steps back towards the doorway.

In that moment the Captain was on his feet, his sword’s edge touching the underside of Yoshiko’s chin.

“You wouldn’t dare!” Ryūichi shouted.

“I most certainly would. In fact, I just did.”

The Captain reached down and took Yoshiko’s hand, then lifted it so that she could use her sleeve to blot her now very wet eyes. She had not even so much as gasped, but her eyes were now wide and filled with only the long, deep lines of the Captain’s face.

“You—just tell me what it is you *want*,” Ryūichi spat, “so I can give it to you and we can be away from this place. Especially *you*.”

“*Give*?” the Captain echoed. “You can’t *give* me what I’m looking for. You don’t even know you have it, do you?”

Ryūichi’s attention had been so completely on the Captain’s face that only after the other man had finished speaking did he realize he’d pressed the edge of his sword into the soft underside of Yoshiko’s chin.

“If it was as simple as just asking you for something, don’t you think I would have done that some time ago?” He lowered the sword from Yoshiko’s chin, but only slightly. “It’s not something I can *ask* for from you. It’s something that must be *culled* from you. You’re useless as you are now, but—” His smile was terrible to see. “—I’m sure we can do something about that.”

The Captain lowered the sword from the girl’s chin, but kept the point of it aimed at her breastbone.

“Well, for a boy your age, you’ve certainly got good taste in women,” he said after a moment, and guffawed. He slid his gloved fingers into his field jacket and produced Ryūichi’s letter.



Ryūichi shoved his own hand into his jacket so violently that one of the buttons popped off and clicked to the floor. Nothing there, of course, but he could feel his own heart slamming away, and the sweat from his palm and chest adhered to his undershirt.

“You *were* going to give her this, I take it?” The Captain unfolded the letter with a smart snap of the wrist. The paper was so flimsy it looked like something he might have blown his nose in instead.

Soldiers crowded in on either side of Ryūichi. One of them put a hand on his shoulder; it was missing two fingers, with the remaining three being little more than sticks of bone wrapped in veined meat. The other reached behind and grabbed him by the hair at the back of his head. It felt like the flesh on his face was being peeled away from behind.

“I wrote it for her,” Ryūichi said, and did his best to load those words with whatever defiance he could find inside himself. Everything else he could have wanted to say—*Where did you come from? What do you want with us?*—just sounded too much like begging to his own inner ear. This at least was not begging. “I wrote it for her,” he continued, “and I’ll be the one to read it to her, not you.”

“Then read it to her!” The Captain balled up the letter and threw it at him; it landed on his chest, and he closed his arms around it.

Ryūichi’s hands were free, but between the grip on his hair and the hand on his shoulder he could not take one step from his spot. He unfolded the letter in his hands and stared at what was written there. The only reason the skin on his scalp did not crawl was because it was being pinned into place so mercilessly.

—*What I might do first is place my hand inside the bosom of your kimono and feel what is there, so that I would learn how excited you could become from just that touch alone—*

I did not write this! Ryūichi told himself. I remember my own words. If I close my eyes I can remember what I wrote for real. Not this filth . . .

“*Dear Yoshiko,*” he said out loud.

The Captain’s smile started to lose some of its breadth.

*“Dear Yoshiko: I have watched you come and go from this house, always at a distance, always so far away. So much of that distance has been my own doing. I felt that if I came too close I might ruin you—”*

The rest of that sentence was obliterated by the shearing sound of the Captain’s sword cutting the air next to Ryūichi’s head.

“Read what’s on those *pages*, you whelp—” The Captain reached out with the tip of his sword and flicked one of Yoshiko’s earlobes.

It’ll take more than that to make her cry out loud, you bastard, Ryūichi thought. If she’s not crying out now—and, indeed, she wasn’t—then that’s not going to work.

“Read it!”

The air in the room had become unbreathable with malevolence. Each rasping movement of Ryūichi’s own lungs, each silent tear from Yoshiko’s face, landed on him and sank into him. It was like being held in place in front of a mirror that reflected back only ugliness. The only conceivable way to escape was to break the mirror.

Ryūichi opened his lips as if to begin reading again, then crumpled the letter back up into a ball and threw it at the Captain’s face. The next thing he knew he was being lifted up into the air by the hair on his head. He lashed out with his feet, but hit nothing. The pain turned his vision red and blurry.

“Stop it! Stop it, damn you!” Yoshiko shouted, and flung herself at the Captain’s back. It was a clumsy blow, without even much strength in it, but it was enough to knock the Captain to one side and cause his sword to go spilling forward. The flat of the blade landed against Ryūichi’s chest, and he somehow closed his hands around the pommel.

In that moment, the malevolent atmosphere that had been suffocating Ryūichi at last became a conflagration that blinded and deafened him. He was in the middle of that fire that burned even the sun itself—not only steeped in it, but merging with it, as if he and the flame had been distant cousins that only now recognized each other.

He opened his eyes despite the agony it cost him. Somehow he knew now that the agony was only illusory, something put there by his senses for lack of knowing how else to respond to all this. The room, the house, everything around them in widening circles was blazing, and the epicenter of that fire was the blade of that sword. He thrust it backwards into the apparition behind him, the ruined soldier-thing holding him by his hair, and its body fell apart in several large, coal-like chunks.

The Captain seized Yoshiko around the waist and clamped a hand over her mouth. The flames eddied over them but did nothing more; this fact alone caused Ryūichi to hesitate.

“It’s not me you need to fear,” the Captain shouted over the blaze. “Or, for that matter, not me you need to hate—”

Yoshiko squirmed and shrieked under the Captain’s hands. Their bodies twisted like kites in a storm, and in that moment Ryūichi swung and drew a deep gouge in the man’s side.

It was as though he had cut a wound in the air itself. That wound spewed forth a new fire of its own, a fire that even more malevolent and pure than the one that surrounded them now.

In the seconds before there was nothing else to see, Yoshiko twisted free and ran.

So this is how everything will burn, Ryūichi thought. And it will have been all my fault.

**AT FIRST THERE WAS NOTHING TO BE SEEN** but brightness that Ryūichi dimly realized was the sun. *Only* the sun, he thought; at this point I’ve seen things that made the sun look like a cold cinder.

High and close around the sun were dark pillars that he realized were the facing walls of two buildings. He was in an alley somewhere, staring up at the sky, and this realization was made complete when a bank of clouds covered the face of the sun and broke his concentration. He was wearing the same jacket and cap and trousers as before, and still had his wooden clogs on, but his feet ached as if he had been walking for hours on end without a rest.

The mouth of the alley opened, like the eye of a cat widening

in the dark, as he stepped towards it. It showed him a street that he somehow knew to be in Tokyo; it connected with some memory that he was not sure he knew why he possessed, but he possessed it all the same. For whatever reason, he told himself, I know this as Tokyo and it's familiar to me.

He remembered it all: the Ishibashi house, Yoshiko's socks and tears, his "father"—the Captain, he corrected himself—and the flames that would burn even other flames. It was all horribly immediate, and he felt his body shaking as if chilled from the loss of blood.

Something was knocking regularly against his leg each time he took a step. He turned his attention down to himself and saw that he was still clutching the sword—the Captain's sword, now in its scabbard and tied neatly to his belt.

I can't be seen walking around with this, he thought, and dove to one side of the alley. The cord was tangled—or, rather, it had been tied so thoroughly that he gave up trying to unravel it and simply used the point of the sword itself to cut it loose. The sword went back into its scabbard, and he wrapped the severed cord around the whole thing and turned around in place looking for a spot to get rid of it.

The river, he thought. If I remember right I'm only a few blocks from the Sumida River itself. I just have to wait for a moment when no one is looking and throw it over, and that'll be that. Just dumping it here in an alley wouldn't do it. Someone else might find it. The less chance of anyone else being afflicted by this, the better.

He was not aware at first that time had passed. He had simply been standing there with the sword in his hands, uncertain of himself, when he looked down at it and realized he might have been in that alley for minutes on end, undecided. Only after that realization came another, and then another, and then a flood of understanding that chilled him. Before all this he had been in the Ishibashi household, for . . . how long, now?—Even that was uncertain. And before that, there was a memory of a memory, of fire and Tokyo being flattened under a wave of devastation. And before that, nothing at all. Nowhere in this sequence was there any

sense of how he came to be here, clutching this thing and with his back pressed to a brick wall as the sun moved slightly out of view. The past, he thought—it's all a muddle, like someone took that letter I'd written for Yoshiko and gotten it wet.

And then: *Yoshiko*. Not burned by the flames, but caught in the hands of that brute that called itself his father, which was more than terrible enough.

He sat down on a tiny, crumbling stoop in the alley. The doorway behind the stoop had been bricked up, and was now covered with the rotting remnants of a movie poster—a black-and-white samurai adventure serial, from the look of it. Only the eyes of the character remained, burning and heavy-set between the folds of a black cowl. For the first time Ryūichi understood what it meant to feel like such a picture was watching you no matter where it was within your line of sight. At his feet was a pile of mosquito netting, conspicuously torn here and there and now cast off and left in the alley to rot.

He turned his back on the poster and pinched his eyes shut. Within him was building the urge to stand, to point himself in the general direction of the Ishibashi household and start walking. The house had been somewhere in the greater Tokyo area—but he could not narrow down its location any more than that. Everything about the house seemed to live in his memory as an island that one only visited in sleep.

I could ask for directions, he thought; a family as famous as his ought to be well-known by anyone with their ears reasonably wide open.

Find a pawnshop, he told himself. Get rid of this sword, get something in return for it, get directions to the Ishibashi house, hire a jinrikisha to go there, and then deal with the rest once you're standing on those steps again. Worry later about the fuzzy feeling inside of your head.

It was a far better plan of action than simply squatting in a bricked-up doorway and feeling profoundly lost.

The street beyond led him to the Sumida River, and only as he stepped into the open did he realize that the streets were also bustling with people. Their clogs and Western-style shoes scraped

and crunched on the (newly-laid) paving stones, both in and out of time with his own footsteps. They had somehow not registered on any of his senses before—as if until that moment the world had consisted of nothing but him, the sword, the buildings and the sun overhead. It was a relief to realize that other people existed after all.

He was still somewhat dizzy from all this when he did his best not to blunder into a woman in a dark padded kimono with a baby strapped to her back. The baby's eyes were large and dark, and seemed to look at him as if he were nothing more than a tree, a piece of the landscape.

Ryūichi forgot all about the sword in his hand as he turned himself sideways and pressed forward. Something was indefinably different about Tokyo, and as he followed the river south and towards the harbor tiny pieces of what he saw clicked into place. Many brand-new buildings were being raised, scaffolding bristling around them like twigs sticking out of the sides of a bird's nest. It all chafed at him.

I don't like not knowing why this bothers me so, he thought. There are more empty spaces inside of me than there are actual memories, or much of anything else.

At least I don't seem to be drawing attention by carrying *this* around.

He looked down at "this"—the sword—and realized he had at some point wrapped the mosquito netting around it. Now it looked like nothing more than gauze wrapped around what for all the world might well have been a bundle of curtain rods. Good, he thought; as long as no one has a reason to stare at me and ask questions.

Somehow, the simple act of following the banks of the Sumida River south put him at a kind of ease. The empty places within him remained empty, but they no longer ached like an empty stomach. They were more like the places left deliberately empty on a painter's canvas; they could be filled in, but they provided an unexpected kind of balance as they were. I know, he told himself, that if I went back north to Asakusa I could probably find directions to a pawnshop from one of the drifters there. That

place is a hotbed for such people. But I don't know *how* I know such a thing. It's as if someone told me all of this once, and I've since forgotten who or when.

I just have to keep moving.

It was easy enough to walk as if under the influence of a dream, unattached to everything. There, the little street-side shrine ensconced in a niche, with its bodhisattva being cleaned off and given new clothes by a bent old woman in a black coat . . . Ryūichi watched her at work as he walked by, sweeping here and patting there; only at the last minute did he remember to bring his eyes forward and watch where he was going. The only thing in front of him, by several paces, was a woman in a formal kimono leading her similarly-clad daughter by the hand. Something about the woman's hair, even from behind, seemed familiar—not in the sense that he might know her, but that the sight of it instilled unexpected comfort in him.

I had a father and mother, the same as everyone else, he thought. Even if what I know of my father has the face and form of a demon—and even if I don't remember my mother at all.

That realization disturbed what peace had been built up inside him, but only slightly. It was still comforting to watch the mother and daughter walking along, the little girl's hand darting out and pointing as they walked past the bridges arching their cobbled spines over the Sumida. She let out a happy yelp of "Bridge!" on seeing each one, and even veered in their direction, tugging her mother along to get a better look. Ryūichi wasn't even sure if he envied them, but somehow he felt he must. To not envy them somehow seemed a mistake; to simply be happy at their own joy was not enough.

It was only after he had followed them for a time—the distance from one bridge to the next—that he realized those ambivalent feelings were not coming from him, but *through* him, much as if he had been instructed to manifest those emotions. There was no sense of who might have told him such things, only that he had been so taught and was bound to obey through some obscure sense of honor.

Who says I have to listen to that! he told himself. He doubled

his pace to hurry around in front of the two of them, bowed, and asked the woman in the politest way possible if there was a pawn shop anywhere nearby.

“What is it that you’re selling?” she said, peering at the bundle in Ryūichi’s hands.

“My father’s old army sword.” It wasn’t hard at all for Ryūichi to sound deeply gloomy. “He fought the Russians, but my mother and I, we’ve—”

“Now, now,” the woman declared. “You don’t have to explain yourself. The fact that you’re alive at all in these terrible times is miracle enough.”

It wasn’t clear to him what she meant by that, but Ryūichi didn’t ask. He brought the whole of his attention to bear on her directions—he had to retrace his steps slightly, but the rest was easy enough. As he bowed and turned to leave, the little girl bobbed and stretched at the end of her mother’s arm, waving her own hand at him frantically. “Mother” knelt down next to her and waved in unison.

“Goodbye and good luck!” she called out.

They wish me well even if they don’t know a thing about me, he thought. I can feel happy about that, can’t I?



# Three

## *Absolute Fairness*

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THE SIGN IN FRONT OF THE PAWN SHOP READ *Absolute Fairness in Prices*, but the top half of the sign was badly weathered and the paint had all but flaked off. It took some guesswork to figure out the word *Fairness*, but the characters for *Absolute* could be made out with some effort. The display window was crammed with furniture and household knickknacks—a box camera with a worn leather strap, an elegant-looking tobacco pipe set made of blue steel, a go board with wood so dark it seemed to be stained. An officer's sword would scarcely be out of place in the middle of that jumble, he thought.

Ryūichi started to unwrap the bundle in his arms, without being quite certain what the point was. To compare it against what was in the window, maybe, but anything beyond that eluded him. I should just go inside and take care of business, he told himself, but his hands were busy pulling away the dirty mosquito netting and tightening themselves around the sword's hilt. He stopped himself before taking the sword completely out, and almost dropped the weapon out of surprise.

I'd better get rid of this damned thing as fast as possible, he thought. Who knows what kinds of stupidity I'll end up committing if I keep hanging onto it.

He shoved the sword under one arm, let the now quite torn and dirty mosquito netting tumble into the street, and stepped inside.

The man at the low table that served as a shop counter seemed scarcely older than Ryūichi himself. An errand boy, he

thought; someone who has been put in charge of things while the real master of the shop has stepped away for a bit. On stepping closer he realized the other man was probably in his late twenties or so, but had a face so boyish and fair that it would probably not show his true age until he was well into his fifties or sixties. His black hair was a messy mop that stuck out to the sides behind his ears as well as nearly hanging in front of his round glasses. None of that hanging hair seemed to distract him from the newspaper he was reading, however. *Peace Preservation Law Is Enacted*, read the headline. The term meant nothing to Ryūichi.

“I’m sorry to bother you,” Ryūichi said out loud.

The other man looked up from his paper. The lenses of his glasses appeared to be badly smudged, as if they had been blindly manhandled many times and never cleaned.

“Are you the owner?” Ryūichi continued.

“I’m as good as the owner.” The other man sat up straighter and put the paper aside, folding it up with a neatness that seemed at odds with the rest of him. His hair and glasses were messy enough, but the collar of his white dress shirt (which peeped out from his kimono jacket) was creased and stained in a way that indicated it had been worn almost continuously, day in and day out, without washing. Ryūichi was suddenly aware that the shop was suffused with a smell that reminded him of mountains of unclean laundry. But the man’s boyish face, he could see now, was sharp and handsome—just that he twisted the corners of his mouth and turned down the edges of his eyes in ways that made him seem homely.

“I’m not sure what you mean.” Ryūichi pushed off his clogs and knelt down at the table, figuring he had all the leave he needed to be seated.

“Meaning, the owner has decided that I’m better suited to running this place than he is,” he said, stretching out the arm he’d been using to turn the newspaper’s pages, “and he’s given me free reign to do as I please. He makes plenty of money in this other business he’s started up, so he’s not worried about *this* outfit going to pot.”

The languidness of his words was at sharp odds with a feel-

ing that rose within Ryūichi. It seemed plausible that his peers at school would sneer off teachers or bully each other in such tone, but such things seemed wrong coming from a grown man who now stuffed tobacco into the metal bowl of a pipe while sitting in front of him. With the snap and sputter of a match, he set smoke spiraling up and drew in several long lungfuls of it.

How is it that I know this is wrong? Ryūichi thought. It's as if I remember without remembering. I remember the feelings, but not the facts.

Ryūichi lifted the sheathed sword from his lap and set it on the table between them, pushing it slowly forward with the tips of his fingers.

"Where'd you steal that from?" The other man's tone was not so much accusatory as bemused.

"It's my father's. He died in China during the Russo-Japanese War." Ryūichi took his hands away from the sword. "And now times are hard, and so . . ."

". . . and so your mother's taking in other people's mending and washing to make ends meet, and now you're selling all you can dig up, is that it? Very well—what unit was your father in? What was his rank?"

"Captain—but I don't remember the—"

The pawnbroker put his hand on the sword and shoved it back across the table at him, the loud rasp interrupting Ryūichi's words. "Lifted it from a neighbor, did you?"

Ryūichi said nothing. So what if I don't remember any of that very well. It's not as if I would have been happy to hear such things anyway. The words *army* and *war* just enter my ears like they were names for diseases.

"Or, not a neighbor," the other man went on. "A family friend dies, leaves you her pile of clutter, and this was from *her* husband, or father, or what have you. And since people don't ask questions about such things, you've brought it here in the hopes that you could turn a few yen from it. Not as if I blame you."

I'm just going to give him the coldest stare I have, Ryūichi thought. Maybe that'll shame him into realizing he's made a mistake.

“You’re offended, now?” The other man rested his chin on his fist, pipe snug between two fingers. “All right. So maybe you’re too young to remember what his rank and unit and where he died and all that. That’s fine with me. Either way, it’s really none of my business to care. You’re here to do business with me, not to listen to my moralizing. So how much?”

He inverted the pipe and brought it down on the edge of the metal tray in front of him. The resonating *smack* made Ryūichi’s skin twitch.

“Or, let’s start from the beginning. What’s your name? I have to write all this down, anyway.” He reached for a pencil and a blank sheet of ruled paper.

“Ishibashi,” Ryūichi said. For all I know it might well be the truth anyway, he thought. “Ryūichi Ishibashi.”

“Your real name?”

“That is my real name.”

“Fine, then. —Address?”

“None.”

The pawnbroker looked up from the paper, then back down again. “No fixed abode,” he murmured. “Is it just you, then?”

“No mother, no father, no family,” Ryūichi said. It felt strangely liberating to come out and say it. “None anymore that I know of.”

“Living on the good graces of strangers?”

Nod. “As good a story as any, I guess,” he said. “How about your name?” The way Ryūichi said it, it sounded to his own ears like a dare.

“Amano. Seiichi Amano.”

“Your real name?”

“No,” Amano said, and laughed. “Well. If Ishibashi is your real name, then Amano’s my real name too. Amano-*sensei* if you want to be precise.”

“Why ‘sensei’?”

“I was a teacher. I taught English and arithmetic. Not here in Tokyo, out in the backwoods. I did that for two years before getting real sick of it. Everything was against the rules. I couldn’t even have the kids put on a *play*. So I came back home and told

my father-in-law, 'Remember when you offered me a position running the junk shop?' And he said, 'It's not a junk shop, it's a pawnbroker's, but it's yours to run if you want it.' So I said yes." He spread his arms widely, the bowl of his pipe passing within a fraction of an inch of a pile of bedding. "And here we are."

"What's not to like about it?" At least it's something you can sort of call *yours*, Ryūichi thought.

"Every day people come in here with pieces of their little worlds peeled off, like bamboo shoots ripped off the bole. Looking to me as a way to give them that much more of a lease on existence in this gold-plated world. Sometimes I can help them. Most of the time I can't." He looked at the pile of bedding next to him and poked it with his elbow. "This was from a woman whose children perished in the earthquake. She was visiting her aunt in Osaka that week, and her sister had come over to the house to take care of them. Two little girls, six and seven years old each. I saw them once. They knew how to juggle. They'd stand facing each other with these little beanbags and juggle them back and forth between them." He pointed at the little vestibule where Ryūichi had removed his clogs. "One of them stood there, the other right where you're sitting, and they juggled those beanbags back and forth for minutes on end. 'They can do this all day,' Miss Tokiko said. That was their mother: Miss Tokiko. Off she goes on the train to Osaka for a week and a half in December. Two years ago."

Amano's voice had wound down to a gloomy mumble.

"The way the house caved in, it was like some kind of evil curse had come home to roost. Only the front half collapsed. That was where everyone was sleeping—the two girls, Miss Tokiko's sister, and a female friend of hers who had stopped in for the night. The back half of the house wasn't even touched. It just tilted a bit. The spare bedding was in a closet back there—spare bedding for the children, because sometimes they would have night terrors and wet the sheets. So she told me. She brought me this bedding after hanging onto it for a solid year. 'Anything and everything that even *smelled* a little bit of them,' she told me, 'I couldn't bear to be without it. But now I can't bear it anymore.' So all that's left now is a couple of piss-stained bedsheets. And bad

memories.”

“I remember the earthquake,” Ryūichi said distantly. “I . . . remember that and not much of anything else.”

The city vanishing like a map drawn on sand . . .

For the first time, something approaching sympathy for Ryūichi appeared in Amano’s eyes, and as Ryūichi spoke that sympathy deepened and took on a new aspect. It seemed like it might be best to call it pity, but Ryūichi resisted thinking of that word. He did not want anything to come between him and the flood of newly-freed memory that was now rushing through him and out of him. Somehow, it had been unlocked, and to lock it back up again was tantamount to a crime against his soul.

Ryūichi said:

**WHAT I REMEMBER MOST ABOUT THAT DAY** was the feeling that I was not within my body. I felt as if I was looking at something, like a movie screen or a picture-book, something where I could not stop or change anything. I remember the way the shaking and noise and buckling and cracking of everything around me was not just in my ears or in my nerves or bones. I felt like it was hatching out of me. And as it went on, I remember it felt as if it were coming through everyone else caught in it too.

I remember seeing everything that was happening from the air, somehow. As if I were riding on a cloud, or maybe in a very tall building. When the city started to shake it came through the soles of my feet . . . but again, the more I think about it, the more I couldn’t say whether it came *in* through them or *out from* them. And I remember falling, but, again, it felt like I was falling up instead of down, or the other way around.

And I remember how all this went on and on. I was walking through what was left of someone’s house, and it felt as if things were still shaking—again, from inside me, too. There was a broken piece of piping and it was spewing water all over this pile of bricks and wood, the water trickling down between the cracks and the splinters. I walked around to the other side of that pile and saw a hand, a pale hand like a woman’s—just the fingertips sticking up from around the corners of a piece of stone.

I knelt down and started lifting pieces away; so many of them were so heavy, I couldn't lift them out of place or so much as rock them. I was only able to get the hand uncovered a little bit and I saw the skin, the fingernails, all of it was torn up and covered with something that I thought was mud but I realized it was dried blood.

I remember how all of it smelled. There was a smell like a thousand things rotting and burning, all at once, like an open sewer running through a funeral pyre. But somehow all far away, like something wafting in from a nearby lot. It was only then while looking at that dead hand that I started to smell it all for real. That's the smell of death, I told myself. Didn't you know that? I wasn't even able to turn my head; I threw up over and over again but there was nothing in my stomach, and I just . . . dribbled yellow spit all over the hand. And I couldn't stop crying, either. I cried over the hand, too. I thought, maybe my tears will be a good way to wash all this off.

I wiped off her hand as best I could and laid down.

I don't know how long I laid there. It might have been for all of the night. I remember the light in the sky was this strange color, like dawn and dusk mixed together. I'd been hearing shouts and rumbling wheels and lots of other things, so much of all of them that I finally couldn't hear anything at all, just a kind of endless, bottomless noise. And I thought, this noise isn't coming from outside me, is it? It's coming from inside; that's why I can't really hear anything.

Then there was this clattering sound right near me, and that scared me out of my wits. It was the first "real" sound I'd heard in a long time. I turned to look and I saw this man in a torn-up police uniform pulling a cart with a grass mat thrown over it. He was wearing these very shiny shoes—I could see this because he stood right next to my head and yelled down at me, "Can you hear me? Can you see me?" It was funny how the clattering sound was so near, and yet when he shouted at me it seemed so far. So I filled up my lungs and shouted back as loud as I could, "Yes, I can hear you! I can see you!" Somehow I knew it wasn't coming out as much more than a feeble little whimper. My throat and the inside of my

mouth felt so dry I thought they were going to crack and split.

He knelt down next to me and started looking here and there, touching my arms, lifting my feet—I guess he wanted to make sure I hadn't broken anything. I didn't think anything was broken, but I could scarcely tell. He reached under me and lifted me off the ground and put me on top of the grass matting on the cart. There were things under it, bumpy things that were hard here and soft there.

"You're dehydrated," he told me. He had a bamboo canteen, and I watched him unplug the end of it and roll a handkerchief over the hole. It wasn't until he put the wet handkerchief in my mouth that I understood what he was doing. Everything that was happening in front of me felt evil and strange. I thought, it'll feel like that for everything else that happens, too, until it's too late and something really evil does happen.

"Just suck on that until there's nothing left," he said. I felt like a baby, but I did what he told me, and watched him all the while. Again, he set to doing something that didn't make any sense at first: he put one shoe up on the edge of the cart and started whipping a dirty cloth across it. Oh, he's *shining his shoes*, I thought. In the middle of all this, he's shining his shoes. I suppose he noticed me staring, and he said: "I'm an officer of my country, after all."

He didn't spend much time shining his shoes, though. He threw the cloth back into a little wooden box that was tied to one of the handles of the cart, then grabbed up the handles under his arms and started to drag me away from there.

I tried to sit up, but I couldn't do it, so I just turned my head to the side and looked at everything that was drifting by. Even the ruins didn't make sense. Some buildings were just little piles of sticks and flaming rubbish; some of them were totally untouched. Some had half-fallen down, or were leaning as if they had been kicked. And burning, burning—everything was burning, even the stones and the air and the smoke that was rising from all the fires seemed to all be burning. I turned my head a little bit more so that my mouth was against the grass cushion I was lying on and tried to breathe through that, because I was afraid that the fire



would start reaching into my lungs too.

There was no sky, somehow. The sky itself seemed to have been torn out. No sun, no stars, no clouds, just something that looked like you had pulled a red kimono sleeve over your face. And yet somehow with everything burning and that redness overhanging it all, it was all terribly dark, so dark I could barely make out the face of the man who had rescued me.

I felt the cart stop; the army man had pulled it over next to a wall that was still mostly standing, and had run over to me. “Don’t,” he said over and over again. He had the cloth I had been sucking the water out of, and was daubing my face with it. “Don’t, don’t. You do that and you’ll get even weaker.” In my state I couldn’t understand what he was talking about, as I was so far away from everything, including myself. And then I realized I was crying, crying harder than I could ever remember, sucking in my own tears and gagging on them. I was crying because the world was burning—and, I thought, because all that had been burned was not enough. They would burn everything and set it to ruin, and then take the ruins themselves and burn them, and then take the fires and set those alight as well. They would burn the very air, the sky, the cinders; everything that couldn’t be burned would be used to make a fire that *would* burn them.

“You mustn’t say that,” the army man said, and then I realized I had been gasping all of this out at him. “Burning!” I remember saying to him right after he tried to soothe me. “It’s on fire and nothing will put it out!”

Finally, he stopped wiping my face, then bent down and put his face next to mine, and I felt something go through both of us—from him to me or from me to him, I couldn’t say. But I knew then that he was crying, too, and that all of his shoe-shining and firm words were falling away at last. He put his head down next to me on that grass mat and cried, and then he took his cap and put it over my face so that I wouldn’t have to look around me anymore and so I could fall asleep. I didn’t sleep after all, but in the dark with his cap over my face I could at least pretend it was something like sleep.

**RYŪICHI DIDN'T DECLARE THAT HE WAS FINISHED;** his words simply trailed off and stopped there. Amano had allowed his pipe to lean out from between his fingers until it was resting across the ashtray and its fresh, unlit wad of tobacco had spilled out onto the table. He took the piece of paper he had been writing on and used it to sweep the brown crumbs into his cupped hand.

"Sorry if I was dubious," Amano said. It was a remarkably sullen-sounding apology. "But you have to understand how cautious folks have to be these days. I know what lies sound like."

Ryūichi reached for the sword and pulled it back onto his lap.

"Listen, I have a better idea." Amano ground his thumb into the bowl of the pipe; he was using everything in front of him to avoid having to look Ryūichi in the face. "You could hock that and maybe get a few meals out of it—and if that's what you'd rather do, then I can't stop you. But I know someone who needs a little help, and you're not averse to doing a little real work, are you?"

"Not at all." Ryūichi sat up a little straighter. "Before the earthquake I was doing errands in a rich man's house, between lessons. Ishibashi." Then, humbler: "I was just now using his last name."

"I guessed. —Not like it matters." Amano waved the pipesmoke dismissively. "I'll be honest; I don't care where you came from right now. You seem like a decent enough sort, and if you were getting up at some ungodly hour to clean house and then sit on a bench in a classroom for half the day—"

"It wasn't *quite* that bad, actually."

"No toting around night-soil, I hope."

Ryūichi laughed; it felt like the first laugh he'd had since he'd realized what a laugh was. "There was also this girl who came to visit regularly."

"Oh, *was* there now!"

The younger man fidgeted inwardly but kept talking. "Mr. Ishibashi's niece—she came over every so often. I wrote her a letter, but I can't remember what I did with it." He unthinkingly patted the breast of his jacket. "I know I would have at least tried

to give it to her.”

“You remember her name?”

“Yoshiko.”

“She was an Ishibashi, too?”

Before Ryūichi could answer, Amano reached under the table and yanked the sword out of the younger man’s lap. “Easy,” he muttered. “Just sit there.” He uncrossed his legs and stuffed the sword under him as the shop door opened with no warning. In walked a man dressed in the stiff, single-breasted uniform of a police officer. The buttons on his jacket had more shine to them than the man’s own eyes.