

"Women can be like that," Misaki added.

Kafuku couldn't think of what to say. So he kept silent.

"To me, it's a kind of sickness. Thinking about it doesn't do much good. The way my father walked out on my mother and me, my mother's constant abuse—I blame the sickness for those things. There's no logic involved. All I can do is accept what they did and try to get on with my life."

"So then we're all actors," Kafuku said.

"Yes, I think that's true. To a point, anyway."

Kafuku settled back in the leather seat, closed his eyes, and tried to focus his mind on the sound of the engine when Misaki shifted gears. But he couldn't catch the precise moment. It was all too smooth, too mysterious. He could only make out a slight gradation in the engine's hum. It was like the wings of a flying insect, now drawing closer, now fading away.

Time to take a nap, Kafuku thought. Sleep deeply and wake up. Ten or fifteen minutes would be enough. Then back to the stage, and the acting. The bright lights, the rehearsed lines. The applause, the falling curtain. Leaving who one was for a brief time, then returning. But the self that one returned to was never exactly the same as the self that one had left behind.

"I'm going to sleep a little," Kafuku said.

Misaki didn't answer. She quietly studied the road. Kafuku was grateful for her silence.

Translated by Ted Goossen

YESTERDAY

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 Kitarru. 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, Kitarru'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.

YESTERDAY

To my ear, Kitaru had an almost pitch-perfect Kansai accent, even though he was born and raised in Denenchofu, in Ora-ku, in Tokyo. As for me, although I was born and raised in Kansai, I spoke almost perfect standard (that is, Tokyo-style) Japanese. The two of us definitely made an odd pair.

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 Ora Ward, in Tokyo.

"Ora 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, Verbs, nouns, accent—the whole nine yards. Same as studying English or French. Went to Kansai for training, even."

I was impressed. So there were people who studied the 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. It 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 wearing their jerseys 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 the 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 the 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. "But your version isn't the dialect from Hanshinkan—the Kobe area. It sounds more like it comes from hard-core, downtown Osaka."

"You picked up on that, huh? During summer break

in high school, I did a homestay in Tenjiku in Osaka. Great place. Can walk to the zoo and everything.”

“Homestay?” Now that was impressive.

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

He had a point. Even his self-directed put-down 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 particularly 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,” Kitarru 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.

There were a couple of reasons why, when I came to Tokyo, I totally gave up speaking the Kansai dialect. Until I graduated from high school, I spoke nothing but—in fact, I’d never spoken standard Tokyo even once. But all it took was a month in Tokyo for me to become completely fluent in this new version of Japanese. I was kind of surprised that I could adapt so quickly. Maybe I’m a chameleon and I didn’t even realize it. 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 the 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 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 with a clean slate as a brand-new person. Try out the new possibilities of a new

me. Jettisoning the 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.

YESTERDAY

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

"You name it."

"Didn't get along with your folks?"

"We get along okay," 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. The road in front of our place was kind of narrow, and my parents just 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."

"A girl from Ashiya?" Kitaru asked.

"No, not from Ashiya. She lived in Shukugawa. It's nearby."

"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. "That was another thing I didn't want to remember."

"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. That's where he sang the song with those absurd lyrics for me (though whether it was for my sake or not, I'm not sure).

"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 smartass. 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, like people do when they're in the tub. He hit the high notes especially well. "Tho' she was here / Til yesterday . . ." Or something along those lines.

He lightly splashed the bathwater as an accompaniment. I probably should have interrupted him, sung along to encourage, 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?"

I've never been able to spend much time in the bath. I get bored trying to sit still and soak. You can't read a book or listen to music, so I soon find myself at loose ends.

"When I soak in a bath for a long time, all kinds of good ideas suddenly 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, what a downer you are. My mom says exactly the same thing. Aren't you a little young to be, like, the voice of reason 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 and have fun. And go out on some real dates with my girlfriend."

"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 all the motivation you need?"

"I guess," Kitaru said. "Look, this could get pretty long if I get into it all. Thing is, it's like I'm divided into two parts inside me, you know?"

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 gotten 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. "Okay," 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. Pretty old school.

Kitaru wasn't what you'd call handsome, but he was pleasant looking enough. He wasn't tall but 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. He and his girlfriend made a great-looking couple. His only possible defect was that his face, a bit too slender and delicate, could give

the impression that he was lacking in personality or was wishy-washy. But the moment he opened his mouth, this overall positive effect collapsed like a sand castle under an exuberant Labrador retriever. People were dismayed by his Kansai dialect, which he delivered fluently, 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 get-out. 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."

That didn't explain anything. What kind of relationship could there possibly be between me being a good guy (assuming this was the case) and me going out with his girlfriend?

"Erika and I have spent almost our whole lives together so far. We've been in school together from the start. 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.

YESTERDAY

Split himself in two? "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 fucking cram school, studying for the fucking 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—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—what's gonna happen to us? We have that kind of choice, I was thinking. You follow?"

"I do and I don't," I said.

"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?"

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

I wasn't exactly following what was wrong with things being smooth and comfortable, but pursuing that looked tricky, so I gave it up. "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. I've known her since she was a kid, and it's kind of 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 kiss her, of course, and hold her hand. I've touched her breasts, through her clothes. But it's like we're just fooling around, y'know, playing. Even when we get a little worked up, there's never any sign like things'll go any further."

"Instead of waiting for signs or anything, shouldn't

you be the one to make things happen, and take the next step?" That's what people call sexual desire.

"Naw, it's like in our case things just don't go that way. 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. What do you 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 a navy-blue miniskirt. Like the perfect model of a respectable uptown college girl. She was as attractive as in her photograph, but when I saw her in the flesh what really drew me 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.

Kitaru introduced us. "I'm really happy that Aki-kun has a friend," Erika Kuritani 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 the 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 the 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. The Tokyo dialect's no better than Kansai!"

"Maybe they are equal," Erika insisted, "but since the Meiji Restoration the way people speak in Tokyo has been the standard for spoken Japanese. I mean, has anyone ever translated *Franny and Zooey* into the Kansai dialect?"

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

I probably would, too, I thought, but kept quiet. Best to mind my own business.

"Anyway, that's common knowledge now," she said.

"You're narrow-minded, Aki-kun, and biased."

"What are you talking about, narrow-minded and biased? To me, cultural discrimination is a much more dangerous kind of bias."

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. He meant me. "His looks are okay, he has good manners, and he knows all kinds of things, reads these difficult books. 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 okay for me to go out with another guy if it's Tanimura-kun here? Because he's a *really nice guy*, 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 okay. A cultural exchange it is."

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. A basic problem that changing locations and languages doesn't solve.

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. He's in a screenwriting workshop."

"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 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 gotten 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 in a good mood when we left the theater.

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 Kuritani nodded.

"Even if we'd gone all the way, things most likely would have ended up the same," I said. "That became

increasingly obvious after I moved to Tokyo and put some distance between us. I'm sorry things didn't work out, but I think it was inevitable."

"Is it hard on you?" she asked.

"Is *wabat* 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.

"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 Kuritani mulled over something for a while. I helped myself to the pizza in the meantime.

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

"Sure," I said. Uh-oh, I thought, what have I gotten myself into? 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 Kuritani 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's convinced it's Waseda or nothing. I think that's a pointless way of thinking, but 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, a waste of his life. I find that way of thinking unbelievable."

That's one way of looking at it, I thought, but didn't share my analysis with her.

Erika Kuritani sighed and went on, "In elementary school he was really good at studying. 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 gotten 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 the Kansai dialect. Why does somebody who was born and raised in Tokyo go to the trouble of learning the 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 the 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. It really depends on the person. 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."

"The rate at which time progresses might be a little 'off,' depending on the person," 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, very genuinely and directly. It's just that I don't think he's grasped yet what it is. That's why he can't make any progress, and that applies to all kinds of things. 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 besides 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 *wirge* inside me to try something else, to come into contact with all kinds of people. Call it curiosity, a thirst to know more. More possibilities. 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 Kuritani 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 Kuritani stared silently at the candle flame flickering in the breeze from the AC. "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,' 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. Best to 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. The bottom half is sunk down in the sea. I'm leaning against Aki-kun, the moon shines beautifully, it's just the two of us, the waves lapping gently outside. But every time I wake up I feel unbearably sad. That moon made of ice is nowhere to be found."

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 wonder what kind of dream I'll have the next day and I get so frightened it's like I can actually hear 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've 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 okay 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. You know—not *normal* kinds of 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. For someone from Tokyo who learned it by studying, it's just too perfect."

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

"It might give people the creeps."

"Hmm. Could be."

"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. "Who says there's anything wrong with *that*? If you're not bothering anybody *right now*, then so what? Who knows anything beyond *right now* anyway? You want to speak the 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, you 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 trying to say."

"But Erika Kuritani 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."

"Hey, how about giving someone else a chance to point that out?"

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 being so "totally irresponsible," as he put it. He was owed a week's pay, but he didn't come to pick it up. The owner asked me if I knew his address, but I told him I didn't. I didn't know either his phone number or his address. All I knew was roughly where to find his house in Denenchofu, and Erika Kuritani's home phone number.

Kitaru didn't say a word to me about quitting his job, and didn't get in touch after that. 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 one thing that did concern me was how, the last two days before he disappeared, Kitaru had been 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 why 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."

"I've never flattered anyone in my whole life," I said. Her smile deepened. 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. Plus her smile was a little too amazing to be real.

"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 dive me

so hard at work," she joked, "that I have no time to get married." I surmised that she'd had a number of affairs over the years. There was something about her, some aura radiating from her, that made me sure. 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. It's just a waste of time to keep on doing this, he said. 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 like that and never ask me? What about *me*?'"

"And what did he say to that?"

She didn't respond. She just held her lips tight. She seemed about to say something, but it looked like if she did, she would cry. She managed to hold back the tears,

as if wanting to avoid, above all, ruining her delicate eye makeup. 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."

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 hope I can answer it."

"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 okay. 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 Kuritani 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 I had 'that kind' of experience."

"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 roundabout way."

That's what we all do: endlessly take the long way around. I wanted to tell her this, but kept silent. Blurring 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 will never make a go of marriage."

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

“Perhaps.”

“Is it out of the realm of possibility that the two of you might meet up again and get together?”

She smiled, looked down, and shook her head. I couldn't tell what that gesture meant. Maybe that this was not a possibility. Or else that it was pointless to even think about it.

YESTERDAY

“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—when you need to—borrow and lend out,” I said. I really do overplay these sayings sometimes.

“That's a wonderful idea,” she said. The smile still graced her face.

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.”

Erika Kuritani looked past me, starting off in the distance for a moment, as if searching the night sky for a moon made of ice. She abruptly turned and walked away. Off to the ladies' room, I imagined, to touch up her mascara.

When I'm driving and the Beatles song “Yesterday” comes on the radio, I can't help but hear those crazy Yr-

ics 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, the history of the Denenchofu public elementary school, the emotional richness of the Kansai dialect. 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

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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 no one was beside me. 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.

I hope that in Denver (or some other faraway town) Kiaru is happy. If it's too much to ask that he's *happy*, I hope at least that today he has his health, and all his needs met. For no one knows what kind of dreams tomorrow will bring.

Translated by Philip Gabriel

AN INDEPENDENT ORGAN

THESE ARE PEOPLE in the world who—thanks to a lack of intellectual acuity—live a life that is surprisingly artificial. I haven't run across all that many, but there are certainly a few. And Dr. Tokai was one of them.

In order for these so-called principled souls to survive in this warped world, these sort of people need to carefully adjust every day, though in most cases they're not consciously aware of the tiresome level of finesse necessary to do so. They're thoroughly convinced that they're perfectly guileless people who live honest lives devoid of ulterior motives or artifice. And when, by some chance, a special light shines on them, revealing how artificial and *unreal* the inner workings of their lives really are, circumstances can take a tragic, or in some cases comic, turn. Of course, there are many such people—we can call them blessed—who never encounter that light, or who see it but come away unfazed.

I'd like to record everything that I learned about this man named Tokai. Most of it originates from things