Volume One – Creative Project

Refrain

A novel submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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August 2006
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Date: 30/08/2006
Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to my supervisors, Dr Christine Balint and Antoni Jach, who provided much guidance and critique, and whose enthusiasm and commitment were evident at every stage of the project.

Portions of the material were workshopped by my fellow RMIT postgraduate Creative Writing candidates: Kalinda Ashton, Cassandra Austin, Keith Butler, Christine Darcas, Philippa Garrard, Craig Garrett, Alison Goodman, Jacinta Halloran, Rosalie Ham, Kate Holden, Jerry Kara, Tali Lavi, Julie-Ann Morrison, Martine Murray, Ellie Nielsen, Florence Nulens, Sonia Orchard, Jeff Sparrow, Jen Spry, Kylie Stevenson Cayley, Dion Teasdale, Dana Thomson, Samantha Tidy, Carrie Tiffany and Alexis Wright. Their insights were invaluable in defining and refining the project, and their camaraderie was an inspiration. In particular, Sonia Orchard generously shared strategies and resources for postgraduate survival; Craig Garrett’s line editing skills significantly improved the first quarter of the novel; and Jeff Sparrow greatly assisted in proofreading the exegesis.

For their unfailing faith and encouragement, I thank my family – especially my parents, Hugh and Dianne.

Among the many friends and peers who supplied personal and intellectual assistance during my research, I am especially thankful to Michal Kulbicki, Craig Garrett, Kane Barwick, Alex McDermott, Amanda Kerley, Anna Poletti, Tim Richards, Rallou Lubitz and Tadhg Taylor, and Tamara and David Shardlow.

I would also like to thank my colleagues and students at NMIT – particularly the Advanced Writers class – for their interest in my work and their willingness to forgive my occasional preoccupation.

Finally, special thanks are due to Kate Walker, friend and mentor, who was crucial in helping develop and shape the novel; and to Kalinda Ashton for her rigorous feedback on both parts of the project, her assistance in line editing and proof reading, and her boundless patience, good humour and affection.
Refrain
Prologue

I shut the door, wrestled the antiquated bolt into its bracket on the heavy wood doorframe, and snapped on my padlock to keep it in place. It would hold. The tiny window was barred. And nothing was going to get through the bone-yellow marble tiles that covered the walls, floor and ceiling – though they now ceased to make the place seem luxurious. It was like our own private mausoleum. But at least it was private.

For the first time in what felt like weeks we were alone.

Even the thick sour taste in the air and the racket from the street below were less evident.

But there was another sound, closer to hand, that I could not immediately place.

I turned. In the middle of the low, almost room-sized bed, Penny lay curled in a tight ball, impossibly small. Her back was to me, but the movement of her shoulders confirmed she was sobbing.

‘What’s wrong?’ This was not what I’d hoped for from the first day of our Grand Tour.

She didn’t answer. She didn’t even acknowledge that she’d heard me. She just kept crying.

‘Please, what’s up?’ It was a struggle to maintain a calm and reasonable tone. As I sat on the edge of the hard mattress, I had to stifle a groan. My muscles ached from hours of cold and enforced inactivity – first in the plane and then in the grimly functional arrival lounge where we’d waited for daybreak – followed by the struggle with my overladen pack onto the bus and then through the seething streets, choking on incense and traffic fumes, mobbed by beggars and peddlers.

It wasn’t that I couldn’t understand how Penny was feeling. But this had been her idea.

‘Hey, we’ve made it.’ I heard a rough edge in my voice. ‘What’s to cry about?’
I gently rubbed her shoulder. Her tears gave way to gulps of air, which eventually subsided enough for her to make herself understood.

‘I’m scared,’ she said.

I opened my mouth, intending to point out that crying probably wouldn’t help. That it was a little late for second thoughts now that we were thousands of kilometres from home, with six-month visas and a painstakingly planned itinerary. That we weren’t doing anything that hadn’t been done before by hundreds like us who all agreed that the initial culture shock was the worst part. But this was also what made the place so interesting, and why we’d come. This and the fact it was dirt cheap. And if we’d survived until now we would probably manage to continue doing so.

That was what I intended to say.

What I said was ‘I’m fucking terrified.’ The words just fell out, and I was too exhausted to stop them.

Penny uncurled, rolled over and looked up at me. Her eyes were bloodshot and ringed with dark circles, her face was blotchy and streaked with tears, her nose ran, her hair had gathered in lank matted clumps. ‘Really?’

I shrugged and then nodded. So much for my usefulness as a travel companion. The guilty feeling that I’d failed her already was worse even than the fear itself. And together the two added up to total defeat – no point trying to pretend otherwise.

I lay down beside her. ‘Listen, if we don’t feel better in a few days, we’ll go home. We’ll rent a little place close to the city – no more share-housing. I’ll find a job and you can finish your course and we’ll live happily ever after, just like we talked about.’

For the first time, it didn’t sound so bad. I liked her a lot. I thought I might even love her. Whenever I noticed other girls now, it was with a virtuous feeling akin to nostalgia.
Anyway, I was twenty-five and my bid for rock’n’roll stardom had failed. Why not try something new?

Penny hiccupsed and pressed closer.

‘We don’t have to wait if you don’t want to,’ I said, feeling suddenly quite carried away. ‘We can go back to the airport right now and wait for the next couple of spare seats. Shit, one of those guys down in the street is probably selling tickets.’

Penny giggled. ‘No. Let’s give it a few days.’

‘You’re sure? Absolutely sure?’ As much as I’d come to look forward to the trip, I was almost hoping she’d change her mind.

‘Absolutely.’ She smiled. It was a tentative, bleary smile, weirdly trusting and even grateful. I couldn’t understand it, but it was wonderful.

We removed each other’s rank, travel-stained clothes fumblingly and crawled between the stiff, cool sheets where, exhausted as we were, we made love.

Afterwards, she kissed me and said ‘Thanks for being honest about how you’re feeling. Promise you always will.’

‘Sure,’ I murmured, half-asleep already. ‘If I know, you’ll know. Fair enough?’

We slept through our first day overseas and didn’t wake until the following morning. Of all our time in India; of all the wondrous, splendid, extraordinary things we saw and did in the following months – the memory of that first morning is still the one I cherish most.
Part One
One

The streets and towers of Sydney were like a child’s dream of a city. Everything looked new, fresh out of the box. Even the smoke-stained brick terraces and the walls covered with ragged posters; even the sprawling Moreton Bay figs down the side roads. On the street corners, instead of the crippled beggars I was used to, there were automatic teller machines. The air was cold and crisp, the sky streaked with clouds, entirely unlike the all-engulfing clouds of the subcontinental wet season. Seen from inside a car, everything appeared strangely unreal, like a Duty Free display or another in-flight movie, although the soundtrack – Brian and Mum arguing loudly between the back and the driver’s seat – jarred.

They had arrived at the airport an hour late due to Brian’s last-minute rush to clear his stuff out of my old room, though Brian kept insisting that Mum had taken the slow route and he was now was annoyed at the prospect of getting home too late to catch the rugby on TV. He was clearly not impressed, either, by Mum’s proposal that he relinquish the front passenger’s seat to me.

‘There’s nothing quite like the sight of home, is there,’ Mum said brightly, with yet another sidelong glance that failed to disguise her concern at my evident deterioration. She herself appeared essentially unchanged: the well-preserved suburban divorcee, from her practical, not unstylish brogues to the plain, shoulder-length haircut. Brian, on the other hand, was almost unrecognisable after only four months. His early twenties were finally upon him, wiping out all evidence of the former weedy teenager, and he had literally expanded in a way that suggested roughly equal parts junk food and gym training. He was wearing shabby jeans and a grubby, American college-style sports T-shirt.
Driving out of the car park, Mum continued to insist how pleased they were that I’d be part of the household again, which added to my suspicion that she and my brother had already fought at least one major battle over this. No doubt Brian considered me an interloper, perhaps with good reason. I hadn’t lived in the family home for half-a-dozen years, since moving out after high school, into the city with the rest of the band. Brian had never left, and on my infrequent visits I’d noticed how he’d taken to the role of man of the house.

‘Shit, Mum, watch it,’ he yelled from behind me, interrupting Mum’s homecoming speech. ‘You nearly souvenired that taxi.’

‘Brian...’

I let their voices – Brian’s low and belligerent, Mum’s high and strained – wash over me along with the passing glimpses of the inner city. I felt as if I’d woken from a dream so vivid that the real world had become tinged with strangeness, and familiar things were no longer quite themselves.

We were heading onto the freeway when Brian began to complain of nausea. He kept it up until Mum pulled into an emergency bay, where he leant against the side of the car inhaling exhaust fumes until I suggested we swap seats. Back on the road he and Mum continued arguing, but at a volume I could barely hear.

Soon we were passing through the sandstone cuttings that channelled commuters out of the last untidy suburbs and into the eucalyptus-covered hills. I lay down on the back seat the way I used to when I was a child and the four of us – Dad included – were on a long holiday trip. The hum of the road passing below and the murmur of the engine were like echoes of that orderly, reliable world, and I wondered why I’d ever turned my back on it. This only inflamed the painful awareness of how instantly, back with the rest of the family, the new
easy intimacy of our recent letters evaporated, and we were once again facing one another across the wasteland of recent years.

Still, I'd been aware of this possibility, and things could change, I told myself as jet lag dragged me down into sleep. I ought to remember, too, that this was not the end of my journey but a new stage. And if the current situation was far from ideal, it had its advantages. There’d been no mention of Penny, and for the time being that was a relief.
Two

The Rising Star was one of those ageing inner-city pubs. Two-storey, sooty brick trimmed with cracked ornamental tiles and decaying wrought iron; inside, adhesive carpet and striped wallpaper disappearing under a film of nicotine. Apart from the cage-like wooden bar, the hotel’s only features were a couple of poker machines and a small coin-operated pool table. During its heyday, half a century earlier, it would have been a watering hole for workers employed in the mines or the mills, which had been the city’s lifeblood.

Now its only patrons were a handful of old-timers and the city’s small, fanatical independent music scene: a mix of funereal Goths, grungy metal heads, spiky-headed punks, stylish alterna-popsters, feral hippies and electro-geeks. Affiliations with any particular subculture were secondary to the sense of solidarity fostered by our awareness that in the eyes of our fellow citizens we were collectively indistinguishable, not to mention undesirable.

By the time we discovered the Rising Star, Anth, Wizz and I were already rehearsing and song-writing in every spare minute we had (including those when we should have been studying for exams). We’d played a couple of backyard parties, but this scene was a revelation. Here was a different world. A world far removed from the outer suburban beer barns with their Top-40 cover bands and sweat-soaked Oz Rock. A world somehow more vivid and real than what we considered our suffocating, banal day-to-day existence.

It had seemed natural to us that the Rising Star should be our first stop on route to superstardom, and indeed our audience numbers soon grew till we were regularly packing the place out. We began playing larger venues around town, even a couple of support slots in Sydney. Yet even as we dreamed of grander stages, we continued to regard the Star as our
spiritual home and seemed to play best there. Some day, we agreed, the place would become a pilgrimage site for music fans and documentary crews from all over the globe. The site of our humble beginnings, where we might still be glimpsed hanging out like ordinary people, in between recording, world tours and doing our bit to promote world peace.

The Rising Star was also where I first met Penny.

But my last memory of the place was not pleasant. In fact it was not so much a memory as a toxic smudge of alcohol and recriminations, the three of us refusing to look at one another the entire time we were playing, which was approximately five minutes or one-and-a-half songs. It was our worst gig ever, and would turn out to be our last though we hadn’t planned it that way. We were worn out – by each other, the tardiness of fame, and our first real efforts to write songs that were not merely copies of our idols.

The fact that the Rising Star was also the place Anth proposed we meet to celebrate my return suggested he’d put that behind him. I hoped so. And as soon as I pushed through the scratched green doors it was obvious the scene was still healthy. The pub was crowded, the air muddy with cigarette smoke and beer fumes, and a low thrum of expectancy in the wash of conversation. The confusion of styles was still so evident that it took me a moment to realise the faces had changed. A new generation of scene-sters had arrived in my absence. And gauging from the stares at my freshly washed and ironed travel clothes, they took me for a hapless square who’d wandered in accidentally, and were waiting for my hasty retreat.

I spotted Anth and Caroline sitting up the back. Approaching the table, I noticed with shock how sparse Anth’s hair had become at the crown.

‘Stop perving on my pate,’ he muttered. ‘I know how irresistibly attractive it is – Caroline tells me constantly – but I’d expected more restraint from you.’

After an instant’s hesitation we shook hands, something we’d never done seriously before.
It felt less like a greeting than a chance to size each other up. Beside him, Caroline smiled and said ‘Hi.’ The flow of chatter around us made the sudden silence that fell on our table sound even louder.

‘Here.’ Anth pushed a brimming glass towards me across the streaked linoleum tabletop.

‘I diagnose an advanced beer deficiency. I just hope we’re not too late.’

I looked at the glass. It was the closest I’d been to alcohol in four months, and I had to will myself not to push it away.

‘Thanks,’ I said. But at the first sip I couldn’t help grimacing.

‘Looks like you got back just in time,’ Anth said.

‘So how are you guys?’ I tried to make it sound casual, as if I didn’t remember Anth’s less-than-optimistic letter of only a month before.

‘Ladies first.’ Anth nudged Caroline.

‘I’m good, Jake. It’s nice to see you again.’ She was one of those rare people who could make ‘nice’ sound genuine without sounding idiotic. ‘I’m still temping, and that’s about it. He’s the one with the news.’

‘Who? Me?’ The way Anth leant against her made it clear that whatever else had happened, their relationship had survived. And I might have guessed from Anth’s nonchalance what his news would be: after months of unmitigated job-hunting failure, having recently applied for a position at the sewage treatment plant, he got an offer out of the blue that turned out to be his dream job. He was now on a monstrous salary and spent most of his days grazing internet sites dedicated to New Wave sci-fi, Existentialism and/or home brewing.

I didn’t bother trying to disguise my relief. ‘Congratulations. I was worried I’d get back
and find you in small pieces.’ Perhaps there was hope for me too.

‘What about you?’ Anth said. ‘How’s it feel to be back?’

‘I know it won’t be easy, but I’ve never felt so together.’

‘See. Didn’t I tell you?’ Anth pouted at Caroline and then turned back to me. ‘So when are we jamming?’

For a second I may have frozen. Then I laughed. ‘You’ve got to be kidding.’

‘Just for fun.’ Anth looked hurt. ‘To let off steam, like the old days.’ He smiled.

‘Though of course if word gets out and people start offering us gigs and record contracts and loads of money…Well, it wouldn’t be polite to knock them back.’

As my bemusement deepened, I couldn’t think of anything to say.

‘You can’t hide it. I can see that six-string supernova sparkle in your eye.’

I shook my head. If this was Anth’s way of insisting that bygones were bygones, I could appreciate the gesture. Yet he seemed serious, and I noticed Caroline remained silent and had become suddenly interested in the rest of the pub.

‘Music nearly ruined our friendship.’

Anth squinted and leaned forward over the table. ‘Music is what our friendship was always about.’

‘Well, right now I’ve got a few more important things on my mind.’

‘Is this because you’ve found religion? That letter, that stuff about letting go and finding peace…Listen, mate, I wouldn’t want to knock anything that works for you, but I’ve been worried. There’s always crazies out there claiming to have the answers, and they target confused, vulnerable people. Anyway, it didn’t stop George Harrison.’

Up until that moment I had allowed myself to imagine returning like a prophet from the wilderness, bringing the simple, sane, life-changing message of the Teachings to my friends,
and watching as it gently caught hold and spread outward. But I couldn’t even begin, now, without sounding defensive.

‘It’s not that,’ I said. ‘And don’t you remember the only thing we could agree on as a band, by the end, was that being in a band sucked? If I hadn’t had Penny to keep me sane…Well, after all that, do you really think it’s so crazy not to want to get back into music?’

Anth scratched his head. ‘I guess not. I mean it makes perfect sense. It’s just not like you at all.’ He raised a sly eyebrow.

It was hardly the nastiest conversation we’d ever had. I could see, too, that he thought he had my best interests at heart. Nevertheless, I felt a surprisingly strong impulse to tell him that if he thought I was so pathetic then he wouldn’t miss my friendship and we might as well say our final goodbyes now so he could stop worrying on my behalf. Despite all the years we’d known each other and everything we’d been through, the scenario unrolled in my imagination with the clarity of a premonition. I knew I’d instantly regret it. Even so, I might have acted it out, were it not for the Teachings.

‘Sticks and stones.’ I forced a smile.

‘Fair enough.’ Anth looked down at his nearly empty glass, and I couldn’t tell if he was more relieved or disappointed. ‘You’re probably right. It was a dumb-arse idea. I guess I blocked out the bad stuff and just remembered the cool bits. And I was so hanging out for you to get back.’

He laughed ruefully and I felt suddenly bereft. I was as sure as ever I was doing the right thing, but the satisfaction had gone.

‘Listen,’ I said, ‘I don’t know about the future. Maybe…maybe I’ll be ready to give it a go in a while. But not now, that’s all I’m saying.’
The corners of Anth’s mouth lifted like escaped helium balloons. ‘Oh, definitely not now. Of course not. I wasn’t meaning right away.’

I grinned in response, whilst assuring myself that this wasn’t a mistake, I hadn’t committed to anything, and searching for a new topic of conversation. Fortunately, just then the PA speakers spluttered into life and a band I hadn’t noticed through the crowd began to play. I leaned back and listened. They were good.

‘Who are these guys?’ I had to lean across the table to be heard.

‘The Paper Tigers. Darren and Mike’s new band. I think I mentioned them in the letter.’

Darren had played drums in another now-defunct band I’d never liked. Mike was an old friend and former housemate of Penny’s – I’d thought at first they were a couple – and I knew he had been learning bass. Together, Mike and Darren were a solid rhythm section. But it was the other band members who caught my attention. I got out of my chair, peering between the tightly packed punters. I caught a glimpse of a black turtleneck and mop of hair with dark glasses, straight out of Greenwich Village circa 1956. The new guitarist on the block, I thought with a prickle of jealousy. His style wasn’t flashy, but its elegant strength perfectly set off the extraordinary voice spiralling above. Try as I might, I could see nothing of the owner of this voice, so powerful and assured that it fell through the murky sound system like sunlight through a crack in the clouds. All Anth had told me was that she was Mike’s new girlfriend.

The set seemed to end too quickly. When I resumed my seat and said how much I’d enjoyed it, Anth slapped the edge of the table.

‘I knew they’d inspire you. You’ve been away from the scene too long.’

I smiled at his irrepressibility. ‘A shame our drummer happens to be on the other side of the continent.’
‘Wasn’t Wizz a sly bastard? Pretending not to care about that uni degree, though he always used it as an excuse to make us do the legwork.’

I recalled how much it used to annoy both Anth and me, yet now it did seem like a subject for fond reminiscence. ‘Do you remember that night –’

‘I thought it was you guys. Wow!’ The crowd parted as Darren advanced, hands on hips. His small, broad build and wispy beard always made me think of the mythological dwarves who worked in the mines and mills of Scandinavian gods. The impression was strengthened by the sight of his white singlet darkened with sweat under the armpits and across the chest.

‘Great gig,’ I said. ‘Great performance, great songs…great everything.’

Darren looked relieved, embarrassed and proud.

‘And Jake’s only had half a beer, too,’ Anth added.

‘No, seriously.’ I realised I must have sounded over the top. ‘Why bother making music when the Paper Tigers are already better than we ever were?’

‘You thinking of playing again?’ Darren said. ‘That’s great. You were the reason Mike and I started jamming.’

‘Wanna be our new drummer?’ Anth asked.

Darren blinked. ‘Really?’

‘He’s pulling your leg,’ I said.

Darren looked confused. ‘Well, if you change your mind…’

‘Just wait and see,’ Anth said.

‘Indeed,’ I said. From the other side of the room we heard Darren’s name being called.

‘Shit, there’s Mike.’ Darren ducked guiltily. ‘We’ve got to pack up and lug out.’

‘Give him my compliments, too,’ I said. ‘And here’s my new email address.’ I grabbed a beer coaster and a pencil stub left over from the afternoon’s betting and scribbled the details.
Darren headed back towards the stage. Anth, Caroline and I kept talking for a while. Then I couldn’t stifle a yawn.

‘I can see we’re going to have to build up your stamina again,’ Anth said.

Caroline rolled her eyes. ‘Look who’s talking, old man. As if you’re not nodding off over your beer.’ Ignoring his exaggerated scowl, she kissed him on the cheek. I promised I’d visit them soon.

‘Hang in there,’ Anth said. ‘It’s good to see you again.

I stood up and braced myself for the squeeze through the throng to the exit. I wasn’t certain, but it seemed to me that several punters who’d been standing nearby when Darren came over were again staring in my direction, now with a different kind of curiosity.
Three

I got home after midnight but my brother was still sprawled on the living room couch in front of the TV. Brian had his own TV – an entire modular home entertainment system, in fact – in his room, where he usually lurked.

‘Thanks for the loan of the car,’ I said, dropping the keys on the coffee table beside him.

‘Nothing damaged?’ He was doing his best to sound casual.

‘No, Dad.’

‘All right; just asking.’

I felt bad. I could see that Brian was making an effort to show that he didn’t resent my Prodigal Son routine. But I didn’t like having to beg favours and found myself wistfully recalling my battered old wagon, the Band Mobile, which I’d owned since high school and sold the week before going overseas.

I headed for my room. But jet lag was still playing tricks on me, and now the exhaustion I’d felt at the pub had vanished. I sat down at my desk and began another letter to Penny. In the days since my return I’d begun several on paper and many in my head. They all tapered off, however, in a mood of despair. I didn’t know if this was because of the difficulty of conveying life back home or because I might succeed. A correspondence might bring us closer together in spirit, or highlight the distance separating us.

That night, I wrote with renewed confidence. Anth’s encouragement to get back into music had brought certain things into focus. Aside from the practical objections there was another reason for my lack of enthusiasm. Though I didn’t want to admit it to Anth, I felt I’d moved on. I could still appreciate the attraction – but from a distance, as if looking back
on an earlier era. This sense of removal made me feel both scared and proud of myself. Of course my past involvement with the music scene was proof of my talent for self-deception. But knowing this, and with what I’d learnt since, I would be more realistic from now on.

Penny was the only person I thought might understand.

I wrote without stopping until the curtains around my window were edged with the silvery undersea glimmer of pre-dawn. Then I sealed the pages in an envelope without reading back over them and retreated under the bedcovers as Mum’s alarm began to chirp on the other side of the house.

That afternoon, after an unproductive search on the internet for employment, I received an email thanking me for the compliments I’d paid the Paper Tigers. The sender’s name was Mitsuru. I wasn’t sure if this was the guitarist or the singer, and sent a brief, cautious reply assuring him or her of my sincerity and wishing them luck.

I stayed online and searched for mentions of the Teachings. There were a surprising number of websites, including several by a prominent organisation dedicated to ‘alerting the unwary about the very real dangers of mind-control posing as colourful mystic wisdom.’ I was still browsing when I received another email. I opened it:

Was it wrong of me to contact you uninvited, or are you always so stuffy?

Anyone would think I’d propositioned you. But maybe you’re used to dealing with obsessed fans, being a living legend round these parts. That’s what Mike says, anyway. If you were a girl I’d be jealous. He’s heartbroken that you’ve given up music. My guess is you’re scared. You figure it’s safer to settle for legendary status than to make a comeback and risk us showing you up. Actually I’d quit too if it wasn’t for Mike. People always appreciate you more when you’re history.

Hmm, I’m not usually this obnoxious. It’s kind of fun. Almost makes me forget…But I won’t go into the details because they’re boring and I’m already bored (no offence, I’m at work) and we don’t even know
each other.

Yours briefly and bitterly,

Mitsuru

PS – Maybe I’m just pissed off that you didn’t steal our drummer. Then I wouldn’t need an excuse to give up.

So this was the owner of the voice that had sung with such beauty and power. It certainly confirmed that music was one thing and life another – though I was more amused than offended. This girl had the soul of a diva. And it seemed obvious that the studied obnoxiousness and self-absorption were intended to prevent others from seeing how desperately she wanted to be liked – and probably hoped to be, regardless. This was not so much insight on my part as recognition. Clearer than ever, I saw that was how I’d been, though I hadn’t realised at the time.

She could wait a little longer. I went back to reading about the value of equanimity and detachment.
Refrain

Four

The woman behind the counter shook her head – though whether in straight-out refusal or mere disbelief I couldn’t be sure. I was standing at the enquiries window of the local branch of the bank where Penny and I had opened our joint account. Having waited in line for what seemed like no time at all by Indian standards (although the customers immediately on either side of me seemed less impressed), I had been feeling extra cheerful as I explained my wish to transfer the account into Penny’s name alone. And the woman whose pleasure it was to be of assistance – a wistful middle-aged redhead with eyes like new coins – assured me it would be a simple process. All I needed was a statement by both signatories authorising the transfer. I then explained that the other signatory currently resided in a remote mountain village in a country that had remained largely impervious to the telecommunications revolution, and where the local postal system took weeks to deliver those letters it didn’t ‘lose’. My winsome Customer Enquiries Officer seemed to feel suddenly out of her depth. As she shook her head, her gaze leapt from one side of the room to the other as if she was convinced I must be either a distraction for an impending hold-up, or an actor employed by one of those practical joke TV shows.

Eventually she stopped shaking her head and gathered her smile (which now appeared more professionally wistful). ‘I’m sorry, sir. I can see your problem but it isn’t our policy…’

I pointed out there was no reason for the other signatory to object, since I wasn’t after the money for myself but rather the opposite. To no avail.

I’d been back nearly a week, and still it seemed not an hour passed without some new, unpleasant reminder of how remote Penny and I now were from each other. On this
occasion I tried not to think about the possible ramifications as I headed back to the nearby Social Security office, where I’d already waited earlier that morning and was soon due for an interview. This was the reason I wanted to change the bank account. I had no intention of accessing the funds, regardless, and was applying for the dole to ensure I wouldn’t need to. But the application form required a list of all personal savings and investments; applicants were not supposed to have other means of support.

I decided not to mention it. Probably the amount remaining in the joint account was so minuscule it wouldn’t be an issue. And after years of creatively re-interpreting the facts as a struggling muso, this time I was morally in the right – though it was the first time I’d committed provable perjury.

My nerves were not soothed upon meeting my interviewer. Bernard – like me, adrift in his mid-twenties – introduced himself with professional cordiality. But the moment he accessed my Social Security record on the computer beside him, his features seemed to set like quick-drying cement in children’s cartoons. He began to contemplate my current application with a thoroughness apparently intended to signify that times had changed and the department was cracking down, tightening its fist, introducing stringent new measures – all on account of those bad citizens who’d abused the system far too long, making it tougher on everyone, especially the genuinely needy. Not to mention Bernard himself, who clearly would’ve preferred to be contributing more productively to society instead of wasting his time and the nation’s resources on irresponsible bludgers. Like me.

I understood Bernard’s disgruntlement. But I wished I could tell him that the best option would be for him to stop depressing us both and cut through the red tape as quickly as possible so I could get out and start looking for work. Anyway, my case couldn’t have been simpler. For bureaucratic purposes I could be summed up by a list of negatives: no spouse,
no dependents, no income, no assets, no criminal convictions, no employment history, no trade qualifications, no higher education, no medical conditions, no current rental agreement…No-hoper.

‘You have three forms of identification?’ he asked, as if doubting the existence of anyone so undistinguished, and willing me to disappear in a swirl of paperwork, like Robert DeNiro in *Brazil*.

I handed over my birth certificate, passport and driver’s licence. While Bernard marched off to the photocopier I examined my surroundings, hoping for some comfort from familiarity. In my experience Social Security offices, like international airports, were all alike. This one was an almost exact replica of the office I’d patronised regularly when I lived in town. Muted pastel colour scheme. Demoralising synthetic smell. A thin soup of voices, the loudest from a TV bolted in a commanding position to the wall of the waiting area, like a house-hold altar. Nearly all the ‘clients’ were dejected or angry, though a few – the scariest – exhibited an exaggerated jollity. What I noticed most, however, was the open-plan layout. The place was like a giant showroom divided by low, moveable, cloth-covered partitions. I assumed the design was meant to emphasize the office’s social aspect. Although far from inspiring a sense of security, it just begged for some particularly jolly client to storm in and shoot the place up.

Bernard returned with my ID and continued scrutinising my forms. After several more minutes he looked up.

‘So where were you employed, Jacob?’

The question confused me. ‘I’ve never had a proper job.’

His eyes narrowed. ‘But for the past four months you haven’t been on the system.’

I explained where I’d been, trying not to look ashamed of myself for enjoying a jet-set
lifestyle at the tax-payer’s expense. I could see the current affairs show headlines.

‘Before that,’ Bernard said, remembering his professional demeanour, ‘what attempts were you making to find employment?’

I squared my shoulders. ‘I was in a band. We thought we’d be the next big thing.’ And though we never even made enough money to cover rehearsal rooms and pizza, to my surprise I felt for an instant as glorious as if we had succeeded.

‘You have no other qualifications or experience whatsoever?’

The silence lengthened. ‘Well, I did give English lessons. Voluntarily, overseas.’

‘English as a Second Language?’ His expression sharpened, like that of a miner spotting a twinkle amid piles of debris. I couldn’t imagine how he might turn the information to use. Demographically, this town was about as Anglo as they came. In the whole area there was a handful of Greek and Italian families who’d been settled long enough for everyone to forget they weren’t there from the start. As far as we were concerned, this was multiculturalism. And since the industries closed the only new arrivals were rich ex-Sydney commuters.

‘You have an ESL certificate?’ Bernard asked. ‘A statement from the agency you worked through?’

I shook my head and something in Bernard gave way. He sank back in his chair, defeated. I was officially a lost cause.

My sympathy for Bernard, trying so admirably against such odds, was somewhat diminished by my own rising trepidation. I’d long ago discovered that the only qualities required to get government money were a flexible sense of self-respect and the stamina for jumping through the required hoops. Around here, if you didn’t actually want a job and were prepared to live like a pauper or a pensioner, there wasn’t much the authorities could do about it. Previously I had even summoned up a certain sense of virtuousness in stepping
aside for the people who really wanted the few jobs available. But now the unimaginable had happened – I did want a job – and it occurred to me that my track record was going to be a serious liability.

Bernard trotted through the remaining formalities in a monotone. I confirmed my particulars with a nod. When he reached the question about personal savings, he didn’t even look up from his computer.

Finally, the benediction: ‘Since you don’t have any available savings you’re eligible to claim benefits immediately. But you understand it will take several days to process your claim.’

I understood.

‘You’re also eligible for Intensive Assistance, and you’ll be expected to attend any activities deemed likely to improve your employment prospects.’

I wasn’t keen on sitting through any more motivational videos or classes in ‘How to Write a Resume’ – the standard options. But these generally weren’t wheeled out straight away. With luck I’d find work before it came to that.

Outside, the day seemed brighter and warmer; the air, fresher; the sound of birds and traffic, clearer. Like Orpheus stepping out of the underworld, I inhaled deeply and turned my face to the sun. For a moment life again seemed as simple as it had only a week ago and a continent away. Soon, I thought, things would change. But that was okay. As the Teachings said, change was what life was about; the trick was to learn how best to deal with it.
Five

I arrived at Anth and Caroline’s new place as they pulled into the driveway after work. They were renting a weatherboard bungalow in an old suburb near town. It was an unimposing place that seemed light years away from both the spacious, super-clean, brick homes we’d grown up in, and the scuzzy, half-derelict terrace the band had called its own. The furnishings and decorations were mostly Op Shop finds, but carefully chosen and assembled to create an atmosphere both stylish and homely. It was the kind of set-up Penny and I had envisioned for our return. Recently, though, Anth and Caroline had begun to attend weekend auctions and were talking about taking out a mortgage.

While Caroline took a shower, Anth pulled a couple of beers from the fridge. We sat at the kitchen table.

‘Any luck?’ Anth said, eyeing my office clothes.

I shook my head. I’d spent the past fortnight following up cryptically worded Position Vacant notices and making enquiries at every place I could think of that might require unskilled workers. I’d narrowed down the field quickly and comprehensively by cutting out any jobs where an employer could hire someone younger for less pay. Given the condition of the local economy, there wasn’t much left over. Those who managed to get even the shittiest work hung on to it, never moving on or up because that kind of work never qualified you for anything better.

‘Don’t let it get you down,’ Anth said.

‘I know: it’s just a matter of time.’

Anth contemplated me as if searching for telltale signs of irony. In fact with each new
knock-back I assured myself it would ultimately make the final breakthrough sweeter. And I remembered the people I’d met overseas and their almost non-existent opportunities.

After a long sip, Anth said, ‘Have you thought any more about the band? You can’t blame the lack of a drummer now.’

‘We can’t steal Darren from the Paper Tigers.’

‘It wouldn’t be stealing, just borrowing. Anyway, I don’t think the Paper Tigers will be around much longer.’

‘Really?’

‘I think it’s mostly because of Mike’s girlfriend.’

‘Mitsuru?’

‘Mitsuru, yeah.’

I realised I’d been pronouncing the name wrongly. It was Mee-TOO-rue. But Anth was evidently too preoccupied to wonder how I even knew it.

‘Apparently she’s…’ His index finger circled in the air beside his ear.

‘How so?’ I tried not to display any particular interest, enjoying the sense of knowing more about the subject than Anth suspected.

‘Just totally feral. The first time I saw them play she was so pissed she stopped in the middle of a song and threw up behind the PA speakers. And apparently she’s always cancelling band practices or not showing up –’

‘I seem to recall a few other people who used to do that sort of thing.’

‘Yeah, well’ – he shrugged – ‘I ran into Darren at the supermarket a few days ago. We had a long talk and he told me Harvey, their guitarist, is fed up with her. Of course Mike sticks up for her, even when she treats him like dirt, which makes it more difficult. And you know how easy-going Darren is? Well he said he’s just about over it, trying to keep the peace.’
It was really none of my business. But the more I thought about it, the more Anth’s smugness rankled. ‘Listen, you boring old fart, isn’t that what the scene is all about – being young and irresponsible? That’s what attracted us, remember? Just because we’re too decrepit to keep up with the lifestyle, it doesn’t mean we have to get all high and mighty about it. Frankly, I’m not convinced that Mitsuru is crazy.’

Anth paused, his expression like a picture hung slightly askew. Then his eyes narrowed and he lowered his beer. ‘All right, mystery man. What’s the story?’

‘There’s no story.’ I explained that we’d begun exchanging emails, and that she had even offered to tell me about any job opportunities at the place where she worked part-time, doing data entry. Then I trailed off, conscious of Anth’s deepening frown. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘Does Mike know?’

‘Where else would she have got my email address?’

Instead of reassuring him, this only made Anth look even graver. ‘Be careful, Jake. She’s got a reputation for causing trouble.’

‘For God’s sake, Anth, you sound like an old woman.’

‘Take it easy, I just meant…’

‘I’m sure she has problems. Haven’t we all?’

In the back of my mind I recalled Mitsuru’s response to a remark I’d made about the unnerving feeling of being a real outsider overseas, after years of imagining myself as one at home. Having grown up half-Japanese in Australia, she wrote, the sense of her own difference was second nature. One of the strangest experiences of her life had been a high school excursion to Japan, where everyone treated her like a local.

‘All I’m saying,’ Anth murmured, ‘is that I feel sorry for the rest of them, especially Mike.’
I'd begun to regret having mentioned my new acquaintance. I realised I hadn’t wanted to consider it as a possible source of complications. ‘Sure, absolutely. If anyone’s crazy, it’s Mike for going out with her.’

The ease with which I’d betrayed Mitsuru made me uncomfortable. But Anth grinned along with me, looking reassured, and indeed the whole controversy seemed nonsensical.

‘Like I told you in the letter,’ I added, ‘I’m still committed to Penny. Our separation was mutually agreed on, and as long as there’s a chance we’ll get back together, that’s my number one priority.’

‘Of course,’ Anth said.

I finished my beer and left. On the bus home it struck me as ridiculous that Anth and I had bothered arguing over such a trivial issue. I wasn’t even sure what the argument had been about. It made me wonder if my lack of progress in finding a job was making me more stressed than I realised.

It also seemed strange that while I’d been away, when I had good reason to feel lonely, I hadn’t felt that way at all – perhaps because I had home to look forward to. But now, back at home, I felt almost entirely isolated.
Six

When I told Anth – as I told everyone I knew – that the separation between Penny and me was mutually agreed-on, I exaggerated.

On what was to be our last night together in India, we had slept in a farmer’s hovel – a windowless hut with holes in the roof that let in the night-time chill without noticeably diminishing the smell of cow dung and mildew – huddled on two rag-filled mattresses on the clay floor. It was a long way from the marble-lined room of our first days, but we had no choice. As summer turned the great cities and historic sites on the plains into an inferno, we’d come north into the hills where the climate was still bearable. Unfortunately, on arrival we found all proper accommodation in the nearby village booked out. The area was a favourite with religious pilgrims and spiritual tourists, and the following day was the most important festival of the year. We were lucky to find a greedy farmer. And after three months on the subcontinent, we were a lot more used to bizarre and uncomfortable situations.

Still, I was totally unprepared next morning when Penny suggested, for the first time since we stepped off the plane, that she might go out alone.

‘Sure. Go if you want to,’ I said, more roughly than I’d intended, peering out of my sleeping bag. She was kneeling on the edge of the mattress. In the coffee-coloured dimness all I could make out was a paler area and the question-mark silhouette of a shoulder.

‘If you don’t want me to…’ she said. ‘I just thought you might want some time to yourself. You don’t seem well.’
True enough, I’d woken with a nauseating clamour inside my skull – probably, yet again, a side-effect of the local food.

‘I’ve felt better,’ I said. ‘But it’s no big deal.’

Penny surveyed our small, dim quarters as if she were looking for something but had forgotten what. Then she said, ‘We’ve changed, haven’t we?’

‘What?’

‘We’ve changed.’

Her tone made me hesitate. ‘I don’t think so.’

Penny shook her head. Later I would wonder if it was a sign of incredulity, or if she believed me only too well.

‘I think we should take some time apart,’ she said. ‘I mean live separately and do our own thing.’

I sat up, but before I could speak she continued, ‘It’s nothing you’ve done. Or haven’t done.’

I kept my voice calm. ‘What is it then?’

‘Probably nothing,’ she said. ‘But I know I won’t be able to figure it out unless I have a few days to myself.’

‘A few days? Exactly how many?’ I asked.

‘Please, Jake. It’ll be over before you even miss me.’ She began gathering her things from the floor with quick, determined movements.

‘Okay, if it’s really what you want,’ I said as coolly as I could manage. The pain in my skull was increasing. I could hardly hear, let alone focus. But it occurred to me this was not an argument I could win, and things might get worse if I didn’t cooperate. ‘You stay here, I’ll find another place.’
Penny hesitated. ‘You don’t have to, Jake. This was my idea.’

But I was already out of my sleeping bag and fumbling with my pack.

‘Thanks,’ she said after a moment, in a strained voice. ‘Let me know where you’ll be, and we’ll talk soon.’

A few minutes later I was stumbling out into the milky pink dawn with all the dignity I could muster.
Seven

The day came when, according to my calculations, I could expect a reply to the first letter I’d sent Penny. (In the intervening period I had sent several more.) Actually I was already in the habit of listening for the postman, whose motorbike could usually be heard whirring along the footpath mid-morning. I had told myself that my immediate detours to the letterbox were in case of mail from Social Security, notifying me of available work. I did not dare to admit the possibility that Penny might write to me unprompted.

It was Wednesday, the day the local newspaper published its midweek employment section. After breakfast I took the paper to my room and sat beside the window overlooking the front yard. A slanting shaft of late winter sunlight threw the rest of the room into near darkness, but there wasn’t much to see anyway. The room remained more or less bare; apart from a couple of boxes of clothes and documents, I still hadn’t got round to unpacking.

I trailed down each column with a discomfiting sense of familiarity. There were no new positions I could conceivably apply for. Then the mail arrived: a power bill, a newsletter from one of Mum’s long-abandoned support groups, and another offer of extended credit card facilities for Brian. Of course I had based my calculations on the speediest delivery times in both directions, assuming Penny would reply to my letter the day she received it. Assuming, indeed, that she did receive it at all and that her reply didn’t go astray – though I knew that a couple of postcards I’d sent never reached their destination and at least one of Mum’s letters to the poste restante address had gone missing. I realised that from now on my days would revolve around the postman, and each day that passed without word from Penny would leave me with a deepened despair mingled with heightened anticipation.
Normally I rationed myself to one bulletin per week. But given the magnitude of the occasion in my mind, and since I had no other duties to attend to, I began a new letter.

_I am shocked – deeply, profoundly shocked at your heinous dereliction of duty…_

I paused and tried to muster my standard flippant tone – the only way I could express a little of what I was actually feeling without sounding bitter or needy. Halfway through the next phrase, however, I decided it sounded too throwaway and scratched it out. The line after that struck me as obviously forced. I screwed up the piece of paper and began again. I was used to such difficulties but I’d never had this much trouble. Midway through the afternoon I took a break to check my email. There was another message from Mitsuru.

Though I was sure Anth’s warning had been misguided, I’d become more cautious. Mitsuru and I still hadn’t met in person, or even spoken. And the impersonality of a computer screen encouraged intimacy, offering a neutral zone in which ideas and emotions, detached from their point of origin, might roam freer and further than usual. Still, I confined myself to cheerful trivialities and felt grateful to have an escape from the search for work; life with Mum and Brian; and the ongoing anxiety, like a high-pitched shriek at the upper limit of hearing, about Penny.

If Mitsuru noticed this reserve, she didn’t mention it and seemed capable of divulging an unending stream of gossip about mutual acquaintances in the music scene, tales about her own unlikely exploits and general music news (the most interesting of which I relayed to Penny). After informing me of a couple of Paper Tigers gigs, which I found excuses for not attending, she noted that obviously I didn’t really like the band; I was just another smiling hypocrite with no taste. I didn’t bother trying to explain. I didn’t mind being considered a has-been. Nor did I enquire why Mitsuru stayed in contact. I assumed it was a combination of boredom, the desire for a new audience, and my usefulness as a source of information.
about Mike’s life before she knew him.

The new email, however, was different.

Dear Jake,

Despite your cool (stone cold) show of indifference, I can tell you’re dying to know more about my life. Of course everything you’ve heard is true! (No matter how much of an antisocial hermit you pretend to be, if you haven’t heard some of the rumours I’ll fire my publicist.) Anyhow, here’s some stuff you might not know.

Please excuse any spelling mistakes. I had an exceptionally big night last night and my head feels like...you don’t wanna know.

Both my parents are professional musicians. I have no illusions about the life. I started playing piano when I was three-and-a-half, and did the exams. But I didn’t really care till I started high school and discovered I had a voice. Singing took over. I practised every spare minute. By sixteen I was ready for my AMUS.A exam and I couldn’t wait to go to the State Conservatorium.

Less than a week before the exam I had an accident at home: I fell and broke my shoulder and two ribs and ruptured my spleen. At first the doctors thought I’d punctured a lung too. And though they wouldn’t admit it to start with, no one could believe it was just f*cked-up luck. I found out later that they’d questioned my father. Then they decided I must’ve been so stressed out I wanted to kill myself. It took months for everything to heal properly and the rehab workouts were agony. It was the most horrible time of my life.

Without consulting me, my teacher contacted the Conservatorium and told them about my situation and my background. They decided to give me special consideration. Though I hadn’t passed my final exam, they offered me a scholarship anyway.

Of course I was grateful. It was the hugest compliment. But after being unable to sing for so long, I knew my technique had deteriorated and I deferred the scholarship for a year. That year passed, I deferred again and finished high school. This year I had no more excuses. The final deadline for my acceptance of the
scholarship was last month. I think my parents were secretly relieved. They’re very cynical about the professional music world.

At least after all the years of piano I picked up touch-typing in no time and got this job. It’s mindless work and I get through it with plenty of time to pester people with emails.

The funny thing is — and it’s such a cliché — I know music is my life. I’ve known it all along. It’s not just what I’m best at or what I get the most satisfaction from. It’s who I am — or the best part, anyway. Even if everything else is messy as hell, none of it matters when I’m singing.

I’m not talking about the band of course (though before Mike came along I barely left the house). Pop music’s fun and I like playing in pubs, but there’s only so much you can do with that. Plus Harvey writes most of the tunes and the only way he knows how is to sing them, so the melody range is tiny. Then yesterday I found out the boys have organised a whole lot of gigs over the next month without asking me. I was so pissed off. It’s just typical. After all I’m not a real musician; I’m just the singer — or the bass player’s girlfriend! And if I complain, I’m a prima donna. (As if I care. I complain anyway.)

When I used to sing seriously, people said I had the potential to make it. Of course it’s not the sort of thing you can be sure about. But I still can’t imagine anything more wonderful than singing Mimi in La Boheme, or the lead in Madame Butterfly, or Donna Elvira in Don Giovanni.

So why didn’t I take the scholarship? I can’t explain why. I just couldn’t.

What’s worse is I have no idea what happens next. I’m still desperately in need of inspiration. I guess that’s why I’ve been trying to goad you into making music again. But I’m not telling you this because I expect you to help sort it out. I don’t think the past can be sorted out. Just thought I’d let you know.

Now if you’ve finished why don’t you go take a walk. Sitting too long in front of a computer monitor, wading through someone else’s fading dreams is no good for you, and I’ve got work to do. Thus sprach, Mitsuru.
I could hardly believe this was the same smart-arse gossip-hound. I winced, recalling my attitude towards her up till this point, which had been frankly condescending. Yet if I’d misjudged her, Mitsuru had done nothing before now to disturb my less-than-flattering image. On the contrary, she seemed to delight in playing up to it.

I felt faintly resentful without being sure if this was because she’d fooled me or because in revealing the truth she’d ruined an enjoyable diversion. And I wondered why she had decided to drop her guard.

The half-written letter to Penny lay on the desk beside the keyboard. I glanced from it back to the screen, clicked the Reply icon and began: *How interesting you should mention fading dreams.*

In contrast to the painful slowness of all my letters to Penny, this account of my current situation seemed to take no time at all and when I scrolled back over it I was amazed at how much I’d written. But the strangest thing was that I had effortlessly maintained the light-hearted tone of my previous emails. Indeed, while I’d been writing, even the most painful details struck me as rather ridiculous. For the first time I could see the funny side.
When eventually it did arrive, Penny’s short note contained little more than thanks for my efforts at staying in touch, and the news that she was busy helping organise and staff the village’s newly-approved, temporary community centre. Once the sense of anticlimax passed, I realised my expectations had been preposterously high. I pictured Penny, exhausted from an unforgiving schedule of selfless work, scribbling these lines to me and I felt honoured and proud.

I read the single page again and again, searching for evidence that Penny missed me, or even registered my absence. At times I was certain I sensed, between the lines, hints of deeper feelings. Then I would reread the same passage and decide I was deluding myself. And so on.

When the following day’s mail brought nothing new, I felt as though my innards were being dragged away by the postie’s receding bike. Then, little by little, with each subsequent day the feeling began to fade.
‘I suppose you’re going to hang out at some scuzzy dive in a bad neighbourhood,’ Brian grumbled.

‘Actually, I’m off to a night at the opera.’

‘Yeah, right.’ He sniffed, looking strongly tempted to withhold vehicular privileges as punishment for piss-taking. I suspected it was only the prospect of having the house to himself for the evening (Mum had gone to the movies with the ‘girls’ from her department) that made him hesitate.

‘Grow up,’ he said, tossing me the keys.

I wasn’t too sure of the details myself. All Mitsuru had said was that it was an amateur recital featuring ‘the usual stuff,’ adding ‘You’ve probably got better things to do. I only mentioned it because you said you were interested. And it’s not like you can pick and choose in this puddle.’

Arriving at her family home, which was not far from Anth and Caroline’s place, I was greeted at the front step by a giant white cat. (This, I knew from Mitsuru’s emails, was Köchel.) The front door opened and the cat was joined by a short, plump, dark-haired woman. Her features were pretty in an unremarkable, generically European fashion. Her naturally friendly smile went some way towards putting me at ease.

‘I’m Daphne, Mitsuru’s mother. You must be Jake.’

I nodded. Another figure appeared in the hallway behind her. For a second I wondered whether this was one of the music students who visited the house for private tuition. Then Daphne turned and planted a quick kiss on her cheek. Seeing them side by side, I could
hardly believe they were related. Mitsuru was my height – possibly a little taller. She shared her mother’s substantial build, but the curves too were higher. Her features were strikingly exotic, though they might just as easily have belonged anywhere from the Arctic Circle to Nepal. The impression of outlandishness was heightened by her cropped hair, most of which was the deepest shade of black I’d ever seen, streaked with fluorescent pink. She wore a dark dress and a coat trimmed with white fur that might just as easily have belonged to Köchel.

‘See you later, Daphne.’ She gave her mother a quick kiss. ‘We’d better get going.’

We had plenty of time. I’d been careful to arrive early. ‘Nice to meet you,’ I said as Mitsuru hurried past me.

‘It’s good of you to go along with her,’ Daphne said, still smiling. ‘Her father and I would go, but I’m afraid Mitsuru thinks we’re too daggy to be seen with. Anyhow, break a leg, darling.’

In the car, I said, ‘What did your mum mean by break a leg?’

‘Stage term,’ Mitsuru said blandly. ‘It’s a way of saying good luck without jinxing the person.’

‘Yes, I know that. But I thought you only said it to people –’

‘That’s just Daphne. She loves her euphemisms. Like her saying Father wanted to come along. What she means is that she’d like to go, but he despises anything that isn’t world class. He says he has to put up with enough amateurism from his students.’

Her voice was sour.

‘You and your father don’t get along?’ I said, easing the car into the quiet street.

When she didn’t answer, I said ‘Sorry. It’s none of my business. After my parents split, I disowned my dad. Anyway, I like your mum.’
‘It’s funny.’ Her tone suggested anything but. ‘When they met at the conservatorium – the local one, where I study – my parents were amazed at how much they had in common. Both Japanese on their mother’s side and Anglo-Australian on their father’s. Wartime romances. Both couples – my grandparents – decided there was a better future here.’ With a mock flourish Mitsuru indicated the passing parade of brick bungalows and low-rise apartments. ‘Still, they were seen as freaks back then and my parents had it pretty rough growing up. It’s easy to imagine why they fell for each other.’ She paused as if the idea had some particular significance, then added, ‘It was only after the wedding that they realised how completely unlike they were.’

‘But they stuck it out.’

‘Mostly thanks to Daphne. Father is…difficult.’

I waited to see if she would elaborate, then said ‘If your parents were both brought up as Aussies, why did they choose to give you a Japanese name?’

‘It’s the name of my father’s mother – my paternal grandmother. If I’d been a boy I would have been named after Father’s father. Norm. Maybe then I would’ve got all the normal genes instead of the freakish ones.’

I wanted to tell her I found her freakishness – if that’s what it was – wonderful, when a twinge of self-consciousness stopped me. I realised Mitsuru was looking at me expectantly. In the protracted silence that followed I suspected I’d inadvertently insulted her.

We managed some vague small talk in the remaining time before we arrived at the town hall, though the prickly sense of restraint remained. It only became worse when we got inside and I found myself confronted by plush crimson seats, an immensely high ceiling, ornate gilt trimmings and parquetry floor – the remnants of a period of civic glory and grand aspirations that now seemed hardly imaginable. A small chamber ensemble was arrayed
across the back of the stage: a piano, string quartet and a couple of woodwinds. They had
the tidy, resigned look of a ship’s orchestra who knew their vessel was on the way to the
bottom.

By the time the concert was due to start, the place was barely half full. The audience gave
the impression of being carefully maintained and perhaps fashionable as recently as twenty
years ago, but secretly longing to climb back into their forebears’ decayed dinner suits and
whalebone corsetry. I could feel their sunken, watery eyes staring discretely at Mitsuru and
me, as though unsure whether we were flesh and blood or particularly distorted memories.

It came as a shock, when the music began, to hear how thoroughly alive it sounded. I
soon realised there was no single featured artist. The performers were senior students at the
local conservatorium; each sang one or two pieces and then retreated backstage amidst polite
applause, making way for the next soloist, duo or trio. I recognised a couple of the songs –
the Jewel Song from Faust and the duet between Papageno and Papagena from The Magic
Flute – and resolved to quiz Mitsuru about several others.

However, as soon as interval arrived she excused herself, leaving her coat and purse on the
seat and promising to return shortly. I leant back into the cushioned seat and tried to
imagine how time would treat the music that I had once performed. Would the best of it
survive? Would audiences a century or two in the future wistfully wish they had heard it in
its heyday?

I was startled from my daydreams by the muted chimes indicating that patrons should
return to their seats. I checked my watch. The interval had lasted a half-hour. Mitsuru
hadn’t returned. I scanned the hall, thinking she might have been delayed by another
acquaintance. I wondered if I should get up and check the corridors. The dusty opulence
began to appear sinister – decadent instead of charming. But what if I wasn’t allowed back
in once the second half began, and Mitsuru returned to find me gone? At least if I stayed
put she knew where to find me. And by now the chimes had fallen silent and the lights were
dimming again. I took a deep breath and tried to refocus my attention on the stage.

This proved easier than expected. The first performance of the second half was a duet.
The singers were a middle-aged man with the physique of an ex-professional football player,
and Mitsuru. I recognised the music immediately: the first encounter between Rudolfo the
young poet and the doomed street girl Mimi in *La Boheme*.

For a moment, standing in the spotlight centre-stage, Mitsuru looked trapped and scared.
I felt my fingers sink into the upholstered arms of my seat but couldn’t look away. Then she
began to sing and I realised that, impressive as she’d sounded with the Paper Tigers, they
had no way of doing justice to her capabilities. Though I couldn’t pretend to grasp the
nuances of this sort of music, I’d listened to enough of it to appreciate how extraordinary
she was – way beyond the better-than-average standard of everything else I’d heard that
evening. But strangest of all, hearing her sing the part of a fictitious character, I felt certain
this was who she really was, rather than the person who fronted a local band or sent me odd
e-mails.

Poor Rudolfo gave his all but was utterly upstaged. I couldn’t imagine him as anything but
a well meaning, callow and rather feeble dilettante, far more likely than his love interest to
perish miserably by the end.

It was surely not coincidental that the audience response that followed was more
enthusiastic and prolonged than for any previous performance. It would have taken more
than a lukewarm cup of tea during the interval to revive that moth-eaten audience. But
perhaps the most enthusiastic and long-lasting applause came from me.
I hardly noticed the next performer. I was wrapped in that blend of exhaustion and buzzing euphoria that usually followed only the very best rock concerts. I became aware of my surroundings again during the subsequent, moderate clapping, during which Mitsuru slipped back into the seat beside me.

I turned, frowned and hissed ‘Where were you? You missed the best act of the night.’

One corner of her mouth twitched upwards. ‘Just my luck.’

I made another attempt to pay attention to the pieces that followed. But my concentration was shot. All I could be sure about was that they were nowhere near as good as Mitsuru.

Afterwards as we made our way out of the hall, Mitsuru was stopped several times by people who congratulated her on her performance. A couple of them seemed to know her and I gathered from their solicitude that in these circles her reputation was higher and more established than in the independent rock scene. One patron – a steely-looking matron – also enquired respectfully after Mitsuru’s father. She responded with what seemed to be practised vagueness.

We finally got outside, away from the crowd, and I glared at her. ‘Why didn’t you warn me?’

‘I didn’t want you to think it was a big deal. You should’ve heard me a couple of years ago. I don’t know why I still bother, now.’

‘Are you kidding? I don’t know why you’re not singing at the Opera House.’

Mitsuru shook her head. It seemed to me that she was pleased by my comment but that the subject made her uncomfortable. As much as I wanted to ask more questions, I decided that now was not the time. I gestured in the direction of Brian’s car.

To my surprise, Mitsuru said ‘Would you mind if we walked for a while?’

‘Not at all.’
We crossed the road and the dark strip of footpath under the giant fig trees. In the darkness above, fruit bats squealed and circled. I noticed for the first time that Mitsuru’s gait was slightly uneven and her shoulders were not quite level – a result of the accident that had derailed her operatic ambitions, I assumed. As we set out along the cement path leading between the flower beds, Mitsuru pointed at a tall, box-like building on the adjoining edge of the park.

‘That’s the Con, where I study. It’s crap. Anyone with talent gets out as soon as they can and goes to the State Conservatorium. It’s the best in the country. You ought to see it. From outside it looks like a castle, and the inside is like a French period film.’

As we drew level with a bench, she sighed and slumped down. I sat beside her. Mitsuru opened her purse, withdrew a packet of cigarettes and a plastic lighter, and lit up.

‘I guess you don’t want one,’ she said, glancing at my face.

‘If you’re not interested in a singing career, you certainly picked the best way to make sure you don’t have the voice for it.’

She inhaled deeply, held in the smoke for several seconds, and then let it escape in a long, thin ribbon. ‘I only smoke if I’m having fun or I’m stressed. And I don’t chain-smoke. I can’t seem to manage it.’

I suspected she was waiting for a reaction, though I wasn’t sure why. I waited.

Abruptly, as if continuing a conversation, Mitsuru said ‘Do you hate Penny for what she’s done?’

‘It’s not her fault.’ I tried not to sound disconcerted. ‘These things happen.’

‘So? It’s not Mike’s fault that he can’t stop trying to make me change, or that sometimes I think he’s only interested in saving me.’

‘But you love him, regardless.’
‘I owe him so much. Without him I’d probably still be a basket case. And he’s very sweet.’

Her tone was so noncommittal I instantly suspected she was more attached than she wanted to admit.

‘Mike doesn’t mind my coming with you tonight, does he?’

Mitsuru took another puff and then smiled dryly. ‘He thinks you’re a better influence than anyone else I know. He’s hoping some of your new grown-up-ness will rub off on me.’

I was almost sure I heard a note of warning. ‘I think we can be fairly certain that’s not going to happen.’

‘Plus he’s not into _that easy-listening shite,_’ she added, as if she hadn’t heard me.

I peered at her. ‘Doesn’t he understand what it means to you?’

‘Perhaps.’ She looked away. ‘He just doesn’t get it. To Mike, opera is people in silly costumes screaming over the top of each other. Like heavy metal.’ She laughed and stubbed out the butt of her cigarette.

I didn’t know what to say. The town hall clock chimed.

‘Well Cinderella, I’d better get you home before your parents start to worry,’ I said, before remembering that by Mitsuru’s standards the night had barely begun.

‘Daphne won’t mind. She likes you, I can tell. And Father never needs an excuse to get angry.’

‘Still…’ I said.

But I didn’t move. I stared back across the neat expanse of lawn and flower beds, etched in silver-tinted monochrome, to the floodlit creamy sandstone façade of the town hall rising up behind the silhouetted tangle of figs. Apart from a few distant, shadowy figures shuffling...
away from the hall, the area was deserted. It was like being in the middle of a giant theatrical set, and in the back of my mind I heard Mitsuru singing Puccini.

I realised that for the first time in a long time, I felt completely happy. It was as if I’d stepped out of my life and become a ghost. But it was the real world that had faded and become insubstantial, while I grew more and more corporeal. In fact I felt larger even than my physical body – some part of me extending, halo-like, beyond the boundary of my skin. Without having to look I could sense Mitsuru’s hand on the bench, centimetres from mine. Then I shifted on the hard wooden slats and our fingers were touching.

‘Your hand is so small and chilly,’ I said, laughing quickly.

‘The standard translation is “Your tiny hand is so cold”,’ Mitsuru observed. ‘Anyway, it sounds better sung. In Italian.’

But she moved her fingers over the top of mine. And then, somehow, they’d become enmeshed, so that I wasn’t sure whose were whose. I felt calm and clear-headed. There was no need for alarm. What was happening couldn’t be happening – was impossible for a number of reasons that we’d both already acknowledged.

This obviously also explained why it seemed so easy and natural when we turned and leaned towards each other. We kissed with the circumspection of test subjects involved in pioneering research, intent on registering every minute sensory impression for posterity.

Perhaps for that reason, when we eventually pulled apart and walked silently, hand in hand, back to the car, I could recall only that urgent desire to remember. I could not remember anything about the act itself.
Dear Jake,

The last month has gone so quickly. Monsoon season is over, the days are lovely and clear and cool. Soon it’ll start getting seriously cold. Apparently in winter the snow comes all the way down the mountain, covering the forest and the village, almost to the plain. It sounds amazing but I won’t get to see it. In a few more weeks my visa runs out and it’s back to Australia. But I feel I owe you one more letter before I leave and if I wait much longer I’ll get back before this does. I can’t tell you how much I’ve appreciated your letters. Between you and Mum I feel like I still have some connection to Australia. Mum and Dad say hi, by the way. Mum’s been meaning to phone you, but you know how she is. Everyone else seems to have forgotten I exist, but I’ve been just as slack with them. Anyway, it just makes me more grateful for your support.

I know I haven’t given you much in return. It isn’t that I’ve wanted to keep you in the dark. My thoughts and feelings have been so confused I didn’t know what to say. I hoped the time here would make things clearer. From the first day here I felt this place was special. It has an atmosphere that makes life seem so much less complicated. But now it’s almost time to leave and everything seems more complicated than before.

I never imagined the community centre would be so draining. The last few weeks have been hard. If it weren’t for a few great local people it would’ve been a disaster. Now word is finally getting around and there’s more interest. Hopefully the hardest part is over. It’s still terribly disorganised, though, and the council hasn’t committed to anything long-term and I feel like it could all collapse tomorrow. Still it’s not like I expected to make a big difference. I know nothing I can do could repay this place for what it’s given me.

Unfortunately, when I tried explaining this to Mum she wrote back about some new bacteria they’ve discovered in the water around here. And her last letter was about how their church had been praying for the
good work I’m doing. They must think I’ve got some kind of Mother Theresa complex. Next thing they’ll be trying to have me canonised. That’s what this place means to them: a Worthy Cause, somewhere you go to do charitable works. They can’t imagine there’s anything here of value in itself. I don’t suppose anyone who hasn’t been here could really understand.

Please don’t think I haven’t missed you. After you left I wondered if this was the stupidest thing I’ve ever done. There are still times when I feel so lonely and doubtful. Maybe I am running away from stuff I don’t want to face. But if these past months have taught me one thing it’s that I can handle pretty much anything. It’s just that when I think about going home I don’t feel happy or excited, either. I don’t feel anything much at all. Just this giant emptiness. It’s almost like trying to imagine how it would feel to not be alive.

I guess this is just a temporary thing. Everything changes, right? And although the time I’ve spent here feels more worthwhile than anything I’ve ever done, I suppose once I get back I’ll start to remember all the good things about Australia. It might take a while, but your last letter sounded much happier, which gives me hope.

By the way, your friend Michael is still around. We say hello when we pass in the street. And the other day he asked how you were, then told me you were a good person and that you cared very much about me. I nearly burst into tears.

Have I gone crazy? Am I missing the point and confusing an issue that’s really very simple? You’ve always had faith in me – more faith than I have in myself, I sometimes think. I hope I haven’t destroyed that, because I think I’m going to be in need of it when you see me next.

Till then,

Penny.

There was no need for reading between the lines this time. I felt like the person in the popular story who goes to a party, drinks a polite toast and wakes in a bathtub full of ice,
missing a vital organ.

As I turned the flimsy airmail pages over and forced myself to start again from the top, I couldn’t avoid feeling that it was no more than I deserved. I had no sooner dropped Mitsuru back at her house on the night of the opera recital than it hit me: if I’d wanted to ruin any chance I still had with Penny, I couldn’t have found a more effective way.

There was no question of contacting Mitsuru. I didn’t consider her any more culpable than I was, even if she was involved in a more conventional relationship, with someone close at hand. But I was scared the situation would appeal to her love of melodrama and she’d use it to create the biggest possible stir.

Of course the kiss meant nothing, really. It was just a momentary lapse, a stupid indiscretion I’d committed out of loneliness and possibly an unconscious need to bolster my battered ego by proving I could appeal to someone so young, glamorous and talented. I couldn’t be sure what the attraction was for her, though I guessed it was connected with my former image, along with the desire to continue playing Mimi to a convenient Rudolfo, and the thrill of a conquest.

When a couple of days passed with no sign of imminent disaster, I began to relax. It occurred to me I must have been right in my suspicion that for all her complaining, and her show of condescension towards him, Mitsuru was more serious about Mike than she cared to admit, and I had been nothing more than a novel distraction. In fact, she was probably doing her utmost to forget about both the kiss and me, if either had ever registered. I decided this was the best thing for me to do as well. There was no sense in investing it with unnecessary significance.

Unfortunately, I couldn’t say the same of Penny’s letter. It was almost as though she knew what I had done. Her undisguised lack of interest in returning made my current activities
seem worthless. I’d hoped to demonstrate my commitment to our future together, but I may as well not have bothered. Not only had I achieved nothing; I was burying my head in the same dreary life I’d spent my youth trying to escape – though even the escape attempt had been misguided.

Penny on the other hand had found a genuinely better alternative. A simpler existence offering few comforts but more freedom and satisfaction. And she wasn’t too timid or proud to admit the truth to herself. Perhaps she was right and no one who hadn’t experienced the village could understand. But I understood, or thought I did. And I understood her desolation at feeling the beautiful dream slip away.

If I truly cared about Penny’s happiness I must do whatever I could to help her hold on to what she had found. There was a way. Our six-month visas were the longest you could get; Indian law forbade foreigners from spending more than half of any year in the country. But we’d heard from other travellers that it was possible to cross the border into Pakistan or Nepal, where consular extensions could be organised with the liberal application of *baksheesh* – the ubiquitous system of donations that thrived within India’s sprawling nineteenth-century bureaucracy.

It was simply a question of money: enough money to make the journey and pay the inflated cost of a new visa, plus cover the day-to-day cost of living once Penny returned. Even living as frugally as possible, she must be nearing the end of our combined savings (which had been strained already by our time spent living separately). But I’d saved every cent of my dole payments apart from the money I gave Mum for board and Brian for petrol. There was now a few hundred dollars in my personal account, which I’d been imagining would eventually go towards rental bond, or another used car. It was not enough for my new plan.
I looked around my room. There was my stereo, which I’d taken out of storage to listen to some CDs Mitsuru had lent me. But it was so old and temperamental I doubted anyone would be interested. I had also retrieved the milk crates containing my record collection and my boxes of CDs to look for some albums Mitsuru had expressed interest in. It was a collection to be proud of. I’d spent years building it up, the way some people build up share portfolios or cars or their physique. Countless hours poring over music magazines and lurking in second hand shops. Absurd sums acquiring rarities from specialists. At the time I had considered it an investment. In hindsight it seemed more like a drug habit. Only Penny’s influence had helped me curb it and eventually gave me the will to get rid of a goodly amount when we were saving for our trip. I’d kept only those discs I considered indispensable – the primordial requirements of life. Yet now, sifting through them again, I decided I’d hardly miss any of them.

The most demoralising part was knowing that if I had the time – a month or two – I could find buyers who’d gladly pay as much as I’d spent, maybe more. But in the present circumstances I would have to offload quickly, and there was no hope of getting a fair price at Bryce’s, the only place in town that did that kind of deal.

I owned only two other items of any value, both still in storage. My guitar and amplifier. It struck me as odd that I would consider selling my records and CDs first even though I might’ve eventually found myself in the mood to listen to some of them, while I couldn’t imagine picking up the guitar ever again. But my axe, my amp and I had been through a lot together. In my mind they were more like holy relics than mere contraptions of wood, wire and plastic.

I went out to the garage. They were packed at the back of everything else – the guitar in its road case, the amp sealed in plastic bags to ensure no moisture got into the valve
circuitry. I wondered if I ought to take them back to my room to test if they still worked, though an inner voice warned that once I plugged in and played a few chords I’d start finding reasons not to part with them.

At that moment Mum arrived home. It was barely afternoon; she was hours earlier than usual.

‘I’ve got a splitting headache,’ she murmured as she raised herself from the driver’s seat. ‘I told them I’d be all right but they insisted I go home and get some rest. You weren’t planning on making any noise, were you?’ she added woefully, noticing the gear in my hands.

It seemed like a sign. ‘Would you mind if I borrowed your car for the afternoon?’

‘Go ahead.’ With a look of relief she handed me the keys and tottered into the house.

I loaded up the car and drove into town. The deal at Bryce’s was as bad as I’d feared. When I asked the shop owner if he knew any good pawn shops he gave me a knowing smile and said the one next door was as good as any. I went next door with my guitar and amplifier. The place was dusty and foetid. I’d never hocked anything before but I understood the concept: the longer I took to redeem the items, the more interest I’d have to pay on top of the original loan, provided someone else didn’t buy the goods first. I didn’t pay attention to the details.

I rushed to the bank where Penny and I had our joint account, deposited my newly acquired cash and transferred the money from my own account. It was a week-and-a-half till my next Social Security payment, but I had a few dollars in my wallet for emergencies.

There was just enough time after that to scribble a note to Penny explaining what I’d done. By my calculations she should now have enough funds for another six months if she wanted. I made it clear I realised her letter hadn’t been a request for help, and assured her the money came with no conditions or fine print. I simply couldn’t think of a better use for it.

52
The post office was about to shut. I had to plead with the white-bearded, grey-faced gent behind the counter and when he saw the address he snorted and shook his head.

‘It’ll take weeks,’ he warned.

‘I know.’

‘And that’s how long it should take. Everyone’s in too much of a hurry these days.’

‘You’ll make sure it gets in this evening’s mail?’ I said.

‘Don’t you fret. I was young and impatient once.’ He shook his head again and laughed.

‘Didn’t make a scrap of difference, but there’s no use telling you that.’

I thanked him and stepped outside into the twilight. To the west the sky was violet. It was possible the letter might not reach Penny before she set off from the hills. She might not think to check her account balance when she got to New Delhi, and be back in Australia before she learned of her missed opportunity. On the other hand she might refuse the offer, for whatever reason.

I was feeling slightly giddy and short of breath, my head buzzing in a way that had previously come from drinking too much too quickly on an empty stomach. I had the impression of being suspended within the noise and movement and streaming lights of winter rush hour like a circus acrobat tumbling in midair between one trapeze and another. I was not so much afraid as exhilarated by the extremity of my self-abnegation. But that was not the only cause. There was also another factor I dared not think about too deeply: Regardless of the preference indicated in Penny’s letter, it also contained the first hint, since our separation, of the intimacy we had once shared.
Twelve

It wasn’t simply that I could visualise Penny’s surroundings and the life she must be leading.
It was also the particular feeling I sensed in her words. It was the same feeling, I was sure,
that had accompanied me the morning I set off along the trail that cut across the hillside,
separating the terraced fields below from the pine forest above, back towards the village –
away from the hovel and from her.

On that morning, too, my head was spinning. The shoulder straps of my pack felt like two
giant hands pressing me into the ground. And already sweat clogged my armpits and the
small of my back. I had no idea where I was headed. In truth, I’d hoped that when Penny
saw my willingness to go along with her plan, she would decide it was unnecessary and ask
me to stay. I’d never felt so alone and utterly bereft.

The village was a cluster of shabby concrete boxes that included several businesses, some
seedy tourist hostels, cafes and a general store, all set along one muddy main street, which
followed the spine of a ridge protruding from the snow-tipped mountain above. The whole
place had been hung with brightly coloured streamers in readiness for the day’s festivities.
The few locals up and about watched without interest as I shambled past their doors. I saw
only one foreigner – a tall, skinny young man with close-cropped blonde hair, ambling down
a side path marked with a sign ‘To the Centre.’ This was my first glimpse of Michael. In
days to come I would welcome the sight, though just then his receding back made me feel
even more alone.

I began to wonder if I’d acquiesced too easily; if I should have stood my ground,
demanded an explanation, then argued like hell against it; if even now I wouldn’t be better
dashing back and doing just that. Maybe Penny, too, was having second thoughts. I imagined the two of us falling into each other’s arms in a flurry of tears and kisses – even as I stumbled onward.

Now my initial astonishment had begun to fade, the illness I’d woken with was returning with Shiva-like vengeance. My head felt like a hot-water bottle filled to bursting; the rest of my body, a primary school macramé project. Every movement produced a damp sucking noise where the pack clung to my back. I couldn’t envision my fortitude lasting much longer. Nevertheless, the main street was only a few hundred metres long, and I soon verified that we had not overlooked any hotel or guesthouse in our frantic search for accommodation on arrival the previous night.

At the bottom of the street, near an open garbage pile, I turned with a sense of humiliation and relief to begin my retreat. It was then I noticed, dug into the hillside below the rest of the village, a single, bunker-like cement house. The path down was almost invisible, the descent steep and strewn with pebbles. Still, if I was going to throw myself back upon Penny’s mercy, I wanted to be able to tell her I’d tried every alternative. I staggered and slithered downward, reckless now beyond caring.

The house was fronted by a broad terrace, where a woman in a pink sari sat picking through a tray of dried yellow beans.

‘Namaste,’ I said.

‘Hello,’ she said.

There was a pause as we both registered that we’d reached the limits of our knowledge of the other’s language. But the woman guessed my purpose and gestured at a nearby window and doorway. I lumbered over. The room was separate from the rest of the house. The floor, walls and roof were the familiar whitewashed cement. Pale blue curtains framed the
window, beneath which sat a wooden chair and a tiny rectangular table draped in discoloured cheesecloth. It was as good a place as any I'd come across in the past months. In the corner was a narrow bed.

‘How much?’ I steeled myself for the astronomically inflated price I knew I was too exhausted to haggle over.

The figure she named was reasonable, even modest.

I nodded, thanked her and toppled into my new room. As my pack slid off my back and onto the floor, I realised that, despite the odds, I’d proved my ability to take care of myself. Yet I felt more lost and helpless than ever.

I had just enough strength to exhume my sleeping bag and crawl inside, like an insect pupa that had exited its cocoon prematurely then realised its mistake.
Dear Jake,

Apologies for not getting back in touch sooner. I know how distressing this must have been for you, and I do hope you haven’t done anything silly like swallowing arsenic or throwing yourself on your dagger out of lovelorn despair. Assuming you’re still alive, I hope you have understood by now that my apparent heartlessness is actually for your own good.

I don’t blame you for succumbing to my irresistible charm. I am accustomed to my devastating effect on the weaker sex. Such is my fate, to which I am resigned. Be grateful that in your case I decided, on a whim, to spare you further immediate temptation and give you time to come to terms with the futility of your attachment and the fact that I am completely out of your league.

It can’t be easy, I’m sure. And should you prefer to shun all further contact, so be it. However, as far as I am concerned it seems rather absurd to allow a moment of perfectly understandable weakness on your part to spoil a not altogether unpromising friendship. You may, if you wish, pretend you were merely paying me the compliment you knew I deserved, rather than being utterly smitten. I have no objection to playing along.

Finally, though, the future of any further acquaintance between us must depend on your ability to suppress the all-too-evident violence of your affections – no matter how overwhelming they might seem – and to behave henceforth with appropriate decorum.

Regardless, know that I shall remain

Sincerely Yours,

The Divine Mitsuru
For all my efforts to stay level-headed, the days since our indiscretion had been flecked with anxiety. Yet my relief now was not as overwhelming as I’d expected. Mitsuru certainly had style. Still, I felt a little peevish at how lightly she was treating the episode. I hit Reply.

*How divine indeed that you should deign to take pity on me in my abject, smitten state…*
Fourteen

The weeks passed like a song heard so often it has become a more innocuous form of silence, an echo of nothing. My awareness of official calendar designations revived only with the accidental discovery that my next dole form had been due the day before. I realised I hadn’t got round to applying for the minimum number of jobs required. But it wasn’t hard to invent a couple. I’d done just that for years previously. There wasn’t much chance of getting caught if you chose businesses large enough to involve a number of employees but too small to keep records of who’d enquired about work. Pubs were good, or any medium-sized retailer – almost all that remained in the area.

In fact I was working overtime trying not to wonder where Penny was and what she might be doing, although I did mention our latest correspondence to Anth when he phoned, wanting to know what I’d been up to. Subsequently I received calls from other old friends inviting me to various social events: dinner parties, films, indoor sport. The ones I attended seemed so half-hearted, I would have suspected they’d been organised solely for my benefit had I not known they were now regular fixtures. The sight of us around the table or the TV or the football made me think of a primitive tribe huddled miserably around a fire in the hope of solace and protection against the night.

I couldn’t avoid the thought that everyone involved was trying to distract themselves from a gap that couldn’t be filled, though the nature of the gap remained obscure. It couldn’t have been wholly the fact that we’d left the music scene behind, since Mike was another regular, always turning up alone and looking like he felt he ought to appear happy. When I asked after Mitsuru he simply gave an eloquent shrug.
Anth continued to talk about getting back into music. Yet whenever I suggested we see a
gig, he seemed to find some excuse: a tax return that needed doing; a homebuyers’ special on
tellie; a hard day at work. Possibilities that would have sounded ludicrous to us a year
before. To Anth I made a show of being jealous of his newfound domesticity. To myself I
pretended I wasn’t and headed for the Rising Star regardless.

My return visits to the independent scene were overseen by Mitsuru, who introduced me
to her circle of friends – the latest crop of young, beautiful hipsters. To their credit they
forgave me my extreme old age and lack of fashion sense. (The trend was loose-fitting, calf-
length jeans with nerve-wrackingly tight, brightly coloured tops. It seemed to me, recalling
the dress she’d worn to the town hall, this style was less flattering to Mitsuru than to others.
Yet she chose the most extreme, incongruous combinations.) But there was never any
question of my being other than a novelty, a walking anachronism. Certainly not a bona fide
punter. I hammed up the role, feigning incomprehension of music Mitsuru had been
educating me about. My new acquaintances claimed to have no idea of groups I had
worshipped.

As for Mitsuru herself, it was a truth universally acknowledged that she would end each
night shit-faced. The question was how drunk she’d be by the time she was supposed to
perform. Her capacity for holding booze was unnaturally well-developed and I always left
before things got too messy. I could be assured of hearing the full story later – whatever
Mitsuru could remember, or had since learned from others – beginning, invariably, with *I’ve
been sooo bad*. And the amusing, articulate way in which she presented the most sordid,
pathetic details made them seem only half real. At times I wondered if it wasn’t all part of
her performance. Mitsuru was smart enough to realise that the threadbare mythology of
rock’n’roll still held a fascination for many in the independent scene. Perhaps she even
believed it could still provide a way to celebrate her sense of being an outsider.

Whatever the reason, I felt that this public version of Mitsuru was somehow less genuine than the person I knew from our private exchanges. These were limited to email and the occasional phone call – there was no further talk of spending time together unaccompanied – and their tone was, if not entirely earnest, increasingly less trivial. With some trepidation I had mentioned the philosophical concepts I’d become interested in. To my surprise, Mitsuru revealed that at her lowest ebb, after her accident, she’d gotten involved with the Hare Krishnas. She’d quickly broken with them because of their patriarchal attitude. But I suspected she still yearned for a system to help get her life back on track, and it struck me that the essentially rational approach of the Teachings might fit the bill.

I proceeded cautiously. Perhaps too used to being labelled exotic herself, Mitsuru seemed immune to enigmatic references to my experiences overseas. During one phone conversation I teasingly accused her of being the most incurious person I knew. ‘Not that I mind,’ I added. ‘It does get boring answering the same questions about the Taj and the temples and all the rest.’

There was a pause on the other end of the line. ‘I have been wondering one thing.’

‘Well, I don’t guarantee a comprehensive answer,’ I said, trying not to sound too expectant.

‘Like I said, I’m really only a novice myself –’

‘Actually, it’s not about the theory. I was wondering, what does it feel like?’

‘Feel like? I’m not sure I get you.’ In fact I had begun to suspect she was repaying my mockery.

‘I mean what does it feel like to rethink your whole outlook?’ The crossness in her tone sounded genuine enough. ‘And do you still feel the same way about it now?’
I considered. Her approach was typically baffling, but I was well primed. ‘That’s just it: I realised that how you feel isn’t that important. Everything changes, and feelings faster than anything, right? It’s simply a matter of understanding that.’

‘Of course.’ Mitsuru sounded not at all convinced, but the fact that for once she didn’t argue made me think I’d made vital progress.

My own feeling of satisfaction didn’t last long. In an email shortly afterwards, I observed that looking for happiness in anything outside oneself is misguided since even if we get what we want there’s no way of holding onto it, and we’re quite likely to end up more miserable than before.

*What’s wrong with being miserable?* she replied. *I think there’s something marvellous about wasting a whole day in bed, moping and listening to music and thinking your life hasn’t even begun and it may as well be over.*

The more often I countered her objections, the more perversely she insisted the arguments didn’t apply to her.

*Why should I learn to be happy with what I’ve got? Why should I avoid trying new things because some of them might be bad? Why should I convince myself I don’t want more, just because the truth will make me dissatisfied?*

When it came time to hand in my next dole form I once again invented all my job-seeking efforts. I reminded myself that Penny’s visa expired within the week; she might even now be en route to the flight we’d booked to bring us home. But even this prospect failed to inspire me – perhaps because no matter how hard I tried to convince myself this was even a remote possibility, my imagination failed me. I was a car with a flat battery, unable to generate the spark that would set off the process of recharging. The fact that this hardly bothered me seemed to indicate that my mastery of the Teachings had substantially progressed.
Fifteen

Mitsuru’s resistance to the central ideas of the Teachings didn’t surprise me. Her reaction was, if anything, less negative than my own initial response had been.

On returning to the hovel to inform Penny of my new abode and discuss arrangements for the coming days, I’d been greeted with a plastic bag containing various bits and pieces I’d left behind, and the news that Penny was now considering a more extended break.

‘How much longer?’ I kept my voice level. I didn’t want to supply her with any justification for keeping me at a distance.

‘A week or two, that’s all. I think it’ll do us both good. I’ve given you half the First Aid kit,’ she continued quickly, as I opened my mouth. ‘And you can hang on to the guide book.’

‘Well then, that’s the important stuff sorted out,’ I said.

On my walk from the village back across the fields, I’d rehearsed all the reasons against living separately, from the extra expense to personal safety. In Penny’s presence, however, such arguments faded beneath the glaring fact that for the time being she didn’t want my company. And maybe I was overreacting. Since that first, harrowing day in India, I’d come to trust Penny’s judgement completely, and I had no reason to doubt her now. Maybe this was what we needed.

I took the plastic bag and returned to my new lodgings. Amongst the assortment of bandages and pills from the First Aid kit was a booklet entitled What to Do in an Emergency. I checked, but there was nothing about relationship breakdowns, temporary or otherwise. I took a sheet of airmail paper and a pen and sat at the small table by the window. (At least
the immediate view was wonderful – across the ravine below the terrace to the grey slopes of
the adjoining mountain, speckled with slowly milling brown-and-white goats.)

These are my options, I wrote. 1 – Trash myself. 2 – Take first flight home. 3 – Hang in there.

The first, my preferred option in crises past, might have been feasible despite the notable
absence of debauchery from most of Indian life. But I had to admit I couldn’t muster the
requisite sense of carelessness. Option two was more tempting, and I might have taken it if
only I’d been able to imagine Penny, overcome with remorse at her heartlessness, following
me back. Unfortunately that left only the last option, which meant filling in a lot of hours
until she was ready to talk things over.

The area’s single noteworthy attraction was the Centre for Esoteric Studies, a local
establishment moderately famous with post-hippy New Agers from all over the world.
Penny and I had already done puja in Varanasi, tried yoga in Rishikesh and visited countless
shrines and temples. What did I have to lose in trying another life altering experience?

The Centre was several whitewashed, two-storey concrete boxes of the same uninspired
design as the rest of the village, clustered around an orange-daubed stone cairn topped with
an orange pennant. Beyond this the ridge fell away, offering a panoramic view of the dusty
grey plains far below. I arrived in time for the daily Teaching, dispensed year-round by one
of the holy man’s senior disciples. Following the example of the thirty-odd resolutely benign
foreigners and the handful of robed minions, I discarded my boots at the door, took a purple
cushion and sat cross-legged on the floor.

The room was bare except for a low orange dais, soon occupied by a sun-tanned, middle-
aged Caucasian man who greeted us with a New York accent. I guessed that in his previous
existence he’d traded on Wall Street, or worked high up in a multinational corporation. For
an hour he pushed the old line about peace of mind: To be truly happy you had to correctly
understand the nature of existence. Etcetera. I found myself glancing to either side, wondering what was so wrong with these people’s lives that they pined after some patently simplistic, nursery rhyme formula.

When it was over I trudged gloomily back up the path to the village. In the pine grove beyond the Centre was a tea stall, where I ordered a glass of chai and sat a little way off on a rock to gather my thoughts.

‘Excuse me. You are waiting for someone?’

Standing beside me was the young man I’d glimpsed the day before while searching for a place to stay. I had noticed him again at the Centre. He would have stood out anywhere. His neon-blue eyes, crew cut blonde hair and gaunt features gave him the look of an extra from a Swedish art movie set in the Middle Ages – either an enthusiastic Inquisitor or a willing human BBQ. Fanatical in any case.

I shook my head.

‘Perhaps then we will dialogue.’ He even sounded like a cartoon European, clipped and guttural.

‘Sure.’ Even on good days I did my best to avoid striking up meaningless short-term acquaintances with other travellers. But my lack of enthusiasm didn’t appear to translate.

He ordered tea for himself and took a rock beside me. ‘I am Michael.’

I introduced myself.

Michael said, ‘I think it is good I should dialogue with you. I learn English language not so long now. I come from – ’ The name sounded like marbles in a plastic bag. ‘Near city of Prague. You are interested in the Teachings?’

I made a noncommittal gesture.

‘I am interested.’ His matter-of-fact manner was reassuring. ‘I think I am staying here.
Then I will be monk.’

Perhaps this was some kind of super-droll Czech humour. Either that or he was even loonier than he looked. ‘Are you serious?’

‘Very much serious.’

Ordinarily I would have finished the conversation as quickly as possible after that. Instead, all the strain and anger that had been building up suddenly found a release.

‘Let me get this right,’ I said. ‘You’re going to give up worldly life because you believe it’s a bad idea to cling to anything?’

Michael nodded.

‘Well, aren’t you just clinging to the idea of not clinging?’

Michael’s placid smile merely infuriated me more.

‘And if all things share the same basic nature’ – I paused; he nodded again, resolutely – ‘why prefer living without, to living with? Why deny yourself all the opportunities of ordinary life? Like being in love, for instance.’

I stopped, aware of how carried away I’d gotten, and glared at the young man beside me in embarrassment.

Michael looked serious. ‘Being in love. Yes, being in love it is very much nice.’

Haltingly, he told me he had been working in a bar in Prague. After decades of Communism, the city’s nightlife was booming with visiting Westerners and young people from across the former USSR looking for a gateway into the West. Among the latter was a girl from Mongolia. Michael had never met anyone like her. He fell in love, she moved into his tiny apartment and they lived together for a year. For a year he was perfectly happy. Then she was offered the chance to move to America, provided she was unattached. After she left, Michael was inconsolable. He drank too much and took any other substances that
came his way. He lost his job, avoided his friends and rarely left the room that had once seemed like heaven. Finally, without knowing why, he scraped together enough money to travel to Mongolia to visit the girl’s parents. They understood his grief. It was they who told him about the Teachings.

As Michael fell silent, I tipped out the dregs of my tea and gazed absent-mindedly at the puddle they made on the ground. I realised I should have guessed his attraction to the Teachings came from somewhere. Yet I still couldn’t let the issue drop.

‘Isn’t it possible you’ll change again?’ I insisted. ‘You’ll find someone new and you’ll feel…maybe not the same, but still good?’

His look of bemusement made me think I must have offended him, and I was about to apologise when he said ‘Of course. This is why I should use this time when my eyes are clear and I see that all attachments lead to sadness.’

He smiled again and I thought he had missed my point. Then I saw that there was no satisfaction in this smile, only pain, and I did not know what to say.

‘Now I must be going,’ Michael drained his glass and stood. ‘I must be meeting with Indian friends. We practise together our English dialogue. Perhaps you will help us?’

I was immediately on guard again. I said I also had another engagement.

‘Perhaps then another time,’ Michael suggested.

‘Perhaps,’ I said.

This time my unspoken message must have reached him. I could tell he understood that I meant no.

‘Please do not feel about it badly,’ he said.

Then I felt guilty, and I realised that in spite of Michael’s flawed English, I hadn’t had such a good conversation in a while.
‘It’s not that I wouldn’t like to,’ I said, hastily. ‘But I probably won’t be staying here long
and I wouldn’t want to make any promises.’

‘I am understanding,’ said Michael. Then he mentioned the café where he and the local
students met to practise, in case I changed my mind.
Sixteen

Arriving home from the Social Security office I found among the day’s mail a postcard from Lahore, Pakistan, where Penny had gone to renew her visa.

Both Mum and Brian were at work, but I automatically retreated to my room, where I peered at the short, mundane message printed on the reverse. Then I began to pace the triangular path from my desk to my stereo to my bed and back to the desk.

I’d prepared for this eventuality by telling myself that whatever preparations I made, the moment of truth would be overwhelmingly worse. Yet I felt little different now to how I’d been feeling for weeks, and it wasn’t so much a feeling as a lack of feeling. I wondered, vaguely, whether this was shock, and the pain would kick in later, as the numbness wore off.

One thing did surprise me, however: the one reason I’d found it impossible to completely believe Penny wouldn’t return as planned. This had less to do with hope than with hopelessness. Knowing her sense of honour, I was convinced Penny would not accept my money unless she felt there was still something between us. One way or another it looked as if I’d misjudged yet again. But in which direction? Clearly I couldn’t trust my own perceptions. I needed someone else’s advice.

There was Anth. But the last thing I wanted was mere sympathy. The same went for our other old friends who’d known Penny and me together. As for my family, we were still in the clutches of polite neutrality. That left Mitsuru. She hadn’t known Penny personally, but this might make her more objective, and Mike must have told her stories from when he and Penny were close. Plus Mitsuru had the advantage of providing me with a female perspective. And although she could be difficult and contrary, I’d come to appreciate her
perceptiveness.

It was mid-afternoon. She would be at work. For once I felt too impatient to sit and write an email. I found her company’s phone number in the directory, called and was told Mitsuru had taken the day off sick. (Unsurprisingly her health wasn’t the best and she regularly succumbed to minor ailments.) I phoned her house, got an answering machine and left a rambling message in case she was screening calls. No one picked up the receiver.

Then I remembered the Paper Tigers were playing that night, and Mitsuru had told me that Harvey the guitarist had been complaining they weren’t prepared. Right now they were probably at a last-minute practice, and would head straight to the Rising Star afterwards. I’d seen them several times recently, and though I still enjoyed their songs, I privately agreed with Harvey. Individually they were fine, and Mitsuru’s voice lifted them above most other bands, but it was increasingly clear they lacked cohesion and focus.

Perhaps tonight would be the breakthrough. Regardless, although the pub setting wasn’t conducive to serious conversation, I couldn’t wait.
Seventeen

The doubts were already creeping in when Brian arrived home late and in a foul mood.

‘What is it with you?’ he said when I asked to borrow his car.

‘I’ve been using public transport whenever I can, and I always put in more petrol than I need.’

‘That’s not what I mean.’

I waited.

Brian looked away. ‘I thought you’d changed.’

‘Meaning?’

‘You said you were over the rock’n’roll stuff. But you’re spending more time out than in – at least while we’re here.’

‘I didn’t think you liked me disturbing your domestic set-up.’

Brian seemed not to hear. ‘Maybe you think we’re not interesting company, and that’s fine with me. But how do you think Mum feels? You pissed off when Dad left and you might as well still be overseas now.’

He wiped his glistening forehead ferociously. I couldn’t believe how big he’d become. A throwback to some giant ancestor. But his voice had never lost that adolescent whine.

‘If you don’t want to lend me the car, say so,’ I said. ‘I’ll borrow Mum’s car. Even if it is due for a service and she wants to use it as little as possible.’

Brian frowned. ‘All I’m saying…Forget it. Take my car.’

I took his car. He’d spent the previous evening polishing it with a chamois and reblacking the tyres. I forced myself to keep to the speed limit, though I could feel my confidence draining away with every second. Was there really anything so strange about Penny’s
decision, or was it just another monotonous instalment of the story of recent months?

I was so deep in thought I didn’t notice I’d taken a detour until I found myself outside Anth and Caroline’s. It must have been a residual instinct from the days when Anth and I always went into town together – to give each other immoral support, we said. I decided I might as well pay a quick visit. There was no point turning up to the Rising Star early, when Mitsuru would be jittery and in no mood for conversation.

I was sure neither Anth nor Caroline would be interested in the gig. But Caroline had a migraine, and she insisted Anth go with me rather than tiptoeing around the house. After some worried protesting he gave in. I had a bad feeling I was expected to spend the night cheering him up. However, when we got outside, and Anth saw Brian’s car, he burst out laughing.

‘This is what you get around in nowadays? Shit, you’re not doing too bad after all.’

The atmosphere between us shifted. Or rather, shifted back. The stilted, forced tone of recent times was gone. I remembered how it had been, back in high school and immediately after – the feeling of conspiratorial anticipation. The world was ours, we were going places, and a night out at a pub was the most important thing there was. We gossiped and laughed the rest of the way. I might have been tempted to confide in Anth about Penny’s decision to stay abroad, but it had slipped from my mind.

The evening was chilly, the air spilling like cold soup from the roofs of the old miners’ cottages opposite the pub. Anth and I strode in the front doors like there was nowhere else we could possibly be. In the corner that served as a stage, the band equipment was set up, but the place was less crowded than usual. I wondered if the Paper Tigers’ recent lacklustre performances had begun to take their toll. Once audience members drifted away they were hard to entice back. Fortunately Mitsuru’s crew of friends were the coolest and most
attractive in the scene. I said hello to a group of them, then Anth and I sat down at an empty table.

‘If I wasn’t in a relationship,’ Anth said, ‘I would definitely be asking for introductions. For a dag, you do groove with the in-crowd.’

‘Can’t a bloke be polite without being accused of ulterior motives? The thought hadn’t crossed my mind.’

‘Shame on you, then.’

I was looking around for the band members. Even in a friendly establishment like the Rising Star you didn’t leave your gear unattended for long, and they ought to have started playing by now. Darren was at the bar wearing a coat, beneath which was certainly the practical if unfashionable white singlet he always wore for drumming. (Mitsuru and I had privately agreed we liked him more for it.) After a few words with the brick-faced pub owner, he steered his schooner in our direction and slumped into an unoccupied chair.

‘Well, here we all are,’ Anth said gleefully. ‘The new band.’

Darren groaned and took a deep sip of beer. ‘Don’t talk to me about bands. The proprietor just bawled me out for not starting on time. If we don’t start soon Mitsuru will be paralytic. She and Mike weren’t speaking all afternoon, and I don’t know where he is. And Harvey’s threatening to quit. I don’t need this.’

He finished his beer in another gulp. Anth patted him on the shoulder. I suddenly remembered why I’d come. But discussing my personal life with Mitsuru no longer seemed such a good idea. In fact it seemed not only ill-advised but possibly dangerous. If Anth hadn’t been there I might have left straight away.

‘There’s Mike,’ Darren said, looking past my shoulder. ‘I’ll see you guys later.’

He scurried towards the front doors where Mike was standing with a young man I didn’t
recognise. I noticed that instead of the fashionable clothes Mitsuru chose for him, Mike was wearing scruffy jeans and a faded flannel shirt that I recalled from years before, when we first met. He did not look happy. But after a brief exchange with Darren the two of them headed for the corner. From a nearby alcove Harvey appeared, immaculately black as usual. There was a minute or two of tuning and sound checking. Then the three instrumentalists launched into the introduction of their opening number. Seconds later Mitsuru strolled through the back entrance, took her place behind the microphone and began to sing.

The effect was instantaneous. To all appearances she remained motionless and slightly asymmetrical, her eyes closed. But she had slipped from the place where the sound was being produced into a different universe – the place where the music originated. It was like an esoteric phenomenon of atomic physics, whereby Mitsuru the singer became Mitsuru the song.

Again it struck me that there was no way for guitar, bass and drums, no matter how competently played, to do justice to that voice. At best they could be a forgivable imposition – necessary ballast. Meanwhile, at the edges of my consciousness, I was aware that everyone else in the room – even the surly pub owner and the two antiquated pisspots propped at their slot machines – had turned towards her.

It was only when the song finished that Mitsuru showed signs of self-consciousness, squinting unenthusiastically past the two stage lights (which, I knew, reduced everything beyond to dim shadows) and slouching to disguise her lopsided gait – a ploy that made her appear more physically awkward. In those elongated seconds she was indeed the foreign, exotic element in the scene. Then Darren clicked four beats with his drumsticks, the music began again and Mitsuru drew us back into her trance.

It was little wonder I didn’t immediately notice the small circle of cardboard in front of
me. Even when I registered that it hadn’t been there earlier, its presence hardly aroused my curiosity. It was just a throwaway promotional beer coaster.

Except that it lay face down and on the back, scribbled in pencil, were the words *STAY AWAY FROM HER*.

For a while I simply stared. Then I picked it up and reread the message slowly, convinced it must have some meaning apart from the obvious. Finally I glanced around me. Everyone nearby appeared engrossed in the Paper Tigers.

It was like a B-grade film noir. I couldn’t help laughing – rather loudly and perhaps a touch hysterically. Anth looked at me, then down at the beer coaster.

‘What’s up?’

‘Nothing.’ I crumpled the cardboard in my hand. ‘A dumb joke. Did you notice someone walk by?’

‘That guy near the bar,’ he said, after a brief survey. ‘He walked past a few minutes ago and he’s staring at us.’

I didn’t have to ask for further details. It was the young man Mike had walked in with. I still couldn’t recall having met him before, though he had the generic good looks of a Hollywood pretty-boy – dark eyes, broad forehead, practised pout. His body looked formidably well maintained. I felt an instinctive dislike, which I tried to quash although he was glowering at me in a manner that was clearly unamiable.

I turned back towards the band without seeing or hearing them. Obviously it was some sort of misunderstanding. It occurred to me that having made his point – whatever it was – Beefboy might deem further action unnecessary. There was no reason for me to dignify this senseless bullying with any form of acknowledgement.

Without intending to, I stood and walked over to the bar. Everything around me seemed
to belong somewhere else, like a TV playing behind plate glass. I held out the crumpled piece of cardboard.

‘I think you dropped something.’

He glowered some more then shook his head. ‘It’s yours.’

‘It’s not mine,’ I said. ‘And I thought it must have belonged to you.’

He grunted indistinctly. The conversation seemed to be going nowhere so I dropped the coaster in front of him and walked back to the table. Settling in my seat, I pretended not to see Anth’s inquisitive frown and addressed myself again to the scheduled performance.

As soon as the set finished I proposed to Anth that we head home.

‘No socialising at all?’ he asked. ‘What happened to being polite?’

I didn’t try to explain what seemed inexplicable. Outside the temperature had dropped further. My breath hung curtains of mist in the air. Once beyond the pub’s hemisphere of illumination I felt better, but as we reached the car I heard quick footsteps behind us. I turned. It was Mitsuru.

‘What an arsehole,’ she said, breathing heavily. ‘I heard what happened. I’m so sorry.’

‘Sorry?’ I said. ‘It wasn’t your fault, was it?’

‘It’s just so like him. Fucking juvenile.’

Anth cleared his throat. ‘Am I in the way here?’

When I outlined what had happened he shook his head. ‘Bloody hell, you’re crazier than I thought.’

‘They told me he kept giving you filthy looks for the rest of the gig,’ Mitsuru said. ‘He was waiting for an excuse to fight you. And when I went up to him he was smirking like –’

‘Who is he?’ I interrupted.

‘No one. A dickhead,’ she snapped then looked down at the curb. ‘Nick is an old friend
of Mike’s. He’s sort of the reason we met in the first place.’

‘Okay,’ Anth said. ‘I definitely need another beer.’

As he crossed back to the Rising Star, I gazed up at the wan splash of stars, trying to process Mitsuru’s information while suspecting no good would come of it.

‘You mustn’t worry about him,’ Mitsuru said quietly.

‘It’s not him I’m worried about. I don’t want to make problems between you and Mike.’

‘You don’t think Mike…?’ She shook her head. ‘I’m sure he had nothing to do with it.’

She looked so bewildered I realised I couldn’t leave with things as they were.

‘I’m going to talk to him,’ I said.

Mitsuru said nothing. I headed for the pub, clenching my jaw to stop my teeth chattering from the cold.

Anth was helping Darren pack up the drum kit. Mike stood in front of his unplugged amp, looking as much a castaway as Mitsuru. At my approach, his expression shifted queasily through a mix of emotions I couldn’t then understand – though the memory would return much later to haunt me. Nick skulked nearby, but I ignored him.

I told Mike I was sorry about the unnecessary drama; that I didn’t blame him and I had no intention of causing trouble. He chewed at his lower lip and nodded. I hesitated, realising I’d given no thought to what I would say next but feeling more was required.

‘If you’d rather Mitsuru and I had no more contact, I’ll give you my word.’

Mike shook his head. ‘I don’t want to be possessive. My father used to get so jealous, in the end…I know Mum didn’t want to leave. And he still hates himself for it.’

His expression was vulnerable and determined. At that moment I had no trouble believing Mitsuru loved him.

‘I don’t want to spoil your friendship,’ he added. ‘I hope I haven’t.’
We shook hands with awkward gravity. Anth was waiting for me at the back, beside the pile of drums.

‘Darren’s getting his van. Mission accomplished?’

‘I think so.’

‘Looks like the love birds are on speaking terms again.’

I followed his gaze back towards the corner, where Mitsuru had joined Mike. The two of them were deep in conversation. For some reason the sight failed to cheer me and I was glad when Darren reappeared to release us from guard duty.

‘I’d better get home,’ I said.

‘It’s been quite a night,’ Anth grinned. ‘But hang on…’

Mitsuru was coming towards us, looking determined.

‘Mike told me you offered not to have anything to do with me.’ Her voice was impersonal, like a medical specialist’s.

I nodded.

‘I’m sorry our friendship means so little to you. Obviously I’m just a nuisance you’d be glad to get rid of. So I’ll spare you the trouble. I’ve told Mike I never want to see you or speak to you again.’

She stood for a second, looking at me. Then she began to turn away.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. Indeed, the pain I’d been expecting earlier seemed to have finally caught up with me. As Mitsuru hesitated, I added ‘I wanted to help you pull yourself together. I think it’s a shame you’re wasting your life. But if you’re not willing to take yourself seriously, I guess there’s nothing I can do.’

For a second, as she blinked at the words, I thought I would finally see her bravado give way. I braced myself for the outburst.
‘No wonder Penny dumped you.’ She said it in almost the same tone, only softer, and as if bemused.

I held my breath, thinking she was about to mention the kiss.

‘You don’t care about anything,’ she said. ‘You’re like a locked up house with nothing inside.’

Before I could think of a reply she was walking away.

In the car, Anth said ‘Definitely flaky. You’re lucky you got off so light.’

It was only when I arrived home, in the garage, I noticed somebody had dragged a coin along the driver’s side of Brian’s car, leaving a gouge from the front fender to the back panel.
Eighteen

Dear Penny,

I got your card. I guess you’ll be back in India by now. It’s never easy writing to you, but this letter will be hardest of all. I have to tell you about something that’s come up, something I never expected or wanted. I won’t go into the details, but the fact is I think I’ve developed feelings for somebody else…

It sounded so convincing I almost believed it myself. For an instant my mind baulked at the possible repercussions. But I was sick of being patient and staunch and reasonable and making the best of it. Better to gamble everything on a long shot. At least I could be sure of a definite response. One way or the other – it hardly seemed to matter.

After I returned from the postbox I phoned Anth. He answered on the fifteenth ring.

‘What’s up?’

‘I’ve decided you’re right. I do need to let off steam. Fuck it, let’s try making music again.’

‘Do you realise it’s five-thirty in the morning?’

‘I’ll need to borrow some money, though. My equipment is still in hock.’

‘Fabulous, Jake. I’m over the goddam moon. Please can we discuss this tomorrow?’

‘It is tomorrow. But okay, I guess I can wait a little longer.’

I left a note for Brian on the kitchen bench, explaining I’d repay him for the damage to his car. Then I went to bed and lay in the darkness waiting for sleep. Even that seemed a long way off.

Up until now I’d consoled myself that if my life currently seemed to be teetering on the brink of ruin, eventually everything must change. And it wasn’t that I had ceased to believe
this was true. The problem was that nothing changed in the way I wanted it to. It just got worse.
Part Two
Nineteen

‘It’s unbelievable,’ Darren said. ‘You wouldn’t think it was the same person. She’s on time for practices and she’s obviously putting effort in. She and Harvey are actually working together on the new songs. As for her and Mike…They’re so sweet it’s repulsive. She agrees with everything he says. And he’s like a new man.’

Anth looked at me. I took another slug from my stubby – the beer cold and bitter – and stared out over Anth and Caroline’s backyard. The vegetable garden Caroline had started along the fence on one side was faring badly. Most of the potato plants had turned yellow and the broccoli and cauliflowers looked shrivelled and sad. Caroline, undaunted, was out buying seeds for the spring crop – though I suspected that wasn’t her only reason for spending the afternoon away from the house.

‘Don’t get me wrong,’ Darren went on. ‘I never thought she was a bad person. We always got on all right.’

Anth grunted. ‘You’d find a way to get on all right with Attila the Hun.’

‘What about all her other friends? She could be good with people when she wanted to be. Just ask Jake…I mean, as well as being rude,’ Darren added awkwardly.

I became conscious they were both watching me. ‘Of course she’s a decent person.’

‘From what I saw’ – Anth pursed his lips – ‘your saying so is more a credit to you than to her. I dunno if I’d be so generous about someone who acted like that to me. Especially when I’d just done my best to make their life easier.’

‘I deserved it. I shouldn’t have said what I said.’
‘Under the circumstances I’d say that was understandable.’

*Under the circumstances, I thought, in which I also decided to give music-making another go.*

Aloud I said, ‘Yeah okay, she’s a crazy bitch. Whatever.’

‘Well,’ Darren said, ‘it was pretty obvious she needed to grow up. I just never thought it’d happen overnight.’

In the ensuing lull the chorus of a Top-40 ballad drifted over the back fence, forlorn and lost in the drowsy Saturday late afternoon like a debutante at a wake. Seconds later it segued rudely into football commentary.

‘So now everything’s peachy, band-wise,’ Anth said, ‘do the other Paper Tigers mind you messing round with us?’

‘Nah. It’s funny: I think they would’ve been ropable a month back when the wheels were falling off. But now, especially with the new stuff we’re coming up with, I reckon we all feel like we’re…kind of more in tune. I’ll tell you another weird thing, though,’ Darren added. ‘I know Harvey is keen to make it, even if he’s too cool to say so. And I’d love to make enough money from music to not need a day job, even if the music’s not great, even if I was playing cover versions. But I’m starting to think Mike doesn’t really care one way or another. He’s mostly just doing it because he thinks it’s good for Mitsuru. And she’s just doing it for him. Kind of weird, isn’t it?’

But Anth had lost interest. He rubbed his hands together and stood up. ‘Speaking of weird, if we’ve finished refuelling let’s go make some more.’

I finished my beer and we trooped dutifully back to the living room. All the furniture was pushed against the walls to make room for the music equipment. The floor was a snake pit of power cords, leads and a couple of guitar strings that had snapped after months of disuse. There was a primordial inevitability about the scene that I found discouraging.
Darren squeezed behind his drums. Anth picked up his bass and adjusted the microphone stand while I settled the guitar strap on my shoulder. The amps troubled the air like swarming insects. We ran through the song we’d been practising before the break – a song Anth and I wrote years before, at what seemed in retrospect to have been the pinnacle of our career. Darren easily picked up Wizz’s drum line. He said he used to practise along to the version we’d put on tape.

It still sounded strange to my ears. Not just the drumming. Anth and I had already jammed together a couple of times in the past fortnight; we’d wanted to get up to speed before bringing Darren in. (Anth confessed he hadn’t played or sung since our final gig.) But without a beat the songs were barely recognisable; a vital ingredient was missing. It was only now becoming evident that the addition of a beat failed to significantly improve the situation. And my guitar playing was truly abysmal. Even the right notes came out sounding wrong.

I glanced at Anth and Darren. Neither appeared unduly perturbed. As we began stumbling through a cover version Darren had suggested, I wondered if I was being too harsh. Anth and I were out of practice, the three of us had no experience as a unit and we couldn’t expect an instantaneous, magical rapport. Perhaps, even – though the idea seemed ludicrous given my feelings towards the end – I might have developed an overly rosy picture of how things had been. I told myself to lighten up.

What bothered me most was that it all bothered me more than I wanted to admit. I knew that once we’d been good – really good, on occasion. The fact that we weren’t so good any more shouldn’t have made any difference to what had been. But it did. And we no longer had ignorance and inexperience on our side. No longer truly felt that being in a great rock band was the most important thing there was.
After another hour we called it quits. I'd been keeping an eye on the clock and insisted we finish at the arranged time.
I didn’t want to miss my bus and be late for dinner. It was Brian’s night to cook. He left most meals to Mum, reserving his energy for elaborate productions that showcased his mastery of the finer points of contemporary international cuisine. *(It’s a necessity, he’d explained recently. *I don’t know a single self-respecting bloke who doesn’t have his own special marinade.)*

At home the table was set and Mum was opening the wine under the chef’s supervision. ‘You’re bloody lucky you weren’t ten minutes later,’ he said. ‘This stuff doesn’t wait.’

Despite the gruff tone I could see he was pleased with himself. For starters he had created a thin chowder flavoured with seaweed. This would be followed by buckwheat crepes (galettes, Brian insisted on calling them) filled with shitake mushrooms and adzuki beans, with tofu crème caramels for dessert.

‘It’s French-Japanese crossover,’ he observed off-handedly.

‘Like raw frogs’ legs,’ I suggested.

He sniffed. ‘Culinary artistry is wasted on the naturally tasteless.’

‘Now, boys.’ Mum lifted a glass, smiling. ‘Don’t ruin the toast I’m about to propose. To us, the three of us, for sticking together after everything that’s happened.’

It wasn’t strictly true. I hadn’t stuck with them and I’d returned as a last resort, hoping it would be only briefly. But as I raised my glass I realised that in the time following my return Mum had been obviously unhappy and I’d simply accepted it as her natural state, post-divorce. Now, though, her smile was real and radiant. She must have noticed that since Brian’s incredibly laid-back reaction to the damaged car, he and I had been making a new
effort to get along. To my surprise, Brian seemed genuinely grateful that I was spending evenings at home.

Now he hesitated, looking slightly uncomfortable, before raising his own glass.

‘Jeez, Mum, what’s with you? You got a boyfriend?’

‘Don’t be stupid. Why would I need another man in my life?’

The mix of vitriol and affection made me shiver but it was comforting to think that some things, on the surface at least, were improving.

‘By the way, Jake,’ she added, ‘there’s a message for you. Someone rang while you were at Anthony’s. He had a strange name. It started with a K, I think. No, G.’

‘Gautama?’

‘That’s it. Please tell him sorry, I thought at first he was a telemarketer. But he said you’d rung about some teaching.’ She didn’t quite manage to disguise her scepticism, though I knew it would’ve been more pronounced if she’d known I had found Gautama’s contact details on a local website dedicated to the Centre for Esoteric Studies. ‘Apparently there’s a meeting tomorrow night. He gave me the address. Does this mean you might have found a job?’ Mum pursued, when I failed to volunteer further information.

I shook my head. ‘It’s something I discovered overseas. A local…philosophy.’ The term wasn’t quite as ominous as ‘religion’, which would certainly have sent her rushing to the Yellow Pages in search of the nearest cult deprogrammer.

Even so, she appeared strangely unconcerned.

‘For a philosophy,’ Mum said, ‘it lives in a classy neighbourhood.’
Twenty-One

The city had only one geographical landmark: the Hill. It was the longest-established part of town and rose beside the civic centre, but it was also strangely invisible. There were no shops or businesses on the Hill, no major thoroughfares, nothing to attract the attention of outsiders. I’d never had reason to go there previously, and as I now discovered there were no public transport routes through those steep, tree-lined streets.

Bright, hard late-winter sun had been pounding the city for days, and halfway up the first block of the Hill I was sweating and out of breath. But my discomfort seemed to dwindle in the environment in which I now found myself. There were big houses in the suburbs, but they looked like they’d been built for the sole purpose of being big. The houses on the Hill were different. About half had been built by the area’s earliest moneyed citizens and were slowly falling into haughty decay; the other half were one-off designs by modish modern architects, featuring extravagant angles, fancifully shaped windows and unlikely combinations of building materials. Both types, however, were more than just big. They were grand and elegant and stylish. The kind of houses that belonged to the kind of people whom I’d seen at Mitsuru’s conservatorium recital. They were, as my mother had said, classy.

I felt as much of an interloper as I had overseas. But whereas the great temples and maharajas’ palaces had seemed part of an exotic, vanished past, entirely separate from my existence, the Hill was connected somehow to life as I knew it, in a way that produced an involuntary, self-righteous indignation. I didn’t want to belong here, I insisted to myself.

Attaining the halfway point, I briefly considered setting up a base camp before my final ascent. A police patrol car crawled up beside me in low gear. Without looking directly at it,
I could tell someone inside was examining me. I realised I’d seen no other pedestrians since leaving the mall below. I walked on, repeating the address in my head. The numbers were getting closer. The police car continued upwards, past me. I glanced at it then, so as not to appear to be deliberately averting my gaze. Maybe it was my imagination, but even this vehicle seemed to be of a better quality and better maintained than most of the local cop cars.

Then I was standing outside the house. It was one of the newer variety. The lower storey was an almost unbroken expanse of river rock, austere and vaguely medieval; the upper level, glass, though too high up to offer passers-by any insight into the life of the inhabitants; the roofs curved like the sails of the Sydney Opera House.

I stood on the footpath and reminded myself that I had no reason to be against money on principle, any more than against music. The Teachings were about putting aside prejudices and preconceptions and accepting the experience itself, and it was ridiculous to imagine they were more appropriate to the ascetic, humble setting of rural India. Still, I couldn’t seem to find the impetus to step onto the raked, white pebble path. I wondered if my time wouldn’t be better spent focussing on the Teachings privately.

At the intersection at the crest of the hill, the patrol car executed a tight U-turn and headed back down in my direction. I strode quickly up the path, to the huge double front doors. The doors were made of dark stained teak, intricately carved in what appeared to be an ancient Hindu style. I recognised the elephant-headed god Ganesh on one panel. A couple of panels in the lower corners seemed to have been based on the Kama Sutra. To one side of the door was a delicate, beaten copper lotus flower. I tentatively pressed it. It shifted, and in the distance I was almost sure I heard the chime of a temple prayer bell.
I could also hear, more clearly, the police car in the street behind me. It had stopped, though the motor was still running. I promised myself that if they left before someone answered, I would make a run for it.

‘Greetings and welcome.’

I turned towards the voice. Another pebbled path led towards the corner of the house, where the rock wall was interrupted by a tall wooden gate. Along this path came a figure dressed in bright orange robes. His face and exposed forearms were deeply suntanned; his teeth, blindingly white, but the blue eyes and white-blond hair were unmistakably Caucasian.

‘Can I help you?’ he continued. His voice was sonorous yet ethereal, like a hybrid of advertising voiceovers for building societies and funeral directors. As he drew nearer I surmised he was middle-aged, but it was difficult to be more precise. He looked as though he spent a lot of time at a health club. But what stood out above everything else was the smile: a beaming beacon of absolute assurance and tranquillity.

‘I’m looking for Gautama,’ I managed to say.

A modest inclination of his head. ‘Gautama is my yogic name. But if it would make you feel more comfortable, you can use my birth name: Stephen.’ His attention strayed from me to the street, he waved languidly and I heard the police car resume its downward course.

‘Gautama is fine,’ I muttered. ‘I’m Jake.’

He nodded and clasped my hand in both of his. It was like shaking hands with a stuffed toy; I felt no matter how hard I squeezed I would not make any lasting impression.

‘I should have let you know that during scheduled sessions you can let yourself in by the side gate. Come.’

I followed him down the path, through the gateway and along the side of the house. The nape of his neck, his shoulders and the valley between his shoulder blades were covered with
a thick pale fleece, which curled over the top of his robe. I kept my eyes fixed on this, trying not to notice the prickling across the back of my own neck.

After the extravagant frontage, the backyard took me by surprise. At first I wondered whether the former was for appearances, and the owners were either less well off or more penny-pinching than they at first seemed. I couldn’t fathom why else anyone who could afford such an abode would stick a squat, whitewashed concrete shed out the back. Then I noticed the pile of orange-daubed stones nearby, topped by a limp orange pennant. I realised what I was looking at: a scaled-down version of the main building of the Centre. Even the spindly pine saplings planted in front were the same variety as the grove bordering the path from the village.

It was a shock partly because of the scale, which produced an impression of seeing the Centre from a point much further away than I was used to; and partly because, instead of the vastness of the Indian plains spread below and behind it, I saw a rendered wall with a chain link fence projecting above, and halogen floodlights atop the corner posts – almost certainly an adjoining tennis court. Over the fence beside us protruded the top of a wrought-iron, faux-Victorian pergola entwined with jasmine. Rising behind the opposite fence were the chromium-plated exhaust pipes of a high-powered ski boat.

‘We had the materials shipped here,’ Gautama observed, offhandedly. ‘They were left over from the last building project, which we helped sponsor, and they’ve been blessed by Him. Did you ever meet Him personally?’

I shook my head.

Gautama sighed sympathetically. ‘Maybe next time.’ Though it was not clear whether he meant my next overseas pilgrimage or my next incarnation.
From the door of the mini-Centre – I tried not to think of it as ‘CentreWorld’ – came another orange-robed figure. This figure was female, and I had the impression that beneath her robes she was unencumbered by underwear.

‘This is Lakshmi,’ Gautama said. ‘My life partner.’

‘Pleased to meet you,’ she said. Her voice and demeanour had the same unearthly benevolence and solicitude as Gautama’s; her body, the same tanned-and-toned sleekness. Equanimity billowed off both of them like exotic, industrial-strength perfume.

‘Pleased to meet you,’ I echoed, thinking perhaps it was not too late to pretend I’d come to the wrong address and was meant to be at another Gautama’s house cleaning his in-ground pool and delivering a consignment of hard drugs.

But we’d arrived at the doorway, which was in every respect a copy of the front door of the Centre, and I was automatically slipping my shoes off. Inside the room were half-a-dozen others. Thankfully, all wore Western clothes, observed a reverent silence, and displayed no overt curiosity. From my brief scan it also seemed that they were much older than me. Just as in India, the room was unfurnished apart from a low dais at the front. But this dais was occupied by an enormous, home-cinema-sized screen, hung with garlands of the most vivid tangerine marigolds I had ever seen outside of Bollywood films.

Gautama silently indicated a pile of pillows. I took one and found an empty space near the back. As Gautama and Lakshmi glided towards the front, I reflected that the Teachings had been hard to accept in India, in my hyper-receptive state. Here, the whole thing teetered on ludicrousness. But wasn’t that simply my middle-class, suburban squeamishness – the quotidian mentality I ought to be striving to overcome?

In fact, I wasn’t as bothered by the differences in the set-up as by the similarities, which underscored how much had changed in my life since I’d last attended a Teaching. This
made it easier to entertain another idea: I’d been lucky to have the Teachings to help me through my crisis overseas, but perhaps it was time to throw away that particular crutch and move on. I would sit through this session – it would be bad form to leave now, and they might call my house again to find out what had happened. Then afterwards I would politely bid them farewell and wish them all the best in a way that made it clear I wouldn’t be back.

My hosts had settled themselves on their cushions, and now Gautama raised a remote control from beside him. Suddenly the screen on the dais was full of the American acolyte who’d delivered the Teachings every morning at the Centre.

*Once more, for old time’s sake,* I thought.

It was surprisingly easy to forget current distractions and focus on the screen and the words (which sounded as if they were being pumped through a top-notch amplification unit). And as I listened, something happened. My surroundings – the room and the other people in it – swam out of focus as though someone had knocked the lens of a projector. Details blurred and became abstract, like one of those 3D pictures that look like random patterns until you fix your eyes elsewhere.

I’d had similar experiences several times at the Centre, only ever short-lived, before the present rose sharply back into the foreground. But on this occasion, instead of plummeting to earth, I felt my own thoughts blur too, and then dissipate within the rest. Effortlessly, I ceased to know anything. There was only abounding emptiness and harmonious silence, and it was the most natural, ordinary, perfect thing in the world.

It might have lasted barely a millisecond; it might have been hours or years.

Then I became conscious of people rising slowly in front of me, and the screen on the dais was blank again. I stood up automatically, picked up my cushion and placed it on the pile before walking to the door.
It was only then I realised I was not looking out at the courtyard of the Centre; that I was not about to stroll back towards the village, stopping for a glass of tea with Michael and a discussion of the morning’s Teaching and the impending afternoon language class. As the memory of everything that had happened in the meantime hit me all at once, I grabbed my shoes from beside the door, shoved them on my feet without bothering to tie the laces, and bolted back up the path around the side of the house.

I didn’t stop running till my legs and lungs brought me to a gasping standstill at the foot of the Hill, where the leafy avenues gave way to boarded-up shop fronts and walls plastered with peeling posters.
Twenty-Two

The endless grey cold of August in the suburbs.

I hadn’t wanted this gap in my life. I’d been ready to plunge into adulthood, to finally make something of myself, even if not on the grand scale I’d once envisaged. I hadn’t wanted all this time for little but thinking. Not that I’d been scared of what conclusions I might reach. At the time I simply believed I’d figured out everything that needed figuring out.

Had I got it wrong, or had I not thought things through far enough? Maybe it made little difference either way and thinking was just what happened when everything else slipped through your fingers.

One of my first realisations was that I had been seriously mistaken regarding Mitsuru. To begin with there was my obvious mistake of taking her presence in my life for granted, against all probability. But far worse, I now understood that when she had described her enjoyment of wallowing in self-pity, she’d been wiser than I. I’d got hung up on preferring happiness to unhappiness. I wanted her to be happy because I felt sure she was basically a happy person; because no matter how disastrous her news she always delivered it in a way that made me smile; and because whenever I communicated with her I found myself naturally assuming the same cheerfulness.

Now it seemed our positions were reversed: Mitsuru was getting her life together; while I divided my time between desk and bed, leaving the phone to the answering machine, and the house only to collect the mail. Vacant minutes became hours, which turned into days. Although this existence was even simpler than my life in the village overseas, my thinking
had become less clear away from the mountain air. Occasionally I felt I might be on the
verge of an important discovery. But whatever it was, it remained in the distance – perhaps
a mirage, perhaps a destination from which recent events would appear in a new, revelatory
arrangement.

Then, one morning: two envelopes addressed to me. They couldn’t have been more
different. One standard government issue (the same sort as my fortnightly dole forms came
in, but I’d just received one of them), my postal details visible through a rectangular plastic
window and a return address beneath another, smaller window in the top left, yet
anonymous nonetheless, and so clean and new it looked like it had been generated and
distributed wholly by automated machinery, never touched by human hands. The other was
made of cheap fibrous paper, tattered, dirt-stained and dog-eared, the stamps skewed, the
address shakily hand-lettered in green ink which had smeared at the bottom.

Yet when I held one in either hand they weighed roughly the same. And when I closed my
eyes and shuffled them I discovered that if I held each between two fingers – as if they were
particularly delicate or distasteful – I couldn’t be sure which was which. I held one up and
opened my eyes. It was the one from Penny. I opened the other.

The letter informed me I’d been selected for a special six-week, full-time intensive job-
seeker course. The course would include workshops in resume-writing, motivational videos,
mock interviews and other activities culminating in the preparation of a personal programme
designed to fast-track you into the workplace. If I had recently started working, or accepted a job
offer before the course commenced, I should contact my local social security office.

Otherwise I would be expected at 9 am on the specified day, less than a month away.

My grace period was over; my days of freedom were numbered. I didn’t mind in principle;
one way or another it was inevitable. But I knew that after a couple of days of that stuff my
current train of thought would be well and truly derailed. And before the six weeks were up I’d be down on all fours, frothing at the mouth and begging for a job as a guard dog at a cement factory.

Banishing the image I opened the other envelope. At least Penny’s tidings couldn’t be much worse, I told myself without conviction. I was completely unprepared for the contents. The first paragraph was almost illegible:

*Just received your letter and read your big news. You didn’t mention her name but it’s not hard to guess. I don’t know why I didn’t see it coming. Guess I’m pretty stupid. Or maybe it’s because I thought she already had a boyfriend. Well, from everything you’ve said about her she sure sounds terrific. There’s obviously no way I could ever compete. So what are you waiting for?*

After that the writing became more like Penny’s usual rounded print.

*Sor...
other from the full impact of our experiences by the similarity of our perspectives – which eventually became frustrating and oppressive. After we split up, Penny was at first too conscious of my absence and concerned about our relationship to properly appreciate the things she’d been so curious about. When I succeeded in reassuring her she hadn’t ruined her chances with me, she felt unburdened. All her doubts temporarily receded and she was caught up in everything that was good and exciting about the place. It was only recently the magic had begun to wear off, leaving her as confused as when we first arrived in India, only now without anyone to rely on at her side.

Penny insisted that I had been more than understanding. The offer of money to stay longer had reduced her to tears (though she insisted on repaying me as soon as possible.) She felt she could make no further claims on me, especially since she was still so far from being able to promise anything in return. But she confessed to enormous relief on reading that I had decided not to pursue my feelings for Mitsuru, if that’s who it is – and I don’t want to know either way.

Finally, she thanked me for my honesty and asked my forgiveness if her previous letters had seemed cold and distant. It wasn’t simply that she was distracted by the things around her. She had deliberately downplayed her own uncertainty, feeling honour bound not to encourage what might later seem like unrealistic hopes. But she would never forget my continued faith in her.

I’d hoped for something like this for months. I knew I should feel happy. But I’d been telling myself for so long there was no hope, that the evidence in my hands seemed strangely unreal.
Twenty-Three

There had been a moment in India, too, when I’d allowed my hopes to rise.

Penny had found new lodgings and invited me for dinner. I arrived to find her wearing new clothes of local design: a loose cotton tunic and a skirt made from sari cloth. Her lodgings were two small rooms, the front one furnished with a folding card table, two wooden chairs, and a two-burner gas camp stove balanced on the window ledge, at which she was preparing soup. Through the doorway beside me, hung with a bright yellow sheet, I’d glimpsed a bedroom with a single bed. The walls were dotted with photos and a potted geranium stood by the front door creating a cosy, settled atmosphere. The contrast to my large, bare room could hardly have been greater.

I sat on one of the chairs and began to make small talk about the perfect summer weather, various minor events in the village, and the letters from home that had started to turn up, poste restante. The mere fact that Penny had invited me here seemed distinctly promising. Our last few, brief meetings had been in one of the local cafes, where she insisted on avoiding any talk or behaviour that might suggest to gossip-hungry onlookers that we’d ever had a past together. On the other hand, regular attendance at the Teachings had convinced me that building up expectations was a kind of bad faith: illusory, unnecessary and likely to leave me disappointed. If Penny was ready to reassess our situation, so be it. But it was also possible she’d invited me here to let me know the worst – a possibility I was determined to face. There was comfort in that.

Penny’s manner was more cheerful, too. ‘So, how’ve you been?’ she asked, plucking a bay leaf out of the simmering pot.
‘Very well. I should thank you for keeping us here. You were right – I’ve got a lot out of it.’

‘I hear you’re popular with a lot of locals for your English lessons.’ She sounded mildly amused, perhaps surprised. ‘And are you still going to the Centre?’

I nodded. ‘I still feel a long way from properly understanding the Teachings – or even my language students, for that matter. But still…’ I smiled modestly. ‘I think I’m finally getting used to not being a permanent disaster area.’

‘Good for you.’ Her tone was neutral.

I asked what she’d been doing. Penny explained she’d been working with some well-off Britons, regulars to the area, who were lobbying the local council to set up a community centre for local people and long-term visitors, offering a library, computer access, environmental education and a volunteer co-ordinator.

‘We’re trying to get it up and running by the monsoon,’ she added.

The monsoon. My students spoke of it with weary smiles that confirmed what I already knew: the hills were perfect during the hot season, but they also had one of the highest annual rainfalls anywhere on earth, and most of it fell during a couple of months of mud, disease and disaster. Already the summer was deepening and the number of tourists steadily dropping. But this was the first time she’d made any reference to the fact that we would eventually have to move on.

I didn’t take the bait. ‘That soup smells good,’ I said.

Penny sighed and grimaced. ‘Don’t worry, it will be ready before the monsoon. Though it won’t necessarily taste good. You know, I never thought I’d miss having a kitchen.’
She ladled the soup into small stainless steel bowls, which she then placed gingerly on the table. She sat down in the chair opposite. Suddenly we were closer than we’d been for some time.

‘What’s wrong?’ Penny was staring at me with unconcealed alarm. ‘Are you okay? The soup isn’t that horrible, is it?’

It had dawned on me that the situation was tolerable. The Teachings were right: if you were willing to let go of your preconceived notions of good and bad, desirable and undesirable; to cultivate a detached perspective and appreciate the present for what it was – you could become used to almost anything. And already we were adapting successfully to independent lives. It was a terrifying thought.

I pushed the bowl of soup away from me and, resting my elbows on the table’s edge, leaned forward, determined to explain my realisation and reiterate my feelings. But the words I needed had vanished. The only words I could think of seemed cumbersome and treacherous, like the English spoken by my students. In desperation I reached across and caught hold of the hand holding her spoon.

‘Please, Jacob, don’t.’

There was an uncertain note in her voice – a faint hint of desire?

For almost a minute I cradled her hand in mine. Penny didn’t pull away. I felt her fingers loosen around the spoon, which slid into the bowl. I raised her hand to my face and laid it against my cheek. Her skin was rough and dry; it smelled of the harsh, disinfectant odour of local soap. I kissed her fingertips.

Meanwhile, I reached forward with my other hand, tracing her upper arm through the cotton blouse and drifting upwards to hover against the skin of her neck.

‘That’s enough,’ she murmured sleepily, while her head sank sideways, trapping my fingers
between her jaw and her shoulder.

Then we were in the other room, behind the yellow curtain, on the narrow bed. Penny was wriggling against me, grasping and stroking my skin. It was like the very first time, when unfamiliarity was both impediment and provocation. Then it struck me that perhaps her resistance was not merely playful. I pulled back, looking for a clear sign. A second later she lurched away and sat on the opposite end of the bed, breathing heavily.

‘That’s so typical of you, Jacob.’

‘Typical?’ As I squinted at her across the bed it seemed to me that on the contrary my behaviour had disoriented her because it was so atypical. After all the time we’d been together, I felt I knew her – not perfectly, but pretty well. And even now I was almost certain she wanted me as much as I wanted her. Not just physically – she wanted back what we’d had before. It didn’t make sense.

‘Please go now,’ Penny said.

I started to apologise but she cut me off.

‘I don’t want to know!’ She put her hands over her ears. ‘I don’t want to know! I don’t want to know!’

The effort had taken everything I had. For the time being, there was nothing remaining in reserve. I left.
Twenty-Four

Anth and I were waiting for Darren, who had phoned to say he’d be late but that we had to wait for him. According to Anth he sounded excited but when Anth asked what was up Darren fobbed him off with a mystifying remark about nothing except the most amazing thing ever.

‘It must involve music then,’ I guessed.

‘He was at a Paper Tigers rehearsal,’ Anth said, nodding.

‘Talk about keen. If I was him I wouldn’t waste my time with us. Especially not after last practice.’

Anth laughed. ‘We totally sucked, didn’t we.’

‘Well I’m glad it wasn’t just my paranoia,’ I said, surprised to hear him admit it.

Anth handed me a beer and opened another. The new hi-fi unit was playing an album that was now over half a decade old at low volume.

‘Still pretty fucking good, eh?’ Anth said, cocking his head.

The production had dated audibly – the sound of another era. But the songs were indeed more than pretty fucking good. I nodded.

‘And all those memories,’ he added wistfully.

I remembered. Anth had bought the album after one of our first ever practices, in Wizz’s family’s garage. We’d almost managed to jam a whole original song when the police arrived to shut us down. They said there’d been two separate complaints. It was a truly rock’n’roll scenario. Afterwards the three of us piled into my car and headed into town, to our favourite record shop, where Anth pounced on the album as soon as he saw it. It was a new band, none of us had heard any of their songs but we’d read the raves in the overseas music
papers. Anth didn’t even ask the shop assistant for a sample, he was so hyped up. We raced back to his parents’ place (stopping for takeaway fish and chips), where we locked ourselves in his downstairs bunker and turned his shitty old stereo up as loud as we dared. From the first note it was better than the most hysterical reviews. We’d never heard anything like this. It sounded like it had plummeted out of the sky from another galaxy, trailing smoke plumes. When it was over we commemorated the occasion by sneaking down to the reserve to smoke some of Wizz’s brother’s horrible weed, which was all we could get our hands on in those happier times.

‘I still wish I knew how they did it,’ I said to Anth as my all-time favourite track began.

‘They’d probably say the same thing.’

Naturally it hadn’t taken us long to unearth various musical progenitors. The album was not so utterly unprecedented as we’d first thought, though its forebears were a diverse lot. In the end all this genealogy confirmed was that the sum was far greater than its constituent elements.

‘At least no one can say we didn’t try,’ Anth added.

For us that album was the key that unlocked the songs percolating within us. We didn’t set out to rip off our idols’ tunes and riffs. It was the spirit of the music we aspired to emulate, and if the results resembled their models, they were only a first step towards a sound more quintessentially us.

‘The thing I still can’t figure out,’ I said, ‘is how anyone ever imagined this was mainstream.’

‘Or how the mainstream imagined it could do this.’

By rights the album was far too good to get the recognition it deserved. Of course it featured in the ‘Independent’ chart – where originality and freakishness were recognised and
celebrated. But no one could’ve dreamed it would come within spitting distance of the chart reserved for mega-selling, manufactured, disposable teeny-bopper music. The real chart. As it hurtled to the top, we swung between jubilation and despair. We knew that from then on the music would cease to be ours alone, a mark of spiritual kinship. It would be claimed by the people we despised – who were perhaps not as different from us as we wished to believe.

‘Do you still have the other one?’ I asked.

Anth shifted uncomfortably. ‘Nah. Sold it with a bunch of other stuff when I was really hard up. I keep meaning to get another copy.’

‘I ditched mine at Bryce’s not long ago. It might still be there.’

It wasn’t that the hotly anticipated follow-up album had been no good. But though it was reviewed and talked about everywhere, a lot of the talk barely mentioned the songs, focussing instead on the fact that this album could never have the impact of its predecessor. And it was soon swept away on the unabated floodtide of soundalikes – the talentless nonentities and former stars hoping to reignite fading careers – touted by cynical record companies and devoured by innumerable willing dupes.

‘Actually I’m not sure I want to remember that particular era,’ Anth admitted.

As if we could forget spiralling into disarray as our local shows got bigger and we had our first taste of out-of-town interest. By then I could no longer bear to listen to the first album. Any reminder of our former naïve optimism was too painful. Yet even in India I would find myself humming a tune or pondering a line, without the faintest inkling what had brought it to mind.

Now, as the last song faded out, I felt the old in-rush of emptiness. The certainty that more music must follow but that none could. It made me want to reach out and clutch at
the dying reverberations. It felt as if they were the only thing holding me to the surface of the planet, preventing me from spinning away into space.

‘Yeah,’ Anth muttered.

He seemed about to say more but then think better of it, and instead stood up and fetched two more beers. I couldn’t remember finishing my first.

‘I think you were right,’ he said, handing me a bottle. ‘If we’d just held on a bit longer –’

‘It wouldn’t have mattered. We’d probably just still not be talking to one another.’

‘But those last few songs. We were finally finding our voice. Don’t forget those guys’ – he gestured at the stereo – ‘didn’t record that disc till they were the age we are now.’

I had forgotten. I associated it so closely with the age we were when we first heard it, and the creators had burnt out so quickly, I remembered them as younger. I stared at Anth.

‘You don’t actually think that we, now…’

He hesitated and then shook his head. ‘Not now, no. And I’m happy with my life the way it is. I wouldn’t give this up for anything, not even if my fairy godmother offered to turn me into the biggest rock star in the universe. That must sound pretty lame, I know.’

‘No, it doesn’t,’ I said, only half mocking. ‘Not at all.’

Anth grinned. ‘And I’ll always be proud of us for giving it a shot.’

We were both getting quite tipsy. I felt expansive and primed with casual, resounding insights, self-conscious and strangely important as if we were mugging to a TV audience.

‘But honestly,’ I said, ‘does anything now feel as real as it did back then?’

‘Well, yes.’ He frowned. ‘In a different kind of way. What about you?’

I laughed. For some reason the question caught me off guard.

‘India felt real, that’s for sure. It was so bizarre it had to be.’

I tried to fix my mind on the time since, but was distracted by Darren’s arrival at the back
Refrain

door. He was practically twitching with excitement. But before he would explain he insisted
we help bring his drums in. He’d been carrying equipment all day.

‘I hope the news is that you’re getting a lighter kit,’ I said, lugging the barrel-sized kick

Finally it was all piled in the corner and Darren was persuaded into the best armchair with

‘This better be fucking worth it,’ Anth warned.

‘You fellas are tanked,’ Darren said.

‘Are you going to tell us?’ I said. ‘Or do we have to beat it out of you?’

‘We’re getting scouted!’

‘Scouted? As in…’

Darren nodded. ‘Harvey never mentioned it till now, but one of his relatives – a second
cousin, I think – works in the industry. In fact he’s an A-and-R man…you know, Artists
and Repertoire, the dudes with the contracts and the cheque books. He’s signed some big
acts, too. And Harvey has persuaded him to come and check us out.’

‘Us being the Paper Tigers,’ Anth said, neutrally.

‘Yeah. I mean naturally.’

‘Naturally,’ Anth agreed. ‘Well, that is amazing news.’

‘Congratulations,’ I said and raised my bottle, which curiously had become empty again.

‘You better not forget to mention us in your first Grammy acceptance speech.’

‘There’s already problems, though. Harvey’s rellie is super-busy. Going to promo events,
jet-setting round the world – that sort of thing. Harvey said we could travel to Sydney if it’d
be easier, but this guy wants to see us in front of a home crowd and there’s only one night he
can get here in the foreseeable future. Three weeks from now. The Rising Star is already
booked and the owner won’t reschedule. We’ll have to find another venue.’

‘So what,’ Anth said. ‘That’s not the end of the world.’

‘I suppose not.’ Darren shrugged. ‘But we also have to find a support act to warm up the crowd. I’m sure there are dozens of bands who’d kill for a chance like this, but what a drag.’

He pursed his lips, leaned back in the chair and gazed at the ceiling. He seemed to be having trouble keeping a straight face.

‘You have to be kidding,’ Anth said.

Darren looked back at us with a grin that was half arch, half goofy.

‘You arsehole.’ Anth was grinning too, like a maniac. ‘All this time…’

‘What do you reckon, then? Interested?’

Anth paused. ‘Well, I couldn’t possibly make any decision without consulting my astrologer.’

‘I’ll consider that a yes,’ Darren said. ‘And I take it, Jake, that you have no unavoidable sock-drawer rearranging engagements?’

‘What about the others?’ I said. ‘Do they think it’s a good idea?’

‘Actually, I had nothing to do with it. It was Mike’s suggestion, and I said straight away I’d abstain from the discussion because of the conflict of interest. Harvey was against it; he wanted someone with a track record. And Mitsuru disagreed too, at first. She seemed to think you wouldn’t be interested.’

His voice told me Darren was beginning to wonder the same thing. Anth’s expression had clouded over.

‘Anyhow,’ Darren continued, ‘she changed her mind when she saw that Mike was set on it. So then it was Harvey against those two with me in the middle, just like old times.’ He grimaced. ‘I have to admit I was thinking up reasons why the three of us couldn’t do it. The
last thing I wanted was to ruin the good vibe the Tigers have had lately. But then – I swear I never would’ve thought it was possible – Mitsuru sweet-talked Harvey around. I guess she’s just been so agreeable lately, and I always suspected Harvey had a soft spot for her. So voila!

‘Well, that’s good,’ I said, trying not to sound suspicious. ‘But what do you think gave Mike the idea in the first place?’

‘Listen, I can tell what you’re thinking and I know he feels bad about what happened between you and Mitsuru. Mike still worships you guys as much as the rest of us do. It’s a gesture of respect.’

Darren thumped his bottle decisively against the chair arm.

‘Mind the furniture,’ Anth yelped. Then: ‘C’mon Jake. It’ll probably be our last gig ever.’

‘We already had one of those. Do you want to end up like Tom Jones?’

‘This one will be fun, like the other one should’ve been.’

‘But we suck,’ I protested. ‘You said so yourself.’

‘It doesn’t matter any more, remember?’

‘You’d be doing the Paper Tigers a big favour,’ Darren added.

Suddenly I felt uncomfortably sober and trapped. Was the foreboding whisper at the back of my mind just stupid pride?

I said I’d need time to think about it. Anth shook his head disbelievingly. Darren swallowed hard and reminded me the gig was only three weeks away, then told me to let him know as soon as possible. Preferably before yesterday.

We didn’t mention the subject again for the rest of the practice. We still sucked.
Twenty-Five

The walk from Anth and Caroline’s to the Hill was not far, barely long enough to allow me to mentally shift gears in readiness for the evening’s Teaching. But I’d accepted the fact that my life was made up of parts that would never sit easily together. I’d have to learn to be comfortable with that.

In fact, much of my time recently had been spent attempting to replicate the experience I’d had during that first visit to Gautama and Lakshmi’s. I knew it was useless, and completely against the spirit of the thing. Yet it was as impossible not to yearn for that timeless, dissolved moment as it was to get back there by trying.

This evening, however, once I settled down, was better than most. Perhaps because I was even more concerned with avoiding thoughts about the band and Darren’s offer, I concentrated harder on the videotaped figure on the screen. The message never seemed to develop beyond what I’d heard on my first visit to the Centre. It was simply repeated in different ways, with slightly varying inflections. To my mind, the trick was to find ways of coming at it each time as if for the first time. On this occasion, I was able to let go enough to sense my own relative unimportance, which was strangely reassuring.

I still preferred not to hang around after these sessions, and I had realised that my fellow visitors shared a similar instinct. In fact, everyone took their leave so swiftly and unceremoniously, I wondered whether my original flight had even been noticed. Gautama and Lakshmi remained benevolent but distant. And so I was surprised when Gautama motioned for me to stay as the others hurried back to the outside world.
We stood out in the backyard. The night was chilly, though Gautama apparently didn’t feel the cold. The sharp fragrance of the mountain pines around us was mixed with the scent of jasmine from the yard on one side and high-octane boat fuel from the other. Low wattage electric lamps placed strategically within the manicured foliage cast a diffuse green-tinged faerie glow around us. Through the open doorway to the Teachings room I saw Lakshmi kneeling before the dais in what appeared at first to be obeisance. Then I realised she was switching off the audiovisual system concealed underneath.

Gautama coughed. ‘I just wanted to mention I’m impressed by how serious you are about the Teachings.’ His voice, while still soft and even, sounded less otherworldly than usual, I thought. ‘It’s obvious to us that you are serious. That’s quite unusual in someone your age, when most are chasing transient pleasures of one kind or another.’

I thought I heard an unspoken question and wondered if this was some sort of test.

‘To be honest, I don’t know if what I get from coming here is any less transient than any of the other pleasures I used to chase.’

I’d never seen Gautama’s expression alter from its beatific smile. Now he laughed like a tipsy uncle at his own bad joke. ‘Good answer, mate.’ As Lakshmi pulled the door shut and stepped out to join us, Gautama repeated my reply to her. She grinned – though I still wasn’t sure if they were pleased with the answer, or just amused.

‘These paradoxes still do my head in,’ Gautama continued, scratching his chest noisily through the thin material of his robe. ‘But you’ve certainly given this a bit of thought. What do you do the rest of the time?’

‘Not much,’ I said. ‘I’m unemployed and having trouble finding work.’
Lakshmi’s cheerfulness seemed to falter without entirely disappearing. It was as if I’d announced I suffered from a particular non-contagious chronic illness that she’d once heard about and was trying to recall.

‘A smart bloke like you shouldn’t have any trouble getting a job,’ Gautama said. ‘The economy has gone down the dunny, no mistake. Those politicians should be ashamed of themselves.’

I was curious to know if he was referring to a particular party or to the species in general, but I thought it unwise to ask.

‘We had a tough start ourselves,’ Lakshmi ventured. ‘Didn’t we, Steve?’

Gautama-Steve didn’t appear to register the name change. ‘I’d say. Working class families, both of us. My parents had ten kids and dad died from bad air down a mine when we were young. But I got a break early on and made a packet fast. Let me tell you, that’s when the trouble really started. See, we were taught that you had to keep up with everyone else but you could never get too far ahead or people would think you were up yourself. Of course no one knew what big money was, or how it could affect you, and no one had ever taught us how to be sensible about it. So we went crazy, spending willy-nilly, having a wild old time. But I felt guilty, thinking of all the people who didn’t have what we had, and a voice in the back of my head kept telling me that the higher you climbed, the further you had to fall. And then I’d feel so bad that I’d have to go and spend more money, or work even harder, which just brought in more money.’

‘That does sound like a…an interesting problem,’ I said.

Lakshmi nodded earnestly. ‘It’s so obvious now that we were searching, searching for a way to make sense of it all. And we found it in India, of all places.’ The bemusement in her voice suggested that no one had ever found anything similar in that area.
‘But I’m afraid it isn’t a problem I fully understand,’ I added, trying not to sound waspish.

‘Exactly,’ Gautama-Steve crowed. ‘And you should consider yourself lucky.’

‘You must have led a wonderful past life,’ said Lakshmi, ‘to not have any of those distractions and to be exposed to the Teachings and to have the time now to cultivate your understanding of them.’

It was so nearly what I’d been trying to convince myself to believe, I winced.

‘Not that we’re complaining.’ Gautama-Steve shrugged. ‘Even though we must have done some bad things in our last lives, we obviously did something right to finally find the way out of that maze and learn how to be comfortable with who we are and where we are.’

I glanced at the fairytale garden and the darkened house towering behind me and thought that where they were looked pretty comfortable to begin with. ‘I wish I could say the same. But the truth is I’m finding it hard not to feel depressed.’

I was amazed I’d actually said it. I began to wish I hadn’t spent the last hour getting quite so deeply relaxed. Gautama-Steve looked as if I’d trodden on his toes (which were exposed by his hand-sewn Indian sandals, and pedicured).

‘If you want my opinion, Jake,’ he said, accompanied by a wide-eyed frown from Lakshmi, ‘if you’re fortunate enough to find yourself in the position that all the great spiritual masters have sought, I reckon you’re risking some pretty dire consequences if you don’t take advantage of it.’

‘It doesn’t look like I have a choice, anyway,’ I pointed out.

‘True.’ He brightened momentarily, then sighed. ‘However, I do happen to know a number of prominent figures in the local business community, and I often hear them complaining about the difficulty of finding good employees. I suppose I could put in a word for you.’
‘They’d be sure to take your advice,’ Lakshmi concurred, sounding equally troubled.
Twenty-Six

By the time I got home I’d decided to agree to the gig. Maybe Gautama had a point about learning to be comfortable with what you were and where you were. And Darren was right, there were dozens of bands in the area who would kill for this chance – as we would’ve once upon a time – and the idea of approaching the occasion with total disrespect was the ultimate rock’n’roll gesture. A parting up yours to the establishment that had ignored us in our prime. It was a pretty childish attitude, but that was the point.

I phoned Darren, punching in the number with a feeling of disconcerting familiarity. In my memory it was Penny’s number, from when she’d shared the flat with Mike before we went overseas and Darren moved in. The line was engaged. Probably on the internet. I logged on to send him an email and found the first new message to hit my inbox in weeks:

I couldn’t bear the thought of you checking your emails day after day and finding nothing new (except spam for introduction agencies and miracle inventions to improve your love life). Because I know what a sad, endless void your life must be. I picture it as a grainy black-and-white cartoon set in the Depression, and you have an enormous beard (you can’t afford razors) which turns grey as we watch, from worry and grief.

If this resembled the truth even vaguely I would feel so, sooooo bad! But in fact I’ve been keeping tabs on you and I’m fully aware you’re back to your old rock-pig ways again. No doubt you’ve got a syringe banging out of one eyeball and a groupie under each arm at this very second. Who’d have thunk it? And you seemed like such a sensible, grown-up young man!

Seriously though, I was quite bamboozled when I heard. I had you down as a sour old thing who’d disowned your interesting past and settled permanently in a rocking chair by the fire with a crocheted rug over your knees. If I’d imagined you still had the faintest glimmer of life left in you I might have tried to corrupt
But let's get down to business. My ulterior motive for writing (cos I know you must be expecting one) is to
tell you you shouldn't think twice about accepting the gig on my account, because of our 'falling out'. The
truth is I wasn’t angry at you. I was angry at me. For eternally fucking things up. It's like a curse and I
wanted to protect you from anything like that happening again, plus punish myself for being such a menace to
people I care about. (Don’t try to make sense of that. It doesn’t.)

Of course ever since then I’ve been getting angrier and angrier – I’m absolutely furious now – at the
shameless, disrespectful way you haven’t attempted to contact me. It’s not like you had any excuse. The
promise I made never to talk to you or see you again didn’t disallow you from anything, did it?! For that
matter it didn’t disallow me from emailing, as I would’ve graciously acknowledged if you’d made any effort
whatsoever. If I didn’t know better I’d suspect you were a sadist, but it’s obvious you’re just totally lacking
in imagination. It’s sooo unfair – how come you have all the advantages?

Anyway, think yourself lucky I’m not generally the kind of person who holds grudges. In case you were
even faintly curious – which I’m sure you’re not – you haven’t missed much in your absence. The day after
our last meeting Mike and I almost split up. We had the hugest fight (over some utterly insignificant thing,
nothing to do with you). I completely lost it and went so far off the deep end I freaked myself out. And
Mike started admitting all this stuff – stuff he’d never mentioned before, about things I’d done that had hurt
him. Like the opera concert. Remember? Well apparently Mike had been waiting for me to invite him; he
was just too afraid of looking like a try-hard to admit he had an interest. I never even considered it.

I could tell he wasn’t trying to guilt trip me. It was hurting him to say it. We had to stop at one point so
he could throw up in the toilet, and then he got a nosebleed. The weird thing was, all the time this was going
on I felt an amazing sense of satisfaction, joy almost. Then, all of a sudden, I understood why.

Before the accident I had always found it easy to live up to people’s expectations, and I held the highest
expectations for myself. I felt confident I could do anything, I was invulnerable. When I discovered how
wrong I’d been I lost that confidence and everything suddenly seemed very scary. I was so scared of being disappointed again, it was easier to just accept it before it happened. So when Mike came along I kept waiting for him to realise the truth — that I wasn’t worth the faith he put in me — and admit defeat. The more I misbehaved, the more it proved me right and him wrong. The more I hurt and disappointed him, the easier it would be for us both in the long run. Talk about screwed up!

I don’t know why I mentioned that. You’re already well enough aware of my faults. You won’t hold any of this against me, will you? It’s all so stupid I just want to forget about it, and your friendship is too important to me to let stubbornness get in the way, or fear.

Enough ranting. I told myself I wouldn’t for once, and now I’ll have to bolt to get to the shops before they close. Remember that album I lent you — the one I said was my favouritest ever? I just found out they’ve released a new one. Never mind that stuff about talent scouts or R’n’R men or whatever they’re called.

This is great news! There had better be a copy in stock or I’ll scream the place down.

Please reply, and I hope you accept the gig.

Your friend as always,

Mitsuru

I found it strange that she did not mention the efforts she’d been making to put her life in order, which so amazed Darren and that she must have known I’d approve of. Almost as if she wanted to pretend nothing had changed. But it was good to know her unpredictability and irreverence were intact. I looked forward to taking up where we’d left off. Mitsuru was right: I didn’t have much imagination.
Twenty-Seven

It was just Mum and me at dinner, and she seemed preoccupied, which made my task all the more difficult. I had decided to invite my family to the gig as a goodwill gesture, since I’d always made it clear that they were not welcome in that part of my life. It was the least I could do given the way they’d allowed me back into their lives, and I hoped it might ease the tension. Unfortunately it felt more like an obligation than a pleasure.

‘It’s not that I don’t want you there,’ I tried to explain, ‘although actually I don’t. But not because of you. It’s going to be a fiasco.’

‘Of course I’ll come.’

‘Please don’t come just because you think you should. I know you’re not interested in the music.’

‘And I’m sure Brian will, too,’ she added, looking slightly uneasy. ‘If he hasn’t already made plans.’

‘Mum, are you listening? I’m honestly not trying to fob you off.’

‘Sorry dear, what was that?’ She sighed. ‘I’m at my wits’ end. I don’t know what’s got into him.’

My bemused expression was enough to bring forth the details. Mum was worried about Brian. He’d been acting strangely and she thought he might be on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

‘What do you mean by strange?’ I asked. I hadn’t noticed him acting any more or less strangely than usual, but we continued to maintain a polite, safe distance.

After a moment’s thought, Mum admitted it was hard to pinpoint a good example. There
was the fact that it was just the two of us eating dinner together, for the second time this week.

‘He rang to say he was working late,’ I pointed out.

‘His voice sounded strained. Like he was hiding something.’

‘Probably stress. It must be a busy time at the office.’

‘I hope so.’ Mum shook her head. ‘He was such an open, happy child. He may act immaturely sometimes but he’s put up with a lot.’

‘Yeah, I know.’ I didn’t have to ask what she thought might’ve changed the situation. I mightn’t be directly at fault, but that was little consolation. ‘Anyway, he’s not the sort who goes off the rails.’ In fact, as we both knew, he was more or less the ideal son.

‘I know it’s wrong to compare siblings,’ Mum murmured, as if she’d heard my thoughts. ‘But I sometimes wish he was a little more like you.’

‘Like me?’

‘You’ve always known how to look after yourself.’ She paused.

‘If it makes you feel better I’ll have a chat with him.’

I would’ve suspected a ploy to get Brian and I to bond, but it was obvious Mum was genuinely concerned. I needed to talk to him anyway, about the gig. But later, after he’d had his nightly shower, when I knocked on his bedroom door there was no immediate answer. I thought I heard the sound of papers being shuffled together. And when he let me in and I started talking about the gig, Brian’s face turned strangely mottled and he looked so upset that I wondered if Mum was right. Maybe he was cracking up.

I was about to ask if he needed a glass of water when he said ‘Why can’t you just get on with your own life?’

The bitterness in his voice shocked me as much as the words themselves. ‘Last I heard,
you wanted me to be more family-spirited.’

‘I was wrong. I should’ve known you’re too good at fucking things up. You did us a
favour, pissing off after dad left.’

‘What is your problem, Brian?’

He strode past me, shut the door and then walked back to his desk. From the bottom
drawer he pulled out a manila folder.

‘Mum can’t come to your gig and neither can I.’ His voice was low and under control
again. ‘We won’t be here. I’m taking her on a surprise holiday up north. I’ve spent the last
fortnight organising everything and I paid for the tickets this evening.’

“So what’s the occasion?”

‘I just felt like it, all right.’

‘How lovely. You are indeed the perfect son,’ I said, not holding back on the irony.

‘You think I’m trying to make this some sort of competition?’ Brian looked askance.

‘It kind of looks that way, though I don’t know why you’d bother. You already won years
ago.’

‘That’s not it. Okay, you want to know the reason? I wanted a chance to break the news
to Mum that I probably won’t be around here much longer.’ Brian cleared his throat.

‘There’s a girl, a girl from work –’

I’d always thought of Brian as a closet asexual. I imagined he’d keep expanding until one
day he split into two independent entities, like a single-cell organism.

‘Shit, I thought you were about to tell me you had cancer.’

His look was so puzzled I couldn’t help grinning. Brian stared at me and then shook his
head with the air of a martyr.

‘We’ve been friends for ages, but there’s always been this…flirting, I guess. But it never
went beyond that – I never felt like I could, because of Mum – and I suppose I liked it that way. Recently, though –

‘Hang on, what do mean because of Mum? Why couldn’t you do anything?’

Brian sniffed. ‘What happened with Dad and the divorce was the perfect excuse for you to do what you liked, wasn’t it. Nobody would blame you. But I had to look after Mum. She was so messed up. And ever since, I feel like it’s my job, only now I figured since you were back…You could sort of take over. I know if I don’t make a move with Barb soon…’

As if a tap had been turned off, the words stopped flowing. Then, looking grim, he added, ‘That’s why I organised this holiday: to give me a chance to break the idea to Mum gently.’

My mind felt as useless as a waterlogged towel, and Brian was staring at me anxiously.

‘Give Mum a bit more credit. I reckon she’ll be glad to hear your good news.’

‘I hope you’re right,’ Brian said.
Twenty-Eight

‘Are you sure Caroline doesn’t mind us practising here?’ I asked Anth, surveying the chaos that had again overtaken his living room.

‘No way, absolutely not. It’s a great excuse for her to hang out with her friends.’

‘It’s just that she seemed a bit put out today. And I wouldn’t blame her.’

‘I know a cheap rehearsal studio we could use until the gig,’ Darren added, from behind a small mountain of drums.

Anth looked cornered. His hands slid away from his bass to hang by his sides, leaving the instrument slung across his torso looking strangely like a burden. ‘It’s not the practices. She’s just getting freaked out about where all this might be heading. I keep telling her it’s just a bit of fun, not like before...’ His voice was embarrassed and defiant. His gaze remained fixed on an armchair that had been pushed into a corner.

‘Of course it’s not serious,’ I said. ‘But it’s not worth doing if it’s going to upset Caroline and cause trouble for you.’

Darren shifted on his stool but said nothing.

Anth sighed. ‘You’re right. And I’m grateful you said so.’ He paused, inhaled deeply and then smiled. ‘But it’ll be okay. Especially when I casually mention this conversation to her,’ he added, deadpan.

I was unsure whether to feel relieved or disappointed. With the gig only days away, we all knew this was our last chance to bow out. After today we were honour bound to go through with it.
We finished setting up and ploughed into our set: old songs of ours plus a couple of cover versions of songs that had inspired us. The atmosphere of uncertainty and demoralisation deepened. The material sounded dated and lacking in conviction. As I’d explained in my latest letter to Penny, I had no intention of expending extra energy on music – though I suspected my apologetic tone might be misinterpreted. I hadn’t told her about the band to begin with, and would gladly have stayed silent on the topic but for the fear that word of our gig might reach her via someone else. She wouldn’t condemn my involvement again in music. I was fairly confident of that. But I felt strangely ashamed, given the plans we’d made, and things I’d said since.

It had been harder still emailing Mitsuru to warn her that we’d be terrible. I wanted her to be prepared. Any old friends in attendance would remember what Anth and I used to be like and hopefully forgive this epilogue for what it was. The new crowd wouldn’t know and wouldn’t care. But it pained me when I thought of Mitsuru’s attempts to coax me back into music and I imagined her disappointment. I wasn’t sure, either, that admitting we weren’t taking it seriously would help matters. To her, music was sacred. And my confession sounded more like contrived modesty.

Ironically, the only preparation Anth, Darren and I had made so far was to sit down with a case of beer and decide what to call ourselves. Among the plethora of bad ideas, the most promising were the Monumental Masons, and Knights of the Living Dead. But I had to admit I wasn’t entirely sold. I pointed out that it was all very well to criticise our wasted youth…At which Anth whooped gleefully and our name was born: Wasted Youth.

The worst of it was that since then I’d begun hearing music that wasn’t there. Nothing impressive – a snatch of melody, a chord progression, a rhythm pattern. But looping over and over, sometimes for hours, almost impossible to ignore. Eventually it occurred to me to
record one of these fragments onto our band practice cassette by plugging my guitar into my stereo. For some reason, this procedure acted as an exorcism, making it easier to erase the originals from my mind, though I didn’t plan on doing anything with the tapes. I had enough grief between renewed, desperate attempts to find work and scrutinising the fine print on my Social Security documents for a way out of the six-week course (which was due to start the Monday after our Friday-night performance).

However, on the day Caroline left in a huff, after nearly an hour of excruciating aimlessness, I mentioned the cassette to the other two. As soon as I saw the jubilant look that passed between them, I was regretting it.

‘About bloody time,’ Anth said with a snort.

Darren grinned. ‘We were starting to think maybe you really had given up.’

‘If this didn’t work we figured nothing would.’

I felt betrayed, though I wasn’t sure by whom. But it was my turn to laugh when they heard the tape.

‘What the fuck is this?’

‘Are you serious?’

‘It’s the sound of the future,’ I said.

‘It’s the sound of everything we hated when we started the band,’ said Anth.

He was right – at least partly. The wheel of musical fashion had turned. The music Mitsuru had introduced me to, though considered by her circle to be cutting edge, bore striking similarities to the music Anth, Wizz and I had set out to destroy.

Darren was looking thoughtful. ‘It sort of reminds me of some stuff Mitsuru played us once.’
Refrain

Anth beamed slyly back at me. ‘I see. So this is what the kids of today are into. Maybe we’d better try it, then.’

‘Make up your mind,’ I said. ‘I don’t care one way or the other.’ In fact, the tinny, dodgy tape recording had brought the music back into my mind and I was curious to hear it performed properly.

‘I’d like to give it a go,’ Darren said.

‘Yeah, of course,’ Anth agreed, overenthusiastically.

The result was not as I’d imagined. Anth and Darren weren’t just under-confident, they played like a couple of dancers trying to adapt the steps they knew to a completely different rhythm. I was tempted to forget the whole thing. But I didn’t want to seem disapproving. In truth the other two had more or less got the notes right. The problem was more abstract, a question of *nuance* – though such a pretentious term, the antithesis of the rock’n’roll spirit, set my teeth on edge.

As I offered a few suggestions I sensed a sudden coolness. Well, it served them right if they were worried they’d unleashed a monster. Though to their credit they listened, and when we played through the section again the improvement was audible.

When it came time to add the melody, however, Anth kept making changes. I tried to remain open-minded, and it wasn’t that Anth’s alterations didn’t fit. They were just too obviously like the songs we used to do – predictable and instantly forgettable. I asked Anth if he’d mind giving the original version a proper trial. The next run through was much closer to the sound in my head. Darren was nodding slowly, as if it had begun to make sense. I thought about the time we had left before the gig. It was possible – just possible – that if we scheduled more practices and put in some serious effort we could have the new songs sounding pretty good by then. I mentioned to Anth that there were still a couple of places
where his singing was significantly different to the taped version.

‘What’s your fucking problem?’ he muttered.

I snapped. ‘What’s yours? Was that stuff about finding our own voice just bullshit meant to get me interested? And if you couldn’t care less about sounding like crap, why are you scared to try something new?’

‘Why are you being so anal?’

We stared at each other. This would have been the right time to start laughing at the absurdity of it. But we were both too shaken. I wondered how we’d managed to stay friends so long without learning anything at all. Hadn’t we moved beyond this?

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, as sincerely as I could.

Anth shook his head. ‘I was a dickhead for thinking that another band was a good idea.’

‘Never mind,’ Darren said in a small voice. ‘The Paper Tigers can find another support act.’ He didn’t seem surprised.

I looked from one to the other. I felt as uncertain as before. But I shook my head. ‘No, I think we should still do it,’ I said. ‘Just this one gig, and we’ll forget about the new stuff. Then we’ll split up afterwards.’

‘What’s the point?’

‘I guess I’d like to end on a good note. I just need to be more relaxed about it.’

Anth nodded. ‘I’ll tell you what: you chill out and I’ll play your music of the future, even if it does sound like the end of rock’n’roll as we know it. I don’t have any better ideas.’

By the end of the practice we’d recorded our band versions of the new material onto an old tape of Anth’s. On the way home, on a quiet stretch of road, I wound down the window of Brian’s car and hurled the cassette of my original versions into the twilight.

Later that night I realised Anth had been at least partly right. The melodies I’d come up
with didn’t suit his voice. In my head I’d been hearing them sung by a stronger, more agile singer with a greater range. Someone like Mitsuru.
Twenty-Nine

As the distractions piled up I forgot how much I’d yearned for them. It was all very well to accept, as the Teachings said, that everything was in a constant state of flux. But you never really felt it until a whole lot of seemingly unrelated areas decided to change en masse. Then it became obvious these areas – my family, my search for employment, my friends and the music scene, my relationship – weren’t, in fact, unrelated. The point of intersection was me, and I felt pitched into a sudden, roaring, turbulent acceleration, like a broad slow river sweeping into a narrow gorge. Too much to think about and no time for thinking.

Since life swept on regardless and my thoughts made no appreciable difference, perhaps it was just as well I didn’t dwell on it. I did what seemed to need doing, albeit with diminishing grace. Despite feeling more tired at the end of each day than I had in a long time, my sleep was restless. The night before the gig I had a dream.

I was back in the hills, at the top end of the village’s narrow main street, standing at the bus stop. I was about to leave. I had my pack with me, the bus was idling and the driver was impatient. But all of a sudden I felt sure I’d lost something. I opened my pack and began searching through it, carefully at first and then with growing recklessness, tearing things out and dropping them on the muddy ground. I couldn’t remember what I thought might be missing, but I knew I’d recognise it when I saw it and I had to be certain I wasn’t leaving it behind.

The bus driver revved the engine and my heart echoed the sound, forcing blood and adrenaline through my system. Time was running out. Then a voice nearby said: Why are you leaving? And I realised what I’d known all along – that this was my home.
‘I can’t stay,’ I said, still rummaging in my pack. ‘I have to go to the city to start a new life.’

But everything you know is here, said the voice. (It was so familiar I didn’t have to look up to recognise the speaker.)

‘That’s why I have to go,’ I said. At the same time I started picking up all my scattered belongings and shoving them back in my pack. I was annoyed because I didn’t want to admit defeat and because I felt secretly relieved at not having to endure the discomfort of the bus trip, which I knew was inevitable and which I’d spent a long time working myself up to. When the last item was stashed away I looked up at where my companion stood. At that point I awoke, with every detail of the dream vivid in my memory, and from the lingering sense of familiarity I deduced I’d dreamt the same thing for several nights previously but had forgotten upon waking.

That morning I drove Mum and Brian to the local domestic airport. Luckily it was only a short distance away. In the couple of days since Mum learnt about her holiday, she’d wound herself up so tight I worried she might have a heart attack before they managed to board the plane.

Brian, savouring his finale as ringleader of the family circus, still hadn’t revealed where they’d be spending the next four days. All he’d say was that it was warm. I gathered he planned to wait until they were firmly settled on their banana lounges, after a couple of cocktails, to mention his other news. My gig had turned out to be a windfall for him, since it provided a good excuse for why I wasn’t joining them. On the other hand, despite my best efforts to ease her conscience, Mum was guilt-stricken about missing the event.

‘I’m so sorry we can’t be there for you,’ she said for the fifteenth time in fifteen minutes as we pulled into the car park. ‘But you know we both wish you good luck.’

She seemed oblivious to Brian’s clenched teeth and obviously had no idea that according
to showbiz superstition a good luck wish would bring the most awful bad luck.

    Ironically (though I kept the thought to myself) Brian's fantasy of escaping the winter cold
was somewhat undercut by the weather. As we crossed the tarmac to the terminal, the
morning was mild and the air seemed laden with long-absent smells and colours, the first
whisper of spring.

    By the time I got back home the mail had come. Amongst the bills and a floral-design
envelope addressed to Brian was an aerogramme from India. My internal organs began to
rearrange themselves, then paused. The handwriting wasn’t Penny’s.

    I went inside, deposited the other mail on the kitchen bench and opened the aerogramme.
It was from Michael.

    Last week I am walking back to my room and it is the afternoon and I am thinking about my friend Jake.

    I am near the post office and then I see there is Penny. I say this to her that I like to send my friend some
letter and perhaps she will give me some address to send to. And now it is time I am writing to you this
letter.

    I hope you are well. How are you?

    Thank you I am good.

    The reason I am thinking about you. When we will be ordained is specially important to remember all
others and specially who have helped in our life to reach this goal. So I remember my friend Jake who will
help me in my learning English dialogue although I am not so good student.

    Perhaps I will not be so good monk also. But this is my goal for the long time. Because the Teachings say
that each person you must travel your special path and to travel your path not so good it is better than other
persons path with success. This is my path. And now it is the very special time of my life. Tomorrow is a
day I am being ordained. Tomorrow I am being the monk!!

    I wish also that you will feel the encouragement and the faith. Perhaps your path is not clear or not so
good always. Does not matter. I have the belief about you and the grateful memory.

Your good friend Michael. (Until tomorrow, then I will have the new name.)

I wondered how much of my recent history Penny had mentioned. I didn’t mind, though. Until then I hadn’t realised, or didn’t want to admit, how trapped and terrified I felt. Now, however, I knew that somewhere a monk wished me well. For the time being I felt nothing could touch me.
Thirty

The Paper Tigers had been hard on the publicity trail. There were paragraphs about the gig in both weekly newspapers and a feature in the entertainment guide of the daily paper: *Come along and support our brightest young hopefuls… The best new independent band in town… Catch them now before you have to pay international tour prices.* They’d plastered the inner city with posters and done interviews on the college radio station. They even managed, miraculously, to get one of the commercial primetime DJs to mention them. For a local act who’d been around barely half a year, it was unprecedented. Darren proudly reported that people were comparing it to the buzz surrounding the last gig by Anth, Wizz and I – although none of the publicity mentioned a support act.

No matter how determined I was to not get my hopes up about the gig, there was always a part of myself – a small but seemingly ineradicable part – that liked to imagine that maybe, magically, we would surprise ourselves. Our swan song might win us the kind of applause on which careers were made. Recognition late in coming, but not too late. Of course nowadays, with our newfound appreciation of life’s simpler pleasures, we would not be so easily caught by the shiny lure of fame. It would have to be worth our while… Whenever I found myself indulging in such daydreams I quashed them mercilessly and forced myself to think about other things. Perhaps such lapses were harmless, but the Teachings were full of warnings about the danger of falling into unproductive thought patterns.

The Teachings were particularly in my mind because Gautama and Lakshmi had scheduled a special session on this same night. Apparently it was an auspicious date on the Indian calendar. I had already made my excuses (without mentioning the reason for my non-
attendance), but a sense of urgency compelled me to stop by the Hill on the way to the venue.

The side gate was locked. I tried the lotus doorbell and eventually the carved front doors parted silently to reveal a dishevelled figure in sky-blue lycra bicycle shorts, his chest bare apart from the mat of pale hair. This, I decided, was definitely Steve.

‘I know it’s not time for the Teaching today and I still can’t make it later,’ I said, hoping I didn’t sound as awkward as I felt. ‘I was just wondering if you’d had a chance to mention me to any of your business friends. You see, I’m getting a bit desperate. The dole office is making me start a ridiculous course on Monday…’

Light from an electric chandelier in the onyx-tiled hallway behind threw his features into shadow, but I could still see the brilliant white smile. And his voice was at its most placid and elevated. ‘Lakshmi and I had high hopes for you, Jake. You’re so far along the path already. That’s why we’ve decided we can’t in good conscience steer you in a direction we know is wrong; that would only draw your attention away from what’s most important. You have to trust us, Jake. We know from experience.’

Still smiling, he took a step backwards. It seemed that while Gautama was doing the talking, Steve expected me to throw myself at his throat. I looked at his throat. It was thick and ropey. I was tempted. But I suspected that even if there wasn’t a police car outside, there’d be one ready to hand. And I had a gig to get to.

‘Thanks for your consideration,’ I said, finding it surprisingly easy to match his level, good-humoured tone.

His smile didn’t falter but he blinked and then shook his head wistfully. ‘It really is a great loss to the business community.’
Thirty-One

The venue (an eleventh-hour find) was the upstairs function room of a pub called, perhaps fortuitously, the Enterprise. It was unfamiliar territory. I’d always been loyal to the Rising Star and avoided the Enterprise particularly, due to its reputation. I parked in the back alley behind Darren’s van. The old Holden sedan in front of it belonged, I supposed, to Mike or Harvey. I’d been told the Paper Tigers planned to arrive early to get the place ready.

The stench of rotten food, sour beer and urine was almost tangible, hanging over everything like a shroud of grease-streaked newsprint. The rusty back stairway groaned and shuddered as if it might topple away from the wall at the slightest provocation. But nothing prepared me for the interior. In some distant past life it might have been a cocktail lounge. Or someone had tried to turn it into one but lost hope halfway though the project. What remained was half-dream, half-decay: prolapsed *fleur-de-lis* wallpaper, corroded mirrors trimmed with leprous fake gilt, crimson carpet climbing the skirting boards like a bloody tide. Scarier still, it looked like the place had last been used for a high school football hero’s eighteenth birthday. Bunches of balloons hung from the ceiling; folding patio chairs were scattered about; against the near wall a trestle table held plastic plates with limp sausage rolls and party pies, bowls of chips and a stainless steel beer keg. In the middle of it all stood the three male Paper Tigers, surveying the carnage.

I approached.

‘Looks like you could use a hand.’

Even the black-clad, normally reticent Harvey was grinning. For a moment I couldn’t figure it out.
Then it clicked. ‘You did this?’

‘We knew we couldn’t put on a show anywhere near as cool as a big-city band,’ Darren observed with a self-deprecating cough. ‘So we decided to go the opposite direction. The suburban jungle.’

‘Wow! Like the Ramones getting a New York stylist to design their jeans and T-shirt image.’

‘The Ramones? Yeah, right.’ He looked vague.

I was lost in admiration. The set-up was so authentically daggy no one, even the most jaded record company high-flier, could fail to be moved by a sense of primeval recognition. It could have been any of half-a-dozen backyard teenage piss-ups that our band had started out playing. As soon as the Paper Tigers began, however, it would be obvious they were way beyond that. Whether you chose to see them as naïve prodigies or super-savvy impresarios, they were cool.

Where that left the support band I wasn’t sure, and I was more intent on fighting off the memory of cheap beer and bile in the back of my throat.

‘You people are evil,’ I said.

‘Wait till we switch on the smoke machine,’ Mike said, with shy pride. ‘It’s pina colada flavoured.’

With a moan Anth staggered through the back doorway, his face florid, hauling his bass rig.

‘I can’t believe I used to do this all the time,’ he gasped as his breath returned. His response to the décor was forthright: ‘What a shit hole.’

But when the rationale was explained to him he whistled in amazement and declared the idea a stroke of genius. Looking at the others I was struck by the absence of the usual half-
humorous show of nerves; the parodied stage fright. Their studied lack of concern made it clear how serious this gig was. Yet as we stood there trading dumb remarks I could guess how they must feel, and it seemed we shared an understanding, a sense of destiny weaving itself around us, uniting us in the rock’n’roll dream. I felt glad to be part of it.

I continued to scan the room but there was no sign of Mitsuru. A few minutes later when I’d lugged the rest of my gear onto the stage, my curiosity was shading into anxiety. Was it possible she was avoiding me, despite the friendly email? Was there some veiled message in it that I’d failed to grasp? (This seemed unlikely; I’d reread that email at least a dozen times since receiving it.) On the other hand, might it be that her recent efforts at self-discipline had not taken root deeply enough, and that she was displaying her old unreliability? (Equally unlikely: if there were any cause for panic involving Mitsuru, Mike would never be able to hide it.)

‘Are you okay?’

I became aware that Mike was observing me with concern. And now the others were looking at me, too. Feeling suddenly self-conscious, I wondered whether I ought to admit the real reason I was preoccupied. But why shouldn’t I? I waved my hand carelessly.

‘I was just wondering whether you guys had decided you were better off as a three-piece. I mean, obviously I’d be flattered that you were so keen to follow our lead.’

Amid the friendly groans implying that I was a stuck-up has-been, Mike said ‘Mitsuru is at her singing practice. She’s getting really serious about it again, and there’s a big audition coming up.’ There was no hint of mistrust in his voice; he sounded pleased to be able to mention her, and slightly awestruck. ‘Actually’ – he examined his watch – ‘she should be finishing about now. I’d better go and pick her up.’
‘You’d better hurry,’ Anth suggested, ‘if you want a decent sound check. Who’s doing the sound, anyway?’

‘Some guy the booking agent recommended,’ Darren said. ‘He’s the regular mixer here and he knows the PA system. He just went out to get something.’

‘He definitely fits in with our theme,’ Harvey added.

A nudge from Anth told me he was wondering the same thing. But surely it couldn’t be..?

‘Here he is.’ Mike nodded towards the main entrance. ‘Do you guys know him?’

It was Jeff. Still dressed to kill in his thongs, crotch-hugging stubbies and tie-dyed T-shirt. Drifting across the room like he was underwater. Nodding his head in time with the music sandwiched inside his skull from decades in the city’s dodgiest venues. Deaf Jeff. Also known as Darth Fader. The man responsible for more cases of tinnitus than all the city’s remaining industries put together.

‘Hey,’ he said with his usual familiarity, though it was clear he was having trouble remembering us. This didn’t surprise me. It was equally clear what he’d gone out to get: catatonically stoned. ‘Ready to sound check, fellas?’ he said, refocussing on the Paper Tigers.

‘Shit! Mitsuru!’ Mike grimaced and turned to me. ‘Could I ask you to do me a big favour? Could you go and pick her up from the conservatorium? She said she’d wait down in the foyer. I’m sorry to do this to you…The place is easy to find. It’s right across the park from the town hall.’

‘Yeah, I know,’ I said. And I suddenly had an image of Mitsuru pointing it out to me as we crossed the park after the opera recital – an image so surreally clear it made my heart plummet like a barometer reading before a storm.

‘Don’t get lost,’ Anth said. ‘We’re due on in half an hour.’

I had no choice. I couldn’t back out without raising questions.
Down in the alley I realised I would’ve had to move Mum’s car even if Mike had gone to pick up Mitsuru himself, since I was blocking the exit. Fortunately, Anth had parked around the corner, unwilling to leave his vehicle in such dire surroundings. The evening traffic was moderate – mostly convoys of young men in hotted-up cars with unnaturally enlarged sound systems pumping out American ghetto music, beginning their night-long circumnavigation of the town centre.

I took deep breaths and told myself there was no reason to be edgy. If anything I should feel grateful to Mike. I sensed that his request was an attempt to smooth over past tensions and wondered whether he had engineered the situation.

There were half-a-dozen people waiting in the conservatorium foyer, but no Mitsuru. As the door croaked closed behind me, my gaze was drawn to the opposite wall. Above a set of closed elevator doors, the numbers were changing: flickering on and then off again, right to left, in reverse order as the lift returned. The silky whistle of its approach was already audible over the asthmatic air conditioning, and getting louder. I shuffled a couple of steps forward, leant casually against the nearest wall and crossed one leg over the other, then uncrossed them and straightened up again. I tried to imagine I was back at the village in India, at the Centre, waiting with a relaxed demeanour and a clear mind to go in for the day’s Teachings.

As each number lit up I waited for it to stay illuminated or begin to ascend. Then the lift reached the floor directly above. And then that light blinked off and I could already picture her stepping out as the doors swept open like stage curtains. She would be tired, of course, after an afternoon shift of data entry followed by an hour-and-a-half here. She would probably be halfway across the room before she noticed me. Then she would tilt her head
sideways in perplexity and make that gesture with her hands I’d noticed at our first meeting, like twisting a Rubik’s cube…

The woman who emerged must have wondered why I was beaming at her with such inane intensity. Tightening her grip on a strangely shaped black case that looked like a portable reliquary for a medium-sized squid, she strode towards the main entrance. I slipped out of her way and into the nearest seat, pretending to gaze fixedly at the curling, faded poster beside the elevator buttons. The longer I stared, the more familiar the figure on the poster looked – perhaps simply because his picture was more modern in style than the other posters, and his features distantly resembled those of a Top-40 pseudo-star. I found myself imagining Mitsuru’s face on such a poster, or her name engraved on a plaque beside the front door, with an inscription noting that this was where her rise to international fame began.

My carefully groomed cheerfulness began to wane. Mitsuru had been right about this place, even compared to the garages and pubs of my experience, it was utterly depressing. Its whiffs of floor polish and school lunches and awful determination seemed better suited to a community dental surgery.

But as the elevator slid out of sight again, and then returned with other occupants; as those waiting with me trickled away, upstairs or outside – my personal anxiety was eclipsed by larger, more urgent concerns. Where was she? What if she’d left early and headed to the pub herself? What if I was now the one they were waiting for?

I quickly dismissed the idea that this might be an elaborate trick to ensure we didn’t play at all. That made no sense. But what if the pressure had got to Mitsuru, derailing her attempt to lead a reliable, reformed life? The more I thought about it, the more plausible it seemed.
And then, without my noticing how it happened, Mitsuru was standing in front of me – head tilted, hands twisting.

‘Hello.’ Her voice was guarded. ‘What brings you to these hallowed halls?’

I was finding it hard to concentrate. Mitsuru was dressed in her most retina-torturing gig attire – 70s burnt orange cut-offs and a leotard-tight, iridescent lime green top – and carried a large, sealed suit bag. She would have looked unusual anywhere. In these surroundings she might as well have been an extraterrestrial mutant. I wished there were others still waiting in the foyer. It would’ve felt good to know they knew that she was the one I’d been waiting for.

‘Oh, what a coincidence! I was just passing by and I happened to sit down here for a breather…’ I saw the downward twist of her mouth and gave up. ‘Actually, I’m your new chauffeur.’

‘Oh.’ The frown set in like bad weather.

‘Mike’s busy sound-checking,’ I continued hurriedly. ‘He wanted to come himself. But the sound mixer was running late. And it’s such an important gig, you want to make sure the sound is good, especially with an unfamiliar venue.’ I knew I was over-explaining, but I couldn’t stop myself. ‘Plus, you’ll need all the help you can get with Deaf Jeff.’

Then I realised I’d really put my foot in it.

‘Not that he’s a bad mixer’ – I could hear my voice dropping like a stalled jumbo jet. ‘Actually, he’s…very experienced. And I know you’ll sound terrific. I mean, your voice sounds great at the Rising Star, and that PA is nothing compared to the one you’ve got tonight.’

‘Okay, Jake. You can stop now.’ She shook her head, covering her mouth with her hand.
A second later I realised she was laughing at me. I decided I could live with looking like a dickhead and grinned back.

As we walked to the car, I asked how her vocal training was going.

‘Not so good, today. I sang lousier than I have in ages. The thing is, I’ve stopped trying to pretend that I care about performing any other music except classical, and I’ve decided to audition for the State Con again. Even if I’ve lost my chance at a scholarship, it’s where I want to be. It seems harder than before, though. Or maybe that’s just because I’m taking it seriously. Anyway, I found out today that they’ve finally set the date for my audition. I knew it’d be coming up in the next few weeks, but knowing exactly when makes it a lot scarier.’

‘You’ll be fine. Just from the way you’re talking, I can tell it’s the right decision.’ It was true: I’d never heard her sound so certain. ‘I suppose this gig tonight isn’t such a big deal for you, then.’

Mitsuru halted. ‘Just because I’ve finally admitted to myself that this isn’t what I want to be doing,’ she said coolly, ‘doesn’t mean I don’t care about tonight. I’m going to try my best. Not just because I know how much it means to the others.’ Starting forward again, she continued in a softer tone ‘I can’t really explain it, but I’m not sorry anymore that I ended up in the band scene. It’s meant a lot more to me than I ever guessed it would.’

We reached the car. I laid the suit bag carefully across the back seat (Mitsuru explained that her teacher insisted on concert attire for rehearsals, as psychological preparation) and we set off back towards the Enterprise. The traffic was heavier and slower. I started to feel apprehensive again and couldn’t stop myself from glancing at the clock on the dashboard. By the time I pulled back into the alley behind the Enterprise, there was no time to waste.

‘God, this place really is gross,’ Mitsuru muttered, opening the passenger’s door.
A second later, as I squeezed out of the driver’s side – there wasn’t enough room to open the door fully – I heard a yelp and then half-heard, half-felt a body hitting the ground.

I turned, couldn’t see her, and rushed around the back of the car, barely managing to avoid spraining my ankle on a slippery, unidentifiable dark green-brown substance. Mitsuru was sprawled on the other side.

‘Oh fuck,’ she said, wiping one hand uselessly on the stained leg of her jeans. ‘Fuck fuck FUCK!’

‘Are you okay?’

She looked up. ‘What does it look like? I’m covered in shit and I’m fucking shity!’

It struck me that I should’ve stopped at the head of the alley and let her out. I began to apologise but, awful as the situation was, I felt a smile creeping into my face.

Mitsuru scowled at me. ‘Thanks a lot, you unsympathetic bastard.’ Then she looked down at herself again and sighed. ‘Well, I guess we are going for the casual look tonight. At least I changed out of my dress. Daphne would’ve killed me if that got ruined.’

‘I really am sorry,’ I said, reaching down to help her up.

‘Yeah, sure.’ She took hold of my hand and hauled herself roughly up.

We were standing close together in the narrow gap between the car and the streaked wall at the foot of the stairs. Mitsuru was breathing heavily – from the shock of the fall, I assumed. But then I noticed I was breathing heavily, too.

‘Oh God, no,’ she said.

For a fraction of a second I found myself recalling the time I tried to fix a loose connection in my amplifier, and my hand had brushed an unshielded wire. In the micro-second before I was thrown backwards across the room, the electricity pouring into my body
had made my hand tighten convulsively on the wire despite every neuron in my brain screaming to let go.

As abruptly as the memory flickered into my head, it was gone and I was aware only of the way our hands were clutching at each other and our bodies were falling towards each other. Then, like the time I electrocuted myself, the momentary convulsive grasping turned into its opposite. We both lurched backwards – Mitsuru against the wall, me against the side of the car.

‘What are we doing?’ Mitsuru turned and stared up at the open doorway at the top of the stairs. ‘What the hell are we doing?’

I looked in the direction of her gaze. Then my eyes fell on the area below – a dim recess formed by the end of the alley and a half-open dumpster.

I looked back at Mitsuru. She nodded. We scrambled and slithered past Darren’s van and Mike’s car. We no longer cared what we were treading on or in, and we were lucky to reach the far end without serious injury. Mitsuru was ahead of me. Drawing level with the corner of the dumpster, she turned and blinked with the dazed expression of someone drunk or high. Then she backed into the gap and I followed her.

The clamminess and the foetid stench were almost overwhelming. The space was so cramped we barely had room to reach for each other. I began to fumble with her pants and Mitsuru fumbled with mine. In the same instant we both realised it was taking too long, let go of one another, and I undid my pants and let them drop around my ankles. Reaching forward again as Mitsuru freed herself, I got one hand behind her back – partly to cushion her and partly to brace myself against the brick wall. I slid my other hand up under her T-shirt, realised there was no chance of undoing her bra, and slipped my fingers under the lacy upper edge to feel her cool, tight nipple.
Mitsuru bit her lip and inclined her head back. As I lowered my mouth onto hers, I could feel her hands at my waist, drawing me closer. Then she reached down, grasped my penis and pressed the tip against her. I hesitated.

‘Do you –’

I was inside her. To my surprise, she was already wet. I’d forgotten how good sex felt. I thought I was going to come instantly and started to withdraw. Then the first surge of sensation receded. We began to move. Even with the similarity in our heights, it wasn’t easy. But we found a rhythm. And although the smell and the dampness were impossible to ignore completely, and through the walls I could feel the low vibrations of amplified sound, none of it made any difference to the feeling itself.

After a while I became aware that Mitsuru was making small, strangled noises; her movements were changing; her muscles seemed to be drawing me further into her. I opened my eyes. Hers were wide open but showed no recognition. Above us, the sound of approaching footsteps drifted out of the open doorway. And suddenly the orgasm was rushing through me on a wave of pleasure and panic. Mitsuru pressed her hand over my mouth. The spasm passed and we both stood very, very still. The footsteps receded. I looked at her.

‘Did you…?’

She was already hitching up her pants and didn’t seem to hear me.

‘What do we do now?’ I said, a little louder.

She looked up. ‘What are you talking about?’ Her tone was tense.

I realised I had no idea. That was how I had felt after the electrocution, too, as I’d picked myself up off the floor, hardly knowing how I’d got there.

‘For goodness’ sake,’ Mitsuru muttered. ‘Hurry up. We haven’t got time.’
Thirty-Two

Upstairs, the house lights were off. The rest of the Paper Tigers and Anth were standing together beside the stage, looking out at the room, which was already quite full.

‘Sorry about that,’ I said, trying not to notice the kiss between Mitsuru and Mike, the easy way she handed him her suit bag, and his solicitude at the sight of her filthy clothes. ‘The traffic was bad, and Mitsuru had a little accident, but…’

I realised the others weren’t paying the slightest attention.

‘He’s here,’ Anth said in a low voice, barely audible above the whining, crackling PA. Without looking directly, he tilted his head towards the back of the room. In the bad light I could just make out a solitary figure slouched on a stool.

I couldn’t even feign interest in the A and R man, or in the sight of familiar faces nearby – old friends and fans from our heyday in the scene, whom I hadn’t encountered since arriving back from overseas. As the Paper Tigers moved away to discuss their set list, Anth nudged me.

‘Hey, wake up! You look spaced out. You’re not getting stage fright, are you?’

I stared guiltily, wondering whether he’d guessed.

‘Call me suspicious,’ he continued, ‘but I can’t help thinking that Mike arranged for you to go and get Mitsuru deliberately so we wouldn’t have time for a full band sound check. And by the way, I noticed when they were checking their levels that the left-hand foldback wedge is dodgy – just so you know. At least our drummer had a decent check. And I reckon drums are about the only thing Deaf Jeff can still hear, anyway.’
The compulsive speed at which he was talking would have been enough of a giveaway, without the sidelong glances he kept throwing at the figure up the back. I’d never seen Anth so jittery and preoccupied.

‘It’s a good thing we’re not taking this seriously,’ I said.

If Anth heard, he didn’t show it.

Somewhere deep inside I might have been unsettled, but everything seemed to be happening far below and off in the distance, the way the plains had looked from the village in the foothills in India. I felt as disconnected as when I had first returned. Only now I couldn’t avoid the thought that rather than being freed from life’s complexities, I was sinking beneath them – and this dreamy numbness was like the calm euphoria that supposedly came over drowning men when they no longer had the strength to struggle and their lungs filled with water.

Then Darren was back, with three bottles of beer, telling us it was time for Wasted Youth to go on. We raised our bottles in a toast.

‘Tora tora,’ Anth said.

I stepped up onto the low stage and looked out across the room. All I could see was the familiar pit of darkness behind the stage lights, though I sensed the presence of a crowd. I picked up my guitar and switched on the amp. Behind me, Darren clicked his drumsticks.

We were away.

Suddenly I had to concentrate. The songs were still so unfamiliar, my technique so rusty, and the band so unsure of itself as a unit – it took everything I had in me to avoid the whole thing going completely off the rails. Even then we were hardly a well-oiled rock’n’roll machine, and the sound was muddy though fortunately not deafening. Deaf Jeff, loyal to the
sound mixers’ unwritten law, was making sure he left a few decibels in reserve for the headline act, so they’d be more impressive.

But we kept it together. If it wasn’t the best we’d ever played, there were no awkward dropouts or screamingly obvious mistakes. It occurred to me, too, that our song writing had developed to a point where we understood how all the pieces should fit together; what worked and what didn’t work. And in spite of everything, I could even feel a rustle of the old enthusiasm.

The audience didn’t go berserk, but they seemed to be paying attention and they clapped at the end of each song. There were even a few whistles and cheers (from recognisable sources).

Then – it felt like no time at all – we were toppling into the last note. I held my guitar to the amp to squeeze out a final squeal of feedback. The three of us bowed like the Beatles and I saw Anth stick out his tongue and raise his hand in the heavy metal salute. I tossed my plectrum out into the blackness. Darren was wiping his face with his sweat-stained singlet. In its own way, the moment was perfect.

The stage lights went down.

‘You guys were great,’ Harvey said as Anth and I dragged our equipment off stage.

Mike, waiting beside him to move their gear into place, shook his head. ‘I knew we shouldn’t have let you support us. How are we going to top that?’

But from the way he grinned at Darren and Harvey, I could see they had every intention of rising to the challenge. I didn’t ask where Mitsuru was. I wasn’t expecting to see her. As soon as I’d pushed my stuff into the corner, I told the Paper Tigers to break a collective leg and headed for the bar.
I sidled through the crowd, skirting the trestle table and the patio furniture. Then I felt a tap on my shoulder. The person slouching beside me wore an expensive 1950s-style black leather jacket (the kind I'd always secretly imagined I might look good in) with a plain black T-shirt and designer jeans. The outfit wouldn't have looked out of place in a fashion shoot, though its effect was somewhat diminished by the wearer: a paunchy middle-aged man with thinning, salt-and-pepper-coloured hair. I knew even before he introduced himself that this was the record company Artists and Repertoire scout.

‘You blokes got a demo disc?’

When I shook my head and explained that this was our first gig his eyebrows arched upwards. With the practiced elegance of a conjurer, he reached inside the jacket and produced a small cardboard rectangle.

‘When you’ve played a few more gigs, record your stuff and send me a copy. You’ve got potential.’

I nodded, thanked him and edged away.

I had scarcely taken half-a-dozen steps before Anth grabbed me.

‘I was coming to tell you that Caroline said the A and R guy seemed to like us. So what did he say?’

I told him.

Anth’s eyes widened. For a second I thought he was going to scream for joy. Then his expression fell. ‘This is so huge. I dunno what Caroline’s going to say.’

I could guess. ‘Caroline will say if you really want to do it, she’ll support you one hundred per cent.’

‘Yeah, you’re right.’ He still looked bemused. ‘And it’s what we always dreamed about. But I just don’t know any more. It’d be different if I was in your position…’
The answer was surprisingly easy. ‘No. It’s not what we always dreamed about. We wanted to be the best, remember? Even if we never made it into the charts and had to do everything ourselves and never made a cent, at least we’d know we were better than all the other shit out there. But we’re not. Maybe we could make a career out of music, but we’d never live up to the bands that inspired us. Could you really keep going, knowing that?’

I hadn’t meant to sound so heated. It occurred to me I might never be entirely free of the rock’n’roll dream.

‘To be honest,’ Anth said, ‘maybe. I’d rather play music than work a day job. And it’d be nice to own a mansion in France. Even just a small mansion.’ He sighed and grinned. ‘But then there’d be all those fan letters to answer, and the drugs and groupies I’d have to turn down. I reckon life on the road might get a bit boring after a while, too. And all those late nights. Nah, you’re right. Let’s forget about it.’

We shook hands.

‘Poor Darren,’ I said. ‘No one ever consults the drummer.’

‘He’s still in with a shot.’ Anth nodded towards the front.

Harvey and Mike had finished setting up, and Darren was back behind the drums. As the stage lights faded up, they launched into their first song. Seconds before the vocal entry, Mitsuru walked out of the shadows at the side of the stage. Her casual manner, as she stepped up to the microphone and began to sing, betrayed neither fear nor excitement.

Her delivery was flawless and apparently effortless. And yet the longer I watched and listened, the more I felt that it was also lifeless. She was performing like an automaton. It was as if she had already moved on. The rest of the band seemed to feel it too – though the way the other three kept looking at one another, I wondered whether they understood what
was wrong. The overall impression was of four very different individuals who just happened to be sharing the stage.

As I looked for reasons to be hopeful, it struck me that Harvey was a better songwriter than I’d given him credit for. In the new songs especially it was clear he’d been developing his style and the arrangements to suit Mitsuru’s voice. Which only made them sound worse now – almost nonsensical. By the middle of the second song, the vitality had gone out of their playing. No one was making mistakes, but even a mistake would have been a relief.

Curiously, most of the crowd didn’t seem to notice or care. The sense of occasion was so palpable they yelled and screamed anyway. I began to wonder if perhaps I was imagining the problem, and the despair I felt was simply my own. But when I turned to Anth, he spread his hands with a look of sad puzzlement. As the next song began, I couldn’t stand it any longer. Shouting to be heard above the music, I told Anth that he and Darren could have the rest of our drinks rider and that I’d retrieve my gear some other time.

‘Give the Paper Tigers my apologies,’ I added. I couldn’t think of any words of encouragement. ‘Tell them my mum didn’t want me to leave the house unoccupied late at night while she and Brian were away.’

Halfway home I wished I’d brought some of the beer with me. I stopped at a bottle shop that was about to close and bought a bottle of vodka and a bottle of orange juice.
Thirty-Three

The phone was ringing. I climbed off the couch, lurched across the living room and fumbled with the receiver. It was an automatic response; I’d never been able to ignore phones. I didn’t think to wonder who might be calling this late at night. The connection was bad and I heard nothing on the other end of the line except strange muffled noises.

‘Hello?’

There was no response, but I was sure I knew who it was.

‘Mitsuru?’

Still no response. I took a deep breath and steadied myself against the kitchen bench.

‘If you’re calling to ask me to keep quiet about…what happened before the gig tonight, you needn’t have bothered. I understand.’

The silence that followed was long enough for my impaired brain to begin to wonder whether this was Mitsuru. And if not, who it might be and what they would now be thinking.

Then she said ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to disturb you. I’ll go now. Bye.’

‘Wait a second.’ I struggled to make sense of the unfamiliar note in her voice. ‘You didn’t ring to say that. Since we’re talking, let’s talk.’ In fact, I didn’t want her to stop; it didn’t matter what she said.

‘You sound half-asleep or pissed off.’

‘I’m just a bit tipsy, that’s all.’

‘Oh.’
Her surprise was reasonable, I supposed. In the time we had known each other, she was the one supposedly prone to misbehaviour. *Everything changes*, I reflected bitterly.

‘So, how was the rest of the gig? Have you signed your record contract yet?’

‘I told Mike,’ she said.

‘You told him?’ Suddenly I felt very, very sober.

‘Not about what happened – I couldn’t bear it. Just that I’d realised we couldn’t stay together.’

‘Shit. How did he take it?’

‘How do you think?’

This was a different kind of vertigo: a kind I hadn’t felt since six months before, in the hotel room on my first morning overseas. That feeling of having strayed into somewhere bigger, stranger and more complicated than I’d ever imagined; that if I continued forward there was no telling where I’d end up.

‘Shit,’ I said. ‘Where are you?’

‘In the pay phone, on the main road near my house.’

‘Stay put. I’ll be there soon.’

‘Are you sober enough to drive?’

‘I’m fine.’ I hung up.

Then I turned away from the phone and nearly fell over. The bottle of vodka on the coffee table was half empty – or half full, depending on how you looked at it. I was having trouble seeing at all.
Part Three
Thirty-Four

‘Is everything all right? You sound strange.’

I tightened my fist around the receiver and closed my eyes, straining to hear the meaning inside Mitsuru’s words. ‘Strange? That’s my voice.’ When she didn’t answer I added, ‘Well, I’m still adjusting to gainful employment and having my mother and brother back home. Fortunately, they’re too busy planning the engagement party to bother with the working classes. But you must be pretty tired, right?’

Her silence stretched a few seconds longer. Then she said, ‘I am a bit.’ Another pause. ‘This must be so boring for you.’

‘I’m the guy you once accused of being the most boring person in the world, remember?’ I tried to smile audibly.

‘That was before I’d seen the wild animal lurking beneath that mild mannered exterior.’

This was more like it. I almost sighed in relief. ‘You were closer to the truth the first time, I’m afraid. That’s how I could spot the mild mannered Mitsuru lurking beneath your wild animal exterior.’

I sensed I’d miscalculated even before I heard the sharp drop in her voice. ‘I really am sorry we got off to such a dud start.’

But I wasn’t going to give up now. ‘Are you talking about everything that’s happened since we met, or just the fact that we haven’t seen each other since we got together?’

Miraculously, she laughed. ‘Touché. It’s not like the last couple of weeks is anything new. I just keep getting these strange impulses to hop in a taxi and turn up unannounced at your door to sweep you away to a fancy restaurant for a candle-lit dinner and cocktails.’
‘The pressure must be getting to you.’ I managed a short, flat chuckle. ‘But you really
don’t have to worry on my behalf. I’m sure everything will get better soon. How was
practice?’

There was an exhalation from the other end. ‘Fine…I guess. Jules says the last week is
always the hardest. I just wish I could be so confident. Maybe I’m crazy to think I can jump
straight back into this. Maybe I should be taking it slower.’

‘You’re not crazy,’ I said quickly. ‘It’s what you want to do and what you’re supposed to
do.’

‘I know.’ She made it sound like an admission of defeat, and despite my best efforts I felt
a tug of despair. Then her voice was strong again. ‘You’re right, things will be better after
the audition. How terrible can one extra week be? And I’m so self-pitying I still haven’t
asked how your day went.’

‘The job? Well, it’s a step up from resume writing, but it’ll never sell out stadium tours.’

‘Have you heard from Penny yet?’

Her tone suggested nothing but a casual enquiry, and I responded in the same breezy
manner. ‘Of course not.’

‘But she’d be back now.’

‘Remember, she said she’d wait for me to get in touch with her.’

‘Do you think she got your letter before she left?’

‘Honestly, Mitsuru, I’m not sure.’ I allowed myself a trace of good-humoured
exasperation. ‘If mine got delayed like her last one…But why does it matter? I wouldn’t be
bothered if we ran into each other by accident. But I’m happy to leave that part of my life
behind.’ Unfortunately, my conviction sounded threadbare. We had reached this point too
often already. I decided to take a gamble. ‘Unless you think I should get in contact, to make
sure she knows how things stand.’

‘That’s your call,’ Mitsuru said coolly.

‘To be truthful, from the tone of her letter, I don’t think she cares one way or the other. I
reckon the only reason she wrote was because she felt guilty for not telling me sooner about
her new relationship and she knew it’d be easier to do on paper, before she got back. Right
now she’s probably only thinking about how long she has to wait till this guy Arjuna gets
here. Trust me.’

‘Of course I trust you,’ she said. ‘But I still think she’ll contact you, no matter what she’s
said. And please remember, Jake, I’m counting on you to tell me…anything. If you’re
having second thoughts, I can live with that. I don’t want you to hide them because you’re
worried I’ll fall apart. I’m not such a nutcase. Not any more. Or did you prefer the nutcase
Mitsuru? You could at least feel sorry for her, yeah?’

Though she had fallen back into her habitual teasing tone, I knew Mitsuru was right: she
could live with anything I might tell her. She was stronger than I’d ever be. But was it only
my imagination that she sounded almost eager for me to offer her the bad news? Was she
trying to tell me that from her point of view it wouldn’t be bad news?

‘Hello? Jake? So it’s that awful, is it?’

I realised she was waiting for a response. It was all I could do to keep my voice steady as I
replied, ‘I never thought you were a nutcase. Well, maybe just a little bit. But there’s
nothing to tell. As far as I’m concerned, it’s all fine.’

A small, metallic throat-clearing sound. ‘Don’t worry, Jake. You’re in no danger of
sweeping me off my feet. Now for goodness’ sake, stop sounding so…’

‘I know: strange.’
We both laughed and wished each other good night. As I put down the phone and climbed reluctantly into bed, I reflected that it was lucky Mitsuru couldn't possibly be aware of the Technicolor-vivid nightmares that had been haunting my sleep in the time since we got together.

But wakefulness was just as bad. The doubts came rolling in, worse than ever before. I was almost sure she was unhappy. Of course that could be explained by the pressure she was under, with the audition so close. It did not necessarily indicate she regretted getting involved with me, just as her unwillingness to admit being dissatisfied did not mean she was simply afraid of doing me serious damage.

Nevertheless, despite my determination to reassure her otherwise, there seemed every chance of serious damage. After the night we'd spent together, I had given up trying to pretend to myself that I wasn't utterly besotted – more than I'd ever been before about anyone. It was terrifying how good I felt whenever we were in contact, even just by phone, and how alone I felt the rest of the time.

Only one thought gave me the strength not to show it: the thought of her reaction if she found out the truth. I mustn't act too serious too quickly, as Mike had with her and as I had with Penny. On the other hand, I wasn't going to accept any veiled invitations to back off. I figured if I could keep things running smoothly till after the audition, Mitsuru would see that I wasn't going to get in the way of her career, and maybe then we'd both feel less anxious.

Except that after the audition would come the news that she had been accepted into the State conservatorium. And then she'd leave this dead-end town, with all its fraught and tangled memories, to start a new, brilliant life among her equals.

And she wondered why I sounded strange.
Thirty-Five

Afterwards, I couldn’t recall how it happened. After helping the truck driver unload the latest shipment into the loading bay, signing off for it and preparing the paperwork for the next consignment – all of which I was already well accustomed to – I began shifting boxes onto the conveyer to store upstairs. Next thing I knew there was a thud from above, followed almost immediately by a splintering crash, as loud as a trio of domestic disputes, muffled but still painfully audible over the conveyer’s wheeze.

For a second or two I froze. By the time I’d lowered the box I was carrying and hit the Stop button beside the conveyer, a second crash had ensued – if anything, louder than the first, although perhaps it simply seemed so because I was now entirely focussed on it.

I bolted around the remaining boxes, forgetting that I wasn’t supposed to leave them unattended with the back roller-door open, at the mercy of passing light-fingered locals. I crossed the loading bay in seconds, vaulting the first two stairs, landing awkwardly and almost tumbling sideways into a thicket of bamboo garden torch-holders. I scrambled up the remaining stairs, and as my head came level with the floor above, I turned towards the top end of the conveyer.

The scene was shrouded in a swirling cloud of dust, which looked almost solid under the cone of light from the weak bulb above. The contents of one box were strewn across an extraordinarily large area of the concrete floor – a mosaic of brightly coloured fragments of cheap Chinese ceramics partially obscured by drifts of white polystyrene packaging. At the epicentre, directly in front of the conveyer belt, another box balanced on one crumpled point like a piece of modern art, while just above, on the end of the conveyer, a third box
hung noncommittally. As if it had merely been waiting for an audience, however, the latter slid gently sideways, falling onto the one balanced below with a conclusive crunch that sent them slumping in opposite directions.

The newly raised dust-cloud was even more magnificent, and I wondered where all this dust had come from, since my final job every day was to sweep the entire floor area. The thought fled as William’s elephantine figure hove into view from the back of the warehouse.

‘Mother of God,’ he said in a voice of terrible quietness.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘I don’t know what happened.’

He realigned himself towards me. His pouchy red-rimmed eyes blinked like danger signals. ‘I’ll tell you what happened: you weren’t paying attention. You’ve been bloody useless all week, and this is your piece de resistance.’ Coughing, he wheeled back towards the disaster area, directing his next words at the pile of debris. ‘For God’s sake, stop gaping and clean this shit up.’

I grabbed the broom from near the tiny, putrid washroom and began sweeping, while William, patting at his remaining rust-coloured hairs, continued: ‘Then we’ll have to sort through the boxes and see if you managed to leave anything in one piece. And we’ll have to make up another inventory, and find some spare boxes…’

He said We, but restricted himself to giving the orders and making dire predictions about what the hell Junior was going to say. Despite William’s lack of any physical contribution, he was more animated than I had seen him in the days since I started working there.

I followed his instructions diligently, even when he changed his mind half-a-dozen times in as many minutes. It was true: I should have been paying more attention, I had spent the past few days in a kind of trance, and this was the result. Still, I felt hard done by. I’d already
witnessed several other stuff-ups, albeit none quite so spectacular. But the other mistakes had clearly been William’s.

Instead of calming down, William became more and more agitated. He started pacing between the lunch table and the mangy chintz armchair where he passed most of the day when not outside on cigarette breaks. Then he actually grabbed his packet of smokes and began puffing through one after another, disregarding the No Smoking sign at the head of the stairwell.

I took a moment to focus on my breathing and my heartbeat (both quicker than normal, but steady). Then, in a placating tone, clearly not intended to sound accusatory, I said ‘Listen, William. I know it was my fault. I’m willing to have my pay docked to cover the damage. But I’ve seen enough of these boxes by now to know that this stuff isn’t expensive or hard to get hold of. And I just wrote up the latest delivery log; we don’t have any urgent orders to fill. Surely it can’t be such a big deal.’

I would never have guessed that such a round face could scowl so deeply. ‘Thank you for explaining the situation to me, and I am glad it’s all bonza by you, mate. That’s a real weight off my mind, it really is.’ He looked up at the green, corrugated plastic skylight above, with a pious expression. ‘Maybe you’d do a better job of explaining this to Junior, too. Christ, why didn’t he hire someone with a bit of experience?’

I returned to my sweeping with extra ferocity to hide the rubberiness that had crept into my arms. William and I both knew why Junior had hired me and not someone experienced. He wanted the bonus that the Social Security people had started paying to take on people like me – the ones with little chance of getting off unemployment otherwise. And William and I both knew also that now I’d been working there long enough for Junior to pocket the cheque, he only needed a reason to fire me and he could take another dip in the money pool.
I, on the other hand, would forfeit my right to apply for benefits. Somebody had to take the fall.

No sooner had the thought occurred to me than from the street below came a sound midway between a jet aircraft and a pack of mad dogs. It rose to near-deafening volume before being obliterated by a musical air horn playing the riff to ‘Wild Thing’. Then abrupt silence. I did not need to look up to know that William had halted. Without a word, he poured himself towards the stairs, to greet the overseer of our operation.

Junior was a few years older than me and was carrying on the import business founded by his father, the elder Mr Campanelli, whom I had never met. Business was booming thanks to the spread of dollar emporiums around town, but from comments dropped by William in his more garrulous moods, I gathered that Mr Campanelli Senior retained a firm grip on the reins and considered his son incompetent at best. I still wasn’t sure whether or not this assessment was true, since Junior spent at most fifteen minutes each day at the warehouse – just long enough to sign the paperwork and complain about the old man’s tightfistedness and the wog girls his mother was forever trying to set him up with – before returning to his primary occupation of cruising the town’s main drag in his red Ferrari, from one café to the next.

I rested the broom against the table and pictured William and Junior standing downstairs beside the manager’s cubicle (its doorway too narrow for William to fit through), finalising the demise of my first, and possibly last, proper job. I reminded myself it wasn’t as if I’d become attached to the position. And there was at least one potential advantage: I would be free to accompany Mitsuru to the big city, where there might be more employment to go around.
One thing still didn’t add up, however. Why was William so bothered? It was almost enough to send me picking through the broken merchandise in search of smuggled drugs or jewels or high-tech hardware. Instinct told me, though, that nothing so glamorous could be involved. Instead, I slowly and quietly walked over to the stairwell, listened for nearby voices, and then descended, trusting the lack of decent lighting and the sounds of vermin and nearby warehouses for concealment.

‘Since when? And what’s that supposed to mean?’

As I reached the bottom step and halted behind a tower of cheap electrical goods, I was briefly puzzled by the unfamiliar voice. Usually Junior spoke in a low, flat purr that sounded as well oiled and conditioned as his car and hair. Now he sounded as shrill as if he’d been sucking helium. But there was nothing amusing about his next words, which sounded oddly familiar.

‘Maybe you’d like to explain it to him, William. How about that?’

There was a gap in which I could make out William’s asthmatic murmur but not the words themselves.

‘And what if he does notice?’ Junior keened. ‘What am I supposed to say?’

I pressed my luck and edged closer, into the shadow of a low wall of imitation copperware, from where I could see the entrance to the manager’s cubicle and the two figures – one short and slight, the other resembling a higher order of beanbag – silhouetted in the loading bay door. Both were facing in my direction, but I still couldn’t hear William’s reply.

‘If you’d been doing it right,’ Junior continued, ‘I wouldn’t have to bother about it. I’ve got enough on my plate. And now you give me this. Why didn’t you think about it? You know he knows your handwriting. All right, so do I…’
I didn’t need to hear William’s response. I guessed what the real issue was. By rights, William should have been supervising the other end of the conveyer. He should also have been signing the invoices and updating the log, both of which he’d given to me on my second day. On the other hand, Junior should have noticed long before now – and would have, had he been paying the least attention. Instead it seemed they would have to report the accident to Mr Campanelli Senior. And if he saw the paperwork…

I glanced around in the subterranean gloom at the mouldering cardboard metropolis, which suddenly looked a lot like purgatory. It was easy, I realised, to cultivate a philosophical outlook when the blame for a problem appeared to fall squarely on your shoulders. If it appeared that someone else was not only at fault but likely to let you bear the blame, it was much easier to feel deeply pissed off.

I decided then that I would walk calmly over and tell them, in a polite and dignified manner, where they could stick their job. Why not? I might as well put the boot in before they put it into me. And how satisfying it would feel – letting them know that I would not be taken advantage of.

I set off purposefully towards the cubicle. Seconds later, Junior noticed my approach and broke off, looking more deeply worried than I would have imagined of someone who’d never expressed anything beyond mild impatience for the next coffee or beer, the next pretty girl, the next fast car. Changing tack ever-so-slightly, I nodded and picked up the box I’d abandoned in the middle of the loading bay. Then I returned upstairs, where I deposited the box carefully at the top of the conveyer, retrieved the broom and continued cleaning up.

My breath was coming fast and uneven, my heart banging inside my ribs like a crazed inmate in a prison riot. I swept and tidied with maniacal vigour, trying to erase every thought beyond getting the job done. I was almost finished when I heard the prehistoric
roar of Junior’s Ferrari; a scream of tormented rubber, quickly fading; and shortly afterwards
William’s laboured gasps as he mounted the stairs.

Without a word, he crossed the cement floor and lowered himself into the armchair. I
continued my work. We both managed to avoid speech, whilst carrying out regular duties,
for the rest of the long, sweltering afternoon. As soon as the end of the day officially arrived
I left off repacking the unbroken ceramics and headed straight for the corner where I stored
my bag and water bottle.

‘Just a second.’ William surfaced from the depths of his sulk. ‘You want to know how
things went with Junior?’

I waited.

‘As a rule he doesn’t give second chances. But I told him you’re a good worker – a damn
sight better than the last few deadbeats we’ve had. So he’s agreed that you’ve had your
screw-up. Now you better get your act together, because if you make another mess you’re
out. And you should consider yourself bloody lucky. There are hundreds of fellas your age
gagging for a steady job. Understand?’

‘I understand. Thanks.’

He didn’t press the issue.

I wandered the block-and-a-half to the bus stop pondering my good luck. I spent the long
bus ride imagining how I would retell the story for Mitsuru’s entertainment when I phoned
her that evening. Although we had never openly discussed the fact, each day since we got
together Mitsuru and I had taken it in turns to phone each other. Tonight was my turn.

Then, as I came in view of home, I realised that I couldn’t tell her. Not as things stood.
She might ask how I could have been so distracted. And even if she didn’t think to wonder
what was on my mind, she’d been making such a big deal about how good it was that I had a
job – how would she take the news that I’d nearly lost it through inattention? My prospects were poor enough as it was.

The thought was like a brick dropped in a room full of loaded mousetraps. All the niggling worries I’d been tiptoeing around seemed to go off in unison. I realised, as eager as I was to hear her voice, I couldn’t be sure I’d be able to talk as though everything was okay. If I didn’t call and she called me, that alone would make me feel better – perhaps good enough to shrug off this sense of desperation. On the other hand if she didn’t call (and she was tired and busy), tomorrow was the weekend and I would almost certainly feel better, and able to call her.

Mum’s and Brian’s cars were in the driveway. I let myself into the house. It was going to be a long night.
Thirty-Six

I pressed the yellowing plastic buzzer on Anth and Caroline’s front door, took a step back, and only then realised how nervous I was. Summer was barely a rumour and the sky looked as fresh as a half-finished watercolour, but a finger of perspiration traced a line down one side of my spine.

Anth and I had been friends a long time. We’d been through a lot together, seen each other at our worst, and the friendship had survived. Nothing would easily shake it now. And I had honestly meant to return the phone messages he’d left. Anyway, he would understand. By now he must have heard about Mitsuru and me. Of course I ought to have been the one to tell him. I shouldn’t have waited for the situation to settle down. As if it ever did.

However, with Mitsuru immersed in rehearsals (there were only two days until the audition), and Mum and Brian on a shopping safari with Brian’s Intended, now was the time to make amends.

The door swung open. To my relief, as soon as Caroline saw me she looked genuinely glad.

‘Thank goodness you’re here. Maybe you can stop this madness.’

Without waiting for a response she whirled, beckoning me to follow. As we headed through the house I noticed she was wearing the black velvet dress she used to wear to gigs, though now with an apron over the top. We didn’t stop inside, but continued straight out the back door and down the cracked cement path to the slouching weatherboard back shed. Over Caroline’s shoulder I saw Anth within, hunched at the workbench under the small,
cobweb-curtained window. He was wearing a pair of jeans that were almost as much hole as fabric, and a T-shirt that retained only a shadow of the band logo and tour dates it once proudly advertised.

‘If you won’t listen to me…’ Caroline said, stepping aside.

Anth looked up and I couldn’t hold back a grin.

‘What is that thing on your face?’

The perimeter of his mouth and his jaw were covered in dark down like a worn car-seat cover.

Anth crossed his arms. ‘Don’t you start.’ Then, tugging at his chin between thumb and forefinger, he continued: ‘When I was a kid I had this idea that growing up meant growing a beard. And now seemed as good a time as any.’

My attempt to recall jokes about facial hair faltered as I noticed the object on the bench beside him. Without knowing why, I felt a twinge of foreboding. ‘What are you doing with your amp?’

He turned, as if to check what I was referring to. ‘Oh, just cleaning it up. It still works perfectly – never had any trouble with it. But I figured I should mend that tear in the front mesh and wash off the beer stains. I put an ad in the classifieds.’

‘Along with his guitar,’ Caroline added. ‘Go on, Jake, tell him. Tell him he’s being a dickhead.’

I’d never seen Caroline so vehement. And of all possible issues, this, I would have thought, would be the one least likely to upset her. Caroline had always treated Anth’s involvement with music as if it were a smelly pet he had brought to their relationship, to be accommodated on sufferance, in the hope it would run away or die. And I doubted recent events had done much to change that.
‘Anth, you’re being a dickhead,’ I said obligingly. ‘How much are you asking?’

‘Five hundred. For both.’

‘I retract my scepticism. You are a dickhead. Someone’s going to get the deal of the century.’

‘Good luck to them.’ Anth rubbed his jaw stoically. Then he grinned. ‘But I won’t sell to any professional muso who plays in a covers band.’

Caroline scowled from Anth to me and back again. ‘I can’t believe I’m hearing this.’

She shook her head, spun on her heel and marched back into the house.

‘Sorry,’ I said, as the back screen door slammed. ‘I didn’t mean to make trouble.’

Anth advanced from the dimness to stand in the doorway in the mid-afternoon sunlight, blinking. ‘It’ll blow over.’ He looked around the back yard and then sighed. ‘Actually, I feel like I should be apologising to you. I feel personally responsible for…well, what happened. I was trying to help you out. But I just swapped one mess for another, didn’t I?’

‘It’s no big deal.’

‘Now I know you’re mad about it. We’ve been friends too many years for me not to know that you always say that about what matters most. It’s no big deal. Yeah, right. Incidentally’ – his voice hardened – ‘you look like shit. Worse than when you got back from overseas. And don’t tell me it’s just old age.’

I might have predicted this. It was too much to hope that this visit could be a complete holiday from current dilemmas. But maybe a friendly chat would put my worries about Mitsuru into better perspective.

Matching his business-like tone, I said, ‘All right, I have some stuff on my mind. Personal stuff.’

‘Mitsuru?’ The furrows above Anth’s eyes reconfigured into a less fierce, more appraising
expression.

‘You heard, then.’

He pushed past me and motioned towards the peeling wooden bench under the corrugated iron awning beside the back door. ‘Have a seat. I’ll be back in a jiffy.’

I followed his instructions and stretched my legs. The small, grassy back yard had recently been mowed, and a pair of mynah birds strutted near the freshly turned vegetable patch, exclaiming to each other. It occurred to me that I was feeling better already for simply voicing my concern. Why did I not think to do this sooner?

Anth returned with two stubbies. He handed one to me, we clinked the perspiring bottles together and drank.

‘I only heard a few scraps,’ Anth said after a moment. ‘I’m way out of the loop. But I don’t blame you. Seriously. I reckon it’s just…unfortunate.’

‘Unfortunate.’ My laugh rattled like loose change in a clothes-drier. ‘That’s a good word for it.’

‘It got nasty?’

I realised that he assumed the problem was quite different. ‘Actually, Mike was a saint about it. Of course there’s no shortage of people who feel they have the right to be scandalised and angry on his behalf, but that’s their business.’

Anth nodded slowly. ‘And Mitsuru?’

‘Yeah, good question.’

‘You’re still together, then?’

His astonishment did nothing to reassure me. ‘I guess so. It’s hard to tell, sometimes.’

Anth said nothing.

‘It’s funny, really.’ I squirmed at the irony. ‘I actually used to think we had some sort of
psychic connection. Which just goes to show, I guess.’

‘We all imagine crazy things sometimes,’ Anth suggested.

I turned away, unable to face his pity. ‘It’s more than that. I’ve been trying so hard…to feel differently. I’ve tried to step back, to be more detached about it all. And lately I’ve just been trying to ignore it. But I should have known –’

‘Known what?’

This, I realised, was the crux of it. The truth I’d been edging around for weeks.

‘That our feelings aren’t equal. We just don’t feel the same way about each other.’

I paused and took a deep breath and then a swig of beer. The admission had been easier than I’d expected. But it didn’t make me feel any better. And now another thought deepened the gloom. ‘You won’t mention this to anyone, will you? Promise me. It’d only make things worse.’

‘Why do you think I’m getting rid of my music stuff?’ Anth tugged at the label on his bottle, pulling a ragged strip away. ‘I’m not part of the scene any more. I’ve got no one to gossip to.’ Then, more sombrely: ‘And like I said, I don’t think you’re to blame. If anything, I feel partly responsible.’

‘How?’ If I hadn’t been so surprised I probably would’ve been annoyed that he so readily agreed there was a problem.

‘I thought I was doing you a favour, pressuring you to get back into music. I figured it would be a good distraction from…everything else you were dealing with. Not that I didn’t think you were dealing with it pretty well. Amazingly, in fact. But…Well, I guess really I wanted it pretty badly myself.’

‘It was fun,’ I said.

Anth didn’t seem to hear. ‘Even when I was sure we were getting too serious, I kept
hoping that maybe, this time around…’

‘Listen, Anth,’ I said more forcefully as he tailed off. ‘It really doesn’t bother me.’

This time he raised an eyebrow.

‘I mean it. What makes you think it was such a big deal to me?’

‘For one thing, the way you were acting at the time. Plus, how else do you explain what happened afterwards? If you weren’t so desperate for another distraction, why’d you jump straight into this thing with Mitsuru?’ His manner was so earnest, at first I didn’t even realise I ought to be offended.

‘You’re saying Mitsuru is just another distraction for me?’

‘You just said so yourself, more or less.’

‘I did?’ I straightened myself up on the hard wooden slats.

‘That stuff about unequal feelings. Her being too serious…Hey, what’s so hilarious?’

He wasn’t joking; I was sure his bewilderment was genuine. Yet I could hardly believe the whole conversation had been based on a misunderstanding; that Anth imagined the situation was the opposite of what it actually was. I raised my empty bottle and pretended to drink, while the implications played across my mind in fast forward. Anth couldn’t possibly know Mitsuru’s feelings, and he hadn’t seen the two of us together recently. Still, this was the first evidence that maybe I was not doing such an awful job of appearing independent of Mitsuru. And maybe I’d overestimated the degree to which she suspected my reliance. I lowered the bottle again, trying to keep a straight face.

‘You’re right about one thing. I guess I’m not bad at playing down what’s important to me.’

‘It’s not that I’m against these new ideas of yours,’ he said quickly. ‘To be honest, when I got that weird letter from overseas, I thought you were just trying to get over Penny. Then
when you got back and you still seemed so into this spiritual stuff, I was worried you’d end up wearing curtains and shaving your head and dancing around in the mall.’

‘I was pretty attached to the idea of non-attachment.’

Anth shook his head. ‘But you were right about how we always hold onto things too hard and for too long. And then what’s good turns bad. That’s what you were on about, isn’t it?’

‘I suppose.’

He nodded and then, in a tone of deep seriousness, said, ‘The thing is, you can go too far, can’t you. Like now, for example, you’re doing your best to ignore the fact that another beer is absolutely necessary. Yeah, you’re lucky you’ve got me to put things to rights.’

As he disappeared indoors again I stared up at the coral-tinged sky and wondered whether I had once been the kind of person Anth implied I was – the kind who would take advantage of someone else’s feelings for me, even if I didn’t feel the same way towards them. I supposed I had been. It was not a nice thought. And why hadn’t I set Anth straight yet? It had become a reflex: the urge to not show how hopeful I was where Mitsuru was concerned. But I could rely on Anth’s discretion, and it would be a relief to know that someone else knew.

The dull squeak of Anth’s sneakers approaching across the lino kitchen floor sealed the issue. As the screen door squawked open, I prepared myself for the round of questions that would inevitably follow. I would quickly regain his sympathy, I was certain. And I still hadn’t mentioned my new job. He’d be glad to hear about that, and it would give us a different subject to talk about.

Anth lowered himself beside me again and handed me another bottle.

‘There’s something –’ I began.

‘About Mitsuru –’ Anth said at the same time.
We both paused and then said ‘You first,’ simultaneously.

I insisted and Anth quickly nodded.

‘It’s none of my business, and maybe I’m way out of line, but I want to say I think it’s a shame about you and Mitsuru. I had my doubts to begin with, and I know you two didn’t get off to a great start, but you were right when you said, ages ago, that she was a decent kid. Still’ – he cleared his throat – ‘you can’t make yourself feel what you don’t feel, even if you’d like to. And maybe it’s your instincts telling you it won’t work. I just don’t think you ought to let it drag on. It won’t get any easier.’

I couldn’t be sure if I responded or not. Because suddenly my head was full of the image of someone – maybe one of her friends, maybe her mum – offering Mitsuru the same advice, and for the right reasons. I shivered and realised that the afternoon was nearly over and the sun had fallen behind the shed, leaving us in shadow.

After that I was vaguely aware of telling Anth that what I had to say wasn’t greatly important.

‘Well, I don’t know if I should mention it, but I just remembered something else.’ He squinted at me. ‘Caroline and I were in town the other day, and you’ll never guess who we bumped into.’

As if it would be anyone but.

Anth knitted his fingers around his bottle. ‘Penny. And she asked a lot of questions about you. It’s okay, I played dumb – it wasn’t too hard.’ For the first time since I’d arrived, he put on one of his old grins, and I understood that our friendship would survive. ‘Does she know about…?’

I shrugged and told him about her last letter – the one that had been delayed in the mail, arriving after I had already posted a letter about my night with Mitsuru – about her early
return, and her new relationship with Arjuna, and their plan to bring him out here. We both fell silent after that, and sat sipping our beers until they were finished. I gathered that Anth felt awkward, but I had no words of reassurance to offer. I left shortly afterwards and walked back to the bus stop.

As I peered down the long straight stretch of main road, looking for one of the rare weekend buses, I noticed a phone box at the end of the block. My chest tightened. I knew this phone box. This was where Mitsuru had rung from, after the gig, and where I’d found her waiting for me. Her parents’ house was only a short walk away. Perhaps she might even be arriving home herself, after the day’s rehearsal.

I found myself meandering towards the box – slowly and casually, hands in pockets – as if it were a skittish half-wild animal that might bolt at the first sign of direct interest. Mitsuru probably wouldn’t want company. Probably she was looking forward to some time to herself (she had mentioned her parents would be away for the night). Furthermore, I had promised myself I would not disturb her before the audition. I could wait another couple of days.

There was still no sign of an approaching bus as I reached the phone box. Its interior smelt of urine and rancid fast food, but the machine appeared intact. I lifted the handset, the coin indicator lit up and I heard a crisp dial tone. Still more surprisingly, I had change in my wallet and the coins rattled down the machine’s throat without encountering any obstacle.

Then I remembered Anth’s advice about not letting it drag on. Could this phone call possibly help my cause? Or would it simply provide not only added reason for Mitsuru to give me the cold, hard truth, but perhaps also the opportunity she’d been looking for?

A knock against the glass scattered my thoughts.

‘Hey, mate, how about making up your mind?’
I stepped out, forgetting my change in the machine, and apologised to the man slouching outside. It was only as he pushed past me, muttering under his breath, that I registered his grey uniform and the bus idling at the curb.
Thirty-Seven

Anth’s mention of Penny could hardly fail to remind me of the last time she and I had seen each other. It was at the bus stop at the top of the village, where we’d arrived together weeks earlier. The bus on which I was leaving was painted in the customary garish fashion and sported the obligatory shoe dangling from the front bumper for good luck, though it also had a ragged gash down the side. It quivered and grumbled like an animal before a storm – and the afternoon sky was indeed low and murky, clenched around the hillside like a cocoon, the sun diluted almost to nothing.

Penny looked tired and gave the impression of wanting to get back to her room before the next downpour began. I’d asked Michael and my local friends not to come to farewell me, knowing their presence would make Penny self-conscious. We were self-conscious anyway.

‘I knew you couldn’t stay forever,’ Penny said. ‘I should be glad you stuck around so long.’

I did not ask, Why should you be glad? What benefit was there in my sticking around? I wanted our parting to be free from bitterness, and for days I’d been planning and rehearsing a speech to reassure her that this need not be the end. I had simply realised this was the best way – perhaps the only way left to me – to prove my faith in her: by giving her all the space and time she needed. But now the moment had arrived, such explanations seemed beside the point.

I said, ‘I stayed because I wanted to. And now I’m going home because I think I’m ready to start that new life we used to talk about.’

I might just as truthfully have said that leaving, finally, hurt less than staying.
'It’s going to be a hell of a trip out of here,’ Penny said. ‘The roads are mud. You don’t believe in doing yourself any favours, do you?’

At that we both smiled. And I wondered, what was the favour I should have done myself? Left weeks ago? Or…? But if there was an ‘or’, it remained obscure.

‘Michael will miss you,’ she added, fidgeting with her skirt. Then: ‘To be honest, I wasn’t expecting you to be so nice about everything.’

But she wasn’t being honest – or not entirely, I sensed. It occurred to me that perhaps she’d been expecting me to be nice but not hoping for it. But that made no more sense.

‘It wasn’t easy,’ I said.

When she didn’t respond, I took one last chance. ‘You know that when I’m gone you’ll suddenly realise what an idiot you’ve been, letting a terrific guy like me escape?’

She held my gaze. ‘If you want my opinion, I think you’re doing the right thing.’

A long blast from the bus horn made us both jump. I bent to pick up my pack. Then, on impulse, I straightened and quickly leant towards her. I wanted desperately to kiss her full on the lips. But at the last instant I thought better of it and veered to one side, to connect with her cheek. Then I turned and hauled my pack toward the open door.

That parting conversation was among the most meaningless of my life. It’s strange the things that stay with you.
Thirty-Eight


‘Message two. Today at three seventeen pm: Where the hell are you, Jake? You’d better not be screening. Call me back, we need to talk.

‘Message three. Today at five nineteen pm: Forget it. I mean, it’s Mitsuru again. Please disregard the previous messages. Everything is totally fine. I hope you’re enjoying…whatever…Yeah, see you.’

Her voice – its odd crescendos and decrescendos, its wandering pitch like a private, improvised aria – still stirred up a heady cocktail of anticipation and anxiety. I was so spellbound by listening I was unable to formulate a coherent thought. As soon as the last message finished, however, a dozen terrors winged in like seagulls around a scrap of bread.

I pushed the replay button, hoping for clues. Of the first two messages (left when Mitsuru was supposed to be at rehearsal), the first sounded surprised but happier than I’d heard her for a while; the second, unmistakably strained. But it was the last message that snagged my attention. It was not exactly emotional, nor entirely blasé, but a bit of both. It brought to mind several past occasions, and one in particular. But those were very different circumstances.

I was certain, though, that all was not right. And even as I struggled to understand, my fingers were finding the telephone buttons.

Mitsuru’s line was engaged.

Stay calm, I told myself. You can’t afford to freak out.
I paced through the house. There was no sign of the rest of the family. Brian and his Intended must have been giving Mum’s credit cards a thorough workout. In the kitchen I put the kettle on to make a cup of tea. The afternoon beers, followed by the bus trip home, had left me feeling mildly feverish.

Wandering into my bedroom, I picked up a novel Mitsuru has recommended. I stared at the page, but all I saw was her on the phone to Mike, telling him that the novelty had worn off, I’d turned out to be a disappointment, and she’d realised her mistake. Of course Mike would agree to try again. And when she pointed out to me that it was better this way than for the two of us to go on making each other unhappy in the hope of recapturing a brief, vanished flutter of intimacy – when she told me this, I would promptly, politely agree.

In another minute I tried her number again. Still the same relentless, smug chirrup. I held on for some time, as if that might make a difference. Gradually I became aware of a terrible, high-pitched squeal, which grew louder the longer I listened. Eventually I realised this was not my overstrained nerves but the kettle. I stumbled into the kitchen and turned off the heat. Then I found Mum’s spare car keys, scribbled an apologetic note and raced out to the garage to begin the trip back towards the city.

An oily twilight was deepening over the burbs. I stuck fanatically to the speed limit for fear a lurking highway patrol car would delay me further. I told myself the phone messages probably weren’t urgent at all. She’d said so herself. *Please disregard…Everything is fine.* Who wouldn’t sound uptight, less than two days before a career-making audition? Regardless, the fact that our relationship had come to mean pretty much everything to me was, for the time being, irrelevant. What mattered at this point was what Mitsuru needed. I felt as though I were strolling through a burning building.

By the time I arrived at her parents’ house, night had closed in. The house had a
forbidding, empty look, though a faint halo outlined one of the side windows. It was only after some determined knocking that I saw her silhouette, dim and distorted through the pebbled glass, approaching slowly along the dim hallway. She paused at the door, switching an object from one hand to another. A small firefly glow.

‘Oh,’ she said as the door swung open. ‘It’s you.’

Her look of resignation – the expression you’d offer a dental nurse who had just told you *Settle back, it won’t be long now* – might have sucked away my courage and determination. But I was too busy staring at the full-length, ivory-coloured, lace-trimmed gown. I’d never seen her look so devastating. It was several seconds before I recovered enough presence of mind to notice the glass she’d transferred back to her right hand, and the cigarette in her left. The shock was like a finger-click in my face. I forced a grin.

‘Please, try to moderate your enthusiasm.’

Mitsuru downed the contents of her glass, shuddered and then raised the cigarette to her lips. ‘What do you expect, turning up here uninvited?’

Lame as it was, our banter felt like a gift.

‘Sorry,’ I said, ‘it’s my wild, impetuous nature.’

The abruptness with which she rounded away suggested I’d taken the joke too far. As I trailed behind her, however, I found some consolation in the sight of the telephone handset lying face up next to its cradle on the hallway table. Though it didn’t prove she hadn’t been speaking to Mike.

In the living room, the old standard lamp, adrift in eddying smoke, threw baroque shadows around the clutter of household and musical paraphernalia. Mitsuru slumped into an armchair, making no attempt to prevent her audition gown crumpling around her. I took the nearest place on the couch at right angles, being careful not to sit on Köchel, who was
curled up on the middle cushion. Before us on the coffee table sat a half-empty bottle of vodka, a green plastic lighter, a cigarette packet and a saucer crowded with butts.

From the deliberateness of her gestures, I suspected Mitsuru might be smashed enough to believe she could behave soberly. There was no question of engaging her, in this condition, in a Deep and Meaningful. On the other hand, I couldn’t just play along. At this stage of her training, the effect of cigarettes and alcohol on her throat could be anything from bad to disastrous. And whatever had caused this relapse had to be serious.

As I tried to figure out how best to proceed, Mitsuru leaned forward – her upper body as stiff as a falling tree – and poured another drink. Clearly I couldn’t afford to wait for her to set the tone.

‘I was at Anth’s this arvo. When you rang.’ Neither an excuse nor an apology, but simply a passing comment.

‘Oh. How’s he going?’ She was equally off-hand.

‘Fine. Though it looks like he’s finally giving up music. The funny thing is Caroline’s taking it worse than him.’ I chuckled, but Mitsuru did not join in. She seemed slightly bored. ‘So, how are you?’

‘You know…Or maybe you don’t.’ She grinned craftily and waved her cigarette hand towards the table. ‘Drink?’

I knew I shouldn’t – not when I was driving. ‘Sure. Why not?’

Mitsuru waved me in the direction of the kitchen. When I returned with a glass, she was refilling her own again. There wasn’t much left in the bottle. I poured the remainder and said, gently, ‘What’s wrong? What happened?’

‘Wrong?’ Mitsuru frowned. ‘Why would anything be wrong? As a matter of fact, today has been full of good news.’
She dragged one leg under her and stretched out the other, laid one arm along the arm of the chair, with the cigarette dangling over the end; suspended her glass between two fingers of the other hand.

I made myself take a sip from my glass, holding the liquid in my mouth for several seconds before swallowing. The searing taste was something to hold onto as silence congealed around us.

‘All right, Mr Nosy.’ Mitsuru waved her cigarette. ‘If you must know, at lunchtime, after we’d been rehearsing for a few hours, Jules told me she’d never known anyone to improve as fast as I have. She said her only concern is that I’m being too hard on myself, and that I should stop worrying and take the rest of the day off.’

‘But…that is terrific. Congratulations.’

‘Thank you.’

Surely it wasn’t possible that her strange tone was simply ordinary, uncomplicated drunkenness? I couldn’t quite believe it. Yet I felt a tingle of expectancy along the back of my neck – not the clammy, fearful anticipation that had preceded our latest meetings, but the warm, feather-tipped euphoria I remembered from our early days.

‘Of course Father wasn’t impressed when I got home early,’ Mitsuru continued. ‘He and Daphne were about to head off to Sydney for the concert. Daphne thought I must be sick. She said she’d stay home to look after me. But Father went ballistic. He started yelling that I was a stupid, spoilt girl who didn’t appreciate how lucky I had it.’

So that was it. From everything I knew of her father it made sense: his permanent skulking in the music room; the importance Mitsuru placed on his approval. And now, before she could exceed his own minor achievements, he’d tripped her up.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘That’s fucked. And you know it isn’t true.’
‘Take it easy.’ Mitsuru reached forward to stub out her cigarette and light another, before continuing. ‘When I finally managed to get a word in and tell him what Jules had said, he calmed down. I think he even felt a bit guilty. He actually said he was proud of me. I could hardly believe it – after all the years he took everything good I did for granted. I guess there’s a first time for everything. And of course Daphne was over the moon…’

Mitsuru went on, but I was only half listening. I stared at her flushed cheeks, the casual disarray of her body, the tilt of her head, and wondered why it was so hard to believe that this could be a happy ending. After telling myself for so long that things were bound to improve, why couldn’t I accept that they had, and that here again was the Mitsuru I’d first crossed paths with: wide-eyed, impulsive, intense, contradictory, wonderful?

‘That really is good news,’ I interrupted. ‘But aren’t you a bit worried that…’ Deep breath. ‘Aren’t you worried that getting trashed will ruin things again?’

Mitsuru took another deep drag on her cigarette. Her raised eyebrows and faint smile suggested good-natured puzzlement, as if she thought I was being deliberately obtuse. ‘But that’s just it, Jake. I realised this afternoon, after all this had happened, that it really doesn’t matter, does it? I can’t believe I was so stupid, wasting all that energy on things that aren’t important – not in the long run.’

I had been looking down into what seemed like a bottomless abyss – the fear of her escaping to a new life without me, the fear of who would happen if she didn’t get the opportunity. And now, with those few words, Mitsuru had shown me that I was really only looking down at a puddle, at the reflection of the limitless night sky above.

‘So everything really is okay, then?’

She snorted. ‘Why wouldn’t it be?’

‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to –’
'What’s it got to do with you, anyway?'

‘Huh?’

‘Why is it your problem? Why should you care? You can’t be responsible for anyone’s happiness but your own, right?’

‘Sure, but –’

‘And remember: everything changes.’ The way her voice remained even and mild only made it more disturbing.

This time I didn’t answer. I wanted to shift my position on the couch, but I forced myself to remain still.

‘You haven’t become attached to the nice, sweet reformed Mitsuru, have you?’

So she had guessed. My relief at being exposed eclipsed my fear of the consequences.

‘No, of course not,’ she continued. ‘You don’t get attached to anything or anyone, do you?’

‘Mitsuru, is this really the right time –’

‘But there is no other time.’ Her eyes glittered within the pall of smoke. ‘All we have is this moment. Now. And if I want to mess myself up…’ She shrugged and the mix of scorn and nonchalance was like burning cinders.

‘Okay, sure. I understand you’ve been under a lot of strain lately and –’

‘For fuck’s sake, would you stop being so understanding. I don’t need you to offer excuses for me. Anyway, I’m doing you a favour. You’ve been holding your breath for long enough, I’m sure. It must be a relief to know you were right all along: I am just a fuck-up.’

I wanted to grab her. Shake her. ‘I don’t believe you. You’re not.’

‘That’s very kind of you to say so, Jake.’ She sounded puzzled. ‘But can’t you hear how pathetic you sound? And why should I believe you, after all that stuff about detachment
and…and acceptance. Jesus, I know bullshit when I smell it. Why don’t you just admit it?’

Despite her mild, hardly accusatory tone, I sensed much riding on my response. I was even tempted to insist that I really didn’t mind. (And in truth, I knew I could live with her drunkenness and even her scorn if necessary – if the alternative meant losing her altogether.) But not only was I certain she’d seen through me already, I also suspected that any attempt to deal with the nuances of the situation would only look as if I were trying to dodge the central issue. Already, in the time it took me to process these thoughts, she had leant forward impatiently. At the very least, anyhow, I was determined to prove that I could be detached about my own shortcomings.

‘All right, I admit it. I am a hypocrite.’

Mitsuru laughed sharply. ‘Well, that wasn’t so hard, was it?’ But her voice was strangled and she looked more startled that I’d expected.

‘It isn’t bullshit, though,’ I persevered. ‘At least I don’t think so. I really do believe in it…’

Then I found myself trailing off as her expression changed.

‘Frankly, Jake…’ Her voice cracked. She stopped short. Swallowed. Exhaled. ‘Frankly, that is absolutely, positively, the last thing on earth that I care about right now.’

I hadn’t expected that. Disappointment, yes. Disapproval, maybe. Even disgust. But in the midst of my confusion, one thing was clear: she was hurt and I was the one who had hurt her. Despite all my good intentions, or because of them – the finer details were irrelevant.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said.

‘Whatever.’ Her voice was back under control. ‘Do us both a favour and go.’

I fixed my eyes on the far corner of the room, where a frayed spider’s web trembled in air currents I could not feel, above a shelf of music trophies and framed certificates. I
swallowed the rest of my drink and focussed on the numbness, which was strangely like
pain, spreading further throughout my body with every faraway breath and muffled
heartbeat. Still I hoped for a last-minute reprieve – the faintest, most ambiguous sign that
the situation wasn’t so bad.

I looked back at Mitsuru. She was watching me avidly, hungrily. And then I remembered
Mike’s face that night at the Rising Star when I’d received the note saying STAY AWAY
FROM HER – the night Mitsuru and I had our first falling-out. I remembered the blur of
feelings in his expression, which I had found incomprehensible then, but in hindsight
recognised as the desperate confusion of pain and desire.

I stood up and crossed the room like a sleep-walker, clipping the coffee table. As I
reached the hallway, I heard Mitsuru’s voice behind me. It was enough, even then, to make
me pause. But she was not calling me back. She was singing: a surprisingly steady, even
confident, warble that I recognised, in a heartbeat, as Mimi’s aria from La Bohème. The
theme of the doomed heroine – though in my ears, now, it reeked of juvenile melodrama
and sentimental self-pity.

It followed me down the hall. Even after I stepped outside and pulled the door shut
behind me I couldn’t escape. And I could still hear its echo through the roar of the car
engine; and behind the siren when the police pulled me over for speeding; and in the hiss of
the two-way radio after I failed the breathalyser test.
Thirty-Nine

These are my options…

I paused and stared down at the page with a sense of unpleasant familiarity. I knew already what my options were. Would they ever be any different? Was this what was meant by globalisation: the opportunity to make the same mistakes anywhere in the world?

But these questions were too big, too hard. I pushed them mentally aside and returned to the task at hand, hoping that once on the page the possibilities would make another kind of sense. Or, failing this, that they would at least seem not so intangible, like the Ghost of Relationships Past.

For variety, I began at the bottom of the list:

3 – Hang in there. The obvious, practical alternative. My family could hardly hold my brush with the law against me forever. Soon, I suspected, Brian would get married, and perhaps even move out. If he was right and Mum liked having a bloke around the house, I might be doing her a favour by staying. On the other hand, she might be ready to rediscover her own life – in which case I’d soon have saved enough money to move out again. Either way, I’d manage.

But when I looked up from my desk and around my room, no deep sense of belonging was forthcoming. My wardrobe, my neatly-made bed, my armchair beneath the window, which opened onto a characteristically empty Sunday morning – all these things seemed curiously displaced, like the hotel room in outer space at the end of 2001: A Space Odyssey.

This might, however, have been merely due to my having lain awake all night with the scene at Mitsuru’s playing over and over again in my memory.
I forced my attention back to the list.

2 – *Take first flight back to India*. Unfortunately, the first thing this conjured up was an echo of derisive laughter. But Mitsuru had been right to laugh at me. How quickly I’d forgotten the lessons I learnt at the Centre and let myself believe that romance was more important than anything else. And this was the result. But I could go back to studying the Teachings, give them my full attention this time, maybe even eventually follow Michael’s lead. And over there, people would applaud and encourage my efforts to renounce worldly life, rather than pity me.

A kind of enthusiasm stirred inside me. The knotted strands of confusion and tiredness seemed to loosen and I considered the possibility that what looked like unmitigated disaster was really just the necessary workings of some greater mechanism – destiny, whatever – that had been moving me steadily, for the past six months, towards a life change more radical than I would’ve believed possible.

But there was one more item to add to my list, and the instant it was written I wondered why I’d bothered with the other two. Perhaps just for extra distraction, or in the belief that postponing the inevitable would help me savour it. I could hardly have been hoping to fool myself that other alternatives were available. This was it:

1 – *Trash myself*.

Again, it seemed Mitsuru was right. Why bother travelling overseas to learn to escape yourself the hard way when you could wipe yourself out in the comfort of your own life, more or less instantaneously? Surely this was truly living in the present, letting go…

This revelation was interrupted by a tap at the door.

‘Are you there?’ Mum’s voice was muted. Apparently last night’s shrill anger was abating.

‘There’s a phone call for you.’
I couldn’t stop myself: immediately I imagined Mitsuru ringing to tell me all was forgiven, that it had been a joke gone wrong, or a bizarre misunderstanding we could laugh about together. Even just to heap more abuse on me.

When I opened the door, my mother’s expression was carefully blank.

‘It’s Penny.’

There was an unspoken question here. I realised that she was offering me the opportunity to pretend I was not available. I wasn’t sure why; the name sounded vaguely familiar but I couldn’t quite pin it down. I took the phone automatically, murmured thanks and withdrew into my room.

‘Hello?’

‘Is that you, Jake?’

‘Oh. Hello. Yes, it’s me.’

‘The line seems to have gone bad. I can hardly hear you.’

I was not only having trouble hearing her; I couldn’t seem to form words.

‘Are you still there?’ A note of impatience or frustration entered her voice.

I swallowed and then hauled in a lungful of air. ‘Sorry, I think it’s a relapse of that bug I got in India.’

‘Umm. Well,’ – her tone softened – ‘I shouldn’t disturb you if you’re sick.’

‘No, please, it’s okay.’ I clamped the moulded plastic handset against my ear. ‘It’s nice to hear from you. How are you going?’

‘Good. Well, fairly good. I was just calling to ask if you wanted to catch up. But if you aren’t up to it…’

‘I’m fine. I mean it’s fine with me.’ The pounding in my head was getting louder and faster. ‘When?’
‘I was going to suggest maybe this afternoon. Say two?’

‘Where?’ It was almost a yelp.

‘I don’t know. The Rising Star?’

‘Sure.’

I hung up. Then I realised what I’d let myself in for. Why now? And why, of all places, the Rising Star? At least I couldn’t recall ever going there on Sunday afternoon (we were usually recovering from the night before) and it was unlikely we’d run into anyone we knew. And I had just decided on the importance of being inebriated.

Another bus trip into the city. (My vehicular privileges were, of course, indefinitely suspended.) The journey made no impression – we could have taken a detour through India, for all I noticed. I wasn’t thinking or imagining what might lie ahead, either. I had fallen into that stupor that settles over passengers during the last hours of an intercontinental flight. Nothing registered, not even the desire to be elsewhere.

My daze only started to dissipate as I came within sight of the Rising Star. The street was lined with parked cars. At least a dozen children rushed around in the adjacent empty lot where, on Friday and Saturday nights, music fans overcome with enthusiasm and alcohol often collapsed. From under a temporary awning attached to the side of the pub, a gas barbeque wafted the smell of burning fat and charred onions towards me. And as I trudged closer, I could hear noise emanating through the front wall louder than any rock gig of my experience.

As I pushed through the doors, the sound rose sharply in pitch and intensity – a wave of groans and shouts. I halted just inside to wait for my eyes to adjust before committing myself further. Meanwhile, the noise subsided slightly and I could distinguish individual raised voices in counterpoint with the distinctive bray of TV commentary.
My sight returned. The place was not as packed as I’d ever seen it, but there was a good-sized crowd – mostly male and, apart from a few old-timers in threadbare Sunday suits, mostly wearing T-shirts and shorts. Collectively, these patrons seemed to occupy more space than they actually did.

Everyone was turned towards a giant television screen placed in the corner where the musicians usually set up. Even the barman, neglecting a half-poured beer, had paused to watch the replay of a six-stitcher hurtling in slow motion down the cricket pitch, sighing past the swinging batsman and vanishing into the wicket keeper’s gloves. The debate, on- and off-screen, about whether bat and ball had connected, was fierce. The umpire’s decision was evidently unpopular, and some of the abuse around me was becoming quite inventive.

So much for a dignified reunion. I pulled myself together and pressed further into the crowd, glancing into the darker corners and booths – already half-convinced that Penny must have fled directly upon arrival. And I was aware that I must not stare too hard or too long; the surrounding boisterousness could easily tip over into something less pleasant. I pushed through the excitement, unsure whether to feel relieved or insulted that no one nearby appeared to notice my disdain. As the match continued, half the audience turned back to their beers and companions.

Reaching the corner of the bar, I came face to face with a couple of guys my age dressed in carefully-copied foreign cricket uniforms, their faces caked with shoe polish. One of them caught my eye, grinned and raised his glass. I looked away, back at the TV and recognised the opposing team.

India.

Of course.

In the farthest corner sat Penny. She was wearing her favourite, ragged red T-shirt, which
I had only barely managed to persuade her not to take overseas. Now it struck me as an emblem of our relationship in its happiest days. Her hair was slightly longer and perhaps a shade lighter, but otherwise I could see no change. Her expression, however, verged on terrified.

‘Welcome back to Oz,’ I said, drawing nearer.

She rose from her chair, and as we hugged briefly, from the other side of the room another shout went up.

‘I’d forgotten…’ She trailed off, her gaze flickering past my shoulder.

‘Would a beer help?’

She shook her head. Getting smashed would have to wait, then. I sat down on the vinyl-covered chair opposite.

Up close I was even more struck by how little her appearance had altered. There was the same lick of freckles across her high cheeks, the same small hollows around her collarbone, the same solidity in her posture. I wasn’t sure what I’d expected to see, but it wasn’t there. Penny looked healthy and attractive as always, and yet my heart did not turn somersaults but stayed resolutely in its place.

‘Are you feeling better?’ she asked.

I nodded. ‘And you? How’s the settling-in?’

‘The strangest thing’ – she opened her hands on the table in a noncommittal gesture – ‘is that everything feels really…normal.’

The noise and activity in the rest of the pub seemed to fold in upon themselves. The seconds trickled by. Penny coughed and shifted in her chair.

‘I just wanted to say thank you, in person, for all the support you gave me.’

‘I see.’ I didn’t know how I knew, but she was lying. ‘You’re welcome.’
‘I mean it, Jake. I’m not talking about the money, although I haven’t forgotten that and I’ll pay you back as soon as I can. I mean I was so confused, it can’t have been easy for you.’

‘I’m glad you’ve sorted things out.’

She looked away, tugging imperiously at a strand of hair.

I’d hoped to feel more satisfied. For the first time since our separation, I sensed I was in control of the situation between us. The power to care or be indifferent was mine. The trouble was I found it hard to connect the person in front of me with the tantalising spectre that had hung just out of reach in a cloud of happy memories for so long. All I could see was an unhappy stranger whom I had no interest in tormenting.

‘Sorry,’ I added. ‘That was rude. And I’m sorry I didn’t get in touch as soon as you got back. I’ve been…busy.’

A faint smile. ‘How are things with Mitsuru?’ She pronounced the name phonetically – Mit-soo-roo – the way I had before I’d heard it spoken.

‘Fine. Yeah, very well.’ The reply slid out smoothly and naturally.

And what did it matter, one way or the other?

The smile tightened fractionally. ‘I could tell, as soon as you started writing to me about her, that you two were right for one another.’

I coughed to disguise my wince. The unintentional nature of the cruelty only made it worse.

‘You must be missing Arjuna,’ I said. ‘When does he get here?’

Another long pause.

‘I don’t know,’ she said at last. ‘We had a fight just before I left. A bad one.’

‘They do happen, you know.’ I did my best to ignore the sudden weight in my chest.

‘That doesn’t mean…’
'Of course not. No, we’ve had plenty before. And he wrote as soon as I’d gone, apologizing and telling me how much he cares. I’m sure he’s genuine.’ She leant on the edge of the table. ‘But on Friday I got another letter. He’s having trouble getting a visa. Apparently there’s a problem with his paperwork – I’m not sure exactly what; it didn’t make much sense. But there’s always a problem over there. You know what it’s like.’

‘Sure. Roll out the red tape.’

‘Probably he just hasn’t paid the right people. Anyway, he says he’ll sort it out as quick as he can. I guess it’s just a matter of waiting.’

‘Right, definitely.’ I tried to sound sincere.

Penny grimaced. ‘I didn’t mean to dump all that onto you. My apologies, you’re the last person who should have to put up with this. It’s just that no one else has any idea what I’m talking about, half the time.’

‘It’s not their fault,’ I suggested. ‘It isn’t real to them.’

‘I guess. But I feel better for talking about it, thanks. I’m probably just being stupid.’ She sighed and glanced morosely over my shoulder again before peering back into my face.

‘What’s up?’

‘You really want to know? All right, I was thinking how often I’d imagined this scenario: you feeling confused and out-of-place, and me the only one who could begin to understand. And now here we are, it’s perfect – except that it’s not the same.’

Penny seemed surprised. Then she rubbed her forehead. ‘It’ll be so much easier once Arj meets you and realises what a wonderful person you are and that that he’s got nothing to worry about.’

‘Him worry?’ Either the noise in the pub had risen or my ears were playing up again. I couldn’t have heard properly.
‘What do you think our fight was about?’ She clapped her hands in exasperation – a habit of hers I’d forgotten. ‘That’s the reason I didn’t get in touch with you as soon as I got back, and why I was relieved when you didn’t contact me. He’s jealous of you, Jake.’

What kind of bad joke was this? ‘Can’t you just tell him the truth?’

‘The truth? What truth?’

‘That you had every reason to dump me and none at all to get back together. That I’m not relationship material.’

Now she was twining her fingers together. ‘You don’t seriously believe that. Do you?’

I couldn’t seem to move or speak.

‘Listen, Jake, I knew you’d be great relationship material. I knew we could have had a good, lasting partnership. Don’t you see? – that’s what made it so hard.’

‘But –’

‘I knew how much I was risking. And then when you were so supportive after we separated – so much better than I had any right to expect – it made the decision even harder. I explained that to Arj, right from the start. In fact, I thought that would be enough to turn him off completely. Then I was so awful to him, making him put up with all my doubts. No wonder he lost patience sometimes – though that didn’t make it any easier, either.’

‘I still don’t get it.’ I was glad I hadn’t bought a beer. I felt queasy enough, as if I’d fallen off one showground ride and into another. ‘If I was so goddam terrific, then why…?’

My voice quivered and broke like a schoolboy’s.

‘Does it matter?’ Penny squinted at me. ‘It’s over and done with, right? We should be focussing on now.’

‘I’m sick of now!’ The words escaped before I had time to think. Seconds later I was almost certain that no answer she might give could provide solace or satisfaction. I should
have quit six months ago, at the start of this losing streak, when I was only slightly behind.

‘I’m sure you’re right,’ I continued, astonishing myself with how calmly and deliberately I was still capable of sounding. ‘But, as you say, what difference could talking make? It won’t affect your new relationship, will it?’

Slowly, Penny exhaled. ‘Sorry, I’m a bit freaked out. I guess it’s just jet lag and reverse culture shock. I can’t imagine how you managed back here alone. Mitsuru must have been a great help.’

The truth caught me like the edge of a door slammed on a finger. Yes, Mitsuru had been a great help. Right from the start, when I imagined, in my need for validation, that I was helping her. Even her scepticism had been a form of encouragement: a chance to prove myself, which I had ultimately wasted.

This was no real news, merely the cold fact I had been trying to dodge since the previous night. But then a new, even less pleasant thought occurred to me.

‘Are you saying that’s why you got serious with Arj? That if I hadn’t gotten involved with Mitsuru…?’

Penny blinked. Perhaps she was simply absorbing the proper pronunciation of Mitsuru’s name. Probably her hesitation lasted no more than a few seconds, though to me it seemed a very long time.

‘No, I don’t think so,’ Penny murmured. ‘By then it didn’t make a difference. I already knew my feelings for Arj were serious, and I had told him so before your news arrived – luckily, or he might have convinced himself he was only the booby prize.’

But I could see she wasn’t satisfied with this explanation, and a moment later she added, ‘All right, maybe your feelings for Mitsuru had some influence. I mean it’s not as if I didn’t see that coming. But give me some credit, Jake. It wasn’t the most important issue.’
‘Okay.’ My head felt suddenly much clearer, as if everything unnecessary had been expunged. ‘Then why, Penny? If I was so good to begin with, and you say I improved afterwards, why wasn’t I worth making the effort for?’

Penny was breathing heavily now, and I noticed the silvery-dark sheen under her eyes and the blotchy skin around her jaw. ‘Maybe this meeting wasn’t a good idea. I think I should go.’

‘Sure, no worries. You’re feeling better about your problems and now you can piss off again without any proper explanation, until next time you need me.’ I suspected I might be speaking louder than necessary, but I didn’t care. ‘You were never in love with me. It’s that simple, isn’t it? Why don’t you admit it?’ I paused, struck by the phrase, which sounded strangely familiar.

‘I thought I was,’ Penny said, barely above a whisper.

‘You thought?’ I laughed bitterly. ‘Pardon my ignorance, but am I missing an important distinction between thinking you are, and actually being in love?’

‘Listen, Jake.’ She straightened. ‘The feelings I had for you – whatever you want to call them – they simply weren’t strong enough to cope.’

I tried to form the question, but my voice had gone again.

‘At least with Arj I know where I stand. I know how much our relationship means to him.’

‘But…I loved you.’

‘Please, Jake.’ Her tone was somewhere between a plea and a command, like a parent cajoling a disobedient child. ‘Why are you telling me this now? And don’t say that I knew. Maybe I did. But even when we were together, it was like you weren’t really there.’

‘Go on,’ I said.
‘At first I thought it was the band and the stress of that falling apart after all your effort. When I suggested that the two of us get away somewhere totally separate from our old lives, I was hoping we’d finally have a chance to really enjoy each other’s company. But instead…’

She raised one hand to her eyes.

‘I was trying to deal with everything that had to be dealt with. And we were just getting the hang of it, and then I thought you’d gotten sick of my company.’

‘It wasn’t your company I was sick of, Jake. It was your absence.’

Unfortunately, it did make a kind of sense. Enough to make me think I would have preferred the situation to remain utterly incomprehensible.

‘But what about all the changes I made?’

‘What changes, Jake? You were always a decent, caring person. But that self-improvement, enlightenment stuff seemed like an excuse to withdraw even more. You acted like us separating was the best thing that could have happened; then you left and got on with your life.’

She didn’t sound angry or accusatory but sad, which only made the whole scenario feel much worse. But I suddenly spotted the giant flaw in her story – the way to turn my own sense of guilt and shame into righteous indignation.

‘That isn’t fair. You accuse me of not communicating properly, but you left me to guess what the problem was and what to do about it.’

‘I tried, I really did. But I couldn’t tell you straight out. It would have felt like I was demanding that you be more affectionate or demonstrative or whatever. I needed you to do it because you wanted to; because being with me made you want to. You’re right, I was being unfair. I should have been happy with you as you were. And when I said we needed a break, it wasn’t to make you change. I was hoping that some time apart would put things
back in perspective for me; that it would help me remember all your good points and realise I was being over-critical.’

‘Oh,’ I said.

‘Of course I never doubted that you cared about me and liked being in a relationship with me. And I wanted that to be enough – I really did – because I did love you.’ She frowned, squared her shoulders and stared at me defiantly. ‘To be honest, when Arj and I first got together, it was only because I persuaded myself that I needed a bad experience to make me realise how good I had it with you. Obviously that was just a stupid rationalisation, but… What’s wrong?’

I opened my mouth to insist that I was okay, but what emerged was a ragged sob. Tears were sliding down my cheeks.

‘I’m sorry, Jake.’ Penny’s resolute posture now looked awkward and strained. ‘I didn’t mean to… I thought, since you asked… Oh, shit.’ She reached across the table and placed a hand on my shoulder.

When I was able to speak again, I said ‘It’s not your fault. It’s just ironic. I’m too tepid to make you happy, but that’s still enough to comprehensively fuck up Mitsuru.’

‘But you said…’ Her eyes widened. ‘God, is it that bad?’

As my sobs petered out into hiccups, a shaven-headed man with shoulders like legs of lamb leaned over from a nearby table. ‘Never mind, mate. There’s still the middle order. They’ll pull us through.’

I nodded dumbly, which seemed to reassure him, and I felt a little better myself. I turned back to Penny.

‘When I told you everything was fine, I meant fine in the sense of “couldn’t get any worse”. I’ve been using it in that sense a lot lately. Actually, ever since we separated.’
For a while, neither of us said anything. I blew my nose and wiped my eyes. Penny seemed deep in thought. Eventually she shook her head.

‘I can’t believe I didn’t realise sooner.’

I attempted a wry grin. ‘You had help from an expert.’

‘Why couldn’t you show me this part of you earlier? That’s all it would’ve taken.’

‘That’s all?’

Penny made an uneasy gesture.

It was all the encouragement I needed. ‘Did you really only get involved with Arjuna because you thought it wouldn’t work?’

Penny withdrew her hand from my shoulder. ‘That’s what I told myself.’ She leant back in her chair. ‘For self-protection, I guess.’

I swallowed, took a deep breath and forced myself to speak slowly and clearly. I didn’t think I could bear to repeat myself. ‘But what if you and Arj don’t work out? Would you consider trying again with me?’

Penny blinked, looked away then back at me. I wished I could understand what was going through her mind, although it was enough that she did not appear either appalled or offended. ‘I don’t know, Jake.’

‘All right, that isn’t a no. So it’s still a possibility.’ The words rushed out. ‘You don’t have to decide right away.’

Then she seemed to take hold of herself. ‘What are you doing, Jake? Maybe it was my fault last time, but don’t you understand you’re asking for the same thing again?’ For the first time I could hear resentment and anger. ‘No. It is not still a possibility. I thought it might be, when we first separated. But not now.’

‘How can you be so sure?’
‘It isn’t just that I’ve made a commitment to Arj. The truth is, the way I feel about him—I’ve never felt like this about anyone else. I can’t explain it and I know it doesn’t make sense and I’m sure you and I would have a better chance in a lot of ways. But none of that matters. I can’t think about the possibility of him and me not being together.’

I nodded. There was no recourse beyond this. Then, cruelly, I said ‘That doesn’t mean it will work.’

‘No, it doesn’t,’ she agreed without rancour. She hesitated, then continued: ‘There’s another thing now, too. I don’t know…I don’t know how it will affect the situation. But I found out this week that I’m pregnant.’

‘I see. Well, congratulations. Oh shit.’ I closed my eyes and laid my head on the cool linoleum table-top. The reek of commercial detergent and dead cigarettes stung my nostrils and the back of my throat, and I inhaled hungrily, relieved to find anything so unambiguous.

When I looked up again at Penny, she hadn’t moved. Even her expression remained calm and blank. But I could guess what she was thinking.

‘So even if you wanted to go back…’ I began – not out of cruelty this time, but simply because I understood that while my hardships were petering out, hers were only beginning.

‘Yeah.’ She found the loose strand of hair again. ‘Anyway, what about you?’

‘What about me? All things considered, I guess I’m okay.’

‘Of course you’re okay, for goodness’ sake. That’s not the point.’

I waited.

‘When you were crying, who were you crying for? Who really?’

‘For myself, really, I suppose.’

‘God, you’re obtuse.’ She screwed up her face, but for the first time since we’d started talking there was a trace of amusement, even fondness, in her voice. ‘I mean, who about?’
Me? Or Mitsuru?'

I didn’t even need to think about it.

Penny nodded. ‘You have changed. I realise that now. You could never let go and show your emotions like that when we were together. And be honest, Jake: even if we got back together, wouldn’t you always be thinking about her?’

‘You’re being romantic. Life isn’t that simple.’

‘No, life isn’t simple. But some things are.’ She looked me straight in the eye with a directness that was sympathetic but also scary, and made me realise that despite appearances she too had changed. ‘I’m not asking you who’s the logical choice, or the easy choice, or who you feel you ought to choose.’

The pain was still there, but I could put it aside like the dregs at the bottom of a glass. ‘All right, I get your point.’

Penny gulped as if I’d punched her.

‘Fuck you, Jake,’ she said, hardly above a whisper. Then louder: ‘Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you! You don’t get it at all.’

I was paralysed. All I could do was watch as she stood and pushed towards the door. No one else was taking any notice. Things were happening on TV, and suddenly they were all going wild.
Mitsuru’s mother squared her shoulders and settled herself behind the half-open door, without removing her hand from the inside handle. Her face showed no traces of her past friendliness.

‘I’m warning you, Jake.’

‘Please, Mrs Childers.’ I heard the taxi turning in the street behind me, probably heading back to the Rising Star or another pub to wait for drunken cricket fans. ‘I just need a few words with her.’

‘I think you’ve done enough damage. I’m not saying you were entirely to blame, but if you don’t leave now, I’ll have to call the police.’

‘I’d rather you didn’t. I’ve already been charged once in the last twenty-four hours. But I’m not going. I have to talk to Mitsuru.’

Her eyes narrowed.

But she didn’t move.

‘I don’t know what happened, Jake, but you hurt her badly. She needs time – I think you both need time – to think things over and calm down.’

I nodded, amazed at how carefully we were both speaking. The conversation resembled a tap dance in a minefield. ‘I didn’t mean to hurt her and I wouldn’t have come back if I didn’t think there was a chance to make amends. But I believe there’s been a misunderstanding. I think I might have given her the wrong impression about my feelings.’

Mitsuru’s mother frowned and shuffled an inch forward, narrowing the gap between door and frame. ‘I believe you mean well. But I don’t think you have any idea how fragile
Mitsuru is. What an awful condition she’s in.’ Her voice wavered and I saw how frightened
she was. Yet a moment later she continued more or less evenly ‘And I can tell you, if it
hasn’t occurred to you already, if you’re wrong you’ll ruin any chance you might have had.’

It had occurred to me. It was all I could think about on the way here. But hearing her say
it made me feel far, far worse.

‘You may be right. I don’t know. I do know that you only get so many chances, though I
don’t think anyone knows in advance how many. But if I have a chance, even if it’s only
remote, and I don’t use it, who’s to guarantee I’ll ever get another one?’

I cast my mind around desperately in search of more to say, to make the most of this gap.
I suspected there were any number of further questions to answer and issues to address –
especially after last night – that would have to be faced at some point. But right now this
was as much as I understood, and if this didn’t turn the tide, nothing would.

Already evening shadows were deepening in the corners of the covered entrance where I
stood. A strange heaviness hovered over the neighbourhood. It was not quite silence, for I
could make out, faintly, more cricket commentary from a radio or TV nearby. It was more
like the rumble of far-off surf – the murmur of thousands upon thousands of people
assiduously minding their own business and trying to convince themselves that the weekend
hadn’t ended yet.

‘I’m sorry, Jake.’ Mitsuru’s mother raised her free hand in a warding-off movement. ‘But I
can’t risk upsetting her any more.’

‘Couldn’t I at least try to explain to you?’ I couldn’t stop myself, though I was sure I was
only making things worse.

Down the hallway, a door creaked. Mitsuru’s mother turned, still keeping hold of the half-
open front door. The dimness inside made the pebbled glass opaque and reflective; all I
could see was part of my fragmented silhouette outlined by the bright driveway behind me. However, the heaviness of the approaching footfalls told me this was not Mitsuru, and my last hopes sputtered and evaporated like water droplets on a hotplate as I realised who the new arrival must be.

The troubled glance that Mitsuru’s mother gave me as she shuffled to one side did nothing to reassure me. Yet when I ignored the churning in my stomach and looked directly at Mitsuru’s father, he presented a less than monstrous figure: a little below average height, slightly pudgy, neat black hair streaked with grey. As with Mitsuru’s mother, there was little evidence of the Asian half of his heritage. It was hard to imagine that this unprepossessing couple possessed the genetic make-up capable of producing someone like their daughter.

‘And who might this be?’ He spoke hardly above a murmur, his voice mild and distracted.

‘It’s all right, Frank,’ Mitsuru’s mother began.

‘I’m Jake.’ I couldn’t avoid sounding as though it were an admission of guilt.

‘Jake?’ He seemed to chew on the name and I waited for the flash of recognition that would earn me a restraining order, if not worse. ‘Well, this is a treat. How nice to finally meet you. I’m Mr Childers.’ There was no change in either his tone or his abstracted expression – which suddenly reminded me of the kind of expression I’d often seen in India on long-term students at the Centre.

Was it possible? Was Mitsuru’s portrait of the vile tempered, impossibly demanding maverick a wild misrepresentation? Or did he simply not know about what had happened? In either case, perhaps I did still have a chance.

‘It’s good to meet you, too,’ I said, trying even harder to keep the desperation out of my voice.

‘How lucky you’ve turned up,’ he continued as though he hadn’t heard me. ‘It seems we
had an incident – a little bit of an upset – here last night.’ His eyes seemed to fix on me more closely, though he still sounded as if he might be discussing share prices or fishing conditions.

Beside him, Mitsuru’s mother remained motionless. No help there.

I nodded. ‘Yes, I know.’

‘And you’ve come to apologise and clear the matter up?’

‘I hope so.’

‘You hope so. Well, that is good news, isn’t it, Mother?’ He didn’t look at his wife nor seem surprised by her lack of response. ‘Being older people, we wouldn’t presume to understand these matters, and I imagine you’d prefer not to discuss them with anyone but the other party. So I suppose the best thing we can do would be to step aside and let love find a way.’

As he beamed in evident satisfaction at this summary, I saw where Mitsuru had inherited both her scepticism and her sarcasm from. I was feeling so frustrated, I wanted to yell at him to stop playing mind games; that this was serious. Which I now understood was exactly what he hoped I’d do.

‘I’m afraid it’s more complicated than that,’ I ventured, offering a polite half-smile.

‘Oh, nonsense!’ His smile broadened into almost a grimace, his tone growing abrasively cheerful. ‘I am sure the complications are only superficial. I would hate to think you were one of those cynical, disillusioned young people who –’

‘That’s enough, Father.’

Her voice was barely more than a whisper. I might have wondered whether I’d imagined it, except that Mitsuru’s mother wheeled around. Mr Childers, still with that smile plastered across his face, continued talking – something about how he might have to reconsider the
situation in light of my disappointing attitude.

I was no longer paying attention.

I still couldn’t see further along the hallway, and Mitsuru’s mother was clinging to the other side of the front door like someone at risk of being swept away by flood waters. I could hear the strain in her voice when she said, ‘Please, Mitsuru．’

Then I heard Mitsuru’s voice again: ‘I said that’s enough, Father．’

Mitsuru’s father stopped. He turned his head towards the same point at which his wife was looking. ‘Mitsuru, how lovely of you to grace us with your presence. You don’t look well, though, my dear. I’m afraid we’ve disturbed you from your sick-bed. Luckily, there’s someone here who has the answer to all your problems．’

‘It’s all right, darling,’ Mitsuru’s mother said. ‘You should go back to bed．’

‘Well, my dear．’ Mr Childers raised his shoulders. ‘Mother has spoken．’

‘Thank you both for trying to help,’ Mitsuru’s voice was stronger. ‘But I think I can handle this．’

‘Did you hear me, Mitsuru?’ Now, for the first time, Mr Childers raised his voice. ‘Did you hear what your mother said?’

I could not see the look that passed between them. But then Mitsuru’s father said, ‘Mitsuru, if you refuse to obey, you will be turning your back on your parents. Is that clear?’

‘Frank,’ Mitsuru’s mother said.

‘Yes, Father. It is clear．’

No one spoke for several seconds.

Then Mr Childers turned far enough back in my direction for me to see his face again. His expression was as affable as before. He raised an eyebrow at his wife and said in his former, mild tone, ‘Well, Mother, I don’t see why we shouldn’t let him have her. In fact, it will be a
relief. We’ve done our best but it’s obvious we wasted our time. There’s no sense in putting up with any more of this. She’ll never come to anything.’

He turned and ambled out of sight down the hallway. Several seconds later a door creaked and then clicked into place. Mitsuru’s mother continued to look in that direction for a moment longer, before gazing back at me. Before she could say anything, I pushed past her and into the hallway.

At the far end of the corridor, Mitsuru stood in front of her bedroom door. She was still dressed in her recital gown, and I tried not to look too hard at several large stains down the front. Her face was pallid and drawn; her hair stuck out in all directions; her sideways stoop was more pronounced than I’d ever seen it.

As I advanced down the hallway she stared at me without discernible emotion. But as I got closer she shuffled backwards into her room. I hesitated in the doorway. The room was dark – the curtains were drawn and the lights were off – which emphasised the familiar, rank smell of smoke, perspiration and vomit. I could just make out Mitsuru’s shadowy form as she lowered herself onto the edge of the bed.

‘Make yourself at home,’ she said in a voice that was surprisingly firm, with an edge of mockery.

I stepped inside and closed the door behind me.

‘I heard what you said,’ she added as I turned back towards her.

‘Good.’

‘Listen, Jake. If I gave you the impression that I blame you for messing things up for me, I apologise. But I’m not interested in being rescued. I don’t want to be your charity case.’

‘What makes you think I’m so charitable? I’m here for my sake, not yours.’

‘What’s in it for me, then?’
And then I was looking at the dark shape upon the dark background and telling her how much she meant to me, and how I was afraid I hadn’t done a very good job of showing it so far, and that I might not be expressing myself well because it’s the first time I’ve ever said anything like this, but I’ll do better from now on if she gives me another chance.

And then I know I got something right.

The End