

Man-Eating Cats

by Haruki Murakami
Translated by Philip Gabriel

I bought a newspaper at the harbor and came across an article about an old woman who had been eaten by cats. She was seventy years old and lived alone in a small suburb of Athens -- a quiet sort of life, just her and her three cats in a small one-room apartment. One day, she suddenly keeled over face down on the sofa -- a heart attack, most likely. Nobody knew how long it had taken for her to die after she collapsed. The old woman didn't have any relatives or friends who visited her regularly, and it was a week before her body was discovered. The windows and door were closed, and the cats were trapped. There wasn't any food in the apartment. Granted, there was probably something in the fridge, but cats haven't evolved to the point where they can open refrigerators. On the verge of starvation, they were forced to devour their owner's flesh.

I read this article to Izumi, who was sitting across from me. On sunny days, we'd walk to the harbor, buy a copy of the Athens English-language newspaper, and order coffee at the cafe next door to the tax office, and I'd summarize in Japanese anything interesting I might come across. That was the extent of our daily schedule on the island. If something in a particular caught our interest, we'd bat around opinions for a while, Izumi's English was pretty fluent, and she could easily have read the articles herself. But I never once saw her pick up a paper.

"I like to have someone to read to me," she explained. "It's been my dream ever since.

I was a child -- to sit in a sunny place, gaze at the sky or the sea, and have someone read aloud to me. I don't care what they read -- a newspaper, a textbook, a novel. It doesn't matter. But no one's ever read to me before. So I suppose that means you're making up for all those lost opportunities. Besides, I love your voice."

We had the sky and the sea there, all right. And I enjoyed reading aloud. When I lived in Japan, I used to read picture books aloud to my son. Reading aloud is different from just sentences with your eyes. Something quite unexpected wells up in your mind, a kind of indefinable resonance that I find impossible to resist.

Taking the occasional sip of bitter coffee, I slowly read the article to Izumi. I'd read a few lines to myself, mull over how to put them into Japanese, then translate aloud. A few bees popped up from somewhere to lick the jam that a previous customer spilled on the table. They spent a moment lapping it up, then, as if suddenly remembering something, flew into the air with a ceremonious buzz, circled the table a couple of times, and then -- again as if something had jogged their memory -- settled once more on the tabletop. After I had finished reading the whole article, Izumi sat there, unmoving, elbow resting on the table. She put the tips of the fingers of her right hand against those of her left to form a tent. I rested the paper on my lap and gazed at her slim hands. She looked at me through the spaces between her fingers.

"Then what happened?" she asked.

"That's it" I replied, and folded up the paper. I took a handkerchief out of my pocket and wiped the flecks of coffee grounds off my lips. "At least, that's all it says."

"But what happened to The cats?"

I stuffed the handkerchief back in my pocket. "I have no idea. It doesn't say."

Izumi pursed her lips to one side, her own little habit. Whenever she was about to give an opinion ? which always took the form of a mini-declaration ? she pursed her lips like that, as if she were yanking a bed sheet to smooth out a stray wrinkle. When I first met her, I found this habit quite charming.

"Newspapers are all the same, no matter where you go," she finally announced. "They never tell you what you really want to know."

She took a Salem out of its box, put it in her mouth, and struck a match. Every day, she smoked one pack of Salem -- no more, no less. She'd open a new pack in the morning x and smoke it up by the end of the day. I didn't smoke. My wife had made me quit, five years earlier, when she was pregnant.

"What I really want to know," Izumi began, the smoke from her cigarette silently curling up into the air, "is what happened to the cats afterward. Did the authorities kill them because they'd eaten human flesh? Or did they say, 'Yon guys have had a tough time of it,' give them a pat on the head, and send them on their way? What do you think?"

I gazed at the bees hovering over the table and thought about it. For a fleeting instant; the restless little bees licking up the jam and the three cats devouring the old woman's flesh became one in my mind. A distant seagulls shrill squawk overlapped the buzzing of the bees, and for a second or two my consciousness strayed on the border between reality and the unreal. Where was I? What was I doing here? I couldn't get a purchase on the situation. I took a deep breath, gazed up at the sky, and turned to Izumi.

"I have no idea."

"Think about it. If you were that town's mayor or chief of police, what would you do with those cats?"

"How about putting them in an institution to reform them?" I said. "Turn them into vegetarians."

Izumi didn't laugh. She took a drag on her cigarette and ever slowly let out a stream of smoke. "That story reminds me of a lecture I heard just after I started at my Catholic junior high school. Did I tell you I went to a very strict Catholic school? Just after the entrance ceremony, one of the head nuns had us all assemble in an auditorium, and then she went up to the podium and gave a talk about Catholic doctrine. She told us a lot of things, but what I remember most ? actually, the only thing I remember ? is this story about being shipwrecked on a desert island with a cat."

"Sound interesting," I said.

"'You're in a shipwreck,' she told us. 'The only ones who make it to the lifeboat are you and a cat. You land on some nameless desert island, and there's nothing there to eat. All you have is enough water and dry biscuit to sustain one person for about ten days.' She said, 'All right, everyone, I'd like you to imagine yourselves in this situation. Close your eyes and try to picture it. You alone on the desert island, just you and the cat. You have almost no food at all. Do you understand? You're hungry, thirsty, and eventually you'll die. What should you do? Should you share your meagre store of food with the cat? No you should not. That would be a mistake. You are all precious beings, chosen by God, and the cat is not. That's why you should eat all the food yourself.' The nun gave us this deadly serious look. I was a bit shocked. What could possibly be the point of telling a story like that to kids who'd just started at the school? I thought, Whoa, what kind of place have I got myself into?"

Izumi and I were living in an efficiency apartment on a small Greek island. It was off-season, and the island wasn't exactly a tourist spot, so the rent was cheap. Neither of us had heard of this island before we got there. It lay near the border of Turkey, and on clear days you could just make out the green Turkish mountains. On windy days, the locals joked, you could smell the shish kebab. All joking aside, our island was closer to the Turkish shore than to the next closest Greek island, and there -- looming right before our eyes -- was Asia Minor.

In the town square, there was a statue of a hero of Greek independence. He had led an insurrection on the Greek mainland and planned an uprising against the Turks, who controlled the island then. But the Turk captured him and put him to death. They set up a sharpened stake in the square beside the harbor, stripped the hapless hero naked, and lowered him onto it. The weight of his body drove the stake through his anus and then the rest of his body until it finally came out of his mouth -- an incredibly slow, excruciating way to die. The statue was erected on the spot where this was supposed to have happened. When it was first built, it must have been impressive, but now, what with the sea wind, dust, and seagull droppings, you could barely make out the man's features. The locals hardly gave the shabby statue a passing glance, and for his part the hero looked as though he'd turned his back on the people, the island, the world.

When Izumi and I sat at our outdoor cafe, drinking coffee or beer, aimlessly gazing at the boat in the harbor and at the far-off Turkish hills, we were sitting at the edge of Europe. The wind was the wind at the edge of the world. An inescapable retro color filled the place. It made me feel as if I were being quietly swallowed up by an alien reality, something foreign and just out of reach, vague yet strangely gentle. And the shadow of that substance colored the faces, the eyes, the skin of the people gathered in the harbor.

At times, I couldn't grasp the fact that I was part of this scene. No matter how much I took in the scenery around me, no matter how much I breathed in the air, there was no organic connection between me and all this.

Two months before, I had been living with my wife and our four-year-old son in a three-bedroom apartment in Unoki, in Tokyo. Not a spacious place, just your basic, functional apartment. My wife and I had our own bedroom, so did our son, and the remaining room served as my study. The apartment was quiet, with a nice view. On weekends, the three of us would take walks along the banks of the Tama River. In spring, the cherry trees by the river

would blossom, and I'd put my son on the back of my bike, and we'd go off to watch the Tokyo Giants Triple A team in spring training.

I worked at a medium-sized design company that specialized in book and magazine layouts. Calling me a "designer" makes it sound more than it was, since the work was fairly cut-and-dried. Nothing flamboyant or imaginative. Most of the time, our schedule was a bit too hectic, and several times a month I had to pull an all-nighter at the office. Some of the work bored me to tears. Still, I didn't mind the job, and the company was a relaxed place. Because I had seniority, I was able to pick and choose my assignment and say pretty much whatever wanted to. My boss was O.K., and I got along with my co-workers. And the salary wasn't half bad. So if nothing had happened, I probably would have stayed with the company for the foreseeable future. And my life, like the Moldau River -- or, more precisely, the nameless water that makes up the Moldau River -- would have continued to flow, ever so swiftly; into the sea.

But then I met Izumi.

Izumi was ten years younger than I was. We met at a business meeting. Something clicked between us the first time we laid eyes on each other. Not the kind of thing that happens all that often. We met a couple of times after that, to go over the details of our joint project. I'd go to her offices or she'd drop by mine. Our meetings were always short, other people were involved, and it was basically all business. When our project was finished, though, a terrible loneliness swept over me; as if something absolutely vital had been forcibly snatched from my grasp. I hadn't felt like that in years. And I think she felt the same way.

A week later, she phoned my office about some minor matter and we chatted for a bit. I told a joke, and she laughed. "Want to go out for a drink?" I asked. We went to a small bar and had a few drinks. I can't recall exactly what we talked about, but we found a million topics and could have talked forever. With a laserlike clarity, I could grasp everything she wanted to say. And things I couldn't explain well to anyone else came across to her with an exactness that took me by surprise. We were both married, with no major complaints about our married lives. We loved our spouses and respected them. Still, this was on the order of a minor miracle ? running across someone to whom you can express your feeling so clearly, so completely. Most people go their entire lives without meeting a person like that. It would have been a mistake to label this "love". It was more like total empathy.

We started going out regularly for drinks. Her husband's job kept him out late, so she was free to come and go as she pleased. When got together, though, the time just flew by. We'd look at our watches and discover that we could barely make the last train. It was always hard for me to say goodbye. There was so much more we wanted to tell each other.

Neither one of us lured the other to bed, but we did start sleeping together. We'd both been faithful to our spouses up to that point, but somehow we didn't feel guilty, for the simple reason that we had to do it. Undressing her, caressing her skin, holding her close, slipping inside her, coming -- it was all just a natural extension of our conversations. So natural that our lovemaking was not a source of heartrending physical pleasure; it was just a calm, pleasant act, stripped of all pretense. Best of all were our quiet talks in bed after sex. I'd hold

her naked body close, and she'd curl up in my arms, and we'd whisper secrets in our own private language.

We met whenever we could. Strangely enough, or perhaps not so strangely, we were absolutely convinced that our relationship could go on forever, or married lives on one side of the equation, our own relationship on the other, with no problems arising. We were convinced that our affair would never come to light. Sure we had sex, but how was that hurting anyone? On night when I slept with Izumi, I'd get home late and have to make up some lie to tell my wife, and I did feel a pang of conscience, but it never seemed to be an actual betrayal. Izumi and I had a strictly compartmentalized yet totally intimate relationship.

And if nothing had happened, maybe we would have continued like that forever, sipping our vodka-and-tonics, slipping between the sheets whenever we could. Or maybe we would have got tired of lying to our spouses and decided to let the affair die a natural death so that we could return to comfortable little life styles. Either way, I don't think things would have turned out badly. I can't prove it; I just have that feeling. But a twist of fate -- inevitable, in retrospect -- intervened, and Izumi's husband got wind of our affair. After grilling her, he barged into my home, totally out of control. As luck would have it, my wife was alone at the time, and the whole thing turned ugly. When I got home, she demanded that I explain what was going on. Izumi had already admitted everything, so I couldn't very well make up some story. I told my wife exactly what happened. "It's not like I'm in love," I explained. "It's a special relationship, but completely different from what I have with von. Like night and day. You haven't detected anything going on, right? That proves it's not the kind of affair you're imagining."

But my wife refused to listen. It was a shock, and she froze and literally wouldn't speak another word to me. The next day, she packed all her things in the car and drove to her parents' place, in Chigasaiki, taking our son with her. I called a couple of times, but she wouldn't come to the phone. Her father came on instead. "I don't want to hear any of your lame excuse," he warned, "and there's no way I'm going to let my daughter go back to a bastard like you." He'd been dead set against our marriage from the start, and his tone of voice said he'd finally been proved right.

At a complete loss, I took a few days off and just lay forlornly alone in bed. Izumi phoned me. She was alone, too. Her husband had left her, as well, but not before slapping her around a bit. He had taken a pair of scissors to every stitch of clothing she owned. From her overcoat to her underwear, it all lay in tatters. She had no idea where he had gone. "I'm exhausted," she said. "I don't know what to do. Everything is ruined, and it'll never be the same again. He's never coming back." She sobbed over the phone. She and her husband had been high-school sweethearts. I wanted to comfort her, but what could I possibly say?

"Let's go somewhere and have a drink," she finally suggested. We went to Shibuya and drank until dawn at an all-night bar. Vodka gimlet for me, Daiquiris for her. I lost track of how much we drank. For the first time since we'd met, we didn't have much to say. At dawn, we worked off the liquor by walking over to Harajuku, where we had coffee and breakfast at a Denny's. That's when she brought up the idea of going to Greece.

"Greece?" I asked,

"We can't very well stay in Japan," she said, looking deep into my eyes.

I turned the idea around in my mind. Greece? My vodka-soaked brain couldn't follow the logic.

"I've always wanted to go to Greece," she said. "It's been my dream. I wanted to go on my honeymoon, but we didn't have enough money. So let's go ? the two of us. And just live there, you know, with no worries about anything. Staying in Japan's just going to depress us, and nothing good will come of it."

I didn't have any particular interest in Greece, but I had to agree with her. We calculated how much money we had between us. She had two and a half million yen in savings, while I could come up with about one and a half million. Four million yen altogether --about forty thousand dollars.

"Forty thousand dollars should last a few years in the Geek countryside," Izumi said. Discount plane tickets would set us back around four thousand. That leaves thirty-six. Figure a thousand a month, and that's enough for three years. Two and a half, to be on the safe side. What do you say? Let's go. We'll let things sort themselves out later on."

I looked around. The early-morning Denny's was crowded with young couples. We were the only couple over thirty. And surely the only couple discussing taking all our money and fleeing to Greece after a disastrous affair. What a mess, I thought. I gazed at the palm of my hand for the longest time. Was this really what my life had come to?

"All right," I said finally. "Let's do it."

At work next day, I handed in my letter of resignation. My boss had heard rumors and decided that it was best to put me on extended leave for the time being. My colleagues were startled to hear that I wanted to quit, but no one tried very hard to talk me out of it. Quitting a job is not so difficult, after all, I discovered. Once you make up your mind to get rid of something, there's very little you can't discard. No ? not very little. Once you put your mind to it, there's nothing you can't get rid of. And once you start tossing things out, you find yourself wanting to get rid of everything. It's as if you'd gambled away almost all your money and decided, What the hell, I'll bet what's left. Too much trouble to cling to the rest.

I packed everything I thought and need into one medium-sized blue Samsonite suitcase. Izumi took about the same amount of baggage.

As we were flying over Egypt, I was suddenly gripped by a terrible fear that someone else had taken my bag by mistake. There had to be tens of thousands of identical blue Samsonite bags in the world. Maybe I'd get to Greece, open up the suitcase, and find it stuffed with some else's possessions. A severe anxiety attack swept over me. If the suitcase got lost, there would be nothing left to link me to my own life ? just Izumi. I suddenly felt as if I had vanished. It was the weirdest sensation. The person sitting on that plane was no longer me. My brain had mistakenly attached itself to some convenient packaging that looked like me. My mind was in utter chaos. I had to go back to Japan and get back inside my real body. But here was in a jet, flying over Egypt, and there was no turning back. This flesh I was temporarily occupying felt as if it were made out of plaster. If I scratched myself, pieces

would flake off. I began to shiver uncontrollably, and I couldn't stop. I knew that if these shakes continued much longer the body I was in would crack apart and turn to dust. The plane was air-conditioned, but I broke out in a sweat. My shirt stuck to my skin. An awful smell arose from me. All the while, Izumi held my hand tightly and gave me the occasional hug. She didn't say a word, but she knew how I was feeling. The shake went on for a good half hour; I wanted to die -- to stick the barrel of a revolver in my ear and pull the trigger, so that my mind and my flesh would turn to dust.

After the shakes subsided, though, I suddenly felt lighter. I relaxed my tense shoulder and gave myself up to the flow of time. I fell into a deep sleep, and when I opened my eye, there below me lay the azure waters of the Aegean.

The biggest problem facing us on the island was an almost total lack of things to do. We didn't work, we had no friends. The island had no movie theatres or tennis courts or books to read. We'd left Japan so abruptly that I had completely forgotten to bring books. I read two novels I'd picked up at the airport, a copy of Aeschylus' tragedies that

Izumi had brought along. I read them all twice. To cater to tourists, the kiosk at the harbor stocked a few English paperbacks, but nothing caught my eye. Reading was my passion, and I'd always imagined that if I had free time I'd wallow in books, but, ironically, here I was -- with all the time in the world and nothing to read.

Izumi started studying Greek. She'd brought along a Greek-language text, and made a chart of verb conjugations that she carried around, reciting verbs aloud like a spell. She got to the point where she was able to talk to the shopkeepers in her broken Greek, and to the waiters when we stepped by the cafe, so we managed to make a few acquaintances. Not to be outdone, I dusted off my French. I figured it would come in handy someday, but on this seedy little island I never ran across a soul who spoke French. In town, we were able to get by with English. Some of the old people knew Italian or German. French, though, was useless.

With nothing much to do, we walked everywhere. We tried fishing in the harbor but didn't catch a thing. Lack of fish wasn't the problem; it was water was too clear. Fish could see all the way from the hook up to the face of the person trying to catch the. You'd have to be a pretty dumb fish to get caught that way. I bought sketchbook and a set of watercolors at a local shop and tramped around the island sketching the scenery and the people. Izumi would sit beside me, looking at my paintings, memorizing her Greek conjugations. Local people often came to watch me sketch. To kill time, I'd draw their portrait, which seemed to be a big hit. If I gave them the picture, they'd often treat us to a beer. Once, a fisherman gave us a whole octopus.

"You could make a living doing portraits, Izumi said. "You're good, and you could male a nice little business out of it. Play up the fact that you're a Japanese artist. Can't be many of them around here."

I laughed, but her expression was serious. I pictured myself trekking around the Greek isles, picking up spare change drawing portraits, enjoying the occasional free beer. Not such a bad idea, I concluded.

"And I'll be a tour coordinator for Japanese tourists," Izumi continued. "There should be more of them as time goes by, and that will help make ends meet. Of course, that means I'll have to get serious about learning Greek."

"Do you really think we can spend two and a half years doing nothing?" I asked.

"As long as we don't get robbed or sick or something. Barring the unforeseen, we should be able to get by. Still, it's always good to prepare for the unexpected."

Until then, I'd almost never been to a doctor, I told her.

Izumi stared straight at me, pursed her lips, and moved them to one side.

"Say I got pregnant," she began. "What would you do? You protect yourself the best you can, but people make mistakes. If that happened, our money would run out pretty quick"

If it comes to that, we should probably go back to Japan." I said.

"You don't get it. do you?" she said quietly "We can never go back to Japan."

Izumi continued her study of Greek, I my sketching. This was the most peaceful time in my whole life. We ate simply and carefully sipped the cheapest wines. Every day, we'd climb a nearby hill. There was a small village on top, and from there we could see other islands far away. With all the fresh air and exercise, I was soon in good shape. After the sun set on the island, you couldn't hear a sound. And in that silence Izumi and I would quietly make love and talk about all kinds of things. No more worrying about making the last train, or coming up with lies tell our spouses. It was wonderful beyond belief. Autumn deepened bit by bit, and early winter came on. The wind picked up, and there were witecaps in the sea.

It was around this time that we read the story about the man-~eating cat. In the same paper, there was a report about the Japanese emperor's condition worsening, but we'd bought it only to cheek on exchange rates. The yen was continuing to gain against the drachma. This was vital for us; the stronger the yen, the more money we had.

"Speaking of cats," I said. a few days after we'd read the article, "when I was a child I had a cat who disappeared in the strangest way."

Izumi seemed to want to hear more. She lifted her face from her conjugation chart and looked at me "How so?"

"I was in second, maybe third grade. We lived in a company house that had a big garden. There was this ancient pine tree in the garden, so tall you could barely see the top of it. One day, I was sitting on the back porch reading a book, while our tortoiseshell car was playing in the garden. The cat was leaping about by itself, the way cats do sometimes. It was all worked up something, completely oblivious of the fact that I was watching it. The longer I watched, the more frightened I became. The cat seemed possessed, jumping around, its fur standing on end. It was as if it was something that I. couldn't. Finally, it started racing around and around

the pine tree, just like the tiger in 'Little Black Sambo.' Then it screeched to an abrupt halt and scrambled up the tree to the highest branches. I could just make out its little face way up in the topmost branches. The cat was still excited and tense. It was hiding in the branches, staring out at something. I called its name, but it acted like it didn't hear me."

"What was the cat's name?" Izumi asked.

"I forget," I told her. "Gradually, evening came on, and it grew darker. I was worried and waited for a long time for the cat to climb down. Finally, it got pitch dark And we never saw the cat again."

"That's not so unusual," Izumi said. "Cats often disappear like that. Especially when they're in heat. They get overexcited and then can't remember how to get home. The cat must have come down from the pine tree and gone off somewhere when you weren't watching."

"I suppose," I said. "But I was still a kid then, and I was positive that the cat had decided to live up in the tree. There had to be some reason that it couldn't come down. Every day, I'd sit on the porch and look up at the pine tree, hoping to see the cat peeking out between the branches."

Izumi seemed to have lost interest. She lit her second Salem, then raised her head and looked at me.

"Do you think about your child sometime?" She asked.

I had no idea how to respond. "Sometimes I do," I said honestly. "But not all the time. Occasionally something will remind me."

"Don't you want to see him?"

"Sometime I do," I said. But that was a lie, I just thought that that was the way I was supposed to feel. Whenever I was living with my son, I thought he was the cutest thing I'd ever seen. Whenever I got home late, I'd always go to my son's room first, to see his sleeping face. Sometimes I was seized by a desire to squeeze him so hard he might break. Now everything about him -- his face, his voice, his actions -- existed in a distant land. All I could recall with any clarity was the smell of his soap. I liked to take baths with him and scrub him. He had sensitive skin, so my wife always kept a special bar of soap just for him. All I could recall about my own son was the smell of that soap.

"If you want to go back to Japan, don't let me stop you," Izumi said, "Don't worry about me. I'd manage somehow."

I nodded. But I knew that it wasn't going to happen.

"I wonder if your child will think of you that way when he's grown up," Izumi said. "Like you were a cat who disappeared up a pine tree."

I laughed. "Maybe so," I said.

Izumi crushed out her cigarette in the ashtray and sighed. "Let's go home and make love, all right?" she said.

"It's still morning", I said.

"What's wrong with that?"

"Not a thing," I said.

Later, when I woke up in the middle of the night, Izumi wasn't there. I looked at my watch next to the bed. Twelve-thirty; I fumbled for the lamp, switched it on, and gazed around the room. Everything was as quiet as if someone had stolen in while I slept and sprinkled silent dust all around. Two bent Salem butts were in the ashtray, a balled-up empty cigarette pack beside them. I got out of bed and looked out at the living room. Izumi wasn't there. She wasn't in the kitchen or the bathroom. I opened the door and looked out at the front yard. Just a pair of vinyl lounge chairs, bathed in the brilliant moonlight. "Izumi," I called out in a small voice. Nothing. I called out again, this time more loudly. My heart pounded. Was this my voice? It sounded too loud, unnatural. Still no reply. A faint breeze from the sea rustled the tips of the pampas grass. I shut the door; went back to the kitchen, and poured myself half a glass of wine, to calm down.

Radiant moonlight poured in the kitchen window, throwing weird shadow, the walls and floor. The whole thing looked like the symbolic set of some avant-garde play. I suddenly remembered; the night the cat had disappeared up the pine tree had been exactly like this one, a full moon with not a wisp of cloud. After dinner that night, I'd gone to the porch again to look for the cat. As the night had deepened, the moonlight had brightened. For some inexplicable reason, I couldn't take my eyes off the pine tree. From time to time I was sure that I could make out the cat's eyes, sparkling between the branches. But it was just an illusion.

I tugged on a thick sweater and a pair of jeans, snatched up the coins on the table, put them in my pocket, and went outside. Izumi must have had trouble sleeping and gone out for a walk. That had to be it. The wind had completely died down All I could hear was the sound of my tennis shoes crunching along the gravel, like in an exaggerated movie soundtrack. Izumi must have gone to the harbor, I decided. There was only one road to the harbor, so I couldn't miss her. The lights in the house along the road were all off, the moonlight dyeing the ground silver. It looked like the bottom of the sea.

About halfway to the harbor, I heard the faint sound of music and came to a halt. At first I thought it was a hallucination ? like when the air pressure changes and you hear a ringing in your ears. But, listening carefully, I was able to make out a melody. I held my breath and listened as hard as I could. No doubt about it, it was music. Somebody playing an instrument. Live, unamplified music. But what kind of instrument was it? The mandolinlike instrument that Anthony Quinn danced to in "Zorba the Greek"? A bouzouki? But who would be playing a bouzouki in the middle of the night? And where?

The music seemed to be coming from the village at the top of the hill we climbed every day for exercise. I stood at the crossroads, wondering what to do, which direction to take. Izumi must have heard the same music at this very spot. And I had a distinct feeling that if she had she would have headed toward it.

I took the plunge and turned right at the crossroads, heading up the slope I knew so well. There were no trees lining the path, just knee-high thorny bushes away in the shadows of the cliffs. The farther I walked the louder and more distinct the music grew. I could make out the melody more clearly; too. There was a festive flashiness to it. I imagined some sort of banquet being held in the village on top of the hill. Then I remembered that earlier that day, at the harbor, we had seen a lively wedding procession. This must be the wedding banquet, going on into the night.

Just then -- without warning -- I disappeared.

Maybe it was the moonlight, or that midnight music. With each step I took, I felt myself sinking deeper into a quicksand where my identity vanished; it was the same emotion I'd had on the plane, flying over Egypt. This wasn't me walking in the moonlight. It wasn't me but a stand-in, fashioned out of plaster. I rubbed my hand against my face. But it wasn't my face. And it wasn't my hand. My heart pounded in my chest, sending the blood coursing through my body at a crazy speed. This body was a plaster puppet, a voodoo doll into which some sorcerer had breathed a fleeting life. The glow of real life was missing. My makeshift, phony muscles were just going through the motions. I was a puppet, to be some sacrifice.

So where is the real me? I wondered.

Suddenly, Izumi's voice came out of nowhere. *The real you has been eaten by the cats. While you've been standing here, those hungry cats have devoured you -- eaten you all up. All that's left is bones.*

I looked around. It was an illusion, of course. All I could see was the rockstrewn ground, the low bushes, and their tiny shadow. The voice had been in my head.

Stop thinking such dark thoughts, I told myself. As if trying to avoid a huge wave, I clung to a rock at the bottom of the sea and held my breath. The wave would surely pass by. You're just tired, I told myself, and overwrought. Grab on to what's real. It doesn't matter what? just grab something real. I reached into my pocket for the coins. They grew sweaty in my hand.

I tried hard to think of something else. My sunny apartment back in Unoki. The record collection I'd left behind. My nice little jazz collection. My specialty was white jazz pianist of the fifties and sixties. Lennie Tristano, Al Haig, Claude Williamson, Lou Levy, Russ Freeman ... Most of the albums were out of print, and it had taken a lot of time and money to collect them. I had diligently made the rounds of record shops, making trades with other collectors, slowly building up my archives. Most of the performances weren't what you'd call "first-rate." But I loved the unique, intimate atmosphere those musty old records conveyed. The world would be a pretty dull place if it were made up of only the first-rate, right? Every

detail of those record jackets came back to me ? the weight and heft of the albums in my hands.

But now they were all gone forever. And I'd obliterated them myself. Never again in this lifetime would I hear those records.

I remembered the smell of tobacco when I kissed Izumi. The feel of her lips and tongue. I closed my eyes. I wanted her beside me. I wanted her to hold my hand, as she had when we flew over Egypt, and never let go.

The wave finally passed over me and away; and with it the music.

Had they stopped playing? Certainly that was a possibility. After all, it was nearly one o'clock. Or maybe there had never been any music to begin with. That, too, was entirely possible. I no longer trusted my hearing. I closed my eyes again and sank down into my consciousness ? dropped a thin, weighted line down into that darkness. But I couldn't hear a thing. Not even an echo.

I looked at my watch. And realized I wasn't wearing one. Sighing, I stuck both hands in my pockets. I didn't really care about the time. I looked up at the sky. The moon was a cold rock, its skin eaten away by the violence of the years. The shadows on its surface were like a cancer extending its awful feelers. The moonlight plays tricks with people's minds. And makes cats disappear. Maybe it had made Izumi disappear. Maybe it had all been carefully choreographed, beginning with that one night long ago.

I stretched, bent my arms, my fingers. Should I continue, or go back the way I came? Where had Izumi gone? Without her, how was I supposed to go on living, all by myself on this backwater island? She was the only thing that held together the fragile, provisional me

I continued to climb uphill. I'd come this far and might as well reach the top. Had there really been music there? I had to see for myself, even if only the faintest of clues remained. In five minutes, I had reached the summit. To the south, the hill sloped down to the sea, the harbor, and the sleeping town. A scattering of street lights lit the coast road. The other side of the mountain was wrapped in darkness. There was no indication whatsoever that a lively festival had taken place here only a short while before.

I returned to the cottage and downed a glass of brandy. I tried to go to sleep, but I couldn't. Until the eastern sky grew light, I was held in the grip of the moon. Then, suddenly, I pictured those cats, starving to death in a locked apartment. I -- the real me -- was dead, and they were alive, eating my flesh, biting into my heart, sucking my blood, devouring my penis. Far away, I could hear them lapping up my brains. Like Macbeth's witches, the three lithe cats surrounded my broken head, slurping up that thick soup inside. The tips of their rough tongues licked the soft folds of my mind. And with each lick my consciousness flickered like a flame and faded away.