
FELICITY
SAVAGE
All you need
is love.
THE SPIRIT OF
HARLEM

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Shizuka Nishino, a young Japanese artist, is starving herself in a grotty Harlem apartment. Not that she admits it, of course. But her brother's girlfriend, an American ex-artist currently teaching English in Japan, knows the score. Her quest to save Shizuka's life brings the conflict between the two women to a head, and reveals the true cost of throwing away your dreams.

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THE SPIRIT OF HARLEM

"Let me get this straight," said my boyfriend. "You think my sister's lying to us."

In Japanese it was "telling lies," which sounded worse to me somehow than the English. But I stuck to my analysis. "I think she's crying out for help."

"Even though she says everything's going fine?"

I said, "Well, can you really imagine her saying, 'By the way, Mom and Dad, I can't cope any more and I'm coming home'? Especially if…" I paused long enough to make

the point that I was respecting the family's feelings by naming no names. "Especially if her personal life isn't going well."

"Yeah, well, that would be a blessing." Taka could be very cynical. "It can't last much longer," he said with conviction.

"I don't think it can, either. But supposing it ends, or it *has* ended, would that be an improvement? She's so *vulnerable."* I used the English word because there was no satisfactory Japanese equivalent. I added, "Maybe that's what she's trying to tell us, but no one understands her."

If Taka had objected again, I would have concluded that he really thought I was talking nonsense, but he said nothing. We walked up Kagurazaka, through clouds of smoke and around floods of water from the kitchen doors of izakayas. We'd just come from dinner at his parents' house. The Kagurazaka neighborhood has been called the Montmartre of Tokyo, and the comparison is ironically valid: in both places the avant-garde has moved on and left its reputation to glam up a maze of twisty little streets that barely made it out of the nineteenth century. Mr and Mrs Nishino lived in a cul-de-sac overgrown with magnolias and bougainvillea. He was an Executive Director; she taught kimono-wearing classes and took calligraphy classes. They both worried about Shizuka, the younger of their two children, in much the same way, it seemed to me, as the Japanese government worried about North Korea. Unpredictable, ungrateful, almost an enemy but impossible to write off: that was Shizuka. She lived in New York, where I used to live myself. It wasn't a startling coincidence. What artistically inclined girl *doesn't* want to live in New York? But Shizuka seemed to be more intent on living out the drama than I'd ever been. She painted pictures full of gore and deformities.

And now she was starving.

"She's got a strong mind. She knows what she wants," said Taka. "And she's never had trouble making herself understood before."

"Yeah," I said. "But has she ever been in love before?"

I glanced sideways in time to see him frown. He wasn't admitting that it qualified as love, and I knew why. I instinctively felt the same way, for all that I was supposed to be the open-minded one. Yet I also felt that nothing short of love could have reduced Shizuka to the thing in the photos we'd seen tonight. She certainly was not short of money.

Friends of the Nishinos had happened to travel to New York a few weeks ago and had looked her up. The photos had been taken in Central Park in the autumn sunlight. In all of them Shizuka was beaming, and in all of them she looked ready to collapse inside her layered sweaters and skirts. I'd graduated from Bryn Mawr; I knew anorexia when I

saw it. Except for her smile, Shizuka looked like a junkie interposed by digital wizardry between the Vice President of Marketing and his chunky wife. “She seems to have no plans to come home,” had been their comment to the Nishinos, passed on to us by Mrs Nishino tonight as she handed the photos around the coffee table. But that the photos had been taken and given to Shizuka’s parents at all was a stronger comment, and that they’d been shown to Taka and me was an even more ominous indicator of prevailing feelings.

As a rule Mr and Mrs Nishino discouraged Taka from worrying about his sister. With his MBA from Stanford, his gruelling job as a management consultant, and me, he was the basket into which they’d transferred all their eggs. I thought they knew him less well than I did.

“If only she’d go back to college,” he said after we’d walked another few blocks. “Here, if you drop out you’re well and truly fucked, but over there… if she explained that she’d been working on her portfolio… I’m sure they’d let her graduate. She’s only short a few credits.”

“Has she been working on her portfolio?”

“Good question. Actually, I doubt it.“

I forced myself to confront what I’d been thinking all along. I hated criticizing him, but this time I felt it was fair. “If you talked to her, Taka, I mean talked to her properly and didn’t take no for an answer, she might go back to school… or something.” I would have liked to say the same thing to his parents, but I obviously couldn’t. I was going out on a limb saying it to him. And I saw immediately that I’d gone too far.

“Me? *Me?*” He laughed unamusedly. “Where would I start? What would I say? It’s always been against her principles to take my advice. And I can’t really blame her.”

He grabbed my arm as I was about to step off the curb into traffic. I swallowed my heart and smiled at him in embarrassment.

That Saturday we went to a show. Taka when he was an undergraduate had played guitar in an outfit influenced by the likes of Black Sabbath and Pantera. Two of his former bandmates were still at it, rehearsing on the weekends and performing at underground clubs in the suburbs, and through them we knew a lot of people on the scene. None of the bands ever seemed to solidify their lineups for long enough to have a chance of breaking out. But Freshpig 10 had achieved a rare gestalt. Varying the standard thrashcore sound with *three* guitarists, they’d toured as far afield as Sapporo in the past year. Now they were back in Tokyo, second from the top of the bill at Milk, a renowned den of rudeboys in otherwise refined Ebisu.

Taka and I sat out the opening acts in the kitchen, three floors below ground, where people dumped their belongings on a steel table big enough for a barracks. His friends rollicked and joshed each other with an air of playacting that seemed very funny after your first gin and lime. Many of them had goatees, dyed hair, piercings, and cargo pants hanging off their butts. In contrast, Taka with his short black hair and unfaded jeans looked like… well… like a management consultant. I probably did, too. It's true that I have, or had, my artsy side (I used to make lamps with handmade paper shades and sell them at flea markets in Soho) but for the last four years I've been teaching corporate English classes, and my employers insist on an even more staid look than Taka's do. A long Diesel skirt with zips up the sides was the ruffest item left in my wardrobe. If the hardcore boys and girls gave me any props, it was for speaking Japanese, not for being cool.

Someone looked at his watch and we filed upstairs. One of my deadly secrets is that I can hardly tell thrashcore from melocore from speedcore, and the music filling the main floor still sounded like pure noise to me. But the crowd had fused into an enthusiastic mass. Taka grabbed me around the waist and hiked me up until my feet dangled. I saw Freshpig 10's mad vocalist flinging himself to and fro across the stage. The guitarist with pink hair was wearing a t-shirt that said 私 ♥ *NY*. Wriggling to the ground, I kissed Taka near the mouth and rolled my eyes upwards. He shouted into my ear, "Get our stuff and we'll leave as soon as it's over."

We'd been invited to Freshpig 10's afterparty, to be held at an izakaya nearby. It was an honor, but I'd already guessed that Taka didn't want to go. He did enough social drinking in connection with his job. He gladhanded people at shows to make up for not accepting many invitations, and got away with it, he'd told me, because he was a returnee. What this amounted to was that the Nishinos had lived in Singapore for eight years. (Shizuka was born there.) Taka had been sixteen when they came back to Japan, and although he'd been attending a private school with a Japanese curriculum, he'd apparently picked up some outlandish social instincts that were remarked on to this day (as you might remark on the bump in someone's nose) by all his friends. I wasn't very impressed with this analysis, but because it came from Taka himself I couldn't discount it entirely.

I lugged our stuff up to the gallery that overlooked the club floor. Because Freshpig 10 was so popular, there was hardly anyone up here. I got another gin and lime, leaned my elbows on the railing, and watched Taka and his friends working their way towards the mosh pit in front of the stage. When they got there they respectfully looked on for a few minutes and then hurled themselves into the action, kicking out at each other and

bodyslamming the human walls of the circle with what looked to me like a joyous disregard for life and limb.

Did Shizuka go to shows like this at CBGB's and the Bowery Ballroom? I had an impression that she was more into female singer-songwriters of the Sarah McLachlan school. But maybe that was just an assumption based on a stereotype. I'd always tended to see her as a younger version of myself, making the same mistakes I had, eventually to suffer the same disillusionment with New York and everything it stood for. Our conversations, spaced out over years, had often made me wince with sympathy. I wanted to put electrodes on her head and download the lessons of my own life into her brain. But now I wondered in a fit of subjectivism whether she might not live in a city I didn't know, even though we called its streets by the same names. That quality of multiplicity is one of the biggest things that differentiates New York from Tokyo, after all. Tokyo is the common property of a whole nation – even faintly scary places like Milk are in the public domain, so to speak – whereas every nook and cranny of New York seems to be someone's private property, jealously guarded, fiercely contested. If Shizuka had succeeded in claiming her very own piece of the mayhem, no matter what it had cost her, she would be capable of thwarting intrusions, even by her own family.

Taka was probably right that talking to her would get him nowhere. Most likely, nothing could be done for her until she got weak enough to be hospitalized.

I felt sorrier for her than ever, and unusually appreciative of my own good luck.

My mood seemed to communicate itself to Taka on the way home. We held hands on the train, stumbled into our apartment wrapped together, and had drunken sex on the sofa. Afterwards we spread out the futon and sprawled on it. I smoked a cigarette. Taka lay half on top of me, sloppily kissing my shoulders and back. "Marry me," he said.

"Nope," I said.

This was a ritual exchange.

He got up, padded into the kitchenette, and came back swigging from a half-litre of Calpis soda. He had a passion for the stuff. He switched on the light and started reading in English from the card in his hand, which he'd pulled off the fridge. "'We miss you as ever, darling, especially on your birthday, and hope you will use the enclosed to buy something you want. Our news isn't much to speak of…'"

"My birthday was last month," I said.

"'Molly…' that's the eldest sister, right? 'came over with the little ones yesterday and Dylan, who I think I told you is taking piano lessons, played something very pretty for us but said our piano needs tuning…'"

The birthday card, desktop-published by my mother, had a drawing by my elder

brother Bri on the front. Bri was the creator of a successful comic strip, and for me he'd drawn one of his trademark tots in an uncharacteristic pose, crouching on the edge of a quay labelled Boston Harbor, gazing out at the ocean. Never mind that it was the wrong ocean. I deserved it. I loved my family and I'd deserted them. The analogy of the rats and the sinking ship fit exactly, and I knew how the rats felt. That was why I'd stuck the card on the fridge. But I regretted my masochistic impulse as Taka kept on reading aloud, describing family adventures that he'd shown no interest in when the card first arrived. My mother had typed in one of those fonts that looks like handwriting rather than actually setting pen to paper. Taka didn't stumble over a word even when I jumped up and chased him around the apartment.

I caught him in the other room and pinned him on his back on the carpet. He held the card up in the air. "'… so it will be a rather modest Thanksgiving, but in compensation we should have a full house for Christmas.'"

I lay still on top of him. He had a milk moustache.

"'As always, darling, we would love you to come, and Takao too, although of course it is a long haul for a silly family holiday. But if you intend to come you might look into tickets soon, although they say that flights are still relatively empty due to 9/11…'"

He let his arm fall across my back and gazed up at me. "Well?"

The house is one of the big red brick ones on Brattle Street, and it was full all right. My parents; my grandmother, who was senile and seldom left her own suite of rooms; Bri, his wife, and their small son Nicky, whom Bri credited in interviews with being his inspiration for the strip; my *other* elder brother Paul, an architect, and his wife; my older sister Molly, her editor husband, and their three holy terrors including Dylan the future concert pianist; my *other* elder sister Sadie, a lawyer, divorced, and her small daughter; and my younger sister Claudia, who was studying for her master's in Comparative Religions at Yale. Molly and family lived in Somerville, so they weren't resident, but it was still a lot of Tarrants. At dinner on Christmas Eve my father said with satisfaction, "We have mustered a concentration this year, haven't we?"

Paul said delightedly, "That's the collective noun for us. A concentration of Tarrants!"

No one laughed louder than Taka. And then everyone rounded on him and started teaching him obscure collective nouns.

This was why I'd refused their invitations to both of us for three years running. I'd even suggested we stay at a hotel this time, but my parents wouldn't hear of it, and Taka himself had told me not to be uptight.

I had worried that he would expose a side of his personality I hadn't seen before and wouldn't like. But my fears seemed to have been baseless. I was relieved but also confused. His braying laughter at dinner sounded both unnatural and weirdly familiar. As I lay sleepless that night in Claudia's room it dawned on me. Taka worked for a company that was more or less the same size as my family. Half his colleagues were foreigners. He was simply acting the way he did at work.

Cambridge looked like hell frozen over: bleak and red under a foot of snow. The panhandlers in Harvard Square were bundled up like Third World peasants, their breath puffing out white. It never gets this cold in Tokyo. I skulked indoors feeling purposeless. Taka, on the other hand, was full of energy, or pretended to be. On Christmas morning he helped my brothers chop and carry in the cedar logs for the fire. Open hearths in Japan are known only from the movies, and ours had startled him into praise. He admired the brass fender, the decorative buckets of pinecones, and the fire-irons on the clawfooted stand that the children were always knocking over. My brothers promptly overreached themselves by trying to start the fire with twists of newspaper. The whole house smelled like a bonfire by the time they gave up and resorted to lighter fluid.

For Christmas dinner my mother had roasted a free-range turkey, Bri's wife Rachel had made cranberry jelly, Paul's wife Angela had made pumpkin and apple pies, Molly had made scalloped potatoes, Sadie had made vegetarian stuffing, Claudia had made a sort of couscous casserole, and I had dumped frozen vegetables into saucepans and boiled them according to the instructions on the packets. As soon as everyone had said everything was delicious, the conversation turned political. The subject matter was a foregone conclusion; the unChristmassy urgency in the voices surprised me. One hallmark of people like my family is that, although they're doing well out of the sociopolitical situation, they're invariably in opposition. I'd often thought this was merely a canny choice of ground: they knew they excelled in criticizing, denouncing, and ridiculing, whereas the lustre would go off their rhetoric if they ever spoke in earnest support of something. But the events of the last three years had exceeded their most pessimistic predictions. They were genuinely disgusted and frightened. Some of them fell back on satire. My father was made of tougher stuff. At the mahogany table, with the angel chimes tinkling among the leftovers, he expatiated on the pathology of what he called the junta, dissected their propaganda, and predicted a war by spring.

I looked out of the window at the big desolate yard. Nothing alive was moving out there.

The children were squirming and complaining and at last we went into the parlor to open the presents. My parents had given eight-year-old Dylan an envelope. It was a card

saying that he could collect his very own piano, a Yamaha upright, from Cambridge Soundworks when it opened on Boxing Day. Molly looked stricken. “Where will we put it?”

“We’ll get rid of the television,” said her husband Arthur, triumphantly. “Charles, Viv, you’ve done more than you know for these brats.”

Dylan and his sisters said that if it was a question of choosing, they wanted to keep the television, and that reminded them, could they and Nicky (Bri’s cherubic son, a favorite with the two girls) go watch the Cartoon Network?

When they’d thundered off, we opened a box of liqueur chocolates and made bleak jokes about their future.

My mother, starting to pick up the wrapping paper, found Sadie’s daughter Céline hidden under the tree, crying silently. She said she was scared of being “terrored.”

“Marry your man,” said Arthur to me. He was drunk. “Take out Japanese citizenship, have Japanese babies, and we’ll all come and live off you when they start muzzling the intellectuals.”

“Don’t you think they have already?” I said.

“Speaking of Taka, darling, where is he?” said my mother. “I hope he liked his presents. We weren’t sure what to get for him. I hope he wasn’t disappointed or… or embarrassed.”

They’d given him a Ralph Lauren tie, a leatherbound diary for the upcoming year, and an inscribed copy of my father’s most populist book, *The Haunting of America*. My father is a psychologist who’s often quoted on the sorry state of society, but all the same I couldn’t decide whether giving Taka one of his books had been legitimate or in poor taste. I personally wouldn’t have done it, if only because I knew it would be a chore for him to read that much English. He’d given my parents (without consulting me) half a dozen *fuurin* windchimes for the porches we didn’t have, but I knew he hadn’t expected to receive anything. He’d been so dumbstruck that the family had spotted it and covered up for him. Hence my mother’s concern.

I found him in the room where he’d been put, my old one, smoking a cigarette in the dark. He had the window open, and the room was freezing, but it was a wise move because no one else in my family smoked. I kicked off my shoes and knelt beside him on the windowseat. He put his arm around my shoulders. Outside, snow topped the naked branches of the maple trees. The sky was not black but a ghostly orange color. There were no aircraft warning lights blinking in the distance, as there always were in Tokyo. I could hear one of the children bawling downstairs. I couldn’t hear a sound from outside.

I started talking, mainly for my own amusement, repeating and explaining things my family had said. Taka listened, grunted, and laughed. With every word I spoke it grew less likely that he would tell me why he'd been sitting alone in the dark. I was proud of myself. I *knew* why, or thought I did, and I didn't want him to feel he had to spell everything out to me as if I was a stranger.

This was Taka's first time on the East Coast. Before we met he'd spent two years in California getting his MBA, but had done no domestic sightseeing. At the height of Alan Greenspan's irrational exuberance, the closest to irrational exuberance that the big dreamers at Stanford Business School had ever come, according to Taka, was smoking a joint or two. He went back to Japan with his degree and could, I suppose, have stepped straight into his current job, but for a while he hung around Tokyo doing nothing. Maybe he'd just run out of steam.

That had also happened to be Shizuka's last summer at home. Their parents had consented to send her to SUNY Buffalo, half a world away from Tokyo. She'd had a difficult time in high school. They'd pushed her to maintain her English, so she was equally at home in both languages, and she was apparently driving herself crazy with the whole returnee / identity crisis thing. (No one seems to have suspected at the time that there was more to it than that.) Buffalo seemed like the cure to fit the malady. There was nothing Taka could have said about it either way. Besides, he had his own preoccupations. I was one of them.

We met that July 20th at Vuenos, one of the clubs on Shibuya's Dogenzaka hill. He was there with a bunch of his flamboyant hardcore friends (so I got the wrong impression at first) and I was there with a Finnish girl from the course I'd been taking in Nagano prefecture. It had been she, not me, who'd wanted to see the band performing that night. I lost touch with her soon afterwards, but I owed her. The domino theory doesn't apply to international relations; it does to private lives. In a matter of months Taka had started at Goldstone Associates, we'd moved in together, and I'd got a job teaching English, not imagining I'd keep it a year, let alone four.

What had I been doing in Japan in the first place? Studying papermaking. *Washi* paper used to be used for lanterns and festal tableaux. Now it's just stationery with snob appeal. In reaction to the excesses that surrounded me in New York, I'd worked up a case for my personal integrity based on my handmade paper lampshades. I could talk with convincing passion about my art, and my friends from college who'd gotten real jobs said that I was being fearlessly original. The lampshades had horns, protrusions, and knobbles; I gave them titles such as "Unholy Light" and "Kindly Light." I got away

with it as long as I was in New York, but when I tried to underpin my activities with an ancient tradition of artisanship, the whole show came crashing down around my ears. For me, as for Taka, the summer of 2000 was a breaking point. But he gathered his forces again and carried on, whereas I never went back.

As a prophylactic against our first visit to New York, I'd emailed my best friend from college, Gillian Carter. Like me, Gill had moved to the city after graduation. Now she was a social worker with an MA and student loans to pay off. A year ago she'd become engaged to a graphic designer named Victor Bermudez. I was looking forward to meeting him, and Gill was looking forward, she wrote, to meeting Taka. She promised they would treat us to dinner. I replied that, knowing Taka, it would probably be our treat.

And I wondered if I was factoring Shizuka into our plans heavily enough.

Our plane banked low over Queens; I confirmed for myself that the twin towers were missing from the skyline. We landed at LaGuardia and got a taxi into the city. The driver took the usual route through East Harlem. Nothing seemed to have changed. Maybe there were a few more Duane Reades, KFCs, and CVSes, but the place still looked wrecked. Since long before 9/11 this part of town had appeared to have been bombed and left to grow weeds while the authorities argued in circles about it. What was it that Brecht wrote? I tried to remember the quotation but couldn't. Taka laughed out loud at the sight of a group of tourists, tall and blond and dressed for a wilderness hike, huddling outside a bodega among the intoxicated locals. I said that I admired the tourists' savvy. Why queue for hours at Ground Zero when you could get the complete experience just by taking the 4, 5, and 6 to Lexington Avenue? There were all sorts of ways to save money in the city if you had the courage.

"Yeah, that's what she says." He wasn't looking at me, so he hadn't caught my sarcasm. He was talking about Shizuka, of course. For the last eighteen months – ever since she dropped out of college – she'd been living at 142nd and Edgcombe Avenue in Central Harlem. "$600 a month for three rooms in Manhattan? Not likely, I thought. Someone's being played for a fool. But I get it now."

Taka and I had booked a room at the small hotel often patronized by my parents, the Milburn on 76th and Broadway, instead of at the Holiday Inn or some such. I'd insisted that while Shizuka might think the Milburn stuffy, she would certainly despise the Holiday Inn, and probably us for staying at it. Taka had grumbled but allowed me to make the call. It was a quaint neighborhood, well known to me (I used to live at 101st and Amsterdam), with Christmas trees lying, shedding their needles, outside the brownstones. Snow mounded in the gutters and on the plastic chairs in front of the

Greek restaurant on the corner. Taka was quiet as we checked in and dumped our bags. I went out to the nearby Fairway market and bought some provisions. When I got back to our room he said crossly, “What took you so long?”

“You didn’t think I’d gotten mugged, did you? I couldn’t work out where the mineral water was. There was no one to ask. And a woman made trouble ahead of me in the checkout line. New York, New York!” I broke into song: “If you can make it here you can make it anywhere…”

He eyed the fruit I’d bought: apples, grapes, Navel oranges, and a honeydew melon. “I hope you’re planning to eat all that.”

The room had a little kitchenette. I put the fruit in the fridge, saying, “So what if I went a bit overboard? It was cheap.”

“Oh, just as long as you don’t start doing the same thing at home.” He went into the vast ensuite bathroom and said over the sound of running water, “I saw the fridge at your parents’ house. Old food, new food, so much food you couldn’t fit anything else in, and *rotting* food at the back of it all, I should think. And butter and jam and stuff out on the kitchen table all day.”

I turned on the TV and sat down on the bed. When he came out of the bathroom, shirtless and towelling off his hair, I held out my hands to him. His expression softened. He picked up my hands, folded them together, and kissed the top one.

“Look,” I said, nodding at the TV, where some politician was making up to a crowd of fat, unsmiling elementary school kids. “Malnourished children.”

That evening we went our separate ways. Taka was scheduled to meet up with Shizuka for dinner *à deux.* I met Gillian for a drink at one of our old haunts, Jake’s Dilemma on Amsterdam and 81st. I ended up meeting Victor, too, because he appeared after two hours to escort Gill home. It seemed prearranged, but he said he’d just left the office. (It was eleven o’clock at night on Boxing Day; the guy worked Tokyo hours.) Since he knew Gill wouldn’t be home yet, he’d decided to stop by and clap eyes on her famous friend. That was how he put it, and it took me a few seconds to realize he was talking about those everlasting lampshades. (It seemed like they *would* be everlasting in some cases: Gill had one, and my family must have had a dozen.)

“She’s in culture shock,” Gill excused me. “She hasn’t been home in three… is it? No, four years.”

I felt hurt that she’d had to think about it.

“Oh yeah? I was gonna go to Japan one time. These guys wanted me to do some designs for them, and hey, it’s a cool country, I woulda went, but it just didn’t work out, you know?”

Victor had himself a Rolling Rock, ordered us another round of cocktails, and told me the story in detail. The bar was as fashionably dark as it had always been, but I could see that he was smaller and plumper than he'd looked in the photos Gill had emailed me. He had the enchanting smile of someone who loves the world and assumes that it loves him back. Puerto Rican, born and raised in the Bronx, he was a couple of shades darker than Gill, who was black but far from *black.* They were a touchy-feely couple, he pawing her while he talked, she squeezing his knee and nuzzling his neck. I'd never seen Gill participate in that kind of exhibition before. Her father, a suburban chief of police, espoused Old Testament family values, and she always used to behave as if he could see her. She was the inhibited one and I was the bold one. But now it was me sitting here with a fixed smile, vaguely scandalized. I told myself not to judge on this evidence that Victor was wrong for her. But there was other evidence, too.

We finalized our plans for dinner the next day.

I'd told Gill about Shizuka before Victor showed up, and she'd filled him in briefly. I knew she'd tell him all the rest later, but because she was a devout Christian I trusted her not to make a meal of it. They said Shizuka was welcome to join us. "Bring the whole family. The more the merrier," said Victor. "We can make some extra reservations and then cancel, you know?"

When I got back to the hotel Taka was already there, sprawled on the bed watching CNN with the sound down. The ashtray on the nightstand was overflowing. As I skipped through the icy wind I'd been translating in my head all the things I wanted to tell him about Gill and Victor. Sighing, I junked the script and said, "So where did you end up going?"

"A Japanese place in the forties. We got great service. They're hurting for customers now the tourists aren't coming."

I could hardly believe it. If only he'd asked my advice first! "How did it go?"

"She didn't eat anything." He sat up, swinging his legs off the bed, and stubbed out his cigarette. "No, actually, that's not quite true. I ordered sashimi – I wanted to see if the fish was fresher than it is in California; it wasn't – and she ate some of the shredded daikon it's served on. Daikon has lots of nutrients, so maybe I should have been pleased, huh? Oh yeah, and she drank her miso soup."

I took off my coat and hung it in the closet. I'd normally have dropped it on a chair, but in this mood he'd have noticed and snapped at me for it. "Did you…" I dared not ask him what they'd talked about. "Did you catch up? Tell her about your promotion, find out how her art's going?"

"Her art, no. I heard plenty about Becky's art, though."

Mr and Mrs Nishino never referred to Becky in my hearing. Taka rarely did, either, and never by name. She was from Iowa or somewhere like that. She purportedly went to NYU, and it was my suspicion that she shared the apartment on 142nd Street with Shizuka.

"Here." Taka picked up an Associated Supermarkets plastic bag and took out a newspaper bundle. "Speaking of Becky's art, here's a example of it."

The bundle was so heavy I almost dropped it. Unwrapping the newspapers, I saw why: it was a stone, an irregular natural pyramid. On its flattest side was painted an Asian girl's face. The girl's pink, purple, and yellow striped hair flowed around the rock and turned into hands that clasped each other. The face was in the anime style, deftly executed. The whole was varnished. For once I could scarcely credit my own suspicions. "Is this… this isn't supposed to be Shizuka?"

"Not in the sense of a portrait. But they do model for each other. It's not badly done, is it?" He took the stone and tossed it into the armchair. "The Christmas presents just keep right on coming this year."

"Becky must be very anxious to make a good impression on you."

"Maybe, but I have a feeling we're not going to be allowed to meet her."

I took a deep breath and went for it. "Did you ask Shizuka about dinner tomorrow? Gill and her fiancé said to bring her along. They know a great Italian place."

"Italian, Japanese, American, it doesn't matter. It'll go to waste."

"If she doesn't want to eat, she doesn't have to. She can drink water and nibble lettuce."

After an instant's pause, Taka laughed. "True. And who knows, if the food's good enough she might be overcome by temptation!" He looked around for his lighter, spotted the hotel matchbook, and lit another cigarette. He watched me as he exhaled, eyes glinting.

"And don't you think," I said, "we ought to ask Becky, too? After all, as we say in English, *the more the merrier!"*

It served me right for having expected a bull dyke with attitude. Becky Sharman was one of the quietest Americans I'd met in years. Plump and tall, she wore paint-stained jeans and a Fair Isle turtleneck. Her hair was in pigtails fastened with teddybear bobbles. It was dyed black, but judging by her eyebrows its natural color must have been blonde. She spoke in a little girl's voice, and with any degree of unforced volubility only on the topic of herself. My faith that I could win her over ebbed with each new revelation.

I'd been under the impression that she and Shizuka had met after Shizuka moved to

the city. I now learned that *both* of them had been at SUNY Buffalo. They'd met at glee club tryouts at the beginning of their sophomore year. "The queer community was totally supportive," Becky recalled, but for some unspecified reason she had begun scheming to escape the place. Her machinations had borne fruit at last in the shape of a transfer to NYU. That shouldn't have been possible even if she was a straight A student. The NYU fine arts people must have detected some quality in her work that had escaped me. I said that I'd like to see her larger pieces. She hesitated, then turned pink and said shyly, "Ask Shizuka to show you her tattoo. I designed it. Actually, she designed mine, too."

I stammered, "Where is yours?"

She smirked into her wineglass.

She wasn't from Iowa or anywhere like that, but a small town upstate with a polysyllabic Indian name I'd already forgotten again.

"There were only six Hispanics at my high school," she said. "No Af… African-Americans and no Asians. But I was always into anime." A reminiscent giggle escaped her. "I was like the first person to see *Ghost In The Shell*, and everyone was like, oh my God, what's that?"

"Wow. Yeah," I said. "I thought I could see an anime influence in the piece you gave Taka."

"I'm majorly influenced by Kazuko Tadano. A lot of people don't get that she's really subversive."

She paused as if waiting for me to prove that I'd heard of the woman, which was impossible as I hadn't.

"I used to be a kind of artist, too," I offered. She gave me a tiny smile. A burst of laughter came from behind me. Her gaze slid past my head. I realized I'd been tactless, and felt angry with myself.

Our antipasti plates were removed and giant dishes of baked ziti bolognese and shrimp luciano appeared on the table. Taka refilled everyone's glass (except Shizuka's, which was still full). We started talking about our favorite hangouts in the city. It seemed that Shizuka and Becky usually chilled in the East Village, where there was a Japanese tapas bar called, wait for it, Japas.

"This isn't really my type of place," confided Becky, looking at Gill. "I mean, you know…"

Intrigued, I had another look around. Tony di Napoli's was on the Upper East Side. It was a bit pricey, but Gill and Victor took the view that eating out was supposed to be pricey. Two or three times a month they dressed up and went out for dinner in the same

spirit as Taka and I dressed down and went to a show. This was one of "their" places. And just as well, too, because I knew Taka had made up his mind to pay and would have been irked if we'd insisted on going somewhere cheaper. Shizuka, I thought, was too busy not eating to notice whether she was on the Upper East Side or the dark side of the moon. Did Becky object on principle to the conspicuous consumption all around her?

I told myself not to be too hard on her. Maybe she was identifying with Shizuka. Maybe she couldn't stand seeing Shizuka like this.

Having proclaimed that this wasn't her kind of place, however, she no longer seemed so uncomfortable. She started talking to Gill, asking her nicely about her job and her background. It struck me as funny: Gill, the social worker, coped poorly with such questions directed at herself, and stammered shyly.

Shizuka had hit it off with Victor, and the two of them were teasing each other loudly. Taka was laughing in all the right places, as usual, but I figured he was pretending. To an extent, I figured we were all pretending.

Shizuka had always been a vivacious girl with a falsely confiding manner. On her visits home, she'd usually take a night out of her schedule for dinner with Taka and sometimes me, too. A few hours of her chatter would leave us sated to the point of incuriosity until she was safely out of reach again. I'd thought I was onto her game: appeasement played a part in her campaign for autonomy. But now I had a queasy sense that she'd been several jumps ahead of us all along, developing an escape strategy that was both fiendishly deep and breathtakingly simple. She seemed to have lost a few more pounds since the Central Park photos were taken. Her hair, dyed blonde and cut pixie style the last time she was in Tokyo, had grown out messily. Her cheeks were hollow, her skin the color of vanilla yoghurt. I'd caught strangers staring at her earlier. Whenever for an instant she was not the center of attention, her head would droop and the corners of her mouth sag in a sour way that made her look much older than 21, even though the weight loss made her look bizarrely ageless.

"Well, we're paying $900 for three rooms in Inwood," Gill was telling Becky. "And it's a pretty safe neighborhood. My only problem is my Spanish sucks, so I go in the supermarket and it's like, uh, *como estas?"*

"Hey, it's America," said Victor. "If they can't speak English it's their problem. I tell my mom she better start studying so she can talk to her grandkids!"

Gill smiled and touched his hand as he went for a second helping of ziti. Becky looked offended. I caught Gill's eye and she followed me to the ladies' room. It was in the basement, away from the noise and the flash of cutlery.

"Oh boy!" said Gill, getting her foundation compact out of her purse. "So she says we could save three hundred bucks a month if we moved down to the 145th Street area. Thanks, but no thanks."

"I guess it's gentrifying. Bit by bit," I said doubtfully.

"Well, you'd know better than I would," said Gill with a laugh.

I wasn't in a bantering mood. "I wouldn't bank on it, to be honest. I kind of expected everything to have changed, after 9/11 and all, but nothing has. Maybe it's just me that's changed." But that wasn't evident, even to me, on the face that looked back at me out of the mirror. I said rather hopelessly, "You know what I mean?"

Gill was still smiling. "So I guess you're not planning to hook up with Malik while you're here?"

The last boyfriend I'd had before I left the city, Malik was a reggae vocalist and a committed Afrocentrist. While we were together my lampshades had tended to be red, green, and black. I explained that I was so over that Jah love and ganja shit, I was going out with a management consultant, for God's sake, and we looked at each other in the mirror and laughed, but it didn't feel like happy laughter. I tried again, reminding her that Malik's legal name had been Wesley.

"Wesley! Mek dem say Wesley a de wickedest! Damn, you're making me cry!"

Watching her touch up her mascara, I realized I'd missed my chance to tell her that I had the same bad feeling about Victor she'd had about Malik. But then again, for all I knew, there was more to their relationship than met the eye. For all I knew, they'd talked over each and every issue that stood to divide them and decided that none of it mattered.

For all I knew, it didn't.

I hitched my hip on the counter between the sinks and asked Gill what she thought about Shizuka.

She gave me a serious look. "That girl needs help."

"That's exactly what I told Taka," I said, swinging my foot rapidly. "He, he…"

This seemed to remind Gill that she'd just met Taka, too, and she started congratulating me on what a sweet guy he was. I had a funny feeling that she didn't take my relationship with him seriously. But maybe she was just flipping the script on me. Maybe she'd picked up on my doubts about Victor, even though I'd said only nice things about him.

We got back to the table to find that two more entrées had arrived: eggplant parmigiana and some kind of green spaghetti. It was unclear who'd ordered them. Taka and Victor were apologizing to each other while the waiter hovered, ready to prove that

someone had. Shizuka was saying brightly, "It doesn't matter! We can get doggie bags! Italian food still tastes really good the next day!" I had a sudden urge to scream at her, and realized I'd had too much to drink. But there was still a bottle of wine to be finished. We couldn't put that in a doggie bag.

The bill came to almost $250. I didn't want to be alone with Taka until he got over it, so when Shizuka announced, "Me and Becks are going to walk home instead of riding the subway! It's such a nice feeling to walk at night, and it's not so cold!" I said I'd go along with them.

In the event we all did, jostling along in a noisy group. We crossed over to Madison Avenue at 86th and trudged uptown under the high brick wall of the park. Needless to say, it was very cold. The snow heaped around the streetlights had frozen solid again, as had the puddles of snowmelt on the cobbles. Gill, who was wearing heels, kept skidding and being caught by Victor. We'd all run out of jovial commentary by now, so her yelps were the only sounds that broke the silence.

At the top of the park we turned left on Cathedral, walked for two long blocks, and then turned uptown again on Adam Clayton Powell. The avenues are broader and emptier north of the park. Occasional gypsy cabs raced along, swerving towards us and then accelerating in disappointment. I remembered how much fun it was to rollerblade on this street: wherever a pothole had been filled in there was a hillock of asphalt that bounced you right off the ground. It felt like flying. No one rollerblades in Tokyo. My exercise there was walking. Like this, in fact, in all weathers, from one part of town to another – although walking in Tokyo often feels like walking on a treadmill: indistinguishable office buildings, temples, pachinko parlors, gas stations, and poky little eateries pop up again and again like video scenery, and the cumulative effect is rather restful.

Adam Clayton Powell is lined with enormous white apartment buildings of antebellum proportions. Despite the cold, in their lighted portals people sat on folding chairs, bundled in coats, talking and drinking. I gazed up at rows of dark windows, remembering long hallways, lino floors checked like draughtsboards, and leprous plaster rosettes in the centers of ceilings too high to jump up and touch. The bodegas on the corners, where they aren't shuttered, have Budweiser, Old English, Kool, and Salem posters plastered all over their windows. Lightbulbs frame the signs above their 24-hour hatches. These contraptions – bulletproof perspex windows with revolving carousels set into them – are unique to Harlem as far as I know. When we passed close to them we could hear the faint strains of Arabic music.

At 125th Street Gill and Victor broke into thanks and goodbyes. They were going to walk west to Broadway and catch the 1 and 9, which ran all the way up to Inwood. Gill hugged me. “It’s been so cool seeing you again.”

“You, too,” I said bleakly.

“I promise I’m going to be better about emailing.”

Victor grabbed her hand and said he would remind her of her promise. They scuffled, kissed each other’s noses, and hurried off, waving back at us. “Later,” we all called out. “See you later.”

The four of us who were left stood in the snow, waiting for the walk light. A white Hummer rolled past, making the street vibrate to the muffled beat from its stereo. It was the first time I’d seen a Hummer in real life, and I stared after it in such awe that I almost didn’t hear Becky telling Taka that he and I could catch the 2 and 3 over on Lenox. It would take us back to the Upper West Side in six stops.

“I don’t feeling safe for you to walk alone,” said Taka.

“Oh God,” said Becky in cheerful exasperation. “We live here, you know.”

We crossed the street.

“We were actually hoping,” said Becky, “that you’d be able to see it isn’t a bad neighborhood. I mean, in case Shizuka’s… your parents were worrying, you could, like, reassure them.”

“They don’t worrying,” said Taka. I saw the hint of a smile on his face as he lit a cigarette and tossed the spent match into a snowdrift.

The trickledown from the boom of the 1990s that had produced, on 125th, the Harlem USA mall and Starbucks had reached no farther north. We crossed over to Frederick Douglass and filed along sidewalks shattered under the ice, past demolition sites splashed with graffiti, vacant lots full of saplings inside chainlink fences, and terraces of brownstones with hair salons and check cashing joints on the ground floors. Even dilapidated, the brownstones would have had a dignified air, but they were all painted mud brown or red, layer upon peeling layer. Thanks to the weather, the streets were almost deserted. The few people we met stared at us. A group of men pedaling past on kids’ bikes hooted derisively. I felt hot all over. Ever since Gill had mentioned Malik, I’d been thinking about him off and on, and now I ignobly wished he was here. With him I’d been able to go about Harlem fearlessly. He might have been stoned out of his skull most of the time, but he never deviated far from first principles. Once, walking uptown to visit him at his place on 137th and Lenox, I’d been followed by catcalls of “Whitey” and suchlike. In the safety of his apartment I’d started crying. He’d put his hands on my shoulders, bowed his head until our faces touched, and said, “You’ve got

more soul than any of them." Remembering that now, I felt like crying for different reasons.

He lived at that time in one of those grand old buildings with moulded ceilings and a mosaic in the lobby where a man was shot one night. Sitting on his fifth floor windowsill was like being on board an ocean liner, watching the flotsam and jetsam drift past. Up here, it was more like floundering through the wreckage of the *Titanic*.

I walked beside Becky in silence. Taka and Shizuka kept up a muttered conversation in Japanese, too far behind for me to overhear.

The devastation was worst of all on the cross streets. 142nd, where the girls lived, appeared to have been systematically vandalized, with the banisters of the brownstones' steps hanging askew, broken windows gaping, and garbage bags torn open on the snow by foraging cats. The V of Edgcombe and Bradhurst Avenues perpendicular to the western end of the street, which should have been graced with a Flatiron-style tenement, had been razed to rubble. The brownstones climbing up the Edgcombe side were windowless and doorless. On the uptown side of 142nd stood a housing project. Those massive buildings, as monstrous as any product of the Stalin era in the USSR, have the dubious quality of indestructibility.

"If I lived in one of those," I said, pointing, as Becky got out her keys, "I'd want to flatten it. But the worst I could do would be to fuck with the elevator. I can't imagine anything more frustrating."

We went into a hall with the familiar checked lino floor and started to climb unlit flights of stairs.

"I'd want a tank," I said. It was something I'd first thought of years ago. "A mortar. A rocket launcher. Heavy artillery. A suitcase full of C4." I laughed as a new thought came to me. "I'd want a fucking Boeing 747."

I distinctly heard Becky mutter, "Jesus Christ."

"What?" I said.

"I guess it's easier to joke about it if you weren't here at the time."

"Oh," I said, "I wasn't joking."

"Now I'm working on a canvas on the theme," said Shizuka. "Since you're here, you can see."

Their apartment on the fourth floor was unexpectedly welcoming. Swathes of colorful gauze hung in the windows, the tables and chairs were the best of Dumpster salvage, and standing lamps in the corners of the living-room gave a cozy effect. Shizuka put a CD on the minisystem: Underworld's *Everything, Everything*. Taka and I had it, too. "Anyone want coffee?" asked Becky.

They'd installed track lighting on the ceiling of the kitchen. I'd been wondering whether they might have chosen this place for its natural exposure, but evidently not. Halogen floods illuminated the chaos of a studio. The kitchen counter was covered with Becky's stones. In the corner stood a lumpy object about four feet high, shrouded in a dropsheet. On an easel was a 60 by 40 inch canvas so sketchily begun that I couldn't tell what it was going to be of. It turned out to be Shizuka's work on the theme of 9/11. She showed us a number of preliminary drawings and where their elements would appear on the canvas. The twin towers were to be depicted in all their old glory, but from their top floors people would be jumping, and that famous storm of paper would blow all over the canvas, one or two sheets appearing lifesize in the foreground. These last were to be collage items: faxes of corporate asset valuations from South America that a friend of Becky's had picked up off the street (with an eye to this use for them?). Shizuka showed us them in a plastic folder.

Taka said in Japanese, "Be careful you don't get hauled up for unauthorized use of private material."

I said in English, "I think you've got hold of a really good idea." I wasn't flattering her. I loved the fact that there were not to be any airplanes in the picture. "When do you expect to finish it?"

"I don't know," she said with disarming honesty. "Some days I don't want to touch the canvas. Right now I haven't worked recently. But I have to finish before I can start another project."

She was paler than ever. When I gave her back the folder our fingers touched. Hers were ice-cold.

"Milk? Sugar? Amaretto flavored creamer?" said Becky, pouring out from the Mr Coffee that sat atop the gas rings on the stove. I guessed neither of them did much cooking. The sink had nothing in it except a tumbler full of paintbrushes. Over Becky's shoulder I saw inside the fridge: three Granny Smiths, a dozen fat free yoghurts in various flavors, a bowl of bright red Jello covered with foil, and condiments.

Taka sipped his coffee. "What about your new project, Becky?"

"Oh. Well, it's not finished yet, but…" She put her mug down and lifted the dropsheet off the object in the corner. It was a papier mache sculpture of a nude woman, slightly larger than lifesize (if Shizuka had been the model), kneeling in the seiza pose with hands flat to a wooden pedestal that looked like a fruit crate. A sculpted curtain of hair spilled down, almost hiding the lowered face. The effect of abject apology was so powerful that I wanted to rush over and lift the figure to its feet.

"Very moving indeed," said Taka in Japanese. He was looking at Shizuka, who was

compulsively picking flakes off the neck of a tube of red gouache. I had a sense of impending disaster.

"It's really impressive. What do you call it?" I asked Becky, just to say something.

"Guess."

"Oh, God. *Still Apologizing After All These Years*?" I moved closer to the sculpture and saw that its back was covered with pencil marks. "*Fantasy Figure*," I tried in Japanese. Taka's and Shizuka's heads snapped around.

Becky said gruffly, "*The Spirit Of Harlem.*"

"It's a feminist interpretation," said Shizuka.

"How do you figure that?" said Taka in Japanese.

Starting in English, then dropping into Japanese, Shizuka explained that Becky saw a link between the historical oppression of Japanese women and that of African-Americans, and that the sculpture was intended to place the viewer in the role of the oppressor, the viewing experience creating a space in his or her consciousness for the oppressed groups who were customarily denied such recognition…

I forced myself to smile at Becky and tried for a wry tone – maybe it was time for a bit of American solidarity. "It's all Greek to me, what about you?"

"I speak little Japanese only," she enunciated. Her accent was so poor that it took me a minute to understand what she'd said.

I wandered over and looked at *The Spirit Of Harlem* again. "Are you going to give her tattoos?" I pointed to the sculpture's back.

"Yeah. I haven't decided what yet, though. I could show you my rough drafts." She made it into a question.

"Sure." I followed her through the living-room, into the bedroom. She picked up a sketchpad that had been lying on the bed and showed me her ideas: a snaky dragon such as elderly yakuza have on their arms; a multicultural group of slaves in chains; a crucified man who looked like Tupac Shakur; a 1920s jazz club scene with a large saxophone in it. She didn't seem to be crazy about any of the sketches, so I didn't have to pretend to be, either. I said, "What about a tattoo of a face? It could be angry or defiant or even gloating, whatever her real feelings are."

"But we can't know her real feelings," said Becky. "That's the whole point."

I listened for the voices in the kitchen and caught something over the music about "Mom's friends." I said, "What about Shizuka's real feelings?"

"About what?"

"I don't know, about school. About her art. About you."

Becky stood up. I thought she was going to hit me. She fumbled with the buttons of

her jeans and slid them down her thighs. She was wearing black cotton panties. Blonde pubic hair showed at the legholes. She turned half around. Covering her left buttock was a tattoo of a tree, a tree in the old Shizuka style with blood veins for roots and malformed limbs for boughs, each leaf a hand dripping blood from its fingernails. Becky craned over her shoulder and jabbed her finger into her own skin. "Can you see it? It's pretty small." I had to move closer. She smelled faintly musky. At last I saw that on the trunk of the tree was written in a heart, as if carved, *SN + BS 4 EVER*. "She designed it, like I told you." Becky pulled her jeans back up. "So I guess it expresses her real feelings."

I went to the window and moved the purple gauze curtain aside. I was looking into an airshaft. There were lighted windows on the second and third floors, but I couldn't hear a sound from down there. I said, "Shizuka dropped out of school to follow you down to the city, didn't she?"

"She's a big girl. It's pretty dumb of you to think I could influence her, if that's what you're saying."

"It's not a bad thing to have influence over people. If you do have some over her, you might be able to save her life by using it."

"Well, I don't."

Becky's frustration came through as clearly as if she'd started screaming. I turned around. She gave me a frightened look and sat down on the bed.

"I can't make her do anything. I can't even make her eat. I don't even buy any groceries for myself because she'll just binge and get all weirded out and throw up. I read on this website that you're not supposed to enable them, but if I do buy stuff it's like I'm encouraging her to be bulimic, so no matter what I do it's wrong. But I don't know what to do. It's like, why do I have to be the adult around here? Why am I the one that has to be responsible?"

"I… oh my God. Have you thought about talking to her parents?"

Becky's face darkened, and I knew she was going to tell me why she couldn't. As I racked my brains for some other suggestion to make, I overheard Taka saying in a joking tone I knew of old, "Well, if you're really in love with her then marry her!"

There are no four-letter words in Japanese. That doesn't compromise the language's range of expression. *Fuck* and *shit* and sheer helpless rage were all there in his voice.

We left them with some documentary they wanted to watch just starting on the History Channel. We trudged up the hideous slope of Edgcombe Avenue, turned left on 145th Street, passed a bunch of boys with red eyes shivering in the cold, and descended icy

concrete steps into the subway station. Swiping our Metrocards, we pushed through the turnstiles. The walls were tiled in stripes of orange and white. Our footsteps echoed in the concrete vault. On the faces of the other people waiting for the A train, unpleasant emotions showed in a way that struck me as precivilized. My head was aching badly. The world seemed to be rotating like a pulsar, almost too fast to see, showing me now a bright side on which compassion was necessary and now a dark side on which only revulsion was possible.

Before the train came we had to cope with several demands for money, and when it did come a very stinky homeless man sat down across from us. He got off at 125th and Taka and I started talking. We hadn't been shown Shizuka's tattoo, and we speculated as to what it might be of. As to *where*, there seemed little doubt: on her back, of course. Like a yakuza moll. We discussed Gill and Victor and agreed that even if they did get married, it wouldn't last. Victor had said that he thought in Spanish a lot of the time, whereas Gill couldn't even speak it. How was she ever really to understand him? We got off at 59th Street and climbed to the 1 and 9 platform, discussing the dissimilarities of English and Spanish. It was an established habit of ours to scapegoat language for everything that could go wrong between two people. Referring to the setup on 142nd Street, Taka said, "Did you notice there wasn't a single Japanese book or magazine in the place?"

"There was a whole shelf of manga in the bedroom."

"Manga," he said scornfully.

"Probably Becky's," I admitted. I paced the platform and peered into the tunnel. Becky had made us a present of two more stones: one flattish with a geisha-looking nude on it and one, roughly hemispherical, painted to look like a snow globe with Santa Claus on his sleigh inside. I had them in a plastic bag, and this I now started swinging violently.

A yellow garbage train clanked into the station. Taka sighed and said, "Let's take a taxi."

On the seat we found a crumpled $5 bill, which we handed over to the driver. He seemed astonished by our honesty. Having established that we were tourists, he started telling us about his scheme to go back to Cote D'Ivoire and start an import-export business. I made sympathetic noises. Taka stared out the window. While still listening to the driver I tried to remember if we had any aspirin in the hotel room.

We stumbled out onto the corner of 76th. Taka headed for the Milburn's green awning without looking to see if I was following. "I'll be up in a minute," I shouted, and dashed to the Duane Reade on the next block. There was a whole aisle full of

painkillers. I dithered for several minutes before buying a box of Tylenol. Running back to the hotel, I realized I didn't have my keycard. I knocked on our door. Silence. "Taka, Taka." After another few minutes I went back to the desk and had them call our number. The call was answered. The clerk put down the phone and told me to go on up. I fell out of the elevator to see Taka standing in the open door of our room, wearing nothing except jeans, his hair dripping wet.

"I was in the shower. I thought you had your keycard."

"Well, I didn't." I went past him, then stopped. The room was dark. He shut the door and it was darker. He touched my waist. I turned, locked my arms around him, and said into his ear, getting my face all wet, "I'm sorry."

"It's OK." He undid my arms and padded back into the bathroom, closing that door, too. No light showed underneath it. He was showering in the dark.

I put on one of the nightstand lamps, took Becky's stones out of their plastic bags, and dumped all three of them on the bed. Then I saw the Duane Reade bag lying on the floor where I'd dropped it. I took three Tylenols with a glass of water. Swallowing, I spotted Taka's Marlboro Mediums on the nightstand, took one, and lit up.

I was on my second one by the time he came out of the bathroom. I stood by the TV on top of which I'd placed the ashtray, watching him search through his suitcase for a clean t-shirt. He didn't find one. Sighing, he put on the plain navy one he'd been wearing and a pair of boxers. "Let's talk about it tomorrow. Let's get some sleep."

"I'm not tired," I protested. It sounded childish, and I would have laughed at myself if he'd so much as smiled, but he didn't. He lit a cigarette, sat down on the bed, and fingered Becky's stones.

"We've got one more day. I figure I'll call her in the morning and arrange to have lunch or something. I'll put it to her then."

"Wait, did I miss something?"

"I'm going to give her an ultimatum. Either she comes home, or I tell our parents the truth and they come here."

I'd been convinced all along that going home would be the best medicine for Shizuka. But now I said, "She's an adult. You can't force her to abandon the lifestyle she's chosen."

"She hasn't chosen any lifestyle." He stood up to reach the ashtray and stayed standing, half turned away from me. "She's chosen to die."

I'd thought he didn't get it, or would never admit to getting it. I gripped my left elbow tightly in my right hand. "What if she tells you she's going to come home after she finishes that painting, or whatever, and then she just doesn't?"

"Then I'll fly back here and try again."

"But your job… what if you can't get time off again?"

"To hell with my job."

"I could come back in your place, if it came to that. I can take vacation time whenever I like as long as I apply in advance."

"That wouldn't work."

"We just have to convince her we care about her," I muttered, but I didn't believe it any longer. He'd taken the wind out of my sails. My eye fell on Becky's stones and I remembered what I'd decided to do with them. I went over to the window and pulled back the curtains. I could see nothing outside the glass, of course, but I remembered that we looked down on a strip of cement backyard with a Dumpster in it. I tried to open the window.

"What are you doing? You've got to lift the catch."

"Oops." Ignoring whatever else he was saying, I lifted the catch, but I still couldn't get the window open. It was stuck, or not made to open at all. I jerked at it and ripped a fingernail to the quick. "Ow, shit, ow!"

"Calm down!"

"I am calm." Blood welled up from under my fingernail. I went back to the bed and picked Becky's stones up, two in my left hand and one in my right. Taka moved towards me. I threw the stone in my right hand, the one with the face that might or might not have been Shizuka's on it, at the window. A crack shrieked the length of the pane, but it held. I darted to where the stone had fallen, scooped it up again, and bashed the window with it. Pieces of glass fell into the room and out into the darkness. I hurled the stone out after them. The moment in which I expected to hear it hit the ground passed in silence, as if there was really nothing down there at all. Taka grabbed me, dragged me over to the bed, and threw me flat on my back. He plunged on top of me and pinned my wrists. I still had a stone in each hand. I threw them up at him: not very forcefully, because I could only move my fingers. One of them hit his shoulder. The other one hit the side of his head as he turned it. I screamed.

He let go of my right wrist and touched his head.

"I'm sorry, Taka! I didn't think it would hurt you!"

"I'm fine." He rolled off me and sat on the edge of the bed with his back to me. He pushed up the sleeve of his t-shirt and squinted at his shoulder.

I recovered the stones, tiptoed to the window, and dropped them out. The room already felt colder.

"Had enough?"

I jumped. He was watching me.

"I thought you'd given up smashing things… oh, *years* ago!"

"I thought so, too. I guess I forgot how much stuff there is to smash."

He shook his head, then winced and touched the place over his ear where the stone had struck. It didn't seem to be bleeding, but it must have hurt.

Suddenly I knew what to do. I darted around the bed and dropped to my knees on the floor in front of him. "I am terribly sorry!" I'd seen this done on TV, but it wouldn't have occurred to me now if not for Becky's *The Spirit Of Harlem*. As I bumped my forehead on the carpet, I felt sick with embarrassment. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

"Jesus Christ!" shouted Taka in English. He jumped up and seized my shoulders, dragging me to my feet. "You don't have to do this shit! It's not necessary. You didn't hurt me at all." He hugged me. "Jesus Christ, honey…" He carried on speaking the endearments that don't exist in Japanese. Baby, darling, sweetie, angel… the very words made me feel safe.

I had no strength left in my arms, but I wrapped them around him. He kissed my forehead and then my mouth. I kissed him back weakly.

"Thank you," he whispered, incomprehensibly.

I rested my head on his shoulder and felt myself starting to fall asleep. Straightening up, I said with an effort, "Let me see those bruises. If I *have* hurt you I'll never forgive myself."

Sometime in the small hours of the morning the telephone on the nightstand rang. Taka rolled over and grabbed it.

"It's probably about the window," I muttered wretchedly.

"Hello," said Taka in English, and then his face went blank. He sat up and fumbled about with his free hand for his cigarettes. I switched on the bedside light. His cigarettes were on the other nightstand. I held them out to him, but he didn't take them. He got out of bed and pressed his back against the wall, hunching his shoulders, still clamping the receiver to his ear.

A freezing wind bulged the curtains and blew across the bed. I jumped up and started dragging my clothes on.

Tokyo, April 2003

Author's Note

The Spirit of Harlem is featured in Felicity Savage's collection of novellas, ***Love in Japan: Coming Clean and Four More Ways of F**king Up.*** (The cover's pretty cute, too.) If you enjoyed this story, check out the collection!

About the Author

Felicity Savage is an American fantasy author. Born in South Carolina, Savage lived until the age of two in rural France, and then in the west of Ireland. At six, she moved with her family to the island of North Uist in the Outer Hebrides, where she joined the Girl Guides and appeared in productions of Robin Hood and Peter Pan at the RAF base on Benbecula. Her first novel, *Humility Garden*, and its sequel *Delta City* were published by Penguin ROC in 1994 and 1995, while she was still at Columbia University. Her *Ever* trilogy was published by HarperCollins in 1995, 1996, and 1997. Savage was a finalist for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer in 1995 and 1996. She currently lives in Tokyo, Japan, with her husband, daughter, and two cats (one fat and one insane). When not writing, she works as a Japanese translator, sings Gregorian chant, and moonlights as a serial houseplant killer.

More information is available at *www.knightshillpublishing.com.*

Exclusive Extra!

If you enjoyed this book, read on for a sneak preview of Felicity Savage's first suspense novel, now available from Knights Hill Publishing.

MUSIC TO DIE BY

a suspense novel by

FELICITY SAVAGE

A singer in Tokyo's scuzzy indie rock scene, Shanti Hazard buried her past long ago. But when childhood friend Ned turns up in the audience at one of her band's shows, he threatens to reveal the ugly secret he and Shanti share.

Determined to protect her friends and bandmates, Shanti plots to outwit Ned while the band tours snowbound northern Japan, sleeping on couches. A botched cover-up leads to murder and a tightening web of deception, as the band clashes with the merciless Japanese legal system.

Ultimately, to defeat her past, Shanti will have to confront it… and Ned… before someone else dies.

Music to Die By plunges the reader into the gritty world of the Japanese indie rock scene, building to a shocking climax. The first suspense novel from acclaimed fantasy author Felicity Savage, *Music to Die By* is now available from Knights Hill Publishing in print and ebook editions.

Excerpt follows…

MUSIC TO DIE BY

I saw him.

His blond hair shone in the dark. He was leaning against the wall about three people

behind Nina. At this distance I couldn't see his eyes.

"A lot to say," I repeated. "A lot to say."

I had nothing to say to Ned Gallant, now or ever.

But maybe it wasn't him. Maybe it was just some coworker of Nina's who hadn't been on the guest list, or one of the European drifters Joaquin collected.

Tad glanced sharply at me. I couldn't tell if he was alarmed, or just trying to prompt me, but it reminded me why I was here, why I'd written the song I was currently supposed to be introducing, and how I'd felt while I was writing it, in my tiny studio apartment with my headphones on, pushing rewind over and over again on the rough mix: as far from Ireland as I would ever get.

"Recently," I said, "I realized that I even have something to say about love. And this is it. 'Heartbreak.'"

I signaled to Joaquin with one hand behind my back. The silence lengthened: one, two, three, and the first plaintive piano notes floated out over Tad's bass line. Shingo tapped on the rim of the snare, a sinister rhythm like a clock ticking. Until its closing seconds, this song required no more of Gen than filler duties. "Heartbreak" was that rare thing in our repertoire, a slow burner designed to prove that I could actually sing, and that was appropriate, because it was my song of liberation.

"Struck dumb by a closing door," I sang, cupping my mic in both hands for a bit of distortion, "face down on the bathroom floor. Here's a dirty little sample, better keep it to yourself. I've lived, I've been, I've seen…"

Joaquin's line swelled, surging towards maximum volume.

"I've sunk, I've swum, I've fallen in between…"

Someone whistled deafeningly.

"And you, you think that you'll remain in my memory like a stain, but you'll fade like everyone! You were never here!"

Sweet, languid Jonathan had been the lead guitarist of the first band I was ever in, back in New York, and I'd thought he was the love of my life, until he turned out to be a cheater and a liar. When he cheated on me, I hadn't just dumped him, I'd left the country. Top that, asshole. I'd won, but it had taken me another four years to write him, literally, out of my heart.

And in the meantime, I'd discovered something strange and surprising, better than sex and almost as good as music.

Friendship.

I'd once had a boyfriend. Now I had four boy friends who meant more to me than Jonathan ever had.

I'd written "Heartbreak" for them, and if the lyrics didn't really reflect that… well, my lyrics always turned out kind of dark.

I couldn't lose them. I couldn't, but my own words sounded like a dire prophecy as I sobbed, "Stupid enough to not quite see the temporary nature of everything behind your eyes!"

It was Gen's moment. Unexpectedly, he launched a gargoyle of a riff that climbed on the back of Joaquin's piano line and reached for the stratosphere. We'd heard this variation in rehearsal, but never live. I signaled to Tad and went for a repeat of the chorus. Gen's riff toyed with my voice, then folded up and flatlined into a distorted hum that grew louder and louder until it swallowed Joaquin's last notes.

After that, our last number was an anticlimax. I thrashed around the stage, but I couldn't stop looking at that spot over by the wall. In a montage of underexposed stills, I saw him draining a can of beer, taking off his knit cap, and putting two fingers in his mouth and whistling. So it had been him.

"Encore! Encore!"

For once I wished our supporters weren't quite so faithful.

"Encore!"

I bowed for the third time. Behind me, Joaquin hissed, "What are you waiting for?"

"No encore," I said through my smile.

"Fuck off. What's wrong?"

With the show officially over, we could take a minute to confer. I went back to Joaquin, mic in hand. His face was scarlet and his hands hovered on the keyboard. "OK," I told him, "I'll do an encore. But not 'You're No Fun.'"

"Don't give me this shit. If you don't want to do it, why did you want it on the set list?"

"Joaquin, I can't fucking do it!"

Joaquin's jaw tightened. He seized the mic from my hand and plunged around the Korg, shaking the cord clear. "OK, we'll do another track from Xenophobia," he said out of the side of his mouth. "They've heard the whole album many times, but what the hell."

He arrived at the front of the stage in a single stride with his smile on full. A storm of clapping greeted him. Everyone knew he was the brains of the band, and although he seldom took a producer's bow, they felt he deserved it. He thanked them in English, Japanese, and French, and waited for the applause to subside. I hovered at his side, trying to look supportive rather than apprehensive. He said in Japanese, "We are delighted that you come all the way to Shimokitazawa to see us. I mean, it's the middle

of nowhere, eh?"

Laughter.

"We hope you will come all the way to Hokkaido to see us, too! We can't reimburse you for the airfare, but we think it will be worth it. They say that Sapporo is a beautiful city. Myself, I've never been there, but I'm looking forward to it. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, Gorot is going on tour!"

I did what I had to do, which was lead the applause. When we were debating whether to tour for U-Turn Day, I'd been anti. I didn't know why I even bothered, since Joaquin always got his way in the end.

"Some of you are familiar with Kinderbox," continued Joaquin, naming another of the acts he produced for our label, Cold Coeur Records, which he also owned. "We tour together. We will look for you next week in Sapporo! Hakodate! Aomori! Morioka! Yamagata! Sendai! Fukushima! And Utsunomiya! But if we don't see you there, we hope to meet on Tuesday the twelfth of March at Oasis in Shinjuku, where we plan a party for our homecoming. It is also the release party for U-Turn Day! Yoroshiku onegai shimasu. Also," Joaquin added rapidly, "we have gigs upcoming throughout March, please check out the information on the flyers. We're running late, but we will do one more song for you tonight. 'Dreamstomper.'" Throwing me a look of triumph mixed with a challenge, he hopped back behind the Korg.

Numbly, I waited for the piano loop to roll out of the speakers. In the interval of rustling silence I cleared my throat. "This one's for everyone who got lost along the way," I said, wishing Ned Gallant had.

Backstage, Nina handed out bottles of Crystal Geyser. Joaquin upended his over his head, splashing everyone. "To Cold Coeur Family Volume I!" This, unbelievably, was what our tour had come to be called. Infected by his mood, the other boys slavishly acted like they'd all been excited about it from the start. The manager played along, too, opining that it would be just the ticket to launch us into the big time. Joaquin followed him into his office to sort out our cut of the door. After retrieving our kit from the stage, Gen, Tad, and Shingo piled into the cruddy little restroom down the hall and jostled for access to the tap.

I gulped water. As soon as Joaquin squared the manager, we were due to join up with our faithful supporters and head to an izakaya. Ned might turn out to be someone else, and it wouldn't be the first time. My fight-or-flight reflex often went off at the sight of a blond head and a pair of blue eyes. But if it had been him…

Pushing a hand through my damp, tangled hair, I went out the side door and said

hello to my friends. There were about two dozen people left in the house, and I didn't know all their faces, let alone their names. Back in Gorot's early days, the same people had come to all our gigs and we'd gone to all their gigs; now we had friends and fans, and it was getting harder to tell which were which. I clocked the blond guy hovering near the exit.

I went back through the grey room, past the manager's office and the restroom, looking for another way out. There was an emergency exit, but it was padlocked.

I retrieved my shoulderbag, threw on my coat, and ducked back through the side door. I didn't have a plan. All I knew was that I had to keep Ned away from the band. I couldn't be sure that he wouldn't approach me in front of them, and I was even less sure of my own ability to deny to his face that we'd ever met. I wasn't even sure that would be the best line to take. He might react unpredictably.

"Shanti, you're not skipping out?" Nina said in astonishment.

"You're on PR duty, gorgeous," I said. "Oh, I left my hatbox back there. Could you take it home with you? I'll come over and pick it up tomorrow or sometime."

I beelined to the exit, calling goodnight to the technicians who were shutting down the equipment onstage. As I passed the blond guy, he took an abortive step towards me. I pushed through the door into February. His footsteps echoed mine on the stairs. Out on the street, the rest of our supporters were hanging around in groups, smoking and chatting. I shouted to them that I had an early start tomorrow and inconsistently turned left, away from the station. He caught up with me. I kept walking. At the 7-11 on the corner I turned again. He matched my strides. A cold, dusty wind blew around us.

"Fuck, this feels weird." His voice was deep. I'd subconsciously been expecting him to sound like a child. "But it feels kind of natural, too, doesn't it?"

"Well, it's been a while," I said, head ringing.

"A while?" He laughed. He looked like none of the men I'd mistaken for him over the years. He was still blond, and his eyes were still that eerie blue – but he was no longer small or pale or skinny. His skin had seen a lot of sun, and he hulked over me with shoulders as broad as the axle of a small car. He'd turned out as big as Nigel. But his accent no longer sounded like Nigel's. It had softened dramatically. "I guess you've added the art of understatement to your repertoire. It's been half our lives. No, more. I was twelve, and your birthday is before mine, so you'd have been thirteen."

He spoke as if he didn't remember exactly. This confused me.

"So how's Alastair doing these days?"

We were turning corners at random, and although I couldn't remember crossing the

railway tracks, we must have done, because we were now descending the gentle hill on the far side of Shimokitazawa station. Shuttered boutiques lined the narrow street. Here and there, golden light from the windows of a restaurant shone through a screen of trees. The wind numbed my face; it seemed to have penetrated to my bones and slowed down my brain. Ned and I were talking. How had this happened?

"Alastair lives in the States," I said. My brother had spent his early twenties trying to be an artist; now he was the assistant manager of Windrose & Sons, a 150-year-old gallery in Boston's Back Bay that sold objets d'art and antiques from all over the world, true to its origins as a clearing-house for plunder from the Orient. He and his girlfriend Maisie lived together in Somerville with her second-hand Volvo, his BMW 6-series, and two Weimaraners, and he seemed happy. "He's doing OK, I guess."

"Figures. He was bound to land on his feet. And June? Still painting, is she?"

"She moved back to France years ago," I said. Our mother had nothing to do with it. Ned would have no reason to track her down, nor could he learn anything from her he didn't already know. "She lives near Bordeaux now. It's la France profonde, the true France. She keeps chickens and goats. And yeah, she's still painting her heart out."

Ned laughed. "You know something funny? All this time I thought your family was still in Thailand."

"You're kidding! We only stayed there for six months."

I remembered promising Ned that he could come with us. Promising it would be all right. But I was only thirteen and it wasn't my decision to make.

Ned would probably have hated Thailand, though. We did. After Ireland, it had been so hot that I felt like I'd stepped onto another planet. I remembered the energy draining from my thirteen-year-old body, the sunlight so bright that my eyes hurt, and a hundred and one permutations of boredom and anxiety. That was nothing to how June must have felt. She'd dragged us halfway around the world to the one man who had to take us in: our father. Malcolm Ogilvie had settled in Phuket. He was a poet – we'd owned an actual book of poetry by him at one point – but he subsisted on the generosity of hotel and bar managers who gave him odd jobs. From his point of view, having the three of us descend on him must have been the worst trip of his life, especially since he had a live-in Thai girlfriend.

Somehow, we all managed to cohabit in his disgusting bungalow for five or six months. That was how long it took June to accept that she'd made a mistake. She fell back on her brother Red, my corporate lawyer uncle in Philadelphia. And just like that, as if the first thirteen years of my life had been a dream, I'd suddenly had the life of a privileged American teenager.

Not for long, though. Unlike Alastair, I hadn't been able to keep it up.

"As for our father," I said, "he's dead."

It was Ned's turn to exclaim, "You're kidding!" And in his smile I saw a hint of schadenfreude that chilled me to the bone.

"He hanged himself about ten years ago," according to the letter that the Thai girlfriend had sent June. It had been wrapped around a small teak box that contained Malcolm's ashes. "He left a typical, self-pitying note. Saying he'd failed everyone and he was sorry. Talk about wasted sentiments. *We* weren't."

Ned hissed between his teeth. I thought I'd succeeded in shocking him. But he said in the same easy tone as before, "Funny thing is, *I* live in Thailand now. On Koh Samui. I go across to Phuket all the time, and I used to ask around for you, but no one's ever heard of you or your father."

Shit.

"Ned, how on earth did you end up in Thailand?"

"I'm an architect," he said, and went on expansively, in the strange nonaccent he'd acquired. "Koh Samui is booming. The tsunami created a lot of opportunities. New regulations, new land up for sale. I've got my own business, building villas. Referrals from all over. The clients appreciate having someone on the ground to see their projects through to completion: they don't want to deal with the Thais themselves. They're racist fuckers, as a rule. But I believe in doing the best work possible."

"Wow."

"I'm building my own house, too. It's still under construction. I've been working on it on and off for the last four years. But it's going to be fucking stunning. I can show you some photos if you're interested."

Laughter bubbled up in my chest. Ned was a builder. I didn't know why this struck me as so funny. I said, "Cool. Did you study architecture at school?" I wanted to find out where he'd spent the twelve years that were still unaccounted for. Why couldn't I just ask?

"Sure, I learned on the job. That's the best way. Hands-on experience. You've got to be focused, though. Thailand is full of Westerners who just drift from beach to beach…" Ned shook his head.

"Oh, we've got them here, too, except they don't come for the beaches. They come for the jobs."

"Still, I can't criticize that lifestyle. I lived on Bali for a while. Bummed around Indonesia, Malaysia, India." We reached the level crossing at the bottom of the hill. The barrier was down, the warning bell pinging. "I guess I was looking for something, but I

didn't know what it was," Ned shouted as a train rushed past. "Maybe it was just a decent living," he added, laughing.

"Look," I said, pointing to a record shop on a side street. "They sell our albums. We've got our own label, and we're hooked up with an independent distributor."

"Oh yeah? Way to go!"

"Jesus, Ned, what *has* happened to your accent? You sound almost American."

"You sound fairly American yourself, Shanti."

"Well, I went to school on the East Coast. High school in Philly, and then NYU." No need to mention that I hadn't graduated, committing myself to rock 'n' roll instead of to the library.

"Get a load of you. I didn't go to university at all. After you left, my grandmother showed up and took me back to Denmark with her."

"Denmark!" That was it, of course. He didn't sound American. He sounded ever so slightly Scandinavian. The legend came back to me all at once: the mother who did a runner when Ned was three, leaving Nigel to raise him whilst making a go of his business, Allihies Ceramics. I even remembered Ned telling me where she'd come from. Somewhere like Norway, but without the funky mythic associations. *Denmark*. "I didn't know you even had a grandmother!" I said.

"Neither did I, until she walked in and told me to pack my stuff. I had a terrible time adjusting in Copenhagen. Couldn't get my tongue around the language. I used to think about you and Alastair jabbering away to each other in French. How did you do it? I picked up enough Danish in the end to get by, but as soon as I got out of school I buggered off. I used to go back as often as possible to see my grandmother, though. I owed her, didn't I?"

"She must be an amazing lady," to have put up with you, I added to myself.

"She was. She died last year."

"Oh Ned, I'm so sorry."

I caught his flickering glance of contempt. He didn't believe I was sorry, although when I said it, I *had* been.

We rounded the corner onto the plaza. I veered towards the station entrance and started up the stairs. Ned climbed beside me. He was explaining how it was that he could jaunt off to Japan at his pleasure, with zero hardship or sacrifice, but I wasn't really listening, because I knew it was just a bunch of excuses. I was wondering if I could lose him in Tokyo's fiendishly complicated rail system. "Have you got a ticket?"

"I need to buy one, do I? Where to?"

I thought quickly. "To Shibuya, but the tickets are priced by distance. It's a hundred

and twenty yen."

I watched him shoulder through the milling crowd to the ticket machines, scoop change out of his pocket, and examine every coin before putting one into the slot. I had a prepaid Passnet card. I thought about dashing through the wickets while his back was turned. But there was only one platform. I'd have much better odds of losing him in Shibuya, where the JR, Tokyu, and Keio Inogashira train lines and the Ginza, Hanzomon, and Denentoshi subway lines all looped around each other in a multistorey knot.

As we came out of the wickets at Shibuya, I plunged ahead of Ned into the horde pouring down into the Mark City building. He seized the shoulder strap of my bag. "You don't mind if I hang onto you? This is fucking mad. I've never seen anything like it in my life. Feel like I'm about to be swept off my feet."

"Yeah, it's crazy, isn't it," I said, teeth gritted in frustration.

But then again, if I'd cut and run I would have looked guilty. And he'd just turn up again at our next gig, wouldn't he? My only hope was to brazen it out and get rid of him by some means as yet beyond the reach of my imagination. Leave him as completely as possible in the dark.

Yet every minute he was finding out more about my new life. I showed him how to buy a JR ticket and we rode the Yamanote line south, squashed shoulder to shoulder between drowsy drunks and noisy ones. At Gotanda I got off. He got off. We left the station and walked along a dark street, embroidered on one side with snack bar signs, which led back along the foot of the Yamanote line embankment. There was no traffic. Gotanda was an undercover town, buttoned up during the day and sleazy by night, with the highest concentration of love hotels south of Shibuya. You never bumped into anyone you knew here, which was why it suited me.

Among the office buildings on this side of the station towered a few elderly apartment blocks. I came to the dinged elevator doors at the foot of my building and turned to face Ned, feeling panicky. "Well, now you know where I live."

"Pretty ritzy." He craned his neck to look up at eight floors of concrete balconies.

"At least it's supposed to be earthquake-proof," I said.

"Oh sure, that would be a concern in this country."

We stood between the morgue-like walls of mailboxes. Was he waiting for me to invite him in? Did he plan on crashing *at my place?* No. No. No. This was not happening.

"Whereabouts are you staying, Ned?" I said bluntly.

"I've a couple of mates living in the city." He looked away from me. There was a

trace of anger in his voice. “They came to Japan to work and save money, and they’re spending it as fast as they make it, but they’re good lads. I’ll introduce you at some point. Mike’s got a job in the public school system; Gavin works for one of these English conversation schools, same as you. They’re raking it in. So they’ve a house, not just a crappy little apartment, in Nakano. You know where that is?”

Five minutes west on the Chuo line from Shinjuku. A goodly haul from here. But nowhere would be far enough.

“I can stay with them as long as I want. It’s party central, but I’m not fussy. You’ve no need to worry about me on that score!” Ned chuckled, an unamused masculine sound that reminded me of Nigel.

“Ned, how did you find me?” I blurted. Immediately, I had a sensation of having taken a misstep. “I’ve often thought about you, but I had no way of knowing where you were.”

He looked at me for a long minute. I concentrated on not letting a muscle of my face twitch. At last he said, “I searched for your name on the internet. Googled you, and up you popped. Your band’s website. Pictures and everything.”

I’d known it. I’d *known* it.

“So I knew it was you. Of course, it had to be you; there can’t be two people in the world named Shanti Hazard.”

Oh God. To hell with staying true to myself. I should have changed my name.

“That was about eighteen months ago.”

So I’d been living in jeopardy, my illusion of safety hanging by a thread, for more than a year.

But how could I have talked the boys out of putting up a website? How could I have forced them to leave me off it? I was the face of Gorot, literally – Tad had used a picture of me for our logo, and they were always pushing for more pictures: pictures of me walking on the beach, drinking coffee, laughing out loud – pictures that would make me seem like someone you knew. I vetoed all but the blurriest live shots. That had made me feel better about the website, as did the fact that not much of the information on it was in English. But what difference did that make when my name was out there?

“I thought about getting in touch there and then, but you know how it is. Life gets in the way. By the time I finally got around to it, I thought I might as well just pop over and see you. So I got a Japanese mate to translate the squiggly bits for me, and here I am!”

“And how do you like it so far?” I keened softly through my chattering teeth.

“Well, I’ll tell you. It’s bloody confusing and it’s bloody cold.” Ned lowered his

voice conspiratorially. “And do you get the feeling that these people don’t know how to relax? This is according to my Japanese mate at home, but the culture here is fucking totalitarian. The level of social control is such that the people can’t make their own choices. If they could, maybe they’d choose to be a bit more free!”

“I like it here because I fit in,” I said, provoking a cry of disbelief from him. I explained, though it felt futile: “I didn’t do very well as an American. It’s much easier to be a foreigner.”

“Well, in that case, then, I know what you mean! It was a nightmare living in Denmark, as I said. Looking like them but not speaking their language, not knowing their TV shows or their songs, not knowing shit about their fucking history and not caring. But when you’re a Westerner out East, no one cares where you supposedly come from. No one asks why you’ve got a funny accent. You don’t have to pretend to be something you’re not. You can be yourself, can’t you?”

Ned’s face lit up as the words tumbled out. I didn’t want to agree with him about anything, so I said nothing.

“Shanti, this is the kind of conversation I want to have with you! It’s not everyone who understands, is it? But you’re on my wavelength. You’ve had the same life experiences. You were *there.”*

Feeling dizzy, I steadied myself on the mailboxes.

“I just want to talk. No games, no bullshit.” He looked eagerly into my face. “I just want us to be open with each other.”

“Yeah, OK,” I said faintly, “but can we do it some other time? I’m dead on my feet, and if I don’t get indoors, I’m going to die of hypothermia.”

“Oh well, then, I won’t keep you,” he said, drawing back with unsettling rapidity. “We couldn’t have *that,* could we?”

Safely upstairs, I raged around my apartment, crying. My apartment was too small to rampage around very effectively, but I had a routine: I bounced on the bed, punched the walls, and threw my stuffed fox, Henri, at the bookcase. After fifteen minutes I was calm enough to sit on the floor, wiping my eyes, and realize I was hungry. All I’d had since lunch was some fries at Mickey D’s before the gig.

I topped some bread with processed cheese slices, stuck it in the microwave, and put on a CD while I waited for it to ping. *Appetite For Destruction,* a mood-improver tested under the harshest experimental conditions. I also switched on the heater. What else? I double-checked that the door was locked. Welcome to the jungle… I took a turn around the apartment, picking up the things I’d knocked down. Picture of Alastair and June on

the beach at Biarritz, check. Picture of Alastair and Maisie at Fresh Pond with their dogs, check. Picture of me and Alastair with Uncle Red, Aunt Phoebe, and their daughter Katie, our only cousin, as pretty as a carrot in a plastic bag, check. No pictures of Ireland. June had only ever taken photographs as references for landscapes. But she'd given Ned a little Kodak for his eleventh birthday, I recalled. Defying her example, he'd mostly photographed us, instinctively placing human beings in the center of the universe…

As I washed up my plate, a fresh wave of fear hit me. I forced myself to complete the motions of drying the plate and putting it away. Then I turned off all the lights and the music, went to the window, and parted the curtains. Nothing on the balcony except my laundry carousel. In the distance, clusters of red eyes winked in the brownish night sky: the aircraft warning lights on the tops of the skyscrapers in Shinagawa and Shiodome. I stepped outside in my sock feet. Peeping over the balcony wall, I could see down into the alley that ran around the back of the building. A couple of bare-armed women escorted a salaryman out of a snack bar door and bowed him on his way. Their voices tinkled like a distant music box: goodbye, goodnight, come back and see us some time.

I went back through my apartment, putting on my sneakers en route, and pattered along the windy corridor to the fire escape. By going down a flight and craning around the corner, I could get a view of the sidewalk outside the building's entrance. It was deserted. The light from the lobby fell on bare concrete. As far down the street as I could see, nothing was moving.

But I couldn't stay out here all night! I couldn't defend my perimeter while I was *sleeping!*

I went back into my apartment and sat on the floor with my arms around my knees. After a while I tore off my clothes and flung myself into bed. But it was no good. I rolled over and looked at the clock. Five to midnight. I jumped out of bed and packed some overnight things into my bag.

Gotanda station was full of rings of salarymen bowing goodnight. I threaded between them, caught the Yamanote line south, changed at Shinagawa, and boarded a southbound train on the Keihin-Tohoku line. The press of bodies kept me upright. Wielding my bag, I fought my way off at the second stop, Omori. This was the southern fringe of Tokyo, where the city bled into the Kanagawa sprawl. A couple of kids were playing guitar pop outside the supermarket, off-key and out of tune.

Cutting through Omori's dowdy little red-light district, I hurried south through the narrow streets. Despite the proximity of the railway and the small factories that lined it,

this neighborhood qualified as livable by Tokyo standards. Not many family homes remained among the new apartment buildings and lowrise blocks of condos. Floodlights gave a lurid tint to the greenery that overhung yard walls. Streetlights dimly illuminated the corners. Still, I was very conscious of the darkness. A couple of times I thought I heard footsteps behind me, but when I stopped to listen, I heard nothing except my own breath.

END OF EXCERPT

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