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HARUKI
MURAKAMI

84

A NOVEL

HARUKI MURAKAMI

TRANSLATED FROM THE JAPANESE
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DON'T LET APPEARANCES FOOL YOU

The taxi's radio was tuned to a classical FM broadcast. Janáček's *Sinfonietta*—probably not the ideal music to hear in a taxi caught in traffic. The middle-aged driver didn't seem to be listening very closely, either. With his mouth clamped shut, he stared straight ahead at the endless line of cars stretching out on the elevated expressway, like a veteran fisherman standing in the bow of his boat, reading the ominous confluence of two currents. Aomame settled into the broad back seat, closed her eyes, and listened to the music.

How many people could recognize Janáček's *Sinfonietta* after hearing just the first few bars? Probably somewhere between "very few" and "almost none." But for some reason, Aomame was one of the few who could.

Janáček composed his little symphony in 1926. He originally wrote the opening as a fanfare for a gymnastics festival. Aomame imagined 1926 Czechoslovakia: The First World War had ended, and the country was freed from the long rule of the Hapsburg Dynasty. As they enjoyed the peaceful respite visiting central Europe, people drank Pilsner beer in cafés and manufactured handsome light machine guns. Two years earlier, in utter obscurity, Franz Kafka had left the world behind. Soon Hitler would come out of nowhere and gobble up this beautiful little country in the blink of an eye, but at the time no one knew what hardships lay in store for them. This may be the most important proposition revealed by history: "At the time, no one knew what was coming." Listening to Janáček's music, Aomame imagined the carefree winds sweeping across the plains of Bohemia and thought about the vicissitudes of history.

In 1926 Japan's Taisho Emperor died, and the era name was changed to Showa. It was the beginning of a terrible, dark time in this country, too. The short interlude of modernism and democracy was ending, giving way to fascism.

Aomame loved history as much as she loved sports. She rarely read fiction, but history books could keep her occupied for hours. What she liked about history was the way all its facts were linked with particular dates and places. She did not find it especially difficult to remember historical dates. Even if she did not learn them by rote memorization, once she grasped the relationship of an event to its time and to the events preceding and following it, the date would come to her automatically. In both middle school and high school, she had always gotten the top grade on history exams. It puzzled her to hear someone say he had trouble learning dates. How could something so simple be a problem for anyone?

"Aomame" was her real name. Her grandfather on her father's side came from some little mountain town or village in Fukushima Prefecture, where there were supposedly a number of people who bore the name, written with exactly the same characters as the word for "green peas" and pronounced with the same four syllables, "Ah-oh-mah-meh." She had never been to the place, however. Her father had cut his ties with his family before her birth, just as her mother had done with her own family, so she had never met any of her grandparents. She didn't travel much, but on those rare occasions when she stayed in an unfamiliar city or town, she would always open the hotel's phone book to see if there were any Aomames in the area. She had never found a single one, and whenever she tried and failed, she felt like a lonely castaway on the open sea.

Telling people her name was always a bother. As soon as the name left her lips, the other person looked puzzled or confused.

"Miss Aomame?"

"Yes. Just like 'green peas.'"

Employers required her to have business cards printed, which only made things worse. People would stare at the card as if she had thrust a letter at them bearing bad news. When she announced her name on the telephone, she would often hear suppressed laughter. In waiting rooms at the doctor's or at public offices, people would look up at the sound of her name, curious to see what someone called "Green Peas" could look like.

Some people would get the name of the plant wrong and call her "Edamame" or "Soramame," whereupon she would gently correct them: "No, I'm not soybeans or fava beans, just green peas. Pretty close, though. Aomame." How many times in her thirty years had she heard the same remarks, the same feeble jokes about her name? *My life might have been totally different if I hadn't been born with this name. If I had had an ordinary name like Sato or Tanaka or Suzuki, I could have lived a slightly more relaxed life or looked at people with somewhat more forgiving eyes. Perhaps.*

Eyes closed, Aomame listened to the music, allowing the lovely unison of the brasses to sink into her brain. Just then it occurred to her that the sound quality was too good for a radio in a taxicab. Despite the rather low volume at which it was playing, the sound had true depth, and the overtones were clearly audible. She opened her eyes and leaned forward to study the dashboard stereo. The jet-black device shone with a proud gloss. She couldn't make out its brand name, but it was obviously high end, with lots of knobs and switches, the green numerals of the station readout clear against the black panel. This was not the kind of stereo you expected to see in an ordinary fleet cab.

She looked around at the cab's interior. She had been too absorbed in her own thoughts to notice until now, but this was no ordinary taxi. The high quality of the trim was evident, and the seat was especially comfortable. Above all, it was quiet. The car probably had extra sound insulation to keep noise out, like a soundproofed music studio. The driver probably owned his own cab. Many such owner-drivers would spare no expense on the upkeep of their automobiles. Moving only her eyes, Aomame searched for the driver's registration card, without success. This did not seem to be an illegal unlicensed cab, though. It had a standard taxi meter, which was ticking off the proper fare: 2,150 yen so far. Still, the registration card showing the driver's name was nowhere to be found.

"What a nice car," Aomame said, speaking to the driver's back. "So quiet. What kind is it?"

"Toyota Crown Royal Saloon," the driver replied succinctly.

"The music sounds great in here."

"It's a very quiet car. That's one reason I chose it. Toyota has some of the best sound-insulating technology in the world."

Aomame nodded and leaned back in her seat. There was something about the driver's way of speaking that bothered her, as though he were leaving something important unsaid. For example (and this is just one example), his remark on Toyota's impeccable sound insulation might be taken to mean that some other Toyota feature was less than impeccable. And each time he finished a sentence, there was a tiny but meaningful lump of silence left behind. This lump floated there, enclosed in the car's restricted space like an imaginary miniature cloud, giving Aomame a strangely unsettled feeling.

"It certainly is a quiet car," Aomame declared, as if to sweep the little cloud away. "And the stereo looks especially fine."

"Decisiveness was key when I bought it," the driver said, like a retired staff officer explaining a past military success. "I have to spend so much time in here, I want the best sound available. And—"

Aomame waited for what was to follow, but nothing followed. She closed her eyes again and concentrated on the music. She knew nothing about Janáček as a person, but she was quite sure that he never imagined that in 1984 someone would be listening to his composition in a hushed Toyota Crown Royal Saloon on the gridlocked elevated Metropolitan Expressway in Tokyo.

Why, though, Aomame wondered, had she instantly recognized the piece to be Janáček's *Sinfonietta*? And how did she know it had been composed in 1926? She was not a classical music fan, and she had no personal recollections involving Janáček, yet the moment she heard the opening bars, all her knowledge of the piece came to her by reflex, like a flock of birds swooping through an open window. The music gave her an odd, wrenching kind of feeling. There was no pain or unpleasantness involved, just a sensation that all the elements of her body were being physically wrung out. Aomame had no idea what was going on. *Could Sinfonietta actually be giving me this weird feeling?*

"Janáček," Aomame said half-consciously, though after the word emerged from her lips, she wanted to take it back.

"What's that, ma'am?"

"Janáček. The man who wrote this music."

"Never heard of him."

"Czech composer."

"Well-well," the driver said, seemingly impressed.

"Do you own this cab?" Aomame asked, hoping to change the subject.

"I do," the driver answered. After a brief pause, he added, "It's all mine. My second one."

"Very comfortable seats."

"Thank you, ma'am." Turning his head slightly in her direction, he asked, "By the way, are you in a hurry?"

"I have to meet someone in Shibuya. That's why I asked you to take the expressway."

"What time is your meeting?"

"Four thirty," Aomame said.

"Well, it's already three forty-five. You'll never make it."

"Is the backup that bad?"

"Looks like a major accident up ahead. This is no ordinary traffic jam. We've hardly moved for quite a while."

She wondered why the driver was not listening to traffic reports. The expressway had been brought to a standstill. He should be listening to updates on the taxi drivers' special radio station.

"You can tell it's an accident without hearing a traffic report?" Aomame asked.

"You can't trust them," he said with a hollow ring to his voice. "They're half lies. The Expressway Corporation only releases reports that suit its agenda. If you really want to know what's happening here and now, you've got to use your own eyes and your own judgment."

"And your judgment tells you that we'll be stuck here?"

"For quite a while," the driver said with a nod. "I can guarantee you that. When it backs up solid like this, the expressway is sheer hell. Is your meeting an important one?"

Aomame gave it some thought. "Yes, very. I have to see a client."

"That's a shame. You're probably not going to make it."

The driver shook his head a few times as if trying to ease a stiff neck. The wrinkles on the back of his neck moved like some kind of ancient creature. Half-consciously watching the movement, Aomame found herself thinking of the sharp object in the bottom of her shoulder bag. A touch of sweat came to her palms.

"What do you think I should do?" she asked.

"There's nothing you *can* do up here on the expressway—not until we get to the next exit. If we were down on the city streets, you could just step out of the cab and take the subway."

"What is the next exit?"

"Ikejiri. We might not get there before the sun goes down, though."

Before the sun goes down? Aomame imagined herself locked in this cab until sunset. The Janáček was still playing. Muted strings came to the foreground as if to soothe her heightened anxiety. That earlier wrenching sensation had largely subsided. What could that have been?

Aomame had caught the cab near Kinuta and told the driver to take the elevated expressway from Yohga. The flow of traffic had been smooth at first, but suddenly backed up just before Sangenjaya, after which they had hardly moved. The outbound lanes were moving fine. Only the side headed toward downtown Tokyo was tragically jammed. Inbound Expressway Number 3 would not normally back up at three in the afternoon, which was why Aomame had directed the driver to take it.

"Time charges don't add up on the expressway," the driver said, speaking toward his rearview mirror. "So don't let the fare worry you. I suppose you need to get to your meeting, though?"

"Yes, of course. But there's nothing I can do about it, is there?"

He glanced at her in the mirror. He was wearing pale sunglasses. The way the light was shining in, Aomame could not make out his expression.

"Well, in fact, there might be a way. You *could* take the subway to Shibuya from here, but you'd have to do something a little ... extreme."

"Something extreme?"

"It's not something I can openly advise you to do."

Aomame said nothing. She waited for more with narrowed eyes.

"Look over there. See that turnout just ahead?" he asked, pointing. "See? Near that Esso sign."

Aomame strained to see through the windshield until she focused on a space to the left of the two-lane roadway where broken-down cars could pull off. The elevated roadway had no shoulder but instead had emergency turnouts at regular intervals. Aomame saw that the turnout was outfitted with a yellow emergency phone box for contacting the Metropolitan Expressway Public Corporation office. The turnout itself was empty at the moment. On top of a building beyond the oncoming lanes there was a big billboard advertising Esso gasoline with a smiling tiger holding a gas hose.

"To tell you the truth, there's a stairway leading from the turnout down to street level. It's for drivers who have to abandon their cars in a fire or earthquake and climb down to the street. Usually only maintenance workers use it. If you were to climb down that stairway, you'd be near a Tokyo Line station. From there, it's nothing to Shibuya."

"I had no idea these Metropolitan Expressways had emergency stairs," Aomame said.

"Not many people do."

"But wouldn't I get in trouble using it without permission when there's no real emergency?"

The driver paused a moment. Then he said, "I wonder. I don't know all the rules of the Corporation, but you wouldn't be hurting anybody. They'd probably look the other way, don't you think? Anyway, they don't have people watching every exit. The Metropolitan Expressway Public Corporation is famous for having a huge staff but nobody really doing any work."

"What kind of stairway is it?"

"Hmm, kind of like a fire escape. You know, like the ones you see on the backs of old buildings. It's not especially dangerous or anything. It's maybe three stories high, and you just climb down. There's a barrier at the opening, but it's not very high. Anybody who wanted to could get over it easily."

"Have you ever used one of these stairways?"

Instead of replying, the driver directed a faint smile toward his rearview mirror, a smile that could be read any number of ways.

"It's strictly up to you," he said, tapping lightly on the steering wheel in time to the music. "If you just want to sit here and relax and enjoy the music, I'm fine with that. We might as well resign ourselves to the fact that we're not going anywhere soon. All I'm saying is that there *are* emergency measures you can take if you have urgent business."

Aomame frowned and glanced at her watch. She looked up and studied the surrounding cars. On the right was a black Mitsubishi Pajero wagon with a thin layer of white dust. A bored-looking young man in the front passenger seat was smoking a cigarette with his window open. He had long hair, a tanned face, and wore a dark red windbreaker. The car's luggage compartment was filled with a number of worn surfboards. In front of him was a gray Saab 900, its dark-tinted windows closed tight, preventing any glimpse of who might be inside. The body was so immaculately polished, you could probably see your face in it.

The car ahead was a red Suzuki Alto with a Nerima Ward license plate and a dented bumper. A young mother sat gripping the wheel. Her small child was standing on the seat next to her, moving back and forth to dispel its boredom. The mother's annoyance showed on her face as she cautioned the child to keep still. Aomame could see her mouth moving. The scene was unchanged from ten minutes earlier. In those ten minutes, the car had probably advanced less than ten yards.

Aomame thought hard, arranging everything in order of priority. She needed hardly any time to reach a conclusion. As if to coincide with this, the final movement of the Janáček was just beginning.

She pulled her small Ray-Ban sunglasses partway out of her shoulder bag and took three thousand-yen bills from her wallet. Handing the bills to the driver, she said, "I'll get out here. I really can't be late for this appointment."

The driver nodded and took the money. "Would you like a receipt?"

"No need. And keep the change."

"Thanks very much," he said. "Be careful, it looks windy out there. Don't slip."

"I'll be careful," Aomame said.

"And also," the driver said, facing the mirror, "please remember: things are not what they seem."

Things are not what they seem, Aomame repeated mentally. "What do you mean by that?" she asked with knitted brows.

The driver chose his words carefully: "It's just that you're about to do something *out of the ordinary*. Am I right? People do not ordinarily climb down the emergency stairs of the Metropolitan Expressway in the middle of the day—especially women."

"I suppose you're right."

"Right. And after you *do* something like that, the everyday *look* of things might seem to change a little. Things may look *different* to you than they did before. I've had that experience myself. But don't let appearances fool you. There's always only one reality."

Aomame thought about what he was saying, and in the course of her thinking, the Janáček ended and the audience broke into immediate applause. This was obviously a live recording. The applause was long and enthusiastic. There were even occasional calls of "Bravo!" She imagined the smiling conductor bowing repeatedly to the standing audience. He would then raise his head, raise his arms, shake hands with the concertmaster, turn away from the audience, raise his arms again in praise of the orchestra, face front, and take another deep bow. As she listened to the long recorded applause, it sounded less like applause and more like an endless Martian sandstorm.

"There is always, as I said, only one reality," the driver repeated slowly, as if underlining an important passage in a book.

"Of course," Aomame said. He was right. A physical object could only be in one place at one time. Einstein proved that. Reality was utterly coolheaded and utterly lonely.

Aomame pointed toward the car stereo. "Great sound."

The driver nodded. "What was the name of that composer again?"

"Janáček."

"Janáček," the driver repeated, as if committing an important password to memory. Then he pulled the lever that opened the passenger door. "Be careful," he said. "I hope you get to your appointment on time."

Aomame stepped out of the cab, gripping the strap of her large leather shoulder bag. The applause was still going. She started walking carefully along the left edge of the elevated road toward the emergency turnout some ten meters ahead. Each time a large truck roared by on the opposite side, she felt the surface of the road shake—or, rather, undulate—through her high heels, as if she were walking on the deck of an aircraft carrier on a stormy sea.

The little girl in the front seat of the red Suzuki Alto stuck her head out of her window and stared, open-mouthed, at Aomame passing by. Then she turned to her mother and asked, "Mommy, what is that lady doing? Where's she going? I want to get out and walk too. Please, Mommy! Pleeease!" The mother responded to her cries in silence, shaking her head and shooting an accusatory glance at Aomame. The girl's loud pleading and the mother's glance were the only responses to her that Aomame noticed. The other drivers just sat at the wheel smoking and watching her make her way with determined steps between the cars and the side wall. They knit their brows and squinted as if looking at a too-bright object but seemed to have temporarily suspended all judgment. For someone to be walking on the Metropolitan Expressway was by no means an everyday event, with or without the usual flow of traffic, so it took them some time to process the sight as an actual occurrence—all the more so because the walker was a young woman in high heels and a miniskirt.

Aomame pulled in her chin, kept her gaze fixed straight ahead, her back straight, and her pace steady. Her chestnut-colored Charles Jourdan heels clicked against the road's surface, and the skirts of her coat waved in the breeze. April had begun, but there was still a chill in the air and a hint of roughness to come. Aomame wore a beige spring coat over her green light wool Junko Shimada suit. A black leather bag hung over her shoulder, and her shoulder-length hair was impeccably trimmed and shaped. She wore no accessories of any kind. Five foot six inches tall, she carried not an ounce of excess fat. Every muscle in her body was well toned, but her coat kept that fact hidden.

A detailed examination of her face from the front would reveal that the size and shape of her ears were significantly different, the left one much bigger and malformed. No one ever noticed this, however, because her hair nearly always covered her ears. Her lips formed a tight straight line, suggesting that she was not easily approachable. Also contributing to this impression were her small, narrow nose, somewhat protruding cheekbones, broad forehead, and long, straight eyebrows. All of these were arranged to sit in a pleasing oval shape, however, and while tastes differ, few would object to calling her a beautiful woman. The one problem with her face was its extreme paucity of expression. Her firmly closed lips only formed a smile when absolutely necessary. Her eyes had the cool, vigilant stare of a superior deck officer. Thanks to these features, no one ever had a vivid impression of her face. She attracted attention not so much because of the qualities of her features but rather because of the

naturalness and grace with which her expression moved. In that sense, Aomame resembled an insect skilled at biological mimicry. What she most wanted was to blend in with her background by changing color and shape, to remain inconspicuous and not easily remembered. This was how she had protected herself since childhood.

Whenever something caused her to frown or grimace, however, her features underwent dramatic changes. The muscles of her face tightened, pulling in several directions at once and emphasizing the lack of symmetry in the overall structure. Deep wrinkles formed in her skin, her eyes suddenly drew inward, her nose and mouth became violently distorted, her jaw twisted to the side, and her lips curled back, exposing Aomame's large white teeth. Instantly, she became a wholly different person, as if a cord had broken, dropping the mask that normally covered her face. The shocking transformation terrified anyone who saw it, so she was careful never to frown in the presence of a stranger. She would contort her face only when she was alone or when she was threatening a man who displeased her.

Reaching the turnout, Aomame stopped and looked around. It took only a moment for her to find the emergency stairway. As the driver had said, there was a metal barrier across the entrance. It was a little more than waist high, and it was locked. Stepping over it in a tight miniskirt could be a slight problem, but only if she cared about being seen. Without hesitating, she slipped her high heels off and shoved them into her shoulder bag. She would probably ruin her stockings by walking in bare feet, but she could easily buy another pair.

People stared at her in silence as she removed her shoes and coat. From the open window of the black Toyota Celica parked next to the turnout, Michael Jackson's high-pitched voice provided her with background music. "Billie Jean" was playing. She felt as if she were performing a striptease. *So what? Let them look all they want. They must be bored waiting for the traffic jam to end. Sorry, though, folks, this is all I'll be taking off today.*

Aomame slung the bag across her chest to keep it from falling. Some distance away she could see the brand-new black Toyota Crown Royal Saloon in which she had been riding, its windshield reflecting the blinding glare of the afternoon sun. She could not make out the face of the driver, but she knew he must be watching.

Don't let appearances fool you. There's always only one reality.

Aomame took in a long, deep breath, and slowly let it out. Then, to the tune of "Billie Jean," she swung her leg over the metal barrier. Her miniskirt rode up to her hips. *Who gives a damn? Let them look all they want. Seeing what's under my skirt doesn't let them really see me as a person.* Besides, her legs were the part of her body of which Aomame was the most proud.

Stepping down once she was on the other side of the barrier, Aomame straightened her skirt, brushed the dust from her hands, put her coat back on, slung her bag across her chest again, and pushed her sunglasses more snugly against her face. The emergency stairway lay before her—a metal stairway painted gray. Plain, practical, functional. Not made for use by miniskirted women wearing only stockings on their otherwise bare feet. Nor had Junko Shimada designed Aomame's suit for use on the emergency escape stairs of Tokyo Metropolitan Expressway Number 3. Another huge truck roared down the outbound side of the expressway, shaking the stairs. The breeze whistled through gaps in the stairway's metal framework. But in any case, there it was, before her: the stairway. All that was left for her to do was climb down to the street.

Aomame turned for one last look at the double line of cars packed on the expressway, scanning them from left to right, then right to left, like a speaker on a podium looking for questions from the audience now that she had finished her talk. There had been no movement at all. Trapped on the expressway with nothing else to occupy them, people were watching her every move, wondering what this woman on the far side of the barrier would do next. Aomame lightly pulled in her chin, bit her lower lip, and took stock of her audience through the dark green lenses of her sunglasses.

You couldn't begin to imagine who I am, where I'm going, or what I'm about to do, Aomame said to her audience without moving her lips. *All of you are trapped here. You can't go anywhere, forward or back. But I'm not like you. I have work to do. I have a mission to accomplish. And so, with your permission, I shall move ahead.*

Aomame had the urge at the end to treat her assembled throng to one of her special scowls, but she managed to stop herself. There was no time for such things now. Once she let herself frown, it took both time and effort to regain her original expression.

Aomame turned her back on her silent audience and, with careful steps, began to descend the emergency stairway, feeling the chill of the crude metal rungs against the soles of her feet. Also chilling was the early April breeze, which swept her hair back now and then, revealing her misshapen left ear.

Some time passes here.
This is not chapter 3, it's
chapter 3 of "Book 3" I
think. Just to keep in mind.
-Izzy

Aomame

YOU CAN'T CHOOSE HOW YOU'RE BORN, BUT YOU CAN CHOOSE HOW YOU DIE

One night near the end of July, the thick clouds that had long covered the sky finally cleared, revealing two moons. Aomame stood on her apartment's small balcony, looking at the sky. She wanted to call someone right away and say, "Can you do me a favor? Stick your head out the window and look at the sky. Okay, how many moons do you see up there? Where I am, I can see two very clearly. How about where you are?"

But she had no one to whom she could make such a call. Ayumi was one possibility, but Aomame preferred not to further deepen their personal relationship. She was a policewoman, after all. Aomame would more than likely be killing another man before long, after which she would change her face, change her name, move to a different area, and disappear. Obviously, she wouldn't be able to see or contact Ayumi anymore. Once you let yourself grow close to someone, cutting the ties could be painful.

She went back inside, closed the balcony door, and turned on the air conditioner. Then she drew the curtains to place a barrier between herself and the moons. The two moons in the sky were disturbing to her. They subtly disrupted the balance of the earth's gravity, and they seemed to be affecting her physically as well. Her period was not due for a while, but her body felt strangely listless and heavy. Her skin was dry, and her pulse abnormal. She told herself not to think about the moons anymore—even if they were something that she *ought* to think about.

To combat the listlessness, Aomame lay on the carpet to stretch her muscles, systematically engaging one muscle after another that she had little chance to use on a daily basis, and stretching it as far as it would go. Each muscle responded with wordless screams, and her sweat rained down on the floor. She had devised this stretching program herself and modified it each day, making it increasingly radical and effective. It was strictly for her own use. She could not have introduced it into her sports club classes. Ordinary people could never bear that much pain. Most of her fellow instructors screamed for mercy when she tried it on them.

While going through her program, she played a recording of Janáček's *Sinfonietta* conducted by George Szell. The music took twenty-five minutes to play, which was the right amount of time to effectively torture every muscle in her body—neither too short nor too long. By the time the music ended, the turntable stopped, and the automatic tonearm returned to its rest, both her mind and her body felt like rags that had been thoroughly wrung out.

By now, Aomame had memorized every note of *Sinfonietta*. Listening to the music while stretching her body close to its limit, she was able to attain a mysterious calm. She was simultaneously the torturer and the tortured, the forcer and the forced. This sense of inner-directed self-sufficiency was what she wanted most of all. It gave her deep solace. Janáček's *Sinfonietta* was effective background music for that purpose.

Just before ten o'clock that night, the phone rang. Lifting the receiver, she heard Tamaru's voice.

"Any plans for tomorrow?"

"I get out of work at six thirty."

"Think you can stop by after that?"

"I'm sure I can," Aomame said.

"Good," Tamaru said. She could hear his ballpoint pen writing on his calendar.

"Have you found a new dog yet?" Aomame asked.

"Dog? Uh-huh. Another female German shepherd. I still don't know everything about her disposition, but she's been trained in the basics and she seems to obey commands. She arrived about ten days ago and is pretty well settled in. The women are relieved to have a dog again."

"That's good."

"This one's satisfied with ordinary dog food. Less bother."

"Ordinary German shepherds don't eat spinach."

"That was one strange dog. And depending on the season, spinach can be expensive," Tamaru complained nostalgically. After a few seconds' pause, he added, "It's a nice night for moon viewing."

Aomame frowned slightly into the phone. "Where did that come from all of a sudden?"

"Even I am not unaware of natural beauty, I'll have you know."

"No, of course not," Aomame said. *But you're not the type to discuss poetic subjects on the phone without some particular reason, either.*

After another short silence at his end, Tamaru said, "You're the one who brought up moon viewing the last time we talked on the phone, remember? I've been thinking about it ever since, especially when I looked up at the sky a little while ago and it was so clear—not a cloud anywhere."

Aomame was on the verge of asking him how many moons he had seen in that clear sky, but she stopped herself. It was too fraught with danger. Tamaru had told her about his life last time—about having been raised as an orphan who never knew his parents' faces, about his nationality. He had never spoken at such length before, but he was not a man much given to talking about himself in any case. He had taken a personal liking to Aomame and had more or less opened himself up to her. But ultimately, he was a professional, trained to take the shortest route to see his mission through. There was no point in saying too much to him.

"I think I can get there around seven o'clock tomorrow night after work," she said.

"Fine," Tamaru said. "You'll probably be hungry. The cook is off tomorrow, so we can't serve you anything decent, but if a sandwich or something is all right with you, I can do the preparations."

"Thanks," Aomame said.

"You'll be needing your driver's license, your passport, and your health insurance card. We'd like you to bring those tomorrow. Plus, we'd like a copy of your apartment key. Can you have all those ready for us?"

"Yes, I think so."

"And one more thing. I'd like to see you alone about that business from before. So keep some time open for me after you're through with Madame."

"Business from before?"

Tamaru fell silent for a moment. His silence had all the weight of a sandbag. "I believe there was something you wanted to get ahold of. Have you

forgotten?"

"No, of course I remember," Aomame hurried to say. In a corner of her mind, she had still been thinking about the moons.

"Tomorrow at seven, then," Tamaru said and hung up.

The number of moons had not changed the following night. When she took a quick shower after work and left the club, two pale-colored moons had already appeared side by side in the still-bright sky. Aomame stood on the pedestrian footbridge spanning Gaien-nishi Dori Avenue, leaning against the handrail and gazing at the two moons for a time. No one else made a point of looking at the moons like this. The people passing by did no more than cast puzzled glances in Aomame's direction as she stood there looking up at the sky. They hurried toward the subway station as if they had absolutely no interest in either the sky or the moon. As she gazed upward, Aomame began to feel the same physical lassitude she had experienced the day before. *I have to stop staring at the moons like this*, she told herself. *It can't have a good effect on me*. But try as she might not to look at the moons, she could not help feeling their gaze against her skin. *Even if I don't look at them, they're looking at me. They know what I'm about to do*.

Using ornate cups from a bygone era, the dowager and Aomame drank thick hot coffee. The dowager dribbled in a little milk at the edge of her cup and drank the coffee without stirring it. She used no sugar. Aomame drank hers black, as usual. Tamaru served them the sandwiches he had promised. He had cut them into bite-sized pieces. Aomame ate several. They were simple cucumber and cheese sandwiches on brown bread, but were subtly flavored. Tamaru had a fine touch in making such simple dishes, wielding a kitchen knife with skill, cutting each of his ingredients to the perfect size and thickness. He knew the proper order with which to undertake each task. This was all it took to make an amazing difference in how things tasted.

"Have you finished organizing your things?" the dowager asked.

"I donated my extra clothing and books to charity. I've packed a bag with everything I'll need in my new life, ready to go at any time. The only things left in my apartment are the basics I'll need for the time being: electrical appliances, cookware, bed and bedding, a few dishes."

"We'll take care of anything that's left. And you don't have to think about your lease or other such details. You can just walk out with the few things you really need in your luggage."

"Should I let them know at work? It could raise suspicions if I suddenly disappeared one day."

The dowager quietly returned her coffee cup to the table. "You don't have to think about that, either."

Aomame responded with a nod. She ate another sandwich and took a sip of coffee.

"By the way, do you have money in the bank?" the dowager asked. "I have six hundred thousand yen in a regular savings account and two million yen in a CD."

The dowager did some calculations. "There's no problem with your withdrawing up to four hundred thousand yen from the savings account if you do it in stages, but don't touch the CD. It wouldn't be a good idea for you to cancel it all of a sudden. They might be watching your personal affairs. We can't be too careful. I'll cover the difference later. Do you have any other property or assets?"

"There's the money you paid me before. It's just sitting in a safe-deposit box."

"Take the cash out, but don't keep it in your apartment. Think about someplace good to put it."

"All right."

"That's all we need you to do for now. Otherwise, just go about your business as usual, not changing your lifestyle or doing anything that would attract attention. And make sure you don't talk about anything important on the telephone."

Once she had finished saying this much, the dowager settled more deeply into her chair, as if she had used up her entire reserve of energy.

"Has the date been set?" Aomame asked.

"Not yet, unfortunately," the dowager said. "We're still waiting for them to contact us. The arrangements have been made, but they won't decide their schedule until the last minute. It could be another week, or it could be another month. We don't know the place, either. We just have to ask you to stand by, I'm afraid, on pins and needles."

"I don't mind waiting," Aomame said, "but I wonder if you can give me even a general idea about the 'arrangements.'"

"You'll be giving him a muscle-stretching session," the dowager said. "What you always do. He has some kind of physical problems. They're not life-threatening, but we've heard they give him a lot of trouble. In addition to orthodox medicine, he's tried a number of alternative treatments in an attempt to solve these 'problems'—shiatsu, acupuncture, massage—but none of them seems to help. These physical problems are the only weak spot of this man they call 'Leader.' It's the breach in his defenses that we've been looking for."

The curtains were drawn on the window behind the dowager, concealing the moons, but Aomame could feel their cool gaze against her skin. Their conspiratorial silence seemed to be stealing into the room.

"We have a spy inside the Sakigake organization, and we've used him to pass the word that you are an outstanding expert in muscle stretching. This was not especially difficult, because it happens to be true. Now they are very interested in you. At first, they wanted to bring you into their compound in Yamanashi, but we made it clear that you are far too busy with your work to leave Tokyo. In any case, the man comes to Tokyo at least once a month on business. He stays incognito in a downtown hotel. You will be giving him a stretching session there. All you have to do is take the usual steps with him once you're inside."

Aomame imagined the scene. A hotel room. A man is lying on a yoga mat, and she is stretching his muscles. She can't see his face. On his stomach, he leaves the back of his neck exposed to her, defenseless. She reaches over and takes the ice pick from her bag.

"So he and I can be alone together in his room?" Aomame asked.

The dowager nodded. "Leader keeps his physical problems hidden from others in the organization, so there should be no one else present. You and he will be alone."

"Do they know my name and where I work?"

"They are exceedingly cautious people. They've already done a thorough background check on you and found no problems. We received word yesterday that they will want you to come to where he is staying. They will let us know as soon as the time and place are set."

"I come here so often, don't you think there is some chance they will find our relationship suspicious?"

"I'm just a member of the sports club where you work, and you come to my house as a personal trainer. They have no reason to think that there might be any more to our relationship than that."

Aomame responded with a nod.

The dowager said, "Whenever this Leader person leaves the compound and moves around, he has two bodyguards who accompany him. Both are believers and karate belt holders. We don't know yet if they also carry weapons, but they are apparently good at what they do. They train every

day. According to Tamaru, though, they are amateurs.”

“Unlike Tamaru.”

“Yes, unlike Tamaru. He used to belong to a Self-Defense Force Ranger unit. Those people have it pounded into them to carry out whatever needs to be done to accomplish the mission, and to do it instantly, without the slightest hesitation. The important thing is not to hesitate, no matter who the opponent might be. Amateurs hesitate—especially when the opponent is, say, a young woman.”

The dowager sank her head back into the chair and sighed deeply. Then she straightened herself again and looked directly at Aomame.

“The two bodyguards will most likely wait in the next room of the suite while you are administering your treatment to Leader. You’ll be alone with him for an hour. That is how we have set things up for now. How it will actually go is anybody’s guess. Things can be fluid. Leader never reveals his plan of action until the very last minute.”

“How old a man is he?”

“Probably in his mid-fifties. We’ve heard he’s a big man. Unfortunately, we don’t know any more than that.”

Tamaru was waiting at the front door. She gave him her spare apartment key, driver’s license, passport, and health insurance card. He stepped inside and made copies of the documents. After checking to see that he had all the necessary copies, he handed the originals back to Aomame. Then he showed Aomame to his office, which was next to the front door. It was a small, square space lacking any decoration. A tiny window opened to the garden. The wall-mounted air conditioner hummed along. He had Aomame sit in a small wooden chair, while he sat at his desk. On the wall above the desk hung a row of four monitor screens with changeable camera angles. Four video decks constantly recorded their images. The screens showed views outside the walls. The far right one displayed an image of the front door of the safe house where the women were living. The new guard dog was also visible, resting on the ground. It was somewhat smaller than the previous dog.

“The tape didn’t show how the dog died,” Tamaru said, as if anticipating a question from Aomame. “She wasn’t tied up at the time. There’s no way she could have untied herself, so possibly someone untied her.”

“Someone who could approach without causing her to bark.”

“That’s what it amounts to.”

“Strange.”

Tamaru nodded but said nothing. He had thought about the various possibilities so much on his own that he was sick of thinking about them. There was nothing left for him to say to anybody else.

Tamaru reached over and opened a drawer of the cabinet by his desk, taking out a black plastic bag. From the bag he took a faded blue bath towel, and when he spread the towel open, a lustrous black object emerged—a small automatic pistol. Saying nothing, he handed it to Aomame, who also remained silent as she took it. She tested the weight of it in her hand. It was much lighter than it appeared to be. Such a small, light object could deliver death to a human being.

“You just made two major mistakes. Do you know what they were?” Tamaru asked.

Aomame thought over the actions she had just taken but could discover no mistakes. All she had done was take the gun that was handed to her. “I don’t know,” she said.

“First, when you took the gun, you didn’t check to see if it was loaded or not and, if it was loaded, whether the safety was on. The second was that, after you took the gun, you pointed it—even if only for one split second—at me. You broke two absolute rules. Also, you should never put your finger inside the trigger guard if you have no intention of firing the gun.”

“I see. I’ll be careful from now on.”

“Emergency situations aside, you should never handle or hand over or carry a gun that has even one bullet in it. And whenever you see a gun, you should treat it as loaded until you know for sure otherwise. Guns are made to kill people. You can never be too careful with them. Some people might laugh at me for being too cautious, but stupid accidents happen all the time, and the ones who get killed or badly wounded are usually the ones who were laughing.”

Tamaru drew a plastic bag from his jacket pocket. Inside were seven new bullets. He set them on his desk. “As you can see, the bullets are not in the gun. The magazine is in place, but it’s empty. The chamber is empty, too.”

Aomame nodded.

“This is a personal gift from me. Even so, if you don’t use it, I’d like to have it back.”

“Of course,” Aomame said, her voice dry. “But it must have cost you something.”

“Don’t let that worry you,” Tamaru said. “You have other things to worry about. Let’s talk about those. Have you ever fired a gun?”

Aomame shook her head. “Never.”

“Revolvers tend to be easier to use than automatics, especially for amateurs. Their mechanism is simpler, and it’s easier to learn how to operate them, and you’re less likely to make mistakes with them. But a good revolver can be bulky and inconvenient to carry around. So I figured an automatic would be better for you. This is a Heckler & Koch HK4. A German make. Weighs 480 grams without bullets. It’s small and light, but its 9mm Short cartridges pack a punch, and it has a small recoil. It’s not very accurate for long distances, but it’s perfect for what you have in mind. Heckler & Koch started up after the war, but this HK4 is based on the Mauser HSc, a well-respected model from before the war. They’ve been making it since 1968, and it’s still widely used. So it’s dependable. This is not a new one, but it’s been well taken care of by somebody who obviously knew what he was doing. Guns are like cars: you can trust a good used one better than one that’s brand-new.”

Tamaru took the gun back from Aomame and showed her how to handle it—how to lock and unlock the safety, how to remove and replace the magazine.

“Make sure the safety is on when you take the magazine out. After you open the catch and pull the magazine out, you pull the slide back and the bullet pops out of the chamber—not now, of course, since the gun isn’t loaded. After that, the slide stays open, so then you pull the trigger like this and the slide closes but the hammer stays cocked. You pull the trigger again and the hammer falls. Then you put in a new magazine.”

Tamaru went through the sequence of motions with practiced speed. Then he repeated the same sequence slowly, demonstrating each separate operation. Aomame watched intently.

“Now you try it.”

Aomame carefully extracted the magazine, pulled the slide back, emptied the chamber, lowered the hammer, and reinserted the magazine.

“That’s fine,” Tamaru said. Then he took the gun from Aomame, pulled out the magazine, carefully loaded it with seven bullets, and shoved it back into the gun with a loud click. Pulling back the slide, he sent a bullet into the chamber. Then he pushed down a lever on the left side of the gun to set the safety.

“Now do the same thing you did before. Only, this time it’s loaded with real bullets. There’s one in the chamber, too. The safety is on, but you still

shouldn't point the muzzle of the gun toward anyone," Tamaru said.

Taking the loaded gun, Aomame found it noticeably heavier than before. Now it had the unmistakable feel of death. This was a precision tool designed to kill people. She could feel her armpits sweating.

Checking once more to make sure the safety was on, she opened the catch, pulled out the magazine, and set it on the table. Pulling back the slide, she ejected the bullet from the chamber. It fell on the wooden floor with a dry thump. She pulled the trigger to close the slide, and pulled the trigger one more time, lowering the hammer. Then, with a trembling hand, she picked up the bullet from where it lay by her feet. Her throat was dry, and each breath she took was accompanied by a painful burning sensation.

"Not bad for your first time," Tamaru said, pressing the fallen 9mm bullet back into the magazine. "But you need a lot more practice. Your hands are shaking. You should practice the movements for ejecting and reinserting the magazine several times a day until your hands learn the feel of the gun. You should be able to do it as quickly and automatically as I did. In the dark. In your case, you shouldn't have to change magazines in mid-use, but the movements themselves are the most basic of the basic for people who handle pistols. You have to memorize them."

"Don't I need to practice firing?"

"Well, it's not as if you're going to shoot somebody with this. You're just going to shoot yourself, right?"

Aomame nodded.

"In that case, you don't have to practice firing. You just have to learn to load it, release the safety, and get the feel of the trigger. And anyway, where were you planning to practice firing it?"

Aomame shook her head. She had no idea.

"Also, *how* were you planning to shoot yourself? Here, give it a try."

Tamaru inserted the loaded magazine, checked to make sure the safety was on, and handed the gun to Aomame. "The safety is on," he said.

Aomame pressed the muzzle against her temple. She felt the chill of the steel. Looking at her, Tamaru slowly shook his head several times.

"Trust me, you *don't* want to aim at your temple. It's a lot harder than you think to shoot yourself in the brain that way. People's hands usually shake, and it throws their aim off. You end up grazing your skull, but not killing yourself. You certainly don't want that to happen."

Aomame silently shook her head.

"Look what happened to General Tojo after the war. When the American military came to arrest him, he tried to shoot himself in the heart by pressing the muzzle against his chest and pulling the trigger, but the bullet missed and hit his stomach without killing him. Here you had the top professional soldier in Japan, and to think he didn't know how to kill himself with a gun! They took him straight to the hospital, he got the best care the American medical team could give him, recovered, then was tried and hanged. It's a terrible way to die. A person's last moments are an important thing. You can't choose how you're born, but you can choose how you die."

Aomame bit her lip.

"The surest way is to shove the gun barrel in your mouth and blow your brains out from below. Like this."

Tamaru took the gun from Aomame to demonstrate. She knew that the safety was on, but the sight still made her tense up. She could hardly breathe, as if something were stuck in her throat.

"But even this isn't one hundred percent certain. I actually know a guy who failed to kill himself and ended up in terrible shape. We were together in the Self-Defense Force. He shoved a rifle barrel in his mouth and fired the gun by pressing his big toes against a spoon he had fastened to the trigger. I suppose the barrel must have moved a little. Instead of dying, he became a vegetable. He lived that way for another ten years. It's not so easy for people to end their own lives. It's not like in the movies. There, they do it like nothing, no pain, and it's all over, they're dead. The reality is not like that. You lie in bed for ten years with the piss oozing out of you."

Aomame nodded in silence.

Tamaru took the bullets out of the magazine and gun and put them in a plastic bag. Then he handed Aomame the gun and the bullets separately. "Now it's not loaded."

Aomame took them with a nod.

"Trust me, the smart thing is to think about surviving. It's the most practical thing, too. That's my advice to you."

"I see," Aomame said drily. Then she wrapped a scarf around the Heckler & Koch HK4, which was like a crude machine too, and thrust it to the bottom of her shoulder bag. This made the bag a pound or so heavier, but it didn't change its shape. The HK4 was a small pistol.

"It's not a gun for amateurs," Tamaru said. "Speaking from experience, not much good can come of it. But you should be able to handle it all right. You're like me in some ways. In a pinch, you can put the rules ahead of yourself."

"Probably because the 'self' doesn't really exist."

Tamaru had nothing to say to that.

"You were in the Self-Defense Force?" Aomame asked.

"Yeah, in the toughest unit. They fed us rats and snakes and locusts. They're not inedible, but they sure don't taste good."

"What did you do after that?"

"All kinds of stuff. Security work, mainly as a bodyguard—though maybe that's too fancy a word for what I was doing in some cases. I'm not much of a team player, so I tend to work alone. I was involved in the underworld, too, for a little while, when that was the only thing I could find. I saw a lot of stuff going down—things that most people never have to see in their lifetimes. Still, I never got into the worst of the worst. I was always careful not to cross the line. I'm careful by nature, and I don't think much of the yakuza. So, like I said before, my record is clean. After that, I came here." Tamaru pointed straight down. "My life has been very settled ever since. Not that a stable life is all I'm looking for, but I'd like to try to keep things as they are for now. It isn't easy finding jobs you like."

"No, of course not," Aomame said. "But really, shouldn't I pay you something for this?"

Tamaru shook his head. "No, I don't want your money. The world moves less by money than by what you owe people and what they owe you. I don't like to owe anybody anything, so I keep myself as much on the lending side as I can."

"Thank you," Aomame said.

"If, by any chance, the cops end up grilling you about where you got the gun, I don't want you giving them my name. And if they do come here, I'll deny everything, of course. They'll never find out anything about my past. If they go after Madame, though, I won't have a leg to stand on."

"I won't give your name, of course."

Tamaru pulled a folded piece of notepaper from his pocket and handed it to Aomame. On it was written a man's name.

Tamaru said, "On July 4, you met this man at the Renoir Café near Sendagaya Station. He gave you the gun and seven bullets, and you paid him five hundred thousand yen in cash. He contacted you after he heard that you were looking for a gun. If he is questioned by police, he is supposed to freely admit to the charges and spend a few years in prison. You don't have to tell them any more than that. As long as they can establish how the gun got into your hands, the police will come off looking good. And you might spend a little while behind bars too, for violating the Firearm and

Sword Possession Control Law.”

Aomame memorized the name and handed the slip of paper back to Tamaru. He tore it into little pieces and threw it into the wastebasket. Then he said, “Like I said before, I’m very careful by nature. I almost never depend on anybody for anything, and even when I do, I still don’t trust them. I never leave things to work themselves out. But what I’m most hoping for in this case is that the gun will come back to me unused. Then no one gets in trouble, no one dies, no one gets hurt, and no one goes to prison.”

Aomame nodded. “Meaning, you want me to violate Chekhov’s rule.”

“Exactly. Chekhov was a great writer, but not all novels have to follow his rules. Not all guns in stories have to be fired,” Tamaru said. Then he frowned slightly, as if recalling something. “Oh, yes, I almost forgot something important. I have to give you a pager.”

He took a small device from his drawer and set it on the desk. It had a metal clip to attach to clothing or a belt. Tamaru picked up the phone and punched in a three-digit quick-dial code. The phone rang three times, and the pager responded by emitting a series of electronic beeps. After turning up the volume as high as it would go, Tamaru pressed a switch to turn it off. He squinted at the device to make sure it displayed the caller’s number, and then handed it to Aomame.

“I’d like you to keep this on you at all times if possible,” Tamaru said, “or at least don’t get too far away from it. If it rings, that means you have a message from me. An important message. I won’t signal you to talk about the weather. Call the number you see in the display. Right away. From a public phone. And one other thing: if you have luggage, put it in a coin locker in Shinjuku Station.”

“Shinjuku Station,” Aomame repeated.

“It goes without saying that you should be ready to travel light.”

“Of course.”

Back at her apartment, Aomame closed her curtains and took the Heckler & Koch HK4 and the bullets from her shoulder bag. Sitting at the kitchen table, she practiced ejecting and inserting the empty magazine a few times. Her speed increased with each repetition. Her movements developed a rhythm, and her hands stopped trembling. Then she wrapped the pistol in an old T-shirt and hid it in a shoe box, which she shoved to the back of the closet. The bag of bullets she stored inside the pocket of a raincoat on a hanger. Suddenly very thirsty, she took a pitcher of chilled barley tea from the refrigerator and drank three glassfuls. Her shoulder muscles were tense and stiff, and the sweat of her armpits had an unusual smell. The awareness that she now possessed a pistol was enough to make the world look a little different. Her surroundings had taken on a strange, unfamiliar coloration.

She undressed and took a hot shower to wash off the unpleasant sweat smell. *Not all guns have to be fired*, she told herself in the shower. *A pistol is just a tool, and where I’m living is not a storybook world. It’s the real world, full of gaps and inconsistencies and anticlimaxes.*

Two weeks passed uneventfully. Aomame went to work at the sports club as usual, teaching her martial arts and stretching classes. She was not supposed to change her daily pattern. She followed the dowager’s instructions as strictly as possible. Coming home, she would eat dinner alone. Afterward, she would close the curtains, sit at the kitchen table, and practice handling the Heckler & Koch HK4 until its weight and hardness, the smell of its machine oil, its brute force and quietness all became a part of her.

Sometimes she practiced blindfolded, using a scarf. Soon she could nimbly load the magazine, release the safety, and pull back the slide without seeing a thing. The terse, rhythmical sound produced by each operation was pleasing to her ears. In the dark, she gradually lost track of the difference between the sounds the implement actually made and her aural perception of the sounds. The boundary between herself and her actions gradually faded until it disappeared entirely.

At least once a day she would stand in front of the bathroom mirror and put the muzzle of the loaded gun in her mouth. Feeling the hardness of the metal against the edges of her teeth, she imagined herself pulling the trigger. That was all it would take to end her life. In the next instant, she would have vanished from this world. To the self she saw standing in the mirror, she said, *A few important points: not to let my hand shake; to brace for the recoil; not to be afraid; and, most important, not to hesitate.*

I could do it now if I wanted to, Aomame thought. *I’d just have to pull my finger inward half an inch. It would be so easy. Why don’t I just go ahead and do it?* But she reconsidered and took the pistol from her mouth, returned the hammer to its uncocked position, set the safety, and laid the gun down by the sink between the toothpaste tube and her hairbrush. *No, it’s too soon for that. There’s something I have to do first.*

As instructed by Tamaru, Aomame kept the pager with her at all times. She set it next to the alarm clock when she slept. She was ready to deal with it whenever it rang, but another week went by in silence.

The pistol in the shoe box, the seven bullets in the raincoat pocket, the silent pager, her handmade ice pick, its deadly point, the suitcase packed with her personal effects; the new face and the new life that must be awaiting her; the bundle of bills in a Shinjuku Station coin locker: Aomame spent the midsummer days in their presence. More and more people went off on full-fledged summer vacations. Shops closed their shutters. The streets had fewer passersby. The number of cars declined, and a hush fell over the city. She sometimes felt she was on the verge of losing track of her location. *Is this actually the real world?* she asked herself. *If it’s not, then where should I look for reality?* She had no idea where else to look, and so she had no choice for now but to recognize this as the one and only reality and to use all her strength to ride it out.

I’m not afraid to die, Aomame reassured herself. *What I’m afraid of is having reality get the better of me, of having reality leave me behind.*

She had gotten everything ready. She was emotionally prepared as well. She could leave her apartment at any time, as soon as Tamaru contacted her. But she heard nothing from him. The end of August was approaching. Soon summer would begin to wind down, and the cicadas outside would wring out their final cries. How could a whole month have shot by like this even though each day felt horribly long?

Aomame came home from work at the sports club, threw her sweat-soaked clothes into the hamper, and changed into a tank top and shorts. A violent downpour broke out after noon. The sky turned dark. Pebble-sized raindrops smacked down on the streets, and thunder rumbled. The streets were left soaking wet, but then the sun came out again and used all its energy to evaporate the standing water, shrouding the city in a shimmering curtain of steam. Clouds appeared as the sun was going down, covering the sky in a thick veil and hiding the moons.

She felt the need to relax a bit before preparing her supper. Drinking a cold cup of barley tea and nibbling on some edamame she had steamed earlier, she spread the evening paper on the kitchen table and proceeded to skim it in order, first page to last. Nothing piqued her interest. It was just an ordinary evening paper. When she opened to the human interest pages, however, the first thing to attract her attention was a photo of Ayumi. Aomame caught her breath and frowned.

No, it can’t be Ayumi, she thought at first. Aomame assumed she must be mistaken: it was someone who looked a lot like her young policewoman friend. Ayumi would never be so prominently featured in the newspaper, complete with a photo. The more she looked, though, the

more certain she became that this was her erstwhile partner in those little sex feasts. In the close-up photo, Ayumi had the hint of a smile on her face—an artificial, uncomfortable smile. The real Ayumi always smiled in a natural, open way with her whole face. This photo looked like one that had been taken for some kind of public album. There was something unnerving in her apparent discomfort.

Aomame did not want to read the article, if possible. If she read the big headline next to the picture, she would be able to guess what had happened. But not reading the article was out of the question. This was reality. Whatever it might be, she could not pass reality by. Aomame took a deep breath and started reading.

Ayumi Nakano (26). Single. Resident of Shinjuku Ward, Tokyo.

The article reported that Ayumi had been found dead in a Shibuya hotel room. She had been strangled with a bathrobe sash. Stark naked, she was handcuffed to the bed, a piece of clothing stuffed in her mouth. A hotel staff person had found the body when inspecting the room before noon. Ayumi and a man had taken the room before eleven o'clock the night before, and the man had left alone at dawn. The charges had been paid in advance. This was not a terribly unusual occurrence in the big city, where the commingling of people gave off heat, often in the form of violence. The newspapers were full of such events. This one, however, had unusual aspects. The victim was a policewoman, and the handcuffs that appeared to have been used as a sex toy were the authentic government-issue type, not the cheap kind sold in porno shops. Quite naturally, this was news that attracted people's attention.