

background. It was the store phone most likely.

"I'm not talking about how you feel. At the very least I know I shouldn't have said things like that," she blurted out.

"Into self-discipline, are we?"

"Well, I'm always trying."

She fell silent a moment.

"Do you think we could get together tonight?"

"Sure."

"Eight o'clock, J's Bar? OK?"

"Gotcha."

". . . Listen, I've been seeing some bad times."

"I understand."

"Thanks."

And she hung up.

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To cut a long story short, I'm twenty-one.

Plenty young, but not as young as I once was. Although if I let that get to me, I'd have no choice but to jump off the Empire State Building one Sunday morning.

There was a line I once heard in a movie about the stock market crash, a joke that went something like

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this: Be sure to put up your umbrella whenever you walk by the Empire State Building. You never know when someone's going to drop in on you.

At twenty-one, I have no intention of dying, not just yet. At this point in my life I've slept with three girls.

The first girl was a classmate in high school. We were both seventeen and we thought for sure we were in love. In the woods at dusk she stepped out of her brown slip-ons, took off her white socks, her pale green seersucker dress, her strange underwear obviously the wrong size, then, after a moment's hesitation, her watch. And we embraced on a Sunday edition of the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper.

Suddenly, a few short months after graduation, the two of us broke up. I forget why; some totally forgettable reason. I never saw her again. On sleepless nights, I might occasionally think of her, but that's all.

The second was a hippy I ran across in the Shinjuku subway station. She was sixteen, nowhere to sleep, flat broke—not to mention almost completely flat-breasted—but she had lovely, intelligent eyes. That night the most violent protest rally ever held swept through Shinjuku, and all the trains and buses and other transportation were completely out of commission.

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"They'll nab you for sure just hanging around like that," I told her. She was crouching inside the blocked-off ticket wicket, reading a sports paper she'd lifted from the trash.

"But at least the cops feed you."

"It's no party."

"You get used to it."

I lit a cigarette, gave one to her. My eyes were sore from all the tear gas.

"Haven't had anything to eat?"

"Not since morning."

"C'mon, I'll get you some food."

"Why'd you want to feed me?"

"Well, I . . ." I didn't really know myself. I dragged her out from inside the wicket and we walked the empty streets all the way to Mejiro.

The girl hardly spoke a word the entire week she spent at my apartment. Each day she'd wake up at a little past noon, have a bite to eat and smoke a cigarette, lazily read a book, watch television, sometimes go through the motions of sex with me. All she had to her name was a white canvas sack, in which she carried only a heavy windbreaker, two T-shirts, a pair of bluejeans, three pairs of dirty panties, and a box of tampons.

"Where you from?" I tried asking her once.

"Someplace you never heard of."

That was her answer, not a word more.

Then one day when I came home from the supermarket with a bag of groceries, she was gone. Her white sack was gone. And a few other items had disappeared as well. Left on the table was a scant handful of change, a carton of cigarettes, and a freshly washed T-shirt of mine. There was also a scrap of notebook paper scribbled with one word. "Jerk." Probably meant me.

The third girl was a French major I met in the university library. The following spring she hanged herself in a scruffy patch of woods next to the tennis court. Her body went undiscovered until the beginning of the next semester. Two whole weeks it swayed in the wind. Now no one goes near those woods after sundown.

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She was sitting at the counter of J's Bar looking restless, poking with a straw around the bottom of a glass of ginger ale that was already half ice water.

"I thought you weren't coming," she said, somewhat relieved as I sat down beside her.

"I don't stand people up. I'm a little late because I had some business to take care of."

say a word. If I so much as paid the slightest attention to things, the world would start to conform to my will—that's what it seemed like. All values would shift, the very passage of time would change.

The catch became apparent, unfortunately, only much later. I'd rule a line down the middle of a notebook page, put down all the things I'd recently gained on the left, and on the right everything gone by the wayside—things I'd lost, things I'd crushed, things I was glad to have lost track of, things I'd sacrificed, things I'd betrayed—the list was endless.

A gaping chasm separates what we try to be aware of and what we actually are aware of. And I don't care how long your yardstick is, there's no measuring that drop. What I can set down here in writing only amounts to a catalog. Not a novel, not literature, not even art. Just a notebook with a line ruled down the center. And maybe a lesson or two in it somewhere.

If it's art or literature you're looking for, you'd do well to read what the Greeks wrote. In order for there to be true art, there necessarily has to be slavery. That's how it was with the ancient Greeks: while the slaves worked the fields, prepared the meals, and rowed the ships, the citizens would bask beneath the Mediterranean sun, rapt in poetical composition or engaged in their mathematics. That's how it is with art.

Mere humans who root through their refrigerators at three o'clock in the morning are incapable of such writing.

And that includes me.

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This story begins on August 8, 1970, and ends eighteen days later, on August 26 of the same year.

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"The rich can all eat shit!"

The Rat turned to me and bellowed gloomily, both hands pressed on the counter. Or maybe he was shouting at the coffee mill behind me. The Rat was seated next to me at the counter, so there really wasn't any need for him to turn in my direction. But whatever, once he'd let off steam, he went back to savoring his beer with his usual satisfied expression.

To be sure, not a soul paid his outburst any attention. The tiny bar was packed, and who wasn't shouting just as loudly at someone else? The whole place seemed like a passenger ship about to go under.