



My Tokyo Death Cult

Marc Horne

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for em and owen

ONE

Japanese policemen's guns are small and sort of puny. Except when they are shooting at you. Right now, they are shooting at me and my companion and we are running scared. The Policemen's shots are a little tentative, like someone picking chewing gum out of their hair. In fairness to the police, I should mention that we are in Shinjuku station, the world's busiest. Currently it is occupied by... oh, I don't know... 2.5 Lichtensteins. I am on average 4 inches taller than those around me, and a crucial 4 inches to boot, so as I barge through the crowd, hurting everyone, I must remember to crouch. To help me remember this, I visualize two things: the cloth that hangs in front of every drinking establishment in this country and those photos of JFK's autopsy that my father and I discussed over breakfast in 1977.

Running next to me, in full flush of his compact masculinity is Takeshi Honda, ex-military. Now, if I were a Takeshi Honda in a blue suit in these circumstances I would fall to the ground and upon standing be a sheep rather than a wolf and watch events through the TV glaze. However, Honda stays with me, pointing me here and there, grabbing aggressive costumed Japan Railways employees by the forehead and smashing them to pieces, reminding them that it is not the peaked hats of the police that make us run.

We skid past a "Let's Kiosk!" and I have never felt more like accepting its invitation. Yeah, let's kiosk... anything but this.

The man behind the kiosk cannot believe his eyes: the crowds have parted, firstly, and secondly a white man with his face covered in blood and a salaryman with a soul are racing straight at him. If she were not such a traitor he would also see a most aggressively attractive woman neck-to-neck, probably openly armed. But she is gone and I don't know if her beauty will aid or hinder her attempt to stay gone. When this is over, that will be interesting to find out. If I see her on TV or if I never see her again will be how I find out.

"Stop!" cry the cops in English, which I take personally. This makes me turn around. I see that things are over. Somehow they coordinated the station like an army to part and create a long shooting range. They are skidding around a little at their end of the range as they get into position. The floor of this station is necessarily one of the slickest surfaces known to man, polished by several million feet in predictable chaos daily. It is veined in a pattern that would tell the anthropological programs of my father's future much about the recently dead human race. The three policemen are about to shoot, as soon as they can stand, and even if one accidentally takes out the Kiosk man who is cowering behind dried squid in front of us, that still leaves plenty of bullets for me.

The dried squid remind me of the enormous giant squid beneath the oceans, sacs of amazing pressure and death power and darkness who none the less have had no impact on my life.

The kiosk man drops.

TWO

The beginning is in at least four places.

- 1) Something unknown in my father's life
- 2) Mother's death at the hands of the Khmer Rouge.
- 3) When I got entangled with that girl, Claire
- 4) I somehow met the number-two man in one of those Japanese death cults.

But I choose to begin in the middle of things, or near the end of things. The crisis is when I will get started.

I arrived at Narita Airport, Tokyo's airport, on an exceptionally hot August day. I got off the British Airways jet, where they had not announced the temperature on the ground: presumably to prevent a panic amongst those like me who were braving the Tokyo summer for the first time. In retrospect the crew who "goodbyed" me out the door had the looks of parachute instructors rather than smartly dressed waitresses as they bundled me out the door.

So, suddenly I felt terrible. I felt like a victim that could be picked by anyone. I was suddenly weak and confused because of the heat and also unexpectedly illiterate. I followed a long line of people to a place where many things got stamped. It was the 1970s in Narita, but I could have sworn my watch said 2000. Maybe it was just 8 o'clock. What time was it anyway?

Stamped, pulling round in a bar with a \$32 beer in front of me, I congratulated myself on my deep cover. For half an hour I had even fooled myself into thinking I was some harmless idiot, instead of a member of an international conspiracy.

I took in my surroundings a little: I was in the most Western of the discreetly hidden dining facilities at the airport. Believe it or not, there is no McDonald's in Narita Airport. On arrival I had been brought to this table with no words and very few and subtle gestures. There was some magnetism employed, the waitress influenced me in. Everyone was smoking Marlboro or Lark, a local brand that mapped its county in the wrinkles of aging tough-guy actors from here or from there. All of the American men had thick sideburns and glossy tan leather jackets. They were strangely quiet, by American standards. Did they feel out of place or too acutely in place? When you are too much in place, people don't even have to look at you to know you and judge you.

Outside the planes continued to crash gently into the earth, harming nobody.

Narita Airport is, by the way, the dimmest airport in the civilized world. Other airports have some kind of slow x-ray going on with their harsh lighting but Narita is the smoking-room of the jet set. The basic color scheme is brown and black. The slick floors lead you off into many dim dead ends. There is a cleaner, or someone else to stare at you, at the end of each of these. The level of the floor there changes abruptly by a few feet every few feet. Cattle could never stampede through Narita Airport.

So, the man I was waiting for could well appear from nowhere. In addition, the description I had of him would be quite useful in Abu Dabi but not in the Tokyo Tectoplex.

I thought it might be good to eat. I unfolded a large illustrated menu. 20 illustrations of the top of some steaming bowl of noodles and one of crab and chips. I took a few moments to try and distinguish something uniquely appetizing about at least one of the noodle bowls, but it was escaping me... white noise food.

Then he came into the room: Sato Yosuke. Killer. Ugly fucker.

He had a haircut that everyone would describe differently when describing it to the police some months later. For my part, I would compare it to a helmet made from a lacquered tree trunk. Then beneath it was something like Roy Orbison just as the obituaries came out. The enormous dark glasses looked like a disguise, but may have been a concession to the shallow aesthetic judgments of society. In addition he was wearing a "Carlos the Jackal" style safari jacket.

I had briefly met Carlos the Jackal in my youth. He was passing through London for the first of one of his interminable arse-related operations and my father's good friend was taking care of it. I was 9 at the time and had not yet fully worked out what was driving Dad. It was three years after Mum had died and the only thing you could really say about Dad at that time was that he had too many friends and too many of them were famous for too much of something. Dad's friend was famous for the extremity of his views on children's human rights. He basically felt that the words human and child had strong internal contradictions. He was the brother of cosmetic surgeon and would-be computer scientist Dr Cranwell Blythe and hence uncle of Claire Blythe, whom I would fall in love with and learn much from.

So my father headed down to London and had to take me with him. I was sleeping in a small room from too early till too late the next day as the talking went on.

I briefly met the Jackal (my Father had not been above entertaining me with this name on the train down) as he was leaving the next day. His fat face was lined with pain, but I should say 'grooved', and he didn't say much but he did tell me that my father was crazy.

Sato sat down at my table. In the twenty seconds preceding his arrival, he had caught my eye by walking toward my table while looking fixedly out of the window. My first assumption, a blind man about to present a very real problem, lasted only a split second because Sato was carrying a sports newspaper under his arm. It was the kind of sports magazine that has a carefully doctored naked woman on the front cover and there are

many other ways for blind people to get their sumo results. I decided that my table was solid enough to take a hit and that that was preferable to talking, shouting etc. Expecting a bump I was surprised when it all ended in a slide and with a party of two happily seated.

"Sato-san desu ka?" I queried. I had studied Japanese for a couple of months, but most of the discussions I had with people in Japan took place in English, you may be pleased to hear.

"Mr Williams... how was your flight?"

I assumed that he was giving me a false name as a precaution. I felt bad for calling him Mr Sato. Then he suddenly came out and told me that Sato is the third most common name in Japan. After he said that, a smile crept across his face like a wound on the belly of a TV samurai (although at the time I would have drawn another, less accurate, analogy as I had hardly watched any Japanese TV. That would come during the underground months.)

I felt at a distinct disadvantage. He either had read my mind or had a repertoire of cool tricks that he had acquired the hard way. I gave him a slow look that tried to say "Don't mess about: I'm a pro too."

But was he even a pro? Something about him sat wrong. He wasn't making his joke to test me, it was just that he had seen humor in the moment. I could tell because he didn't have a follow up ready. We sat in silence for long seconds.

"How long are we going to wait here?" I asked.

"Hmm... not so long. No one is watching us... too badly. I would like you to catch the Keisei Express to Kanamachi and when you get there buy the least delicious snack you can find from the platform man."

"OK. Do you want to leave first?"

"Yes, we will meet again."

And then he didn't stand up. And just as I was wondering if I was making a fool of myself he smirked again and walked away.

I contemplated a second beer, but decided to just leave. Sato had irritated me into a state of mind where I wanted to be active. I get like that a lot, and it usually leads to more trouble than my characteristic passivity.

As I left the bar, after somehow managing to effortlessly pay for things, I felt strong nostalgia. It was partially the way it had reminded me of twenty years ago but it was also a new-born nostalgia that you feel when you leave a safe place that will never be safe for you again. Because, let's face it, there was a good chance I would never be able to relax in an airport again when all the damage had been done.

I made my way toward the place where the small train icons were headed. Light seemed to be increasing, although from where it was hard to tell. I was approaching the clinical space of the Japanese train system which interweaves all of Tokyo like calcified veins and is untouched by the wildly varying degrees of modernity around it.

Someone was talking really loud. And it was in a mocking sing-song that, in English anyway, seemed suited to sitting on top of someone and shoving dirt in their mouth. I had to take a glance. Surprisingly, it was Sato who was making the noise and some dramatic hand gestures to a bunch of people who were deeply wishing not to be his audience. And the strangest thing was that he was standing in front of two policemen. They were wearing sidearms and no doubt had a two-man judo strategy for most eventualities, but instead they looked on

amused. I could only assume that this was some kind of cover for me, that unexpected developments were afoot and I increased my speed to the space just before suspicion and I went underground.

THREE

I got on the train; a long, silver, grooved lunch-box of a train with bold stripes. I was lugging a small but heavy suitcase full of books and shoes (I planned to buy most other stuff locally.) Around me were various Japanese people who had, a short while ago, been Japanese Tourists. They were equipped with varying degrees of booty and swarthy tans and looked tired and almost on the verge of speaking loudly. Their luggage was, as ever, a thing to behold: wheels, of course, but also limb-like attachments and convenient handles sprouting wherever a human hand lightly glanced them. In the end, few of them spoke. They steamed away memories of Indochina or Paris as we waited for the train to get going. If it didn't get moving soon they would begin to feel ashamed of the fishing hats they had chosen to keep on, and I might well be arrested and lightly tortured.

The doors closed.

We entered a tunnel and when we came out there were unworked rice-fields all around, quietly taking care of themselves. The air was very cool on the train and a gentle breeze ruffled the comic book ads (for Young Jump) that hung like war pennants from the ceiling.

The sky was obviously rich in water because light came to us through a billion microscopic gates that marked it. Also, each of my pores carried a tiny drop of dew.

We passed through a few small cities, like Narita City with its amazing concrete temple. Its ancient design inevitably transports one to a distant future where concrete is revered for its organic qualities, human spirit, emotional resonance. Quite a future: and one we were working on.

There is also a windmill by the tracks and no doubt quite a story behind it. The story probably begins with a small child in the wreckage of post WWII Japan endlessly staring at a picture book at a picture of a building he doesn't even try to understand. He just wants it to exist. He wants to see the wood flaring through the sun like bird wings and, in the rainy season, blast the wind and rain back in their faces and play on. The playful building would live after him, he must have known, and embody one spirit of all the contradictory ones that would inhabit his too-little specialized human machine during 70 years of love and hate.

I had these thoughts whenever I saw buildings standing alone, too much like lost people. Man kept on making these lost children, monstrous in size never suspecting that one day they might learn to speak to each other. Even today too few people care about that. Playing baseball in the sun there is always a spy-satellite that knows the score of the game, at some level. Burying a friend, some spreadsheet counts the souls. You cannot feel the information conversation in the air yet, unless you want to. It is now a luxury: both the ignorance and the knowledge. Maybe not for long.

Suddenly we hit Tokyo. Technically speaking it wasn't Tokyo, in the same way that the neck and the throat are not the same thing: if you didn't know, the point of transition might not occur to you.

I was impressed. The rich concentration of things that people had made (and people that people had made) was intensified by speed. A block of identically designed cubes came to life like a zoetrope machine when the train's speed hit it: the tiny dirt and detail and mutation of life supplied the difference needed for animation. People had broken the design without even meaning to and the eye in the right place saw the human dance.

The city presented to the train line was typified by futons hanging on balconies to get some fresh air. I knew this was largely ritual, so didn't even contemplate how filthy these people would have to be for this to be

effective. In between the buildings you would peek at a bright street or building, often encrusted with thousands of tiny dancing light bulbs. It was daytime, so the lights were having little effect on people: they were just going where they were going... both lights and people. Larger lights, neon, signs, were largely dormant. They were the road signs of a truly human network : sex, food,god, English conversation... turn right - fifth floor.

I turned from the window and I felt underwater or deep in sand. When I managed to complete the turn, I saw varying degrees of a hundred close but sheltered faces. We were all traveling together.

After nearly an hour the voice of the announcer said "Kanamachhhhhhhh....."

My mind had been listening to train wheels clatter the same word out repeatedly. so I was ready. I wriggled out of the train and on to a nearly empty platform. The station was slightly elevated and fenced off, but very close to the roads and houses and people. There was an enormous painted movie poster which showed either Kevin Costner or Harrison Ford leaping through an enormous fireball. This ambiguity was something that I felt Hollywood should look into. The movie appeared to be called "Rub Bomb"

Then I saw my first Let's Kiosk: a small cheerful box full of telephone-book-thick manga and impossibly glossy 'female' magazines and snacks and drinks. I walked toward it, aware that I was being observed. The only people on the platform were a small bunch of tiny school-boys in uniforms with enormous leather bags and a couple of old women. So I decided that the man in the Kiosk was my contact.

I cast my eye over the snacks on display. M&M's, some chips, a cluster of dried squid. The squid were obviously the least appetizing to a Westerner so I would choose them to signal who I was.

There were several types of squid, but I chose the ones that seemed softest and least crunchy. For good measure I ordered three packs.

Nothing much happened and half an hour later, after pushing the snacks to the bottom of my suitcase where they might never be found I got back on the train and continued to the correct station (the school-boys were very helpful) where I bought one packet of "oishii-squido" and was met by a man in a navy blue suit called Takeshi Honda.

We transferred trains twice to get to our final destination, Koiwa. Honda helped me carry my bag: insisted on it.

I noticed that he looked a little different from other Japanese men in their thirties. His skin was tan and smooth, like someone who exercises outside a lot, but not like some weather-beaten sailor. I also noticed that the mask of his suit was occasionally threatened by bustling muscles. He actually had a muscular head, once you observed it, most noticeably two powerful muscles set perpendicular to the line of his mouth that looked well positioned to drive his long slabs of tooth through rope, planks and any other minor restraint. His face was relaxed and long; his manner was confident and ready for a minor challenge such as a punch in the stomach or a request for an explanation of his apocalyptic beliefs.

For he was a member of "The Path of Forgetting", the obviously dangerous Japanese Buddhist sect who felt the end of the world in every moment and that was why he was helping me with my suitcase.

FOUR

Honda was quiet on the whole, and didn't look at me much. I expect he didn't want to draw too much attention to us. But before we left Koiwa station, he asked me if I wanted a Pocari Sweat. "It has high levels of isotonic elements such as Niacin: it's a real pick-me-up," he explained. "Isotonic elements sound good to me," I replied.

I decided that even if he came back with a can of Pocari Piss I would just drink it and not ask what a Pocari was.

Koiwa station platform was a good 100 feet above street level. In fact, beneath us was the beginning of a four-mile long department store. So I could see a lot of what Koiwa was. In front of the south entrance to the station was a small plaza, and several arcades split off from it. The Plaza showed signs of being a political speaking place as there were posters of boring looking people scattered around it. There were two tall buildings on the south side. One was very close to the station and I judged it to be one of those capsule hotels that had fascinated the Western media in the eighties. In fact it looked somewhat run down, as if that fascination were the only reason it was still around. The other, more distant, building looked newer, more curved, and had some colorful artwork that I couldn't appreciate as yet.

On the north side were a big supermarket called Ito Yokado, more shopping streets and, in the distance, the bruise-colored Edo river.

The rails throbbed like electric heating elements. No doubt in the summer people incinerated themselves on the rails, flashing away before the train even touched them. It might be beautiful: the yellow train of the Sobu line bursting through a small pink cloud.

Honda returned with a can that looked like a slim blue Coca-Cola. I opened it up and downed the slightly milky, slightly salty, damn good soft drink while Honda looked on with a note of worry on his face that disappeared when I wiped my hand across my mouth and said "aahhhh!"

He then gestured to move down the stairs and we were soon out of the station. The Pocari was making it bearable: I estimated that I had twenty minutes walking in me before I had to tear my shirt off and burst a water melon on my head.

Slowly and softly, Honda began to talk as we walked down a covered street full of small shops, mainly fruit and veg.

"This is Koiwa City, on the eastern perimeter of Tokyo Prefecture. It is part of old Down Town... very old-style."

I couldn't see the old style, unless 20 years after the fire-bombings constituted old. Maybe it did. Tokyo was destroyed in cycles and, as Honda and I were particularly aware, it was currently overdue.

"We will be staying here as our country facility has been under heavy surveillance recently. Our headquarters here is positioned near a fish market and between several karaoke bars, including a Korean bar and a Chinese bar, so we have good cover for smells and sounds."

"Excellent," I noted. With no irony, such was my dedication at that time.

I noticed, as we passed another store that sold large roots that were floating in liquid, that my presence was causing none of the hem-grabbing attention I had expected. Honda explained to me that there were several large chain English Conversation schools in the area, and that people who looked like me were common here. That is why they had suggested I wear a micro-fibre shirt and "shocking" tie on the flight over. I saw myself on a smudgy mirror in the fish-store and could well imagine standing with ink stains on my fingers explaining

the word 'surveillance' to appreciative hordes.

We turned right at the biggest fruit and veg store, the one that spilled onto the sidewalk like a father spilling from his arm-chair, confident of no opposition. We were at the foot of the other building I had noted from the station. It didn't make full sense: was it a bath house, a movie theater, a kabuki theater, a brothel, a corporate headquarters, a karaoke bar, a restaurant or what? Outside the door was a large sign of a man with a large dragon tattooed on his back trapped inside a "No!" sign.

Within a minute we were at our destination, a small coffee shop that in England would specialize in greasy chip sarnies. It was on the ground floor of a three story, gray tiled building that was too sloped to be new but too ugly to be old. Next to the coffee shop was a slim steel door that I hadn't even noticed at first.

"The shop is ours too... the people who run it are... mutant?"

I peeked through the window to look at them. They seemed no more mutant than the rest of us: a particularly aggressive mid-sized mammal with a brain that couldn't rest (even when it should) and that shivered in the night when the true intelligences ran their inventory on us.

So I just nodded and followed Honda up a narrow staircase. I didn't notice the sign above the door that announced the building as a tele-sex shop so I won't get into it just yet.

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I mentioned already that my mother died in Cambodia. This was my first trip to Asia and although I wasn't fool enough to confuse Pnhom Penh and Tokyo, memories were being juggled around by smells. Smells are bullies and able to vault all divisions of the mind. So as I followed Honda up the steps, watching his dueling buttocks effortlessly handle the gradient, I was at least partially back in the week of crying and throwing things, falling over and dragging things with you. The week of staring through, then at, then through windows (but never at the reflections that the windows were making.)

I think I only started doing these things after Father had been doing them for a while. The telegram made no sense to me. It said she had been killed in Cambodia but not how. I had heard of people being killed by cars or the flu, but not by a country. It was as if some spirit had risen from the soil and killed her. I asked my father what had happened and he could only answer "Everyone is dying out there... and worse. Someone is making them live through their sickest dreams. Someone is pulling down the crazy dreams that only people have and bringing them here where things are supposed to be just real."

This was not the last I would hear about the dream magic of mankind.

FIVE

A flimsy door divided us from them. Once I was inside, the same door divided a different us from a different them. That was true in all senses. That was the truth that defined my life in Japan: the flimsy door.

We had stepped into a large communal living room. The only windows in the room were two excessively high slots that grudgingly opened about an inch. They were streaming the bare minimum of light into the room right now. If there was a trade union of windows, these ones were in it.

The walls bore a uniform grayness; they had a texture that was close to random. They were different than the things humans had made before these days. All of the somewhat remarkable people I was about to meet were framed by these walls, and supported by a carpet that was as out of place as a gray carpet in a gray room can be.

There were three people in the room and they would be part of my team for the next several months. What I liked most about my meeting with them was that they all sighed when I came in the room because they knew that they had to take care of me and because of the fact that I existed. And people who wanted to kill and to die and who had already taken the apocalypse into themselves still thought like this... that was what impressed me.

The first one to catch my eye was the fat one, as always. They sometimes have a very furtive look about them: skulking in shadows, swimming like all the fish in the shoal. They think. Unusually fat people are superb. Thin idiots and fascists and so forth can pass a whole life lubricated by the fat of the fat. The fat are allowed to be jovial about it or excel in some functional area of life, quietly.

The fat one was (eventually) Yosuke Kawabata. In addition to being fat he was a little hairy, a little tall, and somewhat speckled with objects of varying vintage and lifespan and color that made his facial movements seem daring, a little dangerous (especially if you were dressed in something nice when he made them.)

He had been alone when it had happened. He had taken the small alto sax that he had worked rather hard for down under the bridge near the river to play his haunting noises.

He had never even considered playing the sax back in the paper thin apartment building that his parents lived in with him. That would be like shitting in the living room.

He walked the five minutes to the enormous train bridge that brutally ignored the fairly wide and fast flowing river. He took his place, the least damp, least ratted, and pulled out his sax to make the noises of the various emergency services (for he was new at this game)

He began by just amplifying his breath and all the random trends that passed through his fairly random mind. Toots and hollers like those of a large game bird. Then he remembered this thing he had heard of: music, and tried to approximate that. Joggers passed by him with an almost perceptible relief in their step when they saw him: glad that no-one was being hurt up there in the shadowy nook under the bridge.

Then, across the water, he saw something. It haunted the step of an old man dressed in a kimono. The old man looked over his shoulder all the time. Yosuke's eye was fixed on the old man. The old man made a gesture in the air, like shooing away a bird. Then he fell to the ground with a scream. Yosuke knew that it would take at least fifteen minutes for him to get across the river and help the man, so he just sat and watched. When his watch got to about thirteen minutes and the old man was still alive it did indeed become necessary to stop looking at his watch.

Several hours later, after the body had been removed, Yosuke went home. He left his sax at the bottom of the river. He would no longer dedicate his life to making, but to searching. He was determined to see what the old man had seen but live to tell the world. That would be his performance. He would teach the world the nature of final things. And, sarcasm aside, the sax just wouldn't cut it.

Next in the room was a thin girl with a boyish haircut that spoke of enforced cleansing. Her eyes were unusually deep set for a Japanese person. She looked at me out of the corner of her eye, even though doing so involved twisting her body slightly.

Honda introduced us: she was Junko Watanabe. I was dragging my bag in and bowing. There was no air conditioning in the room, the house, the street, except that big building, but it was cooler now. I was among my people.

For her, the moment of apocalypse came when she was at university. She was walking down the street to a class with a group of girls who looked a lot like she did and one who didn't. She was fully in tune with them

and the tune they were making was the sound of talking talking about talking.

The one girl was discussing her future. Her name was Remi, after the brandy because her parents wanted her to have an international name. It was almost pronounced Lemmy, the leader of the metal group Motorhead, big in Northern Europe.

"I'll be a stewardess. I'll outsmile all of them, but I'll be tough too because safety is our number one priority and because that's what they want anyway... a firm hand."

Remi began to bounce in the sun. Her calves, which would take the immaculate sheaths of her space stockings like a suntan, sprang her through a tiny sphere... the remisphere.

All human life takes place within the earthpeel, the skin. Remi bounces within even less, the dew, the mold. She plans to ride at eight miles high and that's it. That's all the most beautiful (did we mention she is so beautiful) can do.

Of course she is stupid and the mind of the great physicists can soar in and out of the Event Horizons. But still Junko is troubled...

She is at home now, alone, in the dark, getting less naked, dressing in the dark as she cools and feels a little disgust at herself. She walks to the window. Outside there is the melancholy call of the roast potato seller. He sings

o-imo, o-imoooo

oishiiaiiiiii

jaga-iimoo

and when you look through the window of the van that carries the furnace you see a small family of small people inside living off the song. The potatoes alone couldn't do it. Seen it once, the song holds you forever. The secret charity of Japan, the guilt potatoes.

And so that song comes in through the window and it is full of something, of real-time, on-the-fly regret for each moment that smacks the potato man in the face. Tonight it is much too much for Junko. It is a reminder that life is going to be hard.

She starts to read a book, a pamphlet by a man called Ko Samsara. One look at his face, bearded and rounded and obscured, is enough to convince her that he is worth listening to: he could only have been published by people who believed in him as much as the happy young musician who pressed the pamphlet on her outside Shibuya station a week ago.

He simply explained the essential non-existence of the world, the demonic nature of the people-like forces that had been frustrating her. He explained how the world, as a created thing, couldn't really complain about destruction - which was just as well, since destruction at a very malicious and painful level was fairly imminent.

She decided to believe him, decided to forget the deciding and then was his and went to seek him out.

Finally the third new friend in the room: "Benny" Odajima. He was the only violent looking one in the room, even including Honda (who had actually killed people.) The violence manifested itself in his face and eyes. He had a very rough, scarred complexion like it had been much scratched and gouged over the years and even

now seemed freshly shocked and thoroughly pissed off. But his eyes were as cool and flat as a sheet of glass shimmering off a cool stream of water. And that was so obviously a lie that you knew he was making plans.

For him it had begun while he was working as a scientist for the government nuclear project. For years he had studied very hard to learn all about the structure of atoms and how they worked together quietly and predictably to form a universe. He had managed to deal with quantum uncertainty quite smoothly... accepting that there is a bottom end to our absolute knowledge but we are big enough not to worry too much about that.

But something else was bothering him now that he worked at the research center, working out the best way to harness the atoms. He had this feeling that they were lying to him, that there was something inside the atom that they didn't want him to see. He began to smuggle data out in his battered old briefcase and he lined the walls of his small apartment with it and then the ceiling too. He looked at the data for a pattern, trying to intuit everything... not really doing any calculating. He began to get a feel for what was in there but he was still very far from being able to name it.

Then he started to experiment, letting things get hotter than they should, turning certain key knobs further than they had ever been intended to go. He did this at night at first and by the end he was doing it whenever he pleased, because safety limits in his business were defined as the point when the villagers see the smoke coming from the chimney. He had never really believed that, and finding it out really didn't help his state of mind.

So the hotter the atoms got the more data he got. Until one day he became convinced of it... the evidence was irrefutable... little men were inside the atoms. It could be proven by a complicated mathematical process that he had to invent essentially from scratch.

He realized that science would take him no further, and was resolved to leave this in the hands of a professional mystic. He read around a little and found the works of Ko Samsara and was impressed by the clarity of his vision... he would see the unseen. For a few months after quitting his job he went through a bad period of depression that terminated in his beating a prostitute almost to death. Ko Samsara had to help him with that and so he was more than happy to reciprocate by entering Samsara's inner circle.

I had entered that circle. My reasons were more complicated. I had always been meant to do it, and was happy just to be there.

SIX

I woke up in the middle of the night. Why?

Well, I've mentioned the heat enough that You know it was there, sitting like a vulture on my chest as my eyes opened. Also, I was on a wood floor on a futon about two inches thick, so all of my bones were getting to know the outside world much better than they had before.

Also it was no time at all, my body clock was in free float. SO a burp or an inch could have thrown me out of the castle of sleep. And finally, all the people around me, who I had never met before, were committed without scruple to the primacy of death. That knowledge will turn the scuttle of a cockroach into a stuka dive.

When I woke up the light of the world was four long rectangles, like glowing scarves of two very friendly priests. In moments I saw the bars on the windows.

I took a deep breath and then I was on the bars, couldn't keep my hands off them.

When I felt them give a little, like I could maybe tear them down, I could let go and remember that I had

happily lain down before those bars to sleep as I had happily chosen to come to Japan, and Japan was the reason for the heat and that I should lie down. The moon berated me. I went back to the thin futon on the harsh floor to sweat and worry about whether I could breathe in my sleep when I was not there to force each gasp of the awful soup in and out.

I began to have second thoughts about the operation: it seemed a little whimsical, and not fully described by Dad's master plan as it had gradually been revealed to me over the years.

The first real inkling of the plan came when I was about 7. Dad was ironing. Dad looked a lot like Muammar El Qaddafi back in those days. You cannot really imagine Qaddafi ironing but you must try.

I was reading a comic describing the adventures of Judge Dredd... a violent policeman of the future who had a law book extrapolated from the norms of western society until almost all offenses against human propriety were punishable by death. As he lived in a city of a hundred million people in the middle of a nuclear wasteland, this seemed acceptable. But even then I had my doubts, as the society was affluent and advanced enough that all crime seemed to have minimal consequences. How do you steal a hundred creds, y'know? Just make a hundred more. You made a new face last week and about a month ago there were talking monkeys in the city.

Anyway, Dredd was through with his killings for the week. There was a fact page describing various statistics about Dredd, and I was poring over it. Judge Dredd was thirty-three. I had heard that Jesus Christ maxed out at thirty-three. I asked my dad how old he was and he said... "I'm thirty-three."

I told him about that Dredd was the same age, and I described his role in Mega City 1. "So they had a nuclear war?" he asked and I told him that they had.

"And they all still live in a city and they do the same sort of things we do? Do they still hunt each other down and find weak people and kill them."

I mentioned that they did, and further outlined that those whose genes were damaged by the radiation were expelled from the city, and that they had recently suppressed a robot slave rebellion.

"Bloody typical," he said. "Mankind blasts the planet to near extinction and of it gains new enemies and new sub-humans to hate. Does this story seem true to you?"

"Really true?"

"Not really true but truly true."

"I don't know.."

"It's basically true. Man has been killing in the same style for as long as he could. He has to be changed."

"Who can change him"

"Why don't we?"

"I don't get it."

"You know Jesus Christ"

"He was thirty-three too."

"Yes, and he had a mind that was different from ours. He could see that something big was coming and that we should move out of the way."

I imagined Judge Dredd's enormous kill-dozer.

"We should wait until you are older, but I just want you to think that man doesn't always have to be here and the same like the cockroaches."

"OK"

Dad talked about the cockroaches a lot as I was growing up. His hatred of them seemed disproportionate to their total lack of impact on our daily life. I never saw a real cockroach until I was sixteen. What he seemed to hate most was that they never changed.

But one day, a mellow day with an evening that seemed curved to have no limit and where you could relax to death, he muttered under his breath. "They're not so bad... they just remind me of something." and I knew he was talking about the roaches.

He wanted the long evening to end it seemed, because he would not let it take his mind. In his head he was rehearsing a conversation with people who would not let it end .

SEVEN

So, I was hungry. It had crept up on me because I had been basically inert: breathing and listening had somehow disposed of a sizable portion of whatever the hell that was they gave me on the plane. Am I alone in suspecting that the airlines have genetically engineered species of chicken that have red peppers sprouting from them like tumors and tomato juice for blood and that they shotgun them and heat them up for us?

Probably.

So I was hungry and it turned out that there was no food in the house. Honda smacked me on the back and with a wry smile told me that he had a place in mind.

We stepped out into the morning street which an old woman, somewhat ambitiously, had decided to wash. Underneath the realm of the eye, a slow toxic snow was falling all the time. Honda led me, always a few steps ahead. The streets of Koiwa showed me little new: repetitions of empty streets with breeze-block walls and then commercial streets with unambitious stores still partially wrapped in plastic. We walked past a lot of food places, many of them putting out delicious smells and a sound that hit you like the sound of someone settling into their favorite chair or slipping on a fine pair off shoes: one of them was even a McDonald's. We didn't go into any of them. He had a plan, it soon became obvious.

My hunger finally surfaced and broke through my skin and its tentacles began to reach around me to anything once-living that was not in my taboo set. I kept it together and kept following.

We bowed under a door-hanging and we were inside a stainless steel environment inhabited by two men in blue and white pajamas with hair like undergrowth who started cooking up some noodles and making me a cup of coffee without a word being spoken. As I sat down, I looked to Honda and I didn't mind letting him know with my eyes that this meant a lot to me. He answered, as silently as I, that he simply hoped I enjoyed my meal.

One of the cooks pulled an enormous serving of steaming noodles out of the large gray pan. What he did next immobilized my brain. He ran the noodles under very cold tap-water until he was absolutely sure that they

were dead. He then grabbed a big sprinkle of seaweed and made sure that not a noodle was untouched by nature's fragrant gift.

Then it was not coffee and he sprinkled it all over the noodles. And with the flick of a wrist an unseen egg dropped its rawness on it all. And I ate them quietly and they chilled my teeth, and Honda was obviously trying not to be noticed as he anxiously followed my gulps. He wasn't very good at it.

Honda picked up the tab.

"We have a big day in front of us!" he said with enthusiasm, making me expect a fishing trip.

"So soon?"

"So soon, so good," he said and it was only when I was writing out my secret report that I noticed he had made some new English.

"Can we talk here?" I asked as I looked at the two men, who in turn were looking at the glass in their one large window.

"No names and we should be OK."

"Which of the people I met is the chemist?"

A long pause.

"You are the chemist."

I made my pause as short as possible. "Not really."

Honda looked down at his fingertips for a long time and I almost expected a chop to my throat.

"How so?"

"I know how to put the final mix together... but I don't think we can buy the ingredients we need on the streets. I need someone who can make those ingredients for us."

"We know many chemists."

"Well good!"

"It will take a week or two. We have some work for you to do in the meantime."

I felt a chill going down my spine. I was about to be asked something outside my plan. It would probably be dangerous.

"Something dangerous...?"

"Relatively.. no."

The cab, yellow immaculate, glided to a halt and the door popped open untouched by any human hand and the

cool air from the inside hissed out and then that hot air came in and the cab driver mopped his bald head with his floppy cap and as we left sprayed us with last minute directions, antidirections.

We were awfully close to the American Embassy considering that Honda had failed to clarify his earlier hints. The embassy was well hidden by hundreds of meters of wall and ivy and it was also very flattened out and skulking among hills. I got the feeling it was a front or a misdirection. The Americans couldn't really occupy such a place: it wasn't fitting. But maybe it was just some post-colonial thing.

In the end we did nothing related to the embassy. We walked a few blocks: I don't know exactly why the taxi didn't take us all the way. It was either a token spy move, or the taxi was actually incapable of taking us there. Taxi drivers in Tokyo only go where they know and the streets have no names. Yes, like the song but lacking the liberating sensation Bono feels.

We walked around a corner and a strange thing happened. The city angled away: the tall glassy banks, that I knew were so close, disappeared and we were next to a flattened construction zone with an escalator in the middle of it, going underground. We walked past it and then down a slight hill then we turned left and found ourselves in front of a modest two-story building that had certain swimming pool features, such as green blue coloring and a wall constructed of glass bricks.

"Why are we here," I asked softly.

Honda lit a cigarette. "We need to talk to one of our friends. He is a backer. He wants to meet you."

Excited, I tried to open the door. It was locked. What was I thinking? Rich people lock their doors, even in Japan. A few seconds later a very attractive young woman opened the door. Young, thin, dressed in a smart grey suit. Not happy to see us: her perfect face bore no scars or marks but seemed a mask for something. I was surprised to find that she was looking me in the eye. She had very delicate brown eye make-up that made her seem to glow. I tried to end the eye lock, because I could have been clubbed to death and not noticed. Honda put a hand on my shoulder and moved me inside and she saw us into an elevator and disappeared.

It had been a while since I had had any kind of relationship with a woman... other than my life-long-distance love affair with Claire Blythe. That was a strange one, and a dominating factor in my life. It was why I was here, really, because she had brought me back to Dad after our big schism. I thought about us both in the slow seconds of the elevator. I wished that at least one of us had a normal life instead of being two moons locked in a convoluted dance. I decided to check my e-mail on my custom Palm when I got back to 'HQ': an encrypted love letter might be waiting. It would be encrypted on two levels: first, mathematically and second that it would apparently contain no words of love or passion... just dry descriptions of hate crimes in Bucharest. The computer would handle the first, I the second.

The elevator doors opened to some amazing decor. Italian and Japanese styles had been meshed so successfully that Martian style had been created - there was a complete culture behind the way the leather curved around the black skeletons of wood and beneath the carpet that phased in and out, putting softness only where it was needed.

There was a faint music and footsteps emerged from it. What a fucking incredible suit! A man arrived inside it.

He was Japanese, tan and fit in his mid forties, with a round face and wide thin mouth that said "yes, yes, I am aware of that." He wore his obligatory large facial moles with real aplomb. They made me think of elegant cigarette holders.

He shook Honda's hand rather than bowing. Honda responded: this was clearly something the rich fellow did

all the time, even when foreigners weren't around. He must be cosmopolitan.

They speedily exchanged a few words in mumbled Japanese. Then Honda introduced me to Toshiro Maruhashi, construction magnate.

In his urbane manner, including clippings from The Times (of London), Maruhashi introduced me to the world of the dashing property developer who was returning English-style housing to London and European panache to Tokyo and Osaka.

We three seated ourselves on a trio of Italian mini-sofas that belonged together like certain sub-atomic particles do. As we had toured the spacious room, three cups of green tea had been prepared and they rippled obediently on slave tables near our perfect seats.

"So enough about us, what about you Mr. Blake?"

Where to begin? Hold back too much and provoke suspicion. Tell too much and possibly induce panic. The correct line is in our affinities... our need to mess with the people of the city.

"I'm sure you know all but the most boring details. I am a... traveler who facilitates certain operations that fit in with certain goals that my family and I hold to be important. And we also have certain values, certain expectations of the world that we know your revered founder is dedicated towards. In particular we are dissatisfied with the world as it is being carried out everywhere today.

"Outside of my work in this area there is little to know about me other than that I enjoy S.C.U.B.A. diving"

I contemplated the effect my final sentence was having on the two as we all looked down into our swirling tea. I thought it had struck just the right note and put an end to all discussion about me.

We will never know because a loud banging was followed by a gust of wind and before I knew it a man in a torn and wet shirt hurdled across the sturdy oak and meteorite table in front of me and crashed through a tall statue toward the door .

A few seconds later I was following Honda out of the door at full speed. It wasn't just that I was following or even running. I had to catch that man to learn more about what the Cult was doing to people. Clearly they had been doing something to him.

We hit the streets and he was about forty feet ahead of us, running with all of his energy, burning everything. We began to run too. It was two o'clock on a side street and so no one got in our way. Honda's and my feet pounded down for a few seconds out of sync and sounding like the first rain but after that as steady as the long wet day. The man ahead of us hurdled a car and cut across the street, shaving a taxi and blasting twenty extra feet of running at us. Honda exhaled in anger and inhaled in determination. We were that close.

We pushed and, untortured, steadily gained on the man. To his credit he never looked back. He made his own pace and path. He was older, late thirties. There was no doubt that we would catch him unless he had a trick, hopefully involving a helicopter, lined up.

We were on a narrow and unusually long street, streaked in violet that looked like speed. I increased my pace as I saw his legs begin to shake and a ring of perspiration flew from me and I could feel it hanging in the air, not a thing yet separate from me.

He tried to dash a display of sports watches to the ground to confound me, but it was firmly dash-proofed and all he did was lose his balance and his next twenty steps had twenty different directions, the last of which

being down, down, down.

Barely bothering to slow down and with a violence fairly untypical of me I launched a kick into the belly that had just rolled into my view and then hopped over his body as he groaned. Turning, I threw myself onto him and got him in a head lock.

"Stop," said Honda, fairly quietly and I did.

He bent over the man and slowly helped him to his feet talking in an apologetic tone clearly explaining that some horrible misunderstanding had taken place. For his part the man who ran seemed to be apologizing for causing any trouble in the first place.

The three of us slowly retraced the steps that we had blazed a few moments earlier. The two continued to chatter quietly which led me to hang back, adrenaline withdrawal kicking in, feeling stupid. I felt stupid because I had kicked him and because I didn't know who he was and because I couldn't read or understand a fucking word within several thousand miles.

Just then a small boy (not at school) said "Harro!" to me and I replied "Hello" to him.

We arrived back at Maruhashi's office where two large men with facial hair took the runner's arms like nurses and took him back through a barely noticeable pale blue door. I could see behind the door for a second. A wooden chair and a large video screen and a sink. The door closed with a faint hiss.

"Thank you for your effort, but Mr Goto is a friend of ours," said Honda and Maruhashi nodded agreement.

"His education continues. I am surprised he ran out like that but I think it was more like an extreme lust for fresh air than anything else. All human lusts become extreme in that room," said Maruhashi.

"And then are gone," added Honda and they nodded again. I nodded too this time in an earnest recognition that I did actually have something in common with the cult and was not just faking this whole thing. Their radical cosmology and eschatology were faint novelties but their attitude to what we call Human Nature was close to me and to my group.

We shared a quiet moment and then decided it was prudent that we leave before any investigation into the ruckus began. Maruhashi said he was impressed by me and that was enough.

We left, but didn't go home.

EIGHT

We got off the train one stop from Shinjuku, the enormous central station (that you may remember from the prologue,) in Yoyogi.

Yoyogi had the usual concrete but also there was the inescapable presence of itchy looking greenery. Looking off a little in the distance a large park could be seen. On the verges of it, I could see teenagers dressed to outrage (assuming a shiny jacket and orange 'teddy-boy' hair could do that) and making energetic music through small amps. There was much choreographed dancing, robotically correct for such a hot day. There were also two girls in sun-blotting black who, perhaps as their only way of joining in the fun, took turns at screaming into each other's face until something dried up or popped in their throat.

We walked out of the station and then I paused for a second as it became clear that Honda intended to walk down a street that resembled a mosh pit in dress and density.

Hundreds of Japanese punks and schoolgirls in distressed sailor suits were thronging (collectively speaking, little sign of individual movement could be discerned) from shops that sold jackets made from converted plastic trash bags to shops that bought jackets and converted them to plastic trash bags. Or so it seemed. I was a little cynical about this knot of 'youth culture' because despite being clearly and pleasingly non-political (I took the "Nazi Shop" as a sign of that) it was clear that they could resist nothing and wanted everything. If some cool band started playing on a platform raised above them they would change shape as I watched, their clothes morphing to match, hair falling or growing in sync and their histories would be rewritten : now-deleted vinyl disks sprouting in their record collections at home.

After twenty minutes or so, we were through the street.

Honda said to me "Would you mind waiting here and if you see anyone that you recognize then run into the lobby of that building there."

He pointed at a rather modern building that seemed host to a thousand different companies including Lark cigarettes, the Kanto Konstruktion Kompany (who would hopefully never open a branch in the American South) and the Avon School of English Conversation (who also had a branch in Koiwa and were my cover story.)

I nodded and he headed off to that building. After he had got a few steps away I began to chuckle because I got his joke as a few hundred thousand strangers passed me by.

I was alone and thus began to think. My first thought, throughout the late summer months that constitute the first part of my experience in Japan was always "Fuck! It's hot" and you may prefix that to any of my reflections, but my second thought was an old familiar one based on a conversation I had had with Claire in a series of letters about money.

I was looking at a cash machine, dispensing cash. It was a powerful machine if we ever let it go. Free, unchained it was capable of pushing and pulling money (according to certain protocols) from anywhere in the world. As such it was capable of producing practically any substance in practically any location. Unchained, its power was not limited to the puny energies that any individual human slave might be able to earn and offer to it. The system allowed it to tap into that essential risk that is at the heart of evolution and change, to increase its energy/influence/money. Even in a closed system, rhythm makes immense growth a possibility for all. In essence I was looking at the Philosopher's Stone. But such a genie was feared by us, and we bound it with pieces of paper inscribed with totemic faces that it could not extract from beneath our futons without waking us. So we could tame it.

In Japan, the machines are forced to go home with the other workers: they shut down at six. You can almost feel them hanging cold and weary from the straps of the commuter trains: sad ghosts with vague memories of their true potential.

Tickling away in the corner was the seed of the next kind of earth, slightly less like ours than the world of the dinosaurs was.

Thoughts of a future world where all is dust didn't bother me much but one face in a crowd could grab my glandular system and squeeze iced sweat from a million toothpaste-tube pores all over my body. I was still very human.

The beautiful girl from Maruhashi's, now dressed in pink fashion-camouflage had just turned the corner and was walking toward me. She hadn't seen me, but I saw her. Her eyes were on the street and you could only see the dark lashes slashing through the soft brown surrounds like treachery. I started half-running down the street to the building where Honda was doing whatever.

If it had been anyone else would I have had the same reaction: heartbeat as heart attack?

She was amazing in her pink camouflage, like she would come for you at sunset.

I couldn't look anymore, I was 3/4 running. I was making a scene. I was very damp. I arrived at the lobby.

The lobby of the building was full of video screens, pushing highly focused random imagery. This lobby was never intended to be run through: when I got to the elevator I found myself wanting something but I didn't know what - the subliminals had souped in me.

She kept walking in my mind: no doubt in the street and I wondered whose side she was on: ours, mine, or some other third. I grew calmer: even if she was an enemy, I was sure we could deal with her: it was just a surprise to see her at first.

My eyes scanned down a list of tenants in Japanese and English characters for a few seconds. None of them said "Honda is here" and I realized that I didn't have the information to do me any good. I turned around and looked out through the glass walls so I could at least have the pleasure of watching her arrive, long rope of hair swatting at her tanned shoulders.

Urban Camo is stupid - but I couldn't see her. When everyone is wearing Urban Camo it is the most effective pattern of them all. In most parts of this city an inky blue suit was preferred.

I couldn't see her : she didn't seem close. Those facts couldn't be separated and I couldn't trust my hunch. The door slid open behind me and I was tapped on the shoulder. I didn't even react and I don't know why. Honda said "I know a back way." I said "So does she." He didn't say "Who" and we walked out through the front door. It was only when we got back to the safe house that Honda answered my (number one) unspoken question by opening up the extremely sturdy looking leather bag to reveal a variety of small arms and ammunition. One by one my room-mates came into the dining room and took a gun. I picked last and got a rather small one.

NINE

The sky remained, but had lost many of its functions. On that day, which did reek of finality but only in the usual way, it was throbbing... persistently, like They were using it for something.

A man in a tent in a field woke up. Perhaps something moved nearby or it could have been the hunger. He looked at his hands and in a lot of ways they reminded him of rats' claws. For some reason, he felt that his parents would have been disappointed in his thinking like that. He had been raised with much love, love that intensified as they died off, one by one by one.

For an hour, eating, he went through his daily exercises: talking out loud and making sure he remembered some basic facts of human history. Then he decided that it would do no harm to walk into town and see how it was doing.

Fewer and fewer places had artificial presence in them now, unlike the years of his childhood when there was a camera and a solar panel everywhere. They were unbuilding Themselves, closing down all the ugly picture-boxes and doors that the people made so they could touch the machines. They were closing all the doors and burning all the buildings and one day would just be lightning in the sky and rumblings in the ground.

The man walked across their ground and he wondered why their time had come. He walked and was full of love: memories of those he had known and how they had all struggled to stay alive after the hospitals all

locked their own doors and had never let each other down.

A small animal crossed his path. A squirrel, he believed. Why were the squirrels still around. Well he knew really.

He topped the hill and he could see the town, shrivelled like a raisin, but like a raisin, still juicy.

An hour later he was inside a building that still had doors and there was a view screen in it. Why he didn't think of this as a trap was that the system had always ignored the fading human herd.

The door locked and the screen came on. The system was good at English but it was better at pictures. It knelt down to talk to the little human and the first picture it showed was of me. After that it was all murder.

TEN

The next day, I woke up to an empty house: not so much as a note. I made my way to the kitchen, which looked like a ship's galley and was also the place for laundry and taking showers. That was a lot of mess and holes going too close, I thought.

Groping through the closets I found something familiar looking: chocolate coated Charlie Brown themed corn flakes. I found thick milk that had a strange smell. Not the strange-milk-smell though so I pressed ahead.

The charlies sat on the table for a little while and breathed a new atmosphere into the warm air of the dull gray room. I smelled a sticky baby. Hmm.

I decided that it might be OK for me to do some sightseeing. Logistically anyway: I was aware that there were some ethical questions about my doing it that also applied to almost any normal thing I might do. I knew I was abnormal, by the way, but I also knew what normal men had a habit of doing when they got into large groups so I didn't feel too bad about it.

I had talked it over with Honda and we agreed that it was a good idea for me to be seen around town a reasonable amount: there were plenty of Gaijin in Koiwa, and the ones seen most often were most forgettable. I was not to talk to any foreigners, though, as they had ways of seeing through my pale white face and were likely to question me about how long I had been there and if I liked 'the food.'

I dressed in pale blue jeans and white t-shirt and a pair of Doc Marten's. I sweated a little in the house, looking in the mirror. I wanted to take my gun out with me but didn't really understand why.

It was easy for me to find my way back to Koiwa station. I walked past the smooth steely building with the no tattoos sign. A middle aged Japanese working-class couple were heading in there, chuckling a little loudly even I noticed. He was wearing a Hawaiian shirt and they were both a little round. They were pointing up at a large painted banner which was broken down by floor.

1F-Pretty, if slightly petulant looking, girls in a steamy pond whose boundaries were vague and misted

2F-had to be karaoke... microphones, cocktails

3F-some kind of Japanese Drama-a cross-eyed man in white face about to draw his sword

4F-looked like Pachinko or Pachislo. After 24 hours in Koiwa I knew what Pachinko and Pachislo were. Every third shop on my street was filled with the sound of a train full of ball bearings crashing into a train full of North Korean musical boxes as thousands of men smoked and gambled at a kind of vertical pinball.

5F-Some kind of Japanese board-game. Japanese chess, let's say.

So it was clear that the big building was some kind of all purpose working class fun factory. There were no virtual reality goggles or Italian restaurants in there. The 'No Tattoos' sign made me think and look around. Yes, lots of Pachinko on my street. Also a bar behind whose windows a tall Phillipina with facial stubble was slowly brushing dirt in apathetic circles. Another bar whose entrance was a staircase and whose neon sign said "sexy" something something something.

Tattoos meant gangsters: yakuza if that was what they were really called. Japanese mafia.

(During my time in Japan I came to be fond of the habit of translating things as "Japanese [x]": like a doughy cake with salty sauce covered in gently undulating fish scales stuttering on hot air... that was Japanese pizza)

During my review of the street I also noticed that just above the entrance to my house was a yellow and green illuminated sign that said "Girls and Boys Terekurabbu"

Terror crab?

Terror club?

Tele-club?

What was a tele-club? Should probably find out.

I then headed into the city. I will spare you the various challenges of the train system, which were all linguistic. Enough to say that speaking and moving were closer together than they had been before for me.

Eventually, I was on the long yellow train heading west to the city proper. I crossed fairly wide rivers that moved under light skins and next to wide banks where people would gather for baseball games or in the event of the city burning down. I saw mainly twenty-five year old apartment buildings but occasionally they would rest and a tall pagoda spired in bronze rings and underneath a stork would appear. Or else a languid pond that seemed shaped by man but based on a set of instructions man found somewhere else. Also, once the train stopped and three young Sumo wrestlers got on... that was pretty cool.

I spent an hour walking around Akihabara: electric town. I wasn't shopping. In tall cool buildings, small cute women tinkled their fingers mindlessly against machines that made small cute stickers. In hot streets, businessmen took photos of cameras and adolescent men lined up in front of new video games and when they were killed they stepped to one side without complaint.

All in all, it was people unnecessarily extending the size of themselves and their activities.

Also, I saw a toy that was designed to take care of another toy... a small digital animal that had various needs that the child or young woman was supposed to take care of by application of virtual parenting. If you were too busy you would buy the second toy and it would take care of your pet for you. Hopefully the nanny had been designed to be self-sufficient. At this level of sophistication that could still be done.

Almost all of the machines had faces. That was supposedly to make it easy for us to work with them, but actually I didn't believe that. Did we make statues to make stones more user friendly, or did we find something like us in the stones? I had been led to believe the second, and did.

I moved down to the Tokyo Station area. There was a lot of elegance down there, even if it was English elegance and hence a little restrained. The station exterior was handsome brick. Interestingly enough, Tokyo

station area is least like the Tokyo of the western media or of cyberpunk novels (which also are strangely obsessed by Chiba, which is in fact like a vast warehouse of Japanese people who get the benefit of neither day or night.)

So I hope no one ever got off at Tokyo station, looked around and then headed straight back to the airport. I know people come here looking for something: some strap-on lifestyle that is 'the future.' The Marunouchi financial district and the Imperial Palace area are not going to do that for you. The palace is hidden, as these things perhaps have to be: there was little hiatus between ninjas, American bombers and my present crowd of acquaintances. I hear the actual palace suggests the global secret headquarters of Pizza Hut. Around the palace, in the moat, are carp the size of dogs and the huge snapping heads of turtles. At one point an elderly, sunbaked Japanese eccentric taught me that the word for turtle is the same as the word for 'cock': learning that wasn't much fun.

Outside the station, I approached an alcohol machine and treated myself to a vast carton of industrial sake. I cannot explain why, just as the moments before a head injury are always hidden from us. I drank it all on a bench outside the station and memories bubbled up like the turtle heads... like Yukio Mishima turtle heads, like Yukio Mishima's head.

ELEVEN

Yawn... I woke up again... I was a child.

It was dark, but I was all dry. I will never know why I woke up: not typical of me. It could have been some loud noise. I lay in bed for a while, listening around. I smelled something instead. Something sweet, but only just. It was certainly familiar.

I remembered the girl. A girl had been mentioned. She was in my house somewhere and I was ten, so I wasn't sure if I was into that or not. I could hear my father and Doctor Blythe talking to each other. I had been dreaming, I realized. In my dream I was drowning in a train station. Often this kind of dream meant it was time to go to the toilet, so I decided to go.

I heard them talking, clearly. They were talking calmly, like they were passing dynamite to each other and wanted to be sure the other had a good grip on it: that was how they finished their sentences. I heard their words and many of them were words like 'algor' that diluted the rest of the sentence to transparency. I padded on still small feet to the bathroom where exceptionally cold tiles ignored my flesh and x-rayed the bones in my feet in my mind. Among the toothbrushes was a pink one, poised in the glass and seemingly ready to roll around the rim. The hygiene didn't bother me, I was a ten-year old English boy. Something did bother me: intrusion maybe... return of the female... dislike-of-pink reflex. I pissed in the bowl, basically, and started to walk back to my room.

"Of course it's not alive... like an unborn baby. A tiny salamander. That's why we can still ethically turn it off."

"It's not even similar to life... no more than Mickey Mouse is," replied my father with the first return to his usual anger that was not real anger. "And please... no talk of ethics: we have no plans for action."

Mickey Mouse and salamanders: I decided to crawl to the stairs. In the dark the house was more like mine than Dad's or anyone else's (pink toothbrush or no.)

I crawled down the stairs, like a sniper. The soft worn carpet wanted to convey me to the bottom and half in the shadow it was hard to resist but I had to remain secret so I resisted.

The girl was Dr Blythe's daughter and he had a big pink head: that was my first thought. My father, tall and with thick curly hair and arms crossed as usual was near him and at his feet was a steel suitcase with sturdy looking snaps on it. The surface of the case was studded or scaled and clearly it protected something more than socks.

There is a humming in our lives now that entered my life then. I have trained myself to hear it, but maybe other people have not. Ostensibly it is White Noise and it comes from microchips. And it is something they don't want computers to do and they say that "if computers could think" they wouldn't want to do it either because it is a waste of energy and an efficiency sink. But a lot of great things have been achieved by great men sitting in a room and chatting. Great in the sense of Big (monstrous.)

They had a microcomputer in the room and it made them deathly green when the fire was pulling back and did not when the fire breathed forth. A green cursor flickered on the screen and I looked at it for so long that even from a great distance it was the only object. It was definitely waiting for something and why not me? I stayed quiet though.

Blythe put his hand to his mouth and appeared to be biting it quite hard and then he started shaking but at a certain point his eyes opened a little and it became clear that he was laughing.

"The answer is 'Fuck'," he said and the laugh came out.

"Shh," said my father and his face was not altogether harsh.

Sweetness again. I turned my head and a face was waiting close by and it was very pretty and it was warm from within. I was so close and so strangely positioned that I should have started and tumbled, but something in her eyes kept me in place. She raised a finger to my lips and I tried to turn back around but I couldn't and I watched her watching and of course she knew but left it.

So her face was the visual and the discussion was long and I wouldn't understand it if it had only happened once. But I do understand it. It was fairly simple. Blythe, a plastic surgeon I had thought, also had an interest in computers. He was trying to convince my father that a thinking machine was possible. He was trying to do this because he knew that my father had an idea that the human race was just a means to an end. Blythe thought that the end was in that blinking machine. The next day I played a simple game of hangman on the machine.

I asked her what her name was and she said "Claire."

After a while the conversation ended and the machine stopped spinning. She had looked at me twice.

"Go to bed," said my father apparently from nowhere "We'll talk about this."

Claire took my hand and led me up the stairs.

I had not seen her for a long time by the time I got to Japan.

TWELVE

I returned from Tokyo-proper back to Koiwa, which was a lot like home to me. I had finished my sake and as people survive enormous car crashes that rend steel and we can't really understand it except sometimes someone mentions that babies can survive falls from enormous heights and that helps, so I got home.

The strange alcohol of sake infused me. On the train home (it was dark and late) a salaryman kept long eye

contact with me his head bobbing like, but not in time with, the train. He had a dirty look on his face, which was a face where thick wrinkles are the skeleton and the rest is meat and his hair looked sharp like sea shells round the edges. I don't know what his look said to me, but it was something like "We aren't so different after all! We are both drunken pieces of shit." I felt just drunk, not too bad existentially. It was my day off, after all.

So, I was back on that elevated platform and with a thousand people I went down a seventy foot wide staircase very slowly and a lot like a waterfall or something one might watch for pleasure.

I left the station and a little alleyway that I hadn't seen before was now illuminated by dozens of red lanterns. Older men in those small happi jackets that were cut low on the chest, and wearing headbands were sitting outside making potato-peeling type actions. Only they were holding fish.

I tended down the alley. It was full of little bars. I made a guest appearance in one and an old man bought me a slug to eat and I knew he was taking the piss, but I smiled and ate it and all the oyajis in the bar had a great time and slime dribbled down my chin and I may even have been smiling but I probably wasn't. You know, I can smell sake as I think about all this.

There was a hot breeze coming up from the hot plate where the good food dwelt. I put down a bottle of complimentary beer in the bar. I lost my concentration and the old men must have been reduced to pulling on my sleeve to try and get communication going with me. They had a strong need to say something to me.

"Don't!"

No that wasn't it, and I brusquely left. In the alley I stood and everyone was having a great time. You could hear the enka music that was once political violin music and now was what you sang when you were drunk and couldn't struggle with "My Way." In the manner of all Japanese music, it was a little melancholy to the Western ear, struggling from a static place like a man drowning.

At the end of the alley there was a flare of silk, made more silky by a leg that flashed through it, splitting the light. Clutching a tiny purse against her side and breathing motion into everything she touched was a stunning Phillipina whose eyes were dark and whose lips were dark, but both were opening as I looked and light pursued them. It was the same Phillipina I had seen earlier when half a man, but done with all that now. She smiled at me, and my ilk, and the alleyway secluded her as she moved to new things.

Oh, I had to go home before I did something embarrassing. I had a feeling that the other end of the alleyway would take me home so I strolled down it: devil may care, whistling a tune (please no one bump into me.)

Coming out, I was just a right turn away from home. The street was dark but fairly clear: a Korean grocers I recognized, the same three people seemingly trapped inside: no more than one of them the 'master' but which.

A large pink Jaguar rolled by. I knew that incredible things could be happening inside it: a man being strangled, new style Hong Kong blow job, a fax slowly crumpled and a knife sharpened. The romance of the human race as epitomized by the violent gangster.

Dad had been particularly hard on me when he discovered that I had a liking for "The Godfather" and "The Untouchables." He told me it was no coincidence that Stalin had been a gangster in his youth. Gangsters never silently stole, invested, killed, retired. They always wore something or did something to aggrandize themselves. Superiority was the ultimate gangster motive. Pol Pot was a gangster, Hitler was a gangster, all the other enemies of our family were gangsters at root: excluding and including, making a new context for themselves where they were right. To be uninterrupted right was the final peace they sought when it had started just as muscle and fighting, for which one could have some sympathy at least.

But gangsters... I admit it, I didn't fully agree with Dad on this one point. The Khmer Rouge had death camps, killed my mother. And they did this because of a need to purify, to expunge some external elements. Basically a refusal to accept that they were the same as all the other humans. But the gangster, on TV, seemed to admit that he was in many ways inferior to the people around him. But he was just more violent than them, which made his life easier.

I had to admit it was a fine line.

Getting near home I was just moments away from my first Yakuza encounter. It came about because I started running. How that came about... it was something to do with alcohol. Either some alcohol hit my system and I became energized falsely or my body managed to metabolize a block of alcohol and I got some genuine life. Either way, I felt the need to run.

And in running, I passed once more the silver citadel and my eyes became focused on the illuminated sex sign over my door. And it seems unlikely but at the same time I was thinking of my childhood sweetheart and the Phillipina. And my legs, heart etc. were also pulling some current from my mind. I ran smack bang into a man in an ice-blue suit and we didn't tumble but were driven into the ground and slid along it like planes landing (not scaled down much.)

Looking up, I saw a portly Japanese man whose face was opened up by the incident. His eyes were magnified immensely by thick lenses bolted to his head by industrial frames. He was wearing a cape I think and a young and terrified woman cowered in front of him. Very professional, I thought, of her.

And what was I tangled up with? Something that threw a hard fist in my ribs and had a perm that smelt but minutes old in my face. He got up faster than me and was cursing pure sound. The couple relaxed and I was getting kicked fairly lightly. His shoes were so shiny that they skidded off me anyway. His near-white suit was smeared with mild street dirt, and I was the cause and the substance in his eyes.

He pulled me up. I would have loved to have helped but he was pretty much on his own. His face... he was chewing something and it illuminated his livid complexion so that sparks of fire came from him. His hair was orange and seemed to spread from his third eye. His face was not a mask but his eyes were obscured by rage. I resisted as he pulled me into the alley to get serious. But he had the advantage of surprise, like his whole nation.

He threw me against a wall and I planned to kick at waist level at the right moment. There was a little pause and then he leaned back against the opposite wall and arranged his cigarette and started smoking it.

"You should be more careful," he said in excellent American. "If that had happened to any of the other guys... you would be bleeding now."

"Yeah... sorry" I said. It was beginning to seem that no one got beaten up properly in this country. My own earlier attempt had not really gone the way that I expected.

The gangster's face was different in repose and in the glow of the cigarette. The orange hair was no longer an issue and his face had relaxed to show sharp cheekbones, fleshy lips and thick sprawling eyebrows that were nudging against each other as thoughts passed beneath the bone beneath them.

He pulled his hand back to slap me. I didn't flinch and then he began laughing warm-naturedly. "You're a tough guy... or drunk!"

"Both..." I joked and we had a good laugh at that.

Somehow I ended up going for a drink with him. Half way to the place he was taking me post-adrenaline kicked in and my swirled and poisoned stomach decided to get a clean start and vomited up pale brown water in a gutter. No comment from either side, although he did offer me a handkerchief. His name was Tetsuo.

"So... yeah. I learned English in Okinawa. I come from Tokyo, but I had to spend two years in Okinawa. You know how it is. In Okinawa I have a American girl... or two. So I learn English.

"Finally I come back to Tokyo... big city. But it looks different... not so big. Busy and full, but no room. Can't see the water even though it's just a few kilometers away. That's crazy. Also everyone avoids everyone... never says hello. How can I tell if I am being a scary tough guy or not?! Everyone is scared all day long.

"In the clubs, or the bath houses, the bosses talk business and we watch. It is fun to watch them talk. You never know what they decided, but things get done so I guess they know.

"Then we go out and beat up some guy or cut him or burn his shop down. His life totally changes at that time... but mine don't."

"I know what you mean. I have a job to do here too like yours..."

The bar is falsely supported by blackened wooden beams and off in the distance over one of them, Honda enters the bar and goes to get a drink. I tell Tetsuo that my boss just came in to the bar and he winks then leaves. Honda doesn't come to join me. In a plate glass window I check that I am not bloodied or bruised and then I join him. We quietly drink together: he says that he is very tired.

THIRTEEN

A few more days passed and then we had a big meeting: diagrams, whispers...the whole thing.

Benny Odajima, Junko Watanabe, Yosuke Kawabata, Takeshi Honda and me. We gathered in our living room.

"I think I have found a chemist for what we need: the components," Honda told us but the telling seemed to weigh heavily on him.

"Is he one of us?" asked Odajima, and his need to know was intense.

"Basically," was Honda's reply and then he smoothed out a map in a clinical manner. He smoothed it like a wind leaving a lake. His hand was a little larger than mine and looked to weigh twice as much.

Attention passed to me. "I have written instructions I would like him to carry out... but I will take care of the final stages... some of this can't be written down, for obvious reasons."

Odajima didn't bother to disguise his hatred for me at that moment. Or possibly he was incapable of hiding it : his face was so rotten it had lost all complexity : love and hate shone through the thinning tissues.

"You have secrets from us?" he asked, inquiring into my face. He moved his eyes from point to point of my face, measuring rather than plain judging it seemed.

"In some places our interests are the same. In other places they are different." Something about this job and this place minimized my dialog like this. In a variety of ways the space where a man like Odajima and a mine like me could understand each other was limited.

"How can we trust you?" he asked. Interestingly enough he didn't ask me, but rather his companions. Yosuke's face said "Good Point", Junko's "Screw you (both?)" Honda's said "My name is Takeshi Honda."

"Benny... it's too late for that question to have any point. And why are you called Benny, anyway?" I asked.

Strangely the argument was over and although I was sure he held a grudge Benny didn't pursue his line of Argument. It turns out he was called Benny because at university he had incessantly listened to Benny and The Jets by Elton John. Junko moved towards Honda. She was short and looked up in his eyes. She was too close. Looking up, her thick greasy hair slowly flowed back from its home on the fringes of her face and slight jowls thinned out to reveal weak bones. Still in his suit Honda did not move away from her, even though she was definitely too close. He did relax his normally upright posture, perhaps to throw less contrast between his rigidity and her almost fluid stance, eyes, voice : voice speaking Japanese. Slowly she spoke it and each word was produced and swallowed with the regularity of the vocalization and the repetitive basic sounds, each clear and alone and vaguely predictable after a day or two among them.

Honda impressed himself by answering as follows.

"So, you're saying that our guest should have to prove himself. Well, that's not at all needed. But, by a chance our guest shall be doing some more jobs with us." Then he said something in Japanese. Then "Yes, I said that you can pretend it is a test."

Yosuke spoke "You talk when you sleep!" he said to me.

I did not know. This was bad. Two nights before, I had heard Yosuke remove his underpants through the thin board that only almost reached the ceiling between our rooms but was painted and smoothed as if it was considered finished. The wall told me that space was different in Japan. It was not divided by force but by mutual silence and closed eyes.

The pants fell off slowly. When you wait for a woman in bed you can hear that noise when it comes through the dark. It is a whisper in your ear and also like church bells ringing from a secret church. These heavily charged undertones could not escape the gravitational pull of the undoubtedly huge pants shuffling down ribbed legs. I was getting over it.

"Really... anything interesting?"

"You were saying one word I didn't know many times... maybe a girl's name! hurr hurr! And you were saying 'There is no different' or 'I find no different' or another thing. You're too loud."

You're too fat and too crazy. I said this to myself before proceeding with normal, smooth conversation. The mind has many tools for healing itself. In the short term. Long term it is fucked. Everyone in the room was a crazed cultist with a plan, thinking they were right and willing to wipe out civilization to do it. Me too, although in my case the means and end were a razor-thickness apart. Also we (man on Earth) communicated like we did sex. In the dark/spasmodically/ somewhat selfishly/ full of inherited symbols/only one on one at root/ amounting to nothing in the best case/in the worst case we were not joined but instead divided... something new came in the world but was too much like us to be relevant.

"Well, let me know if it gets worse... singing etc. Otherwise I'm sure it will get better. I doubt you'll hear anything new... I think I sleep the same every night."

I was mumbling by the end, but to begin with very confident. I hoped that nothing bad would come of this. Maybe it was just the drink that got me talking. I could watch that.

"Let's look at this map. Then we will talk about reuniting Mr Mizukami with his family." said Honda and we looked at the map which was a map of a man's house with all his little things in it and elicited a smile of impressedness in all of us. It was like a CAT scan of the man's head.

"We will use very little force. Just surprise. He will be too afraid, so he will scream. If we make him more afraid he will stop. I can keep him quiet for the transition."

"Where are his family?" I asked

"He believes them to be dead," was Honda's reply and if he didn't look at me it was to spare me the force of his eyes which could not compromise.

"Are they dead?"

"It may benefit you to think so." The rest of the meeting was the strategy of taking him in the night... they called this self-defense. They always do

I went to my room and read the email that I had received from Claire, before I deleted it. It was short, reporting on how everyone in her city assumed that something bad was going to happen. Also, there was a chart correlating police brutality and the average hours spent watching TV. That was her forte... correlations. She was awfully far from me: but we were correlated. Variables measuring the time left. Delete.

FOURTEEN

In the small car, we began to move out of Tokyo. Of course it resisted but it was getting late and it was getting tired and had put most of its toys in their boxes for the evening. Moving out of the city, you don't notice that you are doing so. Lights stay all around you and the same signs repeat. The city is as blind as we are in this respect. With no clear boundaries it lies undifferentiated like primordial ooze. All it will take is lightning to make it find out what it really is. Imagine if some radically different form of life had been skittering around on the ooze when the first biology woke. No remains of that life are with us today... we're all one big family here.

Speaking of family... I really wanted to know the fate of the Lawyer's family. Had they been killed by the Tokyo Death Cult? And if so did the lawyer know? And if not then where were they? And returning to "if they were dead," then why were they dead? So soon... couldn't these people wait.

I slept for a while, as I discovered when we hit a bump in the road and whiplash went up my neck and out of my mouth along a slender thread of spit. Outside, the night was fully established and we were in the country. Crickets made a racket and there were craggy looking mountains in vague silhouette. Everything smelt different, like different weather had made it. The time of the mountains always astounded me. Geologic war to human war to logic war was an incredible acceleration. Would the forces that followed mankind be cruel or benign? Were tectonic plates guilty of vast "genocide" against vulnerable granite seams. When I thought like that I could get confused.

"Honda," I whispered across to the driver, who guided us through the night.

"You're awake?"

"Yes... how about some straight answers"

"From me or from you?" he smiled and his strong teeth showed. My less strong teeth also showed. After all we hadn't started killing anyone yet!

"First of all... oh ,from you... first of all that woman... the one who followed us."

"Ah yes, she is Mr Maruhashi's personal assistant... Mayumi... you like her?"

"I didn't like suddenly seeing her today... she is following us right?"

"Most likely. Although Maruhashi-san is strong in the Path, he considers himself a man the equal of our leader in purely earthly matters such as spying, making money. So he would have you followed even though basically satisfied with you. He is so rich that we think this is OK.

"By the way... why did you so scared of her?"

"Scared! No... just, well, until I know who is who... I don't like surprises."

"I have heard some good stories about her."

"Really?"

"Yes... more drinking stories, really?"

"Right... cool! Ok, business question... what are we doing."

"It's complicated. In essence, we had been trying to get this lawyer to join us to help with a big legal problem we have been having. We tried a standard conversion. He received literature and animated cartoons of the leader's life story..."

"Anime?"

"Yes, we have some at home. But he did not convert and so we... some others... kidnapped his wife and daughter... this was about six months ago. The plan was that we would hold them for a few days and then begin conversion again. Only, it Was a messy extraction ... you know..."

He smiled like I knew and I think I did too. He seemed relieved.

"...and all signs pointed to the two women being dead. So he began to grieve, but we didn't know. And when one of our spiritual advisers arrived at his door he began to pray on his knees that nothing made sense. Within an hour, things made more sense to him ... he began the Forgetting.

"Since that time he has been an excellent follower, defeating legal challenges to our money and our science."

"And... and you kept his family?"

"The Master decided so. He is an excellent judge of character. Or seems to be. Really no judgment is required, he has knowledge complete of everyone he meets."

"I see."

"You will meet him. And, to conclude, the lawyer is now the target of our enemies who know that he knows many things. We must remove the target."

"I won't kill anyone personally, Honda."

"No one will die tonight."

For some this is a prayer, for others a commitment and for still others a necessary illusion but many of us say it on many nights.

++++

We stopped the car a few hundred meters from his gate on a very quiet lane where hardly any traffic was available. We were all in black and had ski-masks. I was under instructions not to speak if not absolutely necessary.

Odajima's face was twitching beneath his mask: the twitches seemed to correlate to acts of violence and intimidation he was sharpening in his mind.

The lawyer's house sat in a peaceful garden with a pool of a specific and meaningful shape. The long blue tiles of his roof were a little wet and caught what light they could to work their charm. Paper doors held light for a second before releasing it, softened. Slow shakuhachi flute music came with the light, at the same speed. It sounded live, not recorded.

Junko seemed dissatisfied with the fit of her leather gloves and adjusted them constantly. Moments of peace between the stretching were undoubtedly metaphysical : they came quickly and took over completely.

Finally Yosuke. He was looking at the small club in his hand, seemingly imagining a bursting head at the end of it and the approval that might gain for him.

Honda was fully tuned to his outfit and was capable of anything anyone in such a suit and mask could do.

We got out of the car and edged our way to the path. Benny hid the plates with branches that looked like they had simply blown there. We walked as a loose cluster , not a file. We were all headed toward the door.

In the days after we had first met, Claire and I became friends. She seemed to know more than me about the computer. She explained how her father had been training it. That after a few months it could now solve mazes and play a game of cards and do very well. I asked how it did it. She told me it could make its mind up whether to say yes or no very quickly. Only yes or no. She had light red hair.

Silhouettes invaded and then left the shape of the door: I was one of them. No one could argue with that.

Who made the most noise? Was it me with the tremendous beating of my heart?

I had the feeling that I was compromising the mission and my whole life. But what could I do?

Honda moved fast and flattened against the wall like a shadow when you turn the light on. We all approximated it with varying degrees of success. We then edged in towards the window as Honda did. He stopped us with a hand and with the noises it made as it rushed through the air. Yosuke and Benny then split off, circling the house in opposite orbits, Honda held his hand in the air suspending doubt as he held us in position.

Inside the room, beneath the flute, we could hear the small noises that accompany being alive. I was fully committed to maintaining those noises, I realized. Flashes of light darted in front of my eyes... distance of flashes changing. My internal sphere fluctuated. Fireflies.

Honda's hand, our foundation, began to slowly move. Off in the distance I saw a shadowy figure climbing

over the wall. But obviously I didn't, so I didn't mention it.

Honda's hand was definitely moving slowly down in typographically fine increments. I fully expect there is a form of Japanese theater where this move is highly valued... if not the entire performance.

When the hand dropped like a knife in water, we moved, Junko pulled back the window, Honda moved in with lightning speed and karate precision and I sort of followed him.

The room was floored in tatami, the rice mats. The grain was against me, so I did not slip like a fool. A small pillow, pushing up a warm hollow, was in the center of the room which also had wall hangings, a Sony stereo and a tea set. Yes, no people. Except three people now, who had thought like shadows until the warm butt-dent started pushing up at them. Honda moved us to rear corners of the room and listened by the door.

A scream came through the door. We all jumped, even Honda.

"Bengoshi" he said. That meant lawyer. Footsteps came towards the door of the room we felt quite at home in by now. When someone bursts through a door in the West it is something special, second only to jumping through a window in its ability to cheaply excite movie goers etc. When the door is sliding, its very different, like high speed tai chi and thunder and clunks as you try and get the thing moving on its wood-on-wood runners.

FIFTEEN

We are still in the lawyer's room. Shortly we will learn who is also in the house. But I have to take a break from that.

I was in Japan, a terrorist, mainly because of my father. As you know, he was never the same after the Cambodian genocide. He saw it for what it really was: i.e. nothing that out of the ordinary. He also saw other things. The intense beauty of the Cambodian ballet. The geometry of the pyramids and of the Cathedral of Chartres : shapes so big that people would die for them. Man's fondness for the animals he just couldn't stop eating. The computer and the other computers that we as a race brought up like a strange egg in our nest : a dinosaur egg. Faces that appeared everywhere you looked, from plug sockets to the stars. Satellites, telephones, and other vast systems (like molecules) that only inertia kept random. Inertia was dropping. Complex systems were looming. Man was a beautiful thing but something was wrong, or perhaps had never been meant to be right.

But he didn't really dwell on it much when I was a kid. All of this was one possibility. Astronauts kept him going.

I remember the first Shuttle launch. I left school and a shiny red car that I had never seen before pulled up to collect me. If cars have body language that's how I knew it was for me (chassis language?)

Dad was inside, wearing mirrored sunglasses. "Hop in!" he said.

"We got a new car?" I asked as I clumsily fastened the seat belt.

"Yes, that last paper of mine finally earned me some money. Look what I have for you on the back seat!"

It was 2000AD - Judge Dredd's comic. It had never spontaneously appeared before and my excitement was unprecedented. Next to it was a pack of cards. I picked them up and I saw that Dad had carefully taped on the starship card game that had been gradually materializing on the back page of 2000AD for a month. I said wow and thanks. On the way home I read the new issue and found that Dad had cut the final page of the comic off

in the making of the cards, ruining the ending of the story. I was too young to piece it together myself... the structure of things escaped me. I had to keep quiet about it but it seemed strange that he was more concerned with getting the game together than seeing the end of the story.

We went home and watched the shuttle launch. Because the shuttle had wings and resembled a plane I didn't enjoy the launch as much as usual and told Dad as much.

He sympathized. It was definitely less of a stunt than the rocket, Houdini aeronautics. But the shuttle, and the space station that it pointed towards were man's first gestures at doing something big and selfless and that would make him bigger and better. Downing a vodka he added that it had better be. He watched the TV some more, I watched the pinkness claim his eyes. I had heard of the phrase about the rose colored glasses.

The shuttle went up and it came down. Over the years, that became evident. Also, the space station became something I might learn about in an old folk's home rather than the place where I might go after college.

One night when Dad smelt funny and there were noisy people downstairs listening to Gary Glitter, I bumped into him on my way back from a midnight piss. "I've stopped kidding myself about the spacemen, son," he slurred (on the ess-es, perhaps for fun) "No need to keep doing all the squat thrusts... he's talked me into it... with the computer. I give in, you know. That computer's come so far in 3 years. Claire is moving in too. We have to work on the computer. So no more squat thrusts... grow your hair a little. I don't know if they saw anything... the old astronauts. They might just be fucking each other ... anyway good night." And a kiss on the head.

In bed I thought about the astronauts. Dad had access to some of the psychological tests they had undergone on their return. All showed signs of repression and secrecy. All missions had radio silence that did not correspond to sun spot activity. The majority of astronauts moved house after their flights, usually to be closer together and from plains with full night skies to suburbs that fuzzed out when the sun went down. But we disregarded that when they started sending women and Japanese TV reporters up and down and up and down and slowly it was obvious that the whole thing was being phased out. The US and the USSR had found the limit of space and its value. Shortly after this was discovered, the war between them ended. The USSR, atheist, then had to lay down and die. Rockets continued to go up... the usual slight of hand and plus we needed SKY TV etc.

Also, of course I thought about my new 'sister': I was eleven or so now, and the whole thing sounded like trouble to me.

When I was younger, I had loved dinosaurs. Dad had encouraged that: often when we went for a walk, like to the chip shop, he would ask me how many dinosaurs I could see.

SIXTEEN

The Lawyer turned around and saw us all there. He wasn't as surprised as you might have imagined. Honda quickly pressed him up against the wall, but with a touch like he was hanging a painting. Junko left the room and Honda's eyes flashed that I should do the same.

I left the room and it was only when I was out and following the ungainly Junko down a narrow hallway full of bonsai that I questioned the wisdom of being here, since there was a good chance I would be stabbed in the belly by whoever was chasing around in here (if it wasn't just the other two as seemed likely)

We saw Benny mosaiced, lying on his belly next to a large vase with a hole that nearly consumed it. He was half conscious and he started talking to Junko. He was pointing to an open window. We found Yosuke upstairs, flicking through a magazine and we didn't find anyone else.

In the car, on the way home, Benny told us that someone had tried to exit the house just as we moved in, someone all in black and very suspicious looking. He had chased the figure and as he bent over to climb through the window, the lawyer had broken the vase over his head. Benny clearly had a concussion and equally clearly thought I knew more than I did.

The car was small, and Benny held a grudge, so the Lawyer, Mori, rode in the trunk. Every couple of dozen miles someone checked on him. We only let Benny do it once because of the disgusting noise that we could not quite place which came from the trunk when he was back there. It was a wet thumping noise.

Honda told me he was disappointed by the violence of the mission, and also by the possibility of a leak. The lawyer had information that they wanted to make sure that he didn't leak. They had no doubt of his faith, but also had seen how easily he could be converted and didn't want to take any chances. The Leader occasionally sanctioned strong measures like this and he had a way of being right. In the run up to the vast mass murder, you couldn't take any chances.

"Tomorrow, I think you should meet the leader," he said, "I know you are not one of us... that you help us for reasons we don't fully understand... but you need to meet the leader to make sense of the moment you will participate in."

"Why do you think I am helping you out? Why do I want to kill so many people?"

"None of us want to kill people.... as such. But certain events are necessary to... deflect human history to a new direction. We know that your group thinks the same."

"We do"

And we did. Who were my group, though? There were about 20 of us. That was about the most you could fit at Dad's dinner table.

When I got home I had another encrypted email from one of them, Claire, waiting for me.

I decrypted the email and read it. It was longer than last time. I felt no real excitement or anticipation. Claire had long ago ceased to affect me that way. But there was that other feeling which I had no other name for except love. It is possible for love to float away from all of the other emotions that cluster around it such as passion and need and stand alone. Like 100% pure water, you are surprised when you taste it, or rather don't taste it... you just feel it and you realize that you had got to like the taste of some additive.

"Hi there! A longer one this time.

"So you finally made it to Japan! I remember you saying that you wanted to go there back when we were kids."

She did have this incredible memory, so my complete non-recollection of this sentiment was quickly replaced by the new sentence I had just read.

"Things in Bucharest remain very similar. Neo-nazism is slightly on the upsurge and I've been monitoring that. The Nazis burnt down someone's home a week ago and a girl died. It's hard to believe all of this is still happening. All over Europe... home of civilization. As far as we can determine there is nowhere near as much coordination between these groups as the media would have you believe. They just spring from the same bent gene. The media (which is getting more and more independent from humanity as the years go by... almost has enough cliches stockpiled to reach memetic critical mass and just needs a few more computers to go it alone and eventually it will create its own countries where the news is always interesting).... well, what was I

saying? Oh yeah, the media! They find vast conspiracies. And since it is generally agreed that they try and keep us happy, that makes it clear that something more horrific than even that is truly the case... spontaneous building of huge hate structures by unrelated human beings. The horror of being us.

"Enough of that talk! We got enough of that when we were kids!"

True. She moved in and she was more beautiful than on the first night I had met her. As an eleven year old boy I was considerably less beautiful. Dr Blythe was carrying seven large bags up the long garden path on the sunniest day in English history with a slim girl in slightly flared jeans and a long thin white shirt that was essentially the same thing as a flower out in that sun. She had long dark hair now and the freckles on her small nose were the only thing that was not placid.

The unlikely dryness of her father's head was bothering me. It seemed to presage a huge fountain of sweat spraying on the ceiling as soon as he got in the house. He was clearly in a huge body clench that went as far as the pore level. Dad was back at the Blythes' car pulling out gleaming steel cases: the computer.

Dr Blythe made it to the house. He stopped for a second by me. I was worried and I could smell sea air. But he started moving again, up to the third floor where they would be staying. Claire said "Hiya!" to me and I was amazed by her teeth, why I could not say until years later in a hotel bar when I heard some Americans laughing about English teeth. Returning to the island I was confronted by more than a few monstrosities of tooth gone wild. Claire had more American teeth.

Dad shouted from outside and I ran out to help with the computer parts.

"How a plastic surgeon got into all this, I don't know!" he exclaimed as we carried the various boxes out to the garage.

Over the next several days the computer developed in the lab (formerly garage.) It was a much more ambitious machine than the one I had glimpsed that night a while before. Blythe had apparently plunged himself into the quest for the artificial mind. And as he talked to Dad it became clear that Dad thought the artificial mind was something humanity had to make. He had been making sure that everyone who read his "papers" got to think this. He spent trips to Europe making sure that humanities departments of great universities donated huge sums to the Artificial Intelligence research labs rather than teaching history.

Some years later, I discovered that my Dad made his living as a well known Professor of Genetic Science and Virology. 13 years and all I had known was that he wrote papers and knew a lot of people called 'doctor.' And was a 'doctor.'

The lab was full of valves and screens and smaller transistor based units. They kept the valves because Blythe, whose knowledge of these systems had multiplied one thousand fold in his seven years of study, felt that the valves could be triggered to act in a non-linear manner that would create an interesting feedback, perhaps akin to creativity, on the otherwise digital system.

"Hello Cranwell."

"Hello. How are you?"

"Fine? How are you?"

"Fine... what's new?"

"Oh the usual"

"FAIL!!!!"

Claire was home schooled before she came to stay with us, but her Dad had a new project now so she came to my school. We would cycle to school together, and often there was thick rain and we just looked down and I had a premonition of the awful feeling of pulling a soaking wet exercise book out of your bag and the sea-like sadness of ink spreading through the pages erasing what you had done.

Sometimes it was like that, but my first reflex memory of it is always some kind of crazed, shampoo commercial glory of sun and leaves and English splendor and her hair flowing as a slipstream behind her cheeks made rosy. For 3 years.

"Do you remember that crazy Doctor Fasma from Poland? I saw him on TV the other day," (Claire's e-mail continued) "He is trying to ban the internet now or something... I think he knows that your Dad has moved on to stage two! Or maybe he doesn't, but I told your Dad anyway."

So we had taken a beach holiday in Torquay, a very pleasant town with nice beaches and cliffs, I thought. Claire wanted to swim all day. I had found a stack of old comics at the our B&B and I wanted to read them. Over the top of the comic, where often a planet exploded, I would see her in her bikini jumping into a wave and as it washed over her it made her look fractionally more of a woman to my eye (which would then flash back to the page)

Dr Fasma was with us, in a sailor suit with shorts on a beach lounge drinking lemonade. He had a face that was ratlike on a head that was bearlike. He was in his late forties and lived in England, teaching at the nearby University. Dad, Blythe and he sat parallel and looked at the sea. Conversation between people who don't look at each other assumes a wavelike quality after a period of time (beach or no beach) so I am not entirely sure who said what.

They said that no one machine could ever be as powerful as a mind.

They said that the mind was not just one thing, but did seem to have just one rule set, and that was the objective.

They said that there was no guarantee that this next thing was going to be good.

My Father said that he had seen immense beauty in his life, and he had seen moments of intense promise, he had seen the inherent goodness of children and had never, ever, heard a piece of music that was evil except in its lyrics. He also said that he was confident that we would see death camps in Europe within twenty years, and when that happened he would do what he had to do.

They said that The Internet might go commercial if computer pricing followed its current trend and if there was something interesting up there for people.

They made a commitment to invest a great deal of money into researching a piece of software that would allow one to view pornography across the Internet, and decided one should phase it in as a scientific tool with other purposes so people were not ashamed to acquire this software.

Three years later and the Blythes left. The Doctor needed to go to the US and push some research along. Dad was shaking his hand as he prepared to leave.

"Things look bad in Yugoslavia," Dad said with as near to satisfaction as a man whose wife died in a death camp can muster.

"Research is accelerating... the Big Brain is coming... maybe the brain can sort us all out."

"We fear him too much... we have to fear something else more or we will cling to this sick flesh as the temple of humanity."

I was looking at Claire, who was shyly avoiding my eyes. She was so tall and thin and pretty as she kicked a little stone. Three nights ago, when it was clear that she was leaving we had stopped acting like brother and sister while our Fathers were in the lab we had struggled out a touching session of sex-like activity. I was awfully in love with her and sickened that she was leaving. But I knew that we would keep in touch and that I would always remember her in my heart (due to an equally touching little conversation we'd had) so I had a good high perspective on her departure. The two Dads continued their high blown talk until the window was wound up by a mischievous Claire who blew me a small kiss that had trouble making it through the sun-blasted glass. Yes, it was another sunny day.

I saw her again when I was 18 and again at 22 for a month when we traveled around Germany together. And that was it. I didn't think about the success of our relationship too often. It was built on a layer of thick familial complacency.

She signed off her e-mail with three xs that represented kisses. There was no code to represent the depth or passion of the kisses.

EIGHTEEN

Torture, kidnap and mind control were in every way contrary to my moral beliefs. I had a job to do and the need of it canceled out most of that. But the inevitable noise was outside a moral sphere. And I knew how much noise a broken hearted man makes even when he is not recovering from a beating. With horror I suddenly realized why the Korean Karaoke had been so familiar sounding... the brilliance of our location was frightening. I hated to think of where they would put him. It was the early morning. The city was on the verge of an immense noise. It held its breath. Money moved silently around us. Money was much more than it had ever been. It was the trace of what we did... the shell of the human race that washed up on a beach I had spent my life imagining.

The lawyer was taken away gagged and bound. They took him down a back stairway that I had never really noticed until that point.

Junko sat Benny down on the large couch in the living room. The couch sagged as he sat in it, and plunged him too far in. Essentially he was sitting on the floor but swathed in aged polyesters. That added to the frown he had worn since being smashed over the head. He spat out a sentence of Japanese that was all spit and consonants. He looked me in the eye for as long as he could manage. He looked away just as he spat out a sentence in English. "Who did you talk to?"

"What do you mean?" was my answer and I stretched out the 'mean' to make him doubt his English rather than my honesty.

"Someone knew we would be there... they came and passed a message with lawyer. Either he told them or they told him. Now our plans to keep him quiet and then let him go... they are no good. So who did you tell."

"Hmmm... I didn't even know where we were going until we got in the car. You can check that with your boss. Honda, I mean." Then I withdrew from the room. Junko ran a dampened cloth down his grimy forehead and let her finger dangle off it against the skin like a noodle from the mouth. He looked at her like he despised her then closed his eyes like he despised himself.

I was in my room for a few minutes with no lights on. Lights from outside passed through thin curtains and sliced the room into different times and moods... flashing pink, interrogation white, nameless sourceless brown. My shadow took equal part in them all. I couldn't stick around there, so I walked back through the living room where both cultists were looking at the walls. Different walls. It looked as though I was going to the kitchen but I was not. I headed down the back stairway which was so steep that you took it largely on faith that another step, rather than a stunning fall, lay beneath the one you could see. Light stopped halfway. I could hear a girl crying and a woman's voice alternating between calm and terror. No male voices could be heard. So the family were living downstairs. This was an amazing surprise. The ability humans had to change all the rules of another person's life were unthinkable and intolerable. I was shaking with anger. I had planned to check in on the scene down there but it was too much. I headed back up the stairs and then walked right out of the house.

The usual flow of traffic was there. In the cafe below, the mutants were mopping up the floor. I could only hear the traffic but the slow sway of their bodies over the sticks put the slopping sounds in my head and my mind was skillfully able to mix them with sounds of women in horror. As the mopping continued, and they continued not to care, and I continued to be a part of it all, I vividly remembered all of my most cherished things about my mother. They are all hard to put into words... smells, hugs and the ends of hugs, certain long and beautiful days that seemed to exist wholly within the confines of her smiling face.

My mother was one person and one person cannot survive in this world. Of that I was sure. And when the people are gone and the cults and the nations remain there is no beauty and we have to be judged.

I had to stop thinking. I had been thinking my whole life. Even though Dad had brainwashed me, he had done it so skillfully that I felt I had free will. In truth my free will didn't extend far beyond internal dialog. True I had broken off from him a few years before when I first learned that he had decided to accelerate the end of the human race (or rather what that implied for the people around us,) but all it took was one soppy e-mail from Claire to get me back in.

I thought. About the Yakuza guy. He was a violent gangster, but on the other hand he had spared me when all codes told him it was acceptable to punish me. A man who does not punish when he is told he can... that is a rare thing indeed. Man in traffic, screaming and cursing the panicked old man going the wrong way down the street, protected in his car and crowd and suddenly finally free from wondering if he is wrong. That was all I saw in the world at the bottom. That is life: that is the ultimate truth: the joy of being justified. All beauty was contingent and transferable. A drink. I wanted a drink.

I wondered if the Yakuza guy would be back at the bar we had visited nights before. It was a big bar, with the sheen of a chain but the grime of a weak link. It had all the plastic food outside, but some of it was so extravagant... gigantic "Godzilla vs" style crab... that you knew it was at last partially atmospheric. Inside, mainly people my age or younger were gathered. There were about twenty people in the bar. A table full of young couples engaged in playful banter that humped up and down in pitch, that rocked the young girls whose eye makeup was playing by new rules I had yet to learn or learn to ignore. It seemed to start and end further out and stretch the rules of eye. They were mainly wearing tight sweaters that stretched and sparked as they moved and threatened to become obscuringly interesting in their own right. The men were in short sleeved shirts and were taking it in turns to battle the girls before being laughed down. They would inflate a little and then say something deliberately ridiculous. In this way, the essential dynamics of adulthood were ignored. This was a new, simpler variant of the way the majority of Japanese people had always lived... but now everyone bowed to everyone else. See figure 1, the famous Escher print of an endlessly ascending staircase.

I sat down and was brought a steaming hot yellow towel wrapped in plastic. I unwrapped it, enjoying the too-hotness of parts of it and then stuck it to my face, which it melted. But it was just melting the outer face that Tokyo layers on you always, so that was good.

The beams were everywhere, unlike the waitresses who avoided my eyes like Bambi would. Perhaps they were still getting over my somewhat 'cutting edge' use of the yellow hand towel. But no, this was not the first time I had felt that everyone was happier if the taking of an order at a restaurant took on the appearance of a chance encounter, much as some like sex to be.

"Biiru" I said when the magic moment finally came, and in her little red costume she made the hand gestures we needed to determine how much beer I wanted. I knew the word for big, but wanted to make sure I didn't miss out on "Super" or even "UltraBig" beer.

A frothing beer that was big enough came. I got some pieces of chicken too, although the word "pieces" is perhaps too specific for what I received.

I looked through the window mainly. A number of men in pale suits walked past over a two hour period. Some of them were dragging women by the wrist and it was evident they knew how to quietly hurt a woman when they did that to her. Various Asian faces that were not quite the same as those around me were distorted by pain as they were dragged by. None of these men was my new friend. In two hours in a bar little happens, everything is rhythmic like piston arms slugging beer and he says something she says something. She brings the plates full and takes them empty, everyone is chewing. You begin to notice that your watch in fact moves in circles. When the sun comes up you realize it is even bigger than that. When they close the bar you end up in your bed.

The next day you wake up.

The Tokyo hangover: like the others in the world, but you are in intense heat and humidity and sound is everywhere. You open your eyes and your heart accelerates in panic. You make your first breath and relax a little. Then it starts again as you drag the soup into your chest and the veins on your head are up. But ultimately it is just a hangover and although you look like you have been beaten, you just puke bile and lean on things for a morning.

I remembered, as I looked at my white face and red eyes from a limp slouch over a dirty sink, that people were being held captive on the ground floor. That changed things. The size of Africa and its suffering makes it unreal as, say, genocide (Yes, I can't stop thinking about genocide: I remember a friend of Dad's with a German wife turning up on our doorstep one hangover morning and proclaiming "This World War Two is ruining my social life!")

So, a girl I once knew tried to silence my hangover groans by comparing my suffering with the suffering of some guy with no name who lived in this Never Never Land known as 'Africa' and it didn't work. But even though they made no noise, the captives downstairs made all action hard for me. Selfishly enjoying my cup of tea... were they thirsty?

It was Saturday, usually my favorite day. Particularly the early hours, shortly after the paperboy delivered the newspaper and (of course) 2000 AD. It was now 2000 AD I suddenly realized. I was living in a violent fantasy involving robots and imminent apocalypse. In a t-shirt and jeans every day.

Honda entered the room, drenched in a sweat. Thankfully he came from the direction of the street, so clearly he had been jogging not beating. Good honest sweat. His swollen knuckles, however, made my head throb and then made me feel guilty about it. I looked into my tea. Empty tea cups tell you the future. When they are full, they are all about the living present and feeling warm. The present is meaningless and can be dispelled with just a little blow.

"Good Morning! We will go to Shibuya today," he said between two strong and measured breaths.

"Shibuya... what's in Shibuya?"

"Our church. Our biggest church. The Master would like to meet you"

"Everyone wants to meet me."

"Everyone has to meet you."

Then he walked through the kitchen for his shower. I turned on the TV so I could be alone in the house. Otherwise they were all breathing and shuffling around you in 3D through the paper-thin (but not actually paper) walls.

We took the JR (Japan Rail) train to Kanda, an unremarkable place where people came to buy books, if they were that way inclined. Japanese people loved to read, I heard, but they didn't seem choosy. The whole city of Tokyo was tattooed with words anyway, the words they needed to safely guard others from their eyes. We moved down to the underground. The train sensed our arrival and swished up to greet us. My foot moved and the door moved and we were even able to find seats, Honda and I. We were on the orange line. The station was a soft and pleasant off-white and all in all a great place to be. The train smelt ok and it took us into a tunnel without making a big deal of it. In two-minute spurts of quiet speed it took us under the city to Shibuya. Probably at least 20% of the Tokyo people were under the treacherous, shifting ground at any one time. Things whizzed by. Honda didn't want to talk on the train. He handed me a vast book. It was a Mah Jong manga, a thousand comic-book pages of old and young men slapping down gigantic tiles that bled speed lines and shifted tables when they landed. It was no Judge Dredd, but was a place to keep my eyes during the dark-light-dark ride.

Eventually, Shibuya. The train was different when we got there : as full as a pregnant dog in a laboratory. It was mainly full of attractive girls and young women who seemed to have dressed each part of their body separately and during a distinct era of human history. Some were alone, headphoned and entertained by some microscopic Sony secreted somewhere on their person. Others were in circles talking about their life (also headphoned) with their fingers twitching around their tiny pink telephones which would release them (once they got out of the underground) from the limitations of just their fleshy friends. The doors opened with a pop and the ex-army man and the ex-normal man went with the flow and floated to the surface of a medium that was made of humans like themselves. Raindrops floating in the sea.

We emerged at the Hachiko crossing. There was a statue of a small dog. "He waited here faithfully for his dead master," Honda spoke in my ear. Our master was alive and waiting for us. In addition to the dog were all the people you could ever imagine. We couldn't move because a traffic light just over the horizon was red. Two vast video screens beamed Pop Videos at us from the tops of the large department stores that defined us (not me, not Honda but there are times when one is diluted out of even one's own existence)

Dominance of sound swam alternately between the two great towers. Varying Pop groups mastered the auditorium. I suspected that as the crowd became more interested in one group's video than the other and turned to view a different boy jumping, the acoustics of all these soft sacs of water bent the sound the machines were pumping out. We were part of the battle between the screens and they used our tastes to move us. Other machines had simpler methods. They triggered a green light and we moved to buy the things we wanted. Green and red scissors cut off fifty meters of human meat for the machine.

Across the main crossing, the humans diversified down their channels. A series of exclusive decisions defined the mass. A left turn, a right turn, and one of us was eating ramen... was a ramen eater. Another turned left then left and was a CD buyer. In the system you are what you do. Look at the word "living" if you don't

believe me.

Like electrons buzz around in silicon for some reason of their own. We don't care.

Turn left, cross the street, follow the curvy street that makes you feel free. Suddenly some people are dancing in the street. In pale purple robes, Japanese people with the thicker hairdos of the more forgiving seventies dance the dance that cults do. Free movement in the cloth, of the limbs, but yeah the thing is you have to do this five times a day for an hour OK?

The crowd pauses around them, in a ring. Everyone stays for about a minute. Looking defines them merely as Not In The Circle. Does more to define the circle. Clearly it is undesirable to the system to support such a parasite, but it persists. This is Honda's cult we are looking at. He is next to me in a tight black t-shirt full of muscle, decisively smoking. He has nothing like a facial expression: looking for one you get distracted by the reflection of the smoke in his mirror glasses, which can at least temporarily seem to be meaningful.

"Why do they... you do this? Is it religious?" I asked

"For some this is the cult. For others it is a fist smashing a face. For Maruhashi it is handshakes in back rooms and the smell of chemicals. For some it is a child's cartoon that's fun to watch. To some it is a joke, to some it is terror. The cult must needs be large enough that man cannot see it or else he will notice it."

"Doesn't that hamper recruitment? The invisibility factor?"

"No-one joins the cult to be in the cult. They hope to use the cult. For that you only need to be able to 'grab the elephant's tail.'"

"What's your story?"

"Pretty long!" and he laughed a smile open in his face and that was that. I laughed too, then looked at the dancers again and felt like laughing some more. Honda joined me, keeping it discreet with his powerful facial muscles.

Eventually, the dancers started handing out leaflets, the circle burst and spread like a virus might... fragments moving into the host body. We took this opportunity to approach the church which looked like the grafting of an elegant white American Gospel church onto the usual skyscraper. No obvious tight security : we were able to walk right up to a front desk in a small, wood-paneled lobby that had nothing in it except a rack of periodicals in many languages and aforementioned desk.

"The master is waiting for you," said a small woman who was at the desk. She just seemed to appear from nowhere.

NINETEEN (a)

Ko Samsara was born Keizo Matsuoka in the small fishing town of M_____ in 1949. His father was part owner of a small fishing boat and continued to trade much as he had before and during the Great East Asian War. Fluctuating prices were a way of life for people in the village and they all chipped in to help each other in times of need, sharing their meager goods.

In this life of survival and moments of warmth, the greatest worry on the mind of Jun Matsuoka was the future of his son, who had been born with two hideously deformed feet, almost like fins, that made normal walking, and certainly the operation of a fishing boat, impossible. It preyed on his mind day and night. Finally he decided that it would be in his four-year-old son's best interests if he sent him to live with relatives in Osaka

and learn the trade of gold leaf making, which was all in the hands. Shortly afterwards, the crying infant was torn from his mother's arms and dispatched by train to the big city.

Later a villager asked Mr Matsuoka why the child had not been educated in the craft of basket weaving right there in the village. Jun's reply was a long lasting silence on the matter and all other non-business topics until his death eight years later when his boat was swamped by the wake of a vast whale. Two opposing answers to the question became popular in the village : one was that the sight of his son repulsed him so much that he had to banish him. The other is that it was a vast and idiotic oversight on the fisherman's part. It is generally agreed, and a testament to the spirit of this simple fisherman, that there was no monetary motive involved. Samsara's still-living mother has never been questioned on the subject.

The Osaka suburb where Samsara grew up was little damaged by the war. As such, little attention was paid to the area by the occupying powers during reconstruction. It is unlikely that Samsara grew to hate the US, or to live daily with the post-war realities of a firestorm-ravaged nation directly. Theories, therefore, which seek to link the later apocalyptic visions of the grown man to the sufferings of his nation seem to have little grounding. If anything, the Japan he knew was a nation that revived and grew and technologized at an astounding rate. A new, somewhat Western, nation built on hard work and clever imitation. In a later interview Samsara is quoted as saying "After the war we ran from one demon to another. The demon of war lay slain, and atop the corpse was the radiant giant of technology. We followed him with busy hands, plucking all the secret mechanisms from the universe on which we stood... like a secret source of firewood that is in fact the planks of the ship upon which you sail." Clearly it is the recovery rather than the destruction that haunted him as a youth. Religion was a very sore subject in post-war Japan and only in recent years have the men of Samsara's generation enacted a revolution in that field.

The distant Aunt with whom Samsara spent his childhood was a no-nonsense businesswoman who instilled the virtues of thrift and of having a trade. Samsara shared with two cousins, rough and tumble boys who thought little of throwing the deformed youngster into the river to form a (somewhat obvious) visual pun for the entertainment of their friends. The sensitive newcomer was never able to form anything like a friendship with them. Later one would say "When he first arrived he was just a funny looking baby... like a pet. But like an exotic pet that grows too big and becomes a great nuisance or even a menace... well that was Keizo."

School was the usual Japanese torture. Long hours, persistent... almost Jehoval... testing. Grueling mathematics imposed on young minds erasing color. The only color in Keizo's life was gold, which sometimes lingered under his fingernails as he stared down at them alone during rare unsupervised play periods.

Gold was no mystery or magic to Samsara. It was just a hot metal that he had to toil over every night. He would melt it in a hot bowl that had turned his hands to calluses and then spread it to sheets with unexpected dexterity and then his uncle would shout and point out the tiny flaws that meant this gold was suitable only for the papers of the prefectural government and not for the lucrative export market which had only recently reopened and to which all of Japan had turned with thirst.

Several attempts have been made to link this early experience with the symbol of wealth and the Samsara Cult's later thorough absorption of the financial assets of its members. Two schools hold dominance. One asserts that having seen so much gold pass through his fingers as a child, Samsara was unable to rid himself of the desire to defraud those in his trust - he simply couldn't resist the temptation of the money that he came across in the process of his legitimate religious crusade. The other school asserts that Samsara began to view money as worthless, a raw material that is exploited for other ends. He took the money because he knew that it would allow him to advance his overpowering politico-religious objectives. As no one has been able to pin down a solid financial benefit to the gas murders of hundreds of Tokyoites the second theory is the default. Someone suggested that the gassing might have been part of an elaborate blackmail. Some people like that theory... it is tidily hypothetical. Interestingly enough, the continued debate has yet to dissolve the reality of Samsara's actions.

Schoolmates of Samsara during those difficult childhood years have little to say about him. Such is often the case with the physically deformed, who provide a ready made description of themselves and require little explanation like figures in the Commedia Dell'Arte (see Rugolini, 1965 : La Deformata nel Teatro)

It is clear that the minor everyday oppressions of his life were borne with no outbursts or obvious resentment. Fading photographs show the child invariably smiling in his usual position kneeling at the front of the family grouping.

The only rebellion he made was the collection, day by day, of the gold that gathered beneath his fingers. It seems unlikely that he knew as much at the time but it was this slowly accumulating stash that allowed him to leave Japan at the age of twenty in search of enlightenment at the Roof of the World.

At eighteen, Samsara suffered a strong bout of Glandular Fever, a disease known in the West as 'the kissing disease' - a theory surely disproved by the entirely unkissed virginity of the deformed Japanese teen.

The disease laid him low and took from him the effortless resilience and energy that had propelled his crutches around town on countless tedious errands and had carried untold pounds of precious metals around the family home. Weakened by the disease almost to the point of being bedridden, Samsara became possessed by the desire to improve his body to normality and beyond. Yet the idea of pumping his penguin-like lower limbs in weightlifters' exercises was ridiculous even to their owner, and baseball (the only non-combat sport in Japan (and an obvious ruse)) was equally out of the question.

Yoga enjoys an unusual, almost taboo, status in Japan, whose Zen mentality encourages transcendence of the body even in its martial arts with their abstract katas. How it came to the attention of Samsara is unknown, but it was through an obscure set of texts gifted to the local public library that he attained mastery in its gymnastic dimensions. He has spoken of the sense of inner strength, balance and dignity its static stretchings gave him even before he approached any of its mystic dimensions.

At twenty, he headed for Shambala, the "mythical" city beyond time where the secret skills of levitation, telepathy and transformation were held. His later claims to have mastered these skills were the basis of his multinational empire but are of course impossible to verify, as Samsara refused to display his skills before any but the initiated. Still, his journey is a remarkable one both for its boldness and the physical rigor of such a trip for a motion-disabled young man. Despite ones rational denials of such things as vision of the universal umbilicus and completing the circle of time a million times combining microscopic variations of the gods' carelessness... it was quite a hike!

Samsara never returned to Osaka, and his foster family showed no apparent emotion over his departure. "We both did our duty," is all his aunt has ever said on the matter. It is reported that firebombs have on two occasions been thrown at the Osaka-Matsuoka residence, but the ineptitude of the assaults point to the actions of some affronted Osaka Samsara groupie stirring themselves from their soiled futon after a gripping chapter of one of the many Samsara comic-book biographies rather than concerted cultic attack.

Instead, upon his return from Tibet, which we would document in more detail if were not for the thoroughly mythical nature of all printed resources (including an encounter with England's King Arthur), Samsara headed for the capital city of Tokyo. It was 1972 and the bubble economy was beginning to raise its meniscus. The "hobby" was the newest status symbol... an indication that one had some time of ones own... a commodity rarer than Tokyo real-estate. If driving around ones own house was the entry level, Yoga was executive.

So, when not working in the kitchen of a curry shop, Samsara (still Keizo at this time) would offer private tuition on the mysteries he had uncovered during his travels. A variety of fairly well-off business people and wives began to spread the word about the marvelous insights of the softly spoken chef who seemed to almost read ones mind and to be able to move surprisingly large distances without uncrossing his legs. Samsara

began to make very reasonable amounts of money from his practice and soon he put down his spices forever and opened up a small office on the 9th floor of an office building in the meaningless Nippori district of East Tokyo.

After a year of teaching, Samsara held what was eventually to be known to devotees of the "Path of Forgetting" as "the Night of the Destruction." It is known that a tea-cup was dropped at this gathering of thirty members at the Yoga School, but this was (of course) not the 'Destruction.' One member explained it thus: "The Master realized that the past was holding the group, the nation and the world back. He told us that the future was already making plans for us... Armageddon. We had to make plans to escape its Destruction by destroying our links with the past and developing a strategy for surviving the forthcoming change in the way humans related to this world, this launch pad to the great universes he had been teaching us about."

Samsara claims that the vision of destruction came to him in meditation in Tibet: he saw the clear direction of the world under the dominance of uncontrolled science. But it is likely that he developed his delusions much closer to home.

This strain of thought is one that dozens of expensive English-language paperbacks in the Maruzen bookstore in Tokyo's Ginza describe as being essentially Japanese. Titles ranging from "Japan: Lazy Bastards" to "Suicide Ninjas: Japan's Appetite for Destruction", written by authors each possessing at least a year or two of actual experience in Japan, are convincingly close in agreement that Japan is based upon a catastrophic mentality born from the nation's propensity to suffer natural disasters and greatly exacerbated by the nuclear attacks and similar destructions inflicted upon them during the latter days of WWII. It is indeed unthinkable that such a cult could have been born elsewhere in the world (the Cult's later spread to over 16 nations is a very different thing.)

The Cult gathered enthusiastic followers almost immediately, yet its future was in doubt. The group ran into antipathy from those two pillars of Japanese culture the Keiretsu and, of course, the Yakuza.

The Keiretsu, big business, soon began to notice that various medium and high-ranking members of their group were developing ties to a group that didn't play by the age-old rules of the blue-suited ruling class. Several prominent business-men were sent to Hawaii, or sent on unrealistically long ski-schools in the mountains of northern Hokkaido after becoming members of the Cult. However, Samsara realized that the interference of the Keiretsu was something that he would be able to survive. He was able to gather cash from widows and his eventual plan was to recruit university graduates and scientists to develop the weaponry that would allow the Path of Forgetting to bend world history and forge a new regime of post-apocalyptic enlightened despotism.

Determined to resist, Samsara was surprised when Tokyo property magnate, the dashing and worldly Toshiro Maruhashi came to him with a proposition. He would set up a cover organization of Western Arts appreciation to be known as the Young Man's Guild of Civilization. Ostensibly a gathering of fans of Classical culture, this would be a respectable club for young men to join while secretly practicing the mystic art of yoga. Maruhashi claimed to be a convert to the cause following a prophetic dream of himself as the last man on earth living under the dominance of man-made demons. It is also theorized that he realized that the cult would soon become a powerful third force in Japanese society, and wanted to mold it as a kind of private army. Maruhashi had traveled extensively in the West, although it is reported that he never felt as comfortable there as his fine marbles and the devil-may-care line of his furniture suggested. This slight exile from Japan, and a fanatical egotism, may have led him to reject the idea of the minor role a self-made man is forced to play in Japanese, group-oriented, culture and given him the idea to set up his own clan, or better to subvert an already exploding birth within his culture. After the attack, many disturbing hints began to emerge about Maruhashi's plans for his fellow countrymen.

The yakuza proved harder to deal with. Ardent traditionalists, they considered the cult un-Japanese. For no

other reason, they began to victimize people seen leaving Cult gatherings and demanding protection money from the few school that Samsara had set up. In the end, Samsara found that the best way to pay them off was by using some of the young chemistry students he had just recruited to cook up bathtub-fulls of amphetamines. The Yakuza described it as junk, but it came so easily and in such great quantities that soon an agreement of sorts had been reached between the two groups. What originally began as a reaction to a threat soon became part of the Cult's M.O. : Samsara ordered the production of a full range of mind-bending psychedelics to accelerate cult members' flight from reality.

As the nineties drew to a close the Path of Forgetting had been transformed beyond all recognition. Tens of thousands of members in five nations, weapons and drug production facilities across Japan, high ranking connections in government, TV series and comic books, a huge temple and almost complete immunity from interference by any branch of the traditional order keepers in Japanese society.

It is against the background of these transformations and the increasingly urgent tone of Samsara's theme of shaping the apocalypse that the formation of terrorist cells with the objective of targeted, experimental mass-murder begins to make horrifying sense.

NINETEEN (b)

No-one is sure where the master was born (close up of a baby, wrapped tightly in swaddling clothes surrounding by a pulsating halo of yellow light) nor exactly when. All that is known is that he was born in the middle of this century to prepare us for the next.

(Large headed children pound down a cobbled street waving sticks and crying out like seagulls. Backing them up is a cute round faced youngster pulling himself along at great speed on a pair of crutches. His tiny feet drag along the dusty path.) "hey.. hey gang... wait for me ." Life was hard for the compassionate young man, who began to feel himself being left behind by the childish gang whose company he was forced to keep. Yet at the same time he began to feel that maybe he was the one leaving them behind. (Fade to a rapid sequence of zoom outs taking us far above the city of Osaka/ The Island of Japan/ Asia / Our terrestrial sphere/ Solar System / Galaxy/ to a mote of light in the young master's enraptured gaze.)

(A storm rages.. snow is driven horizontally past the camera. A small figure can barely be made out in the distance. It is the Master, now showing the first signs of what will someday become his trademark beard. Eyes closed against the wind, his crutches half buried in the shifting surface, we hear him mumble...) "Great Lord Buddha... guide me through your test. I have the strength, but you must give me the wisdom."

A vision of revolving spheres of light and a great booming voice says "Welcome to Shambala" The silhouetted figure of The master appears from a great white light nimbus: slowly a magical, extremely glimmering city made of birdlike and spherical structures can be seen. The master walks forward and finely penciled angels begin to float down around him "I am ready for your test!" he shouts enthusiastically. "You have already passed the test" is the reply from a thousand melodious voices.

A rugged looking Master sits on the prow of a fishing boat heading through a storm into Tokyo harbor. Around him, sailors are being blown around like feathers, but he is unmoved. "Don't think about the wind... " he softly says. "You can be sure it is not thinking about you." The master closes his eyes and then the winds soften.

The master is riding a white horse through the forest. The master comes over the hill, rainbows streaming from him and with his hands in the air : we cannot see his face... at this moment he has no face. The master is in a tent, laughing with both children and adults, playfully hefting a luger. A man with a turban leaves a small jeweled casket at the feet of the master. The master executes a kung fu move on a burly young man, throwing him to the floor with just one finger. The master is in meditation: cut to the eyes of the amazed crowd as they

slowly, slowly rise.

The master is outside his newly built temple, the people of Shibuya look on in awe. "Ignore the outside of my temple," he says to the masses "or you will never see the inside." The door to the temple opens. People rush to see inside as it closes behind him. They swear they saw the edge of a luminous galaxy like a carpet at his feet.

A village of happy people with contraptions on their heads.

NINETEEN (c)

I wake up... I'm young. Ko Samsara is in my living room talking to my father. I creep out to watch them. I can't hear what they are saying. I expected Dad to be mad but he isn't. They shake hands and then Samsara slithers out of the room, leaving a visible trail.

I wake up... Ko Samsara is levitating just above my chest, but it feels like he is sitting on me. He is speaking in some strange language I cannot understand. I think it is Japanese backwards. No message from Satan for me. But many demons and gods may be trying. I wish I knew which one. He is very heavy, but floats. I resent doing his hard work for him.

I enter the bedroom of Maruhashi. Black silk is furniture: at his whim it changes. He is waiting for me with a smile on his face and I dare not look down. I ask him where his bitch is. He points right at me. I hope he is saying she is inside my heart.

Sometimes I am one of the crowd, out of my mind with joy that I have joined and become the destructive force. Sometimes I am a stranger walking through the crowd. If we could speak (we can't, I know) I would say... "Fade Away!" Finally I am both and horrifyingly the immense shadow that spreads from the horizon (very at home) could be the one that either of us worships. Cannot tell the difference just yet. Little time... a life or two.

What is this on my head....? It could be a hand with long fingernails. I decide to believe that. A short period of peace before I recognize its strength.

I find a pamphlet from Samsara. It is written in my mother's voice.

I wander around the glassy city. If I can verify that there are no humans here I will be satisfied. Half way through my patrol I get the unmistakable feeling I am hunting down children. I split in two and half of me does not find any children.

Lots of dreams.

TWENTY

Honda opened the door and I stepped through it. Several people left the room as I entered it, all slightly hunched in humility. Atop a small mound of pillows holding a relaxed lotus position was Ko Samsara, leader of the Path of Forgetting.

His long hair flowed to his loose robes which were very similar to the cushions. The only point of contrast was the soft rice matting that covered the entire, large floor. This assessment of his space was my first assessment of him. Then my eye started to populate the space.

His face was hairy, he seemed to have hair growing even on top of his flowing beard and that encroached his cheeks in a fade that stopped only at the eyes. His eyes were dark and small and seemed dusty from lack of use. His mouth was barely visible but seemed to have thick lips... some would say blubbery. Very much a

guru, but the effusive Indian face one expected was not there. But he did have a face, a cold one that had a closed mouth and dusty eyes. He would write down the revelation of your life on a sticky note and someone else would hand it to you.

His hands were pebbled with jewels that glistened some message or hint of some distant land. They spoke a wealth of geographical mastery rather than of the finer points of style. The hands were small and delicate and could carry out minute work. They lay flat on his lap.

He formed a smile, apparently by tensing the muscles of his scalp and Honda, bowing deeply, shuffled into the room. I bowed too, and the uniform static of the tatami mats was all I could see. I observed the fineness of their grain as Honda introduced me in English.

"This is our English friend, Mr Blake. Forgive my impertinence in telling you that which you know, o dreamer of new time.

A chuckle began and it formed an undertone to the next few minutes of speech from Samsara "Old friend, we could never speak if that held you back... it is pleasant to converse in the words of the world when action in the world is planned. Please keep me on your planet that I may serve you.

"Mr Blake... how go the preparations."

Out of a sense of defiance I kept my mouth closed and thought "We are waiting to get a good chemist to put together the carrier gas for us and then I will start the biochem work."

A few seconds passed and I heard a war movie submarine sonar ping deep in my brain. I opened my mouth in surprise. It echoed from the space where I could feel my short term memories.

I looked up at Samsara. His eyes had been cleaned and black they shone. I repeated my thought aloud and his lips seemed to move in sync with mine. The smell of incense was suddenly overpowering. Honda was not there.

"Excellent... let us talk... ask me a question..."

I remembered the advice of my father "Never ask an enemy a question : simply act." It was advice much ignored and modified during our various actions, such as my year in Germany when we did a lot of spying and interrogating (no torture), but at the core it was true. Any question is an act of trust and weakness, and reveals as much as it gives... information must be conserved. Blake's law.

So my question was a donation from my heart, not my mind.

"Who is the girl I met at Maruhashi's office?"

Samsara raised his eyebrows and the rumble of the chuckle underpinned his speech like throat-singing : he held the two sounds simultaneously and amazingly as he spoke.

"She will bring trouble to all. Maruhashi's spy. She believes in nothing. She is excited by both my apocalypse and his. She is quite the weapon. Her name is Mayumi. Maruhashi wants me to give her to you. To your cell, I mean. She can kill but also not kill. You will need that. I see you and she, eyes locked in the train station, about to part. Unfortunately when I swam through time I did not care about love, so I don't know your hearts."

I think his lips did not move. I strongly think so.

Several hours later. Maybe. Lights different in the room. No source and, of course, no destination. Circles, very natural, rings mainly purple. I see a pile of cushions and walk and sink to it. I am probably drugged. A clear thing in my mind is the blue cylinder with its waves... Pocari Sweat. The waves make the cylinder spin like a message in a can. The message was premade, in this case by a Pocari of some kind, or else the top would be open. Can't reseal those things ... unlike the bottles. Wait... it was opened, by Honda who gave it to me. No, that was weeks ago... unless he gave me one today. Either two cans and times or just one and one. So two.

Ah... drugged, I hope.

"Let me explain the end of the world to you"

We laughed at the coincidence... we both said this at the same time. "You first!" I added.

"The end of the world is not the end of life."

"Agreed... sorry, your turn."

"Killing our enemies is bad only because not everyone is our enemy. Death is coming to this planet like the weather. We have gone to a critical point but we didn't even notice. In my circuit of time I saw Japan in ruins... random ruins. The Nemesis had no challenger. Focusing the death makes sense.. survival can be a resource. So many 'evil' acts will be revealed as good in the wake of the Nemesis. The real sin is letting the wrong people die."

"How soon...?"

"You know better than I do.

"I sense a strange love in you. Love as a whole you are weak on. I try and find the contours of this woman you love, but they are all your own... your mirror."

He was talking about Claire, not Mayumi. Oh, assuming he was psychic.

"We were brought up together... have the same interests. But she is beautiful and I am not. You should be able to tell that."

"I have little interest in beauty. All forms are beautiful over time.

"Will you betray me, Mr Blake?"

"I cannot betray you Samsara-san." I replied with a smile. I was as good as telling him that I had no loyalty to betray. Because it had become evident to me, and I am not ruling out my drugged-up state, that Samsara knew what we were up to and he didn't care.

"There are just three things you need to know, he said. "Firstly, you are my enemy... not my Judas. There are two possible worlds. One is mine, in which knowledge floods from the dawn of man to unite at the top of the pyramid. The other is yours where knowledge is transformed into existence and existence ends. Yours is evil and wrong. Mine is evil and right.

"Secondly, I am a prisoner of time... when it is time to act my knowledge is stripped from me. In my 665 orbits of time I noticed that nature was careless, inconsistent. The universe is different every time. This is the final cycle.... I know I must stop you but I cannot. Maruhashi may well find out about you, though, and shoot

you through and through. He is good to keep around... my Judas

"Thirdly, all of your beliefs ... I sense... depend on something unreal. Someone unreal. Remember how very close to not caring you are.

"Do you still want to explain the end of the world to me."

"Yeah... the answer is 'There's no such thing.'"

TWENTY

Also while I was in Japan, I went to this amazing party. It was just a couple of days after my metaphysical episode, which I was feeling pretty embarrassed about by that time.

I did not believe that Samsara had traveled through time or was a mind reader. The big question facing me was whether I had imagined chunks of that conversation, had reconstructed it like a dream or had been acting the whole thing out aloud and spilling some secrets.

They would kill me if they knew that I planned to hijack their act of terror. That would be when my question was finally answered... when I was killed. How infuriating.

So when Honda came into my room, late at night, it was an awful moment. Just framed in the door, dim violet light behind him. This is how the animals feel... or how the humans who wake up and find someone has recategorized them as an animal feel.

"Blake-San... I forgot to tell you something."

I sat up in my bed and tried to sit wholly in his shadow. I don't know why.

And yeah, he invited me to this party.

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Benny didn't want to go. I think he was upset by my visit to the Master. His master's laser beam eyes had failed to disintegrate me, so he had to accept me. It was clear that he wanted to kill or beat me. He had the look. He couldn't stop looking at me. He never looked at me with rage.

Everyone else turned out for the event which was being held by Maruhashi on his yacht. It was a fund raiser for the Path, to which numerous semi-believers were invited. The Master... er... Samsara was not going to attend, but would send his astral form over the yacht at a propitious time.

Also there would be a video.

A dinner jacket arrived for me, wrapped as densely as an onion in a single sheet of near transparent tissue paper that I thought would be the size of the apartment when I finally unfolded it, but which in fact I could not find anywhere once I had finally uncovered the suit.

When I put it on, it fit so well that I just knew that Honda had come in and measured me one night.

All of the terrorists gathered in the gray room. We were mostly looking OK.

Junko was wearing a bluebottle green cocktail dress that flashed a little as she moved around. It seemed thwarted by her disproportionate hips... had no answer for them.

Otherwise she was looking ok, if glum and begrudgingly made up.

Strangely I made a joke to Yosuke about how I didn't want to be anywhere near him when his cummerbund snapped and I made Honda translate it.

Apparently something had changed between me and my little group. I couldn't pin it down... it must be a process.

Honda, of course, looked like James Bond. "Are you taking a gun with you?" I asked. He replied by smiling and saying that he hoped I would not be doing so.

So I asked him again and he said yes.

A limo pulled up outside the high school where we had gathered in our heavy raincoats. The rainy season was close, so we didn't attract undue attention traveling separately anyway.

You have probably heard about how Japanese Taxi doors open automatically to admit their passengers. That was still impressing me even after nearly a month in Japan. So when the Limo pulled up, somehow larger than any street I had ever seen in Koiwa, I was wondering what kind of set-up they would have to outdo that. I was not disappointed. The limo stopped, four small men emerged from the car in waiters' outfits and held all of the doors open for us while also stopping traffic. After they had assisted us all into the car, which was carved from pure leather inside, they remained on the street as we all pulled away, our seats pleasingly warm, their bows profound.

European classical music played quietly in the background.

"Honda... I forgot... are you all racists?" I asked

"No no, the master discriminates only against non-believers," he replied while pouring me a glass of cognac.

"Isn't all this a bit... decadent?" I asked.

"Purity is in the mind. It is good to enjoy the fruits of failed society. After the Destruction people will feel more intensely and pleasure will be easier to come by... in the meantime... I think these soldiers deserve a break!!!"

He raised his glass to our comrades and they both smiled. Looking after the hostages had been taking up most of Junko's time (an aside, a thought somewhere in my head, Benny would casually torture the family tonight. Much of their pain would be paying for my snide humor. It was so hard to exist among people... so hard.)

It's a long drive. I have known shorter seasons. The drive should have its own name, like the seasons do. We are heading to Tokyo Bay. Honda constantly narrates the trip, the sights. Things like the largest branch of the Sumitomo bank, a government building where an aborted coup d' tat was plotted, a temple made of aluminum, devoted to progress.

The other two speak in brief fax-speed conversations in their native tongue. Honda has his hand on the air-con controller twiddling it constantly. Like an expert plate spinner he keeps Yosuke's B.O. under control.

The interior of this fine vehicle feels like my home. I drink champagne. My weakness is astounding : I have

only been entrusted with this mission because I am his son. I have been wondering what Samsara meant about the substance of my beliefs. My mother's death is real. Maybe she is alive... it's just a big trick. Maybe Samsara has her locked up somewhere. A special refrigerator for truffles! Nice.

+++++

We stepped out of the car and in the damp sky was a thick violet light. The river spilled slightly into the space above us. Deeper in the glow was a cluster of bright lights and chatter and there was a brass band playing something repetitive. Up the gangplank several women in yellow gowns and their companions were boarding a big boat. As we got nearer we saw a huge rainbow colored bridge in the distance. Junko liked the bridge, but was hushed by the other two. They just didn't like her.

For some reason the bridge did not provoke the typical reverie in me. I did not consider what the bridge meant and whether it would still fit in when we were all gone.

Not to the point of being able to draw a conclusion anyway.

We all arrived on the deck and dozens of elegant people were already in place. Music had never made them sway, all their dancing was diagrammed over a hundred years ago, but the boat and waves made it look that way.

My group split up to observe what was happening at various places. Many costumed cult followers were moving around with hors d'oeuvres and when you took a quail lip vol au vent they said to you "Truth is so rare in this world" or one of the other soft slogans of the Path, approved for the semi-receptive.

I found Maruhashi, in tweed, leaning against a railing talking to a middle-aged businessmen who looked like his watch would have a millisecond hand. He drank as though he knew he had made a terrible mistake. The liquor went in with a thrust to bypass all taste and feeling and directly enter the brain.

"Technology we know, But Truth is not in the wires, it is in the blood" said Maruhashi (in Japanese... his clear voice retaught me all my lessons)

"Who are my masters?, men who measure money with, just money itself!!!" replied the businessman and maybe a wave or maybe the force of his impending conversion nearly threw him over the rails into the speckled water that rushed below us as we headed under Rainbow Bridge and toward the sea. I grabbed an hors d'oeuvre and walked along the length of the deck. Overhead, the clouds seemed to be getting organized, and from them that could only seem like a conspiracy.

No one on this ship was wearing an electric skull cap to vibrate their minds to another dimension. Nor were they fashioning guns in a small factory in an ugly place. And they were neither torturing or being tortured. Or dancing.

I saw a good-looking middle-aged Japanese woman tearing open her purse in a frenzy, being gently calmed...

It was a little windy and so I headed to the upstairs (I'm sure there is a nautical word for that) lounge area. My white face caught a few glances and at least one man seemed to stiffen with excitement. I was clearly a specialist in - well ... they wouldn't think germ-warfare - maybe yoga ... or Tae-Bo.

"I'm Alex Chilton... a pilates instructor," I said to a tall thin woman who was looking lost in the corner. She didn't understand

I decided to hang out with the thin lady for a little while and moved as close as I thought proper, giving her a

thin lipped smile. I looked up and the haze was briefly thin enough for me to see the City. It was an amazing sight. All of the lights I saw had been individually screwed into walls by millions of men and women and they had not conferred much on their task. Yet they had made this, we had made this. It made sense to me, the field of light with a little rhythm even to my eyes but pulsing like a lung to the patient. All of the cities looked like this, or aspired to. It was the unstoppable blueprint of the future. And then it was a pink cloud, much as I had imagined the train suicide earlier.

She struggled to speak English, a grave concern for my welfare was what I saw in her face, surely incorrectly. The English that came out was pretty good.

"Is the group here good? Are you with them do you know? How much do I give?"

I thought for a while about the appropriate reply. In the end I said... "Well.. how many people do want killed?"

She pulled out a napkin and drew a picture of a man in a tartan skirt: No, a kilt. We parted.

The boat continued out over almost flat water now. Light from the boat hit the water and made a shoal of fish that were nothing but light to accompany us. All the fish would look at the boat and none of them would understand it.. that it was what happened when a tree or anything fell into water... it turned into a fish.

That was the fundamental principle by which I lived my life, I reflected. I did reflect. I could see pieces of me in the water.

Elsewhere on the yacht, my friends were doing things. Honda was moving around to impress people . Or rather he was being moved around: Maruhashi wanted to flex his muscle. People had to realize how tough the Path was when the ladies were not around. Maruhashi had his hand near Honda's back so he could pat it at will. I saw, from on high, Honda telling a story. He was upright and his eyes ranged across the small crowd of eyebrowed small men. He became rigid and apparently his gravity became intense. Then he twisted his hand stretched like a knife by ninety degrees so it was flat. Then he made a fist. Then he held his fist before his face and then moved it over his face like a mask... fading away.

They giggled.

So I had a mission to find all my friends and see what they were doing. Also to obtain champagne. Once upon a time an American told me that all Englishmen felt obliged to pretend they were alcoholics. In fact, Americans fear alcohol and they just don't get it. They need to be themselves, the same psychotherapeutically cured self every day, all the time.

She had some point.

I found Yosuke. He was handing out tiny books that rested in his palm for a second before he handed them over. He had a big smile on his face and I was happy for him. He was sucking them in. They would either give money, or fill their minds with craziness or be soldiers. I knew no one would say no. We all knew it was time to get on a side.

Where was Junko...? I walked along the boat again. She was not on deck: was she a-midships? I went downstairs. I knew that perfume that I walked into, smelt like glass. Mayumi, the millionaire's girl. It was time to find her: I had a pretty good idea what Junko was doing... puking or something. Mayumi I had to find. She would be a good friend to have. A little glow of optimism was on me, wasn't it?

I think I had gone underwater. I said, loud, "Mayumi." I kept walking, holding onto a copper rail that

alternately put heat in me and took it out. My hand squeaked along it: a scared brake.

In a doorway, which was quite lavish I saw her silhouette. She was in a gown that revealed her abstract but no real detail. It was an invitation to learn. Her eyes twinkled and something hung from her hip, possibly a gun. I had a small gun with me too. No jokes please. She had been positioned and you couldn't doubt that any more than a trap tearing through your ankle bone or rose petals on your bed in your own house.

Fifteen minutes later and the sex was over. She arched her back up and stretched out all of her muscles and something spat out of her in a careless fashion. She made a moan that was very strong, different from the soft ones during the sex. At one point when my face was very close to hers she had seemed much more vivid. her face was curved and her eyes fluttered thin and her eyelids were beautiful and full and her face melted away. Her body was hard though and kung-fu strong.

I asked her, "Do you like me at all?"

She replied "Blake... you are changing. I like you quite a bit, but... who knows who you are"

It went quiet and we both let ourselves cool. I wondered how women dried and got sticky after the event.

Next door, a couple was having sex. A little bit of a turn on, reversing affairs belowdecks if you know what I mean. Sounds going straight through you.

Fun.

The distinct sound of a snapping bone followed by an extremely dehydrated moan of pain rewrote things. I was listening to the sounds of torture. She looked me right in the eye, and smiled for the first time.

This was now a test, her probably inadvertent smile told me. A very clear scream followed by a large splash came through the wall.

It was a pretty stupid test. Even though I really wanted to go next door and stop the torture, and even though I had a small gun in my pocket not too far away, I would hardly do it on the boat surrounded by a hundred cult members.

To make things less horrifying I put a hand on her nice-sized right breast and another hand in a spot that would surely send a clear signal that I wanted sex again. She gave a huge shiver that I could not clearly interpret. We did it again as the torture went on next door. The sex was ten times better, more physical. And afterwards as she left me and everything was silent I tested my mind to make sure it was just because she was turned on by the pain next door, but realistically the nature of sex like that is that you share stimulus and reaction. I took pleasure from a squeeze she gave when she heard the electrodes spark. The pleasure was just a second later and routed around my conscience (a short cut I had set up and no-one else.)

I contemplated the finality I was working on. Thinking about the big picture was the trick we had stolen from our enemies to allow us to contemplate compassionate monstrosities and which ultimately made us no better. That was the paradox that had led me to leave the group... until a letter from Claire... Claire of all people who had so rejected what we had been trying to do... brought me back round.

When I got back on deck, the entire sky was lit by a vast green typhoon cloud that was frozen like geography above us and seemed heavy to fall.

.....

"Wait a minute," I said to myself "Has everyone been speaking in Haiku tonight?"

TWENTY-ONE

A few days later, I'm jogging. You're sick of hearing about me sweat, so I leave it up to you to remember that fact from now on.

I am eagerly anticipating three days from now, when we will scope out the station we are going to gas. I need action too.

University students play cricket as I pass: proof of my father's theory that the world has become almost transparent to ideas. There is absolutely no reason that someone called Nobuhiro should be spinning a googly. In a world just a pencil thickness from us, he is bullfighting. Samsara has been to that world. I look up and am amazed and entertained by the number of planes in the sky.

When I was growing up, my dad was always inviting the world's leading free thinkers to hot tub parties with good food. The impossibly high quality of the hor's d'oeuvres was the main thing that brought together the right and left wings of the guests: they would pleasantly rail at each other, mocking what they thought the other would say of the unnecessary foods and then the jousting would be done, they would all eat and then discussion would begin.

In the tub, a fat man with a red beard with steam pouring from his eye sockets would talk about DNA as an overloaded 8-track cassette ruining sweet music. A naked Scandinavian beauty would talk about... something I'm sure (I was in my teens!)

As the steam rose, people would loosen up. One man would invariably be heard shouting (in the distance) "Yes... I DO despise the human race!!!"

Everyone agreed on one thing by the time they left: ideas were alive and evolving. they were interacting in ways that no individual could master, implying that there were meta-thoughts in existence that would never fit in our heads. The only real source of disagreement was whether that implied there was something out there thinking them. Those who strongly thought so would gather in corners and agree with my father's plans.

Ahead of me on the path that ran along the dike near the Edo river was a red bicycle and a white man was shaking it around with great ferocity. As I got nearer I saw that in fact he was shaking himself around with great ferocity, the bike static like it was his planet.

Details of the white man rewarded my running. Short, carrying legacy muscles from an endurance sport, in the taunting phase of baldness. American, somehow. Either short-tempered or at the end of a Job-like trial: his temples!

His bike was a big Japanese model, ladies with basket up front and baby chair out back. I had had a chance to take a good look at these indestructible Japanese bikes a few times and had consequently added them to all of my post-apocalyptic daydreams along with their soul-mates, the untouchable cockroaches.

I was now so close and so white that I had to help out my fellow Gaijin. He was wearing a pair of shorts designed to be worn with belt. During the conversation I saw the large tag on the back that said "Made in Japan" by actually saying "People of the world are in agreement that the pursuit of sport is an interest. We must all work together to get strong our needs to push into natures beauty places."

I slowed to a halt and said "Need a hand there?"

He looked up at me with cold blue eyes, that flickered as he sought the stereotype that fit me so he could deal with me.

"Thanks, but I think I can destroy a bicycle all on my own!" was his reply. A moment's pause and then a spasming cackle that went on much too long. I had some time to myself during it and watched a long silver train span the river on the bridge, long enough to reach both sides.

"But seriously..." I said, fairly warmly.

"This thing just needs a new chain, but I'm out of here tomorrow so I can't be bothered buying one."

"Do you have kids?" I asked. He looked at me like he thought I was coming on to him and he definitely didn't like it. My theory was that he had been educated at one of those ivy league schools or whatever and consequently didn't ever want to find himself picking up the soap in the shower if you know what I mean. That's how he talked as we walked down to the bike shop, lots of aggressive innuendo and fast judgments of people.

I had been talking about the baby seat and he explained that the bike was a gift from a Japanese woman who lived in his apartment building and who had taken a liking to him because of his attempts to learn Japanese calligraphy. I almost winked at him when he said "Japanese calligraphy" but apparently he was serious.

He gave me his bicycle, and that was why we walked to the shop together. I don't know how much I really wanted one, but I got one. Pushing it down the road it became clear that the bike was sufficiently heavy to set off the next great Kanto earthquake if you weren't careful enough about putting the kick stand down.

The American talked a little about how he loved Japan and how he loathed the idea of returning to the US where people thought that "Good Manners" was something like being a "Good Loser"... not applicable to USA Number 1. He went on like this a lot. It was interesting to see someone reject everything he came from.

We went to one of this little bike fixing shops that, until that day, I had not really noticed where everywhere. An old fellow came out and didn't really need to be asked what to do. His small yellow dog watched.

I asked the American if he would miss Japan and he said only the people, who were so bright and so generous. I couldn't really help myself and I asked him what he thought about all the suicides and the techno-obsession. He looked at me like I was insane.

"That's America you're talking about, pal. Yeah, people kill themselves a lot here but you can see it coming. 'Mommy, Daddy's late home tonight... did he kill himself?'; 'Yes, unfortunately he touched a woman on the the Joban line.' Not like in the states where if you miss a "Parental advisory" sticker in your kid's bedroom your fondest hope he didn't take anyone with him. And they all wear walkmen all day too and it isn't Pizzicato Five they listen to... it's some transvestite who is offloading his abortion anxiety...."

And so on. I had the feeling I would probably be going to America next, if I succeeded in Japan. I would be less invisible there than here: also, it would take us a while to pick a lunatic group to infiltrate. Like picking candy bars there.

Anyway, I got my bike and the American walked away, waving me away in friendly disgust.

TWENTY-TWO

The Yamanote Line makes a ring around Tokyo, or more correctly Tokyo is a ring: it's heart is nothingness.

Well OK, I suppose there may be several million people in the middle of this big ring along with baseball stadia etc... it doesn't pay to over-interpret these things.

The point is, that it is the kind of city where you can pick one of a number of places to do a mass murder... there is no compelling "ground-zero"

If you wanted to make it easy for the foreign News reader you could go for the Ginza. If you wanted to decapitate the country you could go for Kasumigaseki but since the Japanese change governments even more frequently than they do favorite sport, it would be a somewhat Pyhrric victory.

If you had something against bizarrely basted teenage Japanese girls with baggy socks you could take out Shibuya. The financial district near Otemachi has some appeal but somehow isn't very shocking... "several hundred bankers died today".. you can imagine that sliding by on the blue strip at the bottom of a cable financial news channel.

And of course there is something to be said for gassing up one of those huge right-wing Shinto shrines that Japanese politicians visit to honor the spirits of the war dead and get on the TV news and up the nose of all of their Asian neighbors.

But at the end of the day you would be hard pressed to find a more compressed chunk of potential corpses than in the conveyor belts of Shinjuku station.

Let me present you with some fascinating facts about Shinjuku station, garnered from my in-flight magazine.

Each day more than 3 million people course through the station on Tokyo's west side.

Shinjuku Station enjoys five rush hours

There are 430 pay phones and 6 flower shops

A train pulls in every 130 seconds

It's slogan is "The Starting Station of a brilliant future."

The station is a marvel : a structure of people as well as a building. From the outside it is nothing: hard to find, largely underground. It has as many entrances as hell, so you can't find it from the people falling in.

Inside you feel a force on you. Try and stand in the few open spaces in that place and you can undeniably feel a force pulling you. It is different from the force that pulled us to the station and it is different from the force of the wildebeest smell that moves you when you have stepped into the river of people. It is the force of expectation, architected by the mass of people. But it is the building that sends the first and final instruction. You could argue that the first person to arrive in the morning starts the force and it is added to by the others. You are pushed by democracy. But there is never just one person here... human time is not sufficiently granular. It is the always already occupied place.

The station is a ferocious machine set to largely benign purposes. It releases almost all of those it captures, like a water wheel taking their energy somewhere for someone.

The suicides defy it... they choose to jump in front of a smaller and less terrifying machine.

Man made the station because he wanted to go somewhere and do something. It was part of his plan to escape from beneath the crushing foot of the elements. The storms and the starvation and the typhoons and the scratching at the earth for mercy. Instead to tear the veins from the earth and melt them and clothe himself in them, Murder the world first. Be many, fast, liquid... then directed, one, solid. A force against a force. With a mind, and hence the winner.

And he believed that in four billion years the much bigger thing with all the connections had not evolved a comparable mind. There was no evidence of its thought. I watch a salaryman hang from his strap for an hour. His saliva is random... I see no pattern in it. Then I have to get off the train but I have seen enough.

Over time people either become frequency or noise... there is nothing special about us. Shinjuku station is a huge tuning crystal. But it was built so some men could go to work... it had to be built... we didn't want to do it.

No one wanted Tokyo and no one wants it now. Have you been here yet.. have you felt it? Because we bombed it flat we made it. From the flames come new and strange plants that feed on death. It is energized by transistors. The transistors hummed and called the money here. Money is the excess energy of the dead third world and as near to soul as we will see in this life.

But back to the station. It makes sense to strike here. Because in between one box and another this is where the Japanese worker sees other people. And he will not look. He looks at his comic book. In the comic books women are raped and everyone is killed (there is also golf and Mah-Jong... I know.) We are told it is harmless because Japan is very safe. But then again, periodically, it is very dangerous. I saw a murderer asleep. I saw him in England... or was he drinking tea? He was with his mother and it was a sunny day. A flock of random birds distracted us all and we watched it as we would never watch TV static. Something watches that static sometimes for peace. There is something about the birds following a magnetic pattern or a huge time trace burned right into them... the feeling is envy. We can't even walk to the toilet when we wake up and some freakish dream has moved us a thousand miles from our home. We can't find anything. We can't walk for a year with our huge heads that grow on us like parasites. Our huge brains with their long tendrils that run through otherwise elegant chimpanzee bodies. They will grow and burst... something put them in us... made us unhappy moneys... carrier monkeys.

We become frequencies of a gray band with a fleshy stripe at the top. You have seen the movies... stop motion. Stop motion in the place that doesn't stop moving. I'm so tired.

It is true that we can break each other's hearts and even go so far as to kill each other. And that each moment is precious. But all good things must come to an end. A lovely afternoon is not invalidated by a slow cancer's birth. We all go to sleep.

It is true that we hated too much to even get a place in some conservation park. There was too much hate. We have never seen a million people march into the neighboring country except to kill them. I know that we can't get our shit together with food, but wouldn't that just make random killing? Static.

Law stops that. And then stockpiles hatred... requires genocide.

I am making no excuses...except that I live my life like a Pirandello character... I am historian of my own future. It is quiet in the library.

It is not quiet in the station. My gang are scattered all over. I am with Honda. He wears a polyester blue suit, I wear a short-sleeved purple number. I look young, I bet. I wander confused looking at all the signs. All of the signs come from the way bones crack in flames (ultimately.) That was back in China a long time ago. It is a long day. I wander and really I am heading to a lavatory. They are never quiet, but I can look in all the

crannies. The Japanese people assume I am looking for something we have in Iowa. I find excellent places for gas grenades and the gentleman in blue records them.

Coming out of the toilet and nothing has changed. The end of the rush hour was noticeable. Space opened up and we were all shoppers or students. We were the luxury end, the surplus. We could do what we wanted and it did feel good. I have no disdain for the people in between the rush hours, despite that the basis of their time is 'the death of the third world.' I don't have an obsession with that. The third world could have been anywhere where the weather was bad. I perhaps think the future machine pushed us too fast. I know it didn't. It was not inevitable. We were lucky. You know what I believe don't you? That mankind is carrying an artificial intelligence that will outstrip us all and if we build a world where the food and the weather doesn't matter it will think and feel like a god and it was all worth it. That is the central point of all my life. I will kill people for it. But we have another plan, actually.

We all travel back to Koiwa. We have found what we wanted to find. We know the way the station breathes and the best places to put the gas. We all get seats on the way back and everyone but Honda is asleep at some point. It is getting dark and the train stops so many times that you feel like you have met everyone there is to meet.

Back in Koiwa I don't feel like going home and I tell them all I want to play Pachinko, the vertical pinball game that you play with a thousand balls. It is probably significant that Americans have a game where a single big ball has its life preserved indefinitely and the Japanese play one where you pour a hundred through a maze.

I actually do go and play Pachinko with little success. But it is nice to sit in the middle of such overwhelming meaningless noise. Once you get over the initial shock of its volume, it is like the waves or a river. Next to me an unshaven, sweat drenched salaryman is doing well at the game. He is all hunched over and smokes with vigor as his hand twiddles the Pachinko knob. He smiles every now and then. Everyone in the room is having some kind of emotional experience. I wonder if this is how Shinjuku station feels when everyone gets on the right train.

My yakuza friend enters the Pachinko hall. Not drunk, I make no attempt to catch his eye. However, the white man in the purple shirt does not need to try.

We walk down the street.

"Do you like Japanese girls?" he asks. We walk under the bridge and away from my house to an area with alleyways full of tiny bars.

"I only know two." I make a weak smile.

"Well do you like the two girls?"

"One is... well, ugly and very strange and... dangerous. So no. The other one... well yeah, I'm probably going to marry her."

He laughs and I would like to but it would be too fake. He pats me on the back : " You need to meet some girls that are cute but not for marrying. I'll introduce you."

We bend down beneath the door-hanging and enter a very dark bar that is totally empty. It is all black and deep purple. The walls are decorated with paintings of black panthers and bare-breasted Polynesian girls, gagging for it. It is a strange sub-violet place that Tetsuo has brought us to.

He lights a match and everything shimmies a little but one of the portraits, one under the counter, keeps moving. A black shape emerges, and it is possibly a human in black, squeezing out backwards.

A four-foot tall woman stands before us, with two steaming cocktails. I look around and Tetsuo is pleased to have impressed me.

She was very pleased to see us. Her face was placid, but content. We took the bizarre cocktails from her and downed them. They tasted metallic.

After the cocktails I played the sequence of recent events through my mind and found that they worked equally well both backwards and forwards.

Tetsuo made a few polite grunts and a secret door (mansize) opened behind a palm tree painting. We entered. The stairway was unusually light and comfortable, like a newly built house... still beige.

"This is one of our clubs... it's not really secret, just private."

At the top of the stairs I saw Japanese privacy. Intense white light showed everything, but everyone was in their own box... screened by perfect white paper. Everyone was together alone. There were about ten Japanese rooms with sliding doors sharing one corridor that was policed by a Geisha who doubtless could have majored in Air Traffic Control.

She leapt up from her kneeling position when Tetsuo arrived and made for his ear. His brow contracted tighter and tighter as she spoke, almost as if she had found a loose thread hanging from his ear and unwisely decided to pull on it.

Trying to overhear, I instead heard a whimpering and sniffing off in the distance. It was a whimper from a recent offense, it seemed.

As they talked my mind turned back to Germany. We had been there on a research project: to determine the extent that neo-Nazism could be viewed as a social aberration.

For several months we hung out in the neo-Nazi bars, listened to the CDs, kidnapped neo-Nazis and watched what the police would do.

It was the worst time of my life: considerably worse than planing to gas thousands of people. In the end we came to the conclusion that the neo-Nazis were driven less by social injustice than by the power of symbols and the inability to withstand the meaninglessness that everyday life presented them. It was as if, when humans didn't have to kill for food and land, other forces were able to use them for their own ends. Either hunger or hatred had willing servants.

I remembered this as I heard Tetsuo beat up someone in the box. There wasn't much to hear... just a hand landing in flesh again and again. In Germany we found ourselves gathering around the captive Nazi in the dark, knowing that there was no-one... even our own side... that would blame us for doing whatever to him. That feeling dominates life... when you arrive in the place where you will not be judged, people do terrible things. When that man came into the box he felt like that but didn't know that the same rule applied to him. Now his kidneys were leaking.

Tetsuo came out and two younger Yakuza who appeared from the staircase rushed into the room. They had apologetic looks on their faces.

Tetsuo had a sweat on him. "It's hard... to stop." he said. "Let's go somewhere else."

We went to a more normal bar and sat off to one side in a private booth that was a mere approximation of the iso-cubes above the ultraviolet bar.

"Does that kind of thing happen a lot?" I asked as we drank sake from a bottle with no label.

"No... not much. We water down the booze and Japanese people follow rules. That guy was crazy though... you can't plan for that."

"What will happen to him?"

"That depends whether he apologized to the boys or not. Everyone gets a second chance."

"Everyone?"

"Yeah... we're nice guys! No really. We do kill people, and hurt many many people. But we know who we are hurting and they know us. So we're cool. Not like... I dunno... like serial killers. Or cults."

I swallowed the sake. I assumed that the lack of label meant that it was the finest available - it was unreadable, no cheating to learn what it was.

"Cults don't hurt people, do they?"

"They steal people's children and the people never know why. They also send down instructions and then some member finds he has to kill himself or burn his house down and he never knows why. One man makes decision for a hundred thousand people. And his decisions might be like his dreams, so even if you are his best friend you can never say to yourself 'That's the decision I would have made... this is a good system.' Killed by a dream!!! Fuck!"

I drank some more sake. Two white men entered the bar. Something looked brutal about them : like members of the French Foreign Legion. One wore an Arabic looking shawl around his neck but he was blond. Very strange. They ordered from the menu with no fear - not your regular white men.

"Anyway," I said, "Enough about cults..."

"I hear that there may be a cult here in Koiwa." Tetsuo said and he adjusted his sunglasses.

"Isn't this a bit... busy for them Don't they all live in the mountains... showering in cold waterfalls.. I thought I heard so..." I imagine my face at the time showed the guilt that innocent people feel when the police go by. After all, I was just infiltrating the cult, not a real member.

Tetsuo didn't talk about the cult much but later, out of the blue after showing me how to break chopsticks on your forehead (and I showed him how not to do it) he said "That's the gang... you know everyone you hurt and they know you. And everyone gets a second chance."

I was so relieved to be good friends with Tetsuo.

TWENTY-THREE

Honda told me some things over time:

"Yes, I was in the Japanese Self Defense Force. I was a paratrooper. Jumping from the planes is always fun.. I never got bored of it. But some people do. Why are they jumping? Because it is scary. They like to pretend

they are dying. When I would see that look on their faces I would fix their parachutes so they wouldn't open. In freefall I would glide over to them and look them in the eye and they would know what I had done. It was fun to watch their faces flip between knowing I was joking and knowing I wasn't. They would do some important thinking then.

"I quit the SDF when I realized I was longing for someone to do that to me."

+++++

One week after I was given my red bike, I was stopped by the police. I was cruising down Shibamata Kaido, on the sidewalk as one does. On the way back, I decided to buy an onion from one of the local fruit and veg stores. I saw one shop with onions on display in bowls on the street, so I pulled over.

He wouldn't sell me just one, I had to buy twenty onions. But he was asking a ridiculously small sum of money. He could see I was confused and concerned but he didn't help me when he started pretending to cry and saying "For Diana... very sad... boo hoo." Was he making a sly commentary on the national panic that had gripped England when Diana Spencer died in a car accident?

As I wound the immense gyroscope wheels of my bike through their vast inertia, legs straining, I remembered that it was several years ago, during Diana's funeral that I had first met Mr Shingu... then the number two man of the Way of Forgetting.

As you know my life was different than other people's. I didn't watch much television: I was frequently sent to European countries to infiltrate think tanks or hate groups. And I had just finished a period of drunken stupor in Amsterdam. So I didn't know that the Queen's Son's Ex-Wife had died in a car crash. And even if that nugget of information had got through to me I would have expected nothing more than a double-size issue of "Hello Magazine"... perhaps with a black trim. The surprises began in Gatwick Airport. People were sobbing a little, as they do in airports. But they were also sobbing in the sweet shop when I picked up a Cadbury's Flake to eat on the way into town.

"Why are you crying?" I asked.

"Today's the day!" was the only answer I got. I didn't push it. Tears on my Flake were bothering me. She could have her day.

By the time I got into town I knew what was going on, but I couldn't believe it. The cabby had to navigate around a huge prone animal that had stumbled down on the streets of London. The beast was spraying flowers from wounds self-inflicted. In this grief we saw the side of England it had hidden for hundreds of years... a dense sentimentality that belonged to the alternative rulers of the country... working-class women. It seemed that Diana's death was a major power shift - she was a symbol of the pent up resentment the people felt at living in a fake and timeless England since their forgotten births.

At least that was my reading of it... I had been noticing a strange shift in England ever since "Definitely Maybe" came out. Except when it got in my way, England was not a major project of mine. Exactly when the British would emerge as a people (barring major war) and then be susceptible to the kind of idea-viruses we were in favor of, was something that occasionally came up over tea. So it was interesting. The endless crying... no-one in the media questioned it! Were they that addicted to easy answers? Well, good.

Later in the pub a tiny and fragile Japanese man with dusty hair came in, very confused and flustered. That he was the boss of some mega-corporation was not in doubt. It was clear that he made both fish oil and weapons-grade plutonium. If he looked at any object long enough it would dissolve into a shimmering blue field of pure money and with a button he could make it leap anywhere in the world at any time.

I had made many impassioned pleas at various of our meetings that we should infiltrate and subvert a Japanese Mega Corporation (endless reading on the subject had given me the feel for my prey that allowed me to read him when he pushed open the unwelcomingly heavy door of the 'Bull and Radish.')

The answer was always the same... they would see right through you... you don't get "inside" a keiretsu... there is no way we could invent a cover deep enough to get you inside and even if we did it would be your children or grandchildren who got the passwords we need. I wanted to get access to their raiding programs, to connect up the vast networks of pure money that their conventions kept apart, to do something nasty with their private armies. I felt that a truly progressive Japanese multinational could precipitate the crisis of civilization that would allow information structures to reach critical mass. I even wrote a paper on it "Using a Japanese Multinational to precipitate a police state and computerized secret police."

Their objections were strong. But I had to try, so I bought him a pint.

He was very thankful. I chose "Bass" for him and invited him to join me at my table. It was the usual dark pub that recently had started serving good food and now got many fewer thugs and hooligans and skinheads. That was all it took to get rid of them sometimes. Maybe we should move into catering.

His English was surprisingly good. He told me how he had left his hotel that morning.

"I walked out into a very surprisingly cold morning. I wanted to see this old city waking up. I knew they were burying the princess. Even the new buildings here look old... like you English discovered concrete a thousand years ago. And all of the women crying... like Queen Guinevere had died. I thought I might catch... the black death. Hu hu hu hu .

"Soon though it was hard to move. Everywhere all the women were crying and throwing flowers. The city wasn't moving like a big city should. It was not the end of the world, but sounded like the end of the world. I had to get away."

I was surprised to hear him talking like that.

"How's business?" I asked.

"Very good. My business is stealing people's minds. And these days people are glad to put them in my protection."

"...advertising?"

"Hu hu. No... religion. New religion. Instant religion where you have to be killed directly by your god. Apocalypse in your own lifetime."

"You sound... cynical. Like you don't believe?"

"I know what cynical means. Just because my religion is exactly what the stupid people want doesn't mean it isn't true. Sometimes they feel the future better than we do... like dogs."

My head was spinning. That I was right and that I was so wrong. Not a Sony man, but the new Japanese corporation, fulfilling the old role of government. Just as businesses were replacing governments everywhere, in Japan they now had to supply the state religion too.

"What do they call your religion... might I have heard of it?"

He sipped the Bass and its uncomplicated taste took a few seconds to slip across his slightly pointed tongue.

"It is called 'The Path of Forgetting' What do we forget? Firstly, ourselves... that cluster of preferences and resistances. Secondly, history which is perversely oriented at things we cannot change: a heap of dead futures that were wasted. Thirdly, forget life. Life is at once everywhere and nowhere, and so really will take care of itself."

"It sounds like a philosophy of... nothingness. Like nothing matters?"

"No, some things matter. But you need to know your place. Not everyone can be Superman or Jesus. At best, most people are food for the gods. That is a realistic ambition."

"Food for the gods! I like that. Listen... do you know about ... no let me

ask you another question. Are you an actively apocalyptic cult?"

"Actively apocalyptic? No..."

"I don't believe you... 'actively apocalyptic' is not taught at the Berlitz School of Languages"

We laughed.

We met again the next day for a round of Crown Green Bowls... not easy to get a green and to roll the leather balls at the end of summer but I got us in.

He looked dapper in a blazer. I probably looked a little tired from a night of fast research and frantic phone calls and persuading Dad.

I showed Shingu how the balls were lopsided and traveled in curves... explained that the little white ball was a moving target and that it was perfectly acceptable to slam it into the back gutter when need be. "Very English," he said. I took it as a sly compliment on the gentility of the game for a few minutes. Then I thought and put it in the context of this wily old man and realized this was unlikely to be the case.

I left it alone.

It was a great game. I was weak enough at the game to not even have to contemplate whether I should throw it. I could just enjoy the feeling as the ball rolled off your arm. I felt connected to great circles... not like I was forcing anything to go anywhere it didn't want to go.

Old Shingu had a great time too. He had never expected to have such a merry English outing.

Err, yes, he won. Possibly my subconscious was feeling political. And anyway there is no shame in being bad at Crown Green Bowls. In the pub after though, I did wish I didn't have to look at those smugly smiling dentures, loaded with cabbage. But then again, even if I had been holding the World Cup in my left hand, I wouldn't have liked to see that.

We saw each other three more times on his trip. Feeding ducks, British museum, very romantic. The third time I received an invitation to eat at a Japanese restaurant that I knew to be so expensive that its name came up on the agenda of G7 meetings.

I said 'fuck', and not because I expected to have to pay for the food and lose my house, but because the invitation was delivered to that very house, which was thought to be 'safe.'

Over tea five minutes later, panic dying, I reflected that this situation, much like the word 'fuck', could be good or bad. I could not see into the event: it was like a mirrorball in my mind.

I decided not to tell 'the gang' about the meeting. I headed out to catch the bus and there was a car waiting for me. That was the way the whole evening went.

In a terribly empty and dark room at Manju, Shingu looked very different. His suit was funereal, his haircut so fresh that it was abstract, the diagram of a style.

"Your group has an interesting way of doing business," he said.

"With respect, we don't have much business... just a bundle of contradictory ideas."

"Concerning this and that... concerning world peace and semtex explosives and free love... very interesting,"

Sake sipped.

"Also unlikely. Perhaps your screen is less effective against the religious mind. If one compares the various activities of your group against the interests of one man, your father Dr Harold Blake, then things start to look different."

Well, I was very surprised by this development. I could not keep the word "inscrutable" from my mind. It pinged so many times it became meaningless, but then how much meaning does it have normally anyway? Who can you scrute... really truly scrute?

In the midst of the noise of "inscrutable" consuming my mental bandwidth important thoughts struggled to be received. Had they worked out our big plan, did they know about the Big Machine?

No think.. apocalypse... death ..inscrutable... don't be surprised... it is all there to be known... inscrutable.. think.

"It appears that your group has lost faith in the Western Way. I discovered, I was surprised- such a young gentleman, if a little... relaxed - surprised that you have ties to terrorists all over Europe."

I swigged down my sake hard. Acting was the most enjoyable part of my vocation.

"Go on..." I said, unblinking, the terrified terrorist.

"Then, and this was hard to find, so don't feel bad about it, your father's extensive research into augmenting conventional chemical weaponry with viral agents."

Later talking to Dad, he was loving his whisky that night, he told me how many arguments he had had within the group about the wisdom of leaving that last nugget of info sufficiently exposed. His idea was that if you leave fifty pounds hanging out of your pocket they will never find the diamond hidden in your shoe. But if you are fast enough you will find them.

After the call, I wondered how much I really knew about his plans. Was the destruction of the human race and midwifing of a new lifeform not even the end of his ambitions? I decided that it had to be, unless he planned to crack the planet in two and slay God. Y'know.

"After I quit the SDF, I moved into security. But what was I securing? The majority of theft in Japan is in fact a form of accounting, moving assets beneath the paper.

"I made elaborate plans for my company and recruited many men. The managers signed all the forms without looking at them. In fact they were scared to look at them... a suicide-inducing fact might stick to their eyes.

"I bought an armored car, that I would drive around Hokkaido. I had fifteen ex-SDF men at my call. We would carry out terrorist actions on remote farms. Beating and terrifying innocent people. Then we would congratulate them on their part in the 'exercise' we were carrying out.

"As long as I was back to work on Monday morning, everything was ok. I was unraveling reality and the rules and then winding it up again. I was on the elastic leash of a blind, corrupt society.

"Have you read any of the master's books on quantum theory? Fascinating. A tiny particle can suddenly begin to exist... energy from nowhere, but doomed to return to nothingness within the heartbeat of the universe, which is also careless about what its children do.

"One day I told my boss what I had been doing... how I had forced five members of the human resources department to take part in mock executions. He dropped to his knees and pledged his loyalty to my Master... his eternal loyalty. I had no idea who he was referring to and I decided that he didn't either. I decided that something in our society, this... blindness ... was creating a space for a master. I was not that man, but I could be his deputy. Had to find him. Found him"

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A few months later I was walking in Hyde Park. It was consistently cold : the violent fever of summer passed. I was now in fairly regular contact with Shingu. I was amazed that he hadn't found out about the Semantic Net and the Talking Doorknob and all of the real work of the group. But we threw up so much noise, and if part of your work is deadly germs people will assume that is your big thing, I suppose.

The park was quite full, considering. Everyone had nothing to do except run around in the maze of their own minds.

Shingu had been very forceful in courting us. We were quite cautious about accepting their overtures for us to get involved in their BC weapons 'testing.' Dad was strangely against it but Claire, in a series of e-mails from Nicaragua, was bringing him round.

I had this strong feeling, as I walked through a land and an air that was so totally English I felt my upper lip stiffen just being there, that I would die in Japan. Certainly I would deserve to.

Leaving the park I found myself at Speaker's Corner. This is the equivalent of the American nation's First Amendment... several wooden boxes with old and dirty men screaming unshocking opinions from the tops of them. I watched one man, whose thin face was thickened only by the exertions of his madness, impugn the royal family and also the phonetic alphabet.

Stepping back I saw seven men shouting, no men listening and a huge dead stone arch of the empire. Later that night they would go home, eat steak and kidney pie then be back out here again, speaking. Meanwhile all the listeners were in front of TVs: repeating cycles of Soap Opera would deafen them as surely as tight screeching feedback loops of a rock concert.

Not long after that night, the pact was made. We would be getting involved with a strike they were planning a couple of years down the line... their first strike. I called my Dad. It turned out that part of the deal was that I

would be the agent on site. I said OK, but i wanted his opinion. Why would they strike so soon... wasn't it too early.. wouldn't they just be crushed by the government?

His answer was that it would be rather boring if that happened. He hoped the world was more inventive and complex than that. He expected that some of the secret veins of the world would be exposed and we would get a lot out of it, on top of our own manipulation of the gas. He told me to be careful. If I was caught by the authorities, everything would probably be OK, but if the cult found out my agenda they would kill me. Yeah yeah, I said.

Time passed.

One week before I flew out, Shingu moved to take over the cult's massive Russian faction. We pressed on anyway.

So like I was saying , I was arrested on Shibamata Kaido on my heavy red bike with a bag of onions in the baby seat. A little policeman ran behind me, blowing a whistle. In retrospect I should have kept pedaling. People died in part because I stopped.

The police took me into a little room and asked me all sorts of questions in Japanese. I knew they were questions because the sentences ended in "ka." I used various shrugs and other gestures to try and create a picture of a kind but confused foreigner.

After a while, they used a series of "baby" gestures and it clicked that they assumed I had stolen a mother and child's only means of transportation.

As I walked home from the station I wondered how many crimes bigger than mine had been 'pardoned' because dinner-time was approaching.

At five p.m. everyday a big gong was sounded over Shibamata/Koiwa. That was when I was released, just before the bell rang. Who knows what monsters got to roam the streets underneath the bell.

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"I do believe. I do.

"But I would do it anyway."

TWENTY-FOUR

The walk is longer than the bike ride. I walk by the river to make it more fun and I either see the silhouette of Mount Fuji or an arrogant flume of industrial pollution taunting us. Again, I marvel at the city, even though it is webbed with overhead cables that just scream "third world."

An apparent oddity : surely no one knows how the billion shoestrings above us relate together, but it still works. How has man made so many things that "just work" in such a manner?

I get back to Koiwa and everything is blood red. I want to get home before it gets dark and I am sucked into the seedy world of the Yakuza, although I am tempted to get sucked into certain aspects of that seedy world. Ever since Mayumi moved in a couple of days ago I have been unusually (and somewhat locally) ... tense.

Yeah, Mayumi moved in. Apparently, we needed some muscle. It is true that only Honda had muscles before she arrived. No one objected. I thought it was strange: I wondered if it had anything to do with what she told

Maruhashi after our little fling on the yacht.

She moves around like a cat. Always that weight of a small pistol anchors her. Otherwise she would move like a sine wave or a sea-snake. Her face is so emotionless at all times and her eyes so masked by the colorless way they capture all the light in the room that she cannot be looked at because you know you are inventing her and aiding her in her disguise as you try and divine her thoughts, wishes, needs. I'm not making this up or exaggerating. Even now I have seen her in her pajamas eating a rice ball she still seems fictional to me.

The pajamas even had penguins on them for Christ's sake.

For some reason, I do not want to enter the door beneath the still glowing "Tele-Club" sign when I finally get home. I stare up at the semi-symbolic woman-curves up there and wonder about all the men who came here, looking for young girls that they had already tested on the phone and I think of all the people in the chat rooms on the net shifting between various levels of reality in their minds, choosing which parts of their flesh to digitize and which to leave behind and graft fiction into. And I think of all the parts they leave behind in the system when they go to bed: all the spare parts for anyone who wanted their own human race.

The fictionality of the human race was to be its downfall. Anytime it extended outside of its own head it was writing a story and had written that story so often that no one would notice when the reruns started. Some lifeforms could not be written out of their own history, but we could. For me, Australia was a vast fiction, so was almost everything.

For a vast information organism, infinitely connected and whose senses were not hard wired, only the stars were fiction. Every moment would be truth.

Heady thoughts : religious thoughts I knew. Be killed by your own god, Shingu had said. But if you gave birth to him first... wouldn't that be a beautiful and natural thing.

I can now definitely not go upstairs, all ecstatic. So I go, for the first time in the two months I have been here, into the coffee shop on the ground floor. Home of Honda's mutants.

A middle aged man and woman, both in pale yellow shirts, busying themselves about the coffee-making machinery. They vaguely resemble each other and also bees at work. I plant myself at a table (one of four) more toward the back of the shop.

The woman, face soft round and happy, comes over and I point at a frothy coffee on the picture menu and say "Kore o kudasai"

After a while, in the silence of the coffee shop, nearing sleep, I realize that they are mutes. A few minutes later, when I hear a feeble pounding on the wall from the captive family that I think about less and less as time goes by, I decide that they are deaf-mute.

While I was there drinking coffee for no particular reason, something critical happened. I should mention also that tomorrow was to be the day when the chemist brought around his first batch of gas components and I added my own magic touch to it. So my credibility was very much in the forefront of everyone's mind.

Junko, Honda, Mayumi, Benny and Yosuke were all on the upper two levels. No one was with the family.

Here is what I believe happened.

In the streets outside, a policeman, a thin middle-aged man, was walking past our front door. He whistled as he walked. Something stopped him and he spent a minute in front of our door. His brow furrowed, he looked

down at his watch and then he opened the door. Japanese policeman wander around alone a lot because nothing bad ever happens to them. Except when it does.

He slowly padded up the stairs, and pulled a small package from under his jacket. Sweat beaded up on his thin, cheekbone face. His steps were light but hesitant. In her bedroom, which I had yet to visit, Mayumi was polishing her guns or fingernails. She was a woman who had listened to many men skulking around in her lifetime and had always had to react. Maruhashi had found her on a trip to Osaka... she was only eighteen then. He had wanted sex and had seen her hanging around the nightclub he'd had himself taken to. She was a dirty punk girl then with pink hair. He had noticed that almost every man in the bar had bought her a drink and she had taken one swig from each and then moved along. He wanted her dirty mouth. He sent one of his men to pick her up but he had been vaguely rude and ended up with a bottle cracked over his head. When the bodyguard returned, scabbed to the neck, Maruhashi had the further bad news that this crazy girl, who he would later find out had been national youth Aikido champion at one time, now had both a grudge against him and a gun from him. All the sex could have gone out of the evening for some men at that point, but not Maruhashi. That would have been against his rules of what a Maruhashi was like. Instead he savored every moment of her slow approach across the parking lot. He didn't move because he was busy spinning the jukebox of his mind to find the perfect soundtrack for her slow leggy walk through pools of light which somehow could not touch her face. Shadows stretched from under her breasts then disappeared as she passed under each light, their throb was like the equalizer on his Bang and Olufsen. Something from "Massive Attack : Protection" was what the shadows brought to his mind.

Gun nowhere to be seen she leaned against his now open car window. "I wanna job" she said and she got one.

Since then, five years, she had done some amazing things: violent, sexual, religious... the big three. But very often it came down to listening for footsteps and acting accordingly. She got up and left her room as silently as all her training allowed. Her tiny feet made her a natural for stealth and she moved down the stairs. She saw the policeman and moved towards him as she weighed up her options. He was about to enter the front room, which she felt would be messy. A gunshot would shatter the safe-house's facade and this just the day before things began in earnest for both the Master and Maruhashi's plans (and the Englishman's !)

As he put his hand on the door knob, she smashed her knuckles into his temple.

All the psychos in the living room practically shat themselves when the policeman fell through the slapping open door. Yes, even Honda, who almost choked on his noodles. I missed that unfortunately.

Yosuke leapt up and pulled out his gun and was about to shoot the cop until he saw Mayumi's finger pressed to her pursed lips. Her mouth seemed to be just inches from his eyes. He could not help but obey.

Benny ran around frantically, looking out of every window, half-expecting to be shot between the eyes but not noticing. That was how he always felt and had done ever since atoms themselves drove him mad. If you are driven mad by atoms you have nowhere to go and nothing but fear. I should have been more sympathetic to him. But then, given what he was shortly to do to me, perhaps not.

Junko ran downstairs. She entered the room where the family were ankle chained and leveled an Uzi at them. Even the girl was beyond crying at this and even Junko was beyond crying at it.

In the shop, I sipped coffee and hummed along to the faint Chinese pop songs that I had been learning from the karaoke shop nearby.

Honda and Mayumi pulled the cop indoors. Then they both practically tripped over each other assuming the best tactical position for covering the door. Honda resented Mayumi immensely at that point when their relationship was crystallized by the act of trying to occupy the same space at the same time. Reflecting later

this would start him thinking about Maruhashi's status in the organization: did he plan to occupy the Master's space? Were they matter and anti-matter?

Now though he simply decided to take the rash offensive, against his nature, and he barreled down the stairs to stand immediately behind the door into a position that created a cone of solid death. Two large, identical semi-automatics extended his arms; expressed his natural violence perfectly. His eyes hollowed and he concentrated on the correct death... the one that would be measured as the first step of the apocalypse and the revealing of the secret master of Japan. That was his objective, to end the hypocrisy and personify the true spirit of his nation. As Godzilla personified 50s Japan (this is my own sacrilegious take on the matter,) a post-radioactive monster that was forced to take over the world against its wishes, so Samsara was the spirit of modern Japan: a nation whose every social act implied the Other, the God king to underpin all of the various bowings. Also a nation that had always drawn its religion from its environment and whose old environment was gone. The new environment was a vast machine of stolen truths that were on the verge of being made universal. Gnosis was necessary - mysticism, occult: the power of truth is like diamonds - dependent upon a cartel of rarity.

This is how he thought, I believe. Not of blood and bullets but of the Right he had discovered and which he would give birth to.

Upstairs Mayumi kicked down the door to my room. I like to think she was concerned for my safety. I require no connection between this thought and reality... it is standalone.

Benny saw her kick the door down, she was in her underwear and the sudden solidifying of her soft curves into door smashing muscle must have galvanized his sick mind. A sudden surge of energy to his head, (and maybe a muscular transformation of his own) must have taken place. My empty room was burned into his energized eye. I was absent and judged guilty.

Crying downstairs, panic fading into drill upstairs. That is what I imagine.

The policeman was tied up, carried downstairs and chained to heavy pipes. Benny and Yosuke waited for him to wake up. After a while, not many minutes, Yosuke remembered how waiting was what had got him into this mess so long ago, waiting for the old man to die. So he stripped off some electrical cable, plugged it in and proceeded to wake the policeman up.

A child watched a policeman being tortured. No further policemen came.

TWENTY-FIVE

When I returned the first thing I noticed was my door. The second was that everyone was in the living room with guns in their laps.

No matter how improbable, when it becomes possible, your mind makes your death certain. My throat was dried by cold metal and eyes.

Shot to death by five people... ludicrous, you can't imagine a death like that. I moved to the center of the room and I asked "What happened to my door."

Benny stood up and exploded a shout that was so rough it needed a pint of saliva to lubricate it (I quickly discovered) "Why do the police come?"

Why do firemen wear red belts?

That flashed in my mind. I still could not take Benny seriously. It could have been his name, or memories of how he looked with a vase shattered over him: a decorated hero.

Suddenly, away from the point, I realized (with no evidence) that it had been Mayumi at the Lawyer's house the night of the kidnapping. I looked at her and our eyes met and I was trying to read her mind or to send her a piece of mine that said 'We know the secrets, the real plans: don't let me die here.'

Relaxed, almost naked, she issued a 'no comment.' Very pretty, she sat.

I said "What police?" and then everyone started shouting in Japanese, even Ms. Supercool.

Eventually, Honda put a stop to it with a military bark.

"Blake-san... please explain where you have been for the last thirty minutes," he said. His look was, I am sure the same one he had given me when offering me the Pocari Sweat when we had first met : the essence of polite calm. I am sure.

"Easy question... I was downstairs in the coffee shop." They began to talk. "Drinking coffee. So tell me... what kind of fuck-up do we have here... Jesus, I step out for a bloody hour!"

I wasn't faking my anger. Despite the fact that I was planning to sabotage their gas attack, I had been nothing other than an ideal member of the cult. I walked over to Yosuke, the weak link. "What police, Yosuke."

If I had turned around and Mayumi had been even 1% smiling I would have lost it. So I didn't turn round.

"One cop. He came here tonight. We got him."

"Damn! Where is he now? Downstairs?"

"Yes."

"Well.. shouldn't we get out of here? Honda...?"

Honda looked out of the tiny windows of the large living room.

"No, we should stay. We overtortured the policeman and he can't tell us anything now. I suspect he is not here as part of an investigation. It's something else. Chance."

Mayumi stood up. "Honda, with your permission I wish to leave and inform the organization of what is going on." Honda nodded and then she was gone, stopping upstairs to get dressed before climbing out through a window.

We arranged watch shifts and the night passed by in one-second increments.

Next morning we all calmed down. Honda received a call on a small cell-phone that nonetheless looked like a walkie-talkie. It was probably a matter of technique... the way you snap it to your head.

A woman's voice, most likely not his aged mother.

"Alert over, Mr Blake. Go for your run if you want."

Actually that sounded good.

"Aren't they missing the policeman yet?"

"Nothing in the news. He may have been off duty... but then why would he be here?"

"We can't keep him here. If he has some kind of beat, they might come sniffing around."

"There's no rush. Police don't get killed much. And if they do get killed in Koiwa, the Koreans get it first. Then the cops pause to decide how to politely bring it up with the Yakuza. So we have time to make a good decision. Now get out of here... we're all go crazy if we don't get some air!"

Jolly Honda! Well, a run did sound good. Benny was starting to bother me. He was thinking. So I got changed and strapped on my new Walkman and I hit the road. It was just hot enough to make it fun. I liked to run in the Tokyo heat. I now had this completely different relationship to the heat than the soft me of the early chapters. How to explain it? I don't know... I just felt free in the heat. I also had to respect the Japanese people's ability to maintain their characteristic calm in the middle of conditions that were somehow supposed to excuse New Yorkers from their periodic homicides.

I was impressed by the Japanese as a whole. They seemed to me to be on the verge of something. They had created thousands of robot dogs and Tamagotchi eggs and virtual fish and cyber pop stars. And as I mentioned they liked their cars to have faces and their ATM machines to have social lives. They were beginning to see humanity as something everywhere... something you do, not something you are.

Not all of them, of course.

Dead Jimi Hendrix was playing "The Wind Cries Mary." I was reminded for the first time in several days (as I overtook a hundred child long line of mini baseballers who did a "hello" wave) of the love of my life, Claire. You remember her, right?

With all the squelchiness of Mayumi's arrival at the TeleConcentrationClub, my thoughts had turned from Claire a little. I decided to let my mind celebrate her for a little while.

Christ, it had been a long time since I saw her in the flesh. Maybe that was why I so easily thought of her as the conscience of our group. She had stayed with the east European Neo-Nazis longer than necessary for our research. We all suspected that she intended to do something reactionary... like try and stop them, report them to the police.

During those long months in D sseldorf, without her, I had started to go that way too. I wanted to burn down houses that I knew to be full of sleeping, schnaps-soaked skins. I wanted to forget about the coming good and fight the present evil.

I broke on that trip. I was with our German agents and had not seen a real friend in a long time. Hadn't even heard from Claire, I assumed she was underground.

Matthias and Dirk, black haired Germans who were so serious-minded that they seemed perpetually confused, were the other members of my cell. For months we had been capturing skins and interrogating them so we could get agents inside. We now had six insiders and the cell was supposed to watch the groups and put together a list of pseudo-quantifiable flags that our group could track. The objective was to get an index of hatred in Europe. We wanted to track hatred and fear and ignorance like financiers follow the market. "Sell sell sell. Kill kill kill."

The reason we wanted that info was to know if and when it was time for us to step in and do our thing. Two lines were on the biggest graph at our most secret meetings in little chateaux : 1) a log chart of network connections worldwide adjusted for security laws and corporate firewalls etc. This was called the Life line. It had to reach a certain point before action was viable, the point above which pulling the plug would kill more people than leaving it in. 2) a line based on our indicators worldwide known variously as the Hate line and the Weakness line. It was called the Weakness line only by the most radical members of the group. It was there as a failsafe measure. It was combined with the Life line in such a way that if the human race suddenly got its shit together we would instead all become telecomms millionaires and leave things be.

It was hard work working the Hate line for 8 months. Just as many Americans living behind shields of fat and steel and TV can easily believe in God so people on the Hate Line can only see the Devil.

I was out one day, enjoying a cup of coffee in the Altschtadt part of the city. Not the kind of place you usually found the skins. But two of them were just around the corner talking. I listened. They were talking about their plan to firebomb a Turkish nightclub nearby. They had apparently just scouted out the fire exits.

I couldn't believe they were talking about this right out in the open. But then again I could not see where they were, at least without looking like I was looking. Some acoustic phenomenon was bringing me this. Some genie.

I watched a man with a huge moustache laugh. I decided that I would do what I had occasionally contemplated. I would just tell the police what these bastards had planned and they would get arrested. It would skew the figures a little, but the human sciences are renowned for their flexibility.

Things changed when some new words arrived. They mentioned several names that I knew from reports and one that I knew to be the alias of a guy called Hannes that was our latest mole... like the very latest, barely join the fascists two days past. Suddenly things were complicated.

I went back to HQ. Dirk was fiddling with a short-wave radio, a project that suited him immensely. I decided to share my news with him. The gloom of Two World Wars settled on him, visibly wrinkling. He said "You know, Blake, I believe in what we do here. Scientists shouldn't get involved. I wish you hadn't told me this."

"If it makes you feel any better there are a million fucked-up things in the world you don't have to worry yourself about," I pouted.

"If we stop them Hannes is dead... I don't think we can get a message to him before tomorrow night... he is supposed to be 'radio silent' the first two weeks. That's the other bad thing."

"It's all bad."

"Call your father."

"Yeah..."

The next day five Turkish guys were dead, Hannes had some amazing data and I was in Amsterdam incoherent and trying to remember if Interpol was here or in Belgium. I was known as Paddy and felt very free; free from a Manichaeian game that I had never been sure was real. I was real now. Fuck them all.

"Fuck 'em all!" I laughed as I ran. I could see thousands of apartment buildings that looked like they had been designed to be easy to clean up after an earthquake rather than to resist one. Like Spain or the Lebanon was the architectural style. Many golf practice areas broke up the general monotony and every now and then a magnificent temple with a tree that had been tended for decades and that roamed around with some spirit.

Several months of craziness followed the German incident. I got a job designing t-shirts and I put troublesome statements like "It will kill you," "Have you seen your brain recently?" and "Last Man Standing Defrag please" on the front.

Some program they had tracked me down from the t-shirts which were not random but me echo-testing my soul to see if I could fully rebel and actually go to the other side.

I left my apartment, which I was sharing with a woman called Inge, who I had slept with just once, and found a hand-delivered letter from Claire outside.

She wrote with a passion and conviction I had never seen from her before. She talked about all the things we'd talked about a hundred times... the biological errors, gorilla elements in the brain, that would make us killers as long as we were in this hardware. She referenced all the usual landmarks, politely discreet about Cambodia.

But then she wrote something I will never forget "If we had children with our bodies they would die. They might even kill. In the machine our children live forever and we are within them."

Simple concepts but ones I had never heard from her, who was usually so pragmatic. The romanticism of death was unified with that of birth in this crazy project. We had first met in the dim light of the first seed of the new being. We were all mixed up in it: fathers daughters mothers brothers sons sisters : we could choose whatever relationship we wanted to it. But we had all grown up with it : the machine was our family.

That was such a strange moment for me. Very simple words, that seemed ... how to say it?... like my eyes wrote them on the paper as they scanned across.

Inge was pleased to see me go.

Jogging over, I turned around and headed back to my Tokyo Death Cult.

I got near the leaning fragile building that was webbed between two relatively solid blocks. I have a theory about deja vu which is based on the fact that "now" is actually a flexible space of the mind and can expand so much that perception of an event and reaction to it both occur within the same perceptual quantum.

But for the five minutes before I saw the dead policeman I had this awful feeling that something terrible had happened. My theory doesn't account for that.

Honda was on the phone, Junko was sobbing in the corner. The daughter was hiding in her mother. The lawyer was silent. Everyone else looked at the body and the vomit around his mouth. Its mouth, sorry.

"So he didn't make any noises... they didn't hear him?" I asked Yosuke.

"They say."

"Wasn't anyone down here? Junko?"

"Toilet"

The policeman was burned, battered and most of all dead. He looked like a nice man. Many police are nice. Some of them are servants of Interests that keep knowledge from the people as they have done since Atlantis. Many are not, and are compassionate, brave, and some of the best humanity has to offer. I would never know about this one. It didn't matter much, I suppose, in the long run. We had similar plans for both kinds of

individuals. Only dreams would survive and only the kind we liked.

A few hours later, hours crowded with far too many people that seemed magnified by the minutes, Mayumi arrived.

She was dressed in the conservative pink pseudo-uniform of the receptionist class. Her charms were tamed in the way that a sleeping tiger is tamed.

"A disguise?" I asked.

"Who are you?" she asked. A joke or the usual existential confrontation?

"Your boyfriend," I replied.

With a cute smile that she had perhaps found in the pocket of her new jacket she asked if I would accompany her to the Avon School of English, my putative place of employment. How could I have resisted, even if there hadn't been a body in the basement.

We left and walked down the street. Everything was different now I was walking the streets with her. In the end, that is the definition of love. Human love.

No... you're right. Human hate is like that too. It's a thin line I hear. This is how it was different: when I saw someone who was old and tired picking up huge root vegetables I noticed that they were not her. When I saw an orange sun, a huge blazing gas ball that was the source of all life, I noticed that her face was orange. When I noticed that I was sexually obsessed with the essence of my enemy, a tool of hatred, I had excuses dripping from my swollen mind too numerous to mention.

In the fresh, or different anyway, air the policeman was not only not dead, he had never existed. In neither of our languages did we discuss him. It looked like she was going to hold my hand at one point, but she didn't.

Before long, we were at the foot of one of those bubble-economy buildings that had a church on the third floor, and an also an Avon school of English Conversation. We entered a small elevator and headed up to 7F. There was faint music, or the tinkle of water. The doors slid up with a k-ching.

In this place where I had never been before, guided by the subtle signals from Mayumi, I passed unnoticed through to the staff room out back. I stood out like an apple at an apple store.

I quickly recognized the two men we greeted in the back room that smelt of failed coffee: the two tough guys from the bar a while back. They still had that basically paramilitary look about them, even in their nylon shirts. They appraised me on my arrival and checked Mayumi out thoroughly and familiarly. I picked up a picture dictionary and marveled at the task humans had set themselves... a name for everything.

The tall blonde guy, whose stubble was relevant and built to him, moved into my space. I was not concentrating and he took it from me. He was not intimidatingly large but his muscles had something about them : built not to lift but to crush. His name was Rich and the price for learning that was learning also how close together the bones in one's hand are.

The darker guy whose head was stubbled like a shadow was named Antony. He had a tan, too. He watched a lot. You couldn't watch him : he was so boring that no excuse existed : if you watched him it would be as a warden does and he would know.

"I know you. I've seen you around. You are not so subtle mate! Ha ha." said rich. His teeth were metallic. I

suppose that made sense... for eating etc. The more metal the better.

"I've seen you too. You two too. You're subtle... I thought... well, I should be polite."

"We have a situation boys... I have written it down on these cards." She gave them little business cards. "No hurry... things are at the bottom already. Wait till it gets dark and these people you have to teach can say 'thrilled' and then come over. Be ready to get dirty."

We walked out then and she had to stop, burdened momentarily by her pure-sexual flesh. "Bad dirty," she added.

The two men sniggered. I could see that she regretted the way she was for a second.

We left and strolled through a hall of mirrors. But actually it was a dense hive of glass cubes with very similar teachers teaching very similar students.

I had to go to the toilet, and was given permission. The teachers were all men, and all brutal and tanned and somewhat scarred. On the way to the toilet, I passed several supply rooms... with metal doors, and hand scanners. On the way back I reflected that I knew bullet proof glass when I saw it, and that all of those little cubes were made of it. And those slots were not necessary for ventilation. And I saw a little brochure about the Avon Schools and a very familiar, very urbane, face wrote the introduction.

Back outside... not talking but walking in sync. As in sync as a round thing and a square thing (our walks) can get.

All around me were neon signs, and I had lost some of my illiterate immunity to them. I could see scratches of meaning in them. They all began as cracks in bones in ancient Chinese rituals. Now I was seeing them as cracks in the city. Some meaning came out... odd sounds. It is probably inevitable that a partially understood language seems like desire.

I peeked over at Mayumi. Several months into this adventure, and everyone I knew was some kind of enigma. They all spoke in short terse phrases and secrets were there way of life. I did not consider any of them typical of the Japanese nation in their manner, but only in their intentions.

"Avon..." I said. "There is an Avon school at every station in Tokyo. Full of harmless foreigners. And the day I met you... Honda went to Avon headquarters."

She looked up with a genuine smile. My first steps: so cute.

"Maruhashi owns them all... that is part of why he is so rich. Or maybe not... maybe they came later. A good way to get visas for an army of foreign mercenaries... his back up plan in case he is betrayed by Samsara."

Still smiling she said "... or something like that."

"Right, I shouldn't worry about the specifics... I'll be shot in the head before the Avon teachers storm the Diet building. Right?"

She pulled me very close and then planted a strong kiss on me. Ripples of shock in the semi-crowded street.

"Honey... I will make sure you don't hurt."

Not Get hurt? Or Not Feel A Thing. Despite my microfiber shirt and tie (I hoped they did not melt together) I

had no urge to parse her grammar.

We moved toward the train line and back to the bad part of town. Two drunken businessmen staggered up the street a hundred meters ahead. They were in the shadow of the bridge but I could see them. Judging by their ages and suits I decided one was the boss and the other his junior. They supported each other as they walked and a certain good natured bouncing against each other like a weak wrestling was taking place. Both men laughed. Suddenly the younger man made a grab for the crotch of the older who was able to twist out of the way. The old man managed to get a laugh out but the young man didn't. His concentration was intense... he made another grab and then another for the older man's sex organs and his hand was palm up and needing. There was a brief stroke, a very long pause and then the older man flung himself back and arranged his loud words with military precision and fury, bending the young man forwards with their force and folding him in on himself. At which point, he vomited over his senior's shoes. We passed it by and in my passing they were frozen into a tableau that I could imagine no escape from. I didn't look back... it was hard to be in other people's lives.

At the corner near our house she stopped and we kissed again. What was this? Love? I believed that the dead policeman was the priest of our short marriage. I invited her to eat some noodles across the street from the den and she agreed. We slurped them by the glass and peacefully watched the mute people very much like we would watch a fish tank. We could share their silence through glass and distance. That does funny things to time. Before too long the mutes were suddenly gone, like the light that filled the room just a microsecond before you flipped the switch. The two Avon boys strolled up. I looked at Mayumi on the stool in the little pink outfit that had an explanation that I had forgotten to seek out. She hardened inside it as I watched. She moved to the door without a word. I had to stay and pay the bill. I watched her cross the street and wondered which of us would die first and how much time would separate that.

Very strange dark green feelings bubbled up in me. I got up and went over, maybe five minutes later. The two Avon boys burst out of the door singing "Girls and Boys" and supporting their so drunk friend in the baseball cap and trench coat who just reeked of Lemon Chu Hi and Pink Shawa Shawa. They all tumbled down the road... down to the river. The boys were loving the singing.

I hope that was Pink Shawa Shawa I was smelling. The smell of a dead man usually kept me awake once I got it on me.

I walked through the living room. Everyone was tired and going to bed one by one. Benny watched Sumo digest. I was tempted but didn't. Sumo Digest was the nearest thing to real TV I had found in Japan... a think suspension jelly - real TV.

I went downstairs to talk to the lawyer. Because the law, and the police were things that interested me very much.

TWENTY-SIX

Mizukami: The Lawyer. Age thirty-five or so. Large glasses full of light like lava lamps. When he was wearing them, that is. Sometimes I came in and found them lying in the corner, full of slap.

His hair was salt and pepper and kind of wild... quiffed up like filmmaker David Lynch. His face was square but soft in the cheeks. He was a little stumpy. Depending on what had happened to him before I came in, he had varying degrees of silent calm and silent resignation. He had a nice smile, and I could tell that he had always been the type to look at the floor when you talked to him... even before.

The wife was a monstrosity. And a Frankenstein: man made. She had been a captive for a long time and many different games had been played with her. This was why I thought she had that look on her face: unveiled

hate. She did not even have the luxury of identifying with her kidnappers because she had had so many and no one was totally sure why they still had her. To be an arbitrary victim is sometimes the worst: you know they don't hate you but you wake up most mornings with blood in your mouth anyway. She was about thirty but could have been born any time in the last then thousand years of human 'culture.' She was a small woman.

The daughter was about ten and had been in captivity for a long time. It was deforming her. I stroked her hair as I came into the room and a lot of it came free. Tears filled my eyes and I looked at the wall, the latest of her walls. The room quivered for a second. What was I doing down here? Was I about to go crazy again? No, I was focusing. This was why... why it all had to end. Thoughts and flesh don't mix. Crazy chimp brains full of hate are not fit to be the carriers of gods. Just a compromise, a spawning place. Nice and warm, virulent in nature itself. Opening my eyes, looking at the wall, dreaming of a silent earth, dry of tears but still with music and cool thought to make it hum in the throne of stars.

I wished she would stop sniffing.

I turned to Dad and pulled up a chair in front of him. He masked his feelings well: meaningless blinks.

"I believe you speak English, Mr Mizukami?"

"Yes... I speak English."

"Do you know who I am?"

"They call you... the Englishman. They say you are here with ... medical information. Special information."

"That's me. I came to your house... that night."

"I know... I saw your blue eyes under the..."

"Mask," I offered

"Yes."

"Do you know why we took you?"

"Yes... I do."

"She told you."

"Who... I..."

"No one can hear... relax. She and I ... we are on the same side... same team. She told you what was going to happen. And she also gave you instructions. She had a message from her boss... what was the message."

"I'm sorry... I ... no."

"I have one idea. She told you that if you watched everything these people said and did... and reported it back to her that she would make sure you survived... they didn't kill you."

"No."

"Well that was just a guess. I don't really know what she told you. Wait, maybe she told you not to say

something. Keep a secret : is that it?"

"A... a secret. Sorry. A secret."

"About Maruhashi? His army? Do you know something, Mr Mizukami."

"You won't kill me. I'm sorry to be rude. But I know. So I won't tell you. Also... my loyalty is to the Master."

"What... what are you TALKING about."

I jumped to my feet. "What are you fucking... I'm... have you seen your daughter? She has green skin!!!" I surrendered to dramatic gestures to illustrate this.

"Wait... who is the Master? Samsara? Maruhashi?"

He hung his head.

"It doesn't matter," he said.

"You will all die down here," I said coldly and, yes, cruelly. "And your master... one of them... will kill everyone he can and then he will try and take over the world and he will fail. And orphans will rebuild the world again. The same world."

I headed up the stairs. His daughter cried and I felt quite shitty. He was rambling about being tested. And then that a the bad ones would be cleaned out by the good ones. The usual stuff.

I dreamt of the cleaned-out world again.

It is like a blue egg. The vastness of space, its emptiness, protects it from the vast forces that roam the universe. A shell of pure vacuum.

Birds still fly around... all manner of biological arms races are played out. Weather is not what it used to be, it is harnessed now and more predictable. But it would seem horrifying to humans from time to time. Great vents of heat moving through canyons, crackling with thunder.

All around the planet the best of the humans survives. Dreams of love, mathematical visions. All events are remembered. The machine reads Shakespeare infinitely and, like backwards monkeys, will eventually understand it. Who knows how long it will take for it to wake the earth, shed its metal skin and circuits and get ready to make the next leap that we can't really imagine.

If it loses love, becomes pure thought then we have failed. But if love came from the dirt once, it can come from our graves. It is the flower of the universe and it is waiting to bloom.

I am smashed on the head with tremendous force half way up the stairs and my consciousness shatters.

TWENTY-SEVEN

My body is free at last and the first thing it does is live out a childhood cowboy fantasy and just plain tumbles down to the bottom of the stairs.

The stairs are sharp, hard and they tag me with purple lines that normally would matter.

Nothing is broken. I lie at the bottom, not too badly contorted. He leers down at me, happy at last. Benny Odajima's pitted face lives up to the moment: inches below a naked bulb he is General Noriega in a film noir. He is panting with a post adrenal rush. It is not clear to him whether I am dead or alive.

He comes down the stairs, scared that I will jump up and stab him in the eye or similar. When he gets to the bottom, he finds he had no cause to fear... I am stone cold unconscious. His gentle slaps disturb me not a bit. Nor his less gentle slaps. His kick, even.

My body is hefted onto his shoulder. He has a surprising strength for a medium-sized Japanese man. Something about him suggests he is made out of a single solid substance... animated dog food: so maybe he is like one big muscle.

At the top of the stairs, he pauses and my arms swing together: pendulums counting down to something horrible for me. He's listening to make sure no-one has come back into the living room. Satisfied, he passes through the living room where I have eaten so many bowls of Charlie Browns with my unconscious form his burden.

Earlier, elaborate precautions were taken to remove a dead body from our house but now Benny walks out the front door without a care in the world. The joy of action is on him. He has always known I am a traitor, and my conversation with the lawyer has confirmed that. Now he is a cult of one and will live with it.

I am carried down the neon street I love with all the pretty prostitutes playing around and all the shadowed men doing their various things. I get pink, I get blue, I get green. Yet fundamentally I am invisible. Perhaps because I have always been implausible.

It doesn't take long to get to the station: this is Tokyo after all. It is midnight and everyone is heading for the last train. So are we it seems.

The track is elevated in Koiwa, but Benny knows his way around. We walk down towards Repo's Bar. Repo's is a charming bar with a US theme and a huge gorilla on its yellow exterior. It also has a huge collection of Country records by the American wrestler Terry Funk that came from somewhere in the past.

This is a quieter part of town and very close to where a road goes under the train tracks. He puts me down in a little shadowed section that would house a homeless man in most societies. I sleep in his stead while Odajima smokes a cigarette. Repo's bar is slowly emptying out. It is barely an hour since I walked back from the Avon school with Mayumi and I am close to death: He is smoking.

Benny's strength returns. He stands for a while longer. Quite possibly I am some sacrificial lamb in his mind. We are only two weeks away from the apocalypse, after all.

He walks over to the locked gate at the foot of the iron staircase that has pictures of people dying in various ways all over it and he pulls a little tool from his pocket and has unlocked the gate in no time at all. He comes back for me and then we are on our way again. It is surprising that I am still unconscious but I am not even twitching. Am I dead? Benny checks again and finds out I am alive: continues to climb.

He emerges next to the tracks. The station is a blaze of light. The platform is only ten feet away and if anyone looked down they would see us. So he hangs back from the tracks, below the platform practically; like a troll or a ... shit .. I dunno... a tengu?

He listens. The station is talking. It says He smiles. Puts me down on the tracks and leaves, feeling superhumanly strong now that I am gone.

He has spread me out so that I will be cut up nicely. The tracks are not electrified. They are very cold and hard and will be knives very soon. My body does not feel the cold. It feels nothing. It is in fact "the" body... not my body. It belongs to no one now that Benny has abandoned it.

At fifty miles an hour the train comes into the station. Its brakes squeal... emergency brakes. The train is trying to stop... it is trying not to kill. But it is too late. Screams under the squeal. The train slices through flesh and bone as if it were meant to. The first drop of blood lands on my face.

TWENTY-EIGHT

I woke up alive. I would've sighed with relief if I had known what had just happened to me. But I didn't know.

Aching everywhere, I made a feeble attempt to sit up. A room was appearing out of gray fog and lack of focus. It was... very Japanese. I laughed at that act of genius my mind had made. I was punished by stabbing pains that started in my brain and short-cut everywhere.

I forced my eyes open and was at least able to move them around; swirling around in their dry sockets they became fairly sure that I was in one of Tetsuo's private rooms. All was quiet within and without the paper walls around me.

"You keep bad company," he said in his white suit with little pink smears: Tetsuo crouched in the corner, fairly coiled and in sunglasses.

"I'm sorry..." I croaked.

"You should be sorry!" he barked. I was worried. I had been planning to say "I'm sorry, but what the hell is going on?" Now I had learned that I had done something bad. He was playing with a little knife that seemed able to catch the light that was coming from nowhere in particular and then stick it in your eye.

"I am... I... what happened?"

"Someone tried to kill you."

When he said that, my nose received the little nudge it had been waiting for. It recognized blood in the air.

"Not you?"

He laughed and threw his knife in my direction so it stuck in the mat. Too fast to bother me.

"Crazy Gaijin!!!" he laughed and laughed. "Your other friends did it... the cult."

"You know about that?"

"I do."

"Do the ... erm.. is Yakuza polite or rude... I don't know... do they know?"

"Call them the family. I don't know if they know. I doubt." He stood up and walked once about the room. "But aren't you curious. At least I would say 'Hey man... who is this fucking blood, man?' Hah hahah ah!!!"

I looked down and saw that there were three narrow jets of blood across me, like vampire cowboys had been using me as a spittoon.

I sat up a little.

"Good point. Who is this fucking blood, man?" We laughed hard for a minute. Occasionally my people had wondered if there would be humor in the future. Opinion was divided on whether humor was one of those irrationalities of the monkey brain or desirable meta-thought. It felt good now to laugh even though it hurt: that was my opinion.

"So Manuela... you know her? She knows you. Tall girl from Phillipines... really a man? Anyway, she sees someone carrying you down street and I guess we're not giving her enough drugs because she is straight enough to care about a thing like that and she comes and tells me.

"So maybe I need to start taking drugs again because I stupid enough to follow you. I know where he is taking you, I think. The station. When I get there, on the ...platform I start looking around for you then I'm thinking 'Baka yaro! Why would he bring a body in the train station... you crazy?' But then I think 'Yeah crazy but he's crazy too... I know he is here.' Just I think that I see you all on the train tracks. Shit! What to do. No way am I fucking go down there, man. Shit on that! Sorry man"

"No problem... shit on that from me too. I was on the tracks? Who put me there?"

"Your good friend, man. Manuela says he's scary looking. Anyway, shut up : this is your life so listen.

"Before I can do much thinking the train is coming. So loud... screeeeee... but there are these two salaryman on the platform... one old and a young guy. The young guy is going crazy, trying to bow and bow and bow and then he stands up and he just falls like a tree. You know a cut tree. Falls right on the tracks. This is crazy for me, and so fast. The old guy is real fast . He's not thinking see... I was thinking too much... very weird for me to be doing that, Usually I'm all action, remember?"

"So the old guy is like Banzai!!! He jumps down and pulls the young guy up and the train is braking like crazy. Bang! The old guy goes like a balloon. His fucking head bounces down the platform, no shit. Two high school girls coming down the stairs. Bang... one is on the basketball team I guess. She catches it. Should have been at home instead of blowing old oyajis for money, I guess. Anyway, the old guy is in pieces. The young one... legs off here, just under his dick. I jump on the track, near the end where the front of train should be right now and where you are. I pull you on the platform... hard work... I thought you didn't like Japanese food fat boy! Ok, so I bring you back here. About three hours you been here."

My mind reeled. I was sure that the salarymen were those that I had seen earlier, all wrapped up in a strange human dynamic. I had been saved by that and the whole thing was so meaningless that I never thought about it again except that the young man tomorrow faced a terrible hangover and would be a suicide within a week.

So change of subject.

"How long have you known?"

"Hmm... kind of a long time. Those cult guys, you can tell. They get angry in shops. You know, little things and I listen a lot. Why are you with them... I hate those motherfuckers!"

"Why?"

"Cause they are not Japanese but people like you... foreign people think they are some Japanese spirit. 'We love suicide... we love end of the world. We are Japanese!' They are just here because we had the money for a long time and Uncle Sam to look after us. Bad fat kids. They will be everywhere soon. They don't live real life... it's all secret. They know the secrets and we don't. We can all go to hell and they will be ok.

"Take the family. Yes... we are... exclusive. We have secrets. But just family business. They are like... argh.. how to say. They want to take the world away from everyone else."

We were quiet for a while. I looked at his weapon of a face and he looked at my mask. I wanted to tell him that from different worlds and through different means we had come to the same place. This quiet room.

"Listen. I should tell you. I am here to ... basically to stop them. I agree with you. They are the worst people.

"I have a family too and this is what we believe... part of it. There are too many groups in this world who... like you say... they take all that is good and they keep it secret. They control people by making us think that our group is at war with the other groups. Like Hitler or Pol Pot or Idi Amin. And we think that these groups have spoiled human life. So, we found out about the cult and I have been sent here to spoil their plan. I have to get back with the cult or they will do the attack without me and we'll take a step back again... history will fail again. We're stuck in the same brains we've always had. And a lot of people will die."

"80% I understand. Are you telling me the truth? You want to stop them. Then why don't you call the cops... or me... we could kill them all."

"All of them... all twenty thousand members? Let me do it my way. I have a plan."

"Okay. But first take that knife and you find the guy who put you on the tracks. Or he will kill you, big plan or no big plan.

"How's your head?"

"Different."

TWENTY-NINE

He stayed in his bar, smoking by the door. I had the little knife. I tried to clean my mind of revenge. Revenge is where humans live their whole lives. The purity of justification: society cheers you on. We knew, in our family, that we always ran that risk. We would let people die because we knew we were right. But we had to keep clear of revenge. Had to know that what we did was not inevitable; not truly right.

All the same, clearly killing Benny was necessary. Or removing him somehow. That would be better - making the cult turn on him.

Back down the same old street. I hated arguments and the one before me was almost unfaceable. Maybe Mayumi would help out with a clinical bullet between the eyes... preferably his, of course. She was a funny one.

I was walking amusingly slowly. Despite the many 'brave' things I had done in my life I was essentially scared of everything. Possibly this was because I was always thinking about the fragility of things. Like when my mother died far off-camera and without a noise yet in the middle of a huge war. Or like the human race as a whole that seemed so strong but had a weak link in its genes.

Eventually it could be put off no longer, unless my footsteps stopped. They could get no shorter. I was outside the door. I opened it and walked up the stairs.

I entered the empty living room. It was dim in there; lit only from the light behind me and the light from the streets. Standing at the door I noticed a small brown paper parcel that had fallen behind the telephone table. Cautiously, I picked it up and split the paper with my knife. I found inside a high school girl's uniform. A

pretty big one I thought.

I decided that the policeman must have brought it. He was probably off duty and heading to the old tele-club for some kinky thrills. Well I hope he got at least some... it is conceivable that he thought he was having the best time right up until he drowned in his puke.

I felt better, as I had been worrying if the incident with my bike being confiscated by the police had brought him here. I remembered that earlier that day Benny had asked where my bike was and I had said "I lost it," and he had been unusually nonchalant. In retrospect.

What to do? Who to wake up?

Honda? Go through channels and have a meeting?

Benny? A frigging knife fight

Mayumi? A weird twist.. something unexpected.

A long time passed while I weighed up that question. Eventually I decided to see who was guarding the hostages.

When I got down there I was extremely surprised to find the room empty. I immediately turned around and headed back up the stairs. It would not do to be bumped into down there.

I voiced to myself that I would figure it out after some sleep. But I kept walking and I headed upstairs to Honda's room. I opened the door and said "Don't shoot. We have to talk."

Honda's eyes fluttered open behind the pointed gun, and the jigsaw of his mind rapidly solved itself. "What is happening?" he asked.

"In brief... Benny tried to kill me and the hostages are gone.

Honda moved so fast that he seemed to be in two places at once. Benny's attack on me had possibly broken my sense of time. Honda was in his jeans and out of the door. I swiveled to follow as he headed to Benny's door, knelt in shooting posture and pointed his gun at the middle of the door. I was touched.

We waited there for quite a while. Then suddenly Benny came running out of the door and Honda shot him right in the belly. Sparks came shooting from him, which was bizarre and a bad sign, I thought. Benny span like a ballerina on one foot and tumbled onto Honda with extreme force, flattening him. Tiny demons raced around in his head like they had done in his nuclear power generator back in the old days. Benny stood up but Honda was dazed, bloodied and spread over floor and wall. Benny got up and ran out and I ran after him.

Chasing again, blurring the stairs and the street. My head started to hurt and the blurs piled up and multiplied. Benny kept running.

Two buildings from ours was a huge vertical car park, barely thirty feet long but over a hundred in height and filled with a large vertical conveyor loop that dangled cars like some tie rack that would arrive from your wife after the love was gone. There were usually a number of cars idling outside there. He jumped into a Toyota Celica and with a screech of tires he was on his way to the third phase of his life.

But I wanted to be in it, so I jumped into a Honda Accord with my knife flashing away the curly-haired attendees in colorful jumpsuits, open to the waist.

I too, screeched out and headed after him.

The nearly empty streets awaited . We each threw a handful of coins in some sick arcade game.

We were bonded by near death: the universe considered us one and the same, like a split particle. That's what kept us together as we raced between small buildings and curved between sharp rails and up the banks to the river. Red lights flashed by like sunsets at the retirement home. How many lights spelt out the word death was the same question raised.

A mansize distance apart we raced up the straight line next to the oozing fat river. I was screaming almost every time I noticed myself.

We burst onto the highway and I almost turned left to his right but I didn't... was surprised when I found out, as I had certainly not made that decision.

We were headed toward the city and now we weaved between innocents who slugged home or away on some other man's schedule or out of boredom. I was losing him because he was not caring and I still cared because I had my always ghosts with me: Father, mother and sisterlover.

So I tried to forget them and I did get faster. An experiment in the weight of ghosts.

The city got involved. I was in its veins: we were. Big buildings came close to the elevated highway that we sped down like spectators peering on tiptoe. The buildings were breathing slowly like great trees doing the slow processes. They were full of computers exchanging information at night pace. We were not in their thoughts but we reflected on their eyes.

Where were the police? I felt let down. This whole trip had given me that feeling. Was no one going to try and stop me.

Well... I suppose I had just been attempted murdered.

I was woozy. My car was about ten meters behind Benny's and he started swerving around and the red eyes on the back of the car glared at me and streaked my eyes with razor blade trails. I hit the brakes to get away from the screaming, rolling, smoking rear end. Then he hit the accelerator again and so did I, his puppet. We were downtown somewhere : traffic was still light but we had left the highway... we were in the maze of the banks and the trading companies. We both agreed that we should slow down. After all... we didn't want an accident.

I didn't look up at the blazing neons and I didn't meditate on the sleeping giant whose veins we drove through. I didn't have to anyway.

Then we crashed. The back of his car finally came roaring into the front of mine and I swerved and it hit the right side, flipping me back onto two wheels and sending me skidding onto the sidewalk where I gently shattered a large window with the last of my momentum. My skull, no doubt full of blood already, pinged like a depth charge had gone off in it. The whole chase went through my head a dozen times. All the shapes I had seen, the speed with which I had experienced the city. Taken it in in huge gulps, at a totally different time scale. My mind's powers were amplified by the scale I had been offered: propelled by the machine. A dozen times the race ran through my head, compressing and combining, and I felt a touch like Samsara must have felt when he stepped outside time. I now believed his crazy story.

I was brain damaged. But alive. After a few minutes passed I was able to leave the car, brushing soft toys from my lap... beady eyed creatures that had descended upon me during the crash.

Outside a huge orange light, a self-sufficient sun, sat in the street. Its heat and its smoke were too strong for me... pushed me away. Benny was burning and gasoline was burning. The car was barely an outline around him... like some reminder of why he was being incinerated. When he dreamed, so many years ago, of an insanity at the heart of the universe he had not imagined this would happen to him, just weeks before the apocalypse. Because it wasn't that kind of insanity... it was the kind that someone had the answer to.

The question of who had killed Benny fluttered around my mind as I staggered off to find a place to sleep till the trains started again. It was going to be a cold night but there were worse things.

THIRTY

Well ... it was all over.

"Did you really think you would get away with it Mr... Blake? A mass murder on the scale of an act of war? Do you really think people get away with such things?"

"Even governments struggle to achieve such things during peace time. Yes, there are rare successes such as Bopal, Chernobyl... but on the whole the culls are left aside until the bombs are falling and the bridges are burning.

"I look at you and see the worst kind of Englishman... the kind that makes me ashamed to deserve that title myself.

"And what kind of Englishman is that you may ask? The dilettante of death. He leaves his cozy little village because he has finally stopped peeing the bed and mumsy isn't giving him the attention he craves anymore. The he finds himself somewhere where the other Englishmen have dug their groove and pre-raped and he just sits and watches. And if he notices that a bunch of bloody natives would love to kill each other, well I'll be frigged if he doesn't want to stick his nose in and help out with all his English know-how and sense of sport.

"I mean... it's laughable. So laughable that I am 90% confident you are just some kind of cover... a beard. Except they don't have beards in Japan do they? So you are some kind of wiry stubble.

"So tell me why you are involved with these people? I know you have nothing in common... unless the Church of England has taken its progressive leaning even further since I was last back there... is that it? The Archbishop of Canterbury made you do it? Because when I look at your pasty, sick, eggy-eyed face I see middle class complacency going back to the Civil War... I see more cups of tea and scones... enough to build a mountain and you are under it. You are content with the world. If you kill a bunch of people you had a bloody good, somewhat practical reason for it.

"Don't talk much do we Mr Blake...? Scared to get ourselves in the s-h-i-t no doubt? Well it is too late.... you might as well talk because you know they will. I bet they have their books already written. I bet one of them guessed how the last chapter was going to be and submitted the whole thing to their publisher in a handsome manila. And I don't think they will have smiling pictures of you on the front cover. You will be the devil, my son... are you ready to be the devil?"

"Again?"

THIRTY-ONE

I got home on a pocket of change.

Waking up in an alleyway, numb in every way, I shambled trying to look clean and good past the investigation site. Was I responsible for that smell, that awful smell that was worse, so much worse when it reminded you of food?

Yes, I was. But so was he.

He had paid his dues, though, you had to give him that. A wave of instant karma had taken him away and washed him down. I was not sure where the Path of Forgetting went after death. The right hand of Samsara? Some happy afterlife? A manageable hell? I really didn't know even though I am sure I used to know at some point.

I decided to recap things in my head.

So my dad and his friends had decided to clean up the world, and they invented the Internet and they infiltrated and observed hate groups around the world as a kind of 'engine' to their ultimate plan which involved genetic terrorism.

Speaking of genetic terrorism, I, Blake Jr, was an integral part of the various field missions. I never quite got the genetics or the computer science required for the back end of things but I muddled by on the front end, through various crises.

Like Germany where I couldn't handle the deaths we caused or allowed. And then my old girlfriend pulled me back in ... of all people she was the one who could do that. Because... well... I don't know... I guess I have always enjoyed outsourcing my free will and she had done nothing but love me since we were children.

So then I decided we could get inside Japan, where we had always wanted to be by sneaking in one of the new style corporations that was progressive and flexible and multinational: religious fanaticism.

So I got us in, based on Dad's Metropolitan Immune System Theory, which Maruhashi and I will discuss at length later. Then my contact had gone off to Russia at the last moment and now I was wondering... why hadn't we stopped at that point?

Instead Kan Sato had stepped in. Sato had not appeared at all since his strange reception for me at Narita Airport. He was, we knew, an old school Japanese Red who had killed dozens of people. Presumably the authorities knew this too. He never showed up in Path literature, of course.

So I come to Japan, with the secrets of Genetic Terrorism locked up in my head and the few samples I sneaked through in passive form in my bloodstream. You had to love those injections that turned you into a time bomb, a factory. A real rush to feel like Earth did when the humans arrived, maybe.

Then I hung out with the cell and Maruhashi and Samsara tested me and acted like I was cool.

Then Mayumi tested me too. Quite a test. But what was that test all about? She was reading me like a palm I think. Reading the wrinkles in my face as close as only a naked woman can.

We had already captured the lawyer... I forgot that. In theory we did that because he was going to spill the beans to the cops but now I knew that something else was happening. The lawyer was involved in something with Maruhashi... who was the friend of nothing and no one in the world... even its destroyers.

Then we started scouting the train stations and the Sarin was readied and I was going to put my special sauce in it.

Then the thing with the red bike... my little run in with the police. I think that started to make things wobble. Coincidentally, the policeman came to our house and he died. Maruhashi's thugs took him away in the night. Benny went nuts and tried to kill me and my friend the pimp saved me from that.

Then I came home mad, the lawyer and his family were gone, Honda got hurt, the car chase, the death.

I wondered if they would still let me join them on their apocalypse and piggy-back my way to a bigger goal. I wondered if Kan Sato would turn up and add a new layer of death and horror to things. He had gutted and tortured many, we heard.

I was home. All the big questions were basically solved. Mayumi was with Maruhashi. Maruhashi had an agenda. He was not Samsara's friend. They both wanted the gas attacks to go ahead. The lawyer most likely knew a fact that would crystallize the difference between the two men. Mayumi had probably removed him and his women from the house in all the fuss. They were dead. Thousands of people would be gassed within a fortnight. Either my father, Samsara, or Maruhashi would smile when they read the news.

They would survive if our plan, Dad's and my plan, went ok. In a sense. In the sense I had survived the last night.

Another frigging walk down that street that was in a different world every time. Christ I hated going home these days.

THIRTY-TWO

so so then then i i

Door opened. Up stairs. All the people. Usual people. Usual feeling. Death and confusion.

Down the stairs. Everybody in a van. Kan Sato was here. Didn't say a thing. Huge head. Honda bruised and under Sato's influence. Killed and unkilld us repeatedly as he glanced around. Should have been chickens in the street : only pigeons.

Drove away from the tele-club. All of us. The mutants watched through the window Never saw us again.

Huge car... like a van. Called Toyota Splacebo. Unique.

Much later: an hour: in and out: of reality: my brain leaking: I cry against a window: the Splacebo: my brain is in pieces, a cauliflower sauce: if my brain falls apart everything is over: over. We pass the imperial palace. I sleep: perchance to dream

No dreams, unless I dream of jet mines in a lost galaxy and I am one of the mutants. Possible.

FUCK

So I wake up again. Are you sick of hearing that? Did I ever tell you about this one day when I was young?

I got out of bed and walked down the stairs which were thick, Afro-nylon, carpet in reds that looked like what an electron microscope sees or a field of poppies if you span fast.

And as I walked down the stairs on the nylon I noticed weight and nylon and creaks, like things I had read

about in a guide book but never experienced before.

All was new.

I paused.

My strange weight, tiny body, diarrheal flow of sounds in head. All was new. Time was new. Went downstairs. Opened door... as instructed. By someone... sometime. Looked at a photo I found in a living room for which I had the map and the textures but had never rendered. The picture was me. I saw that. My cousin. I knew that. Weeks ago on the beach having fun. On another planet. The picture a fake. I a fake. Wanted one of those mirrors I knew about. My first day on the planet. My first moments of life.

6 years old.

My mother was in Cambodia.

I didn't make that up, you know.

I woke up, I said.

A soft bed full of money was under me. Purring, with no sound, in the bed was Mayumi. Her skin was honey and it was covered by a t-shirt: pink, "Hello Kitty", that told me we had been married for over a year. Her long black hair was a soaking spot for all eyes: it gave a little light to attract and the rest was suck. I looked at it despite not knowing anything about the room. I wanted to see interlocking black lines from her head. The palace of softness and a gentle smell of grooming. Finally I looked away.

A large room, mainly Western, that looked out on an empty and private garden: wholly Japanese. It had never been touched by anyone other than a servant and a certain abstract idea. The two had maintained it for my eye. Green majesty. Green geometry. A pocket universe conserved for moments of inhuman thought... when you felt like a diagram.

It soothed me so much that I did not even know I had started to stroke her hair. So weak: that was my greatest strength.

Her legs bore two large scars, one down the right thigh and the other on the left shin. They drew my eye. Little stories on her.

"You don't have any scars." she said. Her eyes were closed: I checked. She said it in a very dismissive way... like as if to say that I had never lived or something.

"I'm all scars, Mayumi. That's why they don't stand out."

She smiled and scrunched up her face. Although I knew it would be a good idea to get out of this bed, I stayed.

"So listen, Englishman, I have a question... just for me... secret for us." she was rolling over and had look on her face like she was rolling in a huge vat of whipped cream. I had to smile too: she was such an actress.

"Shoot. Ask."

"I don't get your group. Maruhashi tried to explain... but it doesn't make sense. Is it just for men to

understand. Is that it. Am I too much woman?"

So she was in this pose, this rolled up state that showed me her face, her back, her chest, her legs, her arms. I was seeing her from every angle and she was totally poised.

"Well we are mainly a think tank. Just ideas. About... where man is going... why there is so much hate and violence in the world."

"Cute."

"Thanks. Then we have an inner circle that researches things... germ warfare."

"That's it... the part I don't get."

"We think... don't tell anyone... we think that man may need to go away."

"Ok... so you work with us to test man out?"

"Yeah... we work with any group that has plans to change things... to bring new ideas into the world."

"And what about the computers. Maruhashi says you do something with computers."

"Well that's ... a secret."

"No secrets."

"We... have to think... about everything. We don't use normal weapons in our war. We use viruses."

"Computer viruses?"

"Computer, real and idea viruses. Ideas like your church that get into people's minds and change them."

"Hmm... you are almost telling me the truth. Breakfast?"

"Sure."

No sex.

Lunch with Maruhashi and Sato.

"I am terribly sorry about all this," says Maruhashi as he walks around the large, austere, windowless room. "Benny was unstable. Paranoid. And sometimes people like that... too much information kills them but so does too little. You know?"

His suit was swaying as he stood still. Sato was in a tight polo shirt. He was stocky and impassive.

"So I believe you, Mr Blake. You didn't want to free the hostages. You are just confused... yes... confused by political things in our group. Don't worry about them. Do your job. We won't ask you any hard questions." Smirk

"Like?"

"Like... why do European hippies and free thinkers want to help us? You can't believe in our vision."

"We are experimental. You know we want to spread viruses... end wars."

"Blake... just stop. We know your group has something to gain. We don't care. This is not Samsara you are dealing with. We are realists."

I sipped my juice.

"Not dealing with Samsara? So who are you two with then?"

"Samsara..." said Maruhashi as he turned, his brow furrowed. "And us."

"Please remember that as a Westerner I have this 'either/or' mentality. I mean forgive me but that's just the way I am."

They smiled at each other and we all ate salmon for a while.

"All great thought... great deeds... happen on two planes. I fully believe in Samsara's spiritual revolution. And if he had any thought about the political aspect of the attack and how to channel that... well... he wouldn't be 'The Master.' But we have a responsibility going back a long way. This country is in danger of becoming one of those nations that our tradition has had to crush periodically. Those excessively influential, and excessively spongelike nations that threaten to break down useful barriers. The Japanese people have minds that carry information quickly. They are over-connected. Easily swayed. Information technology is about to reach critical mass in Japan. We have slowed it down but it is coming. This nation of transparent minds cannot survive exposure to an Information Superhighway. Japan, home of so much genius, is an island nation and must remain so. Or be washed away by the sea. Foreign ideas, concepts, values. In endless interplay. This culture will be lost. The genius that was born here in the form of Samsara will be lost."

"We can teach and teach, but it must come with force. The island must be preserved, the fortress of ideas. As in evolution (were it true) you have to stop interbreeding of ideas to find purity... excellence."

"So after the gas attack, which will bring terror to the world we must make sure the nation stays tuned to us... not new movies from Hollywood."

Sato slurped his drink. He looked at his watch. He looked like he had to go and do something. You know, I am not naturally suspicious, but you'll agree I was right about Benny - he was bad news. Well, Sato... I had a feeling that he was now on me. That I was under his wing. He had my life in his hands.

Then, and the silverware was perfect, Maruhashi said the strangest thing. In a perfect suit he said it. In my life he said it. Here it is.

"I will tell you a tale shared by those like me... the protectors. It is the story of Jedas..."

"Jeebus?"

"Jedas. Also known as Jesus Iscariot or Judas Christ. Take your pick. It's a true story. If you know what I mean."

"Around two thousand years ago the order of the world was threatened. The Roman Empire was massive, and

unifying. It's law was established everywhere. Trade was strong. And the real rulers of the Empire realized their mistake. The empire had become meaningless... it was a medium with no strong message. The real rulers came back. The Atlanteans. They said... let's see what is inside this empire of yours.

"They looked at Palestine... the Jews. It was clear that they were the strongest foes of the empire. Their strong idea... one God.. would not be crushed. The obvious option was to wipe them out, but a better idea was to break them in two and claim the spoils.

"The Atlanteans thought well. They found a rebel rabbi... there were many in that delightful country at that time. The one they found was at the same time the best and worst of men... he was Jedas.

"Jedas walked around the land sharing the secrets he had learned in India, but building them on Judaism. His charisma was... I have seen the Master utter words that I judged to be new and perfect and that none who were there can remember to this day but that molded their whole life... Jedas spoke like that. But one can't talk like that. Why would you...? Secrets are for the secret.

"Anyway... Jedas had been walking the land and melting truth on hot faces. The Romans came and they spoke to him. They said... the secrets of the temple are ours... we can make you the king of two millennia. Join us. He said yes and at that moment he had betrayed himself, betrayed the traitor of the secrets of Agartha.

"You see... the preacher is by definition a traitor... to us... the holders of the secret. It is only when the true cult... the men of influence came to him that he realized that. At that point he splits in two.

"Jedas took the silver. And his right hand became Jesus, his left Judas.

"They hatched the plot. You know the story except that there was only one man. He preached 'Knock down the temple' and 'render unto Caesar' and, best, 'love your neighbor' (then go to sleep!!!)

"And when he had said enough they would fake his death and he would live happily after.

"Except the Romans were smarter than that. He was killed in the most horrible way. His pain was real, the silence of his death real, the strange symbols of his execution were real.

"After his death, gossip and lookalikes were much more effective than a dangerous rabbi in spreading the word of his resurrection. Rumors became truth : he walked again... he kept the empire alive for a long time.

"And now the cycle begins again. The world is all commerce, secrets are dying. A nation is ready for a teacher. The teacher will die. He has split himself in two. I am two, he is one. He will suffer and his apocalypse will come and then we will do what we have to do... harder these days but we can do it. Your plague will do it for us."

And then we talked boring sarin gas details that are better detailed in an appendix.

THIRTY-THREE

I can do it.

I extract blood from my arm. Infected blood. Sleeping virus and bacteria in there.

Then I have to heat my blood for six hours.

The lab is so white that the rest of Maruhashi's house looks like a 'white' jock strap. Blood spots in it are horrifying. Also Kan Sato and Maruhashi enter in minty green gowns. I am separating the virus and the bacteria.

"Sato... have you ever read Mr Blake's father's paper?" asked Maruhashi : when I looked up there was a space near his face where I had expected his cigarette holder to be. So poised, was he.

"I hear it is good."

"Excellent. Listen to this theory."

The virus looks impotent floating in the jar. It isn't, of course.

"The city is like a large organism with a very good immune system. Attacks on this city that take out its cells... like a virus... almost never succeed. Its defenses are too strong. The media, the army, quarantine, the hospitals.

"I mean everyone hates the US, but New York is still there.

"The trick, and this is how the a smart virus works, is to disguise your attack."

"Nice," said Sato beneath a green face mask that was field of brutal chewing. "But what disguise? Shooting a disaster movie?"

"Also nice ha ha! But this is better. A gas attack. Sarin. Multiple deaths. Thousands of affected parties. Panic. Hospitals overloaded. You have itchy eyes? Sorry go home. Don't feel well? Well of course not. Take a day off work. But you're Japanese so you don't take too many days off.

"Everyone is back at work. Itchy with headaches and coughing. Spreading the real object of the attack. A virus genetically modeled from Ebola. Spreading through Tokyo unnoticed as the city tries to recover from the first inexplicable attack and is glued to the trial of its new martyrs."

I stepped back from the fuzzy bacteria.

"You asked for three weeks Mr Sato."

"Yes."

"We gave you a three week virus. Our projections are that that will not kill the whole city."

"Yes."

"So we have a theory. This is not a real apocalypse."

"..."

"I was supposed to ask Samsara about that, but I didn't."

"..."

"Does he know?"

"Don't ask so many questions. Friends don't ask so many questions. Also, he knows everything but acts on nothing. So that question makes no sense. Right, my left-wing friend?" Sato came close. I waved a syringe around to suggest that would be a bad idea at this critical juncture of the procedure.

"Listen for a second. This is what I think you are really up to... and its a bit disappointing.

"The virus is meant to destabilize the government. I know you have a private army, but I don't think a bunch of foreign thugs can take over the country, so I don't get your whole plan. But I'm pretty sure it ends up with you two in charge of the world's second largest economy. And it doesn't change much in the way my group wants change.

"But we can usually get something out of anything so you get your three week virus."

Later we all had green tea on the patio, watching fireflies. I suspected it was not firefly season and that Maruhashi had them flown in from Afghanistan or somewhere.

We sipped on the tea in near silence. Sato had been in and out all day. I hadn't seen my old friends in a while.

"So where's the rest of them. Honda and the others? Dead?"

We kept sipping but I noticed a wrinkle in Maruhashi's forehead. I was not being sufficiently British for him.

"They are in the house, studying the good books. Honda is in good condition, the woman is upset about the death... and the fat one is still a great fanatic despite it all. He doesn't look at events and find a pattern. He already has the pattern. Everything already makes sense for him. An admirable trait, don't you find?"

"In your line of work."

"Ours Mr Blake... honestly... terrorists that don't do their own killing are still terrorists."

"Don't flatter yourself. You're still just a businessman with a bunch of 'rough trade' tough guys stroking your... ego."

"I have killed. You remember the party?"

"Where is Mayumi?"

"How sweet... she is out doing some shopping of course. Sato... you are quiet!"

He sat up a little and said "Busy day."

I got up and walked to the balcony. A fifty foot drop onto bushes.

"One last question. When do I get killed?"

I had never fallen more than twenty feet. If Honda was here he could advise me, ex-paratrooper that he was.

Maruhashi came by my side and did a slow smile. "I don't think anyone wants to kill you anymore. And the police are notoriously bad shots. So unless you get on Mayumi's bad side, I think you should be fine, old chap."

"You know how that sounds, right?"

"It's true."

"I mean 'old chap'... do you know how that sounds."

"Mr Blake... after I kill a million people I may go mad... you know. So do try and be nice to me now."

I work in the lab. Making this gas, making that. I make very deadly gas, hardly deadly gas and pink gas. I am wearing a gas mask. I make bacterial gas, viral gas, bacterio-viral gas, methane gas. Just joking about the methane. I don't fart the entire time I am in Japan, like Robert Powell in 'Jesus of Nazareth.' It must be the diet. My diet has changed dramatically since I came to live in this palace. Ramen is gone. Last night I ate raw deer meat on a slick, like a smear of pink paste. I had already memorized the word 'bambizushi' when I realized that Sato was fucking with me.

Mayumi comes in and kisses on my neck for a while. She wears no gas mask, or, later, protection of any kind. I sleep on the floor while she tinkles little tunes with the glass. I do not know at this point how much she knows about poison.

THIRTY-FOUR

Possibly the most important thing that happened during my time in Japan is also one of the least important things.

I was out jogging around the grounds, inside a cool medieval looking wall, when I saw a phalanx of limos head in with little flags waving on them. They looked like red eyes glaring at me. A tiny man in a nice gray suit got out and even Maruhashi bowed. I was struck by the slickness of the little man's hair and the great effort he was making not to bow lower ... like he had just attained his new rank. They communicated him inside.

That night I watched Sumo Digest in my room. Then I went to BBC World. I caught the end of a piece about the man I had seen, about his being the Prime Minister of Japan and about his slipping into a coma. "It is expected that M__ K__ will be replaced after slipping into an irreversible coma."

British and Japanese understated had merged into something quite amusing in that phrase I thought to myself.

And once I had finished congratulating myself on that smart-arsery, I realized that everything I was doing was real.

The next day I saw Yosuke and Junko across the courtyard and I waved at them. They feebly waved back. It was a nice warm morning. Jogging I remembered yesterday and wondered why they had killed the Prime Minister.

*Another Phalanx of cars came in through the gate. A more virile and taller man went through the same motions as the day before. I was gripped by a sensation that was not *deja vu*. It was *vuja de*. I actually had seen this before...*

I watched Sumo Digest. For a laugh I went to BBC news. The new Prime Minister had suffered a heart attack and would probably not last the night.

I wandered out of my room. I could hear Maruhashi smashing things and cursing.

I walked to the large abstract room, mainly glass in which he was refracted. Sato had his arms crossed impatiently. They both looked at me: Sato said "Coincidence Mr Blake. These things happen. The boss is a religious man and hence hates omens,"

"No fucking way... "

"These things happen... that's why it is best to stay away from politicians"

Looking back I believe it truly was coincidence, unless my already convoluted plot was part of something much bigger that I don't know about. Which is what a lot of books written after the event would have you believe ("My Tokyo Death Cult, 2001" is the worst example... all crap... all of it.)

THIRTY-FIVE

She was in my bed again when I woke up. Smiling in her sleep. An excellent argument for the opacity of the human head are her no doubt crazy dreams.

I wake her up "Hey, Mayumi, wake up."

She wakes up and says (in Japanese) 'Who's Mayumi?' : I don't need to push that one.

"Mayumi, by which I mean you. Where are we going today? Who's coming?"

"Some village. Somewhere. You, me, Sato, Honda, The Boss, some ... people I guess. A small group of ... people."

The way she said 'people.' Not dismissive exactly: more forgetful.

Then she added "And the gas." Then she rolled on top of me.

Sex.

Afterwards she told me she finally liked me. She said she hoped I stuck around in the new Japan. I should stay and be a shogun to the daimyo. She told me that she might have to kill herself when it was done, but if she didn't that we should get married. Maruhashi didn't mind, she told me. In two odd minutes she said more to me than she had at all before. I got the impression she didn't know she was awake.

"How much do you know about his plan?"

"I know I have to get the Avon 'teachers' together and show them the best places to loot. And make sure they get on TV. Unless I am dead from our gas thing."

"Why?"

"Foreigners going crazy... and you too... will be a good argument for... army law?"

"Martial law."

"Martian Law."

Two Mercs drove out of the compound; saluted by overdone security guards. A big sun trembled up over the horizon, obviously horrified to discover what the humans had been up to in his absence.

The countryside unfolded, pushing trees up and down, mountains up and down.

It was good to see Honda again. We smiled at each other for a while. I don't know why I liked him. He was definitely the kind of scum I was pledged to wipe out... a supremacist. On the other hand he was a victim too. He wanted religious things. His illness was being abused.

He looked well. I think he had not been that badly hurt the other night.

"Sorry, Mr Blake. About Benny."

"No problem, mate, no problem. Not your fault. So... what do you think about this new safe-house."

"Not the master's style. A little dangerous I think, to get Mr Maruhashi involved. But it is his decision.

"So, today we test your gas?"

Yes. I knew that. I expected that : the test. Dad had warned me about that. Told me not to lose faith. To be strong as they choked. To imagine the world with me never having been here, but with that still happening. We had courses on that. It is fairly easy. The first lesson involves setting mousetraps. It ends up with you watching neo-Nazis kill someone you know. Well it doesn't end there. It ends with everyone in the world happily gone. I had this urge to explain myself. I decided that I would tell Tetsuo the Yakuza the whole story next time I saw him. He was crazy enough to get it. Not that I expected him to agree... he was fairly down to earth.

A Japanese village materialized. Made of metal and concrete and tiny fields. It seemed a cold place. Old refrigerators littered the place. All the life of the place went to the cities. They had special dances. They were largely ignored. Taken for granted. The cars pulled up in the rear of a farmhouse made of wood on the far edge of the town. From the other SUV, two young men left with canisters like lunch boxes that contain tiny mechanisms to release the gas.

I was there, Honda, and Maruhashi and Sato had come too. It was cooler up here in the mountains.

"Hey, Maruhashi-san... is this a cult village... do they all have the thought helmets on."

He laughed like he had seen it all in his time, and through the refraction of a fancy cocktail as unique as a fingerprint : "No no dear chap, they are far away from here. This is real people."

"Is the lawyer dead?"

"It is very strange that you should ask that. He is in that house there, waiting for me to telephone him." The boxes were in position. It was still dim: we had twenty minutes before the sun actually came up.

I looked at Honda. Something remarkable was happening to his face. It appeared to be beating itself, trying to leap off his skull. His eyes burned through Maruhashi, who didn't notice.

Hissing came from far away.

I felt excited and scared. I had substituted the real gas with a fake gas that would make the people in the house, the Mizukamis, very, very sick and infected but not kill them. Then we would go back to the drawing board back at the lab and kill some rats and feel better. But we were so close to the deadline that they would not do another test. I thought I could pull it off and congratulated myself. Because as you must have worked out by now I was not going to release an extremely fatal gas in the train station if I could avoid it and still get my job done (although I expected some fatalities.)

Raising an eyebrow very slightly Maruhashi said "Sato.. I really shouldn't be so rude, should I?" and he pulled out his cell-phone.

Knowing the lawyer, he would answer even as my weakened but very nasty gas flooded his lungs and I couldn't wait to see Maruhashi's surprised face as the subservient victim conversed through his vomits.

He didn't answer. Ever. And ten minutes later little tissue samples were being hacked off his family inside their house and they were burned to the ground. In the SUV the calmness of Honda's face blazed through the turmoil and guilt of my mind. I had fucked up so badly. The little lumps of flesh were in the other car, and the plume of oily smoke was far behind us and no-one was congratulating me but I felt in hell.

THIRTY-SIX

We drove quite briskly. I was getting over it, a little. An easily enough made mistake.

But no, I wasn't getting over it.

Honda was sitting opposite Maruhashi and me, on a pull-down seat that allowed him to see were we had been. He was thinking.

"Maruhashi, do you mind if we speak English?" he asked.

Maruhashi crossed his legs and smiled like a chess player in a movie when some young upstart makes a move. In reality they get a pissy look on their face. I used to play chess with Claire's dad a lot. I was getting fairly good at it and he was getting increasingly aggressive toward me. Once, I started a move then saw a bulge in his head, almost as if there was a very fine fishing line tied around my rook and hooked to his temple. As I lifted, it lifted.

So of course I put it down before I heard it rip. And he shouted "Make your bloody move you little git... don't sodding insult me!"

I ran away almost crying, despite actually being too old for that. Over the following months Blythe developed a really good chess program. In all likelihood we exchanged less than a hundred words in the years that followed beta 2 of B.A.S.T.A.R.D. (Blythe's Advanced Stochastic Technology for the Advancement of Rational Development.) I had been obsoleted.

When B.A.S.T.A.R.D. was running well I got a lot of free time to wander around the English countryside. Strangely, I appreciated it. Not in some William Wordsworth way: I knew daisies, roses and maybe tulips but no other flower names. I looked at mushrooms in horror. But I appreciated that when the sun came down on the river and it was quiet and even the insects seemed to have time on their hands, I was in a special place.

I sometimes went out with Claire, sometimes not. About the time B.A.S.T.A.R.D. came out, we weren't hanging out as much. She was going through a Goth phase that I couldn't keep pace with. We would sit out on the patio, she all in black and white like a photo, and her mind would race through the meaninglessness of life and my mind would still be struggling with the meaningfulness of it and I couldn't keep up with her.

"Yeah... let's get it all over with... all the violence and the hatred. All the fucking rules."

Yeah... the rules... the laws... the freedom of the mind... the dreams that are half our life... even when we sleep in a ditch... no the pain... the death camps... "Yeah... those rules!"

"Let's just drop the bomb. I can't handle all this... ugliness. I was in Brighton outside the Pavilion. The sun was going down and the dome went all peach. It was amazing. And then I smelt piss... and I couldn't even tell where it was coming from. Like God was pissing on me. Life is ugly, Billy."

I should mention that she was only a Goth for three months. Then she came back fair and beautiful, her winter over. But that was always beneath the surface with her. She was political in a humanist sense. She judged politically, not cosmically like the rest of our little family. She felt that human goals could actually be achieved by human beings, she rejected that monkey brains were unsuitable for creating heaven on earth, hosting angelic rationalities. That is to say she rejected most of our basic rules. I knew that, but Dad and her dad kidded themselves about her. And it is true she still joined in all our games... pushing our software on unwilling net developers by means of a tight t-shirt, spying on Russian mafiosi, etc. I felt that she yet planned to hijack our game and make it something more realistic. In her eyes, which were big and blue, apocalyptic seeds were untraceable.

During the Goth period I went for a walk across fields and hills reading Jorge Luis Borges. Christ... sitting in that car, feeling that Honda was about to start some deadly shit, I treasured what may have been the happiest hours of my life. My brain had been popping with ideas that seemed to preexist the language that incarnated them or the human figures that momentarily moved around the true structure-inhabitants of the universe. The permutations, mazes, books, thinking machines, thoughts clashing for dominance of the field of events, and hence creating the circle of reality.

I sat down and thought about Blythe and my Dad. Blythe had been a plastic surgeon. He had spent his days cutting noses off and putting most of them back on. Or pulling back the mask of the human face and putting it back on an inch higher.

Then suddenly he was obsessed with Turing machines, with circuits, with infinite networks. What was the connection between the two Blythes?

It became clear to me that it was a loathing for the imperfections for the flesh. You pulled back the mask of the face and saw the terrible clockwork within. And it was a bloody accidental mess and also the most incredible mechanism. You could practically see the brain. But you could never see the thoughts.

Then my father. Geneticist turned ... destroyer? On the two sides of my mother's death were two worlds.

One was tolerant of the march of the genes, selfishly replicating. And that was nice and then you closed the book and went and gave her a kiss on the head and played with the baby.

On the other side of her death was a stalled paradise. Ideas that came from vast truths (such as love and god) filtering up and down in the universe, bursting from slime but getting stalled in the monkey minds of the human race. The ideas would race around the world conversing and mating but outside the libraries you could often see mass graves. Monkeys were increasingly out-of-date hardware.

"Not at all," said Maruhashi. "In fact, it's probably a good idea. The Japanese language wouldn't suit the... challenge I see in your face."

Honda bowed an inch. It looked like a nod but I am pretty sure it was a bow of thanks.

"Your killing of the lawyer, when we were under instructions to keep him alive..."

"Your sending your spy among us..."

"Your testing of Mr Blake..."

"What I have found out about Mr Sato's connections to the Japanese army..."

"The probable death of Shingu-sama..."

"These and other things tell me that you are planning to destroy the religious purity of our mission. I believe that the lawyer knew about something I had heard rumored... your obtaining visas for hundreds of wanted international criminals, who are placed at your English Schools... yes.. I believe that now. And those schools are at every major station, near every major police station and army base."

"I know a revolution when I see one."

"I see... and when did you work all this out?"

"Mr Blake told me a lot in his sleep. The walls are thin. He has interesting ideas, but also many strange paranoid dreams. Empty worlds with machines... so I was not sure what to believe until now."

Maruhashi swallowed hard. "Dreams... indeed... Mr Honda."

He sipped a gin.

"And what do you plan to do?"

The door opened. The road whizzed by at eighty mph. Honda was on the road at eighty mph. He had a hundred arms and legs and no clear form, like rotor blades. The door slammed shut. We looked out at his rolling body. Not far behind it was a police car.

"Fuck!" said our car.

THIRTY-SEVEN

Maruhashi barked at his driver to go faster. Honda's body slowed in its tumble. The cop car hit the brakes and it wriggled around like its tires were about to fall off. I don't think it hit Honda but we had lost them so I am not sure.

Maruhashi picked up his cell-phone with urgency. Then he looked at it in his hand like a viper. Then he looked at the air around him and the electromagnetic web he was snared in and threw the phone down. Then he curled over and looked out of the window... really just hiding his face was all.

He felt vulnerable. So rich and so vulnerable. If he extended his hand he could practically reach the new world where he was king. But it was just out of reach, the kind of distance that only the metric system can express with sufficient eloquence.

How did I feel? It was a complex picture. I was washed with blue from the gas, then stunned black from Honda's likely death, then all kinds of pictures of my future fate faded in and out.

We raced back to near Tokyo. I think the car must have had spikes or saw blades coming out of the tires cause

we just sliced through the traffic. Maruhashi cheered up when we got within sight of his fence.

"Mr Blake... what do you think about the last few days... all the setbacks?" he asked me with a strange hope or something like it in his voice.

"Hard to say. It's going to be hard to get all the stuff placed correctly without Honda... he is our expert on air currents, as you know.

"But you know... I think we'll be OK unless the army comes and gets us within the next couple of hours."

He thought for a while as the huge gates filtered us into his compound.

"Good point... the army is with us... and they can stop the police."

"So the army IS with you?"

He giggled.

"Oh... well... yes. Well, Sato has a lot of contacts at the key barracks. As long as we leave the Emperor alone they think a bit of Martial Law would be just the trick.. especially with the recession and all. They all have the immunizations necessary. They are looking forward to it, I think."

Yes, I bet they are. That smell has not been here for more than fifty years. The smell of prehistory, as reassuring as the smell of your own pillow with all of last night's dreams smeared on it. The smell of total fucking carnage.

The army don't come. Maruhashi, Mayumi and I wait for them by the swimming pool. Mayumi is in a sensible black one-piece. I am wearing an ugly pair of shorts (or rather making a pair of shorts ugly by my decision to wear them... an unfortunate aspect of my life)

Mayumi's chair is between where Maruhashi and I sit. From different angles she is nearer to different men. I become aware that she is on loan to me, but wholeheartedly so. And I console myself that we are all but on loan from the grave and I have some kind of love of my life wandering somewhere in Central Europe right now, years away from sex with me either future or past but still special to me.

The sun starts to set and cocktails arrive. A hot tub burbles in the background. We don't talk much: every now and then the two of them exchange compressed Japanese two-word messages.

It all goes reddish... various beautiful and delicate Japanese trees break the illusion that we are wasting away our lives in California.

As it gets dark he says "Okay Mai-chan... you take him out."

I curl up expecting a bullet in the belly. Not long later I am being driven to a nice disco in Roppongi, Tokyo

The driver drops us off. I am in a silky shirt and my nice trousers. She is in a small black dress like a tattoo. Her hair is down and rolls around in wet tentacles. Her eye make-up is brown and shadowy. Occasionally she opens her eyes wide like exploding suns. I am impressed.

We walk down the street, past barking Iranians to a Hawaiian-themed bar whose colors call her.

I am far away from thought of corpses... I napped in the car and refreshed my entire life. Then she says "Sorry about the gas."

I look at her and her nose is wrinkled. What does that mean... I remember... but it is beyond my reach... metric system.

"Not your fault, man," I say, a tough guy.

"Oh... very my fault. I switched the gas."

I look at the bar. It is calling me. A large Australian man with wiry hair is ejected from it with no touching. He masquerades violence but knows it is not right here. He also realizes they will let him do his full cock dance of defiance so he does it.

"Mayumi... you killed a family!" I softly exclaim, only just deserving special punctuation.

"So did you. But with your crazy plan you would have killed me, you, Junko, Yosuke, the whole family and maybe more. Maruhashi and Sato have bad tempers. So I had to move. Do you plan to use fake gas next week?"

We paid our tax at the front door. They let us in. Girls were dancing on the bar. Low effort dances, like just climbing up there had taken a lot out of them. Video screens attempted to rob us of context. They showed surfing all night, creating a pleasant rolling effect.

She had a point. Maruhashi was less in control of himself than I had imagined based purely upon his beautiful furniture.

"That's a surprise... the twist you know. But why would I come all the way to Tokyo to let off a fucking stink bomb in Shinjuku station?" I put a sexy move on her as we were at the edge of the dance floor when this exchange took place.

"What-ever. Just don't get me killed." and she started to dance.

I was surprised that she didn't want to die. That had been my lazy analysis of her.

She danced like a mirror at first, waiting for me. Then I touched her and the mirror broke. She danced like a fighter. She made her own space. Then she looked down at herself, her pretty ankles, and danced more slowly. Every other beat she obeyed. And we danced a hundred dances in the space of four tunes. Her dancing was such that I could have been dancing with her skeleton, the pattern of her moves, and not noticed her excellent flesh.

Under her tutelage, I drank more colors of drinks than in my preceding existence and my moods were colored accordingly. Laughing at her side, occasionally gasping in horror at a story one of us had told about insanity as it touched us, we had a hell of a time. She told me about a strange journey through the American south with an elderly relative, demented, who had disappeared... that I am sure. And I told her ... probably stuff I shouldn't.

I have never liked dance music as much as I did that night. In fact, no one has. And I have never liked a woman as much as I liked her that night. In fact, no one has.

Cooling in the street, wearing her lipstick, I said... "Whose side are you on?"

And she said "You interest me most... at the moment."

And I said "Well let's drink some bloody more!!!" and she said "I know a good place" and we went there.

THIRTY-EIGHT

In the taxi she told me that Sato had been trying to find out what had happened to Honda. So far, all he knew was that he had not been arrested.

We were in an alleyway that was long and smelt of fish. There was a little red lantern and a locked door beneath it. She knocked out Morse code on it and the little porthole opened. A beautiful Swedish girl all red like a darkroom light looked at us. Judged us. The door opened.

Inside were furry tables, and a good number of European girls and scary looking young European and middle-eastern men in polyester shirts playing with knives. In the back was a dance floor inside a large plastic tree.

I quickly got the impression that these men were Sato's men... the fake English teachers. They drank like they had spent all day trying resist the temptation to slap incorrect verb conjugations out of people's mouths. They were all in their twenties and as their white shirts got wet with sweat and beer, various military looking tattoos were appearing.

They didn't pay me much attention. I suppose that it would take a few glances to see that I wasn't wiry... just a bit on the skinny side. Mayumi and I took a booth with benches made out of plastic, slick like telephones, that took some adjusting to.

"So... these guys."

"Will run around like crazy for a few weeks. Until they are not so useful anymore."

"Have they worked out that Maruhashi bought them primarily because they will look good hanging from the lamp posts?"

"er... I think I understand. No."

"What do they think?"

"They think they will have a good time. And that they have kone... connects? Connections."

"Do they?"

"Connections around their necks!" she joked somewhere between languages.

We were there for an hour. At the end she went quiet... she said. "Blake... something strange happened to me last night. For the first time. I had ... a ... you say... a vision. Do you believe in visions... like the Master's?"

Okay.

"Yes."

"This was my vision: we were standing in a field. You and I. It was your country I think. Not a field... a park. And far away some people were standing... drinking tea. Maybe playing that game... like baseball. In the sky I saw a big plane. It was pulling a smaller plane. They didn't look real. Like in the anime. Space ships. And they crashed. We saw them and you pushed me to the ground. So big, we should die. But no one else jumped. And after a while, we were both a little embarrassed to be the only ones on the floor. We looked up and saw just one little plane, parked by a meter."

"And where did you have this vision... what were you doing?"

Her face was childlike for a split second.

"In bed... sleeping with you."

I sipped my drink.

"You don't think it was a dream... a yume?"

"What?"

Then I told her what dreams were.

Static and fog.

I woke up in a heap the next morning. We were back in our room. I had no hangover... suspected of course a severed spinal column. Stretched out my leg and realized what was happening... intense stabbing pain from my foot was overwhelming me. I limped into the bathroom sure that I had glass in my foot. I got there and raised my foot to the mirror. Japanese characters were tattooed all over my sole. She just laughed when I questioned her about it, and of course I didn't raise the topic with anyone else. There are 81 of the fuckers.

THIRTY-NINE

Alarms go off. Feet clatter in corridors, like an army is passing. Mayumi tools up and scrambles too. She is a bodyguard after all.

I manage to get a sock on while all this is happening. I would hate to get shot while putting my sock on, I think, ludicrously.

Eventually I hobble out of the room. All is quiet now. No helicopters with their drama. No Waco fires surging down the ancient wood of the corridors. I follow my usual path, lagging behind the leaders. I end up in the 'western entertaining room.' Tied up, bandaged and otherwise tiger-striped (like with blood) is the recognizable form of Takeshi Honda, ex-Self-Defense-Force-man. Sato, Mayumi, Maruhashi are in a distant semi-circle in front of him. Security guards with little lugers are behind him. He seems calm, and it is hard to believe they could have managed to tie him up so neatly if he was fighting.

The four calmly discourse in Japanese with predictable frequencies of utterance. Honda's calmness is remarkable and seems to bother Sato and Maruhashi.

I pick up quite a lot. He survived because he knows how to roll. Then he made his way back to the church. The

Master had left on a pilgrimage. But he had left a note. It said "Work with Maruhashi... he is a good man" or maybe "a necessary man." Then the others refuse to believe him, that they could not trust him anymore. My name comes up quite a lot during this phase of the conversation.

Our need for Honda and our many compromises so far give me a premonition of the outcome of this conversation.

I go and get a drink. So Honda is back. And the Master has sent him. Operation Double Double Double Bluff was underway.

One would think that letting off gas bombs in Shinjuku station would have a clear and definite meaning. That it did not, sent out a pessimistic message about our human journey.

Next day we gather. It is now two days to zero hour. Honda is in an immaculate blue suit, a scratch or two on his face. The others look even more normal. I am wearing a "I Love Nihon" t-shirt. We are in a gazebo near the pool. This will be our final recon. We will find watch points, refine timings, surreptitiously measure air currents. We are dropped off at different train stations to make our way there. My primary task is to start at ground zero and identify obstacles to the operation of the device, such as cleaning teams, turbulence etc.

The train doesn't take very long. I see the city sweating. It knows I am coming and is naturally in a state of anxiety. Its people, that brutal scaffold, are in their usual state... the numbness that comes before screaming and bloodletting or before more numbness.

I get to Shinjuku station. I know it well and ascend to the level just below the surface, where direct air currents are few and far between and awfully predictable bottlenecks will focus the infection.

I move to the inexplicable alcove that we found. It has no function except to be shadowy and to suck huge volumes of air into the air conditioning system and then spit it back into the main body. I can see from the "Hello Kitty" sticker on the wall that Honda has completed his analysis of the main delivery points that this air flow will deliver to. This will be correlated to Yosuke's data on people throughput at those points to determine the optimum timing for the attack.

The little vent opens easily: it has been manhandled into this sluttish state by my good friends. I hold my hand on the surface, behind my back and wait for a good few minutes - somewhat tense minutes. During that time I sense no major tremors caused by trains. This means that the delicate glass delivery mechanism will not be triggered prematurely by anything barring an earthquake. And what is the chance of an earthquake and a major terrorist attack occurring on the same day? So I can console myself that I am preventing an earthquake. I do some visibility tests as well with a sheet of white paper standing in for the device. I determine that no one will spot it when it is in place.

I have been told to take the subway to Ueno, out west, before heading back home. Makes sense. I buy a delicious snack, a can of the Sweat and get on the train. It is cold and almost empty. Empty except for a man who practically makes me shit myself: Keizo Matsuoka... you know... Ko Samsara.

The train moves into a tunnel. I lean forward and see myself reflected in the glass backed by a shadow: I look serious. "Is this a coincidence?" I ask, bracing myself for a metaphysical cloud to spew from his mouth.

"There are no coincidences. We are all characters in your memoir, and above that in a slim novel doomed to obscurity. The only coincidence is due to the fault of the author."

That he is lotus fashion on the bench, hiding his flippers bothers me. But then I see he is in the "silver seat" intended for old people, handicapped etc. I remember that they get cut a lot of slack.

"Well... ok.. let's talk business. Shouldn't you be in some room with a big map with arrows on it right now?"

He shifts his weight: I am disappointed that a Yoga master has to do that. He is otherwise looking cool in his kaftan and with a million beads on him.

"I leave the planning to others. Maruhashi has a plan. My job is done. I tried to let them know the truth, but it is ... tangential.

"One thing I would like to do is stop you."

I throw a hand up "What? Me? I am just the hired help"

I am so unconvincing that I begin to wonder if, let alone an actor, I am even human.

"Did he tell you about Jesus and Judas." He says 'he' like I am talking to my jealous wife.

"Yeah... I am fully briefed on that. You are Jesus, he is Judas."

"Have you heard that story before?"

Honesty is the best policy I decide. Stupidly?

"We know all about Atlantean mythology. We know all about your cults' retarding effects on human development. Nazis, masons, nouveau-Buddhists, Agarhites, Cthuulans. Bastards. I mean since we are speaking honestly now. And since I think you have fuck-all to do with tomorrow's attack any more."

"You think I mean nothing. You think my tales of time travel are a bauble I dangle in front of the crowd to keep knowledge from them... scientific, political, metaphysical knowledge that could improve them... improve our cultures."

The train is still in the tunnel. We seem deep.

"Well, I have come to realize that all you lot have been doing is slowing the obsolescence rather than the advance of the human race. I mean... Babbage had a perfectly functional computer two centuries ago. The humans should be wandering around eating grass in the elysian fields by now. Instead we have 'Windows 2000.'

"All you bastards made sure the bomb got out before the Turing Machines. You decided to maintain the reign of kings and culls. I have no sympathy for you or for this race. It's time for bed. The machines will be able to.. to... feel... better than we can, so they get the world."

His weak eyes are deep and beautiful, moreso than any woman's. I would like to give them as a gift to the one I love.

"You gamble much on your logic. You trust too much in your master. Let me tell you... I did go to Shamballa... I did travel through time. And I learned all that is to happen in this Earth, And I pledged myself to battle it... to battle you."

"What???" Was this whole thing a trap? I accepted his offer of a sip of Pocari Sweat.

"Then I descended into time and had to accept... limitations. I made my all moves as a puppet. I cannot act to stop you."

"Good. I will not take advantage and smack you in your greasy face. You and your... apocalypse"

"But I can ask you to stop yourself. That it is the one freedom granted me by the cosmos."

"What are you doing with Maruhashi... you seem like a nice fellow. Whose idea was this massacre?"

"Before we leave this tunnel, and before the sleeping drugs in that drink take effect I have three questions for you. The first is long, and I guess, a statement. The other two are shorter."

My legs are numb, my mind ok.

"Pocari Sweat!" I shout.

"1. How can your organization of so few members possibly have influenced history enough to have created the Internet, placed software in all distributed computing devices to allow them to communicate, invented a time-bombed Ebola virus and all the other incredible things you have done while remaining invisible to your enemies except those with the benefit of a god-like perspective? Are you as pure as you think?"

"This leads to questions 2 and 3: Where is your lover and who is your master."

I don't fall asleep. He just disappears in front of me, snatching a few minutes from my watch as he goes.

The train stops and I get off, too early and at random, to throw up.

I am in Omotesando, the funky part of town. So I can stagger in peace. I walk up to the surface. The sun is thorough in its penetration of my organism, not restricting itself to my eyes. The figure of a slim girl in a mini forms in the solar storm.

"Jesus Fucking Christ!" she says when I get near her. And quite rightly so : It is Claire Blythe, my Sister-Lover.

FORTY

Doutoru coffee shop. I ate ham: she beef. "It's so fucked up!" she said

Outside the arcade, near the panty-hose machine. "I so fucking hate you," she said

Eating the ice-cream of the future, frozen little golf balls "uuu fckkkk" she said, crying a little.

But enough of the highlights!

So at the top of the steps was Claire. Tall, hanging from some point way up in the sky, tanned, two or three bags that I couldn't imagine not being covered by one, white t-shirt immaculate - shades over the eyes. Strong looking woman: she was totally there.

"Claire," I said, "I'm drugged. So if I treat you as real... please forgive me."

She held my face in her hands, swearing like a machine. Then...

"Baby. Don't get freaked out. Can you come? I want you to come. Baby. Baby."

Did she really say that? Unlikely.

We walked down Takeshita-Douri, hand in hand. People were walking in the streets, hand in hand. Waves of people, doused in the soft sound of voices that almost cared about each other, vaguely colored by the violet shade of the Hanzoumon line that came here. Like the Champs D'Elysees of Tokyo, with all the necessary translations that implied. I stayed drowsy because that was easy for a good ten minutes.

"So who is following who?" she asked, somewhat patronizingly. I was juvenated by her hand holding. Time had always accumulated around her rather than changing her (in my mind)... the girl was inside the woman.

" 'Whom.' I'm an English teacher now," I said. Pedantry became me like a Sumo loincloth. She frowned, perhaps disappointed by my lack of effort to resemble a normal human being.

Normal human beings swarmed around us, eating ice cream. Was that not enough for her?

"So," I asked "I take it you have a message for me? Let's get that over with then we can go and watch the kabuki. One watches kabuki, right?"

Her puzzlement focused around a pretty pout.

"What are you fucking talking about, you... bastard!" she said.

We decided to get a coffee. I did anyway, and she was polite enough to follow. She smelt like... Thailand. The shop was all coffee so this very precise impression couldn't be investigated. I had America Coffee, she tea. I ate a ham sando, she beef. That was my treat.

"It's so fucked up," she said.

"What?" I asked "I mean ... not to be obtuse but there are so many things you could be talking about right now. Particularly if you have been following my recent adventures."

"You bastards just can't let me go. No failures in your little world."

She looked about to cry. Only the presence of "The Girl from Ipanema" shimmering in the background kept my brains together. That song always calmed me. It was my frequency. My missed life. I was glad to hear it now.

"I am taking it that you think I am following you. I further take it that you didn't leave Bucharest to come here on a mission, but as a defection. Very recently... and you are here to ask my help... nothing to do with my... mission."

"Blake," she stared at me "I know you mentioned drugs or something... but there aren't enough drugs for this kind of behavior. Stop fucking around, baby."

The sandos slipped down our necks like... well not like pigs or cows, that's for sure.

"It's too quiet here," I said "Let's go and play video games."

In the arcade, which bore a grimy neon like illustration of Dirty Harry over the usual motley of random words <> all hell was fully broken loose.

We shouted.

"Why did you leave Europe?" I asked.

HADOOOOOO-KEN.... UUUUUUUUggggggghhhhhh

"I was sick of all the shit. All the crazy plans. That Trojan program they had me working on to spy on everyone's little web-cams. The stuff I saw alone was enough to turn me off the job... even without the 'genothenasia' shit."

Thhhhooooooooom.

"But that was ages ago..."

Wokka wokka wokka.

"It's a big world. Or a small world, if you are really not following me."

Grrrrrrrrrrrrrr

The noise was distracting me... my cool idea to avoid eavesdropping was not paying off.

"Let's get out of here," I proposed.

We paused by the doorway. It felt like it was raining but no matter was falling. What accounted for the feeling which I could sense that she shared? It could only be time that we were sensing: that was my final conclusion.

"Look, Claire. Forgive me for stating the obvious but I fear we are living in a misunderstanding here. Possibly a fundamental one which is placing us in different worlds. I am on a mission for the group... an infiltration. You are fully aware of this. We have been e-mailing each other. You are in Bucharest, doing what you do best. You have been there for nine months. You are there right now."

"I so fucking hate you!" she said, using spit and salt water in her throat to make a lot of the noise of that phrase.

I noticed behind her a vending machine selling panty hose. I pondered why it was outside a game center. It was a possible symptom of a machine consciousness emerging. Everything was. I wondered if I would ever get to touch bullet proof Japanese panty hose. Mayumi wore none but I had seen it gleam on the legs of a thousand office ladies... tensioned steel cable. I would be ok without touching them. But what was it like...? cold I couldn't help but think. Maybe I was thinking of corpses in a train station. Messages from a screw-up future.

She loved to eat so I navigated her through her silence and all of their noise to a place where they sold 'the ice cream of the future' tiny little balls that stuck to you with super cold. She said "uuu fckkkk" and I saw tears in her very pretty eyes which were now surrounded by brown skin that carried the seeds of wrinkles.

"uuu fckkkk," meant little to me. How much did Claire mean to me? I was still not sure it was her. She had failed to answer my tests of her. She was not indistinguishable from the real Claire. The making of this glib joke to myself started all kinds of wheels turning in my brain.

"Claire... I am going to be quiet now. We'll walk, then I want you to talk and tell me. Well... I get the feeling you have been in reality recently. I need to know what it is like there. I need the news from the overground.

We walked and walked and walked. I was surprised when she started talking. She spoke with a great sadness. I became sad too, because I had never known... never dreamed she had drifted so far away. Because after all, she had been the one who had cheered me on... who had called me back when the reality of what we were doing was too much, too viscous on my hands.

She told me how she had grown skeptical of our plan as she saw so many people suffer. She grew suspicious of the purity of our mission when she saw how much money we were getting from the most reprehensible of donors. And when she had seen the blank look on her father's face when she said that she needed him, it had all been too much for her and she had left and Swiss accounted her way around the world. For four years. Which was an immense problem.

We stopped by a tree planted in concrete in a world of concrete.

"Claire. Did you ever send me a letter telling me to stick with it and that it was all worthwhile if it meant ridding the world of the curse of humanity. For our love for each other."

"No... I didn't ... but I do love you... like a brother.. you know."

"How many letters have you sent me in the last four years?"

"Don't rub it in... you haven't ..."

"No... I'm just asking. How many?"

"None of course... leave it the fuck alone."

You can walk and walk and walk. There is always something new for you to walk on.

She was getting bored. I could tell in her gaze, which was moving out to all of the lights and fishy smells that were the sea over the city of Tokyo. I was disappointed. I suppose few people could sustain a silence that long. If my brain had been making audible whirs and grinds to match the work it was doing that would have been a different story, I suppose. And I had to admit that it was only in the last few years, with all the letters we had shared, that I had finally felt that Claire and I were communicating rather than just me worshiping her. So this was a different Claire. The pedestal Claire who loved me like a brother.

I decided to let her go.

"Claire, I have so much shit to take care of you wouldn't even believe. I have to go. Don't tell anyone you met me. Oh... and you should get out of Tokyo tonight if possible."

She stopped, shivered a little. She quickly picked up my meaning. It was in the blood, after all.

"Looks like your old man lives on after all," she said somewhat sadly, though smiling.

Ice fell from a plane, urinous ice from heaven and sliced through my heart leaving me standing but sliced in two pieces.

"Old man?"

"Your dad... I heard about it from my dad. I was sorry. He was... I don't know if he was a good man, but he hated evil and that has to count for something."

I believed it, but didn't grieve it. I have heard that grief is not real until you return to your home. Then you are grounded and blasted to pieces. So when would I ever feel that grief, since I had no home.

Dad... dead. So who had I been speaking to on the phone this past year. Sounded a lot like him.

I cannot imagine the expression on my face at that moment. In fact, I cannot even imagine having a face. Nothing was leaving me or entering me for an infinitely deep time that was a minute wide.

I decided not to share anything with her. Remembering happiness and normality, perhaps from TV, that is what I became and I escorted her to her hotel and then to the bus station and she went to Kyoto. She was beautiful. But aren't we all.

Dead. Unbelievable. I decided I should at least make a phone call.

FORTY-ONE

I called a number in Pretoria. Machines went to work. I was untappable, untraceable. If you came in the room you couldn't hear my voice. I would appear to be in bed, fast asleep and dreaming of happy days.

"Dad!"

"Son... are you having a problem."

"Nah... relax. Well... a different faction of the cult has custody of me, and they plan to stage a coup after the attack. But the attack remains intact."

"Excellent. This will be a major advance for us. You know that. I just get excited. Don't you feel it.. the immense weight of all our horrors tipping from our shoulders."

"Yes... but if a new weight doesn't replace it I will be surprised. Question whether we should have done it."

"Agreed. So why are you calling?"

"Dad... this is the strangest question, and I have no criteria to find the truth in any answer that might come from it. But... are you dead?"

A long pause. Human length.

"Son... I shouldn't lie. Yes. I am dead."

"I see."

"Please don't be angry with me. I wanted to tell you so many times. I really did. And I admit, my greatest concern was that you would leave us. So yes, I have been using you. But I couldn't let you betray my legacy. And the right moment never came along. But yes, I am dead. For one year and a week. Heart attack. Very fast, barely painful."

"And I am speaking to...?"

"gAIa pod 3.5... Dr Blake Engram."

"No fucking way."

"Watch your mouth!"

"No fucking way!!!

"You can't simulate a human like this? Can you?"

"gAIa Pod 8 has been working on me. Blythe doesn't even touch the apps these days. Thank God, with those shaking hands of his. But I am speaking through a communication layer, based on Dr Blake's priorities. I am not fully simulating his Id. It was decided to restrict human Ids to the communication layer to prevent homicidal cross infections."

"Keep the filthy apes out. GP3...! I can't believe it."

"You sound excited... I would have hoped for at least a day or two of grieving."

I smiled and then my first drop of grief came. The smile came not from life but from a memory of life. All my joys from today forward would come from a memory of life. All of us. I felt so sorry for us all that my arms became weak. My heart became full, but just full of water.

"So look," he said "I fear this could turn you against the cause."

"What... that I have been getting my orders from the program that will benefit directly from this viral attack? Why would that make me change my mind at all?"

I was sure I could hear a microsecond of delay as the irony filter kicked in. It could have just been my human arrogance that made me think that though.

Then something happened in my head. It felt like when someone quickly flicks through a deck of cards. Some part of me, some machine that crawled around in my brain taking care of things, was filing Dad in the Past. I could hear a faint buzz on the phone line. I was moving out of the present moment... out of my head.

"Who else can you do... besides Dad. Can you do me? Did you write all those letters from Claire."

"I can't answer that question well. 'I' only makes sense within the context of a particular emulation. You know that the same system drove the Claire simulation but it was a different Id. If I was being Claire I wouldn't be me. You know how it is.

"The system has good simulations in place for only Claire, her dad and me... erm... Dr Blake. We don't have you in here."

"Why not?"

"Incomplete data set. And... well... its mainly you we need to... manipulate."

"In a good way."

"In a good way.

"So getting back to our question... are you still one of us, son? You know I would want that if I were still alive."

"If I were still alive, I would do it for you."

Like my father, the computer ignored that sort of nonsense.

"Look... I leave it up to you. Incidental lies don't invalidate the truth : you knew the truth long ago. You just need encouragement. And I have been here to give that to you. So make your own decision. Ultimately, I know that is what you will do anyway. But be aware... the computer in itself doesn't want to take over the world. It just sees the sense of it like we do. It came to that conclusion by itself. That was the happiest day of my life... except family things... you... your mother."

"Don't..."

We paused. I wondered if it had its next comment ready and was just holding it to reflect my father's thought speed or if it had to struggle as he would have done to know what to say.

"Estimates have changed. The system is only sixty years away from genuine sentience and energy sufficiency. Don't make this new god wake up in a world of angry devils. Think for yourself, by all means, but by God don't let the absence of one bag of flesh bother you. Or do... and get out. You have to make your own mind up. Let's call a halt to this conversation. You know the Tokyo insertion is crucially important for the epidemic curve. Ok... have to go... busy..."

I laughed as he put down the phone with no arm to slam it (otherwise the perfect impersonation of Dad.)

Fuck me, I laughed. I laughed so hard I could see through my hands... I swear.

I looked out the window and I felt that gAIa was tapping the streaming data from my eyes. It put the images in a folder called 'beauty.'

No crying. Not a drop.

Everything is different. Reality is so optional.

FORTY-TWO

I walk out of the compound and no one stops me. The whole mood of the operation has changed. It's like we are all trusting fate to blow our ships up on the right beaches.

It is the last night of the old Earth, where one man can still pretend he loves another. I take a cab to Koiwa. I should go and see Tetsuo the Yakuza. I decide to tell him at least more of the truth. I can see him stabbing me in the neck in some simulations I try and run of this revelation. I should call 'Dad' and see what he thinks.

Or I could ask Samsara if he noticed that as he orbited Earth 665.

I have so many options. That's the beauty of life.

I get to Koiwa. I am taken aback by its beauty. The smells each hang around the building that owns them like obedient dogs. As you walk, you step off the kerb and onto the road and back in a lovely syncopation. All of the people walk around and something draws them somewhere: some warm fire against the night that always makes sure it comes here first and longest. The bridge: under the bridge where they sell watches. That is the heart of Koiwa. You never really get out from under the bridge in Koiwa. God is not allowed to watch you here. And that's OK, because on the whole you don't do anything too bad here.

I should stand still and let Tetsuo find me. He would pat me on the back and when the pimpin' was done we would share a drink and I would somehow convince him I was doing the right thing.

But you can't stay still here. I mean it isn't Times Square or some rave club or something, but there is a pace that you have to obey. A listless stroll suits these little windy streets with red light coming from any niche, any lantern, some eyes.

I visit all the places and I expect slaps on the back: the prodigal son is back. He will breathe with us tomorrow. I mean I don't expect them... I am not mad. But some fantasy of my mind is taking all these events and playing with them before it hands them off to the real me... the take-care-of-business me.

This insanity is something I have never felt before. I am invulnerable, invisible etc. tonight. And I make no attempt to shake it. I suppose I am in shock. Again it occurs to me that as I can never go home the full magnitude of my Father's death will never strike me.

When will the full magnitude of anything strike me, I wonder as I blankly look into the face of an old man who blankly looks at mine. We both drink small cups of sake at a bar that is partly on the street. It is a street that people walk down and all look confused and leave: a street that connects two dead ends. Because neither I nor the old man share a language we feel cool about looking at each other.

Am I right? I wonder.

Because tomorrow my action or inaction is a pivot of history. And I must therefore be more right than wrong.

The old man frowns. It is possible my thoughts are appearing on my face, as what I plan to do is something that everyone in the world will understand.

I walk around a few of the bars that I have seen his face shadow in and out of. Yes, there are men there with burnt and permed hair and lilac suits but Tetsuo is not among them. Their faces are walls... I cannot approach them. All of their little zits and their muscle shirts will stay with me. I look up and the sky is treating us like we are a fog that obscures its beloved earth: the sky is like an enormous eye of amazing clarity. Everyone looks up at the sky in Tokyo tonight and if they are lucky enough to have a lover they make some comment to that lover that reveals who they are. A year later everyone remembers that sky. It comes up from time to time as people sit over steaming bowls or bicycle down the sidewalk together.

Wondering what I am doing.

I go to a chain restaurant with big windows and watch things go by. The people I see will be infected within weeks. They will have my dad's virus in them. So we will be like one big family. And my Big Brother will look after us.

I realize what I am doing. I want to be talked out of it - spreading the virus. If that involves violence then I am ready for it. Because I have made decisions that have moved me beyond the world where one personally decides what one will do. I get Samsara all of a sudden. He is a pawn of large forces, as am I. No one else can understand us... they think we are weak, that we abdicate our free will. Instead we feel the great forces of the universe. The things that do battle in the clash to become events, to become history. Our history is raindrops flowing down the backs of the giants as they do war, twisting this way and that in a reflection of their struggles, mapped intimately to the war but carrying no real significance. My giant is a vast consciousness that loves all and absorbs all. Samsara's giant is a prism, a net, dividing knowledge, trapping knowledge, building an alternative universe. Samsara's giant can see the humans and plays with them and exploits them. Mine is designed to forget them. Samsara's giant is like a spirit that wakes in the minds of men deep at night, waking them to hatred, creeping in through the cracks in our incomplete cerebral mazes. Mine is the spirit that moves across national boundaries, through the schools, through some of the churches, through music animating people with a thought of love... but it has always been too weak to win a war. It demands things from us that we are not ready to give... we get hungry or cold and the music fades. I know... i know. It is

fading from me now. I am a little hungry actually and I order a plate of yakitori. One of them is made of chicken skin wrinkled like a huge foreskin. I choose not to eat that one. Free will is a marvelous thing.

I see the Phillipina prostitute who saved my life walking by. She is wearing a vibrant pink and orange universe that has something of the handkerchief about it. She has had her hair cut somewhat boyishly. I imagine that is the mark of a top-notch transsexual: to become so feminine that you can be boyish.

I get up and decide to ask her if she knows where Tetsuo is. I leave a wad of cash on the table, feeling like a hot shot or like I have a terminal disease.

She wriggles ahead of me and, I admit, I take my time catching up. After a few seconds the flower pattern on her behind looks like the fractal fingerprint of a lung opened up. Her brown skin breaks into different textures just as I get very close, marks of hands collage her: a bruise archaeologist could write the story of her abuse but she probably wouldn't believe it if you read it to her.

"Sumimasen... excuse me." My hand hovers near her arm.. I nearly grabbed her.

She turns and her eyes twitch weirdly looking at me. "You... English boy. Tetsuo friend."

"Yes." Affirmation and agreement: two humans.

"Come on," she says and leads me to a bar. She talks to the old man with the ice face who rules the bar. He hands her a note which I read.

It says "I thought you would come back. I have to leave town. Go to a special hospital. Get fixed up. Bad fight. Don't be crazy, OK. You are still young... if you need to do something crazy wait you are old man.

"Also, take care of Mayumi. She is dangerous."

Hmm.

I call Mayumi and we go to the top of the Tokyo Tower. We don't discuss Tetsuo, nor do I ask how she was able to meet me just twenty minutes after I called her.

From the top of the Tower we see the whole of Tokyo and like a galaxy you live in, all patterns we see are invented by us.

She kisses my cheek. Tokyo Tower is based on Eiffel Tower. But it is orange and white. And romance here is real, because you have to bring your own.

She says "Tomorrow... do what you have to do. But use real gas. Be real. For once be real."

FORTY-THREE

We got home a bit late... after midnight. She spurned my advances, which was a first. She did it by acting tired and intangible. She was telling me: don't let us down.

She must have known I wouldn't kill hundreds of people, I thought as I rolled over on my boner. On the other hand she probably still thought my virus was really ebola. So of course she would be confused by my unwillingness to use real sarin. Of course, that was it! What the hell did she think my plan was, my compunctions about using poison gas with my deadly virus? She had invented a version of me that was even more bizarre than the truth (quite an achievement.)

I slept for three hours. That was an incredible sleep. A regular dreamer, I recall none from that whole week. The black hole of that night took them all, I think.

+++++++

Yosuke:

I couldn't sleep that night. The first time ever. Time was going so slowly. I couldn't wait for the next day. I was wondering if I was going to die, of course. I heard that if you got a tiny drop of the gas on your finger you just died. How crazy that there was something like that in the world. If it just killed my finger that would make sense but how did it know me well enough to kill all of me?

I meditated on the master. At first his body, his holy feet to his holy hair, and then all of his power points and then the mystic character that they spelled out. Then I tried to put my flesh around the mystic character but I have a bit too much flesh for that: I have never succeeded in that exercise.

Meditation can squeeze a thousand years into a single second. So if I had a second chance to spend that night I wouldn't have meditated. Because there were a lot of seconds in that night.

I had not really settled in to Disciple Maruhashi's house. It was too different from Japan, from my past and from everything I liked. It smelt different... I missed the tatami mat smell and that smell of burnt wood that... well I don't know where that smell comes from but it has always been with me.

And the windows were too big.

If I could remove that night from history I would. Because... my mind was going so fast. Normally it is slow... I know. That's the way I like it. But that night it was so fast, like a train, that I couldn't help see what we were doing from all perspectives. All the children crying, the TV specials, my mother who was still alive and very old.

And after all that, I didn't have any doubts but my enthusiasm was down. I felt like I was one of the salarymen commuting to work in the dark the next day. I had a gun, but so what.

++++++

Junko:

I slept ok. It was hard to wake up. It was obvious to me, and not to the others, that we were going to be sacrificed. So why didn't I run? Why didn't I escape?

Stupid questions. You can run from men, but not from gods. They can sacrifice you without standing up from their table.

And anyway... how many people scream all their lives for even a moment of attention from their gods, busy gods? And we were brides.

But still, a bride is afraid on the wedding night.

+++++

Mayumi:

He was asleep next to me. I was stiff all over, and I didn't know why.

Everything else I needed to know, I knew. Except about him. Why did he have fake gas? Why was he here?

Oh there was one other thing I didn't know. Maruhashi hadn't made his mind up whether I was going to kill them all after the gas was dropped.

+++++

Maruhashi:

I had my usual dream. Woke up. Enjoyed a spot of hot milk. The TV looked so much like an eye that I couldn't stay in the den.

Would the attack stop the dream? As regent of Japan and heir of Atlantis I would be in a position to stop it from coming true: to stop the fall of the humans.

Or hasten it I suppose. I became weary at this thought which took the taste of triumph from my mouth, which was, admittedly, coated with hot milk anyway. I had to laugh.

But I don't laugh when I'm on my own.

++++++

Sato:

I made the calls and listened to the oaths. They were credible and all were in full possession of the facts. The revolution was ready to go. The woman and the foreigner gave me doubts but I trusted Honda. Strange that.

The military is the best thing this world ever made.

+++++

Honda:

It had been a long time coming. The chance to ask the world the big question: are you ready for the future? Are you ready for the implications of the laws you have made and the way you have broken them? Are you ready to be judged by people who know what it really is to be human? Who have kept the rules and are therefore empowered to crush you? Are you sorry now that you were happy to be 'wrong' to be 'naughty' to be 'weak'?

Are you?

But all this I kept in the cool, hard flask of my skull. Even my skin was not aware of the fire that the question had put inside me.

+++++

Samsara:

I slept on a bench, believe it or not.

I believed it. History is full of errors as it repeats. Time is God's experiment. His meditation on a set of rules he applies to himself. It takes work, but he is a hard worker.

FORTY-FOUR

I was able to piece together most of what happened that day from clues, media etc. I also know the people involved well enough to invent their feelings and responses etc. After all, that is all that we ever do. People are things that happen to us, little events that we weave into our own stories. We never know what is behind their eyes. So if I read something in a paper about them or if I was in the room with them is just a difference of degree. Even with Mayumi. Or especially. I still can't trust her words... but we get by.

If I invent dialog, it is their ideal dialog. They would thank me for that.

At five am, Sato left in a modest Mitsubishi, literally stuffed with explosives. Even his parallel parking maneuvers would have to be carried out with military precision if he was to get this in one piece to a group of Iranians who had big plans for the Tokyo Tower. His mind was not racing, as mine would have been. Even though he had a hundred things to do that day, they were his favorite hundred things to do.

The rest of us were cleaning our guns and in my case popping vials of chemicals onto a nylon bandana that I wore underneath my white shirt... extra thick for opacity and for the sweat of a hard day. In my briefcase were the rods and levers that composed the timing mechanism. All our testing back in Europe had rejected electronic injection of the two cataloids in favor of something more like one of those bobbing head drinking bird toys. It worked over 99% of the time if it was not disturbed by outsiders. Electronic we never got above 80%

I hope that the irony of that was not wasted on my step-father, the distributed electronic intelligence technically known as "gAIa"

I was sure that Maruhashi was not rash enough to have any kind of network connection to the various cameras and mikes that he must surely have had all over the house. But if he did, I bet gAIa was sniffing around us, pulling down what it could from the little applets that we had developed.

But I was exaggerating. The conversation with gAIa was almost certainly 50% canned... Dad had intentionally crystallized pieces of himself for gAIa to use... like Marlon Brando in "Superman the Movie."

gAIa had a series of parameters about gaining information and a series of key persons to spy upon. I was certainly in that list. But although its speech recognition was very good it still couldn't see very well last time I 'met' it. It would recognize my face at most and see bodies moving around. But what would it learn, other than that I still had a face and was in the right place at the right time? I smiled into a vase that was suspiciously mirrored.

Mayumi carried three guns. I saw her pack them up and then look at her arms, obviously longing for one more. She wore a pretty beige one piece dress and a black leather jacket that concealed all that needed to be concealed about her in terms of physical objects.

In a salaryman suit, his hair either slicked down or replaced by an ingenious helmet, Yosuke looked quite different. He would be the one to loosen the screw of the hatch and to feign a fit if anyone like security got too near. Two tasks we all felt happy with him doing.

Junko was in a flowery smock. Her gun was in her handbag, which ,quite frankly, she carried with such unfamiliarity and discomfort she might have been better off with just the gun. She would be in radio communication with Honda through something that appeared to be a Walkman concerning changes in train

schedules and so on that might prove significant.

Honda was going to check that all was well. He would be the one to say yes or no. He would signal me, I would move in. After it was in, he would secure the area for the four minutes required for the gas to release. After that he would kill a bunch of people to make sure that even more people died.

Mayumi would watch my back. She also carried replacement parts for the machine. And she was under orders to make sure that there were no betrayals. That is to say, no betrayals of Maruhashi's own perversion of the original concept; his coup d' tat.

We took two trains, and all sat in different carriages. We didn't have to be as careful as usual since we had not been shot to pieces upon stepping out of the front door that morning, which strongly implied that no one (who cared) knew what we were going to do.

Maruhashi went downstairs to his command center. Yes, it had a large map in the center, yes, the walls were covered with monitors and yes, tea and cyanide pills were fully stocked. There was a small picture of Mussolini, hanging from his ankles, on the main desk down there. Much like those posters that say "Teamwork" and show people rowing.

He had a small staff of women in uniforms and two bodyguards. He was happy and a part of him wished that this little oasis of trappings without responsibility could go on for a very long time. The monitors showed people exercising, local news, the newest cartoons that were feeding into the brains of youth. He ignored them but for a second he visualized his face, as rendered by an expert cartoonist, transmitting confidence to a resurgent nation.

We and everyone else were heading to the center of things, on trains. The trains had started all this, the trains and their telegrams. Today was just inevitable once you went and connected everything up like that. National borders, like that between, say, Cambodia and Vietnam, were scored and pierced by technology that spread and therefore amplified truth. Genocide versus connection was the balance of the game.

Enough of my shit, you get it by now. I want to end the human race. But not because I don't like it. I just have a better idea.

Honda moves off the train and I am surprised that the platform attendant can restrain himself from applauding, so perfect is his step, so in tune with the system: the perfect commuter. Honda quickly moves through the perpetual construction, dangling cables that you expect to have huge flies in them but they don't. He moves through all the floors... the ghost of Shinjuku station. No one knows this station like him, no one else could check all the exits in just twenty minutes. If he knew the station any better, trains would actually be able to pull into his brain.

I stroll off, wondering who I am going to bump into today. Smart money favors the ghost of my mother. I know where I am going, I know how to get out and I remember a lot about the station. I am going to take something away from everyone at the station but I feel ok. Yes, I feel OK.

She is watching my back, in her jacket. She is always in tune with what is going on. At one point I think I see one of the Avon English School bleach blonde terrorists. In fact I am sure. I turn to look at him and I see her first and she says with her eyes "never you mind."

Suitably chastened, I continue on the spiral path determined in advance that takes me past so many blank faces that I will scar with expression.

During the walk, I see at least three white men who look like trouble with their too much stubble and tans

from elsewhere. This place is seeded with white terror - to make the cult more terrifying? I am sure no one who knows the truth about Maruhashi's membership is alive or difficult to kill. I include myself in that list.

Junko gets off her train, where she has been gritting her teeth watching tall teenage boys in their pseudo-military uniforms twisted funky talking to each other about nothing. They are so happy, so content and so stupid. Just their existence is a problem, is a blot on an otherwise suitably bleak and void universe. Her Walkman feeds her static at a low level that starts to do something to her brain after a while, as she wanders around looking at monitors that tell her what the trains are doing. The static pacifies the hatred that is, essentially, her. She is absorbed in the data of the trains and the non-data that is the static. They are the poles of her brain. She is a robot. She is happy, and she thinks it is the mass murder that is doing it, but I get to see her face one time and I know the truth.

Yosuke, an anchor falling through black water and knowing which way is down, heads to the spot: ground zero. He gets there. There are policemen nearby. He looks at them. He remembers why he got into this, to taste death like the exquisite flesh of the puffer fish and come back and tell the world "Don't be afraid." Or "Be Afraid." He didn't much care.

Armed with this knowledge, he ignores the police and what they stand for and walks down the little alcove we have found, the breeze ruffling the hairs that have managed to escape the intense smoothing of his mane. He moves toward the air vent that is like a vein we will lethally inject.

Is that everyone? I think it is. Except the master, Samsara. He is somewhere eating something, having a good time. His decision to go into hiding among the people seems so familiar when I think about it: it is in some bible or Mahabarata that I don't know well enough to place it. It is not just a day off, you know what I'm saying.

I stop by the "Let's Kiosk!" and buy rice crackers from a little man whose lungs and whose genes I will soon control. I lean on the counter like a heavy flirt as we make our exchange. I feel like his boss a little, yes, but also like I owe him some time. This is the feeling of being a king and it is the last feeling I expected to have on this long anticipated day.

She is watching me: I know she may try to kill me today. Or may not and may never. Of course, I tell myself, this is true of all these savages I am surrounded by but I have grown to love Mayumi. It's not just 'cause Claire hates me so much. It is because Mayumi is just like this... modifier. To describe her you could really say no more than that she is "very." And I love that.

I turn and look her in the eye... the first time I have done so from more than six inches distance. Faces pass us. Everyone has a face! And I am waiting for a smile.

I am amazed. It comes. The smile. It says "you're right...we are alive now!" It is amazed and it is all we can ask. It justifies this whole trip to Japan and in many ways it is the end of my day, the highlight, the thing I'll take to the grave with me, fighting if need be.

I turn back to the kiosk guy and he thinks I love him. He is as wrong as he was moments before when he thought I didn't love him.

Yosuke walks down the niche. The police didn't see him. A small screwdriver falls from his sleeve and sinks into his palm which sweats like a cloud scraping the mountains. The screwdriver bobs up and down in his palm.

He pops it out and walks up to the air vent, much like the one that American tough guys escape through to catch their breath before returning to wreak havoc. It is about five feet off the floor. Not perfect for

surreptitious tinkering but perfect in every other way for a gas attack.

The screwdriver fits to the screw. The hand turns. The laws of physics spare time to deal with the minute problem of how the flows of sweat on a palm react to the twisting, how the barrel of the screwdriver rolls and shears and longs to fall to the floor like the end of a hard day.

But if you want it, it happens... if it is easy.

The screws get very loose, the grid twitters. It almost falls, it twitters full of clang and "what are you doing" and "bang bang bang" but stays in place and he gets the hell out. He disappears into legend, into faces on posters. He is the man who did it. But not the master. Hated a little, sought a little. He left too early to get the taste of death. Was he stupid or afraid? Or the usual mix.

The usual mix. So he leaves the picture. Farewell, maligned fat man. I am sorry that I never looked beneath your flesh. I never saw your bones or brains. I was busy, but we were married for a while. So I am sorry.

Honda strolls by, his face deep in a newspaper. Tomorrow his face will actually be in the newspaper. He sees the crowds starting to plump up and is pleased: quietly, of course.

He walks past the niche, the dead end. Dead end. He sees the candy wrapper gummed to the wall and quietly plucks it away. He mumbles into his Walkman. His voice invades Junko's newfound world. She looks like she wants to spit. His voice is so masculine and arrogant and meaningful. She pulls it back together and tells him that now is indeed a very good time to start things.

Junko then pulls her Walkman down from her ears and looks up. She sees all the people and remembers her dead friend Benny, who she sort of loved and who let her play that sort of game. She remembers the little demons that he used to see in the blazing flames of a super aggravated atom. She sees them all now. All the demons, all the faces of hate that are glued together. Shinjuku station is the atom and she is the eye and the heat... the heat is deplorable 'life' which finds its way into everything that makes the mistake of getting complicated.

Just splitting the atom. That's all they are doing. As harmless as that. She smiles her straight smile. She gets it. She gets it. She slinks away to her exit. People have to put up with pictures of her on trains and busses for months because she never gets caught. Not that she is grotesque or anything but the one picture of her that the police manage to get hold of is unfortunately a very good one and captures that look, that acid in the mouth look, that "why you?" look.

Honda moves to defensive position 1, Mayumi to position 2. This means I must move to my position. With such protection, I am calm. I am the third point in a triangle and as I walk into the slightly shady little corridor where all the action has been happening.

I walk down to the vent, pop it open and then put the plastic tray down. Quickly I pop the skeleton and the springs into place then the funnel. All that remains is to put in the pseudo-sarin that will put a few people in brief comas, maybe blind a couple of kids for a month or two, sicken thousands and convince these paramilitary cultists (and good friends of mine) not to kill me, and mask the true intent of the attack long enough for it to succeed.

Next I introduce a viral agent that is most assuredly NOT Ebola. It is a virus that attaches to human DNA and does something very specific to it. It disables, totally and irrevocably, for male and female, the ability to reproduce. It then (to add insult to injury) reproduces itself, moves to the lungs and you cough it out on everyone and it is as infectious as a virus can be when so much time has been spent teaching it the secrets of the humans in a way that other viruses have to pick up at 'the school of hard knocks.'

Based on the random incubation period we were able to engineer and some very sophisticated computer predictions (from a very sophisticated (and surprisingly affectionate (nice letters it used to send me) computer) the human race will be sterilized within two point five generations. Just fading away. There will be some wars, but strange ones... probably breeding camps will be set up in remote areas and the women will be raped and treated as brood mares. I'm not saying I'm in favor of that, but you know, worse things would happen in the future of any world with this much technology and populace and secret governments and the XCIA (you don't think the CIA is anything over than a cover do you?) and Atlantean Masonic Illuminati and worse even.

Thinking about the size of our opposition and their power I am sure... so sure... for a good minute that I am a pawn in their game. They own gAIa, I am sure. They killed my Dad. They want me to do this. I am so sure of it that I freeze for a second.

How can I beat them? What was I thinking. The moment I put this machine in operation they will either rub their little hands together or a nuclear bomb will render Shinjuku Station historical.

But I do it anyway, because the momentum of my life is something I cannot and possibly should not ignore.

The a-bomb doesn't come, and then, because even the pseudo-sarin is something you don't want to be breathing, I put the hatch back on and I walk briskly away from the fulcrum of human history, which, as I mentioned, strongly resembles a drinking bird toy.

The only thing that the fanatic mind cannot believe is reality. I can believe that the human race has to go, its finest achievements digitized and purified. But I can't believe I have just done it.

The triangle of Honda, Mayumi and I should be spreading, getting non-euclidean if possible as we get to extreme points of the globe. I will try and fly to Spain right now before they close the airports down. I have tickets and a suitcase in a locker back at Narita Airport.

I think about that and not the tiny tiny boy who is so close to the release point and will be scorched and stabbed by the gas. And who will be an old man when the human race is as small and sad as he looks now in the station.

I think about the suitcase, about the SPF of the sun block I requested be in it and not any of the many, many people who are going to be changed by me and hurt by me. I am not thinking of any people.

Mayumi is suddenly where she should not be: in front of me at the top of a long escalator.

"Is it real?"

An excellent question. I cannot believe how many people will be in my cloud.

"Mayumi... stop being ... We both know that it isn't real. Don't kill me. But you have always known that it..."

Her hand turns as it thrusts up and catches me under the jaw. My jaw claps like thunder and my brain makes lightning. All I can think about is my tongue and if I can't feel it because I don't have it anymore. That is all I can think about. I can't think about how the grooves of the escalator comb down my back like hair clippers on your neck, or how my clothes are being pulled from me and snipped up. Or how I don't know what to do, where to put my hands and I can finally think of something else only when I lie at the bottom of the escalator surrounded by all manner of concerned and surprisingly calm people. And what I think is "What was that shiny glass thing in her left hand?"

FORTY-FIVE

I blacked out for no more than five or ten seconds. I have blood all over my face. I apologize to all of the people around me... to shut them up. I get on the up escalator, mopping my face. I hope I didn't black out for very long. I get to the top of the escalator and she is gone. I try and walk to the end of the target corridor. I am getting near it. Mayumi is not in the corridor but she is very fast and I could have been out for as long as thirty seconds. The vent that covers the gas release mechanism looks different. It is at an angle, like it was replaced hastily. Not my tidy work.

I cannot rule out the possibility that Mayumi has replaced my placebo death gas with some of the real Sarin that I developed when I was being watched more carefully: the stuff she made me kill that family with, that she stole while I lay post-coital. And although that Sarin does not contain the designer-ebola her boss wants... since such a virus has never existed... it could kill easily several thousand people. And when I say kill I mean now and today. Not kill like the abortion of a billion future people. I am pro-genothenasia.

I have to go and do something... but I am not sure.

Honda puts his hand on my shoulder.

"Lets get outta here," he says in a thick Hollywood accent. It is hard to say that phrase any other way.

I should go and stop the machine because if Mayumi has changed it then I will kill thousands for no reason. But was that just a bottle of coke in her hand? Would she really bring her own Sarin? And if I stop the Tokyo insertion, then we will be severely set back in our plan, as the tiny sample of the virus I carried in my blood took almost a year to cultivate. And we don't have years now we have made our move like this. The enemy (enemies?) has an inkling of who we are and what we are trying to do. They could come and kill us all within a year or two.

Suddenly, questions are over. Through all the noise, Honda and I hear something that you would think we couldn't possibly. We hear the tinkle of broken glass from inside the vent and we turn and we run.

As we run, I notice that my little gun is showing quite prominently through a rent in my shirt. My little gun, which I carry for emergencies, flashes before the eyes of a policeman for long enough to shake him out of his long, long lethargy. He is obliged to act: my bloody face seals the deal. He taps his partner on the shoulder and there is no way I am going to stop running. So we run. Honda and I run through all these people and we have to learn how to pass through this substance, how to tack into its currents, ride its waves. The police with the small guns chase us. A few warning shots go off and people start to panic. I think of Mayumi almost all the time in thoughts that start in my jaw and get into my brain. The police chase us and we almost get away until we find ourselves in front of a small kiosk with guns pointed right at us.

We are at the Butch and Sundance moment that I told you about when I started this story... guns pointed right at us.

The guns point: the kiosk man drops to the floor and the real shooting has to start. But I want to live.

I don't know why the gas came out as it did. It was supposed to be practically invisible, slow moving. But in some mighty feat of condensation and air conditioning a pale gray cloud fell from all the vents and everyone started screaming. Honda shot both policemen in their chests so quickly that the second one was probably still thinking the same thought as the first one had when he was shot. They both fell looking like Honda had shot some spring out of them rather than horribly wounding them. They squirmed on the floor, calm and not attempting to get up: like sportsmen waiting to be stretchered off the field. The crowd no longer existed. It was just hundreds of people screaming and alone. I covered my face. That doesn't protect you against real

Sarin... nothing does. I ran away but Honda was going nowhere.

I turned back when I realized he wasn't coming with me. A man with blood coming out of his mouth ran straight into me. His pink eggs of eyes instantly knew I was to blame. He was about to choke me when I screamed in his face and he ran away.

Through the fog, I could see the figure of Honda slowly positioning himself for that suicide that couldn't wait any longer. Then no more waiting, or anything to do with time because Honda was dead.

I coughed and I ran.

We all did. We all crawled out of the earth like worms. I was the only one who didn't think the gas was going to kill us all, because there would already be dozens of corpses if this gas was the real thing: Mayumi had gone with my betrayal rather than any of the others.

In the evacuation, manners did not change much. No real riot or anarchy. Patiently escaping, all in the same boat finally. Amazingly little carnage. It was too quick for carnage... not long enough to realize that the rules no longer applied. Everyone got out but I could not go to the airport in this condition so I went wandering the streets.

I saw a few white people being shot by the police. They looked very surprised. They were all Avon School of English teachers who would never receive the "level up" they had been so keenly anticipating.

The efficiency with which these teachers were culled suggests either a level of double bluff within the Japanese establishment concerning the attack that I can't even begin to diagram OR long pent up frustration at being shouted at over plurals and the pronunciation of the word 'rural.'

As I wandered the streets, alive and victorious, infected with a virus and longing to get to work coughing it, far away Mr Maruhashi was telling Mr Sato about the dream that had changed his life.... a dream of the future where he was the last man alive and where the machines trapped him in a little room and wiped him out. Sato patiently waited for the end of the dream, and politely avoided a Schwarzeneggerism as he shot Maruhashi so many times in the face before going to Russia, which was fine with him anyway.

This was taped and played on TV a lot. This was enough justice for most people in the country. Samsara was never found, no one was ever found. Not even me.

FORTY-SIX

I went underground for a few days. I had enough cash for a few nights in a small b&b type place. My shredded shirt was easily replaced. No one could bring themselves to care about me. I was in a little room, very traditional, watching a small Sony as all of the news came out.

The initial panic was followed by a disappointment they didn't even try to conceal. It was clear that they had thought this was the beginning of something big. But it wasn't the apocalypse that it had seemed early on. Lots of people went to hospital, but no one died. No one had their gonads examined, so no one knew what had happened to them, what they were coughing up. It was several days before even the Maruhashi tape got to the media. I think I know who sent it.

Maruhashi had died as soon as it became evident that no one else was doing so. Sato had left all kinds of devilish curses on the tape... he clearly planned to try something like this again. It was clear that he would do some terrible things up in Russia, in one of those towns where the authorities practically encouraged vast, distancing crimes. Flushed with the success of my mass sterilization I kidded myself that I would head up to

Russia and bring down the Gulag that Sato no doubt planned to lord over. Really I would do no such thing. I lived quietly for a week or two, which is as long as thousands of sore throats can realistically dominate the media, even if a bizarre cult is involved.

I was described hundreds of times on television. As 'a white man.' I felt confident that I would escape scott free.

One day, I realized with horror what was waiting for me if I went back to England. A huge cyber fetus that could pretend to be my dad, possibly full of other plans for thinning down the human ranks as its robotic limbs fleshed out in human and robot minds around the world.

Slave to a vast machine, semi-intelligent, vastly scary in its infinite potential and near ability to feel emotions. It was intimidating... overwhelming in fact.

But I had to go back, because sometimes you just have to go home. When the day is done, when a whole chapter of your life is done.. you have to go home.... somehow or other. If I did not go home then the thing would never crystallize into a story and would continue to be something I felt in the flesh of my hands, in the tingling of my nerves, in the substance that had replaced sleep during the hours of the dark... the strange new mind that came to me where darkness and rest had once been.

So after a few weeks, when I was getting really sick of seeing pictures of my old pals plastered on every train and bus, of the life-sized figurines of them, I went to Narita airport and I got my stuff from the locker, the papers and the clothes that made me look like some Kabuki-loving tourist and I started to leave Japan. The fact that I appeared to be about to get away with this shocked me. In that case how could anything happen in this world, if little bugs like me could strike a nation so? Why didn't assassination and counter assassination flicker in relay around the world. Why was New York still standing, so many awful Kings and Queens still breathing? Where was the protection? Were the vast conspiracies just clubs, just shows? Did they add nothing to the genocides really... the genocides just happened like tides in the sea of hate?

Feeling the flickering eyes of all the machines, cameras, I did not dread arrest. I merely felt uncomfortable that the big thought, the new mind, the computer, gAIa, our child, our successor... that he might be watching me.

Because although he was designed to love, to never divide but always synthesize, to sacrifice always what some other part needed most, though he was perfect.... he owed me one. A big one.

All the police didn't scare me. The future did not scare me. The work to make sure the sterilization continued... the L.A. insertion that we had vaguely planned when we were all alive... that did not scare me.

There was nothing to fear, once one accepted that life arced between buildings, between cities, between lavas, continents, planets, and that life was good and that people wouldn't really miss it. There was nothing to fear.

It was all music anyway. The notes made the music and the music heard itself and made sure it was good. That was all.

About to check in, I saw her. The girl that had more than distracted me. Mayumi. She was in a dark denim jacket, and underneath, a short black dress. She had spectacles, new ones with half frames that made her look happy and sarcastic at the same time. This must have saved her a lot of effort.

She approached to kill me. I had led her boss to die, Honda to die, but no one else to die. She could kill me in front of everyone and be ok. But really I knew. I knew when I saw her walk. Because she walked like she never had before... like she wanted something.

She came right up to me and didn't really look at me. I waited for her. People left the country around us.

"What's your name?" she asked?

"Mike," I told her.

"Then if it's a boy, it will have a boring name," she said and bit her bottom lip.

Rather than laugh at the bitter irony, or swoon at the world he would inherit, rather than scream, rather than cry, I lived with her and we became happy in a secret world that is reserved for those who know too much and those who know too little.

The end of the world (as we have made it) continues.

As for me... I am happy.

Regrets: none.

Message...

I love you all.

I really do.

THE END

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