

"Never mind," he said. "This life is nothing but a short, painful dream. Thanks to His guidance, I have made it through this far. Before I die, though, there is one thing I have to tell you. It shames me to say it, but I have no choice: I have had lustful thoughts toward your mother any number of times. As you well know, I have a family that I love with all my heart, and your mother is a pure-hearted person, but still, I have had violent cravings for her flesh—cravings that I have never been able to suppress. I want to beg your forgiveness."

There is no need for you to beg anyone's forgiveness, Mr. Tabata. You are not the only one who has had lustful thoughts. Even I, her son, have been pursued by terrible obsessions . . . Yoshiya wanted to open himself up in this way, but he knew that all it would accomplish would be to upset Mr. Tabata even more. He took Mr. Tabata's hand and held it for a very long time, hoping that the thoughts in his breast would communicate themselves from his hand to Mr. Tabata's. Our hearts are not stones. A stone may disintegrate in time and lose its outward form. But hearts never disintegrate. They have no outward form, and whether good or evil, we can always communicate them to one another. All God's children can dance. The next day, Mr. Tabata drew his last breath.

Kneeling on the pitcher's mound, Yoshiya gave himself up to the flow of time. Somewhere in the distance he heard the faint wail of a siren. A gust of wind set the leaves of grass to dancing and celebrated the grass's song before it died.

"Oh God," Yoshiya said aloud.

## thailand

There was an announcement: *Lettuce angel men. We aren't countering some tab bulence. Please retahn to yah seat at thees time and fasten yah seat belt.* Satsuki had been letting her mind wander, and so it took her a while to decipher the Thai steward's shaky Japanese.

She was hot and sweating. It was like a steam bath, her whole body aflame, her nylons and bra so uncomfortable she wanted to fling everything off and set herself free. She craned her neck to see the other business-class passengers. No, she was obviously the only one suffering from the heat. They were all curled up, asleep, blankets around their shoulders to counter the air-conditioning. It must be another hot flash. Satsuki bit her lip and decided to concentrate on something else to forget about the heat. She opened her book and tried to read from where she had left off, but forgetting was out of the question. This was no ordinary heat. And they wouldn't be touching down in Bangkok for hours yet. She asked a passing stewardess for some water and, finding the pill case in her pocketbook, she washed down a dose of the hormones she had forgotten to take.

Menopause: it had to be the gods' ironic warning to (or just plain nasty trick on) humanity for having artificially extended the life span, she told herself for the *n*th time. A mere hundred years ago, the average life span was less than fifty, and any woman who went on living twenty or thirty years past the end of her menstruation was an oddity. The difficulty of continuing to live with tissues for which the ovaries or the thyroid had ceased to secrete the normal supply of hormones; the possible relationship between the postmenopausal decrease in estrogen levels and the incidence of Alzheimer's: these were not questions worth troubling one's mind over. Of far more importance to the majority of mankind was the challenge of simply obtaining enough food to eat each day. Had the advancement of medicine, then, done nothing more than to expose, subdivide, and further complicate the problems faced by the human species?

Soon another announcement came over the PA system. In English this time. *If there is a doctor on board, please identify yourself to one of the cabin attendants.*

A passenger must have taken sick. For a moment Satsuki thought of volunteering, but quickly changed her mind. On the two earlier occasions when she had done so, she had merely had run-ins with practicing physicians who happened to be on the plane. These men had seemed to possess both the poise of a seasoned general commanding troops on the front line and the vision to recognize at a glance that Satsuki was a professional pathologist without combat experience. "That's all right, Doctor," she had been told with a cool smile, "I can handle this by myself. You just take it easy." She had mumbled a stupid excuse

and gone back to her seat to watch the rest of some ridiculous movie.

Still, she thought, I might just be the only doctor on this plane. And the patient might be someone with a major problem involving the thyroidal immune system. If that is the case—and the likelihood of such a situation did not seem high—then even I might be of some use. She took a breath and pressed the button for a cabin attendant.

The World Thyroid Conference was a four-day event at the Bangkok Marriott. Actually, it was more like a worldwide family reunion than a conference. All the participants were thyroid specialists, and they all knew each other or were quickly introduced. It was a small world. There would be lectures and panel discussions during the day and private parties at night. Friends would get together to renew old ties, drink Australian wine, share thyroid stories, whisper gossip, update each other on their careers, tell dirty doctor jokes, and sing "Surfer Girl" at karaoke bars.

In Bangkok, Satsuki stayed mainly with her Detroit friends. Those were the ones she felt most comfortable with. She had worked at the university hospital in Detroit for almost ten years, researching the immune function of the thyroid gland. Eventually she had had a falling-out with her securities analyst husband, whose dependency on alcohol had grown worse year by year, in addition to which he had become involved with another woman—someone Satsuki knew well. They separated, and a bitter feud involving lawyers had dragged on for a full



year. "The thing that finally did it for me," her husband claimed, "was that you didn't want to have children."

They had finally concluded their divorce settlement three years ago. A few months later, someone smashed the headlights of her Honda Accord in the hospital parking lot and wrote "JAP CAR" on the hood in white letters. She called the police. A big black policeman filled out the damage report and then said to her, "Lady, this is Detroit. Next time buy a Ford Taurus."

What with one thing and another, Satsuki became fed up with living in America and decided to return to Japan. She found a position at a university hospital in Tokyo. "You can't do that," said a member of her research team from India. "All our years of research are about to bear fruit. We could be nominated for a Nobel Prize—it's not that crazy," he pleaded with her to stay, but Satsuki's mind was made up. Something inside her had snapped.

She stayed on alone at the hotel in Bangkok after the conference ended. "I've worked out a vacation for myself after this," she told her friends. "I'm going to a resort near here for a complete rest—a whole week of nothing but reading, swimming, and drinking nice cold cocktails by the pool."

"That's great," they said. "Everybody needs a breather once in a while—it's good for your thyroid, too!" With handshakes and hugs and promises to get together again, Satsuki said goodbye to all her friends.

Early the next morning, a limousine pulled up to the hotel entrance as planned. It was an old navy blue Mercedes, as perfect and polished as a jewel and far more beautiful than a new

car. It looked like an object from another world, as if it had dropped fully formed from someone's fantasies. A slim Thai man probably in his early sixties was to be her driver and guide. He wore a heavily starched white short-sleeved shirt, a black silk necktie, and dark sunglasses. His face was tanned, his neck long and slender. Presenting himself to Satsuki, he did not shake her hand but instead brought his hands together and gave a slight, almost Japanese, bow.

"Please call me Nimit. I will have the honor to be your companion for the coming week."

It was not clear whether "Nimit" was his first or last name. He was, in any case, "Nimit," and he told her this in a courteous, easy-to-understand English devoid of American casualness or British affectation. He had, in fact, no perceptible accent. Satsuki had heard English spoken this way before, but she couldn't remember where.

"The honor is mine," she said.

Together, they passed through Bangkok's vulgar, noisy, polluted streets. The traffic crawled along, people cursed each other, and the sound of car horns tore through the atmosphere like an air-raid siren. Plus, there were elephants lumbering down the street—and not just one or two of them. What were elephants doing in a city like this? she asked Nimit.

"Their owners bring them from the country," he explained. "They used to use them for logging, but there was not enough work for them to survive that way. They brought their animals to the city to make money doing tricks for tourists. Now there are far too many elephants here, and that makes things very difficult for the city people. Sometimes an elephant will panic and

run amok. Just the other day, a great many automobiles were damaged that way. The police try to put a stop to it, of course, but they cannot confiscate the elephants from their keepers. There would be no place to put them if they did, and the cost of feeding them would be enormous. All they can do is leave them alone."

The car eventually emerged from the city, drove onto an expressway, and headed north. Nimit took a cassette tape from the glove compartment and slipped it into the car stereo, setting the volume low. It was jazz—a tune that Satsuki recognized with some emotion.

"Do you mind turning the volume up?" she asked.

"Yes, Doctor, of course," Nimit said, making it louder. The tune was "I Can't Get Started," in exactly the same performance she had heard so often in the old days.

"Howard McGhee on trumpet, Lester Young on tenor," she murmured, as if to herself. "JATP."

Nimit glanced at her in the rearview mirror. "Very impressive, Doctor," he said. "Do you like jazz?"

"My father was crazy about it," she said. "He played records for me when I was a little girl, the same ones over and over, and he had me memorize the performers. If I got them right, he'd give me candy. I still remember most of them. But just the old stuff. I don't know anything about the newer jazz musicians. Lionel Hampton, Bud Powell, Earl Hines, Harry Edison, Buck Clayton . . ."

"The old jazz is all I ever listen to as well," Nimit said. "What was your father's profession?"

"He was a doctor, too," she said. "A pediatrician. He died just after I entered high school."

"I am sorry to hear that," Nimit said. "Do you still listen to jazz?"

Satsuki shook her head. "Not really. Not for years. My husband hated jazz. All he liked was opera. We had a great stereo in the house, but he'd give me a sour look if I ever tried putting on anything besides opera. Opera lovers may be the narrowest people in the world. I left my husband, though. I don't think I'd mind if I never heard another opera again for as long as I live."

Nimit gave a little nod but said nothing. Hands on the Mercedes steering wheel, he stared silently at the road ahead. His technique with the steering wheel was almost beautiful, the way he would move his hands to exactly the same points on the wheel at exactly the same angle. Now Erroll Garner was playing "I'll Remember April," which brought back more memories for Satsuki. Garner's *Concert by the Sea* had been one of her father's favorite records. She closed her eyes and let herself sink into the old memories. Everything had gone well for her until her father died of cancer. Everything—without exception. But then the stage suddenly turned dark, and by the time she noticed that her father had vanished forever from her life, everything was headed in the wrong direction. It was as if a whole new story had started with a whole new plot. Barely a month had passed after her father's death when her mother sold the big stereo along with his jazz collection.

"Where are you from in Japan, Doctor, if you don't mind my asking?"



"I'm from Kyoto," answered Satsuki. "I only lived there until I was eighteen, though, and I've hardly ever been back."

"Isn't Kyoto right next to Kobe?"

"It's not too far, but not 'right next to' Kobe. At least the earthquake seems not to have caused too much damage there."

Nimit switched to the passing lane, slipping past a number of trucks loaded with livestock, then eased back into the cruising lane.

"I'm glad to hear it," Nimit said. "A lot of people died in the earthquake last month. I saw it on the news. It was very sad. Tell me, Doctor, did you know anyone living in Kobe?"

"No, no one. I don't think anyone I know lives in Kobe," she said. But this was not true. *He* lived in Kobe.

Nimit remained silent for a while. Then, bending his neck slightly in her direction, he said, "Strange and mysterious things, though, aren't they—earthquakes? We take it for granted that the earth beneath our feet is solid and stationary. We even talk about people being 'down to earth' or having their feet firmly planted on the ground. But suddenly one day we see that it isn't true. The earth, the boulders, that are supposed to be so solid, all of a sudden turn as mushy as liquid. I heard it on the TV news: 'liquefaction,' they call it, I think. Fortunately we rarely have major earthquakes here in Thailand."

Cradled in the rear seat, Satsuki closed her eyes and concentrated on Erroll Garner's playing. Yes, she thought, *he* lived in Kobe. I hope he was crushed to death by something big and heavy. Or swallowed up by the liquefied earth. *It's everything I've wanted for him all these years.*

The limousine reached its destination at three o'clock in the afternoon. They had taken a break at a service area along the highway at precisely twelve o'clock. Satsuki had drunk some gritty coffee and eaten half a donut at the cafeteria. Her week-long rest was to be spent at an expensive resort in the mountains. The buildings overlooked a stream that surged through the valley, the slopes of which were covered in gorgeous primary-colored flowers. Birds flew from tree to tree emitting sharp cries. A private cottage had been prepared for Satsuki's stay. It had a big bright bathroom, an elegant canopy bed, and twenty-four-hour room service. Books and CDs and videos were available at the library off the lobby. The place was immaculate. Great care—and a great deal of money—had been lavished on every detail.

"You must be very tired, Doctor, after the long trip," Nimit said. "You can relax now. I will come to pick you up at ten o'clock tomorrow morning and take you to the pool. All you need to bring is a towel and bathing suit."

"Pool?" she asked. "They must have a perfectly big pool here at the hotel, don't they? At least that's what I was told."

"Yes, of course, but the hotel pool is very crowded. Mr. Rapaport told me that you are a serious swimmer. I found a pool nearby where you can do laps. There will be a charge, of course, but a small one. I'm sure you will like it."

John Rapaport was the American friend who had made the arrangements for Satsuki's Thai vacation. He had worked all over Southeast Asia as a news correspondent ever since the

Khmer Rouge had run rampant in Cambodia, and he had many connections in Thailand as well. It was he who had recommended Nimit as Satsuki's guide and driver. With a mischievous wink, he had said to her, "You won't have to think about a thing. Just shut up and let Nimit make all the decisions and everything will go perfectly. He's a very impressive guy."

"That's fine," she said to Nimit. "I'll leave it up to you."

"Well then, I will come for you at ten o'clock tomorrow . . ."

Satsuki opened her bags, smoothed the wrinkles in a dress and skirt, and hung them in the closet. Then, changing into a swimsuit, she went to the hotel pool. Just as Nimit had said, it was not a pool for serious swimming. Gourd-shaped, it had a lovely waterfall in the middle, and children were throwing a ball in the shallow area. Abandoning any thought of trying to swim, she stretched out under a parasol, ordered a Tío Pepe and Perrier, and picked up reading where she had left off in her new John le Carré novel. When she grew tired of reading, she pulled her hat down over her face and napped. She had a dream about a rabbit—a short dream. The rabbit was in a hutch surrounded by a wire-mesh fence, trembling. It seemed to be sensing the arrival of some kind of thing in the middle of the night. At first, Satsuki was observing the rabbit from outside its enclosure, but soon she herself had become the rabbit. She could just barely make out the thing in the darkness. Even after she awoke, she had a bad taste in her mouth.

He lived in Kobe. She knew his home address and telephone number. She had never once lost track of him. She had tried calling his house just after the earthquake, but the connection never went through. I hope the damn place was flattened, she thought.

I hope the whole family is out wandering through the streets, penniless. When I think of what you did to my life, when I think of the children I should have had, it's the least you deserve.

The pool that Nimit had found was half an hour's drive from the hotel and involved crossing a mountain. The woods near the top of the mountain were full of gray monkeys. They sat lined up along the road, eyes fixed on the passing cars as if to read the fates of the speeding vehicles.

The pool was inside a large, somewhat mysterious compound surrounded by a high wall and entered through an imposing iron gate. Nimit lowered his window and identified himself to the guard, who opened the gate without a word. Down the gravel driveway stood an old stone two-story building, and behind that was the long, narrow pool. Its signs of age were unmistakable, but this was an authentic three-lane, twenty-five-meter lap pool. The rectangular stretch of water was beautiful, surrounded by lawn and trees, and undisturbed by swimmers. Several old wooden deck chairs were lined up beside the pool. Silence ruled the area, and there was no hint of a human presence.

"What do you think, Doctor?" Nimit asked.

"Wonderful," Satsuki said. "Is this an athletic club?"

"Something like that," he said. "But hardly anyone uses it now. I have arranged for you to swim here alone as much as you like."

"Why, thank you so much, Nimit. You *are* an impressive man."

"You do me too great an honor," Nimit said, bowing blank-faced, with old-school courtesy. "The cottage over there is the changing room. It has toilets and showers. Feel free to use all



the facilities. I will station myself by the automobile. Please let me know if there is anything you need."

Satsuki had always loved swimming, and she went to the gym pool whenever she had a chance. She had learned proper form from a coach. While she swam, she was able to thrust all unpleasant memories from her mind. If she swam long enough, she could reach a point where she felt utterly free, like a bird flying through the sky. Thanks to her years of regular exercise, she had never been confined to bed with an illness or sensed any physical disorder. Nor had she gained extra weight. Of course, she was not young anymore; a trim body was no longer an option. In particular, there was almost no way to avoid putting on a little extra flesh at the hips. You could ask for only so much. She wasn't trying to become a fashion model. She probably looked five years younger than her actual age, which was pretty damn good.

At noon, Nimit served her ice tea and sandwiches on a silver tray by the pool—tiny vegetable and cheese sandwiches cut into perfect little triangles.

Satsuki was amazed. "Did you make these?"

The question brought a momentary change to Nimit's expressionless face. "Not I, Doctor. I do not prepare food. I had someone make this."

Satsuki was about to ask who that someone might be when she stopped herself. John Rapaport had told her, "Just shut up and let Nimit make all the decisions and everything will go perfectly." The sandwiches were quite good. Satsuki rested after lunch. On her Walkman she listened to a tape of the Benny Goodman Sextet that Nimit had lent her, after which she con-

tinued with her book. She swam some more in the afternoon, returning to the hotel at three.

Satsuki repeated exactly the same routine for five days in a row. She swam to her heart's content, ate vegetable and cheese sandwiches, listened to music, and read. She never stepped out of the hotel except to go to the pool. What she wanted was perfect rest, a chance not to *think* about anything.

She was the only one using the pool. The water was always freezing cold, as if it had been drawn from an underground stream in the hills, and the first dunk always took her breath away, but a few laps would warm her up, and then the water temperature was just right. When she tired of doing the crawl, she would remove her goggles and swim backstroke. White clouds floated in the sky, and birds and dragonflies cut across them. Satsuki wished she could stay like this forever.

"Where did you learn English?" Satsuki asked Nimit on the way back from the pool.

"I worked for thirty-three years as a chauffeur for a Norwegian gem dealer in Bangkok, and I always spoke English with him."

So that explained the familiar style. One of Satsuki's colleagues at a hospital where she had worked in Baltimore, a Dane, had spoken exactly this kind of English—precise grammar, light accent, no slang. Very clean, very easy to understand, and somewhat lacking in color. How strange to be spoken to in Norwegian English in Thailand!

"My employer loved jazz. He always had a tape playing when he was in the car. Which is why, as his driver, I naturally became familiar with it as well. When he died three years ago,

he left me the car and all his tapes. The one we are listening to now is one of his."

"So when he died, you became an independent driver-guide for foreigners, is that it?"

"Yes, exactly," Nimit said. "There are many driver-guides in Thailand, but I am probably the only one with his own Mercedes."

"He must have placed a great deal of trust in you."

Nimit was silent for a long time. He seemed to be searching for the right words to respond to Satsuki's remark. "You know, Doctor, I am a bachelor. I have never once married. I spent thirty-three years as another man's shadow. I went everywhere he went, I helped him with everything he did. I was in a sense a part of him. When you live like that for a long time, you gradually lose track of what it is that you yourself really want out of life."

He turned up the volume on the car stereo a little: a deep-throated tenor sax solo.

"Take this music for example. I remember exactly what he told me about it. 'Listen to this, Nimit. Follow Coleman Hawkins' improvised lines very carefully. He is using them to tell us something. Pay very close attention. He is telling us the story of the free spirit that is doing everything it can to escape from within him. That same kind of spirit is inside me, and inside you. There—you can hear it, I'm sure: the hot breath, the shiver of the heart.' Hearing the same music over and over, I learned to listen closely, to hear the sound of the spirit. But still I cannot be sure if I really did hear it with my own ears. When you are with a person for a long time and following his

orders, in a sense you become one with him, like husband and wife. Do you see what I am saying, Doctor?"

"I think so," answered Satsuki.

It suddenly struck her that Nimit and his Norwegian employer might have been lovers. She had no evidence on which to base such an assumption, merely a flash of intuition. But it might explain what Nimit was trying to say.

"Still, Doctor, I do not have the slightest regret. If I could live my life over again, I would probably do exactly the same thing. What about you?"

"I don't know, Nimit. I really don't know."

Nimit said nothing after that. They crossed the mountain with the gray monkeys and returned to the hotel.

On her last day before leaving for Japan, Nimit took Satsuki to a nearby village instead of driving straight back to the hotel.

"I have a favor to ask of you," he said, meeting her eyes in the rearview mirror. "A personal favor."

"What is it?"

"Could you perhaps spare me an hour of your time? I have a place that I would like to show you."

Satsuki had no objection, nor did she ask him where he was taking her. She had decided to place herself entirely in his hands.

The woman lived in a small house at the far edge of the village—a poor house in a poor village, with one tiny rice paddy after another crammed in layers up a hillside. Filthy, emaciated livestock. Muddy, pockmarked road. Air filled with the smell



of water buffalo dung. A bull wandered by, its genitals swinging. A 50cc motorcycle buzzed past, splashing mud to either side. Near-naked children stood lined up along the road, staring at the Mercedes. Satsuki was shocked to think that such a miserable village could be situated so close to the high-class resort hotel in which she was staying.

The woman was old, perhaps almost eighty. Her skin had the blackened look of worn leather, its deep wrinkles becoming ravines that seemed to travel to all parts of her body. Her back was bent, and a flower-patterned, oversize dress hung limp from her bony frame. When he saw her, Nimit brought his hands together in greeting. She did the same.

Satsuki and the old woman sat down on opposite sides of a table, and Nimit took his place at one end. At first, only the woman and Nimit spoke. Satsuki had no idea what they were saying to each other, but she noticed how lively and powerful the woman's voice was for someone her age. The old woman seemed to have a full set of teeth, too. After a while, she turned from Nimit to face Satsuki, looking directly into her eyes. She had a penetrating gaze, and she never blinked. Satsuki began to feel like a small animal that has been trapped in a room with no way to escape. She realized she was sweating all over. Her face burned, and she had trouble breathing. She wanted to take a pill, but she had left her bottle of mineral water in the car.

"Please put your hands on the table," Nimit said. Satsuki did as she was told. The old woman reached out and took her right hand. The woman's hands were small but powerful. For a full ten minutes (though it might just as well have been two or three), the old woman stared into Satsuki's eyes and held her hand, say-

ing nothing. Satsuki returned the woman's strong stare with her timid one, using the handkerchief in her left hand to mop her brow from time to time. Eventually, with a great sigh, the old woman released Satsuki's hand. She turned to Nimit and said something in Thai. Nimit translated into English.

"She says that there is a stone inside your body. A hard, white stone. About the size of a child's fist. She does not know where it came from."

"A stone?" Satsuki asked.

"There is something written on the stone, but she cannot read it because it is in Japanese: small black characters of some kind. The stone and its inscription are old, old things. You have been living with them inside you for a very long time. You must get rid of the stone. Otherwise, after you die and are cremated, only the stone will remain."

Now the old woman turned back to face Satsuki and spoke slowly in Thai for a long time. Her tone of voice made it clear that she was saying something important. Again Nimit translated.

"You are going to have a dream soon about a large snake. In your dream, it will be easing its way out of a hole in a wall—a green, scaly snake. Once it has pushed out three feet from the wall, you must grab its neck and never let go. The snake will look very frightening, but in fact it can do you no harm, so you must not be frightened. Hold on to it with both hands. Think of it as your life, and hold on to it with all your strength. Keep holding it until you wake from your dream. The snake will swallow your stone for you. Do you understand?"

"What in the world—?"

"Just say you understand," Nimit said with the utmost gravity.

"I understand," Satsuki said.

The old woman gave a gentle nod and spoke again to Satsuki.

"The man is not dead," translated Nimit. "He did not receive a scratch. It may not be what you wanted, but it was actually very lucky for you that he was not hurt. You should be grateful for your good fortune."

The woman uttered a few short syllables.

"That is all," Nimit said. "We can go back to the hotel now."

"Was that some kind of fortune-telling?" Satsuki asked when they were back in the car.

"No, Doctor. It was not fortune-telling. Just as you treat people's bodies, she treats people's spirits. She predicts their dreams, mostly."

"I should have left her something then, as a token of thanks. The whole thing was such a surprise to me, it slipped my mind."

Nimit negotiated a sharp curve on the mountain road, turning the wheel in that precise way of his. "I paid her," he said. "A small amount. Not enough for you to trouble yourself over. Just think of it as a mark of my personal regard for you, Doctor."

"Do you take all of your clients there?"

"No, Doctor, only you."

"And why is that?"

"You are a beautiful person, Doctor. Clearheaded. Strong. But you seem always to be dragging your heart along the ground. From now on, little by little, you must prepare yourself

to face death. If you devote all of your future energy to living, you will not be able to die well. You must begin to shift gears, a little at a time. Living and dying are, in a sense, of equal value."

"Tell me something, Nimit," Satsuki said, taking off her sunglasses and leaning over the back of the passenger seat.

"What is that, Doctor?"

"Are you prepared to die?"

"I am half dead already," Nimit said as if stating the obvious.

That night, lying in her broad, pristine bed, Satsuki wept. She recognized that she was headed toward death. She recognized that she had a hard, white stone inside herself. She recognized that a scaly, green snake was lurking somewhere in the dark. She thought about the child to which she never gave birth. She had destroyed that child, flung it down a bottomless well. And then she had spent thirty years hating one man. She had hoped that he would die in agony. In order to bring that about, she had gone so far as to wish in the depths of her heart for an earthquake. In a sense, she told herself, I am the one who caused that earthquake. *He* turned my heart into a stone; *he* turned my body to stone. In the distant mountains, the gray monkeys were silently staring at her. *Living and dying are, in a sense, of equal value.*

After checking her bags at the airline counter, Satsuki handed Nimit an envelope containing a one-hundred-dollar bill. "Thank you for everything, Nimit. You made it possible for me to have a wonderful rest. This is a personal gift from me to you."

"That is very thoughtful of you, Doctor," said Nimit, accepting the envelope. "Thank you very much."



"Do you have time for a cup of coffee?"

"Yes, I would enjoy that."

They went to a café together. Satsuki took hers black. Nimit gave his a heavy dose of cream. For a long time, Satsuki went on turning her cup in her saucer.

"You know," she said at last, "I have a secret that I've never told anyone. I could never bring myself to talk about it. I've kept it locked up inside of me all this time. But I'd like to tell it to you now. Because we'll probably never meet again. When my father died all of a sudden, my mother, without a word to me—"

Nimit held his hands up, palms facing Satsuki, and shook his head. "Please, Doctor. Don't tell me anymore. You should have your dream, as the old woman told you to. I understand how you feel, but if you put those feelings into words they will turn into lies."

Satsuki swallowed her words, and then, in silence, closed her eyes. She drew in a full, deep breath, and let it out again.

"Have your dream, Doctor," Nimit said as if sharing kindly advice. "What you need now more than anything is discipline. Cast off mere words. Words turn into stone."

He reached out and took Satsuki's hand between his. His hands were strangely smooth and youthful, as if they had always been protected by expensive leather gloves. Satsuki opened her eyes and looked at him. Nimit took away his hands and rested them on the table, fingers intertwined.

"My Norwegian employer was actually from Lapland," he said. "You must know, of course, that Lapland is at the northernmost tip of Norway, near the North Pole. Many reindeer live there. In summer there is no night, and in winter no day. He

probably came to Thailand because the cold got to be too much for him. I guess you could call the two places complete opposites. He loved Thailand, and he made up his mind to have his bones buried here. But still, to the day he died, he missed the town in Lapland where he was born. He used to tell me about it all the time. And yet, in spite of that, he never once went back to Norway in thirty-three years. Something must have happened there that kept him away. He was another person with a stone inside."

Nimit lifted his coffee cup and took a sip, then carefully set it in its saucer again without a sound.

"He once told me about polar bears—what solitary animals they are. They mate just once a year. One time in a whole year. There is no such thing as a lasting male-female bond in their world. One male polar bear and one female polar bear meet by sheer chance somewhere in the frozen vastness, and they mate. It doesn't take long. And once they are finished, the male runs away from the female as if he is frightened to death: he runs from the place where they have mated. He never looks back—literally. The rest of the year he lives in deep solitude. Mutual communication—the touching of two hearts—does not exist for them. So, that is the story of polar bears—or at least it is what my employer told me about them."

"How very strange," Satsuki said.

"Yes," Nimit said, "it *is* strange." His face was grave. "I remember asking my employer, 'Then what do polar bears exist for?' 'Yes, exactly,' he said with a big smile. 'Then what do we exist for, Nimit?'"

a f t e r   t h e   q u a k e

The plane reached cruising altitude and the FASTEN SEAT BELT sign went out. So, thought Satsuki, I'm going back to Japan. She tried to think about what lay ahead, but soon gave up. "Words turn into stone," Nimit had told her. She settled deep into her seat and closed her eyes. All at once the image came to her of the sky she had seen while swimming on her back. And Erroll Garner's "I'll Remember April." Let me sleep, she thought. Just let me sleep. And wait for the dream to come.

super-frog saves tokyo

Katagiri found a giant frog waiting for him in his apartment. It was powerfully built, standing over six feet tall on its hind legs. A skinny little man no more than five-foot-three, Katagiri was overwhelmed by the frog's imposing bulk.

"Call me 'Frog,'" said the frog in a clear, strong voice.

Katagiri stood rooted in the doorway, unable to speak.

"Don't be afraid, I'm not here to hurt you. Just come in and close the door. Please."

Briefcase in his right hand, grocery bag with fresh vegetables and canned salmon cradled in his left arm, Katagiri didn't dare move.

"Please, Mr. Katagiri, hurry and close the door, and take off your shoes."

The sound of his own name helped Katagiri snap out of it. He closed the door as ordered, set the grocery bag on the raised wooden floor, pinned the briefcase under one arm, and unlaced his shoes. Frog gestured for him to take a seat at the kitchen table, which he did.