

Ho Lin

Happenstance

HE FORGOT WHO SAID IT or how it came up, but it was definitely after the third pear cider, on one of those drizzly December evenings in the subtropics that soak the tips of your shoes. The pub had been overrun by a bunch of Londoners, all sweaty and red and shouting, and it wasn't even football season. On the stage a band in flower print shirts was covering Muddy Waters: *Got my mojo working... got my mojo working...* They were shooting for blues, attaining rockabilly.

That's when one of the Londoners divorced himself from another conversation just long enough to say to him very distinctly: *Every great story must have at least one of the following: a death, a departure, or a tragedy involving a child.*

Hmm, he replied, in slow motion. He didn't even get a good look at the man who spoke to him—bad teeth, skull-tight ski cap, and now his back was to him again. And yet his fingers moved of their own volition and jotted the words down on a napkin: *death, departure, children*. Then he thought about it a bit. No doubt most literature these days was about children. Orphaned children, abused children, handicapped children, bereft children. Death? A trickier one, did minor characters count? Death and rebirth? Figurative death? And departure? As in leaving a state of mind, or physical movement? Departure was just another way of representing death anyway.

He drank his fourth pear cider. He was a wuss, no doubt about it. Beer too bitter for him, wine and straight alcohol too strong. The pussification of society. Like obsessing over weak mosquito spray for days on end in the jungle. He had been to the jungle, too insect-ridden, then to the beach, too quiet, and now finally he was in the city, six months later. Freshly unemployed, he had told his friends before he left home, half-joke and half-challenge: *I'll be writing the Great American Novel*. Six months later, one hard drive crash, fifty pages of meanderings, zero epiphanies.

He flipped through the bills in his wallet—just enough for another drink. Not here. The Londoners weren't so bad, at least they were laughing and talking and existing. He just needed to move. If everything fails or sucks, then stumble forward because people believe in the illusion of motion. *There's a departure for you.*

Outside the rain had stopped and fog was settling in. Squat buildings built to earthquake code huddled under flyovers and highway overpasses. He took note of a karaoke bar with shuttered windows and rust-brown curtains, a mackerel tabby cat crouched just underneath on the sidewalk, its aggrieved eyes tracking his movements. Why insult a cat by naming him after a fish, he mused. Smeared newspapers and pink plastic bags littered the streets, makeshift umbrellas having served their purpose. The locals were wussies too—who needed umbrellas with such a light drizzle? Today's revelation: he fit right in with everyone else here. No big deal to get wet, we all dry out in the end and eventually we're dust. *How morose*. He was luxuriating in it and it felt good for the moment. He liked these crisp, empty streets where he could project anything he wanted on them. A notion that this city would soon be razed had taken hold of him. All inhabitants evacuated long ago. He would be a roaming minstrel, a low-rent Chaucer (impossible, wasn't Chaucer low-rent already?) snatching local stories from the empty air. And if he should chance upon someone on the road, he would look in their eyes, recognize someone dear to them, and begin to sing: *I am he as you are he as you are me and we are all together...* Wait, wasn't that from a song...?

Then he saw the simple blue neon sign down the street that curved out a sexy number 2, and heard the Beatles music.

You ever read The Tibetan Book of Death? the taxi driver asked her.

She didn't answer immediately; she was trying to think chords. "For No One" was always tricky. Beginning on the B (although for her purposes she had moved it up to a C sharp), it was easy to start off singing the harmony instead of the lead melody, and hard as hell to shake the habit. Singing is sometimes subconscious—you steel yourself to do it a certain way, and then something erupts from out of nowhere and you're off on a tangent. Sometimes brilliance, mostly dreck. She tried to curl her fingers into the shape of a C sharp guitar chord. Her fingertips trembled in place, or was it just her vision dilating? Outside the streetlamps were shimmying as they sped past them.

She shouldn't have had the pot cookie—it had seemed like a good idea at the time, something simple and fast, and how could something so sweet be so destructive? Check that, *destructive* wasn't the right word. She was more irritated than anything else. It had seemed like an hour had passed, but it had only been five minutes.

The driver was still talking—he hadn't even waited for her to respond. He seemed nice enough, middle-aged and round with laugh lines around his eyes, but she couldn't focus on him, only the digital clock on his dashboard that danced every which way. *The Buddhists believe that at every moment, the universe is dying and being reborn, he was saying. So that means you're dead and alive right now, with infinite universes open to you.*

Please say no more about that, she thought, you keep talking like this and I can't take responsibility for what my body will do next. This was going badly. The other boys in the band had been so excited about the pot, they had bought it from an American, *an aging rocker* Takashi had called him, but he called any American over forty an aging rocker. This one fit the description though, with his iron-gray hair pulled into a ponytail and peppery stubble on his cheeks and floppy beach sandals he wore everywhere he went. They must have fouled up the cookie recipe. Maybe a faulty English-to-metric conversion. Two kilograms for every pound, or was it two pounds for every kilogram...?

We've got thousands of selves within us, the taxi driver grinned. *We just need to peel them back.*

He was an awfully sweet man, this driver. He reminded her of her father, who was at home right now, bedsheet up to his chin and shivering without benefit of drugs, face as pale as the walls, and in the next room her mom and relatives were playing mah jong. *Clack clack clack* all night long. Did Dad mind the ruckus? He would never admit it even if he did, he was that way, and he had passed on his infinite politeness to her. Infinite universes.

As far as her mom knew, she was at night school, learning English in the hopes of getting some sort of vague secretarial career. Could one live an entire life getting by on lines from Beatles songs? She suspected one could. She tried to pull one out of her head just for demonstration but could only come up with silliness: *The doctor came in, stinking of gin, proceeded to lie on the table...* She stared at the driver's wrist, which was ringed with Buddhist prayer beads. They seemed to be breathing.

How do you peel them back? she asked. Just like singing, the words popped out.

Meditation, said the driver. *Your mind must be still so it can open up. I read the Tibetan Book of Death years ago and it'll take me the rest of my life to study it.*

Study. Of course. It all came down to study. She didn't have the energy for it. She wasn't

tired but the pot had rendered her inert. If the driver wanted to pull over and have his way with her, she probably wouldn't utter a sound. She tugged weakly at her skirt, tried to lengthen it a bit. Not that anyone would be turned on by her legs. Stubby, like elms. Plenty of times she had heard foreigners say that women from her country had the best legs. At least mine look healthy, she thought. No scabs, blotches, knobby knees.

Here we are, the driver grinned. *You don't have to believe me, just read the book and think about it. Everyone has their own path.*

She thanked him, and with a weak little shove, she got the passenger door open. Once again she was crushed by the humidity of the summer evening. Directly before her was the karaoke joint, rust-brown curtains billowing out in front of the opened windows. On the sidewalk, cooped up in a cage scarcely big enough to contain it, was a shih tzu dog with raccoon eyes—*hello, Rocky Raccoon*—and as they locked gazes it gave a surprisingly throaty yelp. Inside the bar a male voice was squawking “Oops, I Did It Again.” Takashi, no doubt. Already she was anticipating the five beers she would drink, the unholy interaction of alcohol with the pot in her stomach, the oatmeal texture of her puke. Then she saw the cool blue neon sign down the street that spelled out the number 2.

The inside of Bar #2 (later he would learn that there was no #1 or #3) had the marine-like illumination of an aquarium and glassy mirrored walls. Yet he found it had a toasty, unassuming warmth, unlike most overheated establishments in the winter. Save a couple of older men in the booths, heads drooped to their chests, the place was deserted. He sank down at the counter and ordered a screwdriver. Out of character, even screwdrivers could give him headaches, but something about the formica counter reminded him of college, and the time he had gotten drunk the same day he had his wisdom teeth pulled, the deadly combination of vodka and anesthesia sending him into fits of giggles and loud, happy pronouncements that in retrospect hadn't embarrassed him quite as much as it had his friends.

Happy, ignorant days. Just as these days are ignorant days. The truth of it was he would probably look back on these moments ten years later and scoff at how immature he was back then, what a navel gazer, and then ten years after that the same thing about his self ten years from now, all the way until he was dead. The ring of his glass on the bar was a piece of abstract art, a wayward letter Q. Annoying how he would remember random things like this, sensations minus organizing principles. His reflection in the countertop stared at him. He still looked young anyway, except for the white hair at his temples. It wasn't there six months previously. No problem, he would dye it and he would look the same, maybe even younger. Amazing how doing nothing clears up your complexion. He read an article once which said you could live to be over one hundred fifty if you simply sat still, ingesting like an amoeba.

At the back of the room, dead center, was a platform about six inches off the ground that served as a stage. A college-age student with Fab Four bangs hunched on a stool, singing and playing his acoustic guitar. Behind him two more acoustics had been set up on stands, one black, one white, their purpose (decoration or practical use) unknown.

The student was in the middle of a credible rendition of “She's Got a Ticket to Ride.” Or at least it seemed credible, maybe the screwdriver was starting to work its magic. There was nary a trace of accent, at least. Was the student an expat too, passing time till the end of the year in a futile wait for anything? He had a sudden urge to sing too. “Got to Get You Into My Life”? You needed a horn section to get the song over. Pre-*Revolver* Beatles then. No matter where you were, people loved pre-*Revolver* Beatles.

“Eight Days a Week.” Maybe he could sing the harmony and the student could sing lead. He hauled himself towards the stage.

She had seen the bartender in #2 around—sometimes he’d show up in the karaoke bar down the street to sing some old-fashioned tunes, the ones with the swaying strings that made you think of old people in kimonos standing above a koi pond. He’d sing them quite well in fact, and it wasn’t easy to hit some of those long, held-out notes. Tonight he was tending bar, outfitted in his work outfit—rolled-up sleeves, red bow tie. Didn’t matter what season it was, what the temperature was, the same getup; still, he must be hot in this weather. She couldn’t remember the last time she had been here. Two years ago? Longer? And yet he was here to greet her.

How you doing? she said to him.

Okay, okay. The man made a crisp little bow, grin splitting his face. He even acted Japanese sometimes, even though she knew he wasn’t. There was a photo of his daughter on one of the shelves behind the bar, a very wholesome shot of her in a knit sweater and long hair, her lips cherry-red, a photographer’s credit at the bottom right corner and her name in the bottom left. Miss Something-or-Other Chen. She had never taken a good look at her first name, out of propriety.

What would you like? the bartender asked. *Let me try to remember... Tsingtao beer, the real kind, isn’t that right?*

You got it, she grinned. Already she was feeling better. It must have been the air conditioning in the place—it didn’t sandblast you like most restaurants did in the summer. When had she gotten hooked on real Tsingtao? Maybe when she was on the mainland. It was with old what’s-his-name. Must be still high if I can’t even remember his name. She had been over there for a summer on a student exchange program, they had held hands, kissed under the trees at the local park. She remembered the ground was uneven and knotty with exposed tree roots, and she stood in a spot so they were equal height. She had made fun of his crooked teeth, all the while thinking that if they ever lived together she would take him to the dentist and get braces. And he had gone back to his hometown, in an area so remote that the only way to communicate was by written mail, as even the long-distance phone charges were too expensive. She would hate to see what she wrote back then, and yet she was curious about it. It was probably matter-of-fact stuff—the details of her day, new things in town. She tended to be matter-of-fact when she communicated to people, so there would be no mistaken inferences or nuances. And the act of writing on paper was like bestowing something grand and eloquent. They wrote each other for over a year this way, and then the miracle of Internet came to his village, they exchanged a few emails, and it all just went away. Did she just get sick of staring at frozen pixels on a computer screen? Maybe she didn’t want to subject him to it any more. Maybe it was the act of writing letters that she loved, and when that was gone...

The boy playing Beatles songs in back was probably just a bit younger than her. Not the best stage presence: slumped, hair spilled over his eyes, not moving to the music. Very late-era Kurt Cobain. Not that she required a Madonna stage act, but the real rock stars had that mind-body connection to their music, the need to physicalize what they sang.

He’s not bad, she said to the bartender.

He’s here a couple times a week, he replied. *Friend of my daughter.*

Just a friend? Nothing in the bartender’s cherubic face suggested anything deeper than that. She liked earnest men, or at least she usually did, but the student on stage seemed *awfully* solemn. She had arrived at that place in life where one finds a sense of humor attractive. Or at

least a man with a good laugh. He could be disregarding your needs or making you crazy with thoughtless improprieties, but if he had a good laugh then that would help smooth things over most of the time.

She clenched her fingers in a fist. Thank goodness, feeling had returned. She had come down from the uncomfortable high in the taxi and reached a mellow stage. She was ready to do something. No craziness like Takashi might do when he really let himself go with the booze, like stripping down to his shorts and splashing himself with beer as if it were water. Something she could share with other denizens of the bar. The four or five of them, anyway. There was a man sitting at the other end of the counter who seemed absorbed in the music. Him, then. She would go up and sing something with that student and show the audience what's what when it comes to performance. But what to sing? "Eight Days a Week." Why not. Simple enough to harmonize on, and unlike "For No One," she had the lead melody down cold. With a jaunty hop she was down from her stool and striding towards the stage.

Sorry, he said in her language.

Sorry, she said in his language.

They both laughed in unison.

You want to sing something? she said.

No, go ahead. I'll wait. He gave a wan smile. *As long as you don't sing "Eight Days a Week."*

What? She had heard him, she just hadn't believed it. She slapped her hand to her cheek and massaged it. Stay calm, this may be a symptom of that pot cookie...

That's the one I want to sing, he almost muttered. Look at you, like you're six years old, he thought. Of course she can sing whatever the hell she wants...

She touched the sweater at his elbow, very gently, as if trying to catch hold of a bubble.

Me too. I was thinking exactly of that one. Can you play guitar?

I used to... They were up to the stage now and the student was prying the hair away from his eyes to look at them. "Eight Days a Week"? the boy said. He gave a shy gesture towards the acoustic guitars in back.

She grabbed the black guitar and he took the white. He watched her as she tuned up her guitar by pinging gently at adjacent strings, matching their harmonics. He gave her a few experimental strums—exactly in tune. He had the gift and curse of perfect pitch.

Sorry if I make any mistakes, she said. It was just something to say out of courtesy, for she pretty much expected that this serious-looking man, foreigner or no, wouldn't match up to her.

Their eyes met and he gave a surprising laugh, as if he saw right through her. *How good are you?* he replied.

Damn good, she said, very distinctly. *Most of the time.*

So am I. Some of the time.

Like now.

Like now, he agreed. He was definitely getting giddy. The screwdriver was a good excuse. *Start on E?* he asked.

Yes, she answered before the student could even say something, and then in lighthearted apology she gave him a light punch to the shoulder. *Sorry.*

It's okay, the student murmured. Beyond the stage, the bartender had paused in the act of polishing the counter and was nodding their way.

Let's do it, he said. Now he was being rude, taking charge, and he didn't care because he

didn't know these people. He looked at the near-empty room and had the oddest sensation, as if he was standing in the middle of an open stadium. The student had ceded the spotlight, and the man and the woman were drenched in it. He looked over at her: she was already bopping up and down in place, her longish earrings jingling in counterpoint, setting the rhythm, and it was just right. Taking his cue from her movements, he counted off, *And a one, two, three four...*

I don't have a job, she said.

The bartender had treated them both to Tsingtao at the counter. In the mirror behind the bar, their reflections sat comfortably, as if they always belonged there, and she enjoyed gazing at his profile with impunity. Chin a little weak... Wasn't there a song about that? *Is your figure less than Greek, is your mouth a little weak...* How was it that she had a perfect memory for lyrics, but had absolutely no recollection of important things from college? Idiot savant. She finished off her bottle in half-embarrassment, half-celebration, and before she had even returned it to the table the bartender had slid in a fresh, beading replacement.

Doesn't matter, he said. *You're in a band. And you're good.* It was a pity about her legs, he tended to be a leg man himself, but he didn't mind too much. There was always diets and exercise. No complaints about the rest. It amazed him how openly he was staring at her. Being in a foreign country could abolish propriety. An unwritten law: *foreigners are free to be pigs.*

Unaware of his gaze, she gave a half-shrug. *That's not a job. Just fun. Sorry, nothing interesting to talk about.*

I don't have a job either. So I've got less to talk about.

That's bad, yes? Our job is who we are.

Hell, no. Who tells you that?

Nobody tells me, I just know it.

So cynical.

Realism.

Screw realism. He ordered up another screwdriver. *Hypotheticals are better.*

Sorry—hypo-what?

Things that aren't real but might be. Okay, example. You're going to die soon.

What? She could only think of her father in bed, mahjong tiles *clack clack clack*, his face going grayer day by day, a single vain strand of hair left on his forehead, laying limp and pathetic there.

Her jaw jutted for an instant, just an instant, but long enough for him to notice and he thought *Shit, what have I stirred up...* He could only go on, pretend that he hadn't heard, and pray that his alcohol-fueled ramblings would sweep the both of them along on this current to—where?

You have an hour left to live, only enough time for one album's worth of songs. Would you play your favorite album all the way through, or repeat your favorite song over and over?

Good, she was thinking that one over, crisis averted. The student on stage was back on his own, no doubt relieved that he would longer be upstaged by drunk foreign devils and local rock singers in short skirts. *Isn't it good, Norwegian wood...* He pronounced it like *eat*.

I like listening to an album, she finally said, *but I think I would listen to one song, again and again. I think it would better prepare me for death. A whole album would be sad. Like listening to my whole life. I think of everything I haven't done. What would you do?*

*I don't know. I suck at hypotheticals. Here's an easier one: It's a cold day like today—
You think today is cold?*

Well, with the rain.

Rain? She was sincerely puzzled.

Yeah. Not now, it was raining earlier.

Oh. You must have thin blood. She gestured at his wool coat.

Maybe. You've got high metabolism. He pointed at her bare knees.

It was a warm day. You don't think?

Okay. Anyway. It's a cold day outside, and you walk into a restaurant. The door doesn't swing all the way closed. Cold air is getting in. Are you the type to notice and close the door, or do you not notice, or do you notice and not care?

I am choice number two but I want to be choice number one. What are you?

Number one all the way. And then I get really pissed at number two and number three.

Two and three?

Yeah, because even if you don't notice it all adds up to the same. If you can't pay attention to the world then you don't care enough.

And you care. Too much, she teased.

Absolutely. Shit. At a loss to go on further, he took a good half-minute to finish his screwdriver. That's what you get for going on and on.

He's funny, she thought. He didn't smile much, and yet somehow his mouth had a natural puckish lift to it, as if he was ready to burst out laughing given the exact right circumstance. She couldn't help grinning at the thought, and when he saw her smile a miraculous little one of his own broke out. To further puncture the tension he went cross-eyed, his tongue lolling at the side of his mouth, and their nervous laughter merged.

Another for my friend! He called out. Red-faced, his eyes beginning to droop, the bartender supplied another screwdriver and Tsingtao, and then lingered a few feet away, his elbows on the counter, staring dreamily at an empty booth across the room.

Are you staying in town long? she asked.

Going home in a few days.

Oh. Getting a job?

No. I don't know. No plans.

If you have no plans, then why don't you keep traveling?

No, I've had enough of this place. He almost said it; his shoulders bunched with the sudden effort to hold the words in. But she must have sensed his thought because she smiled.

It's okay. This town is dirty. So much pollution, too many people.

No, it's not that. It's me. It's all about me, he proclaimed, diva-like.

She laughed. *You should get outside you.*

Like you?

She sighed. *I'm always outside. Everything I do is for other people.*

You're in a band. That's you.

No. My friend Takashi, his idea. I just play along. He writes the songs, I sing them. She flopped her arms up and down. *I am a puppet.*

You need a vacation. Do you want mine?

Can I? And you can be in my band. You're good.

Not bad, eh? Bragging was something new to him. Foreign acts in foreign lands. *Used to play in a cover band back in school. Lots of blues songs. Every practice, the lead singer would bring two six-packs, one for himself and one for the rest of the band. We didn't last long.*

Now the student was singing "Michelle." Was that a flippant gesture towards them? The

one Beatles song in a foreign language.

I don't know— he began.

—the words to this one, she finished.

I love you I love you I love you, the bartender crooned in a surprisingly reedy voice, Chet Baker in another lifetime. He leaned in. *Do you love her?* he asked.

What? He feigned ignorance of their language just to buy a few moments. A few moments for what? To decide how to answer? As if he could decide on anything within those interminable seconds.

In English, almost comical with jowly vowels, he repeated: *Do you love her?* He stabbed a finger in her direction in the friendliest way possible.

He hemmed and hawed a bit, like they do in most romantic comedies, and he hated the thought that he was parroting such behavior, such a lack of imagination on his part, but what else did he have to base his reaction on? This just doesn't happen, it never happens.

His eyes locked with hers for a moment. So panicky, she thought, almost cute. She enjoyed his embarrassment even as she her cheeks burned. Of course he would have to say no, it would be insanity to say anything else. I must come to the rescue, she thought, as I always do.

Stop teasing him, Master, she said, giving the bartender a not inconsiderable shove to his forearm. A guffaw exploded from the man as he snapped his arm back.

Okay, okay, he said. *Not my business, I understand. Are you coming back tomorrow? More Beatles?*

Sure. She turned back to the foreigner. *Want to meet here tomorrow night at 8?*

I have no plans.

I know. She smiled and rose to her feet. Instinctively he jumped to his.

I have to meet some friends now.

The words had a pinch of finality to them, yet he understood completely. Her wild and crazy bandmates. She wanted the courtliness of this moment to stamp a period on tonight's events, rather than a further prolonged bout of drinking, loud voices, sweaty behavior. The back of his head was throbbing now, a definite headache coming in, one screwdriver too many, and he took this, too, to be a sign: *Don't push it.*

I'll see you tomorrow night, he said. *What song should we do?*

How about "Hey Jude"? *There should be more people on a Friday. We can get people to sing with us—*

Always thinking of others.

Yes.

Okay. "Hey Jude." He held out his hand and she gripped it for a short moment. Then she offered a closed fist for a knuckle tap. He obliged with a smirk.

What is this? the barman scoffed, but she was already sailing out, swaying a bit from side to side, throwing a last sunny laugh over her shoulder at them. Even as she dove back into the humid night a scent lingered over her, something she had picked up inside, something pleasant like smoldering wood, Norwegian wood. She decided that it would be his smell, whether it had been his in actuality or not.

He gave a small wave to her departing back, a wave she didn't see. The bartender's head was buried in his arms on the counter; he was breathing heavy, on the verge of a snore. Well well, he thought, will she come tomorrow or not? Defeatist already. He would hear no more of that. Twenty hours to go. A scrap of newspaper was carried into the bar by a cruel gust of wind, and sank to rest for good on the floor.

Darling-san, Takashi drawled. She hated the way he said *darling* and he knew it; they had reached the point where her annoyance was a natural state, something to be touched on at least once during the evening. *Darling-san*, he said again, his arm around her neck and drawing her close so her face rubbed against the tiny patch of stubble on his chin, the only place where it grew.

Yes, she sighed. *I know*.

He was pleasantly drunk tonight. The last time she had seen him like this was half a year before, fresh off the plane from his trip to California. The skiing at Tahoe had been beautiful. *Lots of snow bunnies*, he had said, just tossing the newly-learned phrase out, confident that she wouldn't be tiresome enough to be jealous. She had preferred to focus on his sunburned nose and call him the ugliest reindeer in the world, and he had laughed her off with another shot of brandy. That was his talent, he could laugh anything off.

Where were Donnie and Jimmy? One could always count on them to liven things up with a bit of horseplay. As soon as they had arrived in the apartment, Takashi keeping them all quiet with an insistent *shush*, the two of them had made straight for the kitchen. She could hear a few childish giggles coming from there now, and a crazy odor was wafting their way, something like burning tire rubber.

How about "*Poker Face*," Takashi said. *That's a fun song*.

I don't look like Lady Gaga.

No problem. A wig, some makeup, a bra with diamonds on it...

She gave him a half-hearted dig in the ribs. Outside a garbage truck was clanging and banging its way down the alley, and from a little further away a police siren wailed its sing-song dirge. Four in the morning and it was like the entire world was screaming.

If you dress up, she said, then we can do it.

No problem. He smiled at her with half-closed eyes. Somehow he seemed to be swaying in rhythm with the far-off siren. He had the gift of grabbing hold of an outside stimulus like that and reproducing it on his computer, then transmuting it into some strange, wonderful, never-before-heard sound. If he wanted to he could probably make a comfortable living as a musician back in Japan. They adored unexplainable creativity like that.

Slowly she rolled off him and onto her knees. A very proper and Japanese position. *My father is dying*, she said.

He stared at her for a long moment, blinked rapidly. *Your father?*

Yes.

It was unfair of her, unworthy too. They had never talked about her family or his. For all she knew he had a family of his own back in Nagoya, and he might leave suddenly tomorrow, because that was how it often happened—a quick hug good-bye, no estimate or expectation on a day of return, and he would come back after a spell, just after she had given up on seeing him again, as if he could detect that quiet shift in her attitude, and he would track her down at the karaoke bar. What if the karaoke bar burned down? He would still find her. She was sure of it.

I am sorry, he said stiffly.

She couldn't expect anything more from him than that, and yet it seemed wholly inadequate. She turned towards the glass sliding door and the sodium streetlamps just beyond. They were on the sixth floor, high enough to see a ragged carpet of rooftops and the steel towers of downtown on the horizon. How many people making love at this very moment behind all those darkened windows? Perhaps no one. Everyone was too tired for making love.

Can't read my, can't read my, no he can't read my poker face, she chanted.

The kitchen door burst open and Jimmy lurched out, the lower half of his face swaddled in a bandana. *Baking powder*, he said thickly. *Where's the baking powder?*

What are you doing? Takashi asked.

Making tabs. Where's the baking powder?

No baking powder. I don't eat here.

Shit... Jimmy beat it back to the kitchen, and after a quick, sharp exchange, he was out again, the bandana down to his neck, throwing on his high-tops. *I'm going to the 7-11.*

Okay, Takashi said.

Jimmy turned to leave, his ponytail curling in a question mark down his neck, and a chill washed over her: she had a vision of him about a month from now, hair shaved to a prickly buzz cut, a little beret snug on his head, camouflage fatigues hanging baggy off his shoulders in the heat, face like pockmarked granite, ready to do his one year of mandatory military service. And then? Who knew? Maybe he would meet a girl, maybe he'd move to another city, maybe he'd go on to college. And that would be the last of Donnie too, because his commitment to the band was contingent on Jimmy. And then, just maybe, Takashi would finally go back home for good, for lack of having youngsters like Donnie and Jimmy to humor. She had the odd sensation that she was standing alone in this unfurnished apartment while everything outside the windows was happening without her. Why didn't she get the name of the man she met at Bar #2? It was all silly. He said he was leaving the country soon. She wasn't going anywhere. This wasn't a movie.

As the door slammed behind Jimmy she grew aware that Takashi was staring at her. Did he have any idea what she was thinking about?

Darling-san, he said.

She looked stubbornly down at the empty white tiles that covered the space between him and her.

It is what it is.

He had used those words a multitude of times. An easy, ready comment on the vagaries of life. An acknowledgment of lowered expectations. Surrender. And now someone was saying it to him, some woman he had never seen before except on the cover of a bestseller in the bookstore. All bestseller covers looked the same these days: a cloaked figure, a hooded glance.

He was on his way to something celebratory, but he had left his suit back at the hotel, and the return route was no longer a city street replete with signs and stoplights, but a gnarled dirt path twisting into the woods, a barbed wire fence running alongside, abandoned concrete warehouses beyond. And before him was the woman, neither threatening nor helpful, still like topiary, and she said: *It is what it is.*

And then he was awake. Only a few moments had passed; he was still in the café, laptop propped open on the table next to his empty bowl of noodles. Straight from a dried ramen package, no doubt. Probably the broth too, straight from the packet: add water, instant MSG. No difference to him since he had a hangover already. The café was a Hong Kong-style breakfast nook plastered with specials on pastel rice paper, a nursery school project gone haywire.

On his laptop was a blank document, two lines typed at the top:

It is what it is

She said, See you in some other life

Lyrics. Pavel from Belarus. Amazing. He hadn't attempted a song in fifteen years, not since that blues band in college. A traumatic experience. So young and sensitive back then, everything so deeply *felt*, goddammit. He had locked himself in his room for several days listening to Linda Ronstadt singing old standards with the Nelson Riddle orchestra, and his housemates had knocked on his door a few times, asking him as dubiously as possible, *Are you okay?* So he decided to write the blues song to end all blues songs, and one of his lyrics was *Since you've been here my life has been scrambled*, which was enough to drive the lead guitarist to drunken scorn: *Who the fuck uses the word "scrambled"? Goofy, man. Like fucking scrambled eggs. Why don't you say "fucked up"?* But he would have none of it, vulgarity was the last refuge of the incompetent, and maybe even back then he had some dim awareness of the comic nature of his angst, thus *scrambled*. So the band had broken up.

The door to the café swung open, and the resultant winter air that swirled about him had an indefinable scent to it—something sweet, genteel, as if spring and blossoms were only days away. He realized he was holding his breath, anticipating a memory that wasn't quite making it through even as his body remembered. It was true what they said: when one travels, one is never alone even when one is alone. You're always accompanied by fugitive inklings of what you've done before, a tinge of melancholy at things you're dimly aware you have missed.

Pavel shuffled in, a cheery little *ching* accompanying every step he took—he stored all of his money and change inside his socks. Of course Pavel would be here, the café was across the street from the hostel, and yet it was a pleasing burst of synchronicity. Pavel, unsuspecting muse, inspiration for the lyrical exercise on his laptop, another budding writer having lunch.

Greetings, mate, Pavel said. He had been in Australia for half a year. As always, his face was beet red. He was fanatical about his morning shave, one would see him lather up in the communal bathroom, and fifteen minutes later, he'd still be at it, plowing his cheeks. And yet he would insist on donning crumpled, one-size-too-large silk clothes, as if he'd been shoved whole into the washer. The one exception was a rainbow-colored scarf wrapped tight about his throat. Some old family heirloom. Eastern Europeans were like that, with their totemic objects from the past. It was refreshing.

This morning his grave expression was tougher than ever, as if it had been carved into his face. *You know something*, he said. *You can put people in one of three categories.*

Oh yeah?

Writers, editors and readers.

What about publishers?

Ah! Yes. Pavel was very serious now as he raised his index finger in acknowledgment.

Publishers. The worst. To hell with publishers.

To hell with publishers, he agreed, and clanged his empty milk tea glass against Pavel's.

You have time to read more of my novel? Pavel asked.

The novel. Christ. Pavel had guts writing the whole thing in English, no doubts there. *No one in Belarus cares about books any more*, he had claimed. So he had come up with an English stream-of-consciousness thing wherein the first paragraph was a monolithic block of text that lasted for ten pages, rife with creatively misplaced adverbs and tenses. A mammoth reverie about a bookshelf that had been built by the narrator's great-grandfather and was now held together by ill-fitting nails and duct tape, and of course an entire family history was relayed in the process, one breathless chronicle of rapes and revolutions and estrangement. There was a sort of crazy genius about it. He didn't have the heart or guts to tell Pavel that no publisher would take it. To hell with publishers, yes, but one had to be realistic too. He winced: *A publisher would say that.*

How did Pavel do it? Writing was indeed an infection, blinkering one against outside indifference and scorn, and if one could do it until death without a single thought of failure invading one's head, maybe that was a perfect life.

Something about the novel must have infected him too, though—how else to explain the lyrics he was jotting down? He had never been to Belarus, knew next to nothing about it, and here he was writing a song about Belarus, because there was something romantic about that word, all Roman and voluptuous. Pavel had said to him a few nights before, both of them tired and somewhat drunk at the local expat pub: *It's like time has stopped there. Everything clean, nothing changed.* That last bit sounded like a lyric right there. Already other fragments were forming in his head, islands in a strait. *Back in ninety-five the thin ice was cracking, the traffic was dragging me...* Dragging him where? Back to a nice bowl of borscht.

Staring at the last truncated bit of noodle at the bottom of his bowl, he murmured: *How old are you?*

Twenty-nine, Pavel said.

Have a girlfriend?

Yes. We were traveling together, and then she got sick and had to go home. She told me I should go on.

And you did. To see what life is like without her.

Pavel smiled. Or just see life.

In all its countless permutations. Before you get to that age where you start defining yourself by what you're not rather than what you are.

Hmm? Pavel looked so Teutonic when his face was squinched like that. No, Teutonic was for Germans. What was the Belarus equivalent?

Nothing, he said. Just thinking out loud. You miss your girlfriend?

Sure. Of course.

But it's a good thing, to know you're going home to her eventually.

Yah.

Soon everyone departs. Death, departure, tragic child. Last night that woman had had that strange look in her eyes when he mentioned dying. He needed desperately to find out what that was about. And his recollection of her, her stubby legs, the wry tug to the left corner of her mouth, the way her shoulders caved in when she said, *I'm always outside*, prompted a follow-on thought: "Belarus" needed a female lead vocal.

I met a girl, he said.

Ah. A girl. Pavel may have been amused but his eyes betrayed nothing. Very Teutonic.

I don't know her name, where she's from. She's a singer.

She a beaut?

Yeah. Sure, in her own way.

Very good. The start of a story, yah?

He hadn't even considered that. Some writer he was. Wouldn't being aware of a story in progress cheapen the whole thing, though? He had confidence it was bigger than that. They could email song ideas to each other. He'd get her to write her own songs too. It was no longer about the stuff in his head that he'd been drowning in for months. This was a collaboration. Wasn't love the act of two people looking in the same direction together? *Damn.* Silently, his lips puckered in an exaggerated pronunciation, like the bartender from #2. *Do you loooove her?*

All I know is I'm going to meet her tonight, he said. And I'm going to invite her to come with me to Belarus, and we'll visit you. And we'll finally meet this beautiful girlfriend of yours

and talk about traveling around the world. And even if it's the dead of winter and minus 30 Celcius, it'll be great because nothing is better than sitting inside and having hot soup—

Yes! Oh I miss the soup... Pavel nodded vigorously, and this time he broke into a full-veined smile. *Because every restaurant, they make their own kind of soup.*

Infinite diversity, he said. *Za vashe zdorovy.*

To health, Pavel said, and they toasted with empty cups. Again the café door yawed open, and again he smelled a hint of spring in the air. He didn't dare speak or even look at Pavel, for he couldn't disturb the reverie the scent had brought upon him. It was like he was being invited somewhere. Pavel was hefting his sock in his hands, and without warning a bunch of sweaty change clattered on the table, the café's fluorescent lights dancing on their surfaces.

Seven-thirty p.m. on a cloudless night, nary a star in sight—it was impossible with all the smog and light pollution, but she didn't mind—and she could not move from the doorway of the Sogo department store. People squeezed by her, and some even pushed a bit, sparing only a momentary withering glance for the woman blocking entrance and egress, but the important thing was that the doors continued to open and close, gusts of air-conditioned bliss battering her at unexpected moments. Arms dangling at her sides, she wiggled her fingers, and every so often someone else's hand would accidentally brush against hers. *Hello, pleased to meet you.* And then the person would disappear, with nary a memory of the contact except a bowed head, a swinging purse, sandals and painted toenails.

Takashi was running up to her, armed with two ice creams. His treat this time, a rare thing, but he had a knack of knowing when to offer. It didn't make much difference in the end since she was spending her father's money whenever she paid for the both of them. No doubt Takashi was spending some of his benefactor's cash, whoever that benefactor happened to be: rich family, sugar mama? She would probably never know.

He was licking the melting vanilla off the side of his cone when he caught up to her, and his exposed tongue jutted straight in her direction, then undulated a bit. The Japanese had a fetish for tongues. Compensation for other parts of their anatomy?

Thanks, she said.

My pleasure, he said cheerfully. The man had to be a reptile to look so dry and nonchalant in the heat. Would it rain later tonight? He had a sense for that, and took a childish sort of glee in getting wet. Everyone else might be running around, opening umbrellas, nylon canopies ramming into other nylon canopies, and he'd be outside the curb instead of under the crazy-quilt awnings on the sidewalk, hopping and skipping over puddles, face crinkled open as he faced the sky, his clothes sopping and stuck to his body so he looked even thinner than he actually was.

On cue, he said: *I think rain's coming.*

Hmm, she said absently. Her chocolate ice cream was good but the cone had gone stale—it folded rather than crunched.

I got some more cookies, he grinned.

Special night, she thought. It was a trifecta: ice cream treat, eager for the rain, another dose of pot.

They climbed the rusted green steps to the flyover over the avenue. From below headlights winked at them. Even in the summer the sun went down early here. She had heard that in other places in the summer (not including the North or South Poles, that was too obvious) the sun would go down at nine or ten at night. Would what it be like to live an extra few hours every day? Left to her own devices, she would go to bed at dusk and awake with the sunrise. She

belonged on some farm from an earlier century.

How's your father? Takashi asked.

The same, she said. It was a lie; he was much worse. Earlier that day, in the parched afternoon light, she had visited him in his bedroom. He resembled nothing more than a plum pit, all cracked skin and a single black O where his mouth was. First he called out his wife's name, and then when she responded he apologized for mistaking her. So polite all the time.

You still learning English? he asked. He always asked this question and she always told him she was doing fine. Either his memory was gone or he was sharper than ever and knew she was lying. His baby-like fingers grabbed hers and squeezed. *Do what makes you happy*, he said. *That's all I want.*

I'm going home, Takashi said. *Got a plane tomorrow.*

Oh, she said. *All right.*

Normally it would be left at that, and she was fine with it. Far down the avenue, just before it snaked around the low-slung buildings, a neon sign blinked on and off. It was too far away to read the characters, she could just see pink and white. Maybe a love hotel. She had always been indifferent about sex, maybe frigid, or at least that's what she claimed although she didn't believe it—she just hadn't had one of those moments yet. At least Takashi enjoyed himself when they were together, and was usually solicitous with her. In return, she supplied some pleasing noises, a few strategic digs of her nails into his back. Now, though, maybe love wasn't a bad idea. Was there enough time?

Would you like to visit me? he asked.

She laughed. *Why?*

It's cooler than here.

What would I do in Nagoya?

You could stay with me. Get a part-time job if you want. Stay a month, see how it goes.

Are you lonely in Nagoya? She said it with a touch more haughtiness than she intended but he didn't seem fazed by it. Thank goodness for language differences.

No. I just want to hang with you more.

You can hang with me whenever you're here.

I'm not sure when I'll be here again.

What?

Some things have changed. I may need to stay in Japan for a while.

And the band?

Jimmy's going to the Army.

Ah. Yes. So it was finally happening. She had known it all along. She gave a long silent sigh, almost not noticing his dry hand atop hers.

But I want the band to continue, he said. *In Japan. You and me. What do you think?*

You really want me to decide right now?

No, you don't have to. He thrust his hands in his shorts pockets, shuffling his feet, looking for all the world like a ten-year-old. *I just thought it'd be more fun we went together.*

She looked at her watch. It was fifteen minutes to eight. She had not thought about Bar #2 and the Beatles and the man all day. She hadn't forgotten, it just had not received her attention. It was like spying an exotic bird in the jungle, mere feet away, and you don't dare move, make a sound or even look at it, for fear of it flying away. She needed a Tsingtao and a guitar to strum more badly than anything she had wanted in a long time.

Darling-san, she said. It was the first time she had ever said it. *You really want me to?*

No hemming and hawing this time, he looked her straight in the eyes. *Yes.*

Wow, she said. She couldn't help it. As soon as the word escaped her mouth he gave a nervous little laugh and rubbed furiously at the back of his head, the prototypical Japanese show of embarrassment.

I like that, she said. *But are you more interested in me, or the band?*

Where did that come from? How did she get so indelicate all of a sudden? This wasn't like her. She would stand for a lot of things, why get all personal and insinuating now? She looked away from him to hide the pinched look on her face.

What? He seemed genuinely confused. *What do you mean?*

Nothing, nothing. I'm sorry. I have to go. I'll think about what you said, okay? I'll call you later, okay? She stood on tiptoe and gave him a chaste peck on the cheek.

Is—everything okay? Never before did he seem so out of equilibrium. She was walking fast now, making for the other end of the flyover, her sneakers flying over the tiles, one step for each tile, now one step for each tile and a half, and he was a few steps behind, matching her acceleration.

I'm sorry, I have to be somewhere, she said. Now she was tripping down the stairs, braving a broken neck with every step as her toes skidded on the edge of each step, and even Takashi was being cautious as he stood there, watching helplessly as she landed on the street with an awkward *clomp* of both feet. The traffic was at a cacophonous standstill; diesel smothered the air. She sprinted around the corner, towards a less crowded intersection, a caterwaul of car horns and snatches of modern tunes from nearby stores stalking her. *Love follows*, a young pop idol sang. Enough of love, she needed the Beatles. Who was the asshole honking at her? It was an empty taxi running alongside her. The driver was gesturing for her to get in. *Oh, sorry*, she huffed out loud. With an unexpected strength she wrenched the passenger door open and tumbled in.

You ever read The Tibetan Book of Death? the taxi driver asked.

What? he said. Traffic was at a crawl; as far ahead as eyes could see was a galaxy of bright red tail lights and floodlit skyscrapers. Already cars were honking. That was the craziness of traffic here—if you weren't moving forward at the moment the light *going the other way* was turning yellow, then you were going to get those impatient blasts of the horn.

The Buddhists believe that at every moment, the universe is dying and being reborn, the driver said. *So that means you're dead and alive right now, with infinite universes open to you.*

If we don't get moving one of those universes is going to close, he thought grimly.

Sorry, he said. *How close are we?*

A few minutes. We'll be okay. He hadn't gotten a good look at the driver when he entered the car. Now in the rear view mirror he saw a slash of face, two cheery wrinkled eyes. *I promise. All right?*

Sure, sure, he grunted. Why hadn't he gotten her contact information? It was the screwdrivers. That, and being in a foreign country. Mind on autopilot, just existing. But that was what had led him to that bar in the first place. Destiny, fate, New Age bullshit.

I was driving a young boy around today, the taxi driver said. *You know what he said to me?* I want to die.

What?

He wouldn't explain. Maybe he was having problems at home. He had an address to drive to and he didn't want me to take him there. He just said he wanted to die.

How old was he?

I don't know, eight, ten? What difference does it make? So I told him about the book. I don't think he got most of what I was saying, but I told him he was in-between lives, and he liked that one. Just moving on from one thing to the next. I told him he was already dead. Ready for the next thing. I think he was okay after he heard that.

Hmm.

You moving on to the next thing?

Maybe. And you're always moving.

Yep. I like how it all works out.

He looked at his watch again. 7:58. He looked up at the jolly eyes in the rear view mirror, but before he could say anything the driver bellowed *Here we are!* and the taxi rolled to a noiseless stop.

There it was, just as it had been the night before. The blue neon sign, the near-deserted street. (Strange for this time of the evening.) Remnants of paper money used for burning at dusk were playing tag with each other on the wind. As he opened the passenger door he smelled something salty in the air—not the acrid burn of an industrial plant, but the heavy, deep salt of the ocean, which was quite a feat considering the nearest ocean was dozens of miles away.

Are you going to be okay? The driver asked. Now that he was outside the car, he had a clear view of the driver. The man wore a ring of unvarnished Buddhist beads about his wrist, and had a birthmark in the exact center of his forehead.

Sure. Thanks. He thrust out some extra paper bills as tips and the driver adamantly refused them.

No, no, the driver said. *It all comes out even in the end. You get me?*

Sure, he said.

Sure, sure, the driver repeated in friendly mockery. *It's all right if you don't believe me. Just keep moving. Okay?*

Okay, he agreed.

The driver threw up his Buddhist-bead hand in farewell and the taxi clattered off with an emphatic squeal of the tires. 8:00 p.m. exactly. He entered #2.

Are we going to make it? she asked.

The driver gave a neutral grunt. He was a young man with bang-laden hair (Beatles '65), and a toothpick dangled incuriously from his mouth, just like it did for old Hong Kong action movie stars just before they blew away members of a rival gang. Her father used to love those movies. They would actually make him cry. Especially when someone pledged undying loyalty to someone else.

What would it be tonight? She had said "Hey Jude" but maybe that was too obvious. Something more eclectic? Maybe "Bungalow Bill" from *The White Album*. Or maybe a George Harrison song, George never got enough credit. Everyone wanted to be John, but honestly, living with George would probably be better than living with any of the others.

She didn't know why she was so fixated on getting there at 8:00 p.m. Why was she getting flustered at all? Takashi had texted her several times already. She had only read the first one: *You okay? Call me.*

Not okay, she said to herself. Not bad or good either. Just focused. Of all the things to get focused about... This required great deliberation. If she had one of those pot cookies now, she could imagine how much more *intent* she would be, like a child counting peas.

How close? she asked.

Just a few more blocks.

Something rattled against the roof of the taxi. The rain was coming. Takashi, right once more. Suddenly she shivered. The air conditioning in the car was on full blast.

I have to get out, she said.

What? The young driver said. His mouth hung open a little stupidly and yet the toothpick managed to stay glued to his bottom lip. He probably wasn't much older than Jimmy, or maybe even younger. They were all the same, these boys, all of them loud in their dullness, because being loud meant they were alive.

Stop the car please, she said. She recognized the street now, they were only one block away. In the headlights the rain was white needles. She didn't care; as soon as she was in the open and it crashed against her face she grinned.

Slowly, she walked towards the entrance to Bar #2. A single palm tree had been planted at the end of the street in a vain attempt to add a little tropical flavor to the surroundings. It was swaying with the wind and rain. Almost gale force. Her hair flew across her eyes. Inside she would grab a towel—she was sure the old bartender would lend her one. What would she and the foreigner talk about, other than music? Music was enough. One could go an entire life and just talk about music. How long would it take to listen to every worthwhile song on the planet? If you were cynical, maybe a few days. She had chosen not to be cynical.

She stood at the front door, clearing the hair from her eyes. In a strange quirk of acoustics, she couldn't hear the rain at all, just the bustle from inside, the student on stage singing "It Won't Be Long." With shaking hands she pulled the door open.

[To be concluded]