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South of the Border,  
West of the Sun

HARUKI MURAKAMI

## SOUTH OF THE BORDER, WEST OF THE SUN

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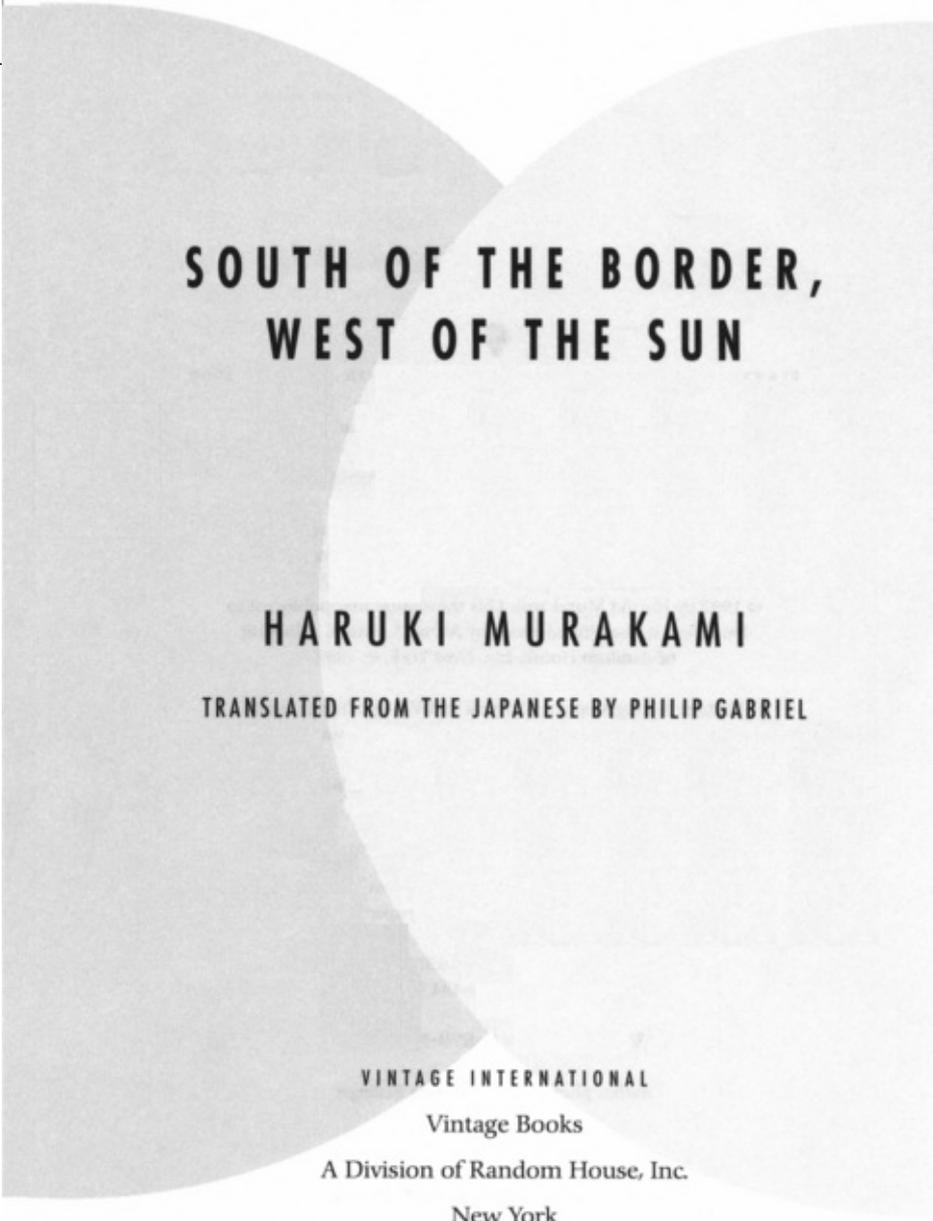
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**SOUTH OF THE BORDER,  
WEST OF THE SUN**

**HARUKI MURAKAMI**

TRANSLATED FROM THE JAPANESE BY PHILIP GABRIEL

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My birthday's the fourth of January, 1951. The first week of the first month of the first year of the second half of the twentieth century. Something to commemorate, I guess, which is why my parents named me Hajime— "Beginning," in Japanese. Other than that, a 100 percent average birth. My father worked in a large brokerage firm, my mother was a typical housewife. During the war, my father was drafted as a student and sent to fight in Singapore; after the surrender he spent some time in a POW camp. My mother's house was burned down in a B-29 raid during the final year of the war. Their generation suffered most during the long war.

When I was born, though, you'd never have known there'd been a war. No more burned-out ruins, no more occupation army. We lived in a small, quiet town, in a house my father's company provided. The house was prewar, somewhat old but roomy enough. Pine trees grew in the garden, and we even had a small pond and some stone lanterns.

The town I grew up in was your typical middle-class suburbia. The classmates I was friendly with all lived in neat little row houses; some might have been a bit larger than mine, but you could count on them all having similar entranceways, pine trees in the garden. They all worked. My friends' fathers were employed in companies or else were professionals of some sort. Hardly anyone's mother worked. And most everyone had a cat or a dog. No one I knew lived in an apartment or a condo. Later on I moved to another part of town, but it was pretty much identical. The upshot of this is that until I moved to Tokyo to go to college, I was convinced everyone in the whole world lived in a single-family home with a garden and a parking space and commuted to work decked out in a suit. I couldn't for the life of me imagine a different lifestyle.

In the world I grew up in, a typical family had two or three children. My childhood friends were all members of such stereotypical families. If not two kids in the family, then three; if not three, then two. Families with six or seven kids were few and far between, but even more unusual were families with only one child.

I happened to be one of the unusual ones, since I was an only child. I had an inferiority complex about it, as if there was something different about me, that what other people had and took for granted I lacked.

I detested the term *only child*. Every time I heard it I felt something was missing from me—like I wasn't quite a complete human being. The phrase *only child* stood there, pointing an accusatory finger at me. "Something's not quite all there, pal," it told me.

In the world I lived in, it was an accepted idea that only children were spoiled by their parents, weak, and self-centered. This was a given—like the fact that the barometer goes down the higher up you go and the fact that cows give milk. That's why I hated it whenever someone asked me how many brothers and sisters I had. Just let them hear I didn't have any, and instinctively they thought: An only child, eh? Spoiled, weak, and self-centered, I betch. That kind of knee-jerk reaction depressed me, and hurt. But what really depressed and hurt

me was something else: the fact that everything they thought about me was true. I really was spoiled, weak, and self-centered.

In the six years I went to elementary school, I met just one other only child. So I remember her (yes, it was a girl) very well. I got to know her well, and we talked about all sorts of things. We understood each other. You could even say I loved her.

Her last name was Shimamoto. Soon after she was born, she came down with polio, which made her drag her left leg. On top of that, she'd transferred to our school at the end of fifth grade. Compared to me, then, she had a terrible load of psychological baggage to struggle with. This baggage, though, only made her a tougher, more self-possessed only child than could ever have been. She never whined or complained, never gave any indication of the annoyance she must have felt at times. No matter what happened, she'd manage a smile. The worse things got, in fact, the broader her smile became. I loved her smile. It soothed me and encouraged me. *It'll be all right*, her smile told me. *Just hang in there, and everything will turn out okay*. Years later, whenever I thought of her, it was her smile that came to mind first.

Shimamoto always got good grades and was kind to everyone. People respected her. We were both only children, but in this sense she and I were different. This doesn't mean, though, that all our classmates liked her. No one teased her or made fun of her, but except for me, she had no real friends.

She was probably too cool, too self-possessed. Some of our classmates must have thought her cold and haughty. But I detected something else—something warm and fragile just below the surface. Something very much like a child playing hide-and-seek, hidden deep within her yet hoping to be found.

Because her father was transferred a lot, Shimamoto had attended quite a few schools. I can't recall what her father did. Once, she explained to me in detail what he did, but as with most kids, it went in one ear and out the other. I seem to recall some professional job connected with a bank or tax office or something. She lived in company housing, but the house was larger than normal, a Western-style house with a low solid stone wall surrounding it. Above the wall was an evergreen hedge, and through gaps in the hedge you could catch a glimpse of a garden with a lawn.

Shimamoto was a large girl, about as tall as I was, with striking features. I was certain that in a few years she would be gorgeous. But when I first met her, she hadn't developed an outer look to match her inner qualities. Something about her was unbalanced, and not many people felt she was much to look at. There was an adult part of her and a part that was still child—and they were out of sync. And this out-of-sync quality made people uneasy.

Probably because our houses were so close, literally a stone's throw from each other, the first month after she came to our school she was assigned to the seat next to mine. I brought her up to speed on what texts she'd need, what the weekly tests were like, how much we covered in each book, how the cleaning and the dishing-out-lunch assignments were handled. Our school's policy was for the child who lived nearest any transfer student to help him or her out; my teacher took me aside to let me know that he expected me to take special care of Shimamoto, with her lame leg.

As with all kids of eleven or twelve talking with a member of the opposite sex for the first

time, for a couple of days our conversations were strained. When we found out we were both only children, though, we relaxed. It was the first time either of us had met a fellow only child. We had so much we'd held inside about being only children. Often we'd walk home together. Slowly, because of her leg, we'd walk the three quarters of a mile home, talking about all kinds of things. The more we talked, the more we realized we had in common: our love of books and music; not to mention cats. We both had a hard time explaining our feelings to others. We both had a long list of foods we didn't want to eat. When it came to subjects at school the ones we liked we had no trouble concentrating on; the ones we disliked we hated to death. But there was one major difference between us—more than I did. Shimamoto consciously wrapped herself inside a protective shell. Unlike me, she made an effort to study the subjects she hated, and she got good grades. When the school lunch contained food she hated, she still ate it. In other words, she constructed a much taller defensive wall around herself than I ever built. What remained behind that wall, though, was pretty much what lay behind mine.

Unlike times when I was with other girls, I could relax with Shimamoto. I loved walking home with her. Her left leg limped slightly as she walked. We sometimes took a breather on a park bench halfway home, but I didn't mind. Rather the opposite—I was glad to have the extra time.

Soon we began to spend a lot of time together, but I don't recall anyone kidding us about it. This didn't strike me at the time, though now it seems strange. After all, kids that age naturally tease and make fun of any couple who seem close. It might have been because of the kind of person Shimamoto was. Something about her made other people a bit tense. She had an air about her that made people think: Whoa—better not say anything too stupid in front of *this* girl. Even our teachers were somewhat on edge when dealing with her. Her lameness might have had something to do with it. At any rate, most people thought Shimamoto was not the kind of person you teased, which was just fine by me.

During phys. ed. she sat on the sidelines, and when our class went hiking or mountain climbing, she stayed home. Same with summer swim camp. On our annual sports day, she did seem a little out of sorts. But other than this, her school life was typical. Hardly ever did she mention her leg. If memory serves, not even once. Whenever we walked home from school together, she never once apologized for holding me back or let this thought graze her expression. I knew, though, that it was precisely because her leg bothered her that she refrained from mentioning it. She didn't like to go to other kids' homes much, since she had to remove her shoes, Japanese style, at the entrance. The heels of her shoes were different heights, and the shoes themselves were shaped differently—something she wanted at all costs to conceal. Must have been custom-made shoes. When she arrived at her own home, the first thing she did was toss her shoes in the closet as fast as she could.

Shimamoto's house had a brand-new stereo in the living room, and I used to go over to her place to listen to music. It was a pretty nice stereo. Her father's LP collection, though, didn't do it justice. At most he had fifteen records, chiefly collections of light classics. We listened to those fifteen records a thousand times, and even today I can recall the music—every single note.

Shimamoto was in charge of the records. She'd take one from its jacket, place it careful

on the turntable without touching the grooves with her fingers, and, after making sure to brush the cartridge free of any dust with a tiny brush, lower the needle ever so gently on the record. When the record was finished, she'd spray it and wipe it with a felt cloth. Finally she'd return the record to its jacket and its proper place on the shelf. Her father had taught her this procedure, and she followed his instructions with a terribly serious look on her face. Her eyes narrowed, her breath held in check. Meanwhile, I was on the sofa, watching her every move. Only when the record was safely back on the shelf did she turn to me and give a little smile. And every time, this thought hit me: It wasn't a record she was handling. It was a fragile soul inside a glass bottle.

In my house we didn't have records or a record player. My parents didn't care much for music. So I was always listening to music on a small plastic AM radio. Rock and roll was my favorite, but before long I grew to enjoy Shimamoto's brand of classical music. This was music from another world, which had its appeal, but more than that I loved it because she was a part of that world. Once or twice a week, she and I would sit on the sofa, drinking the tea her mother made for us, and spend the afternoon listening to Rossini overture, Beethoven's *Pastorale*, and the *Peer Gynt* Suite. Her mother was happy to have me over. She was pleased her daughter had a friend so soon after transferring to a new school, and I guess it helped that I was a neat dresser. Honestly, I couldn't bring myself to like her mother very much. No particular reason I felt that way. She was always nice to me. But I could detect a hint of irritation in her voice, and it put me on edge.

Of all her father's records, the one I liked best was a recording of the Liszt piano concerto, one concerto on each side. There were two reasons I liked this record. First of all, the record jacket was beautiful. Second, no one around me—with the exception of Shimamoto, of course—ever listened to Liszt's piano concertos. The very idea excited me. I'd found a world that no one around me knew—a secret garden only I was allowed to enter. I felt elevated, lifted to another plane of existence.

And the music itself was wonderful. At first it struck me as exaggerated, artificial, even incomprehensible. Little by little, though, with repeated listenings, a vague image formed in my mind—an image that had meaning. When I closed my eyes and concentrated, the music came to me as a series of whirlpools. One whirlpool would form, and out of it another would take shape. And the second whirlpool would connect up with a third. Those whirlpools, I realize now, had a conceptual, abstract quality to them. More than anything, I wanted to tell Shimamoto about them. But they were beyond ordinary language. An entirely different set of words was needed, but I had no idea what these were. What's more, I didn't know if what I was feeling was worth putting into words. Unfortunately, I no longer remember the name of the pianist. All I recall are the colorful, vivid record jacket and the weight of the record itself. The record was hefty and thick in a mysterious way.

The collection in her house included one record each by Nat King Cole and Bing Crosby. We listened to those two a lot. The Crosby disc featured Christmas songs, which we enjoyed regardless of the season. It's funny how we could enjoy something like that over and over.

One December day near Christmas, Shimamoto and I were sitting in her living room. On the sofa, as usual, listening to records. Her mother was out of the house on some errand, and we were alone. It was a cloudy, dark winter afternoon. The sun's rays, streaked with fire,

dust, barely shone through the heavy layer of clouds. Everything looked dim and motionless. It was nearing dusk, and the room was as dark as night. A kerosene space heater bathed the room in a faint red glow. Nat King Cole was singing "Pretend." Of course, we had no idea then what the English lyrics meant. To us they were more like a chant. But I loved the song and had heard it so many times I could imitate the opening lines:

*Pretend you're happy when you're blue  
It isn't very hard to do*

The song and the lovely smile that always graced Shimamoto's face were one and the same to me. The lyrics seemed to express a certain way of looking at life, though at times I found it hard to see life in that way.

Shimamoto had on a blue sweater with a round neck. She owned a fair number of blue sweaters; blue must have been her favorite color. Or maybe she wore those sweaters because they went well with the navy-blue coat she always wore to school. The white collar of her blouse peeked out at her throat. A checked skirt and white cotton socks completed her outfit. Her soft, tight sweater revealed the slight swell of her chest. She sat on the sofa with her legs folded underneath her. One elbow resting on the back of the sofa, she stared at some far-off, imaginary scene as she listened to the music.

"Do you think it's true what they say—that parents of only children don't get along very well?" she asked.

I mulled over the idea. But I couldn't figure out the cause and effect of it.

"Where did you hear that?" I asked.

"Somebody said that to me. A long time ago. Parents who don't get along very well end up having only one child. It made me so sad when I heard that."

"Hmm....," I said.

"Do your mother and father get along all right?"

I couldn't answer right away. I'd never thought about it before.

"My mother isn't too strong physically," I said. "I'm not sure, but it was probably too much of a strain for her to have another child after me."

"Have you ever wondered what it would be like to have a brother or sister?"

"No."

"Why not?"

I picked up the record jacket on the table. It was too dark to read what was written on it, so I put the jacket down and rubbed my eyes a couple of times with my wrist. My mother had once asked me the same question. The answer I gave then didn't make her happy or sad, it just puzzled her. But for me it was a totally honest, totally sincere answer.

The things I wanted to say got all jumbled up as I talked, and my explanation seemed to go on forever. But what I was trying to get across was just this: The me that's here now has been brought up without any brothers or sisters. If I did have brothers or sisters I wouldn't be the me I am. So it's unnatural for the me that's here before you to think about what it'd be like to have brothers or sisters.... In other words, I thought my mother's question was pointless.

I gave the same answer to Shimamoto. She gazed at me steadily as I talked. Something about her expression pulled people in. It was as if—this is something I thought of only later, of course—she were gently peeling back one layer after another that covered a person’s heart, a very sensual feeling. Her lips changed ever so slightly with each change in her expression, and I could catch a glimpse deep within her eyes of a faint light, like a tiny candle flickering in the dark, narrow room.

“I think I understand what you mean,” she said in a mature, quiet voice.

“Really?”

“Um,” she answered. “There are some things in this world that can be done over, and some that can’t. And time passing is one thing that can’t be redone. Come this far, and you can’t go back. Don’t you think so?”

I nodded.

“After a certain length of time has passed, things harden up. Like cement hardening in a bucket. And we can’t go back anymore. What you want to say is that the cement that makes you up has hardened, so the you you are now can’t be anyone else.”

“I guess that’s what I mean,” I said uncertainly.

Shimamoto looked at her hands for a time.

“Sometimes, you know, I start thinking. About after I grow up and get married. I think about what kind of house I’ll live in, what I’ll do. And I think about how many children I’ll have.”

“Wow,” I said.

“Haven’t you ever thought about that?”

I shook my head. How could a twelve-year-old boy be expected to think about that? “Sure, but how many kids do you want to have?”

Her hand, which up till then had laid on the back of the sofa, she now placed on her knee. She stared vacantly at her fingers tracing the plaid pattern of her skirt. There was something mysterious about it, as if invisible thread emanating from her fingertips spun together an entirely new concept of time. I closed my eyes, and in the darkness, whirlpools flashed before me. Countless whirlpools were born and disappeared without a sound. Off in the distance, Nat King Cole was singing “South of the Border.” The song was about Mexico, but at the time I had no idea. The words “south of the border” had a strangely appealing ring to them. I was convinced something utterly wonderful lay south of the border. When I opened my eyes, Shimamoto was still moving her fingers along her skirt. Somewhere deep inside my body I felt an exquisitely sweet ache.

“It’s strange,” she said, “but when I think about children, I can only imagine having one. I can somehow picture myself having children. I’m a mother, and I have a child. I have no problem with that. But I can’t picture that child having any brothers or sisters. It’s an only child.”

She was, without a doubt, a precocious girl. I feel sure she was attracted to me as a member of the opposite sex—a feeling I reciprocated. But I had no idea how to deal with that.

feelings. Shimamoto didn't, either, I suspect. We held hands just once. She was leading me somewhere and grabbed my hand as if to say, *This way—hurry up.* Our hands were clasped together ten seconds at most, but to me it felt more like thirty minutes. When she let go of my hand, I was suddenly lost. It was all very natural, the way she took my hand, but I knew she'd been dying to do so.

The feel of her hand has never left me. It was different from any other hand I'd ever held, different from any touch I've ever known. It was merely the small, warm hand of a twelve-year-old girl, yet those five fingers and that palm were like a display case crammed full of everything I wanted to know—and everything I *had* to know. By taking my hand, she showed me what these things were. That within the real world, a place like this existed. In the space of those ten seconds I became a tiny bird, fluttering into the air, the wind rushing by. From high in the sky I could see a scene far away. It was so far off I couldn't make it out clearly, yet something was there, and I knew that someday I would travel to that place. That revelation made me catch my breath and made my chest tremble.

I returned home, and sitting at my desk, I gazed for a long time at the fingers Shimamoto had clasped. I was ecstatic that she'd held my hand. Her gentle touch warmed my heart for days. At the same time it confused me, made me perplexed, even sad in a way. How could I possibly come to terms with that warmth?

After graduating from elementary school, Shimamoto and I went on to separate junior highs. I left the home I had lived in till then and moved to a new town. I say a new town, but it was only two train stops from where I grew up, and in the first three months after I moved I went to see her three or four times. But that was it. Finally I stopped going. We were both at a delicate age, when the mere fact that we were attending different schools and living two train stops away was all it took for me to feel our worlds had changed completely. Our friends were different, so were our uniforms and textbooks. My body, my voice, my way of thinking, were undergoing sudden changes, and an unexpected awkwardness threatened the intimate world we had created. Shimamoto, of course, was going through even greater physical and psychological changes. And all of this made me uncomfortable. Her mother began to look at me in a strange way. *Why does this boy keep coming over?* she seemed to be saying. *He no longer lives in the neighborhood, and he goes to a different school.* Maybe I was just being too sensitive.

Shimamoto and I thus grew apart, and I ended up not seeing her anymore. And that was probably (*probably* is the only word I can think of to use here; I don't consider it my job to investigate the expanse of memory called the past and judge what is correct and what isn't) a mistake. I should have stayed as close as I could to her. I needed her, and she needed me. But my self-consciousness was too strong, and I was too afraid of being hurt. I never saw her again. Until many years later, that is.

Even after we stopped seeing each other, I thought of her with great fondness. Memories of her encouraged me, soothed me, as I passed through the confusion and pain of adolescence. For a long time, she held a special place in my heart. I kept this special place just for her, like a Reserved sign on a quiet corner table in a restaurant. Despite the fact that I was sure I would never see her again.

When I knew her I was still twelve years old, without any real sexual feelings or desire

Though I'll admit to a vaguely formed interest in the swell of her chest and what lay beneath her skirt. But I had no idea what this meant, or where it might lead.

With ears perked up and eyes closed, I imagined the existence of a certain place. This place I imagined was still incomplete. It was misty, indistinct, its outlines vague. Yet I was sure that something absolutely vital lay waiting for me there. And I knew this: that Shimamoto was gazing at the very same scene.

We were, the two of us, still fragmentary beings, just beginning to sense the presence of an unexpected, to-be-acquired reality that would fill us and make us whole. We stood before a door we'd never seen before. The two of us alone, beneath a faintly flickering light, our hands tightly clasped together for a fleeting ten seconds of time.

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In high school I was a typical teenager. This was the second stage of my life, a step in my personal evolution—abandoning the idea of being different, and settling for normal. Not that I didn't have my own set of problems. But what sixteen-year-old doesn't? Gradually I drew nearer the world, and the world drew nearer to me.

By the time I was sixteen I wasn't a puny little only child anymore. In junior high I started to go to a swimming school near my house. I mastered the crawl and went twice a week for lap swimming. My shoulders and chest filled out, and my muscles grew strong and taut. I was no longer the kind of sickly kid who got a fever at the drop of a hat and took to his bed. Often I stood naked in front of the bathroom mirror, scrutinizing every nook and cranny of my body.

I could almost see the rapid physical changes right before my eyes. And I enjoyed these changes. I don't mean I was thrilled about becoming an adult. It was less the maturation process I enjoyed than seeing the transformation in myself. I could be a new me.

I loved to read and to listen to music. I'd always liked books and reading, and my interests in these had been fostered by my friendship with Shimamoto. I started to go to the library, devouring every book I could lay my hands on. Once I began a book, I couldn't put it down. It was like an addiction; I read while I ate, on the train, in bed until late at night in school where I'd keep the book hidden so I could read during class. Before long I bought a small stereo and spent my time holed up in my room, listening to jazz records. But I had almost no desire to talk with anyone about the experience I gained through books and music. I felt happy just being me and no one else. In that sense I could be pegged a stuck-up loner. I disliked team sports of any kind. I hated any kind of competition where you had to rack up points against someone else. I much preferred to swim on and on, alone, in silence.

Not that I was a total loner. I managed to make some close friends at school, a few, at least. School itself I hated. I felt as though these friends were trying to crush me all the time, and I had to always be prepared to defend myself. This toughened me. If it hadn't been for these friends, I would have emerged from those treacherous teenage years with even more scars.

After I started swimming, I no longer was so picky about the foods I ate, and I could talk with girls without blushing. I might be an only child, but no one gave it a second thought anymore. At least on the outside, it seemed I had freed myself from the curse of the only child.

And I made a girlfriend.

She wasn't particularly pretty, not the type your mother would point out in the class picture as the prettiest girl in school. But the first time I met her, I thought she was rather cute. You couldn't see it in a photo, but she had a straightforward warmth, which attracted people. She wasn't the kind of beauty I could brag about. But I wasn't much of a catch, either.

She and I were in the same class in junior year of high school and went out on dates often. At first double dates, then just the two of us. For whatever reason, I always felt relaxed with her. I could say anything, and she listened intently. I might just be blabbing away about some drivel, but from the expression on her face you'd have imagined I was revealing a magnificent discovery that would change the course of history. It was the first time since Shimamoto that a girl was so engrossed in anything I had to say. And for my part, I wanted to know everything there was to know about her. What she ate every day, what kind of room she lived in. What she could see from her window.

Her name was Izumi. Love your name, I told her the first time we talked. "Mountains and a spring," it means in Japanese. Throw in an ax, and out would pop a fairy, I said, thinking of the fairy tale. She laughed. Izumi had a sister, three years younger than her, and a brother five years younger. Her father was a dentist, and they lived—no surprise—in a single-family home, with a dog. The dog was a German Shepherd named Karl, after Karl Marx, believe it or not. Her father was a member of the Japanese Communist Party. Granted there must be Communist dentists in the world, but the whole lot of them could probably fit in four or five buses. So I thought it was pretty weird that it was *my* girlfriend's father who happened to be one of this rare breed. Izumi's parents were tennis fanatics, and every Sunday would find them, rackets in hand, heading off to the court. A Communist dentist tennis nut—what a weird combination! Izumi wasn't interested in politics, but she loved her parents and would join them in a round of tennis every so often. She tried to get me to play, but tennis wasn't my thing.

She envied me because I was an only child. She didn't get along well with her brother or sister. According to her, they were a couple of heartless idiots she wouldn't mind giving the old heave-ho. I always wanted to be an only child, she said, living as I please, with no one bothering me every time I turn around.

On our third date I kissed her. She was over at my place that day. My mother was out shopping, so we had the whole house to ourselves. When I brought my face near and touched my lips to hers, she just closed her eyes and was silent. I'd prepared a full dozen excuses, in case she got mad or turned away, but I didn't need any of them. My lips on hers, I put my arms around her and drew her close. It was near the end of summer, and she had on a seersucker dress. It was tied at the waist, and the tie hung loosely behind her like a tail. My hand touched the latch of her brassiere. I could feel her breath on my neck. I was so excited my heart felt like it was going to leap right out of my body. My penis was ready to burst; I pushed against her thigh, and she shifted a bit to one side. But that was all. She didn't seem upset.

We sat for some time on the sofa, holding each other tight. A cat was sitting on the chair across from us. It opened its eyes, looked in our direction, stretched, and went back to sleep. I stroked her hair and put my lips to her tiny ears. I thought I had to say something, but nothing came to me. I could barely breathe, let alone speak. I took her hand again, and kissed her once more. For a long time, the two of us were quiet.

After I saw her off at the train station, I couldn't calm down. I went home and lay on the sofa and stared at the ceiling. My mind was in a whirl. Finally my mother came home and said she'd get dinner ready. But food was the last thing I could think about. Without a word,

went out and wandered around the town for a good two hours. It was a strange feeling. I was no longer alone, yet at the same time I felt a deep loneliness I'd never known before. As with wearing glasses for the first time, my sense of perspective was suddenly transformed. Things far away I could touch, and objects that shouldn't have been hazy were now crystal clear.

When Izumi left me that day, she thanked me and told me how happy she was. She wasn't the only happy one. I couldn't believe a girl had actually let me kiss her. How could I not be ecstatic? Even so, I couldn't be unreservedly happy. I was like a tower that had lost its base. I was up high, and the more I looked off in the distance, the dizzier I became. Why her? I asked myself. What do I know about her anyway? I'd met her a few times, talked a bit, that was it. I was jumpy, fidgety beyond control.

If it were Shimamoto, there would be no confusion. The two of us, with no words spoken, would be totally accepting of the other. No uncomfortable feelings, no unease. But Shimamoto was no longer around. She was in a new world of her own, and so was I. Comparing Izumi and Shimamoto was pointless. The door that led to Shimamoto's world had slammed shut behind me, and I needed to find my bearings in a new and different world.

I was up until the light shone faintly through the eastern sky. I slept for two hours, took a shower, and went to school. I had to find Izumi and talk to her about what had happened between us. I wanted to hear from her lips that her feelings were unchanged. The last thing she'd said was how happy she was, but in the cold light of dawn it seemed more like an illusion I'd dreamed up. School ended without my getting a chance to talk to her. At recess she was with her girlfriends, and when classes were over she went straight home. Just once when we were in the hallway changing classes, we managed to exchange glances. She beamed when she caught sight of me, and I smiled back. That was all. But in her smile I caught an affirmation of the previous day's events. *It's all right*, her smile seemed to tell me. *Yesterday really did happen*. By the time I was riding the train home, my confusion was gone. I wanted to see her, and my desire won out over any doubts.

What I wanted was clear enough. Izumi naked, having sex with me. But that final destination was still a long way down the road. There was a certain order of events one had to follow. To arrive at sex, you first had to undo the fastener of the girl's dress. And between dress fastener and sex lay a process in which twenty—maybe thirty—subtle decisions and judgments had to be made.

First of all I had to get hold of some condoms. Actually, that step was a bit further down the chain of events, but anyhow I had to get my hands on some. Never know when I might need them. But I couldn't just duck into a drugstore, plunk down some money, and waltz out with a box of condoms. I'd never pass as anything other than what I was—a high school junior—not to mention that I was too much of a coward to make the attempt. I could have tried one of the vending machines in the neighborhood, but if anyone caught me red-handed I'd be up the proverbial creek. For three or four days, I turned this quandary over endlessly in my mind.

In the end, things worked out more easily than expected. I asked a precocious friend of mine, who was sort of our local expert on these matters. See, the thing is, I asked him, I like to get some condoms, so what should I do? No sweat, he deadpanned. I can get you a whole box. My brother bought a ton of them through a catalog. I don't know why he bought

so many, but his closet's full of them. One missing box isn't gonna kill him. Fantastic, enthused. The next day he brought the condoms to school in a paper bag. I treated him to lunch and asked him not to breathe a word. No problem, he said. Of course he spilled the beans, told a couple of people I was in the market for condoms. These people told some others, and it made the rounds of the school until Izumi heard about it. After school, she asked me to come up to the school roof with her.

"Hajime, I heard you got some condoms from Nishida?" she asked. The word *condom* didn't exactly roll off her tongue. She made it sound like the name of some infectious disease.

"Uh ... yeah," I admitted. I struggled to find the right words. "It doesn't really mean anything. I just thought, you know, maybe it'd be better to have some."

"You got them because of me?"

"No, not really," I said. "I was just curious about what they were like. But if it bothers you, I'm sorry. I'll give them back, or throw them away."

We were sitting on a small stone bench in a corner of the roof. It looked like it might rain at any minute. We were all alone. It was completely still. I'd never known the roof to be so silent.

Our school was on a hilltop, and we had an unbroken view of the town and the sea. Once my friends and I filched some records from the Broadcast Club room and flung them off the roof—like Frisbees, they sailed away in a beautiful arc. Off toward the harbor they flew happily, as if life were breathed into them for a fleeting instant. But finally one of them failed to get airborne and wobbled clumsily straight down onto the tennis court, where some startled freshman girls were practicing their swings. It was detention for us. That had been more than a year before, and now here I was in the same spot, being grilled by my girlfriend about condoms. I looked up at the sky and saw a bird etching a slow circle in the sky. Being a bird, I imagined, must be wonderful. All birds had to do was fly in the sky. No need to worry about contraception.

"Do you really like me?" Izumi asked me in a small voice.

"Sure I do," I replied. "Of course I like you."

Lips pursed, she looked straight into my face. She looked at me so long it made me uneasy.

"I like you too, you know," she said after a while.

*But*, I thought.

"But," she said, sure enough, "there's no need to rush."

I nodded.

"Don't be too impatient. I have my own pace. I'm not that clever a person. I need lots of time to prepare for things. Can you wait?"

Once again I nodded silently.

"Promise?" she asked.

"I promise."

"You won't hurt me?"

"I won't hurt you."

She looked down at her shoes for a while. Plain black loafers. Compared to mine, lined up next to them, they were as tiny as toys.

“I’m scared,” she said. “These days I feel like a snail without a shell.”

“I’m scared too,” I said. “I feel like a frog without any webs.”

She looked up and smiled.

Wordlessly we walked over to a shaded part of the building and held each other and kissed like a shell-less snail and a webless frog. I held her close against me. Our tongues met lightly. I felt her breasts through her blouse. She didn’t resist. She just closed her eyes and sighed. Her breasts were small and fit comfortably in the palm of my hand, as if designed solely for that purpose. She placed her palm above my heart, and the feel of her hand and the beat of my heart became one. She’s not Shimamoto, I told myself. She can’t give me what Shimamoto gave. But here she is, all mine, trying her best to give me all she can. How could I ever hurt her?

But I didn’t understand then. That I could hurt somebody so badly she would never recover. That a person can, just by living, damage another human being beyond repair.

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Izumi and I went out for more than a year. We dated once a week, went to movies, studied together at the library, or just took long aimless walks. As far as sex goes, though, we never made it all the way. About twice a month I had her over to my house when my parents were out and we held each other on my bed. But she never took all her clothes off. You never know when someone might come back, she insisted. Overly cautious, you could call her. She wasn't scared; she just hated to be pushed into some potentially embarrassing situation.

So I always had to hold her with her clothes all on and fumble around as best I could beneath her underwear.

"Slow down," she told me whenever my disappointment showed. "I need more time. Please."

Actually, I wasn't in that much of a rush myself. I was just confused, and disappointed by all sorts of things. Of course, I liked her and was grateful that she was my girlfriend. If she hadn't been with me, my teenage years would have been completely stale and colorless. She was basically an honest, pleasant girl, someone people liked. But our interests were worlds apart. She couldn't understand the books I read or the music I listened to, so we couldn't talk as equals on these topics. In this sense, my relationship with her differed dramatically from that with Shimamoto.

But when I sat beside her and touched her fingers, a natural warmth welled up inside me. I could tell her anything. I loved kissing her eyelids and just above her lips. I also liked to push her hair up and kiss those tiny ears of hers, which invariably sent her into a giggling fit. Even now, whenever I think of her, I envision a quiet Sunday morning. A gentle, clear day, just getting under way. No homework to do, just a Sunday when you could do what you wanted. She always gave me this kick-back-and-relax, Sunday-morning kind of feeling.

She had her faults, for sure. She was pretty hard-headed and could have done with a bit more in the imagination department. She wasn't about to take even one step outside the comfortable world she was raised in. She never got so involved in something that she totally forgot about eating and sleeping. And she loved and respected her parents. The opinions she did put forth—the standard opinions of a sixteen-, seventeen-year-old girl—were not surprisingly, pretty insipid. On the plus side, I never once heard her bad-mouth another person. And she never bored me with conceited talk. She liked me and was good to me. She listened carefully to what I had to say and cheered me up. I talked a lot about myself and my future, what I wanted to become, the kind of person I hoped to be. A young boy's narcissist fairy tales. But she listened intently. "I know you'll be a wonderful person when you grow up. There is something special about you," Izumi told me. And she was serious. No one had ever told me that before.

And holding her—even with her clothes on—was fantastic. What confused and disappointed me, though, was that I could never discover within her something special that existed just for me. A list of her good qualities far outstripped a list of her faults, and certainly far outshone

my own, yet there was something missing, something absolutely vital. If only I'd been able to pin down what that was, I know we would have ended up sleeping together. I wouldn't have held back forever. Even if it had taken a long time, I would have persuaded her that it was absolutely necessary for her to sleep with me. But I lacked the confidence to see this through. I was just a rash seventeen-year-old whose head was crammed full of lust and curiosity. But in that head of mine I still knew that if she didn't want to have sex, I shouldn't try to force the issue. I had to wait patiently for the right time.

I did, though, hold Izumi naked in my arms one time. I can't stand holding you with your clothes on, I pleaded. If you don't want to have sex, that's okay. But I want to see your body. I want to hold you with nothing on. I *have* to, and I can't bear it any longer.

Izumi thought for a while and then said that if it was what I really wanted, she didn't mind. "But promise me, okay?" She looked at me seriously. "That's all you'll do. Don't do anything I don't want to."

She came over to my house on a beautiful clear Sunday in the beginning of November. A bit chilly, though. My parents had to go to a memorial service for someone on my father's side of the family, and actually I should have attended with them. I told them I had to study for a test, and stayed home alone. They weren't supposed to return until that night. Izumi came over in the afternoon. We held each other in my bed, and I took her clothes off. She closed her eyes and let me undress her. It wasn't easy. I'm all thumbs to begin with, and girls' clothes are a pain. Halfway through, Izumi opened her eyes and took over. She had on light blue panties and a matching bra. She probably bought these specially for the occasion; up to then her underwear was always the kind mothers bought their high-school-age girls. Finally I undressed myself.

I held her naked body and kissed her neck and breasts. I stroked her smooth skin and breathed in its fragrance. Holding each other, naked like this, was out of this world. I felt if I didn't go inside her I'd go insane. But she pushed me firmly away.

"I'm sorry," she said.

Instead, she took my penis in her mouth and licked it all over. She'd never done that before. Over and over she drew her tongue over the tip of my penis, until I couldn't think straight, and I came.

Afterward, I held her close, caressing every inch of her body. Her body bathed in the autumn light was beautiful, and I kissed her all over. It was truly a gorgeous afternoon. We held each other tight many times, and I came again and again. Each time I came, she went to the bathroom to rinse her mouth.

"What a weird sensation." She laughed.

I had gone out with Izumi for just over a year, but that was without a doubt the happiest time we ever spent together. Naked, we had nothing to hide. I felt I knew more about her than ever before, and she must have felt the same. What we needed were not words and promises but the steady accumulation of small realities.

Izumi lay still for a long while, her head nestled on my chest as if she were listening to my heartbeat. I stroked her hair. I was seventeen, healthy, on the verge of becoming an adult. Wonderful is the only word for it.

Around four, just as she was getting dressed to leave, the doorbell rang. At first I just ignored it. I had no idea who it was; if I didn't answer it whoever it was would surely give up and go away. But the doorbell rang on, insistent. Damn, I thought

"Are your parents back?" Izumi asked, blanching. She was out of bed, hurriedly gathering up her clothes.

"Don't worry. They can't be home this early. And they have a key, so they wouldn't ring the doorbell."

"My shoes!" she said.

"Shoes?"

"My shoes are just inside the entrance."

I threw on my clothes, rushed downstairs, and tossed her shoes inside the entry closet. When I opened the door, my aunt was standing there. My mother's younger sister, who lived about an hour's train ride away and visited every once in a while.

"What in the world were you doing? I've been ringing the bell forever," she said.

"I was listening to music with headphones, so I didn't hear you," I replied. "My parents are out—they went to a memorial service. They won't be back till late tonight I guess you know that, though."

"They told me. I was running an errand in the neighborhood and I knew you were home studying, so I thought I'd cook dinner for you. I've already shopped."

"I can make dinner myself. I'm not a child, you know," I said.

"But I've bought everything. And you're busy, right? I'll just make dinner while you study."

Oh God, I thought I wanted to curl up and die. Now how was Izumi going to get home? In my house you had to pass through the living room in order to get to the front door, then past the kitchen window to get to the gate. Of course, I could introduce Izumi as a friend who came over to see me, but I was supposed to be studying hard for an exam. If it came out that I had a girl over, there'd be hell to pay. I couldn't very well ask my aunt to keep it a secret from my parents. My aunt wasn't a bad person, but keeping secrets was definitely not one of her strong points.

While my aunt was in the kitchen getting her purchases out of the bags, I took Izumi's shoes upstairs. She was completely dressed. I explained the situation to her.

She turned pale. "What in the world am I supposed to do? What if I can't get out of here? You know I have to be home every night by dinnertime. If I don't, I'll be in big trouble."

"Don't worry. It'll be okay. We'll figure something out," I said, trying to calm her down. But actually I was just as clueless about the next step.

"And I can't find one of my garter belt clasps. I've looked everywhere."

"Your garter belt clasp?" I asked.

"A little metal thing, about this big."

I scoured the room, from the floor to the top of my bed. But I couldn't find it.

"Sorry. Couldn't you skip wearing your stockings just this once?" I asked.

I went into the kitchen, where my aunt was chopping vegetables. We need some salad oil," she said, and asked me to go out to buy some. I couldn't refuse, so I rode my bike over to the nearby store. It was already growing dark outside. At this rate Izumi might be stuck in my house forever. I had to do something before my parents got home.

"I think our only chance is for you to slip out while my aunt's in the bathroom," I told Izumi.

"You really think it'll work?"

"Let's give it a shot. We can't sit around like this, twiddling our thumbs."

I'd wait downstairs till my aunt went to the bathroom, then clap my hands loudly twice. Izumi would come downstairs, put on her shoes, and leave. If she'd made her escape okay, she would call me from a nearby pay phone.

My aunt sang happily as she sliced vegetables, made miso soup, and fried up some eggs. But no matter how much time passed, she didn't take a bathroom break. For all I knew, she might be listed in the *Guinness Book*, under World's Biggest Bladder. I was about to give up when she took off her apron and left the kitchen. As soon as I saw she was in the bathroom, I raced to the living room and clapped twice, hard. Izumi tiptoed downstairs, shoes in hand, quickly slipped them on, and as quietly as she could snuck out the front door. I went to the kitchen to make sure she got out the front gate okay. A second later, my aunt came out of the bathroom. I breathed a sigh of relief.

Five minutes afterward, Izumi called me. Telling my aunt I'd be back in fifteen minutes, she went out. Izumi was standing in front of the pay phone.

"I *hate* this," she said before I could get out a word. "I don't *ever* want to do this again."

I couldn't blame her for being angry and upset. I led her to the park near the station and sat her down on a bench. And gently held her hand. Over her red sweater she had on a beige coat. I fondly recalled what lay beneath.

"But today was beautiful. I mean until my aunt showed up. Don't you think so?" I asked.

"Of course I enjoyed it. Every time I'm with you I have a wonderful time. But every time afterward, I get confused."

"About what?"

"The future. After I graduate from high school you'll go to college in Tokyo, and I'll stay here. What's going to happen to us?"

I'd already decided to go to a college in Tokyo after I left high school. I was dying to get out of my hometown, to live on my own away from my parents. My GPA wasn't that great, but in the subjects I did like I made pretty good grades without cracking a book, so getting into a private college would be no big deal, seeing as how their exams covered only a couple of subjects. But there was no way Izumi would be joining me in Tokyo. Her parents wanted to keep her close at hand, and she wasn't exactly the rebellious type. So she wanted me to stay put. We have a good college here, she argued. Why do you have to go all the way to Tokyo? If I promised not to go to Tokyo, I'm sure she would have slept with me.

"Come on," I said. "It's not like I'm going off to a foreign country. It's only three hours away. And college vacations are long, so three or four months of the year I'll be here." I

explained it to her a dozen times.

“But if you leave here you’ll forget all about me. And you’ll find another girlfriend,” she said. I’d heard these lines at least a dozen times too.

I told her that wouldn’t happen. I like you a lot, I said, so how can I forget you that easily? But I wasn’t so sure. A simple change of scenery can bring about powerful shifts in the flow of time and emotions: exactly what had happened to Shimamoto and me. We might have been very close, but moving down the road a couple of miles was all it took for us to go on separate ways. I liked her a lot and she told me to come see her. But in the end I stopped going.

“There’s one thing I just can’t understand,” Izumi said. “You say you like me. And you want to take care of me. But sometimes I can’t figure out what’s going on inside your head.”

Izumi took a handkerchief from her coat pocket and wiped away her tears. With a start, I realized she’d been crying for some time. I had no idea what to say, so I sat waiting for her to continue.

“You prefer to think things over all by yourself, and you don’t like people peeking inside your head. Maybe that’s because you’re an only child. You’re used to thinking and acting alone. You figure that as long as *you* understand something, that’s enough.” She shook her head. “And that makes me afraid. I feel abandoned.”

*Only child.* I hadn’t heard those words in a long while. In elementary school the words had hurt me. But Izumi was using them in a different sense. Her “only child” didn’t mean a pampered, spoiled kid but spoke to my isolated ego, which kept the world at arm’s length. She wasn’t blaming me. The situation just made her very sad.

“I can’t tell you how happy I was when we held each other. It gave me hope, and I thought who knows, maybe everything *will* work out,” she said as we bade each other goodbye. “But life isn’t that easy, is it.”

On the way back from the station, I mulled over what she’d said. It made sense. I wasn’t used to opening up to others. She was opening up to me, but I couldn’t do the same. I really did like her, yet still something held me back.

I’d walked the road from the train station home a thousand times, but now it was like a foreign town. I couldn’t shake the image of Izumi’s naked body: her taut nipples, her wispy pubic hair, her soft thighs. And eventually I couldn’t stand it any longer. I bought some cigarettes from a vending machine, went back to the park where we’d talked, and lit a cigarette to calm down.

If only my aunt hadn’t barged in on us, things might have worked out better. If nothing had disturbed us, we could have had a pleasanter goodbye. We would have been even happier. But if my aunt hadn’t come by, someday something similar was bound to happen. If not today, then tomorrow. The biggest problem was that I couldn’t convince her this was inevitable. Because I couldn’t convince myself.

As the sun set, the wind grew cold. Winter was fast approaching. And when the new year came, there would be college entrance exams and the beginning of a brand-new life. Uneasy though I was, I yearned for change. My heart and body both craved this unknown land, this blast of fresh air. That was the year Japanese universities were taken over by their students.

and Tokyo was engulfed in a storm of demonstrations. The world was transforming itself right before my eyes, and I was dying to catch that fever. Even if Izumi wanted me to stay and would have sex with me to ensure that, I knew my days in this sleepy town were numbered. If that meant the end of our relationship, so be it. If I stayed here, something inside me would be lost forever—something I couldn't afford to lose. It was like a vague dream, a burning, unfulfilled desire. The kind of dream people have only when they're seventeen.

Izumi could never understand my dream. She had her own dreams, a vision of a far different place, a world unlike my own.

But even before my new life began, a crisis came to rip our relationship to shreds.

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The first girl I ever slept with was an only child. Like Izumi, she wasn't exactly the type to turn any heads; most people would hardly notice her. Still the first time I laid eyes on her, it was as if I were walking down the road one afternoon and a silent bolt of lightning struck me smack on the head. No ifs, ands, or buts—I was hooked.

With a very few exceptions, your typical beautiful women don't turn me on. Sometimes I'll be walking down the street and a friend will nudge me and say, "Wow! Did you get a load of that girl?" But strangely enough, I can't recall a thing about this supposed knockout. And gorgeous actresses or models don't do a thing for me. I don't know why, but there it is. For me the boundary dividing the real world and the world of dreams has always been vague, and whenever infatuation raised its almighty head, even during my early teens, a beautiful face wasn't enough to get my engines started.

I was always attracted not by some quantifiable, external beauty, but by something deep down, something absolute. Just as some people have a secret love for rainstorms, earthquakes, or blackouts, I liked that certain undefinable *something* directed my way toward members of the opposite sex. For want of a better word, call it magnetism. Like it or not, it's a kind of power that snares people and reels them in.

The closest comparison might be the power of perfume. Perhaps even the master blender himself can't explain how a fragrance that has a special power is created. Science sure can't explain it. Still, the fact remains that a certain combination of fragrances can captivate the opposite sex like the scent of an animal in heat. One kind of fragrance might attract fifty out of a hundred people. And another scent will attract the other fifty. But there also are scents that only one or two people will find wildly exciting. And I have the ability, from far away, to sniff out those special scents. When I do, I want to go up to the girl who radiates this aura and say, *Hey, I picked it up, you know. No one else gets it, but I do.*

From the first time I saw that girl, I knew I wanted to sleep with her. More accurately, I knew I *had* to sleep with her. And instinctively I knew she felt the same way. When I was with her, my body, as the phrase goes, shook all over. And my penis got so hard I could barely walk. I'd probably felt the stirrings of this kind of magnetism—a prototype of it—when I met Shimamoto, but I was too young to recognize it as such or even to give it a label. When I met this other girl, I was seventeen, a senior in high school, and she was twenty, a sophomore in college. Of all things, she happened to be Izumi's cousin. She already had a boyfriend, but for the two of us, that was beside the point. She could have been forty-two, with three kids, and with a pair of tails growing out of her butt, and I wouldn't have cared. The magnetism was that strong. I couldn't just let this girl walk on by. If I did, I'd regret it for the rest of my life.

Anyway, that's how the person I lost my virginity with happened to be my girlfriend's cousin. And not just any old cousin, but the one she was closest to. Since they were little, Izumi and she often visited each other. The cousin was attending college in Kyoto and lived in an apartment near the west gate of Gosho, the old Imperial Palace. Izumi and I went to Kyo

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