

MOONLIGHT SHADOW

(1988)

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Wherever he went, Hitoshi always had a little bell with him, attached to the case he kept his bus pass in. Even though it was just a trinket, something I gave him before we were in love, it was destined to remain at his side until the last.

Although we were in separate homerooms, we met serving on the same committee for the sophomore-class field trip. Because we had completely different itineraries, the only time we had together was on the bullet train itself. On the platform after we arrived, we shook hands in a playful show of regret at having to part. I suddenly remem-

bered that I had, in the pocket of my school uniform, a little bell that had fallen off the cat. "Here," I said, "a farewell gift," and handed it to him. "What's this?" he said, laughing, and—although it wasn't the most creative gift—took it from my palm and wrapped it carefully in his handkerchief as if it were something precious. He surprised me: it was not typical behavior for a boy that age.

As it turns out, it was love.

Whether he did it because the gift was from me or because that was how he was raised, not to treat a gift carelessly, it amazed me and made me warm to him.

There was electric charge between our hearts, and its conduit was the sound of the bell. The whole time we spent apart on that class trip, we each had the bell on our minds. Whenever he heard it ring, he would remember me and the time we had spent together; I passed the trip imagining I could hear the bell across the vast sky, imagining the person who had it in his possession. After we got back, we fell deeply in love.

For nearly four years the bell was always with us. Each and every afternoon and evening, in each and every thing we did—our first kiss, our big fights, rain and shine and snow, the first night we spent together, every smile and every tear, listening to music and watching TV—when Hitoshi took out that case, which he used as a wallet, we heard its faint, clear tinkling sound. It seemed as though I could hear it even when he wasn't there. You might say it was just a young girl's sentimentality. But I did think I heard it—that's how it felt to me then.

There was one thing that always disturbed me pro-

foundly. Sometimes, no matter how intently I would be staring at him, I would have the feeling that Hitoshi wasn't there. So many times, when he was asleep, I felt the need to put my ear to his heart. No matter how bright his smile, I would have to strain my eyes to see him. His facial expressions, the atmosphere around him, always had a kind of transparency. The whole time I was with him there was that feeling of ephemerality, uncertainty. If that was a premonition of what was to come, what a sorrowful one it was.

A lover should die after a long lifetime. I lost Hitoshi at the age of twenty, and I suffered from it so much that I felt as if my own life had stopped. The night he died, my soul went away to some other place and I couldn't bring it back. It was impossible to see the world as I had before. My brain ebbed and flowed, unstable, and I passed the days in a relentless state of dull oppression. I felt that I was fated to undergo one of those things it's better not to have to experience even once in a lifetime (abortion, prostitution, major illness).

After all, we were still young, and who knows whether it would have been our last love? We had overcome many first hurdles together. We came to know what it is to be deeply tied to someone and we learned to judge for ourselves the weight of many kinds of events—from these things, one by one, we constructed our four years.

Now that it's over, I can shout it out: *The gods are assholes!* I loved Hitoshi—I loved Hitoshi more than life itself.

* * *

For two months after Hitoshi died, every morning found me leaning over the railing of the bridge on the river, drinking hot tea. I had begun to go jogging every day at dawn, since I slept very badly, and that point on the bridge was where I rested before the run back home.

Sleeping at night was what I feared most. No—worse than that was the shock of awakening. I dreaded the deep gloom that would fall when I remembered he was gone. My dreams were always about Hitoshi. After my painful, fitful sleep, whether or not I had been able to see him, on awakening I would know it had been only a dream—in reality I would never be with him again. And so I tried not to wake up. Going back to sleep was no answer: depressed to the point of nausea, I would toss around in a cold sweat. Through my curtains I would see the sky getting lighter, blue-white, and I would feel abandoned in the chill and silence of dawn. It was so forlorn and cold, I wished I could be back in the dream. There I would be, wide-eyed, tortured by its lingering memory. It was always then that I truly woke up. Finally, exhausted from lack of sleep, beginning to panic at the prospect of that lonely time—like a bout of insanity—in which I would wait for the first morning light, I decided to take up running.

I bought myself an expensive two-piece sweatsuit, running shoes, and even a small aluminum container in which to carry a hot drink. I thought, ironically, that beginners always over-equip—but still, it was best to look ahead.

I began running just before spring vacation. I would run

to the bridge, turn around, and head home, where I would carefully wash out my neck towel and sweaty clothes. While they were in the dryer I would help my mother make breakfast. Then I'd go back to bed for a while. That was my life. In the evenings I'd get together with friends, watch videos, whatever, anything to leave myself as little free time as possible. But the struggle was fruitless. There was only one thing I had any desire to do: I wanted to see Hitoshi. Yet at all costs I had to keep my hands and body and mind moving. Doing that, I hoped, albeit listlessly, would somehow, someday, lead to a breakthrough. There was no guarantee, but I would try to endure, no matter what, until it came. When my dog died, when my bird died, I had gotten through in more or less the same way. But it was different this time. Without a prospect in sight, day after day went by, like losing one's mind bit by bit. I would repeat to myself, like a prayer: It's all right, it's all right, the day will come when you'll pull out of this.

The river, spanned by a white bridge, was wide, and divided our part of the city almost exactly in half. It took me about twenty minutes to reach it. I loved that place—it was there that I used to meet Hitoshi, who had lived on the other side of the river. Even after he died I still loved the place.

On the deserted bridge, with the city misted over by the blue haze of dawn, my eyes absently followed the white embankment that continued on to who knows where. I rested, enveloped in the sound of the current, leisurely

drinking hot tea. Standing there in the clear air that tingled with cold, I felt just the tiniest bit close to death myself. It was only in the severe clarity of that horribly lonely place that I could feel at ease. My self-torture stopped when I was there. Without this respite I would never have been able to get through the days. I was pierced by how much I needed it.

That morning I awoke with a start from a vicious nightmare. It was five-thirty. In the dawn of what promised to be a clear day I dressed and went out as usual. It was still dark; not a soul was out. The air was biting cold, the streets misty white, the sky a deep navy blue. Rich gradations of red were coming up in the east.

I had to force myself to run. My breath was labored; the notion that running this much on not enough sleep was only tormenting my body passed through my mind, but I ignored it: I can sleep when I get home, I thought in my befuddled brain. The streets were so utterly quiet that I struggled to remain fully conscious.

The sound of the current grew louder as I approached the river; the colors in the sky were changing moment by moment. I was leaning over the railing the way I always did upon reaching the bridge, absently looking at the rows of buildings on the street, which hung in a faint mist, as if submerged in an ocean of blue air. The river was roaring, sweeping along anything and everything in its way on a stream of white foam. The wind it gave off blew cold and seemed to suck the perspiration from my face. A half-

moon shone serenely in the still-brisk March sky. My breath came out in puffs of white. I took the cap off my aluminum bottle and poured out some tea, still looking out over the river.

Just then I suddenly heard a voice from behind me pipe up, "What kind of tea is that? Could I have some?" It startled me—so much so that I dropped the bottle in the river. I still had a full cup of steaming tea in one hand.

Imagining god knows what, I turned around, and there stood a young woman with a smile on her face. I knew she was older than me, but for some reason I couldn't guess her age. Maybe about twenty-five . . . She had short hair and very clear, large eyes. She wore a thin white coat, but seemed not to feel the cold in the least. She had popped up before I had a clue that anyone was there behind me.

Then, looking cheerful, she said in a slightly nasal but sweet voice, "It's just like that Brothers Grimm story about the dog, isn't it? Or was that Aesop?" She laughed.

"In that instance," I said coolly, "the dog dropped his bone when he saw his own reflection in the water. Nobody sneaked up behind him."

She said, smiling, "I'd like to buy you a new thermos."

"Thank you," I said, showing her a smile in return. She spoke so calmly that I was not afraid of her, and she wasn't attempting familiarities. She didn't seem crazy, nor did she look like a drunk on her way home at dawn. Her eyes were too knowing and serene; the expression on her face hinted that she had tasted deeply of the sorrows and joys of this world. The air around her seemed somehow charged.

After taking one sip to wet my throat, I offered her the

cup. "Here, have the rest. It's Pu-Arh tea."

"Oh, I love that," she said, taking the cup with a slender hand. "I just got here. I came from pretty far away." She looked down at the river. Her eyes had the bright sparkle of a traveler's.

"Sightseeing?" I asked, wondering what could have brought her to this particular place.

"Yes. Soon, on this spot, there'll be something to see that only happens every hundred years. Have you ever heard about it?"

"Something to see?"

"Yes. If all the conditions are right."

"What, exactly?"

"I can't tell you yet. But I promise I will, because you shared your tea with me." She laughed as she said it, and I almost failed to catch that last part. The mood of approaching morning seemed to fill the whole world. The rays of the rising sun spread over the blue sky, illuminating the faintly sparkling layers of air with white light.

It was time to be getting back, so I said, "Well, good-bye." At that she looked me directly in the eye with that same bright expression. "My name is Urara," she said. "What's yours?"

"Satsuki," I answered.

"Let's get together again," said Urara, waving good-bye.

I waved back and started running home. She was an odd one. I had no idea what she was talking about, but somehow I knew that she was someone who did not live like

other people. With each step I took I grew more uneasy, and I couldn't help but turn and look back. Urara was still on the bridge. I saw her face in profile as she watched the river. It shocked me—it was not that of the person I had just talked with. I had never seen such a severe expression on anyone.

She noticed me standing there, smiled brightly again, and waved. Flustered, I returned her wave and broke into a run.

In heaven's name, what kind of person was she? I pondered it for quite some time. More and more, that morning in the sunlight, the impression of that mysterious Urara carved itself with baroque filigree into my sleepy brain.

Hitoshi had an extremely eccentric younger brother. His way of thinking, his responses to events, were "curioser and curioser." He lived exactly as if his awareness of things had been formed in some other dimension, after which he was plopped down on this planet to fend for himself. That was my first impression of him, and I stick by it. His name was Hiiragi. He was to turn eighteen this month.

Hiiragi and I had arranged to meet, after he got out of school, in a coffee shop on the fourth floor of a department store. In he came, wearing a sailor-style girl's high school uniform, complete with middy blouse and skirt.

The truth is I was mortified, but he acted so natural that

I managed to feign calmness. Sitting down across from me, he asked, breathless, "Were you waiting long?" When I shook my head he smiled brightly. After he had ordered, the waitress stared him up and down and muttered, "Yes, sir," mystified.

He didn't look much like Hitoshi, but sometimes the way his face and fingers moved would remind me so much of his brother that my heart would stop.

"Oh!" I said, purposely giving voice to my surprise, as I always did when he reminded me of Hitoshi. It was part of a ritual between us.

"What is it?" he said, looking at me, cup in hand.

"You . . . you reminded me of him, just then," I said. Then, according to our ritual, he said, "I'll do Hitoshi," and imitated his brother. We both laughed. That was the only way the two of us had to make light of the wounds in our hearts.

I'd lost my boyfriend, but he had lost both brother and girlfriend at once.

His girlfriend, Yumiko, had been a small, pretty girl his own age, and a tennis ace. The four of us were close in age, got along well, and had often hung out together. I would go over to Hitoshi's house and Yumiko would be there with Hiiragi—I couldn't count how many times the four of us stayed up all night, playing games.

The night it happened, Hitoshi was giving Yumiko a ride from his house, where she'd been visiting Hiiragi, to the train station. On the way they got into an accident. It wasn't his fault. Still, the two of them were killed instantly.

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"So, you're jogging?" said Hiiragi.

"Yes."

"Then why are you getting so fat?"

"It must be because I lie around all afternoon," I said, laughing. The truth was, I was getting noticeably thinner.

"Sports aren't good for you—it's true," he said. "But I have an idea—they just opened this place near my house that makes incredible tempura on rice. Very fattening. Let's go there now—right now!"

Although Hitoshi and Hiiragi had been very different from each other, they were both just naturally kind in a way that was without affectation or ulterior motives. That's how they were raised. The sort of kindness that makes a person wrap a bell in a handkerchief.

"I'd love to," I said.

The girl's school uniform Hiiragi was wearing had been Yumiko's.

After she died he had started wearing it to school, though he went to one where uniforms were not required. Yumiko had liked to wear the uniform. Both sets of parents had begged him, in tears, not to do it, saying Yumiko wouldn't have liked to see him in a skirt. Hiiragi just laughed and ignored them. When I asked him if he wore it for sentimental reasons, he said that wasn't it. "Things are just things, they can't bring back the dead. It just makes me feel better."

"Are you going to wear it forever?" I asked him.

His face darkened a little. "I don't know."

"Aren't people talking about you? Aren't they saying things about you at school?"

"No, they know that's just how I am. Actually, I'm getting a lot of sympathy. And the girls are crazy about me. It must be because, wearing a skirt, perhaps they think I understand them."

I laughed. "Well, that's good, isn't it?" Outside the glass wall of the coffee shop, crowds of boisterous shoppers came and went. The whole department store that evening was jovial, and gaily illuminated spring clothes were on display.

Now I understood. His sailor outfit—my jogging. They served exactly the same purpose. I wasn't as eccentric as him, so I was satisfied with mere jogging. Because nothing so conventional would do for Hiiragi, he chose the sailor outfit, as a variation. Neither recourse was anything more than a way of trying to lend some life to a shriveled spirit. It was a way to divert our minds, to kill time.

Both Hiiragi and I, in the last two months, had unconsciously assumed facial expressions we had never worn before, expressions that showed how we were battling not to think of what we had lost. If, in a flash, we remembered, we would suddenly be crushed with the knowledge, the knowledge of our loss, and find ourselves standing alone in the darkness.

I got up. "If I'm going to eat dinner out, I have to call home and let them know. What about you? Is it okay for you not to eat at home?"

Hiiragi said, "Oh, yeah, right. My father's away on a business trip."

"So your mother's all alone. You should probably go home."

"It's okay. I'll just have something delivered to her. It's still early, so she won't have started cooking yet. I'll pay for it, and she'll get this surprise dinner—compliments of her son."

"That's a sweet idea," I said.

"It'll cheer her up, don't you think?" Hiiragi smiled artlessly. This young boy, usually so precociously adult, looked his age right then.

One winter day Hitoshi had said, "I have a younger brother. His name is Hiiragi." It was the first time I had heard of him. We were climbing the long stone stairway behind the school, under leaden gray skies that promised snow. His hands in his coat pockets, his breath a cloud of white, Hitoshi had said, "But in a way he's more grown up than I am."

"Grown up?" I laughed.

"How can I say it? . . . he thinks well on his feet. But still, when it comes to the family, he's strangely childlike. Yesterday my father nicked his hand a little on a piece of glass, and my brother freaked out—really, seriously freaked out. You would have thought the sky had fallen. I just now thought of it, his reaction was so out of proportion."

"How old is he?"

"I guess he's . . . what, fifteen?"

"Does he look like you? I'd like to meet him."

"Well, I warn you, he's pretty weird. So much so you'd never take him for my brother. I'm afraid if you meet him you might stop liking me. Yes, he certainly is an odd one," said Hitoshi, smiling a classic elder-brother smile.

"Well, is your little brother so strange that you're going to wait till years from now to introduce me, when you're sure of my unwavering love?"

"No, I was kidding. It'll be all right. I'm sure you'll get on fine. You're a little strange yourself, and Hiiragi likes 'good people.' "

" 'Good people?' "

"Right." Hitoshi laughed, still looking straight ahead. At times like that I always felt shy.

The stairs were steep and I hurried up, flustered. The windows of the white school building reflected the darkening dead-of-winter sky. I remember climbing step by step in my black shoes and knee socks; the swish, swish of the skirt of my school uniform.

Outside, the night was filled with the scent of spring. Hiiragi's sailor-style uniform was hidden under his coat, which was a relief to me. The light given off by the department-store windows shone white on the faces of the bustling crowd. In spite of the sweet smell of spring on the wind, it was still cold. I took my gloves from my pocket.

"The tempura place is near my house, so it's a bit of a walk," said Hiiragi.

"We'll cross the bridge, then, won't we?" I fell silent,

remembering the encounter with Urara. Every morning since then I had gone running, but I hadn't seen her again. I was absently thinking about that when Hiiragi suddenly said in a loud voice, "Oh!—don't worry, of course I'll drive you back." He had interpreted my silence as worrying about how I'd get home.

"No, no, that's no problem. It's still early," I said, confused, thinking, you . . . you reminded me of him just then, although this time I didn't say it. At that moment he was so like Hitoshi there was no need to ask Hiiragi to do him. A kindness spoken out of reflex, at once impersonal and generous, but by no means bridging the distance established between two people—it always produces in me that sense of transparency, that deeply moving emotion I was being reminded of right then. An unbearable sense of loss.

"The other day," I said as we set off, "one morning when I was jogging, I met a strange person on the bridge. I was just remembering that."

"A strange person? You mean a man?" Hiiragi smiled. "Jogging early in the morning can be dangerous."

"No, it's not that at all. It was a woman. Not an easy person to forget."

"Maybe you ought to see her again."

"Hmm."

It was true; for some reason I wanted terribly to see Urara. That expression on her face—it made my heart stop. She had been gentle and smiling with me, and then, as soon as she was alone again, she . . . if I had to describe it, I'd say the expression on her face was like that of a demon turned into a human who suddenly caught herself

feeling emotions and was warning herself that she wasn't permitted to. It was unforgettable. I felt that my own pain and sadness had never even come close to hers. Perhaps there was still much worse in store for me.

We came to a large intersection. Both Hiiragi and I felt a little ill at ease; this was the scene of the accident. Even now cars were coming and going furiously. At the red light Hiiragi and I stopped side by side.

"I wonder if there mightn't be ghosts here," Hiiragi smiled, but his eyes weren't smiling at all.

"I thought you were going to say that," I said, trying to smile back.

The traffic signal changed, and the river of light formed by the cars continued on its way. The signal shone brightly, suspended in the darkness. Hitoshi had died here. A feeling of solemnity slowly came over me. In places where a loved one has died, time stops for eternity. If I stand on the very spot, one says to oneself, like a prayer, might I feel the pain he felt? They say that on a visit to an old castle or whatever, the history of the place, the presence of people who walked there many years ago, can be felt in the body. Before, when I heard things like that, I would think, what are they talking about? But I felt I understood it now.

This intersection, the colors of these buildings, and rows of shops in the darkness were Hitoshi's last sights. And it wasn't all that long ago.

How afraid was he? Did he think of me, if even for a

flickering instant? Was the moon climbing high in the sky as it was now?

"It's green." I was staring so absentmindedly at the moon that Hiiragi had to give me a push on the shoulder. The small white light it gave off was so pretty, so cold; it was like a pearl.

"It's amazing how good this is," I said. The tempura on rice we were eating, seated at the counter in this new little shop smelling of fresh wood, was so good it revived my appetite.

"Isn't it?" said Hiiragi.

"Yes. It's delicious. So delicious it makes me grateful I'm alive," I said. So delicious I was moved to praise extravagant enough to make the counter person blush.

"I know. I knew you'd say that. You have excellent taste in food. It really makes me happy that you like it." After saying that all in one breath, with a big smile, Hiiragi went to order the meal for his mother and have it delivered.

With the bowl of food before me, I thought: I'm stubborn, and I'll probably be dragged even deeper into this darkness, but I have no choice. I must keep living this way. But, as soon as possible, I wanted this boy to be always smiling, like he was now, like he always used to, and without the sailor outfit.

It was noon. Suddenly the phone rang.

I had caught cold and was drowsing in bed. I hadn't even

been able to go jogging. The ring of the telephone jabbed into my slightly feverish brain again and again. Sleepily I got out of bed. No one seemed to be home, so I had no choice—I went out into the hall and picked up the receiver.

"Yes?"

"Hello. Is Satsuki there?" It was an unfamiliar woman's voice.

"This is she," I said, puzzled.

"It's me," said the person across the phone lines.

"Urara."

I was startled. Again she had shocked me. How in the world had she found me?

"Sorry this is so sudden, but I wonder if you're free just now? Can you come out and meet me?"

"Umm . . . sure. But why? How did you get my phone number?" I said, faltering. She seemed to be calling from a phone booth, judging by the sound of traffic in the background. I heard little puffs of laughter.

"I just say to myself, 'I *must* get this phone number,' and it just naturally comes to me," Urara said, as if reciting a spell. She said it in such a matter-of-fact, reasonable way that I thought, oh, I see.

"Meet me on the fifth floor of the department store across from the station, in the section where they sell thermoses." With that she hung up.

Normally there would be no way I'd go out now—the way I feel with this cold, I should stay in bed, I thought after she had hung up. My legs were wobbly and it felt like my fever was getting worse. But still, driven by curiosity to

see her again, I started to get ready. In the innermost recess of my heart the light of instinct was twinkling, and I was as free of doubt as if I had heard the command, "Go!"

In retrospect I realize that fate was a ladder on which, at the time, I could not afford to miss a single rung. To skip out on even one scene would have meant never making it to the top, although it would have been by far the easier choice. What motivated me was probably that little light still left in my half-dead heart, glittering in the darkness. Yet without it, perhaps, I might have slept better.

I bundled up in warm clothing and got on my bike. It was a noon enveloped in warm sunlight—it made you think that spring would truly come. A light wind was blowing, soft and gentle on the face. The trees on the street were beginning to sprout their tiny infant leaves. A thin veil of mist hung distantly in the pale blue sky far beyond the city.

Such blossoming delectability did not make my own insides flutter; it left me unmoved. The spring scenery could not enter my heart for love or money. It was merely reflected on the surface, like on a soap bubble. Everyone out on the streets was coming and going, looking happy, the light shining through their hair. Everything was breathing, increasingly sparkling, swathed in the gentle sunlight. The pretty scene was brimming with life, but my soul was pining for the desolate streets of winter and for that river at dawn. I wished my heart would break and get it over with.

There stood Urara, her back to the display of water

bottles. Wearing a pink sweater, standing ramrod-straight in the midst of the crowd, this time she looked my age.

"Hi," I called. When I came nearer her eyes widened. "What?" she said. "You have a cold? Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't know when I asked you to come out."

I smiled. "Is it that obvious?"

"Yes, your face is bright red. So . . . let's choose quickly, shall we? Any one you like." She turned to face the display. "So what do you think? Probably a thermos, right? Or for running you might want a lighter one. This one is just like the one you dropped the other day. Or, oh, if it's design you care most about, let's go to where they sell ones made in China."

Her enthusiasm as she said all this made me so happy, even I could feel myself turning bright red.

"Okay, that little white one." Beaming with pleasure, I pointed out a small thermos.

"Mmm. The honored customer is a person of fine discernment," Urara said, and bought it for me.

As we were drinking barley tea in a nearby rooftop garden tea shop, Urara said, "I brought you this, too." She took a small packet from her coat pocket. Then another, and another, again and again. I could only stare.

"Somebody who owns a tea shop gave me this as a parting gift. There are all sorts of herbal teas, barley teas, Chinese teas, too. The names are written on the packages. Something to fill your thermos with. I hope you like them."

" . . . Thank you, so much," I said, hesitant, pleased.

"Not at all. It was my fault you dropped yours in the river."

The afternoon was clear and bright. The light illuminating the streets was so vivid it almost made one's heart ache. Clouds moved slowly, dividing the city below into patches of light and shadow. It was a peaceful afternoon. The weather was so tranquil that it almost made me forget I had any problems at all—aside from the fact that my nose was stuffed up and I could taste only a hint of what I was drinking.

"By the way," I said, "how *did* you get my phone number, really?"

She smiled. "I told you. That was the truth. For a long time I've been on my own, moving around from place to place, and I developed this ability to just . . . sense things, calmly, like a wild animal. I don't remember exactly when that started, but . . . So I thought to myself, Satsuki's phone number is . . . ? And when I dialed, I just let my fingers move naturally. I usually get it right."

"Usually?" I smiled.

"Yes, usually. When I'm wrong I just apologize, laugh, and hang up. Still it makes me ashamed of myself." Urara laughed cheerfully.

I wanted to believe she got the number that way rather than by other, more normal methods. That's the effect she had on a person. Somewhere deep in my heart I felt I had known her long ago, and the reunion made me so nostalgic I wanted to weep tears of joy.

"I want to thank you for today. You've made me as happy as a lover," I said.