

"All right, then, here's a word from your lover: get over that cold by the day after tomorrow."

"Why? Oh, is it the day after tomorrow? The something to see?"

"Precisely. All right? You mustn't tell anyone else." Urara lowered her voice a little. "The day after tomorrow, come to the place where we met the other day by no later than four fifty-seven A.M. If all goes well you may see something."

"What is this something? What kind of thing? Something invisible?" I couldn't hold back a flood of doubts.

"Yes. But it depends on the weather, and also on you. Because this is a very subtle matter, there are no guarantees. Still, and this is just my intuition, I think there's a profound connection between you and that river. That's why I'm sure you'll be able to see it. The day after tomorrow, at the time I said, in that place, if a number of conditions are met, you *may* be able to see a kind of . . . vision, something that happens only once every hundred years or so. I'm afraid 'may' is the best I can do."

That explanation didn't really clarify much, either. Still, I was deeply thrilled, something I had not felt in a long time.

"Is it a good thing?"

"Yes . . . Not just good, though—priceless. That's up to you."

That's up to me.

Just now, when I'm so weak, with no strength to defend myself . . .

"Yes," I said. "I'll be there."

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The connection between me and the river. Even with my heart beating wildly, my mind shouted out an impromptu yes! The border between my country and Hitoshi's—that's what the river was to me. When I thought of the bridge, it was always with Hitoshi standing there, waiting for me to come. I was always late; he was always there before me. When we said good-bye, it was there that we parted, he going to one side of the river, me to the other. The last time was that way, too.

"So," I had said, "you're going over to Takahashi's house after this?" I was still happy then and had a healthy plumpness that I've lost now. This was our last conversation.

"Yes, after I stop off at home first. We haven't gotten all the guys together in a long time."

"Give them my regards. But I know what you all talk about when it's just guys."

"Anything wrong with that?" He laughed.

We had done nothing but have fun that whole day and, a little tipsy, we walked along laughing and joking. The biting cold night road was splendidly colored by the starry sky overhead, and I was lighthearted. The wind stung my cheeks, the stars twinkled. Our hands, joined in my pocket, palms touching, felt very warm and soft.

Then, "Oh," he said, as if suddenly remembering something. "But I swear, I'd never say anything bad about you!" He was so touchingly funny as he said it that I had to bury my face in my muffler to stifle my laughter. To have loved

each other this much for over four years, I thought, isn't it marvelous. That me seems ten years younger than I feel now. The faint sound of the river reached our ears; the moment of our parting was approaching.

The bridge. That bridge was where we left each other, never to meet again. The river roared, and the cold wind was like a slap in the face. Amid its vivid thundering, under the sky full of stars, we exchanged a short kiss, and thinking how much fun that winter vacation had been, we parted, smiling. The tinkle of the bell disappeared into the night. Hitoshi and I both cherished that sound.

We had horrible fights and we both had our little outside flings. We suffered from the changing balance between love and desire. Children that we were, we hurt each other many times over. So it isn't that we were always as happy as we were that day; our times together were often painful. Still, it was a good four years, and that day was an unusually perfect one for us, so much so as to make us fearful it would end. Of that day in which everything was just too beautiful in the transparent winter air, what I remember most is the sight, when I turned back to look, of Hitoshi's black jacket melting into the darkness.

That scene is one I cried about over and over again. Or rather, whenever I recalled it, the tears would flow. I would dream of myself crossing the bridge, chasing after him and calling out, "You mustn't go!" In the dream, Hitoshi would smile and say, "I didn't die after all, because you stopped me."

Sometimes the memory would come to me in the middle of the day, and I would manage not to break down in

public—but what good did it do me? I felt he had gone somewhere endlessly far from me, and my stoicism only made the feeling worse.

When I parted with Urara, that "something" I *might* be able to see at the river was, for me, half joke, half hope. Urara, beaming, disappeared up the street.

Maybe she's just telling me some weird kind of lie, I thought, but I wouldn't even mind if, bright and early, I ran there, chest pounding, only to make a fool of myself. She had shown my heart a rainbow. The thing was . . . she had reminded me that I could get excited over something unknown, and a tiny window opened in my heart. Even if nothing happened—even if it turned out to be just the two of us watching the sparkling glints off the cold, flowing river—it would feel good. It would be enough for me.

That was what I was thinking as I walked along, holding my thermos. On the way to get my bike where I'd left it at the station, I spotted Hiiragi.

There he was, in the middle of the street, wearing his regular clothes. He must be skipping school, I thought, which made me smile.

It wasn't that I was hesitant to run up to him and call his name—it was just that because of my fever I couldn't muster the energy, so all I did was walk toward him without changing my pace. Just then he set off in the direction I was going anyway, so quite naturally I followed him up the street. He was a fast walker, and I, unwilling to go faster, soon fell behind.

I watched Hiiragi. In his own clothes, he was good-looking enough to turn people's heads. Wearing a black sweater, he was walking along like he always did—tall, long-limbed, calm, cool, and light on his feet. No wonder, I thought as I watched him from behind, the girls couldn't get enough of him. Yumiko had died, and he was wearing her uniform in her memory. It just didn't happen that often, losing one's brother and girlfriend at once. It was the epitome of unusual. Maybe I, too, were I a carefree high school girl, would long to be the one to restore him to life and would fall in love with him. Girls that age find nothing more attractive.

If I just called out his name he would turn and smile at me. I knew that. But still, somehow I had a bad feeling about calling to him as he walked alone up the street; I felt there was nothing anyone could do for him. Or maybe it was just that I was terribly tired. Nothing could enter directly into my heart. All I wanted was to get through this as quickly as possible, to see the day when memories would be just memories. But the more I wanted that, the further away it seemed. Thinking of the future only made me shudder.

Then Hiiragi suddenly stopped, and I automatically stopped, too. Now you really are trailing him, I said to myself, smiling. I took a step toward him and was about to call out—then I realized what he was looking at and froze in my tracks.

He was staring into the window of a tennis shop. How well I understood the blank look on his face as he peered

into that window. He seemed to be feeling nothing at all. But in that very lack of expression, the profundity of what he was doing was transmitted nonetheless. It's like unconscious conditioning, I thought, like a baby duck trailing after some moving object, taking it for its mother. Though the baby duck is unaware of it, it's very touching for the observer.

That's how I felt, watching Hiiragi.

In the spring light he stood among the crowd, staring, staring detachedly into that window. The sight of all that tennis equipment must have had a powerful effect on him. It did the same thing for Hiiragi that being with him did for me: thanks to the trace of Hitoshi in him, his very presence calmed me. I thought how sad that was.

I myself saw one of Yumiko's tennis matches. The first time I met her I thought she was cute, all right, but she struck me as a bit average, rather overly cheerful, not too deep, and I couldn't imagine what Hiiragi saw in her that bewitched him so. With Yumiko, Hiiragi was in a dream. On the surface he was the same old Hiiragi, but something in her quieted his spirit. In real strength, she was his match.

"What is it about her?" I asked Hitoshi one time.

"Apparently it's tennis," he said, smiling.

"Tennis?"

"Yes. According to Hiiragi, she's incredible."

It was summer. The sun beat down mercilessly on the high school tennis court. Hitoshi, Hiiragi, and I had gone

to watch Yumiko play in the finals. The shadows were deep and dark under the blazing sun; our throats were dry. Everything was dazzlingly bright.

And no doubt about it, she was incredible. She was a different person, not the little girl who ran after me laughing, calling, "Satsuki, Satsuki." I was amazed when I saw her play. Hitoshi seemed surprised, too. Hiiragi said with pride, "See what I mean? Incredible, isn't she?"

She played a take-no-prisoners game of tennis, propelled by the full force of her intensity and powers of concentration. Then I knew how strong she really was. Her face was all determination. It was a face capable of murder. Still, after the deciding shot, the instant she'd won, she turned to Hiiragi with her old baby-faced smile. It was impressive.

The four of us had a lot of fun together, and I liked her very much. She'd say to me, "Satsuki, let's the four of us always hang out together, don't you two ever break up." Teasing, I would smile and say, "Well, it won't be us." She would laugh and say, "Well, it won't be us either!"

And then it happened. It's too horrible.

I doubted if he was recalling her at this moment like I was. Boys don't go out of their way to feel pain. But still, his eyes, his whole person, were saying one thing only. He himself would never speak it. To say it would mean to suffer from it. To suffer terribly. That thing was, "I want her to come back."

More than words, it was a prayer. I couldn't bear it. Was that, then, how I looked by the river at dawn? And is that

why Urara had spoken to me? Me, too. I, too, wanted to see him. I wanted him. Hitoshi. To come back. At the very least, I wanted to say a proper good-bye.

I knew I wouldn't tell Hiiragi what I'd seen today. I resolved to speak up cheerfully the next time, but for now I left without calling to him.

With all that activity, my fever went up. It makes sense, I thought; it simply follows that if one goes running around town in the condition I was in, delirious, this would be the result.

My mother laughed and asked me if it might not be like a teething fever. Weakly, I laughed back. But in a sense I think it was. Perhaps my unproductive thoughts had spread like poison throughout my body.

That night, as usual, I awoke from a dream of Hitoshi. I dreamed that in spite of my fever I had run to the river and Hitoshi was there. He said to me, smiling, "You've got a cold; what are you doing?" That was the lowest point yet. When I opened my eyes it was dawn, time to get up and get dressed. But it was cold, so very cold, and in spite of the fact that my whole body felt flushed, my hands and feet were like ice. I had the chills; I shuddered, my whole body in pain.

I opened my eyes, trembling in the half-darkness. I felt

I was battling something absurdly enormous. Then, from deep within, I began to wonder if I mightn't lose.

It hurt to have lost Hitoshi. It hurt too much.

When we were in each other's arms, I knew something that was beyond words. It was the mystery of being close to someone who is not family. My heart dropped out, and I was feeling what people fear the most; I touched the deepest despair a person can know. I was lonely. Hideously lonely. This was the worst. If I could get through this, morning would come, and I knew without a doubt that I would have fun again, laugh out loud. If only the sun would rise. If only morning would come.

Whenever it had been like this before, I had set my teeth and stood up to it; but now, lacking the strength to go to the river, I could only suffer. Time inched along, as if I were walking on shards of glass. I felt that if I could only get to the river, Hitoshi really would be there. I felt insane. I was sick at heart.

I sluggishly got up and went to the kitchen for some tea. My throat was parched. Because of my fever, the whole house looked surreally warped, distorted; the kitchen was ice-cold and dark. Everyone was asleep. Delirious, I made tea and went back to my room.

The tea seemed to help. It soothed my dry throat and my breathing became natural again. I sat up in bed and parted the curtains.

From my room I had a good view of the front gate and yard. The trees and flowers rustled, trembling in the blue morning air—they seemed painted in flat colors, like a diorama in a museum. It was pretty. These days I was well

aware of how the blue air of dawn makes everything seem purified. As I sat there peering out the window, I saw the shadow of a person coming up the sidewalk in front of my house.

I wondered if it was a dream and blinked my eyes. It was Urara. Dressed in blue, grinning broadly, she looked at me and came toward me. At the gate she mouthed, "May I come in?" I nodded. She crossed the yard and reached my window. I opened it, my heart pounding.

"Sure is cold out," she said. An icy wind came in through the window, freezing my feverish cheeks. The pure, clean air tasted delicious.

"What's up?" I asked. I must have been beaming like a happy little kid.

"I'm on my way home. Your cold is looking worse, you know. Here, I'll give you some vitamin C candy." Taking the candy from her pocket, she handed it to me, smiling artlessly.

"You're always so good to me," I said in a hoarse voice.

"You look like your temperature is very high. You must feel rotten."

"Yes," I said. "I couldn't go running this morning." For some reason I felt like crying.

"With a cold"—she spoke evenly, lowering her eyes a little—"now is the hardest time. Maybe even harder than dying. But this is probably as bad as it can get. You might come to fear the next time you get a cold; it will be as bad as this, but if you just hold steady, it won't be. For the rest of your life. That's how it works. You could take the negative view and live in fear: Will it happen again? But it

won't hurt so much if you just accept it as a part of life." With that she looked up at me, smiling.

I remained silent, my eyes wide. Was she only talking about having a cold? Just what was she saying? The blue of the dawn, my fever, everything was spinning, and the boundary between dream and waking blurred. While her words were making their way into my heart, I was staring absently at her bangs, which were fluttering in the wind.

"Well, see you tomorrow." With a smile, Urara gently shut the window from the outside. She skipped lightly out the gate.

Floating in a dream, I watched her walk away. That she had come to me at the end of a long night of misery made me want to cry tears of joy. I wanted to tell her: "How happy I am that you came to me like an apparition in that bluish mist. Now everything around me will be a little bit better when I wake up." At last I was able to fall asleep.

When I awoke I knew that my cold was at least a little better. I slept so soundly that it was evening before I woke up. I got out of bed, took a shower, put on a fresh change of clothes, started drying my hair. My fever was down and I felt quite well, except for the sensation of my body having been through the mill.

I wondered, under the hot wind of the hair dryer, if Urara had really come to see me. Maybe it was just a dream—her words resounded in my brain as if it had been. And had she really only been talking about having a cold?

My face in the mirror had a touch of dark shadow on it,

making me wonder—was this a harbinger of other terrible nights to come, like the aftershocks following an earthquake? I was so tired that I couldn't bear to think about it. I was truly exhausted. But still . . . more than anything, I wanted to evade those thoughts, even if I had to do it on my hands and knees.

For one thing, I was breathing more easily than I had been even yesterday. I was sick to death at the prospect of more suffocatingly lonely nights. The idea that they would be repeated, that that was just how life was, made me shudder with horror. Still, having tasted for myself that moment when I suddenly could breathe easy again made my heart beat faster.

I found I was able to smile a little. The knowledge of how quickly my fever had dissipated made me a little giddy. Just then there was an unexpected knock at my bedroom door. I thought it was my mother and said, "Come in." When the door opened, I was amazed to see Hiiragi.

"Your mother says she kept calling you, but you didn't answer," he said.

"I was drying my hair, I guess I couldn't hear." I was embarrassed to be caught in the intimacy of my room with just-washed, unstyled hair, but he said, nonplussed, "When I phoned, your mother said you had a cold, like a terrible teething fever, so I thought I'd come and see how you're doing."

I remembered that he'd been here with Hitoshi, like the day of the festival and that time after the baseball game. So, just like old times, he grabbed a cushion and flopped down.

It was only I who had forgotten how well we knew each other.

"I brought you a get-well present." Hiiragi laughed, indicating a large paper bag. At this point I couldn't tell him I was actually just about over it. I even forced a cough. He had come all this way because he thought I was sick. "It's a chicken filet sandwich from Kentucky Fried, which I know you love, and some sherbet. Cokes, too. And, I brought enough for myself, so let's eat."

He was treating me like I was made of brittle glass. My mother must have said something to him. I was embarrassed. Still, it wasn't as if I were so much better I could say flat out, "I'm completely well!"

In the brightly lit room, warmed by my little heater, the two of us calmly ate what he had brought. The food was delicious, and I realized how very, very hungry I was. It occurred to me I always enjoyed what I ate when I was with him. How wonderful that is, I thought.

"Satsuki."

"What?" In a reverie, realizing he had said my name, I looked up.

"You've got to stop torturing yourself, all alone, getting thinner and thinner—you even got a fever from it. When you feel like that, call me up. We'll get together, go do something. Every time I see you you look more frail, but you pretend everything's all right. That's a waste of energy. I know you and Hitoshi were so happy together that now you could die of sadness. It's only natural."

He had never said anything like that. It was odd—that was the first time I had seen him express such emotion:

sympathy as open and unguarded as a child's. Because I had thought his style too cool for that, it was totally unexpected, this purehearted concern. But then I remembered Hitoshi saying how Hiiragi, usually old beyond his years, reverted to a childlike state where the family was concerned. I had to smile—I felt I understood now what Hitoshi had meant.

"I know I'm still a kid, and when I take off the sailor outfit I feel so alone I could cry, but we're all brothers and sisters when we're in trouble, aren't we? I care about you so much, I just want to crawl into the same bed with you."

He said it with such an utterly sincere face, and it was so obvious his intentions were honorable, I had to smile in spite of myself. Then I said to him, deeply moved, "I'll do as you say. I really will, I'll call you, I mean it. Thank you. Really, truly, thank you."

After Hiiragi left I went back to sleep. Thanks to the cold medicine I took, I slept through a long, peaceful, dreamless night. It was the divine, anticipatory sleep I remember having slept as a child on Christmas Eve. When I awoke, I would go to Urara waiting at the river, and I would see the "something."

It was before dawn. Although my health was not quite back to normal, I got dressed and went running. It was the kind of frozen morning in which moon shadows seem to be pasted on the sky. The sound of my footsteps resonated in the silent blue air and faded away into the emptiness of the streets.

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Urara was standing by the bridge. When I got there her hands were in her pockets and her muffler covered her mouth, but her sparkling eyes showed she was smiling brightly. "Good morning," she said.

The last few stars in the blue porcelain sky winked, a dim white, as if about to go out. The scene was thrillingly beautiful. The river roared furiously; the air was very clear.

"So blue it feels like it could melt right into your body," said Urara, gesturing at the sky.

The faint outline of the rustling trees trembled in the wind; gently, the heavens began to move. The moon shone through the half-dark.

"It's time." Urara's voice was tense. "Ready? What's going to happen next is, the dimension we're in—time, space, all that stuff—is going to move, shift a little. You and I, although we'll be standing side by side, probably won't be able to see each other, and we won't be seeing the same things . . . across the river. Whatever you do, you mustn't say anything, and you mustn't cross the bridge. Got it?"

I nodded. "Got it."

Then we fell silent. The only sound the roaring of the river, side by side Urara and I fixed our eyes on the far bank. My heart was pounding. I realized my legs were trembling. Dawn crept up little by little. The sky changed to a light blue. The birds began to sing.

I had a feeling that I heard something faint, far away. I looked to one side and was startled—Urara wasn't there anymore. The river, myself, the sky—then, blended with the sounds of the wind and the river, I heard what I'd longed for.

A bell. There was no question, it was Hitoshi's. The sound came, faintly tinkling, from a spot where no one was standing. I closed my eyes, making sure of the sound. Then I opened them, and when I looked across the river I felt crazier than I had in the whole last two months. I just barely managed to keep from crying out.

There was Hitoshi.

Across the river, if this wasn't a dream, and I wasn't crazy, the figure facing me was Hitoshi. Separated from him by the water, my chest welling up, I focused my eyes on that form, the very image of the memory I kept in my heart.

Through the blue haze, he was looking in my direction. He had that worried expression he always had when I acted recklessly. His hands in his pockets, his eyes found mine. The years I had spent in his arms seemed both very near and very far away. We simply gazed at each other. Only the fading moon saw the too-violent current, the too-distant chasm between us. My hair, the collar of Hitoshi's dear, familiar shirt fluttered in the wind off the river as softly as in a dream.

Hitoshi, do you want to talk to me? I want to talk to you. I want to run to your side, take you in my arms, and rejoice in being together again. But, but—the tears

flowed—fate has decided that you and I be so clearly divided like this, facing each other across the river, and I don't have a say in it.

My tears fell like rain; all I could do was stare at him. Hitoshi looked sadly back at me. I wished time could stop—but with the first rays of the rising sun everything slowly began to fade away. Before my eyes, Hitoshi grew faint. When I began to panic, he smiled and waved his hand. Again and again, he waved his hand. He was disappearing into the blue void. I, too, waved. Dear, much-missed Hitoshi—I tried to burn the line of his dear shoulders, his dear arms, all of him, into my brain. The faint colors of his form, even the heat of the tears running down my cheeks: I desperately struggled to memorize it all. The arching lines described by his arm remained, like an afterimage, suspended in the air. His form was slowly growing fainter, disappearing. I stared at it through my tears.

By the time I could no longer see anything at all, everything had returned to normal: morning by the river. I looked to one side; there stood Urara. Still facing straight ahead, a heartbreaking sadness in her eyes, she asked me, "Did you see it?"

"Yes," I said, wiping away my tears.

"Was it everything you had hoped?" This time she turned to face me, smiling. Relief diffused through my heart. "It was," I said, smiling back at her. The two of us stood there in the sunshine for some time, as morning came.

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The doughnut shop had just opened. Urara, her eyes a little sleepy, said over a hot cup of coffee, "I came to this place because I, too, lost my lover to an early death. I came hoping to say a last good-bye."

"Were you able to?" I asked.

"Yes." Urara smiled a little. "It really does happen only once every hundred years or so, and then only if a number of chance factors happen to line up right. The time and the place are not definitely set. People who know about it call it 'The Weaver Festival Phenomenon.' It can only take place near a large river. Some people can't see it at all. The residual thoughts of a person who has died meet the sadness of someone left behind, and the vision is produced. This was my first experience of it, too. . . . I think you were very lucky today."

"Every hundred years . . ." My mind raced at the thought of the probabilities involved in my having been able to see it.

"When I arrived here to take a preliminary look at the site, there you were. My animal instincts told me that you had lost someone yourself. That's why I invited you." The morning sun shone through her hair. Urara, smiling, was still as a statue while she spoke.

What kind of person was she, really? Where had she come from and where would she go from here? And who had she seen across the river? I couldn't ask her.

"Parting and death are both terribly painful. But to keep

nursing the memory of a love so great you can't believe you'll ever love again is a useless drain on a woman's energies." Urara spoke through a mouthful of doughnut, as if making casual chitchat.

"So I think it's for the best that we were able to say a proper, final good-bye today." Her eyes became terribly sad.

". . . Yes," I said. "So do I." Urara's eyes narrowed gently as she sat in the sunlight.

Hitoshi waving good-bye. It was a painful sight, like a ray of light piercing my heart.

Whether it had been for the best was not something I as yet fully understood. I only knew that, right now, sitting in the strong sunlight, its lingering memory in my breast was very painful. It hurt so much I could barely breathe.

Still . . . still, looking at the smiling Urara before me, amid the smell of weak coffee, the feeling was strong within me of having been very near the "something." I heard the windows rattle in the wind. Like Hitoshi when we parted, no matter how much I could lay bare my heart, no matter how much I strained my eyes, that "something" would remain transitory. That was certain. That "something" shone in the gloom with the strength of the sun itself; at a great speed, I was coming through. In a downpour of blessings, I prayed, as though it were a hymn: Let me become stronger.

"Where will you go now?" I asked as we walked out of the doughnut shop.

Smiling, she took my hand. "We'll meet again someday. I'll never forget your phone number."

With that, she melted into the wave of people crowding the morning streets. I watched her go and thought, I, too, will not forget. How very much you have given me.

"I saw something the other day," said Hiiragi.

I had gone to meet him to give him a birthday present during the lunch break at his high school, my alma mater. I had been waiting on a bench by the school grounds, watching the students come and go, when he came running up to me. He was no longer wearing the sailor outfit. He sat down next to me.

"You saw what?" I asked.

"Yumiko," he said. My heart skipped a beat. Students in white gym suits ran past us, kicking up dust.

"The morning of . . . was it the day before yesterday? . . ." he continued. "It may have been a dream. I was sort of half-asleep when suddenly the door opened and Yumiko walked in. It was all so normal I forgot she was dead and I said, 'Yumiko?' She smiled, put her finger to her lips, and said, 'Shhhhhh.' She went to my closet, carefully took out the sailor outfit, and bundled it up in her arms. Then, her lips silently forming 'Bye-bye,' she waved good-bye. I didn't know what to do—I fell back asleep, thinking it must have been a dream. But the sailor outfit is gone. I looked everywhere for it. Then I just suddenly burst out crying."

"Hmm," I said. Could it be that it could happen somewhere other than the river? It was the right day, the right morning. With Urara gone I had no way of knowing for

sure. But he was so calm about it. There was more to Hiiragi than met the eye. Perhaps he had the power to draw an event to himself that should only have occurred at the river.

“Do you think I’ve lost my mind?” he asked, jokingly.

In the faint spring afternoon sunshine, the lunch hour hubbub coming from the school building carried on the wind. I laughed, gave him his present, a record, and said, “I recommend jogging when you feel like that.”

Hiiragi laughed, too. Sitting there in the light, he laughed and laughed.

Hitoshi:

I’ll never be able to be here again. As the minutes slide by, I move on. The flow of time is something I cannot stop. I haven’t a choice. I go.

One caravan has stopped, another starts up. There are people I have yet to meet, others I’ll never see again. People who are gone before you know it, people who are just passing through. Even as we exchange hellos, they seem to grow transparent. I must keep living with the flowing river before my eyes.

I earnestly pray that a trace of my girl-child self will always be with you.

For waving good-bye, I thank you.