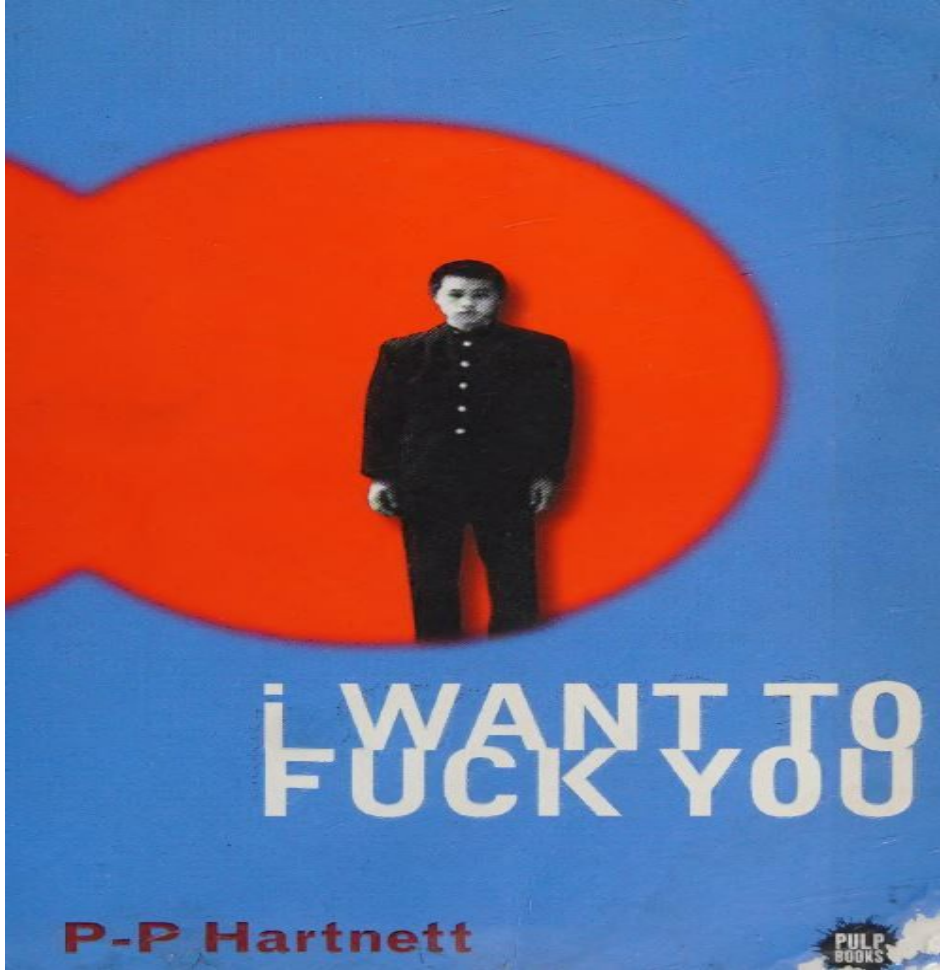




# I WANT TO FUCK YOU

**P-P Hartnett**

**PULP  
BOOKS**



## REACTIONS TO *CALL ME*

“Liam Hanmore decides to experiment with other people’s sexual fantasies by placing a personal advertisement in the contact pages of a London magazine. Many of the meetings which follow are weird, and some are deeply disturbing. Hartnett gives us an insightful insider’s account of ‘doomed but beautiful wretches waiting to be wined dined and sixty-nined’, exposing a world a world of inadequacy and loneliness.” Andrew Biswell, *Daily Telegraph*

“Recommended book. Hartnett has a winning, breezy style and a perverse sense of humour, but the power of *Call Me* resides in his ability to convey the sheer desperation that people feel—not about sex, but about the need to make sense out of their lives, their feelings, and their desires.” *Amazon.com*

“Hartnett’s *Call Me* is a funny, sad, wonderful lubricious think-off.”  
Laurie Stone, *Village Voice*

“From punks, Goths and New Romantics to today’s Ecstasy-driven ravers, the photographer P-P Hartnett spent twenty years documenting midnight’s children and their club culture... Later his investigations into ‘loneliness, isolation, sexual compulsion’ even led him to contact serial killer Dennis Nilsen, visiting him in prison and receiving more than 100 letters and paintings from the man who murdered over a dozen young men.”

Sheryl Garratt, *The Independent* “

Very nasty. Very 90’s. Very much the sort of book people are going to be talking about for some time to come.”

Paul Burston, *Time Out*

“A cutting, satirical first novel.”

*Publishers Weekly*

“Very dark, sometimes terrifying. Once you pick up this book it won’t let you go anywhere until you turn to the last page.” Ron Beck, *Q Press*

“A book of rare courage and charm, handling sensitive, often disturbing material with lyrical deftness. I found myself wishing Peter-Paul Hartnett elevated beyond cult status to take his place alongside Orton and Morrissey in the cultural pantheon.”

James O’Brien, *G-Spot*

“SCUMBAG USES MOORS TAPE IN PORN RAPE SCENE.”

*Sunday Sport*

“Wild and wicked writing. Bike Boy catches us with our cocks hanging out.”

Paul Hallam, author of *The Book Of Sodom*

“While the gay literati quibble about uses and misuses in queer writing, P-P Hartnett shows how it’s done. *Call Me* is smart, funny, surprising, heartbreaking—and damn sexy.”

Justin Chin, author of *Bite Hard*

“Hartnett’s writing seductively slides the reader down his blade of fantasy.”

Andy Simmons, *Gay Times*

“A debut novel that’s more precise than a pathologist’s report (complete with glossary) and a whole lot more vivid, an eye-opening view of the devastating, horrific effect of loss.” *Kirkus Reviews*

**i WANT TO  
FUCK YOU**

**P-P Hartnett**

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this book is dedicated to

## **Andy Marshall**

big shout to

Anthony Agius. Bill Avis. Box 3968. Dave Baby. Peter Bailey-i Nurse Barnes-i  
Lawrence Bartell. Stephanie Bartell. Isabella Belonje. Edward Belli Horst Bieber.  
Jutta Bieber. Philip Blackmore. Jill Borrowdale. Brian Bradley. Jeff Brown-i  
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**MONDAY**

月

## #7B

She knew what she was about to do was wrong, but she still wanted to do it.

Through the tiny cracks of pretend-asleep eyes, dim fingers of light hit his retina. Field of vision was small. She smelled the same as usual but her eyes were enlivened and dark.

He could feel his mother breathing and she was breathing ever so slowly. Her crimson lips, the little outside muscles of her mouth, looked fuller and younger from his viewpoint below her, outstretched in bed on his young back.

‘Takeo?’ she whispered, making almost no sound.

The shining black, perfectly-cut bob that she lovingly snipped the last Saturday of each month was on the receiving end of soft strokes. Three. Each cut little jungle paths of sensation as the woman’s fingers ran through her son’s feathery hair. The boy remained absolutely still.

That woman lowered one side of her face to one side of his, just like in the afternoon soaps. Son thought the warmth was nice at first, then too much. Too close, too intense.

Kiss to an ear.

The night had been moist, heavy with heat and a throbbing whir of insects only briefly silenced by a heavy shower during which Takeo had stripped off his teeshirt and pyjama bottoms by the window. It was one of those full-length windows, letting in lots of sky. The boy’s pale, slim body had been lit by lightning. He enjoyed the weather: it disturbed and excited him.

Kiss to an ear.

‘You awake?’ she asked two freckles and a mole.

She wanted the delicate bloom and loveliness of him to stay. Maybe there was something in her one and only's maturation that frightened her. The body of the little boy she had made would soon be darkened with hair. Soon that head would be weighed down with facts, figures and pretty girls.

His growing independence made her feel less important than she had once been. The woman was worried that she would soon have no way of knowing his whereabouts, his thoughts, his desires, then the final destiny of his manhood. It wouldn't be long before he'd be keeping secrets from her, then lying. Eventually he would, of course, leave her. She felt powerless.

Once they'd spent whole days in the shade of great trees, playing games together. She'd removed grit from between his toes, had pointed to smooth snow-topped mountains, holding his little warm hand.

'What's in my hand, Mummy?'

'Four red leaves.'

'How did you guess?'

'Mummy knows everything.'

The kiss she placed on his neck made Takeo's skin tingle. Her lips were cooler than her cheek. A slight shock: dry, then moisture.

With his eyes closed, this could have been anyone: Noriko, Fumie or Handa San, the PE teacher who'd started at the school that term. Handa San, just a little older looking than the kids in the top year.

Sunlight broke through the window, dappling skin with warm splashes that moved. The heat of his flesh could be felt through the thin white cotton sheet which clung in places.

Her kimono was softly printed with wildflowers, a garden of colour spreading the length of her body. The material parted.

Takeo tried to convince himself that he was dreaming all this. His heartbeat thumped and echoed in both ears.

On hearing her kimono slide a little, Takeo dared sneak another snapshot through pantherish slits.

The son moved a little to one side slowly, turning his back on his mother. She began stroking his shoulder blades with the tips of her thin, cold fingers. Takeo couldn't see the enormous weariness compounded of gratitude, melancholy and frustration that suffused her face.

The sheet had shifted in sleep and his attempt at discretion had only exposed his long, skinny, pale (totally passive) form. From the angle she

was in her son could have passed for a tall, skinny girl. Without pants on she had his bottom to view. These were the buttocks she had started to kiss and powder with precise regularity some twelve, almost thirteen years ago. Soon a small patch of long fine hairs would define its centre, then thicken and spread. *Her* buttocks were stretchmarked and saggy.

To Takeo, this world seemed to operate on so many sets of unspoken rules...particularly on touch. Who could touch whom, when, where, why, how and with what. Doctors, teachers and parents were to be trusted.

Swooping down again to kiss his waist, Takeo's mother decided to avert her eyes. It felt like a goodbye kiss.

'Best boy in the world,' the mother whispered, slowly— ever so quietly.

Miniature and perfect, a tiny bird-boy—fragile bones displayed in a neat tracery under thin skin. His mother had loved him best when he was five and his feet didn't reach the floor from chair, sofa or stool.

The woman sucked in the undiluted odour of her son as it rose from the nape of his neck, his hair, from that gap just under each shoulder blade, the wrinkle inside his elbows. It flowed into her like a gentle breeze. Savouring her son's lovely warm smell she began to sob. Only with a little breath control did she manage to conceal it.

He thought she'd leave—any minute—thought she'd stop all this and go about making the breakfast. She had her routines with their respective, unvarying courses— measured and ritualistic. Go and rattle a box of Cornflakes, Takeo thought. Get my sandwiches made.

When she slid in beside her son, he felt his body temperature first lower, then rise steeply. The child struggled to keep his breathing sleepy.

Maybe mother's advice was going through the woman's mind but what was running through her left hand were the long, fine, black strands of her son's fringe.

As she cuddled up to him, Takeo pushed his kiddy hard-on down between his legs—then he could have been a girl.

Climbing behind the boy's alarm clock, a shiny-shelled monster cockroach with waving antennae tried to detect something edible in the room, which, in a roaches case, can be anything from television wires to coffee grounds to sweaty socks and banana skins. An erratic, darting runner, eager to fill its stomach ASAP.

Mother/Mummy/Mum was saying the three syllables of her son's name in a low voice—not a whisper.

‘Tak-e-o.’

Two bodies, warming a bed together. Hers a dark coffee-cream, his a golden wheat. An evenness of inhalation and exhalation.

Fear fluttered in that boy child’s guts like an infestation of the large, black butterflies you see hovering over tombstones.

A schoolboy’s alarm clock wasn’t due to buzz for another half hour. No yapping dog, ambulance siren or last of the mosquitoes in an ear sounded. No excuse to wake up suddenly. His father, absent for the last six years, didn’t return from the dead to remove the hand his wife was sliding over, then between, the firm fat-free boy legs of his son.

*Atsko’s foul teeth*, he thought, desperate as he was not to get hard again as he probably would be later that morning, standing as he did in the front row of (any minute now) pubescent boys—eyes forward, just a metre from his favourite teacher, his favourite man: Handa San.

Feeling a gradual loss of ownership, Takeo’s mother hit the line she used to whisper into the ear of her little brother, ‘Darling little fishbone’.

Through the unfocused screen of his eyelashes, Takeo saw the monster cockroach beside him on the pillow. Attempting to breathe the deep, relaxed breath of sleep was too much of a challenge—inhalation/exhalation ceased. He froze. Warm lips that once kissed away tears skimmed over the twin flowers of his bare feet, tasting salty toes.

She could have aborted, as her husband had wished, yet she’d allowed him to grow silently in her, on her blood. She had been so happy, so proud. Then he’d forced himself out of her. His head stretched her vagina and split her vulva before he gasped his first breath in her world.

On hearing the familiar crack of a bone in his mother’s left foot as she headed off toward the kitchen at last, the only son of an unimaginative marriage let out a gale from his lungs, spinning the roach across that room.

## #8A

Shigeru was dressed in the only item of clothing he then owned, brand new Levi's. 501s, white ones. They were stiff, too new.

'Once you get into Today,' his father had so often said, 'everything will be just fine.'

Standing in his usual spot by the window, the look Shigeru wore on his face was both fixed and faded. Half-smiling, half-mourning. What he felt was relief. He was looking at the view he knew so well, the view he'd grown up and into.

He stood there, doing nothing in slow motion—then yawned.

Skin that sensed it would only be alive for a short while longer smudged up into the air. His breathing had formed a grey halo around his head. When he became aware of this he wrote his name backwards through it, then erased with the most tender part of his left wrist.

'Just fine.'

The day before had been the last day of September. The day before his parents had left for Kagawa at dawn. They always left early when off on one of their trips, squeezing the maximum out of a day.

Off to Kagawa, to Tsuda again. Booked into the Kuataraso Sanuki Tsuda Therapy Institute in a sad attempt to get *genki*. Shigeru reckoned they could manage the fifteen minute walk from JR Tsuda to the pine grove with their eyes shut. Blindfold, even. Off again to walk the beach facing the Seto Inland Sea, taking polaroids of each other as they had done every October since 1972. Always the same spot, by the giant exposed roots his mother had been sitting on when their eyes first met.

Off, again, to catch the fourth Sunday performance at the Ochi Toramaruza Doll Theatre in Ochio-cho. They'd bring back grains of white sand with them in their pockets and in their grey hair. Those grains would show by the plug after a sensible hand-washing of the clothes they'd worn. Those grains would show when they got round to taking a long, hot

soak in the tub. All being well they'd be back late Sunday afternoon with their same old reports, same old bunch of so'n'so's regards.

The sense of freedom that he always felt when his parents were off somewhere flooded him. It was precious. The last time they had gone away, departing at five on a Wednesday in April, he had waved to them from that same window while unnecessary luggage was loaded into the cab. Then he had sat there for sixty-two hours until ten that Friday evening, staring beyond the clear screen of glass at the stillness and tiny focusing movements of people and machines as if it were all a film.

He'd always enjoyed sitting in the same spot for hours. Railway stations had been a great pleasure in the past: watching, imagining. The woman desperate to catch the next train to Maibara, the foreign student having trouble with a timetable, the man waiting for a lover, mother, friend or brother. Or someone he hadn't yet met—Box 8583 out of *Barazoku*, perhaps.

A light shower at eight improved air quality for a while—then a breeze had started up. The sun was lazy behind layers of mist and gauzy cloud. The sky kept changing. It was soiled white, mainly.

Among red roofs, blue roofs, unlit neon and orange tv aerials there were seven hundred and fifty variations of grey. The view he had wasn't old, but felt it. Most of what he saw had gone up in two previous generations. It didn't look so bad in sunshine or sunset, but in total cloud cover it was dreadful. He'd somehow managed to let the greys of that view invade his soul, filled with the fragile existence of those quickly thrown up, quickly pulled down structures.

'Architects and engineers have been playing a cat and mouse game with nature a long while,' was a stock remark the young man's father spouted with uncomfortable regularity. To Shigeru the threat of earthquakes was very real. 1923, 1946, 1994; the Great Hanshin-Awaji of 1995. Mainlands, islands—threatened by nature. As a child, Shigeru had imagined his death would have been due to an earthquake...last breath squashed out of him under piles of rubble. It was not to be so.

'What use are satellites in space when a neighbour's gas is going to blow your head off?' Stock rhetoric Shigeru's mother used to ask herself/her reflection/husband and son. Same old questions, same old shakes of the head, same same same fucking stories. Shigeru's pillow was wet with more tears than average for a nineteen-year-old.

The smell of coffee made only an hour ago was already fading. Shigeru had been busy, hadn't stopped since they'd left. A *Things To Do* list in the young man's head had many ticks to go.

Sorting out memories in chronological order is an interesting business. People get left out, whole sequences forgotten. Bits and pieces are overlooked, then patched in—sometimes blurry, sometimes in sharp focus. Shigeru's recall was patchy at the best of times, being so caught up with himself that his observations varied from blind to intense.

Within minutes of those parents heading off for their week of heaven, the walls of his room—lined with books—had been bared. Those once precious books had been roughly bound with nylon string and dumped in the bins; goodbye to all that. All those practice test books of old old old exam papers seemed like nothing more than a giant trivia contest compiled by impotent scholars.

Sawing his desk in two, then four, then eight, then sixteen neat parts, brought a smile to his face but no sweat to his brow. The desk had been one of those deluxe models, with a built-in alarm clock for self-imposed speed tests, built-in calculator, high and low intensity lights. A special offer buy his parents had considered a good investment, once upon a time. Dismal.

He wanted to leave things tidy, right. Getting everything right included binning all personal items from the flat so it would seem like he'd never been there. The back-and-forth trips to the garbage had been precision-planned for years. Umbilical cord, primary school paintings, the awful attempts at pottery, school certificates, Hi-8 cassettes, CD collection, clothes—all binned. Postcards off the kitchen wall, photos from the family album (naked at three, shirtless at ten), carefully-hidden pornography, floppy discs, cacti—disposed of. Binoculars, computer—dumped. Good job the dog had been put down the previous year. Lucky the last of the Shubunken had curled up and floated to the top during that summer power-cut.

Getting everything right included machine-washing curtains from what had been *his* room. He knew the boil-washed bedsheets, folded ever so neatly, would eventually be slept on. Those parents of his hated waste.

Getting everything right involved laying down three double pages from *Mainichi Shimbun* to protect the tatami when painting those four thin bedroom walls. It had been three years since they'd last been done.



The *Kite White* emulsion spread with a lovely thickness. Glossing the doors, shelves and skirting boards was a tiring, tedious affair. Only a sense of humour helped him finish it/himself off. No traces of his existence were to be found in the flat, except the body.

Drinking a glass of tap water by the window, his eyes scanned the block of flats opposite. He knew each window so well. Some with curtains half-closed, some with blinds permanently drawn. Many with Venetians turned to a precise angle.

Grey, ferro-concrete.

One day the demolition men would go about their work with cranes, drills and hammers, pounding through the partitions of that block, smashing down exteriors, ripping out ironwork, reducing all to piles of raw materials to be sold for scrap, recycled or dumped. The bulldozers of the site-levellers would tidy away before men with brooms appeared. Housewives would wipe their windowsills free of dust, then there'd be nothing left. Shigeru was pleased he wouldn't be around to see that day. He was more concerned should anyone witness a pair of brand new Levi's jettison from the eighth floor than his nakedness at the window.

Down below he could see the boy from #7B heading off for school, the same neighbourhood school he had once attended. Same inky-black, five button-fronted uniform every Japanese schoolboy wears with no choice in the matter. An outfit still retaining that military feel which got going in the thirties. Shigeru waited till the boy had turned the corner before flinging the jeans up, up and away.

The floor and walls of the bathroom, laid with glazed ochre-yellow hexagonal tiles, shone brilliantly. Every surface, shiny shiny. The place was immaculate but for the plastic shower curtains, spotted...here and there... with damp. Light blue seagulls, frozen in flight—his mother's choice—went back in a whoosh. Perfect but for the drip drip of the shower-head.

Shigeru splashed his face with double handfuls of cold water. Drops splattered his chest. He needed the water, needed to splash, rinse and wipe. More and more water. He let it splash into his hair and ears. It didn't matter about the floor, not any more. The emptiness of the tiled room gave back to him all his sounds and movements, echoing like an indoor pool.

Getting everything right also meant standing still for ten minutes covered head to toe with lemon-scented *Immac*.

He showered carefully, rinsing off thoroughly as suggested, obediently following the step-by-step instructions. A mess of dead black was retrieved from the plughole and flushed.

The depilatory exercise was successful but for a few isolated areas that got a quick tidy-up shave with a *Bic*. This included eyebrows, an impulsive final touch. Shocking, he thought, applauding his reflection.

There was gloss paint deep under the nails of the index and middle finger of his right hand; neat semicircles of white. A careful clipping removed most of the imperfection, but not all. He was too exhausted to care at that point and let it be.

The enema seemed a matter of course. Shigeru hadn't eaten the day before to ensure that floating shit wasn't a feature of his suicide, something many Hollywood starlets had failed to consider in their heyday.

Removing the spray nozzle, he inserted the usual comfortable length of tube. It was well worth the bother. A number of small ping-pong clockwork turds bounced against the fibre-glass of the toilet.

'Why did he do it?' Shigeru said to himself in the mirror, running a hand over his bald head. 'Can't imagine,' was the reply, said in a voice two octaves below his usual, hands on hips.

He watched the tub fill, emptying an entire bottle of hair shampoo into the flow. The water creamed into bubbles as it mixed. Large bubbles, peppermint-scented. His eyelids grew motionless. They ceased to be focused on the rippling, furling surface. He knew what he was about to do would not be pretty.

'Bath time,' he sing-songed toward the mirror, but his reflection had become a steamed-up blur.

Waving a hand from side to side over the glass, Shigeru half-laughed at himself. To him it looked like he was waving a giant, desperate *bye bye*.

'Sayonara,' he said with a wink, 'and good riddance to bad rubbish,' another stock expression heard so often in that household, usually when removal men were doing back and forth carrying. Then he switched the light off, wanting to be discovered in the shuddering brightness of the fluorescent.

It was as he lit a candle by the mirror that Shigeru surprised himself with tears. The only comfort the preceding months had held for him was the intelligent planning of those last days. The grand finale had come and he was surprised to be feeling nothing but a modest trace of determination.

When he bent to elbow-check the temperature of the water, muscles in his back (particularly the shoulders) rippled beneath that smooth, clean, faintly-tanned skin. Momentary flexings like sparks. Musculature as natural and effortless as the structure of a flower—not studied and built with rapid-grow drinks and Nautilus pumping.

Only head, knees and shoulders emerged above the level of the water, like something severed—set there for viewing. The temperature was a bit too hot; perfect. No gin, no sake, no bottle of Suntory beer. Shigeru hadn't had a drink inside him for the last six months. Alcoholism would not be a cover up excuse his parents could use with the neighbours when questions started to be asked.

His first cut was tentative; vertical, up the vein. Afraid of making a mistake he slowly pushed the blade through the skin, as if it might break from too much pressure.

It was an incision the length of an average porn star's dick. There was no sound. He'd expected a muted hiss.

Dragging the knife firmly up from the palest part of his left wrist in a perfect (and deep) straight line for a second time, the one thought in his head was of the plug being pulled later. The flesh kind of peeled back, opening up quickly, blood type A jetting out to pink the water in a tropical way. He squinted against the pain.

The action was repeated one last time, just to be on the safe side. With regret he glanced over toward the squeezed out tube of *Immac* and the *Bic*; he'd forgotten about their planned, neat disposal, but not that of the knife. Rocking on to his left buttock he tidied it away up his arse, black plastic handle first. Buried it beyond the second ring.

Both of those large capable hands were then placed under his feet, eyes blindly fixing on the tiniest start of a damp patch beside the air vent directly above.

His eyes wandered over the perspex towel holders, the neatly folded pale blue cotton. A vegetable knife seemed such a mundane thing to end his life with. He'd have preferred a benediction-given sword, something decorative—inlaid with agate and jade—though such an item is difficult to dispose of in the depths of an average dirt-box.

He wondered what shade of opalescent yellow his skin would fade to, how dark the water, how long it might take the concierge to make use of the emergency key if a nasty smell were noticed.

Shigeru was sure of one thing: the person who would pull the plug, revealing inch by inch more of his remains, would do it not in the style of a half-running chicken with its head cut off, unsure of its direction, but with a cold, professional detachment—careful not to get fingers wet.

The dead can be so graceless, flopping—mouth open, falling as gravity dictates on the mechanical restriction of joints. Shigeru knew this and wished he could freeze into a position that did not look a mess. He didn't want an inelegant heap to be discovered.

Stretching his neck, resting his head backwards, gave him—weightwise—a balance. The ribcage also became nicely elongated, suds held him sweetly at the waist.

His body had always been so precious to him, so great and abundant. He could feel the nourishing blood pump away, gently reducing his strength with the flow. Not for the first time that day the youth wondered if his mother's vegetable knife would be returned to her and, being the woman she was, if she would continue to make use of it. Waste not, want not.

The nineteen-year-old's lifeblood curled out of him with the twirl of a barber's candy stick. The bubbles popped one by one or...sometimes, a few together at once. He liked the irregularity of both tempo and volume. It was all quite musical with his eyes closed. Behind those eyelids was a whole galaxy of red stars. He felt wonderful. Just fine. Perhaps the way an imago feels cracking out of the chrysalis or how a snake feels when a skin is shed. It was the kind of experience he used to take drugs to have.

'A hint of old-fashioned pain,' a youth at the end of his teenage years thought aloud.

Tears, not sweat, rolled down his cheeks—he was that happy. He wiped them away with his good right hand, then balanced it on the side of the tub. The index and middle finger drummed flat, rhythmic, numb beats over which a blast of fuzz guitar was imagined.

'Oh, excellent,' his voice smeared to a twinkle of light in the mirror.

It occurred to Shigeru, only briefly, that he might resemble a miscarriage when found. A dirty, great big baby. Him, the boy who followed two brothers who had never made it past the cervix. Him, the only child of a regimented marriage.

His features slowly began to morph with a face he'd worn at the start of the year when he'd had bad flu. He could feel himself fading away from

one world, not fading into another. It was black he was fading into. Comforting, welcoming black.

Moments before consciousness was lost he heard, then—with effort—spotted a rather short, bristly bluebottle by the light switch.

*Perfect*, he thought.

He managed to mouth one last word to the fly, but no sound was voiced. Shigeru's last word was *Soon*. Thought, mouthed, but unheard.

Drip drip of the shower-head.

It wasn't long before the bath water was as cold as a deserted egg in a bird's nest.

The compound eyes of the fly, a masterpiece of microcircuitry, enjoyed the sweet excitement of monitoring the reduction in power of that dying, dimming human. Each and every tiny inhalation and exhalation was monitored up to one hundred times a second before all movement ceased.

There were so many silent fertile places to lay her eggs. The maggots, the fly thought, will be beautiful and numerous.

The clever little thing was well aware that nine ants, three spiders, two centipedes and a single, very hungry cockroach were also present.

The race was on.

# SCHOOL

‘Stretch! Go on, right up. Tiptoes. Over. Hold. Back. Keep breathing. Up. Keep the trunk stretched upwards, no leaning forward. Come on, Sasabe. Stretch! Kobayshi, don’t rush it. Tiptoes. Arms down and re-lax. Well, that was useless!’

Handa San’s tone was that of a (nice) sergeant major. Echoing off the concrete walls the voice came from all angles as if by the wonders of Dolby Surround. All more or less the same size, all quite alone on the white lines of the sports pitch, thirty-six boys in neat rows stopped their clumsy efforts.

Thirty-six pairs of eyes faced forward. Those who had seemed fast asleep in an English lesson just fifteen minutes ago had wakened while removing jacket, white shirt and vest, then shoes, trousers and socks. Each face was alive with a perpetual listening quality.

‘Right, watch me.’

Smoothly, evenly, again and again in lovely slow motion, Handa San demonstrated the required exercise. How strong, how taut. He dominated the scene. All thirty-six boys watched the elegance of muscle cutting through air.

It was a stretch—a plain stretch. Something they’d done thousands of times since infancy, often to NHK. Handa San was struggling to bring a fresh awareness to the familiar exercise. A body so expert in judo, kendo, karate, kyudo and aikido was doing just that for thirty-six boys.

‘No bouncing at this point. And here...push as far as you’re comfortable with.’

Unlike his own school PE teacher just a few years back— a man who felt exercises were only effective when students were on the verge of collapse—Handa San didn’t want to hurt: inflicting pain was not his aim. What he wanted to see in his students was sturdy, physical development.

‘Remember...*gently*.’

There was still a novelty element to this new teacher. He hadn’t been there at the start of the new school year back in April. He brought with him

fresh methods of teaching, new approaches.

*Viscosity* had been Handa San's first word to each and every class—pronounced as if a difficult foreign word. Few of the boys had known what it meant. He had illustrated the idea with a simple experiment that was of interest/delight to the boys crowded around him.

Opening two tins of treacle, he asked a boy to stir with a spoon. One tin had been in the sun, the other had come from the staff room fridge.

'Well?' he'd asked each and every class.

The cold treacle offered considerable resistance to the spoon. The warm treacle had been more fluid, easier to stir.

'Because the treacle is warm it's more mobile,' Handa San had said. 'Similarly, when a body is warmed up, the muscles are more efficient, able to contract faster and more easily than when they're cold and stiff.' A few titters, as expected. *Stiff* always got a few.

He'd introduced his students to ballistic stretching, static stretching, Proprioceptive Neuromuscular Facilitation (PNF) stretching. Together they'd look into Newton's first, second and third laws of motion. A step on from step ups.

Handa San's skin was almost a rich milky chocolate from exercising boys in the sun. His shoulders seemed wider and broader than when he'd joined the school staff. He'd gained a little weight, too, yet still retained a gymnast's trim; that supple grace. The majority of mothers agreed that the new teacher was a hunk.

'Okay?'

Through the tiny crackle of chest hairs above the neckline, Handa San scratched briefly with a thumbnail, rattling the pea in his whistle. Takeo's wondering sense of the man's body was triggered. Delicate currents of air brought his scent to the boy's nostrils.

'Right, let's try it again.'

Waiting for the orders to commence, some of the boys were shivering in anticipation. Every muscle, every sinew, tense. Each boy like a sample, a taster—like those use-once-only tiny pots of jam and marmalade you get in hotels.

'Come on, Hosokawa. Stretch! Tiptoes. Arms down and re-lax. Mmm, better.'

The jet black curls had been carefully cut away, sheared down to a military #4 after his first month at the school. It was with the haircut that

Handa San had begun to admit to himself his matter-of-fact attraction to a twelve-/nearly thirteen-year-old boy named Takeo.

At first glance there was nothing to set the boy apart from the others. He fared well when asked to read aloud from a text, come up with a calculation/theory/translation. Never one to bodge his homework, he'd heard.

At second glance: a thin, earnest boy of subtle proportioning, animal innocence and mortified purity. Notably articulate and poised for his age. He wasn't one of those boys anyone would call beautiful, pretty or cute. Takeo was—quite simply—skinny perfection. His eyes seemed to smile every time he looked Handa San's way.

As a teacher, particularly as a PE teacher, Handa San had close proximity to literally hundreds of boys of all shapes and sizes, many riddled with acne from waist to skull. Boys springing out of podgy childhood into clean-limbed, tumultuous adolescence. A ring-side view of hormones smashing many a sweet soprano to a painful squawk.

It was his job to knock twelve- to sixteen-year-olds into shape. Eight thirty to six except Saturdays, when the small hand pointing up between 12 and 1 and the big hand swinging down on the 6 brought everything to a standstill.

On week days, the majority of his colleagues made a hasty evacuation at three. Not so with Handa San. The gymnastics club kept him back till six, five evenings a week. For many of the students the club life after three was the most pleasant and encouraging part of the day—contrasting sharply with the monotony of classes.

Handa San wasn't the only teacher in the school who didn't want to think of himself as a *paedophile* or *ehebophile*. He hoped the shivering attention he paid Takeo was just a phase he was going through. After all, he consoled himself, he didn't actually want to fuck the boy, get the boy on his knees or anything like that. He liked his students, was genuinely interested in their variety of character and outlook. He'd never wanted to cuddle one of them before.

Takeo wasn't an obvious choice but, once alerted, Handa San was hooked. The direction in which the boy combed his hair, varying from day to day, had become a shivering fascination. (That day Takeo's hair, parted dead centre, was swept back off the forehead in two perfect wings.) The



lightness of his step, the minute flickerings of his eyebrows and particularly his smile, all caught Handa San off guard.

Though the days were timetabled, unvarying, pretty much identical, Handa San found himself getting excited when it was Takeo's class he was to take. Chance encounters in corridors were savoured, as was the recent picture of the gymnastics squad, Takeo at his side—knee to knee.

Handa San scanned the clouds above, hands on hips. Some sort of inbuilt radar that only PE teachers and farmers have detected a nine in ten chance of a downpour.

Sometimes a gust of wind tugged at his vest and it rode up. Tapering from waistband of those those grey shorts to a little above the navel came a finger-wide piping of hair which showed when he ran or jumped. Takeo had the best view of it all.

'Right, four volunteers.'

Thirty-six arms that could snap like brittle ice shot up. Takeo's beautiful head slowly rose, black hair falling across his clear olive face.

'You, you, y-you,' then their eyes met for the first time that day, 'n you. Line up.'

Takeo's long lashes lifted slowly just before he smiled (first with teeth white as radishes, then eyes), pupils dilating with an inky surge.

'Me, Sensei?' Takeo asked hoarsely, touching the tip of his nose with a pointed finger. Handa San nodded. Those almond-shaped, lustrous, long-lashed eyes smiled Handa San's way again. Takeo was surprised to be selected; he'd also been chosen to demonstrate in the last class.

Four boys, two on either side of him, Takeo to the left. Magic.

'Watch.'

Thirty-six sets of eyes obeyed.

Takeo wanted a haircut like Handa San's. He was sick and tired of the little boy haircuts his mother gave him. He knew that what he was going to do would cause his mother to glare at him with a frightening face—he was already looking forward to that.

He'd decided to get a crop after school using the pocket-money set aside for a CD he could wait another week for.

He was going to get a crop, a #4 like Handa San's. It was, after all, *his* hair.

'Up. Tiptoes. Over. See, no rocking. Nice'n'smooth. Hold. Back. Relax.'

He smiled. 'Perfect!'

During the exercise Takeo's little cock had slipped out of the built-in gusset of his shorts. There'd been no giggling, so he assumed no one had noticed.

'Back you go lads.'

The boys began to move off, obediently.

'Well done, Takeo,' Handa San said casually, raising whistle to lips—mouth concealed briefly by fist.

Takeo's smile was a crooked dimpling of the right cheek and an explosion of sparks in his eyes—something not gained through genetic inheritance.

The boy felt Handa San was taking a special interest in him and liked the feeling. On one occasion this had involved removing his vest to show the horizontal line that defined the base of his chest muscles. Takeo was, after all, in the gymnastics team. Handa San had pointed out the line of the diaphragm with an index finger which touched featherily; gliding over warmed dinner plate skin.

'Okay. Let's see if we can all get it right this time.'

The scent of the rain came before the heavy drops spotted Handa San's shorts and his neat rows of boys. The grey air that had stained the sky on and off all morning darkened. Silvery needles of rain attached targets to sky. The warm rain, splashing in seconds, soaked into them through trickles sliding down the backs of necks and on to the occasional outstretched tongue. Shorts darkened then clung, tightly. White became transparent. Hair was slicked, skin received an added shine.

Rain ran on to leaves and into puddles. Rain dripped from noses, chins and elbows. The delight of the drenching was intensified by its just as sudden cessation. With the abrupt end of the downfall, each figure seemed totally individual until the bodies began to steam.

Teeshirts worn to protect the naivete of their bodies were thrown down on to green grass, then thirty-six boys were naked above the waist in what had become the softest air. It was time for the organised mayhem of the circuits. Just one blow of the whistle got groups rushing to line up—pull, push, work it.

'You're not making love to that mat, Kobayashi, you're supposed to be doing push-ups!'

Thirty-five boys howled with laughter. Kobayashi looked awkward.

‘Come on, get moving!’

There was no time for random chatter, dirty jokes or bullying...not with Handa San about. The general consensus was that he had eyes in the back of his head. In weightless, silkily synthetic shorts, they did as they were told.

‘Flex! Harder! Come on, you’re not trying!’

Hairless legs apart, hairless legs together, little legs in the air.

Looking up smooth, slim, frogs’ thighs, Handa San walked among the boys. Flat bottoms, round bottoms, tiny waists, shining eyes and hair. Nearly thirteen and pounding testosterone; fresh and innocent flesh.

‘Don’t fiddle with the apparatus!’

The atmosphere was more industrial than educational.

Boys sweating.

‘Circle your hips!’

Boy smell.

‘Bend and stretch!’

Boys, under his spell.

Handa San was momentarily in silhouette as he stood close to Takeo. The curves and shapes the man had worked so hard at creating over the years became mythological, holy in effect.

‘Good, you couldn’t do that last week. Well done!’

Takeo detected a change in Handa San’s voice. It had softened since his appointment to the school.

All went quiet for Handa San as he studied a waterdrop at the end of Takeo’s fringe that couldn’t make up its mind whether to fall or not. Handa San would quite happily have scooped it up in the palm of his hand and drunk it.

While the boys went about their set tasks, Handa San ticked off the register he’d forgotten to take—unlike him.

Amid so much commotion, Takeo was the focus. The boy was doing a handstand, not one of the required exercises for that circuit. A handstand. (The boy had wanted to do one all morning.) Handa San felt his face lift with the first smile of the day, wondering if he should go over to support those legs.

Hairless legs apart, hairless legs together, lovely little legs in the air.

Again, looking up smooth, slim, frogs’ thighs, Handa San walked among the fresh and innocent flesh of his students.

Handa San's calm lips pursed around his warm whistle. The young teacher was reaching was that segment of time detached from all others. He was almost there.

'Okay. That's your lot. Pack away now.'

Job done, it was time to deliver the one instruction he always shouted with pounding heart. He tried to say it dispassionately, looking at his watch—slightly paranoid.

'Into the showers!'

The shower-room was sectioned off into the usual two lines of cubicles with little swing-doors like gates, five of which were broken. With the exception of those five cubicles, the boys were shielded from knees to nipples. By no means were the facilities deluxe—it was all more than a little shabby. Within each cubicle, firmly fixed shower-heads sprayed fierce jets. Handa San only ever switched two of the six fluorescents on, a relief for the shy.

Almost as if Takeo were deliberately choosing the same cubicle each time, one of the five without a door, Handa San became all too aware of each rolling drop over and down the boy's body. The man felt thrust into the presence of the child.

Tiny bubbles gathered in the boy's hair, making it seem like glass. The boy's eyelashes were beating so quickly they turned the drops descending from his fringe into spray. His skin shed water like liquid silk. When he walked to and from the showers it was not with the hunched scamper of most naked boys—it was just an ordinary walk.

Handa San had to look away, lowering his clipboard in front of him... the way so many teachers do.

If Takeo could, somehow, with some miraculous device, have been pumped up like a balloon to adult size—he would, Handa San so regularly considered, be the dream lover. That's what he wanted, a blow-up boy—a perfect adult boy. By no stretch of the imagination would Handa San ever fuck the boy, or any boy.

The blow up version of Takeo would have pubes. He couldn't fuck a body without pubes, unless they were shaven pubes. An idea worth patenting. But the chances of such an invention are, Handa San sighed to himself, as high as the moon being made of tofu.

## #7B

Wearing an apron with fading forget-me-nots scattered all over it and a heart-shaped pocket bulging with clothes-pegs, Takeo's mother was restitching the seam that had come undone in the armpit of the right sleeve of his spare school jacket. She wondered how it had happened, wishing her son had drawn attention to it.

When she started to cry, the end of her nose went red and shiny. When she put her face into her hands her skin felt hot, as though she had a fever.

Shaking her head, as if coming up for air, her eyes fixed on the blur of a woman hanging out washing on a roof far off. Takeo's mother consoled herself that—at least—her son hadn't woken. She preferred not to think about it. Nothing like that would happen again. Silly.

The bathroom was the only room in which she allowed herself a cigarette. The place was immaculate but for the plastic shower curtains, spotted with creeping dots of damp. Red and blue kites, frozen in flight—Takeo's choice—went back in a whoosh. Even in her distressed state she felt compelled to sprinkle a little liquid detergent into the tub and give those curtains a nice, long soak.

Relaxing her head back, Takeo's mother exhaled toward the vent above. Through the shared air ventilation system of the block, the woman heard the annoying drip drip of the faulty shower-head of the flat one up, across.

Distracted and tense again, she rose to rinse her face in the sink. She took a look at herself in the mirror. She was sure she'd shrunk. Taking a closer look at herself she tutted and made for a pair of tweezers on the second to bottom tier of the bathroom cabinet. She plucked at two vomitous wisps of hair from the reddish-brown mole on her chin. A little lipstick made her feel better.

Drip, drip.

'Christian Dior,' she whispered to her reflection, as if starring in a tv commercial.

From that plughole rose the home sweet home smell of bleach. Where a germ settles it breeds. Her life revolved around her rapidly developing son and cleanliness. She was neat about everything. In winter she left tidy footprints after her in the snow.

Even when she was very quiet, those hands were rarely still. She stroked her apron, her hair, her mouth with a backward motion. That mother's nerves were in those hands, in those flexing fingers. Those fingers which had the ability to spread wide or snap into cold, tight fists. She'd never, as a child, put those fingers in her mouth—that was a dirty thing to do.

Before leaving the bathroom she gave three quick sprays of wild freesia air freshener, shaking the can well before use, ensuring the nozzle was pointed away from her.

In the small white kitchen, tiled floor painted red, on a tiny white table with two silver chairs shoved under it, vegetables were reaching room temperature after a night in the fridge.

Had she peeled back a couple of layers of the head of cabbage on the draining board, she might have detected a small black spot where an infestation of tiny black insects were nibbling. These, however, wouldn't last long—not with the salted rinsing she was so good at. But first there were other jobs to do; the ironing, then the windows.

It wouldn't be too long before Takeo was back home.

## #8B

Shinohara San wore delicate hoops of gold-plated silver and freshwater pearls through the lobes of her ears. Venus, who rose to life through the water, was known by the Romans as the lady of the pearls, water dripping from her ears as she rose, catching the light like pearls.

Around her neck an Italian printed silk scarf (based on decorative borders of first century AD frescoes from Pompeii and Herculaneum) half-strangled her. She did her best to look elegant. She looked classy, nice. Perhaps a little too conservative. A little fussy with a chain on all three sets of sunglasses. Did she think someone was going to try and steal the glasses off her face? A little uptight. Not unsexy though, not for her age.

The breeze insinuated itself along the nape of her neck. Normally she wouldn't have felt it, hair shielding that space she loved being kissed. That day her hair was drawn back tight in a neurotically neat bun for the first time in a long while. It suited her.

The breeze swerved into the delicate machinery of her ear—chilling the lobe, whizzing around the cochlea, thumping the Eustachian tube.

Shinohara San's well-built, conscientiously exercised body was squeezed into an outfit that had fitted her far better when she'd bought it. The curse of weight gain.

Two sprays of Chanel boosted a confidence that needed boosting.

Everything in the flat was in coordinated earth tones. She admired a simplicity in the arts and crafts. Functional, basic, stripped to essentials—showing respect for materials such as stone, wood, clay, paper and bamboo.

Her left hand smelled of the rubber she held tightly for when her right hand would erase, adjust and smudge the sketch she was doing. The long, dried grasses the evening class teacher had suggested she try were proving difficult.

Her eyes scanned the block of flats opposite. She knew each window so well. Some with curtains half-closed, some with blinds permanently drawn.

Many with Venetians turned to a precise angle. The greyest of grey ferro-concrete. She wanted a drink and, she decided, she was going to have one.

Shinohara San's cat, Sunday Girl, sat at the window, a place she spent hours dreaming of meeting a tom on one of those rare occasions when she managed to escape between the legs of her mistress to the corridors, lift and staircase of the building.

A vain dream, alas, for the male cats in the building— that Kado woman's in #9B, the Banzai's in #6B and Utsumi San's ginger in #2A—had all been doctored. (All three owners agreed their cats had calmed down after the little op'. They were happy to stay at home, only sometimes wishing they could catch a bird—having to make do with the occasional creepy crawly for a bit of harmful fun instead.)

Her husband showed more interest in that cat than in her, always alert for any signs of a loss of fur, a dry nose or watery stool.

Shelves displayed a selection of—to Shinohara San—beautiful and interesting things from every age of Mother Earth's history. She enjoyed those trinkets, often given as thoughtful presents by family and friends. Fine and unusual gifts, inspired by the past—but fake. Reproductions. Authentic, mass-produced replicas.

She wore a Celtic cat brooch (without the matching earrings), based, she boasted, on a design taken from the handle of a bowl dating to the early first century AD, found on the slopes of Mount Snowdon and now in the National Museum of Wales. She knew this because she'd been there, had seen the silversmith at work emptying moulds, smiling for the customers. She'd got her Handycam out.

For their next trip, more than anywhere else, she had her sights set on Paris—city of romance. Paris, she voiced inwardly, pouring herself a glass of wine—Paris. She dreamed of filling ashtrays in the cafes. How long would it be before her husband got the occasional hints she dropped via music, food and Berlitz cassettes?

At nineteen she had haemorrhaged following an abortion, losing two pints of blood. Her husband didn't know anything about that or the (married) Tsukiji shopkeeper who had been fucking her rotten when they met. She'd promoted herself as a virgin and he'd gone for the goods.

After the first welcome sip, Shinohara San went on a wander around the flat, glass in hand. The place was shining, spotless. It felt like a show flat. The floor and walls of the bathroom, laid with glazed salmon-pink



hexagonal tiles, shone brilliantly. Every surface—cartoon sparkly. The place was immaculate but for the plastic shower curtains, spotted with damp. She hoped the design of palest blue butterflies frozen in flight would still be available at Seibu.

‘Oh God, deep in my heart infinite happiness wells up,’ she said to her reflection in a voice two octaves above her usual. She sniffed at the wine, then took another sip.

Tossing her head back she began to laugh then stopped herself, knowing how sound could travel through the vent above the tub. Her teeth freeze-framed in the mirror.

She closed her eyes and put her one free hand over her stomach. After a long inhalation—held for ten seconds— she rocked from left to right, just like her mother did when she went through this daily routine.

‘I’m happy, I’m happy, I’m happy. I have a good life. I enjoy myself.’ She began to laugh again, opening her eyes. ‘I’m thankful. It’s a beautiful day. I am beautiful.’ No laughter this time. ‘Well,’ voice dropping two octaves, hand on hip, ‘not bad. There’s life in the old bitch yet.’

Glug.

‘My husband is in good health,’ she continued, heading back toward her easel, sounding more like herself. ‘We are wealthy. He’s...’

Shinohara San felt an improvisation coming on as she neared her reflection in the pane, ‘He’s a speech therapist. He gives remedial help to children with stammers, lisps, cleft palates. When he gets home he doesn’t like to chat much.’

Glug.

‘It had been a long while since he’d talked to his wife,’ the woman camped into her glass, as if she were doing a somewhat bored voiceover for a mid-morning tv documentary. ‘It had become more than a habit—it had become an essential part of the shithead’s nature.’

Glug.

Back by the window her eyes scanned the block of flats opposite.

‘I smile. Look, I’m smiling.’

She knew each window so well. Grey, grey, grey. She had a vague sense of being watched; understandable paranoia.

‘I laugh. Listen, I’m laughing. 1-2-3...’ She laughed in a wa-ha-ha, wa-ha-ha way, octaves rising in cruel parody of her mother who had done this exercise every day for close to thirty years.

‘If you can’t feel happy,’ that mother so regularly told her small circle of friends over in Meguro-ku, ‘you should simulate a smile. Of course,’ she’d add, ‘the mind comes first but if you can’t control your mind you can start with the shape. It helps.’

The mimicry brought a dull twinkle to Shinohara San’s eyes. She began to sound very tired.

‘Short of a miracle I will never have a child.’

She watched a jet scratch two lines across the sky.

Three doctors had said there was nothing wrong, that everything was possible. There was still time.

A child, a child. She wanted a child. A boy. A girl would have been fine, but it was a boy she wanted—not quite sure why the preference.

A dull, plum-dark blush swelled the delicate membranes of her face. She took another deep breath and her skin paled for a few seconds.

‘Paris’, she said to the pane of glass in front of her, ‘P-A-R-I-S.’ She had a vague and kind of bizarre idea that she’d conceive in France. Then again, she’d had the same idea about Wales, and all they’d done was argue.

When she started to cry the end of her nose went red and shiny. She drank down the tears through the side of her mouth. She liked to quickstep and foxtrot until her sweatless feet began to weary. He didn’t. She wanted a garden, wanted to grow roses that were flower-show perfect. He suffered from hay fever.

Sometimes she’d sit for hours, diagnosing the fits of sulk and pique she saw in him, but never spoke about. She’d monitored the accelerating shortening of her husband’s temper with increasing detachment. The decline of their furniture and fittings twitched her out more than he did, but she could do something about that.

One day the demolition men would go about their work with cranes, drills and hammers, pounding through the partitions of that block, smashing down exteriors, ripping out ironwork, reducing all to piles of raw materials to be sold for scrap, recycled or dumped. The bulldozers of the site-levellers would tidy away before men with brooms appeared.

All she knew about that block opposite was that there’d once been a man who’d kept Alsatians, five of them. He’d moved away after complaints.

Half-smiling, Shinohara San remembered a newspaper article about a yapping dog and a neighbour whose patience was at an end. The neighbour

had broken into the flat and thrown the offending runt from the balcony of the seventh floor. The owner, seized with rage, rushed over to the neighbour's. There was a soap opera style confrontation resulting in the dog-killer meeting the same fate as the dog. Splat.

Monday, not the best day to be thirty-nine. Her husband had forgotten her birthday for the last three years. She was sure he wouldn't be returning home with flowers.

For Christmas he'd given his dear, long-suffering wife something she had wanted from him for a long while—the offer of a divorce. When she got that dreamed of situation she realised she didn't want it. She'd begged him, actually on her knees. It's what he'd wanted. He had no intention of really divorcing her. He dreaded the idea of being alone.

What she'd seen in his face that morning were the lines left by the work he devoted himself to but had no feeling for, the signs of weary patience and restrained anger.

It wasn't the face of a man who'd remember to buy red roses on the way home.

## #6A

The last leg of the journey involved a cab ride from the model agency, entering the building, getting the key of #6A off the concierge and getting sorted. No problem with the cab, easy.

The lobby to that building was spacious, almost square.

Softly lit by frosted windows and discreet spotlights, men with dogs and kids with balls passed interior decorators clutching notebooks and faxes or men with briefcases smoking cigarettes. Removal men with rolled up carpets, lamps, fish tanks, hundred-year-old clocks and large family portraits. Tables with flaps flapping, cages with birds shivering nervously. Women who'd been girls. Girls who were angry.

Through that lobby came letters, announcements of births, marriages and deaths, box number replies, doctors on emergency calls, fast-food delivery boys, the occasional hooker.

Awakened by a hidden electronic eye, the building's sleek metal and glass doors parted soundlessly. Stepping out of the mid-afternoon sunlight without breaking stride, the interior seemed totally black. Just for a second.

The future occupant of #6A was (Aeroflot) jet-lagged and sweaty. Hair smelling of jet fuel, ears of that sweet plastic reek one finds with audio headsets, he wanted a bath. First impressions had been displayed and the performance had drained/had wilted the young man. Shoes polished to parade standard some twenty hours before were scuffed and—inside—gross.

The new arrival walked up to the reception desk. More flight deck than desk, what with all that fogged glass, underlighting and height. Reflected in a large mirror in a surround of gilded (really quite horrible) mouldings was the face of one Liam Hanmore. He was surprised to be there and slightly shocked by the narrow bald head resting down on criss-crossed arms: fast asleep.

Liam had the feeling of being on a film set to play a part for which he was clearly miscast.

Woken by a prompting cough, eyes gone vague and opaque with cataracts observed him while emitting embarrassment. The concierge was on all kinds of medication for a glandular imbalance—a thyroid condition with occasional attacks of pain, making his eyes protrude. Energy levels were maintained through a minimum of human contact.

At most, the inhabitants of the block received a nod from this descendant of a long line of leather tanners, butchers and shoemakers. Those cloudy, decomposing eyes couldn't make out much on the video screens, probably weren't capable of focusing any more. He did, however, manage to consult his diary.

There were two entries for that week; a reminder to renew the batteries in all fifteen fire detectors in the building and the name Hanmore. It seemed a good time for Liam to say his name, to which he added *San*. This made them both smile, then laugh lightly.

Liam was given a thin, steel key. The old man's experience of foreigners was limited; not much beyond clearing up after them, phoning the emergency services and watching James Bond. He was surprised at feeling friendly toward the young chap. He'd have to watch that, he thought.

The lift machinery of the block had, Liam was to discover, a mind of its own. It was out of order and wore a neat sign telling all of its incapacitated state, all except Liam, who couldn't speak more than a clutch of basic phrases and was unable to decipher a single symbol. It was all chocolate patterns and fishbones to him.

The sleepy concierge nodded the new arrival toward the back staircase, insisting on carrying his hand luggage which alone could have killed him. Toes turned out, feet scuffing the lino, he shambled rather than walked. His sandals slap-slapped the stairs, a contrast to the new arrival's leather-soled, rubber heeled padding.

Liam took the stairs slowly, getting a sense of the building from the greasy steps. He felt he was sneaking through a back door, getting under the skin of the building too soon. This very impression, old-fashioned and of questionable cleanliness behind the rather middle-class respectability the lobby proclaimed, came as a bit of a shock.

Liam was sure he heard laughter coming up from the basement.

The concierge would have liked to tell him that once there'd been a communal laundry down there, storage space and a car park—before times had changed.

The walls were a state. Minute yellow flowers could be seen flowering on aquatic moss. Such prettiness failed to camouflage the slime.

On this same staircase the concierge, who was now panting—and not yet on the third floor—had in the last month found a Russian leather cigarette case containing French cigarettes; a CD walkman that had gone beyond the expiry date of the repair guarantee; a split carton of live yoghurt; a copy of *Hot Dog*, open on pages thirty-two and thirty-three; a blunt pencil sharpener; a bobbin of black thread and a child's broken Batman mask.

As they rose, steps resounding, they moved further away from iron doors stencilled with warnings and skulls, bins loaded to the brim and leaking. Behind the smell of steamed fish and floorcloths, mops and broomheads, sour sponges in plastic buckets, half-used paint pots and insecticides were a whole host of (frequently oozing) tins/squeezy bottles/sprays containing miscellaneous supplies for patient cleaning, regular maintenance. Products to brighten, shine, untarnish and unblock—bleach, beeswax, ammonia, acid and descaling liquid.

To the fore of this veil of scent was the building's number one weak spot—ignored each and every eight hours of the concierge's shift: damp. Damp was eating the walls, warping wood, rusting metal.

There were seepages. Microbes were alive and doing well. Nests were warm and growing in populace. There were blind termites with insatiable mouths, caterpillars with tubular hearts and massive guts, great white worms and scurrying mice plus God knows how many ants, spiders, centipedes and cockroaches on that staircase.

When they got to #6A, Liam bowed saying, 'Arigato'. He remembered this by thinking *Harry* and *gateau*. He had a smile you could trust and the concierge went away thinking that maybe not *all* foreigners were bad.

Standing at that door Liam remembered other times at other doors.

He took in a deep breath, then slid the thin, steel key into the single lock.

# BRIDGE

Akio Sugai was doing a little self-assessment as he came to a halt in the middle of the bridge. He had three things going for him: his body, his mind and the clothes he stood in.

His body was eighteen years old, ready and eager for all the sex and money it could come by. His mind, both educated and tortured—skipping the scheduled day—was seeking a challenge. His clothes were classic casuals in subtle shades of beige.

Akio was more than attractive, he was desirable and knew it. The sharply-groomed, gym-trained young man was also, tra-la, blessed with one of those lazy, adventurous cocks—confident with astounding powers of engorgement and extension.

It was as if his brain had switched to auto pilot, to that part of the cerebral hemisphere that handles the heart, lungs and co-ordination in tap dancing. His mind was elsewhere and that elsewhere was centre stage.

Lots of things in life had lost their shiny appeal to him. The feeling had come suddenly—the transition—a power-cut effect that drained, then surged him with energy.

Under him ran water, miles of it. A whole world of water, polluted and fresh, stagnant and prehistoric. In this water Akio saw a downward-looking self reflected in black and white.

Viewing himself from a distance, he found the detachment thrilling and strangely romantic. His reflection had starred in the dusty mirrors of his secret world of make-believe ever since he could remember.

‘Sumida River.’

He said it slowly. Sumida. It was the only way to say it. A sound that exuded length and a treacherous depth. A sound invoking quiet flux. Cool. Cold under the cool.

Just for a moment he stopped breathing. No inhalation/exhalation at all. A tremendous stillness filled him. He felt invisible. He was floating. Something inside him had been put on PAUSE, something else on REC and PLAY.

He'd always liked the idea of disappearing. Poof. Gone. Vanished.

He felt suddenly sad, in a wonderful way.

Floating in the insidious drag of the Sumida River were blobs of toxic froth. A heavy kind of oil spread rainbow-coloured smears over the surface. Akio found it hard to believe that below, in that water, anything could be alive. University was having a really negative effect on his brain, he told himself. Really bad.

Currents whose motions were invisible to the eye drew occasional debris from the surface and, mysteriously, relinquished it again downriver into the central flow—back into the all-accepting sea, back into deep-water currents, cold-water layers.

His shoulders were sagging a little, something his former PE teacher would have picked him up on. The river didn't look inviting but it did promise not to judge or question. All he had to do was jump.

A fish was staring up at Akio with wide-awake black eyes. Below the fish, in apparent panic, dozens of grey slimy eels writhed about in a squirming tangled ball on the river bed. Cold little snakes' eyes stared.

Autumn was coming and soon the trees would be losing control of colour up and down the river, ready to shed leaves from criss cross branches before standing naked.

Beneath the bridge, on the embankment, an old man crouched in the shadows playing a game with cardboard boxes; whatever the game, every once in a while he let rip a thesaurus of profanities then picked leaves out of the water with, to Akio's astonishment, chopsticks.

Akio was itchy for dick, itchy for solitude. Itchy for the buzz (and anonymity) of urban life and for the life of a recluse. His whole body begged, pleaded, to be sent off to find some sordid sanctuary.

Unhurried, regular as the beat of a pulse, an extremely rapid succession of events would start. By the end of the week he'd be living for his Sumitomo Bank balance.

When he'd phoned the agencies he was both trance-like and sharply conscious. It wasn't like it was *him* doing it, but *really him* doing it. It was like...like someone had walked into his body. And they were welcome to it.

The week before, in a half-second flash of inspiration, the step he was about to make had got started. The idea had secretly churned in some dark spot for a long while before making itself known to him.



Akio had woken up feeling like a crumpled piece of origami. A glance in the mirror had confirmed that this was a visible condition. Much time had been spent on dolling himself up. Having swallowed two cups of black coffee and several lungfuls of Marlboro Lights, he was looking almost pounce-worthy.

He wanted to be free of the messiness of human relationships. He wanted to be alone, away from people. He wanted something different from those stifling years in Tsuchiura. He wanted the sexual bungee jump to start with getting his nipples severely sucked. He was on his way to becoming a prostitute in a basement massage parlour.

People rarely go into prostitution cheerfully. Akio had entered the arena a few days before with the delighted planning, calculation and premeditation a farmer devotes to planting fields of rice. A jump-start into a present reality a million miles from the *Things To Do* list mapping out his next three years at Uni. Sure of his body, he was eager to share it.

With the energy born of despair, Akio set off for his destination with a bounce in his desirable step.

## #6A

Liam was dressed in old Levi's. 501s. Indigo gone baby blue. They were soft, ready to rip.

Though twenty-six, he had somehow retained the rose-white skin of boyhood. His passport said he was British, but he was of Irish parentage, which accounted for his colouring.

The glad feeling of arrival had frozen within a minute of being in that flat. The place was basic...and filthy. Everything had been done on that sofa.

The good news was that he was to be alone for the first night until the new batch of models flew in for the shows.

Standing by the window, the look on his face was both fixed and faded. Half-smiling, half-mourning. What he felt was relief. He was looking at a view he'd soon get to know well, a view he'd grow into.

It was one of those full length windows that let in lots of sky. His breathing formed a silver halo around his head. He wrote his name backwards through it, then rubbed it out.

Waving a hand from side to side over the pane, Liam half-laughed at himself. It felt like he was waving a giant (yet timid) *hello* to Tokyo.

His eyes scanned the windows of the block of flats opposite, some with curtains half-closed, some with blinds drawn down. Many with Venetians turned to a precise angle. The greyest of ferro-concrete.

'Bath time,' he sing-songed to his blur of a reflection.

Most of the glazed lime-green hexagonal tiles laid on the floor and walls of the bathroom were cracked. Someone had been having fun, perhaps a spot of revenge with a stiletto. Every surface was smeared, as if the place had been subjected to the quickest lick and a promise of a clean up after a very dirty bunch.

The once immaculate shower curtains were so spotted with clumps of damp that the design of fluffy blue clouds could hardly be seen. Plastic that

had been soaked, scrubbed, bleached and splashed with all kinds of stuff, was carefully unhooked and laid to rest by the kitchen bin.

A health and safety risk, Liam felt.

The whole place was grungey, particularly the kitchen. That bin hadn't been emptied in weeks and was number two priority on the *Things To Do* list upon arrival, after the swift opening of each and every window.

Down in the basement—by the bins—Liam managed to stop the rancid flow of fermenting veg', spotting shiny CDs scattered out of their cases, sensible clothing and some kid's launch into the art world thrown out and awaiting collection. Under that were piles of books, half-strangled with nylon string.

Liam switched into flea-market mode and had a sort through. A selection of wank magazines and snapshots of someone from baby to sad-looking sodomite made him pause for thought. There was even a collection of cacti—all disposed of, dumped. Someone must have been having a clean-out, Liam thought. Maybe they'd moved. Or died.

From another bin he retrieved a cardboard box.

Within minutes the cacti had been treated to a drop of water—just a drop, mind—then lined up in the room he'd chosen as his. It was as if they'd always been there. The rest of the stuff was shoved up beside his suitcase, pornography safely stacked at the bottom.

Pouring a little hair shampoo into the flow with a sense of fun, Liam watched the tub fill. The water creamed into bubbles as it mixed; large Sainsbury's apple blossom and mint bubbles. *For Frequent Use*.

Only head, knees and shoulders emerged above the level of the water, like something severed—set there for viewing. The water was a bit too hot; perfect. The bathroom soon misted up and didn't look so bad.

Resting his head backwards, stretching his neck, gave him—weightwise—a balance. The ribcage became nicely elongated. Suds held him sweetly at the waist. After his meeting with that drag king who ran the agency, Ms Golding, he knew that lots was going to happen to him all at once and very soon. It had already.

Within fifteen minutes of arrival he had been in a cab with one of the managers, a Jean Pierre, to walk up and down a showroom in Shinjuku. Sano Insano—an improbable name for a design label, Liam thought. But, Jean Pierre had told him, one of the most prestigious.

On the strength of a few polaroids taken in Soho Square, Liam's name was down on a number of lists in pencil. Assessed on a ten second trot, he'd got the booking—a show on Friday.

The bubbles popped one by one or, sometimes, a few together at once. He liked the irregularity of both tempo and volume. It was all quite musical with his eyes closed. Behind those eyelids was a whole galaxy of red stars. He felt his personality had been filed away, mislaid en route perhaps. Or Tipp-Exed. The internal mutterings that plagued him in London hadn't made it through Customs. He felt at peace.

Liam had liked what he'd seen of Tokyo that day. No, he'd liked what he'd felt. As he walked through the crowds he had been something conspicuous, something distinct. He liked the fact that he couldn't understand the language.

Thinking back to the flight, the new arrival half-nodded to himself about the service: decidedly lack lustre. Then he began to breathe the deep, relaxed breath of sleep, and he was—sleeping.

The building shook for a few seconds, nothing much. It didn't wake him.

## BASEMENT

In the time it took Akio to carry his assets the twenty minute walk to the massage parlour, four cars/two vans/a schoolgirl on her way to the dentist and a teenage boy in a white apron and paper hat (carrying a tray of stacked empty dishes above his right shoulder) had all slowed up on their travels to take in the sight of him. Live currents of desire shot from eyes to coffee-coloured skin. As each minute neared the appointed hour, Akio became more and more pounce-worthy.

For days Akio's mind had been teasing him. He'd often thought of what it must be like to work in one of those places. At the mercy of the first man to come in, however ugly, old or dirty, doing what he wants you to do—everything he wants.

It felt as though the thoughts blasting into his head were not his own. Powerful thoughts that would not leave. Not the kind of thoughts he could shake his head to be rid of.

Imagine yourself as a prostitute, the voice went on, imagine kissing mouths smellier than the average latrine. Mouths can be filthier than cocks. Akio felt terribly excited.

A moth fluttered around inside one large wall lamp outside the building, the bowl of which was littered with the small, dark bodies of dead insects. The sun was directly hitting the glass. It was hot in there. Not long to go.

The spiral staircase turned a full three times down to the basement of that building. Matt black stairs which absorbed sunlight and streetlamps with the same equanimity creaked (almost imperceptibly) at the passage of men who trod them secretly. Men with a faith, a wife and two children, favourite tv programmes, nice hobbies and careers that mean everything—plans for the future...all tangled...those men, Akio thought, come here.

Male prostitution was less of a secret with the Greeks, actually licensed and taxed in Augustan Rome.

Down that staircase, dizzy after the spiral, through that door would march a long procession of masochists—willing, eager, manipulative

victims. Guys who'd started off the evening all dry-cleaned and groomed, cruising from Hokuo Shoji to Hibiya Park via Zip Bar, ending up in that basement when nothing could be found elsewhere. Useful.

Open 11.00-23.30 each and every day.

Easy. Money that commanded power just for a little while. No admission fee, no drinks to buy, no music to shout over.

Time to dream with the aid of the low lighting. Inhaling deeply from little brown bottles marked *Rush*, *Man Scent* and *Cobra Aroma*...off they'd float on a cloud of amyl nitrate.

A place where the occasional antibody status and contact lens went amiss. A place where piss didn't always end up in the toilet bowl.

Akio knocked on the door with the bold spirit of hilarious research. Men invariably took deep breaths before entering. The area was dim, what an estate agent might describe as indirect semi-shade.

The door was opened by a tiny little man who introduced himself simply as Ippei. One of those over-tanned queens who wears too much white. A tad low on testosterone, bar code of a hairdo. In that light (in any light) the man had multiple, packed bags under his eyes.

His onceover was somewhat European. In all his years Ippei had never seen such a well-groomed, handsome and sure eighteen-year-old ready-to-serve bit of rent.

'I'm here as a result of having shut my eyes and crash-landed a finger on a list of ads for places such as this,' Akio said with a smile. He'd rehearsed the line well and it had the desired effect. Ippei smothered a laugh, giving only a tiny smile so as not to further crinkle the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes.

The advert Akio had seen in *Barazoku* was very much to the point:

MASSEURS REQUIRED  
NO EXPERIENCE NECESSARY  
TRAINING GIVEN  
(03) – —

In that month's issue Akio had counted twenty-five ads for masseurs, thirty-eight for escorts and nineteen for agencies.

'You'd better come in. You phoned yesterday, right?

'Yes, you said three. It's three.'

The sound of Akio's voice seemed amplified. The walls were hard and thick. He was underground, almost buried. The air somewhere above the average set of head and shoulders was formed into damp canals where odours congealed. Akio tried to dissect the stench analytically into its smallest and most remote origins, single strands—but they were threaded together into tight, dirty knots. Had the scent been bottled it might have been named *Pineapple On Wool*.

The place was not deluxe by any standard. Large-leaved plants camouflaged a need to redecorate. To Akio it was perfect. He was thrilled and frightened, thrilled and appalled. It felt like he'd discovered his natural habitat.

Hands that had tended grey-green potato leaves, yellow-green wheat and blue-green beet many years back rested down on Akio's shoulders.

'Are you sure escorting is what you want to do? You could regret it later if you're acting on a whim.'

That question made many a young man blush then turn on his heels. Akio breathed in slowly through his nose; already the smell of the place went as unnoticed as the clothes against his skin. Without quite seeing where the adventure might lead, but rather as a fish is attracted to bait, he said, not quite voluntarily, and in a kind of trance, 'Sure,' then added, 'absolutely.'

Ippei didn't actually care, not having much time for misery. He believed doubt, confusion and anxiety to be natural and wholesome characteristics of the human condition, constituting the material of emotional and spiritual growth. A little bit of misery, he believed, could do people a whole world of good.

'You're over eighteen, right?'

Akio flashed ID.

Ippei was a superstitious man who liked to do things by the book. Anything out of the order was viewed as magical with a hint of occult.

'You could do very well, you've got the looks. You're a different class to the rest of them. Keep it that way. Dress well—unless the client stipulates otherwise. Don't think *prostitute*, think *counsellor*. Use psychology. Ask questions like, 'How's your week been?' Tilt your head to one side a little, wait for the answer as if interested. Listen well. Don't interrupt unless it's to laugh, agree or ask a question which they'll find attractive. Remember, dumb can be sexy, too. Intelligence can frighten them off.'

‘Right.’

‘Find something interesting about them. Anything. Boost their confidence. Get them to tell you their secrets. Do that and they’ll pay well and visit regularly—and that’s important. Get them to see you as a person. Touch them emotionally. The chat will bore you to death though, believe you me.’

‘Right.’

‘Treat all the customers as cops, people with AIDS and God knows what else...tax officials.’

‘Right.’

‘Never say you do extras, never ask for a tip—even if they’ve seen stars. Okay?’

‘Okay.’

The man’s occasional hand movements were ever so slightly effeminate, just a smithereen.

‘That’s the big room, for regular regulars.’

A flourish of the left hand directed Akio to a mirrored room, massage table centre-stage, potted plants concealing a tiny cabinet and all-essential little tin bin.

‘Got any diseases I need to know about?’

‘No, just crabs.’

They both laughed.

‘Back in a sec,’ Ippei said, ‘then we’ll check out anatomy.’ Akio had a tremendous inrush of energy as he took everything off but his pants. He knew he was in the hands of an expert, things would take their course.

The life and soul of the little brothel was back in a moment, busy with towels, tiny brown bottle and the zipper of his trousers.

‘Perfect. Gorgeous. Only the name must change. From Akio to...’

‘Akira,’ Akio said, already inhabiting his body in a new way. With the man he was docile and polite, a good listener. Malleable. More than anything, Akio felt like an impartial party sent to observe.

‘Perfect. A sense of humour helps.’

There was something dumb and eloquent about that sunless, converted basement, as if it were some sacred place full of old tales, loss, dementia, burial. The place was all about instant gratification: no time, no sub-text, no foreplay, no future. Akio liked that. Liked it all right down to awful design of diving birds on the walls.



‘I’m going to introduce you to a lot of people and you’re going to make a lot of money. A whole lot of money.’

As Ippei said this, the head of Akio’s cock began to swell under the waistband of the BVD bikini briefs.

A fly crossed the room, a short bristly bluebottle. Ippei spotted it instantly. The fly made a big mistake, landing on his knee. Akio could see that when Ippei didn’t like something his genteel manner dropped straight back into that Manila gutter. He wasn’t to be messed with. Ippei, or whatever his real name was, flicked at the fly with an expert middle finger.

‘Flies,’ he said, getting up on the massage table, ‘dirty things. Spread germs. What was I talking about?’

‘Money,’ Akio whispered, running a hand over the man’s thighs.

‘Ah, yes. Useful stuff,’ the man said, tapping above his heart a breast pocket full of cash.

Akio wondered how much he could accumulate without too much wear and tear.

‘The majority come for sex. Some come to inflict hate on the vulnerable—but you’re pretty safe down here with everyone around. Three out of four, nine times out of ten, they’re okay. Clean, at least. Take a group of one hundred ordinary people, be a fly on the walls in their homes, peep into their fantasies, and you’ll discover a few surprises.’

He smiled, showing the perfect equal spread of whiteness that expensive bridgework provides.

‘The basic massage fee is Y12,000. Half goes to me. I handle the money—or Hiroshi, my assistant. You’re given whatever you’ve earned at the end of each session. Basically, the more complicated the massage, the larger the tip. Supposedly. It doesn’t always work out that way, even if the gent has splashed the ceiling.’

‘Right,’ Akio said.

‘You up for out calls?’

Akio nodded.

‘With hotels you just walk in, with a purpose. You have to be smart, not necessarily wearing a tie but leaving the jeans and leather jacket at home. Just suss out where the lifts are and off you go. No eye contact with reception, no hanging around. Carrying an envelope with the name of the

person you're to see is a good ploy, but then there's the problem of surnames—and *real names*.'

This had all been said before, hundreds of times to hundreds of blow-up adult boys.

'Entering hotels is hardest late at night, with some it's like Passport Control.'

Jutting sideways out of Akio's tight briefs was a hard ridge of cock.

'Want to bother with a shower?' Akio whispered.

'Let's just get down to it,' Ippei croaked.

Short gasps of ecstasy countered long groans of... whatever, it was all over in ten minutes.

Akio was assured he was a 'very nice boy' owing to excellent personal hygiene. Akio was pleased at how tedious he had found the whole process. He felt professional and a long way from his origins in Tsuchiura.

'Very important—be nice after. Never rush. Point 'em toward the shower or offer a hot towel. Light their cigarettes. Get them a juice. Don't offer tea or coffee, a hot drink takes forever to get down them. Be nice, get them out, then make up the room.'

Ippei kept files on clients, Akio was to later learn. Putting whole lives on his little laptop, anything a gentleman caller told about himself; wife, job, kids, car, hobbies, tastes/specialist tastes, home addresses, work addresses, telephone/fax/mobile/car registration numbers, credit card numbers complete with expiry date.

Akio was walked over to a door, one section of which contained a two way mirror. Giving Akio a look-what-I-have-to-put-up-with kind of shrug/smile, he knocked twice, then—door opened just a few inches—whisked back a curtain inside the door.

Confined in the narrow space were seven boys who shared the ability to grin a winning smile at strangers, persuading them to part company with their money for a bit of therapeutic action. Between them they could cater for every sexual excess of which flesh is capable. Above the two long sofas on which they sat, hung a silk tapestry of three Koi carp.

'This is what we call the fish-bowl,' Ippei announced. 'When can you start?'

'I'm...' Akio stumbled, '...ready.'

'Marvellous,' Ippei smiled, wondering what the boy's sell by date would be, 'but we're chock-a-block at the moment, I never go beyond seven in

there. Let's have a look at the ol' diary.'

## #7B

Takeo was late home. He was never late home.

‘What have you done to your beautiful hair?’ his mother had bawled. That haircut got him sent straight to his room. Her sobs might have flowed into tears but her cheeks were hot. That sad face was red and patchy, like she’d been sitting over a fire. Both eyelids ached, feeling hard and glassy, painful as sunburn.

Drawing both knees up to her chin she felt another teardrop trickle, then dry on the hot surface of her face. She retained the same uncomfortable position for a full ten minutes, then raised herself off the bathroom floor angrily.

To his mother’s eyes Takeo looked completely different. She couldn’t get over how quickly, how suddenly, his little boy looks had gone with that horrible scalping. She felt punished.

‘Why did he do it?’ she begged the bathroom mirror to explain, before cooling herself down with splashes of cold water.

It wasn’t his slamming of the bedroom door that had made his mother cry, it was the uncertainty of the last Saturday of the month. She’d always enjoyed cutting her son’s hair. She feared what he might be thinking about her. She promised herself a scalding bath within the hour, steam lifting her aches away, eucalyptus oil slipper between her knees.

Sniffing for a last time, Takeo’s mother settled herself. His haircut was a badge of his serious commitment to the gymnastics club. He’d probably been asked to do it. Boys are.

Takeo freed himself of the confinement of school uniform. Having carefully arranged the jacket on a hanger, he laid it flat on his bed. He felt guilty—the place smelled of ironing. His mother knew exactly how many teeth were inside his head, the precise spot where his collar bone was once fractured, which socks were in the wash. She did her best for him. But it was *his* hair.

Takeo dragged shirt and vest over his ears together and folded them as a complex on the back of his homework chair. These warm clothes gave off a

fragrance many would buy if bottled. Over that same chair Takeo layered his socks, smoothed flat into two-dimensional neatness.

Finally, he undid the belt of his trousers, wriggling out of them with extravagant movements of hips and behind. He slithered out of his pants exposing his total, subtle naked body to the paired full length mirrors on the inside of the wardrobe door.

Running a hand over the precision-cut crop, he thought he looked just a little like Handa San. The haircut made him look older, tougher. A #4, just like Handa San's. The baby mouse of his penis stirred.

A feeling the boy wasn't expecting sledgehammered his body. It was a whole new experience. A sensation he couldn't put a name to. Not like fear, anger or sadness. It was—like a whole new phrase would be needed to translate that emotion. Something in capital letters.

Takeo hurriedly put on grey shorts and a fresh vest, then sat to look at himself.

Knocking twice before entering (she'd never done that before) Takeo's mother found her son sitting straight-backed on the edge of his bed, hands on knees, staring into the reflection of the blank tv screen. Zero eye contact.

She asked if he fancied a drink or something to eat. He said he was alright.

'Look at me when I speak to you. I'm your mother.'

His eyes were the same colour, same shape, but what had always been behind those eyes had gone, or had changed. The little darling she knew wasn't there any more.

She nodded him toward his desk, hung his jacket in the wardrobe with a tut, then slid the door shut too quietly.

Takeo's mother wiped her hands on the corner of her apron, though they weren't dusty/dirty/cold or wet, before opening the fridge: whale for dinner. Yellow Tail.

Before moving to his desk, Takeo scanned a look at the recent picture of the gymnastics squad, Handa San at his side. Knee to knee. Again the boy's body was sledge-hammered with a sensation that needed translation.

Takeo sat at his desk by the window, almost ready to scale the Himalayas of his homework. Holding a thick transparent ruler in front of his mouth enlarged and distorted his gums, teeth and those un-kissed lips.

Clouds the shape of Australia, Africa, the Iberian peninsula and the heel of Italy floated by. A whole menagerie of shapes—mountain cats, pythons,

two fully formed elephants, a roast chicken. Of course, those clouds no more looked like Africa or elephants than his parents' marriage had looked ideal, but to Takeo those shapes in the sky were real and special. He enjoyed the sky.

*an army of soldiers*  
*a band of musicians*  
*a muster of peacocks*  
*a bench of magistrates*  
*a covey of grouse*  
*a gang of labourers*  
*a tuft of grass*  
*a staff of servants*  
*a smuck of jellyfish*

Concentration was lacking. Dreamily and interminably he clicked his ballpoint, gazing off into napping Tokyo. The nails of the beautifully young right hand were dawn-coloured, agatoid. Perfectly spherical, marvellously arched. A clear-cut half-moon rose from each.

It was a hand to hold a pen to sign a million times; a hand to hold a hand; a hand to wank and make a fist; a hand to wave hello/goodbye.

Hitherto unknown glands were busy as he looked up again at the sky, grinding and creaking into secret excretions. The hand lightly dragged an exercise book marked *ENGLiSH* toward him to reproduce what he'd been told to copy down in neatest cursive.

Takeo rushed off the copying homework, then began flicking through an encyclopedia, its pages flushed with sunset. Past pictures of boxers, divers, pop stars, butterflies, flags of the world and queens of England, Takeo slowed up on a page—a grainy black and white picture of the New York skyline—and became suddenly hard. He couldn't work out why. He turned back to the sports section. Delayed reaction, he thought.

Shuffling past Joan of Arc (who he took for a boy), St Sebastian bound and pierced by arrows, armpit hair, sweat and white gloves, he found the spread on divers. They had cropped heads, too. From spring-board champions to gymnasts and rowers on black water.

Takeo rested his chin in a cupped hand, nibbling his bottom lip close to bleeding as he checked the boring copying task.

*an army of soldiers*  
    *a band of musicians*  
        *a muster of peacocks*  
    *a bench of magistrates*  
*a covey of grouse*  
    *a gang of labourers*  
        *a tuft of grass*  
*a staff of servants*  
            *i want to fuck you*

Unlike so many in his class, Takeo had no need for cram schools. He was lucky, he'd got off to a good start. As soon as he was toilet-trained he'd been sent to a prestigious local kindergarten where he was quick to pick up rude words in a number of international languages. Some of the teachers said he was gifted.

While Takeo's mother quartered a cabbage in the kitchen, cutting out its white heart, she remembered dinner parties where guests concentrated all conversation on the joys of food. Old recipes, bygone chefs, white-butter-sauce like mother used to make and suchlike tastebud topics. Dinner parties with an over-generosity of pre-dinner gins and mid-dinner sake. And all that small talk.

She was pleased her husband had died, releasing her from all that. That and all his bizarre ways: a man for whom cups and saucers had to be placed exactly three inches from the edge of the table in allotted positions. Washing up had to be performed noiselessly, without a single plate or utensil touching any other plate or utensil. Everything had to be rinsed three times with scalding water. Objects were wiped to purity, not to clean.

Marrying him had been a mistake. When they did make love she felt he was making do, spurting into her some stored-up passion intended for someone else. It suited her fine to play the mourning widow. Life was nicer, simpler, with just her and Takeo to think of. Much.

Takeo thought of nothing/Handa San/nothing/*a smuck of jellyfish*. Then he saw what he couldn't believe he'd written. The f word, an uck word, like suck and muck and duck. He took in a deep breath, tore the page out and

— with his favourite pencil—scrawled, *SeX FUck YOU baby* in an angry diagonal.

The small, geared hexagons of the pencil between his teeth felt nice. He didn't bite, but held it there, releasing the faint grip every once in a while to rotate a measured turn making a noise only he could hear.

He enjoyed the taste of paint and wood upon his tongue.



## Apt. 7A

A dandy collection of neighbourhood fuckups were sitting on a wall at the end of the street, waiting for a bus. They were busy picking spots and contemplating orgasms, satchels strapped to their backs like snails' shells.

One was certainly worth watching, eyes black and handsome in the shadow of his cap. Nothing waist. Taking such a strong drag on his cigarette, it appeared that he was trying to get some form of vital nourishment from the thing.

An old woman walked past them awkwardly, not quite sure how to manipulate the new durulum crutch under her armpit.

The Lego set, once played with by the boy in #8A then passed on to a neighbour's son in #7B, was being played with by the boy in #4B. Through the same window a glimpse was caught of the child's mother raising the parts, piece by piece, of a newly-knitted but as yet unstitched jumper to hold against the arms, back and little chest of her seven-year-old.

A clearer view could be had of some than others. Separated by mere partition of walls, they shared the same space repeated from storey to storey. Often there were shared moments: the switching on/off of lights, the laying of tables, the rush to the windows when thunder struck. Simultaneous existences, but quite separate. Unaware of each other in the main, and unaware of being observed through binoculars by someone on the seventh floor of the block of flats opposite—the length of an Olympic pool away.

Taking another swig of Pokari Sweat behind Venetians turned to a precise angle, the shrewd, far-distant set of eyes scanned. Each window was known so well. Some with curtains half-closed, some with blinds permanently drawn. Many with out-view only Venetians. Little lives wrapped in grey ferro-concrete.

Lean hips were touched with flickering shadows from the light of a large aquarium. Fish were the perfect pets for that resident, requiring no midnight forays into the park, no injections, no expensive/heavy shopping,

no smelly dishes or trays to clean up. No grooming. No noise. Shame when there was a power cut. Two Blackmoores skulked at the bottom.

In that front room with a back-alley ambience, its walls painted a cerebral cortex blue, binoculars picked out the subtle shading of colours, titles of books, eyelashes. The viewer felt challenged to find something that had changed.

From the thick black tangle under grey jeans came tight skin, untouched by hair. The abdominals were smooth and hard. Vertical lines crossed with horizontals showed when those (surprisingly strong) arms were raised. Those eyes were fastened, magnetised.

There was no view into the home of the conductor on the first floor, strained and excited at the prospect of rehearsing an orchestra for three days before performing on the fourth. Not a single sighting of the former croupier on the ninth, who had turned into a shy, retiring old lady, or Utsumi, the graphic designer with the ginger cat in #2A. But there, for all the world to see, the fat girl in #8B— secretly pigging out.

Sometimes the binoculars zoomed from blur to sharp focus with the often alarming transition old newspaper photographs were given with sharpened pencils. Details became giant. Such was the power of the binoculars that fine, light blue stains above the shirt pocket, like a cluster of insect eggs, could be detected on the body of the lonely old queen in #10B. The sagging tits were getting too big for that shirt. Pressed up against the window, the man's face was swollen, smudged. Unshaven. He looked like he was sleepwalking as he minced six paces to sit at his (ridiculous) baby grand piano. It appeared that he was playing, but his fingertips were running along the lid which was down. One of those directional microphones the police use to eavesdrop was wished for. Nice toy.

The blinds of the penthouse apartment were shut all day long, but at night they opened to let an old black and white tv flicker like a star. There was a special ambience of seclusion to those windows.

The binoculars commanded to look/close in/frame those residents living side by side, and on top of one another. They rose excitedly from the hanging position on chest to eyes as a curtain opened, light switched on. They were busiest during the hot weather.

Sometimes there came muttered urgings to one or two of the twitching puppets.

The binoculars knew where the occupants kept their serving spoons, umbrella stands, playing cards, bunches of keys, small change, favourite herbal infusions, shiny CD collections. They knew when occupants watered their potted plants and when, but not why, they had a little cry.

The pursuit from room to room gained a tempo— loitering, appraising. But the binoculars rarely got beyond the geography of a story, rarely being more than a panner for the significant detail—reducing the viewer to a mere delver. Frustrating.

The binoculars shifted over a blurred mass of concrete to a startlingly clear and close full view of life inside #7B. The owner of the binoculars (who'd acquired the voyeur's confidence of being unseen many moons ago) let out a whistle of absolute schoolboy delight. The mouth not made for smiling smiled.

Small droplets of sweat began to bead on the upper lip. Both hands were needed to hold the heavy binoculars without shaking. A concentrating tongue formed an arc, lodged on the upper lip.

There was a claw-like tightening of both hands as eyes darted hither and thither, much more alert than usual. Irises the size of needle holes—close to drying up in eyes on the brink of cracking up—focussed through the weighty binoculars on the boy. They were much more alert than when watching tv, unless diving competitions or light flyweight boxing featured.

The child's room had been full of toys only a few weeks ago. All around noises ceased, the viewer stood at the epicentre in a vacuum of feelings.

The carefully positioned Venetians framed his image above and below with a kind of boring soft focus.

As each minute passed, that face was being gently thumbed, generally rethought by puberty.

'Mmm.'

Everything the boy did reverberated in sharp shocks through the binoculars: his stroll into his room (sliding the door shut with as much of a bang as he could muster), his undressing and self-inspection so close to a couple of closet mirrors. The stroking of that newly-cropped head. He'd paced around the room with an angry firmness—somehow territorial—before sitting on his bed.

The boy on the seventh floor suddenly had an atmospheric density to him.

Behind the binoculars were twin dark eyes in a triangle of bone that seemed to be melting. There was a shiny blackness in those eyes, that look dogs get when they want to screw—one-track eyes. Saliva shot up inside the mouth.

A lean, starving outline moved decisively toward the window.

This sighting was well worth the patient investment of time. The binoculars were held firmly. A brute strength radiated from that grip. Not the hands of a workman, perhaps those of a ticket collector or gas-board inspector. Business-like and soft. The pores of the skin were widespaced. Veins on the back of the hands stood out, pulsing. Every move was monitored in clenched silence.

This firm, healthy boy body was almost too virginal, almost too aristocratic to satisfy the usual taste. It was a body that had not yet ripened but showed potential.

A decision was made: a great investment of thin, slow time would be spent on that window. Despite the inevitability of extended lulls, the scattered (squinted) sightings of the boy would be worth it. Bearing witness to the development over the coming weeks would be a joy.

For the occupant of Apt. 7A the ultimate wet dream boy was the kid who plays truant from school, minimum requirement being six days in the most recent term. Suspension/expulsion serving as a fetishistic bonus. Being a runaway from some manufactured suburb a further plus. Involvement in any form of graffiti, vandalism, fighting (where hospitalisation is necessary), alcohol, solvent abuse, drugs, prostitutional activities: jackpot. Those dream boys should, however, be free of hair dye and make-up: bruises, scars and pathological lying would be acceptable, as would tiny waists, slim necks and muscular calves. Such boys were romanticised, adored and difficult to get hold of.

The carriage of the boy's head, his careless casual stance, harmonised with his beauty of the body in the delicate transition from the formlessness of childhood to the imbalance and dislocation of adolescence. The beautiful transience had a linear severity made for film to capture. The body had a sense of impending loss about it, an invading possession due any time.

Not a single freckle, mole or scratch on the completely blank skin, the viewer thought. Perfect.

The intimacy of the gaze was long and detailed, the binoculars tracing every intricate curve and crevice of that boy body with the loving attention that a Jacques Cousteau film devotes to a rare breed of Manatee. The viewer watched, practically licking that face with those eyes the way tongues go at an ice-cream.

‘Ooh, slapped wrists—I’m feeling emotionally incorrect,’ a hoarse voice whispered.

One thing the boy had inherited from his father was his habit of sitting to gaze into the middle of space. Though the sky was the colour of oranges, a heavy drop of rain fell against the window of #7B, then two or three splashes hit the window of Apt. 7A, behind which the viewer’s mouth had gained an uncouth droop.

The boy’s lips were moving. It was as if the kid knew exactly what to do to maximise an audience’s interest. Straight teeth and a broad, glistening lower lip showed in a smile as he talked to himself or sang.

Not a single word could be lip-read, but enjoyment was gained copying the slow patterns the boy’s mouth was making, twisting them into imaginary kisses.

In that silence were the first bonding strands of feeling(s) for the boy, that boy who always left the building with a bounce in his step. Could the boy feel the imagined stroking of his hair from fifty metres away?

A breeze fluttered the Venetian blinds, making a disagreeable noise. Nothing was done about it. The boy looked mildly self-conscious, as if somehow aware of being watched. It was a scary moment. He seemed to be looking beyond the Venetians, as if alerted by a glint of the lens. He actually half-sat up for a second, only to lay back, hands cupping his head behind him. The viewer was safe in the cool tide of shadow.

Both hands wanted to reach out and feel the skin over the boy’s throat and a couple of inches below the neckline of the vest he wore.

The idea was dreamed up of plucking that boy from his desk to be planted on the sofa or between the freshly laundered sheets of the solitary single bed.

Touching the boy would be like embracing a symphony; something ultimate. The boy’s skin would smell of cake— or raspberries. It’d be all hands and everywhere-kisses.

When the boy moved away from the window to twitch about in his own routines and whims, the binoculars returned to their usual place beside the

four-speed fan.

The nails of both hands drove into palms. Pale green goosebumps were shivered, saliva swallowed hard. Next to the binocular case lay a shiny parallelepipedic metal box with a long slit opening on the top side, out of which emerged—in part—a Kleenex tissue.

**TUESDAY**

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## #8B

‘Hey, sexy—over here.’ When Shinohara San’s husband called the cat over to him, it remained pressed against the window-pane, pretending not to hear.

Sunday Girl was a Western breed; a pretty female with soft, silky fur, unusually elegant in form and features. If Shinohara San’s husband had looked at the reflection of the cat’s face in the cold glass, he would have met an extremely unfriendly glance in his direction.

As Shinohara San continued trying to interest her husband in the subject of their next big trip abroad, Sunday Girl slipped behind the sofa, as if detecting a further change in mood and where that mood might lead. The man had recently taken to shouting if his bath wasn’t ready, if beer wasn’t suitably chilled or if the rice wasn’t just so.

Signs of age showed in the way Sunday Girl carried herself, the look in her eyes, the condition of her coat. The chic lines and gently sloping shoulders were gaining a weight to them. She was a good creature—never made a mess, always using her little box when nature called.

When the man slammed his fist down on the breakfast table with a volcanic punch, emphasising the ‘No!’ to his wife—the cat’s ‘oww’ had a tearful quality to it.

Five years back, the arrival of the cat had lightened the mood of #8B. Meal times were generally more relaxed with Sunday Girl acting as a point of focus, purring and begging or just observing them impartially.

Dawn was coming up grainy blue.

‘Good morning Tuesday,’ Shinohara San shivered into

Sunday Girl’s soft neck by the window as they watched the man of the house go off to work.

Already the day felt old.



## #9A

Gnawing at the edge of a Jaffa Cake, Atsko stared at a map of the London Underground, figuring out how she'd get from West Acton to Camden Town eighty-four days into the future. Red line, black line.

Atsko, a girl of fifteen, alone in her bedroom. Alone, except for an eight month, long-eared, long-nosed Artois beagle panting beside her—Sherry.

Both shared chubbiness verging quite distinctly on corpulence, not to say obesity; second in attention-grabbing to faces that were not unattractive. Both were sent on enforced half-hour walks each evening in an effort to slim down. Atsko's mother was a firm believer in fresh air and lots of exercise—Atsko wasn't. For her, snack shop loitering was pure heaven.

Having nibbled off the edges to expose the orange jelly filling, she swallowed the biscuit whole. The dog's constant tail-wagging for attention was getting her nowhere; she whined—she wanted another one of those delicious biscuits. The girl's mother was forever telling that daughter of hers to chew food well before swallowing. Atsko ignored this, it was a waste of time and boring; though, that day, the half-chewed food was a little painful to the sore throat that had got her the day off school.

It always upset Atsko that being ill actually hurt. Being ill meant discomfort. She thought being ill wouldn't be so bad if it didn't involve so much time feeling yuk.

Sherry whined—it had been more than a minute since she'd had a treat thrown her way.

When the girl managed a smile, tiny (sharp) teeth showed. When she grinned, the canines and silver-grey brace her small smile concealed would briefly show before a hand raised to hide it.

It was exactly one year since Atsko had consciously set out to become a lazy, slovenly fat slag. Because a lazy, slovenly fat slag was indisputably the opposite of what her mother ever was. It had been a bit of a battle but, at

last, her mother was beginning to realise that daughter of hers was not going to live up to her high expectations of hard work and excellence in all. Discipline, good health, strong bones, trips to the library: uh-uh.

There was an appeal in staying in bed all weekend, not caring about spots because there was this fabulous stuff that came in tubes called foundation. The girl's acne was doing well on a daily diet of so many secret, naughty but nice gobbles.

Atsko had a tendency to consume far more than she could metabolise. The family album documented this on a regular basis in holiday resorts all over the world. The girl's mother provided calorie controlled meals to combat her daughter's weight problem, but irrepressible bulimia tempted the too generous weekly amount of pocket money toward crepes and drink machines.

A classmate had told her if she wanted to lose weight she should go to a petrol station and breathe in the fumes. It was supposed to suppress all appetite for up to eight hours. Atsko reckoned it probably killed more than appetite.

The window sill of the girl's bedroom was home to inward-facing clowns with ping-pong ball noses, wisps of hair in varied shades of carrot red, chequerboard costumes, huge polka dot bow ties and long, very flat shoes. Most of the clowns had sparkling teardrops halted somewhere between eyelid and cheek. She had always found the presence of dolls a comfort.

She talked to them, frequently imagining they were a film crew making a documentary about her little life. She preferred them to the Russian dolls on the shelves beside her bed, preferred them to the Rika chan dolls and Barbies safely stored at the back of her wardrobe in a dustbin liner.

Having finished her Jaffa Cakes, Atsko opened the window. She was more concerned should anyone see the packaging fall from the ninth floor than catch a glimpse of her in bra and knickers.

She spotted the boy from #7B heading off for school, the same school she'd have attended if she'd been born a boy. (Takeo, that was his name. Tall for his age. Bit shy.) She waited till a corner had been turned before flinging the empty packet up up and away. (Cute haircut.)

With manic precision, so obsessively meticulous as to be almost clumsy with it—back turned to the window—the girl raised a little mirror in one

hand, a mascara brush to the upper right lashes of her (slightly bloodshot) right eye in the other. She imagined a clapperboard banging shut.

‘I’d never want to marry a gaijin though, they’ve got far too much hair on their backsides for my liking.’

Unlike her mother, Atsko intended to get what she could from men, enjoy them, but not let them get in her way. She’d never have a use for bridesmaids. Even by the age of ten she’d promised herself never to depend on a man for anything. She’d have been happier if there was an alternative to men, but she couldn’t for the life of her think what that alternative might be.

# AGENCY

To Liam the agency looked like the HQ for a marathon tv fund-raising event.

Beautiful people around the room were represented by far less beautiful people on the phones talking times, sizes and prices, frantically scribbling on clipboards snatched from a revolving hanger in the centre of the big, circular table at which they sat. Busy busy busy.

One wall was covered with plastic pockets containing models' index cards, endless black-and-white eyes staring out into the room.

It was like registration at college: neat haircuts, white teeth, self-defensive manners and budget clothes dressed up a bit.

Golding was, Liam had been told by the street-style scout who'd discovered him, a place where the phone rang from the first of January to the thirty-first of December. He was all eyes as he tried not to scratch the bites jitterbugging mosquitoes had left on his ankles.

Ms Golding sat at her desk. A big woman with a hint of bleached-out moustache, a laugh that shook her chins/the building. She was deep in conversation with the engaged tone of her off-the-hook telephone at home, a ploy she frequently took whilst assessing the obediently gathered.

Most of these people, these *models*, are just beautiful, the successful model agent thought, just physical perfection covered head to toe with skin that needs no air-brushing. Mere startling smilers with ivory cuticles. But some shine. How they shine, no fashion editor knows. Where the flashes of bioenergetic light come from, no ad man has a clue, but these halos/auras/shines are what get the bookings and tearsheets best.

Tattersall checks plus thunder-and-lightning tweeds formed a strong vein of Englishy that morning: an outfit of a certain price range that compensated for its lack of originality.

Golding enjoyed how the models always arrived in curious, expectant moods—soon dampened—soon jaded. She nodded a lot saying 'Hai' too loudly, then straining to look and listen.

Julie B, classic English rose with freckles variety and that week's *An-An* cover girl, was reading a letter from One Tree Hill. Smelling of something expensive out of a little bottle with a snugly-fitting glass stopper, Julie B brought a touch of class to any casting she attended with those bones, that Celtic skin, those perfect clothes-hanger shoulders, those huge, wide apart blue eyes with long, feathery lashes. Those shiny blue eyes sparkled better than anything computer enhancement could come up with. Those perfect, shiny blue eyes scanned exasperation over New Zealand's weather and concerns for an only daughter's diet. Twelve sheets of A4 air mail.

This girl with a china-like prettiness flicked her lovingly cut seventies pageboy hair behind her perfect (so kissable) ear, then did it again before it could possibly have fallen down. She knew what she was doing and she knew it was cute.

The advancement of her career and ANZ Bank account (Mangere Bridge branch) were uppermost in Julie B's mind at all times. Her attempts at speaking anything beyond the most basic of Japanese, though well-intentioned, were for the most part impenetrable. But they impressed, though not as much as the seemingly regulated crossing and recrossing of her long, sculpted legs.

From across the room, a former *Big Issue* seller of eighteen/nineteen—all thick lips and blank, handsome features radiating unseeing boredom made for mass distribution—was mouthing names off the Autumn/Winter headsheet in front of him. Very slowly. Greg.

Greg: the sort of bloke other men want to be mates with and women want to straddle. Despite this, he wasn't getting much work and wanted to go back to his council flat in Finsbury Park. He was missing his girlfriend/baby/ dog. He was missing his little chats with his regulars outside Safeways. Playing wind-up toy was not for him. Had no one been about he would have drawn glasses and beards over the lot of them on that headsheet.

Detonations of laughter exploded by the minute. Cigarette sucks, portfolio flips. All these ethnic mixed-up mixes eating tempura every night, not speaking more than a dozen words of Japanese and not caring. Simply there to get laid, paid and made for back home with those beautifully printed tearsheets.

More often than not, Golding knew so well, when the sixty-day contracts were up they'd want to renew, stay a while longer. Off they'd then

go to renew their visas in Hong Kong or Thailand, to recharge their batteries/top up their tans/go shopping, returning to burst on the catwalks or the dancefloor of Delight.

Behind Golding was a photograph of her parents who had set up the agency at the start of the eighties. Overbearing in saturated colours on gloss, they glared over the bleached, cropped head of their only child, as if backing her up. (Don't you dare give any shit to our darlin' Della, it warned.) The photo had the same artificial haughtiness heads of state get set up with.

To the left of Golding was Kubo, at a little table of her own. Kubo who, in the position of head booker, kept managers Yada and Jean Pierre (frantically) busy. Kubo who sorted out those negotiable fees. Kubo, with the brilliant body language, back permanently turned to the office, face shielded by her long black hair: the one island of calm amid the mayhem, the one who talked sky-high figures in a husky whisper. The models generally thought Kubo was cool. Little did they know dear Kubo took a very discreet cut of the hush hush rake-offs. Golding liked to fuck her models, one way or another.

Loretta, just back from a three day shoot up Mount Fuji—a creature quite possibly born chewing gum—was looking through a new girl's portfolio, slapping the international editorial smackily as she turned each page, denting if not piercing the edges with nails. Mild anxiety pulled her face. She was wearing a dress so tight it seemed to be breathing, its folds and creases going in and out like gills. She—clearly—didn't like the look of this new piece of competition who was...in fact...a negative of her.

*'Height: 5'8"/1.73 Bust: 34/86 Waist: 22/60 Hips: 34/86 Shoes: 6/24 Hair: Blonde Blonde my arse. You hold her down and I'll Tipp-Ex those roots. Eyes: Blue Specialities: Shows, teeth, hands. Hands, yeah right,'* Loretta said to a guy stuck somewhere between has-been DJ and young exec'. Sam.

Sam: a young man marinated in Kouros, positively reeking of the stuff. Sam Zimmerman, though his index card read Sam Dylan. Dylan, a good catchy name right up near the top of the alphabet, valuable bearing in mind how clients go through the agency book. Except in Japan.

Sam and Loretta. Loretta and Sam. The dynamic duo.

Loretta: Brazilian pain in the arse who was taught English as a foreign language by a queen from Bethnal Green.

Sam: Australian pain in the arse who met Loretta in Brazil when Loretta was Carla. Darling Sam, who never went anywhere without a tambourine and a couple of chips of something wrapped in tin foil. Sam, who knew everything there is to know about animal tranquillisers. Sam, who found Deputy Dawg moving and tragic.

Sam'n'Loretta: hyper types who loved to talktalktalk, loving more the sound of their own voices than the ins and outs of a good debate. Too full of laughter/poor listeners. Excellent imitators. The kind who talk in cinemas or laugh too loudly, drawing attention to themselves as much as possible/at every opportunity/because that's what they've done since way back.

They were ideal playmates. Both drank too much once it got dark at those Roppongi clubs. Both didn't know how to dress down, shut up or stop chewing. He'd die of a big disease with a small name, becoming a grand host to the virus within—and why not?—within the next seven days. She'd pop her designer clogs in a fastback, souped-up silver-grey sports car driven by the Tunisian chauffeur of the South African millionaire she was also fucking within...give or take a week...six months.

It'd be dark, Michael Jackson would be singing something recorded back when he was an abuser friendly kid of ten/nearly eleven. They'd be on the wrong side of the road, of course, taking an S-bend at something lethal—well over ninety, naturally. Sweet Loretta would be thrown forty yards before heading toward a late night dip in the ocean, missing splash-down by a matter of yards to land on rocks where trapped crabs were waiting to feed.

From an early age, Liam guessed, Loretta had got into the habit of switching a sarcastic little grin on to her face triggered by something or other. It was ugly and disfigured the lower half of her gob.

'Penny Strutt. Sad name,' Sam said—dismissing the index card, 'sounds like a village in the Cotswolds.'

Golding shook her head. Loretta's contract wouldn't be renewed. Her foul mouth caused bad feeling among the models—particularly at castings. Everyone who had spent more than an hour with her in a location bus or backstage at a show agreed she was that season's sadist. There's always one, Golding thought.

Ending the non-conversation in perfect Japanese, bowing too much as she did so, Golding raised a considerable arse off her chair and made straight for Loretta—hands in trouser pockets. Her style was a sort of grotesque butch, given a sinister turn by recent weight-gain over big

bones and solid muscle. The hereditary large, chestnut-coloured forehead blanched to palest olive when she was angry, blue veins pumping below the surface all sorts of signals from her brain.

An atmosphere was detected before eye contact was made. Words were not needed.

Loretta replaced the portfolio back on the *NEW* shelf of the booking table in a happy-go-lucky, disco-beat kind of way with the confidence of someone who has been told since birth they were a beautiful little darling.

The viscose slip dress she was wearing had kind of caught on her cute little derriere as she'd turned, then snapped into a perfect fall. She knew Golding hadn't missed that detail, guessed Golding was wishing she had an arse like that, one way or another.

Placing one foot in front of the other in short steps to make her hips sway, Loretta returned to her original position at the end of her strollette. She knew how to pause, swivel on the spot, lead from the pelvis, with the torso tilted behind, chin up. She could be such a delight with those long legs, those long arms, all that natural, graceful movement.

Big ugly Seiko seconds clicked past as Julie B's portfolio, mysteriously binned in Ometesando underground just the previous week, was remembered by Ms B herself. Breathing out audibly she hit an angry stare which cameras went flashflashflash for. She had absolutely no class but confidence, and attitude. Bags and bags of sheer, irresistible confidence. Triple-A edge.

Golding returned to her chair, coming down on all three legs and vertebrae alike. Despite her good manners, often an unsuccessful strategy to get what she wanted, the woman was an obvious swine. Della The Fella was one nickname she pretended to know nothing about, Pigwoman another.

Julie B packed away her letter in an expensive crocodile bag with a sniff to show what a good girl she was, then with a flick of her wrist opened a compact and checked for nose shine in a little mirror. She proceeded to dab powder about her face with an expression of artificial concentration. It was all very brisk. Yacht harbour privilege was stamped on every move.

Though the shyness in Julie B's face was mastered, two beautiful legs were shaking beneath her knock-off Christian Lacroix skirt. Victim she was not, the only problems she had were with her nails and breathing through



her new nose, both of which were ready for a go-see any minute to an advertising agency she knew all about.

‘I love being blonde,’ Sam was suddenly shouting at Loretta in brutal high spirits, ‘it’s so much fun.’

Someone was having the piss taken out of them. Was it Julie B, Golding thought—or me? Whoever, rather like a head teacher accumulating incident slips in the hope of proving the need to exclude to a local Education Authority, Golding decided Yada and Jean Pierre were to keep a note of anything untoward.

The agency went quiet, then Loretta lit the fuse paper leading to a cruel explosion of laughter from Sam by simply running a finger over one of her beautiful eyebrows.

Julie B sniffed again, tilting head backwards to give a better view of that perfect (expensive) nose (job) and (natural) blonde hair, worn up that day to show her (fine) bone structure.

Kubo turned and parted her hair briefly with fingers edging out of a Vivienne Westwood tartan and ermine man’s shirt to view the room. She was smirking without moving the muscles of her mouth. Shaking her head but remaining absolutely still, Kubo was yawning internally. The new guy was watching her. Liam.

Far from being the typical all American square-jawed, collegiate Gillette model variety, Liam was real. She had an absurd sense that he was more grown-up than the lot of them put together.

‘Some of them actually Vim their teeth,’ Kubo said in a husky whisper.

# SCHOOL

Takeo was late for class. He was never late for class.

As the sliding door to the Science lab rattled back, he'd expected heads to turn. But no. He'd entered a vivisection tableau. As the teacher held forth, the usual atmosphere of interminable deadly boredom was not to be felt. The room was neatly quiet. Tsuji San was busy with a scalpel, cutting through a frog's heart.

No question went Takeo's way as to why he was late. He'd never been late for class before. Tsuji San just gave the haircut a quick, fixing look—then nodded to himself. Probably been on an errand, the teacher thought.

Takeo had been looking for his wristwatch, sure it must have slipped behind a bench in the changing room. There was no sign of Handa San, the gym had been empty.

Holding his breath, Takeo had knocked on the door of the small changing room where the teachers dressed/ undressed and showered.

'Sensei?' the boy had called.

With the heat already approaching the eighties, rising off the tarmac, amplified by high humidity, Takeo knew the afternoon would be intolerable.

A poor attempt at a Scott Joplin rag drifted over the sports pitch.

The toilets were silent for once. The sticky subject of masturbation was to be the main topic of conversation for that school year. The key question asked of boys by boys (with faces of fragile, transitory innocence) would be, 'Can you come yet?'

Takeo plunged both hands into his pockets and felt the tip of his dick bounce beneath his fingers: hot, damp and rubbery—like a dog's toy bone. It seemed to radiate like a hunk of plutonium, or the bleeding heart in Catholic pics of Jesus Christ. It kind of hurt, kind of got on his nerves. He liked it.

And he liked that glow, which was something to do with sunshine and making babies and porno and Handa San. He wondered if his penis would always be fun. Much more fun than a lighthouse for bath time seascapes. Stiff dicks: they were somehow naughty and for fucking women. And that difficult word: e-jac-u-lat-ion.

Fucking women, he thought. Okay, once it's in, then what? What do you talk about when it's in? How long do you leave it in? A minute? Ten? Overnight? Did it kind of get locked in until the job was done? Surely it wasn't like what he saw on tv, all that oohing and gasping. He wished he had an older brother to tell him.

In the middle of his homework his penis kept poking out of his shorts, his pyjamas at night, his school uniform. He dreaded being asked to stand up in class to read aloud the way the English teacher seemed to have a fetish for.

Behind a locked cubicle door, trousers down, Takeo felt through the stretched cotton of his pants, fingering the thick vein running along his cock. Like a river or a subway line or one long worm.

He imagined Handa San placing his lips wetly on the base of his neck, saying, 'Oh, Takeo,' in a low voice—not a whisper. Two bodies, warming a toilet cubicle together.

When the briefs came down a stiff little shape swished up with a slap against the spot where pubes were ready to sprout. Takeo stared at the little thing, raised like a warning finger.

Stooping, seemingly to weigh his balls noncommittally in the palm of his right hand, he stopped breathing. The wrinkled puckerings of his scrotum heaved, smoothed out, sagged and squeezed. This, he thought, is where spunk gets made. He wondered how it would get from one of those two little eggs to out of his penis.

The silence rang like tinnitus in Takeo's ears. When his heart began to thump rapidly, chaotically, causing the blood to throb violently against his throat, he had a stab at wanking. Only bubblegum wrappers of four different flavours were emptied from his pockets and flushed.

It felt like a Sunday.

The boy zipped up and got out of there pretty quickly when he thought he heard footsteps in the gym.

Takeo walked to where Tsuji San liked his students to leave their bags, carrying his satchel high up under his right arm, where it pushed the

beginnings of three underarm hairs into his flesh. Fine hairs that had started to burst out of him unawares during the night.

Takeo became one of two neat semicircles of boys around the teacher and the very dead frog spread on a dissection board, slit from anus to chin. Long pins fastened back folds of skin and innards.

For ten minutes the usual boredom was swapped for absorption, hormones crackling the air. Tsuji San wasn't a popular teacher. Though he was probably the most boring member of staff (he made sexual reproduction sound as exciting as crop rotation), the man had his own style and that style was slow.

He didn't believe in quick results. The best results with his students came step by step. He couldn't wand-wave a slow learner, and there were plenty of those. He had no magic solutions up his sleeve, but he could be patient and methodical and that he was. His delivery was persistently serious.

The man was a pro, not an entertainer.

As ever, it was a delivery punctuated with a few rhetorical questions that he answered without looking up from the job in hand. Anecdotal moments were rare, he made it his rule to assiduously avoid diversions. The important points and things to remember were his priorities. Facts.

Several times an approaching test was mentioned. Tsuji San didn't believe in equipping those in his care for tomorrow's world, but he did believe in Education. He dashed off lots of letters to single Mums/single Dads/Mums & Dads/guardians. Made phone calls, did home visits, gave detentions—all to keep his exam results up.

Unpopular, boring, without style—the same hairdon't and selection of clothing since 1984, same old jokes (outside of the classroom only) since long before then—but good(ish) results.

'Okay boys, find a partner to work with and sit down.'

Takeo sat by himself. He knew that out of the class of thirty-six, with three away, there'd be one student who'd be partnerless or shoved into a group of three. He wanted to draw attention to himself.

Inside Takeo's bag, a sweating can of Pokari Sweat had worked its way in between the pages of his English exercise book. The t's of his scrawl, which seemed to be underlining the preceding line, were smudging. The dots of his i's, which appeared to be punctuating the sentence above,

and the flourishes of his f's, which littered the lines below with electric tails, were dribbling.

'A right, fine mess,' was the (slightly confusing) phrase his English teacher would scold him with first lesson after lunch. But that man could talk: occasional three-word comments were written in a hand that even a graphologist would have had trouble deciphering.

Handa San stepped quietly along the top floor corridor, cruising like a kerb-crawler. He sneaked an occasional peek through classroom doors. Unlike the bodies that filled each room, the classrooms themselves were old, far from genteel. Like nineteenth century one-room schoolhouses, with raised lectern, large blackboard and bank of windows to one side. There was little reliance on artificial lighting, as the principal was so keen to maintain low overheads.

Caricatures of classroom virtue, faces ever-alert and serious, shot their arms up to a question in one room. Obviously knowing the material backward and forward. In another, he spotted a neatly folded message being passed from one desk to another.

Both boys froze as the moment was spotted by Handa San and as fingertips almost touched, the drone of the teacher within changed to a sudden bark. They were told to stand. They stood.

'Not since the principle of universal compulsory education was established in 1872 have I ever come across two boys quite as stupid as you two,' the man said, volume rising with each step taken toward them. 'Give that here.'

Both paled.

'Right, my little lovebirds...' (uproar) '...report to my room at three.'

Both blushed.

Further along, a magazine was spotted tucked inside the colourless textbook of a new boy, a transfer. *Young? Jump?* Brief eye contact with the boy was made. He smiled, turned back to his magazine almost haughtily, then flicked the page. Handa San made a mental note of the impudence. He'd check the boy's file before addressing the incident.

The majority of classes just sat, staring forward passively. Waiting for the next instruction, the next fact to note, obediently following the teacher-centred approach, resigned to the boredom bordering on mental cruelty.

Twelve hundred students in the one plain, three-storey collection of standard-size rectangular classrooms linked by hallways devoid of anything except signs and room numbers.

Barren. Walls painted a serviceable grey. Like being below decks in an economy line ship.

No lockers and no student lounges to require steady maintenance. No maps or travel displays. No items of curiosity. Not a single potted plant. The only piece of colour took the form of the inevitable cardboard chart of the weekly schedule of classes. Such a contrast to the principal's surprisingly large and ornate office filled with framed photographs, plaques, trophies, inspirational messages, pottery and the occasional painting neatly demonstrating an exercise in perspective.

An oasis of antiquity. Handa San half-laughed to himself. Ever so comfy. The set of stuffed chairs covered (so typically) with white linen lace that gave the whole setting a prim Victorian air. Contradicted only by such objects as the confiscated computer game that the man was so enjoying and a large, gaudy cigarette lighter on the coffee table that dispensed an imposing three-inch coloured flame for important people...and parents. So much for his antismoking stance. And so far from the somehow military environment in which, day in day out, conveyor belts of boys were shaped into future generations of disciplined workers for a technomeritocratic system that requires highly socialised individuals capable of performing reliably in a rigorous, hierarchical and finely-tuned organisational environment.

Through the classroom window Handa San had a perfect side view of Takeo stretching forward to prod the frog placed before him. Science was one of Takeo's favourite lessons.

Handa San drew Takeo's watch up to his nose and sniffed at the leather strap. More delicious than that was the underside of the actual mechanism. So smooth—and smelling of the boy. It wasn't counting sheep that sent this full grown man off to sleep at night, it was the idea of carrying an injured Takeo from the gymnasium to the sick bay for a spot of First Aid attention.

Handa San knocked, then moved away from the door a little. The room went quiet. Everyone wanted to know what it was all about.

'Takeo?' Tsuji San called out.

Then Takeo was there, standing in front of him; breathing and warm and full of life. Their eyes met for the ?th time that day. Every part of that slender body displayed burgeoning strength. The boy felt his heartbeat swiften. He wondered if Handa San could hear it.

‘Yours?’

‘Yes.’

Takeo almost sang the single syllable in one long drawing-out of fresh breath.

Then Handa San’s lips were moving, indicating that he was speaking, but Takeo didn’t hear any of the words—lost in that close proximity of the man, the lovely smell of him. So close, Takeo noticed how long the man’s lashes were, and thick.

Takeo’s heart seemed to be banging against his forehead. The whiteness of Handa San’s track-suit was so clean it actually seemed to repel dirt. Dirt knew better than try to attach itself to him.

This was the man Takeo wanted to straddle in a tent, pinning the man’s arms back above his head as he kissed him, leaving a flattened shape of bent stalks and trampled-down flowers in a field of giant clover. In Austria.

Already Handa San had forgotten exactly how Takeo’s hair had looked the day before—except for that shine on the blackness or when the silvery bubbles formed in the showers. It’d be a while, Handa San thought, before it grew to a length that would need fingers spread like a comb to push it off his forehead.

*His* fingers wanted to run over Takeo’s head, feeling their way like a blind man’s—reading each feature. Where to start? The bone of his nose or those small beads of sweat on the boy’s upper lip?

Takeo took the watch from his PE teacher’s hand.

‘Thanks.’

## #8B

The paintbox Shinohara San had bought herself three years before opened slowly. The metal felt cold.

An enamelled palette unfolded, revealing a double tier of rounded, labelled colours with convex top surfaces like silk or satin cushions. Each pretty dollop of colour had been filled into clinical white frames that would soon be spoiled.

It had been a long while since Shinohara San had held a paintbrush and she was nervous of looking silly to herself, never mind to the rest of her Thursday evening class. She could draw, enjoyed charcoal and chalk, found working with Indian ink and wash exciting, but felt too challenged with paint. The variety of strokes and the whole range of tones unnerved her. You don't get stray hairs with a pencil, don't get a run with chalk.

She made a tentative start, dotting out vanishing lines, determined to master an art for which she had absolutely no spontaneous inclinations.

Sitting by the window, Shinohara San noticed a change in the days. A chill jet hit her for a second. She knew the Kuroganes were away for a week; maybe—she thought— maybe she'd been mistaken in thinking Shigeru was to have stayed behind.

There'd been no noise next door. Nothing.

For a moment a fear palpitated briefly in her. In the guttering flame of her memory she wondered if everything was alright.

Her eyes scanned red roofs, blue roofs, cubes and oblongs of grey. Intolerable geometry. No, she thought, Shigeru must've gone with them, despite it being term time. Then she thought of his age: 19. And 19 = old enough to look after himself.

Someone in the building had their tv on far too loudly. Occasionally there were laughs. Curious, Shinohara San plugged in her own set to see what was so amusing.

The remote control switched from NTV to TBS to NHK.



Flash: a laughing chat show audience; flash: a seagull gliding over Sydney Harbour and flash: highlights of the previous year's horse racing from Fukushima. Just as Shinohara San tuned in to what she could hear from two floors below—commercials on TV Asahi—whoever it was turned off. She'd missed the big joke.

Before her, some dumb cartoon of teenage boys and girls bowling skulls at thighbones set up as skittles jumped out in too many day-glo colours for her liking. She hit the off switch, furious that she'd bothered herself.

Leaning out of the window a little, she could see a hand shove out into the air, flicking ash off a cigarette. #6A. Shinohara San felt like spitting. She hoped there wouldn't be any more trouble. The concierge had told her husband the model agency were on their last chance. Shinohara San shook her head at how the tone of the block had spiralled.

Shortly after this she heard the steady sound of rain, first approaching from some distance, then passing directly overhead, splashing down hard on ledge, then window.

The first brushstrokes were strong, confident, unerring— no hesitancy.

## #6A

Liam was wet in the seconds it took him to get from cab to lobby. The occupant of #6A was not in the mood to meet the flatmate he'd heard about: Jeff.

Reflected in the large mirror with the surround of gilded (really quite horrible) mouldings, on the receiving end of a lazy polishing, was the face of the concierge. If the man could have seen the reflection of Liam's advancing features in the cold glass he would have met a smile in his direction.

Eyes gone vague and opaque with cataracts registered Liam only as a blur. It was the sound of footsteps that had made the concierge turn. He was an expert when it came to recognising the tenants by their walk.

Though it was his custom to maintain energy levels with a minimum of human contact, he mumbled a quick good afternoon.

'Konnichi-wa,' Liam replied. This made them both smile, then laugh lightly. Liam's accent was more Spanish than Japanese. At least he was trying.

The old man nodded the new arrival toward the shining stainless steel doors of the lift, gave a victory sign, then returned to his task.

The lift was a lift that could have been a lift anywhere in the world where people don't urinate in lifts. *NO SMOKiNG* read a DIY sign a meter above a little tray affair intended for dripping umbrellas. Someone had used the thing as an ashtray. 630kg—8 PERSONS MAX.

Inside, Liam saw exhaustion reflected in the waist up mirror. Shoulders he'd struggled to hold back for a camera just an hour before were gaining a weight to them by the minute. His eyes, the widening pores of his skin, begged sleep.

The afternoon had been completely Mickey Mouse, with Liam's body clock announcing Greenwich Mean Time as he'd changed from one outfit to another. Golding had organised a test session to get a card and portfolio together. Six outfits, six different looks.

The E6 were already processed, black and whites due...Liam thought, looking at his watch...due now.

Golding said she'd make the selection for what went on his index card: the choice was hers. Modelling struck Liam more as a predicament than a profession.

Standing outside #6A, Liam took in a deep breath, then slid the thin, steel key into the single lock. A CD Walkman lay on the kitchen table, track 3 running. At whatever time Jeff had got in he had obviously forgotten to turn it off. First impression: Madonna singing *Like A Virgin* for (was it really?) the ten millionth time.

Liam followed the sound of running water coming from the bathroom. He braced himself for an introduction.

Jeff was actually wearing one of those ice packs over his eyes when Liam popped his head around the open door. He could almost have been Liam's twin: but gym-toned, sunbedded—over-groomed.

'Hi,' he croaked, removing the ice packs casually, 'You're Liam, right?' Silk Hackett pyjamas, ostentatious slippers, fluff fresh set of initialled towels. Ice-cold, wet handshake. 'Jeff. J-E-F-F.'

Big, slimy curling tentacles of charm spread Liam's way.

Leaning against the door frame like they'd been old buddies for a lawwwng time, Liam watched Jeff attend his needs. Momentarily coy, Jeff put the pretty-much-melted ice packs to one side before getting down to the serious business of brushing his teeth. Liam half-expected to pay an admission fee for the spectacular flossing performance. The gargling spot was...something else. A skilled spit.

J-E-F-F: somehow he looked incomplete, something seemed to be missing: maybe a giant bucket of popcorn, a little hand mirror complete with rolled up dollar bill or Catalina clapperboard in front of his crotch.

'I feel like shit,' he said—but look at me, he thought, I look great, don't I? He did, even under the fluorescent. Jeff's skin was shiny, tight, almost varnished in appearance, but minutely wrinkled around the eyes.

No time had been wasted in moving into the double room, arranging ties in alphabetical order to designers. He was in a great mood, the kind that soars high before it crashes.

'Where you from?' Jeff asked, giving Liam a vada, lingering over the strong chin and deep-carved lips.

As if it matters, the interviewee groaned to himself.

‘London.’

Jeff seemed impressed.

‘Of Irish parents,’ seemed a nice, humbling qualifying statement.

‘Me? I’m from New York.’

Liam hadn’t asked. Loretta had made public a little known fact about Jeff as Sam had pulled Jeff’s portfolio from the *NEW* shelf—he hailed from Racine, Wisconsin— between Chicago and Milwaukee. She knew Jeff from Milan, knew all about him.

Jeff. Nice sensitive hands with manicured nails. Nails that seemed healthy. Jeff. Vitality, sunbeds and vitamin pills. J-E-F-F, with the ideal hands to sell washing-up liquid to rich old men. A real \$tud. J. A natty dresser who would rather not sit down than crease his trousers.

‘Time for Polly to put the kettle on,’ Liam said.

While the water boiled, Liam changed into his brand new Levi’s. They were stiff, needed breaking in. Standing by the window, Liam tutted at a cobweb in the corner. He scooped it up into a sticky(ish) rope in his hand— then regretted having made a spider, somewhere, temporarily homeless.

The place had been cleaned up a bit. Two identical picnic blankets camouflaged the sofa.

‘So, who are you with in London?’ Jeff asked, en route to his room.

‘Sorry?’

‘Agency,’ he shouted, removing the bathrobe.

‘Oh, I’m not.’

Jeff stood at the door, naked. ‘Huh?’

‘I’m new to all this.’

‘Oh, right,’ Jeff said, making for the wardrobe. ‘How’s work here?’

‘Don’t know, I only arrived yesterday myself.’

Jeff approached the window slowly, bringing his odour with him in a large, compact cloud, wearing nothing but a pair of black D&G bikini briefs.

‘Oh,’ he said.

Jeff stared at the block of flats opposite, scanning the windows as if willing the grey ferro-concrete to explode. Then he turned his head slowly, taking in the neat lines of cacti in Liam’s room, the pile of books and stuff by the bed.

‘Oh, I thought you’d been here a while.’ Jeff sounded disappointed.

His back was casually bronzed from weeks by and in a pool a safe distance from Saint Paul's Bay. That back was thickly corded with muscle, elongated first from dance classes but more recently from the up and downing of that boring pool in Malta.

He'd swum millions of metres underwater every day for two weeks just a month ago. A pair of Speedo trunks had preserved the white band of flesh—his buttocks—from the sun and the eyes of any admirer except the one paying for the pleasure of it all. The colour had been topped up on a sunbed or two. It had gone fake. At the core of that magnificent physique Liam was seeing a sad, skinny silhouette of a boy who craved attention.

A blur of an old man on a roof-top way off stooped to water some plants. Liam wondered what they might be. Agaves, perhaps.

Down below the first jarring notes of a tinny melody were beginning to be churned out of twin grey speakers on the roof of a black van.

'Tokyo,' Jeff said with a prolonged sigh. (Uh-oh, Liam thought, could be tough keeping a straight face for this.) 'Not a city I'll ever be in love with.'

'How can you say that? You've only just arrived.'

'A feeling.'

'H'ho, yewer an awfill man altogedder,' Liam said in a truly awful Irish brogue. It was all he could think of to get him away from a young man far less interesting than his CV would imply. J-E-F-F.

As the bathroom fogged, the idea of sharing suddenly didn't seem so bad. Jeff had a degree of entertainment value to him—like bad tv.

Liam slowly submerged his head in a shiver of bubbles, then resurfaced to rest his eyes. Thinking back on the day and the motivating chat with Golding over the lightbox as the first transparencies were viewed, Liam felt encouraged. As bubbles popped one by one or, sometimes, a few together at once, Kubo was busy faxing his face out to stylists who preferred their models not to look like models.

*Like A Virgin.* Liam connected. The last time he'd consciously heard that track was the day he'd been discovered in true Hollywood style at The Edge. He'd been sitting alone at a table, swamped in black reading *Boyz*; the day of his father's funeral.

An anonymous sexual compulsive in search of a fresh face, a new body—searching for some magical quality to feel complete—had fixed his sad eyes on Liam in hopeful anticipation. He'd perfected that wanna-lick-yer-

arse-this-minute look with years of practice. It had been flashing across his forehead more garishly than the pulsing neon of Shinjuku.

It was at the point that Madonna finished singing the song which compared her to a virgin being touched for the very first time, that the old fool had put on his glasses gingerly, one ear at a time, changing from the pair of reading glasses he'd scoured one of the free papers with. He'd wanted a jolly good look at that blur of a young man swamped in black.

The man had stared, and stared, teacup in hand, like Liam was the creature he'd been waiting all his life for. Liam prayed he'd soon be off to Brief Encounter after a sniff round Comptons and Village...stumbling the noisy jungle/desert of the metropolis, sitting inside the vacancy of his hopes...or raking through those exciting imported magazines in the basement of Clone Zone, all in the name of a bit of fun he couldn't quite explain.

When the corners of the man's mouth had begun to curl up in a horrible smile, Liam had leaned forward, whispering words that didn't please. The man's face had dropped—not amused. Before leaving in a huff the old fool stood, folded a copy of *The Pink Paper*, then threw it down on the table full of animated indignation.

The seat was taken shortly afterwards by a tall, skinny Japanese guy who looked too Britpop for words. Within a minute he'd introduced himself as a scout for a model agency in Tokyo. After the flashing of a business card and what the guy (obviously) thought was some pretty impressive talking, three polaroids were snapped of Liam in Soho Square. Measurements and telephone number taken.

Five minutes later Liam was in the Gay and Lesbian section of Books Etc Charing Cross Road, wondering if it had all been a wind up...and if the new Alan Hollinghurst was worth buying. Before the week was out the rather frightening possibility of modelling in Japan was presented to him on a curly fax.

Liam had enjoyed bubble-baths ever since he'd been a child. (One Christmas, aged nine, he'd run naked through the garden—gradually less and less clothed in foam—pretending to be a snowman. As a consequence he was off school for a month with pneumonia.) The popping of those bubbles was all quite musical with his eyes closed. Behind those eyelids was a whole galaxy of red stars.

The locked up, one-bedroom flat in London seemed a long way away. Unless burglars paid a visit everything would be as he left it until his return. Liam had no idea when that would be. Sell it, a voice inside him said. Sell.

He had a feeling that when his eight-week visa ran out, he'd be off to renew in Hong Kong or Thailand, recharging his batteries/getting a tan/shopping, returning to burst on the catwalks or wherever.

## BASEMENT

Down that staircase, through that door, marched farm labourers and department store demonstrators and graduates from Keio University, Kyoto, Hitotsubashi, Waseda, Kobe, Tohoku, Kyushu, Osaka and Yokohama. One thing drew all those men together regardless of social differences, of wealth, age, looks and sporting ability: they were men who want what they want when they want it.

Ippei nodded Akio in without a smile. 'Hiroshi!' Ippei called out in a full-throated fortissimo.

The smartly dressed, gym-trained body known as Hiroshi, with a hairstyle between has been DJ and young exec, came out into the reception area.

'Hi,' he said, his manner somewhere between offhand and downright rude, which he mistook for cool. Akio was given half a onceover.

'Akira,' Akio said, trying to sound tough.

'Yeah, sure. My name's not Hiroshi either but that's what you can call me.' He spoke the words as if he were reciting lines that had been scripted for that moment.

Alert, sharply dressed. Obviously did alright for himself.

'Welcome aboard,' he yawned. 'Kitchen's there. Help yourself to whatever. Towel cupboard over there. Big one for the massage table, and two small ones. One for the punter, one for a hot towel if he can't be fussed with a shower after.'

'Right,' Akio said, accidentally slipping into a natural softer tone that raised an eyebrow.

Hiroshi's head moved to one side, just a fraction before the buzzer sounded.

'Action stations,' he camped.

Akio was given a light shove toward the tiny room known as the fish-bowl.



Down there, in the basement of that block of flats, were adult boys who'd convinced the proprietor they were all over the age of eighteen. Down there, under the elaborate silk of three large koi: ready. Quiet types, insecure/frightened—crushed alongside others less quiet, less insecure/ frightened. Together, like a sexy new multi-ethnic boy band.

Akio discovered an immediate occupational hazard of prostitution: daytime tv. There they sat, behind the two way mirror, yawning, keeping each other amused to keep each other awake. Sitting, waiting; a tide-line of hair grease around the walls. A bull, a cock, crow, dog, dove, eagle, fox, frog, horse, monkey, snake or chirpy sparrow would not have looked amiss among that human menagerie.

These sexy(ish) boys sitting around the room were represented by a far less sexy man tucked away in a back office talking times, sizes and prices into a telephone all day long. A man with his feet up on the desk. A man with a floppy wedge his ol' mum trimmed to a treat the first Saturday of each month. It caused a sensation when he sorted out French, Germans, Spaniards and Americans in his perfect French, German, Spanish and American-taught English.

The motives of the men looking through the two way mirror were rarely philanthropic. They looked beyond the pane of glass with familiarity, contempt: an itchy hunger for a bit of action. So simple, that little world, a far cry from their social lives, marriage, family, work. A simple transaction, money for services rendered.

Ippei gave the familiar knock.

A third generation resident Korean boy beside Akio hoisted up his shiny, blue football shorts. Hooking since the age of eighteen, two evenings a week. Girlfriend named Yoko. Secretive boy.

Outside that room, the chief puppeteer of that little hideaway could be heard delivering a cultivated line in small talk for the benefit of the sweaty client.

'It's been a while since I've been,' the man said, sheepishly for the customs official from Tokushima Airport.

'You look well,' Ippei lied, smiling one of his brisk and brittle smiles at the cheap, grey suit.

'I've grown my hair. I've learned that I can no longer afford to wear it short. The recession on the temple is so extensive—as you can see here and here—it ages me so.'

Then he smiled. Ippei also smiled, never failing to find an old queen's pathetic outpourings amazing. For many, whole lives had been spent chasing dick, much time in imagining. Dreams of faces and faeces and arseholes like cunts. Paying to touch and be touched. In his opinion, the majority of the gentlemen callers needed urgent psychiatric treatment in a discreet hospital.

Just before the curtain was drawn back, there was one of those moments when the contents of the fish-bowl briefly took each other in like pitiable animals under the same controlled experiment.

Looking through the lover's limbo of the two way mirror with a nostalgia for desire, the tired old man came face to unseeing face. With the little touches of make-up and soft lighting he thought they looked wonderful.

Each strutted marketable differences. Under the clothes the bodies available were all more or less selling the same thing. Each individual had a unique way to attract a customer. Some did it with smiles, some with ethnicity, some with tissues packed down the front of their jeans. Lovely lazy bodies, cashing in on youth.

Akio raised his beautiful head, black hair falling across his clear olive face, then flashed a green-light look beyond the two way mirror.

'New boy,' Ippei said, 'arrived just a minute ago.'

Akio imagined the customer outside, perhaps a university lecturer or old school mate, brother-in-law or neighbour in pre-foreplay mode. Perhaps a serial killer looking for an easy catch. Maybe a timewaster, wanting a voyeuristic eyeful before shuffling off to some toilet for a quick wank after saying, 'Maybe another day.'

'Akira,' Ippei whispered. 'Student.'

Akira. Common enough name, the man thought. Wonder what your real name is.

Ippei rattled off sales talk that included some pretty vital statistics as the man's hungry eyes relished the tableau. Face to face, crotch to crotch. The old fool was breathless with the thought of so much dick at his disposal. He wasn't sure where to begin, like a shoplifting child at the pick'n'mix.

'Nice boy. Lovely skin.'

Four of the five *boys* were seated, bolt upright. One chose to stand sagging against the wall. A prime target in scuffed sneakers, patched and grimy Levi's ripped at the knee and a Yomiuri Giants teeshirt: Midori. A

certain natural endowment made him very big with customers. He parted his hair in the middle with his hands to see where he was going, even to eat. Somewhere under that hair were headphones blasting a noise texture of fuzz guitar, whiny vocals and feedback. Wrapped around his neck he wore a cheap towel, his sartorial trademark. Burakumin was stamped all over him. Midori: an anybody nobody body without any antibodies to run a mile from.

A pretty, pre-operative black transexual who'd never go through with the op', known simply and insistently as Diana, adjusted hippy beads, centring them, fancying that attention to detail might improve chances. The left (very flared) nostril sported two silver loops, ears a horrible symphony of mangled flesh and ear studs. Everything about the specimen said 99% WOMAN. That other 1% saying DON'T FUCK WITH ME OR I'LL SLIT YOUR WARM THROAT.

Three buttons on a Western boy's Levi's were undone, scoring well on the groinward glance scale: Scottie. One of those blond and block-shaped heads set upon a throat as broad as the head itself, a throat with the smooth and supple muscularity of the male organ in its early stage of tumescence. He tried so hard (too hard) to be the reincarnation of James Dean. Under the red and black checked shirt (woven, not printed) was a tight teeshirt cut off below the nipples, displaying a washboard torso that out-rippled everyone else's. His intensely aerobicized abdomen was an attracting feature—flaunted at every opportunity.

Scottie had his regulars many of whom, according to goss', enjoyed quickie sex as part of the one-to-one conversational English classes he offered Tokyo businessmen. Depending on which of his ex-lovers one spoke to, he was either heterosexual, asexual, bisexual or out, proud and very loud. They said he was mean-spirited, moody, a party animal. Sometimes macho, sometimes a right queen. A mass of contradictions and the son of a father who was kinda cute. In the main he alternated between a parody of the strong, silent type and a Provincetown fag.

The boys, the boyz, all ready and willing to capitalise on closetry, frustration and desperation. There, like wank magazines neatly lined up, waiting to be fingered.

A dribble on the man's bottom lip increased with more saliva each time he saw what he liked.

‘Lovely cock,’ Ippei whispered, nodding toward Akio again. It was important to get the new recruit on the go quickly, before he changed his mind and hopped it. Important to give him that first highly infectious taste of money.

Akio imagined cannibal lips being licked by a cannibal tongue.

‘You’d be the first,’ Ippei whispered up close.

A slobber of emotion crossed the man’s lips.

‘Right then. That one.’

The door opened an inch. ‘Akira,’ Ippei bleated.

Hiroshi whispered a few quick words as Akio fetched the towels.

‘Hi,’ Akio said, closing the door.

The man sat on the massage table fully clothed, saying nothing, enjoying the nervousness he detected. He was taking his time, making it clear there was no need to rush. His cash held an authority over the proceedings and he wanted his money’s worth.

The man patted the dull plastic of the massage table. Akio sat beside him, towels bunched on his lap.

The flat nose of that man was the first to inhale the hanging remnants of Akio’s boy smell. There’d be snub noses, Roman noses, noses dripping with colds and purplish noses more used to sniffing fine wines from distant cellars than snorting between scrotum and inside leg/armpits/buttocks/inner ear.

‘Beautiful,’ the man confessed.

Akio smiled. In that moment of eye-to-eye contact he had to let the dirty old man know that it was okay about his paunch/glasses/height/weight/buck teeth and bald spot.

The man wiped the hairless back of his hand over his shiny forehead. There was a strange smell to him. Perhaps he was one more given to a long soak than a good wash with plenty of soap.

Smiling, the bundle of fun admitted a very recent sad fact.

‘I got caught on my way here by the police for doing 55mph in a 30mph zone, not for the first time either. All I’d like right now, I’m out of breath you see, is a nice slow— very slow—wank. That’d be nice.’

Akio’s small, warm hand quickly busied through the material of the man’s trousers, alternately soothing and stroking a penis in need of some rest.

‘How’s that?’ Akio whispered.

‘Oh, yes,’ the man confessed against Akio’s neck, ‘Very nice indeed.’  
Akio flashed a look that said GO.

‘When I was little,’ the man started, ‘I met a girl...I was six, she was nine. She was an attractive little girl. I didn’t know that then but now I certainly do. She was more than a little interested in my dick, kept pointing at the bulge in my shorts. She liked to touch it and make it hard. I didn’t really know what was happening. It was exciting. For years after that I exposed myself to little girls in woods but they used to run off like I was the bogey man. One day I exposed myself to a boy of nine. We, you know, had a bit of a fiddle and I came. I’ve been doing it with boys ever since.’

He coughed, pulled his knees up to under his chin and said, ‘I’d like you to imagine this room’s a wood.’

The man remembered the boy’s eyes looking back at him as he urinated. The boy’s superior smile. The boy just standing there, his cock between the brassy teeth of cheap denim shorts, hard as an ice-pop straight out of the fridge.

‘You’ve just taken a piss in the bushes and when you turn round you see me sitting on a fallen trunk.’ Deep breath. ‘Be a boy of nine for me.’ High board dive about to commence, ‘Take me to what happens next.’

‘Right,’ Akio said, standing, beginning to strip down to just white vest, pants and socks. ‘Can I ask a question?’

‘Go ahead.’

‘Did the boy piss rigid jets?’

‘Oh yes.’

‘And were his legs spread, knees slightly bent like this?’

‘Oh, I can tell you’re going to be good,’ the man said, removing his jacket.

Smoothly, evenly, in lovely slow motion, Akio began a simple stretch exercise. The man watched the elegance of muscle, cutting through air. It was a stretch—a plain stretch. Something he’d done thousands of times since infancy, often to NHK. Delicate currents of air brought his scent to the man’s nostrils.

The sky had been streaked with golds and reds, the remains of the day cutting through the branches. It was about the same time of the year, but cooler. A Sunday. No one about.

The man recalled the tiny waist, those shining eyes. He’d been nearly thirteen and pounding testosterone when the close proximity of nine-year-

old's fresh and innocent(ish) flesh had excited him to orgasm.

Akio began sweating as he circled his hips, face reddening as he bent. The eighteen-year-old removed his vest. Man, under his spell.

The young whore's eyes were fastened, magnetised on those of the man. A fuse line of fine hair trailed from navel to the tiny nest of his groin. It showed when he stretched up. As Akio rose up high for the third time, his cock slipped out above the waistband—cockhead nesting into the navel.

The man was instantly in his favourite position: down on bended knees, sucking. Leonardo DiCaprio—that's what he was thinking. Lovely little Leo.””

On the one hand Akio felt like some soiled love-machine enduring perverse humiliation, on the other he felt surges of power/vengeance/charity and evil.

The man didn't want a shower and no amount of coaxing would get a bar of soap near him.

‘Shirt off,’ Akio whispered. ‘And the rest.’

\*The reader may find it useful to consult p. 14 of *The Leonardo DiCaprio Album*

by Brian J Robb (Plexus, UK £9.99, US \$15.95) to fully appreciate this moment.

Unpeeled, revealing a shaved torso...pimply here and there...the man smelled of poultry.

‘Lay down.’

‘Floor or table?’

‘Floor, shithead.’

Akio straddled the man, knees pinning arms down.

‘You married?’

‘No.’

‘Live alone?’

‘Yes.’

Dribble leaked out of the man's mouth as Akio jerked him off. Close to orgasm, the dribble frothed then transformed into a kind of fluff—like meringue.

He'd been told the man liked verbal. Anything. Just a bit.

‘You fucker,’ Akio snarled. ‘You dirty rotter.’

It seemed enough.

‘I’m going to shoot,’ the man croaked in a cold, impersonal, almost automaton-like tone. Maybe that was his natural voice, the voice his wife, children and wide range of hookers were used to hearing. A voice that made the occasional smuggler’s stomach turn. A voice from a face taking on the colour of a scalded prawn.

The man made a faint V-ing noise as he shot what looked like camel spew over his chest.

It took a while for him to get his breath back.

‘Get me a glass of water, would you?’

When Akio returned, the man was fully dressed and sitting on the massage table, exactly as he’d found him fifty-eight...fifty-nine minutes back.

‘I’m fifty-three years of age and absolutely worn out,’ he said after a sip.

Akio received a kiss on his forehead. An accordion of pre-paid cards tumbled out of the man’s wallet—taxi card, train-ticket card, supermarket, amusement arcade, McDonald’s. Whoah. He fished out a stiff note that he pushed down the waistband of Akio’s jeans. Good tip.

As the man was going up the spiral staircase, Akio was showering like someone exposed to radiation. Sex with that man reminded Akio of tea with his grandmother. The hour had the same long, slow progress of the minute hand.

Akio hoped the man would return for more. Knowing what the man wanted was half the trick.

Already he had become something different: a penis, enlarged nipples, a great arse. A good listener with the ability to endure details of the most tedious small talk politely. A whore.

‘How’d it go?’ Ippei asked as Akio strode toward the fish-bowl.

‘Fine, no problem,’ Akio replied, saluting.

Ippei flicked the ash off his cigarette. He was impressed that Akio didn’t go into all the ins and outs of the client’s fantasy world. No questions. No comments.

Keen to see how Akio would cope with the brothel hard nuts, Ippei stage-whispered, ‘Hey everybody...meet Akira.’

## Apt. 7A

Loaded cars were on their way home with all the good things supermarkets can provide. Canned soups, scrubbed vegetables in transparent bags, breakfast cereals and frozen meat.

A woman at the bus stop, tired after the jostling trolleys at the checkout, cash registers bleeping louder than the muzak, sat watching trees turn to silhouettes. Such was the silence around her, as if having spoken all she'd wanted to say, she seemed drained—emptied—and beyond listening. She just stared forward.

Beside her, striking intense attitudes on the edge of the bench, was a man wanting to know what on Earth she...

Perhaps it was the familiar drama of a confession, the much repeated 'It's over,' or the 'I'm pregnant!' There was restrained outrage on his part, hand-waving, question-firing at point blank range. Perhaps jealousy. Or fear. Urine tests? Blood? Or was it something to do with money? The binoculars warmed, viewer imagining the dialogue.

What was he saying as he grabbed her shoulders? His remonstrations silenced the dandy collection of neighbourhood fuckups sitting on the wall close by, stopping the busy picking of spots and contemplation of anything but their homework.

'Doctor—you must go to a doctor.' This was the line the occupant of Apt. 7A decided was being whispered into the woman's neck as she cried on to his shoulder. Only then did the man utter to his sister/girlfriend/wife/? the often-used yet mystical, even miracle-working words, 'I love you.' But he didn't hug her, and after a while he spoiled it by saying, 'Of course I do.' Well, maybe, the viewer thought.

Lit only by streetlamps and passing traffic the couple were grainy, flickering. When the bus came they didn't get on. After a minute a cab was hailed.

'I think you should see a doctor. You must.' Were those the last words mouthed?



The Lego set, once played with by the boy in #8A, then passed on to a neighbour's son in #7B was being ignored by the boy in #4B. His favourite, rapidly-flashing cartoon was on tv. Through the same window a glimpse was caught of the child's mother holding a newly-finished knitted jumper into the air before her.

It was with reluctance that the child left the screen to have the garment shoved over his head.

**WEDNESDAY**

水

## #8B

The reflection of Sunday Girl's face in the cold glass was one of fascination. A short, bristly bluebottle was caught in a cobweb at the corner of the window.

All that buzzing and bouncing as it tried to escape the finely-spun trap was quite a show, but this was no solo performance. The slow advances of a spider every now and then to see if dinner was ready, just a paw away, were a real treat.

As the fly gave one last burst of energy in an attempt to be free, Sunday Girl made for it. Slightly freaking as the spider hopped from the web, the cat only managed to scoop up its home into a sticky(ish) rope, freeing the fly.

Sunday Girl's gently sloping shoulders sagged a little in disappointment, then bunched as the fine strands of the spider's home were licked into a tiny grey ball and swallowed.

Somewhere, for the second time that week, the spider was temporarily homeless.

## #7B

Takeo was dreaming of the four thousand eight hundred and fifty names listed on the wrought iron gates of the Komaba campus of Todai, University of Tokyo. His name was not among them. He'd failed the University of Tokyo Entrance Exam, much to his relief.

Around him, fellow black-uniformed high school students danced with joy or stood in shock. Some cried. Anyone looking at Takeo would have presumed he'd gained the pass all had confidently expected of him.

Outstretched on his young back, Takeo woke up with a hard-on that hurt. He couldn't remember anything of his dream but knew it had something to do with exams. He felt like he'd just been run over by a big, soft, cottony car.

Exams, he thought. The average high school student's statistical chances of eventually entering Tokyo University are about one in four hundred and forty, the principal had said to him at the start of the new school year in April. One in four hundred and forty, Takeo mused. Whatever the cost over the next few years, he'd have to be that one in four hundred and forty to make his mother happy.

Beyond the unfocused screen of his eyelashes Takeo knew Handa San's eyes were gazing his way from the photo he'd often got an old magnifying glass out to look at.

Takeo moved a little to one side slowly, pretty much turning his back to the photo on the wall next to him. The sheet shifted, exposing his long, skinny, pale (totally passive) form to the colour gloss paper. The carefully printed teacher's lips swooped down to kiss Takeo's waist, before moving downwards. (These were the buttocks the boy wanted to have kissed.) As the imagined lips parted to touch with the tip of his tongue, the boy's right hand squeezed his cock. (Felt nice.)

'Best boy in the world,' Handa San whispered, slowly— ever so quietly—as the roughness of the child's recent crop was softly stroked. Then

Handa San was running the warm tips of his strong, thick fingers over Takeo's shoulder blades.

The boy wondered what it would feel like to have his smooth-skinned little body pressed up against that of Handa San's. To have his warm-skinned self flush against a brick wall, prickly hedge or the cold metal and glass of an empty train compartment.

Takeo had the desire to piss or bleed through that cock of his as he imagined the shiny white lines of his ears being kissed by the man, the full-grown man.

From tv, films, extensive secret reading, beach chats and occasional phone lines (hard on pocket money from local payphones), Takeo knew lots about the wonderful world of sex.

Though his alarm clock wasn't due to buzz for another half hour he was wide awake. He kneaded his foreskin delicately, putting a hand behind him, gathering up a fistful of bedsheet. If the imagined dick he was guiding toward his young arse had been actual flesh and blood and had pounded into his rectum, he'd have bled to death in that bed of his.

Hearing the familiar crack of a bone in her left foot, the only son of an unimaginative marriage let out a gale from his lungs. With hormones in the fast lane he was flat on his back, cock tucked between his legs, arms behind head. But his mother didn't pop in. Had she, she might have noticed the four hairs under his left armpit, six under his right.

The wardrobe smelled of spray starch and *Eternity* by Calvin Klein. Until recently his mother had done his shopping, clearing out and buying without consultation. Everything was perfect. Perfectly washed, perfectly ironed, perfectly polished/dry-cleaned/spaced out. All this was taken for granted. Standing back with one hand on a hip to peruse the wardrobe, Takeo half-smiled.

Six YSL short-sleeved polo shirts in assorted pastels, six long-sleeved Ralph Lauren Oxford cloth shirts with button-down collars. (Two solid navy, two solid ecru, a couple of the classic blue-and-white striped. No pink.) Six plaid cotton flannel shirts, woven not printed. Drawers of stuff. Four Shetland wool crew neck sweaters, navy blue, grey, black, brown heather. Drawers, neatly arranged. Two V-neck jumpers, gunmetal grey and white. Three pairs of jeans, Levi's, Edwin and...and a white track-suit. Takeo didn't know what to wear that weekend. He wanted to look good, but

didn't know why. There was nothing planned except the gymnastics competition in the morning—but he had to wear school uniform for that.

Had someone been inclined play I Spy through binoculars at that time of the morning, they might well have seen Takeo putting on and taking off a number of different garments—ever so slowly—each time reinventing himself.

Coat-hangers clashed softly against others like the slow tolling of bells. Takeo shook his head from side to side and made for the white track-suit, a smaller version of the one Handa San frequently wore. Same brand: Puma. The material was already stretched and thinning through constant wear.

How his mother shook her head when he'd begged for it—she liked to see him smart, not in sports clothes. Certainly not in Levi's ripped at the knee. No son of hers would ever dress like that.

Takeo focused on Handa San's eyes, which seemed to be watching his every move and secretly smiling.

Running a hand over his head, the boy hoped he'd grow up to be a man just like Handa San.

## SHIBUYA DOG STATUE

Liam couldn't remember much about the morning. He knew it started with a phone call from one of his sisters with all the (non) news from London, like how the plaster on her loft conversion had dried patchily.

Two alarm clocks rang simultaneously at six. Sleepwalking through shuffles of Jeff's glossy magazines en route to the bathroom (where he half-smiled at himself in the mirror, face like a crumpled marshmallow), he'd wanted to be a little boy again, faking illness to get a day off school.

When Liam got to Shibuya he didn't know whether it was the place or his fucked up body clock that was making him feel dizzy. He turned round and round, looking up at the buildings, pulsating neon, feeling the huge cartoon quality of it all. He was in a state of near hallucination.

'God bless America,' Jeff had said out loud, beside Liam.

So many people, all moving so fast to wherever. Coming from, going to. Trying hard, succeeding/failing. It's a kind of death, thought Liam. How, day in day out, crammed together in the glaring, probing white light with their sports pages, magazines, petite story books and violent, erotic comics bound in thick paperback volumes, do they cope with all this? How do they feel when they return to their rented one-room, six tatami mat apartments?

It seemed that a whole gang of people had arranged to meet by the dog shrine at the same time. Schoolgirls not at school, little old ladies, a tall thin man who—after shaking his head at his watch—got busy with a mobile. Then Liam heard Sam, who he immediately decided he'd avoid for the duration of his life.

'So there we were, outside Roppongi fuckin' Almond on this boiling hot day waiting for Yada—who's always late—and Loretta arrives saying, 'Oh shit, I can't believe what's just happened!'

This got a laugh from Loretta then all seven models. Loretta was prone to panting little dramas, stories starting off with, ‘The problem is...’ or, ‘What really pisses me off about...’ or, ‘Oh shit, I can’t believe it, guess what...’

‘Tell them that one and I’ll tell about that time it snowed in Milan and you got on the wrong train, an express, arriving three hours late for a two hour booking,’ Loretta shouted, chocolate brimming at the back of her throat. She was attempting some sort of rustic look, but only succeeded in appearing untidy.

Sam flushed, let off a laugh grenade then—panting—much to Julie B’s amusement, launched into, ‘Oh shit, blah blah blah, guess what...I was in McDonald’s, right? Just across the street, right?’

‘Big Mac’n’fries’n’happy, right?’ interrupted Loretta, taking over and cheerfully becoming a nastier version of herself, ‘Walking out the door, okay? Had a fry, yeah? It was cold, well lukewarm, an’ chips aren’t supposed to be like that. So I went back an’ asked for hot ones, yeah? ‘Hotu!’ I said, an’ picked one up. ‘Coldo!’ I said. So this zip-eye nipped over to the fries section and he had his back to me, right? I couldn’t see exactly what he was doing but had this feeling, you know what I mean, an’ he came back an’ I thought okay, so I took ’em, arigato, little bow’n’shit. Well, the ones on top were hot, nice’n’hotu actually, but the ones underneath were definitely coldo by that time I was out that door. I thought *BASTARD*...he’d only gone an’ crushed the cold ones down with ’is dirty little Nip mitt an’ just sprinkled a few fresh ones on top so I stormed right back in an’ threw ’em at him an’, I hate to admit this, missed! He ducked, but I got ’im with my Big Mac.’ (Pauses for a breath and a smile toward Sam—*best bit coming, promise* look in her panning eyes.) ‘Got the fucker right in the face,’ (Sam animates action in slow-mo), ‘so he rips off ’is McDonald’s cap, jumps over the counter an’ pushes me—actually fuckin’ pushes me—an’ suddenly there’s this policeman with ’is torch’n’all behin’ me with my arm twisted up my back—bruised me too, right?—shoutin’ *CALM DOWN!* with sushi breath at maximum volume. So I says ‘McDonald’s fries no good’, an’ he just looks at me, an’ we look at each other, kinda of cute actually, but sayonara teeth. So I explain all ladylike, ‘French fries coldo, no hotu,’ you know the way they do, an’ the fucking pig, he says very slowly in that television English lesson kinda voice, ‘*ARE*



*YOU CRAZY?* So I say sorry sorry, learry solly an' he gives me some okay this time fuck off outta here shit and I turn to leave an' then...'

'Always wanting the last word,' Sam chipped in.

'...I'm screaming *coldo, no goodu* an' he just stares at me an' the guy puts his McDonald's cap back on an' gets back to the search for job satisfaction outa serving cold fries, so I go right up to him an' say, 'You fuckin' bastards, McDonald's is shit, I'm going vegetarian, an' that's when...'

'And that's when the lovely Loretta was arrested.'

'Golding 'ad to cab it in a hurry to Ginza. It was fabulous. Took 'er fingerprints as some kind of bail. Weird.'

Yada had arrived, a washed-out Oxford scarf around her neck and a rolled up copy of *The Guardian* under her arm, (Liam wondered where she'd picked up both). Hearing only the final line of the all too familiar story, she waited for her presence to be felt then acted all pained.

'Sorry I'm late. There was a fatality on the Hanzomon line.'

A lie, quite an exciting one, too. Julie B gasped. When Loretta tutted at that, Yada noted the sarcasm down in her little black book. Lurking behind Yada was a tall, thin man who didn't look too comfortable as he introduced himself. Yada did lots of bowing, high-pitched simasens, smiling like a tightly stretched elastic band. Full apology mode.

There was a bit of talk, lots of genuine surprise at the name of the photographer, then something kind of special and important was brought into the air.

'This is Koizumi Yakumo San from XXY. The client,' Yada announced.

'KY,' Sam whispered to Loretta.

The sleeves of his navy blue jacket were cut to a perfect length. KY from XXY gave a nod that started off somewhere between cool to offhand and ended up somewhere much closer to downright rude, which Loretta felt was directed at her because of the whispering.

As they sat on a cracked, concrete bench, the man came face to face with the models, each doing their best to look lovely in broad daylight. For the previous twenty minutes he'd been monitoring quite a different side to the majority and his little eyes, barely visible black dots had missed nothing. Each strutted marketable differences. Each had a unique way to attract and repel a client. Some did it with smiles, some with

ethnicity, some with tissues packed down their bras. Lovely lazy bodies, cashing in on youth—portfolios waiting to be fingered.

‘The agency are doing three separate audition at office today and Koizumi San has be in Kyobashi in short while,’ (like ten minutes ago), ‘so we’re goin’ make audition here,’ Yada explained, half expecting a riot.

The pale blue sky turned grey as the mixture of quiet types, insecure/frightened—among others less quiet (but probably far more insecure/frightened) stood like a group of potential staff applicants groaning inwardly. No one knew what the job was all about, when it was due to be shot or whatever. Or what the *guarantee* was.

Jeff was sagging against the actual dog shrine itself. Hunched, stoop-shouldered. He always did his best to be different, wanting so very much to stand out. He thought it was a good way of being remembered even if it wasn’t right for that job, maybe the antic would help get a job next time round. Maybe even a direct booking. (Something which meant italics in Jeff’s head. Albertus Extra Bold. Size:48. Underlined.)

The man from XXY scanned the semicircle of international, smartly dressed, exfoliated, gym-trained flesh, antennae busy—fine-tuned reception searching the magic frequency. Maybe he was searching for that special shine, or some trivial physical attribute that hadn’t been neatly documented page after page in the shiny portfolios each clutched. Whatever, he did it with an air of familiarity and contempt mixed with that hungry itch for a successful advertising campaign. Everyone was ready for everything; polaroids, Hi-8, measurements, a few steps of tap dancing.

A manager from Folio swanned by with a pair of red-haired identical twins.

‘Hi-ya,’ the woman sing-songed to Yada. Yada’s toes curled up inside her Gucci. Go sees and the occasional casting were sometimes held in coffee shops, but outside Shibuya station was a first.

Julie B sat alongside the client, squeezing her knees together, raising a little on to the toes of her adorable size six feet. There, on the opening page of her portfolio was the *An-An* cover that was everywhere that week.

*Height: 5’11’/1.81m Bust: 34/86 Waist: 22/60 Hips: 34/86 Shoes: 6/24 Hair: Blonde Eyes: Blue Specialities: Languages, teeth, horse riding.*

Julie B adjusted the single, simple string of Jackie O style pearls around her beautiful neck, centring them, fancying that attention to detail might improve chances. She smiled, acted a little embarrassed. Stomach in,

shoulders back, verging on virginal. First impressions at the ready for a closer inspection.

This, Julie B insisted to herself internally, is my one year off before Business Studies.

‘Nice girl. Lovely skin,’ Yada said.

The client gave Julie B a full onceover and smiled, placing the card to his right.

‘Where you from?’ the client asked.

‘New Zealand. Auckland, New Zealand.’

Morrison Models would have been proud of the slow, clear articulation.

‘Thank you, Miss B,’ the client said, and they both had a little laugh.

Little Miss B, Liam thought—quite shaggable actually. The compass needle of his sex life up till then had been fully jammed at GAY, but it was flickering. He wasn’t sure if it would point elsewhere. Where next? Absolutely nowhere was fine by him.

‘Jeff.’

Jeff ran a hand through his hair with fingers stretched out like a giant comb. He smiled to show how easy-going he’d be to spend a few hours with on the job, chewing gum as steadily as he breathed air. He played at being polite and containable while his body language communicated increasing arrogance with every breath.

Look, Jeff was saying, good hair. Well groomed. Cut it, dye it—whatever.

One of his eyebrows, the left, was slightly but beautifully arched as he whispered internally, *please book me. (Italics. Albertus Extra Bold. Size:48. Underlined.)*

There he stood, in a public place, arms folded like a Bruce Weber sailor, pushing out his biceps. Legs apart. Too physical. ET would have been less conspicuous.

The smile faded to show that serious, intense inner life. Just ten minutes before he’d said, ‘I love my face right now. It’s gotten so thin, real thin. Before I was like this...(Blowfish face).’ That’s what he’d said, and then, ‘Hey, now tell me honestly, can you tell I have make-up on?’ The lighting was not in his favour for the answer he’d wanted. Liam had said, ‘No, I can honestly say I can’t.’ (Except for that horrible clog of orangey foundation stuck in the area of a squeezed spot he’d splashed the

bathroom mirror with that morning. A well-squeezed crater at the edge of the smiling, non-stop talking mouth.)

Truanting schoolgirls and little old ladies sucking mints watched, fascinated. And there, on the opening page of what he called his *book* was the (slightly out of focus) page from *Dazed & Confused* of someone he was the spitting image of. Not him. Not J-E-F-F from Racine, Wisconsin. Same hair, same contours of the face—the kind plastic surgeons manufacture for the already good looking—same kind of stupid American faggot, the client thought, having seen the very model in town just the week before.

‘Small world,’ the client said to Jeff, snapping the book shut. Jeff’s card was placed to the left.

‘New boy,’ Yada said, ‘just started modelling.’ *Height: 6’1”/l.85m Chest: 38/98 Waist: 30/77 Inseam: 34/86 Outside leg: 43/112 Shoes-10/28 Hair: Dark brown Eyes: Hazel Specialities: Shows.*

Liam was on the receiving end of two nods and a smile as the six test shots flipped. His card, fresh from the printers that morning, was placed on top of Julie B’s.

Liam felt he hadn’t done well. Inside a bell went *ding*. He’d have to pick up the lingo.

‘Loretta,’ Yada whispered.

Loretta raised her beautiful head, black hair falling across that clear olive face, then flashed a red-light look. Hey, look, yeah hi, it’s little ol’ me!

The client hadn’t forgotten. He’d quite specifically told the booker not to send Loretta, having had the experience of an overnight shoot in Isikawa the previous month. Golding had insisted Loretta go on the casting just to waste her time, despite what the client might come back with.

Looking through Loretta’s portfolio, slapping the international editorial smackily, memories flooded back of her tantrum in the Kenrokuen Garden, her demands to break for lunch at eleven in the morning before being photographed at the Isikawa Gate, not to mention the entire set of Wajima lacquerware she spoiled by dropping in a fit of giggles on the steps of the Natadera Temple. Loretta knew she’d been no angel, had in fact been surprised when she realised she was on an XXY casting.

He didn’t return her wink of a greeting, preferring to say nothing, enjoying the progressive sense of unease he detected. When she saw how the man’s nails were denting, if not piercing the edges of those transparent

plastic pages, she knew which planet he was on and how very much he wanted to not give her the job. Any job. Ever. Card to the left.

‘Sam,’ Yada whispered, ‘Sam Dylan.’

In that moment of eye-to-eye contact, young Zimmerman had to let the man know that it was okay by him to camp it up as a Teletubby, come over all sexy in a tux, be a meanie in combats, whatever—whenever.

‘Lovely eyes.’

‘But not lovely enough,’ thought the client.

Sam’s portfolio was greeted with that total lack of interest that too often signifies a total lack of interest. Card to the left.

‘And this is...’

Portfolio flips, cigarette sucks. Then two names were whispered to Yada.

Yada nodded Liam and Julie B over toward a blank wall. Two polaroids were quickly shot of each.

# SCHOOL

Takeo was the third of forty to enter the gym after a warmup jog around the sports pitch.

He leaned back against laminated photographs of team members performing on the track, in the pool, on the horse, asymmetric bars, beam and mats. A display illustrating all manner of hops, skips, jumps, dives, handstands, headstands, fly springs, backward rolls, cartwheels, splits and flic-flacs.

Sadao Hashizume, the high school swimming and athletics team captain heart throb and cruel upper grader, not at all breathless after the running, was doing show off push-ups on one arm as if it were no effort at all.

After forty, that arm was aching like wanker's cramp. Sadao was pushing himself beyond the usual onset of fatigue to distress—pain. He only stopped when he knew Handa San had taken in a full five seconds worth.

Then standing, the fifteen-year-old deigned to glance at Takeo. His eyes were set close—they were small, dark and glassy, of startling concentration. His general attitude was one of toughness, malevolence and ferocity—all the makings of a delicious delinquent. Tough-looking, tough-talking, taut-muscled. No one messed with Hashizume.

Sadao knew the twelve-/nearly thirteen-year-old was another admiring, spellbound schoolboy who'd melt if he were within arm's reach. He walked toward Takeo, shaking out his shoulders as he did so. If Takeo had been there alone he might have thought an attack were imminent.

Rape, even.

Sadao was as tall as Handa San, legs as hairy, almost an identical build. Like Handa San, his skin was a rich milky chocolate. Like Handa San, his shoulders were wide and broad, more so than any other boy's in the school. Though he was blessed with a supple grace he was a threatening presence in the changing rooms.

Like Handa San, Sadao's jet black curls had been carefully cut away, sheared down to a military #4 after the teacher's first month at the school. They could have been twins but for the remnants of Sadao's baby face and eyebrows that were sharply arched as if plucked. But most definitely weren't.

Takeo had heard that Sadao shaved himself all over when it came to swimming competitions. He thought that was a bit weird but really committed. To Takeo, the older boy was like a second adult in the sessions, but not one to be trusted.

Handa San was the only teacher Sadao had any respect for. School was worth coming to with a teacher like that. He enjoyed the leisurely chats with the man about anything and everything. Judo, kendo, karate, acne, diet. His future.

Sadao said he wanted to be a PE teacher. He didn't really, no money in it. Only good thing about teaching was the holidays. Sadao already knew a lot about Handa San. Where he was brought up, what he watched on tv. Unmarried. He liked him. He knew it was what they called a schoolboy crush; but it was okay. It wasn't a queer sort of thing, just a curiosity, an admiration.

'Right, watch me.'

Unlike the last PE teacher—a man who felt exercises were only effective when students were on the verge of collapse—Handa San was inspirational, a good example. Sadao couldn't believe that first lesson when Handa San had gone on about viscosity, all that business with the treacle. It was kind of Junior High, but okay. He'd pulled it off in a tv Science kind of way.

Through the tiny crackle of chest hairs above the neckline, Handa San scratched briefly with a thumbnail, rattling the pea in his whistle. Sadao's wondering sense of the man's body was triggered. Delicate currents of air brought his scent to the adolescent's nostrils. Like Handa San, Sadao used an aftershave with a touch of cloves. A mature smell, not light and citrus.

Though the days were timetabled, unvarying, pretty much identical, Sadao found himself getting excited when it was PE. Chance encounters in corridors were as treasured as the recent photo of the athletics team.

At first, Sadao found acknowledging the enjoyment he gained from attending Handa San's classes and after school club difficult. He didn't

want to think of himself as a *queer*. He hoped the shivering attention he paid the man was a phase he was going through. After all, he consoled himself, he didn't actually want to get down on his knees and suck the bloke off or anything like that. He'd never thought of a teacher as much as he thought about Handa San. He'd never thought so much about a man.

Passing before his eyes was that small inverted 'U' where the man's buttocks joined together. An area with an insatiable centre between those long, strong legs—Handa San's arse. He'd never found himself looking at a guy's arse before. It kind of confused him because he knew he wasn't a faggot, any of that kind of shit. It was just anatomy, human sculpture. He liked girls, he reassured his paranoia. Cunt, he whispered to himself. C-U-N-T, nice bit of.

'Right, over here by the ropes. Line up.'

It was action stations, animated action stations. What was it to be? Arm and shoulder supplying? Hip mobilising? Corrective muscles for the neck?

The boys never knew what was coming next with that teacher. Every session was out of the blue, but every session was somehow linked to the last. It all made sense.

'Volunteer?'

Forty arms that could snap like brittle ice shot up.

Takeo raised his beautiful head, black hair falling across that clear olive face.

'You,' then their eyes met for the first time that day, 'step forward, Sadao.'

Sadao felt Handa San was taking a special interest in him and liked the feeling. He was often picked out to demonstrate to the class. On one occasion this involved removing his vest to show the horizontal line that defined the base of his chest muscles. Sadao was, after all, the swimming and athletics team captain.

Handa San had pointed out the line of the diaphragm with an index finger that had felt the warmth of the adolescent's body without actually touching.

The scent of the rain outside came before the heavy drops spotted the white lines of the sports pitch. Rain ran on to leaves and into puddles, splashing against the windows.

'Watch, and listen carefully.'

Silence, but for that drumming of rain on the roof.



Handa San turned to Sadao, 'Just do as I do and you'll be fine.'

Handa San took his white track-suit off. The man's grey shorts were bunched up around the tops of his legs. The clinging creases were given a few, casual plucks. He removed the whistle from around his neck, then his vest slid up and off.

What a time to start getting a stiffy, Sadao thought. For a moment he tried to imagine a ginger-haired woman on her back, with swollen, close-set breasts. A smooth, soft, warm belly between protruding European hips with stumpy arms, plump thighs, deeply-tanned skin and half-closed eyes who in her grandiose and taunting provocation demanded that her fishy fanny be licked—but his erection only wilted a little, creeping back up to full strength with the vision of Handa San standing beside him in nothing but those grey shorts and Reeboks.

'First listen, then watch. I want you all to climb to the top of the rope and when about a metre from the top, swing both legs up overhead to grasp the rope between your feet. Release the grasp of the right hand and move it down the rope beyond your head, grasp firmly and then do the same with the other arm. Yes, upside down. Descend hand-over-hand, gripping the rope with your feet, allowing it to slide between them as you come down. If in doubt, give a shout. When about a metre from the floor, retain the hand-grasp and swing your legs down to a standing position. Right, I don't want any showing off or Tarzan cries. No *Look at me! Legs only!* stuff. And take it slowly, I don't want any broken necks. Got it?'

'Ready Sadao?' Handa San asked, giving his rope a yank.

The volunteer nodded. He hoped the pulling and straining would rid him of that bulge in his shorts.

'Okay,' Handa San said, and they were off.

A metre from the top, Handa San flashed Sadao a look. Sadao swallowed hard, he felt dizzy. His heart was pounding like that time he'd tried an E. He was relieved to see that all thirty-nine sets of eyes below were on Handa San.

Swinging both legs up overhead, as instructed, grasping the rope between his feet, the bone hard erection intensified.

Fuck it, who's going to notice anything upside down? Sadao thought.

Releasing the grasp of the right hand and moving it down the rope beyond his head, grasping firmly, then doing the same with the other arm, all seemed to be going well.

Descending hand-over-hand, gripping the rope with his feet, the rope kept sliding, banging, exciting. Handa San flashed the youth beside him a look, face red as a morello cherry.

Retaining the hand-grasp, both swung legs down to the floor at exactly the same time.

Sadao made a dash for his vest, wiping his face with it in a single movement before holding it there in front of him.

‘Well done, Sadao,’ Handa San said casually, raising whistle to lips.

‘Please, Sir, may I be excused? Bustin’ for a slash.’

Handa San smiled. That was no way to speak to a teacher, but it was okay coming from Sadao. He found the boy’s man-to-man approach a little comic. And not unsexy.

‘Sure,’ he said, watching the kid move off.

As boys lined up in three lines of ten, one of nine, Sadao was making for the toilets. At that age he had mastered the fine art of wanking and knew that within a minute he could be splashing into a urinal if he chose to.

Behind the locked cubicle door, he could hear Handa San’s voice, telling thirty-nine boys to get their vests off. Oh shit, God, he thought, please don’t make me a faggot.

Like many a fifteen-year-old boy, he knew the taste of his own spunk, but hadn’t thought of comparisons, words to describe the texture, the tastebud sensation of it.

Once again the toilet door warmed as yet another young thing’s heart began to thump rapidly, chaotically, causing the blood to throb violently against his throat.

‘Great,’ Handa San shouted. ‘Now swing both legs up overhead to grasp the rope between your feet. That’s right. Don’t rush it, Takeo. Release the grasp of the right hand and move it down the rope beyond your head. Grasp firmly. Now do the same with the other arm. Good boy, you’ve got it.’

All was going well. Handa San looked around, Sadao was taking his time.

‘That’s right, *really* grip the rope with your feet.’

The sudden shrill of Handa San’s whistle made Sadao stop himself, just in time. He knew coming would kill his energy. He slapped one side of his face lightly, talking himself down.

‘Reckon you’re up to it a second time?’ Handa San asked when the boy joined the line of nine.

The boy nodded, said, ‘Sure.’

Sadao managed pretty well throughout the session, but found his erection bubbling up during the single-hand face knee-vault exercise and downright impossible to suppress during the final loosening up routine.

The shower-room was quieter than usual. The whole session had been somewhat subdued. The firmly fixed nozzles sounded fiercer than ever before as they sprayed water and steam.

Soaping himself in the confines of the cubicle, Handa San seemed far off and distant. So alone. So mysterious. Maybe a little lonely, Sadao thought.

Takeo stretched alternate legs up toward the falling water, hands on head. Within twenty minutes the boy would be shouting, ‘Mum, I’m home.’

Drying himself, Sadao asked the teacher about the competition arrangements for Saturday. Nipples a mixture of maroon and brown were patted slowly with a pale green towel as he pretended to listen.

Look at me, Sadao’s body language was murmuring, not taking in a word the man was saying. Hey, look at this. Come on.

Sadao longed to catch the man’s eyes on him. They weren’t. His penis jiggled as he dried himself. Jiggled and grew. Look, now—you bastard. Oi, over here.

When all but four students were left in the changing room, Sadao was still naked, sitting on the long wooden bench, towel wrapped around his neck.

‘Hurry up, Sadao,’ Handa San said, sounding a little impatient.

Sadao stood, faking discomfort at the far end of the changing room.

‘You okay?’ Handa San asked on cue.

Sadao said nothing and—reluctantly—put on powder blue, ribbed, bikini briefs. Something with a little Polyester or Lycra spandex woven in for elasticity.

Handa San would be so matter of fact about the sex, he’d get right down to it without any inhibitions. There’d be none of the emotional shit he’d already had with girls. It wouldn’t be about love, it’d be about cock and arse and pumping sperm.

Han-da San, the three syllables the adolescent had voiced when shooting his load three nights back. Before he was fully hard again, he slipped on his

vest, also of palest blue.

‘Good night Sensei,’ Takeo said.

Handa San nodded, a smile breaking the corner of his mouth. ‘See you.’

Moving to stand in what was left of Takeo’s aureole of young heat, Handa San looked at his watch. Then he held a basketball to his chest and rocked it, almost cradling it in those strong arms.

A quizzical look from Sadao created a little fit of panic in Handa San. Sadao was just sitting there, watching him as he ran a hand over that left shoulder. Takeo and the other two had gone: they were alone.

Alone: a potentially dangerous position for the young teacher to be discovered in. There was a departmental policy warning against ever being a-l-o-n-e with a student. Black and white clearly stated it was something to be avoided.

Beyond professional paranoia, Handa San felt more than a frisson of recall. Many was the time he’d been the last to get dried down and dressed—steam pouring in from the showers.

Then Sadao went for it. Thought he’d give it a try. The idea was a challenge.

‘Sensei, I think I’ve pulled a muscle. Right here. It really hurts.’

The words felt funny/forced/porno.

‘Let me take a look.’

The words felt familiar/awkward/porno.

Takeo was hurrying down the grey path from the gymnasium, puddle-stained and criss-crossed with muddy mountain bike tracks, his trousers catching on a monotony of ferns spilling out of their beds.

Glassy drops of water rolled on to his shoes, then off to cracks in the paving slabs, down to the secretive roots of large pine trees, clutching grit and crystals.

A stain on the wall at the corner of the gym scared Takeo for a moment. It jumped out at him. Like the shadow of a man, he thought, waiting there. He laughed at himself for thinking such a thing.

‘Grow up!’ he said to himself. ‘Jerk.’

Bearing his over-the-shoulders satchel like a hunchback,

Takeo could hear books sliding up and down together as he bounced along, pencils shaking—a noise like galloping horses right there on his back.

## #8B

Outside was grey with flies, a horrible net curtain of insects.

Just before dark, a light shower had fallen, improving air quality for a while—then a breeze had started up.

Sitting by the window Shinohara San scanned red roofs, blue roofs, unlit neon and orange tv aerials. There were, she reckoned, seven hundred and fifty variations of grey now turned to black. And a glint of silver, a brief glint that came from the block of flats opposite. Seventh floor. Venetian blinds. She was sure. Just a flash of light on lens.

It was only a feeling, but Shinohara San was sure she was being watched. She was (99.9%) certain she had seen a figure take a step back behind those Venetians when she had gazed right into them. At first she'd felt slightly invaded, a little frightened. Some dirty pervert. Then she got to like the idea. Maybe she had a secret admirer.

How long had she been at her easel lately? How long had it been going on? What had she worn? Then she gulped. There was that time in the summer when she'd thought, after a few drinks, what the heck, and with a strategically placed mirror, had attempted a nude self-portrait.

What if someone had been watching her as she played at being a whore, smoking with her legs wide apart? What if she'd been watched, alone with her body on the sofa?

She opened the paintbox slowly, revealing the double tier of rounded, labelled colours. Each of the pretty dollops of colour had been softened with water. Some were already quite worn down. She'd soon be out of black. Everything became deliberate.

What if I'm being watched? she thought. And a finger went to her mouth, her throat, to the V-neck of her jumper. Then, below that jumper, her heart began to thump.

She felt sensual, horny. Close to masturbation. She looked at the clock, then the jumper was off.

It gave her pleasure to blow smoke into the cool, evening air. Between the fibred holes of her knickers, the gusset wore a tender honey stain. She was more than moist. The pip within the slit was begging for an encircling finger, a gentle and shy fingering, the first-time kitten licks at warm milk from a saucer.

Before he put his key in the door he gave a belch smelling strongly of miso bean soup. As the key turned she sprang up, skipping to the bathroom. By the time her husband had finished fussing over Sunday Girl at the door, the bubble bath she'd decided to give herself was ready to be stepped into.

'Hi,' he said.

'Hi.'

Husband read an article about the circulatory and respiratory problems of deep sea divers as wife prepared a bite to eat.

Wife was ignored as husband enjoyed his sake, with a dish of marinated horse mackerel to wash it down. Sunday Girl's eyes grew quite round as she gazed up at the longed-for morsels entering the man's mouth, her nostrils quivering.

Still wrapped in a towel, drying her hair roughly, Shinohara San eased down on to the sofa. He didn't even look at her.

'Women want to talk after sex, men want to go to sleep,' Shinohara San said. 'Discuss.'

He smiled.

'I think you should know I need a fuck.'

She insisted they do it there, right then, without gargling, on the sofa. Lights on, curtains wide apart.

After they'd both come, her husband whispered in her ear for a full two minutes before falling asleep.

## #7B

‘Mum, I’m home.’

The flat smelled of broiled eel, his mother’s favourite— not his.

He dragged shirt and vest over his ears together, folding them as a complex on the back of his homework chair. Over that same chair went layered socks, smoothed flat into two-dimensional neatness. Finally, he undid the belt of his trousers, wriggling out of them with extravagant movements of hips and behind. Slithered out of his pants.

When the only son of an unimaginative marriage saw his reflection in the paired full length mirrors he thought it would be sexy to stay that way and—for the first time ever—decided to make use of that lock on the bedroom door. Had his mother not been humming to herself quite so loudly as she scoured a pan, she might have heard the gunshot click that made Takeo jump/stand on tiptoes/ blush/consider unlocking quickly. He waited. Nothing. Maybe it was okay, he thought.

Takeo sat at his desk, by the window, anglepoise lamp lighting half his face, Science homework before him.

Concentration was lacking. Dreamily and interminably he bounced his knees together. Grinding round the interior of the boy’s skull was a loathsome tune heard on the radio that morning. A noise texture of fuzz guitars, whiny vocals and feedback. Flat, rhythmic, repetitious. Numb. The chorus circled his brain, begging him to buy it on CD format ASAP.

Running a hand over the precision-cut crop, already double what it had been just a couple of days back. The haircut was softening, making him look young again, less tough. He wondered what Handa San had looked like at his age, hoping he’d looked like him.

Takeo returned to the mirror to have another look at himself. His stomach was empty, flat. Breathing in, each bone in his ribcage was outlined. In, out. Rising, falling. From behind, the boy’s shoulder blades jutted out like wings.

He wanted to look at himself and at the photo of Handa San at the same time so, easing it off the wall carefully, Blu-Tac remaining firm, he rehoused his hero on cold mirror glass.

The boy didn't know what he was up to, but knew it was to do with the word *masturbation*. He thought it would be fun pretending to be Handa San stripping off. On went white socks, BVD briefs, white vest, grey shorts, black teeshirt, track-suit and trainers. Then he felt silly, it was still him. With a baseball cap on, worn back to front the way Handa San sometimes wore his, plus Ray Bans—just like Handa San's—Takeo was transformed, and transfixed.

He wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry.

Off came the glasses, eyes wide with astonishment. Out of the blue a few screws were shaking into new slots in his head. There was an unhappy realisation on the twelve-/nearly thirteen-year-old's face. He spoke in a hoarse whisper to his reflection as if confiding to his teacher.

'I'm going to be a faggot. Even if I marry, I'm going to be a faggot.'

He'd never associated homosexuality with a reality that could touch him. That he could actually do the things he dreamed of, in the flesh—if only in the distant future—aroused him and made him feel a bit foolish. He smiled, thinking of a tent in Austria. Through the fine white material of the briefs and track-suit bottoms poked a bulge. Back on went the glasses.

'Stretch! Go on, right up. Tiptoes. Over. Hold. Back.

Keep breathing. Up. Come on, Sasabe. Stretch! Kobayashi, don't rush it. Tiptoes. Arms down and re-lax. Useless!'

His tone was that of a (nice) faggot school teacher trying to sound tough. His whisper echoed off the bedroom walls, the voice came from all angles as if by the wonders of Dolby Surround.

Takeo imagined thirty-six boys in neat rows on white lines halting their clumsy efforts.

'Right, watch me.'

Smoothly, evenly, again and again in lovely slow motion, Takeo showed the mirror how to do the required exercise. The boy watched the elegance of his body, cutting through air. It was a stretch—a plain stretch. Something he'd done thousands of times since infancy, often to NHK. The mirror brought a fresh awareness to the familiar exercise.

'No bouncing at this point. And here...push it till it hurts!'



Takeo became aware of the tightness of his skin, the smoothness. This, he thought, is what Handa San sees.

‘Okay? Right, let’s try it again.’

He gave a melodious laugh which sounded so boyishly innocent.

‘And stretch! Right up. Tiptoes. Over. What did I say about bouncing? Hold. Keep breathing. Back. Up. Come on, Hosokawa. Stretch! Tiptoes. Arms down and re-lax. Right, four volunteers.’

Takeo imagined thirty-six arms that could snap like brittle ice rising.

‘You, you, you...’ Then, taking off the glasses, his eyes met his own, ‘...and you—you sexy little thing you—over here. Next to me lad. Line up.’

Takeo’s pupils dilated with an inky surge set perfectly against the brilliant whites.

‘Watch.’

## Apt. 7A

The eyes of the viewer were alert. They were large, round eyes. Very dark. Long eyelashes, each hair shined individually.

To these eyes the boy in the block of flats opposite was perfect. If beauty could have been held, put on freeze, that was the moment to press PAUSE.

Close to seven the boy was at his desk, perfectly lit, as if for a photograph. Sidelit by anglepoise, backlit with fluorescent, overhead—just a hint of moon. The pencil he had in his mouth, the viewer thought, made a great prop.

Maybe he liked the feel of the small, geared hexagons between his teeth. He didn't bite, but held it there, releasing the faint grip every once in a while to rotate a measured turn. Like all children he did, no doubt, enjoy the taste of paint and wood upon his tongue as he gave the end a soft chew. The closer he got to the window, the more radiant he became.

When Takeo turned the light beside him off, the occupant of Apt. 7A's face took on its normal blank sag. When the anglepoise was quickly switched back on— making him appear like a sudden black and white picture—the viewer wondered if some sort of game were in progress.

Off on off. On. Off on. Off.

## #9A

Atsko was licking salt off her fingers when she spotted her mother hop off the bus, right on schedule. She was always late on Wednesdays. Staff meeting.

Atsko opened a pack of sugar-free gum to get rid of the smell of peanuts, just in case her mother caught a whiff.

She'd pass that fresh breath test.

Atsko's mother took one look at the back of her daughter's throat, placed the palm of her hand under her only child's fringe, then pronounced Ats chan well enough to walk the dog. Had that only child not been chewing chemical-flavoured bubble gum—strawberry and lime—she might well have managed to get yet another day off school, missing afternoon PE which she hated.

Atsko didn't really understand what her walks had been about over the last six months. There was more to them than walking off advancing cellulite. From her parents' marriage, Atsko understood that in a sexual relationship one person gets more out of the exchange than the other and the one who usually gets more is the man. Unlike her mother, she wanted to be the victor. She knew girls who allowed themselves to be no more than slits, slots. Sockets to force. Little warm things to finger, fuck and piss up. A girl in her class had undergone a hush hush abortion the previous month. Everyone knew.

'Boys are lucky,' she confided to her bow wow.

The comb with which she straightened her fringe had teeth cut with uncanny precision.

The little dog, the long-eared, long-nosed Artois beagle named Sherry, was panting and salivating while running in circles. Atsko had sung that magic word, 'Walkies.'

## STREET

It was a Tokyo night—Hondas and Toyotas bumper to bumper. Lights, faces, doughnut shops. Gleaming steel and glass, neon chaos.

Splashing past traffic lights toward more traffic lights with a tiny transparent umbrella, an obese fifteen-year-old schoolgirl moved at quite a pace.

In a narrow side-street flagged with cloth signs in vertical folds and hoardings rampant with black ink, that fifteen-year-old girl out walking her dog paused to attach the clip-on earrings her mother didn't know about to soft, full lobes. Then the lipstick. She had to hurry.

When Atsko lit a cigarette she took two quick lungfuls of soothing smoke. Instantly she appeared different, dry-eyed and cracked. Older. Imagining herself absolutely naked, she set off. A nymph clad only in her own hair, swinging the tiniest handbag in the world—barely capacious enough for a set of keys.

Approaching Roppongi Crossing, Atsko pocketed her brace and unwrapped some fresh chemical-flavoured gum. Pineapple. Maybe she'd get a snog.

There was the usual huddle of lithe figures hovering by the chrome entrance of the Almond, beneath the pink and blue canopy, clutching flat, black folders—checking their watches. Cool in their linen suits and silk dresses. Acquirable youth and energy. One looked just like the girl on the cover of that week's *An-An*. So tall, maybe 1.81.

Over the crossing, down, right, down, sharp left, down two steps—there. There by the bushes. A good place for a fifteen-year-old to stand if s/he wanted to get raped. She knew what to say and how to say it. She had a perfectly modulated voice, a sleepy kid sister's high-pitched quality.

'Take my hand and put it where you'd like it to be,' she whispered the English words with an American accent into her cupped hand, checking that exhalation smelled sweet. 'Go on,' she whispered, in that too young, too fresh, too eager to please tiny little doll with a pull-string voice of hers.

The only child of an unimaginative marriage would basically do it with any guy as long as they were above twelve, below forty, having no facial hair of any kind. Or glasses. And they had to be foreigners. No fatties, either. She wasn't looking for Mr Right, she was looking for fun and she had ten minutes or questions would be asked.

One night, just the once, a couple of really obvious dykes had passed by and kind of flirted (some kind of telepathic moment) then turned to see what her reaction was. They'd poked their tongues, made fucky fucky thrusting movements, yelled out, 'Here pussy pussy!' Foreigners. Atsko had felt kind of disgusted and confused. Flattered, mostly.

Sherry, the eight month old long-eared, long-nosed Artois beagle beside her, knew the routine and the rules. Any barking, any pulling of the lead would mean no M&Ms on the way home. Occasionally its head nodded like one of those toys in the back of a car.

Atsko looked at her watch. She wondered if her satin-feel legs would be splattered by a giant gaijin's prick over the next eight minutes.

Use me, her body language whispered. Use me.

## BASEMENT

The man from Hokkaido was taken over in the usual way. It was a breathless, pulse-hammering longing for the reincarnation of James Dean.

‘The new boy’s nice,’ Ippei encouraged. ‘Big.’

‘Think I’ll stick with the little devil I know.’

‘Scottie,’ Ippei bleated.

Scottie lurched toward the towel cupboard, taking the usual quota.

‘Lucky you,’ Ippei laughed, ‘it’s the big baby.’

Scottie groaned.

The man’s obscene ugliness inspired in everyone—except Ippei—feelings of disgust, pity, but then trust. Ippei, since first meeting him some nine months back, had wanted to know his story, what made him tick. What made the man from Hokkaido the creature he was. And, perhaps more importantly, what he was worth.

Scottie checked himself in the bathroom mirror. Stomach in, shoulders back, skills of patience to the fore. He’d just come from a sunbed treatment and his face was turkey-red. Three quarters scorched—one quarter peeled, post-nuclear. He looked in the mirror with above average neurotic self-absorption and tutted.

Away from the brothel, Scottie filled his time with purposeful curiosity. He read constantly, spoke seven languages, worked out. Memorised the names of the finest wines, knew who made the best shoes, jewellery, perfumes, suits. Like an actor preparing himself for a challenging role, he acquired the best in everything along the way. He could chat about Chinese jade, English porcelain, French furniture, European painting and Indie. Best of all, Indie.

Born and raised in Yokohama, son of a (nice) sergeant major based there, Scottie spoke perfect Japanese, something that pleased/unnerved clients as the hour came to a close.

He’d spent his adolescence reading Donne and Shaw, studying History, Philosophy, Zoology and Physics. Joining clubs, preparing for a career,

learning languages and jokes off by heart. Scottie knew it didn't really matter if he had an IQ of seventy or one hundred and seventy when a gentleman was eyeing his contours behind the two way mirror, but it helped once the game was in progress.

Scottie had his twenty-three-year-old sights set on Los Angeles. Anywhere, actually.

He desperately wanted to get away from Yokohama. He wanted out and his Sumitomo Bank balance was looking healthy.

He wanted to do something in the wonderful world of cinema. He'd studied film at art school and was currently putting together a little something on the gay scene in Japan.

Many was the time he'd screamed his way through a repeated stage directed shoot—low budget, high camp, slightly trippy. He was better in front of the camera, he boasted. A natural. The videos he sold of himself to clients revealed a younger, slimmer, expertly innocent artiste in a variety of jockstraps, swimwear, uniforms and leather. Home movie stuff the average home doesn't usually stretch to.

'Hi,' the man said, all friendly, briefly raising the horrible cheeks of his face, more unpleasantly chubby than average European buttocks. To his eyes the youth coming toward him looked terrific, as if just back from a good day at the beach. His very own hypersexed golden boy.

'I know what you want.'

One Levi Strauss & Co button, two Levi Strauss & Co buttons, three... then—pop—four, five Levi Strauss & Co buttons were all undone. Shining stainless steel or whatever they're made of.

The big baby was enthralled by the denim, how it was fraying at the second to bottom button. How it was so pale above the pockets, how the loops looked so blue against the black leather of the belt.

His eyes moved from one nipple to another, back again, pursing his lips like a thirsty fellow about to drink from a frosted glass. Pink, perky, minced meat nipples. Left nipple, right nipple. The man was hypnotised, enthralled, within Scottie's power. Nice, clean Scottie with the Immac'd bottie.

A lapel of the man's jacket was given a gentle pull.

'Strip.'

The more clothes the man took off the more traumatic the experience became. There were thick black quiffs of hair on the nipples of his sagging D-cup breasts.

Most liked it with oil, that man preferred baby powder which had its advantages. The powder absorbed sweat and camouflaged body odour—the numero uno nightmare of whoring.

The man could feel Scottie bending over him. He smelled the same as usual, *Eternity* by Calvin Klein. Through the tiny cracks of his pretend-asleep eyes he saw Scottie fetch the talc very slowly, the way he always did. No rush.

‘Okay?’ Scottie asked.

Hearing the familiar unfastening of the Johnson & Johnson, the man from Hokkaido pinched his nose. It was Midori who’d given him a sneezing fit some weeks back with his slapdash approach and the man hadn’t taken any chances since.

‘Three sprinkles of talcum powder there...

three sprinkles of talcum powder there...  
and there...

and there...

and

sprinkle  
sprinkle  
sprinkle

and

one  
down  
there.

And

one  
for  
luck.’

‘Lovely,’ the man said



‘That nice, huh?’

‘Mmm,’ the man replied, closing his eyes.

‘Okay. Under starter’s orders—and they’re off.’

He liked it on his chest. Soft and light and warm and round and round. Over and over before the action started. Circling. One ugly Seiko minute, two ugly Seiko minutes, three ugly Seiko minutes—always ten ugly Seiko minutes, or thereabouts. Over and over. Scottie had to get him to that snoozy state, then drag him back. Over and over. Increasing pressure then reducing suddenly to be tender, to circle. Tease. Make him feel good, give him a break from being the scary monster from Hokkaido.

‘Okay?’

‘Soo-pah.’

The man let out a full litre fart of noxious gas.

‘Hey, what’s that new boy like?’ he asked in perfect English. ‘Akira. I hear he’s what you Americans call VWE.’

‘XXL, so word has it.’

‘Mmm.’

‘Wouldn’t mind a slice of that myself,’ Scottie muttered, as if an aside.

Ippei had all the boys drilled to encourage encouragement. Scottie had sowed the suggestion well.

‘Dick of death by all accounts,’ Scottie added.

The man rolled over. He’d had a lovely little dirty idea.

‘Fancy a threesome?’

## #7B

In that block, like so many blocks, the bedtime rituals of locking doors, checking taps, straightening towels, setting clocks, kissing photographs good night and darkening rooms was in progress. Takeo's mother was close to completing hers—just another few more minutes.

Takeo's shoes, polished to parade standard some twenty hours before, were scuffed and—inside—gross. Perhaps the idea of applying the polish by tongue was passing through her mind, lovingly.

She sprinkled a little anti-fungal powder in, sprinkle sprinkle, then started.

Despite her age she still retained a girlish quality. Effortlessly those shoes were shined, fingers enjoying the feel of where her son's big toe was beginning to force a shape in the leather upper of the right.

In the darkness her eyes were like black grapes, pushed into her unsmiling pale face.

When clouds briefly parted in front of the moon each grey hair of her head struck out like guitar strings.

She didn't like the view except when powder-snow drifted in gusty veils, reminding her of home. She wondered where the clouds were going, cruising to some weird address that was left at the mountain, right at the bird's nest.

It was close to midnight, time to do something she so enjoyed, something her little boy didn't know she got up to. She poured herself a glass of sweet sherry, sat by the window and—headphones on—fiddled with a tiny transistor radio to find a song worth listening to until one she didn't much fancy started up. Then she'd move along the dial, starting the process off again. From Bunka Hoso, Nippon Hoso to J Wave and the BBC World Service. She heard all kinds of things that way, made all kinds of discoveries.

The radio was tuned to the Far East Network, the US military station.

It wasn't long before she was silently clapping her little hands along to 'Careless Whisper'.

She remembered herself as a young girl walking along a winding road with three flowers a boy had surprised her with.

She remembered the random song of birds as that boy had shouted out to her, 'Nighty night!'

She remembered the wind ruffling her hair, warmth rising up from between her breasts, the magic and rich world of youth.

She remembered how the crickets trilled and rasped as she stopped to cry with happiness at being alive.

She also remembered times when floods were waited on to abate, grim costs to be reckoned. Butterflies stitching the air. But that was all a long time ago, way away in another place, a far cry from the seventh floor of a block of flats in Tokyo.

'Oh dear,' she sighed to herself, feeling boxed in somewhere amid eleven stories piled high.

A scatter of birds flew at a diagonal from left to right.

Thinking they should have been perched somewhere at that time of night, all tucked up, she decided it was time for bed.

**THURSDAY**

木

## #7B

There they both lay, on his bed. Identical. Both tall, for twelve/nearly thirteen, both slim, both naked. Each with a knee dragged up sideways, facing each other. Icily regular. Peaceful pale flesh on the bed. Warm flesh, cold reflection.

Takeo had kicked the sheets off in the night, sleeping raw with the door locked.

He was listening to the radio on his Walkman. There were very tiny (thinner than eyelash) hairs beginning to grow down into the crack of his arse from the small of his back.

The rose-brown puckerhole wanted to open up to the finger he was thinking of sliding in just a little. But the finger stayed under the pillow. He knew creams and things were needed to do that. Oils, lubricants. Condoms. Vibrators. Sex. SEX. S-E-X. He wanted to know what it was all about. He wanted to crank-start that body of his.

In spite of interrupted sleep, the boy felt fresh and lively, then he shivered, felt dizzy. He was keen to start the day, struggling with his socks, pants, then trousers.

In that bright, flat light you get just before a storm, Takeo was at the window, lip hovering above his gum, sniffing. Before he'd been sent off to bed the weather forecast had promised dry with sunny spells. At seven the tune had changed to grey drizzle, until evening.

'Good morning,' he said to the block of flats opposite, wanting to hear his voice, wondering if it had cracked in the night. 'And how are you this morning?'

Again, by the mirror, almost in terror of what he knew was there—holding his breath in—the boy of twelve/nearly thirteen years old in flat #7B saw hair growing underneath his arms.

He checked the area above his upper lip, sure those little hairs which had always been there were suddenly lengthening and thickening the way his dick was.

He pulled on yesterdays underpants, they looked okay.

Only a minute after he'd unlocked the door, covering the click with a fit of coughing, Takeo's mother knocked twice before entering. She found her son sitting straight-backed on the edge of his bed. His long, lithe muscles were supported by the palest hands flat on his knees. There was sweat on his forehead. His mother hadn't known her son was capable of looking so serious.

'Are you feeling alright?'

Feeling alright? I can't be looking alright, Takeo thought. What day is it? he quickly asked himself. Thursday. No PE on Thursdays, he'd only miss club. This, he thought, is the perfect cue for a stomach ache.

'No,' he lied.

Takeo's mother put a hand to his forehead: normal to bit warm.

Rain came down in a veil of grey and silver, big drops from clouds that couldn't be seen.

'Headache?'

'Bit.'

'How are your bowels?' she asked.

No reply, a lowering of the head.

Takeo rested his chin in a cupped hand, nibbling the bottom lip close to bleeding. Then rain fell suddenly against the window, sounding like a cheap shower, flooding over the pane and banging the thin metallic sill. He avoided eye contact, staring sightlessly out of the window.

'You're quite a temperature.'

He looked at her, amazed.

'Am I?'

Maybe I am, he thought. Maybe I am.

'I'll phone school,' were the magic words that meant he was to have a day at home.

With the tips of her thin, cold fingers she stroked his shoulder blades, then wanted to know if he'd fancy a drink or something brought in for him. That was the cue to get into his pyjamas and jump back into bed.

He asked for a glass of cold water. And a bucket—just in case.

Takeo was growing up but he was still her little boy. He'd be home with her all day. She could fuss over him. This kind of dependence made her feel important, needed. The woman was excited at the idea of being Mummy all day long.

The kiss she placed on his forehead made Takeo's skin tingle. He thought she'd go, get busy with her routines with their respective, unvarying courses—measured and ritualistic, but she just sat there, smiling, and when he thought she was going to go mental or something she said, 'I love you.'

Climbing behind the boy's alarm clock a shiny-shelled monster cockroach, with waving antennae, tried to detect something edible in the room, which, in a roaches case, can be anything. Anything.

Takeo closed his eyes. His mother thought he was moved to tears. He felt an itch. Hearing the familiar crack of a bone in her left foot, heading off toward the kitchen at last, the only son of an unimaginative marriage felt an itch and wanted to scratch. It was an itch under his pants, in his groin. Pants down, Takeo let out a gale from his lungs, as he counted one-two-three pubic hairs.

Climbing beside the boy's bed, over a wall pockmarked with Blu-Tac, the cockroach felt watched and froze.

Takeo felt completely powerless.

'I'm going to be a faggot,' he said to the roach he was briefly tempted to crush with his transparent ruler— hearing the crunch, seeing the squash.

'Even if I marry, I'm going to be a faggot.'

## STUDIO EBIS

Liam's days were running to a schedule no member of the Royal family would tolerate.

Sitting in front of a long mirror, flicking the theatrical lights surrounding it on and off, he waited. On, off. The dressing room was empty but for a row of stools. On. He was the first to arrive. Off. Forty minutes early. On. A white room. Off, on, off. The last thing he wanted was the panic of finding himself on the wrong platform or (worse) on the wrong train (particularly an express). On. He'd read and reread the street directions on the job sheet. Had gulped at the amount he was to be paid. Off. Had run a finger over the name of the photographer many times before switching off the lights close to midnight. On, off. He was almost awe-struck in the dark. On. Herbie Yamaguchi. Can't be, he thought, cannot be. Off, on.

Liam was studying, almost chanting, the various lines of the Tokyo subway system. Ginza line, Marunouchi line, Hibiya line, Tozai, Chiyoda, Yurakucho, Hanzomon—the one he liked the sound of most, the purple line—Namboku, Toei Asakusa—the one he found most difficult to pronounce, pink—Toei Mita, Toei Shinjuku and Toei #12 line.

A map that looked like leftover spaghetti drawn by a methodical but colour blind child. The thick, black lines of the JR railways and the thin black lines of what the map listed as OTHER RAILWAYS gave it an almost three dimensional feel.

Liam set himself little tasks; how to get to Kanda from Hikarigoaka; Yotsuya-Sanchome (another one he liked the sound of) to Akihabara; Ebisu to Tsukiji, where he wanted to go one morning. The fish market. A good place to buy pottery and knives, he'd been told.

Twenty minutes to nine and the make-up artist arrived. Mikiko. Lots of bowing. She fetched tea. Ten minutes to go and the hairstylist stuck his head round the door, got a cassette out of his breast pocket and seemed much relieved to have *his* choice of music coming over the speakers.



Mitsuru. Five, then the stylist. She gave a panning glance, a minimal ‘Ohio,’ and got a conversation going on her mobile. Mikiko, Mitsuru and Maki. Liam wrote the names down. He could only remember so much.

Liam’s solitary refinement commenced with a head massage from Mitsuru, followed by a very precise trim. Golding had been quite adamant that there should be no radical changes in hairstyle, he had to resemble his new index card. Copious amounts of hair gel were promised after the make-up was done.

An aluminium toolbox bought three years before, opened slowly.

The make-up artist was a bit nervous, not because of Liam, Mitsuru or Maki chan—nothing to do with the photographer—it was her first job with XXY and she wanted to make a good impression.

Her brushes were lined up, more on show than at the ready. Enamelled palettes unfolded, revealing triple tiers of rounded, labelled colours with convex top surfaces like silk or satin cushions. Each pretty dollop of colour—scarlet, carmen, umber, ochre...had been filled into clinical white frames, many of which were wearing thin. (Busy girl.) The sheer range of tones briefly unnerved her. Liam’s skin was pale, close to Kabuki white. She hoped the client didn’t want an all American boy tan job.

Nine o’clock.

Soft and light and warm and round and round went little dabs of cleanser, astringent and moisturiser. Gently around the eyes. Over and over. Circling. The lightest touches. Working on all those muscles around the eyebrows she knew the names of. Reshaping. Pulling up into the scalp. Patting, revealing a new definition to the features. Over and over. Pushing away surface fluid. Increasing pressure then reducing suddenly to bring out that something from within. Making him feel good with all the patting. And she was bringing something out from within Liam. He was actually feeling more at home in Tokyo than he’d ever felt in London. Fresh, that’s what he was feeling. Dusted down and shiny.

When Koizumi Yakumo of XXY arrived with, yes, the photographer Herbie Yamaguchi, the music was lowered, fresh tea fetched by a studio assistant—though it was black coffee they both wanted.

‘Yamaguchi San,’ said KY of XXY.

Liam stood, as if meeting an old teacher who’d inspired. There was acknowledged recognition before Liam’s formal bow and slow, clear

articulation of his name. There was something unusually sincere in his, ‘Yoroshiku onegaishimasu.’

‘Just call me Herbie,’ the man smiled.

He leaned against the door frame as if they’d known each other for years, watching Mikiko (momentarily coy) attend the needs of Liam’s face.

‘Who are you with in London?’ Herbie asked.

‘Oh, I’m not.’

‘Huh?’

‘I’m new to all this.’ Then, softly, ‘I’m not really a model.’

‘Excellent,’ Herbie said, ‘Stay that way. Some actually Vim their teeth.’

Liam smiled just a little, but said nothing to incriminate the grand profession.

‘So, what do you do in London?’

‘Take pictures. Street-style stuff. Similar to what you were doing back in the days of Blitz and Taboo.’

‘Oh—’ Herbie seemed genuinely surprised, ‘—you’ve seen my work?’

Liam nodded. He even had a copy of *The London Dream*.

‘Little bit of advice,’ Herbie whispered. ‘When we do the pictures today—just be yourself. Think of someone you love, or someone you have loved. Think, I dunno, think of where you’d like to sort of be next.’

Liam nodded. ‘Right.’

The make-up artist fussed with her brushes. It had been a long while since she’d been nervous of looking silly in front of a client. You don’t get stray hairs with an eyebrow pencil, she thought. As her hands were beginning to shake, KY of XXY complemented her on the job she’d done of that week’s *An-An* cover, saying Julie B would be arriving at ten to do a double shot. He wanted more or less the same look. Natural. Then he smiled and everything was fine.

There was whispered conversation between the photographer, make-up artist and XXY art director. Liam was not to be subjected to foundation. A little powder? Yes, to avoid shine. Translucent. A little something on the eyebrows perhaps, a smudge of something around the eyes.

‘Something on the lips,’ the photographer said, ‘but natural.’

‘Eyes and lips,’ the make-up artist concluded. ‘Natural.’ Easy.

The single brush strokes of an almost completely wiped mascara brush thickened and lengthened those brows. Each movement was light, confident, unerring—no hesitancy with the task of subtle exaggeration.

After a spot of punking up with gel and some sadistic backcombing, Liam was all done in the dressing room. Lights off.

Liam stood by the fire escape in a carrot red and yellow chequerboard shirt, huge polka dot bow tie and black, plastic trousers.

‘Ame,’ Mikiko said, pointing to the sky.

‘Rain,’ Liam said quietly.

So much for the accuracy of Japanese weather forecasts. It was far from being dry with sunny spells. A chill jet hit him for a second. His eyes sparkled. He wondered if everything was alright back at the flat in London, if his neighbour would follow the plant-watering instructions okay. If she’d remember to switch off lights, lock up properly.

One by one, spotlights came on. Liam settled himself rather self-consciously in the semi-darkness that surrounded the tungsten lit area like an auditorium. Then they were ready for him and he stepped up to the back-drop.

He felt a rush of elation as the brilliance of the spotlights became warmth. How he loved the radiance on his skin, turning the rest of the studio into a gulf of blackness.

The stylist, perhaps suffering from some sort of nutritional imbalance, picked nittily, fussing over everything. Everything had to be just so and she just couldn’t get the bow tie to sit straight. Herbie said it looked better crooked and when Liam agreed, KY from XXY said that’s how it should be. Then it was a matter of making it cutely crooked, naturally. The ironic thing was that they had Liam on a trampoline and the careful tucking and arranging would be progressively fucked once the bouncing started.

Standing on a spot marked with an X in red chalk, Liam was put through an endurance of light tests. One soft pop after another. Readings were taken from under his powdered nose by an assistant in his socks.

‘Rightio, we’ll just do a polaroid,’ Herbie said to...the camera?

Flash.

‘Polaroid.’

Flash.

After the flash of white, Liam closed his eyes to watch the dot fade.

Flash.

He stood dead as a doornail as three assistants behind him ran about with sparklers.

Flash.

Dead, but with lots of life. Was that another polaroid or have we started?  
Liam wondered.

Flash.

Even from the position Liam was in, he could hear Julie B's walkman being waltzed into the studio and up those stairs to the dressing room. A professional fifteen minutes early.

Flash.

Crucifixion pose.

Flashflashflash.

They liked that. Herbie took the studio slippers off and got on to the backdrop.

'Do what you want,' he said.

For a moment Liam looked very lost.

Flash.

First Holy Communion nerves.

Flash.

Hospital bedside.

Flash

Graveside.

Flash.

Queueing in Sainsbury's.

Flash.

Feeling like a right down, eyes to heaven.

Flash.

Feeling like the most basic mammal, paid a ridiculous amount by the hour for such lunacy.

Flash.

Change of film.

Flash. (Light test.)

A smile. Sincerely insincere.

Flash.

'Herbie, I need to know what this is for—what the concept is—to get it right, don't I?'

Flash.

And Herbie translated what Liam had said and everybody laughed, clapped their hands. Yes, they'd forgotten to explain the concept.

Flash.

But it didn't really matter, random was in.

Flash.

Liam mimed to the music coming from the speakers, blasting an imagined noise texture of fuzz guitar. Flat, rhythmic, repetitious, a whining lyric fighting against a wall of feedback.

Flashflashflash.

Change of film.

'The concept is something to do with loneliness,' Herbie shrugged. 'Don't ask me,' he laughed, 'I'm just the dumb photographer.'

'And who's it for?'

'A flower delivery service.'

Four rolls of bouncing on the spot.

Flashflashflash x36 x4. Fuji ASA 100.

Julie B's hair had been arranged into short, sharp waves over her forehead. It looked like a child had been busy squiggling with a pen.

By the fire escape she complained for five minutes about a job she'd done from six until ten the previous evening. She showed the polaroids to Liam as proof of how the hairstylist had ruined her perfect hair (she hadn't) and how the make-up artist had made her look silly (he had).

The client hadn't been happy that Julie B wasn't happy so she'd been put through the trauma of readjustments—a zig-zag of glitter over her forehead, reshaping of the lips, dabs of powder over the excessive blusher. Heroin chic gone haywire.

'And just as I thought, oh fuck it, that'll have to do, it's getting late, both stylist and make-up artist became agitated. Stupid client demanded a completely fresh makeover which, look, has left my face all sore. And see that? Bloodshot! Glitter in the eye.'

Well, thought Liam. She'd seemed like such a nice girl when Loretta wasn't allowing anybody else a word in edgeways.

'Hey,' she said, 'excited about tomorrow?'

'Mmm?'

'You're doing the Sano show, right?'

'Blimey, this week's flying by. I'd just about forgotten about it.'

'Pipped Jeff to the post, I heard.'

'Oh, really?'

'And Sam. They're so pissed off. Yada said if you get the Sano show you get the lot.'

Liam raised crossed fingers.

Gently herded into the daylight area of the studio, Julie B and Liam were told in a telling way to stand against a wall bleached with the start of—surprise surprise—late morning sunshine. It could have been a wall anywhere (sunny) in the world. The stylist supplied Julie B with a red PVC raincoat, Liam with a blue PVC raincoat and a bunch of yellow and white, long-stalked tulips.

Again she picked nittily, fussing over collars and cuffs.

Then the hairstylist did a spot of backcombing while the makeup artist checked for shine—paying particularly fine attention to noses. When everything was just so, KY from XXY sprayed both lightly with fine jets of warm water.

‘Okay,’ Herbie shouted.

It was so bright that Liam had trouble with his eyes.

Flash.

They began to stream through squinting so hard.

Flash.

‘Oh you poor darling,’ Julie B cooed, stroking his hair lightly. ‘Don’t cry.’

Flashflashflash.

He had to look away.

Flash.

Finding dark things to look at helped.

Flash.

Sometimes he shut his eyes as if blissed out on something, hands turned deep in pockets—turned inwards in a masturbatory way.

Flashflashflash.

‘Herbie, is there, you know, a concept to this?’ Liam asked once again.

‘Lovers,’ KY from XXY shouted.

‘It’s over!’ Julie B giggled.

Flash.

‘But darling, I’m pregnant!’ Liam whispered in her ear.

Flash.

A whole panto of emotions ensued. Flash. Restrained outrage on her part, much hand-waving, question-firing at point blank range. Flashflashflash. What was he saying as he grabbed her shoulders? Flash. The remonstrations silenced the dandy collection of studio assistants sitting

on the wall close by, stopping the busy contemplation of how best to advance their careers. Flash. Stretching her neck backwards, resting herself against his body in a laugh, gave the picture a balance. Flash. The girl's ribcage became nicely elongated. Flash. Popped up nipples clear even under all that PVC. Flash. Kind of sexy. Flashflashflash. Liam's hands holding her sweetly at the waist. Flash.

'Doctor—y-you must go to a doctor,' Julie B shouted.

Flash.

'Or a historian.'

Flash.

'No, we're being stupid about this. Hollywood darling. Hollywood!' she screamed to the sky, the top of her head denting Liam's right cheekbone. It was a nice moment, what with the water sparkling on the PVC like the tears of a clown—all that spontaneous, real-life stupid laughter. Natural.

The man from XXY wanted to make an adjustment.

He put a hand to Julie B's throat, serious as a doctor, and said, 'This is nice, very nice. Chin down a bit, please.'

## BRIDGE

There were tooth marks and grazes all over Akio's body. Cockhead, neck, nipples, waist and toes: purples, reds, greens and yellows. He knew they'd be gone in a day or two but he wasn't keen on fresh ones or anything deeper.

He was spring-cleaned from top to bottom; moisturised, flossed, manicured, groomed. Having applied much more than a liberal coating of Canesten to the dong department, all he had to remember was to rinse it off upon arrival.

He was dressed in scuffed sneakers (close to falling apart), faded Levi's (patched, grimy and ripped at the knee; more sexily tight than fashionably baggy) and plaid shirt (open to the navel, buttons pulled off just an hour ago). He wanted to create a different impression that day. Rebel. His Sumitomo Bank book stuck a full inch out of his back left pocket.

Under him ran water, miles of it. A whole world of water, polluted and fresh, stagnant and prehistoric. In this water Akio's downward looking self was blacked out by the brightness of the overhead sun.

So, he whispered to himself internally, it's to be another day of skipping lectures and obedient note-taking, eh? He wondered if anyone would notice his absence—twice in one week. He'd have to think up an excuse. Stomach ache, ear ache.

Beneath the bridge, on the embankment, the same old man as before lay in the sun, drying out two blankets and a doormat. No costume cupboard, no wardrobe manager, could have dreamed up those rags. Not even John Galliano. Perhaps designer Christopher Nemeth would have called it *The Coat Of Many Dribbles* as that's what it was. Something Issey Miyake might have glass boxed.

The old tramp wasn't alone. His companion was older, he had no teeth, spoke a dialect in a little quiet voice: a combination difficult to cope with. Something about the ghastly brew of water, grass and mud he was cooking



up, which—he asserted to his sleeping chum—would be the most marvellous soup.

Akio stopped breathing, just for a moment. No inhalation/exhalation at all.

Then a tremendous stillness filled him. He felt that he was invisible. He was floating. He could feel his heart slowing right down. He was, at last, living his childhood daydream. The one that started pre-puberty—just—in Tsuchiura. The one that kicked off with the plastic bag he'd found hidden under a rock at the base of a tree by Lake Kasumigaura. Magazines the like of which he'd only ever seen flash up briefly on late night tv. Uncensored foreign magazines in which big men did rude things with big men. *Suck, Hard, Euro Boy, Inches*.

The glossy pages had filled his pretty little head with ideas from breakfast to teatime. They had style. They were frank, a mess, faces full of lust. And greed. Battered, gorgeous and rancid. The size of those dicks. They'd appalled and attracted the boy.

With their grandiose and taunting provocations, demanding to be licked, Akio forgot about the mystery of cunt, preferring something he could hold in his hands, take in his mouth and arse.

How often he'd checked left and right, straining to hear approaching footsteps, as he bowed to plant kisses on the perfect paper skin of those porn stars in *Suck*.

Doing as much as he could do to himself, doing what he saw in the pictures. He'd squeezed his own nipples, fingered his arse lubed with (chemically-flavoured) spit, pissed up against a tree trunk—just like those shots in *Inches*. He'd moved them from base of tree to centre of bushes, covered by different leaves but the same rock for laughing continuity.

The Tsuchiura schoolboy who wanted to be exotic and knew he was suburban had sought danger as he sat on the same bench for hours, buttons of his Levi's undone, hoping he'd spot some (nice) man kicking about, looking for his 0101 carrier.

He'd return home to Mum, Dad and his gran to play the perfect child puppet, slurping down Tanuki-soba wishing it was slimy cock he was throating. Mum, Dad and his gran. And their awful choice in home furnishings. And the dreadfully conservative aspirations they had for him. What he wanted was danger and excitement and lashings of baby oil over him, just like in the magazines—living a nightlife of sex.

There was something soothing about that neck of the woods which felt dislocated, apart. No (nice) man ever came along to look for his buried treasure(s), but a grey-haired woman out walking her dog did stop to tell him he was flying low. Very directly. When she'd sat down beside him to smoke a cigarette he'd become more than a little frightened.

A light breeze held a welcoming scent, carrying the first of the fallen leaves. It would soon be full-blown Autumn.

The boys down in the basement couldn't compete with the big men he'd dry wanked over in the bushes just a spit from Lake Kasumigaura. Except, he thought, for Scottie, for his Jimmy Dean looks, and Midori, for size.

Through the unfocused screen of his eyelashes, Akio saw the sparkle of the water and wished he were back there right that moment, stretched out on his back, legs wrapped around a tree trunk, uncaring if anyone walked by with their poodle or not, rattling his testicles into a blur... contracting the muscles of his abdomen close to doubling up to get a better look at the favourite pages torn out and pinned to the bark, pages spread out on either side of him.

Something rhythmic was felt along his heart, a gulping, shivering limbo. In his throat he felt an ache. His stomach hollowed.

He wasn't that boy any more but he could remember that last time in the bushes before it got too cold. That last time/that first time. How the ache had spread from throat to thighs.

Horror-struck, he'd felt it happen: like an insect bursting out of the tight confinement of its cocoon—with jerking, compulsive thrusts—freeing its wings to leap into the air.

His first thrown line of white shot up, skidding to a dead stand-still on his throat.

The second landed just below his navel.

The third, the last, the one that hurt something anchored up his arse, shot one heavy drop of himself on to the spot where his first pubic hairs had started forcing themselves out of his groin just days before.

Oblivious to the traffic rumbling like an unsettled stomach/not caring if anyone saw, Akio squeezed the dick straining to get out of his jeans, bending it, bruising it, spreading Canesten over the inside of his undies.

His eyes were fixed on the shimmering sparkle of the dirty water. When his eyelids lowered for a moment, lips shut tightly, his forehead smoothed out. When those eyes rose they were not the same, casting an ecstatic light.

He swallowed hard. Time to move on.

Akio set off for his destination with a bounce in his desirable step. He could feel his heartbeat increase as he left the bridge.

Smiling, he did something he hadn't done for a long while. The little outside muscles of his mouth beat-boxed.

## #6A

Jeff was woken by the phone.

Pulling on bleached-out chinos, he entered the kitchen scratching, hoping coffee was made and still warm.

Sounding inconvenienced and phlegmy he yawned, ‘Yes?’

Standing there, sleepy, twenty-one and six foot two, he could have been in London, Paris, New York or Milan.

‘Jeff...’ It was Golding, the drag king herself, and at that time of the morning she wasn’t starting off with a question but an opening statement.

He looked at the watch he never took off, silently mouthed, ‘Fuck!’

‘...Yada’s been waiting for you by Omotesando police box since ten thirty.’

How would he respond?

‘Hey...’ lie through your teeth, he thought ‘what’s with it at this agency? I’ve been trying to get a line through since ten.’

She’d heard that one before.

‘Stomach ache?’ she said away from the mouthpiece.

Jeff was silenced. Was that Kubo he could hear laughing? Or Loretta?

‘Simple question—can you make it to this casting *only you* have been called up for or shall I tell Yada to come back to base?’

(‘...*only you*...’ the words woke Jeff better than an Old Compton Street espresso, ‘...*only you*...’ Italics. Albertus Extra Bold. Size: 48. Underlined.)

‘Give me twenty,’ Jeff said, like some street-corner dealer.

## #7B

Soft and light and warm and round and round.

‘Does that feel good?’ Takeo’s mother asked.

She thought a massage of the temples was a cure for everything.

Over and over. Circling. Over and over. Increasing pressure a little, then reducing suddenly to be tender; almost tease. Soft and light and warm and round and round. Gently around the eyes. The lightest touches.

The kiss Takeo’s mother placed on his forehead made him shiver. She said she would be as quick as she could, then she’d make a lovely lunch.

As soon as the front door shut behind her, Takeo kicked back the sheets and pulled down the bottoms of his blue and white pyjamas. S-E-X was the last thing on his mind, he wanted to know what was happening to his body.

Again, by the mirror, holding his breath in—the boy of twelve/nearly thirteen years old bore witness to the three hairs growing at the right hand side of his groin.

With the tips of his thin, cold fingers he spread each hair out. One-two-three pubic hairs.

‘Nasty.’

Not one of them had so much as asked for permission to be there.

He stood perfectly still. He didn’t like the look of them, didn’t like any of it. Something would have to be done. Back went the pyjama bottoms in one upward pull, elasticated waist banging down.

‘How are your bowels?’ he asked himself, mimicking his mother as he stomped over to the window. ‘Probably sprouting hairs,’ he shouted at the skyline.

The sense of freedom that he felt when his mother went out flooded him. It was precious. The illicit feel of the empty flat was heady to the boy. Poor Mum, he thought. Poor Mum.

Takeo stood there, crying in slow motion. Tears left a glistening trail on his cheeks. The tears on the right of his face rolled faster than those on the left. His body, he realised, was none of his business in the same way his father’s cancer had been none of his. His vest was wet with tears.

Clouds of dead horses were approaching at quite a pace, somersaulting over Tokyo.

‘I’m going to be a faggot,’ he said to blue roofs, red roofs, unlit neon, orange tv aerials and seven hundred and fifty variations of grey. ‘Even if I marry, I’m going to be a faggot.’

Standing in his usual spot, the look he wore on his face was one of total mourning.

What he felt was loss, loss of the boy body his mother had washed and fed and dressed. He didn’t want to inhabit an adult body and—from what he knew about homosexuals—he certainly didn’t want to be one of *those*. He wasn’t sure whether to hug or hate himself.

Skin that sensed it would only be pure and tight, spot-free and relatively hairless for a short while longer smudged up into the air. His breathing had formed a grey halo around his head. When he became aware of this he leaned toward it and exhaled heavily. In the mist he wrote with a finger, like a lipstick message to an absent lover.

‘Give me an H, give me an O, give me an M, give me annuder 0...what have we got? HOMO!’

Poor Mum. Poor Mum with no husband, a faggot for a son and a moustache she rips off with hot wax, the boy thought.

Takeo stood there for five minutes, staring beyond the clear screen of glass at the stillness and tiny focusing movements of people and machines as if it were all a film. The sky kept changing. It was soiled white, mainly. Those poor horses had toppled over at the last fence and the grey blood had spread everywhere.

**1. I don’t have to be a queer. There must be something I can do.**

**2. I don’t have to have all this hair on me, I can shave it off.**

The bean curd cubes his mother had started cooking before she left were filling the flat with a comforting smell. It made the boy want to retch.

Takeo didn’t know where to start. He went to the fridge and opened up. A beer. Yes, he thought. Why not? As he swigged out of the bottle by the kitchen window, his eyes scanned the block of flats opposite. He made a middle finger to no one in particular, then winked.

One day, he thought, there would be some monster earthquake, reducing that ugly block to piles of raw materials and the occasional smelly corpse.

Down below he could see the man from #10B heading off toward the bus stop.

‘Underneath that suave, confident exterior lurks a spineless amoeba,’ Takeo’s mother had once said. ‘Amoeba *are* spineless, Mum,’ her one and only had replied. ‘You know what I mean,’ she went on. ‘I wouldn’t want him giving *you* piano lessons.’

Takeo couldn’t imagine anyone wanting to do it with the man from #10B, they’d have to be paid.

A fly landed on the rim of the bottle. Had a quick little taste, then it was off.

‘Takeo,’ the boy said in his mother’s voice, ‘don’t drink from that. You never know where it’s been.’

‘Or what it fed off last,’ he said in his own, natural tone, giving the rim a onceover rub with his thumb, focusing again on the old poof down below.

Takeo was tempted to throw the bottle of beer at him, but resisted.

‘Yeah,’ he jeered, as the old man gulped greedy eyefuls of some kid on a bike.

‘Fucking queers!’ Takeo shouted against the glass, ‘I can see you.’ Inside he prayed to himself, please don’t let me end up like that.

The bathroom became the boy’s own personal stage, his scenery, with props for his performance. He started with a certain fugitive haste, stripped right down to the ticklish foreskin in seconds, face to face with himself in the mirror as soon as it was curtain up.

The first thing Takeo did as Handa San was (hands on hips, legs apart) splatter that mirror with pure back of the throat phlegm.

‘What you looking at, faggot?’ he said straight into his eyes, back-alley ambience. ‘Come on, let’s get him.’

Takeo grabbed at the nearest thing to hand—which wasn’t a serviceable implement to bludgeon, cut, penetrate or burn. Wasn’t a rusty screwdriver, crowbar, saw, hammer, twelve inch monkey wrench or stump of wood. Nor a blow torch. It was the candle his mother sometimes lit for one of her mega soaks.

Takeo turned the fluorescent off and hammed the striking of a match. The candle soon made a golden glow. He wanted to feel sexy, porno. He

hunted for the baby oil, but couldn't find it, so made do with a family sized bottle of Johnson & Johnson baby powder.

'And now, you little faggot—hold him—and now a little sprinkle here... a little sprinkle there...

and there...

and there...

and

sprinkle  
sprinkle  
sprinkle

and  
one  
down  
there

for  
luck.'

He knew what he was doing was weird, but he wanted to do it. Be weird.

He was imagining a gang of seven miniature Handa Sans all in white track-suits giving him a duffing up after the showers. (He knew what he was doing.) But the powder was warm as his hands...their little warm hands...rubbed it all over. (He knew exactly what he was doing.) Then he was a snowman and a snowman needs a mouth.

'You dirty cunt,' a twelve-/nearly thirteen-year-old Handa San whispered, raising the nearest implement to hand, which happened to be a Christian Dior sports car red lipstick.

Takeo took a swig of the beer then had a laugh at what he was doing.

'You married?'

'No.'

'Live alone?'



‘Yes.’

‘You dirty queer cunt.’

And the imagined twelve-/nearly thirteen-year-old Handa San began drawing a tiny anticlockwise circle in the centre of Takeo’s mouth, spiralling out over those lips, down to mid-chin and up to the nostrils, base of chin to mid-nose, ending mid-cheek with a smear. His face resembled a barber shop spiral.

‘Faggot.’

Takeo took a swig of beer.

He rouged his right nipple, circling further and further away in a spiral, Christian Dior product decorating the naked boy’s powdered body.

Takeo began to Mmm like the actresses/whores he’d seen on tv getting a good seeing to. His dick felt like a shaken bottle of Coke.

‘And now for the other,’ the leader of the gang whispered, imagined lips touching his right ear.

He was silent and still. Completely passive. Controlled. Another large anti-clockwise circle was started far from the boy’s left nipple, circling away only to return, finally stabbing the teat. Takeo’s eyes were shut, heart pounding, imagining seven Handa San’s his age removing their white track-suits.

‘Okama!’ they shouted. ‘Okama chan!’ they roared, black teeshirts off.

In Takeo’s head, one of the little aggressors got down on his knees before him and wrote SUCK ME on his dick in a smudge of capital letters. That’s when Takeo noticed the lipstick was just a stub. That’s when Takeo heard the front door click.

That’s when the writing on his penis began to distort as it shrank.

‘I’m going to take a bath Mum, I’ve been sick.’

But there was no answer. He listened hard. The click was just that old drip drip from the shower head in #8A. Still not repaired and they’d promised. The fibbers.

Conversations could even be heard through the air vents. Many was the time Takeo had stood on a chair listening to that monster man in #8A rage—only satisfied when the teardrops started.

The boy in the seventh floor flat, home alone, looked at himself in the mirror. He’d never done anything like this and he felt it was all a bit silly. And strange, and he was beginning to frighten himself.

He took another swig of beer, swilling it from one side of his mouth to the other before he swallowed.

Takeo turned the main light on.

Looking deep into each spiral, he reminded himself of his dilemma.

**1. I don't have to be a queer. There must be something I can do.**

**2. I don't have to have all this hair on me, I can shave it off.**

'Raise your arms,' Takeo said to his reflection. He froze as he viewed himself oil tip toes.

Holding his breath, so it wouldn't fog the glass—the boy of twelve/nearly thirteen years old had a clearer view of some than others. The intimacy of the gaze was long and detailed. Not even separated by millimetres, those tiny darkening patches were viewed the way his mother viewed dirt and like dirt the little hairs had to be banished.

Taking another swig of the beer, Takeo checked the door. Yes, it was locked—no one would come barging in on him making sure he wasn't drowning.

My Mum, he thought, my poor old Mum.

Pubic hair, another thing to think of. He'd have to check his underpants before they went in the wash, check the toilet seat, the tub, towels, bedsheets. He didn't want her to know those things were all over him like leeches.

Again the young taut body raised on tip-toes to assess the damage. Takeo's eyes zoomed from blur to sharp focus, he would never forget those hairs. But shaving them off? They'd be back the next day or the day after. Stubble. Flatheaded, not fine. His mother had often moaned about stubble, that's why she waxed her legs.

He looked around. No way was he going to try his mother's hot wax treatment, though he knew how to set it up in the microwave. He'd seen her do it often enough. It wasn't something she hid from him.

In the bathroom cabinet he found tweezers. And his father's old fashioned razor. All the tools he needed were at his disposal, some ideal tools of disposal were, also, within reach. Takeo saw salvation in a tube of *mildly scented* hair-removing cream shoved in at the second to bottom tier of shelves.

Sitting on the toilet, Takeo plucked all three hairs from his groin—holding in the same breath for what he reckoned was under five seconds. It had hurt, but they were gone—replaced by a chicken-plucked look. He decided to use the *mildly scented* cream on his armpits.

*Suitable for face, arms and legs.  
It will leave your skin soft and smooth,  
removing unwanted hair gently and quickly.  
Please follow instructions on the enclosed leaflet.*

**CONTAINS THIOPYCROLLATE**

**KEEP OUT OF THE REACH OF CHILDREN**

*This product is not to be left on the skin for more than ten minutes*

*This product has not been tested on animals*

**100 ml**

There was no leaflet, the box had been discarded. Takeo's mother had kept a tube of the stuff about ever since he could remember. It was one of the mysteries of being a woman. Thiopycollate, the boy could hardly get his tongue around the word. Th-i-o-gy-coll-ate.

‘Ser-i-ous.’

Takeo made a mad dash to his bedroom to get his alarm clock, heeding the ten minute warning. According to the clock his mother hadn't even been gone fifteen minutes which meant she'd probably be another fifteen at the most.

Takeo watched the tub fill, emptying an entire bottle of shampoo into the flow. He reckoned it would take that much to get the lipstick off and keep the sides of the tub clean.

The water creamed into bubbles as it mixed. Large *FOR NORMAL HAIR* bubbles. It was meant to smell of pine—stank of plastic. Enough bubbles for a ballet frothed up.

Takeo wasn't sure how much of the hair-removing cream he would need. When he had dabbed a wad under each armpit, chicken-winging elbows against waist to rub it in, he didn't know what to do with the rest: a good 60ml, he estimated. Roughly the contents of a small-sized yoghurt container.

The twelve-/nearly thirteen-year-old Handa San in the mirror raised his head back, threw a mean look at him, and spat.

‘Have you no self respect?’ the reflection sneered.

Takeo took a step back and saw a boy who was pretending to be sick to spend the day in bed. A boy whose husbandless mother was shopping for her only son to cook something nice to eat within the hour. A boy covered in talcum powder and lipstick like something from a pop video. A boy who was removing underarm hair like a fucking girlie. That’s when Takeo rubbed the surplus *mildly scented* muck all over his head.

‘Take that, you stupid fuckin’ fairy.’

As soon as he’d spread the first fistful over the precision-cut crop, Takeo regretted having pushed things that far. His groin and armpits weren’t for public viewing. Shit, he thought, I’ll be bald as a hard-boiled egg. His mind raced.

Getting everything right meant standing still for ten minutes, thinking how he’d be a better son for every one of them. Slowly, evenly, Takeo’s head became mildly scented with an almost cold detachment. He was more than careful not to let any drip down on to his eyebrows.

From a shiny parallelepipedic metal box with a long slit opening on the top side, Takeo pulled a Kleenex tissue. The hair under his arms slipped away with each confident, unerring downward pull—no hesitancy. The tissues were well behaved, not breaking to leave raggedy trails.

A minute to go. His head felt warm.

From the shiny parallelepipedic metal box with long slit opening, Takeo pulled another Kleenex. His scalp paled with the first strong, unerring downward pull.

**10**

‘Fairy.’

**9**

‘Fucking fairy.’

**8**

Click of the front door.

**7**

‘Look at you.’

**6**

‘You’re in for it.’

**5**

Hard swallow, hands trembling, toes curling on the cold tiled floor.

**4**

‘Here we go now...’

**3**

‘Takeo?’

**2**

Eyes closed.

**1**

Head submerged into the sink, start of what sounded like a hair wash.

**0**

‘I’m going to take a bath Mum, I’ve been sick.’

## ***BLAST OFF***

The handle of the bathroom door lowered.

They both took in a deep breath—he’d never locked before.

He shivered as she stood on the outside, plastic carriers to left and right—loaded with all the good things supermarkets can provide.

‘Everything alright in there?’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘Make it a cool bath, you’ve got a temperature.’

‘Okay,’ he said, voice of an angel as he dropped swampy tissues into the toilet bowl. Sounded like he was taking a crap. Good sign, his mother thought.

What the fuck have I done? Takeo sighed internally, looking at himself, picking off the itchy bitsy pieces of tissue. One thing’s for sure though, I don’t look queer. Right wing if anything.

The taps were turned on full blast to sound busy.

Hair was retrieved from the plughole and flushed. The depilatory exercise was successful but for a few isolated areas that got a quick tidy-up

shave with his father's old razor. Even after all this time, Takeo thought, it smells of him. If he were alive now, could see me now...

'Bath time,' he sing-songed flatly toward the mirror, but his reflection had vanished—he was talking to a steamed-up blur.

When he bent to elbow-check the temperature of the water, muscles in his back (particularly the shoulders) rippled beneath that smooth, tight, boy skin. Momentary flexings like sparks. Only head, knees and shoulders emerged above the level of the water, like something severed—set there for viewing.

The water was a bit too hot: perfect.

As he gulped the last of the beer, his mother was cramming the fridge with scrubbed vegetables in transparent plastic bags.

Dragging the blade firmly across his scalp in perfect, straight lines, careful not to cut himself, the one thought in his head was of the plug being pulled/drying himself down/hiding the evidence of empty tube of hair removing cream/beer bottle/lipstick stub. And as he considered this one grey fluffball of chaos, his hand slipped and the flesh above his right ear kind of peeled back, opening up quickly. It stung.

'Fuck!' he mouthed silently. '*Perfect.*'

He squealed as he rubbed in some soap.

'Takeo?'

No reply. Aquatic noises.

'You alright?'

She was worried. Became firm.

'I want you out here in one minute,' she said, banging the door twice, tight-lipped.

Not a splish.

'Thirty seconds.'

Not a splash.

'Stop treating me like a baby.'

A mother's sigh.

'Mum?'

'Yes.'

'Sorry.'

That was all she needed to hear, he was okay. She was just worrying. He was, after all, nearly thirteen. Big boy now. Man of the house.

Singing, of all things, ‘Splish, splash I was taking a bath’ while slicing onions, Takeo’s mother was momentarily happy. She swallowed a little laugh that threatened to turn into a sob. The chopping was more rhythmic than her singing, the onions sweeter than her voice. The thunk of knife-steel against the sodden cutting board was bassy; the blade needed sharpening.

‘Your son is growing up,’ she said to herself. She stared into the bright mound of bright, shiny onions. ‘He’ll be shaving before you know it.’

Takeo could only deal with the situation by thinking of it as a puzzle.

1. How to rid the bathroom of the smell of beer, talcum powder and that not so mild scent of the hair-removing cream. Solution: create a diversion. Say the top of the talcum powder container broke. This has the added advantage of explaining the talc on every surface.

2. How to get from bathroom to bedroom without any questions. Solution: towels. Wrap up like a boxer before a fight. Kid around.

3. The beer/the lipstick/the hair cream. Solution: they’ll have to be replaced.

4. How to get beer bottle/lipstick/hair cream out of bathroom. Solution: ?

As Takeo rose from the tub, the bubble-bath followed him like a long gown.

Takeo checked every inch of himself and the bathroom. There was lipstick under the middle fingernail of his right hand. A careful clipping removed the imperfection. He was too cautious to let it be.

The tweezers were wiped and replaced. Candle back to its usual position beside some seashells. Razor rinsed under a hot tap. Dried. Body wiped with more tissues in case he’d missed a trace of lipstick. Flushed. He didn’t want to leave any marks on the towels. Sink plug checked. Fine. Bath plug checked. Nothing.

‘Ah, no!’ he shouted, holding back a giggle.

‘What’s—’

‘Top’s come off the talcum powder.’

‘Leave it to me, lunch is nearly on the table.’

Tub washed down with too many sprinkles of Vim. Rinsed. Repeated.

‘I’ll do that,’ his mother shouted from the kitchen. Ah, she thought, giving his old Mum a helping hand. Sweet.

And then he was there beside her, head covered with a towel like Tyson in his prime, shadow-boxing with another towel over his shoulders, another

bunched around his waist. *Pow! Sock!* Punching like an automaton, difficult with a beer bottle squeezed under one arm, squeezed-out tube beneath the other, lipstick between his legs. Just one slip and...

‘Well, you certainly seem much better,’ she said as he punched a gang of seven sexy school bullies down—one after the other—zigzagging a path to his bedroom, turning only to bow. She applauded, deciding to take his temperature in a while—he was a bit red in the face.

He shut the door, hid bottle, tube and lipstick in his school satchel and made for his baseball cap. Whoops, a burp.

‘Oh, the state of the floor,’ she said with delight. ‘And how much shampoo did you use?’

Takeo opened the door like a jack-in-the-box, ‘Dropped that too. Awful, aren’t I!’

‘Who’d have a boy like you?’ she said, hands on hips giving him a look-what-I-have-got-to-put-up-with shrug.

‘Millions!’ he said, raising an eyebrow under the peak of the cap.

She hadn’t had so much fun in ages. To an outsider they’d have seemed as cheerful as honeymooners.

That son of hers, always with that question, *Why?* She hoped he’d never cease to ask *Why Mum?* Always coming to her for direction. But stop he would, as all children do, when the questions were painful or inexplicable.

As Takeo’s mother unpacked bleach, cling film, spray starch and a new breakfast cereal launched that week, she came across the memo she’d scribbled to herself on the back of a The Hara Store receipt.

‘Takeo, you’ll never guess what.’

‘What?’ Takeo shouted back, checking no new pubes had struck.

‘You’ll never guess who I bumped into at The Hara Store.’

‘Shinohara San.’

‘Yes. How did you know?’

‘Because you always do. What was in her basket?’

‘Cat food.’

‘And?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Yes you do.’

‘Cat litter and vermicelli.’

‘Fabulous. Go on.’

‘Well, she wants to do a sketch of you. A profile.’



‘Really?’ Takeo said, sticking his baseball-capped head around the door again. ‘Not today I hope.’

‘She suggested Sunday evening.’

‘Suppose so.’

Takeo had always been in awe of the Shinoharas. They were so cultured. They did things. He’d often thought Shinohara San would have made a great mum.

‘Tell her anytime, as long as she doesn’t want me starkers.’

‘Takeo, really!’

They both laughed. He was more shocked than she was, he’d never said anything quite like that before. Bang went the bedroom door. Takeo’s mother shook her head, how many times had she told him not to slam doors like that? And *starkers*, the very idea.

Takeo set himself the task of solving how to tidy up his bathroom antics. Any minute, she’d want him to sit at the table. He sat at his desk. She’d surely tell him to take his cap off in the house. He decided he wouldn’t.

Drawing the curtains to for the first time since the last of winter, anglepoise on, pointing toward the door to blind her on entry, Takeo decided to play victim.

On went the pyjamas again, on went the hooded top she liked on him, the bottle-green one. He pulled the hood right up and over—down to his eyebrows—knotting the drawstring.

Hiding behind his encyclopedia he got into the old pose every schoolboy/girl has perfected by the age of seven: pretending to read. Time to act like his stomach had taken a turn for the worse. But no, he thought. The lipstick, the missing tube.

‘You have thirty seconds to think of a solution,’ a double page illustration of the Cosmos whispered to him.

‘Come and get it,’ his mother whispered.

Takeo took in a deep breath, rubbed his forehead with the back of his hand, exhaled under the sheet—in case of beer breath—and just as the door opened he shut his eyes.

‘What’s this?’ his mother said, more puzzled than annoyed, looking from anglepoise to Takeo to curtains/anglepoise/hooded top.

‘Got the shivers again,’ Takeo said.

‘Could you manage to get just a little down?’

Puppy eyes, tiny nod.

‘Yes!’ he mouthed silently to his mother’s back.

Oh no, Takeo groaned to himself when he saw the tray. It always reminded him of his father. It was the tray every meal had been served to him on before he finally snuffed it. Takeo’s mother sat at the desk, aware her son wasn’t going to lift the spoon to try his favourite soup.

‘Mum, I’ve been thinking.’

‘Yes?’

‘About Dad.’

‘Mmm?’

‘About things like this tray, his razor, those ties in my wardrobe.’

Oh, she thought, he has been thinking. He’d always had a mind of his own but suddenly he was talking to her on an almost equal basis.

‘And his shoes in the hall cupboard. His clothes.’

There she goes again, he thought, if she shakes that head any more today she’ll shake it right off.

‘I think we should bin the lot.’

Takeo’s frankness shocked his mother. His voice was curiously adult and assertive.

He took a slurp of soup, smiled to say, ‘*Nice!*’

‘I want you to go shopping to Ginza this afternoon, buy yourself a new dress or something, and when you come back it’ll all be gone.’

A dull tear halted close to the edge of her mouth. She sucked it in.

‘And I’m going to make a surprise for you while you’re out.’

Takeo’s mother breathed in deeply through her nose, lifting her breasts. Though it had been six years, he quoted his father.

‘No arguing now, just do it!’ But he’d said it softly, not with a growl and a missile thrown toward her.

‘You’re a gift from God,’ she said, ‘now eat up.’

‘New dress?’ he said.

‘New dress!’ she agreed. Little laugh. What a day it was turning out to be.

Oh shit, Takeo thought, if she’s off to Ginza she’ll want to put on that old lipstick of hers.

‘New dress, new lipstick, the lot. Okay?’

‘So it’s lipstick now, is it?’

Slurp.

‘That old red one doesn’t suit you. It’s so old-fashioned. Get a nice pink one—something cheerful. It’ll take years off you.’

Takeo’s mother laughed, surprised to hear her son talking about lipstick, but Takeo knew the contents of her wardrobe so well; each and every dress, the scarves, discount jewellery. On special occasions, Takeo would be consulted about what she should wear as if he were her little toy boy, her secret gigolo. Had anyone said her son was exhibiting a certain sensibility, Takeo’s mother would have put those hands to hips, rolled her eyes sighing, ‘Don’t be so silly, he’s only a child.’

‘And to make sure you don’t wear it again,’ he said putting the tray to one side and jumping out of bed— miraculously cured—I’m going to...’ And off he went giggling and sliding over the kitchen floor, unpocketing the worn-down stub. ‘...chuck it!’ he shouted.

‘Give it here, you monster,’ his mother squealed from the seat of her son’s homework desk.

‘Come out here and watch.’

Framed in the doorway of her son’s bedroom Takeo’s mother folded her arms, resignedly. Through a tiny parting of the kitchen window she saw that Christian Dior racing car red lipstick held tightly in the grip of her twelve-/nearly thirteen-year-old son’s right hand.

‘Oh no,’ she groaned, as he tapped it teasingly against the glass. ‘Takeo, that’s Christian Dior!’

‘Oh, is it?’ he laughed.

With the fingers of the same right hand he pulled the top off and scribbled an upside down stick-man fast as anything.

‘Dior San, Dior San, don’t jump!’ he giggled.

‘Ahh!’ they both screamed as the lipstick was thrown up, up and away from the block.

That, Takeo thought, just left the problem of the bottle of beer and *mildly scented* hair-removing cream.

## #6A

When Liam had finished the job he phoned in to see if he had any go sees or castings to go on. Jeff could be heard in the background giving his J-E-F-F intro to...to somebody.

Kubo told Liam he had three provisionals, two bookings, and an *audition* at five. Because Liam had been working he'd missed four go sees, but Yada had taken his portfolio.

'Go home for a while and get some rest,' Golding had advised, getting his call transferred to her phone, 'looks like you're going to be busy. There's been a good reaction to your card and, hey, well done. Herbie Yamaguchi phoned to say you were really good. He's pushing you for a calendar job. You can play snooker, right?'

As the door shut, the air conditioning got busy. Liam's fate was sealed in that cab. He could have been taken away anywhere and the driver, checking in his rear-view mirror, knew that.

Liam ran a hand over the freshly laundered white polyester seat covers. They were neatly fitted and sedately frilled, matching the dinky lace curtains over the rear windows.

The driver was old. His ID photo showed a pitted face with bushy moustache—a contrast to the long, cleanshaven neck Liam had a great view of. This driver twiddled his radio until he found an English-speaking station. Nice thought. It was clear he could not understand what was being said by the nature of the broadcast. Still, Liam thought, a nice thought. Handy, too, if he'd forgotten how to order a variety of fish dishes in a restaurant.

Just a few blocks away from his new home sweet home, Liam saw a cyclist in shiny, black, skin-tight cycle shorts on a mountain bike stopped by the lights. As the taxi drew level with the cyclist, the lights turned to green. The play of muscles on the cyclist was visible, regular, monotonous as in animated photos of the early twentieth century. Shoulders hunched up to the ears. Torso, so still, immobile. The one solid part of a sculpture that

was all fluid motion. Feet above the ground, circling. Circling from the calf, knee, long thigh. The hind-quarters above the saddle, just a little—poised. Almost stripped, bared. Crew cut shining. With sudden reflections off black glass, the cyclist's body was reduced to a silhouette, lines sharpened as he drew away at speed. Clarified, purified.

Liam watched the cyclist flow like water through the net of cars. There was practice in his grace, daring too with all that weaving and dipping while racing forward.

Eighteen years old, perhaps, maybe nineteen. Hard to tell. Liam felt inadequate next to this youth on a bike, felt the years creeping up on him. Once, he'd been a beautiful boy dressed like that.

If Liam missed anything in London, it was his bike. But that was all he missed. That's all it took, one small trigger, and Liam's mood changed. His chin lowered.

As he paid the driver, his one hope in the world was that Jeff wouldn't be in. He wanted to serve himself up some French toast and watch tv.

Reflected in the large mirror with the surround of gilded (really quite horrible) mouldings, Liam saw himself.

'I feel like shit,' he said very slowly—and look at me, he thought, I look like a stupid shit, don't I?

The concierge wasn't around, no eyes gone vague and opaque with cataracts were there to greet him.

Just as the shining stainless steel doors of the lift had closed, a schoolboy, not at school for the day, was off jogging—judging by the cut of him.

Standing outside #6A, Liam took in a deep breath, then slid the thin, steel key into the single lock. Following the sound of running water coming from the bathroom, Liam braced himself for a *Hi*. At whatever time Jeff had gone out he had forgotten to turn off the hot water tap to the bathroom sink.

'Hi,' Liam croaked to his blur of a reflection. 'You're Liam, right? I'm Jeff, J-E-F-F.'

Leaning against the door frame Liam felt like he'd known Jeff a few years too many. 'Fucking wanker,' Liam said under his breath.

'Fucking W-A-N-K-E-R.'

Liam was too used to living alone.

'So, where you from?' Liam asked the blur with a sneer, giving the cracked tiled bathroom half a onceover.

‘Me? I’m from a little hell hole called Racine. In Wisconsin. Between Chicago and Milwaukee. Don’t tell a soul.’

Liam drew an upside down smile on what could have been a smiley face and went to put the kettle on. While the (precisely one mugful of) water boiled, Liam changed into his old pyjamas, even though it was early afternoon. They were comfy.

Again there was a cobweb in the corner of the window. Liam let it be, wondering if the woman who came to clean up (a bit) every other day would make the spider temporarily homeless in the course of her domestic duties.

With the smell of maple syrup rising off his French toast, Liam felt more at home than in London. No Goswell Road, he thought. No Shakespeare’s Head drunks pissing on the stairs. No drink cans being kicked along the pavement. Yes, there were still sirens, there was still the sound of traffic from roughly the same height up that he was used to. But it wasn’t the rumble of red buses coming in threes. Nor the rumble of black cabs slowing at the lights—hoping for green to change to amber to gain another minute’s worth on the clock.

Jeff had left his bedroom door wide open. He’d covered the walls of the room with composites of over two hundred models. Liam stepped in. After a couple of hours with Julie B he knew quite a bit about J-E-F-F. By all accounts he’d spent the previous five months in London. Hadn’t done very well, only doing a couple of editorial jobs for *Attitude* and *New Woman*, plus an in-store poster for C&A. No catalogues. No shows. No major campaigns. No tv commercials. He’d already bitched lungfuls to Liam about London, about the Golding agency there, run by the drag king’s parents. Funny though, not a word about where he stayed, friends and stuff. Dodgy.

For someone who hadn’t worked that well he’d certainly done a lot of shopping before he’d touched down at Narita. Everything he had with him was new. It was like he’d done nothing but spend spend spend on that last day in London, shedding an old skin, acquiring lots of new.

His hair had been freshly-cut, subtly highlighted. An expensive bit of last-minute grooming. The sunbed tan was already fading, to his advantage. He’d been manicured, pedicured. Every pore in his face told a story of steaming, squeezing and careful plucking. Some veins had been drained, too.

So many new possessions; three plaid jackets (Hugo Boss), raincoat (Miyake), suits (Paul Smith/Hackett/ Versace), shoes (Churches and Westwood). An occasional moment of vivid colour broke the sweep of black shoulders.

Shutting his eyes, Liam let his fingertips follow the clothes, hanger by hanger, feeling linen, velvet, heavy cotton, pure new wool and cashmere. From preppier-than-thou to outrageous Gaultier viscose and denim. So many textures, such a variety in shape of collar and cut. More velvet. A jacket. Deepest purple. Liam's thumb sank into it.

It was like he'd done a last few hours around London stores (cab waiting outside) with a Platinum American Express card—someone else's. Focused purchases made with a feeling of revenge or pure, infantile greed. Or both.

The leather reeked, the toiletries stank. It was all so very nouveau. J-E-F-F was, Liam had spotted, nervous in his new skin. Was that good (lapsed) Catholic guilt surfacing at times?

Although Jeff played Mr Clean on first impression, he'd hit the clubs with Loretta and Sam within twenty-four hours of being in Tokyo. Going straight from appointments to some place over Roppongi crossing (down, sharp left, up a transparent external lift), he'd already taken to nibbling the free buffet as an economical form of sustenance, gulping down gin fizzes like Evian.

Outstretched on Jeff's unmade bed, Liam could smell the new arrival. Beyond the manufactured scents of aftershave, gel and moisturiser, he could smell Jeff's dreaming body.

'Poor sod,' Liam whispered, slowly—ever so quietly.

Beside the bed was a photo of Jeff as a child leaning against a wall bleached with sunshine. It could have been a wall anywhere in the world but even to someone who'd never been to Wisconsin, it had more than a whiff of Racine to it.

There are scents which linger for years. A piece of leather drenched with cinnamon oil, a cupboard rubbed with musk, a cedar chest. Unlike floral scents that evaporate within a few hours, the smell of some kind of institution, an orphanage, perhaps, was deep in the fibres of that photographic paper. Bleach, wet bed-sheets and damp.

Running a hand over his head, Liam remembered himself as a boy. A boy with so many dreams, wanting to make so many breakthroughs. For a

moment Liam felt very alone, but it wasn't a moment of sadness.

He returned to his own room, then stood in front of the wardrobe. Freeing himself of the pyjama jacket, then bottoms, he surveyed his body. As usual, it was a huge disappointment. Too underdeveloped here, bit too curvy there.

Breathing in, each bone in his ribcage was outlined. In, out. Rising, falling. The mirror was dirty, remnants of Blu-Tac remained. And sellotape.

So many dreams, so many breakthroughs.

Smoothly, evenly, in lovely slow motion, Liam showed the mirror how to do a stretch. Only the cacti lined up by the window saw the elegance of his body, cutting through air. A stretch—a plain stretch. Something he'd done thousands of times since infancy, often to Radio 1, 3 and 4—but never 2.

The mirror brought a fresh awareness to the familiar exercise.

Running a hand over the precision-cut haircut, Liam wondered about those things he'd found down in the bins. From under the books came the grand selection of wank magazines and snapshots. The photos, he decided, he'd keep. The magazines would be dumped. *Suck, Hard, Fresh Men. Honcho, Drummer, Steam*. Big dicked men doing rude things with big dicked men. Liam was neither surprised that many of the pages had oily fingerprints here and there, nor that many of the pages were stuck together.

The centre-spread of *Steam* showed a youth all alone in a bubble bath. Only head, knees and shoulders emerged above the level of the water. The water had obviously been hot, misting the lens. Or was it a filter? The model, resting his head backwards as probably directed by some tedious fag calling himself an art director, seemed out of place among the tattooed muscle of the other pages. Plainer, simpler. Very boy next door. Liam viewed the subject as a person, not as a thing to jerk off over. He studied the look in the guy's eyes. Wondered where he'd come from, what his story was.

Far sexier than those pin-up boys were the snapshots of...of someone. Among school line ups, holiday snaps and the occasional polaroid taken in the back of a bus, there were shots of a boy at his homework desk. Same cacti by the window, same books on the shelves, same view of the block of flats opposite, but from another angle. Higher up. Maybe, Liam reckoned, two or three flights up. That'd make it #8A or #9A.



As with the centre-fold pin up, Liam viewed the subject as a person. He studied the look in the guy's eyes. Liam laid the photos out in the shape of a giant question mark.

'Hands made for playing the piano,' he whispered to himself. 'Nipples a mixture of maroon and brown.' Wonder who took that one.

Liam leafed through books and glossy catalogues from The Edo-Tokyo Museum, Nezu Institute of Fine Arts, The Hatakeyama Collection. Museums and art galleries galore. Many of the pages were marked, not with coffee stains or the squashing of ants, but bus tickets, rail cards, postcards. Liam's eyes scanned his blank walls that seemed to be covered with an easy wipe-down kind of coating. Part wallpaper, part sweet wrapper.

Of all the things to pack on a trip to the other side of planet Earth, Liam had packed paper cutting scissors and a Pritstick. With relish he began to tear out pages from The Japanese Sword Collection Guide, the Idemitsu Museum of Arts brochure and—with a shrug of his shoulders—the centre-spread from *Steam*. Palaces, parks and gardens. Fossils, oceans and solar systems. Mum and Dad (?) on the giant roots of a pine tree. All were to be Liam's wallpaper with careful dabs of the glue. But first, the quickest part — making the *Things To Glue* pile.

An hour later, Liam had a pile of stuff for the bins.

. 6 .

The lift was cool.

Looking at himself in the mirror Liam wondered if he should have put on a teeshirt, a vest at least. He suddenly felt naked wearing only his old Levi's and mashed-up Nike.

As the shining stainless steel of the lift doors met, Liam heard the phone begin to ring. He pressed the open doors button and open up they did.

It was Kubo, chasing Sam who couldn't be found; she'd accidentally rung the wrong number. As she apologised Liam whispered a giant *Uh-oh* internally. By the time he got to the lift, a loosely packed stack which had been at his feet not a minute ago was going from third, to second, to first floor.

Someone had been baking bread, the corridor was aromatic with yeast.

## #7B

Takeo was breathless.

Within half an hour of his mother's enforced departure, he'd binned the remnants of his father's existence along with the empty beer bottle and squeezed out tube.

Racing like a maniac he'd made an essential visit to the chemist opposite The Hara Store, where he'd bought a new tube of that foul-smelling hair-removing cream plus three cheap lipsticks on special offer. To avoid suspicion he had also picked up a bar of mango-scented soap, a horrible shower cap, as a joke, and—from the sweet shop—a packet of her favourite mints.

Then he was back. Back, back in the flat and flat on his back in his bed with both knees raised to his chin and panting, only to realise he'd forgotten to bin the beer.

Down he went again, avoiding eye contact with the concierge as he made for a drinks machine two roads down. Three weeks of pocket money — gone.

Heart going boom-bang-a-bang boom-bang-a-bang loud in his ears, he decided to take the lift for once.

Takeo pulled off his baseball cap, taking a look at himself in the mirror. He was shiny shiny with sweat. He looked like a minty mint Sacha.

'2-3-4...' the boy counted, watching the yellow lights above the door increase.

As yellow hit 5, Takeo spotted a bundle of old books and magazines. A quick fingering between the haphazard pages revealed Inami woodcarvings. Takaoka copperware. Noh celebrities and...the cover shot was a beautifully composed portrait or an amiable-looking muscle boy on the edge of a cliff wearing nothing but a long, wet, white teeshirt. The colour of the trees and of the grass were sidelit by what seemed to be fresh, early-morning sunlight.

Takeo felt completely removed from reality; not himself.

The paper was glossy and smooth. Silky. He traced his fingers over the bold type face of the title: *Fresh Men*. When he had drunk his fill of the picture—and the need to look did seem like a thirst—Takeo turned the page.

-6-

‘Oh, come on.’ Takeo said to himself, ‘what you fuckin’ waiting for?’

Takeo gathered up the pile as if it were a timed exercise in one of Handa San’s circuits. Magazines the like of which he’d only ever seen flash up briefly on late night tv were pulled to his chest.

‘Come on.’

The lift shuddered to a halt.

Click of the door. Bang. Click of a lock.

Takeo closed his eyes in disbelief, but his retina had soaked up each title as blotting paper swallows ink. Splayed out over his bed were uncensored foreign magazines in which big men were doing rude things with big men.

*Suck* and *Hard*, words he knew from English. *Fresh Men*, *Honcho*, *Drummer*, *Steam*. Only the words *Fresh* and *Men* registered.

The boy came face to face with faces full of lust. And greed. Battered, gorgeous and rancid. The size of those dicks.

Something rhythmic was felt along his heart, a gulping, shivering limbo. In his throat he felt an ache. His stomach hollowed.

The pictures appalled and attracted the boy. With their grandiose and taunting provocations they demanded to be licked. Some of the pages were stuck together, one or two torn out.

At that moment nothing in the world mattered more to Takeo than those sheets of stapled paper that a match could have reduced to ashes. The trauma of queerdom was shoved to the back of his mind a while.

How often he checked left and right, straining to hear for the lift/click of the door, as he bowed to plant kisses on the perfect paper skin of those porn stars in *Steam*. Doing as much as he could do to himself, doing what he saw in the pictures, he squeezed his own nipples, bent and squeezed his own dick, tugged on his growing boy balls.

‘So that’s what spunk looks like,’ he said, gazing at spurting ejaculate, caught in hundredths of a second exposures absorbed by Kodak and Fuji. The boy’s bedroom had never felt so secret, with the curtains drawn, the light turned away from desk.

Too hot to handle, Takeo decided he should return them to the lift. Or carry them down to the bins. Or, laughing to himself, post them through the letterbox of #10B. Or #9A. Who could he post them to? Then a nasty little idea struck him—Handa San. But no, he couldn't. What would it take?

Brown paper, sellotape. A trip to the post office. No, impossible. Didn't have the money. And what was the point? Hiding them seemed like the best idea, but where? Not in the flat. So, where?

From the kitchen drawer Takeo fished out a 0101 carrier and gave them the attention of Christmas shopping. Like the best wrapped presents Takeo tore the package apart much faster than it had been neatly piled together. He wanted one picture from each magazine. That's all. He'd find a hiding place for them.

Then he was faced with the problem of overchoice. Priority was given to a page that had something sexy on both sides. Pages 86/87 of his encyclopedia became home to photographs no picture editor would have allowed.

Takeo took the stairs slowly. He felt he was sneaking through a back door, about to commit a burglary. Where light came in through tired ventilators equipped with huge, motionless fans wearing a latticework of oil and (thick) dust, buzzing flies of all sizes seemed to be congregating for a chat.

Takeo wasn't at all frightened as he went down the stairs, steps resounding. He knew he was just approaching iron doors stencilled with warnings and skulls, bins loaded to the brim and leaking.

Underneath products to brighten, shine, untarnish and unblock—bleach, beeswax, ammonia, acid, descaling liquid, Takeo hid the magazines he felt so grateful for having the good luck to find, then mounted the stairs in twos.

Getting everything right meant flushing the packaging, squeezing out a bit, leaving things how they'd been found. Meant fingering to take away that shiny newness. Getting everything right also meant boxing up the contents of the bathroom cabinet shelves and, very carefully, removing the bathroom cabinet from the wall.

Like his mother, he shook his head from side to side, but he wasn't amused. He was angry with himself. He hoped growing up didn't mean doing daft stuff then covering it over so no one would find out. All this trouble, he thought, due to a sudden impulse. It was...and he searched for the word...*INFANTiLE*.

Sitting on the edge of his bed, encyclopedia under the mattress, Takeo's stamp album was reduced one at a time, country by country. Tiny dabs of glue attached the collection to the inside door/back wall and sides of the bathroom cabinet.

He'd once done the same sort of thing with an old First Aid box he'd found in the bins, prettying it up inside with fruit stickers he'd spent two years accumulating. A birthday present for his mother, filled with little jars of dried herbs.

She'd adored the thing, but wished he'd bleached it first.

## #6A

Jeff had a booking for six the following morning.

He knew he should be all tucked up getting some essential beauty-sleep, but he was standing by the window, worrying with the lights off. He wanted to be out. He fancied a beer.

Liam was sitting up in bed, lights on, writing an aerogramme to a mother busy with grandchildren. He could hear Jeff hatching plans and schemes.

Eventually Jeff turned on the light. He needed to Motivate.

He broke open the wardrobe door to study measurements of a dozen male models.

‘Do you think Sam’s just a little bit behind?’ he said through the wall. ‘Just a little bit, you know, vegetable? Not mongoloid but rather close?’

‘No comment,’ Liam said.

‘Hey,’ Jeff started pensively.

‘Mmm?’

‘If we painted the flat a really nice cream or apricot, do you think Pigwoman would get us some new carpeting?’

‘An off white, perhaps,’ Liam said, stabbing a fullstop, ‘or an ivory?’

‘Something light *would* be nice.’

‘I think we’re going to have to think *budget* for any home improvements,’ Liam said, looking at his collage handiwork.

Jeff swallowed vitamins with intermittent sniffs, then he got busy with some Clinique. A sudden outbreak of Kaposi sarcoma would have really fucked up this investment in skin care.

Ten minutes later Liam could hear Jeff having a meaningful relationship with his left wrist. It started with too much silence, then a rustling of bedsheets. A soft, rhythmic sound. An elbow making repeated contact with a patch of bedding as he fingered that circumcised dick of his. Speed increased. Then those sounds, that little *clik* or *plik* or *clik-plik*. Little wet sounds. A breath, a readjustment. More spit. Friction. Repeated actions.

Giant rustles. Legs flexing, kicking the sheets away. Liam imagined Jeff, wanking himself silly, perhaps with a finger up his arse, thinking about... himself, probably. Wanking hard as his mind focused on his favourite tearsheets in his *book* (perhaps open at his side), his tan line, his sister, his dick, the new Ralph Lauren girl (who looked so boyish), Obsession, some Italian guy at the gym in New York (in the showers—steroid knockers/bubble butt), sending postcards to people he hated, his provisional bookings, Madonna, oh yes, Madonna's dancer's (more to the point) and the Italian—taking that dick—and the time he was twelve/nearly thirteen... that time after swimming club... but no, Liam thought, perhaps that was an overestimation of J-E-F-F's imaginative and recall abilities. It'd have to be one fantasy at a time: Calvin Klein helping Jeff into a pair of Calvin Kleins. Bruce Weber about to shoot.

## BASEMENT

The little man was dressed as if ready for an hour at the local driving range to thrash practice balls to nowhere. Ready for that hour in one of those honeycombs of cubicles facing a vast wall of net, balls galore ready to take the blast of an earnest swing.

‘Guess how much I weigh.’

There was a pause in which Akio pretended to guess, knowing the man would go on with some sort of trivia. He wasn’t really in the mood: the tip of his tongue was sore from running over stubbly adam’s apples, sour from the nicotine he’d licked off sets of dentures.

‘I’m six stone twelve. In the last eight weeks I’ve lost nine pounds. That’s considerable, don’t you think? I wouldn’t mind, but I’m not on a diet, you see. I’m feeling a lot of stress. I’m, you know, *under* a lot of stress. I run a shop and business is bad.’ (Pause. Deep breath.) ‘I take it you’ve been told what I need.’

(Little lick of the lips.)

‘No problem,’ Akio said, like it was a faulty electrical appliance he was about to give a seeing to.

In the time it takes a child of five to count to twenty, both were down to a single piece of underwear.

There he stood, in raggedy old fundoshi as if he were doing Akio a favour. Unimpressive tattoos of intertwining dragons and snakes all over the old fool.

‘Take that off and get on the table,’ Akio snapped. He was curious to see the position the man would assume.

For a man in his seventies he was amazingly flexible, those legs went right back in a flash, ankles pressed against his ears.

Akio let the man see what he was made of and the man said, ‘Wow.’

‘No,’ Akio half-snarled, ‘I don’t want to see your face. Get into doggy position.’

No sooner said than done.



Pulses rose as Akio slid a condom over the length of his sizeable penis, something the punter couldn't get his thumb and forefinger to meet around the base of.

The man's puckered anus was a clenched button waiting to be pressed. Press for entry.

Like an extensible iris, that puckered entrance stretched backward a little like skin about to give way to a hypodermic, then suddenly there was gaping black that led the way into something else.

The man's cock lurched as Akio eased past the sphincter. Fully in, right to the shaven-down hilt, probing the old shit's rectum, Akio wanted to hurt the man. So he did.

The man felt a God-awful burning fire flash through his bowels but in spite of the pain within him he stayed quiet. He felt he was getting value for money.

Akio fucked with a mixture of artistic subtlety and subdued rage, at if to a rhythm of his own making. He didn't just stick it in and pull it out. It was in, in a bit more, a little out, back in as far as he could push it, out a little, then in as far as it could be shoved once again hard. REPEAT.

'Yeah, fuck me,' the man said, 'whatever you want.'

Akio wondered if the man would be happy to be tied up, drugged, scratched all over with a rusty hanger, and then have a practical joking tomato juice enema blasted over him to the chant of AIDS! AIDS! AIDS!

Rummaging through his store of techniques, Akio stabbed prize bull movements into that arse, hard and fast. Lingering thrusts with circular withdrawals.

Looking down, he saw the lips of the man's arse curling and uncurling with every thrust and side movement.

Akio went through every video variation. After a while he felt the usual down-below sphincter contractions and deduced the man (from Yonezawa) had come.

When Akio withdrew the condom, not only had it split—it wasn't pretty pink.

Being a thoughtful kind of sex worker, Akio quickly turned his back and got busy with a fistful of tissues, shielding the view of the more than occasional occupational hazard.

The man dressed faster than a fireman and left the room without saying a proper goodbye, like he'd be back in an hour to pick up his dry-cleaning.

He'd left, but hadn't gone, exactly. He'd left something, a feeling. A dusty feeling of ashen anti-climax which no air freshener would budge. And the feeling lingered like a buzzing ghost fly.

## #7B

Slid down and tucked under the quilt, pillow over his baseball-capped head, Takeo could not sleep for worrying what he might turn out to be.

Flicking the pages with above average schoolboy relish for anatomy, past armoured battles, scenes of torture, beheading and idolised icons, Takeo came to his tucked away paper lovelies. No way could he keep those pictures in the flat. They'd have to go.

At close to three in the morning, Takeo stretched himself out on his back in front of the twin wardrobe mirrors. The soles of his feet were flat against the glass as anglepoise illuminated four of the favourite pages torn from those magazines and—so temporarily—Blu-Tacked beneath the shot of Handa San.

Two more of those pages were spread out beside of him. He looked at them all in the random select mode as he rattled his testicles into a blur... contracting the muscles of his abdomen close to doubling up to get a better look at the swimmer, the farm boy, the US marine.

No way was he going to go into the kitchen to retrieve clothes pegs to attach to his nipples like the shot in *Drummer*. That would hurt. He just pulled them a bit, squeezed them between his nails—just a little. No way was he going to drip candle wax on his balls, either. But it made him think.

Takeo imagined himself as one of those magazine men, increasingly undressed, lushly overlit and oiled-up in showers, barns, locker rooms and dental chairs. Takeo, undressed for the camera(s). Takeo, a six-page-spread to be admired and desired. Takeo, legs wide apart—face down into a pillow—as the luscious centre-spread. Takeo, the cover boy, ideal blow up lover boy. *Takeo Magazine*.

The boy considered putting a finger up his arse as he fiddled with himself, gazing beyond the mass reproduced picture of an oiled and lubricated fist penetrating a pair of oiled and lubricated buttocks to the question in his head: wouldn't those guys feel embarrassed having their photograph taken in the nude? And didn't that kind of thing do damage?

Takeo didn't, didn't stick a finger up his arse. There might be shit up there, he thought. He thought he might try it if he didn't eat for a day, one day.

That I'm gonna bleed/I'm gonna piss myself feeling hit a few times, an ache which spread from throat to thighs. But nothing happened.

Close to four Takeo got his scissors out and cut six pieces of paper up very finely.

Pulling back the curtains, opening the window, turning the anglepoise outwards, Takeo squeezed the fragments lightly into a snowball and threw it up up and away toward no one in particular living in the block of flats opposite.

**FRIDAY**

金

## #6A

Jeff had slept well and looked great at five thirty when he brought Liam a cup of tea in bed.

He wanted to have his looks admired, and he was looking good—a vision in autumn beige. He also wanted to have the booking envied. Some advertising job, he'd said casually.

Such attention to the thin veneer of glamour created total openmouthedness in Liam.

He'd been up an hour already, first singing 'Born In The USA' in Spanish while showering, then burning two thin slices cut from the one decent granary his flatmate had managed to hunt down the day before on to which he loaded the wettest of scrambled eggs.

Little did Jeff know that Liam had seen Kubo writing out the job sheet at the agency. It wasn't an advertising job he was bouncing around the flat on his way to, it was editorial for *Popeye*. A glove feature.

'Are you going to Bios this evening?' Liam asked.

'Think I'll probably drop by.'

'Who knows, I might see you there. Julie B has kind of twisted my arm.'

'Ooh, who's a lucky girl then?'

## STUDIO EBIS

Sitting in front of a long mirror, flicking the theatrical lights surrounding it on and off, Jeff waited. On, off. The dressing room was empty but for a row of stools. On. He was the first to arrive. Off. Forty minutes early. On. A white room. Off. It was chilly in there. On.

More than anything else he felt stupid.

The general malaise plaguing him was vague but constant. Beyond the skin of that face was an aching head with hysterical sobs on cue but never released. Behind the large, dark brown eyes into which all kinds of people had looked, hiring the body for an hour here, an hour there, was a matter-of-fact feeling that he was about to implode with bursting blood perhaps as the hairstylist touched him or when the camera began to snap.

Outside, down below, people whirred past grey buildings in their haste. Down, down below, people lurched across zebra crossings when the green pedestrian light showed, each to a different location.

I'm falling, Jeff thought. Falling, with no one to catch me.

With his eyes closed he saw his sister, cross-eyed with rapture in the tiny square of the play area under a kite. An enormous bird of glittering, gold-coloured plastic hovering up in the spring morning air, free of cloud. Blue air. His mother sat on the bench, dressed in grey. Very still. Her monthly visit.

Close to eight a hairstylist skulked into the changing room. He didn't want to be there, he wanted to be doing the Sano collection but hadn't been selected.

Jeff's solitary refinement commenced with a head massage from some guy who didn't bother introducing himself because he could tell the model was the kind who didn't give a damn. Copious amounts of hair gel were promised after the make-up was done.

A tiny young woman head to toe in deepest chocolate said, 'Mitsi,' and bowed.

‘Black, two sugars,’ was Jeff’s reply to this introduction, said gliding a middle finger over his forehead. Inside his head he heard sand-paper dryness.

She shrugged and began to line her brushes, at the ready. Enamelled palettes unfolded from a battered aluminium tool box bought four years back, revealing triple tiers of rounded, labelled colours with convex top surfaces like silk or satin cushions. Each pretty dollop of colour—scarlet, carmen, umber, ochre, chrome, viridian, cobalt, indigo, ultramarine, forest and white—among others—had been filled into clinical white frames, many of which were wearing thin. Then she got the model that coffee he wanted.

‘Mmm,’ Jeff said. ‘Shit coffee. Thanks.’

Shitfuckyou too asshole blow job wanker, she thought. ‘Mitsi,’ she said, index finger rising to land on the tip of her nose, ‘is my name.’

‘Uh,’ Jeff said. ‘O, right. Hi Midzi.’

Lifting a tube of her most inferior moisturiser, what Mitsi chan wished for was a serviceable implement to bludgeon, cut, penetrate or burn. A rusty screwdriver, crowbar, saw, hammer, twelve inch monkey wrench or stump of wood. A blow torch, she thought, would be lovely on that forehead of his.

‘Sunbeds,’ she whispered to Jeff, ‘no goodu.’

Eight o’clock, Jeff thought to himself, ignoring the woman’s tutting, Liam and Loretta and Julie B and God knows who else would be there now, earning a lot more than twenty thousand yen.

Firmly, deeply and round and round went little dabs of the cheap moisturiser. She could have been gentler around the eyes. Over and over. Circling. Not exactly the lightest of touches. Working on all the muscles around those plucked eyebrows. Going through the routine with fingertips she hadn’t bothered to warm. Pulling up into the scalp. (Was that a scratch?) Patting, wanting to slap. Over and over. Pretending to push away surface fat, she was hoping he was allergic to the tube of stuff marked *MORE THAN MILD*. She was hoping he’d come out in spots, a rash and bloodshot eyes by the end of the day. Pat pat pat. She was making him feel stupid with all the patting.

‘Okay?’ she asked, uncaring.

Scottie oinked.



There was whispered conversation between the photographer, make-up artist and fashion editor. Jeff was to be subjected to foundation. He was too (fake) tanned. A little powder? Yes, to avoid shine. A little something on the eyebrows perhaps, a smudge of something to cover up where they'd been plucked. They were too perfect, too fine. Unnatural.

'Nothing on the lips,' the photographer said.

The single brush strokes of an almost completely wiped mascara brush thickened and lengthened those brows. Each movement was light, confident, unerring—no hesitancy with the task of subtle exaggeration. She wanted to get the job over and done with.

After a spot of punking up with gel and some sadistic back-combing, Jeff was all done in the dressing room. All done with modelling, too. Lights off.

Jeff stood by the fire escape in his own clothes. The gloves were the thing. They said they only wanted facial fragments, the odd wisp of hair.

'Maybe it'll be a cover shot,' the photographer said to perk Jeff up.

'Ame,' Mitsi said, pointing to the sky.

'Fuckin' brilliant,' Jeff muttered.

One by one the spotlights came on.

Jeff settled himself rather self-consciously in the semi-darkness which surrounded the tungsten lit area. Then they were ready for him.

He felt a rush of elation as the brilliance of the spotlights became warmth. How he loved the radiance on his skin, turning the rest of the studio into a gulf of blackness. He thought of *Vogue Hommes*, *GQ*, that old body shot in the back of *HX*.

The first pair of gloves were by Pashu. The fashion editor's assistant picked nittily, fussing over everything.

Everything had to be just so. There was a thread on the left index finger that needed cropping down a little. Then a smudge on the thumb that had to be worked around. Otherwise perfect.

Flash.

Mitsi viewed the set up from the fire escape beside the hairstylist.

'Throw out your chest,' she whispered, 'pull in your stomach, squeeze your smelly buttocks together real tight and smile.'

'Shit model,' the hairstylist agreed.

## FASHION SHOW

*Bunraku is a thrilling combination of three elements: the narrator who voices all the roles, the shamisen player who accompanies the narration and exquisitely robed puppets who enact the stories. This unique art has a style and charm unlike that of any Western drama.*

Bunraku, Liam said. Bunraku. He couldn't concentrate, even tucked away right there at the far end.

The room smelled of coffee and cigarette breath, kind of sour. And plastic. Everyone had been asked to be there at eight. Not everybody was.

To keep themselves amused the beautiful people in the makeshift dressing rooms gazed into mirrors and pouted—they meditated, they read, they listened to their CD walkmans, smoking as they bitched, making use of mobile phones or just small-talking drugs, edible knickers, tearsheets and Chinese astrology.

Far less beautiful people whose priorities were getting ties to the right length in seconds, fussed hats into rakish angles, made sure collars and cuffs were stylishly up/down. And more. No fluff, no creases, no threads hanging down.

A film crew and two cameramen hovered, collecting those atmospheric moments that would be of little value within a week.

Liam was determined not to talk, not to listen. Not be any part of it.

*Bunraku is a thrilling combination of three elements: the narrator who voices all the roles, the shamisen player who accompanies the narration and exquisitely robed puppets who enact the stories. This unique art has a style and charm unlike that of any Western drama.*

Bunraku, Liam said. Bunraku. He couldn't remember if he'd already read that bit or not. Every few seconds it was 'Darling! Mwa! Mwa!'

Loretta arrived around half past nine, escorted by Kubo who looked far from happy.

Sweet and pure Julie B, last week's *An-An* cover girl— what with it being Friday—was reading another letter from One Tree Hill expressing

exasperation over New Zealand's weather and concerns for an only grand daughter's diet. This girl with a china-like kind of prettiness, hair cut too lovingly into a seventies pageboy style, raised an eyebrow at Liam as the detonations of laughter gained volume by the minute. Her assessment?: 'The coffee's getting to them.'

Looking around him, Liam realised he was among the goody goodies of the Tokyo model world. Drinking Spa, nibbling fruit, Alexander technique...while over by the door the free club bunch were already munching crisps, attempting to hit high fives with the designer only to ask when the booze would arrive. They wanted beer, chilled beer. Lots.

'Funny,' said that week's *An-An* cover girl (English rose with freckles variety with a piercing through her belly button) to the guy in the Seibu posters everywhere, 'have you noticed how at the start of a day nobody can speak English but, if you've behaved yourself, when the job's just about through they're telling you about their day in Broadstairs or their trip to the Gold Coast and how they adore Blur?' Cigarette sucks, portfolio flips. 'Mmm yeah,' came the response.

Waiting. Talking of where they'd go to renew their visas. Hong Kong or Thailand? The shopping they wanted to do, the copies of clothes they wanted to have made up.

Cigarette sucks, portfolio flips. Trench warfare would have been more agreeable.

*Bunraku is a thrilling combination of three elements: the narrator who voices all the roles, the shamisen player who accompanies the narration and exquisitely robed puppets who enact the stories. This unique art has a style and charm unlike that of any Western drama.*

Bunraku, Liam frowned internally. Bunraku. He realised that his concentration was on zero. His eyes were skimming the words, nothing was going in.

Somebody shouted that The Prodigy were arriving around the back and the film crew and paparazzi bundled out. Then that somebody laughed. Old trick—always works.

Some guy with a clipboard said *Schh!* a lot. Nobody *schhd*. Some guy with a megaphone turned it up so it started off with feedback. Everyone *schhd*.

'Okay, when you hear your name say Hai!'

‘Is that Hai or Hi?’ Julie B said to the ends of hair she was checking for splits.

‘Right, we start with Golding agency...’

Somebody mooded, creating a stir.

‘...Loretta.’

‘Hi-ya all!’ she squealed like a naughty little girl, waving a hand lazily. There was laughter in the main, conspiratorial merriment, only a few groans which she instantly pinpointed.

‘Julie B,’ and the chatter started. ‘Hai!’ But her tiny voice hadn’t been heard over the rumble coming from Loretta’s smuck. (Kubo shook her head, no way would Loretta’s contract be renewed.) ‘Julie B?’

Ms B raised her perfect right hand, waved—blushing.

Beyond the raised hand was Kubo—watching and, Liam noted, she was watching in a true historically-observant fashion. Watching the look Loretta threw at Julie B, a look with volume to it. A look that got a look from the show coordinator to design team leader. A long and searching look that flicked to Kubo. A stern and baffling look that flashed to Loretta who didn’t notice the look because she wasn’t looking—she was giggling her head off like a naughty little girl at assembly. Those quiet giggles—head down—which hurt young bitch ribs. It was all put on and somehow reptilian/defiant/triumphant: a whole mutinous crew of emotions. We are talking Baaad Vibrations.

The design leader noted Kubo’s look of frustration and glared at the coordinator to... ‘Look at that!’ Loretta caught the looks and looked away. What did they want, Loretta thought, blood?

In all the looking at others’ looking, Liam also had a look of his own. He was unaware of being looked at, unaware of looking meditative, if not forlorn. Julie B thought he looked dishy.

At ten, everybody was on the catwalk being told that the show would be a lot of fun and that what was wanted, more than anything else, was spontaneity. Natural spontaneity. Naturally, Liam thought. He had a sense the show would be as spontaneous as a royal wedding. Or funeral.

Some infant called DJ Record Player had been flown in from Berlin with white-label techno and a lot of scratched Marc Bolan. She kept yelping, much to her grrr-eat! amusement.

Loretta was asked to remove the designer stubble on her bikini-line. With all the charm of a Halloween lantern she refused.

She'd had it with Tokyo and Christmas was coming and she'd made enough and she didn't want to finish her contract and if she got back to London before December there was still a chance she'd be in time for the castings for catalogue and Grattan were going to Tenerife she'd heard and she needed some sun, glug, and what the fuck...so she filled some French guy's penny loafers with beer while the dresser wasn't looking but one of the make-up team was. This made for a bit of fun during the second rehearsal. Until the make-up artist told her group leader who told the show co-ordinator who got on his mobile to Golding herself.

'You should have seen the look on her face,' said Julie B, who'd been standing beside her in nothing but bra and knickers as the mobile was passed to Loretta. 'When Pigwoman asked if she'd prefer a plane back to Sao Paolo first thing tomorrow morning or Sunday some time. She looked really happy.'

In London it's...three o'clock in the morning, Liam thought. Three o'clock on a Friday morning. Friday. Friday already. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday. First show at two. Second at four, last one at six.

Liam returned to his guide book. Tomorrow, Liam thought, I'll go to... not Asakusa Kannon or Ueno Zoo. Not shopping in Ginza or the Tokyo Tower. Um...

## **GETTING AROUND**

## **DINING CLIMATE**

## **ACCOMMODATION**

## **FESTIVALS**

## **HI-TECH TOKYO**

## **PARKS & GARDENS**

Ah, yes. That's the one, Liam thought, call me ol' fashioned but...what I need is some fresh air.

## **PARKS & GARDENS.**

*Tokyo is not all buildings and traffic congestion, the tour guide gushed.*

*Hama Rikyo Garden originally contained a villa belonging to the Imperial Family. Known for its tidal pond crossed by wisteria-covered trellised bridges. 9.00am-4.30pm; closed Mon.*

Liam wondered what it would be like to have a tidal pond. More than anything else he was tired of living in a flat. In London, in Tokyo. He so liked hearing rain fall on a roof, like he'd heard at 13, Madeley Road, like he'd heard at 11, The Mead, like he'd heard at 3, Charlbury Grove. Those childhood homes in Ealing, London W5. He missed that kind of rain, the one he enjoyed being under. Missed a garden, watching the droplets splashing the pond surface silver.

*Koishikawa Korakuen was remodeled by various shoguns from the 17th century on. Features a half-moon bridge that becomes a full moon when viewing its reflection in the pond. 9.00am-5.00pm.*

In the second rehearsal Liam was asked to walk in a zig zag, which sounded fine, until he started ricocheting off loopy anorexics.

Three sets of lips were all being finished off with the same perfect, painted hearts of squalid red as three sets of lips elsewhere were biting down on tissues to blot the colour. It was the cue for pandemonium.

'Okay everybody, ten minutes to go.'

'And ten minutes late already,' groaned a French guy, prancing around in nothing but Gucci g-string and nipple rings.

Backstage had all the high drama of a tv hospital soap as hairstylists created looks that were as distinctive as they were appalling.

Seconds before the lights dimmed in the auditorium and the sound system produced a queer silence that made the ears hum, Julie B took a deep breath and switched on half a dozen internal switches. Her posture straightened—she seemed to grow a couple of inches—her sparkling eyes became electric.

Only Liam saw her raise those fingers up to her chest, and quickly, so that no one would notice, cross herself. A real quickie of a crucifix, careful not to smudge the foundation on her forehead. An inexpressible emotion surged through Liam at that moment. Oh yeah, he thought, as the first few notes of Wagner's Tannhauser skittered overhead out there, yeah right. Wonder how deep that faith runs.

Julie B wasn't altogether unhappy that she'd been paired to walk with Loretta. She felt it would give her an edge.

Hooking her thumbs into the pockets of the tight silk pants, the two of them sauntered down the runway, smiling like they were best buddies.

One foot dead in front of the other, hips wiggling subtly, hitting the end to pause for a count of eight before turning to the right, then returning. Together, perfect timing, so unlike the rehearsals. Together, there at the end of the catwalk to stand still for a count of eight with their eyes closed, basking in the spotlight as though it were the Mediterranean sun.

Both felt the full blast of fiftyish/nearly sixty flashlights explode in their faces as they glared beyond the EXIT signs at the back of the hall without a wince, not a blink. Icy cool.

‘Bastards!’ Loretta said as she turned on her heel, half way up the runway, raising two fingers. It was an unscheduled stop, an unchoreographed moment. If Julie B hadn’t echoed the exact movement maybe the show would have got off to an embarrassing start. There was applause.

Dazzling visions of slick pomade and expensive long-term adolescent dentistry made the most of every second under the lights. Boys who paid so much attention to their smells, stars, scars and choice of Scotch in bars worked it.

Just before it was Liam’s turn to hit the catwalk his body temperature must have dropped about fifteen degrees. He actually shivered with nerves. His dresser, a student from some fashion college in Shinjuku, frantic with the ever-pulsing cycles of nostalgia, eyed him over for the one full minute before he sailed down the catwalk and said, ‘Okay.’

A David Bowie soundalike sang a Piaf song as the coldest, prettiest snowflakes in the world tiptoed a dainty march to the count of eight, posed another eight—flashes burning into the retina—then went back to base to change without messing the collars or cuffs with make-up.

The treble and bass seemed miles apart. The sound was huge, spacious. The clothes were crap.

# DISCO

It was packed. Packed. Like a deathtrap firetrap. Three to four hundred there. Some great-looking fairies, tanned to all tints of bronze, danced among great-looking girls got up like mad, bad, dangerous to know drug queens.

The music was too loud, talking was not worth the effort, so they stomped in a uniform, pulsing undulation, doing all variation of aerobic—but nonchalantly. Stomped, all in the same kind of mood, hardly looking at one another but eyes everywhere—swivelling chunkily to the left and right in a tight, fashionable style they'd all picked up somewhere. Maybe there. Every bit of the nonchalance was fake. Fake as the coated denim, misted PVC, rip-stop nylon and light-reflective tape.

While the heads swayed (hair slick with a jar-load of gel), while heads bobbed and jigged, while the heads veritably bounced with all the jogging on the spot—so itchy-footed—dilated eyes hunted. Waiting to see, waiting to be noticed. Working every Nazi jackboot beat like they had some kind of investment in the music industry. Clownishly intense animals in mating desperation, all puffed up and on display. Few seemed to be genuinely enjoying themselves. The majority would be sad fucks by sunrise.

The concrete bar and surrounding austere slate-grey tables received a blast of machine-ice smoke. For atmosphere.

Intricate designs of laser beams and neon, reflected in the mirrored walls, lit faces that receded into infinity. Atmosphere.

There was a terrible consumption of nuts going on.

Half of the Golding crew were in the place, throwing drinks at the backs of their throats. The stinging of their eyes seemed to calm them.

'How did it go with Pigwoman?' everybody wanted to know.

It's not easy to talk at a hundred decibels, but everyone knew Loretta would manage to make herself heard.

'Oh, you'll never guess what...'

'Here we go,' laughed Sam.



‘Well, today, my last day in Tokyo...’

‘What?’ Sam shouted, eyes bulging.

‘Today I was delighted to find dog’s shit in Tokyo. A compact, slightly shiny brown curl on my way up the hill from Harajuku, right? To the surprise of a mother’n’child I picked it up with a McDonald’s napkin, stowing it in a burger box. Like you do. Well, after Pigwoman had done her thing, sayonara speech at volume ten, half money due given just like that, flight booked blah blah blah, I said thanks and began to pack up my index cards, collect tearsheets an’ all that evacuation shit. Well, when she’d got her pussy off that chair of hers to wank or whatever in the washroom, I put the turd on her chair. Well, sheeza bitch. Right? Kubo saw but pretended she didn’t. Kubo’s alright, isn’t she? Then I was outa there.’

‘I just hope you get the balance of what’s due to you in sixty days time,’ Sam said.

Loretta half-shrugged. ‘Anyway, I phoned the agency from a call box five minutes later and got Kubo who just gave yes or no answers.’

‘And?’ Jeff asked.

‘And NO, she hadn’t seen it, YES she’d sat on it and NO she hadn’t noticed but kept complaining about a nasty smell. Kubo told me to call back later and when I did she couldn’t speak for laughing.’

‘I guess that’s what you call a direct shit!’ Sam said. Groans.

Liam gulped at his drink and felt an unexpected pleasure at the warm, bubbly kick of it. Far too strong. Lovely. Jeff was wearing another thousand quid’s worth of clothing that he was trying to look casual in. What he wore never really suited him, it was as if the clothes wore him. He was paying a little too much attention to cuffs and knees as he sat down, looking none too happy as some new arrival shouted over the music. It wasn’t like Jeff to listen attentively. And he was, listening. Very attentively, as an E-flat penetrated his bowels. He had that look on his face that some people get when a bill arrives, face down on a little tray, a bill they weren’t expecting to cough up for. He stared at...stared at Sam making it like a matador with Loretta on the dance floor...mind drifting off, or back, or away.

Taking another swig of a beer that everyone else seemed to be drinking, he sucked the alcohol through his closed teeth. Backwards and forwards, through those teeth, like they do on tv. That old outward sign of inward thought trick. Similar to chewing gum, but more stylish. A cough-syrup drinking, butane sniffing, wired, jittery look. His brain was fizzing like a

bomb. A little penny had dropped. Oops—a crisis. Jeff switched into Terminator mode, vision through a red-tinted viewfinder.



## BASEMENT

A man who had a variety of flowers at the side of his home in Taira, clumped and unspectacular, attracting bees and filling the dwelling with a smell akin to stale honey, looked through the two-way mirror.

Behind the man's little round glasses, misted with sweat, his eyes smiled. Just his eyes.

Within five minutes he'd be on his knees in front of a body he'd remember forever as Akira. First he would remove those little round glasses from his nose, then a set of good-fitting false teeth from his mouth.

Looking upwards, unfocused but polite, he'd beg Akira to make it last until eight: the full hour.

'It's been a while since I've been,' the man said quietly.

'You look well,' Ippei lied.

'One does one's best.'

'Ah, I see you've spotted the new boy. Akira.'

Akio raised his beautiful head, black hair falling across his clear olive face, then flashed a green-light look beyond the two way mirror.

'New boy,' the man said, 'how new?'

'Started Tuesday.'

Every other week that man treated himself to washing feet with his tongue, licking first the tops, then the sides, finally slurping the sole and—best till last—the toes. It made him happy as a little dog let off the lead.

While the man was all sweaty and crazy with all that lovely licking, Akio was wondering if his false teeth would have fluffballs on them when they came out of the pocket. They'd probably, Akio thought, have been very dexterously placed on/into an Irish linen hanky. Or plastic.

While still on knees, within a second of the audible gulping final swallow of yummy saliva, the dry teeth were back in and the focal point of his smile. No visible fluff-balls.

He told Akio all about his little garden and the recent redecoration of his bathroom in one unburdening gush while taking his clothes off and putting

on a cutesy apron.

Sissy fairy, Akio thought, half-sneering from above as Ippei had instructed. He was wearing the blackest wig Akio had ever seen, the blackest wig in the world.

Bet he trusted bugs as a child, Akio thought, until they stung him. Bet he crushed those insect friends then, in tears.

‘Who do you talk to when you’re lonely?’ Akio asked.

Sometimes he had no control over that mouth of his and came out with all sorts. The punters liked it, in the main.

Maybe Akio wanted to hear the man say Mother, an old school chum, a neighbour.

The man said, ‘Myself.’

# STREET

Food from the top of the heap in his stomach rose up splattering the pavement—retching fit for an exorcism.

Somebody who'd nearly finished growing out some rather cheap blond highlights laughed, saying 'Rinse your mouth with this,' in a Dutch accent, handing him half a can of warm Dr Pepper.

'Thanks,' Jeff said, taking a swig. Then he hit the jackpot, vomiting like a magician drawing an endless stem of multicoloured bunting from the depths of his stomach.

Cars, lights, faces. Melons on special offer. Fish glistening in their coffins of crushed ice.

Atsko had fixed the clip-on earrings and a little silk scarf her mother didn't know about as she walked, imagining herself to be 1.81, absolutely naked, and blonde. Then the lipstick. She had to hurry.

At Roppongi Almond she pocketed her brace and unwrapped some fresh chemical-flavoured gum—mango—just in case. The girl was feeling lucky. By the clock there was the usual huddle of westerners clutching flat, black folders. The dirty swish of cars dampened each and every face with spray that felt like glitter.

Over the crossing, down, right, down, sharp left, down two steps, there by the bushes now covered with the first leaves of Autumn.

She was looking for fun and she had ten minutes or questions would be asked.

Sherry gave a single low whine. Every time the dog finished an M&M she gave that same whine and got another. When they'd all gone, Atsko had to prove to the dog that the packet was empty by crackling it in front of her.

'All gone.'

The dog's head nodded, then sank down to sniff the concrete for just one crumb.

The fifteen-year-old looked at her watch.

Atsko reckoned he'd just come from Bios, out of that club block at the far end anyway.

He was tall, well-dressed and obviously more than a bit drunk. Perfect.

That young man from Racine, Wisconsin, needed some air. Time to do some quick thinking. A quick walk around the block to clear his head. And a piss.

Down there, he thought. By that tree. Where it's dark. Yeah, that'll do fine. Down two steps, by some bushes covered with leaves. But there was someone there. Alone, except for a little dog—a long-eared, long-nosed, obedient something or other panting beside her. Both shared chubbiness verging quite distinctly on corpulence, not to say obesity.

She *really* wasn't his type.

He fancied giving that stupid dog a good kicking. Her too. Slag.

'Hi,' he said.

'Take my hand and put it where you'd like it to be.'

'You're cute,' he said. 'Kawaii.'

What a wally, she thought, putting her head to one side, hand outstretched, perfect for her purposes. 'Take my hand.'

Her lips, painted a liquorice-brown, separated, exposing incisors of a devilish whiteness, her tongue moved forward to taste the sweat on his upper lip. That, and his breath, and clear saliva, smelled and immediately tasted of ooh, Dr Pepper—then beer, garlic, gum...

With those incisors she could penetrate the flesh of his neck, sinking in with a power the drunken fucked up foreigner could not have imagined. With teeth like that there'd be no problem drawing blood, leaving the kind of blue marks that redden to purple, fade to brown, pale to yellow.

She busied with his dick through the material of those trousers but nothing was happening.

She often wondered how that part of a man's body could be rigid without there being a bone in there. It might have made it a little easier for the impotent to get off.

'Don't waste time, do you?' the young man from Racine gasped.

The guy was keen to get his zipper down. Good sign.

'I really need a piss,' he declared.

He seemed to be enjoying what she was doing. Well, he was smiling a bit. But his thing was flopping about like...a useless piece of cable?

Contracting the muscles of his abdomen close to doubling up, sweating—little moans—he felt a sensation coming that...

He pushed the girl's hand away.

Spreading from bladder to throat t-to...

That rigid jet sprinkled, scattered and shot down and away from him—splashing the little slut's satin-feel legs. Lots of 'Urghh,' and 'Mmm!' from him. Only.

Jeff shook off a few last drips with the exaggerated thoroughness of the average drunk after a slash.

'Cunt,' the man from Racine said.

Atsko had heard that word before. It had crossed her mind to ask her father to find out the meaning of the word from his occasional one-to-one conversational English teacher—but she thought it best not to—just in case.

'You speak English?'

Atsko shook her head, maintaining perfect eye contact. She was a little upset: no one had ever done what he'd just done all over her.

'I prefer boys. Me, faggot. But thanks. Arigato, sayonara and ciao, baby.'

'Bye bye,' Atsko sang in a perfectly modulated, sleepy American kid sister's high-pitched voice.

No rain began to pour down. In a film it would have rained. In a film she would have leaned against the wall to be showered by Mother Nature. But it didn't rain. And she wasn't in a film. And time was up.

'You should have gone for an ankle,' the girl whined at her bow wow. 'And I should've kneed him.'

On the (hurried) way back, Atsko stopped off to buy a tub of Haagen-Daz chocolate-chip from The Hara Store. It was melting in the heat of her hand so she drank it as if it were a milkshake. Instantaneous rapture lingered on her tastebuds.

## BASEMENT

The man from Ogori was the easiest yet. Ten minutes. Nothing kinky, no dirty talk, just a wank.

Leaning against the wall, pin-stripe trousers unzipped, hands on head, eyes tightly shut, he'd been on the receiving end of Akio's clenched fist for ten glorious minutes of varied wrist action. Akio didn't even have to take his clothes off.

At first Akio thought the man might have been disappointed or something, but when it came to tissue time the man asked if Akio could visit the hotel where he was staying. Sunday, at eight. He'd asked—in a telling way. Ippei, the man from Ogori had said in the whisper of a lakeside fisherman, need never know.

'Room 539.'

'Fine,' Akio had agreed. 'Sunday at eight.'

Akio ran the hot water tap for a minute, then washed his hands very carefully. Much attention was given to his long, thin fingers, remembering that each finger has four sides.

The face reflected in that bathroom mirror was not quite as whorish as it could have been. It was the face of someone fascinated by squalor, acting out a post-adolescent rebellion fantasy.

It wasn't too late, he wasn't smacked up or infected with anything a drop of Dettol wouldn't budge. Slumming it in that flophouse was a lifestyle option.

He'd got his nipples sucked every day that week. They were tender. He'd earned twice as much as he thought he would and lots of them wanted him to visit without going through Ippei. He'd got what he'd wanted, got what he'd come for. He wasn't sure if he should leave, or stay another day/week/month/make a career out of that cock.

Scottie knocked twice, then pushed the door.

'You ready?'

'Sure.'



‘Would you feel more comfortable doing it in here or the kitchen?’

‘Uh, wherever.’

‘Well, I haven’t shot in here yet so this would be good.’

‘Here then.’

Scottie unpacked the camera carefully.

‘Big enough,’ Akio said.

‘Broadcast quality.’

‘And this is just for...’

‘As I said before, cable. Queer cable in the US.’

‘Right.’

‘Trust me. Not like it’s NHK.’

‘Right.’

Akio took in a deep breath, held it, released.

‘And, like I said, your face will be all fuzzed up,’ Scottie gushed.

‘You promise?’

‘Yeah, trust me.’

‘Right, just there by the shower curtain’s fine.’

Scottie seemed to know exactly what he was doing as he attached a small microphone to the neckline of Akio’s vest. Scottie checked the shot and tutted.

‘No. Oh, I know. Sit on the toilet.’

‘The toilet?’

‘Yeah. Great. And remember what I said earlier about answering in full sentences.’

‘Think I can manage that.’

‘And keep it short. For the subtitles, you know.’

Scottie composed the shot. He’d start off wide and move in. It was the telling moments with the eyes he was after.

‘Tell me how you felt on your first day as a masseur,’ Scottie began, a little firmly.

‘On my first day as a masseur I became my cock, the curve of my arse. Pecs, waist, weight and tongue.’

Akio answered very slowly. Unlike Diana and Midori, who’d been camp and flippant, Scottie felt this footage might be usable.

‘And, you know? I think you were best where you were when I came in.’

Akio moved back to stand at the sink.

‘And run some water, wash your hands again.’

‘Not so static, huh?’

‘Right.’

Akio took in a deep breath. Shoulders back, turn turn in. ‘Okay, let’s have that once more, but looking at the camera in the mirror.’

‘Like...’

‘Yeah, fine. And rolling,’ Scottie whispered.

He liked what he was seeing, the way Akio was soaping his hands so carefully. The attention given to each of the long, thin fingers became exaggerated with the zoom.

‘So, what was it like your first time—with a punter? How did you feel?’

Akio looked to the ceiling, as if for inspiration. Then he looked into his own eyes, not at the lens. It was a strange moment, a great moment and Scottie was thinking NBC, RTL, Channel 4.

‘Within a minute of being with my first punter I became my cock, the curve of my arse—nothing more than the softness of my skin, the feel of my waist.’

‘Same question, different answer. And at the camera this time.’

Akio thought it was a bit like the improvisations in Drama club back at school.

‘I look back on my first day with eerie anonymity. I was both present and absent in it all. Scrutinising, catching every word, absorbing the details of each encounter, somehow outside the experience. At the end of the day it seemed real enough when I had the money in my pocket, when I got home and soaked in the tub.’

‘Okay, now tell us about the punters. Keep it snappy,’

‘Some come smelling of soil, mountain water, salted pork or outdoor fires.’

Akio turned, faced the camera—as if he were about to confide to a friend.

‘The clean queens come doused with eye-stinging amounts of eau de cologne by Givenchy, Lauren and Dior.’

He raised his vest to show the side of his waist.

‘Some bite.’

There was a pause, a moment for the edit suite.

‘How do you feel when you’ve been chosen by God only knows who behind that two-way mirror?’

‘Sometimes when I’m chosen I feel like a party entertainer or a hospital patient or a handcuffed prisoner as I walk from the boys’ room along the corridors to meet the man who has chosen me.’

Scottie knew exactly what Akio meant.

‘Great! Try that again. Fragment it,’ Scottie encouraged, as he moved to another angle behind Akio.

‘Ready when you are.’

‘Sometimes when I’m chosen I feel like a party entertainer.’

It was like Akio was faltering. Maybe coming on emotional. Scottie needed a bit of that. He needed something to contrast with the already shot Nichome footage and Ippei’s very business-like five minutes worth.

‘Sometimes when I’m chosen I feel like a hospital patient about to be wheeled off to X-Ray, or surgery.’

Akio splashed some water to his face, then looked into the lens he saw in the mirror.

‘Sometimes...especially when I do hotel jobs or home visits, I wonder if the man who has booked me has a knife. If he wants to do me in.’

He picked up a towel, not rushing the movement. Scottie had told him slower was better than too fast.

‘Say something that you think would end up being cut,’ Scottie urged.

Akio sniffed, stifled a smirk. It was a moment that would be snipped.

‘I’ve a calling, I’m every faggot’s cute kid brother, the one they all wished they’d had to abuse.’

‘No, I think we could go with that. Swear, so it’d have to be bleeped.’

‘Last night some fucking perv got me to pretend I was his dead grandson—lightly powdered and rouged for his own funeral. The guy dressed me in a suit, complete with shirt and tie, then cuddled me. After a while he undid the zip and felt me up. Although I was supposed to be dead I had to come in his mouth.’

‘You’re making this up.’

Akio let out a laugh that could be heard out in reception.

‘Actually, you’re right, but I like things like that. Don’t you?’

Scottie regretted having broken in. Why not reflect the bizarre?

‘What do you, personally, find most shocking about prostitution?’

‘What I find shocking about prostitution is the amount of souls bared, not cocks or arses.’

‘Great, that was good, can we have a bit about family? How your family might feel if they discovered you were renting. When you’re ready.’

Akio’s face became serious. Scottie felt he’d hit a nerve.

‘If my parents had known a man like me would have been the result of their fucking, some time back in September blah blah blah, they probably would have practised coitus interruptus. Or arranged an abortion.’

‘More.’

‘People get upset by the idea of a loved one being a hooker, as if it’s your heart you stick up a punter’s hole, not a length of rubber-sealed dick.’

‘Go on, and remember, this will all be really chopped up.’

There was a knock at the door.

‘Can I watch?’ Midori asked, almost timidly.

‘Sure, come on in.’

Midori lit a cigarette and sat on the toilet. He didn’t realise that he was in frame. With Akio drying his hands in the fore, Scottie had a nice balance going.

Unprompted, Akio let rip a little something he’d prepared earlier.

‘Working as a prostitute you quickly get a very clear idea of what a human body is really made for.’

Midori let out three perfect smoke rings. Maybe he knew he was in frame. Maybe he wanted to be in shot. Whatever, it was good.

Scottie had the feeling a goodie was on the way. It was one of those all of a sudden moments. What the SONY machine was about to record would secure a sale, maybe make his name. A second after the moment, Scottie would be preparing his own soundbites for the turd journalists who work the fag rags/mags/glossies.

‘I’m not myself any more,’ Akio started, staring directly into the camera, ‘I’m a whore.’

Midori stood, put an arm around Akio’s shoulders. It was a great double shot. The cigarette smoking between Midori’s fingers was made to be filmed.

‘Perhaps I needed to see the insanity of life to handle it. Prostitution as therapy.’

Akio’s eyes were too serious. One and two and three...and then he laughed. He was taking the piss.

That bit would be cut.

**SATURDAY**

±

## #6A

Jeff had finished showering only minutes before he heard Liam and Julie B come staggering in.

Ms B said she was fine. Liam was worried that she'd fall out of the window.

'I just need some air,' she said. 'Unzip me, would you?'

It had been a while since Liam had unzipped anybody.

She wanted to hug him but didn't dare touch.

'Don't worry, I'm not going to jump—either out of the window or on you.'

'There,' Liam said, resisting an impulse to kiss her right shoulder the way he'd so often kissed his mother's when performing the little magical task.

'If only...' Julie B started.

The words had been left hanging, it could well have been the beginning of a silly sentimental verse with no rhyme or reason or rhythm, heavy on regret.

'If only what?' Liam asked, maybe just that little bit abruptly.

'Oh, nothing.'

It ended there, with the mingled scent of camellia oil lightly applied to her hair and eyebrows many hours before.

Though Liam slid his door shut ever so gently, it bounced back open just the tiniest inch. He took a peep through.

Just enough to get what navy blue convent-school knickers once shielded from the netball teacher's eyes: Julie B in nothing but a pair of tiny, shiny, weightless panties made of—maybe—rayon. Silk-feel rayon. A triangular patch of pubic curls was visible to the world in seconds and then, with the confidence of a naturist, she toyed with strands of hair in front of her eyes to the point of making herself cross-eyed at the window.

Her face was reduced to a pale pink disc with dark shadows for eyes and mouth.

Normally she'd have been busy with cotton wool balls before bed time, wiping some forthcoming season's colours off her face. Beyond the skin, fine red and blue blood vessels pumped three different varieties of white wine.

It was so quiet that, for a moment, Liam thought this is what it must be like to be deaf. Then he slid the door that final bit shut. Julie B heard the movement. It brought a smile to her eyes. She wanted to get him and she'd be patient. It was just a matter of time, she told herself.

Through her head ran the names of her favourite cocktails: Black Velvet, Margherita, Screwdriver, Harvey Wallbanger. In her head the thump thump of some disco tune still thudded with precision timing. Before her eyes were the covers of magazines her face had graced, floating up, one after another. But they'd been changed—the logo for *Brides* had been switched to *White Lady*, *Cosmopolitan* had been replaced with *Bloody Mary*, *19...Pina Colada*. She laughed. Maybe it was best to take a few steps back from the window.

Itchy eyelids were twitching but she wanted to see the sun come up before she crashed out on the sofa.

Despite being close to unconsciousness, Julie B still held her cigarette elegantly, between the tips of her index and middle fingers, keeping a distance between pulls as if to protect herself from its contaminating fumes.

The ashtray was overflowing. She'd always been fussy about sleeping in a room with an ashtray in it, so she emptied it out of the window.

One drink too many had sent Julie B beyond pleasure, beyond a sense of light-headedness. Way beyond elation, a spirit of adventure and outrage. The normally gradual and containable stages of intoxication had all been air-kissed before Liam had come to her rescue, insisting she came back. Despite feeling just a little queasy, she wouldn't have said no to a diarrhoea-inducing lamb shish kebab.

The black of night had already become the blue grey of dawn. The skyline had begun to regain its contours. The horizon seemed to clutter with fast forward clouds as day was about to break—so she sighed, lay down, missed the ashtray and stubbed her cigarette out on the hem of the slip of a thing she'd bought that day. She looked at the hole with manifest indifference. Her mind stumbled a thought together—maybe...it could be—you know—taken up an inch or so. Then she entered the deep sleep of a drunk.

The long blue-and-white kimono robe Jeff had treated himself to in Mitsukoshi clung to his body as he knelt behind his bedroom door, waiting for the sounds of visits to the bathroom and tucking in to quieten. That kimono— moulded around his crotch, waxed tits and arse—almost cracked when he got up to check the coast was clear.

Time to go, catch ya later.

Starting again from scratch was something Jeff had mastered time and time again over the years.

‘I’m outta here,’ he kept saying over his coffee, gazing at Julie B on the sofa.

Jeff felt awful. Hungover, packed and frightened. How poor his thin surface skin looked when his face was drained of colour. How immobile.

Again he went over what he’d been told back at the club by a new arrival from his London agency. A few personal facts that had made him throw up in fright.

The old queen had kicked up a scene in the London office. Jeff’s shopathon was out. And his past. Everything.

The floor began to sway. Then a set of irreproachable stainless steel ladles on the kitchen wall began to rattle menacingly.



## #8B

Sunday Girl shimmied out from behind the sofa to press her face up against the cold glass. Dawn was coming up grainy blue and she didn't want to miss it.

Until just a little while before, two women and a child had been seen far off, taking washing off a line.

Sunday Girl's nostrils caught a whiff of something, like the scent of a sick animal. But worse.

The dog upstairs was having a good bark, he'd detected it, too. It was strongest in the bathroom.

Sunday Girl went to check.

Yes, worse than last night.

When the cat got back to the window, the sky was as grey and dirty as the street, both polluted by the same.

A day of total cloud cover, Sunday Girl predicted.

## #7B

When Takeo's mother first wakened she was—she realised—not alone.

Through the tiny cracks of pretend-asleep eyes, dim fingers of light hit her retina. Her field of vision was small. She could feel her son breathing and he was breathing ever so slowly.

'I've brought you a cup of tea, Mum,' Takeo said, planting a kiss on his mother's forehead.

Her hair was stroked softly. The shining black, perfectly-cut bob she did herself the last Saturday of each month. 'Best Mum in the world.'

He put his cheek on hers, just like in the afternoon soaps. The black plastic peak of his school cap banged against her cheekbone.

There was something in his sudden maturation that was so pleasing. He felt more like a friend. How she'd enjoyed making lunch the day before. The constant round of fun. Him dressing up like a boxer. Her little man. So what if his head were to be weighed down with facts, figures and girls so much prettier than she'd ever been. As long as he was happy.

The growing independence that had made her feel less important at the start of the week was beginning to feel like a new lease of life. That dress he'd sent her out to find, those lipsticks he'd bought her...oh, she thought, she'd really let herself go. Now he was looking after her.

From that same position Takeo had made his first acquaintances with the outside world. Blurry cars and trees and swings in the park had been first glimpsed through the screen of her hair. Exhaust fumes and supermarket bombardment had been siphoned through the more immediate (and reassuring) scent of his mother's body.

The kiss he placed on his mother's neck made her skin tingle. With her eyes closed it could only have been Takeo's special soft, light kiss. Her heartbeat thumped and echoed in both ears.

'Thank you,' she whispered, turning her back toward him as if sleepily. She didn't want him to see the tears. Just for a few seconds he stroked her shoulder blades with the tips of his thin, cool fingers.

‘My darling little fishbone,’ his mother whispered, slowly—ever so quietly. ‘You’ll never leave your old Mum, will you?’

Takeo hated it when she came out with that one.

‘Course not.’

That one and, ‘You need never feel alone, I’ll always be there for you.’

‘You know, you were only five pounds in weight when you were born,’ she said.

And that one.

He’d felt it since he’d thrown the porno cut-ups at the sky, after he’d slept and breakfasted and been a boy of twelve/nearly thirteen for a day. After all the vital necessities of life had been dealt with. It was a pain, one he’d never experienced before and he had some trouble identifying the feeling. Not like grief or homesickness, they had a strange sweetness to them even at the worst of their bite. The pain the boy felt was gnawing harder than hunger.

He hugged his mother, hoping to rid himself of it. He felt selfish in doing that, it was only his own comfort he was seeking and so he felt even more of the feeling.

‘We’d best get acquainted, you and I,’ the pain said. ‘Yes,’ Takeo whispered internally, ‘After all,’ the feeling continued, ‘I shall probably be around quite a bit over the years.’

‘Do you miss Dad?’ Takeo asked, breaking new ground. ‘Do you sometimes cry for him?’

Takeo’s mother took in a little deep breath. Tempted to laugh, she stiffened and hummed a, ‘Uh-huh.’

The play-acting brought a shiver to them both. When the scent of the Earl Grey tea began to waft her way, that lovely warm smell, she began to sob. Not even with a little breath control did she manage to conceal it. At first Takeo pretended he didn’t notice, then he gave her a tight hug.

She thought he’d go, it was the day of the gymnastics competition and the coach was due off at eight. She thought he’d go to get his shoes on and bang the door.

When he slid in beside her she felt her body temperature first lower, then rise steeply. She struggled to keep her breathing sleepy.

As he cuddled up beside her, Takeo kissed the back of her neck like he was franking an envelope. The smell in the bed was no longer her own.

‘You need never feel alone, I’ll always be here for you,’ Takeo whispered.

Two bodies, warming a bed together. An evenness of inhalation and exhalation.

# SCHOOL

‘Welcome to Shiojiri,’ hollered some creep of a teacher in a yellow tracksuit.

He had the air of someone who’d spent over half their working life alongside students with reduced hearing.

Handa San gave a little bow, said nothing.

Both teachers found themselves surrounded by twelve-/nearly thirteen-to fifteen-/nearly sixteen-year-old boys on the white lines of a sports pitch surrounded by the tallest of fir trees.

The trace of razor could be seen over most of their chins and cheeks.

Takeo had sat alone on the coach, keeping his school cap pulled down tightly, pretending to be asleep. He crushed the crown of his head against a window clogged with grey-flannel mist all the way there, just in case someone tried to pull his cap off as a bit of fun.

Takeo deliberately left his bag behind on the coach which meant nearly everybody was just about changed and ready for warm ups by the time he entered the changing room.

‘Feeling alright?’ Handa San asked, wondering if the boy was having an attack of nerves.

Feeling alright? I can’t be looking alright, Takeo thought. This is, he thought, the perfect cue for a stomach ache.

‘No, Sensei,’ said an octave lower than usual.

Handa San put the palm of his hand under the peak of Takeo’s schoolcap for a feel of the boy’s forehead. He smiled vaguely. No temperature.

‘Headache?’

‘Before you ask how my bowels are, Handa Sensei, I’m just a bit nervous.’

They both laughed. Handa San hurried outside, he was the one needing air.

Takeo changed quickly, then strode out seriously. With what looked like a supremely shaven head there was a taller skinniness to the boy, a brand new solemn air that silenced the squad.

‘Okay boys, I want you all to come forward, that’s right. Gather ’round.’

Through the tiny crackle of chest hairs above the neckline, Handa San scratched briefly with a thumbnail, rattling the pea in his whistle. Delicate currents of air brought the man’s scent to each and every boy’s nostrils. ‘That’s right. And you Daisuke. Omi, Kemchiro, bit closer. Right, mmm. Okay. Today we’re going to...

Boys sweating.

‘Lift those knees.’

Boy smell.

‘Breathe in through the nose.’

Boys, under his spell.

Boys.

‘Line up. Nice and close now.’

A row of five formed at the front. Another followed the pattern. Takeo made sure that out of a group of sixteen he was the one at the back—slightly off-centre.

While the rest of the boys stood at ease, Takeo stood with his legs wide apart, hands on head. Then he coughed and spat. Handa San had never seen Takeo do that before.

‘I’m going to be a faggot, Sir. Even if I marry, I’m going to be a faggot,’ Takeo said under his breath to the man a hop, skip and a jump away.

‘Stretch! Go on, right up. Tiptoes. Over. Hold. Back. Keep breathing. Up. Come on. Right up. Stretch! Tiptoes. Arms down and re-lax. Excellent!’

Smoothly, evenly, again and again in lovely slow motion, sixteen boys showed their teacher what he’d shown them. No bouncing.

Handa San’s eyebrows bunched, face to face with his squad, shivering in anticipation. He removed his tracksuit as if showing how to start off a strip routine.

Handa San walked in and out among the boys. Every once in a while he’d tap the small of a back if it were arching, or if it were not. A tap would be given behind knees to avoid stress, chins would be raised.

At the back of three rows of five, Handa San came face to face with Takeo.

The boy felt the man could transfer into a bat with a four-foot wingspan at any moment, taking him off to a cave. Or a tent in Austria.

Only the previous night the man had lain in bed, shivering and shuddering. Then he'd started circular movements all over his body with his soft but strong right hand. So warm. Over and over.

Then the squeezing, jigsaw-dreaming. Remembering snapshot glimpses of the boy. He'd come so quickly, saying that three syllabled name as he'd splashed his chest.

Takeo, he wanted to warn the boy, beware. People like me will prey on you, want to possess/corrupt/exploit you for your beauty. Beware, people like me will suck you dry until there is nothing left and you're destroyed.

Was there a wariness in the boy's eyes which said he was aware of that. Was that a knowing smile?

The man said, 'Good,' but stayed, correcting two movements that had been perfect while breathing in the shade and warmth of Takeo's lovely, young smell.

Takeo raised his beautiful head, the grey of his scalp a sharp contrast to his face.

The man said, 'Nice!'—then moved off. He felt the line of his vision was as clear as two tight crane ropes.

The scent of the rain came before the heavy drops spotted Handa San's shorts and his sixteen twelve-/nearly thirteen- to fifteen-/nearly sixteen-year-old boys. Air that had stained the sky on and off all morning darkened. Silvery needles of rain attached targets to sky as the boys followed their teacher back to the changing rooms.

The warm rain, splashing in seconds, soaked into them through trickles sliding down the backs of necks and on to the occasional outstretched tongue. Shorts darkened then clung, tightly. White became transparent. Hair was slicked, skin received an added shine.

Rain ran on to leaves and into puddles. Rain dripped from noses, chins and elbows. There was a delight in the drenching.

For Takeo the rain was like a bath for the brain. It banged against his scalp. Each drop. That's what ejaculate must feel like he thought, but heavier, and—surely—hot.

In the changing rooms all sixteen boys were suddenly naked above the waist in what had become the softest air.

‘Get naked, get dry, get your kit on. Competition starts in ten minutes.’



## #6A

‘Thank God it’s Saturday,’ he whispered to the line of cacti by the window.

It was close to noon when Liam spotted the bathroom shelves had been cleared. Room, shelves and cupboard pretty much emptied. But not completely.

There was a note on Jeff’s pillow.

*Got to dash ol’ boy. Got a plane to catch.*

*Isn’t life an adventure!*

*Hope you like what’s in the closet.*

*Yours.*

*Bye.*

*J*

‘Oh, sometimes—and this is one of them—I wake up and feel like a dog run over,’ Julie B groaned.

She certainly didn’t look her best. Despite the amount of liquid her pretty little throat had swallowed the night before, her tongue was surprised to find that mouth bone dry.

Beside the sofa, on top of that slip of a dress, was what looked like a very well chewed shrimp salad. Liam showed her the note, pretending not to see the mess more colourful than an average paella.

He could almost hear the crinkly arrow form in the middle of little Miss Perfect’s forehead as he made for what had been Jeff’s room.

In his urgency to get to...wherever...Jeff had decided on travelling light. Maybe he didn’t have enough to pay for excess baggage, Liam thought.

Funnily, he’d taken all the more garish stuff—the Gaultier, the outlandish Versace—more suited to Halloween or Wigstock. Liam found

himself left with the more classic, conservative items. What he'd inherited was nearly all black, white and grey.

Liam ran his fingers along the neat row of linens, heavy cottons and velvet. He felt wicked inheriting it all, guessing someone else was footing the bill.

Jeff's smell lingered in Liam's wardrobe—his aftershaves, his club smoke. Most of the clothes had never been worn. One or two just once or twice. Liam had been worrying what he was going to turn up at show castings wearing. That wasn't a problem any more.

'Liam?' Julie B's embarrassed voice drifted in from the sitting room.

'Here,' he said, tossing her a long black shirt with matching Bermuda shorts, 'wear these.'

## #7B

Takeo's mother, though suffering the beginning of a head cold, had gone to Aoyama Cemetery as she did every Saturday to pray at her husband's graveside. She prayed for Takeo, world peace, good weather—anything but the man she'd made the mistake of marrying.

It had rained the morning of her husband's funeral with a steadiness, a determination that couldn't be ignored. Not heavily, not torrentially, but enough for everyone to have wished they'd brought umbrellas.

The rain made the ceremony a somewhat brisk affair—no one wants to catch a chill in February.

For Takeo's mother the rain was a blessing. It veiled the face having difficulty mourning. What people thought were tears were raindrops. How fortuitous and appropriate, she had thought, so much cold water, so little warmth.

Some grit had blown into her eyes on the way back and she'd spent half the day rubbing—as a result they were heavily bloodshot. When Takeo got home he thought she'd been crying. She explained slowly and clearly, that the tears welling up (eventually cascading) were not induced by grit, but by the pride she felt on seeing the polaroid Handa San had taken of her son on the rings. She didn't say a word about his hair, or lack of it. She assumed it was as vital as chalking hands. Part of his world. And none of her business.

Takeo, on the rings. In white. Arms out, crucifixion position.

'Ah, that's really lovely.'

## BASEMENT

Only Hiroshi knew that the Dustbin Bag Man lived in a luxury apartment in Hiro-o with an enviable view of Arisugawakinen Park. Not even Ippei knew that. All Ippei knew was that he paid cash. And liked red.

A rickety sideboard in that luxury apartment held his treasures, pictures galore of men with erections, glorious annals of buggery with titles like *All Man*, *Leather Man to Bound & Gagged* and *OG*. How many monthly subscription forms had the man filled out in his time?

Only Hiroshi had seen the prints on the walls, painters from the late-nineteenth century 'aesthetic' school. Subjects were young working class men by water, ready for action. Rowdy crews of cheeky lads, stripped for the plunge. Some naked, some sunbathing, some swimming and relaxing. Casual. Boys being boys in the hot summer months, full of fun, some with mouths parted voicelessly—lips with whimsical curls, dimples in cheeks and buttocks. Pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids. Boys being boys in the delicious hot summer months, golden skinned, slender and tight. Natural. Some grubby and pale, others muscular and vigorous. Idyllic, innocent of self-conscious aerobics, liposuction and implants.

With arms around shoulders and waists, drying off in the sun, they were mates grinning spontaneously, looking into each other's eyes, inviting admiration unaware, happy in their warm congregations, not a designer label on them. So natural. Idolised for years in print form, costumes clinging and exaggerating every curve and bulge. Cool after the water but warming nicely in the sun, heat penetrating the wet cloth. Sun kissed—and wanked over by a Japanese businessman in Hiro-o, Tokyo. Japan.

Hiroshi often wondered, with guys like that, how many buckets of spunk had soaked him one way or another over the years: splashed, swallowed, taken up the arse. They say spunk's good for the skin, it hadn't worked for that one—the regular regular and first class fist-fuckee.

The first part of the procedure was a slow and careful cutting of the fister's nails with a lot of soft talk about how he didn't mind bleeding just a

little bit—and he was the one to judge how much was a little.

Those words, part of the procedure, said absolutely still but for the slow rising of his penis. Gradual, pulsing jerks, pumped with warmth, stiffened the object. It became enormous (bigger at least), detached from the smooth shaved pubic mooring.

The man's dick—his *lurve muscle*—was so pumped up, so red-headed, so animatedly erect, it looked like a falsie. Like something that had been on a charger then plugged into his groin.

That poor wee little thing had been subjected to years of tossing, shaking, squeezing. Had suffered itches, rashes, teeth marks, mysterious dribbles, cock rings, infections, menthol rubs, sores, handcreams, oils, warts, condoms, spit and the man's acrid urine plus catarrh like cum. The man's little name for that little dick was Dick, and Dick was yapping to perform his #1 trick.

The man didn't know his antibody status. He didn't know for sure, one way or the other. He hadn't been tested and he wasn't going to go to the bother. What would be would be. Life would be sweeter without those three letters of the alphabet: HIV. But he thought there was a chance, after all, he hadn't gone to San Francisco every year since '73 of the twentieth century for the ocean view, but for the delights of porn star fists. He loved those men. Chad Connors, Steve Marks, Kip Harding, Danny Somers, Ryan Idol, Wes Daniels, Brian Maxx, Randy White, Al Parker, Anthony de Marco, the very sweet Joey Stefano. And Jeff. Jeff Stryker.

Those men, in rubber, leather, sportswear, military uniforms—groaning and groining. Men who managed to get outrageous equipment from the gene pool.

Those men in *Daddy Trains*, *Bondage Dreams*, *Inch By Inch*, *9 1/2 Inches*, *The Bigger The Better*, *The Biggest One I Ever Saw*, *How Big Is Big?*, *Bigger Than Huge*, *Jaw Breaker*, *Like A Horse*, *Face Down*, *Deep Inside*, *Pumped*, *Man Shit*, *Human Toilet Seat*.

Polk Street, Castro, Haight-Fillmore, Mission, South of Market, Tenderloin—BEEN THERE. Fascinated by the services offered in *Blueboy* and *The Advocate*—yep—he was there: on his knees, thrust against walls, frequently trussed-up in the occasional sling. Backrooms, bathrooms, steamrooms. Cheap and not so cheap hotel rooms. Mmm mmm. DONE THAT.

San Francisco: gay gay gay. Best place on Earth for a sex vacation.

What had been fun in one decade had become a trip to the mortuary. He had a kind of respect for the virus. What an adventurer. Climbing every mountain, crossing every sea and demolishing his address book.

As usual Hiroshi had to wear mirror sunglasses and black leather chaps. As usual the Dustbin Bag Man had come provided with a bag full of goodies, well douched out and ready for a good hot meal when he got back home.

Ippei wished he'd never let it all start. It had set a precedent. That kind of thing was, really, for out calls only.

For half an hour he was played with gently, clothes pegs and nipple clamps, deep heat creams and candle wax. Weights hung from those piercings, urine dripped from his lips. The more stoned they got, the more Hiroshi increased the S in the S&M that man needed so badly.

He took himself to his own limit. Hiroshi joined him on that high precipice, poppers in hand, keeping him balanced there—controlling the peak.

The man grabbed the lower part of Hiroshi's free arm, giving it a squeeze. The fingers were weak. Maybe this was a sign, intended reassurance coming across as a plea. A gesture of solidarity, a gesture beyond words. Basic understanding of the task before them. He didn't want sympathy, he wanted to be fisted from hip bone to plexus. Simple as that.

It was an arse/arsehole/hole/dugout with absolutely no power to suck, hold or ingest. Like big lips without a mouth or throat. Like putting your wrist inside your ol' mother's biggest handbag to do the Hokey Kokey.

The dustbin bag crinkled a lot: the man liked the sound, inspired obscenity a punk rock rent boy had dreamed up en route to Hampstead Heath one starry night.

Oh, yes, mmm. How that knotty, purple hole opened up like automatic department store doors. The fingers irritating a cluster of warts here and there (and there...and there...) causing a little highly-infectious bleeding.

As per usual, the man began to hum one long single note. An element that was as essential to getting fisted as playing Kraftwerk for smoking dope. That skinny bit of rent from Crouch End had taught him one hell of a lot back in '77. Andy, with the safety pins everywhere. Andy, with the big hands. Andy, with the blue hair and green teeth. Shit'n'Piss Andy, RIP.

The Dustbin Bag Man was smiling as he took a sniff of poppers.

‘I wish you had bigger hands, like a Tsukiji barrow boy’s, like a stinking Tsukiji barrow boy’s,’ he laughed. ‘Go on, you don’t have to be gentle with me.’

Hiroshi didn’t move a finger. He felt a surgeon’s operating gown would not have been out of place, plus a local anaesthetic for the Dustbin Bag Man—a shot of laughing gas for himself.

‘You do realise,’ Hiroshi whispered, ‘I could be anybody. You don’t know me from Adam. I could be a madman. A lunatic. Someone out on day release, someone—having lost the taste for Lithium—who hasn’t taken their medication for days. Know what I mean?’

Sphincter muscles gripped at the wrist. The man mmm’d. Hiroshi wasn’t half as convincing at that bit as Midori. He’d have to book them both one day, over at his place for a change. Make an evening of it. Both their hands up his arse. Mmm. Spot of dinner afterwards. Out. Chinese. Then on to a club. Lots of lovely cocaine.

Hiroshi whispered, ‘I have absolute control of your life. Realise that now. This young man with a rubber gloved fist and trash bag up your arse could be a nutter.’

He moved the hand slowly. No resistance, relaxing the sphincter in an instant. Expertly. Two experts.

‘I could, with just one, short, shocking pull, tear your insides out—killing you. I’d get away with it, say it was an accident. After all, you’ve got a reputation for this sort of thing. You pay for it. Don’t mind a drop of blood, do you darlin’? Maybe I’ll put *this* hand down your throat and shake hands with myself.’

When the man got too excited, Hiroshi slowed it all down. Maximum crinkling. Then back to one. Fist. Deeper and deeper, going beyond. Endorphins rushing through the man like a flag going up.

‘Take some more.’

Mfff mfff.

Then the expression that always got to him, ‘Push your cunt out. Show us your mancunt.’

Hiroshi became aware of the circulating of the man’s blood. He had a sense of the man as a machine, some kind of filthy plumbing system needing an overhaul. He could tell by the cliched, pornographic contortions flickering over Dustbin Bag San’s face that he was having an above

average good time. Indeed, he was reaching a new level, his own personal best. FAB-ulous.

Hiroshi pulled the man's legs open just a little more, just as if he were helping a woman in labour. A smell hit him, something fierce. It came from round bends (and more bends) and when Hiroshi leaned back, panting like a javelin thrower, the smell intensified.

'You're good, very good,' said with a widening smile, wet lips wiped with the abrasive back of his shaved right hand.

'Mmm,' jerking his head back to pull on that chain between his teeth, ripping those nipples. ('Oh, B-Bob,' he stuttered, glimpsing the Thames, the dome of Saint Paul's. 'Urgh-oh.' He could almost hear that Laurie Anderson CD. Poor Bob, never wore rubber gloves. Bob, RIP.)

That dick got a squeezing, a bending, a bruising, a good working over.

Hiroshi looked at his arm. He'd never lost sight of that mole three quarters up to the elbow before—he was way past it.

Rattling his descended indeed hellhound testicles into confusion... rolling a little as if on a fairground ride...jerking away swiftly and sweating—the uncorked, sparkling explosion which he couldn't hold back, that he had to let go came quickly.

The man became very verbal on ejaculation, shooting gems like:

- \* 'Fuckin' shit!'
- \* 'Oh yeah!'
- \* 'Oh my G-d, yes!'

The ejaculation sprinkled, scattered and shot all over his chest.

When the last splash hit into his navel he had that (classic) unbearable look of someone fighting for life. That mouth of his formed a great O before squeezing out one long turd of a moan—as if dying.

Then he coughed.

Within an hour the man would be cooling down over his floppy discs, flowcharts and figures.



**SUNDAY**  
日

## #6A

Clasping both hands behind his head, Liam began to bend opposite elbows to opposite knees, counting aloud as he did so.

Gulping air, he hissed increasing numbers before slipping his toes under the edge of a wall unit, continuing to count fifty sit-ups.

On his stomach, hands wide/body stiffened, he began push-ups. Each and every muscle on the back of him, from calves to neck, stood out as he inhaled/exhaled one hundred breaths.

Finally he collapsed; panting, hurting, ready for a pint of water, then cool shower.

He felt great. He was over the jetlag and had done some serious thinking.

1. He wanted to get out of that flat and into a Japanese guest house he'd heard about in Ueno. It would work out cheaper and breakfast was included. Golding was charging exorbitant rates. He wanted to keep a distance from the model mentality.

2. He'd spotted a mountain bike in a sale over in Omotesando. He was going to buy it.

3. He was going to look into the possibility of using his dusty teaching qualifications to hunt out a job when the modelling lark began to dry up, which he felt it would by Spring. He'd already spotted plenty of adverts seeking graduates to work in English Language Schools. BBC English Club, Kent Eigo Kogo Gakuin, Model Language Studio, WINS—whole pages in the Yellow Pages. But first he'd approach the American School in Japan, Tokyo British School and the International School of the Sacred Heart to discover the lay of the land.

4. He was going to put his flat up for sale. It was time to get out. Move on. He'd phone an estate agent in Old Street. The keys he'd left with his neighbour could be copied.

5. He'd dust down his old Nikon and focus in on Japanese youth culture. Flog features to the occasional Sunday supplement and style

magazines. He'd already had an idea of doing backstage shots at the forthcoming collections.

He felt great, felt good to be alive. Hadn't felt better in years.

## #7B

In an impulsive imitation of suicide, Takeo took a small knife left out for the imminent chopping of carrots and, with first a flourish, then a grimace, drew the thing just an inch above his own very thin, pale neck.

From inside this same throat came a cartoonish gush, a creaking salivary splutter out of the side of his mouth.

His mother let out a wailing scream that echoed through the kitchen. After the scream came a very poor attempt at crying, a hum with no tears. Then they both laughed. A familiar bit of fun. It must have been Take 200.

While his mother busied with air freshener and bleach in the bathroom, Takeo was shifting his desk so that it ran lengthwise against the window. Then he moved his mattress and two pillows over. The mattress hung precariously over the edges of the desk, like cheese off a burger.

It was one of those freak sunny days, the last of the year.

Takeo was doing something he'd been warned not to do over and over: sunbathing on his desk, legs hanging out of the window. His father used to do it, that was his argument, so it was okay. And he wasn't a child any more, he was nearly thirteen.

He stretched, emitting a high yawn. His mother froze in her tracks. What she heard was her long-dead husband.

Takeo was wearing shiny black running shorts with no underwear and the headphones of his Walkman. It wouldn't be long before the elastic band was tucked beneath his hairless balls. Occasional drops of juice fell from the Nashi pear he was eating. Those pale splashes ran down the sides of his warm, dry chest, spotting those shorts.

A wave of humidity rolled over his firm boy muscles. Pores opened up to the air. Stretching back with a hand cupped beneath his head, the newly-sprouted hairs were making a blunt comeback. It was like he was lying there awaiting examination by the blue sky. Like his body was boasting his maturation to the occasional passing aeroplane.

He ate the entire pear, pips and all, then rested his head back again on two warm, cupped hands. Inside his head he was doodling a cross-section of the block he lived in, dividing it up into fairly neat imaginary rectangles. He came to realise how many of his neighbours he didn't know a thing about.

He looked up, facing the block opposite. There was the penthouse flat to start with, the entire fifth floor, #4A, #3B, #2B and #1B. Next door had been unoccupied for nearly a year. No one would take it. Takeo reckoned it was the noise from #6A that made it hard to sell.

'I wish you wouldn't do that,' Takeo's mother said at the door.

Takeo forced himself to remain stationary, as if frozen.

'What if there was an earthquake?'

They both laughed.

'What a way to go,' Takeo giggled, '*Splat!*'

Takeo's little heart was booming, he hadn't heard her at the door. He wondered how long she'd been standing there.

'I'll only be a short while. See you later.'

'Okay. Bye.'

Sunday mornings were her time to do an hour's worth of very slow breast-stroke. It was the only exercise she took besides carrying the shopping and cleaning.

And #10A, Takeo continued to think. He didn't know about #10A. Or the basement.

He shivered five seconds of gooseflesh from top to bottom as he heard the front door shut, then his balls hardened in the wrinkled, uptight scrotum, like little batteries, ready to go. Full of life and little lusts all of their own.

That word flashed inside his head again: masturbation. MASTURBATION. M-A-S-T-U-R-B-A-T-I-O-N.

## MASTURBATION.

Following that word were little words, like the trails on a kite: wank, toss, jerk off.

He felt through the stretched cotton of the inner lining, fingering the thick vein running along his cock—showing through in contour.

Fear hopped around in his guts. He shivered pale, green goosebumps as he imagined Handa San placing his lips wetly on the base of his neck. Groin and head throbbed simultaneously. Two ill-shaven lips grazing his neck, hands caressing his soft warm flesh as he pretended to struggle against the

adult tongue finding the pink, clean insides of his ear. Those shorts, against his face—smothering him.

A stiff little shape swished up with a slap against the spot where a cluster of new pubes were poking through. Takeo stared at the patch, then his penis raised like a warning finger.

Once again the boy's eyes were rivetted to that split eye of his bone-hard erection.

Sex. SEX. S-E-X.

Everything was fresh and new and to be discovered.

**SEX.**

When his heart began to thump rapidly, chaotically, causing the blood to throb violently against his throat, he had a stab at wanking.

He began to twist his body and head to and fro, almost as if trying to get out of his skin, worms of curiosity inside him.

His toes curled, fists tightened—abdominals shot out in waves as he writhed, curling like shavings from a turning lathe—then he slowed down, suppressing a groan that heightened the shivering shudder and pain of it all.

He wanted to take the lid off that thing. When would he have Orgasm #1?

He hated Simply Red, and that's what the DJ was playing so he twiddled the dial. He turned the volume as far up as it would go, then down a bit.

A blast of fuzz guitar drowned out the sound of breaking glass from the flat above.

Overhead, clouds like fingerprints drifted by slowly.

The boy began to sing.

## BASEMENT

Sitting on the edge of the massage table, was a man in a black tracksuit. He was tired, he'd been sweating like a rapist all night.

He was nervous/nervously excited/pissed off. His first time, Ippei had said. No clues. First time with a guy, Akio had wondered—or first time paying for it?

The man's first words to Akio were few, 'Hey, this is just a bit of fun, right?'

Akio felt this probably wasn't the first time the man from—he didn't say—had said this.

Akio prepared to reduce himself to a full scale production number, telling the man how lovely he was and how big it was and what nice teeth he had. And how he hoped he'd call again. But the man stopped him in his tracks.

Running his bitten fingernails over the shadow of his cropped skull in a mock scratch he said, 'Could...would you...please...put these on?'

From out of a Takashimaya carrier bag came navy blue shorts, a white teeshirt and trainers. All contained a whiff of Lost Property. Boy smell winning over flat damp.

Everything was just a half size too small for Akio. Just that little bit tight on him. From a Seibu bag from within the Takashimaya bag came a black school uniform: 19th Century Bremen Naval Academy standard issue. There was a cap, too.

'Uniform over the PE gear?'

'If you would.'

'Change here or in the bathroom?'

'I'll...I'll turn my back.'

'Okay.'

The man thought about a boy aged twelve/nearly thirteen years old, almost chanting the young lad's name.

The cap was tilted back, cockishly.

‘Cap down a bit, please.’

What he meant was right down, so that the rent boy’s face couldn’t be seen. So that the body could be the boy body of his dreams.

Akio stood to attention for a full two minutes. When no move at all was being made, Akio started to remove the uniform slowly, as if in a dream/a ballet/a doctor’s surgery/back in his own school locker room. He could almost smell the white lines of the sports pitch.

‘Stretch! Go on, right up. Tiptoes. Over. Hold. Back. Keep breathing. Up. Come on, Sasabe. Stretch! Kobayashi, don’t rush it. Tiptoes. Arms down and re-lax. Good!’

The man’s tone was that of a (nervous but nice) school teacher. Echoing off the wallpapered walls, the voice came from all angles as if by the wonders of Dolby Surround. Akio’s efforts were far from clumsy. Pleasing.

‘Right, watch me.’

Smoothly, evenly, again and again in lovely slow motion, the man showed Akio how to do the required exercise. Akio watched the elegance of muscle, cutting through air. It was a stretch—a plain stretch. Something he’d done thousands of times since infancy, often to NHK.

‘No bouncing at this point. And here...push as far as you’re comfortable with.’

The man’s skin was almost a rich milky chocolate, he obviously spent a lot of time in the sun. Beautifully broad-shouldered.

‘Okay?’

Through the tiny crackle of chest hairs above the neckline, the man scratched briefly with a thumbnail, rattling the pea in a whistle. Akio’s wondering sense of the man’s body was triggered. Delicate currents of air brought his scent to the pretend boy’s nostrils.

‘Right, let’s try it again.’

Eyebrows bunched, waiting for the orders to commence—Akio was shivering in anticipation. Every muscle, every sinew, tense. Ready.

‘And stretch! Right up. Tiptoes. Over. What did I say about bouncing? Hold. Keep breathing. Back. Up. Come on Hosokawa. Stretch! Tiptoes. Arms down and re-lax. Better.’

As a teacher, particularly as a PE teacher, I have close proximity to literally hundreds of boys of all shapes and sizes, many riddled with acne



from waist to skull, the man thought. My teaching career has the possibility of contact with thousands. I hope I can keep my hands off them.

Passing through his mind was that small inverted 'U' where Takeo's buttocks joined together, a true boy curve. An area with an insatiable centre between those long (perfect perfect perfect) legs, the boy's arse.

He scanned the ceiling above—hands on hips. Some sort of inbuilt radar only PE teachers and farmers have imagined a nine in ten chance of a downpour.

'Right, I'd like a volunteer.'

One arm that could snap like brittle ice raised.

'You.'

Their eyes locked.

Akio's long lashes lifted slowly just before he smiled (first with teeth, then eyes), pupils dilating with an inky surge set perfectly against the brilliant whites.

'Watch.'

A solitary set of eyes obeyed. Akio wanted a haircut like the man's. He was sick and tired of the style he'd had since he was fifteen/nearly sixteen years old. He knew it would probably upset his mother, but he decided to get a crop in a day or two. He'd get a #4, just like that punter's. Could be good for business, he thought.

'Up. Tiptoes. Over. See, no rocking. Nice and smooth. Hold. Back. Relax.'

He smiled. 'Perfect!'

During the exercise Akio's cock had bulged. Those shorts were far too small for him. So skin-tight they hurt.

'Well done, Takeo,' Handa San said casually, raising whistle to lips—mouth concealed briefly by fist.

Akio's smile was a crooked dimpling of the right cheek and an explosion of sparks in his eyes—the man had got his name wrong, he'd thought, but he wasn't going to correct it.

'Are you chewing?'

Akio froze.

'Have you got gum in your mouth?' Handa San quizzed.

Akio nodded.

'Spit it out in the bin. Now.'

Akio spat.

‘Vest off.’

Akio was fully erect as Handa San stood behind him.

‘And this,’ Handa San said to the door handle, the little tin bin, the light switch, ‘this horizontal line defining the base of his chest muscles...is the diaphragm.’

Akio felt the warmth of the index finger that ran lightly over his skin, only just touching.

Handa San held the rent boy to him. A hand circled that rent boy’s body. Double-circled over hot cock.

Handa San patted the massage table.

‘Sure,’ Akio said.

‘No talking,’ Handa San snapped. ‘Ten push-ups,’ and he blew that whistle, causing sharp intakes of breath in the reception, the fish-bowl, the bathroom, three other squalid little rooms and the office out back. ‘Come on, you’re not making love to that mat, you’re supposed to be doing pushups!’

In the weightless, silkily synthetic shorts, Akio did as he was told.

‘Flex! Harder! Come on, you’re not trying!’

‘On your back. Sit-ups, ten.’ And again he blew his whistle.

Slightly hairy legs apart, slightly hairy legs together, slightly hairy legs in the air. Handa San looked up those smooth, slim, slightly hairy thighs. Round bottom, tiny waist, shining eyes and hair. Nearly nineteen and pounding adrenalin.

Rent boy sweating.

‘Circle your hips!’

Rent boy smell.

‘Bend and stretch!’

Rent boy, under his spell.

‘Good, you couldn’t do that last week. Well done!’

Akio detected a change in the man’s voice. It was softening. Either he was going to make his move or get all emotional.

If Takeo could somehow have been pumped up like a balloon to adult size, he would, Handa San thought-bubbled, be the dream lover. That’s what he wanted, a blow-up boy. A giant boy—a perfect adult boy.

By no stretch of the imagination would Handa San ever fuck the boy, or any boy. The blow up version of Takeo would have pubes. He couldn’t fuck a body without pubes unless they were shaven pubes.

‘Hi,’ Handa San said smiling.

‘Hi,’ a perfect adult boy replied.

Then it was time to deliver the one instruction he always shouted with pounding heart. He tried to say it dispassionately, looking at the bin—slightly paranoid.

‘Into the showers!’

The rent boy was more than attractive, he was desirable and knew it. He was blessed with one of those lazy, confident cocks, confident with astounding powers of engorgement and extension.

Akio felt a frisson of recall. It wasn’t that long since he’d been one of the boys in the showers with a PE teacher at the door. Monitoring, making sure there was no horseplay, no hanky panky or a slip on stray soap. What he felt was a drifting away of that precious youth that had once filled him, and a welcome eagerness for a man who was about to touch him. Any moment. Surely.

Nipples a mixture of maroon and brown were patted with the smaller of the two towels. Akio’s penis—slightly darker than the rest of his body—jiggled as he pretended to dry himself.

His textbook arse had got him smiles all that week. Peanut buttocks, hard and boxy—edges rounded off with die for skin. Only slightly hairy. Deep crack. Not a blemish. Smelling of baby oil and clean pretty boy. More of a prototype arse than a real living thing. More enjoyable to tongue than a face, simpler. Less information to digest. No challenging eyes to hide from, play with or respond to. No sticky out nose in the middle. Plain. An inviting crack, a delicious hole. Warm, blank, unchallenging. Easy to project upon, direct into. Fuckable, too.

Handa San wanted to kiss those lips. He would. Yes.

‘Hurry up you lot!’ he barked, doing an impersonation of his old PE teacher, making Akio jump then giggle. He dropped the towel.

Handa San’s hands rested down around the rent boy’s neck. The crown of Akio’s head rested against Handa San’s chin. Stomach against stomach, legs between legs, lips meeting in the faintest, most tentative first kiss.

Takeo would taste heavenly, his would be saliva to swallow. Takeo would be so soft.

Tak-e-o, the only three syllables the man had ever voiced when masturbating.

Akio's breath smelled of chemically flavoured gum, pineapple. His saliva tasted of it, too. It was an unexpected juvenile thrill.

Handa San stroked the rent boy's hair softly. It was a shining black, perfectly-cut bob, swept back off his face in two perfect wings. Kind of like Takeo's before he had it cropped.

Handa San put his cheek against Akio's, just like in the afternoon soaps. The warmth was nice at first, then too much. Too close, too intense.

There was something in Akio's maturation that frightened Handa San. Soon the little boy he had made so fit, so agile, would have his body darkened with hair. Soon that head would be weighed down with facts, figures and—probably—girls. To Handa San he was at the peak of beauty, in the final days of boyhood—innocent. He wanted the delicate bloom and loveliness of him to stay. Takeo was, he thought, so young, so easy to destroy. Handa San felt powerless.

The kiss he placed on Akio's neck made his skin tingle. All four nipples in the room hardened. It was Takeo's mouth he wished he was now placing his tongue in.

His heartbeat thumped and echoed in both ears. Quick flashes of Takeo's nudity all too soon concealed by embarrassed quick fumbblings with a long vest, small pants, were recalled in that kiss. Akio thought it felt like a goodbye kiss.

The man's right hand squeezed his cock, bending till it hurt. (Felt nice.)

'So sweet,' the teacher whispered, slowly—ever so quietly.

When he began to savour Akio's lovely warm smell he began to sob. Only with a little breath control did he manage to conceal it.

An evenness of inhalation and exhalation.

Fear fluttered in his guts like an infestation of the large, black butterflies you see hovering in graveyards. Groin and head, flesh and blood, throbbed simultaneously.

'What's your next lesson, Takeo?' Handa San asked looking past him, as if the rent boy did not exist.

'History, Sir.'

'Okay! Homeroom then off to...off to History.'

Handa San nodded Akio toward the door.

Running a hand up to Handa San's chest, feeling a popped up nipple, Akio said, 'Do you really want me to leave?'

Handa San nodded.

‘I need to be alone for a few minutes.’

‘Right.’

Akio shut the door behind him. Moving to stand in what was left of Akio’s aureole of young heat, Handa San sucked in his cheeks, gathering up a great gobbet of saliva and then spat a direct hit at his reflected face.

Clothes peeled off, the man with a pretty impressive CV stood naked, still but for the one hand circling his chest. His dick was hardening with increasing pumps. He could smell his armpits and the bin. He could smell his groin, and the bin. He wanted the softest part of his taut, corded neck to be kissed by a nearly thirteen-year-old boy.

‘You married?’ he asked himself.

‘No,’ he replied.

‘Live alone?’

‘Yes. I’m a faggot, you see. Even if I marry, I’m always going to be a fucking faggot. An out of control paedophile, ephobophile and all-round pervert.’

He wasn’t sure whether to laugh or cry. He jerked himself off in less than a minute.

There was a knock at the door.

‘Just a sec,’ Handa San said, looking at his watch. He had to go. He had reports to write.

Had a serviceable implement such as a butcher’s very largest of knives slipped into the man’s right hand, he might well have enjoyed the ringside view of each cut, each thrust, each slice and slit and slash of his very own wrists/throat/cock and guts.

Looking like a guy about to take his dog for a casual stroll or a jog around the Imperial Palace moat, Handa San left the building.

## Apt. 7A

Air was rushing in and out of nostrils.

That skinny boy's body—so perfectly proportioned— had dried the viewer's mouth.

Fascinated by the shadows that nestled under the boy's ribs, focus was adjusted as necessary every few seconds.

A camera, tripod and darkroom equipment should have been invested in ages ago.

'Clickclickclick. That would have been a nice shot.'

Negatives processed, contact sheets printed, enlargements made—enlarging any section of the boy printed up as desired, covering the walls with larger than life reproductions on a gigantic scale, filling the room.

That boy in 3-D. That boy, as a hologram. A cyber bit of fun. As a real-feel, life-size doll.

'Mmm.'

It looked as though the boy was talking to himself, then the viewer glimpsed the headphones and realised that he was singing.

The clicks of a camera shutter, quickly followed by the whir of film-advance motors were imagined.

'Oh, wow.'

The boy was doing something his mother would have wagged her finger at him for; sunbathing in the nude. For a minute he was gone, then back—munching another pear. Occasional drops of juice fell. Those pale splashes ran down the centre of his chest. He rubbed them in to his skin with the middle finger of his one free hand.

'Go on, do that again. Slowly,' was the low, whispered direction as the viewer unscrewed a small, brown bottle of *Rush*.

A wave of humidity rolled over the viewer. Pores opened up to the air. The boy closed his eyes, stretching back with a hand cupped beneath his head. It was like he was lying there awaiting examination by the binoculars.

Like his body was boasting the recent spurt in growth, his maturation. He ate the entire pear, pips and all, then rested his head back on two hands.

‘Clickclickclick.’

The boy’s thumb alternated between lazy grazes and a deep, gentle massage of his left nipple. As he did so, he widened his legs.

‘I wish you wouldn’t do that,’ the viewer’s binoculars were put down. Clothes needed to be shed.

The binoculars returned, held with just the one hand. The viewer was fizzing.

And while the boy seemed to be sleeping, his genitals were inspected.

‘Clickclickclick.’

The raphe: that little pebbled amber protuberance running along the ridge of the perineum and the middle of the scrotum, anus to end of prepuce, like the boy were split in two halves, then crudely stitched together again.

When the boy opened his eyes they were lifeless, the eyes of a (very large) dead animal. What was he going to do?

‘No, don’t go.’ Whispered words.

Kitchen. Fridge. Black shorts back on. Position resumed.

His can of Coke opened with an explosion. Sexily, he put his mouth down over the hole, sucking up the soft brown foam. It was all over him. Then he was gone again.

‘I’m definitely going to have to get a camera with a big long telescopic lens.’

But the viewer knew photographs would not be enough. The boy couldn’t be represented—or possessed—merely by stains on white paper.

Minutes later the boy was back, fresh from a cool shower, rubbing his hair with a pale blue towel.

He’d wrapped the towel around his waist. Fresh and ready. The viewer’s mouth let out a muted wolf whistle, freezing in the O position.

For five minutes the boy simmered beneath a film of sweat and oil. Absolutely still.

‘Do something.’

Leaning back on his shoulders, holding his penis loosely between his extended fingers and thumb, he moved his hand up and down as fast as was humanly possible. Occasionally his toes curled, fists tightened—taking

himself to some great height...then stopping one stroke short, possibly terrified he'd explode. There was a timpanist in there waiting to sound off.

'If only...'

The boy rolled over, it was time to sun his back a little.



## #8B

Shmohara San wasn't wearing any delicate hoops of gold-plated silver and freshwater pearls through the lobes of her ears or Italian printed silk around her neck.

Showing absolutely no respect for materials such as stone, wood, clay, paper, bamboo and glass, Shinohara San had demolished the living room in a fit of temper after her husband had said he was going for a walk and would be gone a couple of hours.

The long, dried grasses the evening class teacher had suggested she have a try at were in the bin, along with the week's sketches.

Her eyes scanned the pavement below. The sun shone down on seven hundred and fifty shades of grey—nothing new. It was a long way down—long enough to think up a haiku or two.

She needed a drink and, she decided, she was going to have another.

Shinohara San's cat, Sunday Girl, was under the sofa. It seemed like the safest place to be as the (to her) beautiful and interesting trinkets from every age of Mother Earth's history were smashed to pieces all over the living room floor. She'd enjoyed those trinkets, always careful not to knock them down when going for a wander.

'No!' he'd said three times the night before, with a weird smile on his face. Paris was not to be. Then he'd wanted to fuck.

She'd told him about the haemorrhage she'd had at nineteen following an abortion, losing two pints of blood. Told him about the (married) Tsukiji shopkeeper who had been screwing her rotten when they met. Told him she wanted that Christmas present he'd offered her last year, a divorce.

The floor and walls of the bathroom, laid with glazed salmon-pink hexagonal tiles, shone brilliantly. Every surface, shiny shiny. The place was immaculate but for the plastic shower curtains, spotted with damp. She pulled them down and spat in the mirror.

'Oh God, deep in my heart infinite misery wells up,' she said in a voice two octaves above her usual. A tear dripped into the wine as she took

another sip. Tossing her head back she began to laugh. Her teeth freeze-framed in the mirror. Eyes closed, she put her one free hand over her stomach. She let out a quick succession of deep sobs then rocked from side to side, just like her mother did when she went through this daily routine.

‘I’m unhappy, unhappy, unhappy. I have a shit life. I never enjoy myself.’

She began to laugh again.

‘I smile. Look, I’m smiling.’ She sounded very tired. ‘I laugh. Listen, I’m laughing. 1-2-3...’ Then she sobbed in a wa-ha-ha wa-ha-ha way. Her nose was red and shiny, sore from wiping. She drank down the tears through the side of her mouth.

Watching the tub fill, Shinohara San emptied an entire bottle of bubble bath into the flow. The water creamed into bubbles as it mixed. Large bubbles, lemon scented.

‘Bath time,’ she sing-songed toward the mirror, but her reflection had become a steamed-up blur. When she bent to elbow-check the temperature of the water, a roll of recent fat rippled. Clean, pale fat. She’d put on weight.

Only head, knees and shoulders emerged above the level of the water, like something severed—set there for viewing. The temperature was warm-to-hot; perfect.

The glass of wine by her side failed to give its usual predictable, safe, soft smudging wipe-out.

She emptied her glass, then threw it at the mirror. Shattered fragments bounced back in her direction. A piece hit her left breast. The flesh kind of peeled back, opening up quickly, blood jetting out to pink the water in a tropical way. Perhaps there was a muted hiss. She let it bleed.

As tears welled up again, Shinohara San shut her eyes and felt the first pure surge of total relaxation. She could feel herself beginning to slip off to sleep.

The bubbles popped one by one or, sometimes, a few together at once.

‘I’m thirty-nine,’ she shouted at the ceiling.

Her face tightened as the tears rose. She didn’t dare blink. To avoid spilling she widened those brimming eyes.

‘Miaow,’ Sunday Girl miaowed.

Then she heard the lift, the door.

‘What the...?’

Her husband, who had forgotten her birthday for the last three years, entered the bathroom with flowers and, from the breast pocket of a navy blue cashmere jacket his wife had chosen for him, came two tickets for a far-away place called Paris.

## #7B

If someone out there is watching me, Takeo thought, through a telescope, binoculars or camera, I wonder what they're thinking now.

Digging his thumbs into his cheeks about an inch from his hole, he pulled them apart and whispered, 'Lick this!' into the pillow.

## Apt. 7A

An anus that made the viewer think of a Leica lens, an expensive aperture with many possible f-stops.

The boy would be shoved face down on the bed, savagely. He wouldn't be able to breathe what with all the kissing.

He'd be hot, sweaty. Then sticky. It'd be no contest— he'd be overpowered.

Pleasure zipped up to regions of a brain long since staled. A tongue then finger would worm in, into that smooth pink slit, torturing nerve endings up that arse with the usual slow tease before the probing, circling thumb. Maybe he'd be made to wear a dress.

The boy would feel pain and a degree of pride at being fingered like some stupid girlie. His tears, like his sweat, would be more sweet than salty. The finger-fuck rape would be considerate, there'd be lots of lubricant. It would subside into gentle, healing movements, finally rocking the soft coiling limbs—stroking the (totally passive) tear-stained young boy's face.

Like a shot he was running through the kitchen clutching the towel in front of him. His mother was back. She'd bought herself a fresh bunch of flowers.

Even through the binoculars they looked machine made, flowers from a store not a back garden.

A slight smile preceded two sets of three heavy coughs.

## #9A

The girl in the ninth floor flat, home alone, looked at herself in the mirror.

She'd never done anything like this and knew her mother would hit the roof. It was all a bit silly. And strange, and she was beginning to frighten herself. So it was wonderful, right?

She felt wonderful—perhaps the way an imago feels breaking out of the chrysalis or how a snake feels when a skin is shed.

Taking another drink, swilling it from one side of her mouth to the other before she swallowed, she was ready to finish the job.

What, she thought, would such a haircut be called? It certainly wasn't a standard short, back'n'sides—but it was short.

Playing pretty little girl was out. Would the hairstyle get her sent home from school? She fancied bleaching it, or shaving it all off.

Atsko watched the tub fill, emptying a combination of bubble bath and hair shampoo into the flow. The water creamed into bubbles as it mixed. Large bubbles, strawberry and mango scented.

The temperature was close to scalding; perfect.

It was lovely daydreaming with her eyes half-open at two in the afternoon when she should have been doing something worthwhile. The glass of sake by her side gave its usual predictable, safe, soft smudging wipe-out.

The sense of freedom that she always felt when those parents were off somewhere flooded her. It was precious. It had been ages since they'd gone off on a little Sunday trip. Briefly she wondered how she'd replace the sake she'd downed. Then she didn't give a damn.

The depilatory exercise was successful but for a few isolated areas that received a quick tidy-up shave with a *Bic*.

Dragging the razor down in one slow movement removed the first of the stubborn pubes. Over and over the action was repeated. It was like mowing a lawn, she thought—with a blunt mower.

She got bored as she scraped so carefully, and it was when she got bored that the razor slipped. The flesh kind of peeled back, opening up quickly, blood jetting out to pink the water in a tropical way. Perhaps there was a muted hiss.

‘Boys are so lucky,’ Atsko moaned to her soapsuddened nipples.

She was, she realised, not just bored with school, but frustrated. Frustrated by the nonentities in her class. Unlike them she wasn’t prepared to just drift through school— making no mark. Unlike them she didn’t want to pass out into the world to swell the population then have babies— die— and be forgotten. She had no plan, but decided on two things. Playing dumb at school was daft, it would be much more fun confounding all expectations by getting A’s.

## #8B

Perched on an easel, close to completion, was a landscape; the view from that window. It was still wet, done in a happy hurry that afternoon.

‘Husband not in?’ Takeo asked.

‘He’s out playing golf,’ Shinohara San replied. ‘So we’re alone,’ she added.

Takeo blushed.

The atmosphere was, to him, bohemian. Exciting enough for the boy to overlook the paint-by-number flatness of the piece.

Shinohara San had decided on a profile.

‘Look out of the window,’ she said.

The sun was going down, casting frail rays at a slant through precisely parted blinds. The sky was cloudless, only the single vapour trail of a jet plane scarred it. The light seemed to carve a space around Takeo’s young face. Perfect, Shinohara San thought, as she raised the white chinagraph pencil above the pad of fifty sheets of blank, A4 black.

‘Eyes perfectly still now.’ She sounded happier than usual.

Takeo’s eyes followed a path that he felt was made to be seen. The shape at the window on the seventh floor of the opposite block could be detected through the Venetians— narrow and thiefish.

Takeo ran a hand over his stubbly scalp.

The crop, Shinohara San thought, made him look older, tougher. He was growing up. The woman’s eyes lingered over the blue Levi’s her subject was wearing, jeans that had been baggy on him.

There he sat in front of her, straight-backed on the edge of the stool, hands on knees, staring sightlessly out of the window. The black vest he wore was slack by the armpits. A trickle of sweat hovered above the ribbed neckline. Takeo scratched briefly at the rolling drop with a thumbnail.

Delicate currents of air brought his scent to Shinohara San’s nostrils. She savoured the smell and the beneath the vest side-on view of his little chest.



Smelling like a pretty, clean girl, he looked like the kind of boy who regularly goes missing in America.

‘Are you hungry?’

‘Growing boys are always hungry,’ he answered, quoting his mother.

It seemed like an odd answer, Shinohara San thought, somehow sexy.

‘I’ve baked a cake,’ she announced. ‘I’ll cut you a slice as soon as we’ve done the first sketch. Fifteen minutes okay?’

He smiled as he nodded.

His eyes were the same colour, same shape, but what had always been behind those eyes had gone, or had changed. The little darling she knew wasn’t there any more. Yes, his mother was right—he was growing up. She’d have to put a little shading around his upper lip.

Shinohara San fussed with a razor blade, getting the tip of the chinagraph extra fine.

Clouds the shape of Australia, Africa, the Iberian peninsula and the heel of Italy floated by. A whole menagerie of shapes—mountain cats, pythons, two fully formed elephants, a roast chicken. Of course, those clouds no more looked like Africa or elephants than Shinohara San’s marriage had ever looked ideal, but to Takeo those shapes in the sky were real and special. He enjoyed the sky as the woman prepared to sketch.

*an army of soldiers*

*a band of musicians*

*a muster of peacocks*

*a bench of magistrates*

*a covey of grouse*

*a gang of*

Takeo couldn’t remember the rest. Concentration was lacking. Dreamily and interminably he bounced his knees together. The figure at the window had gone.

The boy found his lips mouthing that song again, the one with the blasts of fuzz guitar over rhythmic, numb beats. Over and over. The songs he liked best always had English lyrics. It all felt exciting. He wished he could understand more than the occasional few words.

‘Get into a position that feels comfortable.’

What she meant was *Keep still!* Shinohara San turned to a fresh sheet.

Takeo rested his chin in a cupped hand, leaning against the window sill. Shinohara San had to tell him to stop nibbling his bottom lip, it was close to bleeding.

*an army of soldiers*

*a band of musicians*

*a muster of peacocks*

*a bench of magistrates*

*a covey of grouse*

*a gang of labourers*

*a tuft of grass*

*a staff of servants*

*i WANT TO FUCK YOU*

Takeo thought of nothing/Handa San/nothing/how he always wrote i and not I and he wondered why.

Shinohara San liked the feel of the small, geared hexagons of the chinagraph end between her teeth. She didn't bite, but held it there, releasing the faint grip every once in a while to rotate a measured turn, making a noise only she could hear.

Their eyes met for a fraction of a second, then she made the first mark of white on black, singing:

'Come Spring, please come soon,  
The baby has just learned how to walk,  
She has new red shoes,  
She longs to go outside.'

Takeo, smiled a *That-was-jolly nice!* smile at her, then returned to the perfect view of a dandy collection of neighbourhood fuckups sitting on a wall at the end of the street, waiting for a bus.

One was definitely worth watching, his eyes were black and handsome in the shadow of his baseball cap. Nothing waist. He smoked a cigarette with an appearance of doubtful enjoyment but much self-importance.

An old woman walked past them awkwardly, heavy and stiff, not quite sure how to handle the walking stick she was using for the first time. She stopped to speak to them but they ignored her like she was crazy. Maybe she was.

Takeo's eyes moved to the block of flats opposite. A clearer view could be had of some than others. Separated by mere partition of wall they shared the same space repeated from storey to storey. Often there were shared moments, shared movements at the same shared times. The switching on/off of lights, the laying of tables, the rush to the windows when thunder struck. Simultaneous existences, but quite separate. Unaware of each other in the main, and unaware of being observed.

## Apt. 7A

Taking another swig of Pokari Sweat behind Venetians turned to a precise angle, a shrewd, far-distant set of eyes studied the boy.

From that front room with a back-alley ambience, binoculars picked out the subtle shading of his face, the lips, those eyelashes.

From the thick black tangle under grey jeans came tight skin, untouched by hair. The abdominals were smooth and hard. Vertical lines crossed with horizontals showed when that individual's surprisingly strong arms raised the binoculars. Those eyes were fastened, magnetised.

One of those directional microphones the police use to eavesdrop was wished for. Nice toy. The mouth not made for smiling smiled. Both hands were needed to hold the heavy binoculars without shaking.

A concentrating tongue formed an arc, lodged on the upper lip. The boy from downstairs was upstairs.

As was always the way, the vision of him was slightly hazily occluded above and below by the carefully positioned Venetians. They framed the image with a kind of boring soft focus. Behind the binoculars were twin dark eyes in a triangle of bone that seemed to be melting.

There was a shiny blackness in those eyes, that look dogs get when they want to screw—one-track eyes.

Saliva shot up inside the mouth. A lean, starving outline moved decisively toward the window. The binoculars were held firmly. A brute strength radiated from that grip.

That beautiful boy body was monitored in clenched silence. The intimacy of the gaze was long and detailed.

The viewer knew what she was about to do was weird. But she still wanted to do it.

## #8B

Takeo became aware of a spacious glow of beautiful colours reflecting off the walls of that seventh floor flat opposite as the Venetian blinds were raised up.

In a freak moment of afternoon light, the walls seemed of a Caribbean blue—blue skies, blue sea. All the soft golds and ambers of sunset were there.

Takeo recoiled from the window with a head-jerk as if from the flash of an atomic explosion, then went timidly back. Shinohara San didn't notice, busy as she was with the curves of the twelve-/nearly thirteen-year-old's left ear.

'You've moved the binoculars,' Takeo said.

She stopped, thought.

'Would you like them? Wait, I'll just...une instante, s'il vous plait.'

Takeo stood by the window, running his palm up and down his left thigh.

His breathing formed a silver halo around his head. When he became aware of this he wrote his name backwards through it, then rubbed it out with his soft, warm palm. Waving a hand from side to side over the pane, Takeo half-laughed at himself. To him it felt like he was waving a giant (yet timid) *hello*.

'Here they are,' she sing-songed to his blur of a reflection in the window pane. 'Yours. Consider them as payment for the sitting.'

Both heard the lift bounce to a halt, both heard the jerky opening. Suitcases, sighs, shuffles.

Both heard the doorbell ring playfully, an electronic chime echoing though the flat next door. Sighs, a tut. There was no smiling face to greet them at the door, no helping hands for the luggage.

Both heard the wait, the silence.

## #8A

Ding-dong went the bell again. Ding-dong x 3. No answer.

Shigeru's mother smiled.

Maybe he was taking a nap, she thought. Not out, surely not out. She'd said they'd be back at five and, yes, on the dot. Five.

Shigeru's father sighed, tutted. Said, 'Typical.' Then there was a getting busy with keys.

Shigeru's mother was tanned, toned and pounds lighter—she wanted to show off to her boy and get the laundry started.

Ringling the bell again, the mother hoped to hear unsocked feet bouncing toward the door in an instant— perhaps the smell of something nice cooking had kept her son a moment.

'Ah-ha,' a dead boy's father sing-songed.

The key was inserted carefully, turned softly. If Shigeru were sleeping his mother wanted to wake him with a kiss.

The smell hit them instantly—something rotten. Sharp, bitter-sweet; a stagnant stink. Worse than black leaves in a May ditch. Even so, they still took the time to shed their shoes and then padded in with urgency. Something was wrong.

He went to open the windows, she to the kitchen bin. Then, together, they followed their noses.

On went the fluorescent. Pause. Flicker. Silence.

Everything in the bathroom sparkled, as if littered with glittering silver. But the sparkle came from the wings of hundreds of flies alighting from what had been their son's face.

Two sets of eyes strained, as if trying to make out shapes in a darkened room.

Those widening eyes didn't blink but the foreheads of each frowned when something reminiscent of their newborn child some nineteen-years back came into focus. But maggots hadn't crawled through the eyes of that baby.

A wailing scream echoed through the building.

In the vastness of the scream there was a knowing agony. There was a reason behind that scream. It was a sound like a car alarm going off on a public holiday: relentless.

After the scream came a crying. After the crying came a hum with no tears.

Both Shinohara San and Takeo heard the door of #7B swing open. Both knew Takeo's mother was fearful something had happened to her son.

Time suspended: neither of them moved. Neither of them could change what had happened and something obviously had.

'Stay here, Takeo.'

It took Shinohara San one very slow deep breath to get up, only a few steps to get to the door. As she was passing the frame of #8A where Takeo's mother stood in shock, Takeo lifted the binoculars.

The nipples he saw were soft and pink, kind of like his cousin's that he'd glimpsed two weeks before when her top had come down after a high-board dive. Kind of like the titties for all to see on the top shelf just around the corner in the twenty-four hour 7-Eleven, magazines he so regularly steered toward. Kind of like the pretty pastels on pages ninety-three and four of his PSE textbook.

When the woman lowered her binoculars, Takeo saw that her eyes were enlivened and dark. Shiny, too. Her palest pink lips, the little outside muscles of her mouth, looked so full and young. He could see her breathing and she was breathing ever so slowly.

They shared an evenness of inhalation and exhalation.

She must have been around...it was hard to guess with those binoculars over her face again so quickly.

She had to be—something like—not anything older than...?

Takeo's heartbeat thumped and echoed in both ears as he ran down the stairs.

## #8A

Shigeru's father threw up into a wastepaper basket in the sitting room.

As bad luck would have it, the bin was a piece of wickerwork. The pretty little thing let out more of the man's vomit than it kept in.

'What a fine mess,' he said to himself, and was sick again. He comforted himself with the knowledge that it wouldn't be long before the remains of his wretched son were taken to a bleak, functional building rather resembling a factory.

Uurgh, went that woman's stomach.

She gulped air, that air, a thin film of sweat on her brow and upper lip in an instant.

The acids of her stomach were bubbling. She had to get to the toilet quickly, that stomach was becoming a shrunken fist already in the process of clenching, swilling contents on their way up—back through where they came from—through wailing mouth.

Staring at the toilet seat (wishing she'd raised it even with her rotting son beside her), digestive juices fizzed as they fell as they splashed as they sank.

Her husband, the father, looked at the ceiling. Normally he'd have swatted the fat fly there by the air vent—but that fly was not alone. Its family was there, and friends of the family. So many of them. Six swarms, perhaps.

The man's mind was on the inconvenience of it all. He wasn't sure whether to call 110 (Police) or 119 (Ambulance and Fire). Already he was planning: the clean up, the funeral, the move to another place where nobody knew them—where no one would know. Maybe only the air at Tsuda could cleanse their noses of that stench.

Stomach contents emptied—with plenty of bile—that mother flushed then sat to sob on the toilet seat. She stared very hard at her dead son's face, trying to remember every expression it had ever had, trying to remember the last words he'd said to her.



Had he said 'I love you' before he said 'Goodbye', or was it the other way round?

'Why did he do it?' a dead boy's father said to himself in the mirror, running a hand over his bald head.

'Can't imagine,' a dead boy's mother said in a voice two octaves below her usual.

There was a sharp pine needle between her toes. It had worked its way into her skin. With her knees held tightly against her chest, face buried in the warm pocket formed by her own body, she cried.

## #7B

The woman with the binoculars was putting on quite a show with that one free hand.

Takeo removed his black vest, then lowered his old Levi's—then pants—covering his erection with a hand. His long, skinny, pale (totally passive) form glowed from the window. From the angle he was in, Takeo could have passed for a tall, skinny girl. Then he showed his erection— in profile.

The woman gave her tiny bird-boy a giant wave.

Groin and head throbbed simultaneously in both sets of flesh and blood.

As she placed her lips wetly against the window—tongue swirling, smearing the glass—Takeo had the desire to piss or bleed through that cock of his. He pressed his whole body against the pane. It was cold, it felt dangerous: exciting.

Mine, she thought as she parted the pink creases of her labia, revealing her engorged clitoris. In her grandiose and taunting provocation she demanded to be licked.

Her lips were moving, saying something. Or singing, Takeo thought.

*an army of soldiers*

*a band of musicians*

*a muster of peacocks*

*a bench of magistrates*

*a covey of grouse*

*a gang of labourers*

*a tuft of grass*

*a staff of servants*

*i WANT TO FUCK YOU*

Through the unfocused screen of his eyelashes, Takeo saw the lights of Tokyo.

He squeezed his dick, bending it, bruising it. Bursting tiny blood vessels. His eyes were fixed upon the woman's triangular patch of hair shielding a vagina once stretched with a little head, a vulva split before a midwife had announced the disappointing words, 'It's dead.'

Back and forth the foreskin went, burning with friction—not a clue about the fine art of wanking.

Through the binoculars she could see the boy's eyelids lowering for a moment, then rise—casting an ecstatic light.

Jerking about like a marionette...he felt a sensation he hadn't felt before. Something rhythmic was felt along his heart, different to...a gulping, shivering limbo.

Horror-struck, Takeo felt it happen: like an insect bursting out of the tight confinement of its cocoon—with jerking, compulsive thrusts—freeing its wings to leap into the air.

'Mmm.'

His first thrown line of white sprinkled, scattered and shot up, up and away from him—splashing the window. An authentic, unrehearsed expression crossed his face.

Orgasm #1.

It was over. Penis collapsed, docile as a roll of putty. That was it, that's what the fuss was all about. Something a bit like a sneeze.

He'd been expecting to see sizzling strips of white lightning shoot out of that baby mouse dick of his. He saw globs of something resembling cheap hand cream running down the window pane and wondered if he'd soon be pissing blood.

Momentarily, Takeo felt revolted—that was the stuff he'd fantasised Handa San shooting over his chest.

Stupid. Fucking repulsive. Hideous. All those thoughts about Handa San were as transitory as spots.

I don't want to be like that, he screamed internally—post ejac' mood heightening—I don't have to be like that. I'd rather slash my wrists. Rather be dead.

Queers, wanting to lick and be licked. Queers wanting it in their mouths and up their arsecunts. Fucking scumbags. He didn't want any of that kind of sex.

S-E-X, SEX...vaginas like snugly clasped purses...that's what he wanted. Clits ranging from button-like to tentacular. Cunt. Pussy. No fear of shit at the end of your dick when you fuck cunt, Takeo thought.

When the woman in Apt. 7A had seen those splashes hitting the window that let in so much sky, she'd exhaled a gale from her lungs.

Mopping up with a sock, waving a hand from side to side—smearing the glass—Takeo half-laughed at himself. To her it must look like I'm waving a giant bye bye, he thought.

The woman's hot breath had formed a silver-grey halo around her head. Aware of this, she wrote her telephone number backwards through it. An impulse.

Through the binoculars she watched her young playmate make a dash into the living room, checking the numbers through his binoculars after he'd dialled the first three digits.

He wondered what her voice would sound like.

What would he say, or would she do all the talking? And what if she wanted him to nip round to do the f word?

He watched the woman of that seventh floor apartment pick up her phone. Though her lips were moving, all Takeo could hear was the engaged tone.

The woman seemed to freeze, then scan the windows she knew so well—some with curtains half-closed, some with blinds permanently drawn. Many with Venetians turned to a precise angle.

Her binoculars zig-zagged over a blurred mass of concrete to a startlingly clear image at the top of the block: a lean, starving outline holding a telephone. There, up in the penthouse. Was this the person whose voice she was hearing?

Then, there. The old queen in #10B, delicately holding the daintiest pair of opera glasses as he blew a schoolboy whistle of absolute delight. And there, the father of that littleun in #4B, also holding a telephone while chuckling to his wife who was straining to focus a camera. The foreigner in #6A, doing a spot of alternative sight-seeing. And there, on the ninth—the former croupier, roaring behind a telescope, raising an old nightie to wriggle her hips.

The telephone in Apt. 7A was slammed down.

With her binoculars lowered, that woman looked every minute of her forty-four years. Horror was having an outing all over her face as she

rubbed desperate fingers backwards through that already fading telephone number. Takeo decided against pressing redial.

When her phone rang again, it was the voice of a young woman, or girl, making a repulsive suggestion in a perfectly modulated voice. There was a sleepy kid sister's high-pitched quality to that voice. The dolly with a pull-string kind of voice asked if the woman might like to try a little lesbian experimentation.

The Venetian blinds of Apt. 7 A snapped shut.

## GLOSSARY

*Adon*: Japanese gay magazine.

Airtex: A British brand of school uniform shirts,

ame: rain.

amyl nitrate: heart drug, often used to enhance dance and sexual experience.

*An-An*; Japanese magazine aimed at teenage girls,

arigato: thankyou.

*Barazoku*: longest established Japanese gay guide, similar to *Spartacus*. Very detailed. Up to 550 pages. (Translation of *Barazoku*: Rose Family.)

Burakumin: minority group of Japanese, distinguished by special low-status occupations until 1870.

BVD: a popular brand of underwear.

Catalina: name of a major US film production company specialising in male pornography.

chan: normally the diminutive suffix 'chan' is used only for small children, never grown men. Gay men, however, use chan as an endearment.

Channel 4: major British tv network.

chaps: Western style clothing that covers the legs but leaves the crotch and rear on view.

Edwin: a make of jeans/leisurewear.

501's: a range of Levi's jeans.

fundoshi: traditional cotton item of clothing similar to a jock strap.

gaijin: foreigner.

genki: well, healthy, lively.

gomenasai: sorry.

guarantee: agreed fee for a modelling assignment,

hai: yes.

homeroom: similar to a form room.

*Hot Dog*: Japanese magazine aimed at teenage boys.

*HX*: a free gay American publication, similar to *QX* in the UK.

*JUMP*: Japanese magazine aimed at teenage boys,  
kawaii: cute.

Kimigayo: Japanese national anthem.

Kuatarso Sanuki Tsuda Therapy Institute: hot springs, fitness facilities  
and restaurants in the Tsuda/Tosan area of Kagawa.

*Mainichi Shimbun*: national newspaper.

NBC: major American tv network.

Nemeth, Christopher: British fashion designer who is particularly  
popular with the Japanese market.

NHK: major Japanese tv and radio network.

0101: the Marui department store.

ohio: A shortened version of 'Ohio gozaimasu'. Good morning.

okama: derogatory word for homosexual.

Old Compton Street: the anal passage of London,

origami: the Japanese art of paper folding.

Pokari Sweat: a popular Japanese light refreshment promoted as a sports  
drink.

*Popeye*: Japanese magazine aimed at teenage boys,

poppers: amyl nitrate.

PSE: Personal Social Education.

red: part of gay colour code system—indicates interest in fist fucking.

Dark red: double fisting,

rent: male prostitute.

RTL: major German tv network.

Rush: a brand of poppers, amyl nitrate.

Sacha: a make of collectable doll. Boy dolls particular sought after.

Seibu: a department store,

sensei: teacher, a term of respect,

shubunken: a variety of cold water fish.

simasen: sorry, excuse me.

*So-En*: teenage magazine for girls.

Takashimaya: a department store.

tanuki-soba: noodles in fish bouillon topped with fried flour crust,  
spinach and fish cake,

tatami: weaved floor covering.

Todai: Tokyo University. Very prestigious,

vada: British gay polari for look, take a look.

VWE: abbreviation for very well endowed.

XXL: abbreviation for extra extra large.

Yamaguchi, Herbie: Japanese photographer,

yoroshiku onegaishimasu: literally translated, please remember me.

Something said when meeting somebody for the first time. Formal. Usually only used in a professional capacity.

*YOUNG*: Japanese magazine aimed at teenage boys.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

P-P Hartnett was born in West London of Irish parents. Until the age of seven he grew up in a residential home for the elderly.

His best friend left school at sixteen to start up a ladies underwear stall in Kensington Market and go on the game. “With a friend like Ashley, weekends meant initiation: shoplifting in Knightsbridge, prick-teasing in Earl’s Court, stalking the King’s Road with a Nikon.”

Hartnett’s club and street-style photography has featured in *The Sunday Times*, *The Independent*, *The Face*, *ES Magazine* and *Time Out*—amongst others—and exhibited in New York, Tokyo and London.

He has also worked alongside children with emotional and behavioural concerns, the homeless, young people involved in prostitutional activities and people with AIDS.

In 1995, the year of lesbian visibility, Hartnett ran the notorious drag king club, Naive.

*Mmm yeah*—a collection of short stories with an international flavour, is Hartnett’s next work soon to be published by Pulp Books.

P-P Hartnett lives alone. Home is a little house on a hill in Lancashire. He is currently working on a third novel.

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Quentin Crisp on *Call Me*, P-P Hartnett's first novel

A twelve-year-old boy pretends to sleep while his mother touches him. Both are naked in the boy's bed. The woman is frightened of the changes puberty might bring to their relationship. He's all she has.

That son's mind is elsewhere as his mother masturbates beside him.

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