



KITCHEN by Banana Yoshimoto

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Published by Grove Press A division of Grove Press, Inc.

841 Broadway

New York, NY 10003-4793

Published in Canada by General Publishing Company, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Yoshimoto, Banana, 1964-
Kitchen. English]

Kitchen / Banana Yoshimoto.

p. cm.

Translation of: Kitchin.

ISBN 0-8021-1516-0

| Title.

PL865.07138K5813 1993

895.6'35 - dc20 92-12871

CIP

Manufactured in the United States of America Printed on acid-free paper First
English-language edition 1993

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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1 KITCHEN

The place I like best in this world is the kitchen. No matter where it is, no matter what kind, if it's a kitchen, if it's a place where they make food, it's fine with me. Ideally it should be well broken in. Lots of tea towels, dry and immaculate. White tile catching the light (ting! ting!).

I love even incredibly dirty kitchens to distraction - vegetable droppings all over the floor, so dirty your slippers turn black on the bottom. Strangely, it's better if this kind of kitchen is large. I lean up against the silver door of a towering, giant refrigerator stocked with enough food to get through a winter. When I raise my eyes from the oil-spattered *gas* burner and the rusty kitchen knife, outside the window stars are glittering, lonely.

Now only the kitchen and I are left. It's just a little nicer than being all alone.

When I'm dead worn out, in a reverie, I often think that when it comes time to die, I want to breathe my last in a kitchen. Whether it's *cold and* I'm all alone, or somebody's there and it's warm, I'll stare death fearlessly in the eye. If it's a kitchen, I'll think, "How good."

Before the Tanabe family took me in, I spent every night in the kitchen. After my grandmother died, I couldn't sleep. One morning at dawn I trundled out of my room in search of comfort and found that the one place I *could* sleep was beside the refrigerator.

My parents - my name is Mikage Sakurai - both died when they were young. After that my grandparents brought me up. I was going into junior high when my grandfather died. From then on, it was just my grandmother and me.

When my grandmother died the other day, I was taken by surprise. My family had steadily decreased one by one as the years went by, but when it suddenly dawned on me that I was all alone, everything before my eyes seemed false. The fact that time continued to pass in the usual way in this apartment where I grew up, even though now I was here all alone, amazed me. It was total science fiction. The blackness of the cosmos.

Three days after the funeral I was still in a daze. Steeped in a sadness so great I could barely cry, shuffling softly in gentle drowsiness, I pulled my futon into the deathly silent, gleaming kitchen. Wrapped in a blanket, like Linus, I slept. The hum of the refrigerator kept me from thinking of my loneliness. There, the long night came on in perfect peace, and morning came.

But... I just wanted to sleep under the stars.

I wanted to wake up in the morning light.

Aside from that, I just drifted, listless.

However! I couldn't exist like that. Reality is wonderful.

I thought of the money my grandmother had left me - just enough. The place was too big, too expensive, for one person. I had to look for another apartment. There was no way around it. I thumbed through the listings, but when I saw so many places all the same lined up like that, it made my head swim. Moving takes a lot of time and

trouble. It takes energy.

I had no strength; my joints ached from sleeping in the kitchen day and night. When I realized how much effort moving would require - I'd have to pull myself together and go look at places. Move my stuff. Get a phone in-stalled - I lay around instead, sleeping, in despair. It was then that a miracle, a godsend, came calling one afternoon.

I remember it well.

Dingdong. Suddenly the doorbell rang.

It was a somewhat cloudy spring afternoon. I was intently involved in tying up old magazines with string while glancing at the apartment listings with half an eye but no interest, wondering how I was going to move. Flustered, looking like I'd just gotten out of bed, I ran out and without thinking undid the latch and opened the door. Thank god it wasn't a robber. There stood Yuichi Tanabe.

"Thank you for your help the other day," I said. He was a nice young man, a year younger than me, who had helped out a lot at the funeral. I think he'd said he went to the same university I did. I was taking time off.

"Not at all," he said. "Did you decide on a place to live yet?"

"Not even close." I smiled.

"I see."

"Would you like to come in for some tea?"

"No. I'm on my way somewhere and I'm kind of in a hurry." He grinned. "I just stopped by to ask you something. I was talking to my mother, and we were thinking you ought to come to our house for a while."

"Huh?" I said.

"In any case, why don't you come over tonight around seven? Here's the directions."

"Okay ..." I said vacantly, taking the slip of paper.

"All right, then, good. Mom and I are both looking forward to your coming." His smile was so bright as he stood in my doorway that I zoomed in for a closeup on his pupils. I couldn't take my eyes off him. I think I heard a spirit call my name.

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

Bad as it sounds, it was like I was possessed. His attitude was so totally "cool," though, I felt I could trust him. In the black gloom before my eyes (as it always is in cases of "bewitchment"), I saw a straight road leading from me to him. He seemed to glow with white light. That was the effect he had on me.

"Okay, see you later," he said, smiling, and left.

Before my grandmother's funeral I had barely known him. On the day itself, when Yuichi Tanabe showed up all of a sudden, I actually wondered if he had been her lover. His hands trembled as he lit the incense; his eyes were swollen from crying. When he saw my grandmother's picture on the altar, again his tears fell like rain. My first thought when I saw that was that my love for my own grandmother was nothing compared to this boy's, whoever he was. He looked that sad.

Then, mopping his face with a handkerchief, he said, "Let me help with something." After that, he helped me a lot.

Yuichi Tanabe ... I must have been quite confused if I took that long to remember when I'd heard grandmother mention his name.

He was the boy who worked part-time at my grandmother's favorite flower shop. I remembered hearing her say, any number of times, things like, "What a nice boy they have working there... . That Tanabe boy ... today, again ..." Grandmother loved cut flowers. Because the ones in our kitchen were not allowed to wilt, she'd go to the flower shop a couple of times a week. When I thought of that, I remembered him walking behind my grandmother, a large potted plant in his arms.

He was a long limped young man with pretty features. I didn't know anything more about him, but I might have seen him hard at work in the flower shop. Even after I got to know him a little I still had an impression of aloofness. No matter how nice his manner and expression, he seemed like a loner. I barely knew him, really.

It was raining that hazy spring night. A gentle, warm rain enveloped the neighborhood as I walked with directions in hand.

My apartment building and the one where the Tanabes lived were separated by Chuo Park. As I crossed through, I was inundated with the green smell of the night. I walked, sloshing down the shiny wet path that glittered with the colors of the rainbow.

To be frank, I was only going because they'd asked me. I didn't think about it beyond that. I looked up at the towering apartment building and thought, their apartment on the tenth floor is so high, the view must be beautiful at night... .

Getting off the elevator, I was alarmed by the sound of my own footsteps in the hall. I rang the bell, and abruptly, Yuichi opened the door. "Come in."

"Thanks." I stepped inside. The room was truly strange.

First thing, as I looked toward the kitchen, my gaze landed with a thud on the enormous sofa in the living room. Against the backdrop of the large kitchen with its shelves of pots and pans - no table, no carpet, just "it." Covered in beige fabric, it looked like something out of a commercial. An entire family could watch TV on it. A dog too big to keep in Japan could stretch out across it - sideways. It was really a marvelous sofa.

In front of the large window leading onto the terrace was a jungle of plants growing in bowls, planters, and all kinds of pots. Looking around, I saw that the whole house was filled with flowers; there were vases full of spring blooms everywhere.

"My mother says she'll get away from work soon. Take a look around if you'd like. Should I give you the tour? Or pick a room, then I'll know what kind of person you are," said Yuichi, making tea.

"What kind? I seated myself on the deep, comfy sofa.

"I mean, what you want to know about a house and the people who live there, their tastes. A lot of people would say you learn a lot from the toilet," he said, smiling, unconcerned. He had a very relaxed way of talking.

"The kitchen," I said.

"Well, here it is. Look at whatever you want."

While he made tea, I explored the kitchen. I took everything in: the good quality of the mat on the wood floor and of Yuichi's slippers; a practical minimum of well-worn kitchen things, precisely arranged. A Silverstone frying pan and a delightful German-made vegetable peeler - a peeler to make even the laziest grandmother enjoy slip, slipping those skins off.

Lit by a small fluorescent lamp, all kinds of plates silently awaited their turns; glasses sparkled. It was clear that in spite of the disorder everything was of the finest quality. There were things with special uses, like ... porcelain bowls, *gratin* dishes, gigantic platters, two beer steins. Somehow it was all very satisfying. I even opened the small refrigerator (Yuichi said it was okay) - everything was neatly organized, nothing just "left."

I looked around, nodding and murmuring approvingly, "Mmm, mmm." It was a good kitchen. I fell in love with it at first sight.

I went back and sat on the sofa, and out came hot tea.

Usually, the first time I go to a house, face to face with people I barely know, I feel an immense loneliness. I saw myself reflected in the glass of the large terrace window while black gloom spread over the rain-hounded night panorama. I was tied by blood to no creature in this world. I could go anywhere, do anything. It was dizzying.

Suddenly, to see that the world was so large, the cosmos so black. The unbounded fascination of it, the unbounded loneliness... For the first time, these days, I was touching it with these hands, these eyes. I've been looking at the world half-blind, I thought.

"Why did you invite me here?" I asked.

"We thought you might be having a hard time," Yuichi said, peering kindly at me. "Your grandmother was always so sweet to me, and look at this house, we have all this room. Shouldn't you be moving?"

"Yes. Although the landlord's been nice enough to give me extra time."

"So why not move in with us?" he said, as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

He struck just the right note, neither cold nor oppressively kind. It made me warm to him; my heart welled up to the point of tears. Just then, with the scratch of a key in the door, an incredibly beautiful woman came running in, all out of breath.

I was so stunned, I gaped. Though she didn't seem young, she was truly beautiful. From her outfit and dramatic makeup, which really wouldn't do for daytime, I understood that hers was night work.

Yuichi introduced me: "This is Mikage Sakurai."

"How do you do," she said in a slightly husky voice, still panting, with a smile. "I'm Yuichi's mother. My name is Eriko."

This was his mother? Dumbfounded, I couldn't take my eyes off her. Hair that rustled like silk to her shoulders; the deep sparkle of her long, narrow eyes; well-formed lips, a nose with a high, straight bridge - the whole of her gave off a marvelous light that seemed to vibrate with life force. She didn't look human. I had never seen anyone like her.

I was staring to the point of rudeness. "How do you do," I replied at last, smiling back at her.

"We're so pleased to have you here," she said to me warmly, and then, turning to Yuichi, "I'm sorry, Yuichi. I just can't get away tonight. I dashed out for a second saying that I was off to the bathroom. But I'll have plenty of time in the morning. I hope Mikage will agree to spend the night." She was in a rush and ran to the door, red dress flying.

“I’ll drive you,” said Yuichi.

“Sorry to put you to so much trouble,” I said.

“Not at all. Who ever would have thought the club would be so busy tonight? It’s me who should apologize. Well! See you in the morning!”

She ran out in her high heels, and Yuichi called back to me, “Wait here! Watch TV or something!” then ran after her, leaving me alone in a daze.

I felt certain that if you looked really closely you would see a few normal signs of age - crow’s feet, less-than-perfect teeth - some part of her that looked like a real human being. Still, she was stunning. She made me want to be with her again. There was a warm light, like her afterimage, softly glowing in my heart. That must be what they mean by “charm.” Like Helen Keller when she understood “water” for the first time, the word burst into reality for me, its living example before my eyes. It’s no exaggeration; the encounter was that overwhelming.

Yuichi returned, jingling the car keys. “If she could only get away for ten minutes, she should have just called,” he said, taking off his shoes in the entryway.

I stayed where I was on the sofa and answered “Mmm,” noncommittally.

“Mikage,” he said, “were you a little bit intimidated by my mother?”

“Yes,” I told him frankly. “I’ve never seen a woman that beautiful.”

“Yes. But ...” Smiling, he sat down on the floor right in front of me. “She’s had plastic surgery.”

“Oh?” I said, feigning nonchalance. “I wondered why she didn’t look anything like you.”

“And that’s not all. Guess what else - she’s a man.” He could barely contain his amusement.

This was too much. I just stared at him in wide-eyed silence. I expected any second he would say, “Just kidding.” Those tapered fingers, those mannerisms, the way she carried herself... I held my breath remembering that beautiful face; he, on the other hand, was enjoying this.

“Yes, but...” My mouth hung open. “You’ve been saying all along, ‘my mother’ this, and ‘my mother’ that...”

“Yes, but. Could *you* call someone who looked like that

‘Dad’?” he asked calmly. He has a point, I thought. An extremely good answer.

“What about the name Eriko?”

“It’s actually Yuji.” ; It was as though there were a haze in front of my eyes.

When I was finally ready to hear the story, I said, “So, who gave birth to you?”

“Eriko was a man a long time ago. He married very young. The person he married was my mother.”

“Wow ... I wonder what she was like.” I couldn’t imagine.

“I don’t remember her myself. She died when I was little. I have a picture, though. Want to see it?”

“Yes.” I nodded. Without getting up, he dragged his bag across the floor, then took an old photograph out of his wallet and handed it to me.

She was someone whose face told you nothing about her. Short hair, small eyes and nose. The impression was of a very odd woman of indeterminate age. When I didn’t say anything, Yuichi said, “She looks strange, doesn’t she?”

I smiled uncomfortably.

“As a child Eriko was taken in by her family. I don’t know why. They grew up together. Even as a man he was good-looking, and apparently he was very popular with women. Why he would marry such a strange ...”he said smiling, looking at the photo. “He must have been pretty attached to my mother. So much so he turned his back on the debt of gratitude he owed his foster parents and eloped with her.”

I nodded.

“After my real mother died, Eriko quit her job, gathered me up, and asked herself, ‘What do I want to do now?’ What she decided was, ‘Become a woman.’ She knew she’d never love anybody else. She says that before she became a woman she was very shy. Because she hates to do things halfway, she had everything ‘done,’ from her face to her whatever, and with the money she had left over she bought that nightclub. She raised me a woman alone, as it were.” He smiled.

“What an *amazing* life story!”

“She’s not dead yet,” said Yuichi.

Whether I could trust him or whether he still had something up his sleeve ... the more I found out about these people, the more I didn’t know what to expect.

But I trusted their kitchen. Even though they didn’t look alike, there were certain traits they shared. Their faces shone like Buddhas when they smiled. I like that, I thought.

“I’ll be out of here early in the morning, so just help yourself to whatever you want.”

A sleepy-looking Yuichi, his arms full of blankets, pillows, and pajamas for me, showed me how the shower worked and pointed out the towels.

Unable to think of much of anything after hearing such a (fantastic!) life story, I had watched a video with Yuichi. We had chatted about things like the flower shop and my grandmother, and time passed quickly. Now it was one in the morning. That sofa was delectable. It was so big, so soft, so deep, I felt that once I surrendered to it I’d never get up again.

“Your mother,” I said after a while. “I bet the first time she sat on this sofa in the furniture store, she just had to have it and bought it right then and there.”

“You got it,” he said. “As soon as she gets an idea in her head she does it, you know? I just stand back in amazement at her way of making things happen.”

“No kidding.”

“So that sofa is yours for the time being. It’s your bed. It’s great for us to be able to put it to good use.”

“Is it,” I ventured softly, “is it really okay for me to sleep here?”

“Sure,” he said, without a hint of hesitation.

“I’m very grateful.”

After the usual instructions on how to make myself at home, he said good night and went to his room.

I was sleepy, too.

Showering at someone else’s house, I thought about what was happening to me, and my exhaustion washed away under the hot water.

I put on the borrowed pajamas and, barefoot, went into the silent living room. I just had to go back for one more look at the kitchen. It was really a good kitchen.

Then I stumbled over to the sofa that was to be my bed for the night and turned out the lamp. Suspended in the dim light before the window overlooking the magnificent tenth-floor view, the plants breathed softly, resting. By now the rain had stopped, and the atmosphere, sparkling, replete with moisture, refracted the glittering night splendidly.

Wrapped in blankets, I thought how funny it was that tonight, too, here I was sleeping next to the kitchen. I smiled to myself. But this time I wasn't lonely. Maybe I had been waiting for this. Maybe all I had been hoping for was a bed in which to be able to stop thinking, just for a little while, about what happened before and what would happen in the future. I was too sad to be able to sleep in the same bed with anyone; that would only make the sadness worse. But here was a kitchen, some plants, someone sleeping in the next room, perfect quiet ... this was the best. This place was ... the best.

At peace, I slept.

I awoke to the sound of running water.

Morning had come, dazzling. I arose drowsily and went into the kitchen. There was "Eriko-san," her back turned to me. Her clothing was subdued compared to last night's, but as she turned to me with a cheery "Good morning!" her face, even more brilliantly animated, brought me to my senses. "Good morning," I answered. She opened the refrigerator, glanced inside, and looked at me with a troubled air.

"You know," she said, "I'm always hungry in the morning, even though I'm still sleepy. But there's nothing to eat in this house. Let's call for takeout. What would you like?"

I stood up. "Would you like me to make something?"

"Really?" she said, and then, doubtfully, "Do you think you can handle a knife, half-asleep?"

"No problem."

The entire apartment was filled with light, like a sun-room. I looked out at the sweet, endless blue of the sky; it was glorious.

In the joy of being in a kitchen I liked so well, my head cleared, and suddenly I remembered she was a man. I turned to look at her. Deja vu overwhelmed me like a flash flood.

The house smelled of wood. I felt an immense nostalgia, in that downpour of morning light; watching her pull a cushion onto the floor in that dusty living room and curl up to watch TV.

• • •

She attacked the food - cucumber salad and soupy rice with eggs - with gusto.

It was midday. From the building's garden we could hear the shouts of children playing in the springlike weather. The plants near the window, enveloped in the gentle sunlight, sparkled bright green; far off in the pale sky, thin clouds gently flowed, suspended. It was a warm, lazy afternoon.

I couldn't have dreamed of this yesterday morning, this scene of having breakfast at

the house of someone I had just met, and it felt very strange. There we were, eating breakfast, all sorts of things set out directly on the floor (there was no table). The sunlight shone through our cups, and our cold green tea reflected prettily against the floor.

Suddenly Eriko looked me full in the face. “Yuichi told me before that you reminded him of Woofie, a dog we used to have. And you know - it’s really true.”

“His name was Woofie?”

“Yes, or Wolfie.”

“Hmm,” I said, thinking, “Woofie.”

“You have the same nice eyes, the same nice hair.

... When I saw you for the first time yesterday, I had to force myself not to laugh. You really do look like him.”

“Is that right?” Not that I believed I looked like a dog, but I thought, if Woofie was a Saint Bernard, that would be pretty awful.

“When Woofie died I couldn’t get Yuichi to eat a bite, not I grain of rice, nothing. So it follows that Yuichi feels close to you. I can’t guarantee it’s romantic, though!”

Mom shook with laughter.

“Okay,” I said.

“Yuichi says your grandmother was very kind.”

“Grandmother was really fond of him.”

“That boy. You know, I haven’t been able to devote myself full-time to raising him, and I’m afraid there are some things that slipped through the cracks.”

I smiled. “Slipped through the cracks?”

“It’s true,” she said with a motherly smile. “He’s confused about emotional things and he’s strangely distant with people. I know I haven’t done everything right... But I wanted above all to make a good kid out of him and I focused everything on raising him that way. And you know, he is. A good kid.”

“I know.”

“You’re a good kid, too.” She beamed.

Her power was the brilliance of her charm and it had brought her to where she was now. I had the feeling that neither her wife nor her son could diminish it. That quality must have condemned her to an ice-cold loneliness.

She said, munching cucumbers, “You know, a lot of people say things they don’t mean. But I’m serious: I want you to stay here as long as you like. You’re a good kid, and having you here makes me truly happy. I understand what it’s like to be hurt and to have nowhere to go. Please, stay with us and don’t worry about anything. Okay?”

She emphasized her words by looking deep into my eyes.

“... Naturally, I’ll pay rent and everything,” I said, desperately moved. My chest was full to bursting. “But yes, till I find another place to live, I’d really appreciate your putting me up.”

“Of course, of course, think nothing of it. But instead of rent, just make us soupy rice once in a while. Yours is so much better than Yuichi’s,” she said, smiling.

To live alone with an old person is terribly nerve-racking, and the healthier he or she is, the more one worries. Actually, when I lived with my grandmother this didn’t occur to me; I enjoyed it. But looking back, I can’t help thinking that deep down I was

always, at all times, afraid: “Grandma’s going to die.”

When I came home, my grandmother would come out of the Japanese-style room where the TV was and say, “Welcome home.” If I came in late I always brought her sweets. She was a pretty relaxed grandmother and never gave me a hard time if I told her I was going to sleep over somewhere or whatever. We would spend a little time together before bed, sometimes drinking coffee, sometimes green tea, eating cake and watching TV.

In my grandmother’s room, which hadn’t changed since I was little, we would tell each other silly gossip, talk about TV stars or what had happened that day; we talked about whatever. I think she even told me about Yuichi during those times.

No matter how dreamlike a love I have found myself in, no matter how delightfully drunk I have been, in my heart I was always aware that my family consisted of only one other person.

The space that cannot be filled, no matter how cheerfully a child and an old person are living together - the deathly silence that, panting in a corner of the room, pushes its way in like a shudder. I felt it very early, although no one told me about it.

I think Yuichi did, too.

When was it I realized that, on this truly dark and solitary path we all walk, the only way we can light is our own? Although I was raised with love, I was always lonely.

Someday, without fail, everyone will disappear, scattered into the blackness of time. I’ve always lived with that knowledge rooted in my being: perhaps that’s why Yuichi’s way of reacting to things seemed natural to me.

And that’s why I rushed into living with them.

I gave myself permission to be lazy until May. I was in paradise. I still went to my part-time job, but after that I would clean house, watch TV, bake cakes: I lived like a housewife.

Little by little, light and air came into my heart. I was thrilled.

What with Yuichi’s school and job, and Eriko’s working at night, the three of us were almost never home at the same time. At first I would get tired. I wasn’t used to sleeping in the living room, and I was constantly coming and going between the Tanabes’ and the old apartment to get things in order, but I soon got used to it.

I loved the Tanabes’ sofa as much as I loved their kitchen. I came to crave sleeping on it. Listening to the quiet breathing of the plants, sensing the night view through the curtains, I slept like a baby. There wasn’t anything more I wanted. I was happy.

I’ve always been like that - if I’m not pushed to the brink, I won’t move. This time it was the same. For having been granted such a warm bed after finding myself in the direst straits, I thanked the gods - whether they existed or not - with all my heart.

One day I went back to the old apartment to take care of the last of my things. When I opened the door, I shuddered. It was like coming back to a stranger’s house.

Cold and dark, not a sigh to be heard. Everything there, which should have been so familiar, seemed to be turning away from me. I entered gingerly, on tiptoe, feeling as though I should ask permission.

When my grandmother died, time died, too, in this apartment. The reality of that fact was immediate. There was nothing I could do to change it. Other than turning

around and leaving, there was only one thing to do - humming a tune, I began to scrub the refrigerator.

Just then the telephone rang.

I picked up the receiver, knowing who it would be. It was Sotaro. He was my old... boyfriend. We broke up about the time my grandmother's illness got bad.

"Hello? Mikage?" The sound of his voice made me want to weep with nostalgia.

"Long time no see!" I cried out joyfully. We were beyond displays of shyness.

"Yeah, well, you haven't been coming to classes, so I started wondering what was wrong and I asked around. They told me your grandmother had died. I was shocked... That's really rough."

"Yes. So I've been pretty busy."

"Can you come out now?"

"Sure."

As we decided where to meet, I looked up at the window. The sky outside was a dull gray. Waves of clouds were being pushed around by the wind with amazing force.

In this world there is no place for sadness. No place; not one.

Sotaro loved parks.

Green places, open spaces, the outdoors - he loved all of that, and at school he was often to be found in the middle of a garden or sitting on a bench beside a playground. The fact that if you wanted to find Sotaro you'd find him amid greenery had entered into university lore. He was planning to do some kind of work with plants.

For some reason I keep getting connected to men who have something to do with plants.

We were the very picture of a student couple in my happier days (Sotaro is always cheerful). Because of his obsession we would plan to meet outside even in the middle of winter, but I was late so often that we found a compromise meeting place. We hit on a ridiculously large coffee shop on the edge of the park.

So this day, too, there was Sotaro, sitting in the seat nearest the park in that large coffee shop, looking out the window. Outside, against the backdrop of the entirely overcast sky, the trees trembled in the wind, rustling. I made my way over to him, snaking around the comings and goings of the waitresses. He smiled when he saw me.

I sat down across from him and said, "I wonder if it's going to rain."

"Nah, it's clearing up, don't you think? Funny, isn't it, we haven't seen each other in all this time and we talk about the weather." His smiling face put me at ease.

It's so great, I thought, having tea in the afternoon with someone you really feel at home with. I knew how wildly he tosses in his sleep, how much milk and sugar he takes in his coffee. I knew his face in front of the mirror, insanely serious, as he tries to tame his mop of unruly hair with the hair dryer. Then I thought, if we were still together I would be worrying about how I've just chipped the nail polish on my right hand scrubbing the refrigerator.

In the middle of gossipy chitchat, as if suddenly remembering something, he changed the subject. "I hear you're living with that Tanabe guy."

That startled me. I was so surprised I let my cup tilt sideways and spilled my tea into the saucer.

"It's the talk of the school. Don't tell me you hadn't heard?" he said, looking upset

but still smiling.

“I just didn’t know that you knew. What happened?”

“Tanabe ‘s girlfriend - or should I say former girlfriend? - anyway, she slapped him. In the cafeteria.”

“What? Because of me?”

“Seems that way. But you two must be pretty cozy. That’s what I hear, anyway.”

“Really? It’s the first I’ve heard of it,” I said.

“But you’re living with him, aren’t you?”

“His mother lives there too!” (All right, “mother” wasn’t strictly correct, but...)

“What?! Don’t He to me!” Sotaro said in a loud voice. In the old days I loved him for his lively frankness, but right now it struck me as obnoxious, and I was only mortified.

“This Tanabe guy,” he said, “I hear he’s pretty weird.”

“I wouldn’t know,” I said. “I hardly ever see him

... and we don’t talk much. They just took me in like they would a dog. It’s not that he especially likes me or anything. So I don’t know anything about him. And I had no idea about that stupid incident.”

“It’s just that I often don’t understand who you like, or love, or whatever,” said Sotaro. “In any case it seems like a good thing for you. How long are you going to stay there?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, hadn’t you better decide?” he said, laughing.

“I intend to,” I answered.

On the way home we walked through the park. There was a good view of the Tanabes’ building through the trees.

“That’s where I live,” I said, pointing it out.

“How great - right next to the park. If I lived there I’d get up every morning at five and take a walk.” Sotaro smiled. He was very tall, and I was always looking up at him. Glancing at his profile, I thought, if I were with him, he would ... he would grab me by the hair, force me to decide on an apartment, and pull me kicking and screaming back to school.

I loved his hearty robustness, I thirsted after it, but in spite of that I couldn’t keep pace with it, and it made me hate myself. In the old days.

He was the eldest son of a large family; without being aware of it he got his sunny outlook from them, and I had been drawn to it. But what I needed now was the Tanabes’ strange cheerfulness, their tranquility, and I didn’t even consider trying to explain that to him. It wasn’t especially necessary, and I knew it would be impossible anyway. When I got together with Sotaro, it was always like that. Just being myself made me terribly sad.

“Well, bye.”

From deep in my heart, my eyes asked the question: Before it’s too late, do you still feel anything for me?

“Chin up, kid!” He smiled, but the answer was clear in his own eyes.

“Okay,” I said, and waving, we parted. The feeling traveled to some infinitely distant place and disappeared.

That evening, as I was watching a video, the door opened and there was Yuichi, a large box in his arms.

“You’re home,” I said.

“I bought a word processor,” Yuichi exclaimed happily. It had begun to occur to me: these people had a taste for buying new things that verged on the unhealthy. And I mean big purchases. Mainly electronic stuff.

“That’s great.”

“Anything you need to have typed?”

“Yes, come to think of it.” I was thinking, maybe I’ll have him type up some song lyrics or something, when he said, “Right. Shouldn’t you be sending out change-of-address cards?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Well, how long do you intend to go on living in this huge city without an address or phone number?”

“But it seems like a lot of trouble, considering I’m going to move and I’d have to do it all again.”

“Fuck that!” he burst out, and then, softening, “Okay, just please do it.”

But what I had heard from Sotaro was still fresh in my mind. “Yes, but don’t you think it’s a little weird, my living here? Doesn’t it cause problems for you?”

“What are you talking about?” he said, giving me a mystified, stupid look. Had he been my boyfriend, I would have wanted to slap him. My own dependent position aside, for a moment I hated him. How dense could he be?

I have recently moved. Please reach me at the following address and telephone number:

Mikage Sakurai
tel. XXX-XXXX
XX Apartments, No. 1002
XX Ward, XX 3-21-1
Tokyo

Yuichi gave me the above as a model, then, while running out copies (I should have known these people would have a photocopier stashed away), I began addressing envelopes. Yuichi helped me; he seemed to have some spare time tonight. Something else I realized was that he hated spare time.

The scratching of our pens mingled with the sound of raindrops beginning to fall in the transparent stillness of the evening.

Outside, a warm wind came roaring up, a spring storm. It seemed to shake the very night view out the terrace window. I continued down the list of my friends’ names, quietly nostalgic. I accidentally skipped Sotaro. The wind was... strong. We could hear the trees and telephone lines rattling. I closed my eyes, my elbows resting on the small folding table, and my thoughts skittered out to the row of shops along the now-silent street below. What was this table doing in the apartment? I couldn’t know. She about whom Yuichi had said, “As soon as she gets an idea in her head, she does it, you know?” must have bought it.

“Don’t fall asleep,” said Yuichi.

“I’m not. I really love doing this, writing change-of-address cards.”

“Yeah, me too. Moving, writing postcards on trips, I really love it.”

“Yeah, but ...” I broached the subject a second time. “These postcards are going to make waves. Won’t you get yapped in the school cafeteria?”

“Is that what you heard today?” He smiled bitterly. It **gave me** a start in its contrast to his usual smile.

“Well then, isn’t it better to just be honest about it? You’ve done plenty for me already.”

“Cut the crap,” he said. “You think this is the postcard game we’re playing here?”

“What’s ‘the postcard game’?”

“I don’t know . . .”

We laughed. After that, somehow the conversation strayed off the subject. Even I, slow as I am, finally understood his excessive unnaturalness. When I took a good look in his eyes, I understood.

He was terribly, terribly sad.

Sotaro had said that even though she’d been seeing him for a year, Yuichi’s girlfriend didn’t understand the slightest thing about him, and it made her angry. She said Yuichi was incapable of caring more for a girl than he did for a fountain pen.

Because I wasn’t in love with Yuichi, I understood that very well. The quality and importance of a fountain pen meant to him something completely different from what it meant to her. Perhaps there are people in this world who love their fountain pens with every fiber of their being - and that’s very sad. If you’re not in love with him, you can understand him.

“It couldn’t be helped,” said Yuichi without raising his head. He seemed bothered by my silence. “It was in no way your fault.”

“Thanks.” For some reason *I* was thanking *him*.

“You’re welcome,” he said, laughing.

I’ve touched him, I thought. After a month of living in the same place, at close quarters, I’ve touched him for the first time. In that case, I might end up falling in love with him. When I’ve fallen in love before, I’ve always tried to run it down and tackle it, but with him it would be different. The conversation we just had was like a glimpse of stars through a chink in a cloudy sky - perhaps, over time, talks like this would lead to love.

But - I was thinking while I wrote - I must move out.

It was patently obvious that the trouble between Yuichi and his girlfriend was my living here. As to how strong I was, or whether I would soon be ready to go back to living alone, I couldn’t venture a guess. Still, I told myself, soon, of course, very soon - although telling myself this while writing my change-of-address cards could be considered a contradiction.

I had to move out.

Just then the door opened with a squeal of hinges, and in came Eriko holding a large paper bag. I looked at her in surprise.

“What’s going on? What’s happening at the club?” said Yuichi, turning around to face her.

“I’m going right after this. Listen, guess what I bought: a juicer,” said Eriko happily,

pulling a large box from the paper bag. Unbelievable, these people, I thought. “I just came home to drop it off. Go ahead, use it.”

“If you’d called, I would have gone and picked it up.”

Yuichi was already cutting the string with scissors.

“It’s no trouble, it wasn’t heavy.”

In short order the package was open, and a magnificent juicer that seemed able to make any kind of juice was drawn out of it.

“I hear fresh-squeezed juice gives you beautiful skin,” said Eriko, delighted.

“It’s a little late for that at your age,” retorted Yuichi, not raising his eyes from the instruction booklet.

The incredible ease and nonchalance of the conversation made my brain reel. It was like watching *Bewitched*. That they could be this cheerfully normal in the midst of such extreme abnormality.

“Oh!” cried Eriko. “Is Mikage writing her change-of-address cards? This is perfect. I have a moving-in gift for her.”

Then she produced another package, this one wrapped round and round with paper. When I opened it, I saw that it was a pretty glass decorated with a banana motif.

“Be sure to drink lots of juice, okay?” said Eriko.

“Maybe we should drink banana juice,” said Yuichi with a straight face.

“Wow!” I said, on the verge of tears. “I’m so happy!”

When I move out I’ll take this glass with me, and even after I move out I’ll come back again and again to make soupy rice for you. I was thinking that but wasn’t able to say it. What a special, special glass!

The next day was when I had to clear out of the old apartment for good; at last I got it cleaned out completely. I was feeling very sluggish. It was a clear, bright afternoon, windless and cloudless, and a warm, golden sunlight filled the empty rooms I had once called home.

By way of apology for taking so much time, I went to visit the landlord.

Like we often did when I was a child, we drank tea and chatted in his office. I felt very keenly how old he had become. Just as my grandmother had often sat here, now I was in the same little chair, drinking tea and talking about the weather and the state of the neighborhood. It was strange; it didn’t seem right.

An irresistible shift had put the past behind me. I had recoiled in a daze; all I could do was react weakly. But it was not I who was doing the shifting - on the contrary.

For me everything had been agony.

Until only recently, the light that bathed the now-empty apartment had contained the smells of our life there.

The kitchen window. The smiling faces of friends, the fresh greenery of the university campus as a backdrop to Sotaro’s profile, my grandmother’s voice on the phone when I called her late at night, my warm bed on cold mornings, the sound of my grandmother’s slippers in the hallway, the color of the curtains... the *tatami* mat... the clock on the wall.

All of it. Everything that was no longer there.

When I left the apartment it was already evening.

Pale twilight was descending. The wind was coming up, a little chilly on the skin. I waited for the bus, the hem of my thin coat fluttering in the gusts.

I watched the rows of windows in the tall building across the street from the bus stop, suspended, emitting a pretty blue light. The people moving behind those windows, the elevators going up and down, all of it, sparkling silently, seemed to melt into the half-darkness.

I carried the last of my things in both hands. When I thought, now at last I won't be torn between two places, I began to feel strangely shaky, close to tears.

The bus appeared around the corner. It seemed to float to a stop before my eyes, and the people lined up, got on, one by one.

It was packed. I stood, with my hand on the crowded strap, watching the darkening sky disappear beyond the distant buildings.

When the bus took off my eye came to rest on the still-new moon making its gentle way across the sky.

My angry, irritable reaction to the jarring each time the bus lurched to a stop told me how tired I was. Again and again, with each angry stop, I would look outside and watch a dirigible drifting across the far-off sky. Propelled by the wind, it slowly moved along.

Staring at it intently, I felt happy. The dirigible traversed the sky like a pale moonbeam, its tiny lights blinking on and off.

Then an old lady sitting beside her little granddaughter, who was directly in front of me, said in a low voice, "Look, Yuki, a dirigible. Look! Look! Isn't it beautiful?"

The little girl, whose face epitomized "grandchild," was in a very bad mood, perhaps because of the traffic jam and crowdedness. She said angrily, fidgeting, "I don't care. And it's not a dirigible!"

"Maybe you're right," said the grandmother, smiling brightly, not at all annoyed.

Yuki continued her whiny pouting. "Aren't we there yet? I'm sleepy."

The brat! I, too, had acted that way when I was tired. You'll regret it, I thought, talking to your grandmother that way.

"Don't worry, we'll be there soon. Look, look behind you. Mommy's asleep. You don't want to wake her, do you, Yuki?"

"Oh! She is, isn't she?" Turning around to look at her sleeping mother in the back of the bus, Yuki finally smiled.

Isn't that nice, I thought. Hearing the grandmother's gentle words and seeing the child's face suddenly turn adorable when she smiled, I became envious. I'd never see my own grandmother again.

Never again. I don't care for the loaded sentimentality of those words or for the feeling of limitation they impose. But just then they struck me with an unforgettable intensity and authority. I intended to think them over dispassionately. Jostled by the motion of the bus, I was determined to keep that dirigible, so far off in the sky, in sight no matter what. But then, overpowered by their enormous weight, I found that tears were pouring down my cheeks and onto my blouse.

I was surprised. Am I losing my mind? I wondered. It was like being falling-down drunk: my body was independent of me. Before I knew it, tears were flooding out. I felt myself turning bright red with embarrassment and got off the bus. I watched it drive away, and then without thinking I ducked into a poorly lit alley.

Jammed between my own bags, stooped over, I sobbed. I had never cried this way in my life. As the hot tears poured out, I remembered that I had never had a proper cry over my grandmother's death. I had a feeling that I wasn't crying over any one sad thing, but rather for many.

Looking up, I saw white steam rising, in the dark, out of a brightly lit window overhead. I listened. From inside came the sound of happy voices at work, soup boiling, knives and pots and pans clanging.

It was a kitchen.

I was puzzled, smiling about how I had just gone from the darkest despair to feeling wonderful. I stood up, smoothed down my skirt, and started back for the Tanabes'.

I implored the gods: Please, let me live.

"I'm sleepy," I announced to Yuichi, and went straight to bed. It had been a prodigiously tiring day. But still, unburdened after my good cry, I slept like a baby.

I had a feeling that I heard, in some part of my brain, Yuichi going into the kitchen for tea and saying, "What?

Are you really already asleep?"

• • •

I had a dream.

I was scrubbing the sink in the kitchen of the apartment I had cleared out of that day. Funny, but what made me feel most nostalgic was the yellow-green color of the floor.

... When I lived there I had hated that color, but now that I was to leave it I loved it with all my heart.

I noticed that the shelves and the wheeled kitchen cart were bare. But, in fact, everything had been packed away ages ago. Then I realized that Yuichi was there, cleaning the floor with a rag. I relaxed.

"Take a break, let's have some tea," I said. My voice echoed loudly in the empty apartment. It felt large, very large.

"Sure." Yuichi looked up. I thought, to work himself into such a sweat scrubbing the floor in a house someone else is moving out of... that's so like him.

"So this was your kitchen," Yuichi said, sitting on a cushion on the floor and drinking the tea I brought him from a glass (the teacups were all gone). "It must have been great."

"It was," I said. I was drinking, tea-ceremony style, with both hands, from a bowl.

It was as quiet as the inside of a glass case. Looking up, I saw that all that remained of the clock on the wall was its outline.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"Around midnight, I think," said Yuichi.

"How do you know?"

"It's so dark outside, and so quiet."

"I guess you could say I'm fleeing by night."

"To continue what we were talking about," said Yuichi. "Are you planning to move out from our place, too? Don't."

I looked at him, puzzled. It wasn't a continuation of anything we had been talking

about.

“You seem to think that I live on impulse, like Eriko, but inviting you was something I thought over very carefully. Your grandmother was always so concerned about you, and probably the person who can best understand how you feel in this world is me. I know that once you’re well again, really okay again, you’ll do what you want. But for now leaving would be wrong. You don’t have anyone but me who can tell you that. The money my mother has saved up from working so hard - that’s what it’s *for*, times like this. It’s not only for buying juicers!” He laughed. “Please stay with us. Relax!”

He looked me straight in the eye and he spoke for all the world with the sincerity of someone trying to persuade a murderer to turn himself in.

I nodded.

“Well! I’m going to finish mopping the floor,” he said.

As I washed the tea things, I heard Yuichi singing to himself, his voice blending in with the sound of running water.

*To avoid disturbing the
Moonlight shadows
I brought my boat to rest
At the tip of the cape*

“Oh!!” I said. “I know that song. What’s it called again? I love that song. Who was it that sang it?”

“Umm ... Momoko Sakuchi. It really sticks with you, doesn’t it?” Yuichi smiled.

“Yes, yes!”

While I scrubbed the sink and Yuichi mopped, we sang together. It was so much fun, hearing our voices in the silent kitchen in the middle of the night.

“I especially love this part,” I said, singing the second stanza.

*A lighthouse in the distance
To the two of us in the night
The spinning light looks like
Sunshine through the branches of trees*

In high spirits, we sang that part again, together, at the top of our lungs: “A LIGHTHOUSE IN THE DISTANCE - TO THE TWO OF US IN THE NIGHT THE SPINNING LIGHT LOOKS LIKE SUNSHINE THROUGH THE BRANCHES OF TREES.”

All of a sudden I found myself blurting out: “Wait, *stop*. We’re going to wake my grandmother sleeping in the next room.” Now I’ve done it, I thought.

Yuichi seemed to feel it, too. He abruptly stopped scrubbing and turned to face me, his eyes troubled. Embarrassed, I tried to smile.

The son that Eriko had brought up so gently was suddenly revealed to be a prince. “After we finish cleaning up “Here, I really feel like stopping at the *ramen* noodle stand in the park,” he said.