

THE GUN

Also by Fuminori Nakamura

The Thief

Evil and the Mask

Last Winter We Parted

THE GUN

FUMINORI
NAKAMURA

Translated from the Japanese by Allison Markin Powell

SOHO

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So because thou art lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spew thee out of my mouth.

—Revelation, 3:16

Author's Note

The Thief, Evil and the Mask, and *Last Winter, We Parted* are my novels that have been translated into English to date. *The Gun* was written long before any of those books. It first appeared in a Japanese literary magazine in 2002, and the following year it was published in hardcover as my debut. I am delighted to see this long-ago novel of mine retroactively translated into English. My deepest gratitude to everyone who has been involved in the process, and to all those kind enough to read it.

Fuminori Nakamura

August 1, 2015

後書き

僕の小説は、これまで「スリ」「悪と仮面のルール」「去年の冬、きみと別れ」と英訳されていますが、この小説は、それらの作品よりもずっと前、2002年に日本の文芸誌に掲載され、翌年単行本として刊行された僕のデビュー作になります。このように昔の僕の小説も遡って英訳されたことを、とても嬉しく思っています。関係者の皆様、そして読んでくれた全ての人達に深く感謝します。

2015年 8月1日 中村文則

1

LAST NIGHT, I found a gun. Or you could say I stole it, I'm not really sure. I've never seen something so beautiful, or that feels so right in my hand. I didn't have much interest in guns before, but the moment I saw it, all I could think about was making it mine.

It was raining last night. The kind of rain that seems like it will never stop, that falls at an angle, so even if you use an umbrella you still get soaked. I had been out walking around in it—if I had to say what time, it

was about eleven at night. The relentlessness of the rain seemed to symbolize my own melancholy, and although from the knee down I was sopping wet and cold and couldn't wait to get out of it, for whatever reason I made no effort to head back home to my apartment. I really can't say why I kept walking around outside. I guess for no reason other than I just felt like walking, and I had no desire to go back to my own place. My actions were often motivated by such vague justifications. With no real plan, I changed course, passing through a street lined with darkened shops and along a side street that bordered a small park. I remember clearly that there was a small cat under a parked white van. The cat was staring at me. Come to think of it, this wasn't the only time a cat was watching me before something major happened. I didn't really register it at that moment, but now it seems like it might have been a forewarning.

I went over the railway tracks at a crossing, and passed through a warren of streets. Water had collected and was dripping down off of the edge of the roof of an old apartment building, falling persistently and loudly on broken pieces of prefab that were lying around. It was that sound, more than being pelted by the rain, that prompted me to think I ought to get back home soon.

In my mind, I pictured myself hurrying home, taking a shower, and changing into dry clothes. Yet I continued my aimless wandering with no end in sight. No matter how often I think about it, I can't seem to attach any specific meaning to my actions at that time. But then, it really wasn't all that unusual for me. On rare occasions, I would let things happen that were—I don't know—the opposite of what I wanted to do. Soaking wet and still nursing my melancholy thoughts, I kept walking.

Despite all this, I still take pleasure in the choice I made that night. I hardly ever used to evaluate my own past actions. I really didn't make a habit of thinking too hard about right and wrong, or about the consequences that arose from either. But I feel something akin to gratitude for what I did that night. Had I simply gone back to my apartment, I wouldn't have the gun in my hands now. In contrast, when I think about the possibility of never having had the gun, I am seized with a vague terror. Maybe it's wrong to think that, since it wasn't mine to begin with.

The next thing I did was buy a can of coffee from a vending machine. I wasn't thirsty, but I often drink coffee while I'm walking, so I bought it out of habit, more or less. I flipped the tab and took a sip as I stepped

carefully to avoid the puddles that had formed on the asphalt. The sky was overcast with heavy gray clouds—neither the moon nor the stars were visible. There was a chill in the air—the rain had banished any trace of warmth from earlier in the day.

I continued to wander. Literally wandering; like I said before, I had no destination. I drank the canned coffee as I listened to the sound of the rain, and after I finished the coffee, I lit a cigarette. I passed through another warren of streets lined on either side with residences, and emerged onto a wide avenue. Cars sped along right beside me, sending up spray, not a single one slowing down as it passed. Needless to say, I was soaked repeatedly. I would have liked to get off that road, but there were no side streets that I could turn onto. As each car drove past, the headlights illuminated the drops of falling rain, which glimmered gold like particles of light. This registered as beautiful to me, but I could no longer bear the chill that I felt throughout my body, or the accompanying discomfort of being wet.

The road turned into a bridge that spanned a river, and on just this side of the bridge there was a gentle slope carpeted with grass, which I headed down. For now, I only wanted to get out of the rain. I figured I

could stop under this huge bridge and smoke a cigarette while I thought about what to do next. Approaching the river, the ground went from grass to concrete, and both sides of the embankment were also faced with concrete. The river was high because of the rain, and it flowed swiftly and noisily. I ducked under the bridge, closing my umbrella. The sound of the river echoed under the bridge, making it seem remarkably louder. I found the noise extremely unpleasant. I wished I were back in my apartment, as I usually was, so I wouldn't have to listen to it. I was fed up with everything, but I knew that I had no one to blame but myself. I lit a cigarette, and looked for a place where I might be able to sit for the time being.

Right then, over by where the lawn turned to concrete, I thought I saw a dark silhouette, in the shape of a person. I considered that it might have just been some trash lying there, though the shadow looked a little too much like a man. I was immediately struck by a desire to flee. I felt a mixture of discomfort and unease, a complicated awareness that didn't take long to morph into fear. But my impulse to run away did not exceed my sense of curiosity. I focused my attention and approached cautiously. After taking two or three steps closer, I could

tell for sure that it was a man. At that moment, I experienced a sharp jolt to my heart. He was wearing a black suit, lying facedown with his left arm stretched out limply above his head. I could feel my heart starting to race, fast and loud. I swallowed my saliva repeatedly in an attempt to moisten my throat, which had gone dry.

I came right up next to the man. He had short hair with a hint of gray, which made him appear to be in his fifties. His head was turned to the side, so I could see him quite clearly. I would have expected him to have a terrible look on his face, but there was something quite calm in his expression. His features had hardened, as if he were staring sullenly at something. Neither of his eyes was completely open, and his mouth was almost closed—there was nothing disgusting running out of it either. On the concrete where his head lay, there was a dark pool of liquid that, based on present circumstances, I assumed to be blood. For whatever reason, I couldn't stop staring at the blades of grass that stuck out from between the fingertips of the man's left hand. His suit jacket was flipped up in the back and I could see a little bit of his white shirt. I don't know why, but that white held my gaze for a long time too. The man's body retained a vigor, and exuded a sense of presence—the

concrete and the lawn actually seemed like they were there for his sake. That didn't make any sense, though, because the man was dead. I stood there, as if rooted to the spot, but after a while the pounding of my heart gradually settled down, and finally I managed to regain my composure. This surprised me a little, the fact that I had started to get used to this scene, to this situation.

Not far from the man's right hand, I noticed the dark, clear-cut shadow of an object. I must have only become aware of it because I had started to accustom myself to the dead man. My heart started beating fiercely again, ringing in my ears. It felt like my heart was pounding even more wildly now than when I first saw him. I crouched down over the spot to get a better look at the dark object. I picked it up and brought it close to my face. I had no strength in my arm, so it took a lot of effort to maintain that position. I could feel an intense joy spreading throughout my body. And at the same time, to think that I felt such excitement at the mere sight of it—that I was filled with such delight—was disturbing. I had the sense of being torn in two. The elation seemed to escalate, independent of my own will, and I feared that I wouldn't be able to control myself. But I couldn't stop it, or pull myself back together. It wasn't

long before the joy exceeded my tolerance level, and for a moment I was carried away. My heart throbbed painfully, my vision narrowed and, at the edge of my consciousness, I could tell that everything was growing blurry. It occurred to me—from this day on, the gun was mine. These words, which must have been generated by me, repeated themselves inside my head. The pleasure of that repetition, the bewildering pleasure—I had never experienced such a sense of fulfillment. Before long, my mind seemed to catch up with the joy, and I consciously repeated those words to myself. I even felt a slight blur of tears in my eyes. It was as if—I don't know—as if I forgave myself for feeling that way. Who knows, maybe I had already lost my mind. But now that I am able to make an even-tempered judgment, even if I was out of my head at the time, I think it was only temporary.

Soon after the joy flooded through me, I remembered that a person was lying dead only a short distance away. But I no longer cared about him. He was just some guy I didn't know, a stranger. I shoved the gun into the back pocket of my jeans, covering it with my shirt. I think I probably had a smile on my face. Now in high spirits, I had the urge to do something clever; I thought about calling up the police to tell them that I'd found a body.

But that seemed like it would be too much trouble. My next thought was that I ought to stay out of this, as much as possible. They might think that I was the one who killed this guy and, since above all my intention was to make off with the gun in hand, I might already be liable for a crime, legally speaking. I cautiously surveyed my surroundings, the same way that someone who had committed a murder would, and checked that there were no witnesses. Then I scrutinized the area for traces of myself, making sure that I hadn't dropped anything before I left. I projected a deliberately calm expression; I didn't hurry, I walked at a purposely slow pace. I paid particular attention when I emerged from the grassy slope back onto the street. I remained hidden in the shadow of the bridge, waiting patiently for a break in the stream of passing cars, so that I wouldn't be seen by anyone. I tried to concentrate on even the slightest sound, but it was hard to hear over the noise of the rushing cars and the raging river. Timing it just right as I emerged, I was careful to maintain a composed look on my face. I walked away slowly, going so far as to make it look as though I were pondering something, aware that someone might be watching. Then I realized that I was walking along

without using my umbrella, so I hastily opened it. I was suffused with a joy that would not subside. The spray from the cars drenched me all over again, but I no longer minded in the least. My attention remained focused on the way the gun felt in my back pocket. At one point, unable to contain myself, I ducked into the shadow of a building to pull out the gun. The way it appeared in the light from the street was exceedingly beautiful. But now I realized that it was covered with crimson blood, smeared in particular around the end from which the bullets fired. I was stunned; it seemed strange to me that I hadn't noticed this when I first discovered the gun. I remembered that I had a packet of tissues shoved in my pocket and, moistening them with rainwater, I used them all up to wipe off the gun. I stuffed the now bloodstained tissues into the right front pocket of my jeans. I had no choice—there was nowhere to throw them away. It wasn't until after I finished wiping the gun off that it occurred to me that there was no need to have done such a thing right here and now. Once again, I surveyed my surroundings, checking that no one had seen me. There was no sound other than the rain drumming against the ground and the buildings—the neighborhood was

so quiet it was unsettling. I exhaled a breath, savoring my sense of relief, and took one more look at the gun, confirming its magnificence. Then, as if to seal in that beauty, I hastily shoved it into the other back pocket of my jeans. I almost felt as if by exposing it for too long out in the open like that, its beauty might escape. I started walking slowly, in an effort to contain the heightened emotions coursing through my entire body. Maintaining that pace, this time I headed steadily back home.

I opened the door to my apartment, slowly went inside, and turned the lock. Standing in the middle of the wooden floor of my tiny apartment, I took out the gun I had just acquired. Looking at it, I could again feel joy spreading throughout my body. The gun was a little larger than the palm of my hand, the metal a rivetingly deep shade of silver-black. The tip of the barrel that the bullets were fired through was short, and the part next to that was molded to resemble the gills of a fish. In the center was a cylindrical contraption that must have held the bullets and, I figured, when this rotated it carried a bullet where it was supposed to go. Embedded right under this cylinder, there was a screw with the shape of a minus on its head, which signified to me that this was

a man-made device. The part that I held in my hand was a densely uniform brown, and in the middle there was a round gold inlay with a decorative design. From there down, the handle was carved with an intricate diamond mesh pattern, and there was another screw with the same minus sign. The design on the round gold inlay was the image of a horse. Rearing up on its hind legs, the horse had something like a spear in its mouth, and another one caught between its front legs. Above it, the letters COLT were engraved, and there was a faint dull spot, like a dark patina, around the T. The same emblem appeared on the flat part of the silver-black metal as well—I had no idea what it meant, except that it had to symbolize something. On the left side of the barrel that the bullets fired from were engraved letters: LAWMAN MK III 357 MAGNUM CTG. I assumed this was the name of the gun, but it seemed more like a code. MAGNUM or MK III sounded awesome to me. And it felt good in my hand—it was uncanny how quickly I had gotten used to holding it. When I grasped it as if to take aim, without thinking each of my fingers found their proper position, comfortably steadying both the gun and myself. My thumb and index finger each moved purposefully to engage the hammer and the trigger, while the others supported

them so naturally, taking on a shape as if my fingers had been meant to fit there. I knew I would never tire of the taut excitement transmitted through my skin where it made contact with the gun. The metal had such a deep luster, I stood and admired it in my grasp for a moment. I could have stayed like that forever, but it occurred to me that the gun was now mine, and I could look at it whenever I liked. I carefully examined it to see whether there were still any bloodstains, and when I found any I wiped them off right away, rubbing the whole thing over and over with a towel. Then I looked around my apartment, searching for a place where I could stash the gun.

In a corner of the room, I found a brown leather satchel and picked it up. It had been a present from a girl I had dated for only a month, a long time ago. I had been using it to store my insurance card, my official seal, the lease for this apartment, things like that. I dumped out all its contents and placed the gun inside. I felt like it was missing something, and after thinking for a minute, I spread a few white tissues underneath it. As I placed the gun back on top, I was filled with a sense of satisfaction. I stared at it for a moment, and then I practically had to force myself to close the flap and fasten the clasp.



THE EVENTS OF that night seem like a giddy dream to me. Even now, in my memory, they have a different quality, more pronounced, and for that reason, they lack a sense of reality. To me, reality always meant tedium. A few seconds after waking up, I recalled the events of the previous night, and again I was filled with that same joy. But then the joy turned to worry, and I hastily opened the leather bag. There was the gun, securely inside. Even if I doubted my reality, the mere fact of the gun there indicated its existence. I gazed upon the gun with fresh eyes. Once again, its overwhelming beauty and presence did not disappoint. I felt as though I might be transported—that is to say, that the world within myself could be unlocked—I felt full of such possibilities.

2

THREE DAYS HAD passed since I acquired the gun. There were no noticeable changes to my life—at least, superficially, there had been no shift. Everything around me was as tedious and boring as ever, but my spirits remained high. The change had occurred inside me.

I woke up each morning, as always, and the first thing I did was open the bag to make sure the gun was there. Then I got dressed quickly, put on my shoes, and went out. In the past, I often forgot to lock the door, but these

three days, not once did that happen. This was hardly surprising, considering that I was leaving the gun behind in my apartment.

I looked up at the perfectly blue sky and thought about how the rain had finally stopped. For the past three days, the rain had continued to fall as if it some kind of spell had been cast. I was aware that I actually said to myself, *The rain has finally ended*, but that was because I was in a good mood, which was also why I peeked into my mailbox. I thought I might even allow myself to try the kinds of things normal people usually did.

I got on the subway and headed toward the university. The school's campus was crowded with students, and the riotous mix of colors from the clothes they were wearing hurt my eyes a little. A number of people I knew called out to me, and I smiled at each of them and said a few words in response. I entered a big dingy white building and went up the stairs. On my way, a guy bumped against my shoulder as he passed, and knocked me a little off balance. The guy muttered a simple apology and kept going. He was really rushing, like he must have been in some kind of hurry. At that moment, I had the idea to run after him, to chase him and try to

knock him down. Doing so would surely take him by surprise, and shock whoever was watching. I was fascinated, imagining such a scene. Even just coming up with an idea like that must have been another sign that I was in a good mood.

Someone tapped me on the shoulder from behind, and I turned around to see Keisuke. He was smiling as usual. “How come you’re just standing there?” he asked me. I was a little taken aback, and I laughed without answering his question. He looked at me and said, “Did something good happen to you?”

Keisuke kept talking. “The other day,” he was saying, “I ended up just taking her home, like an idiot. I must have really been out of it. In the car, she was talking to me about all kinds of things, she was crying—think I felt like hitting on her? I just got outta there. I did the right thing, seriously, I did. I ended up cheering her up and all.”

“Seriously? You really must have been out of it. You usually go in for the kill.”

“Yeah, you know me, going for the kill. Like you should talk, Nishikawa,” Keisuke said, laughing. He had started to walk alongside me. That’s when I remembered that we had the next lecture together, that we always had.

Keisuke rattled on about girls, about his paper, about the CDs he'd bought recently.

After attendance had been taken and the lecture began, Keisuke gave a big yawn and promptly fell asleep next to me. Someone touched the back of my head, and I turned around to see a girl there. She said to me, "Haven't seen you in a while," but I didn't know who she was.

The bespectacled lecturer started talking in a low, subdued voice about globalization in the world, and about how American culture occupied a major position in it. As he passed out papers to the students, he spoke slowly about how America developed as a country while absorbing the cultures of various peoples. However, he went on to say, even a place as tolerant as America was still besieged by problems such as ethnocentrism and ghettoization.

"What is so powerful about American culture"—he got this far and then sneezed once, loudly—"however, is America's diversity itself. The Americanization of Japan is nothing new, but I would hate to think that it demonstrates a scarcity of Japanese culture. Yet the longing for American culture has existed since our defeat in the war up through the present day . . ."

As I was half-listening, I had also been replying to questions, one by one, from the girl sitting behind me. She said she was bored so she asked if I wanted to go to the cafeteria with her, but I didn't feel like it so I declined. At some point I realized that she was gone, although I had no idea when she had left.

In the middle of taking notes, I stopped and let my thoughts drift to the gun I had left behind in my apartment. I wondered why the gun held such boundless fascination for me, why I still felt such excitement about it being there. I led a boring life. It stood to reason that the gun would act as a stimulant within such tedium. I must have appreciated its absolute simplicity. The minimalism of the gun's shape epitomized the act of firing bullets even as it conveyed cruelty. I could think only of it causing injury, of destroying life; it had been created expressly so that a person could commit such deeds, its design utterly compact, nothing extraneous. It seemed to me a symbol, like Thanatos, the god of death himself. Yet it was difficult to determine why I was so mesmerized by such a lethal object. It wasn't as if I harbored the desire to kill someone. Nor did I yearn to kill myself. The thing is, up to then, I never expected to have anything to do with a gun. The idea

occurred to me that I might be just like a child, thrilled by the acquisition of an unusual plaything, and that was what I liked best about it. There was no need to dwell on it. Whatever the case was, the gun was mine, and the pleasure I took from that had enabled me to pass each day since with relative ease. That, to me, was an important fact. To use the gun, to do something with it—the circumstances I now found myself in, that allowed for such a possibility, was the best part. I could use the gun to threaten someone, or I could use it to protect someone. I could kill someone, or I could even easily commit suicide. Rather than the question of whether or not I would actually do those things, or whether or not I wanted to, what was important was being in possession of that potential—that incarnation of stimulus itself.

When the lecture was almost over, Keisuke opened his eyes and said something to me. I wasn't really listening to him, so I just gave a vague answer. After class, Keisuke walked beside me as I left the classroom. He asked if I wanted to go to the cafeteria, and I realized that I was hungry. I decided to go along with him to get something to eat.

“You're coming to the speed dating thing tonight, right? I don't know how many people will be there, but I

think the girls will be hot. It won't be any fun if you don't come along—you know I need my wingman, right?" Keisuke said, laughing jovially. I thought of the gun, and declined. But Keisuke wouldn't take no for an answer.

"Come on, I'm serious—I haven't had sex for a while now. It's been like a month. Really. I'm going to lose it if I don't get some. I need you on my team—you can have the hot one. It'll be worth your while."

"It makes no difference if I'm there or not."

"No, man, it matters to me. You always know how to come through for me. Like before, you got those two chicks to come out with us, didn't you? You could do it again."

Keisuke was so persistent, I had no choice but to give in. I regretted it as the image of the gun flickered in my mind. I had been thinking that today I would go out and buy some white cloth to lay under the gun. Then again, it might not be so bad to delay my gratification.

Keisuke and I killed some time, then headed to the bar. For some reason, the air conditioning was on inside, and I felt a little cold in the artificial chill. "We've been waiting for you," I heard someone say, and I saw Nakanishi. Keisuke and I had made a conscious decision to show up later than we were supposed to. It drew more

attention, and somehow it was better to seem like you weren't really all that enthusiastic. Nakanishi was sitting at a large table with four girls and a guy whose face I recognized. I had only met him recently, and even though he had told me his name at the time, I couldn't quite remember it. Keisuke and I made up an excuse for being late, and Keisuke must have said something funny, because they all laughed at the same time. Two of the girls were awful, and the other two were average. Predictably, Keisuke and I chatted up the average-looking pair. We all left the bar and headed to a karaoke place. For whatever reason—maybe because they were drunk—both of the ugly girls were really hyped up, and they kept touching me. Every so often Nakanishi and I caught each other's eye and couldn't keep from smirking. One of the ugly girls was a good singer, and she seemed to know it, because she sang a lot of songs. She sputtered a lot, though, and since I was next to her, her saliva landed on me repeatedly.

I went to the toilet, and Keisuke showed up a little later. "I'm definitely gonna get some tonight," he said. "She's not all that cute, but that doesn't matter to me tonight." All I could do was laugh at him. I saw one of the average-looking girls heading toward the

toilet, and I called out to her. “You look a little down,” I said, and she told me she was stressed about her boyfriend, and she really hadn’t planned on coming here tonight. I said that I wasn’t really in a partying mood either, I felt more like having a quiet drink, and I mentioned the idea of going somewhere else. Keisuke said, “There’s no reason to force it if you’re not in the mood,” glancing at me for some reason. Then we got her to send a text to the other average-looking girl to come over and join us, and the four of us left the bar together. Keisuke texted Nakanishi, hiding his smirk. I asked him what he’d written and Keisuke said that he’d asked Nakanishi to take care of the others. He smirked again. As I laughed with him, I noticed that the first girl looked really upset. I knew that most girls liked to talk about whatever was stressing them out. I stared at the pair of them, not really feeling up to it. Still, I focused on the one with bigger breasts as I thought about what to do next. Normally in this kind of situation, I would play the nice guy and go home, but because of the gun, I had been in such a good mood these last few days. I made up my mind to do it tonight, just like Keisuke.

He and I chose a quiet bar, and we listened to the girls talk. We ordered strong drinks for them, and

sympathized with whatever they said, caring expressions on our faces. At one point, the girls started to feel guilty about sneaking out of the karaoke bar, but Keisuke and I told them not to worry about it. “Just tell them we forced you to leave, or we were begging and crying, so you were freaked out and followed us. Make us the bad guys, so they won’t blame you or the other girls. I mean, we were the ones who asked you to go anyway, weren’t we,” Keisuke said, laughing a bit, though I wasn’t sure why.

After a little time had passed, I thought I’d give it a shot, so I touched the hand of the girl who I had been talking to the most, then caressed her hair, and she made no move to resist. *Seems like the time is right*, I thought to myself, and I decided to stop drinking. Then I left the bar with the girl.

We took a taxi to the building where the girl lived, and I went into her apartment. She seemed pretty drunk, but I suspected that she wasn’t really as tipsy as she was pretending to be. I threw her down on the bed and undressed her. I decided to pay special attention to her body. Normally, at this point, I basically did whatever I felt like. Plenty of times, I just came whenever I was ready to. But, this time, I proceeded cautiously

and deliberately, watching for her response to whatever I did. I chalked it up to my recently improved mood. She moaned a lot, and I focused on that while I took as much time as I was capable of.

3

I WOKE UP in the girl's apartment. I had intended to leave before she woke up, but I must have been tired, because the girl was no longer beside me in bed. I heard a clink, followed immediately by the rushing sound of a flame. There was an earth-toned curtain that acted as a divider so I couldn't see, but I figured she must have been cooking something. The scent of her on the fingertips of my right hand made me nauseous. I reached out and grabbed my cigarettes from on top of the table,

lit one, and inhaled. My discarded clothes were folded neatly at the foot of the bed in a way that made them seem like they weren't mine.

“Oh, I must have woken you up. Sorry,” she said, peeking through the curtain. It being morning, she was made up simply, and she was wearing a white sweatshirt. I liked what she said to me, it made me feel satisfied. The words she had spoken were common and ordinary, yet there was something indescribably good about them. Searching for an appropriate response, I said, “No, that’s okay.” I thought that sounded inadequate, so I added, “What time is it?”

“It’s already ten. Too late to make second period. I didn’t really feel like going anyway.”

“Nine? I guess I thought it was earlier.”

“What? It’s ten—not nine. I said ten,” she said with a little laugh, then announced that she was making coffee.

I thanked her, and asked her to make it strong. I got up from the bed, and put on the folded clothes. Then I thought about what I should do now. I realized I could do anything in this situation. The old me had enjoyed these kinds of thrills, but it was hard for the new me to experience it the same way. They say that a person can get used to anything, and I agree that is often true.

Call it self-centered, but I felt nothing more than weary annoyance about what to do next.

I put out my cigarette, and walked into the kitchen where she was making coffee. She had her back to me, and I wrapped my arms around her body from behind. Aware that I was being vulgar, I touched her breasts and ran my mouth along the nape of her neck. I did it so that she would think I was the worst kind of guy, only interested in her body, and the idea that maybe I was that guy made me smirk. She laughed, too, and pressed against my chest as she said, “Wait a minute.” I put my right arm between her legs, roughly sliding my hand over her sex through the denim of her jeans. I said, “Lemme do it one more time. I only got a taste last night, I need some more.” I waited for her to get angry at me. I thought she might throw the boiling water on the burner at me, which I supposed would have been a reasonable thing to do. I resigned myself to whatever was going to happen next. I took great pleasure in the act of choosing to surrender myself. But she burst into laughter.

“Okay, I get it, but you don’t need to be all over me—I mean, if you really want to do it, that’s fine. Just wait for the coffee. I have a boyfriend, but we can see each other

when you like, if that's all right with you," she said, not taking me seriously.

I didn't know how to react, but what she was suggesting didn't sound all that bad to me. I decided that I would go home after I had some coffee.

I chain-smoked cigarettes while channel surfing on her television. I finally settled on NHK. Numerous people were climbing a snowy mountain in winter. A man whose face was snow-burned a deep brown said something to the men and women surrounding him, and everyone laughed out loud.

The girl placed the coffee and plates of toast on the table. The aroma of the coffee wafted through the room, and as I took a sip, the pleasing bitterness slid down my throat. I complimented her on the coffee, and she told me that she worked in a coffee house. "I get ground beans from there. You should stop by some time, it tastes much better in the café," she said, taking a sip.

The program ended and the news came on the television screen. A man wearing a suit described the situation in Afghanistan, and the broadcast showed a hospital somewhere. A man missing a leg was lying on a dingy bed, and when he realized he was on camera, he scowled. The camera drew closer, focusing on his

contorted face. He spoke in his cryptic language. *I'm a mule trader. The Japanese subtitles flashed across the bottom of the screen. But all my mules were burned with my house, and I lost my leg. I know nothing about politics, and I don't care.* He appeared to still be talking, but the scene shifted to a desert landscape.

The girl talked about various things, and I made responsive sounds at the appropriate moments. I nibbled on the toast and drank the coffee. The bread was still warm, and I realized how long it had been since I'd eaten toast. I looked around her apartment, which was decorated uniformly with furniture in mellow shades of brown, and the walls were such a fresh white it almost hurt my eyes. There was a large stuffed bear on top of the bookcase, and when I stared at it she smiled and told me that her boyfriend had bought it for her.

The screen changed again, and I saw the words, MAN'S BODY FOUND AT ARAKAWA RIVER. I grasped the coffee cup with my fingers, my attention absorbed by the report. I experienced a sharp jolt to my heart; it felt as though I had been injected with something and couldn't move. "Yesterday, the twenty-fourth," the man on the television said, "the body of a man was discovered near the Arakawa River in Tokyo's Itabashi Ward. The man had

been shot in the head, and it appears that approximately five days had passed since the time of death. The man appeared to be in his forties or fifties; his identity has not been made public. The Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department is treating this as a homicide, and has begun a criminal investigation, including inquiries regarding the whereabouts of the possible murder weapon.”

The news then switched over to sports—Ichiro had a hit and the Mariners had won. A Westerner whom I didn’t recognize was holding a press conference and speaking proudly about something. Some guy on a golf course was holding a silver cup; horses were running. I had fallen silent, and the girl turned to say something to me. I responded to her, trying to maintain my composure.

“What’s the matter? You look white as a sheet.”

“What?”

“Your face—you’ve gone pale as a ghost.”

I couldn’t comprehend what she was saying. Thinking she must be making fun of me, I laughed. I meant to laugh out loud, but my voice was hoarse, and all that escaped from my throat was a strained sigh. My vision became dim, and some time passed before I realized that I had been staring at her for

quite a while. At the edge of my consciousness, the word “bathroom” flickered, and I managed to tell the girl that I was going to the bathroom. She said something to me about being worried. I went into the bathroom and looked in the mirror. My face was ashen, as if white paint had oozed from every pore of my skin. There was sweat on my brow, and a chill went up and down my spine. I felt a tingle along the inside of both arms, like I had virtually no strength. I splashed water on my face, and then for some reason, drank some. I thought the contact with water would bring back some feeling to my face. There was a knock on the door, and it gave me quite a start. “Are you okay?” I heard a voice that must have been her. I muttered to myself, *What the hell are you doing? Everything is going to be fine.*

Through the door I said, “Uh, sorry, I, uh, kind of threw up. I’m really sorry. Yeah, I’ll be fine.”

“What? Oh, I was afraid of that. But the bread was still fresh—oh, no, I’m so sorry.”

“No, that’s not it—sometimes, this happens for no reason. I guess it’s just how I am.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, really—should I call an ambulance, or something?”

“No, no. I’m fine. It’s nothing, really. I’m better now. I always feel better right after.”

Staring in the mirror, I could feel laughter starting to well up. I was getting ahead of myself, I thought. After all, I didn’t kill that guy. For all I knew, he might have committed suicide. But then it occurred to me. Since I had made off with the gun from the scene, his death was considered a murder. If the weapon that caused his death were not at the scene, it was unlikely to be deemed a suicide, which must be why the police were treating it as a homicide. And, at least as far as the police were concerned, whoever had the gun was the criminal. I was still a little worked up, but I managed to pull myself back together. I had figured all along this would happen, ever since that night. None of this was outside of my expectations. At the time, I had been very careful when I left the scene of the crime—nothing there could be traced to me, and there were no witnesses. There was no way for anyone to know that I was in possession of the gun. I was safe, I thought to myself. And as long as I didn’t make any mistakes, the gun would remain mine.

Nevertheless, I was a little surprised that I hadn’t been checking regularly for this in the news. I ought to

have been actively seeking information about when they would discover the man's body, and how the police were conducting their investigation from the outset. The fact that I hadn't done so was probably because I had been on such a high. It must have taken them so long to find him because of the days of rain. Under normal circumstances, nobody ever went near that darkened bridge, much less when it was raining. It seemed like I should be grateful that it had taken so long to discover him. I felt like I had been saved, despite my lack of attention. At least now, the police and I were on the same starting line, and I would be fine as long as I went about it carefully. There was no reason for anyone to associate me with the dead guy. At the thought that sooner or later the case would be forgotten, I felt a sensation of relief mixed with joy, as the strength once again seeped out of my body. I thought to myself, it was possible that this tension, and even my sense of relief at having overcome this looming crisis, could transform into a kind of enjoyment.

I then had sex with the girl one more time. I got the impression that she wasn't all that into it, but I was feeling good and was up for it. I think I might have really worn her out. After I came, I stroked her hair. I did that

for a while, despite the fact that she was certainly not a beauty. Then I made a joke to get her to laugh, and added, "I'll be back sometime."