

SUZUKI



LOOKING OUT AT THE CITY, Suzuki thinks about insects. It's night but the scene is ablaze with gaudy neon and streetlamps. People everywhere. Like a writhing mass of luridly colored insects. It unsettles him, and he thinks back to what his college professor once said: 'Most animals don't live on top of each other in such great numbers. In some ways, humans are less like mammals and closer to insects.' His professor had seemed pleased with the conclusion. 'Like ants, or locusts.'

'I've seen photos of penguins living in groups all bunched together,' Suzuki had responded, gently needling. 'Are penguins like insects too?'

His professor flushed. 'Penguins have nothing to do with it.' He sounded endearingly childlike, and Suzuki had felt that he wanted to be the same way as he got older. He still remembers it.

Then a memory of his wife flashes through his mind. His wife died two years ago. She used to laugh at the story about his professor. 'You're supposed to just answer, "You're absolutely right, professor," and then everything works out,' she used to say.

It was certainly true that she loved it anytime he had agreed with her and said, ‘You’re absolutely right, honey.’

‘What are you waiting for? Get him in the car.’

Hiyoko’s urging startles him. Suzuki shakes his head to ward off the memories, then pushes the young guy in front of him. The guy tumbles into the back seat of the sedan. He’s tall, blond hair. Unconscious. He has a black leather jacket on over a black shirt, with a pattern of little insects. The unsavory pattern matches the guy’s general unsavory vibe. Also in the back seat, on the other side, is a girl. Suzuki had forced her into the car as well. Long black hair, yellow coat, in her early twenties. Her eyes are closed and her mouth slightly open as she sleeps sprawled on the seat.

Suzuki tucks the guy’s legs into the car and closes the door.

‘Get in,’ says Hiyoko. Suzuki gets in on the passenger side.

The car is parked just outside the northernmost entrance to the Fujisawa Kongocho subway station. In front of them is a big intersection with a busy pedestrian crossing.

It’s ten thirty at night in the middle of the week, but this close to Shinjuku things are busier after dark than they are in the daytime, and the area is thronged with people. Half of them are drunk.

‘Wasn’t that easy?’ Hiyoko sounds totally relaxed. Her white skin has a luster like porcelain, seeming to float in the dark car interior. Her chestnut hair is cut short, coming just to the top of her ears. Something about her expression is cold, maybe because of her single eyelids. The red of her lipstick shines brightly. Her white shirt is open down to the middle of her chest and her skirt doesn’t quite reach her knees. She’s apparently in her late twenties, same as Suzuki, but she often shows the craftiness of someone far older. She looks like a party girl, but he can tell she’s sharp, with the benefit of a proper education. She’s wearing black

high heels, and has one foot on the brake. *It's amazing she can drive in those*, he thinks.

'It wasn't easy or hard, I mean, all I did was get them in the car.' Suzuki frowns. 'I just carried these two unconscious people and put them in the back seat.' *I take no further responsibility*, he wanted to say.

'If this sort of thing rattles you, you won't get very far. Your trial period is almost over, so you better get used to jobs like this. Although I bet you never imagined you'd be kidnapping people, huh?'

'Of course not.' Though the truth is that Suzuki isn't all that surprised. He never thought his employer was a legitimate company. 'Fräulein means "maiden" in German, doesn't it?'

'Very good. Apparently, Terahara named the company himself.'

When she says that name his body tenses. 'The father?' That is, the CEO.

'Obviously. His idiot son could never come up with a company name.'

Suzuki has a momentary vision of his dead wife and his emotions boil. He clenches his stomach and feigns calm. The idiot son, Terahara's son – anytime Suzuki thinks of him he can barely contain himself. 'I just never thought that a company with a name that means "maiden" would actually prey on young women,' he somehow manages to say.

'It does seem strange.'

Hiyoko may be the same age as Suzuki but she's been with the company for a long time, and has the according rank. In the month since Suzuki joined as a contractor, he's been reporting to her.

As for what he's been doing in that month, it was all standing in shopping arcades, hailing passing women.

He stood in the busy spots, calling out to women walking by. They would say no, they would ignore him, they would swear at

him, but he still kept trying. Almost all of the women just walked away, regardless of his delivery, effort, technique or skill. They scowled at him, they looked at him warily, they avoided him, but still he kept calling out to every woman who walked by.

But there was usually one woman each day, maybe one in a thousand, who showed interest. He would take her to a cafe and give her a pitch for makeup products and diet drinks. He had a basic script: 'You won't see the effects right away, but after about a month you'll see dramatic changes.' He would improvise, saying whatever felt most appropriate, then show her the pamphlets. They were printed in color, full of graphs and figures, but not a single thing written in them was true.

The gullible girls would sign an agreement right then and there. The more suspicious ones would leave saying they'd think about it. If he could sense that there was still a chance, he would follow them. After that, another group would take over, far more persistent, starting their illegal solicitation. They would force their way into the woman's home and refuse to leave, keep constant surveillance on her, until she finally gave in and signed the agreement. Or so Suzuki understood. But that part of the arrangement was still all hearsay to him.

'Well, you've been with us for a month. Shall we take you to the next level?' Hiyoko had said this to him an hour earlier.

'The next level?'

'I can't imagine you planned to spend the rest of your life soliciting women on the street.'

'Well, I mean,' he answered vaguely, 'the rest of my life is a long time.'

'Today's job is different. When you get someone into a cafe, I'll be coming with you.'

'It's not that easy to get someone to listen,' he said with a pained smile, thinking of the last month.

But for better or for worse, inside of thirty minutes Suzuki had found two people willing to hear him out. The guy and girl who are currently passed out in the back of the car.

First the girl showed interest. 'Hey, don't you think if I lost a little weight I could do modeling?' she asked the guy casually. He answered encouragingly, 'Sure, babe, you could definitely be a model, for sure. You could be, like, a supermodel.'

Suzuki called Hiyoko, took the couple to a cafe, and started introducing products as he normally would. Whether it was because they were young and stupid or just gullible, the young man and woman seemed almost comically willing to go along with what Suzuki and Hiyoko were pitching. Their eyes lit up at the barest of compliments, and they nodded enthusiastically at all the bogus data from the pamphlets.

Their complete lack of skepticism was enough to make Suzuki feel concerned for their futures. He had a surge of memories of his students from when he was still a teacher. The first place his mind went, for some reason, was to one poorly behaved kid. He remembered the boy saying, 'See, Mr Suzuki, I can do good too.' He was always acting out, and the other students didn't like him much, but one time he surprised everybody by catching a purse-snatcher in a shopping district. 'I can do good too,' he had said to Suzuki, smiling with both pride and embarrassment. Then he said, 'Don't give up on me, teach,' looking like a much younger boy.

Come to think of it . . . The guy in front of him flipping through the pamphlet, face pockmarked from acne scars, somehow reminded him of that student. He knew he had never met this person before, but the resemblance was striking.

Then he noticed that Hiyoko had gone to the counter to order refills of coffee. He took another look and saw that she was doing something with her hands over the cups, then realized: she was drugging the coffee.

Before long the guy's and girl's eyes glazed over and their heads started sagging. The girl said, 'They call me Yellow, and he's Black. Just nicknames, you know? That's why I'm wearing a yellow coat, and he's dressed in black.' Then she mumbled, 'Hey, I'm like, sleepy.' And she nodded off. Next to her, the guy said, 'Yeah, but my hair's blond, and yours is black,' slurring nonsensically. 'Why is that . . .' Then he passed out too.

'Well then,' said Hiyoko. 'Let's get them to the car.'

'Depending on how we use them, these two dummies could make us some decent money,' she says, sounding bored.

Would you do this to my students? Suzuki has to tell himself not to ask it out loud. 'Are we . . . just staying here?'

'Normally we'd be leaving now.' Her voice sharpens. 'But tonight's different.'

A sense of foreboding runs up his spine. 'Different, how?'

'I need to test you.'

'What are you testing?' Suzuki's voice quavers a bit.

'We don't trust you.'

'You don't trust me?' He swallows. 'Why not?'

'If you're asking what's fishy about you, well, there's plenty. You were really determined to join our company. And you seem like a pretty strait-laced guy. What was it you did before?'

'Teacher,' Suzuki answers. He doesn't see any reason to hide it. 'I worked at a middle school. I taught math.'

'Yeah. You *seem* like you taught math. That's why we didn't trust you from the get-go. You're clearly wrong for this. A middle-school math teacher going out of their way to get involved with a company like ours. I mean, we scam young people – does that seem like work a teacher would ever do?'

'It doesn't matter what most teachers would do, here I am doing it.'

'I'm telling you it would never happen.'

She's right. Of course it would never happen. 'You may not be affected, but there's a recession on, and it's tough trying to find work. So when I heard about this company called Fräulein that was looking for contract workers, I applied.'

'Bullshit.'

'It's true.' It was bullshit. Suzuki hadn't found out about Fräulein randomly. He had been searching for them. He realizes that his breathing is becoming rough, and his chest is starting to rise and fall. *This isn't casual conversation. It's an interrogation.*

He looks out the window. Young people are gathered in front of a fountain outside a hotel. It's only the beginning of November but there are already Christmas decorations on the trees lining the sidewalks and the signs hanging from the buildings. The clamor of car horns and young voices laughing seems to fill the air, mixing with the curtain of cigarette smoke.

'I'm sure you knew we weren't a strictly above-board company, but do you know exactly how dirty we are?'

'I don't quite know how to answer that,' he says with a forced grin, shaking his head. 'Now, this is just what I imagine . . .'

'Your imagination is fine. Go ahead.'

'Well, I've thought that maybe the things I'm selling aren't health products, but something else. Something habit forming, something that's, uh, how might you put it . . . ?'

'Illegal?'

'Right. That.'

Over the past month, he had met several of the women using the Fräulein brand products. All of them were jittery, with bloodshot eyes. Most of them had begged him with unsettling urgency to send more. Their skin was chapped and their throats painfully dry. It would be far easier to believe that they were on drugs than on a health regimen.

'Correct.' Hiyoko's color doesn't change even a shade.

Like she's testing me. Suzuki grimaces. 'But is it actually

effective to solicit people on the street like we do? It's fishing with a rod instead of a net, I mean, it feels like the ratio of effort to profit is all off.'

'Don't you worry. We have much more ambitious scams too.'

'Ambitious, how?'

'Like sometimes we'll hold a beauty seminar at a venue and invite lots of girls. Like a big sales event, and we sell plenty of products.'

'People fall for that?'

'The majority of the women are plants. If fifty come, forty of them are with us, and they get the buying rush started.'

'So then others join in?' He had heard about schemes like that targeting seniors.

'Do you know about the Performers?'

'Performers? Like a theater troupe?'

'Not quite. The Performers work in our industry.'

He's starting to get a sense of what she means by 'our industry': people in the business of illegal, illicit activities. The more that's revealed to him the more improbable it all seems. Apparently in the world of professional criminals everyone has eccentric aliases.

'There's a group called the Performers – I don't know how many of them there actually are, but they have all kinds of actors. You can hire them to play basically any part. Do you remember a while back when a Foreign Ministry official was killed in a bowling alley in Yokohama?'

'Um, I missed that story.'

'All the people at the bowling alley were members of the Performers. They were all in on it. But nobody ever found out.'

'And so?'

'We hire them too, to come to our sales events. That's how we get our plants.'

'So people in our industry help each other out.'

‘Well, now there’s some friction.’

‘Friction?’

‘What got paid, what didn’t get paid, it turns into trouble.’

‘I see.’ Suzuki isn’t all that interested.

‘Then there’s the organ business.’

‘Sorry, what?’

‘Hearts,’ Hiyoko says like she’s listing off products, ‘kidneys.’ She pushes the climate control button and cranks the temperature dial.

‘Ah. That kind of organ.’ Suzuki does his best to look calm. *Yes, internal organs, of course I knew that, naturally.*

‘Do you know how many people in Japan are waiting for organ transplants? Plenty. Which means there’s plenty of business. We really rake it in with that.’

‘I could be mistaken about this, but I’m pretty sure it’s not legal in Japan to buy and sell internal organs.’

‘That’s my understanding as well.’

‘Which means you can’t have a company that operates that way.’

‘That isn’t a problem.’

‘Why not?’

Hiyoko shifts to an indulgent tone, as if she’s explaining the way the world works to a naive student. ‘Say, for example, a little while ago, a certain bank went out of business.’

‘A certain bank.’

‘But it ended up getting rescued by an infusion of trillions of yen.’

‘And?’

‘Or take another example – an employment insurance scheme, which all company employees paid into. Did you know that several hundred billion yen of that was used for unnecessary building projects?’

‘I might have heard about that on the news.’

‘Buildings no one needed that cost hundreds of billions and never recouped the expenditure. Sounds strange, right? And then they say that the employment insurance fund doesn’t have enough to cover what’s needed. Doesn’t that make you angry?’

‘Yes it does.’

‘But the person responsible for that needless spending goes unpunished. They could throw away hundreds of billions of yen, trillions in taxes, and not get in any trouble. Not only that, they still get a nice fat bonus when they retire. Footloose and fancy-free. It’s crazy. And you know why it happens that way?’

‘Because the Japanese citizenry is so kind and forgiving?’

‘Because the people at the top have a shared understanding.’ Hiyoko raises her index finger. ‘Life has nothing to do with right and wrong. The people with the power make the rules. So if they’re on your side, you have nothing to worry about. That’s how it is with Terahara. He and the politicians have a give-and-take. They work together like they’re in a three-legged race, basically inseparable. If a politician says that someone is in the way, Terahara takes care of it. In exchange, the politicians never go after Terahara.’

‘I’ve never met Mr Terahara.’

Hiyoko adjusts the angle of the rearview mirror and touches her eyelashes. Then fixes Suzuki with a sidelong gaze. ‘But your business is with his idiot son.’

Suzuki shudders, as if an arrow has been shot straight into his core. ‘I have business with Mr Terahara’s son?’ His voice is flat, and he’s barely able to get the words out.

‘And this takes us back to the beginning of our conversation.’ She makes a little circle with her finger. ‘We don’t trust you.’ She sounds like she’s enjoying herself. ‘I meant to ask, but forgot – are you married?’

He clearly has a ring on his left ring-finger. ‘No,’ he answers. ‘I’m not. I was.’

‘But you still wear a ring?’

‘I gained weight and I can’t get it off.’

Another lie. If anything, his ring is loose. He’s lost weight since he was married. It always feels like his ring might slip off just from walking around.

Don’t lose your ring, his wife would say with great gravity, when she was still alive. *It’s the symbol of our connection. Whenever you look at it, I want you to think of me.* If he lost it, she’d be furious, even now that she’s dead.

‘Shall I guess?’ Hiyoko’s eyes glitter.

‘This isn’t a quiz.’

‘I’m guessing that your wife died because of Terahara’s idiot son.’

How does she – He struggles to keep himself still. His eyes want to dart around. His throat wants to swallow hard. His brow wants to tremble. His ears want to turn bright red. His panic wants to burst out of every pore. At the same time, he pictures his wife, crushed between the SUV and the telephone pole. He clenches his stomach, tries to block the memory out.

‘Why would Mr Terahara’s son kill my wife?’

‘Killing for no good reason is just part of the idiot son doing his idiot thing.’ Hiyoko’s face says that she expects Suzuki to know this. ‘That moron causes all kinds of trouble. He’s always stealing cars in the middle of the night and going on joyrides. Getting drunk, running people down. He does it all the time.’

‘That’s terrible.’ Suzuki tries to keep any emotion out of his voice. ‘It’s just terrible.’

‘Isn’t it though? Hard to forgive and forget. So, how did your wife die?’

‘Why would you assume that she’s dead?’

He’s picturing his wife’s mangled body again. He thought the memory had faded away, but now it roars back, all too vivid. He sees her: soaked in blood, face crushed in, shoulders shattered

and askew. Suzuki had stood there, rooted to the spot, while next to him the middle-aged forensics cop got up from examining the ground and muttered, *They didn't even try to brake – looks like they actually sped up.*

'Wasn't she hit by a car?' Bullseye. That's exactly what happened.

'Don't make assumptions.'

'As far as I recall, two years ago the idiot son ran over a woman whose family name was Suzuki.'

That was also right on the nail. 'That can't be true.'

'Oh, it's true all right. The idiot son is always bragging about his adventures. No matter what he does, he never faces any consequences. And do you know why?'

'No idea.'

'Because everyone loves him so much.' Hiyoko raises her eyebrows. 'His father, the politicians.'

'Like with what you were saying about taxes and employment insurance.'

'Exactly. And I'm sure you're aware that he never got into any trouble after killing your wife. Because you looked into it. And you found out that he works for his father's company. You found out about Fräulein. So you joined us as a contract worker.' Hiyoko reels off the facts, like she's reciting a report from memory. 'Isn't that right?'

'Why would I do all of that?'

'Because you want revenge.' She says it like it's obvious. 'You're waiting for a chance to get back at the idiot son. So you've stuck it out for a month. Am I wrong?'

She was not wrong. 'These are baseless accusations.'

'And that,' she continues, raising the corners of her red lips, 'is why you are currently under suspicion.' Over her shoulder, the garish lights from signs blink off and on.

Suzuki swallows hard.

'Which is why yesterday I got special orders.'

‘Orders?’

‘I’m supposed to find out if you’re just working for us or if you’re out for vengeance. We have plenty of use for dumb employees, not so much smart guys with vendettas.’

Suzuki says nothing, only smiles vaguely.

‘Oh, and by the way, you’re not the first one.’

‘Sorry?’

‘There have been others like you who have a bone to pick with Terahara and his idiot son and joined the company looking for revenge. We’re used to dealing with this sort of thing. So we let them work for a month and keep an eye on them. And if something still feels off, then we test them.’ Hiyoko shrugs. ‘Like we’re doing with you today.’

‘You’re wrong about me.’ As he says this Suzuki feels a deep hopelessness wash over him.

The fact that others have tried this before makes his vision go dark. Working for a shady company like Fräulein, spending a month selling young women what he was sure were drugs, it was all so he could avenge his wife. He told himself that the women he was scamming should have known better, trying to smother his guilt, to push aside his fear and sense of decency, to focus only on his plan.

But now he’s finding out that his mission is a rerun, a rerun of a rerun, and it’s like the bottom drops out from under him. He feels scattered, powerless, lost in darkness.

‘So now it’s time to test you. To find out whether you’re actually interested in working for us.’

‘I’m sure I can live up to your expectations.’ But as he says it Suzuki is aware that his voice sounds tiny.

‘In that case,’ Hiyoko says, jabbing her thumb at the back seat, ‘why don’t you kill those two back there? Just some guy, some girl, nothing to do with you.’

*

Nervously Suzuki turns his head to look between the front seats at the back. ‘Why me?’

‘To clear up any suspicions, obviously.’

‘Doing this won’t prove anything.’

‘What does proof matter? The way we operate is very straightforward. Potentialities, evidence – we don’t care about any of that. We just have some simple rules and rituals. So it’s like this: if you kill the two of them, right here, right now, you’ll be a full member of the team.’

‘A full member?’

‘We’ll get rid of the contract part of your contract employee title.’

‘But why do I have to do *this*?’

The car is off, and it’s quiet. Suzuki can feel vibrations, but he realizes that it’s the thrumming of his own heart. With each breath his whole body seems to rise and fall, and the expansion and contraction transmits through the seat and shakes the whole car. He exhales, then inhales, the smell of the leather seats filling his nose.

In a daze, he turns back to the front and looks out the windshield. The green of the pedestrian signal at the intersection starts to blink. It looks like it’s in slow motion. It feels like it might never turn red.

How long is it going to keep flashing?

‘All you have to do is shoot those two back there and we’ll be good. Shoot them and kill them. That’s your only option.’ Her voice brings him back to reality.

‘But what’s killing them going to achieve?’

‘Who knows. If they’ve got good organs we might cut those out and sell them. The girl might end up as a decoration.’

‘A . . . decoration?’

‘Sure, if we cut off her arms and legs.’

He can’t tell if she’s joking.

‘Well? Are you going to do it? The gun is right here, sir, at your disposal.’ Hiyoko’s overly polite word choice is mocking, as she produces the dull-colored instrument from under her seat. Then she aims it at Suzuki’s chest. ‘And if you try to run away, I’ll shoot you.’

Suzuki freezes. The blunt reality of a gun pointed at him takes away his ability to move. It’s like someone is staring at him from deep within the black hole of the barrel, fixing him in place. Hiyoko’s finger is on the trigger. *All she has to do is bend her finger, apply just the barest pressure, and a bullet will rip into my chest.* The realization of just how easy it would be drains his blood.

‘You’re going to use this gun to shoot our friends in the back seat.’

‘What if,’ he begins, afraid to even move his lips, ‘you give me the gun and I aim it at you instead? What would you do then? Purely a hypothetical question.’

Hiyoko is unfazed. If anything her look is pitying. ‘I’m not going to give you the gun just yet. Another company member is on the way. Once they’re here I’ll give you the gun. Then you won’t be able to do anything rash.’

‘Who’s coming?’

Casually, as if it’s nothing at all, she says, ‘The idiot son. He’ll be here soon.’

Suzuki’s whole body clenches and his mind goes blank.

Hiyoko switches the gun to her left hand, and with her right she points toward the windshield. Then she taps it once, seeming to affix her finger to the glass. ‘He’ll come from right over there, across that intersection.’

‘Terahara?’ There’s a crash inside Suzuki’s head, like everything he had in there has collapsed. ‘Terahara is coming here?’

‘Not Mr Terahara. His son. You two haven’t officially met yet, have you? Well, you will now. How lucky for you! The idiot son who killed your wife will be here shortly.’

Hiyoko says Terahara’s son’s name, but Suzuki doesn’t process it. He’d rather not acknowledge the man as a flesh-and-blood human being.

‘Why is he coming here?’

‘I told you, to get a look at you and see what you do. When we test people like this he always comes to watch.’

‘Nice hobby.’

‘Oh, you didn’t know that particular detail?’

He’s at a loss for words. Somehow he manages to look out the windshield. The pedestrian crossing of the big eight-way intersection looms like it’s right on top of them. There’s a crowd of people waiting for the signal to change. They look like they’re gathered on the shore, looking out over the boundless expanse of the sea.

The density of the crowd once again calls to mind what his professor had said. *He was right, it’s like a swarm of insects.*

‘Oh, there he is. The idiot son,’ Hiyoko says cheerfully, pointing. Suzuki jolts upright and cranes his neck forward to look. Slightly off to the right, at the diagonal crosswalk, is a man in a black coat. He appears to be in his mid-twenties, but his long coat and suit give him an expensive air. He grimaces as he pulls at his cigarette.

Hiyoko grabs the door handle. ‘I don’t think the idiot has noticed us.’ As soon as the words are out of her mouth, she’s out of the car, gun still in hand. With her other hand she waves to Terahara’s son.

Suzuki also gets out. Terahara’s son is just a few meters away.

He recalls what his wife always used to say: *Guess you just have to do it.* No matter the situation, she would clap Suzuki on the

shoulder and say that. If you come across a door, you have to open it. If you open it, you have to step through. If you meet a person, you have to talk to them, and if someone puts a meal on the table, you have to give it a try. *When you have a chance, you should always take it.* She was always saying that, so light and bright. It also meant that when she was online she would say, *I just have to click on it*, and she did click on everything, so her computer was always riddled with viruses.

Suzuki gets a good look at Terahara's son. There's a brash aura that seems to clear the way around him. His shoulders are broad and his spine is straight. He's tall, and even handsome, like a Kabuki actor who plays romantic leads. Without realizing it, Suzuki is leaning forward. Now he's got Terahara's son in his sights, he's locked on. His vision seems to be zooming in, giving him a clear view of the man's face.

He sees the thick, rich eyebrows, the flat nostrils on the snub nose. The lips that hold his cigarette. Then the cigarette is done, the butt tossed on the ground, bouncing once off the pavement. He sees the left heel that crushes the cigarette butt with a fastidious twist. In Suzuki's mind the crushed cigarette doubles as his wife. Underneath the black leather coat that is both expensive and tasteless, he sees a red necktie.

Suzuki pictures what will happen next. The light will turn green, and Terahara's son will cross. He'll come right up to Suzuki. As soon as Suzuki gets the gun from Hiyoko, he'll turn it on Terahara's son. It may not work, it may have been doomed from the start, but that's his only choice. *If I have the chance, I have to take it. I just have to do it. Like you always used to say.*

'Wait, what?' It's Hiyoko. The moment the traffic light turns yellow.

Terahara's son steps out into the street. The pedestrian signal is still red, but he seems like he's starting to cross, one step, another.

Then a car slams into him. A black minivan moving at full speed.

Suzuki fixes on the moment of impact, like he's trying to capture it with his eyes. The world around him falls silent. It's like his hearing has shut off so that his vision can sharpen.

The bumper collides with Terahara's son's right thigh, which twists inward, breaking. His legs lift off the ground and his body is swept up onto the hood of the car, sliding him toward the windshield on his right side. He crashes against the glass, his face grinding into the wipers.

Then his body rebounds off the car, tossed onto the street where he lands hard on his left side, then rolls, his left arm wrenching under him. Something small flies off and hits the ground – Suzuki sees that it's a button popping off his suit. The button spins away in an arc.

The body tumbles into a depression in the asphalt, rotating with the head as the fulcrum, the neck bent at an unnatural angle.

The minivan keeps barreling forward after sending the body flying, now running over Terahara's son as he lies on the ground.

The right tire rolls over the right leg, ripping the pants, flattening the thigh. The whole car bumps up onto the chest. Ribs break, organs are crushed. The minivan skids a few more meters before finally coming to a stop.

The spinning button slows, then falls flat.

It's like when the symphony ends, everyone in the hall takes a breath, and silence fills the space for a moment – then explodes into applause. Except instead of applause, people start screaming.

Sound returns to Suzuki. A flood of car horns, shouting, the din of confused voices, like a river bursting its dam.

He's shaken up, but he still keeps staring. He saw someone.

Amid the chaos across the intersection, a man was there, a man who turned around to walk away.

‘What just happened?’ Hiyoko says, her mouth hanging open. ‘He – he got –’

‘He got run over.’ Suzuki can feel his heart hammering like an alarm.

‘But did you see what I saw?’ She sounds uncertain.

‘Huh?’

‘You saw it, didn’t you? There was – *somebody* – somebody shady-looking leaving the scene.’ Now she’s talking quickly, almost breathless. ‘You must have seen it. Someone was there. And it looked like the idiot was *pushed*.’

‘I –’ Suzuki isn’t sure how he should answer. But then: ‘– saw it.’ The words are already out. ‘I saw it.’

Hiyoko falls silent. She peers at Suzuki’s face, then looks down at her feet. She clicks her tongue. Then she looks back across the street. Her eyes say that she’s made up her mind. ‘Go after him.’

‘Go . . . after?’

‘You saw a man, right?’

‘I –’ Suzuki is still trying to wrap his head around what happened.

‘Don’t get the wrong idea. You’re not off the hook yet. But we can’t let whoever pushed Terahara’s son into the street get away.’ It appears to have been a highly unpleasant decision for her. ‘And don’t think about trying to escape yourself.’ Then she brightens up, as if she’s had a great idea. ‘Actually, if you try to run, I’ll kill those two in the car.’

‘How does that –’

‘Get after him! Go!’

The chaotic turn of events is destabilizing, almost hallucinatory, but before he realizes what he’s doing Suzuki is on the move.

'Go get him!' Hiyoko shouts almost hysterically. 'Find the guy who pushed him!'

He runs like a racehorse under the lash. As he runs he looks back over his shoulder. His eyes fall on Hiyoko's black high heels. *She'd never be able to chase anyone in those – I guess she didn't think she'd have to.*

THE WHALE



THE WHALE STEPS BEHIND THE seated man and looks out the window. He had just closed the curtain, but now he slides it open five centimeters or so and peers down at the city below. There's nothing particularly interesting to see, though. The room on the hotel's twenty-fifth floor isn't high enough for him to see above all the other buildings, and the scene of the entertainment district at night is nothing special. Just headlights from the cars passing through the big intersection and the lights from the electric signs. Hemmed in by the surrounding buildings, the sky above looks like a narrow patch of ceiling.

He closes the curtain again and turns back to the room. It's spacious, much more so than he would have guessed for a single. There's an austere dignity to the bed and the mirror stand, the design sleek and reserved. This is one of the higher-class hotels in town.

'You want to look outside?'

He asks the man's back. The man, in his fifties, is seated

facing the table, staring at the wall. His posture is good, like a young student on their first day of school.

‘No thank you.’ The man shakes his head. His mind must have been wandering, and the Whale’s voice pulled him back to reality.

Among the political secretaries the Whale has met in his career, this man seems to be one of the more likeable ones. His hair is parted neatly and he has a fastidious, honest air. He wears a foreign-made suit of good quality, but without any flashy details, which is rare. He must be ten or twelve years older, but he speaks very politely to the Whale.

‘You won’t get another chance to look outside.’ The Whale knows it isn’t necessary to tell the man this, but he does anyway.

‘Oh?’ The man’s eyes seem dim.

It’ll be the last view you get, because soon you’ll be dead. The Whale thinks about spelling it out, but decides against it. They never fully grasp their situation, so there’s no point wasting words. Anyway, there’s nothing special to look at.

The man turns back to the table. He stares at the stationery and envelope on it. ‘Does . . . does this sort of thing . . .’ He doesn’t look back at the Whale. ‘Does this happen often?’

‘Does what happen often?’

‘I mean what’s happening now – to me.’ He seems to be groping for the right words. In his confusion, an English word he thinks he knows pops out. ‘*Seaside?*’ He goes back to Japanese. ‘I mean, people being forced to kill themselves. Do you do this often?’

His shoulders are shaking.

It’s always the same. At first, they try to look calm. They do their best to appear at ease, even philosophical. They put on a knowing face and say things like *This is what has to happen.* After a little while they get talkative. They probably think that as

long as they keep talking they'll stay alive. But it makes no difference how much they talk. It always ends the same way.

The Whale says nothing. He just looks up at the ceiling, where a vinyl rope is tied to a vent. The end is fashioned into a noose. The client hadn't given any instructions that it should be a hanging, but when they don't specify, that's what he usually goes with.

'Don't you think it's a little odd, the idea that my dying would settle anything?' Now the man rotates the chair a bit to peer sideways at the Whale. 'I'm just a secretary. My suicide doesn't change the situation at all. And I'm sure everyone knows that. The real culprits are still out there, but somehow my killing myself will put the issue to rest. Doesn't that strike you as strange?'

There's nothing to be gained from engaging. The Whale knows this from experience.

'It's not like I came up with the plan,' the secretary continues. 'Of course I didn't. I could never have come up with something so involved on my own.'

The man is secretary to a legislator named Kaji. The media had recently found out that Kaji was taking bribes from a communications company, and the last few weeks had been a mess for him. It was a potentially career-ending scandal. Elections in the House of Representatives were coming up, and Kaji was in danger of being ousted from the ruling party.

'Are they really going to stop the investigation because I kill myself?'

'Kaji's a coward. He squawks at the littlest thing. When he's frightened, he lashes out. Am I wrong?' The Whale pictures Kaji. He's a small man, an elder statesman with a babyish face. He lets his whiskers grow in hope of projecting an authority that he lacks, and he's always twitching his thick eyebrows for effect, but he's not fooling anybody.