

1.

From July of his sophomore year in college until the following January, all Tsukuru Tazaki could think about was dying. He turned twenty during this time, but this special watershed – becoming an adult – meant nothing. Taking his own life seemed the most natural solution, and even now he couldn't say why he hadn't taken this final step. Crossing that threshold between life and death would have been easier than swallowing down a slick, raw egg.

Perhaps he didn't commit suicide then because he couldn't conceive of a method that fit the pure and intense feelings he had toward death. But method was beside the point. If there had been a door within reach that led straight to death, he wouldn't have hesitated to push it open, without a second thought, as if it were just a part of ordinary life. For better or for worse, though, there was no such door nearby.

I really should have died then, Tsukuru often told himself. Then this world, the one in the here and now, wouldn't exist. It was a captivating, bewitching thought. The present world wouldn't exist, and reality would no longer be real. As far as this world was concerned, he would simply no longer exist – just as this world would no longer exist for him.

At the same time, Tsukuru couldn't fathom why he had reached this point, where he was teetering over the precipice. There was an actual event that had led him to this place – this he knew all too well – but why should death have such a hold over him, enveloping him in its embrace for nearly half a year? *Envelop* – the word expressed it precisely. Like Jonah in the belly of the whale, Tsukuru had fallen into the bowels of death, one untold day after another, lost in a dark, stagnant void.

It was as if he were sleepwalking through life, as if he had already died but not yet noticed it. When the sun rose, so would Tsukuru – he'd brush his teeth, throw on whatever clothes were at hand, ride the train to college, and take notes in class. Like a person in a storm desperately grasping at a lamppost, he clung to this daily routine. He only spoke to people when necessary, and after school, he would return to his solitary apartment, sit on the floor, lean back against the wall, and ponder death and the failures of his life. Before him lay a huge, dark abyss that ran straight through to the earth's core. All he could see was a thick cloud of nothingness swirling around him; all he could hear was a profound silence squeezing his eardrums.

When he wasn't thinking about death, his mind was blank. It wasn't hard to keep from thinking. He didn't read any newspapers, didn't listen to music, and had no sexual desire to speak of. Events occurring in the outside world were, to him, inconsequential. When he grew tired of his room, he wandered aimlessly around the neighborhood or went to the station, where he sat on a bench and watched the trains arriving and departing, over and over again.

He took a shower every morning, shampooed his hair well, and did the laundry twice a week. Cleanliness was another one of his pillars: laundry, bathing, and teeth brushing. He barely

noticed what he ate. He had lunch at the college cafeteria, but other than that, he hardly consumed a decent meal. When he felt hungry he stopped by the local supermarket and bought an apple or some vegetables. Sometimes he ate plain bread, washing it down with milk straight from the carton. When it was time to sleep, he'd gulp down a glass of whiskey as if it were a dose of medicine. Luckily he wasn't much of a drinker, and a small dose of alcohol was all it took to send him off to sleep. He never dreamed. But even if he had dreamed, even if dreamlike images arose from the edges of his mind, they would have found nowhere to perch on the slippery slopes of his consciousness, instead quickly sliding off, down into the void.

The reason why death had such a hold on Tsukuru Tazaki was clear. One day his four closest friends, the friends he'd known for a long time, announced that they did not want to see him, or talk with him, ever again. It was a sudden, decisive declaration, with no room for compromise. They gave no explanation, not a word, for this harsh pronouncement. And Tsukuru didn't dare ask.

He'd been friends with the four of them since high school, though when they cut him off, Tsukuru had already left his hometown and was attending college in Tokyo. So being banished didn't have any immediate negative effects on his daily routine – it wasn't like there would be awkward moments when he'd run into them on the street. But that was just quibbling. The pain he felt was, if anything, more intense, and weighed down on him even more greatly because of the physical distance. Alienation and loneliness became a cable that stretched hundreds of miles long, pulled to the breaking point by a gigantic winch. And through that taut line, day and night, he received indecipherable messages. Like a

gale blowing between trees, those messages varied in strength as they reached him in fragments, stinging his ears.

The five of them had been classmates at a public high school in the suburbs of Nagoya. Three boys, and two girls. During summer vacation of their freshman year, they all did some volunteer work together and became friends. Even after freshman year, when they were in different classes, they remained a close-knit group. The volunteer work that had brought them together had been part of a social studies summer assignment, but even after it ended, they chose to volunteer as a group.

Besides the volunteer work, they went hiking together on holidays, played tennis, swam at the Chita Peninsula, or got together at one of their houses to study for tests. Or else – and this was what they did most often – they just hung out someplace, and talked for hours. It wasn't like they showed up with a topic in mind – they just never ran out of things to talk about.

Pure chance had brought them together. There were several volunteer opportunities they could have chosen from, but the one they all chose, independently, was an after-school tutoring program for elementary school kids (most of whom were children who refused to go to school). The program was run by a Catholic church, and of the thirty-five students in their high school class, the five of them were the only ones who selected it. To start, they participated in a three-day summer camp outside Nagoya, and got to be good friends with the children.

Whenever they took a break, the five of them gathered to talk. They got to know each other better, sharing their ideas and opening up about their dreams, as well as their problems. And when the summer camp was over, each one of them felt they were in the

right place, where they needed to be, with the perfect companions. A unique sense of harmony developed between them – each one needed the other four and, in turn, shared the sense that they too were needed. The whole convergence was like a lucky but entirely accidental chemical fusion, something that could only happen once. You might gather the same materials and make identical preparations, but you would never be able to duplicate the result.

After the initial volunteer period, they spent about two weekends a month at the after-school program, teaching the kids, reading to them, playing with them. They mowed the lawn, painted the building, and repaired playground equipment. They continued this work for the next two years, until they graduated from high school.

The only source of tension among them was the uneven number – the fact that their group was comprised of three boys and two girls. If two of the boys and two of the girls became couples, the remaining boy would be left out. That possibility must have always been hanging over their heads like a small, thick, lenticular cloud. But it never happened, nor did it even seem a likely possibility.

Perhaps coincidentally, all five of them were from suburban, upper-middle-class families. Their parents were baby boomers; their fathers were all professionals. Their parents spared no expense when it came to their children's education. On the surface, at least, their families were peaceful, and stable. None of their parents got divorced, and most of them had stay-at-home mothers. Their high school emphasized academics, and their grades were uniformly good. Overall there were far more similarities than differences in their everyday environments.

And aside from Tsukuru Tazaki, they had another small, coincidental point in common: their last names all contained a color. The two boys' last names were Akamatsu – which means 'red pine' – and Oumi – 'blue sea'; the girls' family names were Shirane – 'white root' – and Kurono – 'black field.' Tazaki was the only last name that did not have a color in its meaning. From the very beginning this fact made him feel a little bit left out. Of course, whether or not you had a color as part of your name had nothing to do with your personality. Tsukuru understood this. But still, it disappointed him, and he surprised himself by feeling hurt. Soon, the other four friends began to use nicknames: the boys were called Aka (red) and Ao (blue); and the girls were Shiro (white) and Kuro (black). But he just remained Tsukuru. How great it would be, he often thought, if I had a color in my name too. Then everything would be perfect.

Aka was the one with the best grades. He never seemed to study hard, yet was at the top of his class in every subject. He never bragged about his grades, however, and preferred to cautiously stay in the background, almost as if he were embarrassed to be so smart. But as often is the case with short people – he never grew past five foot three – once he made up his mind about something, no matter how trivial it might be, he never backed down. And he was bothered by illogical rules and by teachers who couldn't meet his exacting standards. He hated to lose; whenever he lost a tennis match, it put him in a bad mood. He didn't act out, or pout – instead, he just became unusually quiet. The other four friends found his short temper amusing and often teased him about it. Eventually Aka would always break down and laugh along with them. His father was a professor of economics at Nagoya University.

Ao was impressively built, with wide shoulders and a barrel chest, as well as a broad forehead, a generous mouth, and an imposing nose. He was a forward on the rugby team, and in his senior year he was elected team captain. He really hustled on the field and was constantly getting cuts and bruises. He wasn't good at buckling down and studying, but he was a cheerful person and enormously popular among his classmates. He always looked people straight in the eye, spoke in a clear, strong voice, and had an amazing appetite, seeming to enjoy everything set down in front of him. He also had a quick recall of people's names and faces, and seldom said anything bad about anyone else. He was a good listener and a born leader. Tsukuru could never forget the way he'd gather his team around him before a match to give them a pep talk.

'Listen up!' Ao would bellow. 'We're going to win. The only question is *how* and *by how much*. Losing is not an option for us. You hear me? *Losing is not an option!*'

'*Not an option!*' the team would shout, before rushing out onto the field.

Not that their high school rugby team was all that good. Ao was clever and extremely athletic, but the team itself was mediocre. When they went up against teams from private schools, where players had been recruited from all over the country on athletic scholarships, Ao's team usually lost. 'What's important,' he'd tell his friends, 'is the will to win. In the real world we can't always win. Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose.'

'And sometimes you get rained out,' Kuro remarked, with typical sarcasm.

Ao shook his head sadly. 'You're confusing rugby with baseball or tennis. Rugby's never postponed on account of rain.'

‘You play even when it’s raining?’ Shiro asked, surprised. Shiro knew next to nothing about sports, and had zero interest in them.

‘That’s right,’ Aka said seriously. ‘Rugby matches are never canceled. No matter how hard it rains. That’s why every year you get a lot of players who drown during matches.’

‘My God, that’s awful!’ Shiro said.

‘Don’t be silly. He’s joking,’ Kuro said, in a slightly disgusted tone.

‘If you don’t mind,’ Ao went on, ‘my point is that if you’re an athlete you have to learn how to be a good loser.’

‘You certainly get a lot of practice with that every day,’ Kuro said.

Shiro was tall and slim, with a model’s body and the graceful features of a traditional Japanese doll. Her long hair was a silky, lustrous black. Most people who passed her on the street would turn around for a second look, but she seemed to find her beauty embarrassing. She was a serious person, who above all else disliked drawing attention to herself. She was also a wonderful, skilled pianist, though she would never play for someone she didn’t know. She seemed happiest while teaching piano to children in an after-school program. During these lessons, Shiro looked completely relaxed, more relaxed than Tsukuru saw her at any other time. Several of the children, Shiro said, might not be good at regular schoolwork, but they had a natural talent for music and it would be a shame to not develop it. The school only had an old upright piano, almost an antique, so the five of them started a fund-raising drive to buy a new one. They worked part-time during summer vacation, and persuaded a company that made musical instruments to help them out. In the spring of their senior year, their hard work finally paid off, resulting

in the purchase of a grand piano for the school. Their campaign caught people's attention and was even featured in a newspaper.

Shiro was usually quiet, but she loved animals so much that when a conversation turned to dogs and cats, her face lit up and the words would cascade out from her. Her dream was to become a veterinarian, though Tsukuru couldn't picture her with a scalpel, slicing open the belly of a Labrador retriever, or sticking her hand up the anus of a horse. If she went to vet school, that's exactly the kind of training she'd have to do. Her father ran an ob-gyn clinic in Nagoya.

Kuro wasn't beautiful, but she was eager and charming and always curious. She was large-boned and full-bodied, and already had a well-developed bust by the time she was sixteen. She was independent and tough, with a mind as quick as her tongue. She did well in humanities subjects, but was hopeless at math and physics. Her father ran an accounting firm in Nagoya, but there was no way she would ever be able to help out. Tsukuru often helped her with her math homework. She could be sarcastic but had a unique, refreshing sense of humor, and he found talking with her fun and stimulating. She was a great reader, too, and always had a book under her arm.

Shiro and Kuro had been in the same class in junior high and knew each other well, even before the five of them became friends. To see them together was a wonderful sight: a unique and captivating combination of a beautiful, shy artist and a clever, sarcastic comedian.

Tsukuru Tazaki was the only one in the group without anything special about him. His grades were slightly above average. He wasn't especially interested in academics, though he did pay close attention during class and always made sure to do

the minimum amount of practice and review needed to get by. From the time he was little, that was his habit, no different from washing your hands before you eat and brushing your teeth after a meal. So although his grades were never stellar, he always passed his classes with ease. As long as he kept his grades up, his parents were never inclined to pester him to attend cram school or study with a tutor.

He didn't mind sports but never was interested enough to join a team. He'd play the occasional game of tennis with his family or friends, and go skiing or swimming every once in a while. That was about it. He was pretty good-looking, and sometimes people even told him so, but what they really meant was that he had *no particular defects to speak of*. Sometimes, when he looked at his face in the mirror, he detected an incurable boredom. He had no deep interest in the arts, no hobby or special skill. He was, if anything, a bit taciturn; he blushed easily, wasn't especially outgoing, and could never relax around people he'd just met.

If pressed to identify something special about him, one might notice that his family was the most affluent of the five friends, or that an aunt on his mother's side was an actress – not a star by any means, but still fairly well known. But when it came to Tsukuru himself, there was not one single quality he possessed that was worth bragging about or showing off to others. At least that was how he viewed himself. Everything about him was middling, pallid, lacking in color.

The only real interest he had was train stations. He wasn't sure why, but for as long as he could remember, he had loved to observe train stations – they had always appealed to him. Huge bullet-train stations; tiny, one-track stations out in the countryside; rudimentary freight-collection stations – it didn't

matter what kind, because as long as it was a railway station, he loved it. Everything about stations moved him deeply.

Like most little boys he enjoyed assembling model trains, but what really fascinated him weren't the elaborate locomotives or cars, the intricately intersecting rail tracks, or the cleverly designed dioramas. No, it was the models of ordinary stations set down among the other parts, like an afterthought. He loved to watch as the trains passed by the station, or slowed down as they pulled up to the platform. He could picture the passengers coming and going, the announcements on the speaker system, the ringing of the signal as a train was about to depart, the station employees briskly going about their duties. What was real and what was imaginary mingled in his mind, and he'd tremble sometimes with the excitement of it all. But he could never adequately explain to people why he was so attracted to the stations. Even if he could, he knew they would think he was one weird kid. And sometimes Tsukuru himself wondered if something wasn't exactly right with him.

Though he lacked a striking personality, or any qualities that made him stand out, and despite always aiming for what was average, the middle of the road, there was (or *seemed* to be) something about him that wasn't exactly normal, something that set him apart. And this contradiction continued to perplex and confuse him, from his boyhood all the way to the present, when he was thirty-six years old. Sometimes the confusion was momentary and insubstantial, at other times deep and profound.

Sometimes Tsukuru couldn't understand why he was included in their group of five. Did the others really *need* him? Wouldn't they be able to relax and have a better time if he weren't there?

Maybe they just hadn't realized it yet, and it was only a matter of time before they did? The more he pondered this dilemma, the less he understood. Trying to sort out his value to the group was like trying to weigh something that had no unit value. The needle on the scale wouldn't settle on a number.

But none of these concerns seemed to bother the other four. Tsukuru could see that they genuinely loved it when all five of them got together as a group. Like an equilateral pentagon, where all sides are the same length, their group's formation had to be composed of five people exactly – any more or any less wouldn't do. They believed that this was true.

And naturally Tsukuru was happy, and proud, to be included as one indispensable side of the pentagon. He loved his four friends, loved the sense of belonging he felt when he was with them. Like a young tree absorbing nutrition from the soil, Tsukuru got the sustenance he needed as an adolescent from this group, using it as necessary food to grow, storing what was left as an emergency heat source inside him. Still, he had a constant, nagging fear that someday he would fall away from this intimate community, or be forced out and left on his own. Anxiety raised its head, like a jagged, ominous rock exposed by the receding tide, the fear that he would be separated from the group and end up entirely alone.

—

'So you really liked railroad stations that much, ever since you were little?' Sara Kimoto asked. She sounded impressed.

Tsukuru nodded cautiously. The last thing he wanted was for her to think he was one of those *otaku* nerds he knew from the engineering department at work, the kind who were so wrapped

up in their jobs that work became their whole world. The way the conversation was going, though, she might end up thinking just that. ‘That’s right,’ he admitted. ‘Since I was a kid, I’ve always liked stations.’

‘You’ve certainly led a very consistent life,’ she said. She seemed amused by it, but he couldn’t detect any negativity in her tone.

‘Why it had to be stations, I can’t say.’

Sara smiled. ‘It must be your calling.’

‘Maybe so,’ Tsukuru said.

How did we wind up talking about this? Tsukuru wondered. *That* had happened so long ago, and he’d much prefer to wipe it from memory. But Sara, for whatever reason, wanted to hear about his high school days. What kind of student was he, what did he do back then? And before he knew it, he’d segued into talking about his close group of five friends. The four colorful people – and colorless Tsukuru Tazaki.

Sara and Tsukuru were at a bar on the outskirts of Ebisu. They’d had a dinner reservation at a small Japanese-style restaurant that Sara knew, but since she had eaten a late lunch and wasn’t hungry, they canceled the reservation and went out for cocktails instead. Tsukuru wasn’t hungry either and didn’t mind skipping dinner. He wasn’t such a big eater to begin with. He could get by on cheese and nuts at the bar.

Sara was two years older than Tsukuru and worked in a large travel agency. She specialized in package tours abroad and took a lot of business trips overseas. Tsukuru (in his ‘calling’) worked for a railway company, in a department that oversaw the design of railroad stations in the western part of the Kanto region around Tokyo. So although there was no direct connection between their jobs, in a way they both involved aspects of the

transportation industry. He and Sara had met at a party to celebrate his boss's newly constructed house, where they had exchanged email addresses. This was their fourth date. After dinner on their third date, in what seemed like a natural progression of events, they had gone back to his apartment and made love. Today was one week later, a delicate stage in their burgeoning relationship. If they continued to see each other after this, things would surely get more serious. Tsukuru was thirty-six, Sara thirty-eight. This wasn't, of course, some high school crush.

From the first time he saw her, Tsukuru had liked Sara's looks. She wasn't typically beautiful. Her prominent cheekbones gave her an obstinate look, and her nose was narrow and pointed, but there was something indefinably vital and alive about her face that caught his eye. Her eyes were narrow, but when she really looked at something they suddenly opened wide: two dark eyes, never timid, brimming with curiosity.

He wasn't normally conscious of it, but there was one part of his body that was extremely sensitive, somewhere along his back. This soft, subtle spot he couldn't reach was usually covered by something, so that it was invisible to the naked eye. But when, for whatever reason, that spot became exposed and someone's finger pressed down on it, something inside him would stir. A special substance would be secreted, swiftly carried by his bloodstream to every corner of his body. That special stimulus was both a physical sensation and a mental one, creating vivid images in his mind.

The first time he met Sara, he felt an anonymous finger reach out and push down forcefully on that trigger on his back. The day they met they talked for a long time, though he couldn't recall much of what they said. What he did recall was the special

feeling on his back, and the indefinably thrilling sensation it brought to his mind and body. One part of him relaxed, another part tightened up. That sort of feeling. But what did it mean? Tsukuru thought about this for days, but he was not, by nature, adept at abstract thinking. So Tsukuru emailed Sara and invited her to dinner. He was determined to find out the meaning of that feeling, of that sensation.

Just as he appreciated Sara's appearance, he also enjoyed the way she dressed. Her clothes were always simple and subdued, but they were lovely and fit her perfectly. Tsukuru could easily imagine, though, that what appeared to be simple outfits had taken much time to choose, and also hadn't come cheap. Her accessories and makeup, too, were low-key yet refined. Tsukuru himself wasn't particular about clothes, but he'd always loved seeing a well-dressed woman. Just like he enjoyed listening to beautiful music.

His two older sisters loved clothes, and when they were young, before they went out on a date, they had grabbed Tsukuru first to get his opinion of their outfit. He wasn't sure why, but they were very serious about it. What do you think? they'd ask. Do these go well together? And he would give his honest opinion, from a male perspective. His sisters respected his opinion, which made him happy, and before long, this became a habit.

As he sipped his weak highball, Tsukuru mentally undressed Sara. Unhooking the back of her dress, quietly unzipping her. He'd only slept with her once, but it had been wonderful, and fulfilling. Dressed or undressed, she looked five years younger than she was, with pure white skin and beautifully rounded, modestly sized breasts. Leisurely foreplay, caressing her, had been amazing, and after he came, he had felt at peace as he held

her close. But that wasn't all there was to it. He was well aware that there was something more. Making love was a joining, a connection between one person and another. You receive something, and you also have to give.

'What were *your* high school days like?' Tsukuru asked.

Sara shook her head. 'I don't want to talk about that. It was pretty boring. I'll tell you about it sometime, but right now, I want to hear about you. What happened to your group of five friends?'

Tsukuru picked up a handful of nuts and tossed a few in his mouth.

'We had several unspoken rules among us, one of them being *As much as we possibly can, we do things together, all five of us*. We tried to avoid having just two of us, for instance, going off somewhere. Otherwise, we were worried that the group might fall apart. We had to be a centripetal unit. I'm not sure how to put it – we were trying our best to maintain the group as an orderly, harmonious community.'

'An orderly, harmonious community?' Genuine surprise showed in her voice.

Tsukuru blushed a little. 'We were in high school, and had all kinds of weird ideas.'

Sara looked intently at Tsukuru, cocking her head a degree or two. 'I don't find it weird. But what was the purpose of that community?'

'The original purpose, like I said, was to help out at an after-school program. This was where we all met and we all felt strongly about it – it remained an important collective goal. But as time passed, simply being a community ourselves became one of our goals, too.'

‘You mean maintaining the group itself, and keeping it going, became one of your aims.’

‘I guess so.’

Sara narrowed her eyes in a tight line. ‘Just like the universe.’

‘I don’t know much about the universe,’ Tsukuru said. ‘But for us it was very important. We had to protect the special chemistry that had developed among us. Like protecting a lit match, keeping it from blowing out in the wind.’

‘Chemistry?’

‘The power that happened to arise at that point. Something that could never be reproduced.’

‘Like the Big Bang?’

‘I’m not sure about that,’ Tsukuru said.

Sara took a sip of her mojito and examined the mint leaf from several angles.

‘I went to private girls’ schools,’ she said, ‘so I really don’t understand those kind of co-ed groups at public schools. I can’t picture what they’re like. In order for the five of you to maintain that community, so it wouldn’t fall apart, you tried to be as abstinent as you could. Is that how it worked?’

‘Abstinent? I’m not sure that’s the right word. It wasn’t something that dramatic. It’s true, though, we were careful to keep relations with the opposite sex out of the group.’

‘But you never put that into words,’ Sara said.

Tsukuru nodded. ‘We didn’t verbalize it. It wasn’t like we had rules or anything.’

‘What about you? You were with them all the time, so weren’t you attracted at all to Shiro or Kuro? From what you told me, they sound pretty appealing.’

‘Both of the girls were appealing in their own way. I’d be lying

if I said I wasn't attracted to them. But I tried as much as possible not to think of them that way.'

'As much as possible?'

'As much as possible,' Tsukuru said. He felt his cheeks reddening again. 'When I couldn't help thinking of them, I always tried to think of them as a pair.'

'The two of them as a pair?'

Tsukuru paused, searching for the right words. 'I can't really explain it. I thought of them like they were a fictitious being. Like a formless, abstract being.'

'Hmm.' Sara appeared impressed. She thought about it. She seemed to want to say something, but then thought better of it. After a while she spoke.

'So after you graduated from high school you went to college in Tokyo, and left Nagoya. Is that right?'

'That's right,' Tsukuru said. 'I've lived in Tokyo ever since.'

'What about the other four?'

'They went to colleges in the Nagoya area. Aka studied in the economics department of Nagoya University, the department where his father taught. Kuro attended a private women's college famous for its English department. Ao got into business school at a private college that had a well-known rugby team, on the strength of his athletic abilities. Shiro finally was persuaded to give up on being a veterinarian and instead she studied piano in a music school. All four schools were close enough for them to commute from home. I was the only one who went to Tokyo, in my case to an engineering college.'

'Why did you want to go to Tokyo?'

'It's simple, really. There was a professor at my university who was an expert on railroad station construction. Constructing

stations is a specialized field – they have a different structure from other buildings – so even if I went to an ordinary engineering school and studied construction and engineering, it wouldn't have been of much practical use. I needed to study with a specialist.'

'Having set, specific goals makes life easier,' Sara said.

Tsukuru agreed.

'So the other four stayed in Nagoya because they didn't want that beautiful community to break up?'

'When we were seniors in high school, we talked about where we were going to go to college. Except for me, they all planned to stay in Nagoya and go to college there. They didn't come out and say it exactly, but it was obvious they were doing that because they wanted to keep the group together.'

With his GPA, Aka could have easily gotten into a top school like Tokyo University, and his parents and teachers urged him to try. And Ao's athletic skills could have won him a place in a well-known university too. Kuro's personality was well suited to the more sophisticated, intellectually stimulating life she might have found in a cosmopolitan environment, and she should have gone on to one of the private universities in Tokyo. Nagoya, of course, is a large city, but culturally it was much more provincial. In the end, all four of them decided to stay in Nagoya, settling for much less prestigious schools than they could have attended. Shiro was the only one who never would have left Nagoya, even if the group hadn't existed. She wasn't the type to venture out on her own in search of a more stimulating environment.

'When they asked me what my plans were,' Tsukuru said, 'I told them I hadn't decided yet. But I'd actually made up my mind to go to school in Tokyo. I mean, if I could have managed

to stay back in Nagoya, and half-heartedly study at some so-so college, I would have done it, if it meant I got to stay close to them. In a lot of ways that would have been easier, and that's actually what my family was hoping I'd do. They sort of expected that after I graduated from college, I'd eventually take over my father's company. But I knew that if I didn't go to Tokyo, I'd regret it. I just felt that I had to study with that professor.'

'That makes sense,' Sara said. 'So after you decided you'd go to Tokyo, how did the others take it?'

'I don't know how they *really* felt about it, of course. But I'm pretty sure they were disappointed. Without me in the equation, part of that sense of unity we always had was inevitably going to vanish.'

'The chemistry, too.'

'It would have changed into something different. To some extent.'

Yet when his friends realized how determined Tsukuru was to go, they didn't try to stop him. In fact, they encouraged him. Tokyo was only an hour and a half away by bullet train. He could come back any time he wanted, right? And there's no guarantee you'll get into your first-choice school anyway, they said, half kidding him. Passing the entrance exam for that university meant Tsukuru had to buckle down and study like never before.

'So what happened to your group after you all graduated from high school?' Sara asked.

'At first everything went fine. I went back to Nagoya whenever there was a school vacation – spring and fall break, summer vacation and New Year's – and spent as much time as I could with the others. We were as close as always, and got along well.'

Whenever he was back home, Tsukuru and his friends had

lots to catch up on. After he left Nagoya, the other four continued to spend time together, but once he was back in town, they'd revert to their five-person unit (though of course there were times when some of them were busy and only three or four of them could get together). The other four brought him back into the fold, as if there had been no gap in time. Or at least, Tsukuru detected no subtle shift in mood, no invisible distance between them, and that made him very happy. That's why he didn't care that he hadn't made a single friend in Tokyo.

Sara narrowed her eyes and looked at him. 'You never made even one friend in Tokyo?'

'I don't know why, but I just couldn't,' Tsukuru said. 'I guess I'm basically not very outgoing. But don't get the wrong idea – I wasn't a shut-in or anything. This was the first time I was living on my own, free to do whatever I liked. I enjoyed my days. The railroad lines in Tokyo are like a web spread out over the city, with countless stations. Just seeing them took a lot of time. I'd go to different stations, check out how they were designed, pencil out some rough sketches, jot down anything special I noticed.'

'It sounds like fun,' Sara said.

The university itself, though, wasn't very exciting. Most of his courses in the beginning were general education classes, uninspiring and numbingly boring. Still, he'd worked hard to get into college, so he tried not to cut class. He studied German and French; he even went to the language lab to practice English. He discovered, to his surprise, that he had a knack for learning languages. Yet he didn't meet anyone he was drawn to. Compared to his colorful, stimulating group of friends from high school, everyone else seemed spiritless, dull, insipid. He never met anyone he felt like getting to know better, so he spent most of

his time in Tokyo alone. On the plus side, he read constantly, more than he ever had before.

‘But didn’t you feel lonely?’ Sara asked.

‘I felt alone, but not especially lonely. I guess I just took that for granted.’

He was young, and there was so much about the world he still didn’t know. And Tokyo was a brand-new place for him, so very different from the environment he’d grown up in, and those differences were greater than he’d ever anticipated. The scale of the city was overwhelming, the diversity of life there extraordinary. There were too many choices of things to do, the way people talked struck him as odd, and the pace of life was too fast. He couldn’t strike a good balance between himself and the world around him. But there was still a place for him to return. He knew this. Get on the bullet train at the Tokyo station and in an hour and a half he’d arrive at an *orderly, harmonious, intimate place*. Where time flowed by peacefully, where friends he could confide in eagerly awaited him.

‘What about now?’ Sara asked. ‘Do you feel like you’re maintaining a good balance between yourself and the world around you?’

‘I’ve been with this company for fourteen years. The job’s fine, and I enjoy the work. I get along with my colleagues. And I’ve been in relationships with a few women. Nothing ever came of it, but there were lots of reasons for that. It wasn’t entirely my fault.’

‘And you’re alone, but not lonely.’

It was still early, and they were the only customers in the bar. Music from a jazz trio played softly in the background.

‘I suppose,’ Tsukuru said after some hesitation.

‘But you can’t go back now?’ To that orderly, harmonious, intimate place?’

He thought about this, though there was no need to. ‘That place doesn’t exist anymore,’ he said quietly.

It was in the summer of his sophomore year in college when that place vanished forever.