Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Harmless Like You

Written by Rowan Hisayo Buchanan

Published by Sceptre

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Harmless Like You

ROWAN HISAYO BUCHANAN



First published in Great Britain in 2016 by Sceptre

An imprint of Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette UK company

1

First published in paperback in 2017

Copyright © Rowan Hisayo Buchanan 2016

The right of Rowan Hisayo Buchanan to be identified as the Author of the Work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Paperback ISBN 978 1 473 63834 1
eBook ISBN 978 1 473 63835 8

Typeset in Sabon by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire.

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc.

Hodder & Stoughton policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

www.sceptrebooks.co.uk

To my mother and to the people who stay.

Prologue, Berlin

The small, female oblong stood in the shadows beyond the doorway. Sun buttered the sidewalk where I stood, but she was dressed for a colder season. Three scarves wound around her neck – a russet, a cardinal and a white with scarlet reindeer prancing along the weft.

'Guten morgen.' It was the first time I had seen a Japanese mouth shape the Germanic consonants. My German was too weak to know if her accent held the residue of Connecticut. Did the Saugatuck River flow along her vowels? Or did she speak as if she had always lived in Berlin's history-scrambled streets?

'Yukiko Oyama?' I dropped my half-raised hand to my side. 'You're expecting me. I've come about your husband's estate.'

'Come in,' my mother said. If she recognised my features, she showed no sign. She walked slowly, taking the bannister, and irrational as it was, I wondered how someone so very small could be my mother. Her little hand clutching the iron rail appeared innocent as a child's. Then again, misdeeds don't swell the body. On impulse, I reached out. Her head was turned away from me. Just for a moment, I let my fingertips press into the forgiving wool of the reindeer scarf. Soft, very soft. Quickly I pulled away.

She took off her slippers by the front door and revealed layers of socks. She seemed older than sixty. Very spindly. The hair that dipped in and around the scarves was striped with long strokes of white. I'd once wondered what my life

would have been like if she'd taken me with her. On the table where a bouquet might go, a glass jar held a quiver of craft knives. The furniture was paint-spotted. A radiator thumped.

'Tea – would you like some tea?'

I nodded. Empty jars filled a large enamel sink. On a hotplate, she set a pot to boil. She coughed; one hand pressed the base of her throat, while the other wrapped around her mouth. The crackling noise, like leaves being jumped on, continued for a full minute. 'Sick. Talking is difficult. Sorry.' Her voice did sound rough, the end of each word scraped away.

The folding plastic picnic chair creaked as I sat down. I wrapped my hands around the mug she gave me. It was green tea, the cheap kind that comes in bags and always carries a slight bitterness. Still, the mug was warm in the cold. She left our family and for what, this shabby room?

'As I said before, I'm here about Mr Eaves's estate.'

She looked down, flecks of yellow sleep dust stuck in her eyes. Her fingers tugged at her scarf, like a schoolgirl sitting through a scolding.

'You were married to him. Yes? He recently passed away.'

I waited for her to ask what of. She lifted her mug to the side of her face and rubbed it against her cheek. For heat I assumed.

'He left you the house you lived in together.' I pulled out the papers, pushing them across the paint-stained table towards her. 'I just need you to sign for the deeds. Do you have a pen? Of course, there'll be property taxes.' I'd gone over this with the lawyer from my father's firm. 'But you will probably want to sell the house. I'd be happy to put you in touch with an agent. So you'll have to sign here, and here.'

She reached into her sweater's pocket and pulled out a black wax pastel. She aligned the papers, peering down to

read the fine text. She signed her name slowly. Her signature was square, boxy and careful. She passed me back the first sheet of paper, signed the second and then stopped, the edge of the pastel still pressing into the page. She stared at her own name.

'My son?'

Yes. Yes. Yes.

'Where is he?'

Yuki

1968, Quinacridone Gold

A toasted yellow formulated for the automobile industry. It is the colour of streetlights on puddles at night, pickled yellow radish and duck beaks.

The flasher crouched on his usual stoop, eating a hot dog. Yuki didn't cross the street or quicken her pace. She stopped and watched as he sucked the mustard off his knuckles, thick tongue pushing down between his finger joists. She was close enough to him to see the onion strands shiver in the breeze. He wore a beige fedora and a thin, beige raincoat, like a cartoon detective. For the moment, the raincoat was shut, but his naked legs displayed their spider-leg black hairs to the world.

Yuki's satchel bit into her shoulder. The weight of the notebooks full of empty pages pushed down on her – yet another year. What did the flasher do when not revealing himself to the world? Was he too trapped between a desk's iron legs? He crooned the first bars of *Revolution*. The song was punctuated by the squelchy chewing of hot dog. Late-summer sunlight bleached the sidewalk as Yuki leaned against the warm glass of a shop window and examined the man. Faint lines dented the edges of his eyes and grease stained the cuff of his coat.

An office girl clipped past carrying two steaming paper cups. The flasher jammed the last bite of hot dog between his teeth and whipped open his coat and sang full-throated and off-key. The girl kept walking, not even twitching her

eyes towards him. Yuki marvelled that the coffee didn't slop. He was ignored by this chignonned woman, and she, Yuki, was invisible to him, a man who flaunted the shrivelled purple stump of his penis on the first cold day of fall.

She turned away. In the store window, shadows took great bites out of her reflection, leaving behind a curl of braid and a slice of cheek. She peered closer, but the closer she looked the faster her image vanished.

She was sixteen. All year, misery had sloshed under her skin. It was so thick, it should've pimpled her pores, but her face was as smooth as it had been when she disembarked from the aeroplane ten years before. She squinted at the glass until the shadowy girl disappeared, replaced by patent-leather boots. The boots were *White Album*-white. She kicked her left shoe against the brick wall. Yuki's Mary Janes had been resoled six times. Despite the polish, they had visible frown lines around the toes. They were the footwear of someone who knew her feet were as invisible as her face.

Wind chimes clattered as she pushed open the door. The store stank of incense, thicker and bluer than the brand on her family altar. A male voice emerged from under the desk. 'Need help?'

'No, just looking.' Then, 'How much are the boots? The white ones, in the window.'

A boy unfolded, wiping dust off his jeans. 'Those? Thirty bucks.' Yuki's mother gave her five dollars a week for school lunch.

She turned to go. Her hand was on the door, the metal plate cool against the heat of her embarrassment.

'What's your size?' he called out.

'Four.'

'Sorry, smallest we carry is a six.'

Her hand clenched on the door. Of course they didn't make shoes to fit her.

‘Don’t look like that. How about some sunglasses?’ The boy smiled. ‘One size fits all.’ He pulled a pair off a spinning rack and dangled them towards her. ‘They’re on summer’s end sale. Two dollars.’ The sunshine was already flying south for the winter. Yuki didn’t need sunglasses. She put them on. They didn’t fit – the bridge was too big for her nose, and the frames swamped her, but the Tropicana-orange glass gave the world a golden flush. There were two dollars in her wallet, lunch for Thursday and Friday. Yuki bought the glasses.

Outside, the world shimmered. Gold light skipped off fenders and slid down the long hair of NYU girls. The flasher was gone, but his empty hot-dog carton rested on the stoop. Ketchup marks looked less like stains and more like kisses. Her stiff, grey skirt shimmied in the breeze and she twirled, spinning it out wider. The glasses leapt up and down. The world flashed.

The windows of her apartment winked tangerine as she stepped over a bisected rat corpse, probably abandoned by one of the alley cats. Yuki lived at the edge of the Village with Chinatown to the south, and hookers to the north. Her parents could’ve afforded somewhere nicer – her father was a director of the East Coast branch of Japan’s most successful car company – but America had always been an interruption in their Tokyo life. She once asked her mother, why hadn’t Daddy left them in Tokyo? Her mom crouched down and said in English, ‘Daddy needs us,’ as if to admit his weakness in Japanese would be too much of a betrayal. They had been in New York two thirds of Yuki’s life – her Japan was only the smell of boxes of tea Grandmother posted each New Year. Most of his colleagues came alone, returning to Japan and their families after a year or two. Yet, the company had claimed they needed her father in New York, his knowledge of the language and expertise in the culture being the strongest

– each year in the country bricked him in a bit more. But this was the last year.

She inserted her Mary Janes into the shoe rack, next to her mother's pumps and below her father's indoor slippers, their tatami soles worn into the shape of his feet. Her father had explained with horror that westerners wore shoes in their bedrooms, but Yuki couldn't know if that was true – she still hadn't been into an American's bedroom. She slipped into her own flannel slippers and hid the glasses in her satchel.

'Tadaima,' Yuki called, I'm home, as if her mother didn't already know that from the creak of the door and the slap of her feet on the pine floor.

In the tiny kitchen, Yuki's mother frowned at a neat pile of mincemeat. The same pink as the fridge, and the toaster, and the gloves inside of which Yuki's mother curled her fingers.

'What do you think about cottage chīzu?' her mother asked in Japanese. It irritated Yuki when her mom used the Japanese for what were basically English words. Why say chīzu, when she knew perfectly well how to say cheese?

'I don't think anything about cottage cheese,' Yuki replied in English.

'I'm making chīzubāgā. And the recipe says to use chedāchīzu.' After a beat Yuki realised her mom meant cheddar. 'But you know your father, chedāchīzu gives him stomach ache.'

'So why are you making him cheeseburgers then?' Her mom looked surprised and hurt. Why surprised? Her father was intolerant of cheese. He was intolerant of America. He wanted late-summer eel, fattened in cedarwood vats and barbecued on coals. He was a company man. The company had placed him in this outpost, but his exile was coming to an end at last.

'Mom, no one makes burgers from a recipe.'

Her mother seemed determined that the family be as American as possible, before they left. They'd travel in half a year – late March. The plum trees would be blossoming and the spring rains falling, or that's what her father said. Yuki's only image of plums was at D'Agostino's, where each dusky fruit was petalled with the sticker of its distributor. Yuki had visited her grandparents once, and while she'd befriended their dog, she couldn't do anything right for the humans. How many languages had four conjugations for *My name is Yukiko,* one for each level of politeness? Who knew there were even four levels of politeness? And who knew that being too deferential could be considered a form of rudeness? Yuki was a chīzubāgā – enough to make a Japanese person sick and still inauthentically American.

'I'm going to my room.'

Yuki took the sunglasses out again, but in the dark of her room everything just looked brown. She wished she had someone to ask, how do these make me look? On TV, there was always a popular gang and an unpopular gang. This mystified Yuki. How can you be unpopular in a gang? When she was in elementary school, girls had called her Yucky Yuki, but now they didn't bother speaking to her. Perhaps, if she knew the right words, the right passcode, there might be a way in. Fat Carol, whose shirts they slid beetles down in fourth grade, had a boyfriend who played in a band. Stinky Alice's new stepmother bought her a bottle of YSL Rive Gauche. But as the years went by Yuki felt more, not less, yucky.

She emptied the junior-year books onto the desk. Her mother had wrapped them in brown paper to keep the corners from bending. Each textbook was drab as the next. She wrote her name on the inside cover of her geometry book. Despite her father's weekend drills, each time she sat down to a math test, the numbers flipped over like fish dying in a bucket, sixes turning to nines and threes twisting into eights. She

couldn't blame him for looking at the marked quizzes with an expression fit for rotten salmon. She didn't know how to explain that the numbers, perfectly well behaved at home, writhed in the woozy panic of the exam.

Perhaps geometry would be different, better. She wrote her name in English. She wrote it in kanji. Both ways, it was pitiful as a squashed fly. Yuki couldn't imagine that she'd be less alone in Tokyo, just because her face looked like the crowd's.

Yuki reached up and touched the postcard pinned to the wall with four red pins, the kind people in movies used to mark their places on maps. On a class trip to the Guggenheim, she'd seen this Viennese oil of a house. The windows were broken, but the balconies were strung with iridescent stockings and shirts. Sublime laundry. She traced a window with her fingernail, wondering how her name would sound in the language of that place. At least she'd got an A in Art, not that her father cared.

The next day, Yuki avoided the lunchroom. She'd spent all her lunch money on the citrine-glazed glasses. The window of the girls' fifth-floor bathroom led to the fire escape, something she'd discovered last year after failing another math test. She'd seen the ironwork railings through the window, blurred behind the frosted glass and smeared through tears. As if commanded by the name of the apparatus, she'd escaped. Now, she needed it again.

The only way onto the metal escape was through the window. Yuki climbed on to the sink, wedged her shoes against the taps. She wrenched the thick sash; it opened fifteen inches before it jammed. If there were a fire, they'd all burn. This was a fantasy she had during particularly lonesome lunches when she sat at the end table near the trashcans. She eased her torso out sideways into blue sky and slid out onto the rust-freckled struts.

Yuki slipped the orange glasses from her pocket. With the glasses on, she almost didn't feel the stinging in her stomach. Amber slid over the scene; she imagined it flowing over the schoolyard, freezing gossip mid-lip, pausing nail-polish brushes at half stroke, extinguishing sneaked cigarettes, rising into the teachers' lounge to freeze red pens mid-check. Pigeons rose through the gilded air, breaking the illusion, and as she followed their flight she saw, a few steps up, a girl.

The girl wore an avocado dress, with an acutely pointed white collar. She was so thin her cheekbones looked sharpened. A cumulonimbus of blonde hair rose behind the white peak of her forehead. The girl elevated her left hand in greeting. Her right arm was strapped around her narrow knees. When Yuki lifted the glasses, the hair glowed even brighter, as if it had absorbed every drip of gold the glasses had to offer. Yuki couldn't scare out the words burrowed in her throat, not even a 'Hi.' She raised her hand to mirror the girl's. But, it lifted in a rush like she was asking to be called on. She tugged it back down between her knees. There'd never been anyone here before.

Yuki and the girl sat silent and separate on the metal struts until the bell rang, and Yuki coughed up, 'I'm Yuki. Eleventh grade.'

'Odile. Twelfth. It's my first day.' The girl threw her hands up in the air as if to say, but what can you do?

Yuki had never heard of anyone named Odile. 'Cool name.' Everyone at school was called Kathy, Lucy or Amy, at a stretch Rachel, even the scholarship girls.

'I know. I picked it myself.' In the playground, bodies swirled to the door like so much dish soap draining away.

'I guess we should get to class,' Yuki said and slipped one foot under the window. The other girl made no move.

During Art, Yuki couldn't concentrate on the tidy

arrangement of fake flowers; instead she found herself curling clouds of hair across her sketchbook pages.

Miss Shahn, leaning over, said, 'Very Alphonse Mucha, but we're supposed to be drawing from life. Or silk, in this case.' Here the teacher paused pushing her circular spectacles up her small nose. 'I do like how you've done this chin tilt, and the smile, that's good. Keep working on this, but the eyes are too big – if she had eyes this big, they'd be the size of grapefruit. You've got good instincts, but you have to draw from observation before you start making stuff up.'

Yuki was almost entirely sure Odile was real. The mystery was solved during Math. The plaid-vested school secretary interrupted simultaneous equations. 'Has anyone seen Jane Graychild?'

Yuki was happy for the break. 'Who?' asked Mr Schwinger, the Math teacher.

'Tall, skinny, blonde, looks a bit like Sticky? Twiglet?' said the secretary. 'She's supposed to be in remedial, but we figured she might be lost.'

Yuki put down the pen that had been doodling spirals around her x+2y. She had narrowly avoided remedial; by studying all night for weeks, she'd moved her C- to a C+; months of her life for one vertical line, and meaningless now that she was moving away. So the girl was in remedial. Yuki's father would say ignorance was the weakest of bonds, but what did he know? She'd never seen him with a buddy.

'Twiggy,' informed Kathy B.

'I think I know who you mean,' said Kathy M. 'She told me her name was Odale or O' something.'

'Irish?' asked Amy H.

'French,' said Kathy B, the know-it-all. 'She's from a ballet school. I heard she got kicked out for sleeping with her teacher.'

‘I heard she refused to do him,’ said Amy H.

Kathy B looked annoyed. ‘How do you know?’

‘Shut up,’ said Mr Schwinger. ‘All of you.’

When Yuki got home, her mother had made French fries. The salt-studded sticks were spread on paper towel. The unfed fist of Yuki’s stomach flexed.

Her mother gestured to the offering place. And Yuki used the long cooking chopsticks to drop in two bright potatoes.

‘Mom?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Who’s your best friend?’

‘Best friend? Shinyū? Mmm . . .’

‘Shinyū?’ Yuki had never heard the word before. Her Japanese was like that – things about which her parents did not speak did not exist.

‘Shinyū is like friend. Very close friend.’ Her mother slid the fries into a wide-mouthed blue bowl. ‘Nakamura Machiko. She was so funny. Always had the best stories.’ Yuki tried to imagine her mother with a friend. Her mother sharing a secret. Her mother as a person other than just her mother.

‘What happened to her?’

‘Happened? She is my friend.’ Yuki’s mother sliced off a leaf of baked ham, and dropped it onto the ancestors’ plate.

‘But you never see her.’ Yuki had never seen her mother with any friend. Her father had drinking colleagues. But her mother? No wonder Yuki didn’t know what to say to people. ‘You’ve never said her name. Not once.’ Don’t you get lonely? Is the hug of your pink apron enough?

‘Take that to the altar.’ Her mother shooed Yuki towards the main room, smiling still.

The ancestors always ate first. Before each meal, a small serving went on the altar and Yuki’s mother would clap three times to call the dead to dinner. ‘Now we live in America

even the ancestors can try new things,' she'd told Yuki. She'd offered up corned beef hash, chicken potpie, sugar cookies, and French fries.

The altar was on the piano. Yuki placed the plate on the white table napkin, next to the incense. Along with the ashes of a silk-soft Russian hamster in a silver cookie tin, there were photographs of relatives whose remains were kept on that other continental plate. Yuki's mother and father swore she'd met these people, but Yuki couldn't remember a single touch. The aunt in her tea-green kimono was as foreign as Gauguin's Tahitian women in the Met. Flowers were stacked on the piano to be sent up to the ancestors: peonies, chrysanthemums, yellow roses, even those peculiar red-leaved Christmas plants. Yuki imagined an ectoplasmic petalled ocean sweeping across the spiritual realm.

Her mother was still clattering in the kitchen; the fries gleamed still unoffered. How were the ancestors protecting them anyway?

She reached out and took one fry, letting the heat sear her lips, daring the dead to do anything at all.

Only then did Yuki clap. One. Two. Three.

On Friday, Odile turned as Yuki climbed through the window. Her eyes were wide, translucent green and framed by a stippling of mascara dust. She asked, 'Want some gum?'

The gum was green as the girl's eyes, Yuki leaned towards it, but in the brightness of the moment forgot to actually say yes. Odile retracted the gum.

'Smart. It makes you feel better now but after, you're hungrier. Guts are like men that way. A taste makes them slobber. So why are you skipping? I thought Chinese girls were naturally tiny.'

'Japanese.'

‘My family’s from Eastern Europe – basically, they’re half potato. If I look at a fry, I gain a pound.’

Yuki ached to pour a pint of milk into a tall glass and then into her stomach.

Odile continued, ‘And that shit they have downstairs makes me want to puke. Spaghetti and MEATballs. MEAT loaf. They can’t even name the animal it comes from. It’s just MEAT.’

Yuki nodded. Their school was run by an ex-minister. Most kids brought in packed lunches, but there were cheap school lunches for those whose parents were too overworked to cook. It was the poor kids who ate school lunches, but Yuki had learned long ago that it was best not to let her mother pack lunch. She overdid it, sealing potato croquettes, corn on the cob and weenies into tiny Tupperware containers. It was embarrassing; at least in line behind the kids whose moms were dead or working long hours, she could pretend she fit in. Anyway, she enjoyed the sweet tang of the meatballs’ sauce.

Odile leaned over the railing. Pigeons paraded across the sky. The girl was beautiful and Yuki thought that if she’d been born male, she would’ve wrapped her fingers around the girl’s narrow skull and kissed her. As it was, Yuki hoped she had been sent a friend for her last American hours. A spearmint-eyed friend; but there was no gesture she could make with lips or hands to express this wish.

So Yuki said, ‘My mom wears these stupid house dresses like she thinks it’s still the fifties.’ Her mother sewed them herself. She was too petite, and store-bought dresses hit her in the wrong place. She was a war child who had stopped growing the same day her family’s home shivered into flame. Yuki was only 5 foot 3 inches and still half a foot taller than her mother.

‘I know what you mean. My mom has three dresses all in the same Heinz red.’ Odile grimaced.

‘At least she lets you dress how you like.’

‘If it was up to Lillian, I’d be wearing the puff-sleeved horrors my grandmother sends for my birthday.’ Odile readjusted her dress. ‘So Lillian can save cash for pink-tipped cigarettes.’

‘Lillian?’

‘My mom.’

‘So how do you? I mean your dress is – it’s like the inside of banana. In a nice way. It’s creamy.’ Yuki had overheard so many pleasantly vapid girls chattering, and yet she failed at the most basic idiocies. ‘If your mom won’t buy you nice clothes . . .’ Yuki twiddled her sunglasses.

‘I steal them.’ Odile grinned.

‘But, how?’ The dress wasn’t a lipstick that could be palmed. There was nowhere on Odile’s frame to stow such a thing.

‘Aren’t you scandalised?’

Busy imagining the tactics of this fine-boned thief, Yuki had forgotten the moral question.

‘How could you?’ she said, but the tone came out flat, and Odile laughed as if Yuki had made a joke.

‘If you like I’ll show you on Saturday.’

‘Can’t, Saturday Japanese class.’ She hated Japanese class. When she began, she had friends, little girls named Reiko, Jun and Nana, but they followed their fathers home. Now, Yuki was being out-calligraphied by six-year-olds at even the simplest strokes: 女女女女女. The gridded paper looked like a cage, and the characters felt as foreign as the country they were from; so her strokes trailed off into doodles. Her brush sliced through the horizontal and vertical bars to become birds and eyes and wings.

‘After school then,’ Odile said. The bell wailed. ‘Meet me outside?’

In science class, Mr Schwinger – he taught Math, Physics and Baseball – drew a cross section of the Earth on the board. ‘Proportionally, the Earth’s crust isn’t even as thick as this

line. We're all standing on a fleck of chalk dust floating on molten rock.' All year Yuki had felt like wet tarmac: sticky and stinking; but she didn't want to dry, she wanted to crack open so her molten core spilled out fire. 'Now, and this will be on the test, so write it down . . .'

Yuki liked the curving anatomies of clouds and the hearts of planets, but Science carved these into convection, conduction, radiation and then into strings and strings of numbers.

Odile was waiting, leaning against a tree. Generations of students had scratched their names into the trunk, but Yuki would leave without writing her name once.

'I can't take you out like that.' Odile crinkled an eyebrow. 'You'll have to come back to my place.'

Yuki's parents would never allow her to invite an American to their apartment. Apartment: rooms in which a person is kept apart. Yuki touched the stiff fabric of her skirt, running a hand down the stern well-stitched seam. It was the skirt of a junior secretary. Understandably, not bandit-wear. 'I need a disguise?'

'I don't steal my clothes directly. I separate greenbacks, clams, dollars from their owners.' Odile gave a slanted smile.

For a second, Yuki saw Odile, her hands wrapped around an ivory inlaid pistol walking into the bank. Yuki heard the sharp tap of Odile's heels and saw the kink of her lips, as she commanded the frowsy cashiers to empty their registers.

'. . . from gentlemen who drink too much and like to meet pretty girls at bars.'

The bank dissolved into the women who sat on the stoops near her apartment. The women who looked a bit too tired, whose stockings were laddered. The women her father turned away from.

'You sell yourself?' The words came out stiff and old-fashioned, just as her father would have said them.

'God, no, borrow a wallet or two. Then, bar to subway in

zero to sixty.' Odile clicked her feet together like Roadrunner. 'Meep meep.'

'Oh.'

'You know what men keep in their wallets? Photos of girlfriends and dogs. Women and bitches. You in?'

Yuki didn't stay late after school or talk to men. She was a dutiful sidewalk slab of a citizen. But she'd seen something she wanted to steal so badly her fingers itched with it: this girl's sunrise-hair.

'Yes,' she said. 'I'd love that.'

A pride of dresses occupied Odile's bed. Nylon haunches curved, and paisley rumps seemed ready to pounce. Shirts clung to the window rail. It was as if the room contained every sort of girl it was possible to be. Yuki stood with her hands behind her back. Touching anything seemed too intimate.

'This should fit.' Odile plucked something white off the bed and tossed it. It flew towards Yuki, hitting her in the chest and sliding through her open hands. She bent to retrieve it. Shaking it out, she saw it was a peasant dress, forget-me-nots stitched along the hem. Peasant seemed appropriate. Japanese fairy tales were a lot like American ones. You are a humble peasant going about your humble peasant business. And then one day, you stumble into enchantment.

Odile picked out something short and structural for herself.

'Get on with it,' Odile said. 'I won't look.'

The unbuttoning was laborious; Yuki's starched blouse wasn't designed for striptease. Odile looked out the window, and the low sun painted a streak of gold across her cheek. Yuki looked down at herself standing in the shadow. Her underpants were baggy cotton, and the elastic had left welts across her thighs and stomach.

A smudged mirror hung on the door, partially obscured

by a paisley skirt. Yuki let her face go slack. Her eyes were too close together. The reflection looked mean and slow. Her kneebones were clunky. She didn't have enough chest to warrant a bra. A black hair curled above one inverted nipple. How long had she been ugly?

'Done?'

'Almost.' The dress flopped over her skin. 'Done.' She shifted, trying to make the hem fall comfortably. Fabric sloshed around Yuki's ankles.

Yuki touched the braid that her mother had woven. She thought of freeing it but she was only herself in a too-big dress; loose hair would not change that. As she put on her golden glasses, Odile said, 'You can't wear them. You have to WEAR them.' Odile seemed to communicate with intonation as much as word choice. Her long fingers pulled the glasses off Yuki's nose and settled them in her hair.

'Perfect,' Odile said. 'Now, those.' She pointed to a pair of silver sandals. They were too big and as Yuki flexed her feet, the leather soles flapped. Her fairy godmother reached under the bed and removed a pair of slick white boots.

'Where did you get those?' Yuki asked. She felt as if someone had cut them from her dreaming.

'I forget.' Odile pulled the boots on in a neat flow. 'Do you drink?'

Yuki stared at the faint creases in the patent leather.

'No, of course you don't drink. Well, you'll have to. It makes people feel weird if you don't.'

'Um, can I use your phone?'

'Why?'

What could she tell this girl? Well, it's just I'm the only teenager in all of America not to have a single friend. I'm not on the debate team or the chess team or any team at all, because I was too nervous to ask to join and no one ever invited me to anything, until now, and so I never stay out

late, and so my parents will be worried. But Yuki only said, 'Never mind, I'm ready.'

'No, you're not, I haven't even got to your face.'

To get to the bar they cut across Washington Square Park, one of the many places Yuki wasn't supposed to go. Her father disapproved of the chessboards, the girls in their tie-dyed bikinis, the black boys with guitars, the white boys with guitars, and the junkies in their Indian scarves.

'Is it safe?' Yuki asked as they passed under the archway, disproportionately large for the handkerchief of green.

'Just stay out of dark corners.'

They stopped outside a bar. Low sun hit the window dirt, making it hard to see inside.

Happy Hour 5–7, proclaimed the blackboard screwed to the brick. It was six thirty. A chalk smiley face bared rectangular teeth. Under the yellow leer, she wondered what if Cinderella had arrived at the ball and realised she was a servant with no dancing skills? Anyway, the white dress made her feel less like Cinderella and more like one of those girls who gets fed to dragons or lashed to cliffs.

'Coming?' Odile held the door.

'Yes, of course.'

The room was narrow. The walls had been painted in heaving waves of watermelon pink and custard yellow. The bar countertop clearly pre-dated the mural, and the oak's dark knots glared across at the sloppy psychedelics. Yuki hoisted the dress up as she stepped inside.

At the bar, a cluster of four boys stood around a wicker basket of fried chicken. They were already drunk, and their gums glittered with saliva.

'What should I order?' Yuki whispered.

But Odile only took a step backward, knocking into one of them.

'Hey!' He looked up in irritation.

'Oh, sorry, didn't see you there.'

As he looked at Odile, his face slackened, then lifted into a grin.

'What're you drinking?'

'Two beers,' Odile said. Yuki shifted forwards to stand level with Odile, horizontally level at least. Vertically Odile plus boots was half a foot higher than Yuki in sandals.

'We're shipping off,' a different boy said. They wore tight T-shirts, and their necks seemed too thin. A boy wearing a Sgt Pepper-style jacket handed some bills to the bartender.

'Here you go ladies.'

Odile pressed one of the gold-glass beer bottles into Yuki's hand. The boy's buttons shimmered. His hair flowed around his ears like maple syrup. Odile tilted her head at Yuki, and her gold hair seemed to curl in laughter as the boy put his thin leather wallet down on the stool. Yuki edged towards it, but Odile shook, no.

The boys were all named things like Patrick, Fergus and Colin.

'Odial?'

'Odeel,' Odile corrected. 'I picked it myself.'

Yuki thought, so this is a thing you say.

'And this is Yuki. You-Key.'

'What, you two couldn't be called Alice or Mary, something we didn't need a spelling bee to say?'

'This way you won't forget us. Or confuse us with some girl from Brooklyn.'

Yuki longed to introduce herself as Alice or Mary. Girls at the Japanese school regularly chose American names for their expat years, but her father had forbidden it. In the muddle of her own name, she realised she no longer remembered which boy was which. Or if any of them had actually been called Patrick. She'd only absorbed the blur of Irish

sounds and the way their otherwise American voices twanged with their own names. Yuki often forgot her family weren't the only ones far from home.

Sgt Pepper boy talked about Brooklyn, the war, how he was going to learn to fly a plane. A silver chain lifted with each swell of his neck. On the chain was a silver cross and on the silver cross was a silver man. Jesus's feet were pointed like a tiny ballerina's.

'Like it?' he asked. 'Ma's crucifix. She gave it to me when I enlisted.' At school there were whispers of a draft to come, but until then the assorted brothers and boyfriends planned to stay safe in colleges, concert halls, hot dog stands and libraries.

Yuki looked over to Odile; she wished they'd practised what to say. Instead she'd been forced to 'stop wiggling' while Odile glued nylon lashes to Yuki's lower lids. Yuki blinked feeling their extra weight. Odile was conducting the remaining three boys. As she gesticulated, each finger seemed connected to a different boy's chin. One flick of a nail tugged out a corresponding nod. The late-afternoon sun sliced through the cigarette smoke and bounced off the beer-stained floor. Outside, a child whooped, cutting through the bar's music.

'You're Catholic?' Yuki asked.

'Guys, guys. Am I Catholic?'

They laughed. Yuki flushed. She knew all Irish boys were Catholic. She'd meant, did he believe in the magic of the tiny silver man? But her mouth was clumsy.

'Don't look like that,' he said. 'You can try it on if you like.'

He was standing close, looping the chain around her neck. Stars of sweat broke through his T-shirt. She wondered why he didn't take the jacket off. His fingers were warm where they glanced against the back of her neck. Freckles shone on his neck like dropped pennies. Find a penny, pick it up, all the day you'll have good luck.

‘Sorry, the catch is kind of sticky.’

New customers swung through the doors and pressed past her. Yuki tilted forwards on the tips of her sandals.

‘There we go,’ he said.

The boy pushed Yuki forwards so all the others could see. He twirled her on the spot, showing her off from each angle. Yuki could go whole days, whole weeks, without anyone touching her at all. Her mother hugged her only in moments of pain, when a distant relative died or Yuki failed a test, never for the joy of holding. Yuki caught a stool and sat down, dizzy with the attention as much as the spinning.

‘Now all she needs is a rosary,’ said one. ‘And she’ll be a good girl from Donegal.’

‘If you wanted an Irish girl,’ said another, ‘you should’ve stayed in Brooklyn.’

‘A toast,’ said the third, ‘to girls from elsewhere.’

She hadn’t drunk any of her beer. Odile was smiling at her, and Yuki smiled back with all her teeth. Odile had curled her little finger into one boy’s denim pockets.

‘So,’ Yuki’s boy asked. ‘Where’re you from?’

‘Six blocks away. Oh. My family,’ she replied. ‘Japan.’ When she moved back, would she say she was from America?

‘Like Yoko Ono?’

Over the summer, Cynthia Lennon had sued John for divorce. At the time, Yuki’s father had frowned, and asked, ‘Why is Ono-san doing this? She is from a good family. One of the best.’ The kids at school had briefly given Yuki more attention, as if she might be hiding something seductive under the pearlescent buttons of her blouse.

Again, Yuki raised her fingers to the tiny cross. She’d grown up giving food to her dead and believing in the souls of rocks. What bemused her was this God’s all-powerfulness. Life seemed to her like so many signatures scribbled on a bathroom wall, not one vast mural.

'This will save you?' she asked.

'That's what my ma says.'

He reached for the counter and took another long slug of beer. Yuki was pretty sure that it was from the bottle that was supposed to be hers.

He wrapped his hand around her braid. She could feel his fist against the back of her head. His lips were soft, and her mouth sank into them. The sinking was disconcerting, like having misjudged the depth of a puddle. The whole kiss she wondered: is this how it should be, or this, or this? And after it ended, she still didn't have the answer.

'Now I've got two blessings,' he said, winked, and tapped her nose and the silver at her neck.

His friends whooped and raised their bottles. Cigarettes swung and ash danced.

'Ignore them,' he said. Yuki wished she remembered his name.

'Careful with my girl,' Odile said. 'She's delicate.'

Yuki put her hands to her face like a kid playing peekaboo. Her young man said, 'They're idiots. How about you and me, we head over to the park, share a cigarette, look at the moon?'

Odile took her hand. The palm was soft and Yuki clutched it.

'And leave me here?' asked Odile. 'With these lunks?'

Her lunks pretended to be insulted.

'Fine then,' Sgt Pepper said. 'We'll all go moon-gazing.'

They clinked their beers and swallowed them down. Whichever one had been Yuki's had slipped into someone else's hands.

While they'd been in the bar the sun had set, though gold still rimmed the sky. The moon was a silver freckle. He took her hand, and she let him. His grip was hot and sticky.

It was eight o'clock. Yuki's father would just have got home. Her mother would be cooking dinner and listening to

Chiemi Eri records. Chiemi supposedly looked like Yuki's mother the spring they got married. Yuki couldn't imagine her father as a suitor, or as the man who in post-war gloom had gone to the market every Sunday to buy peaches for his pregnant wife. The man who rotated them each morning, so each inch would get an equal share of light.

The kisser tugged Yuki back. In front of them, the shimmering puff of Odile's head swung from escort to escort.

'Why would you want to enlist?' Yuki asked. Her family had built a life on forgetting the war. Her father said the only good thing America did for Japan was forbid them to have an army. Who needed tanks when you could own a midsize sedan with a radio?

'Pay's good,' he said. 'My da worked on the docks, but that isn't there any more, is it? I'm going to see the world. All of it.' He put an arm around her. 'Maybe I'll say hello to Japan for you. Get me a kimono.'

He said it, key-MOW-no. She laughed, imagining his hairy arms sticking out from silken sleeves. Giggling, her body rocked forwards, and she felt the cool crucifix shift.

'You better take this back,' she said. 'It's your mom's blessing, right?'

Again his arms were around her neck, the fingers quick and confident. The others moved ahead. He struggled with the catch. His pupils were as wide as dimes. Then he was putting it back around his own throat.

'We'd better catch up,' she said. Odile and the Brooklyn Boys were already walking into the park.

'If we have to.'

They sat on a bench a way off from the rest. He continued to cloak her hand in his.

'When I was a kid, I'd go down to Red Hook and make hitchhiking thumbs at the freighters.' He crooked a thumb at her, as if she were a ship, able to take him away. 'What

does everyone want to come to New York for? It's not so great. Just diners and dirt.'

Yuki tried to look exotic, but she wasn't sure what that entailed. The three boys stood around Odile and in the night air, they seemed to be men, their shoulders broadening. Odile sat on the edge of the fountain, and in the moonlight her face was pale and rabbity. There was a story Yuki's mother told of the rabbit who fed himself to Buddha. As a reward Buddha sent him to live on the moon. Yuki always thought the moon looked lonely.

'What're you thinking about?'

'Nothing.'

The boy's arm pulled her so close that the buttons on his jacket bit into her side. His hand skimmed her right knee. The last time she remembered her leg being touched was her first day of American school. She had worn long, ribbed, white socks. Her mother had stopped before turning the corner and set each cotton ridge ruler-straight, but by the time Yuki came home, she was all diagonals.

The pallid park lights lengthened his face and puddles of shadow collected under his browbones – it was a face like an alleyway. What was charming in the bright light of six thirty now seemed ominous. Yuki edged her fingers towards her left knee, trying to feel what he was feeling. The knee felt as it always did, cold, smooth and bony.

Odile held three cigarettes, one in each finger gap. She hand-fed her suitors, gently inserting the rolls into male mouths. They were laughing. In other corners of the park, other strangers were laughing. The noise sounded jangled and foreign.

His hand moved up her leg. The thin muslin provided little defence. Her stiff school skirt would have protested.

'Where would you go,' he asked, 'if you could go anywhere in the whole world?'

Home, she thought, to the tablecloth her mother had cut

from green gingham. Home where her mother would be trying to make cheeseless pizza. At home, she would stretch her lips to replay the kiss in slow motion. In private, she might begin to understand it.

'Maybe Europe,' she said. She thought of the postcard pinned above her desk. The houses with their shattered windows and joyful laundry. The artist was Austrian, her teacher had said.

'Asia and Africa are the New Worlds. America is the New Old World,' he said. 'Why would you want to go to the Old Old World? It's dead.'

'I guess.'

One hand was wedged right between the tops of her thighs, and the other was doing something to the side of her dress – lifting it? Despite the talk of travel, she felt as if a gigantic gob of chewing gum had stuck her to her seat.

The boy seemed to decide something. The hand lifted from her legs. He put a palm on each of her shoulders, pulling her close. He bent and touched his forehead to hers. She inhaled. Gushing New York summer stink obliterated any individual smell he might have had. His two eyes melted into a single blur; she felt his fingers on her shoulder blades. She concentrated on each pad, one after the other, locating where they pressed into her. His mouth and her mouth hovered at an inch distance. His breath was warm, or was it hers, rebounding against his teeth?

She couldn't see Odile any more. Yuki strained to know which laughter was her friend's.

'Slow down,' she said. She was talking as much to Fate as to the man. Her life had been a solitary amble. Tonight, it was sprinting, tripping over its own feet.

'Hey. Relax. Don't worry, I've got you.' He touched her cheek.

He leaned forwards. Yuki tilted back. He pressed further.

She leaned back until her shoulders jammed against the slats of the bench. The moon disappeared behind the shadow of his face.

In her father's Tanizaki, Naomi – fifteen, a whole year younger than Yuki – was initiated into slick pleasures by her older lover. Naomi was limber and hungry. Yuki had been attracted to something in the rouge-red characters on the cover. The complicated strokes of: 愛, love. The way the radical 爪, claw, stabbed at 心, heart. Did real Japanese people notice this linguistic quirk, or if it was just because she was half foreign and a slow reader? She'd kept reading because she was amazed her father owned such a scandalous book.

Of course, the novel was a political allegory and not a guide for girls, but Naomi had cradled mature male lust in her juvenile white fingers and Yuki couldn't slow a single boy. Pathetic. How had she retreated into horizontality? He had a good jawline. He had freckles. These were good things. He kissed her again, and the incisors scraped along her lip. The smirking face on the Happy Hour sign came back to her. Yuki thought, I am not here. Her lashes struggled like window wipers scratching ice. She was staring at the bar's grubby window. She was in Odile's room hooking the silver strap of a sandal over her heel. She was with her mother listening to Chiemi. She was on the fire escape watching the whole world change colour. She was not pressed against a bench, a great male weight on top of her. She was not lying on her back, her dress now pushed all the way up. Jesus's silver toes were not grinding into her collarbone. Hands were not moving up along her thighs, to the white flap of her underwear.

'Odile,' she said. The word came out like a timid 'oh-dear'.

A finger hooked up under her underwear's elastic. It felt blunt and male. Trigger finger, she thought. Yuki's mind flashed to her father's newspaper, to the photograph of the execution of a Viet Cong boy: a slight wind had lifted the

soft brush of his black hair and his shirt was loose and open at the neck. Inches from his temple, the gun had done its work. Black blood and grey print pages. More fingers probed.

The boot flashed just above Yuki's eyes. The head was pushed away, and above her was the blackening sky. The weight lifted. Something wet, spit or blood, splattered her cheek. Yuki slid from the bench to the pathway, smacking her knee.

'Up,' Odile said. 'Now.'

Yuki grasped Odile's hand. The boy was standing holding his nose. Her arm was pulled taut. Odile was tugging Yuki to her feet. Odile was running. The silver sandals clapped against Yuki's heels. She slipped out of them entirely. Her bare feet smacked the sidewalk. Slap, slap, the sound of applause or the sound of a beating. They turned pink under the streetlight. Two red dancing shoes. The liquid fear pooled in her lungs began to drain. As Odile's hair rippled in a bright pelt, Yuki's braid untangled and spread out into a black cape. In another life, they could have been superheroes soaring through the night. But it was this life. Sweat stuck behind her ears. The sunglasses slipped to the ground. Glass slashed her foot.

Back in Odile's room, Yuki tweezed out a large triangle of glass. Her blood had striped the lens with a wet sunset red. On the bed, Odile counted out the cash – it was maybe thirty dollars in total. One of the notes was carefully Scotch-taped, the transparent plastic smoothed down on both sides of the bill. Yuki wondered which boy had done this, or if the wound had been passed on transaction after transaction. Odile split the bills into two neat piles.

'Your share,' she said.

Yuki took the notes and wondered what in all of New York was worth buying. Odile stuffed hers into the pocket of a sun-faded dress that hung pinched in the window.

‘Hidden in plain sight,’ she said and winked a heavy wink like someone from the old movies.

‘Do they often . . .’ Yuki asked.

‘I don’t normally leave the bar with them.’

‘But you have?’

‘There was a friend, at my old school, we used to go out together. We were always okay.’

Somehow it was Yuki’s fault. Amidst the swathes of colour, Yuki located the husks of her old clothes. She felt like a bug crawling back into its sheddings.

‘You can keep the dress if you want.’

‘My parents would want to know where I got it.’

She changed fast. This is what came of being noticed: this putrid bile in her gut.

‘He hadn’t actually done anything?’ Odile asked, ‘Right? As soon as I saw him on top of you, I came. It was just a minute.’

The leather carapaces of Yuki’s buckled shoes lay in the corner of the room. She pulled them on.

‘I guess not.’ Things that took a minute: brushing her teeth, toasted barley tea dissipating into a pot, catching a fly in a glass tumbler, losing hope. Two days ago, she’d been offended that a flasher didn’t want to wave his squiggle of a dick at her. Now, look at her running. The boy’s fingers had only reached towards the dry, purple part of herself. The nails had only scratched the ends of her thighs. They could just have easily been the twigs from the shrubs she’d clambered through in Central Park as a child.

‘Good. Don’t forget your money.’ Odile put it in her hands, looping Yuki’s thumb over Alexander Hamilton’s injured face.

Walking home, Yuki tried not to pressure the injured foot. Each step stung, and her feet made a husky shuffle. The Village was sequinned with happy couples and laugher wove into the air. She removed the money from her pocket and

held it up to the breeze. A car rushed past as her fingers loosened. The bills scattered like the first leaves of that fall. They curled and tumbled away from her. There was nothing she wanted to buy.

Yuki shoved her shoes onto their shelf. The warmth pricked. She looked at the clock: 9:30 p.m. It felt later, darker.

'Yuki-chan, it's late. Where were you?' Yuki's mother was in the kitchen washing dishes, her back to the door. Soap bubbles popped in the quiet air of the apartment.

'A friend's house.'

She dried her hands with a dish towel, turned, dropped the towel into the full sink, and rushed towards her daughter. 'Are you okay? What happened?'

'Nothing. I'm fine.'

'Your hair,' said her mother.

Yuki reached up and felt the strands. Sweat from running, sweat from heat, and sweat from fear soaked them.

'What happened? Are you all right?' her father asked. Black flowers of ink blossomed on his lower lip where he had sucked his pen.

'I fell.' Yuki cried, and she couldn't have said if the tears were for the bloody shards of orange glass, the boy's hands, her braid undone, or the neat blue-striped bowl of rice that her mother had left out. Each grain seemed plump with well-being. She added, 'And nobody helped me up.'

Her father pulled her into a hug that smelled of pink erasers and wool. His belly and arms were warm, and she felt the numbness in her temples melt. They were the same height. His face warmed her neck. For work, her father Brylcreemed his hair straight and flat. But tonight it was post-shower soft.

'We'll be home soon,' he said. 'Finally home.'

'Oh Daddy,' she said. Yuki pictured herself and Sgt Pepper

in their separate planes aloft the Pacific. It didn't feel like an escape.

She jammed her hands into the stiff pockets of her skirt. There was something sharp and hard. Glass. When had she put it there? In her room, she removed the orange triangle. The blood had flaked off in her pocket. Yuki walked to her window, pulling it wide open. She was about to drop the worthless glass into the dark, but each edge glowed in the streetlight. Below, young men and women yawped their drunken pleasure. Yuki decided to keep her broken bit of joy. Lifting the glass to her eye, she painted the moon gold.