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Bel Canto

Written by Ann Patchett

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ANN PATCHETT

Bel Canto

A NOVEL



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Fonti e colline chiesi agli Dei;
m 'udiro alfine,
pago io vovro,
ne mai quel fonte co 'desir miei,
ne mai quel monte trapassero

"I asked the Gods for hills and springs;
They listened to me at last.
I shall live contented.
And I shall never desire to go beyond that spring,
nor shall I desire to cross that mountain."

—Sei Ariette I: Malinconia, ninfa gentile
Vincenzo Bellini

Sprecher: Ihr Fremdlinge! was sucht oder fordert ihn von uns?
Tamino: Freundschaft und Liebe.
Sprecher: Bist du bereit, es mit deinem Leben zu erkämpfen?
Tamino: Ja.

Speaker: Stranger, what do you seek or ask from us?
Tamino: Friendship and love.
Speaker: And are you prepared even if it costs you your life?
Tamino: I am.



When the lights went off the accompanist kissed her. Maybe he had been turning towards her just before it was completely dark, maybe he was lifting his hands. There must have been some movement, a gesture, because every person in the living room would later remember a kiss. They did not *see* a kiss, that would have been impossible. The darkness that came on them was startling and complete. Not only was everyone there certain of a kiss, they claimed they could identify the type of kiss: it was strong and passionate, and it took her by surprise. They were all looking right at her when the lights went out. They were still applauding, each on his or her feet, still in the fullest throes of hands slapping together, elbows up. Not one person had come anywhere close to tiring. The Italians and the French were yelling, *"Brava! Brava!"* and the Japanese turned away from them. Would he have kissed her like that had the room been lit? Was his mind so full of her that in the very instant of darkness he reached for her, did he think so quickly? Or was it that they wanted her too, all of the men and women in the room, and so they imagined it collectively. They were so taken by the beauty of her voice that they wanted to cover her mouth with their mouth, drink in. Maybe music

could be transferred, devoured, owned. What would it mean to kiss the lips that had held such a sound?

Some of them had loved her for years. They had every recording she had ever made. They kept a notebook and wrote down every place they had seen her, listing the music, the names of the cast, the conductor. There were others there that night who had not heard her name, who would have said, if asked, that opera was a collection of nonsensical cat screechings, that they would much rather pass three hours in a dentist's chair. These were the ones who wept openly now, the ones who had been so mistaken.

No one was frightened of the darkness. They barely noticed. They kept applauding. The people who lived in other countries assumed that things like this must happen here all the time. Lights go on, go off. People from the host country knew it to be true. Besides, the timing of the electrical failure seemed dramatic and perfectly correct, as if the lights had said, *You have no need for sight. Listen.* What no one stopped to think about was why the candles on every table went out as well, perhaps at that very moment or the moment before. The room was filled with the pleasant smell of candles just snuffed, a smoke that was sweet and wholly unthreatening. A smell that meant it was late now, time to go to bed.

They continued the applause. They assumed she continued her kiss.

Roxane Coss, lyric soprano, was the only reason Mr. Hosokawa had come to this country. Mr. Hosokawa was the reason everyone else had come to the party. It was not the kind of place one was likely to visit. The reason the host country (a poor country) was throwing a birthday party of unreasonable expense for a foreigner who had to be all but bribed into attending was that this foreigner was the founder and chairman of Nansei, the largest electronics corporation in Japan. It was the fondest wish of the host country that Mr. Hosokawa would smile on them, help them in some of the hundred different ways they needed helping. That could be achieved through training or trade. A factory (and this was the dream so dear its name could hardly be

spoken) could be built here, where cheap labor could mean a profit for everyone involved. Industry could move the economy away from the farming of coca leaves and blackhearted poppies, creating the illusion of a country moving away from the base matter of cocaine and heroin, so as to promote foreign aid and make trafficking of those very drugs less conspicuous. But the plan had never taken root in the past, as the Japanese, by nature, erred on the side of caution. They believed in the danger and the rumors of danger countries such as this presented, so to have Mr. Hosokawa himself, not an executive vice president, not a politician, come and sit at the table was proof that a hand might be extended. And maybe that hand would have to be coaxed and begged. Maybe it would have to be pulled from its own deep pocket. But this visit, with its glorious birthday dinner replete with opera star, with several meetings planned and trips to possible factory sites tomorrow, was a full world closer than they had ever come before and the air in the room was sugared with promise. Representatives from more than a dozen countries who had been misled as to the nature of Mr. Hosokawa's intentions were present at the party, investors and ambassadors who might not encourage their governments to put a dime into the host country but would certainly support Nansei's every endeavor, now circled the room in black tie and evening gown, making toasts and laughing.

As far as Mr. Hosokawa was concerned, his trip was not for the purposes of business, diplomacy, or a friendship with the President, as later would be reported. Mr. Hosokawa disliked travel and did not know the President. He had made his intentions, or lack of intentions, abundantly clear. He did not plan to build a plant. He would never have agreed to a trip to a strange country to celebrate his birthday with people he did not know. He was not much for celebrating his birthday with people he did know, and certainly not his fifty-third, which he considered to be a number entirely without note. He had turned down half a dozen strong requests from these very people, for this exact party, until the promised gift was the presence of Roxane Coss.

And if she was the present, who would decline? No matter how far away, how inappropriate, how misleading it might prove to be, who would say no?

But first remember another birthday, his eleventh, the birthday on which Katsumi Hosokawa first heard opera, Verdi's *Rigoletto*. His father had taken him to Tokyo by train and together they walked to the theater in a steady downpour. It was October 22 and so it was a cold autumn rain and the streets were waxed in a paper-thin layer of wet red leaves. When they arrived at the Tokyo Metropolitan Festival Hall, their undershirts were wet beneath coats and sweaters. The tickets waiting inside Katsumi Hosokawa's father's billfold were wet and discolored. They did not have especially good seats, but their view was unobstructed. In 1954, money was precious; train tickets and operas were unimaginable things. In a different time, such a production would have seemed too complicated for a child, but this was only a handful of years after the war and children then were much more likely to understand a whole host of things that might seem impossible for children now. They climbed the long set of stairs to their row, careful not to look down into the dizzying void beneath them. They bowed and begged to be excused by every person who stood to let them pass into their seats, and then they unfolded their seats and slipped inside. They were early, but other people were earlier, as part of the luxury that came with the ticket price was the right to sit quietly in this beautiful place and wait. They waited, father and son, without speaking, until finally the darkness fell and the first breath of music stirred from someplace far below them. Tiny people, insects, really, slipped out from behind the curtains, opened their mouths, and with their voices gilded the walls with their yearning, their grief, their boundless, reckless love that would lead each one to separate ruin.

It was during that performance of *Rigoletto* that opera imprinted itself on Katsumi Hosokawa, a message written on the pink undersides of his eyelids that he read to himself while he slept. Many years

later, when everything was business, when he worked harder than anyone in a country whose values are structured on hard work, he believed that life, true life, was something that was stored in music. True life was kept safe in the lines of Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* while you went out into the world and met the obligations required of you. Certainly he knew (though did not completely understand) that opera wasn't for everyone, but for everyone he hoped there was something. The records he cherished, the rare opportunities to see a live performance, those were the marks by which he gauged his ability to love. Not his wife, his daughters, or his work. He never thought that he had somehow transferred what should have filled his daily life into opera. Instead he knew that without opera, this part of himself would have vanished altogether. It was early in the second act, when Rigoletto and Gilda sang together, their voices twining, leaping, that he reached out for his father's hand. He had no idea what they were saying, nor did he know that they played the parts of father and daughter, he only knew that he needed to hold to something. The pull they had on him was so strong he could feel himself falling forward out of the high and distant seats.

Such love breeds loyalty, and Mr. Hosokawa was a loyal man. He never forgot the importance of Verdi in his life. He became attached to certain singers, as everyone does. He made special collections of Schwarzkopf and Sutherland. He believed in the genius of Callas above all others. There was never a great deal of time in his days, not the kind of time such interest clearly merited. Custom was that after having dinner with clients and completing paperwork, he would spend thirty minutes listening to music and reading librettos before falling asleep. It was impossibly rare, maybe five Sundays a year, that he found three consecutive hours to listen to one opera start to finish. Once, in his late forties, he ate a spoiled oyster and suffered a vicious bout of food poisoning that kept him home for three days. He remembered this time as happily as any vacation because he played Handel's *Alcina* continually, even while he slept.

It was his eldest daughter, Kiyomi, who bought him his first

recording of Roxane Coss for his birthday. Her father was a nearly impossible man to buy gifts for, and so when she saw the disc and a name she did not recognize, she thought she would take a chance. But it wasn't the unknown name that drew her, it was the woman's face. Kiyomi found the pictures of sopranos irritating. They were always peering over the tops of fans or gazing through veils of soft netting. But Roxane Coss looked at her directly, even her chin was straight, her eyes were wide open. Kiyomi reached for her before she even noticed it was a recording of *Lucia di Lammermoor*. How many recordings of *Lucia di Lammermoor* did her father own? It didn't matter. She gave her money to the girl at the counter.

When Mr. Hosokawa put the CD in the player and sat down in his chair to listen, he did not go back to work that night. It was as if he was a boy in those high seats in Tokyo again, his father's hand large and warm around his own. He set the disc to play over and over, skipping impatiently past anything that was not her voice. It was soaring, that voice, warm and complicated, utterly fearless. How could it be at once controlled and so reckless? He called Kiyomi's name and she came and stood in the doorway of his study. She started to say something—yes? or, what? or, sir?—but before she could make out the words she heard that voice, the straight-ahead woman from the picture. Her father didn't even say it, he simply gestured towards one speaker with his open hand. She was enormously pleased to have done something so right. The music praised her. Mr. Hosokawa closed his eyes. He dreamed.

In the five years since then he had seen eighteen performances featuring Roxane Coss. The first was a lucky coincidence, the other times he went to the city where she would be, creating business to take him there. He saw *La Sonnambula* three nights in a row. He had never sought her out or made himself to be anything more than any other member of the audience. He did not assume his appreciation for her talent exceeded anyone else's. He was more inclined to believe that only a fool would not feel about her exactly how he felt. There was nothing more to want than the privilege to sit and listen.

Read a profile of Katsumi Hosokawa in any business magazine. He would not talk in terms of passion, as passion was a private matter, but opera was always there, the human interest angle to make him appear more accessible. Other CEOs were shown fly-fishing in Scottish rivers or piloting their own Learjets into Helsinki. Mr. Hosokawa was photographed at home in the leather chair he sat in when he listened, a Nansei EX-12 stereo system behind him. There were the inevitable questions about favorites. There was the inevitable answer.

For a price that was considerably more than the entire cost of the rest of evening (food, service, transportation, flowers, security) Roxane Coss was persuaded to come to the party, as it fell in between the end of her season at La Scala and the beginning of her appearance at Teatro Colón in Argentina. She would not attend the dinner (she did not eat before she sang) but would arrive at the end of the meal and perform six arias with her accompanist. Mr. Hosokawa was told by letter that he could make a request upon accepting the invitation, and while the hosts could make no promises, the request would be given to Miss Coss for her consideration. It was Mr. Hosokawa's selection, the aria from *Rusalka,* which she had just completed when the lights went out. It was to be the end of the program, though who is to say if she might have sung an encore or even two had the lights remained on?

Mr. Hosokawa chose *Rusalka* as a measure of his respect for Miss Coss. It was the centerpiece of her repertoire and would require no extra preparation on her behalf, a piece that surely would have been included in the program had he not requested it. He did not seek something achingly obscure, an aria from *Partenope* perhaps, so as to prove himself an aficionado. He simply wanted to hear her sing *Rusalka* while standing close to her in a room. *If a human soul should dream of me, may he still remember me on awaking!* His translator had written it out for him from the Czech years ago.

The lights stayed off. The applause began to show the slightest downward sweep. People blinked and strained to see her again. A

minute passed, then two, and still the group remained comfortably unconcerned. Then Simon Thibault, the French Ambassador, who had, before coming to this country, been promised the much more desirable post of Spain (which had been unfairly given to another man as a payoff for a complicated political favor while Thibault and his family were packing) noticed the lights beneath the kitchen door were still on. He was the first to understand. He felt like he had been startled from a deep sleep, drunk from liquor and pork and Dvořák. He took his wife's hand, reached up for it in the darkness as she was still applauding, and pulled her into the crowd, dark bodies he could not see but pushed himself into. He went towards the direction of the glass doors he remembered being at the far end of the room, craning his head to try and catch a glimpse of starlight for orientation. What he saw was the narrow beam of a flashlight, one and then another, and he felt his heart cave down inside his chest, a feeling that could only be described as sadness.

"Simon?" his wife whispered.

It was already in place, without him seeing any of it, the web was spun and snug around the house, and while his first impulse, the natural impulse, was to press ahead anyway and see if he might beat out the odds, clear logic held him. Better not to draw attention to yourself. Better not to be an example. Somewhere in the front of the room the accompanist was kissing the opera singer, and so Ambassador Thibault drew his wife, Edith, into his arms.

"I'll sing in the dark," Roxane Coss called out, "if someone will get me a candle."

With these words the room stiffened and the final moment of applause turned to silence as it was noted that the candles, too, were dark. It was the end of the evening. By now the bodyguards napped inside limousines like great, overfed dogs. All across the room men slipped their hands into pockets and found only neatly pressed handkerchiefs and folding money. A surge of voices went up, there was some shuffling, and then, as if by magic, the lights came on.

* * *

It had been a beautiful party, though no one would remember that. White asparagus in hollandaise, a fish course of turbot with crispy sweet onions, tiny chops, only three or four bites apiece, in a cranberry demiglaze. Usually struggling countries longing to impress the heads of important foreign corporations chose Russian caviar and French champagne. Russian and French, Russian and French, as if that was the only way to prove prosperity. On every table sprays of yellow orchids, each flower no bigger than a thumbnail, all locally grown, trembled and balanced like mobiles, rearranging themselves with every exhalation of a guest. The effort that had gone into the evening, the positioning of each stem, the sweeping calligraphy of the place cards, had been lost without a moment's appreciation. Paintings had been borrowed from the national museum: a dark-eyed Madonna presenting a tiny Christ on her fingertips, his face oddly knowing and adult, was placed over the mantel. The garden, which the guests would see only for a moment when they walked the short distance from their cars to the front door or if they happened to glance out the window while it was still light enough, was polished and composed, birds of paradise and tightly wrapped canna lilies, banks of lamb's ear and emerald fern. They were not far from the jungle, and even in the most domesticated garden the flowers strained to overtake the dull stretch of neat Bermuda grass. From early in the morning young men had worked, wiping the dust from the leathery leaves with damp cloths, picking up the fallen blossoms of bougainvillea that rotted beneath the hedges. Three days before they had put a fresh coat of whitewash on the high stucco wall that surrounded the home of the Vice President, careful that none of the paint should fall on the grass. Every element was planned: crystal saltcellars, lemon mousse, American bourbon. There was no dancing, no band. The only music would be after dinner, Roxane Coss and her accompanist, a man in his thirties from Sweden or Norway with fine yellow hair and beautiful, tapering fingers.

* * *

Two hours before the beginning of Mr. Hosokawa's birthday party, President Masuda, a native of this country born of Japanese parents, had sent a note of regret saying that important matters beyond his control would prevent him from attending the evening's event.

There was great speculation about this decision after the evening turned bad. Was it the President's good luck? God's divine will? A tip-off, conspiracy, plot? Sadly, it was nothing so random. The party was scheduled to begin at eight o'clock and should have lasted past midnight. The President's soap opera began at nine. Among the President's cabinet members and advisers it was an open secret that matters of state could not be held Monday through Friday for one hour beginning at two in the afternoon or Tuesday evening for one hour beginning at nine. Mr. Hosokawa's birthday fell on a Tuesday this year. There was nothing that could be done about that. Nor could anyone conceive how to have a party that commenced at ten o'clock at night or had concluded by eight-thirty and which allowed time for the President to return home. It was suggested that the program could be taped, but the President abhorred taping. There was enough taping to endure when he was out of the country. All he asked of anyone was that certain hours of his week remain unquestionably open. The discussion of the problem of Mr. Hosokawa's ill-timed birthday party lasted for days. After a great deal of negotiating, the President relented and said he would attend. Hours before the party began, for an obvious and unstated reason, he firmly, irrevocably, changed his mind.

While President Masuda's commitment to his programs was completely known and acknowledged by his political inner circle, this commitment somehow managed to remain utterly unknown to the press or the people. The host country was mad for soap operas, and yet the President's unwavering devotion to his television set was so potentially embarrassing his cabinet would have gladly traded it in for an indiscreet mistress. Even members of the government who were themselves known to follow certain programs could not bear to see

the obsession played out so rigidly in their head of state. So for many of the people at the party who worked with the President, his absence was noted with disappointment and no real surprise. Everyone else inquired, Has there been an emergency? Is President Masuda unwell?

"Matters in Israel," they were told confidentially.

"Israel," they whispered. They were impressed, never dreaming that President Masuda would be consulted on matters in Israel.

There was a clear division among the almost two hundred guests that night: those who knew where the President was and those who didn't, and so it remained until both sides forgot about him altogether. Mr. Hosokawa barely noticed the absence. He cared very little about meeting the President. What could a president possibly mean on the evening one would meet Roxane Coss?

Into the presidential void, the Vice President, Ruben Iglesias, stepped forward to host the party. This was not so difficult to imagine. The dinner was being given in his home. Throughout the cocktails and hors d'oeuvres, the sit-down dinner and the creamy singing, his mind stayed on the President. How easy it was to picture his running mate now as Iglesias had seen him a hundred times before, sitting in the dark on the edge of the bed in the master suite of the presidential palace, his suit jacket folded over the arm of a chair, his hands folded and pressed between his knees. He would be watching a small television that sat on his dresser while his wife watched the same program on a large screen in the den downstairs. A picture of a beautiful girl tied to a chair reflected in his glasses. She twisted her wrists back and forth, over and over again, until suddenly she found some slack in the rope and slid one hand free. Maria was free! President Masuda rocked back and clapped his hands silently. To think he had almost missed this, after waiting for weeks! The girl glanced quickly around the storeroom and then leaned forward to untie the coarse rope that bound her ankles.

Then in an instant the picture of Maria was gone and Ruben Iglesias lifted his face to the lights which were suddenly restored to his living room. He had just begun to register that a bulb was burned out

on a side table lamp when men burst into the party from every window and wall. Everywhere the Vice President turned the edges of the room seemed to push forward, yelling. Heavy boots and gun butts pounded through vents, stormed in through doors. People were thrown together and then just as quickly broke apart in a state of animal panic. The house seemed to rise up like a boat caught inside the wide arm of a wave and flip onto its side. Silverware flew into the air, the tines of forks twisting against knife blades, vases smashed into walls. People slipped, fell, ran, but only for an instant, only until their eyes readjusted to the light and they saw the utter uselessness of their fight.

It was easy to see who was in charge—the older men, the ones shouting orders. They did not introduce themselves at the time and so, for a while, they were thought of not by their names but by their most distinctive features. Benjamin: raging shingles. Alfredo: mustache, first and second fingers missing on left hand. Hector: gold wire glasses that had lost one arm. With the Generals came fifteen soldiers who ranged in age from twenty to fourteen. There were now an additional eighteen people at the party. No one there could count them at the time. They moved and spread. They doubled and tripled as they pulsed around the room, appeared from behind curtains, came down from upstairs, disappeared into the kitchen. They were impossible to count because they seemed to be everywhere, because they were so similar, like trying to count bees in a swarm around your head. They wore faded clothing in dark colors, many in the dull green of shallow, sludgy ponds, a handful in denim or black. Over their clothing they wore a second layer of weapons, sashes of bullets, flashy knives in back pockets, all manner of guns, smaller guns holstered to thighs or sticking up hopefully from belts, larger guns cradled like infants, brandished like sticks. They wore caps with the bills pulled down, but no one was interested in their eyes, only their guns, only their

shark-toothed knives. A man with three guns was recorded subconsciously as three men. There were other similarities between the men: they were thin, either from the wanting of food or just the business of growing, their shoulders and knees poked at their clothing. They were also dirty, noticeably so. Even in the confusion of the moment everyone could see that they were smudged and streaked, arms and faces and hands mottled in dirt as if they had arrived at the party by digging up through the gardens and dislodging a panel in the floor.

This entrance could not have taken more than a minute, and yet it seemed to last longer than all four courses of dinner. There was time for every guest to consider a strategy, revise it thoroughly, and abandon it. Husbands found wives who had drifted to the other side of the room, countrymen sought out their own and stood in blocks, speaking rapidly to one another. It was the consensus of the party that they had been kidnapped not by La Familia de Martin Suarez (so named for a boy of ten who had been shot dead by the government's army while passing out flyers for a political rally) but by the much more famous terrorists, La Dirección Auténtica, a revolutionary group of murderers whose reputation had been built over five years of wide-ranging brutality. It was the unspoken belief of everyone who was familiar with this organization and with the host country that they were all as good as dead, when in fact it was the terrorists who would not survive the ordeal. Then the terrorist missing two fingers who was wearing wrinkled green pants and a mismatched jacket raised the large .45-caliber auto and fired two rounds into the ceiling. A splattering of plaster dislodged and dusted a portion of the guests, at which point several of the women screamed, either from the firing of the gun or the touch of something unexpected on their bare shoulders.

"Attention," the man with the gun said in Spanish. "This is an arrest. We demand absolute cooperation and attention."

Roughly two-thirds of the guests looked frightened, but a scattered third looked both frightened and puzzled. These were the ones leaning towards the man with the gun, instead of away from him.

These were the ones that did not speak Spanish. They whispered quickly to their neighbors. The word *atención* was repeated in several languages. That word was clear enough.

General Alfredo had anticipated his announcement bringing about a sort of pricked, waiting silence, but no silence came. The whispering caused him to fire into the ceiling again, carelessly this time, hitting a light fixture, which exploded. The room was dimmer, and slivers of glass settled into shirt collars and rested on hair. *"Arresto,"* he repeated. *"Detengase!"*

It may seem surprising at first, such a large number of people unable to speak the language of the host country, but then you remember it was a gathering to promote foreign interest and the two guests of honor did not know ten words of Spanish between them, although *arresto* made logical sense to Roxane Coss and meant nothing to Mr. Hosokawa. They leaned forward as if it might make understanding easier. Miss Coss was not leaning far, as the accompanist had wrapped himself around her like a security wall, his body ready, anxious, to step in front of any bullet that might stray in her direction.

Gen Watanabe, the young man who worked as Mr. Hosokawa's translator, leaned over and spoke the words in Japanese to his employer.

Not that it would have done him any good in these present circumstances, but Mr. Hosokawa had once tried to learn Italian from a set of tapes he listened to on airplanes. For business purposes he should have learned English, but he was more interested in improving his understanding of opera. *"Il bigliettaio mi fece il biglietto,"* the tape said. *"Il bigliettaio mi fece il biglietto,"* he mouthed back silently, not wanting to disturb the other passengers. But his efforts were minimal at best and in the end he made no progress. The sound of the language spoken made him long for the sound of the language sung and soon he was slipping *Madama Butterfly* into the CD player instead.

When he was younger, Mr. Hosokawa saw the great advantage of

languages. When he was older he wished he had made the commitment to learn them. The translators! They were ever-changing, some good, some full of schoolboy stiffness, some utterly, hopelessly stupid. Some could hardly speak their native Japanese and continually halted conversations to look up a word in a dictionary. There were those who could perform their job well enough, but were not the sort of people one wished to travel with. Some would abandon him the moment the final sentence of a meeting was completed, leaving him stranded and mute if further negotiations were necessary. Others were dependent, wanting to stay with him through every meal, wanting to accompany him on his walks and recount for him every moment of their own lusterless childhoods. What he went through just for a mouthful of French, a few clear sentences of English. What he went through before Gen.

Gen Watanabe had been assigned to him at a conference on the worldwide distribution of goods in Greece. Normally, Mr. Hosokawa tried to avoid the surprise element local translators so often provided, but his secretary had been unable to locate a Greek translator who could travel on short notice. During the plane ride to Athens, Mr. Hosokawa did not talk with the two senior vice presidents and three sales managers who accompanied him on the trip. Instead, he listened to Maria Callas sing a collection of Greek songs on his Nansei headset, thinking philosophically if the meeting was unintelligible to him, at least he would have seen the country she considered her home. After waiting in line to have his passport stamped and his luggage rifled through, Mr. Hosokawa saw a young man holding a sign, *Hosokawa,* neatly lettered. The young man was Japanese, which, frankly, was a relief. It was easier to deal with a countryman who knew a little Greek than a Greek who knew a little Japanese. This translator was tall for being Japanese. His hair was heavy and long in the front and it brushed across the top rims of his small round glasses even as he tried to keep it parted to one side. He appeared to be quite young. It was the hair. The hair denoted to Mr. Hosokawa a lack of seriousness, or perhaps it was just the fact that the young man was in

Athens rather than Tokyo that made him seem less serious. Mr. Hosokawa approached him, gave the slightest bow of acknowledgment that only included his neck and upper shoulders, a gesture that said, You have found me.

The young man reached forward and took Mr. Hosokawa's briefcase, bowing as he did so to the waist. He bowed seriously, though somewhat less deeply, to both of the vice presidents and the three sales managers. He introduced himself as the translator, inquired after the comfort of the flight, gave the estimated driving time to the hotel and the starting time of the first meeting. In the crowded Athens airport, where every second man seemed to sport a mustache and an Uzi, among the jostling of bags and the din of shouting and overhead announcements, Mr. Hosokawa heard something in this young man's voice, something familiar and soothing. It was not a musical voice, and yet it affected him like music. Speak again.

"Where are you from?" Mr. Hosokawa asked.

"Nagano city, sir."

"Very beautiful, and the Olympics—"

Gen nodded, contributing no information about the Olympics.

Mr. Hosokawa struggled to come up with something else. It had been a long flight and it seemed that in the time he had been on the plane he had forgotten how to make conversation. He felt it should be incumbent upon Gen to attempt to draw him out. "And your family, are they still there?"

Gen Watanabe paused for a moment as if he were remembering. A swarm of Australian teenagers passed them, each with a knapsack strapped to her back. Their shouts and laughter filled the concourse. "Wombat!" one girl cried out, and the others answered, "Wombat! Wombat! Wombat!" They stumbled in their laughter and clung to each other's arms. "They are all there," Gen said, eyeing the backs of the teenagers with cautious suspicion. "My father, mother, and two sisters."

"And your sisters, are they married?" Mr. Hosokawa did not care

about the sisters, but the voice was something he could almost place, like the notes opening the first act of, what?

Gen looked at him directly. "Married, sir."

Suddenly this dull question took on the edge of something inappropriate. Mr. Hosokawa looked away while Gen took his luggage and led his party through the sliding glass doors into the blasting heat of Greece at noon. The limousine waited, cool and idling, and the men climbed inside.

Over the next two days, everything Gen touched became a smooth surface. He typed up Mr. Hosokawa's handwritten notes, took care of scheduling, found tickets to a performance of *Orfeo ed Euridice* that had been sold out for six weeks. At the conference he spoke in Greek for Mr. Hosokawa and his associates, spoke in Japanese to them, and was, in all matters, intelligent, quick, and professional. But it was not his presence that Mr. Hosokawa was drawn to, it was his lack of presence. Gen was an extension, an invisible self that was constantly anticipating his needs. He felt Gen would remember whatever had been forgotten. One afternoon during a private meeting concerning shipping interests, as Gen translated into Greek what he had just that moment said himself, Mr. Hosokawa finally recognized the voice. Something so familiar, that's what he had thought. It was his own voice.

"I don't do a great deal of business in Greece," Mr. Hosokawa said to Gen that night over drinks in the bar of the Athens Hilton. The bar was on top of the hotel and looked out over the Acropolis, and yet it seemed that the Acropolis, small and chalky in the distance, had been built there for just this reason, to provide a pleasant visual diversion for the drinking guests. "I was wondering about your other languages." Mr. Hosokawa had heard him speaking English on the phone.

Gen made a list, stopping from time to time to see what had been left out. He divided into categories the languages in which he felt he was extremely fluent, very fluent, fluent, passable, and could read. He

knew more languages than there were specialty cocktails listed in the Plexiglas holder on the table. They each ordered a drink called an Areopagus. They toasted.

His Spanish was extremely fluent.