

Aiko was the first. Nothing about her was that different, really. She liked things any fifteen-year-old girl in Japan likes. Flowers, I guess. Hair accessories—bows and stuff. Hello Kitty, maybe? I have no idea what girls like. Which is why I've been on exactly one . . . two . . . oh, wait, no dates ever. I sat behind Aiko for two years and in all that time I only managed to have two real conversations with her. One of them was in homeroom. The last was at her funeral.

It was the crows. Aiko started seeing them at the beginning of first year. A few weeks later she died. Coincidence? Could be—there are crows all over Japan. But the crows of Kusaka Town are not normal crows. They watch you, clicking their beaks and flicking their wings, hungry to break into your mind. They'll push their way into the deepest tunnels of your thoughts, and once they're inside, you can never get them out.

**WELCOME TO KUSAKA!**

**LOVELY BAMBOO FORESTS, MISTY MOUNTAINS,**

**RICE FIELDS AS FAR AS THE EYE CAN SEE.  
WELCOME TO THIS TOTALLY NORMAL  
JAPANESE TOWN!**

If our town had a sign, it would read something like that. And you might believe it because, you know, it's a sign. But I've got news for you: that sign is a liar. Not a single word about crows, or mountain demons, or river trolls. And it's never good when someone has to promise that they're normal. If you meet a person and the first thing she does is tell you that she's "totally normal," you can be one hundred percent sure that she is not. Kusaka Town is like that.

On the day the crows took Aiko away, I was standing in front of my homeroom class, a neatly written piece of paper in hand.

"In the year Hōan 4, Prince Akihito became emperor of all of Japan. He was a generous ruler," I recited, "but when he was twenty-seven his brother tried to steal the throne."

I glanced back at my teacher, Shimizu-*sensei*. "I added that part about him being generous. I mean, who really knows, right? His brother was probably jealous that Akihito-*tenno* was getting all the ladies and, like, drinking all the *sake* or whatever."

"Koda."

"I mean, I don't have a brother, but if I did and he was emperor and drinking all the rice wine, I would probably hate his guts, too."

"Koda."

“I wouldn’t care if I had a brother now, obviously. Not much to be jealous of when your family owns a *shiitake* farm. Well, joke’s on you, brother I don’t have—I hate *shiitake* mushrooms. The farm’s all yours.”

“Koda!”

“What?”

“Gods above, can you focus on something for five minutes? Look at me. Look right here. Okay. Now, finish your report.”

“And so—”

“Not to me. To your classmates.”

As I turned back to the class, Shimizu-*sensei* buried his face in his hands.

“And so began the Hōgen Rebellion, which eventually forced Emperor Akihito from the Chrysanthemum Throne. After being exiled, Emperor Akihito became obsessed. He searched out ancient Chinese texts that told of eternal life and the revenge of the damned. The emperor supposedly died in the year Chōkan 2, but most historians believe he entered the Tengu Road.”

“Most historians?” broke in Kenji, whom I hate.

“Many historians,” I shot back.

“Liar. How many exactly?”

“One hundred and seventeen. You smart-ass.” I mumbled that last part.

“Koda, just finish your report,” Shimizu-*sensei* said.

“And start with ‘I read on the Internet that,’” Kenji helpfully interjected.

I tried to ignore him. “Most, or some, or one historian

believes Akihito-*tenno* entered the Tengu Road and was transformed into a mountain demon of immense power. As a *tengu*, he could change himself into a giant condor. He flew all over Japan starting civil wars and *samurai* rebellions, causing earthquakes and monsoons—he even brought about the fall of the imperial throne itself.”

When I stopped and looked up, two kids in my class waited a moment and then clapped. Weakly. Kenji hissed, “*Usotsuki*,” and threw a pencil at me.

“*Baka*,” I shot back at him.

Shimizu-*sensei* leaned forward in his seat. “Stop it. Both of you. Just . . . Koda, go sit down.”

I squeezed along the aisle to my seat, avoiding Kenji’s stupid face. When I dropped into my chair, Aiko turned back just a bit.

“You’re not a liar,” she whispered.

“Yeah, well, some people don’t believe in mountain demons, I guess. Their mothers probably don’t love them enough to teach them important things.”

“I believe in *tengu*,” Aiko whispered. “My mother left my family to live with a salaryman named Hiroshi, though. So maybe I don’t believe in them after all.”

“Oh,” I started, “I didn’t mean . . .” but then trailed off and sat there in silence.

Aiko slowly turned back to the front. Which is pretty much how all our interactions began and ended: with awkward silence.

Shimizu-*sensei* walked up to the chalkboard and wrote down our next assignment. “You’re first-year students in high school now,” he said. “I expect your compositions to be at least ten pages. This will be due next Friday, and your topic will be as follows.”

He wrote on the chalkboard:

*Something I Regret*

“And it has to be real. Something you actually experienced. I’m talking to you, Koda. Koda, did you hear me?”

“Yes.”

“What did I just say?”

“Write a report.”

“On?”

“On, let’s say, airplanes?”

“Not even close. Look at the board, Koda.”

“Huh. Question: Can we write about airplanes if we want to? I’d like to be a pilot someday, so I think I could do a really good job on this report—if it was about airplanes.”

Kenji raised his hand. “Koda probably hit his head and doesn’t understand the assignment. Maybe it would help if he put his bicycle helmet on. Then he could hear what you’re saying better.”

I glared at him. “That doesn’t even make sense. I’d hear worse with the helmet on. Besides I only need it when I’m riding my bike . . . or if my head feels, you know, sleepy or whatever.”

“Weirdo,” Kenji said.

The bell rang.

“Thank the gods,” our teacher said. “Dismissed.”

Aiko walked up the aisle before I could say something like, *Sorry for insulting the fabric of your broken family life. My bad.* She stopped in front of Shimizu-sensei’s desk while most of our class filed out into the hallway.

“I regret something,” she said. “I regret not freeing the black birds.”

Shimizu-sensei looked up from his papers.

“Sooner, that is. For not freeing the black birds sooner.”

“Sure thing. Birds,” our teacher said, returning to his papers.

“They’re crying,” Aiko continued.

“Sorry to hear that.”

“No,” she whispered, leaning in close. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

Aiko Fujiwara was smart, despite how that last conversation made her sound. She’d started saying increasingly strange things in those weeks, the weeks before she died, but she was usually quiet, so no one really noticed. Even on good days Aiko floated along in her own little world. Which can be attractive to a guy like me. In an isolated and bizarre sort of way.

Aiko was prettier than a lot of the other girls in our class. She had bright black hair that fell down to her waist and she

always wore this silver barrette pinned above her bangs. Her eyes were brown and huge, and she had long, delicate fingers. She was the kind of girl who makes the words in your mouth start wrestling to see which will come out first. Of course, when I opened my mouth, all those words usually ran off like a bunch of cowards. But that's how it'd always been with Aiko.

She turned without looking back and left the room.

"Until we meet again," I blurted out from my desk. Because apparently I turn into a forty-year-old with a monocle when I try to say goodbye to girls I like. Shimizu-*sensei* looked up from his desk, shook his head, and then went back to his papers.

Aiko: five hundred points. My words: zero.

The students of Kusaka High School made their way downstairs to the first floor. They stepped out of their school slippers. They laughed and shoved each other while pulling on their street shoes in the *genkan* entrance, then turned and walked out into the sunlight.

Most of the students unlocked their back tires and rode their bicycles home, but a few lived far enough into the mountains that the school hired a bus driver to take them back and forth. Yori, the driver, swung the doors open.

"Everybody on," he called out at the top of his voice. "If you get left behind, a water troll will suck out your life energy."

The students laughed and pushed their way into the empty seats.

"I'm serious," Yori said. "You will be a dry and bitter husk."

And we're off!" Yori cheerfully folded the door shut, and the bus pulled away from Kusaka High School. The kids on bicycles rode out like a flock of birds into the rice fields and the neighborhoods below.

I ran back inside the school and returned my copy of *The Hōgen Rebellion* to the library, but I wasn't fast enough. Ino-sensei, the school counselor, caught me on the stairs.

"Koda."

I looked up, still fishing through the front pocket of my slacks for my bicycle key. "*Konnichiwa*," I said.

Ino-sensei smiled and replied, "*Konnichiwa, Koda-kun*." And then stood there. Still smiling.

Okay. Now it was my turn to talk? "I was returning a book," I said.

She nodded. Even the creases in her eyes were smiling.

Ino-sensei and I had these interactions once in a while. I didn't really mind meeting with a counselor, considering my . . . personal issue, but there was an awful lot of smiling that went on. And I am not a good smiler. Picture a bullfrog getting choked, and that's pretty much what my smile looks like. So I shifted a bit, forced my signature froggy grin, and realized my hand was still pretty deep in my pocket. Ino-sensei suddenly noticed it, too.

"Sorry," I said, yanking my hand out. Ino-sensei was twenty-three years old, and other guys in class talked about how pretty she was. That's a nice way of putting what they said about her. I didn't talk like that. I didn't even think like



that. Most of the time I honestly didn't understand the words they were using.

When I pulled my hand out of my pocket, my bike key, along with a huge Pikachu bobblehead keychain, popped out. Listen, just about every businessman in Japan walks around with a cutesy charm dangling off his cell phone. It's not that weird. But as I stood there grinning, Pikachu bouncing back and forth against my leg, the following thought passed through my mind: *Maybe boys in high school shouldn't be carrying these around.*

Ino-sensei motioned to the counseling room. "Do you have a minute, Koda-kun?"

"Hai," I said. Anything to stop the grinning and the bobbling.

"You did well today," she said, sliding the counseling door behind me. "Very well. I'm proud of you."

"Proud that I didn't fall asleep during my report today?"

She knelt down at the low table on the *tatami* mat floor. "Reports can be stressful."

"You must be proud of almost everyone in first-year Class B. Only two people fell asleep. Neither of them was me."

She smiled. "Would you like some *o-cha*?" she asked, twisting the cap from a bottle of green tea.

"*Arigatō gozaimasu.*"

As she poured a glass she asked if I'd considered wearing my helmet during the report.

"It's funny you say that, because I did consider it," I said.

“But then I remembered it’s autumn and indoor bicycle helmets aren’t really in fashion right now.”

“Did you feel stress?” she asked, sliding the tea forward on a coaster.

She meant the kind of stress that makes a kid in my condition fall asleep and smack his head on a desk corner. “Nope. Kenji even said he couldn’t believe how good my report was.”

“He said that, did he?”

“Or he said he couldn’t believe my report. It’s hard to remember.”

“Was he right?” she asked.

“About what?”

“Were you fibbing on your report?”

“Not at all. I mean, mostly not. A little. There was one part. It’s called dramatic irony.”

“Do you know what ‘irony’ means, Koda?”

“I do not.”

“And how did you respond to Kenji?”

“Well, first I bowed. Then I thanked him for his razor-sharp wit and slowly backed out of the room so that my presence wouldn’t offend his ancestors any further.” I sipped from the glass. “Or I may have called him a stupid idiot.”

“Probably the second one?”

“Probably.”

She nodded. “Well, I don’t want to keep you long. I’m sure you have fifteen-year-old things to do. I just want to remind you that this is a safe place to talk. You understand that, don’t you?”

I finished the last of my tea and nodded. “Uh-huh.”

She crossed her hands in her lap and said, “Thank you for coming, Koda-*kun*. I’m very proud of you. Well, mostly proud of you. Be careful out there.” She smiled and then bowed.

I bowed lower and said, “*Iro iro arigatō gozaimashita.*”

I walked down the concrete steps of Kusaka High School and made my way toward the bicycle awning tucked back from the street. I didn’t have a clue what I was going to write for my composition assignment. “Something I Regret”? I regret not punching Kenji in his fat left eye.

Pikachu’s head bobbed back and forth from the lock on my tire as I walked my bike toward the street. I lifted the enormous helmet out of my bicycle basket and latched it under my chin. Picture half a watermelon strapped to a broomstick and you get the general idea of what this thing looked like on me. Thankfully, it stayed in my basket. Most of the day.

My last “incident” had been more than two months ago. Before that time, I hadn’t really had an attack for a year and a half. People like my parents and Ino-*sensei* were making too big a deal of this. If I was falling asleep every other day, fine, stick a giant helmet on my head. But once or twice a year? I’ll risk cracking my head on the floor. Believe it or not, helmets are not one of the socially accepted forms of high school headgear.

I turned my front tire in the direction of my family’s mushroom farm and set my foot on the pedal. Then I heard the

front door to the school open behind me. I looked back and saw Aiko walking down the concrete steps.

She was carrying a few books in her arms, and as she made her way down the stairs she started mumbling to herself. I couldn't make out what she was saying. The sounds just dripped off her lips and evaporated into the mountain air. When she reached the bottom, she tripped and fell. It was a strange fall. Like she hadn't realized she was falling until just before she hit the ground. One of the few times a soccer-ball-sized helmet would have done someone some good.

I should have rushed forward and helped her pick up the books. I should have sprinted over and offered her my hand. I could have at least called out, "*Daijōbu?* Are you all right?" But I didn't do that. I couldn't do that. Like so many times before, when it came to Aiko I couldn't say anything at all.

This time was different, though. Aiko pulled herself up from the pavement. Her eyes were glossy and faded. She looked like she'd been crying. Not from the fall. From before that. She left her books on the ground and walked over to me. My muscles seized.

Aiko Fujiwara looked me straight in the eye, confused, like she didn't recognize me. She pushed my helmet back and took my face in her hand. That was when the world went cold. Ice cold. Middle-of-space, pitch-black, sinking cold. I could feel it on my breath, in my hair, beneath my skin. I knew exactly what it meant. I was having another attack. And for the first time, I was glad I had that stupid helmet on.

In my dream Aiko was bleeding from a cut on her knee. It

was so cold that the blood should have frozen solid, but it seeped down into her wool sock and stained her leg bright red. The stain looked like a *sakura* flower—a cherry blossom in May. It made me think of picnic festivals and music and shrines.

“I have to free the black birds,” Aiko said in my direction. “I have to do it by myself. There’s nowhere left to hide.”

“What are you hiding from?” I asked the frigid air between us.

“You won’t arrive, Yatagarasu,” Aiko whispered past me. “You won’t arrive in time.” Her lip trembled.

“*Crows fly.*

*A traveler on the road*

*Is lost.*”

That was new. Aiko was always a little odd, but I sure don’t remember her talking in *haiku* before.

That’s when my vision flickered back. That’s when the air felt warm again. That’s when I saw my legs tangled up in my overturned bike frame. It had been two months since I’d fallen asleep like that, and now it’d happened in the parking lot of the school. In front of Aiko Fujiwara, of all people.

Aiko left me on the ground. She picked up her fallen textbooks and loosely stacked them in her arms. She stared off into the mountains behind the school, chattering to herself, bleeding down the outside of her leg. She didn’t look at me again. Her feet shuffled forward, and I lay there watching as

she walked up an old tea farmer's footpath. From somewhere behind the school, a flock of crows lifted up like a black wave and stormed after her. Their cries were deafening, but Aiko didn't even notice.

The next morning they found Aiko's body in the school gymnasium. She had drunk a liter of cleaning fluid. I was the last person to see her alive. I should have gone after her.

*Something I Regret*

The day before Aiko's funeral I steered my bicycle down the backstreets to the Lawson's convenience store. Of course, the easiest way to get to Lawson's is riding straight down Route 33, but my folks are afraid I'll fall asleep and drift out into traffic. So I take the backstreets. And always wear my special helmet.

Sometimes I pretend my bicycle is a Yokosuka seaplane. And instead of riding down dusty old backstreets, I'm flying along the coast of Japan, delivering *shiitake* to all those people who can eat mushrooms without throwing up.

For as long as I can remember, I've wanted to fly. To be a pilot who could soar above the clouds and leave the tiny roads and the mountain villages behind. Sometimes I even pretend I was alive during the Pacific War. *You should totally be a pilot, Koda*, someone would say. *You never suddenly fall asleep. In fact, I've never seen you sleep for even a single moment. You could fly to America and back without ever getting tired.*

And I'd say, *Yeah, I pretty much never sleep. Got too many things to do.*

This would get back to the admiral of the Imperial Navy, who would give me my own Zero-*sen* fighter plane.

*Fly like the god wind and crash your plane into the enemies of our beloved emperor*, the admiral would say.

Or, I'd interrupt, *instead of doing that—and this is just a thought—I could fly around the world. Which would also be good for the emperor and all that other stuff.*

The admiral would step back and size me up. *I don't like it. I do not like it one bit. But you are the boy who never sleeps, so here are the keys. Make the emperor proud. And by the way, take off that helmet, boy. There are no helmets allowed in the Imperial Navy.*

*Yes, sir! Gladly, sir!* I'd say, punting my stupid helmet off the side of the aircraft carrier.

But then I get to the convenience store and remember I'm just a high school kid with a secondhand bike and a sleeping disorder. Oh well, there's always the ride home.

"I'll take a bowl of *oden*," I told Haru as I walked into the store.

"What do you want in it?" he asked.

"I don't know. *Konyaku*, *tamago*, a little *daikon*."

"Broth?"

"Sure." I slid Haru two *go-hyaku* coins.

"Nah, take it. On the house."

Even though he was three years older than me, Haru was my only friend in Kusaka. That makes it sound like I had friends outside of Kusaka. Nope, he was my only friend, period.

Haru lived with his uncle in a broken-down house at the



end of our street. His uncle was the kind of man who would push a shrine maiden down a flight of stairs for a warm glass of *sake*. Or for anything really: a coin, an old boot, a bit of tin-foil. The man was simpleminded, and a bastard. Not a good combination.

Haru didn't graduate from high school. He dropped out, stayed in Kusaka, and eventually picked up a job at Lawson's. I usually stopped in after school or when I was in the area delivering *shiitake* to the vegetable stands behind Route 33.

"How's your paper?" he asked, sliding a pair of chopsticks across the counter.

"The one from homeroom?"

"Sure. The one about the robot."

"Robot?"

He pulled a cigarette out of his shirt pocket. "It's not about a robot?" he asked.

"No. When did you ever have robot homework?"

He shrugged.

"And that is why you didn't graduate," I said.

"Let's go outside," Haru said, walking around the counter.

"Can you just take a break like that?"

"I don't know. There's no one here anyway."

We sat down on the curb and Haru lit his cigarette. He held it out to me, but I ignored him. I might be the only fifteen-year-old in Japan who doesn't have a fascination with smoking. Just not that interested in it. I did try it once. My face got all puffy and my skin turned bright red. It was like my body was somehow allergic to breathing in poison.

And really, none of the other fifteen-year-olds should be smoking either. It's obviously against the law. But no one takes that seriously when you can just walk down the street and drop a couple of coins into a *jidōhanbaiki*.

In Japan we love our vending machines. We'll put anything in them: cigarettes, batteries, TV dinners, raincoats, pornography, used underwear. Think of almost anything, and I'll bet you can find a *jidōhanbaiki* somewhere in Japan that's selling it. I've seen a six-year-old kid buy a two-liter bottle of *sake* from the vending machine down the road. I guess his father was too lazy to get up and buy it himself. At least, I hope that's what was happening.

"People like robots, you know," Haru said.

"Hmm."

"Maybe it's a girl robot. She could wear this sexy outfit and fly around rescuing people."

"You remember what homework is, right?"

"Vaguely."

"The paper is on something we regret," I said.

"*Shimizu-sensei*?"

I nodded.

Haru took another drag. "I bet he regrets assigning that now."

"Yeah," I said.

"Didn't you say that girl talked to birds?"

"Aiko talked *about* birds. There's a difference."

"But they were birds that weren't there?"

“A bird,” I said. “It was mostly this one bird. Yatagarasu. But yes, he wasn’t there.”

If Aiko was crazy for talking to something no one else could see, then a lot of people in Japan are crazy. The ghosts of ancestors, gods and goddesses, spirits from local shrines—most people worship things they’ve never actually seen. I didn’t care if Aiko was a little too quiet or spent her breaks on the balcony looking for a three-legged crow. Crows are cool enough, or so I used to think.

“Who drinks bathroom cleaner?” Haru asked. “Who wants to die like that?”

“It was a message,” I said.

Haru snubbed his cigarette and flicked the butt into the parking lot. “How do you figure?” he asked.

“Well, they closed the school after Aiko’s body was found, right? They washed down the doors and the *genkan* and the stairs. They polished and mopped everything to get the school back to the way it was. But now the building just reeks of cleaning fluid. They didn’t remove Aiko from the school at all. They just scrubbed her deeper into the walls.”

“That’s pretty sick.”

“They realized it, but only after it was too late. You should see the place now. No one messes around in the halls or plays badminton in the courtyard during break anymore. Everyone just stays inside with the windows open and the fans on,” I said.

“And I thought this *mimonai* Lawson’s job was bad.”

“It was a message, Haru. No one can ignore her now.”

“I bet it was a message about that driver—what’s his name?”

“Yori-san?”

“Yeah, the crazy guy who drives the bus.”

“Yori.”

“I bet the message was: *He finally did it*. The creepy little driver finally killed one of us.”

I pushed up from the curb. “Whatever. I gotta go.”

“Seriously? Are you mad? It was a joke, Koda. Not a good joke, I see that now. But c’mon.”

I kicked out the stand on my bike and steadied the box of mushrooms tied down to the back. “I’ve got deliveries to make, Haru. See you tomorrow.”

“Whatever,” he said.

I fastened my helmet and pushed off down the street behind Lawson’s. The sliding door dinged softly behind me.

Forget Haru. I didn’t know why, but Aiko had chosen me just before she died. She had walked up to me and whispered in my ear. All I’d ever done was stare at her from the back of our homeroom class, but for some reason she stepped into my dream and told me she had nowhere left to hide. Her death wasn’t random. It meant something. It had to. I just couldn’t see it yet.

Aiko's family lived in a house that must have been two hundred years old. Latticed wood and paper doors. *Bonsai* trees. A small pond for *koi*. All tucked into a mountainside covered with bamboo and scrubby trees and ferns twisting over the ground. An ideal Japanese house in an ideal Japanese town, right?

Instead of traveling to Kōchi City, Aiko's father decided to hold the funeral inside their home. The front doors were pulled open, the family shrine was moved to the sitting room, and the yard was flooded with flowers and lanterns and *ihai* spirit tablets.

I wound my way through the maze of men and women in black suits and dark *kimono*. I saw classmates in pressed uniforms, eyes stained, holding on to their handkerchiefs like they were tiny pieces of Aiko herself. They never thought twice about her before, but after she died she suddenly became the most important person in the entire world.

Ino-sensei stood near the entrance to the house, placing a hand on the shoulders of the students walking by. At times

she would cross her arms and hold her elbows as if trying to physically hold herself together. Headmaster Sato walked up the front stairs with his wife and nodded to the school counselor without looking her in the eyes.

I put my foot on the first step.

“Hello, Koda,” Ino-*sensei* whispered. “Did you come alone?”

I nodded. Someone in the sitting room was crying loudly. Now that I was standing here, I wasn’t sure I could actually go inside. I couldn’t keep the images of Aiko’s family from running wild through my head. I knew that tomorrow morning Aiko’s father would dress in his black suit and drive his daughter’s remains to the crematorium. He would return home and wait while a Buddhist priest laid her body on a metal tray and closed the oven door. In time, her father would get a call from that priest telling him to return. Aiko’s father would stand over the ashes of his daughter. He would pick out her bones with a special pair of chopsticks and place them carefully in an urn.

“Start at the feet and end at the neck,” the priest would say. “That way she’ll be upright in the tomb.”

Aiko’s father would nod and concentrate on keeping his hands steady. He’d wipe at his eyes, trying not to spill his tears on what remained of his only child.

“Please, come in,” said a woman sitting at a thin table at the top of the stairs.

I shook away the images, bowed to Ino-*sensei*, and walked inside Aiko’s home. I set a silver-and-black envelope of condo-

lence money on the table. The woman took the envelope and said, “Thank you, Okita-san. Please sign your name here.”

I picked up the pen and wrote *Okita Koda* into the guest registry. The woman bowed and motioned for me to enter the sitting room.

I turned the corner to see Aiko staring at me. She was wearing her school uniform, a silver barrette pinned in her hair. She looked pretty but serious. Not a corner of a smile. No sadness in her eyes. She looked like she was thinking. Thinking of how she could escape the golden frame keeping her trapped inside that huge portrait.

Guests were seated on either side of Aiko’s shrine. I walked up the center aisle and bowed to her family on the left and then again to the right. Her father was there, his face red and stony. Her mother was missing. Maybe she and Hiroshi the Salaryman couldn’t be bothered to return to Kusaka.

I stepped closer to Aiko’s portrait, which was drowning in a sea of flowers and fruit, *mochi* rice balls, and leafy green branches. I draped a string of *juzu* prayer beads over my hands and bowed to her. Standing there, I didn’t know what to whisper to Aiko. I wasn’t very good at talking to things that weren’t there. After a few moments I bowed again. I guess our last conversation wasn’t really a conversation at all. I hoped if Aiko was watching, or listening, or whatever, I hoped she knew the things I couldn’t say out loud.

I reached out and took a pinch of incense. I dropped it into the copper burner set up in front of the shrine and watched

the smoke drift up over her portrait. The wisps hung in the air and then disappeared completely. I started to leave, but stopped when I caught sight of a three-legged crow.

To the side of Aiko's portrait sat another shrine. This one belonged not to an ancestor, but to the absent Yatagarasu. In the most ancient historical records, this large three-legged crow led Jimmu, the first emperor, to what would become the first capital of Japan. The small shrine was decorated with paper lanterns and statuettes and reliefs showing how Yatagarasu swept down from the heavens and saved Jimmu, leading him safely to his new home. Maybe the shrine was there so that Yatagarasu would find Aiko, too.

I turned and bowed quickly again to her family so that they wouldn't see my face. I hurried through the room and out the front door. The woman seated at the thin table handed me a decorated bag full of tea and small chocolates. I thanked her and quickly walked away from Aiko's used-to-be home. I held my hand over my eyes and stepped down into the crowd of mourners, winding my way toward the front gate.

I thought I could make it through Aiko's yard. I thought I could get on my bike and push away from that place where three-legged crows look for lost girls and words hang in the air like threads of smoke. But before I could reach my bike I collided with another girl, this one dressed in gray.

I looked up and for a fraction of a second I thought I'd run into Aiko. The girl was about Aiko's height and her eyes looked almost identical. She even had a silver barrette in her hair.



I wanted to bow and say *Sumimasen*, but the words froze solid in my mouth.

“Get up,” the girl in gray said.

I tried to answer, but the world had become so cold that my lips could barely move.

“Get up, Seimei! Please!” she screamed, looking past me as if I weren’t even there.

Icy air swirled around my limbs, stiffening my muscles, locking my face and eyes onto hers. This wasn’t real. I’d fallen asleep. *Not here. Please, don’t let me lose my mind here.*

The girl in gray reached out, and the tips of her fingers began to smoke. “You’ll wish you were dead,” she barked. Smoke swirled up out of her sleeves and through the neck of her dress. “By the fire of Inari, you’ll wish you had died with the rest of them!” Through the freezing fog her eyes burned like broken shards of brimstone.

I forced the funeral bag in front of my face, shielding myself with tea and small chocolates. The girl screamed and the world around us exploded in flames.

“Koda. Koda, open your eyes. Look at me, Koda.”

Ino-sensei lifted my neck and pressed a damp handkerchief to my forehead.

“I’m sorry,” I said. The words dribbled out of my mouth and down the side of my face. I tried to stand up.

“Slowly,” she said, helping me to my feet.

All around me stood classmates and teachers and people I’d never seen before. People who should have been paying their respects to Aiko but now looked on in utter confusion

at the fifteen-year-old who had just passed out in her front garden.

I pushed past Ino-sensei and steadied myself. They weren't saying it, but I knew they were thinking it. *At a classmate's funeral? How could he do such a thing? Has he no shame?*

"I'll drive you home," Ino-sensei said.

"I'm fine," I shot back.

"Koda, I'll put your bike in the back and drive you away from here."

My knees felt weak. "Okay," I whispered, because getting away was the only thing I wanted.

The girl in gray, who was never smoking and was never on fire, stood off to the side. She watched me as Ino-sensei and I stumbled through the crowd of silent mourners. When I looked back from the front gate, she was still staring at me, leaning between the black suits and dark *kimono*, keeping her eyes firmly locked on mine.

It's called *suiminhossa*. Sleep attacks. It mostly happens when . . . How did the doctor put it? When the area of my brain that regulates stress dominates the motor control centers of the brain itself. In other words, my feelings sucker-punch my head and I black out. It's only really dangerous when I'm riding my bike. Or attending funerals, apparently.

It didn't always used to be like this. Before Aiko, I'd only had two attacks in my whole life. The first time was when I was thirteen. It was embarrassing. Also, it happened at a public bathhouse—so I was as nude as a *sumō* wrestler's left butt cheek.

I'd soaped myself clean in the showers and then stepped outside to the public bath. Steam was rising from the water and drifting up into the open mountainside. There were other men on our side of the partition, mostly old, lounging around in the hot water with their arms folded neatly across their bellies.

I sat in the water next to my father. He leaned back, closed his eyes, and let out a long sigh of relief. Soon, though, I got

this uneasy feeling. Not the feeling of being surrounded by old, naked guys—I had gotten used to that feeling a while ago—but the feeling I was being watched. And I was. I turned to see a stumpy man crouching in the water on the opposite side of the bath.

I was going to say something like *Hello* or *Good evening* or *Maybe you shouldn't stare at nude boys in a bathhouse*, but he had this look in his eyes. He seemed annoyed by me being there. Like I was seeing something I shouldn't be seeing.

My father shifted and brought handfuls of hot water up over his head and neck. Is it strange to be sitting in a public bathhouse staring at a naked man who is staring back at you? Probably. Probably, yes. But no matter how upset the squinty man appeared to get, I just couldn't look away. The fear bubbling up inside wouldn't let me tear my eyes from his. He had this *tanuki-gao*. A raccoon-face. You know, kind of squished in the middle. Awful, beady little eyes. A face that makes you think he's hiding a whole mouthful of razor teeth.

The man tilted his head to the side, the way a dog does when it looks confused. He raised his hands from the water and shook his palms at me. "*Dete ike, suri. Dete ike.*"

Why was he calling me a pickpocket? The words sounded muddled and confused. It took me a few seconds to work through what he was saying, but by then it was too late. The stubby man had pushed up from the water. He was walking at me and shaking his hands.

Now, when a naked man starts calling you a thief and waving his fat fingers in your face, that is probably the best time

to leave the bathhouse. I looked at my father, whose head was half submerged, and when I turned back, the raccoon-faced man grabbed my hair and shoved me beneath the water. I pushed up, gasping for air, frantically searching for a reason in his crazy eyes. That was the first time I had a cold dream.

I'd never been that freezing before. This wasn't "winter without your coat on," this was "winter exploding out of every pore in your body." The bathhouse had become a glacier. It was so cold that the water should have been a single sheet of ice, but it kept flowing as if it weren't affected by the temperature at all. The raccoon-faced man—the one who had just been attacking me—was now squatting with me on the banks of Kusaka River.

Reaching down into the water, the stubby man pulled up a handful of leaves. He rolled them in the palm of his hand and set the wad on the earth beside him. When he took his hands away, the leaves weren't leaves anymore. They were crumpled *ichi man* bills. Dripping wet, mashed together—there must have been fifty thousand yen just sitting on the edge of the river. A small fortune. Especially to a thirteen-year-old.

The raccoon-faced man reached down and pulled up another handful of leaves and set down another handful of cash. He narrowed his eyes and clicked his tongue and said into the air, "Men don't want wishes anymore. All they want is this." He held up a hairy fist dripping with paper bills. "With enough money a man can make anything he wants appear. No need for wishes anymore. No need for *tanuki*." He threw the bills into the air, but only leaves came tumbling down.

“They’re wrong,” he cried. “Money won’t save them. Money won’t save any of us. Not against the Tengu Road and the monster that lives there.” He dropped his hands into the water. “They are infected with it,” the *tanuki*-man said. “They will bring destruction on us all.”

The next thing I remember was my father kneeling over me, shaking my shoulders. I tried to breathe in, but my lungs were paralyzed. I screamed and only water gurgled out. When I sucked in, it was like inhaling through a coffee stirrer.

The doctors later said that the stress of the stubby man’s attack kicked off my narcolepsy. I’d fallen asleep and slipped below the surface of the water. My father pushed away the strange man and dragged me out of the bath. My attacker disappeared from the bathhouse, though nobody could say in what direction he ran. I never saw him again, but it didn’t matter that much—my life had already changed forever.

“*Suiminhossa*,” the doctor from the hospital said.

“Narcolepsy? My boy will never sleep again,” my mother said, beginning to cry.

“No,” the doctor said. “No, just the opposite.”

My mother cried some more. “My boy will never wake again.”

“Okay, not the opposite. It just means he might fall asleep in inappropriate places.”

My mother sobbed even louder. “My boy will never be appropriate again.”

My father took my mother by the arm and led her out of the small examination room. And then I was all alone. A

thirteen-year-old sitting across from a doctor and three nurses. One of them coughed.

“Do . . . do you have any questions?” the doctor asked.

I thought for a minute and then said, “Can I still fly airplanes?”

“That’s cute,” the doctor said, smiling to the nurses, who smiled right back. “Sure, you can still fly on airplanes. You can even take a nap on an airplane if your head is feeling especially sleepy.”

“No,” I said. “Not can I *ride* on an airplane—can I *fly* the airplane? Can I still be a pilot?”

Everyone laughed, but when they saw I wasn’t laughing, they stopped. One of them coughed again.

“No,” the doctor said. “No, I’m afraid that wouldn’t be safe.”

A year and a half went by before my second attack. Well, attacks. Very small attacks. Like three of them. In a single day. I really think that should just count as one, though.

Haru and I were sitting in front of Lawson’s watching the cars speed by on Route 33 when this guy on a scooter lost control and jerked into an oncoming truck. I don’t remember exactly what it looked like because it happened so fast, but I do remember the sound. The horrible crumpling of metal and popping of plastic. By the time the police and the paramedics arrived there wasn’t much left. The handlebars were in a rice field nearby. A tire was found in someone’s garden.

As the police cars and the ambulance were pulling away, I saw the scooter's rearview mirror lying in the parking lot. I wrapped it in a *furoshiki* to take home. Haru said it was morbid to keep the mirror because the driver was going to die on the way to the hospital.

"I could use it, though," I told him.

"Use it for what?"

"I could keep it in my bathroom. Make sure the back of my hair is straight."

Haru kicked a piece of broken glass. "Somewhere that guy's ancestors are crying because you said that."

"I'd think of him every time I walk into the bathroom."

"You don't even know who 'him' is."

"It doesn't matter," I said. "The important thing is that as long as I have this mirror, he isn't really gone. Someone remembers that he was alive and driving down Route 33."

"Not driving particularly well."

I ignored him. "And isn't that what we all want in the end? Someone to remember us? Doesn't that keep us alive in some small way?"

"I'll tell you what, Koda. If I die, keep a picture of me somewhere. Don't make a comb out of my hand. If that's my only choice, I'd rather not be remembered for running my dead fingers through your hair each morning."

"Gross," I said. "And you won't die. At least not anytime soon."

I smiled, but Haru wasn't looking at me. He was staring off



in the direction of his uncle's house. "Just keep a picture of me somewhere," he said again.

When I got home, I unwrapped the rearview mirror and set it on my bathroom sink. Tried to, anyway. As soon as I touched the plastic my world went ice cold. I dreamed of the accident Haru and I had just seen, only this time from the scooter driver's point of view. Because I didn't know what really happened, my imagination filled in all sorts of details. The man lost control of the scooter because he'd been drinking. He'd been drinking because he knew he was going to get fired from his job at Daimaru Department Store in Kōchi City and he didn't know how to tell his elderly mother. He lost his balance and swerved into the oncoming truck. That's where the dream stopped. I woke up with a mean bruise on my head from the edge of the bathroom sink.

I pushed myself up from the floor. My face was throbbing. I picked up the rearview mirror and the world went ice cold again. The dream was the same as before. Drinking. Going to get fired. Shame. Losing balance. Oncoming truck.

I opened my eyes. There was blood on the floor. I must have split that bruise when I fell for the second time.

"Koda," my mother called upstairs. "Koda, are you all right? Do you want me to come up there? I'll get my cane and walk up there if you need me."

"No," I called back. "Don't do that. I just . . . I just dropped something." I propped myself up against the side of the door and made it carefully to my feet. *Head wounds bleed way more*

than they need to, I remember thinking. Having learned absolutely nothing, I reached down for the rearview mirror and blacked out a third time. My mother sent my father upstairs after me.

“It’s just a nick on his forehead,” my father said.

“It’s a giant gash! He could have died!” my mother cried. “He could have fainted, stumbled into the toilet, and drowned.”

Which seems like the absolute worst way to go, if you ask me.

“He’d just seen a bad accident,” my father said. “He was stressed. Our boy is not strong in the conventional use of the term.”

Hey.

“We should be watching him every day,” my mother said, continuing her freak-out. “He should never leave our sight. We’ll get the old truck running and take him to school every single day.”

“And who’s going to do the driving?” my father asked. “You haven’t driven that truck in thirty years. The boy just needs a bicycle helmet or something.”

“What if he falls asleep and a car hits him?” my mother shot back.

“Give him a helmet and forbid him from riding on Route 33. He’ll be fine.”

My father and I don’t usually see eye to eye on like, anything, but I’m glad he was there that day.

“Fine.” My mother surrendered, tossing the rearview mirror into the trash can. “But only if the helmet is custom-made.

None of those stylish motorcycle helmets for my son, no. It has to be three times the size of a normal helmet. With ear protection. Like a batter's helmet that covers his entire skull. It's very important that any person in the same town as our child instantly sees that he poses a danger to himself and everyone around him. Also, this will make sure no girl ever dates him. Ever."

I may be adding a little bit to that last part. Anyway, that's when I was supposed to start wearing my helmet during "high-risk" situations like bike riding, combing the back of my hair, and talking to girls.

"He can't wear the helmet everywhere. You'll make an outcast of him," my father said. "Besides, he'll probably do something odd like decorate it with Pokémon stickers."

"I won't do that," I protested.

But yes, I did.

The day after the funeral I was standing in the parking lot of Lawson's, downing the last of an energy drink and waiting for Haru's shift to end. Tomorrow all the students would return to Kusaka High School and try not to talk about Aiko. There was nothing left to say. We'd exhausted the hows and the whys. No one really knew what Aiko was thinking that night. She never told us. Sometimes terrible things just happen. Isn't that what they say? The only thing we can do is try to stop those terrible things from happening again.

But guess what? We'd already failed.

I threw the empty can into the recycling bin and looked through the window. Haru was ringing someone up at the counter. When I turned back to Route 33, I thought I saw a white cat dart across the street and disappear under a parked van.

No, it wasn't a cat. Too big to be a cat. I took a few steps forward. It might have been a fox.

Foxes are rare in Japan. I guess. I've only seen a couple of them in Kusaka, so I suppose that means they're rare. I think people say it's good luck to see a fox. Don't they? Well, if they do, they're wrong. I bent over and peered under the van. Nothing. Foxes are not good luck. You can see it in their eyes. And their sharp little teeth. Never trust an animal that can bite off your kneecap. *That's* what people should really say.

Ichiro, star pitcher of the baseball team, walked to school, jimmied open the window to the teachers' lounge, and made his way to the math teacher's classroom. He apparently knocked over a can of pencils on Ikeda-*sensei's* desk. People made a big deal out of that. I don't know why. Especially considering what he was about to do. "Ichiro was the kind of student who would pick up a friend if he accidentally knocked him down," they'd say. "It's strange he left the pencils on the floor like that."

No, it's strange that he was upstairs in Ikeda-*sensei's* classroom, kneeling in the dark with a kitchen knife. That was strange.

The next morning, Kusaka High School locked and chained its doors. Most of the teachers and staff stood outside with their faces in their hands. They told the kids to ride their bikes back home. They flagged the drivers to turn around. They sat on the steps, close to one another, and waited for the sirens to come.

Again.

Kusaka High School closed for the last week of September. Eventually the cars and the trucks and the flashing lights pulled away, leaving the building chained up and draped in shadow. As I rode by on my way to deliver mushrooms, the school rose slowly from the rice fields. Yes, Kusaka is that kind of Japanese mountain town. The kind where we have to build our schools in the middle of rice fields. It always reminded me of a *daimyō* castle surrounded by bridges and moats and narrow dirt paths.

And just like a real *daimyō* castle, the school was built to last centuries. There were heavy metal doors and thick panes of glass with iron-plated storm shutters. Every surface was painted white to reflect the sun and keep out the salty sea air. For eighty years the school had stood up against everything Japan could throw at it: earthquakes, typhoons, flash floods, mudslides. But it couldn't keep Aiko out. And five days later it couldn't keep Ichiro out either.

Oddly enough, things were quieter at school after the

second suicide. We'd spent all the words we carried around when Aiko died.

Ichiro Kobayashi had moved to Kusaka late last year to live with his uncle. He transferred from a school in Matsuyama and no one really knew why. Some kids on the baseball team said his parents died in a car accident. Others said he woke up one morning and they were just gone. Whatever happened, Ichiro was quiet about it. He was nice to the kids who asked, but you knew he couldn't say anything. Not *wouldn't* say anything. *Couldn't*.

After the transfer to Kusaka, Ichiro was immediately promoted to starting pitcher on the baseball team. He made the other students look like the idea of hitting a ball with a bat was so difficult that we should all just give up and do something easier, like calculus or astrophysics. That was Ichiro. Tall, fit, popular. But then he broke into the high school at night and went all feudal Japan on us.

Back in the olden days, long before we settled our differences with celebrity game shows, insane obstacle courses, and Dance Dance Revolution, *hara-kiri* was how a *samurai* purged himself of a great dishonor. The warrior would dress up in a ceremonial *kimono* and cut open his stomach with a short sword. I guess they figured his shame would spill out onto the floor. I don't know who first came up with the idea that shame is something that can actually be cut from your insides, but I bet it was a process of trial and error. Is this the shame? Nope. Okay, how about this squiggly thing? Still feeling shame.

Well, this thing is beating, how about this? Yep. Yep. Feeling less shame already. Feeling less of everything, actually.

The disgraced *samurai* could choose a friend to stand over him with a long *katana* blade. When the *samurai* finished cutting himself, the friend would bring down his sword and end the *samurai*'s suffering with a single stroke to his neck. That was considered an act of mercy, by the way. I'd sure hate to be that one *samurai* who had no friends in the village. Who am I kidding? I *would* have been that one *samurai*.

But Ichiro wouldn't have. He had plenty of friends at Kusaka High School. None were with him that night, though. He knelt on the math room floor, alone, a kitchen knife in hand, and bled out in the darkness.

Using his hand as a *shodō* brush, Ichiro had painted a *kanji* symbol on the floor. The only ink he had was draining out between his fingers.

烏

*Karasu.*

Crow.

The blood seeped into the floor. So deep, in fact, that the more the teachers scrubbed the strokes, the more permanently they etched the *kanji* into the tile. When they stood back and saw what they'd done—how the ghostly word would not be removed—they just abandoned the room. They turned off the lights and shut the math room door and tried to keep Ichiro's last *kanji* a secret from the rest of us.

The school remained chained and bolted during the next week. Teachers were assigned to drive by at night to check for



broken windows. That probably wouldn't have stopped anything, but it made everyone feel a little safer.

"Name seven things that make people in this town feel safe." Haru took a drag on his cigarette and blew out the smoke. Somewhere behind us the television in Lawson's blared colorful commercials at no one.

"Seven things?" I said, leaning back on the curb.

"Yep."

"Disposable face masks. That would have to be number one."

"Of course."

"*Kōban* police boxes."

"Easy."

"Crossing guards."

"Okay."

"Delicately wrapped fruit, a bowl of *miso* soup, braided rope."

"From a shrine?"

"Yes."

"And the last one?"

"I'll go with a *bā-chan* pushing a baby carriage."

"What?" Haru laughed. "No way, that's totally creepy, and not safe. Seriously, why would a little old lady buy a baby carriage in the first place? Where's the baby that should be inside? What exactly is inside it now? Is it a doll? A broken picture frame? A human head?"

"*Baka*," I said, kicking Haru's shoe. "You know why they push them around. Some women work in fields and get their

spines jacked up from spring mushrooms all day. Some women lean on baby carriages for proper back support. Some women fill those carriages with groceries because they don't drive anymore, and when they finally push the stupid thing home again, some women have treats for their sons if they've finished their homework."

Haru crushed his cigarette butt on the asphalt. "Right. Sorry about that. Your parents are old."

"They're freakishly old! And my mother pushes around an empty baby carriage. So what? You work at an empty convenience store!"

"Okay, okay," Haru said. "You know what absolutely makes no one feel safe, though? Bus drivers. At least not the ones who have the brain of a fifteen-year-old."

"Yori-san? That's not fair. They fired him and he hadn't done anything wrong."

"Of course he did." Haru lit another cigarette. "He was standing in the parking lot shouting about river trolls tricking the students into killing themselves. He absolutely should have been fired. That is the exact opposite of making people feel safe."

"He was a nice guy."

"Who told the school board a *kappa* was murdering children."

"I didn't say I believed him."

"Well, I'm glad we cleared that up," Haru said, taking another drag. "He got what was coming to him."

Haru and I sat on the curb as the evening grew darker around us. It's true that not many adults liked Yori. He didn't wear a blue blazer or white gloves like the other drivers who took us around on field trips. He didn't sit quietly in his chair, face forward, bowing and waving from the wrist like some pageant queen. He wanted to talk to us. He wanted to laugh and have conversations with people who thought the same way he did. For Yori, that was a bus full of high school students.

And we liked him. When he drove us on field trips or other school outings, he always talked to us like we were people, not kids who should be disciplined or ignored. He knew how to drive a bus—sort of—but where he truly shone was in details. Small, intricate, mind-spinning details. He could chat about your favorite food one minute and then *manga* the next. You could ask him what his favorite Pokémon was and he wouldn't say “the cute green one with the hat.” Yori could go on and on about Hasuburero and how he evolves for a second time into Runpappa after being exposed to a Water Stone. If you're an adult and have any clue what that last sentence means, congratulations, you are an *otaku* nerd. But for us, Yori the Bus Driver always had answers. Even if the questions were silly. Or weird. Or just plain stupid.

“You shouldn't breathe in the smoke, you know.”

Haru and I flipped around. It was hard to see her at first. She was standing near the far corner of the building. When she walked into the light of the front window, though, I instantly recognized her face.

“Why do you put the smoke in your mouth?” she asked. “Mouths aren’t made for that.” And she would know because the last time I saw her she was on fire in Aiko’s front garden.

“Who are you?” I said.

“Who do I look like to you?” she replied.

“A girl in a gray hoodie.”

“Then that is who I will be.”

“What’s your name, girl in a gray hoodie?” Haru asked.

“Moya.”

She walked over to the curb. She was wearing a pair of jeans and a gray zip-up with ears on the hood. She looked like any other fifteen-year-old who had never been on fire before.

“Moya?” Haru said. “That’s not a normal name.”

“Of course it’s normal. It’s totally normal,” she said, pulling the cigarette from Haru’s mouth and pinching the embers.

“Hey,” Haru said.

“And I didn’t come to talk to you, anyway, smoke-mouth. I came to talk to your friend.” Moya sat down on the curb next to me, knees pointed in, lips cartoonishly pouty.

“Me?” I said. “Why?”

“Because sometimes it can be hard when you’re the new girl at school.”

“Are you . . . I didn’t know you went to our school,” I said.

“Just moved in. Down the street.”

“What street?” I asked.

“The one over there.”

“I have no idea what you’re pointing at.”

"It's called . . . Mountain Street."

"Mountain Street?"

"Something like that."

"Did you just make up a street name?" Haru asked, poking his head forward.

"No."

"You looked up at the mountains and then said Mountain Street."

Moya leaned in to me and said, "That guy's rude."

Haru laughed. "There are, like, ten streets in Kusaka, and none of them are Mountain Street."

Moya shrugged. "I was kind of hoping a cute boy could help me out with a teensy little problem."

"What cute boy?" Haru said. "You mean Koda?"

"Let's just hear her out on this one," I said. "Also, you're an awful friend."

Moya smiled.

"I'm sorry," Haru said to me. "It's just, you're so young, and you wear that giant helmet all the time."

"What?" I said, looking back at Moya. "No . . . I . . . it's just a regular bicycle helmet."

"A comically large bicycle helmet."

"It's because of the padding, Haru. There's nothing funny about responsible headgear!"

I looked back at Moya. She wasn't smiling anymore.

"Gods, you two," she whispered. "Look, Koda, I need you to steal something for me."

“Okay, she’s all yours,” Haru said.

“You want me to steal something?” I said. “That’s your teensy problem?”

“Well, you are a thief, aren’t you?”

“What? No.”

“Sure you are,” Moya said. “Look at me. Let me see your eyes. Don’t touch me, though.”

“I wasn’t going to.”

“I’m serious, kid.”

“I wouldn’t.”

“I will punch you right in the boy bits if you lay one finger on me.”

“I don’t touch girls!” I blurted out.

“Smooth,” Haru whispered.

Moya leaned in close to my face. “Yep, you’re one of them,” she said.

“One of what?”

“A *suri*. A pickpocket. A cutpurse. You know, a thief.”

“Um, no. I’m fifteen and I’ve never stolen anything in my life.”

“Normally, kid, this is not a good thing. Everybody hates a thief, especially *suri*. Also, you’re kind of small. And Haru’s right—you have a ridiculous helmet. But for now, I need something stolen and you’re the only one who can do it. Here’s the address.”

Moya handed me a piece of paper.

“Seriously, who are you?” I asked.

“Have you seen the crows, Koda?” Moya said.

Haru leaned forward. "What crows?"

"I'm having a private conversation with your weird little cutpurse friend here, thank you very much."

"That's insulting," I said.

"Your *handsome* cutpurse friend," she corrected.

"Well, all right, then."

"Have you seen the crows?" Moya repeated.

I looked over at Haru.

"This isn't an abstract question, Koda," Moya said. "These aren't normal crows. They watch you back. Either you've seen them or you haven't."

I didn't want to say it, but . . .

"Yes."

"Then this is the one time in the history of the world when being a dirty little thief is the best thing you could be. Go to the address. It's the only way to stop what's happening to this town."

"What exactly am I supposed to steal?" I said. Because *that* was obviously the sanest question to ask.

"A memory," Moya said, pushing up from the curb.

"A memory? You want me to steal a memory?"

"Of course," she said, looking down at me like *I* was the moron. "It will be attached to something you'd find in a river. Maybe a rock. Or a stick. An arrowhead! Arrowheads would be an excellent place to start. Very traumatic. If you see an arrowhead, definitely steal its memory."

"Steal the memory from an arrowhead? What does that even mean?"

"You're the *suri*. Go to that address and steal the memory that's there. Don't wait, kid. The Road is spreading."

With no other explanation whatsoever, the strange girl turned and walked back the way she came.

Haru slowly pulled another cigarette from his shirt pocket. "Well, she is fired."

"What?"

"I'm firing her."

"From what?"

"I don't know. From being a person? She's cute and all, but she is broken in the head and I am firing her from being a person like the rest of us. What the hell was that about crows?"

"She asked if I'd seen crows."

"Everybody's seen a crow before."

"Then everybody would have said yes."

I folded the piece of paper and slipped it into my slacks.

"You're not seriously going to that address, are you? I guarantee it leads to a graveyard. A graveyard for kittens. That she made herself."

"Actually go there?" I scoffed. "No, I wouldn't do something like that."

But yes, I would.