

Kazuo Ishiguro

GETTING POISONED

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July 28th

Today I saw Eddie's big brother. Eddie's big brother's got the clap. I know because Eddie told me all about it a couple of weeks ago. I saw him on the seafront, leaning his motorbike outside the bowling alley. I couldn't see what the poison had done to him though. He just looked sunburnt and quite healthy. Obviously it takes some time for the poison to get working on you.

When I got home, I examined my prick very carefully. Eddie reckons you can get it, even if you don't fuck. But it looks like I'm all right. I wonder if Eddie will get it off his brother.

July 29th

My mum probably thinks I can't hear her so well if she uses the phone in her bedroom instead of the one downstairs. Actually, if I'm in my room, I can hear her quite well. Last night I could hear her going, "bastard, bastard, bastard," over and over again. She wasn't shouting, but it was like she wanted to and would have done if I wasn't in the house. The day before yesterday, she'd been out with him and she had a big bruise on her face, just under the eye.

My mum isn't a girl. About a month ago I was thinking, well, maybe she was. Because she went and done up her hair, and bought these boots and these red trousers. You could actually see then my mum had a bum. And I thought well maybe if she wasn't my mum, I'd see her and think she was a girl. But now I think about it, I don't reckon she is. She's too old really.

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August 1st

My mum was out all day again today. I don't mind being by myself in the house. Anyway, I'm not by myself, because there's Naomi. I suppose it's almost a year since I found her down the lane, wrapped up in that bit of newspaper. She's really grown now. She's thin and black, a beautiful cat.

I remember just after I found her, how I let her follow me to school. I thought that would be all right, but then some of the boys, Dave Atkinson and all them, they got her in the playground and started throwing her around, throwing and catching her. Then they went and dropped her down the toilet. I got beaten up pretty bad that day. I never let her follow me to school now.

I'm used to getting beaten up. They're all cunts at school, all of them. Except for Eddie. He's the only one I like. But Eddie reckons he's got a girlfriend now. He reckons he's going out with Samantha Kendall, the girl in the fourth year.

I keep thinking I won't go back to school when it starts again. I don't know if my mum will make me or not. She used to be dead strict, but she isn't any more. She never comes home till late, and she doesn't mind what I do now.

August 4th

It's getting really boring sitting out in the garden all the time. Naomi isn't as fun to play with as when she was a kitten. She just sits around now or goes walking off somewhere. The only time she wants me is when she's hungry. I think it's a bit much, her ignoring me like this. I think I'll stop feeding her, just to see how she likes it.

I thought maybe Eddie would come round today, but he didn't. He never comes round now he's got a girlfriend. I don't know if I'll go back to school or not. It's pretty boring not going to school.

August 5th

I haven't fed Naomi all day today. She keeps coming up to me but

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I don't pay her any attention. It serves her right. She shouldn't take me for granted. If it wasn't for me, she'd still be down the lane wrapped up in some newspaper.

I found a key in one of the drawers in the kitchen, and it fits the padlock to the junkroom. I went in and had a look round. They were mostly my dad's things, books and boxes and stuff like that. The books weren't much good. But I found all these dirty magazines piled up in one of the corners. They were ages old. You could tell because the women all had funny hairstyles, and they never showed their cunts. I took some out into the garden and read them for a few hours.

August 9th

The last few days haven't been so boring. I've found this game to play with Naomi. What I do is I tie a bit of string to her collar. Then I put some food out in her bowl, and when she goes to get the food I hold her by the string so she can't quite reach it. She starts to make a lot of noises then. After a while I usually put the food away in the fridge. It's best to keep her hungry otherwise she doesn't play. I'm going through all the magazines out in the garden, and when I get a bit bored, I come back in the kitchen, get the food out of the fridge and we play the game again. It's best if you use a really long bit of string and wait till she's really hungry. Because then you let her go and she makes a really fast run up to the bowl, and she has to jerk right back when the string gets tight.

The magazines are pretty good, even though they don't show cunts. I wonder if any of the girls have got the clap, like Eddie's brother. Some of them must have, because they must all be prostitutes and strippers and things like that. They don't look like they've got it, but then neither does Eddie's brother. It takes a bit of time for the poison to start working on you.

I had a good look at my prick again today. I'm still all right.

August 10th

My mum was crying again last night. She was talking on the

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phone for ages. She was crying sometimes, and going “please, please, please,” all the time. She kept saying she was sorry and crying. My mum didn’t used to cry, but I’ve heard her crying loads of times now. When I saw her this morning, her eyes were all puffy. I didn’t want her to stay in the house, so I kept asking her when she was going to see her John. She said she’d have to clean the house a bit, the place was disgusting. She started bossing me about and once she asked if I’d fed the cat yet. I told her I had, because I wanted to play the game soon as she went out. I asked her again when she was going to see John, and she shouted at me to mind my own business and went upstairs. She was on the phone again for ages, then she came down with a lot of make-up and stuff on and said she was going out.

She’s right about the house being disgusting. There’s cobwebs and stuff all over the place now.

August 11th

I’m not sure I want to have sex. You never know if you’re going to get poisoned. It’s like picking mushrooms. It’s dangerous picking mushrooms and just eating them because some of them are toadstools and you get poisoned.

August 13th

Something happened this afternoon and I felt strange for ages afterwards. It’s a bit hard to explain really. I was in the kitchen, playing my game with Naomi, holding her by the string inches from her bowl, when the front door went. I was so surprised I didn’t quite know what to do. I just froze. Naomi kept clawing at the string. The doorbell went again, so I went out to open it. It was these two tall American blokes. They smiled all the time and the one doing the talking asked if my mum was in. When I said no, he looked at his friend and his friend must have given him some kind of signal, because he turned to me and started saying all this stuff about Jesus and how they were going around telling everybody the good news that Jesus was going to save us. I told

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them they'd have to see my mum about something like that and closed the door. When I got back to the kitchen, there was Naomi eating away like mad. I felt so angry I went up to her and picked her up by the string, picked her right up so she was sort of hanging. This is when it got really horrible. Because I had her hanging up really high, about as high as my face, and her whole body kind of turned on the end of the string and came round to face me. And the sun was shining right in Naomi's face so her eyes didn't look like eyes any more, but like two slabs of glass or something, just glinting. It was horrible and I dropped her straight away. I felt really cold then, so I went out into the garden. It was quite windy today, and the magazines were all over the grass.

August 14th

Last night my mum was shouting, "I hate you, hate you, hate you." She seems to have forgotten I'm in the house and I can hear her. Then she started screaming really loud, "Stop laughing, you fucking bastard, stop laughing." Then she started shouting how much she hated him. But when I saw her this morning, she was quiet and calm like she always used to be, and told me to clear out the spare bedroom and to put any junk into the junkroom. I asked her what for. Then she told me her John was moving in. But the room was for his daughter, Carol, who was moving in as well. She told me to have it ready by about six o'clock, then went out. I suppose John's going to sleep in the same room as my mum. I suppose they're going to fuck.

. . . 1:00 p.m.

I've put everything into the junkroom now, and the room's ready. There wasn't much to do. My mum says Carol's sixteen. That's a bit old for me.

I was looking for more magazines in there, because I've gone through the old ones about thirty times now, but I couldn't find any. But I did find this old can of this weed-killer stuff. So I went and got this test-tube I nicked from school once and filled it up.

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I'm not sure, but it's probably poison. That's why that room's always been locked. Because there's poison in there.

It's still only one o'clock. I suppose I could read the magazines again. I don't want to play the game with Naomi, not after yesterday.

. . . 5.20 p.m.

There's been plenty to do this afternoon. For a start, I killed Naomi. This is how I did it. I had her on the end of the string as usual, but tied her to the leg of the table. I got her food ready and put it on the floor. She got herself wound round the table leg, so I had to unwind her by making her walk round and round the leg. I put the bowl on the floor so that it was just too far, then went out into the garden. About three o'clock it was, I came back and took the bowl outside. Then I got the stuff in the test-tube, and put it in the cat food. Sort of mixed it in and it disappeared. Then I went back into the kitchen and put the bowl down. She was really hungry by this time and kept tugging and miaowing. I got this pair of scissors and cut the string and she really went for it then. She started eating like anything, then she stopped and turned away. They're quite clever, cats. They can tell when they're being poisoned.

I watched her carefully, because I didn't know if she'd had enough of the poison, or how long it would be before it started working. First she sort of crouched down, then started to make this funny noise. It was like a churning noise, a bit like the bus when it's waiting at the bus stop. Then she went to the door and pawed away at it. Then she lay down on her side and went on pawing the door. I could see her ribs going up and down, up and down. Then she got back on her legs again and started to make funny noises that weren't like cat noises at all, more like bird noises. And all this stuff started coming out of her mouth. It was grey and runny, and she made this pool on the tiles. Then more came out. I bent down to have a look, and it was funny stuff with all these tiny bits floating about in it. Then she got back on to her

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side and her hind legs started going a bit. Her eyes were funny, I thought they were looking at me. Then they shut, and her hind leg went a bit more then she wasn't moving.

I kept watching till I was sure she wasn't going to twitch any more. Then I got some newspaper and spread it out on the floor. I picked her up by the fur, because I didn't want to touch her too much, and put her on the newspaper. I tried to pick it all up by holding two corners of the paper, but one of the ends slipped and she fell out and landed on the floor. Then I went and found a plastic bag under the sink, one of the ones from the supermarket. It was a bit dirty, and when I looked inside, there was this funny yellowy liquid at the bottom. I tried to pull the bag over her on the floor, but I didn't get very far doing that. So I picked it up by the fur again, and sort of fumbled it all into the bag. It dropped in a bit twisted. When I held the bag up, some of the liquid started leaking out of the bottom of the plastic and made little dots on the floor. I had to put the bag outside while I mopped up.

I dumped the bag in the lane where I first found Naomi. On the way, I felt something on my leg. The liquid was still leaking out of the bag and was dripping on to my jeans. It's dried up now, I don't think it will show. It smelt a bit funny when I first came home, but I can't smell it now.

August 19th

I quite like Carol from the back. I've been watching from the window. She's walking round the garden, fingering the rose-buds on the bushes by the fence. She usually wears a bikini, but she's got her clothes on today. She looks pretty all right from the back. She's got this long black hair, and she's quite skinny. But I don't like her face, it gives me the creeps. She wears these little round glasses all the time, even when she's sunbathing. And she sticks her nose up a bit, like she's being snooty. But I don't mind all that so much. It's just her face, I don't like looking at it. Because it reminds me. Because I've seen it before.

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August 20th

I'm never alone in the house any more. I can't go downstairs because my mum and that John's there. I can't go out in the garden because she's there. Carol, I mean. I've got a few of the magazines under my bed, but they're getting a bit boring now.

My mum came into my room yesterday and started telling me off because I don't speak to John. She started going on in this whisper, and kept poking me with her finger because she couldn't speak louder. Then someone was coming up the stairs, so she gave me this look and went out. I still don't talk to him. I don't like him. He's big and heavy and looks like he's waiting for me to do something so he can shout at me.

The other morning I was out on the landing, and my mum shouts to me from her bedroom for me to bring up some tea for her and John. I know John doesn't take sugar, so I put a whole load in. When I came back up, I could hear my mum shouting to me not to open the door, to leave the tray outside. I pretended not to hear and went in. They were both in bed without anything on, and John had these tattoos on his arms and his chest. My mum told me to just put the tray down and get out.

August 21st

I never get up before about twelve o'clock now. It's not worth it, there's nothing to do. By the time I'm up, Carol's always out there sunbathing. I like watching her from my window. If I stand a little bit back there's no way she can tell I'm looking at her. There's usually a few books next to her on the grass, and she's always asleep. Her tits are quite big, though probably not as big as some of the girls in the magazines. She's getting quite brown too. She's not bad looking except she never takes her glasses off.

Yesterday I was down in the kitchen making some tea and Carol came in from the garden. She came right in and looked at me. I went all cold and couldn't look at her face. Because I know now where I've seen it before.

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August 22nd

I woke up last night because my mum was shouting at John, just the way she used to on the phone. And he was laughing. He just kept laughing, and she kept going, "You bastard, you bastard," and crying. He just kept laughing. Then my mum came out of her room and went into the bathroom. She stayed there for ages and I was wondering what she was doing. Then in the end, John opens the door of the bedroom and shouts out, "Oy," really loud, like he couldn't care about anybody else in the house. "Oy," he goes. "Come back here, you. D'you hear me?" He says it just like that, like my mum's a dog or something. And my mum, she just comes out of the bathroom, back down the corridor, and I can hear she's sobbing. "Get in here," he goes, and the door shuts and it's all quiet again. Carol's room's further down the corridor. I wonder if she heard any of it.

August 23rd

Carol always looks like she's asleep, but it's funny, it's like she knows when I'm watching her. Like today when I got up and went to the window, she was lying on her front. But as soon as I started watching her, she rolled over on to her back. She looked like she was asleep all the time, but then she started doing all these things. Like opening her legs up and shutting them again. And she kept stretching and curving her back, like she was in bed and couldn't get comfortable. She looks like she's asleep all the time though.

August 24th

I was out in the garden with Carol, but I've come back in here now. She came and got me when I was in the kitchen and made me lie out on the grass with her. I lay on my front so she wouldn't see I had a hard-on. After a bit, I got quite relaxed and I was getting to quite like it lying out there. She asked me about school and what I was doing over the summer and all that kind of stuff. But then she started talking about cats. She asked me if I liked them, if I

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thought they were better than dogs, if I thought they were cleverer than dogs. Then she goes, "You used to have one, didn't you?" She says it just like that. "You used to have one, didn't you?" No, I tell her, I've never had a cat and don't want one. And she goes, "But I thought you used to have one. Your mum said." And I says oh yeah I forgot. She asks me how I can forget a thing like that. I tell her it doesn't count as having a cat, because I've lost it now. She's watching me all the time, through her little round glasses. I felt cold all over, so I came back up here. She's still out there, but I don't feel like looking at her.

August 28th

My mum and John go out quite a lot now. That's really good because that means I can lie out on the grass with Carol and we can play our game. She lets me touch her all over her body. I sort of stroke her very lightly, because she likes me doing that. Sometimes, she lies on her stomach and undoes her top so she can get a tan all over her back. She likes me running my hand down her back, but she doesn't let me touch anything really good. But sometimes I touch the back of her thighs, quite high up, and whenever I do that I can see her buttocks sort of twitch, like they can't help it and do it by themselves. My prick gets so hard then it begins to hurt. But then she stops playing all of a sudden and pushes me away. Then I'm not allowed to touch her at all. She tells me to go away or she'll tell her dad what I tried to do. I have to go back in then. She always smiles to herself when she sees me doing what she says.

August 29th

Eddie reckons he's fucked Samantha Kendall, but I don't believe him. He kept saying how great it was and how they were going to do it again. I saw him when I went round to the papershop on the parade. I felt like asking him why he never comes round any more, but in the end I didn't say anything. Because he's different now. I reckon he's making it up about

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fucking Samantha Kendall.

August 30th

Carol started saying all these things about my mum today, so I've finished with her. She's just a cunt. She started saying that her dad could make my mum do anything he wanted because she's old and thinks nobody else will fuck her. Then she started saying how I didn't know half the things that were going on, and how when my mum used to come round to their flat, all they ever did was stay in bed all afternoon. I told her to belt up, but she kept on saying it, right in my ear, and she had this funny smile on her face all the time. I told her it was all a lot of lying shit but she laughs and says I must know it's all true. Then she starts going on about how once over their flat there was all this shouting, and how my mum was locked out of the bedroom with no clothes on. I told her it was fucking lies, but she went on and on and said how my mum was on her knees banging on the door and crying and begging and how her dad was just laughing inside and didn't let her in for ages. I got up and came inside then, and Carol was laughing, and said she could tell me more, even worse things than that. She's just a cunt.

September 2nd

My mum and John went to Margate for the day today. That meant Carol and I had the whole afternoon to play our game. We'd been playing for about an hour, when I touched one of her tits. I thought she'd sit up and stop playing then, but she just went on lying there and let me have a really good feel. She had her hand up my T-shirt and she was sliding her hand all over me. So then I tried to put my hand down her panties, and suddenly she goes and digs her nails right into my stomach. It really hurt and I screamed and rolled over. There were little marks all round my belly-button. "Why d'you do that?" I says to her. She's sitting up now and looking at me, and she says, "You were being naughty. I have to get you back." That's what she says, "I have to get you back." And I look at her and the sun's going down behind her and it's

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shining against her glasses and I can't see her eyes, just these round slabs of light, and she's smiling at me and going, "I'll have to get you back."

September 3rd

I better start right from the beginning or else I'll forget things. So I better start from when I got up, about eleven o'clock. I went to the window to look at Carol, but she's not out there this time. I get dressed and go to the toilet and have a good look at my prick to check I'm still all right. I could hear my mum and John downstairs, laughing about something. When I came out of the toilet, I could see down the landing, and I saw Carol's door slightly open. I went up dead quiet and had a look through the crack. She'd left her curtains open a bit, and the sun was coming through the gaps, right into the room, and you could see all the dust floating about. Carol was on the mattress with nothing on, lying on her back. Her blankets were all around her legs, like she'd kicked them off in the night. The sun was shining right on to her lenses again, and I couldn't see her eyes. But I thought she was asleep because her head was sort of tilted to one side, and her mouth was a bit open. I was having a good look at her, and she looked a lot better than all those prostitutes in the magazines. Then the sun changed a bit and I could see her eyes then and I could see they'd been watching me all the time. I didn't know what to do, I kind of froze. She kept staring at me, which was weird because her head was still tilted to one side and her mouth was still open, it was like she was dead and looking at me, it was horrible. Then her arms started moving, and her hands went down her body dead slow, then pulled the blankets up really slow, up to her chin. Then she smiles and goes, "Why don't you go and get me a cup of coffee?" I don't know what I said then, I can't remember. I think I just stood there thinking about what she said. Then she says, "Please be a nice boy, and go and make me a cup of coffee." She says it just like that, smiling at me.

It didn't take me long to get it ready. While I was in the kitchen

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making it, I could hear my mum and John laughing in the front room. I went upstairs to Carol with the cup and the first thing she says is for me to close the door behind me. Then she takes the cup and sits up to drink it. The blankets fall down to her waist and her tits are hanging there and they jog a bit when she drinks. I touch her, somewhere around the side of her body. She smiles, then drinks a bit more. I touch each of her nipples, quite gently first, then I squeeze one quite hard. She takes a sharp breath, then giggles a bit. I do it a bit more, and then her arms come down over my head, round my neck. I move a bit closer to her and squeeze more and more making her take more sharp breaths and then she's kissing me, small little kisses all over my face. I try to kiss her back, but my head bangs against her glasses, so I try to take them off, but she pushes my hand away. Then I can feel her undoing my belt, so I keep squeezing her tits, and she's breathing quite hard, and pulling my jeans off. Her mouth is right by my ear and I can hear her breathing, and then she starts whispering, and she's going, "Oh that's naughty, that's naughty," every time I squeeze. "That's naughty," she's going, "I'll have to get you back, that's naughty, I'll have to get you back," and she's pulling at my knickers and touching my prick and saying she'll get me back. I realize what she's saying, but it's too late, I'm sliding inside her and her legs are curling all round me and she's still whispering she's going to get me back. And I'm thinking of all those bodies in the magazines, and Eddie's brother, and all the poison going round in her body, going round and round, round and round, and I try to pull away but she holds me tighter and presses herself on me and I can feel the poison running stronger and stronger all the time. Then she stops suddenly, like something's stabbed her inside. She makes a funny noise down inside her throat. I start to climb off her and she pushes me off and tries to get to her feet. She sort of stumbles as she tries to get to the door, and then she doubles up a bit like something's stabbed her again. She gets to the door, then puts her hand over her mouth and the vomit starts coming. She opens the door all right though,

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and I hear her going down the landing, and the toilet door banging. I pull up my knickers and my jeans and go to the door. I can hear her out there, making funny puking noises. I tip-toe out of the room, down the landing, till I'm outside the toilet door. She's making weird noises and whimpering sometimes, in between pukes. Then her noises become louder, like someone's trying to strangle her. There's footsteps behind me, and I see John coming up the stairs, my mum behind him. "What the fuck's going on," goes John, and I just shrug and say Carol's being sick in the toilet. He pushes me aside and bangs on the door. Carol's gone quiet now. John bangs again, then tries to open the door. It's not locked, but there's something blocking it. He pushes it a bit more, then says, "Oh God." My mum's looking over his shoulder and she says, "Oh God," as well. There's a really strong smell of vomit now. My mum turns round and tells me to phone an ambulance quick. Then she and John are trying to open the door a bit more. I keep standing there, and my mum turns and shouts at me to phone an ambulance.

I start to go down the stairs slowly. They don't see I'm not hurrying because they're both trying to squeeze into the toilet. I keep going down the stairs and start humming a bit because I don't want her to die, because I don't want to think about things too much, because I don't really want her to die. I never wanted to kill her, that's never what I wanted, I had to, but I never really wanted to, I wanted her to be my girlfriend and we could fuck and be in love, I never wanted her to die.

Biographical Notes

KAZUO ISHIGURO was born in 1954 in Nagasaki, Japan, and came to Britain in 1960. He attended the University of Kent at Canterbury, then took an M.A. in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia. Previous occupations include community work in a problem area of Glasgow, and working in a Cyrenian house for homeless people in London. He plays various musical instruments, and enjoys the cinema and travel.