

Kazuo Ishiguro

WAITING FOR J

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The little Jewish girl across the corridor has many night visitors. Quite probably she is a prostitute. Several times in the last few hours I have stopped my typing on hearing footsteps ascending the staircase. But they have gone past my door and stopped at hers.

My fortieth birthday commenced just over three hours ago. Initially I displayed a certain impatience, pacing the floor, peering occasionally through the curtains down at the mews below. A little before two o'clock I prepared here upon my desk a collection of improvised weapons: two thin chisels I use for sculpting, a dome-shaped paperweight made of bronze, the thin sharp knife with which I carve wood. For some minutes I contemplated these implements, intrigued by the problem of how precisely to use them. It has since become clear to me that such a gallery of tools would be of little use, and I have pushed them—somewhat untidily—to one side. I am waiting for J. I may as well confess that I am frightened.

Recently while engaged in some wood sculpting, I injured the little finger of my right hand. I am now disturbed by a twinge of pain each time it is required to touch a type key. The wall immediately facing me is chalky white and the bookshelves to my left cast strange patterns across it.

My room is quite fashionable, much of my furniture being purchased from a predominantly tasteful Scandinavian shop. I am especially fond of the glass coffee table that occupies the centre of the floor. I keep on it several carefully selected items; an ashtray handmade from baked clay, a set of tea-mats of intricately laced

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cork, an elaborate corkscrew I acquired in Spain. The dome-shaped paperweight beside me on the desk is the other item I usually keep on the table. I try not to alter the position of these items, and it was only with the greatest reluctance that I removed the paperweight in order to include it in my gallery of weapons.

At various strategic points in the room I have displayed those of my sculptures I am most pleased with. I frequently work with marble, but my preference is for wood. I gain immense pleasure from carving soft wood, and the technique I have acquired is not negligible. I am especially fond of the statuette of a young goddess I have placed on my window ledge. All in all, it would be clear to those who visited my room that my sculpture is more than a mere pastime. I do have visitors from time to time. Last week, for instance, two of my students dropped in to borrow a chess set and stayed for over half an hour.

Two of my walls are completely covered with books. I have studied extensively and it is acknowledged that I am as well acquainted with my particular field as anyone in the country. The past fortnight however I have not shown my face at the university. I have told them I am ill and they have no reason to disbelieve me. I have become moodier with the approach of my fortieth birthday and for the past fortnight have left my room for only the most essential purposes.

I paused a while in my writing because I thought I recognized his footsteps. Even after these years, I felt I could recognize them. I was mistaken however. Yet again they went past my door, up to the room of the little Jewish girl. I cannot ascertain whether it is the same person or separate individuals who have been frequenting her room throughout the night. For several months I have suspected her of being a prostitute. But I cannot be sure. When we chance to meet, out in the corridor or on the staircase, we merely nod and mutter politely. I watch her eyes but there is nothing to suggest she could be making a pass at me. She is small and thin. She has wispy black hair and often wears boots that come up to her kneecaps. The boots and the footsteps at

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night are all I have as evidence in my speculations. I would like more to go on, and I have often pressed my ear to the wall in the far corner of the room in hopes of catching some small morsel of her night activities. But I can hear nothing. As I sit here I find a strange comfort in thinking of her and trying to picture what is occurring at this moment in her room. I have entertained many times the idea of asking her in for coffee. But then my thoughts return to this night, my fortieth birthday, and to J.

It is partly owing to J that I find myself speculating as to whether or not my Jewish neighbour is a prostitute. For it was he who pointed out Sally Croffick to me as she came out of the village grocery all those years ago. I was eleven then, and J must have been fifteen. We were sitting on the wall outside the church hall when he nudged me and nodded towards Sally.

“I suppose you wouldn’t know about her, would you?” he said to me.

I asked him what he meant, and he laughed saying he would show me if I wished. J’s remarks made me extremely curious and I asked him several times that afternoon to explain himself. Each time he laughed and said he would show me in good time.

To fear J, as I do now sitting here in the small hours of my fortieth birthday, is not a thing new to me. Even as a child, I had noticed there was something strange about him. Indeed at times I felt a huge dread of him. It would engulf me in a sudden wave and I would want to run as far from him as possible. I am not sure now whether he in fact did anything to provoke these moments. All I recall is that there were times, walking along a field or talking together beside a stream, when the fear would sweep over me and I would start to run. The first few times I did this, J would come after me making me run all the more frantically. He would catch me quite easily and push me over on to the grass and laugh, asking what had come over me. Perhaps he genuinely did not know.

I have before now tried to recall what cause he had given me to fear him in that way. Only one incident still comes to mind. It occurred during those days he would take me to the tall poplar

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tree to spy on Sally Croffick. I believe we were on our way towards Sally's farmhouse, I do not remember exactly. In any case we were walking the edge of a ploughed field on a summer's evening when we came across a rabbit in our path. Its eyes were opening and shutting to some internal rhythm of agony. As I stood mesmerized by the sight, J prodded it with his foot and said we would have to put it out of its misery. I do not know where J went then, only that he was no longer by my side. I did not look to find out for I had become quite transfixed by the rabbit. I was not horrified, nor did I feel any pity. A strange fascination had gripped me, and the eyes opening and shutting so rhythmically gave me a curious thrill. Then before I had realized, J had returned and was crouched on his haunches hammering away at the creature with a heavy stone. It seemed to me he went on for ever, hammering and hammering quite passionlessly, as if crafting something out of stone. He kept going and the eyes seemed to go on opening and shutting long after the head was quite mutilated. I stood watching about a yard or so away, watching for the eyes to stop opening and shutting. And then J was tugging at me and laughing, saying we had to hurry or we would miss Sally. He tugged me quite hard and we walked on. The eyes were still opening and shutting as we walked away.

Someone has just walked out of the Jewish girl's room, past my door and down the staircase. There was a small exchange of conversation as the door opened, but I could make out no words. We have lived across the corridor for over a year now, she and I. It would not be absurd for me to invite her to join me for coffee some evening. As a matter of fact, I have been contemplating for several months a little scheme. I will enter her room on the pretext that I wish to borrow her telephone since mine has gone out of order. I could then make a note of her telephone number. This would enable me to compare it with the numerous numbers I have seen advertised on postcards under comically lewd headings in nearby newsagent windows. Of course my not finding her number would in no way sink my suspicions. However it is some-

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thing to be going on and the prospect of further evidence stimulates me.

It is now over an hour since I started to write. I dislike self-deception, and I will not entertain the possibility that J will not come. In spite of all my dread of him, I feel a curious excitement in anticipation of our meeting once more.

J left our village when he was seventeen years old. Much of his last summer we spent by the river. I had by then become a quite expert angler, this being one thing I could do better than J. He would often come to watch me, sit on the bank and talk for an hour or so. He talked almost exclusively of his plans to leave the village and to travel the world. He would first go down to London where he would find work in the theatre, then would travel to Turkey. Why he was so fascinated by Turkey I never found out. He talked a lot of women and recounted stories he had heard about the south of France. He told me that to stay in that village was like living in a shell, and that if I were wise I would get out as soon as I was old enough. He made me promise several times that when the time came—for I was just thirteen then—I would follow his example and travel the world.

A few days before he left, he came and found me fishing at my usual spot by the river. His plans, he said, had been finalized. A friend of his in London would put him up and give him a part in a play. He was in the highest of spirits and talked on freely while I fished. I can recall vividly that picture of him, his thin, almost gangly form sitting in the grass above me on the steep riverbank. His hands were moving, but I could not see at first with what it was they were occupied.

“Don’t know about you,” he was saying, “but I don’t ever want to get old. Not worth it.”

I turned a little and then I saw what it was he was doing. He was carving the end of a small twig with his penknife. I turned my attention back to the float in the slowly moving water.

“Don’t ever want to get as old as my dad,” J went on. “Think I’ll die first.”

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“Yes,” I said hastily, “I quite agree.”

“Tell you what. We ought to make a deal, you and me. We could murder each other when we get to forty.” His hands stopped momentarily. “What’s up with you?” he asked.

“You’re going to cut yourself.”

“What? Oh . . .” He threw the twig aside. “But I’ve just thought. I’m a bit older than you. We’ll have to think up some other plan.”

I watched him pick up another twig, then once more he started to carve. I watched in silence the bark peeling away under his blade.

“You’re going to cut yourself,” I said, finally. “You’ll cut your finger.”

J shrugged and continued to carve the twig. I watched the water and the float. I felt cold all over despite the afternoon sun.

For the first year after his leaving the village, we exchanged occasional letters. He was working in a restaurant, he told me, just to get enough money to start his journeys abroad. Eventually we lost contact.

I did not see J again for over twenty years. Locating him once more entailed laborious enquiries. But finally I was given an address, and late one evening, I found myself knocking on a door on the first floor of a gloomy building. J recognized me immediately and showed me in.

He had visitors, a rather grotesque couple drinking out of beer cans. The woman was large and heavily made-up. Her man seemed younger and wore a flower in his lapel. Both were extremely drunk. J however seemed sober. I answered his questions briefly, but not without affection. Then I watched a kind of embarrassed mood come over him and I could see his eyes checking over his room and casting quick glances towards the guests. His questions ceased and I could see he found difficulty in looking at me.

His room was unremarkable other than for its starkness. There was little to distract the eye from the worn-looking armchairs or

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the drab little coffee table. The only light came from a dim lamp in a corner and through the gloom it was not easy to ascertain whether his walls had even been papered. His friends continued to chatter and laugh, but J became silent. I too spoke little. On several occasions I heard footsteps pass along the corridor outside. Then eventually, towards midnight, the visitors got up to leave. At the door the woman with the make-up kissed J loudly, saying she hoped he had had a nice birthday. Then at last we were alone.

J had changed considerably. He had grown quite plump and his carriage sagged forward a little. He looked tired and told me he had not slept properly for the past fortnight. He worked, he said, as a supervisor in a warehouse. I asked him if he enjoyed his work and he replied that it was a good job.

“I’ve brought you a birthday present,” I said, and took the package out of my bag. J leaned forward in his chair and for a moment his face showed enthusiasm. He took the package and regarded it for some moments without removing the wrapping. Then he slowly took away the paper, looked at the black case and smiled. He opened it and raised his eyebrows.

“What is this, old chap? A banana knife?”

“No. It’s from Turkey. It’s modelled on the design the Turks used in the sixteenth century. I particularly liked the handle.”

“Ah, from Turkey.”

“You always wanted to go there,” I said.

“A long time ago, yes. One has to give up childish things.” He smiled and took the knife out of its case. It was almost two feet in length, a quite exquisite antique.

“Did you ever travel?” I asked.

“Yes, I did once. A long time ago. It hardly makes any difference now.” He gave me a tired smile and touched the point of the knife gingerly. “You come to haunt me, old fellow. Like a conscience.”

“Aren’t you pleased to see me?”

“Of course I’m pleased. But you must understand. Things are

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so dreary all around me now. Damp and dreary.” He laughed a little. “But I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be so gloomy. It’s the time of night, you see.”

I nodded towards the door. “Perhaps that’s why you don’t sleep so well,” I said. “All these footsteps going back and forth out there.”

“Quite. The young lady across the corridor likes to entertain her guests. Sometimes till all hours.”

“Those friends of yours just now. You know them from work?”

“Hardly friends, old fellow. Just acquaintances. They drop in from time to time. Incidentally”—he leaned forward and picked up a set of keys that were lying on the coffee table—“someone left these here about a week ago. They’re not yours, I suppose?”

“No, they’re not mine.”

“Ah well.” He put down the keys, then laid the knife carefully back in the case. “Yes, I much appreciated that paper you read on Turkish architecture. I found it refreshing.”

“Thank you. I didn’t realize you were present.”

“Why of course. I always try and keep up. After all, old fellow, our fields are hardly unrelated. Ah yes, I try and keep up.”

“What do you mean our fields are hardly unrelated? I’m a scholar. You supervise a warehouse.”

J laughed again. “What a way to put it, old chap. But I know you mean well. You really mustn’t worry about me so much. Coffee. How about some coffee?”

I nodded and he disappeared into the small kitchen that adjoined the room. I listened to him for a while clattering with the cups and jars, then said in a voice loud enough for him:

“Do you remember the pact we made once?”

“What’s that you say?” came his voice.

“We made a pact, you and I. By the river once. I was fishing and you were sitting behind me.”

“Oh yes? When was this, old fellow? Do you take sugar?”

“No thank you,” I said, getting to my feet.

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He came into the room, a coffee cup in each hand. He stopped and looked at me with a startled expression. I was holding the knife quite casually, but something in my manner must have given me away. His lips parted slightly, then closed once more. He no longer looked tired, and for a second he brought to mind the figure he was to me at seventeen.

We stood staring at each other for perhaps a full minute. He did not put down the coffee cups, and his face became quite expressionless. I abandoned any notion of disguise now and slowly raised the knife.

“Yes, I remember now,” he said. His voice was devoid of any emotion. “So. You’ve come to keep your side of the pact.”

I did not speak but took a step forward to bring me within striking distance.

“Yes, I remember very well,” he continued. “And I thought you weren’t listening. Quite engrossed in your fishing.” He smiled quickly, then his face was a blank once more. “But you won’t be forty for a few years yet, old fellow. Do you wish me to keep my end of the bargain too?”

“Whatever you wish.”

“So be it then.”

I remained poised in front of him, the knife raised above my head. The light from the kitchen lit up one side of his face, highlighting the bones of his cheek and jaw. The other half of the face was in shadow and I could see the one eye, watching with its detached expression. Then the eye grew tired, almost impatient. I heard a car go by in the street below. Eventually I started to cut. I did not utter a sound while I completed the cutting. The coffee he had been holding began to slowly spread over the carpet.

The little finger of my right hand has begun to trouble me considerably. I hurt it with a chisel a few days ago while carving a small statuette of a Greek goddess. The injury put a prompt halt to operations, and she remains unfinished, left in a corner on some newspaper. I do not feel the urge to finish her. I have carved out goddesses just like her time and again before. Such achieve-

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ments do not bring the same satisfaction they once did.

I have heard no more footsteps in the last half hour. My little Jewish neighbour seems to have ceased her activities for the night. But now I find myself casting sudden glances over my shoulder. I feel an odd mixture of relief and disappointment each time I find J is not standing there behind me. He will come, of that I am certain. The futility of that triumph four years ago seems embarrassingly obvious to me now. I need only cast a quick glance around this room, at my books, the statuettes, the furniture, all these things I have achieved in my forty years, and I know he will be here to pay his respects.

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.