

# THE ZOO ATTACK

by MURAKAMI Haruki

translated by Jay Rubin

Her tone calm and steady, Nutmeg Akasaka told me the story of the tigers, the leopards, the wolves, and the bears that were shot by soldiers on a miserably hot afternoon in August 1945. She narrated with such order and clarity that I felt as if I were watching a documentary film of the events. She left nothing vague. Yet she herself had not actually witnessed the spectacle. While it was happening, she was standing on the deck of a transport ship carrying refugee settlers home to Japan from Manchuria. What she had actually witnessed was the surfacing of an American submarine.

Like everyone else, she and the other children had come up from the unbearable steam bath of the ship's hold to lean against the deck rail and enjoy the gentle breezes that moved across the calm, unbroken sea, when, all at once, the submarine came floating to the surface as if it were part of a dream. First the radio and radar antennas and the periscope broke the surface. Then the conning tower came up, raising a wake as it cut through the water. And finally the entire dripping mass of steel exposed its graceful nakedness to the summer sun.

The submarine ran parallel to the ship for a while, as if stalking its prey. Soon a hatch opened, and one crew member, then another and another climbed onto the deck, moving slowly, almost sluggishly. From the conning-tower deck, the officers examined every detail of the transport ship through huge binoculars, whose lenses would flash every now and then in the sunlight. The transport ship was full of civilians heading back to Japan, their destination the port of Sasebo. The majority were women and children, the families of Japanese officials in the puppet Manchukuo government and of high-ranking personnel of the Japanese-owned South Manchuria Railway, fleeing to the homeland from the chaos that would follow the Soviet entry into the war against Japan. Rather than face the inevitable horror, they had been willing to accept the risk of attack by an American submarine on the open sea—until now, at least.

The submarine officers were checking to see if the transport ship was unarmed and without a naval escort. They had nothing to fear. The Americans now had command of the air, too. Okinawa had fallen, and Japan had pulled in its fighter planes to defend the home islands. No need for the Americans to panic: time was on their side. A petty officer barked orders, and three sailors spun the cranks that turned the deck gun until it was aimed at the transport ship. Two other crewmen opened the rear-deck hatch and hauled up heavy shells to feed the gun. Yet another squad of crewmen, with practiced movements, were loading a machine gun they had set on a raised part of the deck near the conning tower.

That and the deck gun were more than enough to sink the rotting old freighter that had been refitted as a transport ship. The submarine carried only a limited number of torpedoes, and these had to be reserved for encounters with armed convoys.

The crew all wore combat helmets, though a few of the men were naked from the waist up and nearly half were wearing short pants. If she stared hard at them, Nutmeg could see brilliant tattoos inscribed on their arms. If she stared hard, she could see lots of things. She dung to the deck rail and watched as the gun's black barrel pivoted in her direction. Dripping wet only moments earlier, it had been baked dry in

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the summer sun. At home in Hsin-ching, she had never seen such an enormous gun.

The submarine flashed a signal lamp at the freighter: "Heave to. Attack to commence. Immediately evacuate all

passengers to lifeboats." (Nutmeg could not read the signal lamp, of course, but in retrospect she understood it perfectly.) But there were not enough lifeboats aboard the transport ship. In fact, there were only two small boats for more than five hundred passengers and crew members. There were hardly any life vests or life buoys aboard.

Gripping the deck rail, holding her breath, Nutmeg stared transfixed at the streamlined submarine. It shone as if brand-new, without a speck of rust. She saw the white-painted numerals on the conning tower. She saw the radar antenna rotating above it. She saw the sandy-haired officer with dark glasses.

This submarine has come up from the bottom of the ocean to kill us all, she thought, but there's nothing strange about that, it could happen anytime. It has nothing to do with the war; it could happen to anyone anywhere. Everybody thinks it's happening because of the war. But that's not true. The war is just one of the things that could happen.

Face to face with the submarine and its huge gun, Nutmeg felt no trace of fear. Her mother was shouting at her, but the words made no sense. Then she felt something grab her wrists and pull on them. But her hands stayed locked on the deck rail. The roar of voices all around her began to move far away, as if someone were turning down the volume on a radio. I'm so sleepy, she thought. So sleepy. Why am I so sleepy? She closed her eyes, and her consciousness rushed away, leaving the deck far behind.

Nutmeg was seeing Japanese soldiers as they moved through the extensive zoo, shooting any animal that could attack human beings. The officer gave his order, and the bullets from the Model 38 rifles ripped through the smooth hide of a tiger, tearing at the animal's guts. The summer sky was blue, and from the surrounding trees the screams of cicadas rained down like a sudden shower.

The soldiers never spoke. The blood was gone from their sunburned faces. They looked like pictures painted on ancient urns. A few days from now—at most, a week—the main force of the Soviet Far East Command would arrive in Hsin-ching. There was no way to stop the advance. Ever since the war began, the crack troops and once abundant equipment of the Kwantung Army had been drained away to support the widening southern front, and now the greater part of both had sunk to the bottom of the sea or was rotting in the depths of the jungle. The tanks were gone. The anti-tank guns were gone. All but a handful of the troop transport trucks had broken down, and there were no spare parts. Large numbers of troops remained, but there were not enough rifles left to arm every man, nor bullets enough to load every rifle. The great Kwantung Army, Bulwark of the North, had been reduced to a paper tiger. The proud Soviet mechanized units that had crushed the German Army were completing their transfer by rail to the Far Eastern front, with plenty of equipment and with spirits high. The collapse of Manchukuo was imminent.

Everyone knew this to be the truth, the Kwantung Army command most of all. And so the generals evacuated their main force to the rear, in effect abandoning both the small border garrisons and the Japanese civilian homesteaders. These unarmed farmers were slaughtered by the Soviet Army, which was advancing too rapidly to take prisoners. Many women chose—or were forced to choose—mass suicide over rape. Members of the general staff and other high-ranking officers arranged to have themselves "transferred" to new headquarters in Tonghua, near the Korean border, and the puppet emperor Henry Pu-yi and his family threw everything they could get their hands on into trunks and left Hsin-ching by private train. Most of the Chinese soldiers in the Manchukuo Army units assigned to defend the capital deserted as soon as they heard the Soviets were invading, or else they staged revolts 2 of 9

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and shot their Japanese commanding officers. They had no intention of laying down their lives for Japan in a struggle against superior Soviet troops.

The eight soldiers dispatched to the zoo had resigned themselves to their fate. A few days hence, they assumed, they would die fighting the Soviet Army. All they could do was pray that their deaths would not be too painful. None of them wanted to be crushed under the treads of a slow-moving tank or roasted in a trench by flamethrowers or die by degrees with a bullet in the stomach. Better to be shot in the head or the heart. But first they had to kill these animals

in the zoo.

If possible, they were to kill the animals with poison in order to conserve what few bullets they had left.

The young lieutenant in charge of the operation had been so instructed by his superior officer and told that the zoo had been given enough poison to do the job.

The zoo's director confirmed that he indeed had orders to "liquidate" the fiercer animals in case of an emergency and to use poison, but the shipment of poison, he said, had never arrived. When the lieutenant heard this, he became confused. He was an accountant assigned to the paymaster's office, and until he was dragged away from his desk at headquarters for this emergency detail he had never once been put in charge of a detachment of men.

"Bureaucratic work is always like this, Lieutenant," said the zoo director, a man several years his senior, who looked at him with a touch of pity. "The things you need are never there."

To check further into the matter, the director called in the zoo's chief veterinarian, a tall, handsome man in his late thirties. The veterinarian told the lieutenant that the zoo had only a very small amount of poison, probably not enough to kill a horse.

The lieutenant telephoned headquarters for instructions, but since the Soviet Army had crossed the border several days earlier, most of the high-ranking officers had disappeared. The few remaining had their hands full burning documents or leading troops out to dig and-tank trenches. The major who had given the lieutenant his orders was nowhere to be found. The call was transferred from one office to another until a medical-corps colonel got on the line, only to scream at the lieutenant, "You stupid son of a bitch! The whole goddam country's going down the drain and you're asking me about a goddam fucking zoo? Who gives a shit?"

Who indeed? thought the lieutenant. Certainly not he. Now he was faced with two options. He could forget about killing any animals and lead his men out of there, or they could use bullets to do the job.

Either would be a violation of the orders he had been given, but in the end he decided to do the shooting.

That way, he might later be reprimanded for having wasted valuable ammunition, but at least the goal of liquidating the more dangerous animals would have been met. If, on the other hand, he chose not to kill the animals, he might be court-martialled for having failed to carry out orders. There was some doubt whether there would even be any courts-martial at this late stage of the war, but, after all, orders were orders. So long as the Army continued to exist, its orders had to be carried out.

If possible, I'd rather not kill any animals, the lieutenant told himself in all honesty. But the zoo was running out of things to feed them, and most of the animals (especially the big ones) were already suffering from starvation. Shooting might even be easier for the animals themselves—a quick, clean death. And if starving animals were to escape to the city streets during intense fighting or air strikes, a disaster would be unavoidable.

The director then handed the lieutenant a list of animals for "emergency liquidation" that he had been instructed to compile, along with a map of the zoo. The handsome veterinarian and two Chinese workers were assigned to accompany the firing squad. The lieutenant glanced at the list and was relieved to find 3 of 9

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it shorter than he had imagined. Among the animals slated for liquidation, though, were two Indian elephants. "Elephants?" the lieutenant gasped. How in the hell are we supposed to kill elephants? he thought. We'd need a tank for that.

Given the layout of the zoo, the first animals to be liquidated were the tigers. The elephants would be left for last, in any case. The plaque on the tiger cage explained that the pair had been captured in Manchuria in the Greater Khingan

mountains. The lieutenant assigned four men to each tiger and told them to aim for the heart—the where-abouts of which was just another mystery to him. Oh, well, at least one bullet was bound to hit home. When eight men together pulled back on the levers of their Model 38s and loaded cartridge into each chamber, the ominous, dry clicks transformed the whole atmosphere of the place. The tigers stood up at the sound. Glaring at the soldiers through the iron bars, they let out huge roars. As an extra precaution, the lieutenant drew his own automatic pistol and released the safety.

To calm himself, he cleared his throat. This is nothing, he tried to tell himself. Everybody does stuff like this all the time.

The soldiers knelt, took careful aim, and, at the lieutenant's command, pulled their triggers. The recoil shook their shoulders, and for a moment their minds went empty, as if flicked away. The roar of the simultaneous shots reverberated through the deserted zoo, echoing from building to building, wall to wall, slicing through wooded areas, crossing water surfaces, a stab to the hearts of all who heard it, like distant thunder. The animals held their breath. Even the cicadas stopped crying. Long after the echo of gunfire faded into the distance, there was not a sound to be heard. As if they had been whacked with a huge club by an invisible giant, the tigers shot up into the air for a moment, then landed on the floor of the cage with a great thud, writhing in agony, vomiting blood. The soldiers had failed to finish the tigers off with a single volley. They snapped out of their trance and pulled back on their rifle levers, ejecting spent shells and taking aim again.

The lieutenant sent one of his men into the cage to verify that both tigers were dead. They were certainly looked dead—eyes closed, teeth bared, all movement gone. The veterinarian unlocked the cage, and the young soldier (he had just turned twenty) stepped inside fearfully, thrusting his bayonet ahead of him. It was an odd performance, but no one laughed. He gave a slight hick to one tiger's hindquarters with the heel of his boot. The tiger remained motionless. He kicked the same spot again, this time a little harder.

The tiger was dead without a doubt. The other tiger, the female, lay equally still. The young soldier had never visited a zoo in his life, nor had he ever seen a real tiger before. He felt only that he had been dragged into a place that had nothing to do with him and had been forced to perform an act there that had nothing to do with him. Standing in an ocean of black blood, he stared down at the tigers' corpses, entranced. They looked much bigger dead than they had alive. Why should that be? he asked himself, mystified.

The cage's concrete floor was suffused with the piercing smell of the big cats' urine, and mixed with it was the warm odor of blood. Blood was still gushing from the holes torn in the tigers' bodies, forming a sticky black pond around his feet. All of a sudden, the rifle in his hands felt heavy and cold. He wanted to fling it away, bend down, and vomit the entire contents of his stomach onto the floor. What a relief it would have been! But vomiting was out of the question—the squad leader would beat his face out of shape. (Of course, this soldier had no idea that he would die seventeen months later when a Soviet guard in a mine near Irkutsk split his skull open with a shovel.) He wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his wrist. His helmet was weighing down upon him. One cicada, then another began to cry again, as if finally revived. Soon their cries were joined by those of a bird—strangely distinctive 4 of 9

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cries, like the winding of a spring: *Creeeak. Creeeak.* When he was twelve, the young soldier had moved with his parents from a mountain village in Hokkaido across the sea to China, and together they had tilled the soil of a frontier village in Bei'an until a year ago, when he was drafted into the Army.

Thus he knew all the bird, of Manchuria, but, strangely, he had never heard a bird with that particular cry. Perhaps it was a bird imported from a distant land crying in its cage in another part of the zoo. Yet the sound seemed to come from the upper branches of a nearby tree.

He looked toward the lieutenant as if requesting instructions. The lieutenant nodded, ordered him out of the cage, and spread open the zoo map again. So much for the tigers, he thought. Next, we'll do the leopards. Then, maybe, the wolves. We've got bears to deal with, too. We'll think about the elephants when the others are done. And then he realized how hot it was. "Take a breather," he said to his men.

"Have some water." They drank from their canteens. Then they shouldered their rifles, took their places in formation, and headed for the leopard cage. The unknown bird with the insistent call went on winding its spring. The chests and backs of the men's short-sleeved military shirts were stained black with sweat.

As this formation of fully armed soldiers strode along, the clanking of all kinds of metallic objects sent hollow echoes throughout the deserted zoo. The monkeys clinging to the bars of their cages rent the air with their screams, sending frantic warnings to all the other animals, who joined the chores in their own distinctive way. The wolves sent long howls skyward, the birds contributed a wild flapping of wings, a large animal somewhere was slamming itself against its cage as if to send out a threat. A chunk of cloud shaped like a fist appeared out of nowhere and hid the sun for a short time. On that August afternoon, people, animals, everyone was thinking about death. Today, the men would be killing the animals tomorrow, Soviet troops would be killing the men. Probably.

The woman and I always sat across from each other at the same table in the same restaurant, talking. She was a regular there, and, of course, she always picked up the tab. With the kind of money I had, I probably couldn't have afforded an appetizer in such a place. The back part of the restaurant was divided into private compartments, so that the conversation at any one table could not be heard at another. There was only one seating per evening there, which meant that we could talk at leisure, right up to dosing time, without interference from anyone—including the waiters, who approached the table only to bring or clear a dish. She would always order a bottle of Burgundy of one particular vintage and always leave half the bottle unconsumed.

"A bird that winds a spring?" I asked, looking up from my food.

"A bird that winds a spring?" said the woman, who called herself Nutmeg. She repeated the words exactly as I had said them, then curled her lips just a little. "I don't understand what you're saying. What are you talking about?"

I took a sip of wine and wiped my mouth. "Wait a minute, didn't you just say something about a bird winding a spring?"

"She shook her head slowly. "Hmm, now I can't remember. I don't think I said anything about a bird. A bird winding a spring? You mean some kind of toy bird?"

I could see it was hopeless. She always told her stories like this.

"So you were born in Manchuria, then?" I asked.

She shook her head again. "I was born here, in Yokohama. My parents took me to Manchuria when I was three. My father was teaching at a school of veterinary medicine, but when the Hsin-ching city administrators wanted someone sent over from Japan a chief veterinarian for the new zoo they were going to build, he volunteered for the job. My mother didn't want to abandon the settled life they had in Japan and go off to the ends of the earth, but my father insisted. Maybe 5 of 9

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he wanted to test himself in some place bigger and more open than Japan. I was so young it didn't matter where I was, but I really enjoyed living at the zoo. It was a wonderful life. My father always smelled like the animals. All the different animal smells would mix together into one, and it would be a little different each day, like changing the blend of ingredients in a perfume. I'd climb onto his lap when he came home and make him sit still while I smelled

him. If only that life could have gone on forever—how happy I would have been!

"But then the war turned bad, and things got threatening, so my father decided to send my mother and me back to Japan before it was too late. We went with a lot of other people, taking the train from Hsin-ching to Korea, where a special boat was waiting for us. My father stayed behind in Hsin-ching. The last time I ever saw him, he was standing in the station, waving to us. I stuck my head out the window and watched him getting smaller and smaller until he disappeared into the crowd on the platform. No one knows what happened to him after that. He just evaporated, like smoke. We tried asking friends from Hsin-ching who escaped to Japan after us, but it was almost weird how no one knew anything about him. I think he must have been taken prisoner by the Soviets and sent to Siberia to do forced labor and, like so many others, died over there. He's probably buried in some cold, lonely patch of earth without anything to mark his grave. He was just an ordinary civilian—there was no reason for him to be hauled away like that, but it was a confusing time. Lots of mistakes were made.

"I still remember everything about the Hsin-ching zoo in perfect detail. I can bring it all back inside my head—every pathway, every animal. We lived in the chief veterinarian's official residence, in a corner of the zoo. All the zoo workers knew me, and they let me go anywhere I wanted—even on holidays, when the zoo was closed. On those days, the whole place belonged to me alone. You can't imagine what wonderful feeling that was! It was my universe. To me, the zoo was reality—just the opposite of how it is for ordinary people."

Nutmeg closed her eyes to bring back the scene inside her mind. I waited, without speaking, for her to continue her story.

"Still, though, I can't be sure if the zoo as I recall it was really like that. How can I put it? I sometimes feel that it's too vivid, if you know what I mean. And when I start having thoughts like this, the more I think about it the less I can tell how much of the vividness is real and how much of it is an effect of my imagination. I feel as if I've wandered into a labyrinth. Has that ever happened to you? "

It had not. "Do you know if the zoo is still there in Hsin-ching?" I asked.

"I wonder," said Nutmeg, touching the tip of her earring. "I heard that the place was closed after the war, but I have no idea if it's still closed. The city isn't called Hsin-ching anymore, though. Now it's Changchun. But if the zoo is still there I'd like to go and see how much of what I remember is real and how much I've made up in my head. I'd like to know if there really were elephants there. And leopards and tigers and bears. And whether they were really killed by soldiers in the summer of 1945. But, I don't know, maybe nobody really knows the truth."

They killed the leopards. They killed the wolves. They killed the bears. Shooting the bears took the most time. Even after the two gigantic animals had taken dozens of rifle slugs, they continued to crash against the bars of their cage, roaring at the men and slobbering, fangs bared. Unlike the cats, who were more willing to accept their fate (or who at least appeared to accept it), the bears seemed unable to comprehend the fact that they were being killed. When, at long last, the soldiers finally succeeded in extinguishing all signs of life in the cage, they were so exhausted they were ready to collapse on the spot. The lieutenant reset his pistol's safety catch and used his hat to wipe the sweat dripping from his brow. In the deep silence that followed the killing, several of the soldiers seemed to be trying to mask their feelings of shame by spitting loudly on the ground. Spent shells were scattered about their feet like so many cigarette butts. Their ears still rang with the crackling of their rifles. The young soldier who would be beaten to death by a Soviet soldier seventeen months later in a coal mine near Irkutsk took several deep breaths in succession, averting his gaze from the bears' corpses. He was engaged in a fierce struggle to force back the nausea that had worked its way up to his throat.

In the end, they did not kill the elephants. Once they actually confronted them, it became obvious that the beasts were simply too large, that the soldiers' rifles looked like silly toys in their presence. The lieutenant considered, and then decided to leave the elephants alone. Hearing this, the men breathed a sigh of relief. Strange as it may seem—or perhaps it does not seem so strange—they all had the same thought: it was much easier to kill humans on the battlefield than animals in cages, even if, on the battlefield, one might end up being killed oneself.

Those animals that were now nothing but corpses were dragged out of their cages by the Chinese workers, loaded onto carts, and hauled to an empty warehouse. There the animals, which came in so many shapes and sizes, were lined up on the floor. Once he had seen the operation through to its end, the lieutenant returned to the zoo director's



office and had the man sign the necessary documents. Then the soldiers lined up and marched away in formation, with the same metallic 6 of 9

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clanking they had made when they came. The Chinese workers used hoses to wash off the black stains of blood on the floors of the cages, and with brushes they scrubbed away the occasional chunk of animal flesh that dung to the walls.

When this job was finished, the workers asked the veterinarian how he intended to dispose of the corpses. The doctor was at a loss for an answer. Ordinarily, when an animal died at the zoo, he would call a professional to do the job. But with the capital now bracing for a bloody baffle, with people now struggling to be the first to leave this doomed city, you couldn't just make a phone call and get someone to run over to dispose of an animal corpse for you. Summer was at its height, though, and the corpses would begin to decompose quickly. Even now, black swarms of flies were massing. The best thing would be to bury them—an enormous job even if the zoo had access to heavy equipment, but with the limited help available to them now it would obviously be impossible to dig holes large enough to take all the corpses.

The Chinese workers said to the veterinarian, "Doctor, if you will let us take the corpses whole, we will dispose of them for you. We have plenty of friends to help us, and we know exactly where to do the job. We will haul them outside the city and get rid of every last speck. We will not cause you any problems. But, in exchange, we want the hides and meat.

Especially the bear meat—every-body will want that. Parts of bear and tiger are good for medicine—they will command a high price. And though it's too late now to say this, we wish you had aimed only at their heads. Then the hides would have been worth a good deal more. The soldiers were such amateurs! If only you had let us take care of it from the beginning, we wouldn't have done such a clumsy job." The veterinarian agreed to the bargain. He had no choice. After all, it was their country.

Before long, ten Chinese appeared, pulling several empty carts behind them. They dragged the animals' corpses out of the warehouse, piled them onto the carts, tied them down, and covered them with straw mats. They hardly said a word to one another the whole time. Their faces were expressionless. When they had finished loading the carts, they dragged them off somewhere. The old carts creaked with the strain of supporting the animals' weight. All that was left in the zoo was several clean—and empty—cages. Still in an agitated state, the monkeys kept calling out to one another in their incomprehensible language. The badgers rushed back and forth in their narrow cage. The birds flapped their wings in desperation, scattering feathers all around. And the cicadas kept up their grating cry.

After the soldiers had finished their killing and returned to headquarters, and after the last two Chinese workers had disappeared somewhere, dragging their cart loaded with animal corpses, the zoo took on the hollow quality of a house emptied of furniture. The veterinarian sat on the rim of a waterless fountain, looked up at the sky, and watched the group of hard-edged clouds that were floating there. He took a sweat-dampened pack of cigarettes from his breast pocket, put a cigarette in his mouth, and struck a match. As he lit up, he realized that his hand was trembling—so much that it took him three matches to light the cigarette. Not that he had experienced an emotional trauma. A large number of animals had been liquidated in a moment before his eyes, and yet, for some inexplicable reason, he felt no particular shock or sadness or anger. In fact, he felt almost nothing. He was just terribly puzzled. He sat there for a while, watching the smoke curl upward from his cigarette, trying to sort out his feelings. He stared at his hands resting on his lap, then looked once again at the clouds in the sky. The world he saw before him looked the way it always had. And yet it ought to have been a world distinctly different from the one he had known until then. After all, the world that held him now was a world in which bears and tigers and leopards and wolves had been liquidated. Those animals had existed this morning, but now, at four, o'clock in the afternoon, they had ceased to exist. They had been massacred by soldiers, and even their dead bodies were nowhere—as if a light switch had been flipped.

There should have been a decisive gap separating those two different worlds. Because in that world the tigers existed, but in this world they did not. It was a crucial difference for him, for the chief veterinarian of the Hsin-ching zoo, for the man who had taken care of those animals ever since the zoo opened. . . . The gap should have been vast enough to shake the very foundations of his being. What most puzzled the veterinarian was the unfamiliar absence of feeling inside him.

Suddenly he realized that he was exhausted. Come to think of it, he had hardly slept at all the night before. How wonderful it would be, he thought, if I could find the cool shade of a tree somewhere, to stretch out and sleep, if only for a little while—to stop thinking, to sink into the silent darkness of unconsciousness. He glanced at his watch. He had to secure food for the surviving animals. He had to treat the baboon that was running a high fever. There were a thousand things he had to do. He was going to have to keep this zoo running almost single-handed from now on (until who knew when). But now, more than anything, he had to sleep. What came afterward he could think about afterward.

The veterinarian stood up from the rim of the fountain, walked into a neighboring wooded area, and stretched out on the grass where no one would notice him. The shaded grass felt cool and good. The smell was something he remembered fondly from his childhood. Several large Manchurian grasshoppers bounded over his face with a nice, strong hum. He lit another cigarette as he lay there, and he was pleased to see that his hands were no longer trembling so badly. Inhaling the smoke deep into his lungs, he pictured the Chinese men stripping the hides off all those freshly killed animals somewhere and cutting up the meat. He had often seen people here doing work like that, and he knew they were anything but clumsy.

In a matter of moments, an animal would be reduced to hide, meat, organs, and bones, as if those elements had originally been quite separate and had just happened to come together for a little while. He thought, By the time I wake from my nap, I'm sure, those pieces of meat will be out there in the marketplace. That's reality for you—quick and efficient. He tore off a handful of grass and toyed with its softness awhile. Then he crushed his cigarette and, with a deep sigh, expelled all the smoke left in his lungs. When he closed his eyes, the grasshoppers' wings sounded much louder. The veterinarian felt as if grasshoppers the size of bullfrogs were leaping all around him.

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Maybe the world was like a revolving door: this thought occurred to him as his consciousness was fading away. And which section you ended up in was just a matter of where your foot happened to fall. There were tigers in one section, but no tigers in another. Maybe it was as simple as that. And there was no logical continuity from one section to another.

And it was precisely because of this lack of logical continuity that choices really didn't mean very much. Wasn't that why he couldn't feel the gap between one world and another? But that was as far as his thoughts would go. The fatigue in his body was as heavy and suffocating as a sodden blanket. No more thoughts came to him, and he just lay there, inhaling the aroma of the grass, listening to the grasshoppers' wings, and feeling through his skin the dense membrane of shadow that covered him.

And in the end his mind was sucked into the deep sleep of afternoon.

The transport ship cut its engines, as ordered, and soon it came to a standstill on the surface of the ocean. The submarine's deck gun and machine gun were still trained on the transport ship, its crew in a state of readiness to attack. Yet a strange tranquillity hovered between the two ships. The men on the submarine stood in full view on deck, lined up and watching the transport ship with an air of having time to kill. Many of them had not even bothered to strap on battle helmets. There was hardly any wind that summer afternoon, and now, with both engines cut, the only sound was the languid slap of waves against the two ships' hulls. The transport ship signalled to the submarine, "We are a transport ship carrying unarmed civilian. We have neither munitions nor military personnel on

board. We have few lifeboats." To this the submarine responded brusquely, "That is not our problem. Evacuation or no, we commence firing in precisely ten minutes."

This ended the exchange of signal messages between the two ships. The captain of the transport ship decided not to convey the communication to his passengers. What good would it do? A few of them might be lucky enough to survive, but most would be dragged to the bottom of the sea with this miserable old washtub. The captain longed for one last drink, but the whiskey bottle was in a desk drawer in his cabin, and there was no time to get it now. He took off his hat and looked up at the sky.

He was hoping that, through some miracle, a squadron of Japanese fighter planes might suddenly appear there. But this was not to be a day for miracles. The captain thought about his whiskey again.

As the ten minutes was running out, strange movement began on the deck of the submarine. There were hurried exchanges among the officers lined up on the conning-tower deck, and one of the officers scrambled down to the main deck and ran among the crew, shouting some kind of order. Wherever he went, ripples of movement spread among the men at their battle stations. One sailor shook his head from side to side and punched the barrel of the deck gun with a clenched fist. Another took his helmet off and stared up at the sky. The men's actions might have been expressing anger or joy or disappointment or excitement. The passengers on the transport found it impossible to tell what was happening or what this was leading to. Like an audience watching a pantomime for which there was no program, they held their breath and kept their eyes locked on the sailors' every movement, hoping to find some small hint of meaning. Eventually, the waves of confusion among the sailors began to subside, and, in response to an order from the bridge, the shells were removed from the deck gun with great dispatch. The men turned cranks and swung the barrel away from the transport ship until the gun was pointing straight ahead again, then they plugged the horrid black hole of the muzzle. The shells were returned below deck and the crew ran for the hatches. In contrast to their earlier movements, they did everything now with speed and efficiency. There was no chatting or wasted motion.

The submarine's engines started with a definite growl, and at almost the same moment the siren screeched to signal "Commence dive!" The submarine began to move forward, and a moment later it was plunging downward, churning up a great white patch of foam, as if it had hardly been able to wait 8 of 9

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for the men to get below and fasten the hatches. A membrane of seawater swallowed the long, narrow deck from front to rear, the deck gun sank below the surface, the conning tower slipped downward, cutting through the dark-blue water, and finally the antennas and the periscope plunged out of sight as if to rip the air clean of any evidence that they had ever been there.

The transport passengers stood frozen on deck, staring at the watery expanse. Not a throat was cleared, not a limb moved. The captain recovered his presence of mind and gave his order to the navigator, who passed it on to the engine room, and, after a long fit of grinding, the antique engine started up like a sleeping dog kicked by its master.

The crew of the transport ship held their breath, waiting for a torpedo attack. Perhaps the Americans had simply changed their plans, deciding that sinking the ship with a torpedo would be faster and easier than a time-consuming volley from the deck gun. The ship ran in short zigzags, the captain and the navigator scanning the ocean's surface with their binoculars, searching for the deadly white wake of a torpedo. But there was no torpedo. Twenty minutes after the submarine had disappeared beneath the waves, people at last began to break free of the spell that had hung over them. They had come back alive from the verge of death. They could only half believe it at first, but little by little they came to feel that it was true. Not even the captain knew why the Americans had suddenly abandoned their attack. What could have changed their minds? Released now from the unbearable tension, several passengers collapsed where they stood on the deck and began to wail, but most of them could neither cry nor laugh. For several hours—and, in the case of some, for several days—they remained in a state of total abstraction, the spike of a long,

twisted nightmare thrust unmercifully into their lungs, their hearts, their spines, their brains, their wombs.

Little Nutmeg Akasaka remained sound asleep in her mother's arms all the time this was happening. She slept for a solid fourteen hours, as if she had been knocked unconscious. Nothing could draw her back from the world of sleep. Her mother shouted and slapped her cheeks to no avail. So deep was her sleep that she might as well have sunk to the bottom of the sea. The intervals between her breaths grew longer and longer, and her pulse slowed. Her breath was all but inaudible. But when the ship arrived in Sasebo she woke without warning, as if some great power had dragged her back into this world. And so, Nutmeg told me, she did not herself witness the events surrounding the aborted attack and the disappearance of the American submarine. Those parts of the story she heard much later, from her mother. Just moments before the attack was to begin, headquarters had radioed the submarine to suspend all hostilities unless attacked by the enemy. The Japanese government had let the Allied powers know that it was prepared to accept the Potsdam Declaration and surrender unconditionally.

The freighter finally limped into the port of Sasebo a little past ten in the morning on August 16th, the day after the non-attack. The port was weirdly silent, and no one came out to greet the ship. Not even at the anti-aircraft emplacement by the harbor mouth were there signs of humanity. The summer sunlight baked the ground with dumb intensity. The whole world seemed caught in a deep paralysis, and some on board felt as if they had stumbled by accident into the land of the dead. After years spent abroad, they could only stare in silence at the country of their ancestors. At a few minutes past noon on August 15th, the radio had broadcast the Emperor's announcement of the war's end. Seven days earlier, the nearby city of Nagasaki had been incinerated by a single atomic bomb. Within a few days' time, the phantom empire of Manchukuo was disappearing into history. And, caught unawares in the wrong section of the revolving door, the handsome veterinarian would share the fate of Manchukuo.

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