

CARRY

ME

ACROSS

THE

WATER

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For Barbara, Amiela, and Ayla

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March 19th, 1945 (Monday? Sunday?) Aguni-jima, East China Sea

My Most Divine Umi-

You cannot imagine how I long for you.

When I think of my real life (or shall I say my past life? For this, now, is my real life) so much of it vanishes—Sounzan, the mountain, even my beloved parents—and all that remains of my time on earth are the days that I have spent with you. And two of these days you know nothing about! Are you aware that I spent the Saturday before my departure with you? No, how could you know?

You and Kakuzo, with little Teiji in his basket, walked that morning to the inlet of turtles, and Kakuzo carried a gift melon, no doubt offered in honor of Teiji's birth. You shared it, then brought Teiji to the water and dipped his tiny feet. I believe I saw in Kakuzo, as he stood at the edge of the shore stones, a hesitancy to touch the baby: is it possible? I know such details, my love, because I was in the cherry trees watching you.

My life I give to the two of you.

From my hiding place, I watched Teiji closely. He is quite still—a sign in a baby, I believe, of the artist's vision. I believe he is watching everything: the folds of cotton at the rim of his basket, the pale Sounzan sky, the mountain painting itself on the quiet of Lake Ashi. He is watching and recording, and one day he will astonish you. Perhaps he will draw a grove of cherries and, in it, hidden by leaves and branches, a heart that is plundered, watching you. Or perhaps he will attempt to draw the mountain itself, inverted in the lake, perfection as it exists and therefore the stumblestone of all who would attempt its capture. Allow me, if I might, to hope.

And then there was Tuesday morning, the morning I reported to my regiment, when on the way to the Odawara train I passed by Kakuzo's shop. I do not know what I was planning to do. Our beautiful Sounzan was still in darkness, and I had thoughts of entering the shop and telling Kakuzo the truth; but when I came to the window, there he was inside, sewing a mat, and before I had the chance to enter, I saw that you were there also, next to him, on the floor on a tatami watching the baby, and I believe that what I saw in your face was sorrow.

I will believe that what you were thinking about, Umi, was what had occurred between us.

This is my conviction. Perhaps I am mistaken, and in that case the fate that surely awaits me here is the better of the two that are possible. Yet as I rode the train that morning away from Sounzan, I could not help but believe that your melancholy was because you too desired the miracle for which I myself had once hoped, the miracle for which now, as I face the prospect of never seeing you again, I cannot help but hope once again.

Here on Aguni, I have constructed a passable rendition of the world. The island, and my life where I have hidden myself, I will describe to you in an-

other letter. Perhaps it is different from how you imagine: after dark, I venture into the open for food and water, wary at every step. The soldiers are still about, even at night, but at least the snakes, which can drop upon a man from the tree limbs, are in their torpor then. And I am able, miraculously, and thanks to the efforts of carrying such items at great pains into the jungle, to read the poems of Basho and to study the prints of Gaho and Hogai, as well as to continue my own development in oils, a few of which I have carried here with me as well (thinned with kerosene, which is in adequate supply). This indeed is wondrous for me: not just to be able to work—and there are no distractions at all, here, my divine Umi—but to spend my days with these three great teachers of our heritage. Perhaps I will one day be able to tell you what I have learned of the eye and the romance it carries on, quietly and in a most halting manner, with the veiled beauty of the world.

And if they find me here—forgive me, but I know the efforts of our emperor have begun to sour—if they find me here, I plan to show them the Hogai. For this, I must hope that it is a man of sympathy who is the first to enter. For how can the beauty of those paintings not bring peace to such a beart, as it has to mine?

Umi, I know that it is likely you will never see this letter, yet I write in the hope that you yourself might have written a similar one, perhaps, to me; though I am aware, as well, that I most probably will never see that one either.

Yet I remain, in most exquisite devotion—

There is no signature. August Kleinman has a copy of this letter in his condominium in Boston, framed in box-jointed mahogany and calligraphed in a very fine, small hand, one of the few items he brought with him from the house in Newton when he moved. Next to it are two good-sized Francis Bacons and a dark Morandi, and, on the mantel, a porcelain cup containing several dull gold teeth and an alabaster brooch. Above the cup hangs another mahogany frame, from which the original letter, in Japanese, has been removed and in which only the pale rectangles of unfaded backing remain, rimmed by yellow, where for thirty years the rice paper had blocked the assaults of the sun.

I hen August Kleinman was eighteen years old, a particularly florid eighteen—ruby-faced, wiry-armed, bursting with appetites that were so new to him as to seem the appetites of someone else entirely—he was invited to the Fordham University field house by his friend Mickey White, to watch the Fordham Rams practice football. Mickey White had made the varsity team. He and August had grown up together on Beach 28th Street near Seagirt Boulevard in Wavecrest, a Jewish alley of peeling bungalows a guarter-mile from the Atlantic Ocean on the Rockaway peninsula in Queens, and had been friends since the fifth grade, when August had arrived in New York. Mickey was at Fordham because his hair was red and his name might have been Irish, though he and August had attended not only the same high school but the same synagogue as well. Mickey was a year older than August and two years ahead of him in school. August was a junior at Far Rockaway High on the day he crossed the East River on the Long Island Rail Road, then caught the subway north to the Fordham campus in Rose Hill. In his hand he carried a squarefolded copy of the New York Post and in his pocket a bootlegger's flask of diluted Scotch whiskey, which he had poured off from his stepfather's dusty cabinet. At Penn Station he had added a little water for caution. He wasn't even sure he would drink it, yet he wanted something in case his courage failed him. For some time now, courage had occupied his thoughts.

As he sat in the flickering sway of the tunnel shadows, he studied the scores in the Post. That Mickey White had made the Fordham squad was news all over Wavecrest, and though August was only intermittently interested in sports, he was obliged to pay close attention to the team. Mickey White, as it turned out, mattered very little in the success or failure of the Rams. He was a secondstring blocking back and a third-string end—he rarely even made it into a game—but in the collection of bungalows between Seagirt Boulevard and the Atlantic Ocean, he remained a figure of veneration among the children, as well as one of curiosity among their immigrant parents; August, as Mickey's friend, took it upon himself to become the neighborhood expert in his endeavors. Fordham in those days was a national powerhouse. Their games were on the radio every week, and they had been nearly unbeatable while Mickey and August were in elementary school. The Seven Blocks of Granite had graduated now, but Fordham was still felt to have a good shot at the Sugar Bowl. In the first game of the new season they had beaten Holy Cross by three touchdowns and a field goal, and in the fourth quarter of that game August had heard Mickey White's name announced over the radio, substituting in the backfield once the lead had become insurmountable. This was 1940.

August himself had never played tackle football, and as he walked down the ramp in Rose Hill that autumn morning between brick stanchions to the Fordham field, demarked by a crumbling cork track, the sounds of thudding bodies frightened him. He could hear the wallop of leather and a chorus of stamps and thuds as though not men but horses were engaged below him on the green. He paused to compose himself. Then he came around the corner onto the track, where across the grass the team, in fabulous red-and-white jerseys, was running through drills of open-field tackling. Two lines faced each other across fifteen yards of trampled turf, and one at a time the end player would loose himself, fake and cut toward the opposing squad, and be brought down by a man on defense.

How August, a refugee from Europe and a stranger to the game, came to participate in that drill was a matter that would ring in his memory even after he had grown old. He stood watching the team, at first frightened by the violence, then drawn to it. He was not a timid boy, yet his boldness, such as it was, had always been in the service of self-preservation. This is what his short life had taught him. Now, when he noticed the door to the locker room standing open, he walked in. How could he have done so? A sense of the tempting world stood just beyond him, had stood there for some time now, a glinting panorama of possibility that clutched him whenever the train turned on 54th Avenue and hurtled, clacking and swaying, toward the East River. And always, to counter it, was the sense of his mother as well, his mother in her

patched-up sweaters, his mother with all her warnings, rinsing the kosher plates at the sink. Inside the locker room now, he stood behind the immense metal door—a door that seemed big enough for cattle to pass through—preparing a look of bafflement in case one was needed. But nobody approached him. He pinched a drink from the flask and, though at first its fiery taste only alarmed him further, within a moment he felt vigor inflate his chest and then spread to his limbs. Behind the first stand of lockers he found an unattended bus-bin of numbered Fordham jerseys, and another of canvas knee shorts, and hanging from a pole alongside the showers a selection of the jointed shoulder pads, thick canvas thighguards, and leather headgear that the players wore in practice.

On the field, a break came in the drill. August—in a uniform now-slipped out the door onto the grass and found himself at the end of the line on defense. When he reached the front, the player from the line opposite began high-stepping upfield toward him, feinting with his shoulders, and August took three running steps forward, planted his feet, and launched himself.

After he was discovered and ejected, he was escorted back to the locker room by one of the Fordham coaches, Paul Wyzcozki, who sat on a swivel stool watching as August removed the uniform, donned his own plain gray pants and wrinkled white shirt, and walked to the exit. Coach Wyzcozki then stood by the other huge door as August opened it and stepped halfway out onto the street. Suddenly, the coach said, in a not unfriendly voice, "Where do you learn that?"

August turned. Paul Wyzcozki had played offensive tackle for the Brooklyn Dodgers in the National Football League, a giant of

a man with a giant's effortless sonorations, though his head was of a refined appearance. He blinked his eyes and snapped one hand down upon the other. "Such a big tremendous blow."

"I don't know," August said. "I really don't know."

"Who is it you watch for?"

August didn't understand.

"Who are you watching for? You are Villanova, yes?"

August fled up the street then, ran block after block through the quiet streets of Rose Hill toward the subway, borne on by powerful feelings of shame but also, as he boarded the D train and rode it through its first screeching turn toward the water, by a mounting ecstasy; as the train picked up speed and swayed in longer, rattling arcs under the Harlem River into Manhattan, he repeated the coach's words, imitated the respectful smack of one hand upon the other. He was shaking. You are Villanova, yes? It was not until bed that night, lying awake as the apartment grew quiet, that he understood it was not the coach's words that had set him quivering but the tackle itself, some powerful surge of violence that was utterly new to him. Such a big tremendous blow! It was the first time he'd ever felt such release, the moment of impact and the moment thereafter, the sensation of lightness at contact, the complete departure of his earthbound being.

That year at Chanukah, Mickey White told the tale up and down Seagirt Avenue. August was more than a little pleased, not only for the ferocity of the tackle, which Mickey embellished with a swoop of his open hand like a striking torpedo, but also for the gumption of his own maneuver, with which he had surprised himself deeply. He was in the doorway between boyhood and man-