

## chapter one

I had been apart from Nomi for three months when I arrived at the Minneapolis/St. Paul Airport on September 1, 1979. The late afternoon sun, like white rain, flooded the huge glass lobby. I spotted him walking quickly toward me. The yellow in his Hawaiian shirt shimmered, almost iridescently. His round, liquid eyes were just visible through brown-tinted sunglasses. His curly hair had grown longer, framing his square, tanned face. He looked fresh—vibrant and happy. The sight of him reminded me of our early love. New attraction stirred within me. I smiled to myself. America seemed to have already loosened his armor. Excited, I said “Hai!” to Nomi, and then bowed to Aoki, who was standing next to him. Aoki had studied at the same university in Tokyo as Nomi and was now teaching at the University of Minnesota.

Nomi, looking preoccupied, replied, “Hai.” Aoki greeted me formally, using my family’s last name, “Henmi-san, welcome to America!” Aoki hadn’t changed a bit since I last saw him in Tokyo at his farewell party four years ago.

“Let’s go,” Nomi said, hurrying ahead. At that moment, Nomi looked to me like a golden fish gliding through the water. With a start, I took in his receding figure and scurried behind them.

Aoki drove us through tree-lined streets. The green of the trees, so vivid, dazzled me. We sank into a comfortable quiet, talking now and again in Japanese.

“Aoki-san, from the plane Minneapolis is all forest. So picturesque,” I said.

“Yes, it’s a beautiful place. So many trees and lakes.”

Just then I saw a squirrel flit down from a tree. “Look, look, Nocchi, how cute!”

“So? I see them almost every day,” Nomi replied.

The tone of his voice and his unusual disinterest in the conversation unsettled me. Was he angry at me, because I had delayed my departure from Mexico City? I wondered. I had stopped over there to see a feminist writer who had often contributed to the magazine I had worked on in Tokyo.

I looked out the window at tall grasses blurring as we passed, thinking about the writer who had just left her husband, a charming but unfaithful Mexican. I was glad my husband was gentle and committed.

We dropped off my luggage at the house of Nomi’s host family. The young couple and their small boy were in the midst of eating their McDonald’s supper. Wrappers and ketchup packs were scattered about the table. Nomi introduced me briefly and then we left for the ESL farewell party on the University of Minnesota campus.

I followed him into a large hall. “It has already started,” Nomi said. A mixture of gaily dressed people milled about, holding glasses in their hands. American folk music drifted through the sliding glass doors that opened onto a courtyard where people were dancing. The sky had just turned twilight blue, and the streetlamps shed an orange light. Nomi threaded his way through the crowd, often stopping with a smile, introducing me and exchanging a few words.

Standing quietly behind Nomi, hiding the exhaustion from my long flight, I sensed that most of these people already knew something about me. I became conscious of being seen as Nomi’s Japanese wife. I felt uncomfortable.

A woman wearing a red satin dress came up to greet me. She seemed to be surprised I was so small. She broke into a bright smile, her blue eyes betraying a strong interest in me. I felt strangely flattered.

“Hi, Mizuo. I’m Diane Ryder. I’m the director of the English Lan-

guage Institute.” She spoke in controlled, enunciated English.

“How do you do?”

“Nomi is one of the best students we have had in a long time. We’ve enjoyed having him in the program. He has changed our image of Japanese men.”

“I am glad.” I smiled at Diane, proud that, unlike other Japanese men, Nomi was open to progressive women. My eyes stopped at her cleavage. Embarrassed, I looked down at the red embroidery that trimmed my white Mexican dress.

A woman in a dark orange pants suit, who was standing next to Diane, introduced herself. “I’m Annie. How was your trip?”

“Fine, sank you.”

“I’ve heard quite a lot about you,” Annie said enigmatically.

“Oh, yes?” I looked into her eyes for a clue, but they revealed nothing. Besides, I was too tired to understand what she was getting at. I glanced sideways at Nomi, who was talking enthusiastically with Diane.

I felt like a paper butterfly, barely able to stand among the talking people. Nomi stopped talking with Diane and looked at me. “You look dazed,” he said.

I sensed that he wanted to dance, but I felt too weak to move or respond. I stepped back to lean against the wall. Nomi made his way to the courtyard, darting again like a fast-moving fish. I almost thought I saw a trail of light behind him.

I watched Nomi and Diane square dance. My eyes followed as they moved, glued to the deep V in the back of her tight red dress. Something close to a foreboding ran through me, and yet the freshness Nomi had stirred within me was still there. I let the dim orange lights caress me.

Annie walked over to me, her lips forming an upturned crescent. “They do dance well together, don’t they?” she whispered in my ear. “Would you like to dance?”

“No. I’m sorry.”

I turned to watch the people dance, but my mind soon drifted off. I found myself thinking of Ryugujo, the Japanese fairy-tale palace. In the tale, a giant sea turtle brings the young fisherman Urashima Taro

beneath dark water to a sunken paradise. There, Urashima settles into luxury with the Ryugujo princess and is soon lost in the lull of time; they converse in a room scented with curious sea plants, savor ripened sea pomegranates, and dance cheek-to-cheek to music played by nymphs. Then one day, Urashima remembers the pine tree rooted on the beach near his home and leaves Ryugujo on the back of the turtle. Ryugujo is not his home.

After the party, we went to Diane and Annie's house. In the living room, plants of different shapes and sizes grew uninhibitedly, intoxicating me with the smell of green. Nomi wove his way toward a red-checkered sofa and sank into it with ease. I stood immobile.

"Please make yourself at home, Mizuo," Diane said.

I perched on the edge of the sofa, feeling like a stray animal, shrinking and awkward. The three of them looked close and comfortable with one another. Diane and Annie left the room and came back with their arms wrapped around each other, wearing T-shirts and jeans. Stopping in front of the stereo, Diane kissed Annie deeply.

I was struck by their lack of self-consciousness. I had known only one lesbian couple in Tokyo, but I had never seen them kiss. In fact, I hadn't seen anyone kiss in public before. That was the stuff of movies. Only once, in a café full of bright sunlight, after we'd seen a romantic film, did I act on a strong impulse and ask Nomi to kiss me. We were both nineteen. "Kiss me," I said. "Right here?" Nomi asked. "Yes. Right here, now." I sensed his dismay and it made me want the kiss all the more. I tilted my head slightly and closed my eyes. Nomi's lips quickly touched mine, like a passing breeze.

Annie put on Joni Mitchell. She twisted her tall, athletic body in time with the music, her breasts swaying from side to side. Diane motioned to Nomi to come with her. They disappeared and came back a while later with margaritas for all of us. "Kanpai!" We clinked glasses. Annie sat next to Nomi, smiling that crescent smile and talking rapidly with him. I couldn't follow their conversation. I felt left out. I sipped my margarita as Diane came over to sit across from me.

"Nomi told me that you worked for a feminist magazine in Japan. What is it like being a woman in Japan?" Diane asked.

“Not free.”

“Japan is supposed to be quite conformist, from what I hear.”

“Yes. Women are like pretty accessories. When we marry, we become invisible. My mother used to say a wife should walk three steps behind her husband. When I think it, I feel like a big hole inside me. It may be connected with my father. My family says I have more of my father’s blood. My grandmother said when he returned from Manchuria, he is half-dead stranger.” I knew my English wasn’t good. I had trouble pronouncing the difference between r and l. I sought help from Nomi with my eyes, but he ignored me and kept talking with Annie. I felt strange. He used to come to my aid right away.

“Mizuo, I understand you. Nomi’s right—we have a lot in common. I also have a problem with my father, and I feel as if I lost a part of myself.” Diane turned her curious gaze on me. “So Japanese women aren’t encouraged to have a good self-image?”

“No, not at all. In fourth year at university, I started job hunting, and I encountered so many No Woman signs on the blackboard. I was very upset, because suddenly discrimination hit me very, very hard.”

“I can relate.”

“It took me a long time to find a job as an editor. Because the company considers women as a temporary flower on the wall, until we find a husband to marry. But some women want to have a professional career. I went to interview in one of the publishing houses, and the president said that he understood my professional desire, but the history proved that women marry and leave the office even though she said she wouldn’t. I know I don’t, because I’ve been living with Nomi for three years at that time, but I must keep it secret.”

“Why?”

“Because I lived with a man when I am still a university student. That’s very bad to get a good job. The student should only study hard. Our society refuses a couple living together without official marriage. People think we want to live together, because we want sex. They think we are dirty. They cannot think we need each other for our spiritual growth and mutual understanding.”

“Japan sounds like a difficult country for women.”

“Yes, but I was lucky. When I was working in publishing, Nomi

went to graduate school; he preferred to study at home, and when he was tired, he cooked to relax his mind. That's how he became the "wife" of our house, even though we kept it secret from our family. It was wonderful for me to come home to a hot drawn bath and cold beer. Nomi called me at the office, asking what I want to eat tonight. We spoke in code: one, fish, two, pork, three, chicken."

"Nomi made a few dinners for us; his Spanish paella is delicious. We never imagined that a Japanese man could cook."

"Nomi encouraged me when I was having problem in my publishing company. He said again and again that my fight is right; I was in front of a huge iceberg so I didn't see I'm in much larger battle in the future for women in Japan."

"That's wonderful. You'll feel better in America."

"No, I don't feel good. I am a seven-year-old girl again."

"Mizuo, I know it's hard, but don't be discouraged."

"Americans are like a skylark chirping. I can't hear."

"It takes time to get used to the way we sound, but you will soon. Don't worry. Besides, you may not be aware of it yourself, but your face and your hand movements are very expressive. You compensate by using gestures very effectively."

I smiled and looked toward Nomi and Annie, who were in the midst of an intense conversation.

"What are they talking about?" I asked Diane.

She told me they were discussing the Blue Mountain theater rehearsal they saw a couple of days ago, which Nomi had specially arranged for me to see. "I'm sorry you couldn't make it."

"So am I." I remembered Nomi's excited voice when he called to tell me that the director had reminded him of Professor Takagi at my bodywork class. I also remembered his instant silence when I called him back about my delay. I gazed despondently at a plant with long, needle-sharp leaves.

"How did your performance go?" Diane asked.

"Oh, so-so," I said, assuming that Nomi had told her about Professor Takagi's workshop.

Some time after midnight, Diane and Annie dropped us off at the

home of Nomi's host family. They each gave a long, warm hug to Nomi. I was surprised to see Nomi so unreserved. People don't hug in Japan. As Diane came to hug me, I withdrew. Annie put her arms around me lightly. "You'll be in Chicago tomorrow," she said. There seemed to be a hint of relief in her voice.

I followed Nomi to his room, which was plain and simply furnished. I was tired of speaking English all day. While he was packing, I sat on the bed and watched him put a bottle of Wild Turkey and several Spin-A-Paints in his knapsack.

"No-chan, where did you do those paintings?" I asked.

"At the State Fair."

"That must have been fun."

I changed into my new pajamas and climbed into the bed, leaning against the headboard.

"No-chan, Diane seems interesting."

"Yes, she is." He zipped his knapsack closed, and with downcast eyes added, "And she is independent."

"Independent?" I was surprised. He was comparing us—Diane and me. Back in Japan, people always thought I was the independent one.

"Maybe you should get to know her more," he said.

"Do you think we could be friends?"

"I'm sure Diane would be interested in getting to know you. But it would be better if you did it independently from me."

"Okay. I know. This is America."

"But we have to go to all the social gatherings as a couple."

"That's so different from Japan. No more work banquets for men without their wives."

Giggling, I slipped under the blanket. I had expected we would make love that night, but Nomi said he didn't want to disturb his host family with squeaking bedsprings. I found his remark strange, but did not protest.

Nomi fell asleep immediately. Lying beside him, hearing the sound of his breathing, I felt unsettled. I remembered that his professor said it wasn't wise for a couple to spend the first few months in a foreign country apart and advised us to go to Minneapolis together. I stared

into the darkness for a while. I thought of Diane. Suddenly it dawned on me that Nomi hadn't asked anything about me or my trip. That was stranger than anything else he had done or said that day.

The flight to Chicago was short. After we deplaned, we found the airport limousine bus without difficulty. The late afternoon sun was bright. The bus ran through a brutal urban landscape before zipping alongside Lake Michigan. Gazing at the transparent blue water, I felt myself slowly diving down into the cool water toward an opalescent spring that spurted from the bottom. As I touched it, something in me awakened and my whole body trembled like a leaf in a storm.

When the bus pulled up to the curb in Hyde Park, we got out with our knapsacks and four large suitcases. We looked around. The gray Chicago skyline loomed in the distance. We saw no one. The streets were strewn with garbage. The wind off Lake Michigan blew a page from an old newspaper up into the air. I felt as if I had stepped into a movie scene.

"So, where is Al Capone?" I said playfully to Nomi. I imagined Capone turning the corner, smoking a cigar.

Nomi frowned. A shabby brown car passed us, making a loud grating noise and pouring black smoke from its exhaust.

"Let's see if we can get a cab to the university housing office," Nomi finally said.

Just then a cab with a smashed-in grill sped around the corner. I raised my arm and waved. The cab screeched to a halt. Nomi carefully placed one large suitcase in the trunk, and the driver threw in the rest of our bags. Nomi and I exchanged apprehensive glances as we got in.

"The university housing office, please," Nomi said in clear English. The driver responded by hitting the accelerator. From the window we saw a brand-new shopping mall, an old black man selling newspapers at a stand near the railroad station, and a billboard advertising Wim Wender's movie *The American Friend*. After only six blocks, the driver slammed on the brakes and we tumbled forward, our heads almost hitting the divider. "That's it," the driver said brusquely, as he pointed at a two-story institutional rectangle.

Nomi pushed the door open and we entered the building, carrying our suitcases. A housing clerk was speaking with a young couple at the counter.

"Sorry," the clerk said.

The husband said something impatient while his wife pleaded. The clerk spoke too quickly for me to follow, but the tone of his voice seemed unkind. Dejected, the couple took their keys and left. We stepped up to the counter.

"Hello. I'm Nomi Ikawa. I reserved an apartment from Japan."

The telephone rang. The clerk picked up the receiver and hunched over it with his back to us. I strained to hear, but couldn't understand the conversation.

The clerk turned back to Nomi. "Uh, what'd you say your name was?"

Just then the back door flew open and a man came in, calling to the clerk. I heard "what!" and "how much?" and "shit" and "not injured" and "swing by." I wished they would speak like the tapes in my university's language laboratory. I was annoyed that the clerk wasn't concentrating fully on his job. Finally he grabbed a set of keys from a drawer and dropped them in front of us.

"Here you go. Sorry about that."

"May I ask where the apartment is?" Nomi said.

"Sounds like a legitimate request," the clerk said and got the map from the drawer, wrote the address on it, and handed it to us.

"Thank you," Nomi said politely.

"Sank you bery much of your kindness." I bowed my head slightly.

When we got outside, Nomi was beaming. "Our apartment is only four blocks from here, on Kenwood, between Fifty-first and Fifty-second."

We hurried along the deserted cobblestones, the metal wheels of our suitcases grating against the sidewalk. A McDonald's stood next to a shabby car repair shop with a wire fence. A few men hung out in front of a drugstore, passing a bottle in a paper bag between them. At the door of a small secondhand store, a large middle-aged black man in jeans lay dozing on a sofa, his head on the armrest, his arms and legs

dangling limply. I felt somewhat envious of the man, who could relax like that. Turning onto Kenwood, we came upon an abandoned lot littered with dirt-encrusted cushions, broken glass, and aluminum cans.

“What an ugly place!” I said.

“Sh!” Nomi interjected, putting his finger on his lips.

“Ugly . . .”

“I don’t think it’s ugly. I think it’s beautiful.”

I stopped and looked at Nomi, whose lips had curled in a half smile. I could see that our new neighborhood was beautiful to him because it was where he had chosen to live, but I also noticed that something had clearly changed in him. I shuddered, wondering what had happened while we were apart over the summer.

Nomi stopped in front of an old building and checked the address against the piece of paper. We walked up the path leading to the building. Holding up one finger, I looked at Nomi to see if I should ring the bell, but when I pushed it, there was no response. Nomi checked the address again, pulled the keys out of his pocket, and opened the door.

Entering the building, we looked at each other in disbelief. A worn-out rug speckled with yellow, orange, and brown covered the entire hallway floor. We rode the elevator to the fifth floor. When Nomi opened the door to 5C, I cried, “This is awful!”

Nomi nodded awkwardly. Inside the apartment was the same hideous carpeting. A sink and gas stove were squeezed into one corner. Mismatched furniture—an orange sofa, big blue lamps, and two yellow chairs crowded the space. The green curtains were faded. There was no dining table or chairs.

“How could they have such bad taste?”

“It’s disgusting, but we will have to make do,” Nomi said with composure.

The iron bars over the windows made the room feel like a prison. When I ran my hand along one of the bars, it was covered with dust and grime. Just below the window I could see the McDonald’s and the car repair shop. The Victorian tower of a church on the University of Chicago campus rose solemnly in the distance.

The bedroom had iron bars on the windows too. A double bed

took up more than half the space. "Very tiny," I said, disappointed. I had imagined that apartments in America were big.

Nomi sat on the bed and bounced. "The springs are okay," he said.

In the bathroom, a mildewed shower curtain with half the rings missing hung inside the tub.

"I don't know if I can live in this apartment," I said, sighing. "No-chan, let's go back to the housing office and find another place."

"We should settle in first. My classes will start soon. Let's go buy some cleaning stuff, pillows and sheets, so we can at least sleep tonight."

Displeased, I looked at my watch. "It's already four o'clock. Can we buy them in Hyde Park?"

"No. Diane recommended that we go to Marshall Field's downtown. We should buy good stuff, because we'll use it every day."

"Then we should hurry. Didn't the guidebook say the train's safer than the bus?"

We had thoroughly studied the information the university had sent to Nomi.

"Let's take the Illinois Central. We can catch it on Fifty-third." Nomi checked the time schedule. "There is a 4:17 for downtown."

Outside, it was windy. Nomi and I turned up our collars and climbed the steps to the platform. There was no one around except a couple bending over together on a bench. Hearing the sound of snorting, I whispered to Nomi, "Do you think they're sniffing cocaine?" He frowned. After a few minutes, we heard the Illinois Central approach. Several people came dashing up the stairs to the platform.

When the door opened, we noticed all the passengers were black. Taking the nearest seats, we were aware of being watched. I felt the sensation of a caterpillar crawling down my back. I held my breath and stared down at the skin of my hands. I overheard the couple seated across from us.

"They Vietnamese?"

"I think Chinese. They look like chickens knowing their necks gonna be cut off, huh?"

I wondered if I had really heard that. “No-chan, what are they saying?”

“They think we’re Chinese.”

When I looked back at the couple, my eyes met theirs. I said hello but the expression on their faces remained unchanged.

I turned toward the window. Lake Michigan appeared and disappeared among deserted lots, abandoned rail yards, and boarded-up buildings. We gazed in silence at the reflection of the setting sun on the lake until we got off the train.

Downtown Chicago stood before us. I walked ahead, looking up at the skyscrapers. Motioning to Nomi to hurry up, I ran into a large black man. “Hey, silly baby, chill out!” the man said as he pushed me aside.

Nomi caught up to me. “Mi-chan, quit looking all over the place,” he said.

“No-chan, what does ‘chill out’ mean?”

“Maybe it’s slang.”

Marshall Field’s was teeming with shoppers. The crowd pushed us into the back of the elevator, and we barely managed to get off at the bargain floor. I went to find pillows and two sets of sheets, while Nomi looked for cleaning supplies. When we were ready to pay, the cashiers were talking to each other at the counter.

“I got me a sweet tooth, honey. I just love that chocolate. I could eat Hershey bars all day . . .”

“I know what you mean, girl. But my favorite is those Kit Kats.”

I looked at them in disbelief. Japanese cashiers are trained to attend to their customers immediately. Eventually our cashier turned around, put our items in shopping bags, and dropped them on the counter.

After shopping, Nomi took me to a German restaurant, another one of Diane’s recommendations. The atmosphere was cozy, with stained-glass windows and lamps. We drank German beer and enjoyed a dinner of veal and baked potatoes. Then we walked to the Illinois Central station, our footsteps echoing along the street under the dim Victorian-style streetlamps.

The station was empty. Diane had told us that Southside Chicago

could be dangerous. We knew from the guidebook that both the university and the city police departments patrolled Hyde Park. We looked for a public phone to call the campus escort service.

I pointed to a dark corner. "Look! There's a phone."

Nomi dialed, "Hello! Hyde Park Escort Service? We'll be taking the 9:15 Illinois Central train, and arriving at Hyde Park at 9:47, getting off at Fifty-third Street . . . Yes, thank you. We are Japanese, carrying big shopping bags. Thank you again."

"They're following us to our apartment?"

"Exactly. Mizuo, don't get excited."

We boarded the almost empty train. When we arrived at Hyde Park, we hurried down the steps of the station. The streetlights flickered sporadically.

"It's really dark," I said.

I glanced at the security car parked under an elevated bridge. We walked quickly along the deserted street. Occasionally, car beams lit the dark. A group of people came from a side road and walked behind us. I looked back to see the security car following us. Smiling, I waved to the officer, then picked up the pace along with Nomi.

Back at our apartment, we scattered our packages around the room and made the bed together. "Nice," Nomi said, as we covered the bed with a sheet that had a falling-leaf design. He went to the living room and fixed us two glasses of Wild Turkey. I took a big sip, and suddenly felt tired. After finishing the whiskey, I slipped under the blanket as Nomi turned off the light.

The next morning Nomi and I spread a map on the table. The guidebook advised us to stay within the Hyde Park community, which was bordered on one side by Lake Michigan and on the other by Drexel Avenue, running from Forty-seventh to Fifty-ninth Street. The guidebook said this was the area where university students shopped and hung out and that, especially before dark, it was relatively safe. The police regularly patrolled the area, and every half-hour from 8 a.m. to 1 a.m., the university offered a minibus service to different neighborhood areas. Because I was the wife of a University of Chicago graduate student, I was allowed to take these buses too. The book

warned against walking alone, and advised driving, even if only for a few blocks.

“We don’t have a car,” I said, annoyed.

“Look, we don’t know how to drive,” he said. “The main street is Fifty-third. It’s close to our apartment and most of the shops in the area are concentrated around there. Let’s check it out. We need to do some shopping anyway.”

Near the train station along Fifty-third Street, a Walgreens, a liquor store, two grocery stores, and a bank stood in a row. Next to the bank was a gourmet wine and cheese store. We went in and bought some Brie and a Chilean red wine on sale.

Across Fifty-third Street was the Harper Court Shopping Plaza, its flag flapping against the blue sky. White-and-brown tiles covered the plaza in a checkerboard, and there were stylish shops selling books, art supplies, cookware, natural food, and plants. There was also a Mexican restaurant. People gathered around chessboards set into square concrete tables near a light post layered with posters and flyers. We went to a kitchenware store and bought a set of dishes, several steel pans, and a kitchen knife.

When we came back, Nomi checked our mailbox. There was a card from Diane with a picture of rolling hills baking under a brilliant sun.

*Mizuo and Nomi,*

*Minneapolis seems empty without you. Hope Chicago appreciates you as much as I do—Diane*

*P.S. Nomi, this picture seems to me very much like your image of freedom. What do you think?*

One of the things we had to do the next day was to pick up a telephone at the Illinois Bell office. We cut through the campus past the co-op grocery store, turned east, and walked along the streets of abandoned buildings, where large-leafed plants pushed themselves through the crevices, growing defiantly. Then we crossed Drexel Avenue into a bustling street, passed a colorful candy store, a barbershop with its twirling pole, and a corner dive decorated with neon beer signs, finally finding the telephone office.

With the phone and phone number in hand, we headed home. “Let’s stop at the Plaza to buy a shower curtain and cover for the sofa,” Nomi said. “We’ll pick up a six-pack of beer and a carton of cigarettes, and get something to eat at the Mexican restaurant.”

“Let’s have a cup of coffee first.”

“No, not now.”

“Why not? I’m tired.”

“Don’t be childish.”

I was surprised by his reprimand. “You are the one who’s being childish,” I retorted.

We continued on our way to the stores and by the time we got to the restaurant, the sun had gone. My calves were aching. While we waited for seating, I had to stretch them repeatedly. Nomi read a *Chicago Tribune* he had bought and commented that the international coverage was quite limited. When we got a table, I collapsed in my chair and couldn’t bring myself to look at the menu.

“What do you want to eat?” Nomi asked.

“A cup of coffee.”

“You should eat something.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“How about quesadillas?”

“No thank you. Why don’t you eat?”

Nomi ordered two coffees, quesadillas, enchiladas, and a Dos Equis. When the food came, I sipped my coffee, slumping in my seat. He filled a small plate with quesadillas and placed it in front of me. “Mizuo, you’ll feel better if you eat,” he said, and then proceeded to devour all the food.

When we returned home, Nomi checked the mail. “Here’s another letter from Diane,” he said.

*My dear friends,*

*I’m sitting in a still-messy house after a very long day registering new students. I’m trying to get motivated to deal with the chaos, but decided I would rather write to you. I hope you have arrived safely in Hyde Park, and that you have adjusted to your new environment without much difficulty.*

*Annie and I had a wonderful time with you on your last night in*

*Minneapolis. It gave us a crazy idea; we decided we'd rather come to Chicago in October than go to Washington for the gay rights march. Our two friends can't make it to the march, and when I told Annie I would rather go to Chicago, she said she would too. You both seem to have charmed her. So, if you would like some visitors on the weekend of the 13th and 14th, we could fly down to visit you.*

*I'm too tired to be deep or philosophical so I won't go on, but I wanted to write tonight to wish you good luck in Chicago and to say that I miss you already.*

*Love, Diane.*

*P.S. When you get a phone, please let us know your number.*

When I finished reading, Nomi said, "Let's call Diane and tell her they can come. We can also ask her to call us back, so we will know which telephone number is ours." I said yes, although I felt overwhelmed that she invited Annie and herself to our home. When the phone company gave us our new number, we both remembered it differently; Nomi thought it ended in 9356, and I thought it was 9536.

Nomi called Diane, and after giving her a report of our progress setting up a new home, said, "We'll be waiting with a stock of liquor, just like you did for us." Then he asked her to try the two numbers. She called back to congratulate me on my listening, because the correct number was 9536.

Nomi spent the entire next day at the university. I understood his need to establish a daily routine quickly, but wished we could take time to blend in, like slowly spreading watercolors. I sat on the sofa in my pajamas and looked out drearily at the church tower in the distance.

Changing into a T-shirt and overalls, I filled a bucket with soapy water and scrubbed the rug. I draped the orange sofa and yellow chairs with the blue fabric we had bought. Then I removed a large doll wrapped in newspaper from my suitcase. After stretching out her tightly folded limbs, I arranged her on the chair, crossed her gray-booted legs, pulled her gray-green dress down to the knee, placed her beige-colored hands on her thighs, and with my fingers, combed through the white-silver silk that formed her curls. This was the first of several dolls I had

made myself. She did not resemble the traditional wooden dolls of Japan or the antique porcelain dolls of the West; she was the composite of everything I knew about dolls. This doll was very special to me. She showed no emotions on her face. But by watching her carefully, you could begin to hear a hauntingly sad melody flow through her body.

I sat across from the doll. “Okay, now?” I asked her. Her eyes flashed blue in the morning sun.

I crossed over to the stove to light a cigarette. The gas came on but the burner didn’t light. I went downstairs and knocked on the superintendent’s door. Just as I was about to give up, a sullen-faced man stuck his head out.

“Hello. I’m Mizuo. My husband and I moved to 5C. I tried to turn the stove, but I can’t. I think something wrong with ignite.”

“It’s just the pilot light. All you have to do is light it again,” the superintendent said in a heavy accent before slamming the door shut. I knocked again, but there was no response. I stomped up the stairs, furious, then turned around, remembering I wanted to check out the laundry room. A pair of sneakers was churning around with shirts and underwear in one of the washers. I was dumbfounded. “How could anyone wash dirty shoes with their clothes?”

Late that afternoon, I went to the co-op to shop for groceries and walked back along the empty streets, the leafy tops of carrots sticking out of my knapsack. Several black men were hanging around outside the drugstore. The one eating a sandwich turned to me.

“Hey, what’s up, baby?”

I peered up at the sky, but saw nothing. The men laughed. I ignored them and went into the drugstore.

“Give me Camel,” I said to a man behind the counter.

“What?”

I pointed at a pack of cigarettes. I barely caught it when he tossed it at me. As I went out, the same man who had spoken to me before held out his half-eaten sandwich.

“Hey, baby, you wanna bite?”

I jumped back. He laughed uncontrollably.

“Hey, silly boy. Chill out!” I said. The man looked back at me, puzzled.

“Fuck you! I was jus’ tryin’ to share. It’s nice to share. Sheeit.”

I walked away quickly. I passed an empty laundromat, a row of shrub-fenced apartment buildings, and a beautiful dollhouse in the window of a Victorian home. When I came upon a car that had been stripped to its skeleton, I swore under my breath, “Sheeit. Fuck. Share.”

That night I prepared veal with baked potatoes and carrots, imitating the dish from the German restaurant. Nomi savored each bite, talking about several Hyde Park homes that had been designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. “You should take a house tour,” he said.

The phone rang. Nomi picked up the receiver and his face lit up. From what he was saying, I gathered it was Diane. After he finished, I talked with Diane, and she asked me how my English was. I said not too good. She told me I could call her if I needed any help. I thanked her and hung up the phone.

When Nomi left for the library, he told me a classmate and his wife, both Brazilian, lived in our building, and that I would meet them tomorrow night at a welcoming party at the International House.

I met Luis and Maria over wine and hors d’oeuvres. They were a charming couple, fresh and sweet. Luis told us he first met Maria at a party when she returned to Sao Paulo after attending high school abroad. They had fallen in love and were married a few months before they came to Chicago. Maria had just turned eighteen. I was surprised to learn that their parents had been so supportive. When Nomi and I began living together at the age of nineteen, our parents were shocked and ashamed. They kept our relationship secret from their relatives and acquaintances, hoping that we would break up before graduation.

A cheerful-looking woman walked up to Nomi, spreading her arms out and calling his name. She hugged him affectionately. Nomi introduced us, saying that Gloria was from Spain. They had studied together in Minneapolis and were both working on their Ph.D.s in economics. After chatting about the other students from their ESL class, Gloria said, “Nomi, we had so much fun in Minneapolis—happy hours, parties, and field trips. Too bad it’s over. It’s all economics now!” Then she turned to me. “I’m proud of Nomi. He’s so different from my other friends who study economics. He’s a real poet—an artist.”

I looked up at Nomi, who blushed. I thought of Diane in her red dress, square dancing with Nomi, then remembered Urashima Taro, the young fisherman who finally decided to go home—even though the princess had asked him to stay.