

Bottles of Beaujolais · *David Louie*

I will move storms . . .
A Midsummer Night's Dream

IT WAS A LITTLE AFTER eight one morning in late November. Fog, fat with brine, snailed uptown. Bits of the wayward cloud beaded between my lashes, it crept into the creases of my clothing; it infiltrated every pore, seeping a dank chill through my body. On the radio the man said the fog had set a record for low-visibility. Later, when the taxi pulled in front of the sashimi bar where I worked, the cabbie said that by nightfall the city would be covered with snow.

Unlocking the door to the sashimi bar I watched Mushimono in the show window standing upright on his hindquarters. He was thick and cylindrical, a furry fireplug. The otter, whose love for fish had inspired my employer to install it as a sales gimmick to lure other fish connoisseurs into the shop, appeared baffled by the fog. From his home inside the sashimi bar's glass-enclosed street facade—an exact replica of the otter's natural habitat that stretched twelve feet long, reaching as high as the ceiling, and jutted six feet or so into the shop—Mushimono snapped his anvil-like head from side to side, like a blind man lost, following the sounds of the traffic he could not see. Mushimono was one of those peculiar creatures evolution had thrown together like a zoological mulligan stew: he had a duck's webbed feet, the whiskered snout and licorice disc eyes of a seal, a cat's quickness, and fishlike maneuverability in water. His fur was a rich burnt-coffee color and it grew thicker with each shrinking day of the season.

The sashimi master met me at the door. He had the appearance of a box. The bib of Mr. Tanaka's apron cut across his throat just beneath his chin, exaggerating his dearth of neck. I followed an imaginary line that extended up from his thin, black necktie past his purplish lips until it met at a perfect perpendicular with his mustache, again reinforcing the illusion of squareness. Above this plane rested two tiny, black eyes that peered darkly out at me.

Without ceremony Mr. Tanaka told me to make fog. "It not good this way," he said. "Fog outside and no fog inside drive Mushimono crazy." He sliced each syllable from his lips as if his tongue were as sharp as one of his blades.

The otter stood frozen, a mortal enemy might have been perched

nearby. Yet, in spite of this stasis, I thought I saw movement. Perhaps due to the eerie quality of the fog-sifted light or some strange trick of the eye, the twin curves of Mushimono's belly and spine ran congruous and then gradually tapered together at the *ess* of his thick, sibilant tail. Silken motion, where there was none. Strong but delicate lines. My thoughts drifted to Luna—the gentle crook of her neck, the soft slope of her shoulders, the slight but sexy downward turn of her mouth.

"Don't forget, only fresh fish for Mushimono," Mr. Tanaka said.

"I know, I know."

"Sluggishness no substitute for nature," he said, clasping his hands behind his back as he paced the length of the trout-spawning tank. "For Mushimono a fish dead even if it look alive to you. If its eye not clear like—"

"Saki—"

"Their center dark as—"

"Obsidian. Then—"

"They dead," Mr. Tanaka said, completing his favorite adage.

"You mean as good as dead."

The sashimi master furrowed his brow, stroked an imaginary beard, and stared at me with those two lightless eyes, before he headed for the fish counter.

When I was first hired, Mr. Tanaka had promised to teach me the art of slicing sushi and sashimi. In fact, during my interview, he had said, "A good mind," a reference to the *cum laude* on my resume, "make for a steady hand." But as the weeks passed, so did my hopes of ever learning the technique for wielding the razor-sharp knives that could turn chunks of tuna and bass into exquisite paper-thin slices of flesh. My lone task, as it turned out, was to be Mushimono's keeper. I was unhappy at first, but Mr. Tanaka managed to keep me with a more than generous salary. I did not complain, though the sashimi fish, octopi, and shrimp were all off limits to me. Even when I offered to help with the scaling and gutting, he said, "It too delicate a matter for my business, for my sashimi, and for the fish himself for me to permit this ever." But, the job still had its unexpected benefits—all the fish I could eat and the daily visits of Luna.

I netted three speckled trout from the spawning tank and transported them in a pail to Mushimono's pond in the show window. They nibbled

the water's surface, sounding like castanets. As I released the trout into the murky pond—it extended into the basement of the shop—Mushimono, in keeping with the bizarre atmospheric conditions, looked me in the eye with uncharacteristic calm, undaunted by my intrusion into his world.

This world was a reproduction of the lakeshore habitat of southern Maine from which he came. Mr. Tanaka had hired experts in the fields of ecology, zoology, and horticulture to duplicate indoors the appropriate balance of vegetation, animals, and birds found in the wild.

But I made its weather. From an aluminum-plated console outside the otter chamber, replete with blinking amber lights and grave black knobs, I became the north wind, the cumulonimbus, the offshore breeze, the ozone layer. I was the catalyst of photosynthesis. I was the warm front that collided with my own cold front—I let it rain, I held it up. I greened the grasses, swelled the summer mosses, sweetened the air, and then plucked bare the trees. I killed summer's children. In time, I would freeze the pond. I was day and night. Yes, I had the aid of refrigerators, barometers, thermometers, hydrographs, heaters, humidifiers, sunlamps, and fans. But I threw the switches. I possessed nature's secret formulas. What use had transistors, tubes, coils, wires, and filters without me? I made the weather. I turned the seasons. It was no illusion. I manipulated metabolism. I made things grow.

Humidifier set high. Saturation point. Dewpoint. Cooled air. Steamy wisps of white rose from the pond—an immense caldron of simmering soup—and evaporated the further they curled away from the water's surface. In no time the show window filled with fog as dense as surgical gauze. Mushimono, by increments, disappeared.

There was a clock inside me. Its alarm—my accelerated pulse, my shortened breaths—went off each day at the same time. I crouched at the foot of the show window beside the weather console, and anticipated Luna's imminent arrival. I fancy there was something organic between us: a pheromone she emitted, some subtle chemical signal only I could sniff from the air that telegraphed her proximity to the shop. Or, perhaps it was something mystical—perhaps our souls had been linked from former lifetimes. Or, was it a strange combination of the ions in the atmosphere that pulled us together? From the hundreds of feet that shuffled past the sashimi bar each morning, I always knew which belonged to Luna, for hers were like distant fingers snapping. When she came near, there was music on the pavement.

It was not a special magnetic force that drew us together, our molecules did not mesh in any unearthly way. No, quite frankly, it was prosaic love I felt.

Luna's lacquered nails tapped the glass. She stopped each day at the same hour to see Mushimono and lavish her attentions on a creature insensitive to her womanly charms. My stomach bubbled with joy and anticipation. I heard the splash of water as the otter dove into his pond. Unable to spy on Luna, through the fog, I pricked my ears and listened for her sounds. Through the double layers of glass and fog separating us, I heard the wet suckling noise, like a nursing child, she made with her lips to coax the otter from the water. I imagined how she pursed her lips, those soft-looking, fleshy baby shrimp, close to the glass, as if she knew I was watching her and deliberately teased me, mocking my shameful posture of love.

I could have satisfied my longing to see her. I could have flicked on the sunlamps and burned off the fog. I had the power, but not the courage. Mushimono's welfare had to come first, insuring my personal welfare—my employment—was my second priority, and sadly enough the yearnings of the heart could do no better than a distant third.

Luna tapped once more. Through the fog her usual red beret had been muted a plum color. She was but a shadow that swelled and faded depending upon her proximity to the glass. The fog hid and caressed Luna, as a cloud once did Io. And as I had made this cloud, I was Zeus, whose love and lust for Io was cloaked in a cloud for fear of Hera. We were both cowards in our own ways.

Soon, after Mushimono failed to materialize, Luna's impatient ghost disappeared in the morning mist.

By lunch time the fog outside had worsened. Luna entered the shop with a parcel tucked under her arm. Our first meeting without glass between us; the first time she ever entered the shop. She was beautiful even wet. Water droplets in her hair shone silver. Her eyes burned like lapis lazuli. The tiny, dark gap between her front teeth suggested the mysteries that draw men to women.

In the parcel were salmon filets for Mushimono, whom she referred to as the weasel. She adored him, she said, and had been concerned when she did not see him that morning. I assured her of his good health. Luna lit a cigarette. The smoke rose, curling slowly, and then lingered in the damp air around her head like an uneven halo. She seemed distracted.

Her eyes gazed at the rear of the shop where Mr. Tanaka's customers lunched at the sushi counter and the cafe tables. I leaned my elbow on the weather console and explained that I had made the fog that obscured her view of Mushimono.

"Give me the summer," she said, her voice raspy as the night hum of mid-July.

"They predict snow for tonight," I said.

"Snow, fog, what's the difference?" She drew more smoke into her lungs. "It's a mess any way you slice it. In a month, the winter solstice, and your *Mistermomo* will hibernate for the duration. It's a waste and a shame. I mean it. That weasel makes my day; a little life in all this concrete." She exhaled a long agonized breath. "I'm getting depressed thinking of it." Luna removed her beret, shaking off the water.

"If you're such a weather wizard, why don't you do something about this fog?" Luna asked. "I mean it. Let's see you—"

I warned her that any sudden change in the air pressure inside Mushimono's tank might cause him grave discomfort. It was a lie; I had to placate her and keep my job at once. My heart cleaved when she agreed it was best not to take the risk. She said she would stop in on her way home from work if the fog cleared up by then. I promised her I would show her how to make snow. Her chest heaved. "All morning long all I hear is talk of the *bottomline*; everything, it's the *bottomline*." Luna extinguished her cigarette under the thin sole of her snakeskin pump. "It's horrible. I come here to get away from it all, to see your *Mistermomo*, but I don't get weasel. I'm sorry, otter. Instead you keep feeding me this talk about snow. It's so depressing." She knotted the belt on her raincoat. The blood drained from my face.

She spun on her heels and headed for the door. With her hand on the knob she suddenly turned and apologized for her outburst. Grinning, she said her name was Peg. *Peg?! In all my reveries she had been Luna. In all my happy daydreams to come she would still be Luna. Peg? Impossible. How can my Luna be this monosyllabic thing—Peg?*

By afternoon the fog had lifted. Mushimono remained secluded in his underwater lair. At three, Mr. Tanaka left for the day. I volunteered to close shop. After I did so I went around the corner and purchased some wine and a pair of candles. It was already dark when Luna tapped at the front door. The candles had burned to half their original length.

We had barely said hello, I was still holding the door, when she

handed me her Burberry and whisked past me in one swift movement, leaving me lost in her jasmine scent—which I had not noticed earlier in the day—and sped to the little cafe table I had set up, to the dancing flames and the opulent wine. She did not even inquire about Mushimono, who was still in his pond.

Luna took the bottle in her hands, cradling the neck end up like the delicate head of an infant. She read the label, "Beaujolais! I can't believe it! How fortuitous. I think I can cry." She begged me to uncork the bottle. "This is the wine of summer, the wine of picnics." Her eyes fixed on the slow turns of the corkscrew. "This is the wine for lovers." She lit a cigarette and exhaled, "You don't understand, I just had the best summer anyone could ever hope for."

I poured equal amounts of the ruby red liquid into porcelain saki bowls. The tips of her fingers matched the beaujolais. We lifted our bowls and, after a moment of deliberation, toasted, "To *Mistermomo* and Edouard Manet . . . or Monet . . . no, Manet." We drank. Sweet fluid of love. I sipped, watching Luna over the rim of my bowl. Her skin radiated life. Juxtaposed with the candles, she seemed to glow as if lit from within.

"Those guys in Manet's, or is it Monet's *Dejeuner*," she said, placing emphasis on the middle syllable and pronouncing it *june*, "were crazy for beaujolais. They drank it by the gallon. I mean it. I read it in an art magazine." Her cheeks flushed from the wine. She crushed her cigarette. I admired her cameo earrings. Luna said the Impressionists were her favorites, and that beaujolais made her think of them, and they of her recent summer vacation.

"Baudelaire—" I began, having recalled his immortal line, *One should always be drunk*.

"Beaujolais," Luna said. "This is beaujolais." She pointed her long finger at the wine label.

"Of course," I said. "I'm hopeless when it comes to French." I refilled the bowls. "Forgive me."

I never liked the smell of burning tobacco, but when Luna lit a second cigarette the smoke rings rising from her lips seemed fragrant, almost sweet, unlike stench when others indulged. Then Luna coughed. "Bronchitis," she muttered, as she raised the bowl to her quivering lips.

"You should watch out for yourself," I said. "Why don't you quit smoking or take up skiing or something like that?"

The light seemed to dim in her eyes. "Don't depress me again," she said.

I apologized. Then she apologized.

"It's me," she said. "The bum lungs, the cigarettes are what make me *me*. I like the danger. Close to the edge. I'm aware of me each time I cough." She coughed. "Sounds crazy," she said, "but I mean it." Luna drained the beaujolais from her bowl and replenished it with the dregs.

I went behind the sashimi counter to prepare some fish for Luna. Selecting a long, shiny knife from Mr. Tanaka's collection, I was surprised by how light it felt in my hand. I had no sooner sliced through the first tuna filet when the steel blade, as if with a mind of its own, continued along its path and slid into my fingers. Pearls of blood strung in a tidy row pushed through the gash.

"I fancy myself as a burgundy," Luna said.

I clenched a handful of thick, red trouble. I tried to remain calm.

"But, you know, people like to categorize me in the sauterne family."

I could not keep it to myself any longer. It must have been instinct that caused me to shout at the profusion of blood: "I'm bleeding."

"What?"

"I'm bleeding like a pig!" I flicked my wrist, spattering the counter-top with red beads.

"Put some iodine or mercury on it," she said.

"What?"

"Put that tuna on your hand. It's full of mercury. I read it—"

"You mean Mercurochrome." I squeezed the wounded fingers, hoping to staunch the flow.

"Call it what you will, it's probably in the tuna anyway."

I ran my hand under cold tapwater and swathed it with one of Mr. Tanaka's linen napkins.

Luna sipped the dregs of the beaujolais that remained in her bowl. Holding it out to me, she offered me a taste. She accepted the bowl from my good hand, her thumb marking the spot where my lips had touched it, and she drank the last swallow, positioning her mouth to the very same spot. I brought out the other bottle of wine, a chablis. She had to uncork it.

"To me, you are a burgundy," I said. Each syllable echoed in my ears long after they had left my lips. My face burned, my extremities felt cold. "There's nothing remotely sauterne about you. You're not even blond." The wines raced through my veins, their friction swelled my wounded hand. My lungs felt as though they had shrunk—there seemed

to be less air to breathe. "Definitely burgundy, Luna. I won't hear another word about you and sauternes."

"What did you call me?"

"Burgundy, Luna."

"Peg. I'm Peg."

"You're burgundy. Don't test me. You're burgundy, all the way."

"Yes, burgundy. Simple and elegant—"

"Luna, rich and full-bodied."

"Peg!"

"But burgundy—"

"Yes. Earthy, robust, and generous."

"Soft-eyed, soft-lipped, Luna-Peg."

Fires flared under my eyelids. My jaw flapped unhinged. My skin hung loosely from sore bones. Their marrow hardened.

"Drinking burgundy is an event," she said.

"I adore a fine burgundy."

We drank our wine by the mouthful.

"I don't get it," she said. "Sauternes are such flippant, insignificant wines. Silly, vacuous fruit juice—"

"But Luna, you're not silly or vacant."

"And you, sir, are, let me see, yes, a mature port. I mean it. You have those superior powers of discernment that are the trademark of all good ports." She raised her bowl to my lips. "Drink," she said softly. "You must mend your blood." I gulped her offering, obeying her angelic voice. She refilled her bowl and drank.

My hand rested against my thigh. The napkin streaked crimson. My head wanted a place to rest. Lungs ached. Mouth dry. Gums like cement. My heart pounded like the surf, and when the sea receded, I baked in the invisible suns beneath my eyelids until the tides washed over me once more. My head kept time with my pulse, rocking from shoulder to shoulder. I unwrapped my burning hand and dipped the digits in the wine to cool the fire. The wounds gaped. The wine turned rusty. Luna lifted my hand from the bowl and kissed each digit, alternating the kisses with puffs of her cigarette.

"Beaujolais," Luna lamented, staring longingly at the empty bottle. "All gone. The end of summer. No more Monet, Manet—who can get those two straight anyway? All that crazy light and sun and heat and color; the boys and girls at play. Summer. The boys on the beaches and beaujolais."

I closed my eyes. They seemed to have outgrown their sockets. As I dozed in and out of sleep, I slipped into the borderline of consciousness where the *heres* and *theres* overlap. I sat on my spine with Luna *here* beside me. But, when drowsiness swept me away, my dreams became the intimate *here* while the things defined by time and space outside these shadows were the distant *theres*. Luna, repainting her lips, as I opened my eyes—*here*. Then she was *there*, untouchable, in my cottony dreams. In this place her words turned to music.

“Give me the summer any day of the week,” she sang to me.

I opened my sticky eyelids, and was blessed by the sight of her cool blues rimmed with gleaming, watery shards, staring at me.

“My Luna,” I said, smiling, “my burgundy Luna.” I took her by the wrist, as big around as a sparrow’s breast, and directed her eyes to Mushimono’s lakeshore. “Consider it summer again,” I said, languorously. “Your wish is my command.”

“Don’t tease,” Luna said. “You’re two months too late and five months too early.”

Her words were still music to me. What did it matter what her words meant? After all, I made the weather. I was day and night. I turned the seasons. I made things grow.

“You sick or something?” she asked. She caressed my forehead to check my temperature. “You’re hot.”

I blew out the candle and watched the complex spiral of smoke twist to the ceiling. “Suddenly, it’s no more,” I said. “Like that I’ll rid us of winter. I can set summer ablaze as easily as lighting a match, dear Luna.”

“It’s Peg. My name is Peg. You’re not well, are you?”

“Luna, I tell you. Luna, Luna.”

Then the tide inside me ebbed; my body flowed into the chair like a Dali watch. “Luna,” I began, like an invocation, “is Helen of Troy and Raphael’s madonnas fused into one. Luna is Penelope at her loom. Orpheus’ Eurydice found in Hades. Luna is Mozart at seven. Shirley Temple at eight. Luna is what is, but is not. She is that side of the moon we see, as well as what we imagine the invisible half to be. Luna is Titania kissing Bottom. Io snatched in the dewy arms of Zeus. She is Marilyn married to DiMaggio. Luna is Peg: a lovely mystery, mysterious loveliness.”

“You okay?” Luna asked. “Listen, call me Luna if it’ll make you feel any better. I mean it. Burgundy Luna. I’m beginning to like it.”

"I can make summer come and go at will." My words drooled off the shoulder of my shirt.

"But it won't be the same," Luna said, when I proposed the picnic. "It won't be like any of the picnics I went on last summer if we don't have the right wine."

I suggested saki.

"Oh, saki is so . . . formal," Luna said. "I mean some wines go with meat, others with fish, but only beaujolais is the stuff of picnics."

Grabbing the empty beaujolais bottle, I funneled saki into it.

"That's indecent," she said with mock disgust. "But an emergency is an emergency," she added quickly, smiling with mischievous anticipation. Luna joined me behind the sashimi counter where I translated the saki into beaujolais. "But the color's all wrong."

Suddenly her eyes flashed. She reached for one of Mr. Tanaka's special knives. Silvery trails, like miniature comets sliced the air between us. Luna's eyes were the sky. In them I flew. My legs trembled like a frightened dog's. Cold steel splayed my skin, turning aside the crusted cuts. Thin red lines appeared across my fingers. She grabbed my hand and smiled a strange smile of determination. Holding my hand over the funnel, she squeezed, and blood streaked across the palm to the heel, where droplets formed, like lizards' tongues. I could tolerate the pain, but the sickening heat of the blood in contrast with the enervating chill that covered the rest of me caused involuntary collisions of my knees. The red droplets dripped through the funnel's opening and splashed thickly in the saki, dissolving and diffusing in the wine. From the brownish pink the saki had assumed after the first drops, it soon rusted to a tired shade of crimson.

"I know we could've pretended," she said, as she pressed my wounded hand to her lips. "But I knew you wouldn't mind." The tip of her tongue traced the grooves, splitting, stinging, and soothing them all at once. "You're a wonderfully strong and hearty port," she said. Then she squeezed my hand over the funnel once more. The heavy drops pinged the saki's surface faster and faster until she achieved the beaujolais red she desired. Pleased, she raised my hand to her mouth and smeared the blood over her lips like a coat of hastily applied lipstick. I lifted the bottle of beaujolais wearily and intoned, "To Luna." "To summer," she toasted, clasping her hand over mine.

Outside the lakeshore, Luna worked the controls. My loss of blood

left me too dizzy to stand and perform my usual magic. Luna poured the beaujolais into a bowl. "Drink," she beckoned, "wine makes blood." I drank as she held the bowl to my lips. The wine tasted warm, unpleasantly salty. I felt hot, then cold, then hot again. I closed my eyes. The lids seemed lined with sand. I dreamed of Luna, nude, standing in the street outside the lakeshore, tapping the ground glass window, exciting Mushimono. Then I woke and saw her at the controls, and thought it was another dream. The sunlamps burned at noontime intensity. Although the fans stood idle, a gentle breeze circulated through the lakeshore, rustling the dry leaves along the ground. Soon, dew formed inside the glass enclosure.

I gave intructions from the floor where I was stretched out in near stupor, contented with the presence of the sylph, Luna, manipulating the knobs and dials.

"Eighty-five degrees and climbing," Luna sang out. The otter suddenly sprang from the pond. He scurried up the muddy embankment and darted from end to end of the lakeshore. Chipmunks, mice, swallows, and shrews emerged from their hiding places, and ran in quick, clipped movements for cooler cover. Mushimono pawed the glass, but Luna, concentrating on her work at the weather console, did not notice him.

"Humidity, let's see, is up to sixty-eight percent," she said. "Barometric pressure reads thirty-point-two-three and rising."

Mushimono stood erect, directly opposite Luna, and stared devotedly at her, as if he were someone kneeling, waiting to receive Communion.

We entered the lakeshore. The otter dove into the torpid water. Luna spread her plaid blanket on the ground. I basked under the brilliant suns whose healing rays sealed my wounds. Beside me Luna laid out the bowls, the salmon filets, and the beaujolais in a kind of still-life arrangement.

"This is great," Luna said. She untied the laces of my shoes. "They won't believe me at work tomorrow."

"Lovely day," I said, as I rolled onto my side. When my shirt peeled away from my sweaty back, it felt as though my skin had fallen off. A thick dew transformed the window into a wall of water impossible to penetrate with the eye.

"This is really great. I mean it. Summer in winter, day at night." Luna turned her back to me and rolled her stockings off her thin ankles. "There's money in this operation. I'll tell the brokers about it. They'll

probably flip, but they'll know what to do." She stretched out alongside me, undoing the third and fourth buttons of her silky blouse, hiking her skirt past her thighs. She then sat up, poured a bowl of beaujolais and looked down at me. "You remind me of someone. It's your eyes. So big and round and black." She scratched her head, then reached down, picking up a salmon filet. "I see it now," she said. "*Mistermomo!* You and that sweet weasel."

Luna peeled the salmon filets apart and, kneeling beside the lake, skimmed them, one by one, across the stagnant water. "*Mistermomo, Mistermomo!*" she called, "I have a treat for you." She made her suckling noises, loud and wet. The salmon, orange-pink rafts of flesh, floated to all parts of the greenish lake.

"Where's that weasel?"

"He eats fish, not filets."

"Filets," she said, "are fish."

"Mushimono answers only to gills and fins."

Luna clenched her teeth, perfect white shells, tightening the skin around her mouth. She glared at me as if I were mad. Tucking the hem of her skirt into its waistband, she waded knee-deep in the lake.

"Jesus, it's freezing!"

With her next step, she dropped thigh-high, and a turbulence erupted, sucking the lily-like filets to her. When the ripples subsided, one filet clung to the front of her bare thigh. Rather than peeling it off, she smoothed the salmon against her skin, making that low lapping sound of lovers' stomachs pressing together.

The lake, she discovered, and to my own surprise, was too deep. As she emerged from it, Luna shivered and coughed. She unhitched her algae-blotched skirt and let it fall in a pile at her feet. She seemed frail and small. Gasping for breath, she asked for the beaujolais. I picked up the bowl and was horrified by what I saw. The wine had been translated again, this time by the sun. My blood had separated from the wine, coagulating into a cinnamon crust, sealing in the saki beneath it. "I need some wine," she said, "my lovely beaujolais. I'm freezing."

"It's gone," I said. And at that moment I noticed my hand ached. I stared at the bowl, the hardened blood, the unclean saki. The sunlamps stung my eyes.

"I'm cold," she said. She reached across me for the bowl. She glimpsed the cruel, dry, rusty skin. Almost immediately, the bowl fell from her

trembling hands and cracked against a rock. The fire left her eyes and skin; beads of pond water seemed to freeze on her arms. My eyes saw clearly. The lines of her face twisted downward. Her face was livid, the leaden-grey of cod steak, pale as the moon. Opposite me, I saw a girl coughing, crying, shivering, and wan. "It's like a nightmare," she said.

I wiped the dew from the window. No moon in the sky, but snow, just as the cabbie had forecast. Flakes fell in bunches. My hand hurt. I heard her pick up her raincoat, turning over the bowls, bottle, and leftover salmon that had rested upon it. I followed the flight of several flakes in the lamplight's nimbus down to the white street below. She tiptoed from the show window. A gust of cool air shot in from the shop. Not a soul was on the street. Absolutely quiet as it must have been at the beginning of time. I listened to my hand throb. In the pond, the salmon stank, semi-poached by the sunlamps. I heard the gentle hiss of nylons inching over her legs. A rustle of raincoat, the click of her pumps, and the squeak of the front door opening. She crossed the street. Her collar brushed up alongside her ears; each flake seemed to make her flinch and shrink deeper into her coat, like a tortoise into its shell. She was a woman, no she was a girl, a pretty girl, who looked cold, small, lonely against the storm.

Peg, I thought. She slipped from sight. The snow fell in blankets. "Peg," I whispered. I wiped the glass, but she had disappeared.

I ran outdoors, following the unbroken pair of woman's tracks which led from the sashimi bar to where I saw her stand, hailing a cab. "Peg," I shouted, as the cab pulled up to the curb. I began to run. "Peg." I glided like a skater in the narrow lane she had cut in the wet snow. "Peg." There on the sidewalk I saw a salmon filet. "Peg," like my own echo. Then I became aware of a strange jangling sound, like ivory tiles tossed together in a metal can, behind me. I took a quick look, but nothing. "Peg," I cried, as she climbed into the waiting cab. "Peg," I said, in despair. I ran, and the strange tile-like sound grew louder, more urgent the faster I sprinted. "Peg," my eyes fixed on the yellow lamp shining at her shins through the balls of exhaust at the foot of the open door.

I slid in next to her, slamming the door shut, but a new sound, now a metallic scratching, called my attention. I opened the door, and there, illuminated by the amber light, I saw the otter. He panted, out of breath, his belly flush with the pavement. "What is it, a dog?" Peg asked. She held me by the arm as she peeked over my shoulder at Mushimono.

"Don't be afraid," I said, as the otter flopped into the compartment. "He seems quite gentle tonight." I closed the door gingerly behind him.

"You *are* going to take him back," she said, sliding deeper into the far corner of the cab.

"Where to?" the cabbie asked.

No, I thought, no, I would not dream of caging the otter tonight. Wonderful night, with my happily aching hand and Peg so near. We were warm and comfortable where we sat. She nestled close to me; the otter, stretched to its full-length over half of the backseat, purred; the wheels hummed as snow turned to slush, and our cab journeyed without destination. It was a wonderful night. Our hot breaths built dew on the windows. The whoosh of the windshield wipers lulled us to sleep. Peg's chest rose, and she coughed. Melting snow ran off the collar of her raincoat, the icy droplets falling on my chest. We had been trapped again, I thought, inside dewy walls, forgetting where we were, who we were. Quickly, I opened a narrow slit in the window. We needed to feel the cold, raw air outside. I kept an eye on the passing world through the opening.

"But I'm cold," Peg said, pressing closer to me. "I feel sick."

"I'm sorry," I said, "but this is necessary."

Soon the cab was chilled. Puffs of steam rose from Mushimono's snout. I shivered. Peg tried to stifle her cough. A wonderful night.

"Central Park," I said to the cabbie, tapping on the divider. "To the lake where you rent boats in the summertime, where the ducks live."

"Your hand," Peg said.

"Yes, I know," I said. "And you're wet and cold."

I wanted to take care of the otter before I tended to my cuts or found Peg some dry clothes. The cab swerved uptown. Snow fell, covering the city, softening edges, blurring lines. But I had never seen things any sharper or clearer as I did that night. The snow came down with blizzard-force gusts, but I knew it was only a November storm. I knew that by daybreak it would turn to rain, and by noon it would be forgotten.