I make my living as a writer, but I had a terrible hangover that day and hadn’t done a bit of work the whole afternoon. I was supposed to be working on a rush job, finishing up the captions for a volume of photographs by an artist I knew. My throbbing head, though, left me totally uninterested in her pictures of crashing ocean waves.

I’m fond of collaborating with artists whose work I like, but sometimes I get the strangest feeling, almost as if we’re peeking inside each other’s brains, saying, Hey, do you remember that promise we made?

But that day, I hadn’t promised anyone anything, or at least I was acting as though I hadn’t. I just lay there in bed, staring at the clear blue autumn sky. It looked so impossibly clear that I somehow felt betrayed.

From next door, I could hear a little girl practicing the violin, and the screeching brought tears to my eyes. The tones, as she clumsily drew her bow across the strings, spread through the blue sky filling my mind. The more wrong notes she hit, the worse she sounded, the more the sound perfectly matched the shade of brilliant blue, which I could see even with my eyes shut.

As I listened, the image of the blue sky faded into another image, that of the eyelashes of a woman friend of mine. When she was at a loss for words, she would always stammer—“Uh, you know”—while, at the same time, closing her eyes. I could then see the fringe of her jet black eyelashes below the white half-moons of her eyelids, and recognize a mix of anxiety and calm in her ever-so-slightly wrinkled brow. I had the unusual sensation of having grasped her entire personality in that single expression.

Those moments of comprehension always trouble me. I feel as if my heart will stop beating, because once I know that much about a woman, it can never work out between us. And with that particular girlfriend, I was further alarmed by the way she closed her eyes like that. She screwed them shut and searched for just the right word, and finally (in fact, it probably didn’t take more than a second or two), her eyes would open up wide, and she’d be her usual lucid self again. She’d say something like “Understanding is a wonderful thing.”

You can’t get much more straightforward than that, I’d think, but I didn’t
hold it against her. In fact, I considered her simplicity a great merit, and de-
spaired my lack of similar virtues.

She called that day and said she wanted to see me. I agreed, but privately
felt a bit annoyed, because I knew she had something on her mind, and was
probably planning to spill her guts to me that night.

On the phone, she said, “I’ll be at our favorite spot at nine.” I knew, in fact,
that the place she had chosen closed at eight. She was always messing with
my mind.

I called to tell her that I couldn’t make it, but her answering machine pleas-
antly reminded me that she was nowhere to be found. I had no idea where
she’d be when she wasn’t at work. So I had no choice but to get out of bed and
go meet her.

There was not a soul on the dark streets, save the autumn wind. I encoun-
tered this emptiness at every moonlit corner I turned. Considering how clear
and brisk the air was, time had slowed down drastically, but at least the cool
wind purged my mind of aimless thoughts.

When I reached the cafe, it was indeed closed, and she was nowhere to be
seen. A boutique of imported goods occupied half of the shop, and then there
was an area by the front window with a few tables, where you could sit and get
something to drink.

I liked places like that where one thing runs into another, blurring the
boundaries. Night and day; the sauce on a plate; the things they’re selling in
the shop right up near the cafe tables. I think that came from my love for her.
She was like an evening moon, her white light almost swallowed up by the gra-
dations of pale blue sky.

I decided to go see whether she was waiting in the entranceway by the
stairs leading up to the shop, but she wasn’t there either. Just then, I heard her
voice, oddly muffled, calling my name, as if she were speaking from the clouds
far above.

I looked up and there she stood, just inside the window of the boutique.
The white chairs and tables floated up in the darkness behind her. She smiled
and motioned for me to join her. I climbed the stairs and found her holding
the heavy glass door open for me.

“How did you get in?” I asked.

“The manager lent me the key.”

She led me inside. It felt somewhat like being in a museum, with objects on
display, and our footsteps and voices echoing through the space. It seemed
like a completely different place from the cafe where we always met, but it
wasn’t. Like ghosts of the daytime crowd, we crept in and found ourselves a
table.

She went over to the counter and found some clean glasses and a bottle of
apple juice in the refrigerator.

“Are you allowed to raid the refrigerator, too?” I asked.

“Sure, she told me to help myself,” she answered from the other side of the
counter.

“Can’t we turn the lights on?” I asked, a bit uneasy in the darkness.
“Oh, no. People would think the store was open and start coming in. Then what would we do?”

“I guess you’re right. So we’ll just sit here in the dark.”

“Oh, I like it. Don’t you think it’s kind of fun?” she exclaimed, setting the glasses of apple juice on a tray, just like a waitress.

“Don’t you have any beer?”

“But you’ve got a hangover, so I thought you wouldn’t want any.”

“How did you know?” I asked with surprise. “I don’t remember telling you.”

“Yes, you did, on the message on my answering machine,” she said, giggling. I felt relieved.

“It’s after nine at night, for heaven’s sake. I feel fine.”

“Whatever you want,” she said, and went over to the refrigerator to get a bottle of beer.

I could tell that something was up, though I didn’t know what. She was a bit too cheerful, and the sound of her footsteps as she had walked over to get the beer sounded like someone leaving. That made me nervous.

Plus, I was having a hard time enjoying my beer in that dark room. I felt for all the world like I was having a drink at the North Pole, sparkling with ice and frigid. Maybe it was the alcohol in my body from the night before, or the dim moonscape of the cafe, but I felt a buzz before I finished the first glass.

“I wanted to tell you about this seminar I’m going to next week,” she said.

“What kind of seminar?”

“None of my girlfriend’s having some personal problems, and then someone told her about this seminar. It’s supposed to be really radical, so she wanted me to go with her.”

“Radical? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“She said that they completely clear your mind. It’s not one of those mental development things or meditation. They take you down to zero, so you can start all over again. They told her that most of the thoughts and memories crowding our minds are totally unnecessary. Doesn’t that sound good?”

“No, it sounds awful. And besides, who decides what is necessary and what isn’t?”

“I guess that’s the chance you take if you go to one of these sessions. You might even end up forgetting things that seemed really important to you, things you don’t want to forget.”

“Like stuff you’re obsessing about?”

“That, too. My girlfriend is really depressed about her divorce, and I think that’s what she wants to forget. I bet she won’t be able to, though.”

“Don’t go,” I told her, insistently.

“But I can’t let her go by herself. She’s counting on me,” she said. “And, besides, I want to see what it’s like. How can I tell if it’s right for her if I don’t go myself?”

“I don’t trust those kinds of places. Who wants to forget everything anyway?”

“It’s okay to get rid of your bad memories, don’t you think? What’s wrong with that?”
"But you can do that on your own. At least then you get to choose what you forget, right?"

She closed her eyes and searched for the right words. Then she opened her eyes and said, "Well, no matter what happens, I know that I won’t forget you."

"How do you know you won’t?"

"I just do. Don’t get so uptight," she said with a grin. I knew full well that privately, deep inside, she was worried. I could almost hear her voice.

"I’d like to forget about the part of me who wants to forget you."

I knew that there was no more point in trying to talk her out of it. I was bummed.

"You might forget all about our relationship, for all I know," I said, grinning.

"All thousand years of it?" she asked, also with a smile. Sometimes when she’d say something like that, it seemed real. Just for an instant, but still, very true. Maybe it was the cheerful, deep sound of her voice—I could almost believe that we’d been together for a thousand years.

"Do you think I’d forget the first time we went on a trip together?"

"We were so young then. Nineteen."

"Yeah, remember how the maid at that inn said to me, ‘Your wife is so young!’? I can’t believe how people stick their noses into other people’s business!"

"Yeah, especially since I wasn’t any older than you."

"No, but you looked older. Remember how big that room was? It was so spooky. Yeah, full of dark shadows."

"But then we went out into the garden, and looked at the stars. I couldn’t believe how bright they were."

"The grass smelt so fresh. That’s one of the things I love about summer."

"You had your hair cut short then."

"And we put our futons right next to each other."

"Yeah."

"Then you kept telling me ghost stories, and I got too scared to go to the spa alone."

"So I went with you."

"And we made love in that mineral bath outside, near the garden."

"Right, it was like doing it in a jungle."

"The stars were gorgeous. . . . That was so much fun, wasn’t it?"

"It would be like dying."

"What are you talking about?"

"If you lost your memory."

"Oh, stop being so morose."

"Maybe they do something to you like in One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest."

"Like a lobotomy? Are you kidding? Of course not." She shut her eyes.

"They just make you forget memories you don’t need anymore."

"Like me?"

"No! But, you know, to tell you the truth, I’m not sure which ones are necessary and which aren’t."
“Let’s get out of here. It’s too quiet. I feel like I’m at a summit conference or something.”

“Yeah, doesn’t the echo in here make you feel like you’re saying something profound? Wait a sec. I want to check out the store.”

We strolled around, glancing at the imported items on the glass display shelves. The crystal glasses, stacked one on top of another, sparkled like prisms, looking much more elegant than in broad daylight.

We went out the front door, and locked it, just as if we were leaving our own apartment. Outside, we were greeted by a gust of cold wind, and, with that, the clock started ticking once again.

“Let’s have a drink somewhere before we go home.”

“Good idea.” I was feeling a lot happier.

“I promise that I’ll be able to recover all my memories of you,” she said, all of a sudden, as we were walking along. “Even if I forget them at first.”

“Every single one?”

“Of course. We’ve done so much together, wherever I go and whatever I see, I think of you. Newborn babies; the pattern on the plate that you can see under a paper-thin slice of sashimi; fireworks in August. The moon hidden behind clouds over the ocean at night. When I’m sitting down someplace, inadvertently step on someone’s toes, and have to apologize. And when someone picks up something I’ve dropped, and I thank him. When I see an elderly man tottering along, and wonder how much longer he has to live. Dogs and cats peeking out from alleyways. A beautiful view from a tall building. The warm blast of air you feel when you go down into a subway station. The phone ringing in the middle of the night. Even when I have crushes on other men, I always see you in the curve of their eyebrows.”

“So, does that mean every single thing on earth reminds you of me?”

Once again, she closed her eyes, and then, opening them, looked directly at me, her eyes shining like glass.

“No, just everything in my heart.”

“So, you mean, your love for me?” I said, somewhat surprised.

At that moment, I saw a bright flash and, a split second later, heard a loud rumble, like thunder. At first I didn’t know what had happened. We looked up and saw a glow from the top of the building across the way, and then flames flared up. And there was a dull boom, accompanied by splinters of glass raining down in slow motion through the darkness.

In a matter of seconds, people, awakened from sleep by the noise, started pouring into the street from every doorway. Over the din of voices, we could hear ambulances and police cars approaching the scene, sirens wailing.

“It must have been a bomb!” I said, excited by the spectacle.

“And we were the only witnesses, don’t you think? I hope no one got hurt.”

“I doubt it. It’s an office building, and there weren’t any lights on. Besides, we were the only people on the street. I bet it was just some kids.”

“I hope so. It looked really pretty, though, didn’t it? This might sound silly, but it looked like fireworks to me.”
"Yeah, I've never seen anything like it."
"Fantastic."
She looked up toward the sky again. I gazed at her profile, and thought about the two of us.

Your love is different from mine. What I mean is, when you close your eyes, for that moment, the center of the universe comes to reside within you. And you become a small figure within that vastness, which spreads without limit behind you, and continues to expand at tremendous speed, to engulf all of my past, even before I was born, and every word I've ever written, and each view I've seen, and all the constellations, and the darkness of outer space that surrounds the small blue ball that is earth. Then, when you open your eyes, all that disappears.

I anticipate the next time you are troubled and must close your eyes again.

The way we think may be completely different, but you and I are an ancient, archetypal couple, the original man and woman. We are the model for Adam and Eve. For all couples in love, there comes a moment when a man gazes at a woman with the very same kind of realization. It is an infinite helix, the dance of two souls resonating, like the twist of DNA, like the vast universe.

Oddly, at that moment, she looked over at me and smiled. As if in response to what I'd been thinking, she said, "That was beautiful. I'll never forget it."

Translated from the Japanese by Ann Sherif