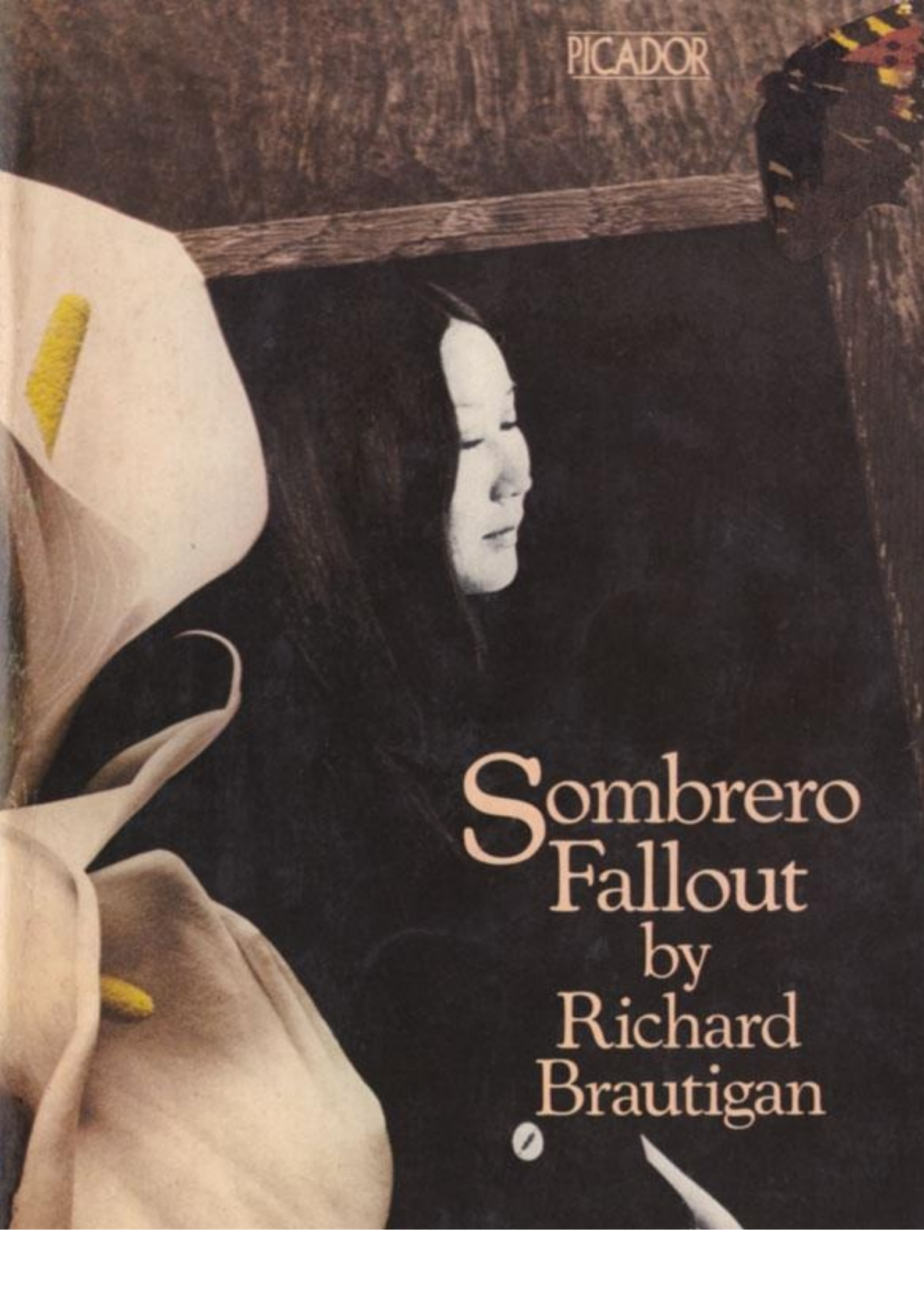


PICADOR



Sombbrero  
Fallout  
by  
Richard  
Brautigan

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Richard Brautigan

# Sombrero Fallout

A Japanese Novel

**PICADOR**

published by Pan Books

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This novel is for Junichirō Tanizaki who  
wrote *The Key* and *Diary of a Mad Old Man*

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# Sombrero Fallout

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## *Sombrero*

“A sombrero fell out of the sky and landed on the Main Street of town in front of the mayor, his cousin and a person out of work. The day was scrubbed clean by the desert air. The sky was blue. It was the blue of human eyes, waiting for something to happen. There was no reason for a sombrero to fall out of the sky. No airplane or helicopter was passing overhead and it was not a religious holiday.

The first tear formed itself in his right eye. That was the eye that always started crying first. Then the left followed. He would have found it interesting if he had known that the right eye started crying first. The left eye started crying so close after the right eye that he didn't know which eye started crying first, but it was always the right one.

He was very perceptive but he wasn't perceptive enough to know which eye started crying first. That is, if one can use such a small piece of information as any kind of definition of perception.

“‘Is that a sombrero?’ the mayor said. Mayors always speak first, especially if it is impossible for them to rise to any other political position than mayor of a small town.

‘Yes,’ said his cousin, who wanted to be mayor himself.

The man who had no job said nothing. He waited to see which way the wind was blowing. He didn't want to rock the boat. Being out of work in America is no laughing matter.

‘It fell from the sky,’ said the mayor, looking up into the absolutely clear blue sky.

‘Yes,’ said his cousin.

The man who had no job said nothing because he wanted a job. He did not want to jeopardize whatever faint possibility he had of getting one. It was better for everybody if the big shots did all the talking.

The three men looked around for a reason for a sombrero to fall out of the sky but they couldn't find one, including the man who had no job.

The sombrero looked brand-new.

It was lying in the street with its crown pointed toward the sky.

Size: 7¼.

‘Why are hats falling from the sky?’ said the mayor.

‘I don't know,’ said his cousin.

The man who was without a job wondered if the hat would fit his head.”

Now both eyes were crying.

Oh, God...

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He reached into the typewriter as if he were an undertaker zipping up the fly of a dead man in his coffin and removed a piece of paper with everything that has been written here except for his crying which he didn't know he was doing because he had done it so often recently that it was like drinking a glass of water that you drink accidentally when you are not thirsty and do not remember it afterwards.

He tore up the piece of paper that had everything that you have read here about the sombrero. He tore it up very carefully into many pieces and threw them on the floor.

He would start over again the next morning writing about something else that would have nothing to do with a sombrero falling out of the sky.

His business was writing books. He was a very well-known American humorist. It was difficult to find a bookstore that did not carry at least one of his titles.

Why was he crying, then?

Isn't fame enough?

The answer is quite simple.

His Japanese girlfriend was gone.

She had left him.

That was the reason for tears that started in eyes that he could no longer remember except for the crying which was now an everyday occurrence since the Japanese woman had left him.

Some days he cried so much that he thought that he was dreaming.

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## *Japanese*

As Yukiko slept, her hair slept long and Japanese about her. She didn't know that her hair was sleeping. Protein needs its rest, too. She did not think like that. Her thoughts were basically very simple.

She combed her hair in the morning.

It was the first thing that she did when she woke up. She always combed it very carefully. Sometimes she would put it in a bun on top of her head in the classic Japanese manner. Sometimes she would let it hang long, reaching to her ass.

It was a little after ten in the evening in San Francisco.

Drops of Pacific rain fell against the window beside her bed, but she didn't hear them because she was sound asleep. She always slept very well and sometimes she would sleep for long periods of time, twelve hours or so, enjoying it as if she were actually doing something like going for a walk or cooking a good meal. She also liked to eat.

As he tore up the sheet of paper with words on it about a sombrero falling from the sky, she slept and her hair slept with her: long and dark next to her.

Her hair dreamt about being very carefully combed in the morning.



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## *Ghost*

He looked at the pieces of paper on the floor about a sombrero falling out of the sky for no apparent reason and somehow the sight of them increased his crying.

*Who was she sleeping with?* he thought, as his eyes raced with tears trying to get out, rushing all over once in front of one another, competing to get down his cheeks as if they were in an Olympiad of Crying with visions of gold medals in front of them.

He imagined her in bed with another man. The man he thought up to be her lover had no definite body or color of hair or even features. Her imaginary lover did not have bones, flesh or blood. The man he had placed in bed with her was just a ghost-like energy force with a penis.

He probably, if it's possible, would have cried even more if he had known she was sleeping alone. That would have made him feel even sadder.

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## *Sailor*

What was he going to do with the rest of the night? It was 10:15 in November. He didn't want to watch the eleven o'clock news. He wasn't hungry. He didn't want a drink. He knew if he tried to read a book the pages would swim through the tears in his eyes.

So he thought about her fucking somebody else. He thought about another man, a nameless fellow with his penis entering her. He thought about her moaning and moving under the weight of another man's cock. Thoughts like that were no good for him but he clung to them like a drowning sailor to a life preserver board in the middle of an ocean without horizons.

Then he looked down at the pieces of paper at his feet. Why should a sombrero fall out of the sky? The torn pieces of paper would never be able to tell him. He sat down on the floor in the middle of the room with them.

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## *Eraser*

The Japanese woman slept on.

Yukiko had gone to bed very tired. It had been a hard day for her. All she wanted to do at work was to go home and go to sleep, and now here she was: she was home sleeping.

She had a small dream about her childhood. It was a dream that she would not remember when she woke up in the morning nor would she ever remember it.

It was gone forever.

It was actually gone as she dreamt it.

It erased itself as it happened.

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## *Breathing*

The first time he met her he was very drunk one night in San Francisco. She had gotten off work and had gone to a bar with some co-workers. She didn't like to drink because typically Japanese she couldn't hold her liquor and besides that, she didn't really like the feeling of alcohol in her body. It made her feel dizzy.

So she didn't go to bars very often.

After she finished work that night she was tired but her two co-workers persuaded her to go with them to a local bar where young people hung out.

When he turned around on his bar stool, very drunk, which was a condition not unknown to him, and saw her sitting there in her uniform, little did he know that two years later he would be sitting on the floor surrounded by little pieces of paper dealing with a sombrero falling out of the sky, his eyes clashing tears forth like a spring creek in the mountains and he would have nowhere to go forever and his life would be tired of breathing him.

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## *Suburb*

Yukiko rolled over.

That plain, that simple.

Her body was small in its moving.

And her hair followed, dreaming her as she moved.

A cat, her cat, in bed with her was awakened by her moving, and watched her tum slowly over bed. When she stopped moving, the cat went back to sleep.

It was a black cat and could have been a suburb of her hair.

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## *Origami*

He picked up the many torn pieces of paper about the sombrero and dropped them into an empty wastepaper basket which was dark and totally bottomless, but the pieces of white paper miraculously found a bottom and lay upon it glowing faintly upward like a reverse origami cradled in the abyss.

He did not know that she slept alone.

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## *Girl*

There had to be a way out of this.

Then he knew what to do. He called a girl on the telephone. She was pleased that it was him who she answered the telephone. "I'm glad you called," she said. "Why don't you come over and have a nightcap with me? I'd like to see you."

She only lived four blocks away.

There was the sound of romance in her voice.

For years they had been on and off casual lovers and she was very good in bed. She had read all his books and was very intelligent because she never talked to him about them. He didn't like to talk about his books and she had never asked him anything about them, but they were all there on his bookshelf. He liked the idea of her having all of his books but he liked even better the fact that they had been lovers for five years now and she had never asked him about them. He wrote them, she read them, and they did some pretty fair fucking together.

She wasn't his physical type but she compensated for it in other ways.

"I'd like to see you," she said on the telephone.

"I'll be over in a few minutes," he said.

"I'll put a log on the fire," she said.

He was feeling better now.

Maybe it would all work out.

Perhaps, it wasn't hopeless.

He put his coat on and started out the door.

Actually, he did nothing because he had been only thinking about all of this in his mind. None of it was real. He hadn't touched the telephone and there was no such girl.

He was still staring at the torn pieces of paper in the wastepaper basket. He was staring very intent at them as they made friends with the abyss. They seemed to have a life of their own. It was a bad decision but they decided to go on without him.

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## *Mayor*

“Why are hats falling from the sky?” said the mayor.

“I don’t know,” said his cousin.

The man who was without a job wondered if the hat would fit his head.

“This is serious,” said the mayor. “Let me take a look at that sombrero.” He gestured toward the hat and his cousin immediately reached to pick it up because he wanted to be mayor himself someday and picking up that hat might get him some political help in the future when his name would be on the ballot.

The mayor might even endorse him and say at a big rally, “I’ve been a good mayor and you’ve re-elected me six times but I know my cousin here will be a great mayor and carry on a tradition of honesty and leadership in our community.”

Yes, it was a very good idea to pick up the sombrero.

His future as mayor depended on it.

He would have been an idiot if he’d said, “Pick it up yourself. Who do you think you are, anyway? I wasn’t put on this earth to pick up sombreros for you.”



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## *Berries*

Though it was a hot day, the sombrero was ice-cold. When the cousin touched the hat, he withdrew his hand immediately as if he had touched electricity.

“What’s wrong?” said the mayor.

“This sombrero is cold,” his cousin said.

“What?” the mayor said.

“It’s cold. “

“Cold?”

“Ice-cold.”

The man who did not have a job stared at the sombrero. It didn’t look cold to him. But what did he know? He didn’t have a job. Perhaps if he had a job the sombrero would have looked cold to him. Maybe that’s why he didn’t have a job. He couldn’t see a cold sombrero when he was looking at one.

His unemployment benefits had run out a month before and he was now reduced to eating berries that he found growing in the nearby foothills.

He was very tired of eating berries.

He wanted a hamburger.

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## *Hamburgers*

An idea took immediate form in the unemployed man's mind. The sombrero was still lying in the street. The mayor's cousin had failed to pick it up. He had jumped back as if he'd been stung by a bee when he tried to pick it up.

The sombrero lay there.

Perhaps if the unemployed man picked up the sombrero and handed it to the mayor, the mayor would give him a job and he could stop eating berries and eat a lot of hamburgers instead.

He looked again at the sombrero lying in the street and his mouth started watering at the imagined taste of hamburgers with lots of onions and catsup on them.

He would not let this chance go by.

He might never be employed again if he did not pick up that sombrero and hand it to the mayor.

What was he going to do when the berry season was over?

What a terrible thought.

No more berries.

Even though he hated berries now, they were better to eat than nothing. What was he going to do when they were gone?

This sombrero lying in the street might be his last chance.

---

## Career

“I’ll get the sombrero for you, mayor,” he said and bent over to pick up the sombrero.

“No, I’ll get it,” the mayor’s cousin said, suddenly realizing that if he didn’t pick up that sombrero he might never be mayor.

Who was this unemployed bastard who was trying to pick up the sombrero and ruin his bid for public office? Did he want to become mayor himself? Even if the sombrero was frighteningly cold, he wasn’t going to let this son-of-a-bitch pick it up and become mayor of the town.

*Why didn’t I just pick it up in the first place?* the cousin thought. Then none of this would be happening. An ice-cold sombrero can’t hurt you. It just surprised him. That was all. He didn’t expect it to be cold, so he had jumped back. Who would have thought that the sombrero would be frozen? Anyone would have been surprised and reacted the way he did.

Suddenly the cousin hated the sombrero for having made a fool out of him. He had to hand the sombrero to the mayor if he ever wanted to be mayor himself. His whole political career would end right then and there if he didn’t get the sombrero to the mayor.

God-damn sombrero!

---

## *Job*

When the unemployed man saw that the mayor's cousin was suddenly very anxious to pick up the sombrero, he panicked. He knew for certain that he would never get a job again if he didn't give that sombrero to the mayor.

Why did the mayor's cousin want to pick up the sombrero?

He already had a job.

His hands weren't covered with berry stains.

---

## *Broom*

The heart-broken American humorist of course had no idea what was going on among the torn pieces of paper in his wastepaper basket. He did not know that they now had a life of their own and had gone on without him. He grieved only for his lost Japanese love. He thought about calling her up on the telephone and telling her that he loved her and would do anything in this world to have her back again.

He looked at the telephone.

She was only seven numbers away from him.

All he had to do was dial them.

Then he would hear her voice.

It would be very sleepy because he would have awakened her. It would sound as if it were coming from a great distance. Perhaps Kyoto, though she was only a mile away in the Richmond District San Francisco.

“Hello,” she said.

“It’s me. Can you talk?”

“No, somebody’s here with me. It’s over between us. Don’t call again. It irritates him when you call.”

“What?”

“The man I’m in love with. He doesn’t like it when you call. So don’t call any more. OK?”

*click*

Then she hung up.

While she was hanging up in his mind, she slept alone with her cat beside her in bed. She was sound asleep. She had gone to bed with no one since they had broken up a month ago. She hadn’t even gone out on a date with another man. All she did was work at her job, come home and do needlework or read. She was reading Proust. She didn’t know why. Sometimes she visited her brother and his wife and they would all watch television together.

It had been a very uneventful time for her since she had broken up with the American humorist. She had been thinking a lot about her life while she was doing these other things. She was twenty-six years old and she was trying to put it into perspective. Somewhere during the two years she had gone on with the humorist, she had lost the dimensions of her existence and what she wanted out of life. The humorist had taken an enormous amount of energy from her. She constantly had to feed his insecurity

and neurosis with her security and mental stability. After two years of this, she didn't know who she was any more. In the beginning all she had wanted out of life was to live with him, have children and enjoy a normal existence.

His basic insanity stopped any of this from becoming a reality.

After about a year together she realized that loving him was not good for her but it took another year for her to end it and now she was very glad that it was over.

Sometimes she wondered how she had allowed it to go on for such a long time.

*I will be very careful the next time I fall in love*, she told herself. Also, she had made a promise to herself that she intended on keeping. She was never going to go out with another writer: no matter how charming, sensitive, inventive or fun they could be. They weren't worth it in the long run. They were emotionally too expensive and the upkeep was too complicated. They were like having a vacuum cleaner around that broke all the time and only Einstein could fix it.

She wanted her next lover to be a broom.

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## *Bar*

He looked at the clock. It was 10:30. He could not call her on the telephone because he knew that she was with another man: enjoying his body, moaning softly underneath him... and loving him.

A huge sigh hurricaned his body and then he sat down on the couch. He tried to sort it all out. She was a thousand pieces of a puzzle tumbling around in his mind as if they were in a dryer in a Laundromat.

For a few moments his mind was simultaneously the past, the present and the future, and there was no form to his thoughts about her. Then her hair began to emerge as a dominant theme in his grief. He had always loved her hair. It was somewhat of an obsession with him. Thoughts of her hair, how long and dark and hypnotic it was, began to put pieces of the puzzle together until he was remembering the first time he met her.

Two years ago, it was raining.

She didn't go to bars very often.

After she finished work that evening she was tired but her two co-workers persuaded her to go with them to a local bar where young people hung out.

He was there and he was very bored. He was often very bored and he did not think twice about telling other people about his boredom. He bore it with the good humor of a cross.

When he turned around on his bar stool, very drunk, which was a condition not unknown to him, he saw her sitting at a table with two other women. They were all wearing white uniforms. They looked as if they had just gotten off work.

She was beautiful.

Her hair was combed into a bun on top of her head in the classic Japanese style. The drink in front of her had barely been touched. She was listening to the other women talk. One of them was talking a lot and enjoying the drink in front of her.

The Asian woman was very quiet.

He stared at her and she looked back for a few seconds and then returned to listening to the women talk.

He wondered if she had recognized him. Sometimes women did and it was to his advantage. Her books were popular and easily obtained in bookstores.

He turned back to the bar and ordered another drink. He would have to think this one over. He was a very shy person when he was sober. He had to be drunk before he could make a pass at a woman. As he sipped his drink, he wondered if he was drunk enough to go over to the table where the Asian

woman was sitting and try to get to know her. He turned around again to look at her but she was already looking at him. It rattled him and he turned back around again to the bar and his ears were burning with embarrassment.

No, he was not drunk enough to make a pass at her.

He motioned to the bartender who came over.

“Another one?” the bartender said, looking at the one that was only half-empty in front of him.

“A double,” he said.

The bartender’s face remained expressionless because he was a very good bartender. He went and got the whiskey. By the time he was back, the humorist had finished the glass that had been half-full. A minute later the double was half-gone. The humorist with two sips had changed it into a single.

He could feel the Asian woman looking at him.

*She’s read my books,* he thought.

Then he drained the glass in front of him.

It was as if the whiskey had fallen into a bottomless well without making a sound. Its only presence now was the energy for him to get up and walk over to the table where the woman sat and say, “Hell, may I join you?”



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