indbooks

landscape with flatiron

Junko was watching television when the phone rang a few minutes before midnight. Keisuke sat in the corner of the room wearing headphones, eyes half closed, head swinging back and forth as his long fingers flew over the strings of his electric guitar. He was practicing a fast passage and obviously had no idea the phone was ringing. Junko picked up the receiver.

"Did I wake you?" Miyake asked in his familiar muffled Osaka accent.

"Nah," Junko said. "We're still up."

"I'm at the beach. You should see all this driftwood! We can make a big one this time. Can you come down?"

"Sure," Junko said. "Let me change clothes. I'll be there in ten minutes."

She slipped on a pair of tights and then her jeans. On top she wore a turtleneck sweater, and she stuffed a pack of cigarettes into the pocket of her woolen coat. Purse, matches, key ring. She nudged Keisuke in the back with her foot. He tore off his headphones.

"I'm going for a bonfire on the beach," she said.

"Miyake again?" Keisuke asked with a scowl. "You gotta be kidding. It's February, ya know. Twelve o'clock at night! You're gonna go make a bonfire now?"

"That's OK, you don't have to come. I'll go by myself."

Keisuke sighed. "Nah, I'll come. Gimme a minute to change."

He turned off his amp, and over his pajamas he put on pants, a sweater, and a down jacket which he zipped up to his chin. Junko wrapped a scarf around her neck and put on a knitted hat.

"You guys're crazy," Keisuke said as they took the path down to the beach. "What's so great about bonfires?"

The night was cold, but there was no wind at all. Words left their mouths to hang frozen in midair.

"What's so great about Pearl Jam?" Junko said. "Just a lot of noise."

"Pearl Jam has ten million fans all over the world," Keisuke said.

"Well, bonfires have had fans all over the world for fifty thousand years," Junko said.

"You've got something there," Keisuke said.

"People will be lighting fires long after Pearl Jam is gone."

"You've got something there, too." Keisuke pulled his right hand out of his pocket and put his arm around Junko's shoulders. "The trouble is, I don't have a damn thing to do with anything fifty thousand years ago—or fifty thousand years from now, either. Nothing. Zip. What's important is now. Who knows when the world is gonna end? Who can think about the future? The only thing that matters is whether I can get my stomach full right now and get it up right now. Right?"

They climbed the steps to the top of the breakwater. Miyake was down in his usual spot on the beach, collecting driftwood of all shapes and sizes and making a neat pile. One huge log must have taken a major effort to drag to the spot.

The light of the moon transformed the shoreline into a sharpened sword blade. The winter waves were strangely hushed as they washed over the sand. Miyake was the only one on the beach.

"Pretty good, huh?" he said with a puff of white breath.

"Incredible!" Junko said.

"This happens every once in a while. You know, we had that stormy day with the big waves. Lately, I can tell from the sound, like, 'Today some great firewood's going to wash up.' "

"OK, OK, we know how good you are," Keisuke said, rubbing his hands together. "Now let's get warm. It's so damn cold, it's enough to shrivel your balls."

"Hey, take it easy. There's a right way to do this. First you've got to plan it. And when you've got it all arranged so it'll work without a hitch, you light it slow-like. You can't rush it. 'The patient beggar earns his keep.' "

"Yeah," Keisuke said. "Like the patient hooker earns her keep."

Miyake shook his head. "You're too young to be making such crummy jokes all the time," he said.

Miyake had done a skillful job of interlacing the bigger logs and smaller scraps until

his pile had come to resemble some kind of avant-garde sculpture. Stepping back a few paces, he would examine in detail the form he had constructed, adjust some of the pieces, then circle around to the other side for another look, repeating the process several times. As always. All he had to do was look at the way the pieces of wood were combined to begin having mental images of the subtlest movement of the rising flames, the way a sculptor can imagine the pose of a figure hidden in a lump of stone.

Miyake took his time, but once he had everything arranged to his satisfaction, he nodded as if to say to himself, That's it: perfect. Next, he bunched up sheets of newspaper that he had brought along, slipped them through the gaps at the bottom of the pile, and lit them with a plastic cigarette lighter. Junko took her cigarettes from her pocket, put one in her mouth, and struck a match. Narrowing her eyes, she stared at Miyake's hunched back and balding head. This was it: the one heart-stopping moment of the whole procedure. Would the fire catch? Would it erupt in giant flames?

The three stared in silence at the mountain of driftwood. The sheets of newspaper flared up, rose swaying in flames for a moment, then shriveled and went out. After that there was nothing. It didn't work, thought Junko. The wood must have been wetter than it looked.

She was on the verge of losing hope when a plume of white smoke shot up from the pile. With no wind to disperse it, the smoke became an unbroken thread rising straight toward the sky. The pile must have caught fire somewhere, but still there was no sign of flames.

No one said a word. Even the talkative Keisuke kept his mouth shut tight, hands shoved in coat pockets. Miyake hunkered down on the sand. Junko folded her arms across her chest, cigarette in hand. She would puff on it occasionally, as if suddenly recalling that it was there.

As usual, Junko thought about Jack London's "To Build a Fire." It was the story of a man traveling alone through the snowy Alaskan interior and his attempts to light a fire. He would freeze to death unless he could make it catch. The sun was going down. Junko hadn't read much fiction, but that one short story she had read again and again, ever since her teacher had assigned it as an essay topic during the summer vacation of her first year in high school. The scene of the story would always come vividly to mind as she read. She could feel the man's fear and hope and despair as if they were her own; she could sense the very pounding of his heart as he hovered on the brink of death. Most important of all,

though, was the fact that the man was fundamentally longing for death. She knew that for sure. She couldn't explain how she knew, but she knew it from the start. Death was really what he wanted. He knew that it was the right ending for him. And yet he had to go on fighting with all his might. He had to fight against an overwhelming adversary in order to survive. What most shook Junko was this deep-rooted contradiction.

The teacher ridiculed her view. "Death is really what he wanted? That's a new one for me! And strange! Quite 'original,' I'd have to say." He read her conclusion aloud before the class, and everybody laughed.

But Junko knew. All of them were wrong. Otherwise, how could the ending of the story be so quiet and beautiful?

"Uh, Mr. Miyake," Keisuke ventured, "don't you think the fire has gone out?"

"Don't worry, it's caught. It's just getting ready to flare up. See how it's smoking? You know what they say: 'Where there's smoke, there's fire.' "

"Well, you know what else they say: 'Where there's blood, there's a hard-on.' "

"Is that all you ever talk about?"

"No, but how can you be so sure it hasn't gone out?"

"I just know. It's going to flare up."

"How did you come to master such an art, Mr. Miyake?"

"I wouldn't call it an 'art.' I learned it when I was a Boy Scout. When you're a Scout, like it or not, you learn everything there is to know about building a fire."

"I see," said Keisuke. "A Boy Scout, huh?"

"That's not the whole story, of course. I have a kind of talent, too. I don't mean to brag, but when it comes to making a bonfire I have a special talent that most folks just don't have."

"It must give you a lot of pleasure, but I don't suppose this talent of yours makes you lots of money."

"True. None at all," Miyake said with a smile.

As he had predicted, a few small flames began to flicker at the center of the pile, accompanied by a faint crackling sound. Junko let out a long-held breath. Now there was nothing to worry about. They would have their bonfire. Facing the newborn flames, the three began to stretch out their hands. For the next few minutes there was nothing more to be done but to watch in silence as, little by little, the flames gained in strength. Those people of fifty thousand years ago must have felt like this when they held their hands out to

the flames, thought Junko.

"I understand you're from Kobe, Mr. Miyake," Keisuke said in a cheery voice as if the thought had suddenly popped into his head. "Did you have relatives or something in the Kansai earthquake last month?"

"I'm not sure," said Miyake. "I don't have any ties with Kobe anymore. Not for years."

"Years? Well, you sure haven't lost your Kansai accent."

"No? I can't tell, myself."

"I do declare, you must be joking," said Keisuke in exaggerated Kansai tones.

"Cut the shit, Keisuke. The last thing I want to hear is some Ibaragi asshole trying to talk to me in a phony Kansai accent. You eastern farm boys'd be better off tearing around on your motorcycles during the slack season."

"Whoa, I sure rubbed you the wrong way! You look like a nice quiet guy, but you've got one hell of a mouth. And this place is Ibaraki, not 'Ibaragi.' All you Kansai types are ready to put us eastern 'farm boys' down at the drop of a hat. I give up," Keisuke said. "But seriously, though, did anybody get hurt? You must have had somebody you know in Kobe. Have you seen the news on TV?"

"Let's change the subject," Miyake said. "Whiskey?"

"You bet."

"Jun?"

"Just a little," Junko said.

Miyake pulled a thin metal flask from the pocket of his leather jacket and handed it to Keisuke, who twisted off the cap and poured some whiskey into his mouth without touching his lips to the rim. He glugged it down and sucked in a sharp breath.

"That is great!" he said. "This has got to be a twenty-one-year-old single malt! Super stuff ! Aged in oak. You can hear the roar of the sea and the breath of Scottish angels."

"Give me a break, Keisuke. It's the cheapest Suntory you can buy."

Next it was Junko's turn. She took the flask from Keisuke, poured a little into the cap, and tried a few tiny sips. She grimaced, but chased after that special warm feeling as the liquid moved down from her throat to her stomach. The core of her body grew a touch warmer. Next, Miyake took one quiet swallow, and Keisuke followed him with another gulp. As the flask moved from hand to hand, the bonfire grew in size and strength—

not all at once, but in slow, gradual stages. That was the great thing about Miyake's bonfires. The spread of the flames was soft and gentle, like an expert caress, with nothing rough or hurried about it—their only purpose was to warm people's hearts.

Junko never said much in the presence of the fire. She hardly moved. The flames accepted all things in silence, drank them in, understood, and forgave. A family, a real family, was probably like this, she thought.

Junko came to this town in May of her third year in high school. With her father's seal and passbook, she had taken three hundred thousand yen from the bank, stuffed all the clothes she could into a Boston bag, and run away from home. She transferred from one train to the next at random until she had come all the way from Tokorozawa to this little seaside spot in Ibaraki Prefecture, a town she had never even heard of. At the realtor's across from the station she found a one-room apartment, and the following week took a job at a convenience store on the coast highway. To her mother she wrote: Don't worry about me, and please don't look for me, I'm doing fine.

She was sick to death of school and couldn't stand the sight of her father. She had gotten on well with him when she was little. On weekends and holidays the two of them had gone everywhere together. She felt proud and strong to walk down the street holding his hand. But when her periods started near the end of elementary school, and her pubic hair began to grow, and her chest began to swell, he started to look at her in a strange new way. After she passed five-foot-six in the third year of junior high, he hardly spoke to her at all.

Plus, her grades were nothing to boast about. Near the top of her class when she entered middle school, by graduation time it would have been easier to count her place from the bottom, and she barely made it into high school. Which is not to say that she was stupid: she just couldn't concentrate. She could never finish anything she started. Whenever she tried to concentrate, her head would ache deep inside. It hurt her to breathe, and the rhythm of her heart became irregular. Attending school was absolute torture.

Not long after she settled in this new town, she met Keisuke. He was two years older, and a great surfer. He was tall, dyed his hair brown, and had beautiful straight teeth. He had settled in Ibaraki for its good surf, and formed a rock band with some friends. He was registered at a second-rate private college, but hardly ever went to campus and had zero prospects of graduating. His parents ran an old respected sweetshop in the city of Mito, and he could have carried on the family business as a last resort, but he had no in-

tention of settling down as a sweetshop owner. All he wanted was to ride around with his friends in his Datsun truck, surf, and play the guitar in their amateur band— an easygoing lifestyle that anyone could see was not going to last forever.

Junko got friendly with Miyake after she moved in with Keisuke. Miyake seemed to be in his mid-forties—a small, slim guy with glasses, a long narrow face, and short hair. He was clean-shaven, but he had such a heavy beard that by sundown each day his face was covered in shadows. He liked to wear a faded dungaree shirt or aloha shirt, which he never tucked into his baggy old chinos, and on his feet he wore white, worn-out sneakers. In winter, he would put on a creased leather jacket and sometimes a baseball cap. Junko had never seen him in any other kind of outfit. Everything he wore, though, was spotlessly clean.

Speakers of the Kansai dialect were all but nonexistent in this place, so people noticed Miyake. "He lives alone in a rented house near here," one of the girls at work told Junko. "He paints pictures. I don't think he's famous or anything, and I've never seen his stuff. But he lives OK. He seems to manage. He goes to Tokyo sometimes and comes back late in the day with painting supplies or something. Gee, I don't know, he's maybe been here five years or so. You see him on the beach all the time making bonfires. I guess he likes them. I mean, he always has this intense look in his eyes when he's making one. He doesn't talk much, and he's kind of weird, but he's not a bad guy."

Miyake would come to the convenience store at least three times a day. In the morning he'd buy milk, bread, and a newspaper. At noon, he'd buy a box lunch, and in the evening he'd buy a cold can of beer and a snack—the same thing, day after day. He and Junko never exchanged more than the barest civilities, but she found herself drawn to him after a while.

When they were alone in the store one morning, she took a chance and asked him about himself. Why did he come in so often, even if he did live close by? Why didn't he just buy lots of milk and beer and keep it in the refrigerator? Wouldn't that be more convenient? Of course, it was all the same to the store people, but still…

"Yeah, I guess you're right," he said. "It'd make more sense to stock up, but I can't."

"Why not?" Junko asked.

"Well, it's just, like—I can't, that's all."

"I didn't mean to pry or anything," Junko said. "Please don't let it bother you. It's just the way I am. I can't help asking questions when I don't know something. I don't mean any harm by it."

Miyake hesitated a moment, scratching his head. Then, with some difficulty, he said, "Tell you the truth, I don't have a refrigerator. I don't like refrigerators."

Junko smiled. "I don't like refrigerators myself, but I do have one. Isn't it kind of inconvenient not having one?"

"Sure it's inconvenient, but I hate the things, so what can I do? I can't sleep at night when there's a refrigerator around."

What a weird guy, thought Junko. But now she was more interested in him than ever.

Walking on the beach one evening a few days later, Junko saw Miyake tending a bonfire, alone. It was a small fire made of driftwood he had collected. Junko spoke to Miyake, then joined him at the fire. Standing beside him, she was a good couple of inches taller. The two of them traded simple greetings, then said nothing at all as they stared at the fire.

It was the first time that Junko felt a certain "something" as she watched the flames of a bonfire: "something" deep down, a "wad" of feeling, she might have called it, because it was too raw, too heavy, too real to be called an idea. It coursed through her body and vanished, leaving behind a sweet-sad, chest-gripping, strange sort of feeling. For a time after it had gone, she had gooseflesh on her arms.

"Tell me, Mr. Miyake, when you see the shapes that a bonfire makes, do you ever feel kind of strange?"

"How so?"

"I don't know, it's like all of a sudden you get very clear about something people don't usually notice in everyday life. I don't know how to put it, I'm not smart enough, but watching the fire now, I get this deep, quiet kind of feeling."

Miyake thought about it a while. "You know, Jun," he said, "a fire can be any shape it wants to be. It's free. So it can look like anything at all depending on what's inside the person looking at it. If you get this deep, quiet kind of feeling when you look at a fire, that's because it's showing you the deep, quiet kind of feeling you have inside yourself. You know what I mean?"

"Uh-huh."

"But it doesn't happen with just any fire. For something like this to happen, the fire itself has to be free. It won't happen with a gas stove or a cigarette lighter. It won't even happen with an ordinary bonfire. For the fire to be free, you've got to make it in the right

kind of place. Which isn't easy. Not just anybody can do it."

"But you can do it, Mr. Miyake?"

"Sometimes I can, sometimes I can't. Most of the time, I can. If I really put my mind to it, I pretty much can."

"You like bonfires, don't you?"

Miyake nodded. "It's almost a sickness with me. Why do you think I came to live in this navel-lint nothing of a town? It's because this place gets more driftwood than any other beach I know. That's the only reason. I came all the way out here to make bonfires. Kind of pointless, huh?"

Whenever she had the chance after that, Junko would join Miyake for his bonfires. He made them all year long except for midsummer, when the beach was full of people far into the night. Sometimes he would make two a week, and sometimes he would go a month without one. His pace was determined by the amount of driftwood that washed ashore. And when the time came for a fire, he would be sure to call Junko. Keisuke had an ugly jealous streak, but Miyake was the one exception. He would rib Junko about her "bonfire buddy."

The flames finally found their way to the biggest log, and now at last the bonfire was settling in for a long burn. Junko lowered herself to the sandy beach and stared at the flames with her mouth shut tight. Miyake adjusted the progress of the fire with great care, using a long branch to keep the flames from either spreading too quickly or losing strength. From his small pile of spare fuel, he would occasionally pick a length of driftwood and toss it in where it was needed.

Keisuke announced that he had a stomachache: "Must've caught a chill. Think I just need a crap."

"Why don't you go home and rest?" Junko said.

"Yeah, I really should," Keisuke said, looking sorry for himself. "How about you?"

"Don't worry about Jun," Miyake said. "I'll see her home. She'll be fine."

"OK, then. Thanks." Keisuke left the beach.

"He's such an idiot," Junko said, shaking her head. "He gets carried away and drinks too much."

"I know what you mean, Jun, but it's no good being too sensible when you're young. It just spoils the fun. Keisuke's got his good points, too."

"Maybe so, but he doesn't use his brain for anything."

"Some things your brain can't help you with. It's not easy being young."

The two fell silent for a while in the presence of the fire, each lost in private thoughts and letting time flow along separate paths.

Then Junko said, "You know, Mr. Miyake, something's been kind of bothering me. Do you mind if I ask you about it?"

"What kind of something?"

"Something personal."

Miyake scratched his stubbly cheeks with the flat of his hand. "Well, I don't know. I guess it'd be OK."

"I was just wondering if, maybe, you had a wife somewhere."

Miyake pulled the flask from the pocket of his leather jacket, opened it, and took a long, slow drink. Then he put on the cap, slipped the flask into his pocket, and looked at Junko.

"Where did that come from all of a sudden?"

"It's not all of a sudden. I kind of got the feeling before, when Keisuke started talking about the earthquake. I saw the look on your face. And you know what you once told me, about how people's eyes have something honest about them when they're watching a fire."

"I did?"

"And do you have kids, too?"

"Yup. Two of 'em."

"In Kobe, right?"

"That's where the house is. I suppose they're still living there."

"Where in Kobe?"

"The Higashi-Nada section. Up in the hills. Not much damage there."

Miyake narrowed his eyes, raised his face, and looked out at the dark sea. Then he turned his eyes back to the fire.

"That's why I can't blame Keisuke," he said. "I can't call him an idiot. I don't have the right. I'm not using my brain any more than he is. I'm the idiot king. I think you know what I mean."

"Do you want to tell me more?"

"No," Miyake said. "I really don't."

"OK, I'll stop then. But I will say this. I think you're a good person."

"That's not the problem," Miyake said, shaking his head again. He drew a kind of design in the sand with the tip of a branch. "Tell me, Jun, have you ever thought about how you're going to die?"

Junko pondered this for a while, then shook her head.

"Well, I think about it all the time," Miyake said.

"How are you going to die?"

"Locked inside a refrigerator," he said. "You know. It happens all the time. Some kid is playing around inside a refrigerator that somebody's thrown away, and the door closes, and the kid suffocates. Like that."

The big log dipped to the side, scattering sparks. Miyake watched it happen but did nothing. The glow of the flames spread strangely unreal shadows across his face.

"I'm in this tight space, in total darkness, and I die little by little. It might not be so bad if I could just suffocate. But it doesn't work that way. A tiny bit of air manages to get in through some crack, so it takes a really long time. I scream, but nobody can hear me. And nobody notices I'm missing. It's so cramped in there, I can't move. I squirm and squirm but the door won't open."

Junko said nothing.

"I have the same dream over and over. I wake up in the middle of the night drenched in sweat. I've been dreaming about dying slowly in pitch-blackness, but even after I wake up, the dream doesn't end. This is the scariest part of the dream. I open my eyes, and my throat is absolutely dry. I go to the kitchen and open the refrigerator. Of course, I don't have a refrigerator, so I ought to realize it's a dream, but I still don't notice. I'm thinking there's something strange going on, but I open the door. Inside, the refrigerator is pitch-dark. The light's out. I wonder if there's been a power failure and stick my head inside. Hands shoot out from the darkness and grab me by the neck. Cold hands. Dead people's hands. They're incredibly strong and they start dragging me inside. I let out a huge scream, and this time I wake up for real. That's my dream. It's always the same. Always. Every little detail. And every time I have it, it's just as scary as the last."

Miyake poked the big log with the tip of a branch and pushed it back in place.

"It's so real, I feel as if I've already died hundreds of times."

"When did you start having the dream?"

"Way, way back there. So long ago I can't remember when," Miyake said. "I have had periods when it's left me alone. A year… no, two years when I didn't have it at all. I

had the feeling things were going to be OK for me. But no. The dream came back. Just as I was beginning to think, I'm OK now, I'm saved, it started up again. And once it gets going, there's nothing I can do."

Miyake shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Jun, I really shouldn't be telling you these dark stories."

"Yes you should," Junko said. She put a cigarette between her lips and struck a match, inhaling a deep lungful of smoke. "Go on."

The bonfire was nearing its end. The big pile of extra driftwood was gone now. Miyake had thrown it all into the fire. Maybe she was imagining things, but Junko thought the ocean sounded louder.

"There's this American writer called Jack London," Miyake began.

"Sure, the guy who wrote about the fire."

"That's him. For a long time, he thought he was going to die by drowning in the sea. He was absolutely sure of it. He'd slip and fall into the ocean at night, and nobody would notice, and he'd drown."

"Did he really drown?"

Miyake shook his head. "Nope. Killed himself with morphine."

"So his premonition didn't come true. Or maybe he did something to make sure it wouldn't come true."

"On the surface, at least, it looks like that," Miyake said, pausing for a moment. "But in a sense, he was right. He did drown alone in a dark sea. He became an alcoholic. He soaked his body in his own despair—right to the core—and he died in agony. Premonitions can stand for something else sometimes. And the thing they stand for can be a lot more intense than reality. That's the scariest thing about having a premonition. Do you see what I mean?"

Junko thought about it for a while. She did not see what he meant.

about it. I don't even know how I'm going to live."

Miyake gave a nod. "I know what you mean," he said. "But there's such a thing as a way of living that's guided by the way a person's going to die."

"Is that how you're living?" she asked.

"I'm not sure. It seems that way sometimes."

Miyake sat down next to Junko. He looked a little more wasted and older than usu-

al. The hair over his ears was uncut and sticking out.

"What kind of pictures have you been painting?" she asked.

"That would be tough to explain."

"OK, then, what's the newest thing you've painted?"

"I call it Landscape with Flatiron. I finished it three days ago. It's just a picture of an iron in a room."

"Why's that so tough to explain?"

"Because it's not really an iron."

She looked up at him. "The iron is not an iron?"

"That's right."

"Meaning it stands for something else?"

"Probably."

"Meaning you can only paint it if you use something else to stand for it?"

Miyake nodded in silence.

Junko looked up to see that there were many more stars in the sky than before. The moon had covered a long distance. Miyake threw the last piece, the long branch he was holding, into the fire. Junko leaned toward him so that their shoulders were just touching. The smoky smell of a hundred fires clung to his jacket. She took in a long, deep breath of it.

"You know something?" she said.

"What?"

"I'm completely empty."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

She closed her eyes and, before she knew it, tears were flowing down her cheeks. With her right hand, she gripped Miyake's knee as hard as she could through his chinos. Small chills ran through her body. He put his arm around her shoulders and drew her close, but still her tears would not stop.

"There's really nothing at all in here," she said much later, her voice hoarse. "I'm cleaned out. Empty."

"I know what you mean," he said.

"Really?"

"Yeah. I'm an expert."

"What can I do?"

"Get a good night's sleep. That usually fixes it."

"What I've got is not so easy to fix."

"You may be right, Jun. It may not be that easy."

Just then a long, steamy hiss announced the evaporation of water trapped in a log. Miyake raised his eyes and, narrowing them, peered at the bonfire for a time.

"So, what should I do?" Junko asked.

"I don't know. We could die together. What do you say?"

"Sounds good to me."

"Are you serious?"

"I'm serious."

His arm still around her shoulders, Miyake kept silent for a while. Junko buried her face in the soft worn-out leather of his jacket.

"Anyhow, let's wait till the fire burns out," Miyake said. "We built it, so we ought to keep it company to the end. Once it goes out, and it turns pitch-dark, then we can die."

"Good," Junko said. "But how?"

"I'll think of something."

"OK."

Wrapped in the smell of the fire, Junko closed her eyes. Miyake's arm across her shoulders was rather small for that of a grown man, and strangely bony. I could never live with this man, she thought. I could never get inside his heart. But I might be able to die with him.

She felt herself growing sleepy. It must be the whiskey, she thought. Most of the burning driftwood had turned to ash and crumbled, but the biggest piece still glowed orange, and she could feel its gentle warmth against her skin. It would be a while before it burnt itself out.

"Mind if I take a little nap?" she asked.

"Sure, go ahead."

"Will you wake me when the fire's out?"

"Don't worry. When the fire goes out, you'll start feeling the cold. You'll wake up whether you want to or not."

She repeated the words in her mind: When the fire goes out, you'll start feeling the cold. You'll wake up whether you want to or not. Then she curled herself against him and

dropped into a fleeting, but deep, sleep.