

William Gibson. New Rose hotel

Seven rented nights in this coffin, Sandii. New Rose Hotel. How I want you now. Sometimes I hit you. Replay it so slow and sweet and mean, I can almost feel it. Sometimes I take your little automatic out of my bag, run my thumb down smooth, cheap chrome. Chinese .22, its bore no wider than the dilated pupils of your vanished eyes. Fox is dead now, Sandii.

Fox told me to forget you.

I remember Fox leaning against the padded bar in the dark lounge of some Singapore hotel, Bencoolen Street, his hands describing different spheres of influence, internal rivalries, the arc of a particular career, a point of weakness he had discovered in the armor of some think tank. Fox was point man in the skull wars, a middleman for corporate crossovers. He was a soldier in the secret skirmishes of the zaibatsus, the multinational corporations that control entire economies.

I see Fox grinning, talking fast, dismissing my ventures into intercorporate espionage with a shake of his head. The Edge, he said, have to find that Edge. He made you bear the capital E. The Edge was Fox's grail, that essential fraction of sheer human talent, nontransferable, locked in the skulls of the world's hottest research scientists.

You can't put Edge down on paper, Fox said, can't punch Edge into a diskette. The money was in corporate defectors. Fox was smooth, the severity of his dark French suits offset by a boyish forelock that wouldn't stay in place. I never liked the way the effect was ruined when he stepped back from the bar, his left shoulder skewed at an angle no Paris tailor could conceal. Someone had run him over with a taxi in Berne, and nobody quite knew how to put him together again.

I guess I went with him because he said he was after that Edge. And somewhere out there, on our way to find the Edge, I found you, Sandii. The New Rose Hotel is a coffin rack on the ragged fringes of Narita International. Plastic capsules a meter high and three long, stacked like surplus Godzilla teeth in a concrete lot off the main road to the airport. Each capsule has a television mounted flush with the ceiling. I spend whole days watching Japanese game shows and old movies. Sometimes I have your gun in my hand.

Sometimes I can hear the jets, laced into holding patterns over Narita. I close my eyes and imagine the sharp, white contrails fading, losing definition.

You walked into a bar in Yokohama, the first time I saw you. Eurasian, half gaijin, long-hipped and fluid in a Chinese knock-off of some Tokyo designer's original. Dark European eyes, Asian cheekbones. I remember you dumping your purse out on the bed, later, in some hotel room, pawing through your makeup. A crumpled wad of new yen, dilapidated address book held together with rubber bands, a Mitsubishi bank chip, Japanese passport with a gold chrysanthemum stamped on the cover, and the Chinese .22. You told me your story. Your father had been an executive in Tokyo, but now he was disgraced, disowned, cast down by Hosaka, the biggest zaibatsu of all. That night your mother was Dutch, and I listened as you spun out those summers in Amsterdam for me, the pigeons in Dam Square like a soft, brown carpet. I never asked what your father might have done to earn his disgrace. I watched you dress; watched the swing of your dark, straight hair, how it

cut the air. Now Hosaka hunts me.

The coffins of New Rose are racked in recycled scaffolding, steel pipes under bright enamel. Paint flakes away when I climb the ladder, falls with each step as I follow the catwalk. My left hand counts off the coffin hatches, their multilingual decals warning of fines levied for the loss of a key. I look up as the jets rise out of Narita, passage home, distant now as any moon. Fox was quick to see how we could use you, but not sharp enough to credit you with ambition. But then he never lay all night with you on the beach at Kamakura, never listened to your nightmares, never heard an entire imagined childhood shift under those stars, shift and roll over, your child's mouth opening to reveal some fresh past, and always the one, you swore, that was really and finally the truth. I didn't care, holding your hips while the sand cooled against your skin. Once you left me, ran back to that beach saying you'd forgotten our key. I found it in the door and went after you, to find you ankle-deep in surf, your smooth back rigid, trembling; your eyes far away. You --couldn't talk. Shivering. Gone. Shaking for different futures and better pasts. Sandii, you left me here.

You left me all your things. This gun. Your makeup, all the shadows and blushes capped in plastic. Your Cray microcomputer, a gift from Fox, with a shopping list you entered. Sometimes I play that back, watching each item cross the little silver screen.

A freezer. A fermenter. An incubator. An electrophoresis system with integrated agarose cell and transilluminator. A tissue embedder. A high-performance liquid chromatograph. A flow cytometer. A spectrophotometer. Four gross of borosilicate scintillation vials. A microcentrifuge. And one DNA synthesizer, with in-built computer. Plus software.

Expensive, Sandii, but then Hosaka was footing our bills. Later you made them pay even more, but you were already gone.

Hiroshi drew up that list for you. In bed, probably. Hiroshi Yomiuri. Maas Biolabs GmbH had him. Hosaka wanted him.

He was hot. Edge and lots of it. Fox followed genetic engineers the way a fan follows players in a favorite game. Fox wanted Hiroshi so bad he could taste it.

He'd sent me up to Frankfurt three times before you turned up, just to have a look-see at Hiroshi. Not to make a pass or even to give him a wink and a nod. Just to watch.

Hiroshi showed all the signs of having settled in. He'd found a German girl with a taste for conservative loden and riding boots polished the shade of a fresh chestnut. He'd bought a renovated town house on just the right square. He'd taken up fencing and given up kendo.

And everywhere the Maas security teams, smooth and heavy, a rich, clear syrup of surveillance. I came back and told Fox we'd never touch him.

You touched him for us, Sandii. You touched him just right.

Our Hosaka contacts were like specialized cells protecting the parent organism. We were mutagens, Fox and I, dubious agents adrift on the dark side of the intercorporate sea.

When we had you in place in Vienna, we offered them Hiroshi. They didn't even blink. Dead calm in an LA hotel room. They said they had to think about it.

Fox spoke the name of Hosaka's primary competitor in the gene game,

let it fall out naked, broke the protocol forbidding the use of proper names.

They had to think about it, they said.

Fox gave them three days.

I took you to Barcelona a week before I took you to Vienna. I remember you with your hair tucked back into a gray beret, your high Mongol cheekbones reflected in the windows of ancient shops. Strolling down the Ramblas to the Phoenician harbor, past the glass-roofed Mercado selling oranges out of Africa. The old Ritz, warm in our room, dark, with all the soft weight of Europe pulled over us like a quilt. I could enter you in your sleep. You were always ready. Seeing your lips in a soft, round O of surprise, your face about to sink into the thick, white pillow -- archaic linen of the Ritz. Inside you I imagined all the neon, the crowds surging around Shinjuku Station, wired electric night. You moved that way, rhythm of a new age, dreamy and far from any nation's soil.

When we flew to Vienna, I installed you in Hiroshi's wife's favorite hotel. Quiet, solid, the lobby tiled like a marble chessboard, with brass elevators smelling of lemon oil and small cigars. It was easy to imagine her there, the highlights on her riding boots reflected in polished marble, but we knew she wouldn't be coming along, not this trip.

She was off to some Rhineland spa, and Hiroshi was in Vienna for a conference. When Maas security flowed in to scan the hotel, you were out of sight. Hiroshi arrived an hour later, alone.

Imagine an alien, Fox once said, who's come here to identify the planet's dominant form of intelligence. The alien has a look, then chooses. What do you think he picks? I probably shrugged. The zaibatsus, Fox said, the multinationals. The blood of a zaibatsu is information, not people. The structure is independent of the individual lives that comprise it. Corporation as life form. Not the Edge lecture again, I said.

Maas isn't like that, he said, ignoring me.

Maas was small, fast, ruthless. An atavism. Maas was all Edge.

I remember Fox talking about the nature of Hiroshi's Edge. Radioactive nucleases, monoclonal antibodies, something to do with the linkage of proteins, nucleotides ... Hot, Fox called them, hot proteins. High-speed links. He said Hiroshi was a freak, the kind who shatters paradigms, inverts a whole field of science, brings on the violent revision of an entire body of knowledge. Basic patents, he said, his throat tight with the sheer wealth of it, with the high, thin smell of tax-free millions that clung to those two words. Hosaka wanted Hiroshi, but his Edge was radical enough to worry them. They wanted him to work in isolation. I went to Marrakech, to the old city, the Medina. I found a heroin lab that had been converted to the extraction of pheromones. I bought it, with Hosaka's money.

I walked the marketplace at Djemaa-el-Fna with a sweating Portuguese businessman, discussing fluorescent lighting and the installation of ventilated specimen cages. Beyond the city walls, the high Atlas. Djemaa-el-Fna was thick with jugglers, dancers, storytellers, small boys turning lathes with their feet, legless beggars with wooden bowls under animated holograms advertising French software.

We strolled past bales of raw wool and plastic tubs of Chinese microchips.

I hinted that my employers planned to manufacture synthetic beta-endorphin.

Always try to give them something they understand.

Sandii, I remember you in Harajuka, sometimes. Close my eyes in this coffin and I can see you there -- all the glitter, crystal maze of the boutiques, the smell of new clothes. I see your cheekbones ride past chrome racks of Paris leathers. Sometimes I hold your hand.

We thought we'd found you, Sandii, but really you'd found us. Now I know you were looking for us, or for someone like us. Fox was delighted, grinning over our find: such a pretty new tool, bright as any scalpel. Just the thing to help us sever a stubborn Edge, like Hiroshi's, from the jealous parent-body of Maas Biolabs. You must have been searching a long time, looking for a way out, all those nights down Shinjuku. Nights you carefully cut from the scattered deck of your past.

My own past had gone down years before, lost with all hands, no trace. I understood Fox's late-night habit of emptying his wallet, shuffling through his identification. He'd lay the pieces out in different patterns, rearrange them, wait for a picture to form. I knew what he was looking for. You did the same thing with your childhoods. In New Rose, tonight, I choose from your deck of pasts.

I choose the original version, the famous Yokohama hotelroom text, recited to me that first night in bed. I choose the disgraced father, Hosaka executive. Hosaka. How perfect. And the Dutch mother, the summers in Amsterdam, the soft blanket of pigeons in the Dam Square afternoon.

I came in out of the heat of Marrakech into Hilton air conditioning. Wet shirt clinging cold to the small of my back while I read the message you'd relayed through Fox. You were in all the way; Hiroshi would leave his wife. It wasn't difficult for you to communicate with us, even through the clear, tight film of Maas security; you'd shown Hiroshi the perfect little place for coffee and kipferl. Your favorite waiter was white-haired, kindly, walked with a limp, and worked for us. You left your messages under the linen napkin.

All day today I watched a small helicopter cut a tight grid above this country of mine, the land of my exile, the New Rose Hotel. Watched from my hatch as its patient shadow crossed the grease-stained concrete. Close. Very close.

I left Marrakech for Berlin. I met with a Welshman in a bar and began to arrange for Hiroshi's disappearance. It would be a complicated business, intricate as the brass gears and sliding mirrors of Victorian stage magic, but the desired effect was simple enough. Hiroshi would step behind a hydrogen-cell Mercedes and vanish. The dozen Maas agents who followed him constantly would swarm around the van like ants; the Maas security apparatus would harden around his point of departure like epoxy.

They know how to do business promptly in Berlin. I wits even able to arrange a last night with you. I kept it secret from Fox; he might not have approved. Now I've forgotten the town's name. I knew it for an hour on the autobahn, under a gray Rhenish sky, and forgot it in your arms.

The rain began, sometime toward morning. Our room had a single window, high and narrow, where I stood and watched the rain fur the river with silver needles. Sound of your breathing. The river flowed beneath low, stone arches. The street was empty. Europe was a dead museum.

I'd already booked your flight to Marrakech, out of Orly, under your newest name. You'd be on your way when I pulled the final string and dropped Hiroshi out of sight.

You'd left your purse on the dark old bureau. While you slept I went through your things, removed anything that might clash with the new cover I'd bought for you in Berlin. I took the Chinese .22, your microcomputer, and your bank chip. I took a new passport, Dutch, from my bag, a Swiss bank chip in the same name, and tucked them into your purse.

My hand brushed something flat, I drew it out, held the thing, a diskette. No labels.

It lay there in the palm of my hand, all that death. Latent, coded, waiting.

I stood there and watched you breathe, watched your breasts rise and fall. Saw your lips slightly parted, and in the jut and fullness of your lower lip, the faintest suggestion of bruising.

I put the diskette back into your purse. When I lay down beside you, you rolled against me, waking, on your breath all the electric night of a new Asia, the future rising in you like a bright fluid, washing me of everything but the moment. That was your magic, that you lived outside of history, all now.

And you knew how to take me there. For the last time, you took me.

While I was shaving, I heard you empty your makeup into my bag. I'm Dutch now, you said, I'll want a new look.

Dr Hiroshi Yomiuri went missing in Vienna, in a quiet street off Singerstrasse, two blocks from his wife's favorite hotel. On a clear afternoon in October, in the presence of a dozen expert witnesses, Dr Yomiuri vanished.

He stepped through a looking glass. Somewhere, offstage, the oiled play of Victorian clockwork. I sat in a hotel room in Geneva and took the Welshman's call. It was done, Hiroshi down my rabbit hole and headed for Marrakech. I poured myself a drink and thought about your legs.

Fox and I met in Narita a day later, in a sushi bar in the JAL terminal.

He'd just stepped off an Air Maroc jet, exhausted and triumphant.

Loves it there, he said, meaning Hiroshi. Loves her, he said, meaning you.

I smiled. You'd promised to meet me in Shinjuku in a month.

Your cheap little gun in the New Rose Hotel. Ale chrome is starting to peel. The machining is clumsy, blurry Chinese stamped into rough steel. The grips are red plastic, molded with a dragon on either side. Like a child's toy.

Fox ate sushi in the JAL terminal, high on what we'd done. The shoulder had been giving him trouble, but he said he didn't care. Money now for better doctors. Money now for everything. Somehow it didn't seem very important to me, the money we'd gotten from Hosaka. Not that I doubted our new wealth, but that last night with you had left me convinced that it all came to us naturally, in the new order of things, as a function of who and what we were.

Poor Fox. With his blue oxford shirts crisper than ever, his Paris suits darker and richer. Sitting there in JAL, dabbing sushi into a little rectangular tray of green horseradish, he had less than a week to live. Dark

now, and the coffin racks of New Rose are lit all night by floodlights, high on painted metal masts. Nothing here seems to serve its original purpose. Everything is surplus, recycled, even the coffins. Forty years ago these plastic capsules were stacked in Tokyo or Yokohama, a modern convenience for traveling businessmen. Maybe your father slept in one. When the scaffolding was new, it rose around the shell of some mirrored tower on the Ginza, swarmed over by crews of builders.

The breeze tonight brings the rattle of a pachinko parlor, the smell of stewed vegetables from the pushcarts across the road.

I spread crab-flavored krill paste on orange rice crackers. I can hear the planes. Those last few days in Tokyo, Fox and I had adjoining suites on the fifty-third floor of the Hyatt. No contact with Hosaka. They paid us, then erased us from official corporate memory. I

But Fox couldn't let go. Hiroshi was his baby, his pet project. He'd developed a proprietary, almost fatherly, interest in Hiroshi. He loved him for his Edge. So Fox had me keep in touch with my Portuguese businessman in the Medina, who was willing to keep a very partial eye on Hiroshi's lab for us.

When he phoned, he'd phone from a stall in Djemaa-el-Fna, with a background of wailing vendors and Atlas panpipes. Someone was moving security into Marrakech, he told us. Fox nodded. Hosaka. After less than a dozen calls, I saw the change in Fox, a tension, a look of abstraction. I'd find him at the window, staring down fifty-three floors into the Imperial gardens, lost in something he wouldn't talk about. Ask him for a more detailed description, he, said, after one particular call. He thought a man our contact had seen entering Hiroshi's lab might be Moenner, Hosaka's leading gene man.

That was Moenner, he said, after the next call. Another call and he thought he'd identified Chedanne, who headed Hosaka's protein team. Neither had been seen outside the corporate arcology in over two years. By then it was obvious that Hosaka's leading researchers were pooling quietly in the Medina, the black executive Lears whispering into the Marrakech airport on carbon-fiber wings. Fox shook his head. He was a professional, a specialist, and he saw the sudden accumulation of all that prime Hosaka Edge in the Medina as a drastic failure in the zaibatsu's tradecraft.

Christ, he said, pouring himself a Black Label, they've got their whole bio section in there right now. One bomb. He shook his head. One grenade in the right place at the right time ... I reminded him of the saturation techniques Hosaka security was obviously employing. Hosaka had lines to the heart of the Diet, and their massive infiltration of agents into Marrakech could only be taking place with the knowledge and cooperation of the Moroccan government.

Hang it up. I said. It's over. You've sold them Hiroshi. Now forget him.

I know what it is, he said. I know. I saw it once before.

He said that there was a certain wild factor in lab work. The edge of Edge, he called it. When a researcher develops a breakthrough, others sometimes find it impossible to duplicate the first researcher's results. This was even more likely with Hiroshi, whose work went against the conceptual grain of his field. The answer, often, was to fly the breakthrough boy from lab to corporate lab for a ritual laying on of hands.

A few pointless adjustments in the equipment, and the process would work. Crazy thing, he said, nobody knows why it works that way, but it does. He grinned.

But they're taking a chance, he said. Bastards told us they wanted to isolate Hiroshi, keep him away from their central research thrust. Balls. Bet your ass there's some kind of power struggle going on in Hosaka research. Somebody big's flying his favorites in and rubbing them all over Hiroshi for luck. When Hiroshi shoots the legs out from under genetic engineering, the Medina crowd's going to be ready.

He drank his scotch and shrugged.

Go to bed, he said. You're right, it's over.

I did go to bed, but the phone woke me. Marrakech again, the white static of a satellite link, a rush of frightened Portuguese.

Hosaka didn't freeze our credit, they caused it to evaporate. Fairy gold. One minute we were millionaires in the world's hardest currency, and the next we were paupers. I woke Fox.

Sandii, he said. She sold out. Maas security turned her in Vienna. Sweet Jesus.

I watched him slit his battered suitcase apart with a Swiss Army knife. He had three gold bars glued in there with contact cement. Soft plates, each one proofed and stamped by the treasury of some extinct African government. I should've seen it, he said, his voice flat.

I said no. I think I said your name. Forget her, he said. Hosaka wants us dead. They'll assume we crossed them. Get on the phone and check our credit.

Our credit was gone. They denied that either of us had ever had an account. Haul ass, Fox said.

We ran. Out a service door, into Tokyo traffic, and down into Shinjuku. That was when I understood for the first time the real extent of Hosaka's reach.

Every door was closed. People we'd done business with for two years saw us coming, and I'd see steel shutters slam behind their eyes. We'd get out before they had a chance to reach for the phone. The surface tension of the underworld had been tripled, and everywhere we'd meet that same taut membrane and be thrown back. No chance to sink, to get out of sight.

Hosaka let us run for most of that first day. Then they sent someone to break Fox's back a second time. I didn't see them do it, but I saw him fall. We were in a Ginza department store an hour before closing, and I saw his arc off that polished mezzanine, down into all the wares of the new Asia. They missed me somehow, and I just kept running. Fox took the gold with him, but I had a hundred new yen in my pocket. I ran. All the way to the New Rose Hotel.

Now it's time.

Come with me, Sandii. Hear the neon humming on the road to Narita International. A few late moths trace stopmotion circles around the floodlights that shine on New Rose. And the funny thing, Sandii, is how sometimes you just don't seem real to me. Fox once said you were ectoplasm, a ghost called up by the extremes of economics. Ghost of the new century, congealing on a thousand beds in the world's Hyatts, the world's Hiltons.

Now I've got your gun in my hand, jacket pocket, and my hand seems so far away. Disconnected. I remember my Portuguese business friend

forgetting his English, trying to get it across in four languages I barely understood, and I thought he was telling me that the Medina was burning. Not the Medina. The brains of Hosaka's best research people. Plague, he was whispering, my businessman, plague and fever and death. Smart Fox, he put it together on the run. I didn't even have to mention finding the diskette in your bag in Germany.

Someone had reprogrammed the DNA synthesizer, he said. The thing was there for the overnight construction of just the right macromolecule. With its in-built computer and its custom software. Expensive, Sandii. But not as expensive as you turned out to be for Hosaka.

I hope you got a good price from Maas.

The diskette in my hand. Rain on the river. I knew, but I couldn't face it. I put the code for that meningial virus back into your purse and lay down beside you.

So Moenner died, along with other Hosaka researchers. Including Hiroshi. Chedanne suffered permanent brain damage.

Hiroshi hadn't worried about contamination. The proteins he punched for were harmless. So the synthesizer hummed to itself all night long building a virus to the specifications of Maas Biolabs GmbH. Maas. Small, fast, ruthless' -- All Edge.

The airport road is a long, straight shot. Keep to the shadows.

And I was shouting at that Portuguese voice, I made him tell me what happened to the girl, to Hiroshi's woman. Vanished, he said. The whir of Victorian clockwork.

So Fox had to fall, fall with his three pathetic plates of gold, and snap his spine for the last time. On the floor of a Ginza department store, every shopper staring in the instant before they screamed. I just can't hate you, baby.

And Hosaka's helicopter is back, no lights at all, hunting on infrared, feeling for body heat. A muffled whine as it turns, a kilometer away, swinging back toward us, toward New Rose. Too fast a shadow, against the glow of Narita.

It's all right, baby. Only please come here. Hold my hand.