

ONE  
MORNING  
LIKE A  
BIRD

ANDREW MILLER



SCEPTRE

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For Frieda

PART ONE

Fire Dreams

鳥

*I may live on until  
I long for this time  
In which I am so unhappy,  
And remember it fondly.*

Fujiwara No Kiyosuke

# 1

He is squatting in his room in the High City, an open book in one hand, the fingers of the other hand stretched towards the glazed blue belly of a brazier. The room is small, the old sewing room, only four and a half mats, and made even smaller by the clothes that hang from the beading along the walls, by the piled books, by the bedding still unrolled from the previous night, though it is already past seven o'clock and pitch dark outside, this last evening of the year.

It has been his room ever since he was sent to sleep there on his return from Uncle Kensuke's after the Great Earthquake. The first room he ever slept in on his own and where, in his twenty-first year – the eleventh of the Showa Era – he wrote, between the February coup attempt and the end-of-the-summer cicadas, all the poems in *Electric Dragonfly*, a miraculous season, but one that has never returned . . .

He sighs, withdraws the hand he was warming, turns the page of his book, transfers the book to the warmed hand and holds out the other to the charcoal. He is reading in French – not his beloved

Rimbaud, but a tale by André Gide he read in Professor Komada's class at Nihon – a strange romance he did not quite understand then, and which now, for entirely different reasons, he is failing to understand for a second time. For how is he to concentrate on the adventures of Gérard Lacase when so many other matters – matters that cannot simply be pushed aside – turn the words on the page into marks as meaningless as the light reflected in the panels of the drying-platform door beside him? So the young hero (who confesses to knowing *nothing* of life except through books) must set out again and again for the château of la Quartfourche while Yuji examines from every futile angle the latest and most pressing of his difficulties, the matter of his allowance, of its cessation, announced to him by Father in the garden study three days ago, no warning, no warming up, everything delivered in a kind of distracted aside, Yuji by the door, Father at his writing table, smoking and peering at the end of a bookshelf . . . Apparently, the allowance had become a burden on the household economy. There was a need to make changes, to curtail expenses. It was the new circumstances, etc. An unfortunate but necessary measure, though at twenty-five he was surely old enough, etc. He was thanked for his understanding. It was understood, of course, that he understood.

'With immediate effect?'

'From the New Year.'

'Ah.'

So now he must find ways of making up the difference, the difference being almost everything. He will have to rely on people like old Horikawa, on Hideo Makiyama, a future of hackwork like the copy he wrote in November for the West Japan Shipping Corporation. (The newest ships! The fastest routes! Niigata docks

are truly a gateway to the world!) Is this how a life goes wrong? How ambition is cut off and talent thwarted, so the fishmonger can be paid?

In the street below, too narrow for much in the way of traffic, a car is creeping towards the house. It stops beneath his window. A minute later the front entrance slides open and a voice, the sort that might emerge from the throat of a speaking bear, calls, 'Is this a house of ghosts? Where are you all?'

Yuji drops the book onto his bedding, shrugs off the blanket he has been wearing round his shoulders, stands and descends – careful on the polished wood – the steep, unlit L of the stairs.

'Grandfather!'

'Grandson!'

Yuji bows. Miyo takes the old man's cape. It's almost too heavy for her, like some huge, dark moth she has captured. Under the cape, Grandfather is wearing a kimono of slate-blue silk, an inch or two of saffron at the sleeves. Father comes in from the study. He greets Grandfather – an exchange of the slightest, most stubborn nods – then the three of them go through the Western room to the Japanese room, where, with Grandfather in the honour place, the alcove behind him, they settle onto sitting cushions. The brazier here is the largest in the house yet seems to warm only the tips of their noses, their knees and fingertips. For most of the winter the room is unused, but the Western room, with its comfortable furniture, its electric heater, would not be quite proper at New Year.

'A good trip over?' asks Father.

'A driver I've had before. He knows his way around.'

'He'll collect you later? You know you are welcome to stay . . .'

'These days I prefer to wake in my own house.'

'Mmm. I understand. And how is your health?'

'Better than yours, I expect. Books will cripple a man faster than digging in his garden ever will. Look at you. You can't even sit with a straight back.'

'Well, I shall have more time for the garden now.'

'And Noriko?'

'Noriko?'

'She's joining us?'

'I'm afraid not.'

'No? A pity.'

'Yes. A pity.'

Grandfather frowns. Father frowns and stares at the matting. On each visit the same question about Mother. On each visit the same reply. A ritual neither seems able to abandon.

The front entrance again. A voice calling its greeting.

'That'll be Kushida,' says Father, standing and going to receive him.

Yuji, left alone with Grandfather, wonders if there might be some way of hinting at the matter of his allowance, of its cessation etc, the difficulty it will cause, the sheer unfairness of it, but the old man, with his wide, wind-burnt face, looks as if he is stirring an enjoyable anger somewhere in his depths. It is not perhaps the moment.

'You haven't been out to see me for a while,' says Grandfather.

'Please excuse me . . . I've been meaning to.'

'I've made some interesting additions to the model.'

'Yes? I'll come soon.'

'You should. I'll be dead one of these days, you know.'

Father leads Dr Kushida into the room. The doctor is chaffing his hands. 'The snow at last,' he says, bowing to Grandfather.

'Started just as I was passing the botanical gardens. One minute nothing, the next . . .'

'I could smell it as I set out,' says Grandfather. 'Like iron.'

Miyo brings in a tray of red and gold cups, red and gold flasks, the festival set. Father and the doctor light cigarettes. Yuji coughs. The scroll in the alcove is a Chinese painting of two figures with packs on their backs labouring up a hill where the pine trees are bent almost double by the weight of the snow. On the shelves beside the alcove is Father's collection of antique incense burners.

'I have a new patient at the clinic,' says the doctor, combing his moustache with the tips of his fingers. 'Came in at the beginning of the week. Name of Amano. He was' – turning to Father – 'at Imperial the same time as us or, at least, there was an overlap – 1911, I think.'

'Is his case serious?' asks Father.

'I'm afraid so.'

'Mmm.'

For several minutes they discuss him, this Amano, or someone who, in 1911, might have been Amano. Was he in the rowing team? Was he the one whose elder brother died of blowfish poisoning? Or was that Maruyama?

Grandfather holds out his cup for Miyo to fill. He stares impassively through the smoky air. He does not think highly of the doctor, once describing him – to Father! – as having the looks of a Meiji petty bureaucrat, the type he'd had to deal with at the mayor's office in the days he was selling his transport interests to the city. And what can 'university talk' mean to one who was earning his rice in the wards of the Low City by the time he was twelve? The life at Imperial, the high ideas and the in-fighting, must be as strange to him as the dancing of cranes.

Haruyo appears, informs them the bath is ready. As their guest, Kushida has the fresh water, then Grandfather, Father, Yuji and finally – as Mother and Haruyo bathed in the morning – the little serving girl, Miyo. The bathroom is on the ground floor, opposite the panelled wall of the stairs where the telephone (one of three private lines in the street) is mounted. At one time the water was heated with coal, but five years ago, when everything in Father's world suggested only serene progress towards an honourable retirement, a new system was installed to heat the water electrically, a method everyone praised as clean and modern (and long overdue) but that has somehow never worked as well as the coal.

Crouching in the tepid steam, Yuji washes at the bucket, then lowers himself into the water on thin white arms. The bath is a wooden oval bound with hoops of steel, a little land-locked boat. Whenever Kushida bathes at the house, whenever Yuji has to use his water, he is sure he can smell Lysol disinfectant in the steam, just as he is sure he can smell it on his clothes for several hours after he has been up to the clinic to collect Mother's drugs. He rests his chin on the tension of the water and finds himself thinking of Amano, of poor Amano in his metal-frame bed listening to the horns of the New Year traffic, to the nurses scuffing along the polished corridors in their paper shoes. It was Monsieur Feneon, one French Club night at his house in Kanda – the discussion taking an unusually serious turn – who said that while everyone understood that everyone must die, no one was able to imagine his own death. Imagination, he told them, balked at that. But could this be true of Amano now? Must he not, as gravely ill as the doctor suggested, imagine his own end constantly? And what does he picture? His wife and children standing around him weeping or bored, and then, at last, the white cloth, which someone has been

carrying carefully folded for just this purpose, floating down to cover his face? Or is he beyond anything so obvious, so literal, and sees instead his death figured in a sequence of memory, something mysteriously retained and played like ten frames of film in a relentless loop against the inner skin of his eyelids?

Yuji slides beneath the water, lies there in a foetal hunch. Because his chest is weak, he cannot hold his breath for long. He listens to the world played through the water, to the muffled drumming of his heart. A poet, even one who has not written in almost two years (who poetry has abandoned as mysteriously, as abruptly, as it arrived), has a duty to imagine what imagination balks at, but the best he can achieve before the air in his lungs starts to burn is something indistinct and swirling, a patch of brightness disappearing into the general dark, like a coin sinking to the bottom of a pond, or the moon through blown clouds, or a head, a face white as a mask, peering through smoke . . .

He surfaces. Whoops for breath.

After the baths, more sake. Grandfather has brought with him a bottle tapped from the cask he receives each year from a business associate who retired up in Iwate. Miyo and Haruyo bring through trays of food – clear soup, steamed yellowtail, deep-fried tofu, pickles and rice. At half past eleven the dishes are cleared, and everyone, with the exception of Mother who goes nowhere, and Haruyo, who goes nowhere with her, prepares to leave for the shrine.

Of the men, only Grandfather is wearing a kimono. Father and the doctor are identical in suits, sack coats and homburgs. Yuji is in a woollen jacket, and a coat that looks, from a distance, as if it

might be made of camel hair, like Monsieur Feneon's. Miyo, thin as young bamboo, has on her usual kimono of dark blue stripes on grey, a black jacket, a grey shawl, colours appropriate to her station, and ones that will not offend those guardians, official and unofficial, of the new austerity, among whom Haruyo it seems now numbers herself, for she has already made the girl wipe off the smear of lipstick she had put on, and would have forced her to remove the comb from her hair, the tortoiseshell one with moonstones Mother gave her last summer for her fourteenth birthday, if Father had not spoken up for her. ('No one will notice such a trifle.')

In the front garden, those five yards between the porch and the street, the snow is already ankle-deep. It lies like laundry in the arms of the persimmon tree outside Mother's window, and like a perfect scoop of sugar on the saddle of Yuji's bicycle, which he has left propped against the fence. They gather in the street, adjust hats and scarves, put up their umbrellas. On the gate of the neighbouring house a lantern is burning beside the coil of sacred rope, and on the pavement below two sets of footprints are filling with fresh snow.

Grandfather gestures to the flag that drifts and snaps from a nail in the pillar of the gate. 'Is that a decoration,' he asks, 'or is the boy still away?'

'Saburo?' asks Yuji. 'He's not expected back for months.'

'So the wife lives alone with the old woman? That can't be much fun for her.'

'Three more flags in this street alone since the fighting at Changsha,' says Father. 'Half the city must be over there by now.'

'Well,' says Kushida, buttoning a glove, 'not every young man needs to worry about that.' He glances at Yuji. Yuji bobs his head.

Father mutters something. Grandfather grunts but says nothing. They start to walk.

Halfway to the shrine, they hear the first bell, the first deep note of the hundred and eight. Moments later the air is a solemn confusion of bell answering bell across the widths of the city.

A voice cries, 'The Year of the Dragon!' Neighbours flit past – Mr and Mrs Itaki, Kiyama the wedding photographer, the Ozonos. Then out of the veils of snow directly in front of them appears Father's old assistant, Tozaburo Segoshi, with his wife and two gangling teenage daughters at his side, the same Segoshi who rose through the law department at Imperial by clinging to Father's bootlaces, who has made a career for himself by filling out the margins of Father's work. Seeing Father, he stops mid-stride, emits a mew of embarrassment, and hurries off at such a pace his women, hobbled by the tight skirts of their kimonos, can barely keep up with him. Even a year ago he would have stopped and bowed profoundly. He would have waited for Father to pass. He would have been honoured.

At the shrine, they join the back of the crowd and shuffle through the churned snow between big yellow lanterns. Ahead of them, muffled handclaps summon the *kami*. The snow is lighter now, and as the last flakes fall the air turns sweet with the steam from the hot sake the priests and shrine-virgins are ladling from cauldrons big as baths. Grandfather gives Miyo a pair of coins to make her offering and buy herself a trinket at one of the stalls lining the path. Yuji waits, considering whether he too might be given something. And then the thought strikes him – if Father one day mused aloud, however obscurely, about the difficulty of managing without his salary from the university, of living on his

savings, could it even have been *Grandfather* who suggested the allowance be scrapped?

He hangs back, slips away, climbs onto a stone by one of the vermilion gates and looks out over army caps and student caps, over shawls and scarves and the bright lacquer of women's hair. He is hoping for a moment of casual good fortune, and that out of all this crowd he will spy Kyoko Kitamura, whose footprints were one of the sets leading through the snow from the neighbours' gate. His plan – a plan that never varies – is to catch her attention without, at the same time, being discovered by the old woman. If he succeeds, then Kyoko, supposing she is in an indulgent mood (and why should she not be on New Year's Eve?), might find some way to join him for a minute, perhaps share a baked sweet potato with him in the shadow of a camphor tree. But if the old woman sees him, then the game is up, and not out of any unusual zeal on her part to keep her grandson's wife guarded, but because she cannot forgive Yuji for living a safe and idle life while Saburo, only child of her only son, risks everything. She has a photograph of Saburo, a big one she keeps beside the god-shelf and which, one morning, she invited Yuji to admire and be shamed by. A picture taken in a studio in Nanking, Saburo in a winter coat with fur collar (non-standard issue), his left shoulder turned to the camera to show off his acting corporal's chevron. A handsome soldier, the sort schoolgirls develop squints knitting mittens for. And should something happen to him – a not unlikely prospect, as everyone knows the casualty lists are far longer than those names inscribed each year in the Yaskuni shrine – then it seems certain the old woman, in her grief, her rage, will denounce Yuji as a coward, accuse him in front of Itaki the tobacconist, Otaki the noodle-seller, Ozono the brush-maker, in front of the whole street. For

what would restrain her? Is it not true that these days the Takano family can be insulted at will?

Someone is calling him. He turns, scans, sees at last, in the light of a kite stall, the Miyazaki brothers, Taro and Junzo, waving to him. He waves back, pushes through to them. They exchange their New Year greetings, first in their own tongue, then, more quietly, as fellow members of the club, in French.

‘Your people here?’ asks Taro.

‘Somewhere,’ says Yuji.

‘Ours too,’ says Taro. ‘Somewhere.’

‘Have you noticed,’ says Junzo, leaning and speaking in a stage whisper, ‘how the priests all look a bit Chinese this year? And there’s a definite smell of garlic about the place. Shouldn’t we, as respectable citizens, report them to the *Tokko*?’

Taro punches his brother’s shoulder. He’s grinning but there’s no amusement in his eyes. ‘Little brother’s had a few,’ he says.

Yuji nods, looks from one to the other – from Junzo, with his hair poking in tufts from under his student cap, a yellow scarf wound round his neck and trailing almost to the ground, to Taro, who, in his new hat, his new coat (a ministry pin on the lapel like a drop of spilt silver), is as neat as the menswear poster outside the Shirokiya department store. There’s a second of silence between them, then, as though to cover an unexpected awkwardness, they start, in hurried voices, to speak about the French Club’s year-forgetting party at the Feneons’, and laugh, all three genuinely amused this time, at the recollection of Junzo’s barking competition with Feneon’s pug, and how at the end of it, Alissa Feneon awarded Junzo the prize, a mock diploma torn from the back page of a newspaper, an advertisement – aimed, presumably, at the families of military men – for a kind of indestructable Rayon sock.

When the laughter stops, Yuji says, 'I've had some bad news.'  
'Your father?' begins Taro, cautiously.

'No, no . . .'

'You mean,' says Junzo, 'someone's given you a job?'

'I mean I shall need to find one now.'

'So, it's the allowance,' says Taro.

Yuji nods.

'A cut?'

'Worse.'

'All of it?'

Yuji nods again, then finds, suddenly, he does not want to discuss the matter at all, that there's a tightness in his throat, a bubble that threatens to swell into a sob. If he was to stand in front of the Miyazakis blubbing, the shame of it would burn for months . . .

He is saved by drums, by lights. The priests and their assistants, illuminated by the brilliant-white cones of two searchlights, are processing up the steps of the hall of worship. Afterwards, the 'Navy March' is played through speakers slung from wires between the trees. The friends agree to meet at Watanabe's bath-house as soon as the holidays are over, then Yuji enters the crowd again, moves through its shifting labyrinth until Mrs Sakaguchi, mad for gossip about his embarrassing parents, tugs at his sleeve as he passes the purification trough. He backs away from her, apologising and bowing, then follows a side path out of the shrine precincts and onto the road to the cemetery.

He has given up the hunt for Kyoko (did he really expect to find her?) but is in no mood to be at home, sitting in the cold and perhaps having to listen to more reminiscences about the old days at Imperial. In a few minutes he is alone, walking through the

lanes of a neighbourhood almost untouched by earthquake and fire – or as untouched as anywhere in this city of disasters. A secretive place where the mouth of an alley, a pair of wooden sandals propped on a verandah, the snow-covered slats of a dog-fence, float uncertainly in the light from tightly latticed windows. At night almost anyone can become lost in such a neighbourhood, but Yuji, preoccupied by an unhappiness almost indistinguishable from a certain type of boredom, navigates with an unconsidered sureness of step until a subtle chilling of the air warns him he is only a turn or two from the cemetery. He does not believe in ghosts and yet, somehow, this does not stop him from being afraid of them. He slows his pace, imagining them roused by drums and gongs, gathering at the cemetery gates (rustling together like the wings of insects) and waiting for some foolish young emissary of the living to pass close by.

And it is then, just as he is considering turning back towards the holiday crowds, that he sees two figures appear, palely, from the dark at the end of the street. He steps under the eaves of the nearest house, presses himself against the shutters, but already he can tell that the figures are men, not spirits, and pale only because, other than for loincloths and headbands, they are both naked. They are running, hopping over the snow, though their progress is pitifully slow. As they come closer, he hears their little yelps of pain and self-encouragement, and as they draw level with him, he sees how their skin glitters with ice like fish scales. Shrine runners. Middle-aged penitents hoping to earn a year of better luck by dousing themselves with buckets of bitter-cold water at every shrine they stagger into. Clenched teeth, clenched buttocks, they do not even glance at Yuji as they pass, though he is no longer hiding from them. If Junzo and Taro were with him, he

might have found the scene absurd, would, perhaps, have slyly laughed, but on his own he simply watches them as they disappear into the bend of the street, stares after them, enviously, as if these men had found a form (forget how mad it looks) that answered whatever urgencies provoked them. If he was to strip now and bundle his clothes, would they object to him hopping over the snow at their backs? It would almost certainly kill him, but no one – not Father or even the old woman – would dare to call him frivolous. How amazed they would be to see him return to the shrine in nothing but his underwear! To hear him hollering to the *kami* as the well water broke over his head!

It's two o'clock before he is in his own neighbourhood again, cold and hungry. He would like to warm himself with a bowl of steaming noodles, and wonders if Otaki, in festival humour, might still be open, but the shop is shut and shuttered, a tongue of snowless pavement outside where the dregs of the broth have been poured away. On the Kitamura Gate the flame is out. He watches a while, his ears stinging with the cold, then goes into his own house, slides the door and stands on the beaten earth of the vestibule listening for voices. A glow in the panel above the doors to Mother's room is enough for him to see Father's boots beside the vestibule step, and the shadow of Miyo asleep under her quilt on the mats at the bottom of the stairs, an arrow charm from the shrine next to her pillow.

He goes to the kitchen, eats a mouthful of congealing rice, washes it down with a cup of water. When he's finished, he steps over Miyo and climbs towards his room. At the turn of the stairs, his toes touch the shaped hard edge of something, and though the turn is the darkest place he knows, as he reaches down, that it's the old talisman of the seven gods that Mother leaves out – with

her own hands or Haruyo's – for him to slip beneath his bolster and so enter the New Year with propitious dreams of eagles, sacred mountains . . .

He carries it to his room, pulls off his jacket and tie but nothing else, then gropes his way into the bedding, curls up and lies gazing at the blue snow-light in the glass of the drying-platform door. The shrine runners run through his head, feebly glittering figures always a step or two from disappearing into the night. In reverie they gain strange identities. Father and Dr Kushida. Junzo and Taro. Himself and Ryuichi. Himself and Saburo. Staggering over the snow, hopping over the snow . . .

Then out of the small-hours hush he hears, faintly from some neighbouring house, the sound of piano music on a wireless. The Schumann piece, perhaps, everyone pretends to like so much. Then it ends, or the dial is turned, and something else begins, the simple notes of a koto playing a song he remembers from earliest boyhood, 'The Boatman's Song', a sentimental, empty-headed little ditty, and to his own cold fingertips he starts to whisper the old words: 'I am dead grass on the riverbank. You are dead grass too.'

## 2

**D**espite the seven gods his sleep is dreamless. He lies in to some unseemly hour (as young boys, he and Ryuichi were always up at dawn on New Year's Day), and in the afternoon plays flower cards with Miyo in the Western room, now and then looking up to watch Father in the garden brushing snow from the delicate plants, unburdening them. Miyo, who excels at flower cards, wins fifty sen and insists on being paid immediately. He pays her, wondering if she has a little purse hidden somewhere, a purse of little coins, perhaps under the house.

At twilight he goes upstairs and onto the platform. With his back to one of the drying posts he gazes over snow-heaped roofs to where a red neon sign for Jintan Pills winks blearily from its gantry in the Low City. He likes sometimes to imagine it's sending him a message, a warning, an invitation, something meaningful, but today it is simply, 'Jintan Pills, Jintan Pills, Jintan Pills . . .'

From the gardens he hears the collar bell of Kyoko's cat. He leans over the parapet and sees its shadow spring from the fence

and glide under the bare branches of the ginkgo tree. The animal is pregnant and seems to have made a nest for herself in the bamboo that grows in a screen round the garden privy. No way of knowing, of course, which of the local toms has been with her.