

‘Very beautiful, very honest and very good.’

‘This is a special one.’

‘If you like books, you’ll love this one.’

‘A love letter to reading . . . Cosy, cute and healing.’

‘A memoir that goes down like a novel.’

‘Fascinating . . . Both quirky and captivating.’

‘A beautiful, thought-provoking memoir that
will stick with me.’

‘I found it really hard to put down and could
have easily finished it in one sitting.’

‘It’s even better than “healing fiction”
because it’s not fiction.’

‘This book made my heart sing.’

‘This was SO GOOD!’

‘I can’t recommend it enough.’

‘Fantastic . . . I looked up most of the books she
recommended.’

‘Understated, entertaining and beautifully
narrated . . . Stunning.’

‘A real hidden gem.’

‘I’m all for books that lead you to more books.’

THE BOOKSHOP WOMAN

NANAKO HANADA

TRANSLATED BY CAT ANDERSON

brazen

LBRIS

We know
books

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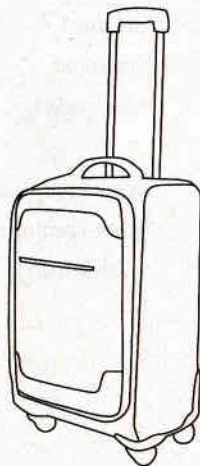
PROLOGUE

JANUARY 2013, MIDNIGHT, ROCK BOTTOM

I'm sitting alone in a family restaurant on the outskirts of Yokohama, numbly waiting for 2am. At times like these, I can't even bring myself to open a book. On the chair next to me is the suitcase I've been taking to work, into which I've stuffed the clothes I need for the foreseeable future, plus a few other necessities. For a week now, I've been homeless.

Tonight I'm planning to stay at a nearby super sento, one of those big public bathhouses with plenty of facilities where you can sleep in a lounge chair. It costs extra if you stay more than six hours, though, which makes things awkward: to keep the cost down to three thousand yen, I have to check in after two in the morning. I've been choosing my accommodation based on whether I need to get a good night's sleep, do my laundry or really economise. Depending on the priority, I stay in a cheap room somewhere, a super sento or a capsule hotel.

Every day, once evening comes, I have to start looking for somewhere to spend the night. Living this way is wearying.



It drains me to see my hard-earned money disappear on accommodation each day. How long can I keep this up?

‘We can’t go on living together like nothing’s happened. Tomorrow I’m going to work, and I won’t be coming home.’ So I said to my husband a week ago, before I left our flat. I had nowhere in particular to go, no ideas about what to do next. And I hadn’t left hoping it would change the way he felt, either.

I sip my coffee, which is now stone cold, and churn things over in my mind. As miserable as this way of life is, I’m still undecided about what to do and I’m nowhere near wanting to return to our shared home. *I’ll probably never go back*, I think. No. It’s time to look for a new place. I’ll live by myself, and get my life back on track.

I wonder whether people will pity me because my marriage has broken down. I don’t want that. If I let it become part of my identity, it’ll turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy, and I’ll only end up making myself feel worse and worse. I don’t want to spend my life feeling sorry for myself.

Until now, however, I’ve always spent my days off with my husband. If I’m on my own, what will I do with my free time? I’m the manager of a branch of Village Vanguard, one of a chain of shops selling books and assorted knick-knacks. Maybe it’s because of my work, but my only hobbies are reading and visiting bookshops – of course I have no friends to spend my time off with. *My life is so lacking. I have nothing of my own.*

My life is so lacking... I feel like I want to see things I’ve never seen before. To put myself out there, become a new me, a happy me.

In the end, that mentally exhausting period of homelessness didn’t last very long. Before too long, I talked it over with my husband and we decided to give up the lease on our flat and go our separate ways. He left first. I found myself a cramped flat on the edge of the Tokyo sprawl, ten minutes’ walk from Yokohama Station and close to work.

The oversized fridge that we’d bought when we got married dominated my tiny one-person kitchen. The view from my window was new and unfamiliar, but I still couldn’t get excited about it. Cars streamed past endlessly on the main road outside. I would gaze at them vacantly and tell myself that things were going to get better soon, that the needle of my life was going to swing from negative back to zero – a fresh start.

*

It was just after the move that I found out about an intriguing people-matching site that I’ll call ‘PerfectStrangers’. I’d been skimming through a new book by a young social entrepreneur when something caught my eye. The author was discussing a new generation of online services, and among them was one that bore the tagline ‘Spend just half an hour chatting to someone new.’

I knew straight away that this might be what I needed. I put down the book and reached for my phone.

*

PerfectStrangers required you to create an account, and to verify your identity using Facebook before you could log in. I'd never felt up to using social media and had avoided joining anything until now, so first I'd have to sort out an account with this Facebook thing.

Account registration, profile setup, verification, more account registration, more profile setup . . . After a lengthy process, I was finally able to browse the matching site. Staring back at me was a huge array of faces, headshot after headshot, each accompanied by a brief comment, such as 'Happy to talk jobs, hobbies or whatever you like. Let's chat!' or 'Hoping to exchange info with people who've started their own business, or are thinking about it.' And these people were inviting me to meet them – on such and such a day, at such and such a time, in Shibuya, in Shinjuku – 'Looking forward to talking to you!'

What on earth is this? I thought. I'd never seen anything like it.

It definitely resembled a dating site, but it didn't seem too iffy, maybe because it wasn't just aimed at meeting members of the opposite sex for romance. It looked quite upmarket, even – very different from my mental image of this kind of thing. Students, older gents, beautiful young women who looked like secretaries, salarymen, people who seemed like they'd probably ride round

the city on expensive bicycles . . . They were all on this site, and they all existed out there somewhere in real life.

So, if I wanted to, I could meet any one of them in person? It sounded pretty incredible. But when I browsed the faces again wondering who to pick, it was harder than I'd expected. People who didn't have any particular hook in their profiles, who just said they were happy to talk about anything, failed to pique my interest. I was more inclined to meet the people who had some specific talking point, something you'd think might be hard to get excited about – the profiles that said things like 'I want to talk about love!' or 'I'm researching the brain!'

With this in mind, what would I write in my own profile? I could play it safe with something like 'My hobby is reading' or 'I'd like to talk about books.' But on this site it felt like that would leave such a non-impression, it would amount to writing nothing at all.

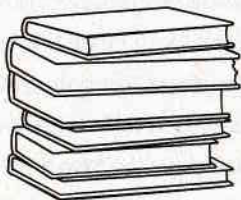
Wait. What about . . . ?

An idea popped into my head, but I quickly dismissed it. *You can't try that with people you've only just met. It's too out there. You've never done anything like that before.*

And yet it wouldn't matter if I failed. Even if I couldn't deliver what I promised, it would only result in a little disappointment for people. And it was better than nothing.

After much deliberation, I edited my profile and hit 'Save'. It now read: 'I'm the manager of a very unusual bookshop. I have access to a huge database of over ten thousand books, and I'll recommend the one that's perfect for you.'

I still wasn't sure if this was a good idea. But there it was. And so, armed with only an untested idea for a weapon, I ventured out onto the mysterious matching site. My journey had begun.



CHAPTER 1

TOKYO IS AN OPEN DOOR

‘Ah, you must be Nanako?’ the tall man said as soon as he entered the café. He looked like he was in his early forties, and had a calmer, more relaxed vibe than I was expecting.

‘I’m Tsuchiya. Nice to meet you,’ he said as he sat down in front of me, cool and collected. ‘Have you already ordered something to drink? I come here a lot; they do very good cheesecake. Would you like to try some? Go on, it really is delicious – let me treat you to a piece.’

It was an occasion worth commemorating. My encounter with Tsuchiya, my very first PerfectStrangers match.

*

After I'd registered my profile on PerfectStrangers, I perused the site until I understood how it worked. It looked like there were two ways to meet someone. You set a time and approximate location (say, 5pm on such and such a day, in Shibuya), added a short comment (‘Looking forward to a great chat!’) and then posted it on the site. This was known as ‘listing a chat’.

Logged-in users could view these listings on a notice board, and if they wanted to meet you, they could reply to your post by clicking 'Respond'. If you received multiple responses, you sifted through them and picked the person you most wanted to meet. If you didn't feel like meeting any of them, you could decline them all and cancel the listing. And if you didn't get any responses, of course, your meeting would just fall through. So in order to meet someone, you had to either list a chat and wait for someone to respond, or respond to someone else's listing.

Just making a profile wasn't enough to set things in motion. The more I browsed the site, the more I understood that, unlike Facebook or Twitter, there was no fun in just browsing. All you could really do was 'like' the intriguing people at the top of the popularity rankings, or go through and tag all your interests – *#reading*, *#travel* and so on – and then check out people with the same tags as you.

I looked at the current listings by those who were seeking someone to meet. They were offering meetings at a whole range of different times, yet lots of them hadn't had a single response, their posts going unanswered. What if no one responded to mine either? That would be sad, embarrassing. Or what if I only got responses from weirdos? I dithered, unable to muster the resolve to set up my own meeting.

Just then, I got an alert from Facebook Messenger. I didn't recognise the sender.

'Hello! 🙋 I'm Tsuchiya,' began the message, complete with friendly waving emoji. 'I work in advertising. I saw you on

PerfectStrangers and thought I'd message. I see you're new – nice to make your acquaintance! I'm not an expert, but if you need any help using the site, just ask. ☆'

I had mixed feelings. I was partly reassured by the appearance of this kind stranger, but also a little suspicious as to why he had contacted me out of the blue.

'Thank you for the offer. How did you find me, though?' I replied.

'Do you mean how I found you on Facebook? 🙋' came the reply, accompanied by another emoji – this one looking slightly sheepish, I thought. The message continued, 'User profiles on PerfectStrangers have little Facebook and Twitter icons at the bottom. You can click them to see the user's Facebook or Twitter feed. If you get a response from someone you think might be dodgy, you should check out their social media – it can be good to see where they work and find out a bit more about them. You can tell more about what they're like from their posts and tweets, too.'

'Also, people who've just signed up to PerfectStrangers and users who're currently online are displayed as featured users. Down at the bottom. Can you see that?'

It was pretty forward of him to message me like this, but at least he seemed friendly.

'Oh yes, I see it . . . Thanks for your help. It's all new to me,' I replied.

'Are you planning to list a chat? Or just looking around for now?' he asked.