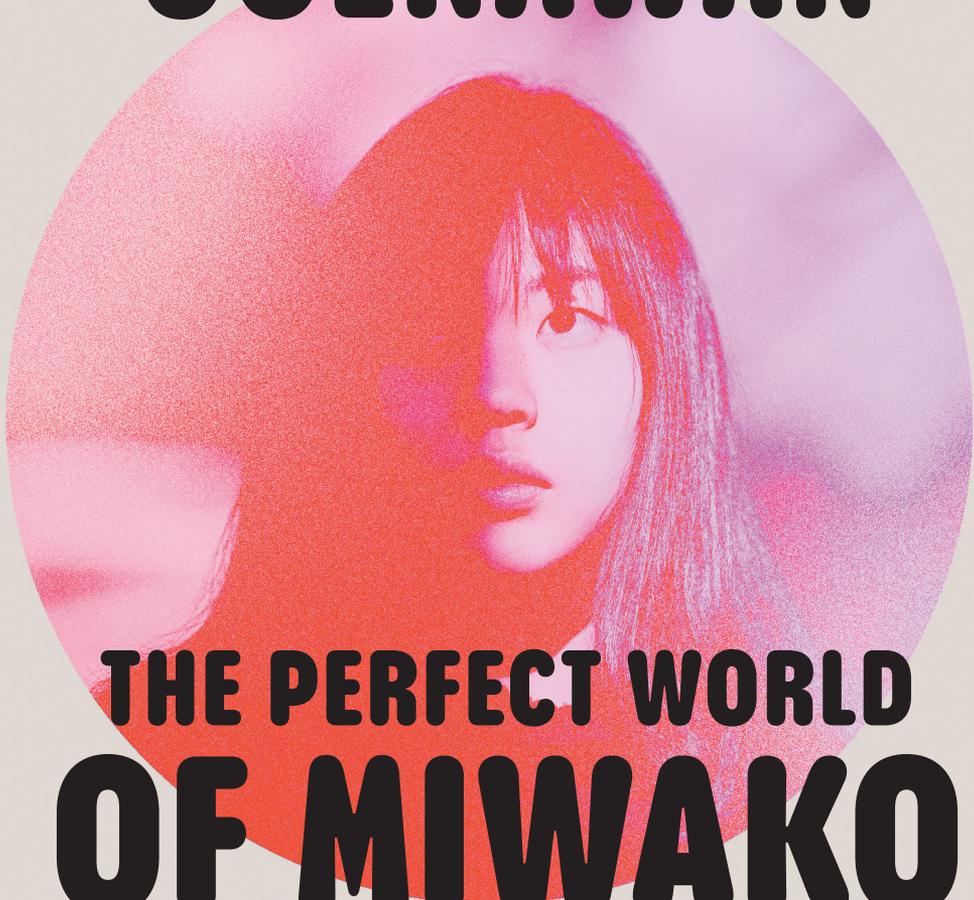


CLARISSA
GOENAWAN

SCRIBE



THE PERFECT WORLD
OF MIWAKO
SUMIDA

'Vivid and intriguing — an elegantly cryptic, poetically plotted Murakami-esque whydunit.' **Sharlene Teo, author of *Ponti***

PROLOGUE

Ryusei and Chie returned to the pathway. Tall grass had given way to dense trees, so close together they almost blocked out the sun. Some of their leaves had fallen, covering the dark mossy ground. Tiny white mushrooms were scattered around their roots. The sound of trickling water had faded away, but every once in a while, a bird chirped in the distance. Amidst this endless wave of trees, it seemed as if they were the only two people left in the world.

“Do you think this is where Miwako hanged herself?” Ryusei asked.

Chie stopped walking. The question sparked a series of troubling thoughts. *Had* Miwako died here? Now that the thought was planted in her mind, the mountain felt anything but peaceful.

She could almost hear the forest spirit calling her, beckoning her to join souls with it, just as Miwako had, to remain here forever.

Stay here, so you can be free. You no longer need to carry this burden.

PART ONE
RYUSEI YANAGI

Before I knew it had happened, I'd fallen in love with Miwako Sumida.

Whenever I was on campus, my eyes unconsciously sought her out. I constantly watched where she went, what she did, what she wore. How she tied her long hair back and adjusted her glasses. When Miwako read, she would tilt her head, resting it on her slim fingers as if it were too heavy. She always looked like she was daydreaming.

One afternoon, she took the seat next to me in the library. I kept my eyes on my book, but she was so close I caught a whiff of her shampoo. The sweet scent of summer strawberries, ripe and bursting with flavor.

Eight months later, Miwako Sumida hanged herself.

But I wouldn't let her death slip past me. She'd wanted to tell me something, and I had to find out what it was.

1

Like a Long-Lost Friend

March 15th, 1989

I met Miwako Sumida at a *goukon* organized by Toshi, a friend of mine.

I had never been interested in group dates. They were desperate measures for desperate people, but Toshi *was* desperate. He'd been trying to gain the attention of a pretty, short-haired girl in his swimming club. I didn't want to ruin his excitement, but the girl had probably agreed to come because Jin—our other friend, popular and a total charmer—would be there. Toshi and I had been hanging out since our first year at Waseda, so I felt obliged to participate.

The *goukon* was scheduled for noon at a family restaurant near our campus. At a quarter past twelve, the girls were still nowhere to be seen. We ordered milkshakes and continued to wait, listening to Oricon singles from the restaurant's only speaker.

"Are you sure those girls haven't ditched us?" Jin teased Toshi.

"Don't say that; they're just late." Toshi tapped his fingers on the table. "They'll be here any second."

"No matter what, you're picking up the tab like you promised. We'll give them another five minutes before we order food."

“Shut up.”

Yawning, I gazed out the window. Wet leaves sparkled in the bright sunlight. It had poured yesterday afternoon and all night, but the rain had stopped right when I'd left the house that morning. The scent of fresh soil lingered, mixed with the fragrance of plum blossoms.

Suddenly, Toshi stood and waved. I turned toward the door and saw three girls walking toward our table.

The one in front was the beautiful freshman Toshi was after, and the two girls behind her were a study in opposites. One had long, silky black hair and a serious expression behind a pair of old-fashioned thick-rimmed glasses. The other was glamorous, with bleached, permed hair and a body-hugging dress that emphasized her curves. The blonde was one-hundred percent Jin's type, so I knew I'd be expected to make conversation with the glasses girl.

Before anyone else could say a word, Jin spoke.

“I can't believe you're here, Sumida,” he said.

The girl with the glasses gave him a thin smile. “Me neither. I'd never have guessed I'd see you again. I'm surprised you remember my name.”

Jin chuckled. “Come on, my memory isn't that bad.”

“You know each other?” Toshi asked.

“We were high school classmates,” Jin said quickly. “Apologies. I've done things in the wrong order, haven't I? Please, ladies, take a seat, and then we can do the introductions.”

The three of them made themselves comfortable on the long sofa. The pretty girl was named Sachiko Hayami, the stylish one was Chie Ohno, and the one with the glasses was Miwako Sumida.

“Sachiko, Chie, and Miwako,” Toshi repeated. “Do you mind if we use first names?”

“Of course not,” Chie said in a cheerful tone. She was so

friendly, probably one of those girls everyone had an easy time getting along with.

Toshi ordered some light snacks, and we made the usual collegiate conversation. What are you studying? Oh, interesting. Are you in any clubs? I've been thinking of checking that one out. What about you, Ryusei? Any fun hobbies? Oh, me too. I listen to the radio all the time. Music, mostly. I have pretty eclectic taste. Wow, people have said that about me too! Have you seen any good movies recently? What did you think of it? Wait, don't tell me the ending. I haven't watched it yet.

As the exchange went on, I became fascinated by how different these girls were. Sachiko and Chie were chatty, while Miwako gave cursory answers to everything anyone asked her, like she didn't want to be there. Then again, I too was only there to pad the numbers.

After a while, it became obvious that Miwako *really* didn't want to be there. She wouldn't stop looking at her watch, which seemed too big for her thin wrist. As expected, Sachiko was more interested in Jin than Toshi. But what piqued my interest was the tension between Jin and Miwako. He seemed overly conscious of her, glancing at her every now and then before averting his eyes. She, on the other hand, openly stared at him whenever he looked at her.

When the girls excused themselves to go to the washroom, Toshi wasted no time in grilling Jin.

"You've gone on a date with Miwako, haven't you?" he asked.

Not bad for Toshi. He was surprisingly sharp that day.

Jin slurped his chocolate milkshake. "No way. She's not my type."

"I don't believe you. She kept looking at you."

"Glaring, you mean?" said Jin, laughing. "If you must know, we

do have an unpleasant history. I'm not going to be the one to spill it, so don't bother asking." He lowered his voice. "But the other girl, Chie. She's hot."

"Yeah, and nice, too." Toshi seemed to have forgotten his question. "So you're going for her? Ryusei, I think you'd do well with the—"

"The mature type," Jin said. "You prefer older girls, don't you?"

"I've never said that," I said, stirring my drink with a straw.

"Look," Jin said. "Just go along with it unless you've got a violent objection."

I didn't respond. Even without them suggesting it, I would have chosen Miwako over the other two. She seemed sensible. A girl like her wouldn't expect too much from a setting like this. Regardless of whom I ended up talking to, we would probably go to karaoke together as a group, exchange numbers out of courtesy, and part ways, never to see each other again. She would forget me, and I would forget her. That was all.

But when it came to Miwako Sumida, nothing was as I expected.

AS PREDICTED, AFTER WE finished lunch, Toshi announced we would be heading to a nearby karaoke joint.

Miwako sighed. "How long will this take?"

Chie twisted her hair around her finger. "Two to three hours at most?"

"I'm going to take my leave. I don't like singing in front of people, and I need to go to the bookstore."

"But we'll be short one girl!" Sachiko protested.

I stood. "Don't worry, I'll go with her. I have to pick up a book too."

Jin snickered. "How convenient."

"Any violent objections?" I asked, parroting him.

He flashed me a smug smile. “No objections. All good. We’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Miwako, are you okay with that?” Chie asked.

“Why not?” she said, grabbing her bag.

The two of us left the restaurant together, Miwako walking in front while I followed a few steps behind. After we were a couple blocks from the restaurant, she stopped and turned to me.

“Ryusei Yanagi, isn’t it? You can stop trailing me now.”

I was impressed she’d remembered my full name after only hearing it once.

“We’ve walked far enough. Your friends won’t notice if we go our separate ways now.” She added, “Unless you want to exchange numbers, in which case I’m not interested.”

I decided to humor her. “Me neither. I actually just want to go to the bookstore.”

She furrowed her brow. “Fine, but don’t be a bother.”

“If you feel that uncomfortable being seen with me in public, we can pretend not to know each other.”

“I didn’t say that, but the place I’m heading to is a little rundown. You might not like it.”

I didn’t respond, even though I knew exactly where she planned to go based on where we were walking.

An old man named Ikeda owned a small secondhand bookshop around the corner. Screw holes marked the place where the shop signboard should have hung. The placard had fallen down a long time ago, and he had never bothered to fix it. Regulars simply called the place Ikeda Bookshop, and I’d frequented it since high school.

At the front of the shop, the old man stacked his newer stock, forming book towers that threatened to topple at any moment. Inside, wooden shelves and crates crammed with yellowing

paperbacks and hardcovers stood close to each other. Two adults wouldn't be able to walk side-by-side between the shelves at the same time, and the whole shop had the comforting smell of old paper.

Ikeda stored even more books at his house. If I wanted a particular title, I only needed to tell him. The next time I showed up, the book would be waiting at the counter like a long-lost friend.

Somehow, Ikeda Bookshop stocked only books in English. According to rumors, Ikeda used to be a rag-and-bone man and had stumbled upon a vacation home in Azabu owned by a British lord. The nobleman had passed away, leaving an enormous collection of English books and no heir to claim them. Old man Ikeda had struck a good deal with the caretaker, buying up the entire library.

The story sounded like something a regular had made up on the spot for a friend they'd brought to the place, but it was also somewhat plausible. How else could old man Ikeda have gotten his hands on such an extensive collection?

Miwako peered into the shop. "Excuse me."

"Yes?" Old man Ikeda appeared from between the shelves and adjusted his thick circular glasses. "Ah, it's you," he murmured. "Give me a minute."

Dragging his feet, he pushed a stool and climbed it to retrieve a book from a wooden crate atop a shelf. After that, he went behind the counter and returned with another book. I always enjoyed watching him pull out books. Despite the chaos, he knew exactly where every title was located.

"The one you asked for," he said, handing a book to Miwako and another to me.

Miwako had a novel with an upper-class European lady and a well-dressed aristocratic gentleman on the cover, while I had requested Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

“I owe you an apology,” Miwako said after we left the shop. “I thought you were making it up. You know, about wanting to visit the store.”

I laughed. “Why is that? Do I seem like I don’t read?”

“Yes,” she said without skipping a beat. “You seem pretty frivolous to me.”

“Frivolous?” I turned to her, taken aback by her frankness. “Really?”

“Do you go there often?” she asked, ignoring my remark.

“Once or twice a week, at least,” I said. “It’s a nice place. You never know what you’ll come across. They have quite a few gems.”

I recalled the favorites I’d collected there over the years—an illustrated copy of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, an autographed copy of *Fahrenheit 451*, and the original 1966 edition of *Flowers for Algernon*, all prominently displayed on my bookshelf. Each time I pulled one down, it brought me back to the day I’d stumbled upon it inside a wooden crate.

Outside of the classics, I sometimes picked one or two titles I’d never heard of that seemed interesting. More often than not, I found myself well rewarded.

“You know that satisfaction you get when you come across something really good? It’s almost like treasure hunting. I could spend hours doing that there,” I continued.

“Did you want to stay longer?” Miwako asked. “Sorry, I didn’t know.”

“No, it’s all right. I go there all the time.”

She glanced at the book in my hand. “What did you buy?”

I showed her the cover.

“What’s it about?” she asked.

“A handsome young man preserves his beauty by selling his soul to the darkness. Instead of him aging, his portrait does. And

every time he does something terrible, the painting becomes more hideous and twisted.”

“That sounds awful.” She turned to me. “Why would you pick a book like that?”

“Well, why not?” I said, unsure what to say. “What about you? Did you buy that romance book because you have dreams of being a runaway princess?”

For the first time, she struggled to come up with an answer. We both went quiet, and I started counting the number of steps we took.

When we reached twenty-seven, a ping shattered the silence. Two steps later, a bicycle shot by, splashing dirty water from a puddle onto my pants. Luckily, they were a fairly dark wash. I looked around for the offending cyclist, but he had already disappeared into the crowd. Somehow, we had already arrived at the metro station.

“Are you taking the train too?” Miwako asked.

“No, just walking you here,” I said. Though I had no idea why.

She stared straight at me. “But you’re not going to ask for my number.”

I nodded and smiled. “That’s right.”

“Then give me yours,” she said, taking out a notebook and a pen. “Let’s go to Ikeda Bookshop again. Next time, we’ll take our time browsing.” She paused for a moment. “Unless you prefer going there by yourself?”

While I did always go to Ikeda Bookshop alone, a change might be nice. “No, of course not. I’d love to go with you.”

As I watched Miwako enter the station, I wondered if she would ever call.

Just a few days after that initial walk, Miwako and I returned to the Ikeda Bookshop. This time we stayed for several hours, until

closing. Almost every week after that, one of us would ask the other to go together. Ikeda Bookshop became our weekly Thursday affair, and eventually, I caught myself looking forward to it soon after the last Thursday had passed.

Since freshman year, I'd spent a lot of time at the university library. Apparently, so had Miwako, though prior to the goukon, I'd never noticed her there. After getting to know her, I began to look for her at the library. Whenever I saw her, I chose a seat at the same table.

We didn't talk much, but I enjoyed quietly stealing glances at her, watching her read. She always tilted her head slightly, resting it on her left hand and caressing the corner of the page with her right thumb and forefinger. She had long, slim fingers, and the way she handled books was so gentle. From time to time, she would adjust her glasses and push her silky black hair behind her ear. Sometimes, she would tie her hair up into a ponytail with a black rubber band. She had an elegant, pale neck. When I looked at her, I always thought, *She looks so peaceful.*

A month later, Toshi and Chie became a couple, and not long after that, Jin started dating Sachiko. Because the six of us were always together, people assumed I was going out with Miwako, though I wasn't. From time to time, I did wonder about the possibility. Life was brighter with Miwako, even when we weren't doing anything in particular. And whenever she was around, my heart beat faster.

Dear Ryusei,

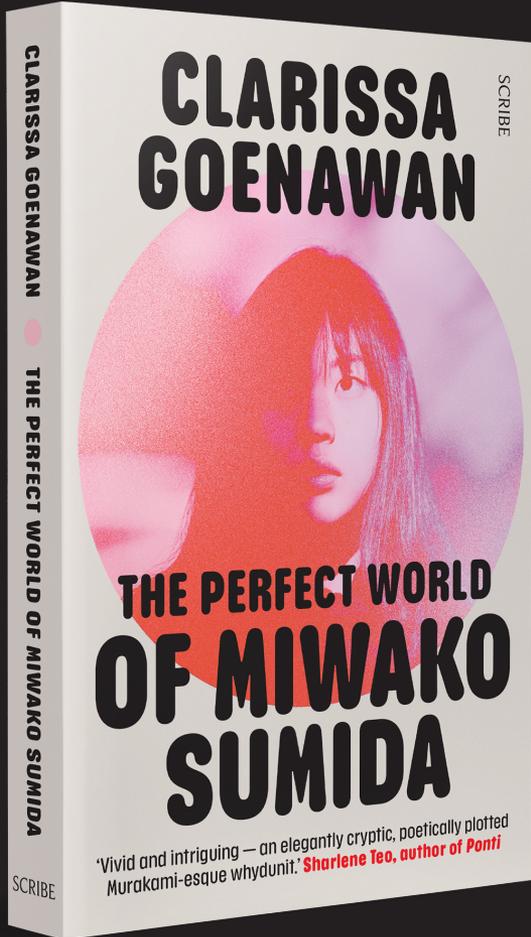
By the time you read this, I will no longer be in Tokyo. Please don't look for me. I had to get away.

This must be confusing, but I'll explain it properly soon.

Thank you for everything. The times we've had together are some of the most precious of my life.

Take care, Ryusei. And please send my apologies to Fumi-nee.

Miwako



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