RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Who is Mr Satoshi?

Jonathan Lee

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About the Book

On the day his mother dies reclusive photographer Rob Fossick – forty-one and already in the twilight of his career – finds among her belongings an unexplained package addressed to a ‘Mr Satoshi’.

So begins a quest that will propel Rob, anxious and unprepared, into the urban maelstrom of Tokyo. With the help of a colourful group of new acquaintances – a vigilant octogenarian; a beautiful ‘love hotel’ receptionist; an ex-sumo wrestler obsessed with Dolly Parton – the scene seems set for him to unravel the secrets surrounding Mr Satoshi’s identity. But until he has faced his own demons, and begun to reconnect with the world around him, the answers Rob craves will remain tantalisingly beyond his reach …

Combining several interlocking mysteries spanning sixty years of history, *Who Is Mr Satoshi?* is a uniquely inventive story from a dazzling new voice in British fiction.

About the Author

Jonathan Lee was born in Surrey in 1981. He graduated from the University of Bristol with a First in English Literature and then, after spending some time living in South America, went on to become a solicitor at a City law firm. In 2007 he was posted to the firm's Tokyo office, and during his time there became increasingly interested in Japanese culture and history. On his return to London he began writing his first novel, *Who is Mr Satoshi?*

Also by Jonathan Lee

Joy

Who is Mr Satoshi?

Jonathan Lee

WINDMILL BOOKS

For my parents

I do not doubt interiors have their interiors, and exteriors have their exteriors, and that the eyesight has another eyesight …

‘Assurances’, Walt Whitman

The punchline of the story relates to an American academic saying of Beckett, ‘He doesn’t give a fuck about people. He’s an artist.’ At this point Beckett raised his voice above the clatter of afternoon tea and shouted, ‘But I *do* give a fuck about people. I *do* give a fuck!’

Beckett Remembering: Remembering Beckett,

ed. James and Elizabeth Knowlson; words of Lawrence Held (Bloomsbury Publishing)

1

ONE AFTERNOON last October, on the concrete of her patio garden, my mother had a fall.

The event replays itself in my memory like an old reel of film. The picture wavers; the perspective shifts; the quality wanes. At the time, I had a clear-eyed view of her. She was so distinct from her surroundings. But not now. Now, watching the film my mind has made, my mother's features blend with everything behind her: the shadows, the lawn, the sepia sky.

She was out there because, at the age of eighty, she woke each morning with one ambition: to keep that patio clear of weeds. Weeds kept growing between the slabs of concrete, and she kept pulling them up. Responsibility for the upkeep lay with the warden, but this made no difference to my mother. The warden was shooed away and, when I offered help, I was told to stay indoors. So that's what I did. I sat in her front room at Finegold Mews, drinking. Outside, it was a crisply lit autumn day. A sliding glass door stood between us and a thin beam of light lasered its way through, falling into the tumbler in my hand, making the ice cubes tremble. The only sounds I could hear were low-level corridor noise: the hum and whine of other residents shuffling along, dropping things, picking them up.

It was the thud, the first of two, that caught my attention. I was watching the light melt the ice when I heard it. I looked up, and immediately saw the danger she was in. The palm of her hand was squashed against the

glass door. Her whole weight seemed to be behind it. Her fingertips, first dark grey, then light grey, slipped and squeaked. I stood up and shouted, ‘Mother!’. For decades I had addressed her as ‘Mum’, but it was the word ‘Mother’ that knotted in my throat and unravelled in the room. Since her death, it’s become the thing to say.

The seconds that followed form a series of staccato, black-and-white shots. She is drifting. Narrow shaken shoulders. Raised brows and fallen eyes. Neck delicately twisted. And the veiny hand. Only this disembodied alien, shrivelled and pockmarked, holding her up. Fingers, inching downward, until she seems certain to fall.

But then the scene changes. The hand stops sliding. Improbable, but it is off the glass completely, dropping, like a weathered stone, into the front pocket of her apron. She regains her composure and balance. She swallows, turns her face up to the sky, takes a big breath. It’s a proud, defensive posture. Only the blackbird overhead can see how thin her hair is.

By the time the second thud came, she appeared almost safe. Looking back now, it is this moment, in which it seemed crisis had been averted, that was the crucial one. I stood in her front room looking through the glass door, the drink still in my hand. I could have walked five yards, slid the door open and brought her inside. Or, if she wouldn’t be reasoned with, taking me for some troublemaking stranger, I could have reached for one of the little orange triangles dangling from pull cords. One of those, or that emergency button on the wall. A forty-one-year-old man can lunge for a triangle or a button without breaking a sweat. For an instant, I could have done any of these things.

I linger there, in that still moment, because it is the last time I really had any options.

How did I even get there, in a position to watch her suffer? Minutes before it happened, I was in the kitchen. I was

clinking ice into a glass.

She walked in and took her gardening gloves from a drawer labelled ‘garden things’, but was oblivious to me downing two glasses of butterscotch schnapps, the only drink I could find, and swallowing three pink pills. Since the dementia set in, she was oblivious to most things.

She took her gloves into the front room. I poured a final schnapps, put the bottle back, and started looking for a snack. There was nothing useful to be found. You could tell that she had built a life for herself in the post-war years. The ‘remedies’ cupboard was packed with Milk of Magnesia, Vicks VapoRub, Fynnon Salts, Friar’s Balsam, Germolene. There was a section of the fridge labelled ‘rationed’, stuffed full of butter, lard, margarine, cheese, eggs. A little storeroom off the hallway (labelled ‘storeroom’) housed precarious columns of tinned goods – fish, tomatoes, meat, soup, vegetables, treacle. Alongside the tins, sugar (caster, icing, demerara), flour (plain, pastry, self-raising), lentils, pasta, rice. Then there were the latticed jars of fruit preserve, the boxes of Braeburns and Bramleys, the bottles of squash. My mother had been acquainted with shortage, and she didn’t forget it.

As I settled down on the leather sofa with my drink, the smell of meals on wheels in the communal corridor drifted in. I remembered that I hadn’t eaten all day. I was so anxious about leaving my place that morning, about facing the dangers that crowd the world outside my flat, I couldn’t manage any breakfast.

‘Why don’t you let me do it?’ I said. She was hobbling across the carpet in the direction of the glass door. ‘Why don’t you let me pull up the weeds, if you’re that bothered?’

She didn’t respond. Instead, apparently remembering something crucial, she took a sidestep toward the television set in the corner. It was a clunky old thing, a throwback to a time when pictures didn’t matter so much. She steadied herself on one of its blunt corners, reached around the

back, and pulled out a shoebox. She placed the shoebox on top of the set, gave it a friendly pat and made her way over to the patio.

I said, ‘What’s in the box, Mum?’

She slid the door open with a colossal effort, then paused for a long time, considered my question. Cold air riddled the room. Then she responded. I remember the exact words she used. In the time that has passed, they have echoed through my mind with greater and greater resonance.

She said, ‘The plan is to deliver it to Mr Satoshi.’

‘Who’s Mr Satoshi?’ I said.

And she said, ‘Most of all, the package is for Mr Satoshi. For when we get an address for him.’

Her voice was soft, but I heard each word quite distinctly. Then, her grip on the door handle suddenly fierce, as if someone unseen were dragging her outside, she said, ‘And if you’ve got any influence around here, you’ll see to it that the warden keeps off my back.’

She slid the door closed behind her and I sank back into a clump of cushions. The gardening gloves lay dejected at my side.

A heartbeat later, as I was swirling my sickly schnapps in the beam of afternoon light, I heard it. The thud. The air was clubbed flat by it. I was surprised that someone so tiny could generate such a sound, and for a second I thought the window might give. I stood to attention, but it stayed in place, her hand still suckered to it. White and sticky and pressing hard. Her head dipping, her body crumpling, her hand sliding downward. And then the recovery – the miraculous recovery – the straightening up, the chin to the sky, the hand off the glass.

One tick of a clock is all it takes for your options to evaporate.

The crucial moment. I felt my heart beating hard in my head. My mouth was suddenly dry, the corrosive fizz of a pink pill charring some hidden tract or tissue in my throat. But I ignored these signs. I wanted to believe that the scare was over. In that empty second, that blank space in time, I knew I had choices. But I convinced myself, I must surely have convinced myself, that there was no need to act. Why else would I have stood there, so rooted to the spot, as she – confident in her own recovery – leaned in again, determined to get it, determined to pluck the rogue dandelion from a gap between two concrete squares?

She wiped her hands on the front of her apron and dipped lower, much lower than before, attacking the perennial scourge of her nice, neat, paved grid. In murky greyscale, as I see things now, she is hunched over a huge chessboard. And then it comes. I see it. I see that the stalk she is clutching isn't lifting. The dandelion's roots, wide-spreading and thick, won't budge from the hard-packed soil. The unsteadiness is all hers.

This time the thud was not from her hand, but her shoulder. It hurtled into the glass door. It slid. Her knees buckled as she succumbed to the gravitational pull of the weed. It drew her into an irresistible downward trajectory.

I doubt she had time to notice, as she accelerated toward the ground, how beautiful the bulbous seed head of the dandelion looked. Its fine, snowflake strands were spectacular. At first those strands held firm in one tight ball on top of the stem. Then they disappeared from view completely, obscured by her shadow spreading across the patio. But, on impact, the seeds burst out from the darkness. They exploded. A firework of bright white atoms, a magnesium flash that burns the image onto film.

And I didn't hear her head strike the concrete. I heard silence punctured by my own short, horrified laugh. I waded toward the window. I dropped my glass along the way. Instead of cracking, it bounced absurdly. Outside, thin

wisps of October cloud thickened in the lowering sky. They drew a veil of grey across the garden. She lay there in a craggy heap. Her hand twitched mechanically and I let out a stupid whimper. The apron had gathered around her neck, and her spent face peeped over the top. Black blood drizzled from her one visible ear.

I stood there until I was sure that she was dead. I pressed myself right up to the glass. My forehead flat against it, my hands too, eyes shuttered, and I stayed there for a long time, collapsed against the cold surface, let it take my weight completely. At some point, it started to rain. I went back to the sofa and sat there, watching translucent drops randomly merge and run jerkily downward. A pool of murky water formed around the body. If I close my eyes now, I can still see that water, a drama of reflected cloud, channelled into the soft grey glow of a camera lens.

Eventually, after taking more medication, I called the emergency people. When they came knocking I felt, just for a moment, that it was Mr Satoshi at the door.

It wasn’t, of course. All that was waiting for me was the thick green rush of paramedics. Pretty soon I couldn’t see my mother at all. The tightly assembled strangers put her on a stretcher and covered her with a cotton sheet.

Her face has remained veiled ever since.

2

THE FOLLOWING Monday, standing in a shaded row at the back of Longcross Church, I watched her neighbours slow-mouthing hymns. My hair was plastered down with sweat and I felt half choked by my tie. The joints and striations of the high windows trapped and shaped the light, illuminating the pews ahead with arcs of yellow, red and green, but the black-clad crowd didn't absorb any of the colour. Each mourner looked like a shadow of the next.

I was the sole representative of the Fossick family, but the residents of Finegold Mews had come out in force to hear the organ notes stir in the pipes. It was difficult to make my lips move in unison with theirs. Looking at the guttering candles and the flower arrangements and the way the white of the stained glass shivered like mother-of-pearl, a thought kept recurring, a question that had the effect of hardening my jaw: was a few years in a care home the way to get a decent turnout at my own eventual funeral? I wondered if my father would turn up, keen to play the estranged yet grief-stricken parent. Or old friends, just one or two, from when I was married.

In a break between hymns the priest said something about shepherds and the fact that death is a great leveller, a reminder that we are all the same under our clothes. I was only dimly aware of his homily. I was thinking about the seeds of my mother's death, and when exactly they had been sown.

Number 17, Virginia Road. The house in which I grew up and Alice Fossick became, quite suddenly, old. It was there that, on one of my visits more than a decade ago, I first noticed the little white labels.

'Red napkins', 'White napkins', 'Red and white napkins'.

Initially they raised no alarm. My mother had always been one to write things down. Birthdays coming up, recipes mentioned on television, the next WI meeting.

But before long the labels had multiplied across the house, one stuck on every drawer and cupboard: '2nd best plates', 'washing tabs', 'broken china'.

Why not just throw the china away, Mum?

'Broken china (for bin men)', read the amended note, sandwiched between 'dishwasher salt' and 'pamphlets/warranties/manuals'.

The labels were just labels; there was worse to come. She wrote a letter to the local paper complaining that the post office had been closed down. 'It is a disgrace,' she wrote, 'that basic services on which the local community has come to rely are being withdrawn without proper consideration of, and consultation with, the villagers themselves.' She showed it to me in draft, to see what I thought. I knew it was a good letter, but I also knew that the post office was still open for business. When I walked her there to prove my point, she started laughing. 'Just winding you up,' she said. 'I haven't lost my marbles yet.'

It was hard to know what to think. She still harboured a wealth of information that most minds would struggle to contain: the names of everyone in the village, the order in which all sixty-six monarchs had ascended the throne, the brands of weedkiller suited to different soil types. She could remember the names of photographers I admired, the places my pictures had been published and hung.

It got to the point where I would come round at lunchtime and find her getting ready for bed, or I'd get calls in the middle of the night because she was confused

about the darkness. At least she remembered my phone number, I thought. When neighbours found her standing on familiar streets consulting an A to Z, she said that she was getting her bearings.

'It's just age,' she said. 'In your seventies you get confused sometimes, that's how it is.'

I asked if she knew the name of my wife.

'Chloe,' she said, affronted.

I shrugged and laughed. She'd always liked Chloe. Years later, when Chloe died, it was my mother who cried the most, who gave in utterly to the grief.

'So what's the next test?' my mother said.

I asked her if she remembered the Prime Minister's name. I took care to frame the question as a joke.

'Ha!' she said. 'The old Chinese Commie. A. T. Lee! Bring back Churchill, I say.'

'A. T. Lee' was her name for Clement Attlee.

'He left Downing Street a while back, Mum.'

'I'm pleasing. I'm please. I'm pleased.'

'Could it be her heart medication?' I asked the doctor. His face wore the same look of apologetic vacancy, of familiarity tinged with confusion, that my mother's did.

'Hmmm,' he said, plucking a thermometer from his breast pocket. 'On occasion the symptoms your mother demonstrates can have other causes – thyroid problems, vitamin deficiency, even depression. We'll explore all avenues. We won't rule anything out.'

On the walk back from the surgery, I stopped at the Green Shop to pick up provisions. I left my mother waiting outside. When I re-emerged, she was stroking a dachshund with an uneven tan.

Mum said, 'Did you remember to get the paper for your father?'

I said, 'Dad left years ago Mum, you know that.'

'I remember my father,' she said.

Finegold Mews was the perfect choice. She already lived down the road from it, so in her lucid moments she knew the area. And there was the fact that all of the residents had the option of their own flat, rather than just some poky room. I even managed to reserve her a spot on the ground floor, with a view of the gardens and her own square of patio.

The patio sealed it. In December 1999, just before humanity in all its different shapes and sizes entered a new millennium, I moved her in. I remember thinking, as I drove us over there in a rented van, that her face looked suddenly different, the corners of the eyes and mouth drifting downward, as if past hopes were gradually subsiding. I remember wishing I had taken her picture more often, before her features acquired that downward aspect.

The Christian hymn medley finished and I made a dash for the church doors. In a quiet corner of the cemetery, hiding behind a silver birch tree, I lit up a cigarette.

Through a patchwork of stubborn shoots and triangular leaves, I could see my mother's weedy little memorial hole. No body in there yet, just spade-split stems and turned earth. All around it were tilted, mottled stones with barely legible names and dates. The mourners, all bone in the bleached light, navigated their way through an assault course of heel marks and tufts, arriving at her space in the ground.

I turned away, but into the vacuum of my ears came exaggerated shuffles and coughs and the sound of the coffin squeaking slowly downward. A few minutes of this before I managed to temper my own listening and, with the eyes of a child, see remembered things. The low lilac hedges at number 17. A porch filled with lemony squares of sun. Tidy rows of cut roses. I finished smoking and lit another and made the roses vanish.

An old man I had never seen before came scuttling across the grass, taking me by surprise. He grabbed my cigarette arm and squeezed it hard.

‘Aha,’ he said, gazing into my eyes. ‘It’s you! The reclusive photographer!’

‘Indeed it is,’ I said, baffled.

‘Lovely service! Keeping well?’

‘Well enough, thanks.’

‘Smashing,’ he said, storming off.

The coffin had been planted, everyone had moved to the car park, and I watched him join the crowd. I smoked intently, greedy for the cigarette’s anodyne fug. Surely it would disperse soon, the muddle of walking sticks, Zimmer frames, bifocals, trifocals, dark grey coats with yawning shoulders. The apparatus of old age. Overhead, the sunlight present during the service was being hazed by clouds. The milky sky curdled and wobbly shadows spread and steadied into a general gloom. I decided to count to twenty-five. If the mourners hadn’t disappeared by then, no matter. I would stroll past them, saying nothing, board the London train, lock myself away, re-engage with the routine. I counted to twenty-five. There was still a flock of mourners ruffling their black feathers on the pavement, parping frenziedly about grief and death and who would be next. I counted to twenty-five again, slower than before, shoe-screwing my cigarette butt into the grass, promising myself that this time I really would step out from behind this tree, head to the train station, and, if someone talked to me, I’d exchange pleasantries and move on, confident and sweat-free, because only kids and psychopaths rely on counting as a means of making things appear and disappear. And when I got to twenty-five once more, and then once more again, I just squeezed the pill bottle in my coat pocket and peered through the camouflage until people receded into the distance.

Off they went: to use the toilet, to drop tea bags in hot water, to tap dusters in dark corners, fortified by the knowledge that everyone else was doing exactly the same.

I picked my moment, but I picked the wrong one. As I tried to cut through the church car park, a lanky old woman scampered towards me. She swung her walking stick like a demolition ball. Her limbs flailed about with indistinct, fuzzy energy, a daddy-long-legs tumbling across a carpet, drunk on dying summer light. I was cornered against a tomato-red bonnet.

She said, 'You must be young Robert, Alice's son.'

'Rob,' I said. 'Or Foss.' I stared at the ground, hoping she would understand that I was pressed for time and energy.

When I looked up a few seconds later she was still standing in front of me, most of her weight resting on the thin wooden walking stick, the rubber ferrule not quite flush with the concrete. Her face reminded me of my mother's: swathes of sagging skin, so pale it was almost green. She was stranded somewhere in her eighties.

I said, 'Can I help you in some way?'

'Oh no. No help required.'

There was a Home Counties twang to her voice, the tongue strumming each 'o' like a plectrum over the rosette of a guitar.

'Were you at the funeral?' I asked.

'Oh yes, yes I was. I thought it was an excellent service. Don't you agree?'

'I thought it was fine, yes.'

'I was a friend of your mother's. I'm Freddie.'

'Hi, Freddie.'

Her hand felt rough and dry.

'You're a resident at Finegold, Freddie?'

'Oh I am, yes. Oh yes. Although I'm perfectly "with it". I knew your mother for quite a long time. She may have mentioned me, but I suspect … So I live down the hall from

her neck of the woods. I believe you still have the flat? I mean to say that you haven't relinquished the lease?'

'That's right.'

'You haven't cleared her things out, I suppose?'

'Well … no. It hasn't been very long.'

'But you'll do it soon?'

'Fairly soon, I expect. I've got quite a lot of stuff on, though.'

'On what?'

'You know, just *on*. Stuff on. But I'll be clearing the flat out soon enough.'

'Oh, I see.'

I studied the pink bags under her eyes. 'You look concerned.'

'It's just, something has played on my mind, since your mother died. Something she said. A kind of request. Perhaps we could head back to the Mews and discuss things?'

'I really must get home, unfortunately. I live in London.'

'Of course, you'll have photographs to take.'

'Indeed.'

'I used to take photographs once. Not quite sure why I stopped. I suppose I no longer had very much to photograph.'

'Freddie, I really should be getting back.'

'Oh, I quite understand, I do, but this is rather important.'

'How so?'

'Well,' she said, leaning forward on her stick and glancing left to right, somewhat conspiratorially, 'it's about a shoebox.'

'A shoebox?'

I could see her scalp through sparse swirls of white hair. The skin was lunar grey and pitted, peppered with tiny silver and pink freckles.

She said, ‘I believe there is a shoebox that contains something your mother wanted delivered. To a Mr Satoshi.’

The name sent an electric surge of memory fizzing through my veins.

‘You know who he is?’

‘Vaguely,’ she said, ‘vaguely. At least I think so. Satoshi sounds foreign, doesn’t it? But unless I’m going senile it’s just a nickname your mother used for an English chap, a Bristolian we used to know. Why don’t we head back to the Mews? I can drive.’

‘You drive?’

She drove. She took me to Finegold Mews in a Citroën so frail its back doors were sealed with duct tape. A windscreen wiper had been reconstructed with a length of coat-hanger wire. Every ten metres felt like a triumph of substance over form. The car smelt like a biscuit tin, crumbly and sweet, and the speckled mud pressed into the floor and dashboard gave it an earthy atmosphere, the warmth of decay and petrification. I felt an odd sense of security, rarely experienced outside the walls of my flat. I felt it even as I glanced down the murky lanes and shady avenues that we passed, taking in their anonymity and the way that, like a rambling thought, they dallied this way and that, without a clear sense of limits and boundaries, of purpose and direction.

3

Finegold mews, declared the copper lettering above the front entrance.

I followed Freddie through the reception area, making small talk about everyday ailments, banes and woes. The space was cluttered with lamps, chairs, rugs and coffee tables. These furnishings were new when I moved my mother in. The newness was a problem for her. It placed Finegold Mews in painful contrast with her old house, a home full of ancient objects tangled up with family memories. She had watched me leave number 17, to go up to university. She had watched Dad leave too, after he fell in love with the City, and later into a lusty embrace with his secretary. But some good ghosts must have remained.

'I'll just ask the warden to let us in,' I said, but Freddie was already pressing a piece of svelte plastic into the slot. 'You have a key card for my mother's flat?'

'Oh yes. We were great friends. Bad luck that I never managed to catch you on one of your visits, really.'

'Yes, well. I didn't get over here as often as I would have liked.'

The motion of opening the door unsettled a lot of dust inside. I didn't know it at the time, but the dust would be the first of many things in my mother's world to be disturbed by my interference; soon nothing would remain settled, nothing would stay still.

'Take a seat, Freddie.'

'Oh, thank you, I will.'

My mother's high-ceilinged front room had an eccentric feel to it. The vaulting walls were out of proportion to the minuscule floor space, so that the room seemed to have been tipped on its end, less a room and more of a cereal box. There were photographs hanging everywhere, painstakingly spaced. The photos were the result of a strange project she launched in her seventies. It involved accumulating a photograph to represent each year of her life. I shot some of them, for example the one made up of tiny squares which, if you squinted at it long enough, cohered into a grid of identical human heads. It was a sheet of commemorative stamps her father had put aside for her on the day she was christened; she had me dig it out and snap it as a reminder of her first year. The one hanging in the top left corner of the far wall, a picture of a rugby ball, was another of mine. Any old rugby ball, but a reminder that in 1936, when my mother was seven years old, her father spilt beer on his lap when the wireless announcer declared that Alex Obolensky had scored a second try. England had beaten the All Blacks for the very first time.

I scanned these and other pictures, mesmerised by the polished glass in the frames. It undulated in the lamplight like fine skin, a living barrier, a human presence in the room.

Freddie said, 'Do you know which year each of these represents?'

'No. I don't know what most of the pictured things mean, which memories they connect to.'

She seemed to consider this very carefully.

'So,' I said, 'about this shoebox.'

'Oh yes,' she said, as if she wasn't expecting the shoebox to come up in conversation at all. 'How about I get us some herbal tea and a biscuit?'

'If you like. There might be something in the cupboard to the left of the cooker.'

She got to her feet with a croak and a groan, the attendant sounds of transition, and pressed her walking stick in the direction of the kitchen. It struck me as unusual to see an old person who was thin and tall, as opposed to thin and small.

She shouted, 'The one labelled "powders/granules/bags"?'

'Exactly.'

I got up, walked to the television, and peered over the top. Sure enough, beyond the scarred black surface, wedged at an awkward angle between the wall and the set, was the shoebox. It must have slipped back there, the victim of a paramedic's stray elbow or the corner of a stretcher. 'The plan,' she had said, her words crowded by silence, 'is to deliver it to Mr Satoshi.' And now this Freddie woman was suggesting that he wasn't just a figment of my mother's imagination, a name torn from a cereal packet or stolen from the *Afternoon Play*. I took the box over to my chair.

'Oh, that's the one!' she said excitedly, eyes fixed on my lap.

Shakily, she handed me a mug. The porcelain was embroidered with the tesserae of some liquefied flower.

'So,' she said. She lowered herself back into the leather sofa and leaned her stick against one of the nickel-studded arms. 'Mr Satoshi. It goes back to my schooldays in Bristol with your mother.'

'You knew her then?'

'Well, of course. Oh yes. Bristol. It's been a long while, but I know that city like the back of my hand.'

She studied her knuckles, white and shiny against the dark cotton of her skirt.

'Our favourite part of the city, your mother's and mine, was Cotham. Clifton was more elegant, but the bonus with Cotham was Mrs Cummings, a teacher at our school and a very dedicated philatelist. Regularly managed to obtain

rare stamps that your mother and I had only ever read about in the latest Stanley Gibbons catalogue. The Nyassa ten reis was my favourite.'

Freddie started reciting the poetry of stamp collecting: magnifying glasses, perforation gauges, tweezers, gummed mounts, the hidden watermarks and their revelation in little grey trays filled with spirit.

'I don't mean to interrupt,' I said, 'but you might need to start from the beginning.'

So that's what she did. Her eyes widened and wobbled as she spoke, as if all kinds of memories were bubbling behind them. Freddie's mother was a German-born woman, Luisa, who had lived in England for most of her life and was naturalised. During the First World War, Luisa fell in love with a Bristolian accountant. 'They married after the war ended,' Freddie said, 'and settled down in Bristol to have me.' When Freddie was seven, Luisa died of sudden heart failure, no warning. Her father had just begun a posting to the British Central Africa Company in Blantyre, Nyasaland, so he sent Freddie to a boarding school in Bristol.

'That's the school your mother attended. And that's why that ten reis I mentioned was my favourite stamp. It had a giraffe on it, which made me think of Africa, and my father.'

'And you and my mother became close friends?'

Yes. The best of friends. For the first of the school holidays, Freddie stayed in the boarding house until the new term started. She had no family in England to stay with. After a while, my mother's parents started looking after her during these breaks.

'I did what her family did. Christmas and Easter in the Clifton house, and part of the summer holidays spent in a rented cottage by the seaside, usually in Weston-super-Mare. Your mum and I used to play on the beach for hours. We'd race each other up and down the seafront, heads down, watching tiny white crabs disappear into punctures in the sand.'