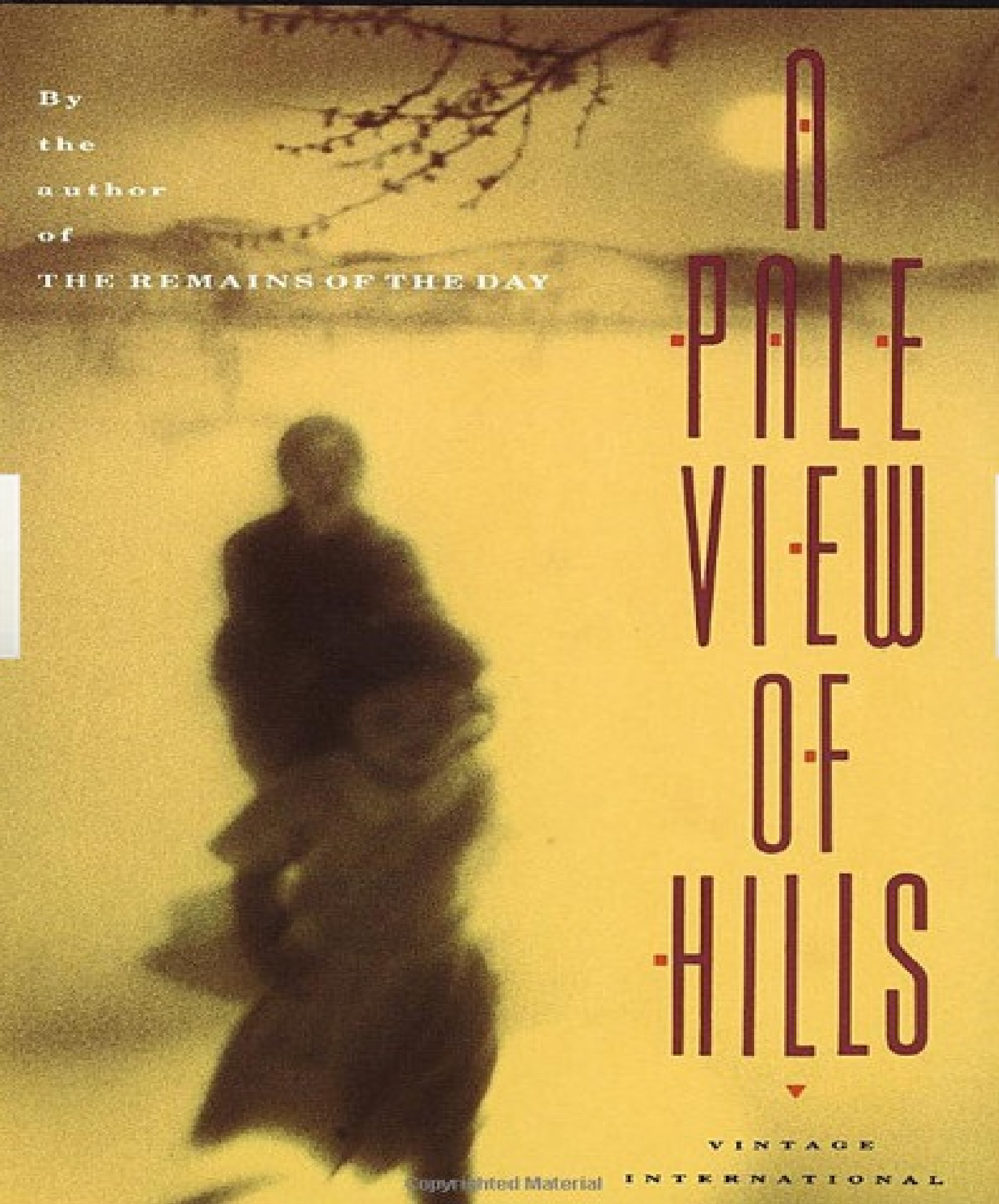
KAZUO ISHIGURO

By the author of THE REMAINS OF THE DAY



A PALE VIEW OF HILLS

VINTAGE INTERNATIONAL

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Chapter One

Niki, the name we finally gave younger daughter, is not an abbreviation; it was a compromise I reached with her father. For paradoxically it was he who wanted to give her a Japanese name, and I— perhaps out of some selfish desire not to be reminded of the past—insisted on an English one. He finally agreed to Niki, thinking it had some vague echo of the East about it.

She came to see me earlier this year, in April, when the days were still cold and drizzly. Perhaps she had intended to stay longer. I do not know. But my country house and the quiet that surrounds it made her restless, and before long i could see she was anxious to return to her life in London. She listened impatiently to my classical records, flicked through numerous magazines. The telephone rang for her regularly, and she would stride across the carpet, her thin figure squeezed into her tight clothes, taking care to dose the door behind her so I would not overhear her conversation. She left after five days.

She did not mention Keiko until the second day. It was a grey windy morning, and we had moved the armchairs nearer the windows to watch the rain falling on my garden.

“Did you expect me to be there?” she asked. “At the funeral, I mean.”

“No, I suppose not. I didn’t really think you’d come.”

“It did upset me, hearing about her. I almost came.”

“I never expected you to come.”

“People didn’t know what was wrong with me,” she said. “I didn’t tell anybody. I suppose I was embarrassed. They wouldn’t understand really, they wouldn’t understand howl felt about it. Sisters are supposed to be people you’re close to, aren’t they. You may not like them much but you’re still close to them. That’s just not how it was though. I don’t even remember what she looked like now.”

“Yes, it’s quite a time since you saw her.”

“I just remember her as someone who used to make me miserable. That’s what I remember about her. But I was sad though, when I heard.”

Perhaps it was not just the quiet that drove my daughter back to London. For although we never dwelt long on the subject of Keiko’s death, it was never far away, hovering over us whenever we talked.

Keiko, unlike Niki was pure Japanese, and more than one newspaper was

quick to pick up on this fact. The English are fond of their idea that our race has an instinct for suicide, as if further explanations are unnecessary; for that was all they reported, that she was Japanese and that she had hung herself in her room.

That same evening I was standing at the windows, looking out into the darkness, when I heard Niki say behind me; “What are you thinking about now, Mother?” She was sitting across the settee, a paperback book on her knee.

“I was thinking about someone I knew once. A woman I knew once."

“Someone you knew when you … before you came to

“I knew her when I was living in Nagasaki, if that’s what you mean.” She continued to watch me, so I added: “Along time ago. Long before I met your father."

She seemed satisfied and with some vague comment returned to her book. In many ways Niki is an affectionate child. She had not come simply to see howl had taken the news of Keiko’s death; she had come to me out of a sense of mission. For in recent years she has taken it upon herself to admire certain aspects of my past, and she had come prepared to tell me things were no different now, that I should have no regrets for those choices I once made. In short, to reassure me l was not responsible for Keiko’s death.

I have no great wish to dwell on Keiko now, it brings me little comfort. I only mention her here because those were the circumstances around Niki’s visit this April, and because it was during that visit I remembered Sachiko again after all this time. I never knew Sachiko well. In fact our friendship was no more than a matter of some several weeks one summer many years ago.

The worst days were over by then. American soldiers were as numerous as ever— for there was fighting in Korea— but in Nagasaki, after what had gone before, those were days of calm and relief. The world had a feeling of change about it.

My husband and I lived in an area to the east of the city, a short tram journey from the centre of town. A river ran near us, and I was once told that before the war a small village had grown up on the riverbank. But then the

bomb had fallen and afterwards all that remained were charred ruins. Rebuilding had got under way and in time four concrete buildings had been erected, each containing forty or so separate apartments. Of the four, our block had been built last and it marked the point where the rebuilding programme had come to a halt; between us and the river lay an expanse of wasteground, several acres of dried mud and ditches. Many complained it was a health hazard, and indeed the drainage was appalling. All year round there were craters filled with stagnant water, and in the summer months the mosquitoes became intolerable. From time to time officials were to be seen pacing out measurements or scribbling down notes, but the months went by and nothing was done.

The occupants of the apartment blocks were much like ourselves—young married couples, the husbands having found good employment with expanding firms. Many of the apartments were owned by the firms, who rented them to employees at a generous rate. Each apartment was identical; the floors were tatami, the bathrooms and kitchens of a Western design. They were small and rather difficult to keep cool during the warmer months, but on the whole the feeling amongst the occupants seemed one of satisfaction. And yet I remember an unmistakable air of transience there, as if we were all of us waiting for the day we could move to something better.

One wooden cottage had survived both the devastation of the war and the government bulldozers. I could see it from our window, standing alone at the end of that expanse of wasteground, practically on the edge of the river. It was the kind of cottage often seen in the the countryside, with a tiled roof sloping almost to the ground. Often, during my empty moments, I would stand at my window gazing at it.

To judge from the attention attracted by Sachiko's arrival, I was not alone in gazing at that cottage. There was much talk about two men seen working there one day—as to whether or not they were government workers. Later there was talk that a woman and her little girl were living there, and I saw them myself on several occasions, making their way across the ditchy ground.

It was towards the beginning of summer—I was in my third or fourth month of pregnancy by then—when I first watched that large American car, white and battered, bumping its way over the wasteground towards the river. It was well into the evening, and the sun setting behind the cottage gleamed a moment against the metal.

Then one afternoon I heard two women talking at the tram stop, about the woman who had moved into the derelict house by the river. One was explaining to her companion how she had spoken to the woman that morning and had received a dear snub. Her companion agreed the newcomer seemed unfriendly—proud probably. She must be thirty at the youngest, they thought, for the child was at least ten. The first woman said the stranger had spoken with a Tokyo dialect and certainly was not from Nagasaki. They discussed for a while her ‘American friend”, then the woman spoke again of how unfriendly the stranger had been to her that morning.

Now I do not doubt that amongst those women I lived with then, there were those who had suffered, those with sad and terrible memories. But to watch them each day, busily involved with their husbands and their children, I found this hard to believe—that their lives had ever held the tragedies and nightmares of wartime. It was never my intention to appear unfriendly, but it was probably true that i made no special effort to seem otherwise, for at that point in my life, I was still wishing to be left alone.

It was with interest then that I listened to those women talking of Sachiko. I can recall quite vividly that afternoon at the tram stop. It was one of the first days of bright sunlight after the rainy season in June, and the soaked surfaces of brick and concrete were drying all around us. We were standing on a railway bridge and on one side of the tracks at the foot of the hill could be seen a cluster of roofs, as if houses had come tumbling down the slope.

Beyond the houses, a little way off, were our apartment blocks standing like four concrete pillars. I felt a kind of sympathy for Sachiko then, and felt I understood something of that aloof i had noticed about her when I had watched her from afar.

We were to become friends that summer and for a short time at least I was to be admitted into her confidence. I am not sure now how it was we first met. I remember one afternoon spotting her figure ahead of me on thd path leading out of the housing precinct. I was hurrying, but Sachiko walked on with a steady stride. By that point we must have already known each other by name, for I remember calling to her as I got nearer.

Sachiko turned and waited for me to catch up. “Is something wrong?” she asked.

“I’m glad I found you,” I said, a little out of breath. “Your daughter, she was fighting just as I came out. Back there near the ditches."

“She was fighting?”

“With two other children. One of them was a boy. It looked a nasty little fight.”

“I see.” Sachiko began to walk again. I fell in step beside her.

“I don’t want to alarm you,” I said, “but it did look quite a nasty fight. In fact, I think I saw a cut on your daughter’s cheek.”

“I see.”

“It was back there, on the edge of the wasteground.”

“And are they still fighting, do you think?” She continued to walk up the hill.

“Well, no. I saw your daughter running off.”

Sachiko looked at me and smiled. “Are you not used to seeing children fight?”

“Well, children do fight, I suppose. But I thought I ought to tell you. And you see, I don’t think she’s on her way to school. The other children carried on towards the school, but your daughter went back towards the river.”

Sachiko made no reply and continued to walk up the hill. “As a matter of fact,” I continued, “I’d meant to mention this to you before. You see, I’ve seen your daughter on a number of occasions recently. I wonder, perhaps, if she hasn’t been playing truant a little.”

The path forked at the top of the bill. Sachiko stopped and we turned to each other.

“It’s very kind of you to be so concerned, Etsuko,” she said. “So very kind. I’m sure you’ll make a splendid mother.”

I had supposed previously—like the women at the tram stop—that Sachiko was a woman of thirty or so. But possibly her youthful figure had been deceiving, for she had the face of an older person. She was gazing at me with a slightly amused expression, and something in the way she did so caused me to laugh self-consciously.

“I do appreciate your coming to find me like this,” she went on. “But as you see, I’m rather busy just now. I have to go into Nagasaki.”

“I see. I just thought it best to come and tell you, that’s all.”

for a moment, she continued to look at me with her amused expression. Then she said: “How kind you are. Now please excuse me. I must get into town.” She bowed, then turned towards the path that led up towards the tram stop.

“It’s just that she had a cut on her face,” I said, raising my voice a little.

“And the river’s quite dangerous in places. I thought it best to come and tell you.”

She turned and looked at me once more. “If you have nothing else to concern yourself with, Etsuko,” she said, “then perhaps you’d care to look after my daughter for the day. I’ll be back sometime in the afternoon. I’m sure you’ll get on very well with her.”

“I wouldn’t object, if that’s what you wish. I must say, your daughter seems quite young to be Left on her own all day.”

“How kind you are,” Sachiko said again. Then she smiled once more. “Yes, I’m sure you’ll make a splendid mother.”

After parting with Sachiko, I made my way down the hill and back through the housing precinct. I soon found myself back outside our apartment block, facing that expanse of wasteground. Seeing no sign of the little girl, I was about to go inside, but then caught sight of some movement along the riverbank. Mariko must previously have been crouching down, for now I could see her small figure quite clearly across the muddy ground. At first, I felt the urge to forget the whole matter and return to my housework. Eventually, however, I began making my way towards her, taking care to avoid the ditches.

As far as I remember, that was the first occasion I spoke to Mariko. Quite probably there was nothing so unusual about her behaviour that morning, for, after all, I was a stranger to the child and she had every right to regard me with suspicion. And if in fact I did experience a curious feeling of unease at the time, it was probably nothing more than a simple response to Mariko’s manner.

The river that morning was still quite high and flowing swiftly after the rainy season a few weeks earlier. The ground sloped down steeply before it reached the water’s edge, and the mud at the foot of the slope; where the little girl was standing, looked distinctly wetter. Mariko was dressed in a simple cotton dress which ended at her knees, and her short trimmed hair made her face look boyish. She looked up, not smiling, to where I stood at the top of the muddy slope.

“Hello,” I said, “I was just speaking with your mother. You must be Mariko-San.”

The little girl continued to stare up at me, saying nothing. What I had thought earlier to be a wound on her cheek, I now saw to be a smudge of mud.

“Shouldn’t you be at school?” I asked.

She remained silent for a moment. Then she said: “I don’t go to school”

“But all children must go to school. Don’t you like to go?”

“I don’t go to school."

“But hasn’t your mother sent you to a school here?”

Mariko did not reply. Instead, she took a step away from me.

“Careful,” I said. “You’ll fall into the water. It’s very slippery.”

She continued to stare up at me from the bottom of the slope. I could see her small shoes lying in the mud beside her. Her bare feet, like her shoes, were covered in mud.

“I was just speaking with your mother.” I said, smiling at her reassuringly. “She said it would be perfectly all right if you came and waited for her at my house. It’s just over there, that building there. You could come and try some cakes I made yesterday. Would you like that, Mariko-San? And you could tell me all about yourself."

Mariko continued to watch me carefully. Then, without taking her eyes off me, she crouched down and picked up her shoes. At first, I took this as a sign that she was about to follow me. But then as she continued to stare up at me, I realized she was holding her shoes in readiness to run away.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” I said, with a nervous laugh. “I’m a friend of your mother’s."

As far as I remember, that was all that took place between us that morning. I had no wish to alarm the child further, and before long I turned and made my way back across the wasteground. The child’s response had, it is true, upset me somewhat; for in those days, such small things were capable of arousing in me every kind of misgiving about motherhood. I told myself the episode was insignificant, and that in any case, further opportunities to make friends with the little girl were bound to present themselves over the coming days. As it was, I did not speak to Mariko again until one afternoon a fortnight or so later.

I had never been inside the cottage prior to that afternoon, and I had been rather surprised when Sachiko had asked me in. In fact, I had sensed immediately that she had done so with something in mind, and as it turned out, I was not mistaken.

The cottage was tidy, but I remember a kind of stark shabbiness about the place; the wooden beams that crossed the ceiling looked old and insecure, and a faint odour of dampness lingered everywhere. At the front of the cottage, the main partitions had been left wide open to allow the sunlight in across the veranda. For all that, much—of the place remained in shadow.

Mariko was lying in the corner furthest from the sunlight. I could see something moving beside her in the shade, and when I came closer, saw a large cat curled up on the tatami.

“Hello, Mariko-San,” I said. “Don’t you remember me?”

She stopped stroking the cat and looked up.

“We met the other day,” I went on. “Don’t you remember? You were by the river."

The little girl showed no signs of recognition. She looked at me fora while, then began to stroke her cat again. Behind me. I could hear Sachiko preparing the tea on the open stove at the centre of the mom. I was about to go over to her, when Mariko said suddenly: “She’s going to have kittens."

“Oh really? How nice.”

“Do you want a kitten?"

“That’s very kind of you, Mariko-San. We’ll see. But I’m sure they’ll all find nice homes.”

“Why don’t you take a kitten?” the child said. “The other woman said she’d take one."

“We’ll see, Mariko-San. Which other lady was this?”

“The other woman. The woman from across the river. She said she’d take one.”

“But I don’t think anyone lives over there, Mariko-San. It’s just trees and forest over there.”

“She said she’d take me to her house. She lives across the river. I didn’t go with her.”

I looked at the child for a second. Then a thought struck me and I laughed.

“But that was me, Mariko-San. Don’t you remember? I asked you to come to my house while your mother was away in the town.”

Mariko looked up at me again. “Not you,” she said. “The other woman. The woman from across the river. She was here last night. While Mother was away.”

“Last night? While your mother was away?"