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DRIVE MY
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FROM THE COLLECTION MEN WITHOUT WOMEN

HARUKI
MURAKAMI



Haruki Murakami

Haruki Murakami was born in Kyoto in 1949 and now lives near Tokyo. His work has been translated into more than fifty languages, and the most recent of his many international honors is the Hans Christian Andersen Literature Award, whose previous recipients include Karl Ove Knausgård, Isabel Allende, and Salman Rushdie.

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Drive My Car

from *Men Without Women*

Haruki Murakami

A Vintage Short

Vintage Books

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Contents

[Cover](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Books by Haruki Murakami](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Drive My Car](#)

BASED ON THE MANY TIMES he had ridden in cars driven by women, Kafuku had reached the conclusion that most female drivers fell into one of two categories: either they were a little too aggressive or a little too timid. Luckily—and we should all be grateful for this—the latter were far more common. Generally speaking, women were more cautious than men behind the wheel. Of course, that caution was nothing to complain about. Yet their driving style tended to irritate others on the road.

Most of the aggressive women, on the other hand, seemed convinced they were great drivers. In most cases, they showed their timid sisters nothing but scorn, and were proud that they, at least, weren't like that. They were oblivious to the gasps and slammed brakes that accompanied their sudden and daring lane changes, and to the less-than-complimentary words directed at them by their fellow drivers.

Of course, not all women belonged to one of those two groups. There were those *normal* drivers who were neither too aggressive nor too cautious. Some could even be called experts. Nevertheless, somehow or other, even with those expert female drivers, Kafuku usually sensed a certain tension. There was no concrete reason that he could point

to, but from where he sat in the passenger seat he felt a kind of friction in the air, and it made him tense. His throat would turn dry, or he would start saying foolish, totally unnecessary things just to bury the silence.

Certainly there were good and bad male drivers too. Yet in most cases their driving didn't create the same charged atmosphere. It wasn't that they were especially laid back. In reality, they were probably tense too. Nevertheless, they seemed to be able to separate their tension and who they were in a natural—likely unconscious—way. They could converse and act normally even while focused on the road. As in, *that belongs there and this belongs here*. Kafuku had no idea where this difference between men and women drivers came from.

Kafuku seldom drew distinctions between men and women in his daily life. Nor was he apt to perceive any difference in ability between the sexes. There were as many women as men in his line of work, and he actually felt more at ease working with women. For the most part, women paid closer attention to details, and they listened well. The only problem occurred when he got in a car and found a woman sitting beside him with her hands on the steering wheel. That he found impossible to ignore. Yet he had never voiced his opinion on the matter to anyone. Somehow the topic seemed inappropriate.

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Thus when Oba, who ran the garage where he serviced his car, recommended a young woman to be his personal driver, Kafuku looked less than thrilled. Oba smiled at his reaction. Yeah, I know how you feel, the mechanic's face said.

"But she's one heck of a driver. I can guarantee that, no problem. Why don't you meet her and see for yourself?"

"Sure, since you recommend her," Kafuku said. He needed to hire a driver as quickly as possible, and Oba was someone he trusted. He had known the impish man with hair that bristled like wire for fifteen years. When it came to automobiles, Oba's word was as good as gold.

"To be on the safe side, I'm going to take a look at your wheel alignment, but assuming that's okay, you can pick up your car the day after tomorrow at two p.m. Why don't I ask the girl to come then too, so you can check her out, maybe have her drive you around the neighborhood? You can level with me if you don't like her. No skin off my nose if you don't."

"How old is she?"

"Never got around to asking. But I would guess in her mid-twenties," Oba said. Then he gave a slight frown. "Like I said, she's a great driver, but..."

"But?"

"Well, how should I put this, she's not exactly the congenial type."

"In what way?"

"She's brusque, shoots from the hip when she talks, which isn't often. And she smokes like a chimney," Oba said. "You'll see for yourself when you meet her, but she's not what you'd call cute, either. Almost never smiles, and she's a bit *homely*, to be honest."

"That's not a problem. I'd feel uncomfortable if she were too pretty, and there could be nasty rumors."

"Sounds like it might be a good match, then."

"Apart from all that, she's a good driver, right?"

"Yeah, she's solid. Not just for a woman, but as a driver, pure and simple."

“What kind of work is she doing now?”

“I’m not too sure. I think she scrapes by as a convenience store clerk, courier service driver, stuff like that. Short-term jobs she can drop right away when something better pops up. She came here on a friend’s recommendation looking for work, but things are a bit tight, and I can’t take on anyone full time right now. I give her a shout when I need extra help. But she’s really reliable. And she never takes a drink.”

Kafuku’s face darkened with the mention of liquor, and his fingers unconsciously rose to his lips.

“The day after tomorrow at two it is, then,” Kafuku said. Brusque, close-mouthed, not at all cute—he was intrigued.

—

Two days later, at two in the afternoon, the yellow Saab 900 convertible was fixed and ready to drive. The dented right front fender had been returned to its original shape, the painted patch blending almost perfectly with the rest of the car. The engine was tuned, the transmission readjusted, and new brake pads and wiper blades installed. The car was freshly washed, its tires polished, its body waxed. As always, Oba’s work was flawless. Kafuku had owned the car for twelve years and put nearly a hundred thousand miles on it. The canvas roof was showing its age. When it poured he had to worry about leaks. But for the time being, Kafuku had no intention of buying a newer vehicle. Not only had the Saab never given him any major trouble, he was personally attached to it. He loved driving with the top down, regardless of the season. In the winter, he wore a thick coat and wrapped a scarf around his neck, while in the summer he donned dark sunglasses and a cap. He

would drive around the city, shifting gears with great pleasure and looking up to take in passing clouds and birds perched on electric wires whenever he stopped at a traffic light. Those moments had been a key part of his life for many years. Kafuku walked slowly around his car, inspecting it closely like a horse before a race.

His wife had still been alive when he had purchased it new. She had chosen the yellow color. During the first few years, they had often gone out for drives together. Since his wife didn't have a license, Kafuku had always been the one behind the wheel. They had taken a number of road trips as well, to places like Izu, Hakone, and Nasu. Yet, for what was now nearly ten years, he had always driven alone. He had seen several women since his wife's death, but none had ever sat beside him in the passenger seat. For some reason, the opportunity had never arisen. Nor had he ever taken the car outside the city, apart from those times when work made it necessary.

"There's some inevitable wear and tear, but she's in good shape," Oba said, running his palm over the dashboard, as if stroking the neck of a large dog. "Totally reliable. Swedish cars of this age are built to last. You have to keep your eye on the electrical system, but they're fundamentally sound. And I've been looking after this baby really well."

While Kafuku was signing the necessary papers and going over the itemized bill, the young woman showed up. She was about five foot five, not at all fat but broad-shouldered and powerfully built. There was an oval-shaped, purple birthmark to the right of the nape of her neck that she seemed to have no qualms exposing. Her thick jet-black hair was fastened at the back, to keep it out of her way. No matter how you looked at her she was hardly a beauty, and

there was something off-putting about her face, as Oba had suggested. The remnants of teenage acne dotted her cheeks. She had big, strikingly clear eyes that looked out suspiciously on the world, their dark brown irises all the more striking because of their size. Her large, protruding ears were like satellite dishes placed in some remote landscape. She was wearing a man's herringbone jacket that was a bit too heavy for May, brown cotton pants, and a pair of black Converse sneakers. Beneath the white long-sleeved T-shirt under her jacket Kafuku could see her larger-than-average breasts.

Oba introduced her to Kafuku. Her name was Watari. Misaki Watari.

"There are no kanji for Misaki—it's written in hiragana," she said. "If you need a résumé I can get you one." Kafuku detected a note of defiance in her voice.

"No need for a résumé at this stage," he said, shaking his head. "You can handle a manual shift, correct?"

"I prefer manual," she said in an icy tone. She sounded like a staunch vegetarian who had just been asked if she ate lettuce.

"It's an old car, so there's no GPS."

"I don't need it. I worked as a courier for a while. I've got a map of the city in my head."

"Why don't we take a little test drive? The weather's good so we can put the top down."

"Where would you like to go?"

Kafuku thought for a moment. They were not far from Shinohashi.

"Take a right at the Tengenji intersection and then drive to the underground parking lot at the Meijiya supermarket, so I can do a bit of shopping. After that we'll head up the slope to Arisugawa Park, and then down past the French

embassy and onto Gaien Nishi Dori. Then we'll swing back here."

"Got it," she said. She asked for no further details about the route. Taking the key from Oba, she quickly adjusted the driver's seat and the mirrors. It appeared she already knew where all the buttons and levers were located. She stepped on the clutch and tested the gears. Then she pulled a pair of green Ray-Ban sunglasses from the pocket of her jacket and put them on. She turned and nodded to Kafuku to signal she was ready to go.

"A cassette player," she said as if to herself, glancing at the audio system.

"I like cassettes," Kafuku said. "They're easier than CDs. I use them to rehearse my lines."

"Haven't seen one of those for a while."

"When I started driving they were all eight-track players," Kafuku said.

Misaki didn't reply, but her expression suggested eight-track players were something new to her.

As Oba had guaranteed, she was an excellent driver. She operated the car smoothly, with no sudden jerks. The road was crowded, with frequent stoplights, but she was focused on changing gears smoothly. The movement of her eyes told him that. When he closed his own eyes, though, he found it next to impossible to tell when she shifted. Only the sound of the engine let him know which gear the car was in. The touch of her foot on the brake and accelerator pedals was light and careful. Best of all, she was entirely relaxed. In fact, she seemed more at ease when driving. Her blunt, impersonal expression became softer, and her eyes gentler. Yet she was every bit as taciturn. She would answer his questions and nothing more.

The absence of conversation didn't bother Kafuku. He wasn't good at small talk. While he didn't dislike talking to people he knew well about things that mattered, he otherwise preferred to remain silent. He sat back in the passenger seat and idly watched the city streets go by. After years behind the wheel, the view from where he now sat seemed fresh and new.

He had her parallel park several times on busy Gaien Nishi Dori, a test she passed easily with a minimum of wasted effort. She had a good feel for the car, and her timing was perfect. She smoked only when they were stopped at traffic lights. Marlboros seemed her brand of choice. The moment the light changed she snuffed out the cigarette. Her butts had no lipstick on them. Nor were her fingernails polished or manicured. She seemed to wear virtually no makeup.

"Mind if I ask you a few questions?" Kafuku said when they were approaching Arisugawa Park.

"Go right ahead."

"Where did you learn to drive?"

"I grew up in Hokkaido, in the mountains. I started driving in my early teens. You have to have a car in a place like that. The roads are icy almost half the year. You can't avoid becoming a good driver."

"But you don't learn how to parallel park in the mountains, do you?"

She didn't answer that. Doubtless she found the question not worth bothering with.

"Did Oba explain to you why I need a driver all of a sudden?"

Misaki answered in a flat, emotionless voice, her eyes trained on the traffic ahead. "You're an actor, and you're on stage six days a week at the moment. You have always

driven to the theater. You don't like taxis or taking the subway. That's because you rehearse your lines on the way. Not long ago you had a minor accident and your license was suspended. Because you'd been drinking a little, and there was a problem with your eyesight."

Kafuku nodded. It felt as if someone were describing her dream to him.

"The eye exam the police required turned up a trace of glaucoma. It appears I have a blind spot. On the right side, in the corner. I had no idea."

The amount of alcohol involved was negligible, so they had been able to hush it up. No one had leaked it to the media. But theater management couldn't ignore the problem with his eyesight. As things stood, a car might approach him from behind on his right side, and he would miss seeing it. Management thus insisted that he stop driving, at least until tests showed the problem had been fixed.

"Mr. Kafuku?" Misaki asked. "Is it all right if I call you that? It's not a stage name?"

"It's an unusual name, but it's really mine," Kafuku said. "The kanji mean 'House of Good Fortune.' Sounds auspicious, but there hasn't been any payoff as far as I can see. None of my relatives are what you could call wealthy."

After a period of silence, Kafuku told her the chauffeur's salary. Not a lot of money. But it was all his theater could afford. Although his name was well known, he wasn't famous like TV and movie stars, and there was a limit to how much money could be made on the stage. For an actor of his class, hiring a personal driver, even if only for a few months, was an exceptional luxury.

"Your work schedule will be subject to change, but these days my life is centered around the theater, which means

your mornings are basically free. You can sleep till noon if you wish. I'll make sure you can quit by eleven at night—if I have to work later than that I'll take a taxi home. You will have one day off every week."

"I accept," Misaki said simply.

"The work shouldn't be that taxing. The hard part will be waiting around for hours with nothing to do."

Misaki did not respond. Her lips were set in a straight line. The look on her face said that she had tackled far more difficult jobs.

"I don't mind if you smoke while the top is down," Kafuku said. "But please don't when it's up."

"Agreed."

"Do you have any conditions?"

"Nothing in particular." She narrowed her eyes as she carefully downshifted. "I like the car," she added.

They drove the rest of the way without talking. When they arrived back at the garage, Kafuku called Oba over to give him the news. "I've decided to hire her," he announced.

—

Misaki started working as Kafuku's personal driver the next day. She would arrive at his Ebisu apartment building at half past three in the afternoon, take the yellow Saab from the underground garage, and drive him to a theater in Ginza. They drove with the top down unless it was raining. Kafuku practiced his lines on the way, reciting with the cassette recording. The play was a Meijiera adaptation of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*. He played the role of Uncle Vanya. He knew the lines by heart, but ran through them anyway

to calm his nerves before a performance. This was his long-standing habit.

As a rule, they listened to Beethoven string quartets on the way home. Kafuku never tired of them—he found them perfectly suited to thinking or, if he preferred, thinking about nothing at all. If he wanted something lighter, he chose classic American rock. Groups like the Beach Boys, the Rascals, CCR, the Temptations, and so on. The popular music of his youth. Misaki never commented on his selection. He couldn't tell if his music pleased or pained her, or if she was listening at all, for that matter. She was a young woman who didn't show her emotions.

Under normal circumstances, Kafuku found reciting his lines in the presence of others stressful, but those inhibitions vanished with Misaki. In that sense, he appreciated her lack of expressiveness and her cool, distant personality. He might roar beside her while he rehearsed, but she acted as though she heard nothing. Indeed it was quite possible that her attention was solely focused on the road. Perhaps driving put her in a Zen-like frame of mind.

Kafuku had no idea what Misaki thought of him as a person. Was she kindly disposed, or unimpressed and disinterested, or did she loathe him and put up with him just to keep her job? He was in the dark. But it didn't matter to him all that much how she felt. He liked her smooth and assured driving, her lack of chatter, and the way she kept her feelings to herself.

After the night's performance ended, Kafuku washed off his stage makeup, changed his clothes, and left the theater as quickly as possible. He didn't like dawdling. He knew almost none of his fellow actors. He would call Misaki on his cell phone and have her drive to the stage door to pick him up. When he stepped outside, the yellow Saab would

be waiting for him. By the time he got back to his Ebisu apartment, it would be a little after ten thirty. This pattern repeated itself on a nightly basis.

He had other work as well. He spent one day a week shooting a drama series at a TV studio in the middle of the city. It was your garden-variety detective show, but the audience was large and it paid well. He played a fortune-teller who assisted the female lead detective. To prepare for the role, he had dressed in fortune-teller's garb and set up a booth on the street, where he told the fortunes of a number of passersby. Word had it that many of his prognostications had hit the mark. When his day of shooting ended he went straight from the studio to the theater in Ginza. That was the risky part. On weekends, after the matinee, he would teach a night class at an acting school. He loved working with young actors. Misaki ferried him around for all these activities. She drove him from place to place without the slightest fuss, always on time, so that Kafuku grew used to sitting beside her in the Saab's passenger seat. On occasion, he even fell fast asleep.

When the weather grew warmer, Misaki replaced her herringbone jacket with a lighter summer jacket. She always wore a jacket while working. Probably it was her equivalent of a chauffeur's uniform. With the rainy season, the roof remained up more frequently.

Sitting there in the passenger seat, Kafuku often thought of his dead wife. For some reason, he recalled her more frequently now that Misaki was doing the driving. His wife had been an actor too, a stunning woman two years his junior. Kafuku was what was generally known as a character actor, hired to play supporting roles that were quirky in some way or other. He had a long and narrow face, and had begun to grow bald while he was still quite

young. Not the leading-man type. His beautiful wife, on the other hand, was a real leading lady, and her roles and income reflected that status. As they got older, however, he became known as a skilled actor with a distinctive persona, while her star began to wane. But they both respected the other's work, and so the shifts in their popularity and income never caused problems.

Kafuku adored his wife. He had fallen deeply in love with her when they first met (he was twenty-nine), and this feeling had remained unchanged until the day she died (he had been forty-nine then). He hadn't slept with another woman in all their years of marriage. The urge had never arisen, although he had received his fair share of opportunities.

His wife, however, slept with other men on occasion. As far as he knew, there had been four such affairs. In other words, there were four men who had shared her bed for periods of time. She had never breathed a word to him, of course, but still it hadn't taken him long to figure out that she was sleeping with some other man in some other place. Kafuku had a sixth sense about such things, and his love for her made it impossible for him to ignore the signs, however much he would have liked to. It was easy to tell who her lovers were from the way she talked about them. Invariably, they were fellow actors working on the same film. Most were younger. The relationship would continue for the few months they were shooting the movie and die a natural death when the filming stopped. The same thing had happened four times, always following the same pattern.

Kafuku hadn't understood why she felt the need to sleep with other men. And he still didn't. Their relationship as a married couple and as life partners had been excellent from the beginning. When time permitted, they talked with

passion and honesty about a wide variety of subjects, and tried to trust one another. He had thought they were a most compatible pair, both spiritually and sexually. Others in their circle also regarded them as an ideal match.

He regretted that he had not summoned his resolve while she was still alive to question her about her affairs. It was a regret that visited him frequently. He had been oh-so-close to asking her. He would have said, What were you looking for in those other men? What did you find lacking in me? But it had been mere months before the end, and she was suffering terribly as she struggled against her approaching death. He didn't have the heart to demand an answer. Then, without a word of explanation, she had vanished from Kafuku's world. The question never ventured, the answer never proffered. He was lost in those thoughts at the crematorium as he plucked her bones from the ashes. So lost that when someone whispered in his ear, Kafuku did not hear him.

Needless to say, picturing his wife in the arms of another man was painful for Kafuku. It could be no other way. When he closed his eyes, the details of their love-making would rise unbidden and then fade away, only to rise again. He didn't want to imagine such things, but he couldn't help it. The images whittled away at him like a sharp knife, steady and unrelenting. There were times he thought it would have been far better to never have known. Yet he continued to return to his core principle: that, in every situation, knowledge was better than ignorance. However agonizing, it was necessary to confront the facts. Only through knowing could a person become strong.

The most excruciating thing, though, had been maintaining a normal life knowing his partner's secret—the effort it required to keep her in the dark. Smiling calmly

when his heart was torn and his insides were bleeding. Behaving as if everything was fine while the two of them took care of the daily chores, chatted, made love at night. This was not something that a normal person could pull off. But Kafuku was a professional actor. Shedding his self, his flesh and blood, in order to inhabit a role was his calling. And he embraced this one with all his might. A role performed without an audience.

Yet if you put these things aside—excluded, in other words, the fact that she conducted occasional affairs with other men—their married life was calm and contented. Their careers proceeded smoothly, and they had no financial worries. Over the course of their nearly twenty years together, they made love countless times; for him, at least, the sex had been entirely satisfying. After she contracted uterine cancer and, in what seemed a mere instant later, passed away, he had been lucky enough to meet several women who, in the natural course of things, he had taken to bed. Yet he never experienced the same intimate joy with them that he had with his wife. All he felt was a mild sense of *déjà vu*, as if he were reenacting a scene from his past.

—

His management office needed specific information to process Misaki's paychecks, so Kafuku had to ask her to provide her address, the location of her family register, her birth date, and her driver's license number. She was living in an apartment in downtown Akabane, her family register was in Junitakicho on the island of Hokkaido, and she had just turned twenty-four. Kafuku had no idea where

Junitakicho was in Hokkaido. But the fact that she was twenty-four grabbed his attention.

Kafuku's wife had given birth to a baby who had lived only three days. It was a girl. She died on her third night in the hospital nursery. Her heart stopped without warning. When they found her the next morning, she was already cold. The hospital said that she had been born with a defective heart. There had been no way to verify their story. Nor would finding the true cause of death have restored her to life. For better or for worse, they had not yet given her a name. Had she lived, she would have been twenty-four years old. Kafuku always marked the birthday of this nameless child by joining his hands in prayer. Then he would think about how old she would have been.

As one would expect, the sudden death of their child wounded Kafuku and his wife, suspending them in a dark, heavy void. It took them a very long time to get back on their feet. They secluded themselves in their apartment, where for much of the time they lived in virtual silence. Words, they felt, could only cheapen the emotions they were feeling. She took to drinking immoderate amounts of wine. He, for a time, became a passionate, almost fanatical practitioner of calligraphy. It was as if he felt that the black symbols flowing from his brush onto the pure white paper could somehow lay bare the workings of his heart.

Nevertheless, by supporting each other, slowly but surely, the two of them recovered from their wounds enough to pass through that dangerous period. Their focus on work became even more intense. When they took on new roles, they immersed themselves totally, voraciously. She told him that she had no further desire for children, and he agreed. They would make sure she never got pregnant again. He was happy to do whatever she wanted.

Thinking back, he realized that it was at that time that her love affairs began. Perhaps the loss of their child had reawakened her sexual desire. But that was pure conjecture on his part. Nothing more than another “perhaps.”

—

“Can I ask you something?” Misaki said.

Kafuku had been looking out the window at the passing scenery, lost in thought. He turned to her in surprise. They had been driving around together for two months, and rarely had she initiated a conversation.

“Of course,” Kafuku said.

“Why did you become an actor?”

“A college friend of mine, a girl, asked me to join her theater club. I’d never been interested in acting. I wanted to play baseball. I’d been the starting shortstop on my high school team, and was pretty confident of my defensive ability. But I wasn’t quite good enough for our college team. So I figured, what the heck, I might as well take a stab at something new. I wanted to spend more time with that girl, too. After I’d been acting for a while, though, it dawned on me that I really liked it. Performing allowed me to be someone other than myself. And I could revert back when the performance ended. I really loved that.”

“You loved being someone other than yourself?”

“Yes, as long as I knew I could go back.”

“Did you ever not want to go back?”

Kafuku thought for a moment. No one had asked him that before. They were heading for the Takebashi exit on the Tokyo Metropolitan Expressway, and the road was jammed.

"There's no other place to go back to, is there?" Kafuku said.

Misaki didn't venture an opinion.

They were silent for a while. Kafuku removed his baseball cap, inspected its shape, and stuck it back on his head. Next to them was a tractor trailer with too many wheels to count, a huge rig that made their yellow Saab convertible feel transitory, ephemeral. Like a tiny sightseeing boat floating next to an oil tanker.

"This may be out of line," Misaki said, "but it's been on my mind. Is it okay if I ask?"

"Shoot," Kafuku said.

"Why don't you have any friends?"

Kafuku looked questioningly at Misaki's profile. "How do you know I don't have any?"

Misaki shrugged. "I've been driving you around for two months now, so I guess I can figure out that much."

Kafuku studied the tractor trailer's enormous tires for a long moment. "There haven't been many people I could call true friends," he finally said. "I wonder why."

"Even when you were a child?"

"No, I had lots of pals back then. But once I grew up I no longer felt the need for them. Especially after I got married."

"Having a wife meant you no longer needed friends?"

"I guess so. She and I were great pals too, after all."

"How old were you when you got married?"

"Thirty. We were in the same movie. She had a major supporting role, and I had a bit part."

The car inched its way forward through the traffic jam. The roof was closed, as it always was when they drove on the expressway.

"You don't drink at all?" Kafuku changed the subject.

"My body can't handle alcohol," Misaki said. "And my mother was a problem drinker, which may have something to do with it."

"Does her drinking still cause problems?"

Misaki shook her head from side to side. "My mother's dead. She was driving drunk, lost control of the steering wheel, went into a spin, and flew off the road and into a tree. She died almost instantly. I was seventeen."

"Poor woman," Kafuku said.

"What goes around comes around," Misaki said without emotion. "It was bound to happen sooner or later. The only question was when."

They were silent for a while.

"And your father?"

"I don't know where he is. He left home when I was eight and I haven't seen him since. Haven't heard from him, either. Mother always blamed me for his leaving."

"Why?"

"I was their only child. If I'd been prettier, Father never would have left. That's what Mother always said. It's because I was born ugly that he abandoned us."

"You're not ugly," Kafuku said quietly. "Your mother just preferred to think of it that way."

Misaki gave a slight shrug. "Normally she wasn't like that, but when she was drinking, she just went on and on. Repeated the same stuff over and over again. It hurt me. It's bad, I know, but I was relieved when she died."

This time the silence was even longer.

"Do you have friends?" Kafuku inquired.

Misaki shook her head. "Not a single one."

"Why?"

She didn't answer. With her eyes narrowed, she focused on the road.

Kafuku tried to take a nap, but sleep wouldn't come. The car edged forward and stopped, edged forward and stopped, as Misaki deftly shifted gears. In the adjacent lane, the tractor trailer moved ahead and fell behind, like the shadow cast by some enormous fate.

Kafuku gave up trying to sleep. "The last time I became friends with someone was nearly ten years ago," he said, opening his eyes. "Perhaps 'someone like a friend' would be more accurate. He was six or seven years younger than me, a heck of a nice guy. He liked to drink, so we drank and talked about all kinds of things."

Misaki nodded and waited for him to continue. Kafuku hesitated for a moment before plunging in.

"To tell you the truth, he was one of my wife's lovers. He didn't know that I knew, though."

It took Misaki a long moment to get her head around what she had just heard. "You mean he was having sex with your wife?" she said at last.

"That's right. I think he was having sex with my wife on a regular basis for three or four months."

"How did you know?"

"She hid it from me, of course, but I could tell. It would take too long to explain how. But there was no question. My imagination wasn't playing tricks on me."

When they stopped for a moment, Misaki reached up with both hands to adjust the rearview mirror. "Didn't that get in the way of your friendship?"

"Quite the opposite," Kafuku said. "I made him my friend precisely because he had slept with my wife."

Misaki didn't say anything. She waited for him to go on.

"How can I put this...I wanted to understand. Why she slept with him, why he was the one she wanted. At least that was my motive in the beginning."

Misaki took a long, deep breath. Her chest rose beneath her jacket, then sank back. "But wasn't that awfully painful? Drinking and talking with a man you knew had slept with your wife?"

"It wasn't easy," Kafuku said. "It made me think things I would prefer to have ignored. Remember things I would rather have forgotten. But I was acting. That is my profession, after all."

"Becoming somebody different," Misaki said.

"That's right."

"And then going back to who you are."

"That's right," Kafuku said. "Whether you want to or not. But the place you return to is always slightly different from the place you left. That's the rule. It can never be exactly the same."

A fine rain began to fall. Misaki turned on the wipers. "So then did you figure it out? Why your wife slept with him?"

"No." Kafuku said, shaking his head. "I never understood. He had some qualities that I lacked. All right, *a lot* of qualities, I guess. But I could never figure out which of those had caught her fancy. Our actions aren't based on specifics like that—we can't pinpoint why we do what we do. Relationships between people, especially between men and women, operate on—what should I say—a more general level. More vague, more self-centered, more pathetic."

Misaki thought for a moment. "But still," she said, "you stayed friends with him even though you didn't understand, right?"

Kafuku took off his baseball cap again and placed it on his lap. "It's hard to explain," he said, rubbing the top of his head with his palm. "Once you really get into a role, it's

hard to find the right moment to stop. No matter how it preys on your emotions, you have to go with the flow until the performance has taken its shape, the point where its true meaning becomes clear. It's the same with music. A song doesn't reach a proper end until it arrives at a final, predetermined chord. Do you understand what I mean?"

Misaki drew a Marlboro from her pack and placed it between her lips. But she never smoked when the top was up, and it stayed unlit.

"So was the guy still sleeping with your wife when you were friends?"

"No, he wasn't," said Kafuku. "If he had been, it would have made things, how should I say...too complicated. We became friends not long after my wife's death."

"So were you *real* friends? Or was it all just acting?"

Kafuku thought for a while. "It was both. It's gotten so I have a hard time drawing a clear line between the two. In the end, that's what serious acting is all about."

—

From the beginning, Kafuku had been able to feel something approaching affection for the man. His name was Takatsuki, and he was a tall, good-looking fellow, the classic romantic lead. He was in his early forties and not an especially skilled actor. Nor did he have what one could call a distinctive presence. His range of roles was limited. As a general rule, he played nice guys, although sometimes a touch of melancholy would cloud his otherwise cheerful profile. He had a loyal following among middle-aged women. Kafuku bumped into him on occasion in the green room at the TV studio. Some six months after his wife's death, Takatsuki came up to introduce himself and express

his condolences. "Your wife and I were in a film together once. I owed her a lot," Takatsuki said humbly. Kafuku thanked him. As far as he knew at that point, chronologically speaking, this man was the last of his wife's string of lovers. It was soon after the end of their affair that his wife had gone to the hospital for tests and been diagnosed with advanced uterine cancer.

"Forgive me, but I'd like to ask a favor," Kafuku said when the formalities had concluded. This was his chance to broach what he had in mind.

"Is there something I can do?"

"If it's all right with you, I'd like you to grant me some of your time. To talk about my wife. Maybe have a few drinks and remember her together. She often spoke of you."

Takatsuki looked surprised. Perhaps shocked would be more accurate. His immaculate eyebrows inched together as he cautiously studied Kafuku's face. He seemed to be trying to discern what, if anything, might lie behind the invitation. But he could read no intent in the older man's expression. All he saw was the kind of stillness you might expect from someone who had recently lost his wife of many years. Like the surface of a pond after the ripples had spread and gone.

"I was only hoping to talk about my wife with someone who knew her," Kafuku added. "To tell the truth, it can get kind of rough when I'm sitting at home all by myself. I know it's an imposition on you, though."

Takatsuki looked relieved. His relationship with the man's wife did not seem to be under suspicion.

"It's no imposition at all. I'd be happy to make time for something like that. I just hope I won't bore you." A faint smile rose to his lips as he said these words, and the corners of his eyes crinkled with compassion. An altogether

charming expression. If I were a middle-aged woman, thought Kafuku, my cheeks would be turning pink right now.

Takatsuki mentally flipped through the schedule he kept in his head. "I think I have plenty of time tomorrow night. Do you have other plans?"

Kafuku replied that he was also free then. He was struck by how easy it was to read Takatsuki's emotions. The man was transparent—if he looked into his eyes long enough, Kafuku thought, he could probably see the wall behind him. There was nothing warped, nothing nasty. Hardly the type to dig a deep hole at night and wait for someone to fall in. But neither, in all likelihood, was he a man destined to achieve greatness as an actor.

"Where shall we meet?" asked Takatsuki.

"I leave it to you," Kafuku said. "Tell me a place, and I'll be there."

Takatsuki named a well-known bar in Ginza. He would reserve a booth, he said, so that they could talk frankly without having to worry about being overheard. Kafuku knew the spot. They shook hands goodbye. Takatsuki's hand was soft, with long slender fingers. His palm was warm and slightly damp, as if he had been sweating. Perhaps he was nervous.

After he left, Kafuku sat down on a chair in the green room, opened his right hand, and stared hard at his palm. The sensation left by the handshake was still fresh. *That hand*, those fingers, had caressed his wife's naked body. Slowly and deliberately, exploring every nook and cranny. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. What in heaven's name was he trying to do? He felt that whatever "it" was, he had no choice but to go ahead and do it.

As he sipped single malt whiskey in the booth at the bar, Kafuku came to one conclusion. Takatsuki was still deeply attached to his wife. He had not yet grasped the immutable fact of her death, that the flesh he had known had become a pile of charred bone and ash. Kafuku could understand the way he felt. When Takatsuki's eyes grew misty recalling her, he wanted to reach out to console him. The man was quite incapable of hiding his emotions. Kafuku sensed that he could trip him up with a trick question if he so chose, induce him to confess everything.

Judging from the way Takatsuki spoke, Kafuku's wife had been the one to call a halt to their affair. "It's best we not meet anymore," was probably how she had put it. And she had followed through on her words. A relationship of several months brought to a sudden close. Nothing long and drawn out. As far as Kafuku knew, that was the pattern of all her amours (if they could be called that). But it seemed that Takatsuki couldn't handle such a quick and casual break. He must have been hoping for a more permanent bond.

Takatsuki had tried to visit her during the final phase of her cancer, but had been flatly refused. After she was admitted to the city hospital, she saw almost no one. Other than hospital staff, only three people were permitted in her room: her mother, her sister, and Kafuku. Takatsuki seemed filled with regret that he had not been able to see her during that time. He had not even known she had cancer until a few weeks before her death. The news had hit him like a thunderbolt, and still hadn't entirely sunk in. Kafuku could relate to that. Yet their feelings were far from identical. Kafuku had watched his wife waste away day by

day as the end drew near, and had plucked her pure-white bones from the ashes at the crematorium. He had passed through all the stages. That made a huge difference.

As they reminisced about his wife, it hit Kafuku that he was the one doing most of the consoling. How would his wife feel if she observed them sitting together like this? The idea aroused a strange emotion in Kafuku. But he doubted the dead could think or feel anything. In his opinion, that was one of the great things about dying.

One other thing was becoming clear. Takatsuki drank way too much. There were many heavy drinkers in Kafuku's line of work—why were actors so susceptible to alcohol?—so he could tell Takatsuki's drinking was not the healthy, wholesome kind. In Kafuku's considered opinion, there were two types of drinkers: those who drank to enhance their personalities, and those who sought to rid themselves of something. Takatsuki clearly belonged to the latter group.

Kafuku could not tell what it was he was trying to get rid of. Maybe weakness in his character, or trauma from his past. Or perhaps something in the present was causing his problem. Or maybe a combination of all those things. Whatever it was, he was trying like mad either to forget it or to numb the pain it caused, which made it necessary to drink. For every drink Kafuku took, Takatsuki downed two and a half. Quite a pace.

Then again, he might have just been tense. He was, after all, sitting face-to-face with the husband of the woman with whom he had been secretly having an affair. That was bound to put him on edge. But Kafuku guessed there was more to it. A man like Takatsuki could probably only drink this way.

Kafuku drank at a careful, steady rate while keeping a close eye on his companion. When the number of glasses mounted and the younger man began to relax, Kafuku asked him if he was married. I've been married ten years and have a seven-year-old son, Takatsuki answered. Due to certain circumstances, however, he and his wife had been living apart since the previous year. A divorce was likely, and the question of who would get custody of the child loomed large. What he wanted to avoid at any cost was being unable to visit his son freely. He needed the boy in his life. He showed Kafuku his child's photograph. A handsome, sweet-looking kid.

Like most habitual drinkers, the more alcohol Takatsuki drank the more loose-lipped he became. He volunteered information he shouldn't have without being asked. Kafuku took on the role of listener, interjecting an encouraging word here and there to keep his companion talking and offering carefully selected words of comfort when consolation seemed appropriate. All the while he was amassing as much information as he could. Kafuku acted as though he had only the warmest feelings for Takatsuki. This was not a hard thing to do. He was a born listener, and he did *truly* like the younger man. In addition, the two of them had one big thing in common: both were still in love with the same beautiful, dead woman. Despite the differences in their relationships with her, neither man had been able to get over that loss. They had a lot to talk about.

"Why don't we meet again?" Kafuku suggested when the evening was winding down. "It was a pleasure talking with you. I haven't felt this good for a long time." Kafuku had taken care of the bar tab in advance. It seemed not to have dawned on Takatsuki that someone would have to pay.

Alcohol led him to forget a lot of things. Some were doubtless very important.

"Certainly," Takatsuki said, looking up from his glass. "I'd love to get together again. Talking to you has taken a weight off my chest."

"I feel that our meeting was somehow preordained," Kafuku said. "Perhaps my late wife brought us together."

There was some truth to that.

They exchanged cell phone numbers. Then they shook hands and parted.

—

Thus the two men became friends. Drinking buddies, to be more accurate. They would get in touch, meet at a bar, and talk about a variety of subjects. Not once did they share a meal. Bars were their only venue. Kafuku had never seen Takatsuki eat anything more substantial than a light snack to accompany his liquor. For all he knew, the guy might never eat solid food. Except for the occasional beer, the only drink he ever ordered was whiskey. Single malt was his preference.

Their topics varied, but at some point the conversation would always return to Kafuku's dead wife. Kafuku told stories from her younger days while Takatsuki listened intently. He looked like a researcher probing a key subject's memory to assemble a comprehensive database about someone else. Kafuku found himself enjoying those moments.

One night, the two were drinking in Aoyama at a small, nondescript bar tucked away on a narrow lane behind the Nezu Museum. The bartender was a quiet man of about forty, and a skinny gray cat was curled up on a display shelf

in a corner of the room. It appeared to be an alley cat that had moved in for the time being. An old jazz record was spinning on the turntable. Both men liked the feel of the place, and had gone there several times before. For some reason, it often rained on the nights they met, and this night was no exception—a thin drizzle was falling outside.

“She was a wonderful woman,” Takatsuki said, studying his hands on the table. They were attractive hands for a man already in middle age. There were no wrinkles around his eyes, either, and his fingernails were tended with care. “You were fortunate to find her, Mr. Kafuku, and to have shared a life together.”

“You’re right,” Kafuku said. “I guess I was happy then. But that much happiness can lead to an equal amount of pain.”

“In what way?”

Kafuku picked up his glass and swirled the chunk of ice in it. “I worried that I might lose her. Just imagining that made my heart ache.”

“I know that feeling,” Takatsuki said.

“How so?”

“I mean...,” Takatsuki said, groping for the right words. “Losing someone that wonderful.”

“In general.”

“Yes,” Takatsuki said. He nodded several times, as if trying to convince himself. “I can only imagine what it must be like.”

Kafuku fell silent. He let the silence linger as long as possible. At last he spoke.

“In the end, though, I lost her. Gradually, in the beginning, then completely. Like something that is eroded bit by bit. The process began slowly until finally a tidal

wave swept it all away, the roots and everything... Understand what I mean?"

"I think I do."

Like hell you do, Kafuku said in his heart.

"Here's what hurts the most," Kafuku said. "I didn't *truly* understand her—or at least some crucial part of her. And it may well end that way now that she's dead and gone. Like a small, locked safe lying at the bottom of the ocean. It hurts a lot."

Takatsuki thought for a moment before speaking.

"But, Mr. Kafuku, can any of us ever perfectly understand another person? However much we may love them?"

"We lived together for nearly twenty years," Kafuku said. "As man and wife, but also as trusted friends. We were able to talk frankly about anything and everything, or so I thought. But maybe it wasn't really like that. Perhaps—how should I put this?—I had what amounted to a fatal blind spot."

"Blind spot," Takatsuki echoed.

"There was something inside her, something important, that I must have missed. If I saw it, perhaps I failed to recognize it for what it really was."

Takatsuki chewed his lip for a minute. He drained his glass and called over to the bartender to bring him another drink.

"I know what you mean," he said.

Kafuku stared hard at him. Takatsuki met his gaze for a few seconds and then looked away.

"In what sense do you know?" Kafuku said in a low voice.

The bartender brought a fresh glass of whiskey on ice and replaced Takatsuki's wet coaster with a new one. They

remained silent until he had left.

"In what sense do you know?" Kafuku repeated.

Takatsuki pondered this question for a moment. Kafuku glimpsed movement in his eyes. He's wavering, he concluded. Battling the urge to reveal something. In the end, though, Takatsuki managed to calm whatever had shaken him.

"I don't think we can ever understand all that a woman is thinking," he said. "That's what I wanted to say. No matter who that woman may be. So I doubt the blind spot you speak of is yours alone. If that's what you wish to call it, then we men are all living with the same sort of blind spot. So I don't think you should blame yourself."

"All the same, you're speaking in generalities," Kafuku said, after some thought.

"That's true," said Takatsuki.

"But I'm talking about my dead wife and me. I don't want to jump to general principles so easily."

"From what I can gather," Takatsuki said after a long silence, "your wife was a wonderful woman. I am convinced of that even as I realize my knowledge of her is no more than a hundredth of yours. If nothing else, you should feel grateful for having been able to spend twenty years of your life with such a person. But the proposition that we can look into another person's heart with perfect clarity strikes me as a fool's game. I don't care how well we think we should understand them, or how much we love them. All it can do is cause us pain. Examining your own heart, however, is another matter. I think it's possible to see what's in there if you work hard enough at it. So in the end maybe that's the challenge: to look inside your own heart as perceptively and seriously as you can, and to make peace with what you find there. If we hope to *truly* see

another person, we have to start by looking within ourselves.”

Takatsuki’s speech seemed to have emerged from deep within him. A hidden door had swung open, if only temporarily. His words were clear and charged with conviction. He wasn’t acting, that was for sure. His acting chops weren’t that good. Kafuku said nothing, just looked straight into his eyes. This time Takatsuki met his gaze and held it for a long time. They could see a certain sparkle of recognition in each other’s eyes.

They shook hands once again on parting. A fine rain was falling outside. After Takatsuki had walked off into the drizzle in his beige raincoat, Kafuku, as was his habit, looked down at his right palm. It was *that hand* that had caressed my wife’s naked body, he thought.

Yet on this day, that thought did not suffocate him. Instead, his reaction was, yes, such things do happen. They do happen. After all, it’s just a matter of flesh and blood. No more than a pile of bone and ash in the end, right? There has to be something more important than that.

If that’s what you wish to call it, then we men are all living with the same sort of blind spot. The words rang in his ear for a very long time.

“So did the friendship last?” Misaki asked, her eyes fixed on the line of cars in front of them.

“It continued for about six months, give or take. We’d get together at a bar every two weeks or so and drink together,” Kafuku said. “Then it ended. I ignored his phone

calls. Made no attempt to contact him. After a while he stopped calling."

"I bet he found that strange."

"Probably."

"You may have hurt his feelings."

"I guess so."

"Why did you break it off so suddenly?"

"Because there was no need to keep acting."

"You mean there was no need to stay friends once you didn't have to act?"

"Yes, there was that," Kafuku said. "But there was another reason too."

"What was it?"

Kafuku fell silent. Misaki glanced at him occasionally, the unlit cigarette clamped between her lips.

"Go ahead and smoke if you want," Kafuku said.

"Huh?"

"You can light that thing."

"But the top is closed."

"I don't care."

Misaki lowered her window, lit the Marlboro with the car lighter, and took a deep drag. Her eyes narrowed in pleasure. She exhaled slowly, directing the smoke out the window.

"Tobacco's a killer," Kafuku said.

"Being alive is a killer, if you think about it," Misaki said.

Kafuku laughed. "That's one way to see it."

"That's the first time I've seen you laugh," Misaki said.

She had a point, Kafuku thought. It had been a long time indeed since he had laughed, not as an act, but for real.

"I've been meaning to tell you this for a while," he said.

"But there's something very attractive about you. You're not homely at all, you know."

"Thank you very much. My features are plain, that's all. Like Sonya's."

Kafuku looked at Misaki in surprise. "I see you've read *Uncle Vanya*."

"I hear little bits of it every day, so I wanted to know what it was about. I get curious too, you know," Misaki said. "'Oh, how miserable I am! I can't stand it. Why was I born so poorly favored? The agony!' A sad play, isn't it."

"A sad play indeed," Kafuku said. "'Oh, how unbearable! Is there no help for me? I am forty-seven now. If I live till sixty I have thirteen more years to endure. Too long. How shall I pass those thirteen years? What will help me get through the days?' People only lived to about sixty back then. Uncle Vanya was fortunate he wasn't born into today's world."

"You were born the same year as my father. I checked."

Kafuku didn't respond. He took a handful of cassettes and scanned the songs on the labels. But he didn't play one. Misaki was holding the lit cigarette in her left hand with her arm out the window. Only when the line of cars crept forward and she had to use both hands to steer and shift gears did she place it between her lips for a moment.

"To be honest, I wanted to punish that guy," Kafuku said, as if confessing to something. "The guy who slept with my wife." He put the cassettes back in their containers.

"Punish him?"

"Make him pay for what he did. My plan was to put him off his guard by pretending to be his friend, find his fatal flaw, and use it to torture him."

"What kind of fatal flaw?" Misaki asked, knitting her brow in thought.

"I didn't think that far ahead. He was a guy who let his defenses down when he drank, so I was sure something

would turn up sooner or later. I could use whatever it was to cause a scandal—create a situation that would destroy his reputation. I figured it would be a piece of cake. Then when he went through his divorce arbitration, he'd probably lose the right to see his son, which would have been a terrible blow. I doubted he could recover from that."

"That's pretty dark."

"Yeah, it's dark for sure."

"And it was all to take revenge on him for sleeping with your wife?"

"It was slightly different from revenge," Kafuku said. "I wasn't able to forget what had taken place between them. I tried really hard. But I failed. The image of her in another man's arms was stuck in my mind, as real as life. As if there was a demon with nowhere else to go clinging to a corner of the ceiling, eyes fastened on me. After my wife's death, I expected the demon would disappear if I just waited long enough. But it didn't. Instead its presence grew even stronger. I had to get rid of it. To do that I had to let go of my rage."

Kafuku wondered why he was telling all this to a young woman from Junitakicho in Hokkaido, a girl young enough to be his daughter. Yet once he started, he found he couldn't stop.

"So you thought you'd try to punish him," the girl said.

"Yes, that's true."

"But you didn't, did you?"

"No, I didn't," Kafuku said.

Misaki looked relieved to hear that. She gave a small sigh and flicked her lit cigarette onto the road. He guessed that was what people did in Junitakicho.

"I can't explain it very well, but at a certain point a lot of things didn't seem like that big a deal anymore. Like the

demon had left me all of a sudden,” Kafuku said. “The rage vanished. Or maybe it was never rage in the first place.”

“Whatever it was, I’m glad for your sake that it left. That you never seriously hurt anyone.”

“I think so too.”

“But you never did figure out why your wife slept with that guy, why it had to be him, did you?”

“No, I never grasped that. It’s still a big question mark for me. He was a nice, uncomplicated guy. And I think he truly loved my wife. It wasn’t just a romp in the hay for him. Her death hit him hard. So did being turned away from her sickbed at the end. But I couldn’t help liking the guy, even thought we could become friends.”

Kafuku broke off. He was trying to trace the evolution of his feelings to find the words that best matched.

“In fact, though, he was a man of little consequence. He had a good personality. He was handsome, with a winning smile. He got along with everybody. But he wasn’t someone who commanded much respect. He was a weak man, and a second-rate actor. My wife, though, had a strong will and great depth of character. She was the type of person who could think things through on her own. So how could she fall for a nonentity like that and go to bed with him? It’s still a thorn in my heart.”

“It sounds like you feel insulted. Do you?”

Kafuku thought for a moment. She had a point. “You may be right,” he said.

“Isn’t it possible that your wife didn’t fall for him at all?” Misaki said simply. “And that’s why she slept with him?”

Kafuku looked at Misaki’s profile as if gazing at a distant landscape. She worked the wipers a few times to remove the drops from the windshield. The newly installed blades squeaked like a pair of squabbling twins.

"Women can be like that," Misaki added.

Kafuku couldn't think of what to say. So he kept silent.

"To me, it's a kind of sickness. Thinking about it doesn't do much good. The way my father walked out on my mother and me, my mother's constant abuse—I blame the sickness for those things. There's no logic involved. All I can do is accept what they did and try to get on with my life."

"So then we're all actors," Kafuku said.

"Yes, I think that's true. To a point, anyway."

Kafuku settled back in the leather seat, closed his eyes, and tried to focus his mind on the sound of the engine when Misaki shifted gears. But he couldn't catch the precise moment. It was all too smooth, too mysterious. He could only make out a slight gradation in the engine's hum. It was like the wings of a flying insect, now drawing closer, now fading away.

Time to take a nap, Kafuku thought. Sleep deeply and wake up. Ten or fifteen minutes would be enough. Then back to the stage, and the acting. The bright lights, the rehearsed lines. The applause, the falling curtain. Leaving who one was for a brief time, then returning. But the self that one returned to was never exactly the same as the self that one had left behind.

"I'm going to sleep a little," Kafuku said.

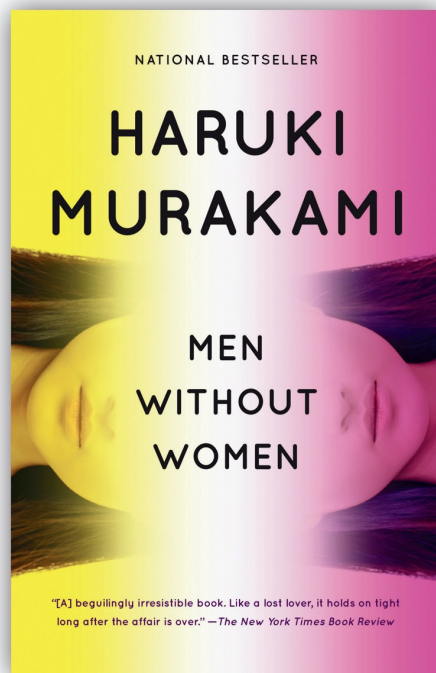
Misaki didn't answer. She quietly studied the road. Kafuku was grateful for her silence.

Translated by Ted Goossen

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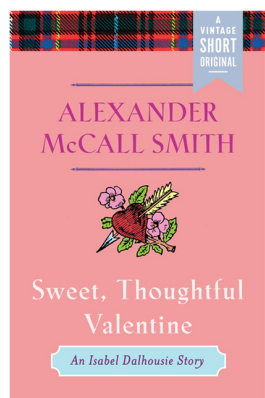


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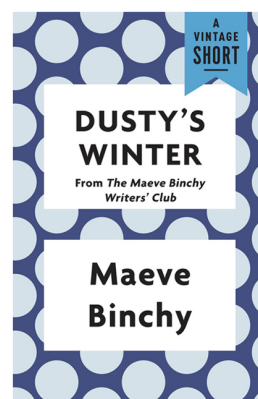
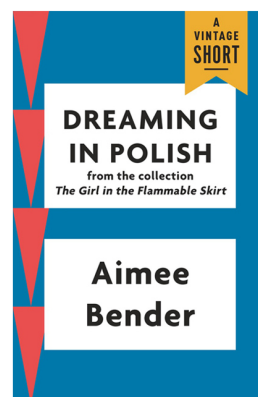
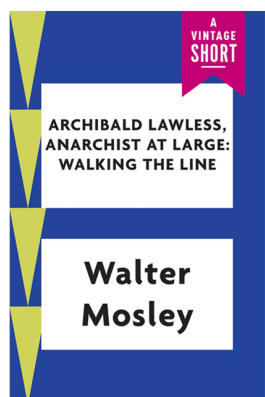
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