

THE NEW YORKER

FICTION

A SHINAGAWA MONKEY

by HARUKI MURAKAMI

Issue of 2006-02-13 and 20

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She sometimes had trouble remembering her own name. Usually this happened when someone unexpectedly asked what it was. She'd be at a boutique, getting the sleeves of a dress altered, and the saleswoman would say, "Your name, Ma'am?" and her mind would go blank. The only way she could remember it was to pull out her driver's license, which was bound to seem weird to the person she was talking to. Even if she was on the phone when it happened, the awkward silence as she rummaged through her purse inevitably made the person at the other end wonder what was going on.

She could remember everything else. She never forgot the names of the people around her. Her address, phone number, birthday, and passport number were no problem at all. She could rattle off her friends' phone numbers, and the numbers of important clients. And when she was the one who brought up her name she never had any trouble remembering it. As long as she knew in advance what to expect, her memory was fine. But when she was in a hurry or unprepared, it was as if a circuit had been broken. The more she struggled, the clearer it became that she couldn't, for the life of her, remember what she was called.

Her married name was Mizuki Ando; her maiden name was Ozawa. Neither name was unique or particularly dramatic, though that still didn't explain how they could, in the course of her busy schedule, vanish from her memory. She had been Mizuki Ando for three years, since she married a man named Takashi Ando. At first she hadn't been able to get used to her new name. The way it looked and sounded just didn't seem right to her. But, gradually, after she had repeated it and signed it a number of times, she began to feel more comfortable with it. Compared with other possibilities—Mizuki Mizuki, for instance, or Mizuki Miki (she'd actually dated a guy named Miki for a while)—Mizuki Ando wasn't bad.

She'd been married for a couple of years when the name started to slip away from her. At first it happened only once a month or so, but over time it became more frequent. Now she was forgetting her name at least once a week. If she had her purse with her she was fine. If she ever lost her purse, though, she'd be lost, too. She wouldn't entirely disappear, of course—she still remembered her address and phone number. This wasn't like those cases of total amnesia in the movies. Still, the fact remained that forgetting her name was upsetting. A life without a name, she felt, was like a dream you never wake up from.

Mizuki went to a jewelry store, bought a thin, simple bracelet, and had her name engraved on it: "*Mizuki (Ozawa) Ando.*" She felt like a cat or a dog, but still she was careful to wear the bracelet every time she left home. If she forgot her name, all she had to do was glance down at her wrist.

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http://www.newyorker.com/printables/fiction/060213fi_fiction (1 of 16)2006-02-16 09:14:02

The New Yorker: PRINTABLES

No more yanking out her license, no more strange looks from other people.

She didn't tell her husband about her problem. She knew he'd only decide that it meant she was unhappy with their marriage. He was overly logical about everything. He didn't mean any harm by it; that was just the way he was—always theorizing. He was also quite a talker, and he didn't easily back down once he had started on a topic. So she kept the whole thing to herself. Still, she thought, what her husband said—or would have said if he'd known about the problem—was off the mark. She wasn't dissatisfied with their marriage. Aside from her husband's sometimes excessive rationality, she had no complaints about him at all.

Mizuki and her husband had recently taken out a mortgage and bought a condo in a new building in Shinagawa. Her

husband, who was now thirty, worked in a lab in a pharmaceutical company.

Mizuki was twenty-six and worked at a Honda dealership, answering the phone, getting coffee for customers, making copies, filing, and updating the customer database. Mizuki's uncle, an executive at Honda, had got her the position after she graduated from a women's junior college in Tokyo. It wasn't the most thrilling job she could imagine, but she did have some responsibility, and over all it wasn't so bad. Whenever the salesmen were out she took over, and she always did a decent job of answering the customers' questions. She had watched the salesmen at work, and quickly grasped the necessary technical information. She'd memorized the mileage ratings of all the models in the showroom and could convince anyone, for instance, that the Odyssey handled less like a minivan than like an ordinary sedan. Mizuki was a good conversationalist, and she had a winning smile that always put customers at ease. She also knew how to subtly change tacks, based on her reading of each customer's personality. Unfortunately, however, she didn't have the authority to give discounts, to negotiate trade-ins, or to throw in free options, so, even if she had the customer ready to sign on the dotted line, in the end she had to turn things over to one of the salesmen, who would get the commission. The only reward she could expect was a free dinner now and then from a salesman sharing his windfall.

Occasionally it crossed her mind that the dealership would sell more cars if it would let her do sales. But the idea didn't occur to anyone else. That's the way a company operates: the sales division is one thing, the clerical staff another, and, except in very rare cases, those boundaries are unbreachable. But it didn't really matter; she wasn't ambitious and she wasn't looking for a career. She much preferred putting in her eight hours, nine to five, taking the vacation time she had coming, and enjoying her time off.

At work, Mizuki continued to use her maiden name. She knew that in order to change it she'd have to change all the data relating to her in the computer system. It was too much trouble and she kept putting it off. She was listed as married for tax purposes, but her name was unchanged. She knew that this wasn't the right way to do it, but nobody at the dealership said anything about it.

So Mizuki Ozawa was still the name on her business cards and on her time card. Her husband knew that she was still going by her maiden name at work (he called her there occasionally), but he didn't seem to have a problem with it. He understood that it was simply a matter of convenience. As long as he saw the logic of what she was doing, he didn't complain. In that sense, he was pretty easygoing.

Mizuki began to worry that forgetting her name might be a symptom of some awful disease, perhaps an early sign of Alzheimer's. The world was full of unexpected, fatal diseases. She had http://www.newyorker.com/printables/fiction/060213fi_fiction (2 of 16)2006-02-16 09:14:02

The New Yorker: PRINTABLES

only recently discovered that myasthenia and Huntington's disease existed. There had to be countless other diseases she'd never heard of. And with most of these illnesses the early symptoms were quite minor. Minor but unusual symptoms such as—forgetting your own name?

She went to a large hospital and explained her situation. But the young doctor in charge—who was so pale and exhausted he looked more like a patient than like a physician—didn't take her seriously. "Do you forget anything besides your name?" he asked. "No," she said. "Right now it's just my name." "Hmm. This sounds more like a psychiatric case," he said, his voice devoid of interest or sympathy. "If you start to forget anything else, please check back with us. We can run some tests then." *We've got our hands full with people who are much more seriously ill than you*, he seemed to be implying.

One day in the newsletter for the local ward, Mizuki came across an article announcing that the ward office would be opening a counselling center. It was a tiny article, something she would normally have overlooked. The center would be open twice a month and would be staffed by a professional counsellor offering private sessions at a greatly reduced rate. Any resident of Shinagawa Ward who was over eighteen was welcome to make use of the service, the article said, and everything would be held in the strictest confidence. Mizuki had her doubts about whether a ward-sponsored counselling center would do her any good, but she decided to give it a try. The dealership was busy on the weekends, but getting a day off during the week wasn't difficult, and she was able to adjust to fit the schedule of the counselling center, which was an unrealistic one for ordinary working people. One thirty-minute session cost two

thousand yen, which was not an excessive amount for her to pay.

When she arrived at the counselling center, Mizuki found that she was the only client. “This program was started rather suddenly,” the receptionist explained. “Most people don’t know about it yet. Once people find out, I’m sure we’ll get busier.”

The counsellor, whose name was Tetsuko Sakaki, was a pleasant, heavysset woman in her late forties. Her short hair was dyed a light brown, her broad face wreathed in an amiable smile. She wore a pale summer suit, a shiny silk blouse, a necklace of artificial pearls, and low heels. She looked less like a counsellor than like a friendly neighborhood housewife.

“My husband works in the ward office here, you see,” she said, by way of introduction. “He’s the section chief of the Public Works Department. That’s how we were able to get support from the ward and open this center. Actually, you’re our first client, and we’re very happy to have you. I don’t have any other appointments today, so let’s just take our time and have a good heart-to-heart talk.” The woman spoke at a measured pace; everything about her was slow and deliberate.

“It’s very nice to meet you,” Mizuki said. Privately, though, she wondered whether this sort of person would be of any help to her.

“You can rest assured that I have a degree in counselling and lots of experience,” the woman added, as if she’d read Mizuki’s mind.

Mrs. Sakaki was seated behind a plain metal office desk. Mizuki sat on a small, ancient sofa that looked as if it had just been dragged out of storage. The springs were about to go, and the musty smell made her nose twitch.

She leaned back and began to explain what had been happening. Mrs. Sakaki nodded along. She http://www.newyorker.com/printables/fiction/060213fi_fiction (3 of 16)2006-02-16 09:14:02

The New Yorker: PRINTABLES

didn’t ask questions or show any surprise. She just listened carefully to Mizuki’s story, and, except for the occasional frown, as if she were considering something, her face remained unchanged; her faint smile, like a spring moon at dusk, never wavered.

“It was a wonderful idea to put your name on a bracelet,” she commented after Mizuki finished.

“I like the way you dealt with it. The first goal is to come up with a practical solution, to minimize the inconvenience. Much better to deal with the issue in a realistic way than to brood over it. I can see that you’re quite clever. And it’s a lovely bracelet. It looks good on you.”

“Do you think that forgetting one’s name might be connected with a more serious disease?”

Mizuki asked. “Are there cases of this?”

“I don’t believe that there are any diseases that have that sort of defined early symptom,” Mrs.

Sakaki said. “I am a little concerned, though, that the symptoms have got worse over the past year. I suppose it’s possible that this could lead to other symptoms, or that your memory loss could spread to other areas. So let’s take it one step at a time and determine where it all started.”

Mrs. Sakaki began by asking several basic questions about Mizuki’s life. “How long have you been married?” “What kind of work do you do?” “How is your health?” She went on to ask her about her childhood, about her family, her schooling. Things she enjoyed, things she didn’t.

Things she was good at, things she wasn’t. Mizuki tried to answer each question as honestly and as quickly as she could.

Mizuki had grown up in a quite ordinary family. Her father worked for a large insurance company, and though her parents weren't affluent by any means, she never remembered them hurting for money. Her father was a serious person; her mother was on the delicate side and a bit of a nag. Her older sister was always at the top of her class, though Mizuki felt she was a little shallow and sneaky. Still, Mizuki had no special problems with her family. She'd never had any major fights with them. Mizuki herself had been the sort of child who didn't stand out. She never got sick. She didn't have any hang-ups about her looks, though nobody ever told her she was pretty, either. She saw herself as fairly intelligent, and she was always closer to the top of the class than to the bottom, but she didn't excel in any particular area. She'd had some good friends in school, but most of them had married and moved to other cities, and now they rarely kept in touch.

She didn't have anything bad to say about her marriage. In the beginning, she and her husband had made the usual mistakes that young newlyweds make, but over time they'd cobbled together a decent life. Her husband wasn't perfect, but he had many good qualities: he was kind, responsible, clean, he'd eat anything, and he never complained. He seemed to get along well with both his co-workers and his bosses.

As she responded to all these questions, Mizuki was struck by what an uninspired life she'd led.

Nothing even remotely dramatic had ever touched her. If her life were a movie, it would be one of those low-budget nature documentaries guaranteed to put you to sleep. Washed-out landscapes stretching endlessly to the horizon. No changes of scene, no closeups, nothing ominous, nothing suggestive. Mizuki knew that it was a counsellor's job to listen to her clients, but she started to feel sorry for the woman who was having to listen to such a tedious life story. If it were me and I had to listen to endless accounts of stale lives like mine, Mizuki thought, at some point I'd keel over from sheer boredom.

http://www.newyorker.com/printables/fiction/060213fi_fiction (4 of 16)2006-02-16 09:14:02

The New Yorker: PRINTABLES

Tetsuko Sakaki, though, listened intently to Mizuki, taking a few concise notes. When she spoke, her voice revealed no hint of boredom, just warmth and a genuine concern. Mizuki found herself strangely calmed. No one has ever listened to me so patiently, she realized. When their meeting ended, after just over an hour, Mizuki felt as if a burden had been lifted from her.

"Mrs. Ando, can you come at the same time next Wednesday?" Mrs. Sakaki asked, smiling broadly.

"Yes, I can," Mizuki replied. "You don't mind if I do?"

"Of course not. As long as you're interested. It can take many sessions of counselling before you see any progress. This isn't like one of those radio call-in shows where the host just tells you to hang in there. Let's take our time and do a good job."

"I wonder if there's any event you can recall that had to do with names?" Mrs. Sakaki asked during the second session. "Your name, somebody else's name, the name of a pet, the name of a place you've visited, a nickname, perhaps? If you have any memory at all concerning a name, I'd like you to tell me about it. It could be something trivial, so long as it has to do with a name. Try to remember."

Mizuki thought for a few minutes.

"I don't think I have any particular memory about a name," she said finally. "At least nothing's coming to me right now. Oh, wait . . . I do have a memory about a nametag."

"A nametag. Very good."

"But it wasn't my nametag," Mizuki said. "It was somebody else's."

"That doesn't matter," Mrs. Sakaki said. "Tell me about it."

"As I mentioned last week, I went to a private girls' school for both junior and senior high,"

Mizuki began. "I was from Nagoya and the school was in Yokohama, so I lived in the school dorm and went home on the weekends. I'd take the Shinkansen train home every Friday night and be back at school Sunday night. It was only two hours to Nagoya, so I didn't feel particularly lonely."

Mrs. Sakaki nodded. "But weren't there a lot of good private schools in Nagoya? Why did you have to go all the way to Yokohama?"

"My mother went to this school and she wanted one of her daughters to go there, too. And I thought it might be nice to live away from my parents. The school was a missionary school, but it was fairly liberal. I made some good friends there. All of them were like me—girls from other places whose mothers had attended the school. I was there for six years and I generally enjoyed it.

The food was pretty bad, though."

Mrs. Sakaki smiled. "You said you have an older sister?"

"That's right. She's two years older than me."

"Why didn't she go to that school?"

http://www.newyorker.com/printables/fiction/060213fi_fiction (5 of 16)2006-02-16 09:14:02

The New Yorker: PRINTABLES

"She's more of a homebody, and she had some problems with her health. So she went to a local school and lived at home. I've always been a lot more independent than her. When I graduated from elementary school and my parents asked me if I'd go to the school in Yokohama, I said O.K.

The idea of riding the Shinkansen every weekend was kind of exciting, too.

"For most of my time there I had a roommate, but when I got to be a senior I was given my own room. I was also appointed the student representative for my dorm. Every student in the dorm had a nametag, which hung on a board at the entrance to the building. The front of the nametag had your name in black, the back in red. Whenever you went out, you had to turn the nametag over, then you'd turn it over again when you came back. So if a girl's name was in black, that meant that she was in the dorm; if it was red, you knew that she had gone out. If you were staying away overnight, or you were going to be on leave for a while, you had to take your nametag off the board. It was a convenient system. Students took turns manning the front desk and when a phone call came in it was very easy to tell a student's whereabouts just by glancing at the board.

"Anyway, this happened in October. Before dinner one night, I was in my room, doing my homework, when a junior named Yuko Matsunaka came to see me. She was by far the prettiest girl in the dorm—she had light skin, long hair, and beautiful, doll-like features. Her parents ran a well-known inn in Kanazawa and were quite well off. She wasn't in my class, so I'm not sure, but I heard that her grades were very good. In other words, she stood out. A lot of the younger students worshipped her. But Yuko was friendly and she wasn't stuck up at all. She was a quiet girl who didn't show her feelings much. I couldn't always tell what she was thinking. The younger girls may have looked up to her, but I don't think she had any close friends."

When Mizuki opened the door to her dorm room, Yuko Matsunaka was standing there, dressed in a tight turtleneck sweater and jeans. "Do you have a minute to talk to me?" Yuko asked. "Sure,"

Mizuki said, surprised. "I'm not doing anything special right now." Although she knew Yuko, Mizuki had never had a private conversation with her, and it had never occurred to her that Yuko might ask her advice about anything personal. Mizuki motioned for her to sit down while she made some tea with the hot water in her thermos.

"Mizuki, have you ever felt jealous?" Yuko said all of a sudden.

Mizuki was surprised by the question, but she gave it some serious thought.

“No, I guess I never have,” she replied.

“Not even once?”

Mizuki shook her head. “At least, when you ask me out of the blue like that I can’t remember anything. What kind of jealousy do you mean?”

“Like you love someone but he loves someone else. Like there’s something you want very badly but someone else just grabs it. Or there’s something you can’t quite do, but someone else is able to do it with no effort. . . . That sort of thing.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever felt that way,” Mizuki said. “Have you?”

“A lot.”

http://www.newyorker.com/printables/fiction/060213fi_fiction (6 of 16)2006-02-16 09:14:02

The New Yorker: PRINTABLES

Mizuki didn’t know what to say. How could a girl like this want anything more in life? She was beautiful, rich, good at school, and popular. Her parents doted on her. Mizuki had heard rumors that she was dating a handsome college student. So who on earth could she be jealous of?

“Like when, for instance?” Mizuki asked.

“I’d rather not say,” Yuko said, choosing her words carefully. “Listing all the details is pointless.

But I’ve been wanting to ask you that for a while—whether you’ve ever felt jealous.”

Mizuki had no idea what Yuko wanted from her, but she decided to answer as honestly as she could. “I don’t think I’ve ever had that sort of feeling,” she repeated. “I don’t know why, and maybe it’s a little strange if you think about it. I mean, it’s not like I have tons of confidence or get everything I want. Actually, there are lots of things I should feel frustrated about, but, for whatever reason, that hasn’t made me feel jealous of other people. I wonder why.”

Yuko Matsunaka smiled faintly. “I don’t think jealousy has much to do with objective conditions

—like if you’re fortunate you’re not jealous but if life hasn’t blessed you you are. Jealousy doesn’t work that way. It’s more like a tumor growing inside you that gets bigger and bigger, beyond all reason. Even if you know it’s there, there’s nothing you can do to stop it.”

Mizuki listened without interrupting. Yuko hardly ever had so much to say at one time.

“It’s hard to explain what jealousy is to someone who’s never felt it,” Yuko went on. “One thing I do know is it’s not easy to live with. It’s like carrying around your own small hell, day after day.

You should be really thankful you’ve never felt this way.”

Yuko stopped speaking and gave Mizuki what might pass for a smile. She really is lovely, Mizuki thought. How would it feel to be like her—so beautiful you turn heads wherever you go? Is it something you can be proud of? Or is it more of a burden? Despite these thoughts, Mizuki never once felt jealous of Yuko.

“I’m going home now,” Yuko said, staring at her hands in her lap. “One of my relatives died and I have to go to the funeral. I already got permission from the dorm master. I should be back by Monday morning, but while I’m gone I was wondering if you would take care of my nametag.”

She extracted her nametag from her pocket and handed it to Mizuki.

“I don’t mind holding on to it for you,” Mizuki said. “But why go to the trouble of giving it to me? Couldn’t you just stick it in a desk drawer?”

Yuko held Mizuki's gaze. "I just want you to hold on to it for me this time," she said.

"Something's bothering me, and I don't want to keep it in my room."

"O.K.," Mizuki said.

"I don't want a monkey running off with it while I'm gone," Yuko said.

"I doubt that there are any monkeys here," Mizuki said brightly. It wasn't like Yuko to make jokes. And then Yuko left the room, leaving behind the nametag, an untouched cup of tea, and a strange empty space where she had been.

http://www.newyorker.com/printables/fiction/060213fi_fiction (7 of 16)2006-02-16 09:14:02

The New Yorker: PRINTABLES

"On Monday Yuko didn't come back to the dorm," Mizuki told Mrs. Sakaki. "The teacher in charge of her class was worried, so he phoned her parents. It turned out that she'd never gone home. No one in her family had passed away, and there had been no funeral for her to attend.

She'd lied about the whole thing. They found her body almost a week later. I heard about it when I came back from Nagoya the following Sunday. She had slit her wrists in the woods somewhere.

No one knew why she'd done it. She didn't leave a note. Her roommate said that she'd seemed the same as always, not especially troubled by anything. Yuko had just killed herself without saying a word to anyone."

"But wasn't this Miss Matsunaka trying to tell *you* something?" Mrs. Sakaki asked. "When she came to your room and left her nametag with you. And talked about jealousy."

"It's true that she talked about jealousy with me. I didn't make much of it at the time, though later I realized that she must have wanted to tell someone about it before she died."

"Did you tell anyone that she'd come to see you?"

"No, I never did."

"Why not?"

Mizuki tilted her head and gave it some thought. "If I'd told people about it, it would only have caused more confusion. I don't think anyone would have understood."

"You mean that jealousy might have been the reason for her suicide?"

"Right. As I said, who in the world would a girl like Yuko be jealous of? Everybody was so upset at the time. I decided that the best thing was just to keep it to myself. You can imagine the atmosphere in a girls' dorm—talking about it would have been like lighting a match in a room filled with gas."

"What happened to the nametag?"

"I still have it. It's in a box at the back of my closet. Along with my own nametag."

"Why did you keep it?"

"Things were in such an uproar at school at the time that I missed my chance to return it. And the longer I waited, the harder it became to just casually turn it in. I couldn't bring myself to throw it away, either. Besides, I started to think that maybe Yuko had wanted me to keep that nametag.

Why she picked me, I have no idea."

"Perhaps Yuko was interested in you for some reason. Maybe there was something in you that she was drawn to."

“I wouldn’t know about that,” Mizuki said.

Mrs. Sakaki was silent, gazing for a while at Mizuki as if trying to make sure of something.

“All that aside, you honestly never have felt jealous? Not even once in your life?”

Mizuki didn’t reply right away. Finally, she said, “I don’t think I have. Of course there are people who are more fortunate than I am. But that doesn’t mean that I’ve ever felt jealous of them. I
http://www.newyorker.com/printables/fiction/060213fi_fiction (8 of 16)2006-02-16 09:14:02

The New Yorker: PRINTABLES

figure everybody’s life is different.”

“And since everybody’s different there’s no way to compare?”

“I suppose so.”

“An interesting point of view,” Mrs. Sakaki said, her hands folded together on top of her desk, her relaxed voice betraying amusement. “So that means that you can’t comprehend what jealousy is?”

“I think I understand what might cause it. But it’s true that I don’t know what it actually feels like.

How overpowering it is, how long it lasts, how much you suffer because of it.”

When Mizuki got home, she went to her closet and pulled out the old cardboard box in which she kept Yuko’s nametag, along with her own. All sorts of memorabilia from Mizuki’s life were stuffed in the box—letters, diaries, photo albums, report cards. She kept meaning to get rid of all these things, but she never had time to sort through them, so she dragged the box along with her every time she moved. But no matter how hard she looked she couldn’t find the envelope in which she kept the nametags. She was bewildered. She had looked in the box when she first moved into the condo and she distinctly remembered having seen the envelope. She hadn’t opened the box since then. So the envelope had to be there. Where else could it have gone?

Mizuki had kept her counselling sessions a secret from her husband. She hadn’t intended to, but explaining the whole situation just came to seem like more trouble than it was worth. And, besides, the fact that Mizuki was forgetting her name and going once a week to a ward-sponsored counsellor wasn’t bothering him in any way.

Mizuki also kept the loss of the two nametags a secret. She decided that it shouldn’t make any difference to her counselling if Mrs. Sakaki didn’t know.

Two months passed. Every Wednesday, Mizuki made her way to the ward office for her appointment. The number of clients there had increased, so Mrs. Sakaki had had to scale back their one-hour sessions to thirty minutes. This didn’t matter, though, since they had learned by now how to make the best use of their time together. Sometimes Mizuki wished that they could talk longer, but, given the low fees, she couldn’t complain.

“This is our ninth session together,” Mrs. Sakaki said, five minutes before the end of one appointment. “You aren’t forgetting your name less often, but it hasn’t got worse, has it?”

“No, it hasn’t,” Mizuki said.

“That’s wonderful,” Mrs. Sakaki said. She put her black-barrelled ballpoint pen back in her pocket and tightly clasped her hands on the desktop. She paused for a moment. “Perhaps—just perhaps—when you come next week we will make great progress concerning the issue we’ve been discussing.”

“You mean my forgetting my name?”

“Exactly. If things go as planned, I should be able to determine a definite cause and even show it to you.”

The New Yorker: PRINTABLES

“The reason I’m forgetting my name?”

“Precisely.”

Mizuki couldn’t quite grasp what Mrs. Sakaki was getting at. “When you say a definite cause . . . you mean it’s something visible?”

“Of course it’s visible,” Mrs. Sakaki said, rubbing her hands together in satisfaction. “I can’t go into details until next week. At this point, I’m still not sure whether it will work out or not. I’m just hoping that it will.”

Mizuki nodded.

“At any rate, what I’m trying to say is that we’ve gone up and down with this but things are finally heading toward a solution. You know what they say about life being three steps forward and two steps back? So don’t worry. Just trust me, and I’ll see you next week. And don’t forget to make an appointment on your way out.”

Mrs. Sakaki punctuated this with a wink.

The following week, when Mizuki entered the counselling office Mrs. Sakaki greeted her with the biggest smile Mizuki had ever seen on her.

“I’ve discovered the reason you’ve been forgetting your name,” she announced proudly. “And I’ve found a solution.”

“So I won’t be forgetting my name anymore?” Mizuki asked.

“Correct. You won’t forget your name anymore. The problem has been solved.”

Mrs. Sakaki took something out of a black handbag beside her and laid it on the desk. “I believe these are yours.”

Mizuki got up from the sofa and walked over to the desk. On the desk were two nametags.

“Mizuki Ozawa” was written on one of them, “Yuko Matsunaka” on the other. Mizuki turned pale. She went back to the sofa and sank down, speechless for a time. She pressed both palms against her mouth as if to prevent the words from spilling out.

“It’s no wonder you’re surprised,” Mrs. Sakaki said. “But there’s nothing to be frightened of.”

“How did you . . .” Mizuki said.

“How did I happen to find your high-school nametags?”

Mizuki nodded.

“I recovered them for you,” Mrs. Sakaki said. “Those nametags were stolen from you and that’s why you had trouble remembering your name.”

“But who would . . .”

“Who would break into your house and steal these two nametags, and for what possible purpose?”

Mrs. Sakaki said. “Rather than having me respond to that, I think it’s best if you ask the http://www.newyorker.com/printables/fiction/060213fi_fiction (10 of 16)2006-02-16 09:14:02

The New Yorker: PRINTABLES

individual responsible directly.”

“The person who did it is here?” Mizuki asked in astonishment.

“Of course. We captured him and took back the nametags. That is, I didn’t nab him myself. My husband and one of his men did it. Remember I told you that my husband is the section chief of the Public Works Department?”

Mizuki nodded without thinking.

“So what do you say we go meet the culprit? Then you can give him a piece of your mind face to face.”

Mizuki followed Mrs. Sakaki out of the counselling office, down the hallway, and into the elevator. They rode down to the basement and walked along a long deserted corridor to a door at the very end.

Inside was a tall, thin man in his fifties and a larger man in his mid-twenties, both dressed in light-khaki work clothes. The older man had a nametag on his chest that said “Sakaki”; the younger man had one that said “Sakurada.” Sakurada was holding a black nightstick.

“Mrs. Ando, I presume?” Mr. Sakaki asked. “I am Yoshio Sakaki, Tetsuko’s husband. And this is Mr. Sakurada, who works with me.”

“Nice to meet you,” Mizuki said.

“Is he giving you any trouble?” Mrs. Sakaki asked her husband.

“No, I think he’s sort of resigned himself to the situation,” Mr. Sakaki said. “Sakurada here has been keeping an eye on him all morning, and apparently he’s been behaving himself. So let’s proceed.”

There was another door at the rear of the room. Mr. Sakurada opened it and switched on the light.

He looked quickly around the room, then turned to the others. “Looks O.K.,” he said. “Come on in.”

They entered a small storage room of some kind; it held only one chair, on which a monkey was sitting. He was large for a monkey—smaller than an adult human, but bigger than, say, an elementary-school student. His hair was a shade longer than is usual for monkeys and was woven with gray. It was hard to tell his age, but he was definitely not young. The monkey’s arms and legs were tightly tied to the wooden chair, and his long tail drooped on the floor. As Mizuki entered, the monkey shot her a glance, then stared back down at the ground.

“A monkey?” Mizuki asked in surprise.

“That’s right,” Mrs. Sakaki replied. “A monkey stole the nametags from your apartment, right around the time that you began forgetting your name.”

I don’t want a monkey running off with it, Yuko had said. So it wasn’t a joke after all, Mizuki realized. A chill shot up her spine.

“I’m very sorry,” the monkey said, his voice low but spirited, with an almost musical quality to it.

http://www.newyorker.com/printables/fiction/060213fi_fiction (11 of 16)2006-02-16 09:14:02

The New Yorker: PRINTABLES

“He can talk!” Mizuki exclaimed, dumbfounded.

“Yes, I can,” the monkey replied, his expression unchanged. “There’s one other thing I need to apologize to you for. When I broke into your place, I wasn’t planning to take anything besides the nametags, but I was so hungry I ended up grabbing two bananas that were on the table. They just looked too good to pass up.”

“The nerve of this guy,” Mr. Sakurada said, slapping the black nightstick against his palm a couple of times. “Who knows what else he swiped? Want me to grill him a little to find out?”

“Take it easy,” Mr. Sakaki told him. “He confessed about the bananas voluntarily, and, besides, he doesn’t strike me as such a brutal sort. Let’s not do anything drastic until we hear the facts. If they find out that we mistreated an animal at the ward office we could be in deep trouble.”

“Why did you steal the nametags?” Mizuki asked the monkey.

“It’s what I do,” the monkey answered. “I’m a monkey who takes people’s names. It’s a sickness I suffer from. Once I fix on a name, I can’t help myself. Not just any name, mind you. I’ll see a name that attracts me, and then I have to have it. I know it’s wrong, but I can’t control myself.”

“Were you trying to break into our dorm and steal Yuko’s nametag?”

“Yes, I was. I was head over heels in love with Miss Matsunaka. I’ve never been so attracted to somebody in my life. But when I wasn’t able to make her mine I decided that, no matter what, I had to at least have her name. If I could possess her name, then I’d be satisfied. But before I could carry out my plan she passed away.”

“Did you have anything to do with her suicide?”

“No, I didn’t,” the monkey said, shaking his head emphatically. “I had nothing to do with that.

She was just overwhelmed by an inner darkness.”

“But how did you know, after all these years, that Yuko’s nametag was at my house?”

“It took me a long time to trace it. When Miss Matsunaka died, I tried to get her nametag from the bulletin board, but it was already gone. Nobody had any idea where. I worked my butt off trying to track it down, but no matter what I did I couldn’t locate it. It didn’t occur to me at the time that Miss Matsunaka would have left her nametag with you, since you weren’t particularly close.”

“True,” Mizuki said.

“But one day I had a flash of inspiration that maybe—just maybe—she’d given it to you. This was in the spring of last year. It took me a long time to track you down—to find out that you’d got married, that your name was now Mizuki Ando, that you were living in a condo in Shinagawa.

Being a monkey slows down an investigation like that, as you might imagine. At any rate, that’s how I came to steal it.”

“But why did you steal my nametag, too? Why not just Yuko’s? I suffered a lot because of what you did!”

“I’m very, very sorry,” the monkey said, hanging his head in shame. “When I see a name I like, I end up snatching it. This is kind of embarrassing, but your name really moved my poor little
http://www.newyorker.com/printables/fiction/060213fi_fiction (12 of 16)2006-02-16 09:14:02

The New Yorker: PRINTABLES

heart. As I said before, it’s an illness. I’m overcome by urges I can’t control. I know it’s wrong, but I do it anyway. I deeply apologize for all the problems I caused you.”

“This monkey was hiding in the sewers in Shinagawa,” Mrs. Sakaki interjected. “So I asked my husband to have some of his younger colleagues catch him.”

“Young Sakurada here did most of the work,” Mr. Sakaki said.

“Public Works has to sit up and take notice when a character like this is hiding out in our sewers,”

Sakurada said proudly. “The monkey apparently had a hideout underneath Takanawa that he used as a base for foraging operations all over Tokyo.”

“There’s no place for us to live in the city,” the monkey said. “There are so few trees, so few shady places in the daytime. If we go aboveground, people gang up on us and try to catch us.

Children throw things at us or shoot us with BB guns. Dogs chase after us. TV crews pop up and shine bright spotlights on us. So we have to hide underground.”

“But how on earth did you know that this monkey was hiding in the sewer?” Mizuki asked Mrs.

Sakaki.

“As we’ve talked over the past two months, many things have gradually become clear to me,”

Mrs. Sakaki said. “It was like a fog lifting. I realized that there had to be something that was stealing names, and that whatever it was it had to be hiding underground. That sort of limited the possibilities—it was either in the subway or in the sewers. So I told my husband that I thought there was some creature, not a human, living in the sewers and asked him to look into it. And, sure enough, he came up with this monkey.”

Mizuki was at a loss for words for a while. “But . . . how did just listening to me make you understand that?” she asked, finally.

“Maybe it’s not my place, as her husband, to say this,” Mr. Sakaki said with a serious look, “but my wife is a special person, with unusual powers. Many times during our twenty-two years of marriage I’ve witnessed strange events. That’s why I worked so hard to help her open the counselling center here in the ward office. I knew that as long as she had a place where she could put her powers to good use, the residents of Shinagawa would benefit.”

“What are you going to do with the monkey?” Mizuki asked.

“Can’t let him live,” Sakurada said casually. “No matter what he says, once they acquire a bad habit like this they’re up to their old tricks again before long—you can count on it.”

“Hold on now,” Mr. Sakaki said. “No matter what reasons we might have, if some animal-rights group found out about us killing a monkey, it would lodge a complaint and you can bet there’d be hell to pay. You remember when we killed all those crows, the big stink about that? I’d like to avoid a repeat of that.”

“I beg you, please don’t kill me,” the monkey said, bowing his head deeply. “What I’ve done is wrong. I understand that. I’ve caused a lot of trouble. I’m not trying to argue with you, but some good also comes from my actions.”

“What possible good could come from stealing people’s names?” Mr. Sakaki asked sharply.

http://www.newyorker.com/printables/fiction/060213fi_fiction (13 of 16)2006-02-16 09:14:02

The New Yorker: PRINTABLES

“I do steal people’s names, no doubt about that. But, in doing so, I’m also able to remove some of the negative elements that stick to those names. I don’t mean to brag, but if I’d been able to steal Yuko Matsunaka’s nametag back then, she might very well not have taken her life.”

“Why do you say that?” Mizuki asked.

“Along with her name, I might have been able to take away some of the darkness that was inside her,” the monkey said.

“That’s too convenient,” Sakurada said. “I don’t buy it. The monkey’s life is on the line—of course he’s going to try to justify his actions.”

“Maybe not,” Mrs. Sakaki said, her arms folded. “He might have a point.” She turned to the monkey. “When you steal names you take on both the good and the bad?”

“Yes, that’s right,” the monkey said. “I have no choice. I take on the whole package, as it were.”

“Well—what sort of bad things came with my name?” Mizuki asked the monkey.

“I’d rather not say,” the monkey said.

“Please tell me,” Mizuki insisted. She paused. “If you answer my question, I’ll forgive you. And I’ll ask all those present to forgive you.”

“Do you mean it?”

“If this monkey tells me the truth, will you forgive him?” Mizuki asked Mr. Sakaki. “He’s not evil by nature. He has already suffered, so let’s hear what he has to say and then you can take him to Mt. Takao or somewhere like that and release him. I don’t think he’ll bother anyone again. What do you think?”

“I have no objection, as long as it’s all right with you,” Mr. Sakaki said. He turned to the monkey.

“How about it? You swear if we release you in the mountains you won’t come back to the Tokyo city limits?”

“Yes, sir. I swear I won’t come back,” the monkey promised meekly. “I will never cause any trouble for you again. I’m not young anymore, and this will be a fresh start for me in life.”

“All right, then, why don’t you tell me what evil things have stuck to my name?” Mizuki said, staring right into the monkey’s small red eyes.

“If I tell you it might hurt you.”

“I don’t care. Go ahead.”

For a time the monkey thought about this, deep frown lines in his forehead. “I think it’s better for you not to hear this,” he said.

“I told you it’s all right. I really want to know.”

“O.K.,” the monkey said. “Then I’ll tell you. Your mother doesn’t love you. She has never loved you, not even for a minute, since you were born. I don’t know why, but it’s true. Your older sister doesn’t like you, either. Your mother sent you to school in Yokohama because she wanted to get http://www.newyorker.com/printables/fiction/060213fi_fiction (14 of 16)2006-02-16 09:14:02

The New Yorker: PRINTABLES

rid of you. She wanted to drive you as far away as possible. Your father isn’t a bad person, but he isn’t what you’d call a forceful personality, and he couldn’t stand up for you. For these reasons, ever since you were small you’ve never got enough love. I think you’ve had an inkling of this, but you’ve intentionally turned your eyes away from it. You’ve shut this painful reality up in a small dark place deep in your heart and closed the lid. You’ve tried to suppress any negative feelings.

This defensive stance has become part of who you are. Because of all this, you yourself have never been able to deeply, unconditionally love anybody else.”

Mizuki was silent.

“Your married life seems happy and problem-free. And perhaps it is. But you don’t truly love your husband. Am I right? Even if you were to have a child, it would be the same.”

Mizuki didn’t say anything. She sank down to the floor and closed her eyes. She felt as though her whole body were

about to come apart. Her skin, her organs, her bones were crumbling. All she could hear was the sound of her own breathing.

“That’s a terrible thing for a monkey to say,” Sakurada said, shaking his head. “Chief, I can’t stand it anymore. Let’s beat the hell out of him!”

“Hold on,” Mizuki said. “What the monkey’s saying is true. I’ve known it for a long time, but I’ve always closed my eyes to it, blocked my ears. He’s telling the truth, so please forgive him.

Just take him to the mountains and let him go.”

Mrs. Sakaki gently rested a hand on Mizuki’s shoulder. “Are you sure you’re O.K. with that?”

“I don’t mind, so long as I get my name back. From now on I’m going to live with what’s out there. That’s my name, and that’s my life.”

As Mizuki was saying goodbye to the monkey, she handed him Yuko Matsunaka’s nametag.

“You should have this, not me,” she said. “Take good care of her name. And don’t steal anybody else’s.”

“I’ll take very good care of it. And I’m never going to steal again, I promise,” the monkey said, with a serious look on his face.

“Do you know why Yuko left this nametag with me before she died? Why would she pick me?”

“I don’t know why,” the monkey said. “But, because she did, you and I were able to meet. A twist of fate, I suppose.”

“You must be right,” Mizuki said.

“Did what I told you hurt you?”

“It did,” Mizuki said. “It hurt a lot.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t want to tell you.”

“It’s all right. Deep down, I knew it already. It’s something I had to confront someday.”

http://www.newyorker.com/printables/fiction/060213fi_fiction (15 of 16)2006-02-16 09:14:02

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The New Yorker: PRINTABLES

“I’m relieved to hear that,” the monkey said.

“Goodbye,” Mizuki said. “I don’t imagine we’ll meet again.”

“Take care,” the monkey said. “And thank you for saving my poor life.”

“You’d better not show your face around Shinagawa anymore,” Sakurada warned, slapping his palm with the nightstick. “We’re giving you a break this time since the Chief says so, but if I ever catch you here again you aren’t going to get out alive.”

“Well, so what should we do about next week?” Mrs. Sakaki asked after she and Mizuki returned to the counselling center. “Do you still have things you’d like to discuss with me?”

Mizuki shook her head. “No. Thanks to you, I think my problem is solved. I’m so grateful for everything you’ve done for me.”

“You don’t need to talk over the things the monkey told you?”

“No, I should be able to handle those myself. I’ll have to think them over on my own for a while.”

Mrs. Sakaki nodded. “If you put your mind to it,” she said, “I know it will make you stronger.”

The two women shook hands and said goodbye.

When she got home, Mizuki took her nametag and her bracelet and put them in a plain brown envelope. She placed the envelope inside the cardboard box in her closet. She finally had her name back and could resume a normal life. Things might work out. Then again, they might not.

But at least she had her name now, a name that was hers, and hers alone.

(Translated, from the Japanese, by Philip Gabriel.) For more by Murakami, visit www.harukimurakami.com.

http://www.newyorker.com/printables/fiction/060213fi_fiction (16 of 16)2006-02-16 09:14:02

Document Outline

- newyorker.com
 - [The New Yorker: PRINTABLES](#)

Table of Contents

[The New Yorker: PRINTABLES](#)