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FICTION

AIRPLANE

by HARUKI MURAKAMI

Issue of 2002-07-01

Posted 2002-06-24

That afternoon she asked him, "Is that an old habit, the way you talk to yourself?" She raised her eyes from the table and put the question to him as if the thought had just struck her, but it had obviously not just struck her. She must have been thinking about it for a while. Her voice had that hard but slightly husky edge it always took on at times like this. She had held the words back and rolled them around on her tongue again and again before she let them out of her mouth.

The two were sitting opposite each other at the kitchen table. Aside from the occasional commuter train running on a nearby track, the neighborhood was quiet—almost too quiet at times. Tracks without trains passing over them have a mysterious silence all their own. The vinyl tile of the kitchen floor gave his bare feet a pleasant chill. He had pulled his socks off and stuffed them into his pants pocket. The weather was a bit too warm for an April afternoon. She had rolled up the sleeves of her pale checked shirt as far as the elbows, and her slim white fingers toyed with the handle of her coffee spoon. He stared at the moving fingertips, and the workings of his mind went strangely flat. She seemed to have lifted the edge of the world, and now she was loosening its threads little by little—perfunctorily, apathetically, as if she had to do it no matter how long it might take.

He watched and said nothing. He said nothing because he did not know what to say. The few sips of coffee left in his cup were cold now, and muddy-looking.

He had just turned twenty, and she was seven years older, married, and the mother of one. For him, she might as well have been the far side of the moon.

Her husband worked for a travel agency that specialized in trips abroad, and so he was away from home nearly half of every month, in places like London or Rome or Singapore. He obviously liked opera. Thick three- and four-record albums lined the shelves, arranged by composer—Verdi, Puccini, Donizetti, Richard Strauss. The long rows looked less like a record collection than a symbol of a world view: calm, immovable. He looked at the husband's records whenever he was at a loss for words or for something to do; he would let his eyes wander over the album spines—from right to left, from left to right—and read the titles aloud in his mind: "La Bohème," "Tosca," "Turandot," "Norma," "Fidelio" . . . He had never once listened to music like that, had never had the chance to hear it. Not one person among his family, friends, or acquaintances was an opera fan. He knew that a music called opera existed, and that certain people liked to listen to it, but the husband's

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records were his first actual glimpse of such a world.

She herself was not particularly fond of opera. "I don't hate it," she said. "It's just too long."

Next to the record shelves stood a very impressive stereo set. Its big, foreign-made tube amp hunched down heavily, waiting for orders like a well-trained crustacean. There was no way to prevent it from standing out among the room's other, more modest furnishings. It had a truly exceptional presence. One's eyes could not help fixing on it. But he had never once heard it producing sound. She had no idea where to find the power switch, and he never thought to touch the thing.

"There's nothing wrong at home," she told him—any number of times. "My husband is good to me, I love my daughter, I think I'm happy." She sounded calm, even serene, as she said this, without a hint that she was making excuses for her life. She spoke of her marriage with complete objectivity, as though discussing traffic regulations or the International Date Line. "I think I'm happy, there's nothing wrong."

So why the hell is she sleeping with me? he wondered. He gave it lots of thought but couldn't come up with an answer. What did it even mean for there to be "something wrong" with a marriage? He sometimes thought of asking her directly, but he didn't know how to start. How should he say it?

"If you're so happy, why the hell are you sleeping with me?" Should he just come out with it like that? He was sure it would make her cry.

She cried enough as it was. She would cry for a long, long time, making tiny sounds. He almost never knew why she was crying. But, once she started, she wouldn't stop. Try to comfort her though he might, she would not stop until a certain amount of time had gone by. In fact, he didn't have to do anything at all—once that time had gone by her crying would come to an end. Why were people so different from one another? he wondered. He had been with any number of women, all of whom cried, or got angry, but each in her own special way. They had points of similarity, but those were far outnumbered by their differences. It seemed to have nothing to do with age. This was his first experience with an older woman, but the difference in age didn't bother him as much as he had expected it to. Far more meaningful than age differences, he felt, were the different tendencies that each individual possessed. He couldn't help thinking that this was an important key for unlocking the riddle of life.

After she finished crying, usually, the two of them would make love. Only then would she be the one to initiate it. Otherwise, he had to be the one. Sometimes she would refuse him, without a word, shaking her head. Then her eyes would look like white moons floating at the edge of a dawn sky—flat, suggestive moons that shimmered at the single cry of a bird at dawn. Whenever he saw her eyes looking like that, he knew there was nothing more he could say to her. He felt neither anger nor displeasure. "That's how it goes," he thought. Sometimes he even felt relieved. They would sit at the kitchen table, drinking coffee, chatting quietly. They spoke in fragments most of the time.

Neither was a great talker, and they had little in common to talk about. He could never remember what it was that they had been saying, just that it had been in little pieces. And all the while one commuter train after another would go past the window.

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Their lovemaking was hushed and tranquil. It had nothing that could properly be called the joys of the flesh. Of course, it would be false to say that they knew none of the pleasure that obtains when a man and a woman join their bodies, but mixed with this were far too many other thoughts and elements and styles. It was different from any sex he had experienced before. It made him think of a small room—a nice, neat room that was a comfortable place to be. It had strings of many colors hanging from the ceiling, strings of different shapes and lengths, and each string, in its own way, sent a thrill of enticement through him. He wanted to pull one, and the strings wanted to be pulled.

But he didn't know which one to pull. He felt that he might choose a string and have a magnificent spectacle open up before his eyes, but that, just as easily, everything could be ruined. And so he hesitated, and while he did, another day would end.

The strangeness of this situation was almost too much for him. He believed that he had lived his life with his own sense of values. But when he was in this room, hearing the trains go by and holding the silent older woman in his arms, he couldn't help feeling confused. Again and again he would ask himself, "Am I in love with her?" But he could never reach an answer with complete conviction.

When their lovemaking ended, she would glance at the clock. Lying in his arms, she would turn her face slightly and look at the black clock radio by the head of the bed. In those days, clock radios didn't have lighted digital displays but little numbered panels that flipped over with a tiny click.

When she looked at the clock, a train would pass the window. It was like a conditioned reflex: she would look, a train would go by.

She was checking the clock to make sure it was not time for her four-yearold daughter to be coming home from kindergarten. He had happened to catch a glimpse of the girl exactly once, and she seemed like a sweet child. That was the only impression she left him with. He had never seen the opera-loving husband who worked for a travel bureau. Fortunately.

It was an afternoon in May when she first asked him about his talking to himself. She had cried that day—again. And then they had made love—again. He couldn't recall what had made her cry.

He sometimes wondered if she had become involved with him just so that she could cry in someone's arms. Maybe she can't cry alone, and that's why she needs me.

That day she locked the door, closed the curtains, and brought the telephone next to the bed. Then they joined their bodies. Gently, quietly, as always. The doorbell rang, but she ignored it. It seemed not to startle her at all. She shook her head as if to say, "Never mind, it's nothing." The bell rang several more times, but soon whoever it was gave up and went away. Nothing, just as she had said.

Maybe a salesman. But how could she know? A train rumbled by now and then. A piano sounded in the distance. He vaguely recognized the melody. He had heard it once, long ago, in music class, but he couldn't recall it exactly. A vegetable seller's truck clattered by out front. She closed her eyes, inhaled deeply, and he came—with the utmost gentleness.

He went to the bathroom for a shower. When he came back, drying himself with a bath towel, he found her lying face down in bed with her eyes closed. He sat down next to her and, as always, 3 of 6

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caressed her back as he let his eyes wander over the titles of the opera records.

Soon, she left the bed, got properly dressed, and went to the kitchen to make coffee. It was a short time later that she asked him, "Is that an old habit, talking to yourself like that?"

"Like what?" She had taken him off guard. "You mean, while we're . . . ?"

"No, no. Not then. Just anytime. Like when you're taking a shower, or when I'm in the kitchen and you're by yourself, reading the newspaper, that kind of thing."

"I had no idea," he said, shaking his head. "I've never noticed. I talk to myself?"

"You do. Really," she said, toying with his lighter.

"It's not that I don't believe you," he said, the discomfort of it affecting his voice. He put a cigarette in his mouth, took the lighter from her hand, and used it to light up. He had started smoking Seven Stars a short time earlier. It was her husband's brand. He had always smoked Hope regulars. Not that she had asked him to switch to her husband's brand; he had thought of taking the precaution himself. It would just make things easier, he'd decided. Like on the TV melodramas.

"I used to talk to myself a lot, too," she said. "When I was little."

"Oh, really?"

"But my mother made me stop. 'A young lady does not talk to herself,' she used to say. And whenever I did it she got so angry! She'd lock me in a closet—which, for me, was about the worst place I could imagine—dark and moldy-smelling. Sometimes she'd smack me in the knees with a ruler. But it worked. And it didn't take very long. I stopped talking to myself completely. Not a word."

He couldn't think of anything to say to this, and so he said nothing. She bit her lip.

"Even now," she said, "if I feel I'm about to say something I just swallow my words. It's like a reflex. But what's so bad about talking to yourself? It's natural. It's just words coming out of your mouth. If my mother were still alive, I think I'd ask her, 'What's so bad about talking to yourself?'"

"She's dead?"

"Uh-huh. But I wish I'd gotten it straight. I wish I'd asked her, 'Why did you do that to me?'"

She was playing with her coffee spoon. She glanced at the clock on the wall. The moment she did that, a train went by outside.

She waited for the train to pass. Then she said, "I sometimes think that people's hearts are like deep wells. Nobody knows what's at the bottom. All you can do is imagine by what comes floating to the surface every once in a while."

Both of them thought about wells for a little while.

"What do I talk about when I talk to myself?" he asked. "For example."

"Hmm," she said, slowly shaking her head a few times, almost as if she were discreetly testing the 4 of 6

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range of movement of her neck. "Well, there's airplanes . . ."

"Airplanes?"

"Uh-huh. You know. They fly through the sky."

He laughed. "Why would I talk to myself about airplanes, of all things?"

She laughed, too. And then, using her index fingers, she measured the length of an imaginary object in the air. This was a habit of hers. One that he had picked up.

"You pronounce your words so clearly, too. Are you sure you don't remember talking to yourself?"

"I don't remember a thing."

She picked up the ballpoint pen lying on the table, and played with it for a few seconds, but then she looked at the clock again. It had done its job: in the five minutes since her last look, it had advanced five minutes' worth.

"You talk to yourself as if you were reciting poetry."

A hint of red came into her face as she said this. He found this odd: why should my talking to myself make her turn red?

He tried out the words in rhythm: "I talk to myself / Almost as if / I were reciting / Po-e-try."

She picked up the pen again. It was a yellow plastic ballpoint pen with a logo marking the tenth anniversary of a certain bank branch.

He pointed at the pen and said, "Next time you hear me talking to myself, take down what I say, will you?"

She stared straight into his eyes. "You really want to know?"

He nodded.

She took a piece of notepaper and started writing something on it. She wrote slowly, but she kept the pen moving, never once resting or getting stuck for a word. Chin in hand, he looked at her long eyelashes the whole time. She would blink once every few seconds, at irregular intervals. The longer he looked at them—these lashes which, until a few moments ago, had been wet with tears—the less he understood: what did his sleeping with her really mean? A sense of loss overtook him, as if one part of a complex system had been stretched and stretched until it became terribly simple. I might never be able to go anywhere else again. When this thought came to him, the horror of it was almost more than he could bear. His being, his very self, was going to melt away. Yes, it was true: he was as young as newly formed mud, and he talked to himself as if reciting poetry.

She stopped writing and thrust the paper toward him across the table. He reached out and took it from her.

In the kitchen, the afterimage of some great thing was holding its breath. He often felt the presence of this image when he was with her: the afterimage of a thing he had lost. But what had he lost?

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"I know it all by heart," she said. "This is what you were saying."

He read the words aloud:

Airplane

Airplane flying

I, on the airplane

The airplane

Flying

But still, though it flew

The airplane's

The sky?

"All of this?!" He was stunned.

"Uh-huh, the whole thing," she said.

"Incredible! I can't believe I said all this to myself and don't remember any of it."

She flashed a tiny smile. "You did, though, just like that."

He let out a sigh. "This is too weird. I've never once thought about airplanes. I have absolutely no memory of this. Why, all of a sudden, would an airplane come popping out?"

"I don't know, but that is exactly what you were saying, before, in the shower. You may not have been thinking about airplanes, but somewhere deep in a forest, far away, your heart was thinking about them."

"Who knows? Maybe somewhere deep in a forest I was making an airplane."

With a small think, she set the ballpoint pen on the table, then raised her eyes and stared at him.

They remained silent for some time. The coffee in their cups clouded up and grew cold. The Earth turned on its axis while the moon's gravity imperceptibly shifted the tides. Time moved on in silence, and trains passed over the rails.

He and she were thinking about the very same thing: an airplane. The airplane that his heart was making deep in the forest. How big it was, and its shape, and the color of its paint, and where it was going, and who would board it.

She cried again soon after that. This was the very first time that she cried twice in the same day. It was also the last. It was a special thing for her. He reached across the table and touched her hair.

There was something tremendously real about the way it felt—hard and smooth, and far away.

(Translated, from the Japanese, by Jay Rubin.) 6 of 6

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