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## **Harper's Magazine**

Oct, 2001

### **ALL GOD'S CHILDREN CAN DANCE.**

Author/s: Haruki Murakami

Yoshiya woke with the worst possible hangover. He could barely manage to open one eye; the left lid wouldn't budge. His head felt as if it had been stuffed with decaying teeth during the night. A foul sludge was oozing from his rotting gums and eating away at his brain from the inside. If he ignored it, he wouldn't have a brain left. Which would be all right. Just a little more sleep: that's all he wanted. But he knew it was out of the question. He felt too awful to sleep.

He glanced up at the clock by his pillow, but it had vanished. Why wasn't the clock where it belonged? No glasses either. He must have tossed them somewhere. It had happened before.

He managed to raise the upper half of his body, but this jumbled his mind, and his face plunged back into the pillow. A truck came through the neighborhood selling clothes-drying poles. They'd take your old ones and exchange them for new ones, said the loudspeaker, and the price was the same as twenty years ago. The monotonous, stretched-out voice belonged to a middle-aged man. It made him feel seasick, but he couldn't barf.

The best cure for a bad hangover was to watch a morning talk show, according to one friend. The shrill witch-hunter voices of the showbiz correspondents would bring up every last bit left in your stomach from the night before.

But Yoshiya didn't have the strength to drag himself to the TV. Just breathing was hard enough. Random but persistent streams of clear light and white smoke swirled together inside his eyes, which gave him a strangely flat view of the world. Was this what it felt like to die? If so, fine. But once was enough. Please, God, he thought, never do this to me again.

"God" brought to mind his mother. He started to call out to her for a glass of water, but realized he was home alone. She and the other believers had left for Kansai three days earlier. It takes all kinds to make a world, and his mother was a volunteer servant of God. He

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still couldn't open his left eye. Who the hell could he have been drinking so much with? No way to remember. Just trying turned the core of his brain to stone. Never mind now; he'd think about it later.

It couldn't be noon yet. But still, Yoshiya figured, judging from the glare of what seeped past the curtains, it had to be after eleven.

Some degree of lateness on the part of a young staff member was never a big deal to his employer, a publishing company. He had always evened things out by working late. But showing up after noon had earned him some sharp remarks from the boss. Those he could overlook, but he wanted to avoid causing any problems for the believer who had recommended him for the job.

By the time he left the house, it was almost one o'clock. Any other day he would have made up an excuse and taken off from work, but he had one document on disk that he had to format and print out today, and it was not a job that anyone else could do.

He left the condo in Asagaya that he rented with his mother, took the elevated Chuo Line to Yotsuya, transferred to the Marunouchi Line subway, took that as far as Kasumigaseki, transferred again, this time to the Hibiya Line subway, and got off at Kamiya-cho, the station closest to the small foreign-travel-guide publishing company where he worked. He climbed up and down the long flights of stairs at each station on wobbly legs.

He saw the man with the missing earlobe as he was transferring back the other way underground at Kasumigaseki around ten o'clock that night. Hair half-gray, the man was somewhere in his mid-fifties: tall, no glasses, tweed overcoat somewhat old-fashioned, briefcase in right hand. He walked with the slow pace of someone deep in thought, heading from the Hibiya Line platform toward the the Chiyoda Line. Without hesitation, Yoshiya fell in after him. That's when he noticed that his throat was as dry as a piece of old leather.

Yoshiya's mother was forty-three, but she didn't look more than thirty-five. She had clean, classic good looks, a great figure that she preserved with a simple diet and vigorous workouts morning and evening, and dewy skin. Only eighteen years older than Yoshiya, she was often taken for his elder sister.

She had never had much in the way of maternal instincts, or perhaps she was just eccentric. Even after Yoshiya had entered middle school and begun to take an interest in things sexual, she would think nothing of walking around the house wearing skimpy underwear--or nothing at all. They slept in separate bedrooms, to be sure, but whenever she felt lonely at night, she would crawl under his covers with almost nothing on. As if hugging a dog or cat, she would sleep with an arm thrown over Yoshiya, who knew she meant nothing by it, but still it made him nervous. He would have to twist himself into incredible positions to keep his mother unaware of his erection.

Terrified of stumbling into a fatal relationship with his own mother, 2 of 15

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Yoshiya embarked on a frantic search for an easy lay. As long as one failed to materialize, he would take care to masturbate at regular intervals. He even went so far as to patronize a porno shop while he was still in high school, using the money he made from part-time jobs.

He should have left his mother's house and begun living on his own, Yoshiya knew, and he had wrestled with the question at critical points: when he entered college and again when he took a job. But here he was, twenty-five years old and still unable to tear himself away. One reason for this, he felt, was that there was no telling what his mother might do if he were to leave her alone. He had devoted vast amounts of energy over the years to preventing her from carrying out the wild, self-destructive (but good-hearted) schemes she was always coming up with.

Plus, there was bound to be a terrible outburst if he were to announce all of a sudden that he was leaving home. He was sure it had never once crossed his mother's mind that they might someday live apart. He recalled all too vividly the profound heartbreak and distress that she had experienced when he announced at the age of thirteen that he was abandoning the faith. For two solid weeks or more, she ate nothing, she said nothing, she never once took a bath or combed her hair or changed her underwear. She hardly even managed to attend to her period when it came. Yoshiya had never seen his mother in such a filthy, smelly state. Just imagining the possibility of its happening again gave

him chest pains.

Yoshiya had no father. From the time of his birth, there had been only his mother, and she had told him again and again, from the time he was a little boy, "Your father is Our Lord" (which is how they referred to their god). "Our Lord must stay high up in Heaven; He can't live down here with us. But He is always watching over you, Yoshiya; He always has your best interests at heart."

Mr. Tabata, who served as little Yoshiya's special "Guide," would say the same kinds of things to him:

"It's true, you do not have a father in this world, and you're going to meet all sorts of people who say stupid things to you about that.

Unfortunately, the eyes of most people are clouded and unable to see the truth, Yoshiya, but Our Lord, your father, is the world itself.

You are fortunate to live in the embrace of His love. You must be proud of that and live a life that is good and true."

"I know," responded Yoshiya just after he had entered elementary school. "But God belongs to everybody, doesn't He? Fathers are different, though. Everybody has a different one. Isn't that right?"

"Listen to me, Yoshiya. Someday Our Lord, your father, will reveal Himself to you as yours and yours alone. You will meet Him when and where you least expect it. But if you begin to doubt or to abandon your faith, He may be so disappointed that He never shows Himself to you. Do you understand?"

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"I understand."

"And you will keep in mind what I've said to you?"

"I will keep it in mind, Mr. Tabata."

But in fact what Mr. Tabata was telling him did not make much sense to Yoshiya because he could not believe that he was a special

"child of God." He knew that he was average, just like the other boys and girls he saw everywhere--or rather, that he was just a little bit less than average. He had nothing that made him stand out, and he was always making a mess of things. It stayed that way for him through elementary school. His grades were decent enough, but when it came to sports he was hopeless. He had slow and spindly legs, myopic eyes, and clumsy hands. In baseball he missed most fly balls that came his way. His teammates would grumble, and the girls in the stands would titter.

Yoshiya would pray to God, his father, each night before bedtime: "I promise to maintain unwavering faith in You if only You will let me catch outfield flies. That's all I ask (for now)." If God really was his father, He should be able to do that much for him. But his prayer was never answered. The flies continued to drop from his glove.

"This means you are testing Our Lord, Yoshiya," said Mr. Tabata sternly. "There is nothing wrong with praying for something, but you must pray for something grander than that. It is wrong to pray for something concrete, with time limits."

When Yoshiya turned seventeen, his mother revealed the secret of his birth (more or less). He was old enough to know the truth, she said.

"I was living in a profound darkness in my teen years. My soul was in chaos as deep as a newly formed ocean of mud. The true light was hidden behind dark clouds. And so I had knowledge of several different men without love. You know what it means to have knowledge, don't you?"

Yoshiya said that he did indeed know what it meant. His mother used incredibly old-fashioned language when it came to sexual matters. By that point in his life, he himself had had knowledge of several different girls without love.

His mother continued her story. "I first became pregnant in the second year of high school. At the time, I had no idea how very much it meant to become pregnant. A friend of mine introduced me to a doctor who gave me an abortion. He was a very kind man, and very young, and after the operation he lectured me on contraception. Abortion was good neither for the body nor the spirit, he said, and I should also be concerned about venereal disease, so I should always be sure to use a condom, and he gave me a new box of them.

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"I told him that I had used condoms, so he said, 'Well, then, someone didn't put them on right. It's amazing how few people know the right way to use them.' But I'm not stupid. I was being very careful about contraception. The minute we took our clothes off, I would be sure to put it on the man myself. You can't trust men with something like that. You know about condoms, I hope?"

Yoshiya said that he did know about condoms.

"So, two months later I got pregnant again. I could hardly believe it: I was being more careful than ever. There was nothing I could do but go back to the same doctor. He took one look at me and said, 'I told you to be careful. What have you got in that head of yours?'

I couldn't stop crying. I explained to him how much care I had taken with contraception whenever I had knowledge, but he wouldn't believe me. 'This would never have happened if you put them on right,' he said. He was mad.

"Well, to make a long story short, about six months later, because of a weird series of circumstances, I ended up having knowledge of the doctor himself. He was thirty at the time, and still a bachelor.

He was kind of boring to talk to, but he was a nice man. His right earlobe was missing. A dog chewed it off when he was a boy. He was just walking along the street one day when a big black dog he had never seen before jumped up on him and bit his earlobe off. He used to say he was glad it was just an earlobe. You could live without an earlobe. But a nose would be different. I had to agree with him.

"Being with him helped me get my old self back. When I was having knowledge of him, I managed not to think disturbing thoughts. I even got to like his half-size ear. He was such a serious man, he would lecture me on the use of the condom while we were in bed--like when and how to put it on and when and how to take it off. You'd think this would make for fool-proof contraception, but I ended up pregnant again."

Yoshiya's mother went to see her doctor-lover and told him she seemed to be pregnant. He examined her and confirmed that it was so. But he would not admit to being the father. He was a professional, he said; his contraceptive techniques were beyond reproach. Which meant that she must have had relations with another man.

"This really hurt me. He made me so angry when he said that, I couldn't stop shaking. Can you see how deeply this would have hurt me?"

Yoshiya said that he did see.

"While I was with him, I never had knowledge of another man. Not once. But he just thought of me as some kind of young slut. That was the last I saw of him. I didn't have an abortion either. I decided to kill myself. And I would have. I would have gotten on a boat to 5 of 15

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Oshima and thrown myself from the deck if Mr. Tabata hadn't seen me wandering down the street and spoken to me. I wasn't the least bit afraid to die. Of course, if I had died then, you would never have been born into this world, Yoshiya. But thanks to Mr. Tabata's guidance, I have become the saved person you know me as today.

At last, I was able to find the true light. And with the help of the other believers, I brought you into this world."

To Yoshiya's mother, Mr. Tabard had had this to say:

"You took the most rigorous contraceptive measures, and yet you became pregnant. Indeed, you became pregnant three times in a row. Do you imagine that such a thing could happen by chance? I, for one, do not believe it. Three 'chance' occurrences are no longer

'chance.' The figure three is none other than that which is used by Our Lord for revelations. In other words, Miss Osaki, it is Our Lord's wish for you to give birth to a child. The child you are carrying is not just anyone's child, Miss Osaki: it is the child of Our Lord in Heaven, a male child, and I shall give it the name of Yoshiya, 'For it is Good.'"

And when, as Mr. Tabata predicted, a boy child was born, they named him Yoshiya, and Yoshiya's mother lived as the servant of God, no longer having knowledge of any man.

"So then," Yoshiya said, with some hesitation, to his mother,

"biologically speaking, my father is that obstetrician that you ... had knowledge of."

"Not true!" declared his mother with burning eyes. "His contraceptive methods were absolutely foolproof! Mr. Tabata was right: your father is Our Lord. You came into this world not through carnal knowledge but through an act of Our Lord's will!"

His mother seemed to have unshakable faith in the truth of this, but Yoshiya was just as certain that his father was the obstetrician.

There had been something wrong with the condom. Anything else was out of the question.

"Does the doctor know that you gave birth to me?"

"I don't think so," said his mother. "I never saw him again, never contacted him in any way. He probably has no idea."

The man boarded the Chiyoda Line train to Abiko. Yoshiya followed him into the car. It was after 10:30 at night, and there were few other passengers on the train. The man took a seat and pulled an open magazine from his briefcase. It looked like some sort of professional journal. Yoshiya sat down across from him and pretended to read the newspaper he was carrying. The man had a slim build and a deeply chiseled face with an earnest expression.

There was something doctorish about him. His age looked right, and he was missing one earlobe--the right earlobe. It could easily have been bitten off by a dog.

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Yoshiya felt with intuitive certainty that this man had to be his biological father. And yet the man probably had no idea that this son of his even existed. Nor would he be likely to accept the facts if Yoshiya were to reveal them to him here and now. After all, the doctor was a professional whose contraceptive methods were beyond reproach.

The train passed through the Shin-Ochanomizu, Sendagi, and Machiya subway stops before rising to the surface. The number of passengers decreased at each station. The man never looked up from his magazine or gave any indication of readiness to leave his seat. Observing him between feigned glances at his newspaper, Yoshiya brought back fragments of what he had done the night before. He had gone out to drink in Roppongi with an old college friend and two girls that the friend knew. He remembered going from the bar to a disco, but he couldn't recall whether or not he had had sex with his date. Probably not, he decided. He had been too drunk: such knowledge would have been out of the question.

The human-interest page of the paper was filled with the usual earthquake stories. His mother and the other believers had probably been staying in the church's Osaka facility. Each morning they would cram their rucksacks full of supplies, go as far as they could by commuter train, and walk along the rubble-strewn highway the rest of the way to Kobe, where they would distribute daily necessities to victims of the quake. She had told him by phone that her pack weighed as much as thirty-five pounds. That place felt light-years away from Yoshiya himself and from the man sitting across from him absorbed in his magazine.

Until he graduated from elementary school, Yoshiya used to go out with his mother once a week on missionary work. She got the best results of anyone in the church. She was so young and lovely and seemingly well-bred (in fact, she was well-bred) that people always liked her. Plus she had this little boy with her. Most people would let down their guard in her presence. They might not be interested in religion, but they were willing to listen to her. She would go from house to house in a simple (but form-fitting) suit, distributing pamphlets and calmly extolling the joys of faith.

"Be sure to come see us if you ever have any pain or difficulties,"

she would tell them. "We never push, we only offer," she would declare, voice warm, eyes burning. "In my own case, my soul was wandering through the deepest darkness until the day I was saved by our teachings. I was carrying this child at the time, and I was on the brink of throwing myself and him in the ocean. But I was saved by His hand, the One who is in Heaven, and now my son and I live in the holy light of Our Lord."

Yoshiya had never found it painful to knock on strange doors with his mother. She was especially sweet to him at those times, her hand always warm. They had the experience of being rebuffed often enough that it made him all the more joyful to receive a kind word.

And when they managed to win a new believer for the church, it filled him with pride. "Maybe now God my father will recognize me 7 of 15

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as his son," he would think.

Not long after he went on to middle school, though, Yoshiya abandoned his faith. As he awakened to the existence of his own independent ego, he found it increasingly difficult to accept those stern codes of the sect that clashed with normal values. This was one major reason for his loss of belief. But the most fundamental and decisive cause was the unending coldness of the One who was his father: His dark, heavy, silent heart of stone. Her son's abandonment

of the faith was a source of deep sadness to Yoshiya's mother, but his determination was unshakable.

The train was almost out of Tokyo and just a station or two from crossing into Chiba Prefecture when the man put his magazine back into his briefcase, stood up, and approached the door. Yoshiya followed him off the train. The man flashed a pass to get through the gate, but Yoshiya had to wait in line to pay the extra fare to this distant point. Still, he managed to reach the line for cabs just as the man was stepping into one. He climbed into the next cab and pulled a brand-new 10,000-yen bill from his wallet.

"Can you follow that cab for me?" he asked.

The driver gave Yoshiya a suspicious look. Then he eyed the bill.

"Hey, man, is this some kind of mob thing?"

"Not at all. Don't worry," Yoshiya said. "I'm just tailing somebody."

The driver took the 10,000-yen bill and pulled away from the curb.

"Okay," he said, "but I still want my fare. The meter's running."

The two cabs sped down a block of shuttered shops, past a number of dark empty lots, past a hospital with lighted windows, and through a new development lined with tiny houses. The streets all but empty, the tail posed no problems--and provided no thrills.

Yoshiya's driver was clever enough to vary the distance between his cab and the one in front.

"Guy having an affair or something?"

"Nah," said Yoshiya. "Head-hunting. Two companies fighting over one guy."

"No kidding? I knew companies were scrambling for people these days, but I didn't realize it was this bad."

Now there were hardly any houses along the road, which followed a riverbank and entered an area lined with factories and warehouses.

The only things marking this deserted space were new light poles thrusting up from the earth. Where a high concrete wall stretched along the road, the taxi carrying the man came to a sudden stop.

Alerted by the car's brake lights, Yoshiya's driver brought his cab to a halt some hundred yards behind the other vehicle and doused his headlights. The mercury-vapor lamps overhead cast their harsh, silent light on the asphalt roadway. The road and the wall: there was 8 of 15

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nothing else here to see. Far ahead, the cab door opened and the man with no earlobe got out. Yoshiya slipped his driver two 1,000-yen bills beyond his initial 10,000-yen payment.

"You're never gonna get a cab way out here, mister. Want me to wait a little while?" the driver asked.

"Never mind," said Yoshiya and stepped outside.

The man never glanced up after leaving his cab but walked straight ahead beside the concrete wall with the same slow, steady pace he had used on the subway platform. He looked like a well-made mechanical doll being drawn ahead by a magnet. Yoshiya raised his coat collar and released an occasional white cloud of breath from the gap between the edges as he followed the man from far enough behind to keep from being spotted. All he could hear was



the anonymous slapping of the man's leather shoes against the pavement. Yoshiya's rubber-soled loafers were silent.

There was no hint of human life here. The scene looked like something from a fantastic dream. Where the concrete wall ended there was an automobile scrap yard. A chain-link fence surrounded a hill of cars that had been reduced to a single colorless mass by long exposure to the rain and the flat mercury light. The man continued walking straight ahead.

What was the point of getting out of a cab in such a deserted place?

Yoshiya wondered. Wasn't the man heading home? Or maybe he wanted to take a little detour on the way. The February night was too cold for walking, though. A freezing wind would push against Yoshiya's back every now and then as it sliced down the road.

Where the scrap yard ended, another long stretch of unfriendly concrete wall began, broken only by the opening to a narrow alley.

This seemed like familiar territory to the man: he never hesitated as he turned the corner. The alley was dark. Yoshiya could make out nothing in its depths. He hesitated for a moment, but he stepped in after the man. Having come this far, it made no sense to give up.

High walls pressed in on either side of the straight passageway.

There was barely enough room in here for two people to pass each other, and it was as dark as the bottom of the sea, as if light never made its way to this separate world. Yoshiya had only the sound of the man's shoes to go by. The leather slaps continued ahead of him at the same unbroken pace. And then they stopped.

Could the man have sensed that he was being followed? Was he standing still now, holding his breath, straining to see and hear what was behind him? Yoshiya's heart shrank in the darkness, but he swallowed its loud beating and pressed on. "To hell with it," he thought. "So what if he screams at me for following him? I'll just tell him the truth. It could be the quickest way to set the record straight." But then the alley gave out. It was a dead end, closed off by a sheet-metal fence. Yoshiya took a few seconds to find the hole, an opening where someone had bent the metal back just enough to 9 of 15

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let a person through. He gathered the skirts of his coat around him and squeezed through.

A big, open space spread out on the other side of the fence. It was no empty lot but some kind of playing field. Yoshiya stood there, straining to see in the pale moonlight. There was no sign of the man.

It was a baseball field, and Yoshiya was standing somewhere way out in center field amid a stretch of trampled-down weeds. Bare ground showed through like a scar in the place where the center fielder usually stood. Over the distant home plate, the backstop soared like a set of black wings. The pitcher's mound lay closer to hand, a slight swelling of the earth. The high metal fence ringed the entire outfield. A breeze swept across the field, carrying with it an empty potato-chip bag.

Yoshiya plunged his hands into his coat pockets and held his breath, waiting for something to happen. But nothing happened. He surveyed right field, then left field, then the pitcher's mound and the ground beneath his feet before looking up at the sky. Several chunks of cloud hung there, their hard edges a strange whiff of dog shit mixed with of the grass. The man was gone. He had disappeared without a trace. If Mr. Tabata had been here, he would have said, "So you see, Yoshiya, Our Lord reveals himself to us in the most unexpected forms."

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But Mr. Tabata had died three years earlier, of urethral cancer. His final months of suffering had been excruciating to see. Had he never once in all that time tested God? Had he never once prayed to God for some small relief from his terrible pain? Mr. Tabata had observed those harsh commandments with such rigor and lived in such intimate contact with God that he, of all people, was qualified to make such prayers (concrete and limited in time though they might be). And besides, thought Yoshiya, if it was all right for God to test man, why was it wrong for man to test God?

Yoshiya felt a faint throbbing in his temples, but he could not tell if this was the remains of his hangover or something else at work.

With a grimace, he pulled his hands from his pockets and began taking long, slow strides toward home plate. Only seconds earlier, the one thing on his mind had been the breath-stopping pursuit of a man who might well be his father, and that had carried him to this strange place. Now that the man had disappeared, however, the importance of the acts that had brought him this far turned suddenly unclear inside him.

What was I hoping to gain from this? Yoshiya asked himself as he strode ahead. Was I trying to confirm the ties that make it possible for me to exist here and now? Was I hoping to be woven into some new plot, to be given some new and better-defined role to play? No, he thought, that's not it. What I was chasing in circles must have been the tail of the darkness inside me. I just happened to catch sight of it, and followed it, and clung to it, and in the end let it fly into still deeper darkness. I'm sure I'll never see it again.

Yoshiya's spirit now lingered in the stillness and clarity of a particular point in time and space. So what if the man was his actual father, or God, or some unrelated individual who just happened to have lost his right earlobe? It no longer made any difference to him, and this in itself had been a manifestation, a sacrament. Was it something to celebrate?

He climbed the pitcher's mound and, standing atop its worn rubber, stretched himself to his full height. He intertwined his fingers, thrust his arms aloft, and, sucking in a lungful of cold night air, looked up once more at the moon. It was huge. Simple plank bleachers ran the length of the first- and third-base lines. They were empty, of course: it was the middle of a February night. Three levels of straight plank seats stood there in long, chilly rows. Windowless, gloomy buildings--some kind of warehouses, probably--huddled together beyond the backstop. No light. No sound.

Standing on the mound, Yoshiya swung his arms up, over, and down in large circles. He moved his feet in time with this, ahead and to the side. As he went on with these dancelike motions, his body began to warm and to recover the full senses of a living organism.

Before long he realized that his headache was all but gone.

The girlfriend he had had throughout his college years called Yoshiya

"Super-Frog," because he looked like a giant frog when he danced.

She loved to dance and would always drag him out to discos. "Look at you!" she used to say. "I love the way you flap those long arms 11 of 15

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and legs of yours! You're like a frog in the rain!"

This hurt the first time he heard it, but once he had been with her long enough, Yoshiya himself began to enjoy dancing. As he let himself go and moved his body in time to the music, he came to have a deep sense that the natural rhythm inside him was pulsing in perfect unison with the basic rhythm of the world. The ebb and flow of the tide, the dancing of the wind across the plains, the course of the stars through the heavens: he felt certain that these things were by no means occurring in places unrelated to him.

She had never seen a penis as huge as his, his girlfriend used to say, taking hold of it. Didn't it get in the way when he danced? No, he would tell her: it never got in the way. True, it had always been on the big side, from the time he was a boy. He could not recall it ever having been of any great advantage to him, though. In fact, several girls had refused to have sex with him because it was too big. In aesthetic terms, it just looked slow and clumsy and stupid.

Which is why he had always done his best to keep it hidden. "Your big wee-wee is a sign," his mother used to tell him with absolute conviction. "It shows that you're the child of God." And so he believed it, too. But then one day the craziness of it hit him. All he had ever prayed for was the ability to catch outfield flies, in answer to which God had bestowed upon him a bigger penis than anybody else's. What kind of world allowed such idiotic bargains?

Yoshiya took off his glasses and slipped them into their case. With his eyes closed, and feeling the white light of the moon on his skin, he began to dance all by himself. He drew his breath deep into his lungs and exhaled just as deeply. Unable to think of a song to match his feelings, he danced in time with the stirring of the grass and the flowing of the clouds. Before long he began to feel that someone's eyes were fixed on him. He sensed a strange tingling in his skin. So what? he thought. Let them look if they want to. All God's children can dance.

He trod the earth and swirled his arms, each graceful movement calling forth the next in smooth, unbroken links, his body tracing diagrammatic patterns and impromptu variations, with invisible rhythms behind and between rhythms. At each crucial point in his dance, he could survey the complex intertwining of these elements.

Animals lurked in the forest like trompe l'oeil figures, some of them horrific beasts he had never seen before. He would eventually have to pass through the forest, but he felt no fear. Of course: the forest was inside him, and it made him who he was. The beasts were ones that he himself possessed.

How long he went on dancing, Yoshiya could not tell. But it was long enough to start him perspiring under the arms. And then it struck him what it was that lay far down in the earth upon which his feet were so firmly planted: the ominous rumbling of the deepest darkness, secret rivers that transported desire, slimy creatures writhing, the lair of earthquakes ready to transform cities into mounds of rubble. These, too, were helping to create the rhythm of 12 of 15

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the earth. He ceased his dancing and, catching his breath, stared at the ground beneath his feet as though peering into a bottomless hole.

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Yoshiya thought of his mother far away in the ruined city. What would happen, he wondered, if he could stay his present self and yet turn time backward so as to meet his mother in her youth when her soul was in its deepest state of darkness? No doubt they would plunge as one into the muck of bedlam and devour each other in acts for which

they would be dealt the harshest punishment. "And what of it? `Punishment?' I was due for punishment long ago. The city should have crumbled to bits all around me long ago."

His girlfriend had asked him to marry her when they graduated from college. "I want to be married to you, Super-Frog. I want to live with you and have your child--a boy, with a big thing just like yours."

"I can't marry you," Yoshiya had said to her. "I know I should have told you this, but I'm the son of God. I can't marry anybody."

"Is this true?"

"It is true. I'm sorry."

Yoshiya knelt down and scooped up a handful of sand, which he allowed to slip back to earth between his fingers. He did this again and again. The chilly, uneven touch of the earth reminded him of the last time he had held Mr. Tabata's emaciated hand.

"I won't be alive much longer, Yoshiya," said Mr. Tabata in a voice that had grown hoarse. Yoshiya began to protest, but Mr. Tabata stopped him with a gentle shake of the head.

"Never mind that," he said. "This life is nothing but a short, painful dream. Thanks to His guidance, I have made it this far. Before I die, though, there is one thing I have to tell you. It shames me to say it, but I have no choice. I have had lustful thoughts toward your mother any number of times. As you well know, I have a family that I love with all my heart. And your mother is a pure-hearted person. But still, I have had violent cravings for her flesh--cravings that I have never been able to suppress. I want to beg your forgiveness for that."

"There is no need for you to beg anyone's forgiveness, Mr. Tabata.

You are not the only one who has had lustful thoughts. Even I, her son, have been pursued by terrible obsessions." Yoshiya wanted to open himself up this way, but he knew that all it would do would be to upset Mr. Tabata even more. Yoshiya grasped Mr. Tabata's hand and held it for a long time, hoping that the thoughts in his breast would communicate themselves from his hand to Mr. Tabata's. Our hearts are not stones. A stone may disintegrate in time and lose its outward form. But hearts never disintegrate. They have no outward form, and, whether good or evil, we can always communicate them to one another. The next day, Mr. Tabata drew his last breath.

Kneeling on the pitcher's mound, Yoshiya gave himself up to the flow of time. Somewhere in the distance he heard the faint wail of a siren. A gust of wind set the leaves of grass to dancing and celebrated the grass's song before it died.

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"Oh, God," said Yoshiya aloud.

Haruki Murakami's work has been translated into sixteen languages.

His most recent novel, Sputnik Sweetheart, was published in May 2001. A collection of stories, entitled After the Quake, will be published next summer. He lives outside Tokyo.

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