

# Blind Willow, Sleeping Girl

by MURAKAMI Haruki  
Translated by Philip Gabriel

When I closed my eyes, the scent of the wind wafted toward me. A May wind, swelling up like a piece of fruit, with a rough outer skin, slimy flesh, dozens of seeds. The flesh split open in midair, spraying seeds like gentle buckshot into the bare skin of my arms, leaving behind a faint trace of pain.

"What time is it?" my cousin asked me. About eight inches shorter than me, he had to look up when he talked.

I glanced at my watch. "Ten-twenty."

"Does that watch tell good time?"

"Yeah, I think so."

My cousin grabbed my wrist to look at the watch. His slim, smooth fingers were surprisingly strong. "Did it cost a lot?"

"No, it's pretty cheap," I said, glancing again at the timetable.

No response.

My cousin had a confused look on his face. The white teeth between his open lips looked like bones that had regressed.

"It's pretty cheap," I said, looking right at him, carefully repeating the words. "It's pretty cheap, but it keeps good time."

My cousin nodded silently.

My cousin can't hear well out of his right ear. Soon after he went into elementary school he was hit by a baseball and his hearing was screwed up. Not that he can't function normally. He goes to a regular school, leads an entirely normal life. In his classroom, he always sits in the front row, on the right, so he can keep his left ear toward his teacher. And his grades aren't so bad. The thing is, though, he goes through periods when he can hear sounds pretty well, and periods when he can't. It's cyclical, like the tides. And sometimes, maybe twice a year, he can barely hear anything out of either ear. It's like the silence in his right ear deepens to the point where it crushes any sound on the left side. When that happens, ordinary life goes out the window and he has to take some time off from school. The doctors are basically stumped. They've never seen a case like it, so there's nothing they can do.

"Just because a watch is expensive doesn't mean it's accurate," my cousin said, as if trying to convince himself. "I used to have a pretty expensive watch, but it was always off. I got it when I started junior high, but I lost it a year later. After that I've gone without a watch. They wouldn't buy me a new one."

"Must be tough to get along without one," I said.

"What?" he asked.

"Isn't it hard to get along without a watch?" I repeated, looking right at him.

"No, it isn't," he replied, shaking his head. "It's not like I'm living off in the mountains or something. If I want to know the time I just ask somebody."

"True enough," I said.

We were silent again for a while.

I knew I should say something more, try to be kind to him, try to make him relax a little until we arrived at the hospital. But it had been five years since I saw him last. In the meanwhile he'd grown from nine to fourteen, and I'd gone from twenty to twenty-five. And that span of time had created a translucent barrier between us that was hard to traverse. Even when I had to say something, the right words just wouldn't come out. And every time I hesitated, every time I swallowed back something I was about to say, my cousin looked up at me with a slightly confused look on his face. His left ear tilted ever so slightly toward me.

"What time is it now?" he asked me.

"Ten twenty-nine," I replied.

It was ten thirty-two when the bus finally rolled into view.

The bus that came was a new type, not like the one I used to take to high school. The windshield in front of the driver was much bigger, the whole vehicle like some huge bomber minus the wings. And the bus was more crowded than I had imagined. Nobody was standing in the aisles, but we couldn't sit together. We weren't going very far, so we stood next to the rear door in back. Why the bus should be so crowded at this time of day was a mystery. The bus route started from a private railway station, continued up into a residential area in the hills, then circled back to the station, and there weren't any tourist spots along the way. A few schools along the route made the buses crowded when kids were going to school, but at this time of day the bus should have been empty.

My cousin and I held on to the straps and the poles. The bus was brand-new, straight from the factory, the metal surfaces

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so shiny you could see your face reflected in them. The nap of the seats was all fluffy, and even the tiniest of screws had that proud, expectant feeling that only brand-new machinery possesses.

The new bus, and the way it was more crowded than expected, threw me off. Maybe the bus route had changed since I last rode it. I looked carefully around the bus and glanced outside. But it was the same old view of a quiet residential district I remembered.

"This is the right bus, isn't it?" my cousin asked worriedly. Ever since we got aboard I must have had a perplexed look on my face.

"Not to worry," I said, half trying to assure myself. "There's only one bus route that goes by here, so this has got to be it."

"Did you used to take this bus when you went to high school?" my cousin asked.

"Yeah, that's right."

"Did you like school?"

"Not particularly," I said. "But I could see my friends there, and it wasn't such a long ride."

My cousin thought about what I said.

"Do you still see them?"

"No, not for a long time," I said, choosing my words carefully.

"Why not? Why don't you see them?"

"Cause we live so far away from each other." That wasn't the reason, but I couldn't think of any other way to explain it.

Right beside me sat a group of old people. Must have been close to fifteen of them. They were the reason the bus was so crowded, I suddenly realized. They were all suntanned, even the backs of their necks dark. And every single one of them was skinny. Most of the men had on thick mountain-climbing types of shirts; the women, simple, unadorned blouses.

All of them had small rucksacks in their laps, the kind you'd use for short hikes into the mountains. It was amazing how much they looked alike. Like a drawer full of samples of something, all lined up neatly by category. The strange thing, though, was that there wasn't any mountain-climbing route along this bus line. So where in the world could they have been going? I thought about this as I stood there, clinging to the strap, but no plausible explanation came to mind.

I wonder if it's going to hurt this time-the treatment," my cousin asked me.

"I don't know," I said. "I didn't hear any of the details."

"Have you ever been to an ear doctor?" I shook my head. I hadn't been to an ear doctor once in my life.

"Has it hurt before?" I asked.

"Not really," my cousin said glumly. "It wasn't totally painless, of course; sometimes there was a little pain. But nothing terrible."

"Maybe this time it'll be the same. Your mom said they're not going to do anything much different from usual."

"But if they do the same as always, how's that going to help?"

"You never know. Sometimes the unexpected happens."

"You mean like pulling out a cork?" my cousin said. I glanced at him, but I didn't detect any sarcasm.

"It'll feel different having a new doctor treat you, and sometimes just a slight change in procedure might make all the difference. I wouldn't give up so easily."

"I'm not giving up," my cousin said.

"But you are kind of fed up with it?" "I guess," he said, and sighed. "The fear is the worst thing. The pain I imagine is worse than the actual pain. Know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I know," I said.

A lot of things had happened that spring. A situation developed at work and I ended up quitting my job at a little ad company in Tokyo where I'd been working for two years. Around the same time I broke up with the girlfriend I'd been going out with since college. A month after that my grandmother died of intestinal cancer, and for the first time in five years I came back to this town, small suitcase in hand. My old room was just as I'd left it. The books I'd read were still on the shelf, my bed was there, my desk, and all the old records I used to listen to. But everything in the room had dried up, had long ago lost its color and smell. Time alone had stood still.

I'd planned to go back to Tokyo a couple of days after my grandmother's funeral to run down some leads for a new

job. I was planning to move to a new apartment too, for a change of scenery. As the days passed, though, it seemed like too much trouble to get off my butt and get going. To put a finer point on it, even if I'd wanted to get up and moving, I couldn't. I spent my time holed up in my old room, listening to those old records, rereading old books, occasionally doing a little weeding in the garden. I didn't meet anybody, and the only people I talked to were members of my family.

One day my aunt dropped by and asked me to take my cousin to a new hospital. She should take him herself, she said, but something had come up that day so she couldn't. The hospital was near the high school I used to go to, so I knew where it was, and I had nothing else going on, so I couldn't very well refuse. My aunt handed me an envelope with some cash in it for us to use as lunch money.

This switch to a new hospital came about because the treatment he'd been getting at his old hospital hadn't done a thing to help. In fact he was having more problems than ever. When my aunt complained to the doctor in charge, he suggested 2 of 6

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that the problem had more to do with the boy's home environment than anything medical, and the two of them went at it.

Not that anybody really expected that changing hospitals would lead to a quick improvement in his hearing. Nobody said as much, but they'd pretty much given up hope that his hearing would get any better.

My cousin lived nearby, but I was just over a decade older than him and we were never what you'd call close. When the relatives would get together I might take him someplace or play with him, but that was the extent of it.

Still, before long everyone started to look at my cousin and me as a pair, thinking that he was attached to me and that he was my favorite. For the longest time I couldn't figure out why. Now, though, seeing the way he tilted his head, his left ear aimed at me, I found it strangely touching.

Like the sound of rain heard long ago, his awkwardness struck a chord in me. And I began to catch a glimpse of why our relatives wanted to bring us together.

The bus had passed by seven or eight bus stops when my cousin looked up at me again anxiously.

"Is it much farther?"

"Yeah, we still have a ways. It's a big hospital, so we won't miss it."

I casually watched as the wind from the open window gently rustled the brims of the old people's hats and the scarves around their necks. Who were these people? And where could they possibly be headed?

"Hey, are you going to work in my father's company?" my cousin asked. I looked at him in surprise. His father, my uncle, ran a large printing company in Kobe. I'd never given the idea a thought, and nobody ever dropped a hint.

"Nobody's said anything about that," I said. "Why do you ask?"

My cousin blushed. "I just thought you might be," he said. "But why don't you? You wouldn't have to leave. And everybody'd be happy."

The taped message announced the next stop, but no one pushed the button to get off. Nobody was waiting to get on at the bus stop either.

"But there's stuff I have to do, so I have to go back to Tokyo," I said. My cousin nodded silently.

There wasn't a single thing I had to do. But I couldn't very well stay here.

The number of houses thinned out as the bus climbed the mountain slope.

Thick branches began to throw a heavy shadow across the road. We passed by some foreign-looking houses, painted, with low walls in front. The cold breeze felt good. Each time the bus rounded a curve the sea down below popped into view, then disappeared. Until the bus pulled up at the hospital my cousin and I just stood there, watching the scenery go by.

"The examination will take some time and I can handle it alone," my cousin said, "so why don't you go and wait for me somewhere?" After a quick hello to the doctor in charge, I exited the exam room and went to the cafeteria.

I'd barely had a bite for breakfast and was starving, but nothing on the menu whetted my appetite. I made do with a cup of coffee.

It was a weekday morning and one little family and I had the place to ourselves. The father was mid-forties, wearing a navy-blue, striped pair of pajamas and plastic slippers. The mother and little twin girls had come to pay a visit. The twins had on identical white dresses and were bent over the table, serious looks on their faces, drinking glasses of orange juice.

The father's injury, or illness, didn't seem too serious, and both parents and kids looked bored.

Outside the window was a lawn. A sprinkler ticked as it rotated, misting the grass with a silvery spray. A pair of shrill, long-tailed birds cut right above the sprinkler and disappeared from sight. Past the lawn there were a few deserted tennis courts, the nets gone. Beyond the tennis courts was a line of zelkovas, and between their branches you could see the ocean. The early summer sun glinted here and there off the small waves. The breeze rustled the new leaves of the zelkova, ever so slightly bending the spray from the sprinkler.

I felt like I'd seen this scene, many years before. A broad expanse of lawn, twin girls slurping up orange juice, long-tailed birds flying off who knows where, netless tennis courts, and the sea beyond ... But it was an illusion. It was vivid enough, an intense sense of reality, but an illusion nonetheless. I'd never been to this hospital before in my life.

I stretched my legs out on the seat opposite, took a deep breath, and closed my eyes. In the darkness I could see a lump of white. Silently it expanded, then contracted, like some microbe under a microscope. Changing form, spreading out, breaking up, reforming.

It was eight years ago when I went to that other hospital. A small hospital next to the sea. All you could see out the window were some oleanders. It was an old hospital, and smelled of rain. My friend's girlfriend had her chest operated on there, and the two of us went to see how she was doing. The summer of our junior year in high school.

It wasn't much of an operation, really, just done to correct the position of one of her ribs that curved inward a bit. Not an emergency procedure, just the type of thing that would eventually have to be done, so she figured why not take care of it now. The operation itself was over quickly, but they wanted her to take her time recuperating, so she stayed in the hospital for ten days. My friend and I rode there together on a 125cc Yamaha motorcycle. He drove on the way there, me on the way back. He'd asked me to come. "No way I'm going to a hospital by myself," he'd said.

My friend stopped at a candy store near the station and bought a box of chocolates. I held on to his belt with one hand, the other hand clutching tightly the box of chocolates. It was a hot day and our shirts kept getting soaked, then drying in the wind. As my friend drove he sang some nothing song in an awful voice. I can still remember the smell of his sweat.

Not too long after that he died.

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His girlfriend had on blue pajamas and a thin gown sort of thing down to her knees. The three of us sat at a table in the cafeteria, smoked Short Hope cigarettes, drank Cokes, and ate ice cream. She was starving and ate two sugar-coated doughnuts and drank cocoa with tons of cream in it. Still that didn't seem enough for her.

"By the time you get out of the hospital you're going to be a regular blimp," my friend said, somewhat disgustedly.

"It's okay-I'm recovering," she replied, wiping the tips of her fingers, covered with oil from the doughnuts.

As they talked I gazed out the window at the oleanders. They were huge, almost like a woods unto themselves. I could hear the sound of waves too. The railing next to the window was completely rusted from the constant breeze. An antique--looking ceiling fan nudged the hot, sticky air around the room. The cafeteria had the smell of a hospital. Even the food and the drinks had that hospital odor to them. The girlfriend's pajamas had two breast pockets, in one of which was a small gold-colored pen. Whenever she leaned forward I could see her small, white breastspeek out of the V-necked collar.

The memories ground to a halt right there. I tried to remember what had happened after that. I drank a Coke, gazed at the oleander, snuck a look at her breasts--and then what? I shifted in the plastic chair and, resting my head in my hands, tried to dig down further in the layer of memory. Like gouging out a cork with the tip of a thin-bladed knife.

I looked off to one side and tried to visualize the doctors splitting open the flesh on her chest, sticking their rubber-gloved hands inside to straighten out her crooked rib. But it all seemed too surreal, like some sort of allegory.

That's right--after that we talked about sex. At least my friend did. But what did he say? Something about me, no doubt.

How I'd tried, unsuccessfully, to make it with some girl. Not much of anything, but the way he told it, blowing everything out of proportion, made his girlfriend burst out laughing. Made me laugh as well. The guy really knew how to tell a story.

"Please don't make me laugh," she said, a bit painfully. "When I laugh my chest hurts."

"Where does it hurt?" my friend asked.

She pressed a spot on her pajamas above her heart, just to the right of her left breast. He made some joke about that, and again she laughed.

I looked at my watch. It was eleven forty-five but my cousin still wasn't back. It was getting close to lunchtime and the cafeteria was starting to get more crowded. All sorts of sounds and voices mixed together like smoke enveloping the room. I returned once more to the realm of memory. And that small gold pen she had in her breast pocket. ... Now I remember--she used that pen to write something on a paper napkin.

She was drawing a picture. The napkin was too soft and the tip of her pen kept getting stuck. Still, she managed to draw a hill. And a small house on top of the hill. A girl was asleep in the house. The house was surrounded by a stand of blind willows. It was the blind willows that had put her to sleep.

"What the heck's a blind willow?" my friend asked.

"There is a kind of tree like that." "Well I never heard of it."

"That's 'cause I'm the one who created it," she said, smiling. "Blind willows have a lot of pollen, and tiny flies covered with the stuff crawl inside her ear and put the girl to sleep."

She took a new napkin and drew a picture of the blind willow. The blind willow turned out to be a tree the size of an azalea. The tree was in bloom, the flowers surrounded by dark green leaves like a bunch of lizard tails gathered together.

The blind willow didn't resemble a willow at all.

"You got a cigarette?" my friend asked me. I tossed a sweaty pack of Hopes and some matches across the table.

"A blind willow looks small on the outside, but it's got incredibly deep roots," she explained. "Actually, after a certain point it stops growing up and pushes further and further down into the ground. Like the darkness nourishes it."

"And the flies carry that pollen to her ear, burrow inside, and put her to sleep," my friend added, struggling to light his cigarette with the damp matches. "But what happens to the flies?"

"They stay inside the girl and eat her flesh-naturally," his girlfriend said.

"Gobble it up," my friend said.

I remembered now how that summer she'd written a long poem about the blind willow and explained it all to us. That was the only homework assignment she did that summer. She made up a story based on a dream she'd had one night, and as she lay in bed for a week she wrote this long poem. My friend said he wanted to read it, but she was still polishing it, so she turned him down; instead, she drew those pictures and summarized the plot.

A young man climbed up the hill to rescue the girl the blind-willow pollen had put to sleep.

"That's got to be me," my friend put in.

She shook her head. "No, it isn't you. "You sure?" he asked.

"I'm sure," she said, a fairly serious look on her face. "I don't know why I know that. But I do. You're not angry, are you?"

"You bet I am," my friend frowned, half joking.

Pushing his way through the thick blind willows, the young man slowly made his way up the hill. He was the first one ever to climb the hill once the blind willows took over. Hat pulled down over his eyes, brushing away with one hand the 4 of 6

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swarms of flies buzzing around him, the young man kept on climbing. To see the sleeping girl. To wake her from her long, deep sleep.

"But by the time he reached the top of the hill the girl's body had basically been eaten up already by the flies, right?" my friend said.

"In a sense," his girlfriend replied. "In a sense being eaten by flies makes it a sad story, doesn't it," my friend said.

"Yes, I guess so," she said after giving it some thought. "What do you think?" she asked me.

"Sounds like a sad story to me," I replied.

It was twelve-twenty when my cousin came back. He was carrying a small bag of medicine and had a sort of unfocused look on his face. After he appeared at the entrance to the cafeteria it took some time for him to spot me and come on over.

He walked awkwardly, as if he couldn't keep his balance. He sat down across from me and, like he'd been too busy to remember to breathe, took a huge breath.



"How'd it go?" I asked.

"Mmm," he said. I waited for him to say more, but he didn't.

"Are you hungry?" I asked. He nodded silently.

"You want to eat here? Or do you want to take the bus into town and eat there?"

He looked uncertainly around the room. "Here's fine," he said. I bought lunch tickets and ordered the set lunches for both of us. Until the food was brought over to us my cousin gazed silently out the window at the same scenery I'd been looking at—the sea, the row of zelkovas, the sprinkler.

At the table beside us a nicely decked-out middle-aged couple were eating sandwiches and talking about a friend of theirs who had lung cancer. How he'd quit smoking five years ago but it was too late, how he'd vomit blood when he woke up in the morning. The wife asked the questions, the husband gave the answers. In a certain sense, the husband explained, you can see a person's whole life in the cancer they get.

Our lunches consisted of Salisbury steaks and fried white fish. Plus salads and rolls. We sat there, across from each other, silently eating. The whole time we were eating the couple next to us went on and on about how cancer starts. Why the cancer rate's gone up, why there isn't any medicine that can combat it.

"Everywhere you go it's the same," my cousin said in a flat tone, gazing at his hands. "The same old questions, the same tests."

We were sitting on the bench in front of the hospital, waiting for the bus. Every once in a while the breeze would rustle the green leaves above us.

"Sometimes you can't hear anything at all?" I asked him.

"That's right," my cousin answered. "I can't hear a thing."

"What does that feel like?"

He tilted his head to one side and thought about it. "All of a sudden you can't hear anything. But it takes quite some time before you realize what's happened. By then you can't hear a thing. It's like you're at the bottom of the sea wearing earplugs. That continues for a while. All that time you can't hear a thing, but it's not just your ears. Not being able to hear anything is just a part of it."

"Is it annoying?"

He shook his head, a short, definite shake. "I don't know why, but it doesn't bother me that much. It is inconvenient, though. Not being able to hear anything."

I tried to picture it. But the image wouldn't come.

"Did you ever see John Ford's movie Fort Apache?" my cousin asked.

"A long time ago," I said.

"It was on TV a while ago. It's really a good movie."

"Um," I affirmed.

"In the beginning there's this new colonel who's come to a fort out west. A veteran captain comes out to meet him when he arrives, the captain played by John Wayne. The colonel doesn't know much about what things are like out west. And there's an Indian uprising all around the fort."

My cousin took a neatly folded white handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his mouth.

"Once he arrives at the fort the colonel turns to John Wayne and says, 'I did see a few Indians on the way over here.' And John Wayne, this cool look on his face, replies, 'Don't worry. If you were able to spot some Indians, that means there aren't any there.' I don't remember the actual lines, but it went something like that. Do you get what he means?"

I couldn't recall any lines like that from Fort Apache. It struck me as a bit too abstruse for a John Ford movie. But it had been some time since I'd seen the film.

"I think it means that what can be seen by anybody isn't all that important ... I guess."

My cousin frowned. "I don't really understand it either, but every time somebody sympathizes with me about my ears that line comes to me. If you were able to spot some Indians, that means there aren't any there."

I laughed.

"Is that strange?" my cousin asked. "Yep," I said. And he laughed. It'd been a long time since I'd seen him laugh.

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After a while my cousin said, like he was unburdening himself, "Would you look inside my ears for me?"

"Look inside your ears?" I asked, a little surprised.

"Just what you can see from the outside."

"Okay, but why do you want me to do that?"

"I don't know," my cousin blushed. "I just want you to see what they look like."

"Okay," I said. "I'll give it a whirl."

My cousin sat facing away from me, tilting his right ear toward me. His ear was really nicely shaped. On the small side, but the earlobe was all puffy, like a freshly baked madeleine. I'd never looked at anybody's ear so intently before. Once you start observing it closely, the human ear-its structure-is a pretty mysterious thing. With all these outrageous twists and turns to it, bumps and depressions. Maybe evolution determined this weird shape was the optimum way to collect sounds, or to protect what's inside. Surrounded by this asymmetrical wall, the hole of the ear gapes open like the entrance to a dark, secret cave.

I pictured my friend's girlfriend, microscopic flies nesting in her ear. Sweet pollen stuck to their six tiny legs, they burrow into the warm darkness inside her, chewing on the soft, light pink flesh within, sucking up all the juices, laying tiny eggs inside her brain. But you can't see them, or even hear the sound of their wings.

"That's enough," my cousin said. He spun around to sit facing forward, shifting around on the bench. "So, did you see anything unusual?"

"Nothing different as far as I could see, from the outside at least."

"Anything's okay-even a feeling

you got or something."

"Your ear looks normal to me." My cousin looked disappointed. Maybe I had said the wrong thing.

"Did the treatment hurt?" I asked. "No, it didn't. Same as always. They just rummaged around in the same old spot. Makes me feel they're about to wear it out. Sometimes it doesn't feel like my own ear anymore."

"There's the number 28," my cousin said after a while, turning to me. "That's our bus, isn't it?"

I'd been lost in thought. I looked up when he said this and saw the bus slowing down as it went round the curve coming up the slope. This wasn't the kind of brand-new bus we'd ridden over on but one of those older buses I remembered. A sign with the number 28 was hanging from the front. I tried to stand up from the bench, but I couldn't. Like I was caught up in the middle of a powerful current, my limbs didn't respond.

I'd been thinking of the box of chocolates we'd taken when we went to that hospital on that long ago summer afternoon.

The girl had happily opened the lid to the box only to discover that the dozen little chocolates had completely melted, sticking to the paper between each piece and to the lid itself. On the way to the hospital my friend and I had stopped the motorcycle by the seaside, and lay around on the beach just talking and hanging out. The whole while we'd let that box of chocolates lie out in the hot August sun. Our carelessness, our self-centeredness, had wrecked those chocolates, made one fine mess of them all. We should have sensed what was happening. One of us-it didn't matter who-should have said something meaningful. But on that afternoon, we didn't sense anything, just exchanged a couple of dumb jokes and said goodbye. And left that hill still overgrown with blind willows.

My cousin grabbed my right arm in a tight grip.

"Are you all right?" he asked me. That brought me back to reality, and I stood up from the bench. This time I had no trouble standing. Once more I could feel on my skin the sweet May breeze blowing by. For a few seconds I stood there in a strange, dim place. Where the things I could see didn't exist. Where the invisible did. Finally, though, the real number 28 bus stopped in front of me, its real door opening. I clambered aboard, heading off to some other place.

I rested my hand on my cousin's shoulder. "I'm all right," I told him.

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