

## THE NEW YORKER

### HUNTING KNIFE

by HARUKI MURAKAMI

Issue of 2003-11-17

Posted 2003-11-10

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I liked to stand out there and look back at the shore, at the long white beach, the red lifeguard tower, the green row of palm trees—it was a gorgeous scene, maybe a little too picture-postcard perfect. Off to the right, the beach ended in a line of dark craggy rocks that led to the hotel cottages where my wife and I were staying. It was the end of June, still early in the tourist season, and there weren't many people at the hotel or on the beach.

There was an American military base nearby, and the rafts lay right in the flight path of the helicopters returning to it. The planes would appear offshore, bisect the space between the rafts, then zoom over the palm trees and disappear. They flew so low you could almost make out the expressions on the faces of the pilots. Still, except for those helicopters swooping overhead, the beach was a sleepy, quiet place—the perfect spot to be left alone on vacation.

Each cottage was a white two-story building divided into four units, two on the first floor, two on the second. Our room was on the first floor, with an ocean view. Right outside our window was a stand of white plumeria, and beyond that a garden with a neatly trimmed lawn. Morning and night, the sprinklers made a drowsy clatter on the grass. Past the garden was a swimming pool and a row of tall palm trees, whose huge fronds waved gently in the trade winds.

A mother and her son, Americans, were staying in the unit next door to my wife and me. They seemed to have settled in long before we arrived. The mother was about sixty, the son close to our age, twenty-eight or twenty-nine. They resembled each other more than any mother and son I'd ever seen—both with identical long, narrow faces, broad foreheads, tightly set lips. The mother was tall, her posture erect, her movements alert and brisk. The son seemed tall, too, but you couldn't really say for sure, as he was confined to a wheelchair. Invariably, his mother was behind him, pushing the chair.

They were incredibly quiet, their room like a museum. They never had the TV on, though twice I

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heard music coming from their place—a Mozart clarinet quintet the first time, the second time some orchestral music I didn't recognize. Richard Strauss was my guess. Other than that, no sound at all.

They didn't use the air-conditioner—they left their front door open instead, so that the cool sea breeze could blow

in. But, even with the door open, I never heard them talking. Any conversation they had—they had to talk sometime—must have been more or less an exchange of whispers. This seemed to rub off on my wife and me, and whenever we were in our room we found ourselves speaking in low voices.

We often ran across the mother and son in the restaurant, or in the lobby, or on one of the walkways through the garden. The hotel was a small, cozy place, so I guess we were bound to cross paths, whether we wanted to or not. We'd nod to one another as we passed. The mother and son had different ways of nodding hello. The mother would give a strong, affirmative nod; the son barely tilted his head. The impression that these two variant nods gave off, though, was pretty much the same: both greetings began and ended there; nothing lay beyond. We never tried to speak to them.

My wife and I had more than enough to talk about between ourselves—whether we should move to a new apartment when we got home, what we should do about our jobs, whether or not to have kids. This was the last summer of our twenties.

After breakfast, the mother and son always sat in the lobby and read the newspapers—each methodically proceeding from one page to the next, top to bottom, as if they were locked in a fierce contest to see who could take longer to read the whole thing. Some days it wasn't newspapers but massive hardcover books. They seemed less like a mother and son than an old married couple who had long ago grown bored with each other.

At around ten every morning, my wife and I would take a cooler down to the beach. We'd cover ourselves with sunblock, then sprawl out on our mats on the sand. I'd listen to the Stones or Marvin Gaye on a Walkman, while my wife plowed through a paperback of "Gone with the Wind."

She claimed that she'd learned a lot about life from that book. I'd never read it, so I had no idea what she meant. Every day, the sun would pop up inland, trace a slow path between the rafts—in the opposite direction from the helicopters—then sink leisurely beneath the horizon.

At two every afternoon, the mother and son would appear at the beach. The mother always wore a plain light-colored dress and a broad-brimmed white straw hat. The son never wore a hat; he had on sunglasses instead, with a Hawaiian shirt and cotton pants. They'd sit in the shade below the palm trees, the breeze rustling around them, and stare off at the ocean, not really doing anything. The mother sat in a folding beach chair, but the son never got out of his wheelchair. Every now and then, they'd shift slightly in order to stay in the shade. The mother had a silver thermos with her, and occasionally she poured herself a drink in a paper cup or munched on a cracker.

Some days they'd leave after half an hour; other days they stayed as long as three. When I went swimming, I could feel them watching me. It was quite a long way from the rafts to the line of palm trees, so I may have been imagining it. Or perhaps I was just being oversensitive, but whenever I clambered up onto one of the rafts I got the distinct feeling that their eyes were trained in my 2 of 11

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direction. Sometimes the silver thermos would glint like a knife in the sunlight.

One listless day followed another, with nothing to distinguish one from the next. You could have changed the order and no one would have noticed. The sun rose in the east, set in the west, the olive-green helicopters zoomed in low, and I downed gallons of beer and swam to my heart's content.

On the afternoon of our last full day at the hotel, I went out for one final swim. My wife was taking a nap, so I left for the beach alone. It was a Saturday, and there were more people there than usual.

Tanned young soldiers with buzz cuts and tattooed arms were playing volleyball. Kids were splashing around at the edge of the water, building sandcastles and shrieking in delight at each big wave. But there was almost no one in the

water; the rafts were deserted. The sky was cloudless, the sun high overhead, the sand hot. It was after two, but the mother and son still hadn't made their appearance.

I walked out until the water came up to my chest, then did the crawl, heading for the raft on the left.

Slowly, testing the resistance of the water with my palms, I swam on, counting the strokes. The water was chilly, and it felt good on my suntanned skin. Swimming in such clear water, I could see my own shadow on the sandy bottom, as if I were a bird gliding through the sky. After I had counted forty strokes, I looked up and, sure enough, there was the raft right ahead of me. Exactly ten strokes later, my left hand touched its side. I floated there for a minute, catching my breath, then grabbed hold of the ladder and scrambled aboard.

I was surprised to find someone else already there—an overweight blond woman. I hadn't seen anyone on the raft when I set out from the beach, so she must have got there while I was swimming toward it. The woman was wearing a tiny bikini—one of those fluttery red things, like the banners that Japanese farmers fly in their fields to warn that they've just sprayed chemicals—and she was lying face down. She was so obese that the swimsuit looked even smaller than it was. She seemed to have arrived recently—her skin was still pale, without a trace of a tan.

She glanced up for a second and then closed her eyes again. I sat down at the opposite end of the raft, dangled my legs in the water, and looked off at the shore. The mother and son still weren't under their palm trees. They were nowhere else, either. There was no way I could have missed them: the metal wheelchair, glistening in the sunlight, was a dead giveaway. I felt let down. Without them, a piece of the picture was missing. Perhaps they had checked out of the hotel and gone back to where they came from—wherever that was. But when I'd seen them earlier, in the hotel restaurant, I hadn't got the impression that they were preparing to leave. They had taken their time eating the daily special and had quietly drunk a cup of coffee afterward—the same routine as always.

I lay face down like the blond woman and tanned myself for ten minutes or so, listening to the tiny waves slap against the side of the raft. The drops of water in my ear warmed in the intense sun.

"Boy, it's hot," the woman said from the other end of the raft. She had a high-pitched, saccharine 3 of 11

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kind of voice.

"It sure is," I replied.

"Do you know what time it is?"

"I don't have a watch, but it must be around two-thirty. Two-forty, maybe?"

"Really?" she said, and let out something close to a sigh, as if that might not have been the time she was hoping for. Perhaps she just didn't care one way or another about the time.

She sat up. Sweat was beaded on her like flies on food. The rolls of fat started just below her ears and sloped gently down to her shoulders, then in one continuous series down her chubby arms.

Even her wrists and ankles seemed to disappear into those fleshy folds. I couldn't help thinking of the Michelin Man. As heavy as she was, though, the woman didn't strike me as unhealthy. She wasn't bad-looking, either. She simply had too much meat on her bones. I guessed that she was in her late thirties.

"You must have been here awhile, you're so tanned," she said.

"Nine days."

“What an amazing tan,” she said. Instead of responding, I cleared my throat. The water in my ears gurgled as I coughed.

“I’m staying at the military hotel,” she said.

I knew the place. It was just down the road from the beach.

“My brother’s a Navy officer, and he invited me to come. The Navy’s not so bad, you know? The pay’s O.K. They’ve got everything you want, right there on the base, plus perks like this resort. It was different when I was in college. That was during the Vietnam War. Having a career military person in your family then was kind of an embarrassment. You had to slink around. But the world’s really changed since then.”

I nodded vaguely.

“My ex used to be in the Navy, too,” she went on. “A fighter pilot. He had a tour of duty in Vietnam for two years, then he became a pilot for United. I was a stewardess for United then, and that’s how we met. I’m trying to remember what year we got married. . . .

Nineteen-seventy-something. Anyhow, about six years ago. It happens all the time.”

“What does?”

“You know—airline crews work crazy hours, so they tend to date each other. The working hours and life style are totally off the wall. Anyhow, we got married, I quit my job, and then he takes up with another stewardess and winds up marrying her. That happens all the time, too.”

I tried changing the subject. “Where do you live now?”

“Los Angeles,” she said. “You ever been there?”

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“No,” I said.

“I was born there. Then my father was transferred to Salt Lake City. Have you been there?”

“No.”

“I wouldn’t recommend it,” she said, shaking her head. She palmed the sweat from her face.

It was strange to think that she’d been a stewardess. I’d seen plenty of brawny stewardesses who could have been wrestlers. I’d seen some with beefy arms and downy upper lips. But I’d never seen one as big as her. Maybe United didn’t care how heavy its stewardesses were. Or maybe she hadn’t been this fat when she had that job.

I scanned the beach. No sign yet of the mother and son. The soldiers were still tossing around a volleyball. The lifeguard up on his tower was staring intently at something with his oversized binoculars. Two military helicopters appeared offshore and, like messengers in a Greek tragedy delivering inauspicious news, they thundered solemnly overhead and disappeared inland. Silently, we watched the green machines vanish into the distance.

“I bet from up there we look like we’re having a great time,” the woman said. “Sunning ourselves out here on this raft, not a care in the world.”

“You may be right.”

“Most things look beautiful when you’re way up high,” she said. She rolled over onto her stomach again and closed her eyes.

Time passed in silence. Sensing that it was the right moment to leave, I stood up and told her that I had to be getting back. I dived into the water and swam off. Halfway there, I stopped, treading water, and turned back toward the raft. She was watching me and waved. I gave a slight wave back.

From far away, she looked like a dolphin. All she needed was a pair of flippers and she could leap back into the sea.

In my room, I took a nap, then as evening came on we went down to the restaurant as always and ate dinner. The mother and son weren’t there. And when we walked back to our room from the restaurant their door was closed. Light filtered out through the small frosted-glass pane in the door, but I couldn’t tell if the room was still occupied.

“I wonder if they’ve already checked out,” I said to my wife. “They weren’t at the beach or at dinner.”

“Everyone checks out eventually,” my wife said. “You can’t live like this forever.”

“I guess so,” I agreed, but I wasn’t convinced. I couldn’t picture that mother and son anywhere but right there.

We started packing. Once we’d filled our suitcases and stowed them at the foot of the bed, the room suddenly seemed cold and alien. Our vacation was coming to an end.

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I woke up and glanced at my watch, on the table next to the bed. It was one-twenty. My heart was beating furiously. I slid off the bed and down onto the carpet, sat cross-legged, and took some deep breaths. Then I held my breath, relaxed my shoulders, sat up straight, and tried to focus. A couple of repetitions of this and I was finally calm. I must have swum too much, I decided, or got too much sun. I stood and looked around the room. At the foot of the bed, our two suitcases crouched like stealthy animals. That’s right, I remembered—tomorrow we won’t be here anymore.

In the pale moonlight shining through the window, my wife was fast asleep. I couldn’t hear her breathing at all, and it was almost as if she were dead. Sometimes she sleeps that way. When we first got married, it kind of scared me; every now and then, I thought maybe she really *was* dead.

But it was just that silent, bottomless sleep. I stripped off my sweaty pajamas and changed into a clean shirt and pair of shorts. Shoving a miniature bottle of Wild Turkey that was on the table into my pocket, I opened the door quietly and went outside. The night air was chilly and it carried with it the damp odor of all the surrounding plants. The moon was full, bathing the world in a strange hue that you never see in the daytime. It was like looking through a special color filter, one that made some things more colorful than they really are and left others as drab and drained as a corpse.

I wasn’t sleepy at all. It was as if sleep had never existed, my mind was so totally clear and focussed. Silence reigned. No wind, no insects, no night birds calling out. Only the far-off sound of waves, and I had to listen carefully to hear even them.

I made one slow circuit of the cottage, then cut across the grass. In the moonlight, the lawn, which was circular, looked like an iced-over pond. I stepped softly, trying not to crack the ice. Beyond the lawn was a narrow set of stone steps, and at the top a bar decorated in a tropical theme. Every evening, just before dinner, I had a vodka-tonic at this bar. This late at night, of course, the place was closed, the bar shuttered, and the parasols at each table all neatly folded up like slumbering pterodactyls.

The young man in the wheelchair was there, resting an elbow on one of the tables, gazing out at the water. From a distance, his metal wheelchair in the moonlight looked like some precision instrument made especially for the deepest, darkest hours of the night.

I had never seen him alone before. In my mind, he and his mother were always a single unit—him in his chair, his mother pushing it. It felt odd—rude, even—to see him like this. He was wearing an orange Hawaiian shirt I'd seen before and white cotton pants. He was just sitting without moving, staring at the ocean.

I stood for a while, wondering whether I should signal to him that I was there. But, before I could decide what to do, he sensed my presence and turned around. When he saw me, he gave his usual minimalist nod.

“Good evening,” I said.

“Good evening,” he answered in a small voice. This was the first time I'd heard him speak. His voice sounded a little sleepy but otherwise perfectly normal. Not too high, not too low.

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“A midnight stroll?” he asked.

“I couldn't sleep,” I said.

He looked me over from top to bottom, and a faint smile came to his lips. “Same here,” he said.

“Have a seat, if you'd like.”

I hesitated for a moment, then walked over to his table. I pulled out one of the plastic chairs and sat down opposite him. I turned to look in the same direction that he was looking. At the end of the beach were the jagged rocks, like muffins sliced in half, with waves slapping at them at regular intervals. Neat, graceful little waves—as if they'd been measured off with a ruler. Beyond that, there wasn't much to look at.

“I didn't see you at the beach today,” I said.

“I was resting in my room all day,” the young man replied. “My mother wasn't feeling well.”

“I'm sorry to hear that.”

“It's not a physical thing. More of an emotional, nervous condition.” He rubbed his cheek with the middle finger of his right hand. Despite the late hour, his cheeks were as smooth as porcelain, not a trace of stubble. “She's O.K. now. She's sound asleep. It's different from my legs—one good night's sleep and she's better. Not completely cured or anything, but at least she's her usual self again. Come morning, she'll be fine.”

He was silent for thirty seconds, maybe a minute. I uncrossed my legs under the table and wondered if this was the right moment to leave. It was as if my whole life revolved around trying to judge the right point in a conversation to say goodbye. But I missed my chance; just as I was about to tell him I had to go, he spoke up.

“There are all kinds of nervous disorders. Even if they have the same cause, there are a million different symptoms. It's like an earthquake—the underlying energy is the same, but, depending on where it happens, the results are different. In one case, an island sinks; in another, a brand-new island is formed.”

He yawned. A long, formal kind of yawn. Elegant, almost. “Excuse me,” he said. He looked exhausted, his eyes were blurry, as if he might fall asleep at any second. I glanced at my watch and realized that I wasn't wearing one—



just a band of white skin on my wrist where my watch had been.

“Don’t worry about me,” he said. “I might look sleepy but I’m not. Four hours a night is enough for me, and I usually get that just before dawn. So at this time of night I’m mostly here, just hanging out.”

He picked up the Cinzano ashtray on the table, gazed at it for a while as if it were some rare find, then put it back.

“Whenever my mother has her nervous condition, the left side of her face gets frozen. She can’t move her eye or her mouth. If you look at that side of her face, it looks like a cracked vase. It’s 7 of 11

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weird, but it’s not fatal or anything. One night’s sleep and she’s good to go.”

I had no idea how to respond, so I just gave a noncommittal nod. A cracked vase?

“Don’t tell my mother I told you about this, O.K.? She hates it if anybody talks about her condition.”

“Sure,” I said. “Besides, we’re leaving tomorrow, so I doubt I’ll have a chance to talk with her.”

“That’s too bad,” he said, as if he really meant it.

“It is, but I’ve got to get back to work, so what can I do?” I said.

“Where are you from?”

“Tokyo.”

“Tokyo,” he repeated. He narrowed his eyes again and stared out at the ocean, as if he’d be able, if he stared hard enough, to see the lights of Tokyo out beyond the horizon.

“Are you going to be here much longer?” I asked.

“Hard to say,” he said, tracing the handgrip on his wheelchair with his fingers. “Another month, maybe two. It all depends. My sister’s husband owns stock in this hotel, so we can stay here for next to nothing. My father runs a big tile company in Cleveland, and my brother-in-law’s basically taken it over. I don’t like the guy very much, but I guess you can’t choose your family, can you? I don’t know, maybe he’s not as terrible as I make out. Unhealthy people like me tend to be a little narrow-minded.” He took a handkerchief from his pocket and slowly, delicately, blew his nose, then repocketed the handkerchief. “Anyhow, he owns stock in a lot of companies. A lot of investment property, too. A shrewd guy, just like my father. So we’re all—my family, I mean—divided into two types of people: the healthy ones and the sick ones. The functional and the dysfunctional. The healthy ones are busy making tile, increasing their wealth, and evading taxes—don’t tell anybody I said that, O.K.?—and they take care of the sick ones. It’s a neat division of labor.”

He stopped speaking and took a deep breath. He tapped his fingernails against the tabletop for a while. I was silent, waiting for him to go on.

“They decide everything for us. Tell us to stay a month here, a month there. We’re like the rain, my mother and I. We rain here, and the next thing you know we’re raining somewhere else.”

The waves lapped at the rocks, leaving white foam behind; by the time the foam vanished, new waves had appeared. I watched this process vacantly. The moonlight cast irregular shadows among the rocks.

“Of course, since it’s a division of labor,” he went on, “my mother and I have our roles to play, too.

It's a two-way street. It's hard to describe, but I think we complement their excesses by doing nothing. That's our *raison d'être*. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yeah, sort of," I replied. "But I'm not entirely sure I do."

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He laughed quietly. "A family's a strange thing," he said. "A family has to exist as its own premise, or else the system won't function. In that sense, my useless legs are a kind of banner that my family rallies around. My dead legs are the pivot around which things revolve."

He was tapping the tabletop again. Not in irritation—merely moving his fingers and quietly contemplating things in his own time zone.

"One of the main characteristics of this system is that lack gravitates toward greater lack, excess toward greater excess. When Debussy was getting nowhere with an opera he was composing, he put it this way: 'I spent my days pursuing the nothingness—*rien*—it creates.' My job is to create that void, that *rien*."

He sank back into an insomniac silence, his mind wandering to some distant region. Perhaps to the void inside him. Eventually, his attention returned to the here and now, the point he came back to a few degrees out of alignment with where he'd departed from. I tried rubbing my own cheek. The scratch of stubble told me that, yes, time was still moving. I took the miniature bottle of whiskey from my pocket and stood it on the table.

"Care for a drink? I don't have a glass, I'm afraid."

He shook his head. "Thanks, but I don't drink. I'm not sure how I'd react if I did, so I don't. But I don't mind other people drinking—be my guest."

I tipped the bottle back and let the whiskey slide slowly down my throat. I closed my eyes, savoring the warmth. He watched this process from across the table.

"This might be a strange question," he said, "but do you know anything about knives?"

"Knives?"

"Knives. You know, like hunting knives."

I'd used knives when camping, I told him, but I didn't know much about them. That seemed to disappoint him. But not for long.

"Never mind," he said. "I just happen to have a knife I wanted you to take a look at. I bought it about a month ago from a catalogue. But I don't know the first thing about knives. I don't know if it's any good or if I wasted my money. So I wanted to have somebody else take a look and tell me what they think. If you don't mind."

"No, I don't mind," I told him.

Gingerly, he withdrew a five-inch-long, beautifully curved object from his pocket and placed it on the table.

"Don't worry. I'm not planning to hurt anybody with it, or hurt myself. It's just that one day I felt like I had to own a sharp knife. I can't remember why. I was just dying to get a knife, that's all. So I looked through some catalogues and ordered one. Nobody knows that I'm always carrying this knife around with me—not even my mother. You're the only person who knows."

“And I’m leaving for Tokyo tomorrow.”

“That’s right,” he said, and smiled. He picked up the knife and let it rest in his palm for a moment, testing its weight as if it held some great significance. Then he passed it to me across the table. The knife did have a strange heft—it was as if I were holding a living creature with a will of its own.

Wood inlay was set into the brass handle, and the metal was cool, even though it had been in his pocket all this time.

“Go ahead and open the blade.”

I pushed a depression on the upper part of the hilt and flipped out the heavy blade. Fully extended, it was about three inches long. With the blade out, the knife felt even heavier. It wasn’t just the weight that struck me; it was the way the knife fit perfectly in my palm. I tried swinging it around a couple of times, up and down, side to side, and with that perfect balance I never had to grip harder to keep it from slipping. The steel blade, with its sharply etched blood groove, carved out a crisp arc as I slashed with it.

“Like I said, I don’t know much about knives,” I told him, “but this is one great knife. It’s got such a great feel to it.”

“But isn’t it kind of small for a hunting knife?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I guess it depends on what you use it for.”

“True enough,” he said, and nodded a few times as if to convince himself.

I folded the blade into the handle and handed it back to him. The young man opened it up again and deftly twirled the knife once in his hand. Then, as if he were sighting down a rifle, he shut one eye and aimed the knife directly at the full moon. Moonlight reflected off the blade and for an instant flashed on the side of his face.

“I wonder if you could do me a favor,” he said. “Could you cut something with it?”

“Cut something? Like what?”

“Anything. Whatever’s around. I just want you to cut something. I’m stuck in this chair, so there isn’t much I can reach. I’d really like it if you’d cut something up for me.”

I couldn’t think of any reason to refuse, so I picked up the knife and took a couple of stabs at the trunk of a nearby palm tree. I sliced down diagonally, lopping off the bark. Then I picked up one of those Styrofoam kickboards lying near the pool and sliced it in half lengthwise. The knife was even sharper than I’d imagined.

“This knife’s fantastic,” I said.

“It’s handcrafted,” the young man said. “And pretty expensive, too.”

I aimed the knife at the moon as he’d done, and stared hard at it. In the light, it looked like the stem of some ferocious plant just breaking through the surface of the soil. Something that connected nothingness and excess.

The New Yorker

<http://web.archive.org/web/20031122030156/http://newyorker.com/p...>

“Cut some more things,” he urged.

I slashed out at everything I could lay my hands on. At coconuts that had fallen on the ground, the massive leaves of a tropical plant, the menu posted at the entrance to the bar. I even hacked away at pieces of driftwood on the beach. When I ran out of things to cut, I started moving slowly, deliberately, as if I were doing Tai Chi, silently slicing the knife through the night air. Nothing stood in my way. The night was deep, and time was pliable. The light of the full moon only added to that depth, that pliancy.

As I stabbed the air, I suddenly thought of the fat woman, the ex-United Airlines stewardess. I could see her pale, bloated flesh hovering in the air around me, formless, like mist. Everything was there inside that mist. The rafts, the sea, the sky, the helicopters, the pilots. I tried slashing them in two, but the perspective was off, and it all stayed just out of reach of the tip of my blade. Was it all an illusion? Or was *I* the illusion? Maybe it didn't matter. Come tomorrow, I wouldn't be here anymore.

“Sometimes I have this dream,” the young man in the wheelchair said. His voice had a strange echo to it, as if it were rising up from the bottom of a cavernous hole. “There's a sharp knife stabbed into the soft part of my head, where the memories are. It's stuck deep down inside. It doesn't hurt or weigh me down—it's just stuck there. And I'm standing off to one side, looking at this like it's happening to someone else. I want someone to pull the knife out, but no one knows that it's stuck inside my head. I think about yanking it out myself, but I can't reach my hands inside my head. It's the strangest thing. I can stab myself, but I can't reach the knife to pull it out. And then everything starts to disappear. I start to fade away, too. And only the knife is left. Only the knife is always there—to the very end. Like the bone of some prehistoric animal on the beach. That's the kind of dream I have,” he said.

( *Translated, from the Japanese, by Philip Gabriel.* ) 11 of 11

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