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THE FOLKLORE OF OUR TIMES

by HARUKI MURAKAMI

Issue of 2003-06-09
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I was born in 1949. I started high school in 1963 and went to college in 1967. And so it was amid the crazy, confused uproar of 1968 that I saw in my otherwise auspicious twentieth year. Which, I guess, makes me a typical child of the sixties. It was the most vulnerable, most formative, and therefore most important period in my life, and there I was, breathing in deep lungfuls of abandon and quite naturally getting high on it all. I kicked in a few deserving doors—and what a thrill it was whenever a door that deserved kicking in presented itself before me, as Jim Morrison, the Beatles, and Bob Dylan played in the background. The whole shebang.

Even now, looking back on it all, I think that those years were special. I'm sure that if you were to examine the attributes of the time one by one, you wouldn't discover anything all that noteworthy. Just the heat generated by the engine of history, that limited gleam that certain things give off in certain places at certain times—that and a kind of inexplicable antsiness, as if we were viewing everything through the wrong end of a telescope. Heroics and villainy, rapture and disillusionment, martyrdom and revisionism, silence and eloquence, et cetera, et cetera . . . the stuff of any age. Only, in our day—if you'll forgive the overblown expression—it was all so colorful somehow, so very reach-out-and-grab-it palpable. There were no gimmicks, no discount coupons, no hidden advertising, no keep-'em-coming point-card schemes, no insidious, loopholing paper trails. Cause and effect shook hands; theory and reality embraced with aplomb. A prehistory to high capitalism: that's what I personally call those years.

But as to whether the era brought us—my generation, that is—any special radiance, well, I'm not so sure. In the final analysis, perhaps we simply passed through it as if we were watching an exciting movie: we experienced it as real—our hearts pounded, our palms sweated—but when the lights came on we just walked out of the cinema and picked up where we'd left off. For whatever reason, we neglected to learn any truly valuable lesson from it all. Don't ask me why. I am much too deeply bound up in those years to answer the question. There's just one thing I'd like you to understand: I'm not the least bit proud that I came of age then; I'm simply reporting the facts.

Now let me tell you about the girls. About the mixed-up sexual relations between us boys, with our brand-new genitals, and the girls, who at the time were, well, still girls.

But, first, about virginity. In the sixties, virginity held a greater significance than it does today. As I see it—not that I've ever conducted a survey—about fifty per cent of the girls of my generation were no longer virgins by the age of twenty. Or, at least, that seemed to be the ratio in my general

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vicinity. Which means that, consciously or not, about half the girls around still revered this thing called virginity.

Looking back now, I'd say that a large portion of the girls of my generation, whether virgins or not, had their share of inner conflicts about sex. It all depended on the circumstances, on the partner.

Sandwiching this relatively silent majority were the liberals, who thought of sex as a kind of sport, and the conservatives, who were adamant that girls should stay virgins until they were married.

Among the boys, there were also those who thought that the girl they married should be a virgin.

People differ, values differ. That much is constant, no matter what the period. But the thing about the sixties that was totally unlike any other time is that we believed that those differences could be resolved.

This is the story of someone I knew. He was in my class during my senior year of high school in Kobe, and, frankly, he was the kind of guy who could do it all. His grades were good, he was athletic, he was considerate, he had leadership qualities. He wasn't outstandingly handsome, but he was good-looking in a clean-cut sort of way. He could even sing. A forceful speaker, he was always the one to mobilize opinion in our classroom discussions. This didn't mean that he was much of an original thinker—but who expects originality in a classroom discussion? All we ever wanted was for it to be over as quickly as possible, and if he opened his mouth we were sure to be done on time. In that sense, you could say that he was a real friend.

There was no faulting him. But then again I could never begin to imagine what went on in his mind.

Sometimes I felt like unscrewing his head and shaking it, just to see what kind of sound it would make. Still, he was very popular with the girls. Whenever he stood up to say something in class, all the girls would gaze at him admiringly. Any math problem they didn't understand they'd take to him. He must have been twenty-seven times more popular than I was. He was just that kind of guy.

We all learn our share of lessons from the textbook of life, and one piece of wisdom I've picked up along the way is that you just have to accept that in any collective body there will be such types.

Needless to say, though, I personally wasn't too keen on his type. I guess I preferred, I don't know, someone more flawed, someone with a more unusual presence. So in the course of an entire year in the same class I never once hung out with the guy. I doubt that I even spoke to him. The first time I ever had a proper conversation with him was during the summer vacation after my freshman year of college. We happened to be attending the same driving school, and we'd chat now and then, or have coffee together during the breaks. That driving school was such a bore that I'd have been happy to kill time with any acquaintance I ran into. I don't remember much about our conversations; whatever we talked about, it left no impression, good or bad.

The other thing I remember about him is that he had a girlfriend. She was in a different class, and she was hands down the prettiest girl in the school. She got good grades, but she was also an athlete, and she was a leader—like him, she had the last word in every class discussion. The two of them were simply made for each other: Mr. and Miss Clean, like something out of a toothpaste 2 of 13

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commercial.

I'd see them around. Every lunch hour, they sat in a corner of the schoolyard, talking. After school, they rode the train home together, getting off at different stations. He was on the soccer team, and she was in the English-conversation club. When their extracurricular activities weren't over at the same time, the one who finished first would go and study in the library. Any free time they had they spent together.

None of us—in my crowd—had anything against them. We didn't make fun of them, we never gave them a hard time; in fact, we hardly paid any attention to them at all. They really didn't give us much to speculate about. They were like the weather—just there, a physical fact. Inevitably, we spent our time talking about the things that interested us more: sex and rock and roll and Jean-Luc Godard films, political movements and Kenzaburo Oe novels, things like that. But especially sex.

O.K., we were ignorant and full of ourselves. We didn't have a clue about life. But, for us, Mr. and Miss Clean existed only in their Clean world. Which probably means that the illusions we entertained back then and the illusions

they embraced were, to some extent, interchangeable.

This is their story. It's not a particularly happy story, nor, by this point in time, is it one with much of a moral. But no matter: it's our story as much as theirs. Which, I guess, makes it a form of cultural history. Suitable material for me to collect and relate here—me, the insensitive folklorist.

He and I ran into each other in the Italian town of Lucca, in the Tuscan foothills. My wife and I were renting an apartment in Rome at the time, but she was back in Japan for a few weeks, and I was travelling around by train. From Venice to Verona to Mantua to Modena, then a short stopover in Lucca, a peaceful little town, with a restaurant on the outskirts that served wonderful mushroom dishes. By coincidence, he was staying at the same hotel I was.

Small world.

That evening, we dined together at the restaurant. Both of us were travelling alone; both of us were bored. The older you get, the less fun it is to travel by yourself. The scenery starts to seem less scenic; other people's endless conversations are grating to your ears. You don't bother to try out new restaurants, and the waits for trains seem endless. You look at your watch again and again, and you don't even attempt to speak the language of the country you are travelling in. You close your eyes, and all that comes to mind are the mistakes of the past.

Perhaps that's why he and I felt somehow relieved to see each other, just as we had at driving school. We took a table by the fireplace, ordered a quality *rosso*, and proceeded to eat our way through an antipasto of *funghi trifolati*, followed by *fettuccine ai porcini* and *arrosto di tartufo bianco*.

He had come to Lucca to buy furniture, he told me. He ran a trading firm that specialized in European furniture, and, of course, he was successful. He didn't brag or anything, but I could tell at a glance that this man had the world in his hands. It was in the clothes he wore, in the way he

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talked, the way he carried himself. Success looked good on him, and, in a way, it was pleasing to see.

Initially, we talked about Italy. The unreliable train schedules, the inordinate amount of time devoted to meals. Then, I don't remember what led up to it, but by the time the waiter brought a second bottle of wine he was already telling me his story, and I was commenting on it at appropriate intervals. I guess he'd been wanting to tell someone for a long time, but hadn't been able to bring himself to do it. If it hadn't been for the cozy restaurant and the bouquet of the '83 Coltibuono, he might never have broached the subject. But talk he did.

"I always thought I was a boring person," he said. "Even when I was little, I was boxed in. I saw fences all around me, and I was careful never to go beyond them. There were guidelines, like on a highway: take the right lane only for this exit, merge ahead, no passing. You just had to follow the signs and you'd get there. So that was how I did everything—I did it the right way—and, as a result, all the adults fussed over me and praised me. When I was young, I thought that everyone saw things the same way. But, sooner or later, I learned that that wasn't the case."

I held my wineglass toward the fire and gazed at it for a while.

"My whole life—or, at least, the first part of it—things went smoothly for me. I had no problems to speak of, but, on the other hand, did I have any notion of what it meant to be alive? I had no idea what I was doing, what I was after. I mean, I was good at math, I was good at English, I was good at sports. Straight flush. My folks patted me on the back, my teachers told me I had nothing to worry about. But what was it that I was really cut out for? What did I want to do with myself?"

Should I study law? Engineering? Should I go to medical school? Any of the above would have been fine. So I did what my parents and teachers told me to do and I majored in law at Tokyo University.”

He took another sip of wine. “Do you remember my girlfriend in high school?”

“Fujisawa something, wasn’t it?” I dredged my memory for her name. I wasn’t at all sure, but it came up correct.

He nodded. “That’s right, Yoshiko Fujisawa. Well, the same went for her. I could tell her everything I was feeling, and she understood. We could have gone on talking forever. It was . . . I mean, until I met her, I’d never had a friend I could really talk to.”

He and Yoshiko Fujisawa were such spiritual twins it was creepy. They were leaders. School superstars. They came from good homes, where their parents nevertheless didn’t really get along.

The fathers had other women and didn’t always come home at night. The only thing that kept the parents from divorcing was what other people would think. The mothers ruled the households, and the children were pushed to be the best at whatever they did. Neither child could get close to anyone. They were both popular, but essentially friendless, and they didn’t understand why.

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Perhaps normal imperfect human beings simply preferred the company of other normal imperfect human beings.

They were always lonely, always on edge. But then, out of the blue, they met each other. They accepted each other. They fell in love. They felt completely at ease with each other, especially when they were alone together. They had so many secrets to share; they never tired of talking about their isolation, their insecurities, their dreams.

When it came to physical contact, they had their rules: never to take off their clothes, to touch each other only with their hands. Once a week, they’d spend the afternoon in one or the other’s bedroom.

Both houses were quiet—absent father, mother out on errands. They allowed themselves ten or fifteen minutes of hectic groping before returning to their studies, chairs side by side at the desk.

“O.K., enough of this, huh? Back to the books,” she’d say, straightening her skirt.

They both got good grades. Studying, for them, was no hardship at all, just second nature. They’d even race each other to solve math problems. “That was fun,” he’d say. Yes, it sounds stupid, but to them it *was* fun. Such fun as we flawed humans will likely never understand.

Yet somehow these relations didn’t entirely satisfy him. He felt as though something was missing.

He wanted to sleep with her. He wanted to have sex. “Physical union” were the words he used. “I thought it would give us a more intimate understanding of each other,” he told me. “It just seemed like the most natural next step.”

She, however, didn’t agree. She pinched her lips together and gave a little shake of her head. “I like you and all, but I want to stay a virgin until I’m married,” she said. No matter how hard he tried to persuade her, she wouldn’t change her mind. “You know I like you,” she’d say. “Really and truly, I do. But that’s that, and this is different. I’m sorry, but just bear with me. Please. If you truly love me, can’t you let it go?”

“If that was how she wanted it,” he told me, “I had to respect her wishes. It wasn’t like she was asking for the impossible. I personally didn’t think virginity was such a big deal. I doubt I’d have cared whether the girl I married was a virgin or not. I’m no radical thinker, but that doesn’t make me a fundamentalist. I’m simply a realist. The

important thing is for a man and a woman to know where they're coming from, mutually. That's what I thought. But she had an image of the life she wanted to live. And I put up with it. We went on petting, hands under our clothes—you know the kind of thing."

"I believe so," I said.

He blushed, then smiled. "It wasn't so bad, as far as it went, but I couldn't stop thinking about sex.

To me, we were only halfway there. I wanted to be one with her. I wanted nothing covered up, nothing hidden. It was a matter of staking a claim. I needed some kind of sign. Sure, my sex drive was part of it, but it wasn't just that. Never once in my life had I felt completely united with anything or anyone. I was always alone. Always cramped up inside that box. I wanted to free myself. I wanted to discover the real me. By sleeping with her, I thought I might be able to break out."

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He approached her with a plan. As soon as they finished college, he said, they could get married. If she wanted to get engaged, they could do that even sooner. It was no problem at all. She looked straight at him for a second. Then a smile floated across her face. A really lovely smile. She was clearly happy to hear those words from him. But, at the same time, it was a smile hedged with forbearance, with a faint hint of sadness. Not condescending, exactly, but not encouraging, either—at least, that's what he sensed.

"It's impossible," she said. "You and I will never get married. I'm going to marry someone a little older than me, and you're going to marry someone a little younger. That's just how it goes. Women mature earlier than men, and they age faster, too. Even if we did get married right after college, it wouldn't last. Anyway, we can't keep going like this. You know I like you, more than I've ever liked anyone else. But that's that, and this is this"—a pet phrase of hers, apparently. "We're still in high school. We lead protected lives. The real world is a lot bigger and a lot more difficult. We have to prepare ourselves."

He knew what she was trying to say. He was much more of a realist in his thinking, after all, than most boys of his generation. If he'd been told the same thing as a general proposition, he might well have agreed. But this was no general proposition; this concerned him very specifically.

"I don't buy that," he told her. "I love you and I want to be with you. I'm very clear on this. It's very important to me. I don't care if some things don't hold up in the real world—honestly, this will. I love you that much. I'm crazy about you."

She shook her head, as if to say, "It can't be helped." Then, stroking his hair, she asked, "Do you really think we know the first thing about love? Our love has never been tested. We're still children, you and I."

He was too disheartened to respond. Once again, he hadn't been able to break down the walls that surrounded him, and he was only too aware of how powerless he was. I can't do a damn thing, he thought. If things keep going like this, I'll probably live out my whole life inside this box, year after pointless year.

The two of them stayed together until they graduated from high school. Rendezvousing in the library, studying together, petting under their clothes. She didn't seem to think that there was anything wrong with this arrangement; in fact, she seemed almost to relish the incompleteness of it.

While everyone else imagined that they—Mr. and Miss Clean—were enjoying an ideal youth, he alone was unconsolated.

Finally, in the spring of 1967, he left for Tokyo University. She stayed in Kobe, where she enrolled at a very proper women's college. It was a top-rated school among such institutions, but hardly a challenge for her. She could easily have got into Tokyo University, but she didn't even sit for the entrance exams. To her mind, that kind of education was unnecessary. "I'm not looking for a career in the Ministry of Finance. I'm a girl—it's different for me. You, you're going to go far, but I'm just going to take it easy for these four years. An interlude, you know, a kind of rest stop. Because 6 of 13

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once I get married I won't be having a career, now, will I?"

Her attitude disappointed him. He'd been hoping that the two of them would go to Tokyo together and reshape their relationship into something new. He urged her to rethink it, but she just shook her head.

The summer after his first year in college (the same summer that he and I met up at the driving school), he went home to Kobe, and they saw each other almost every day. She took him on long drives, and they petted, just like old times. But he couldn't help noticing that something had begun to change between them. The change wasn't drastic. In a way, things were a little too much the same. The way she talked, the way she dressed, her opinions—almost everything about her was as it had been before. But he no longer wanted to blend back into his old life. It was the law of dynamics: little by little, repetition after repetition, the two of them had fallen out of synch. And it wouldn't have been so bad, if only he knew what direction he was veering in.

He had been lonely in Tokyo, still unable to make friends. The city was crowded and dirty, the food tasteless. He thought about her all the time. At night, he'd hole up in his room and write to her. She wrote back (albeit much less frequently), letters detailing her daily activities, which he read over and over; if it hadn't been for those letters, he was sure he'd have gone mad. He took up smoking; he started drinking. Sometimes he even cut class.

How he had longed for the summer break, so that he could go home to Kobe! But now that he was there he was even more depressed. The funny thing was that he had been away for only three months. Why did everything suddenly seem so dusty, so lacklustre? The city he'd missed so much now looked run-down to him, just another self-absorbed provincial town. Making conversation with his mother was an ordeal. Going to the barbershop where he'd had his hair cut since he was a boy was a gloomy prospect. The waterfront where he walked the dog every day was a derelict tract of rubbish.

Even seeing her failed to boost his spirits. What the hell was wrong with him? Of course he still loved her, but that wasn't enough. Passion can't sustain itself forever. He had to play his hand, somehow, or the relationship would be suffocated into extinction.

He decided that he had to take the sex question out of the freezer and serve it up again. It was his last chance.

"These three months alone in Tokyo, I've thought of nothing but you. I really must be in love with you. No matter how far apart we are, my feelings are still the same. But while we're apart I get so insecure. I have dark moods. You may not understand this, but I've never felt so alone in my life. I need to have a real bond with you, an assurance that no matter how far we are from each other we will always be solidly connected."

She took a deep breath and kissed him. Ever so gently. "I'm sorry," she said. "I just can't give you my virginity. This is this, and that is that. I would do anything for you, anything but that. If you truly love me, please don't bring it up again."

Once more, he tried the subject of marriage.

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“There are two girls in my class who are engaged,” she told him, “but their fiancés already have real jobs. Marriage means responsibility.”

“I can take responsibility,” he said firmly. “I got into a good school, and I promise you I’ll get good grades. Any company, any government office would take me on. I’ll get a job anyplace you name. I can do anything if I put my mind to it. What on earth is the problem?”

She closed her eyes and rested her head against her seat and fell silent. “I’m scared,” she said after a while, then buried her face in her hands, sobbing. “Really scared. So scared I can’t help myself. I’m scared of living, of having to make a life. In a few years, I’ll have to go out into the real world, and it frightens me sick. Why can’t you understand that? Why must you torture me like this?”

He put his arms around her. “There’s nothing to be afraid of,” he said. “I’m here. Look at me, I’m scared, too, as scared as you are. But if you and I are together I know that we can make it. If we pool our strengths, there’s nothing to be scared of, nothing at all.”

She shook her head. “You just don’t understand. I’m a woman. I’m not like you. You don’t know a thing about it. Not a thing.”

Nothing he could say did any good. She just kept on crying. And then she said the strangest thing.

“Listen, even if I break up with you, I’ll still remember you forever. Honestly. I’ll never forget. You know how much I like you. You’re the first person I’ve ever cared for, and it’s made me so happy just to be with you. Please understand. If it’s some kind of promise you want, I promise. I’ll sleep with you. But not now. After I’m married I’ll sleep with you. I promise.”

“What the hell was she saying? It boggled my mind,” he said, gazing at the glowing hearth. The waiter brought our *primi piatti* and added another log to the fire, sending out crackling sparks. The middle-aged couple at the next table were deliberating over the dessert menu. “I just couldn’t figure it out. I went home and her words kept playing over and over in my mind, but I simply could not follow her reasoning. Does it make any sense to you?”

“I guess she meant that she was going to stay a virgin until her wedding night, but once she was married and her virginity wasn’t an issue she’d be able to have an affair with you. Something like that.”

“Yeah, something along those lines. That’s the only way I could read it.”

“Unique, I’ll give her that. And logical, in a way.”

A mild smile played over his lips. “True enough. There was some logic to it.”

“A virgin bride, an adulterous wife. It’s like a classic French novel. But with no ballrooms or foot servants.”

“And yet to her that was the only realistic solution,” he said.

“Sad,” I said.

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He shot me a penetrating look, then nodded slowly. “Yeah, sad. Pathetic, really. You hit the nail on the head,” he said. “By now I think so, too. I’ve done my share of growing older. But at the time, no, I couldn’t see it that way. I was still a kid, and totally in the dark about the little tremors that unsettle people’s minds. The whole thing came as such a surprise—it threw me for a loop.”

“I imagine it would,” I concurred.

Then, by tacit agreement, we both ate our *tartufi*.

“I guess you can see what’s coming,” he said after a while. “She and I broke up. Neither one of us came out and said anything. It just came to a natural end. Very peacefully. We just got tired of trying to keep the relationship going. As I saw it, her notions about life weren’t . . . How can I put it? Well, she didn’t come off as very sincere. No, that’s not right. What I mean is I knew she could do better. I was disappointed in her. Virginity, marriage—instead of agonizing over such conventional issues, she should have been trying for more out of life.”

“But that was beyond her,” I said.

He nodded. “I suppose,” he said, forking a meaty slice of mushroom to his mouth. “It happens.

You lose resilience. There comes a point where you’re stretched to the limit, and you can’t go any further. The same thing could’ve happened to me. From childhood on, both of us had been herded along. Pushed and prodded—go forward, get ahead. It gets to where you’re so well trained, so conditioned, you can do only what you’re told to do. Until, one day, you just snap.”

“But you, how is it that you didn’t end up that way?” I asked.

“I got over it somehow,” he said after a moment’s thought. Then he set down his knife and fork, and wiped his mouth with his napkin. “After she and I broke up, I got a girlfriend in Tokyo. A nice girl. We lived together for a while. And, to tell the truth, there were none of the rumblings and jitters I’d had with Yoshiko Fujisawa. It was an honest relationship, and I really liked her. She taught me a lot about real human beings, and I also began to make friends. I took an interest in politics. I learned that realism can come in all shapes and sizes. The world is big enough for different values to coexist. There’s no universal need to be an honors student. And that’s how I found my footing in society.”

“And became successful.”

“Successful enough,” he said, with a slightly disgruntled sigh. Then, looking at me as he might at a co-conspirator, he said, “Compared with other people our age, I admit, my income level is higher, objectively speaking.” That’s all he would say.

But I knew that that wasn’t the end of the story, so I didn’t say anything. I just waited for him to go on.

“I didn’t see Yoshiko Fujisawa for a long time,” he resumed. “A really long time. I graduated from university and got a job at a trading firm. And I worked there for five years, part of it at an overseas 9 of 13

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posting. Every day was filled with work. I was incredibly busy. Two years after college, I heard, through her mother, that she’d got married, but I didn’t ask to whom. My first thought when I heard was, I wonder if she actually stayed a virgin until her wedding night. But then I felt a little sad. And a little sadder the next day. It was as if an era had come to an end, a door was closing behind me forever. Well, naturally. This was a girl I’d really and truly loved. We’d been sweethearts for four years, and I’d even thought about marriage. She was someone who figured that largely in my youth, so of course it made me sad. But, O.K., I really just hoped that she’d be happy. I wished her the best. I was—well, a little worried about her. She had her fragile side.”

The waiter cleared our plates, and we ordered coffee.

“I married relatively late, when I was thirty-two. So I was still single when I got a phone call from Yoshiko. I was twenty-eight. Which makes it just over ten years ago now. In the meantime, I’d quit the company I was working for and had gone independent. My father lent me the capital, and I formed my own little company. I saw astronomical market-growth potential for imported furniture, and I stepped right in. But, as with any startup, nothing went smoothly at first. Delivery delays, depleted stock, warehouse charges piling up, the bank breathing down my neck—to be honest, I ran myself down and I nearly lost hope. It was probably the most difficult time in my life. And right in the middle of it she calls. I have no idea how she got my number. It was eight at night when the phone rang. I recognized her voice immediately. That’s something you never forget. I felt a tinge of nostalgia—you bet I did. It just felt so good to hear an old girlfriend’s voice at a time like that.”

He looked long and hard at the fireplace, as if remembering. The restaurant had filled to capacity.

People were talking and laughing at every table, utensils clattering, glasses tinkling.

“I don’t know who her informants were, but she was up to date on everything about me. I mean everything. She knew that I was still single and had been based overseas, that I’d quit my company and struck out on my own. She knew it all. ‘You’ll come through it, you’re the can-do guy. Just have confidence,’ she told me. I can’t tell you how happy it made me to hear such kind words. So then I asked about her. What sort of guy she’d married, whether they had kids, where they were living. Well, she didn’t have any children. Her husband was four years older than she, and worked in television. A director, she tells me. I say, ‘Sounds like he keeps busy.’ ‘He’s busy, all right, too busy to have kids,’ she says, then laughs. They lived in Tokyo, in a condo near Shinagawa. I was living in Shiroganedai. Not exactly neighbors, but close enough. ‘Strange how things work out, isn’t it?’ I say—you know, whatever. Well, we talked about all the usual things that former high-school sweethearts talk about under the circumstances. It felt a little strained and awkward, but nice over all. Like two old friends catching up on everything. We talked for what seemed like hours.

Then, when there was nothing more for either of us to say, this silence comes over the line. A real .

. . . How to put it? A really dense silence. The kind that invites all sorts of thoughts.” He was focussing on his hands, folded on the tablecloth; then he looked up to meet my eyes. “I should have hung up then and there. ‘Thanks for calling, it’s been nice talking to you’—click, end of story. You see what I’m saying?”

“That would have been the most realistic thing to do,” I agreed.

“But she stays on the line. She invites me to her place. Like, ‘Why don’t you drop by? My 10 of 13

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husband’s away on business, and I’m bored all by myself.’ Well, I don’t know what to say, so I don’t say anything. So she doesn’t say anything. More silence. And then, do you know what she says? She says, ‘You know, I still remember the promise I made to you.’”

“You know, I still remember the promise I made to you.” At first, he claimed, he hadn’t known what she was talking about—he’d never once considered it a real promise. But when it did come back to him he had to think that it was just a slip of the tongue, that she must have been confused.

No, she wasn’t confused. To her, a promise was a promise.

For a moment, he lost sight of where all this was heading. What was the right thing to do? He looked around in desperation, but there were no walls around him, nothing to guide him anymore.

Of course he wanted to sleep with her, that went without saying. Since their breakup, he'd imagined sleeping with her plenty of times. Even when he was seeing other women, his thoughts had found their way to her in the dark. Though he'd never seen her naked, he knew her body from the feel of it under her clothes.

He knew how risky it would be to sleep with her at this stage. He didn't want to go stirring up what he'd so calmly left behind in the shadows of his past. Intuition told him that this was not something he should do. But of course he couldn't refuse. Why should he refuse? It was a perfect fairy tale, a wish granted only once in a lifetime. She lived nearby, and she wanted to fulfill a promise made in the forests of the distant past.

He closed his eyes and couldn't say anything. He'd lost the power of speech.

"Hello?" she said. "You there?"

"I'll come right over," he said. "Can you tell me your address?"

"What would you have done?" he asked me.

I shook my head. I never know how to answer such questions.

He laughed, and looked down at the coffee cup on the table. "I went to her place. I knocked on her door. In a way, I was hoping that she wouldn't be at home. But she was there, all right, and as beautiful as ever. She poured us drinks, and we talked about the old days. We even listened to old records. Then what do you think happened?"

I had no idea. I told him I had no idea.

"When I was a kid, I read a children's story." He seemed to be addressing the far wall of the restaurant. "I forget the plot, but I still remember the last line. It went, 'And, when it was all over, the King and his courtiers roared with laughter.' Kind of a strange way to end a story, wouldn't you say?"

"I would," I said.

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"I wish I could remember what the story was about. God knows I've tried. All I remember is that crazy last line: 'And, when it was all over, the King and his courtiers roared with laughter.' What the hell kind of story ends like that?"

By then we'd finished our coffee.

"We embraced," he said, "but I didn't sleep with her. She didn't undress. We used our hands, just like old times. I thought it would be for the best. And she seemed to think so, too. We petted for a long, long time, without saying anything. What was there for us to say? That was the only way that we could really recognize each other after all those years. Back when we were in school, of course, it would have been different. Plain, ordinary, natural sex might have brought us to some kind of mutual understanding. And, just maybe, we could have been happy together. But we were long past that now. Those days were locked away, and no one could break the seal."

He twirled his empty cup around on its saucer. He kept at it so long that the waiter came over to check on us. But that merely prompted him to return the cup to its original position and order another espresso.

"I stayed there maybe an hour, all told. Any more than that and I'd probably have gone out of my mind," he said with a sly smile. "I said goodbye to her and left. She said goodbye, too, and this time it really was goodbye, once

and for all. I knew it, and she knew it. The last I saw of her, she was standing in the doorway with her arms crossed. She looked as if she were about to say something, but she didn't. I knew what she would have said, in any case. I was exhausted . . . hollowed out, empty. I walked around aimlessly, feeling as if I'd wasted my whole life. I wished I could go back to her place and just screw her, long and hard. But I couldn't bring myself to, nor would it have made anything any better."

He shook his head. He drank his second espresso.

"It embarrasses me to say this, but I went straight out and got myself a hooker. First time in my life.

And very likely the last."

I looked at my own coffee cup and thought about what a standoffish jerk I must have been in the old days. I wanted to let him in on what I was thinking, but I doubted that I'd be able to find the right words.

"Telling the story like this, I feel like I'm talking about someone else," he said with a chuckle, then fell silent.

"And, when it was all over, the King and his courtiers roared with laughter," he said, finally. "I always think of that sentence whenever I remember that time. Conditioned reflex, I guess. I don't know what it is, but sadness always seems to contain some strange little joke."

As I said at the beginning, there isn't much here that you could call a moral. Nonetheless, it's the story of his life, and it's the story of all our lives. Which is why I couldn't laugh when I heard it and 12 of 13

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why I still can't.

(*Translated, from the Japanese, by Alfred Birnbaum.*) 13 of 13

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