FICTION
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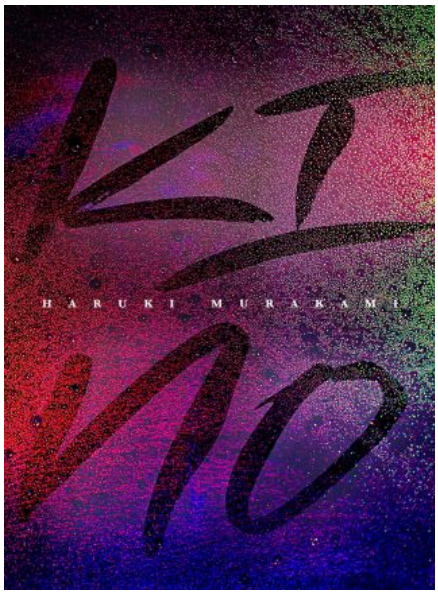
KINO

BY HARUKI MURAKAMI



PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL MARCELLE

The man always sat in the same seat, the stool farthest down the counter. When it wasn't occupied, that is, but it was nearly always free. The bar was seldom crowded, and that particular seat was the most inconspicuous and the least comfortable. A staircase in the back made the ceiling slanted and low, so it was hard to stand up there without bumping your head. The man was tall, yet, for some reason, preferred that cramped, narrow spot.

Main theme

Kino remembered the first time the man had come to his bar. His appearance had immediately caught Kino's eye—the bluish shaved head, the thin build yet broad shoulders, the keen glint in his eye, the

Unison enter

prominent cheekbones and wide forehead. He looked to be in his early thirties, and he wore a long gray raincoat, though it wasn't raining. At first, Kino tagged him as a yakuza, and was on his guard around him. It was seven-thirty, on a chilly mid-April evening, and the bar was empty. The man chose the seat at the end of the counter, took off his coat, and in a quiet voice ordered a beer, then silently read a thick book. After half an hour, finished with the beer, he raised his hand an inch or two to motion Kino over, and ordered a whiskey. "Which brand?" Kino asked, but the man said he had no preference.

Counter line enter ONCE

Counter line enter

Counter line enter

"Just an ordinary sort of Scotch. A double. Add an equal amount of water and a little bit of ice, if you would."

Kino poured some White Label into a glass, added the same amount of water and two small, nicely formed ice cubes. The man took a sip, scrutinized the glass, and narrowed his eyes. "This will do fine."

He read for another half hour, then stood up and paid his bill in cash. He counted out exact change so that he wouldn't get any coins back. Kino breathed a small sigh of relief as soon as he was out the door. But after the man had left his presence remained. As Kino stood behind the counter, he glanced up occasionally at the seat the man had occupied, half expecting him still to be there, raising his hand a couple of inches to order something.

The man began coming regularly to Kino's bar. Once, at most twice, a week. He would invariably have a beer first, then a whiskey. Sometimes he would study the day's menu on the blackboard and order a light meal.

The man hardly ever said a word. He always came fairly early in the evening, a book tucked under his arm, which he would place on the counter. Whenever he got tired of reading (at least, Kino guessed that

he was tired), he looked up from the page and studied the bottles of liquor lined up on the shelves in front of him, as if examining a series of unusual taxidermied animals from faraway lands.

Once Kino got used to the man, though, he never felt uncomfortable around him, even when it was just the two of them. Kino never spoke much himself, and didn't find it hard to remain silent around others. While the man read, Kino did what he would do if he were alone—wash dishes, prepare sauces, choose records to play, or page through the newspaper.

Kino didn't know the man's name. He was just a regular customer who came to the bar, enjoyed a beer and a whiskey, read silently, paid in cash, then left. He never bothered anybody else. What more did Kino need to know about him?

Back in college, Kino had been a standout middle-distance runner, but in his junior year he'd torn his Achilles tendon and had to give up on the idea of joining a corporate track team. After graduation, on his coach's recommendation, he got a job at a sports-equipment company, and he stayed there for seventeen years. At work, he was in charge of persuading sports stores to stock his brand of running shoes and leading athletes to try them out. The company, a mid-level firm headquartered in Okayama, was far from well known, and lacked the financial power of a Nike or an Adidas to draw up exclusive contracts with the world's best runners. Still, it made carefully handcrafted shoes for top athletes, and quite a few swore by its products. "Do an honest job and it will pay off" was the slogan of the company's founder, and that low-key, somewhat anachronistic approach suited Kino's personality. Even a taciturn, unsociable man like him was able to make a go of sales. Actually, it was because of his personality that coaches trusted him and athletes took a liking to him. He listened carefully to each runner's needs, and made sure that the head of manufacturing got all the details. The pay wasn't much to

speak of, but he found the job engaging and satisfying. Although he couldn't run anymore himself, he loved seeing the runners race around the track, their form textbook perfect.

When Kino quit his job, it wasn't because he was dissatisfied with his work but because he discovered that his wife was having an affair with his best friend at the company. Kino spent more time out on the road than at home in Tokyo. He'd stuff a large gym bag full of shoe samples and make the rounds of sporting-goods stores all over Japan, also visiting local colleges and companies that sponsored track teams. His wife and his colleague started sleeping together while he was away. Kino wasn't the type who easily picked up on clues. He thought everything was fine with his marriage, and nothing his wife said or did tipped him off to the contrary. If he hadn't happened to come home from a business trip a day early, he might never have discovered what was going on.

When he got back to Tokyo that day, he went straight to his condo in Kasai, only to find his wife and his friend naked and entwined in his bedroom, in the bed where he and his wife slept. His wife was on top, and when Kino opened the door he came face to face with her and her lovely breasts bouncing up and down. He was thirty-nine then, his wife thirty-five. They had no children. Kino lowered his head, shut the bedroom door, left the apartment, and never went back. The next day, he quit his job.

Kino had an unmarried aunt, his mother's older sister. Ever since he was a child, his aunt had been nice to him. She'd had an older boyfriend for many years ("lover" might be the more accurate term), and he had generously given her a small house in Aoyama. She lived on the second floor of the house, and ran a coffee shop on the first floor. In front was a small garden and an impressive willow tree, with low-hanging, leafy branches. The house was on a narrow backstreet

behind the Nezu Museum, not exactly the best location for drawing customers, but his aunt had a gift for attracting people, and her coffee shop did a decent amount of business.

After she turned sixty, though, she hurt her back, and it became increasingly difficult for her to run the shop alone. She decided to move to a resort condo in the Izu Kogen Highlands. "I was wondering if eventually you might want to take over the shop?" she asked Kino. This was three months before he discovered his wife's affair. "I appreciate the offer," he told her, "but right now I'm happy where I am."

After he submitted his resignation at work, he phoned his aunt to ask if she'd sold the shop yet. It was listed with a real-estate agent, she told him, but no serious offers had come in. "I'd like to open a bar there if I can," Kino said. "Could I pay you rent by the month?"

"But what about your job?" she asked.

"I quit a couple of days ago."

"Didn't your wife have a problem with that?"

"We're probably going to get divorced soon."

Kino didn't explain the reason, and his aunt didn't ask. There was silence for a time on the other end of the line. Then his aunt named a figure for the monthly rent, far lower than what Kino had expected. "I think I can handle that," he told her.

He and his aunt had never talked all that much (his mother had discouraged him from getting close to her), but they'd always seemed to have a kind of mutual understanding. She knew that Kino wasn't the type of person to break a promise.

Kino used half of his savings to transform the coffee shop into a bar. He purchased simple furniture, and had a long, sturdy bar installed. He put up new wallpaper in a calming color, brought his record collection from home, and lined a shelf in the bar with LPs. He owned a decent stereo—a Thorens turntable, a Luxman amp, and small JBL two-way speakers—that he'd bought when he was single, a fairly extravagant purchase back then. But he had always enjoyed listening to old jazz records. It was his only hobby, one that he didn't share with anyone else he knew. In college, he'd worked part time as a bartender at a pub in Roppongi, so he was well versed in the art of mixing cocktails.

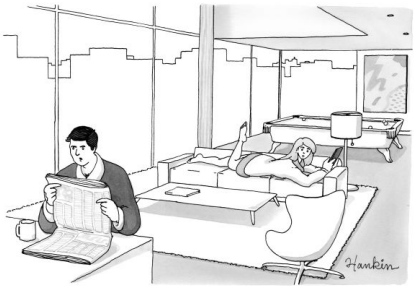
He called his bar Kino. He couldn't come up with a better name. The first week he was open, he didn't have a single customer, but he wasn't perturbed. After all, he hadn't advertised the place, or even put out an eye-catching sign. He simply waited patiently for curious people to stumble across this little backstreet bar. He still had some of his severance pay, and his wife hadn't asked for any financial support. She was already living with his former colleague, and she and Kino had decided to sell their condo in Kasai. Kino lived on the second floor of his aunt's house, and it looked as though, for the time being, he'd be able to get by.

As he waited for his first customer, Kino enjoyed listening to whatever music he liked and reading books he'd been wanting to read. Like dry ground welcoming the rain, he let the solitude, silence, and loneliness soak in. He listened to a lot of Art Tatum solo-piano pieces. Somehow they seemed to fit his mood.

"Always 'billionaire playboy.' Never 'billionaire genius.'"

He wasn't sure why, but he felt no anger or bitterness toward his wife, or the colleague she was sleeping with. The betrayal had been a shock, for sure, but, as time passed, he began to feel as if it couldn't have been

helped, as if this had been his fate all along. In his life, after all, he had achieved nothing, had been totally unproductive. He couldn't make anyone else happy, and, of course, couldn't make himself happy. Happiness? He wasn't even sure what that meant. He didn't have a clear sense, either, of emotions like pain or anger, disappointment or resignation, and how they were supposed to feel. The most he could do was create a place where his heart—devoid now of any depth or weight—could be tethered, to keep it from wandering aimlessly. This little bar, Kino, tucked into a backstreet, became that place. And it became, too—not by design, exactly—a strangely comfortable space.



It wasn't a person who first discovered what a comfortable place Kino was but a stray cat. A young gray female with a long, lovely tail. The cat favored a sunken display case in a corner of the bar and liked to curl up there to sleep. Kino didn't pay much attention to the cat, figuring it wanted to be left alone. Once a day, he fed it and changed its water, but nothing beyond that. And he constructed a small pet door so that it could go in and out of the bar whenever it liked.

The cat may have brought some good luck along with it, for after it appeared so did a scattering of customers. Some of them started to come by regularly—ones who took a liking to this little backstreet bar with its wonderful old willow tree, its quiet middle-aged owner, vintage records spinning on a turntable, and the gray cat sacked out in a corner. And these people sometimes brought other new customers. Still far from thriving, the bar at least earned back the rent. For Kino, that was enough.

The young man with the shaved head started coming to the bar about two months after it opened. And it was another two months before Kino learned his name, Kamita.

It was raining lightly that day, the kind of rain where you aren't sure if you really need an umbrella. There were just three customers in the bar, Kamita and two men in suits. It was seven-thirty. As always, Kamita was at the farthest stool down the counter, sipping a White Label and water and reading. The two men were seated at a table, drinking a bottle of Pinot Noir. They had brought the bottle with them, and asked Kino if he would mind their drinking it there, for a five-thousand-yen cork fee. It was a first for Kino, but he had no reason to refuse. He opened the bottle and set down two wineglasses and a bowl of mixed nuts. Not much trouble at all. The two men smoked a lot, though, which for Kino, who hated cigarette smoke, made them less welcome. With little else to do, Kino sat on a stool and listened to the Coleman Hawkins LP with the track "Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho." He found the bass solo by Major Holley amazing.

At first, the two men seemed to be getting along fine, enjoying their wine, but then a difference of opinion arose on some topic or other—what it was, Kino had no idea—and the men grew steadily more worked up. At some point, one of them stood, tipping the table and sending the full ashtray and one of the wineglasses crashing to the floor. Kino hurried over with a broom, swept up the mess, and put a clean glass and ashtray on the table.

Kamita—though at this time Kino had yet to learn his name—was clearly disgusted by the men's behavior. His expression didn't change, but he kept tapping the fingers of his left hand lightly on the counter, like a pianist checking the keys. I have to get this situation under control, Kino thought. He went over to the men. "I'm sorry," he said politely, "but I wonder if you'd mind keeping your voices down a bit."

One of them looked up at him with a cold glint in his eye and rose from the table. Kino hadn't noticed it until now, but the man was huge. He wasn't so much tall as barrel-chested, with enormous arms,

the sort of build you'd expect of a sumo wrestler.

The other man was much smaller. Thin and pale, with a shrewd look, the type who was good at egging people on. He slowly got up from his seat, too, and Kino found himself face to face with both of them. The men had apparently decided to use this opportunity to call a halt to their quarrel and jointly confront Kino. They were perfectly coördinated, almost as if they had secretly been waiting for this very situation to arise.

"So, you think you can just butt in and interrupt us?" the larger of the two said, his voice hard and low.

The suits they wore seemed expensive, but closer inspection showed them to be tacky and poorly made. Not full-fledged yakuza, though whatever work they were involved in was, clearly, not respectable. The larger man had a crew cut, while his companion's hair was dyed brown and pulled back in a high ponytail. Kino steeled himself for something bad to happen. Sweat began to pour from his armpits.

"Pardon me," another voice said.

Kino turned to find that Kamita was standing behind him.

"Don't blame the staff," Kamita said, pointing to Kino. "I'm the one who asked him to request that you keep it down. It makes it hard to concentrate, and I can't read my book."

Kamita's voice was calmer, more languid, than usual. But something, unseen, was beginning to stir.

"Can't read my book," the smaller man repeated, as if making sure that there was nothing ungrammatical about the sentence.

"What, don't ya got a home?" the larger man asked Kamita.

“I do,” Kamita replied. “I live nearby.”

“Then why don’t ya go home and read there?”

“I like reading here,” Kamita said.

The two men exchanged a look.

“Hand over the book,” the smaller man said. “I’ll read it for you.”

“I like to read by myself, quietly,” Kamita said. “And I’d hate it if you mispronounced any of the words.”

“Aren’t you a piece of work,” the larger man said. “What a funny guy.”

“What’s your name, anyway?” Ponytail asked.

“My name is Kamita,” he said. “It’s written with the characters for ‘god’—*kami*—and ‘field’: ‘god’s field.’ But it isn’t pronounced ‘Kanda,’ as you might expect. It’s pronounced ‘Kamita.’”

“I’ll remember that,” the large man said.

“Good idea. Memories can be useful,” Kamita said.

“Anyway, how about we step outside?” the smaller man said. “That way, we can say exactly what we want to.”

“Fine with me,” Kamita said. “Anywhere you say. But, before we do that, could you pay your check? You don’t want to cause the bar any trouble.”

Kamita asked Kino to bring over their check, and he laid exact change for his own drink on the counter. Ponytail extracted a ten-thousand-yen bill from his wallet and tossed it onto the table.

“I don’t need any change back,” Ponytail told Kino. “But why don’t ya buy yourself some better wineglasses? This is expensive wine, and glasses like these make it taste like shit.”

“What a cheap joint,” the larger man said, sneeringly.

“Correct. A cheap bar with cheap customers,” Kamita said. “It doesn’t suit you. There’s got to be somewhere else that does. Not that I know where.”

“Now, aren’t you the wise guy,” the large man said. “You make me laugh.”

“Think it over later on, and have a good, long laugh,” Kamita said.

“No way you’re gonna tell me where I should go,” Ponytail said. He slowly licked his lips, like a snake sizing up its prey.

The large man opened the door and stepped outside, Ponytail following behind. Perhaps sensing the tension in the air, the cat, despite the rain, leaped outside after them.

“Are you sure you’re O.K.?” Kino asked Kamita.

“Not to worry,” Kamita said, with a slight smile. “You don’t need to do anything, Mr. Kino. Just stay put. This will be over soon.”

Kamita went outside and shut the door. It was still raining, a little harder than before. Kino sat down on a stool and waited. It was oddly still outside, and he couldn’t hear a thing. Kamita’s book lay open on the counter, like a well-trained dog waiting for its master. About ten minutes later, the door opened, and in strode Kamita, alone.

“Would you mind lending me a towel?” he asked.

Kino handed him a fresh towel, and Kamita wiped his head. Then his neck, face, and, finally, both hands. "Thank you. Everything's O.K. now," he said. "Those two won't be showing their faces here again."

"What in the world happened?"

Kamita just shook his head, as if to say, "Better you don't know." He went over to his seat, downed the rest of his whiskey, and picked up where he'd left off in his book.

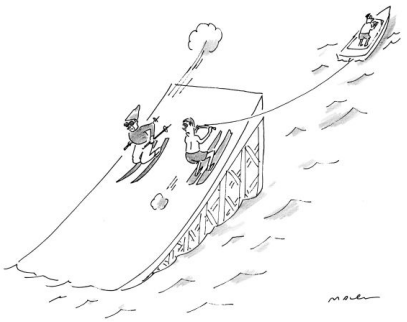
Later that evening, after Kamita had gone, Kino went outside and made a circuit of the neighborhood. The alley was deserted and quiet. No signs of a fight, no trace of blood. He couldn't imagine what had taken place. He went back to the bar to wait for other customers, but no one else came that night. The cat didn't return, either. He poured himself some White Label, added an equal amount of water and two small ice cubes, and tasted it. Nothing special, about what you'd expect. But that night he needed a shot of alcohol in his system.

About a week after the incident, Kino slept with a female customer. She was the first woman he'd had sex with since he left his wife. She was thirty, or perhaps a little older. He wasn't sure if she would be classified as beautiful, but there was something unique about her, something that stood out.

The woman had been to the bar several times before, always in the company of a man of about the same age who wore tortoiseshell-framed glasses and a beatnik-like goatee. He had unruly hair and never wore a tie, so Kino figured he was probably not your typical company employee. The woman always wore a tight-fitting dress that showed off her slender, shapely figure. They sat at the bar, exchanging an occasional hushed word or two as they sipped cocktails or sherry. They never stayed long. Kino imagined they were having a drink before they made love. Or else after. He couldn't say which, but the way they drank reminded him of sex. Drawn-out, intense sex. The

two of them were strangely expressionless, especially the woman, whom Kino had never seen smile. She spoke to him sometimes, always about the music that was playing. She liked jazz and was collecting LPs herself. “My father used to listen to this music at home,” she told him. “Hearing it brings back a lot of memories.”

From her tone, Kino couldn’t tell if the memories were of the music or of her father. But he didn’t venture to ask.



Kino actually tried not to have too much to do with the woman. It was clear that the man wasn’t very pleased when he was friendly to her. One time he and the woman did have a lengthy conversation—exchanging tips on used-record stores in Tokyo and the best way to take care of vinyl—and, after that, the man kept shooting him cold, suspicious looks. Kino was usually careful to keep his distance from any sort of entanglement. Nothing was worse than jealousy and pride, and Kino had had a number of awful experiences because of one or the other. It struck him at times that there was something about him that stirred up the dark side in other people.

That night, though, the woman came to the bar alone. There were no other customers, and when she opened the door cool night air crept in. She sat at the counter, ordered a brandy, and asked Kino to play some Billie Holiday. “Something really old, if you could.” Kino put a Columbia record on the turntable, one with the track “Georgia on My Mind.” The two of them listened silently. “Could you play the other side, too?” she asked, when it ended, and he did as she requested.

She slowly worked her way through three brandies, listening to a few more records—Erroll Garner's "Moonglow," Buddy DeFranco's "I Can't Get Started." At first, Kino thought she was waiting for the man, but she didn't glance at her watch even once. She just sat there, listening to the music, lost in thought, sipping her brandy.

"Your friend isn't coming today?" Kino decided to ask as closing time drew near.

"He isn't coming. He's far away," the woman said. She stood up from the stool and walked over to where the cat lay sleeping. She gently stroked its back with her fingertips. The cat, unperturbed, went on sleeping.

"We're thinking of not seeing each other anymore," the woman said.

Kino didn't know how to respond, so he said nothing, and continued to straighten up behind the counter.

"I'm not sure how to put it," the woman said. She stopped petting the cat and went back to the bar, high heels clicking. "Our relationship isn't exactly . . . normal."

"Not exactly normal." Kino repeated her words without really considering what they meant.

She finished the small amount of brandy left in her glass. "I have something I'd like to show you, Mr. Kino," she said.

Whatever it was, Kino didn't want to see it. Of that he was certain. But he didn't manage to produce the words to say so.

The woman removed her cardigan and placed it on the stool. She reached both hands behind her and unzipped her dress. She turned her back to Kino. Just below her white bra clasp he saw an irregular

sprinkling of marks the color of faded charcoal, like bruises. They reminded him of constellations in the winter sky. A dark row of depleted stars.

The woman said nothing, just displayed her bare back to Kino. Like someone who cannot even comprehend the meaning of the question he has been asked, Kino just stared at the marks. Finally, she zipped up and turned to face him. She put on her cardigan and fixed her hair.

"Those are cigarette burns," she said simply.

Kino was at a loss for words. But he had to say something. "Who did that to you?" he asked, his voice parched.

The woman didn't reply, and Kino realized that he wasn't hoping for an answer.

"I have them in other places, too," she said finally, her voice drained of expression. "Places that are . . . a little hard to show."

Kino had felt, from the first, that there was something out of the ordinary about the woman. Something had triggered an instinctive response, warning him not to get involved with her. He was basically a cautious person. If he really needed to sleep with a woman, he could always make do with a professional. And it wasn't as if he were even attracted to this woman.

But that night she desperately wanted a man to make love to her—and it seemed that he was the man. Her eyes were depthless, the pupils strangely dilated, but there was a decisive glitter in them that would brook no retreat. Kino didn't have the power to resist.

He locked up the bar, and the two of them went upstairs. In the bedroom, the woman quickly took off her dress, peeled off her underwear, and showed him the places that were a little hard to show. Kino couldn't help averting his eyes at first, but then was drawn back

to look. He couldn't understand, nor did he want to understand, the mind of a man who would do something so cruel, or of a woman who would willingly endure it. It was a savage scene from a barren planet, light-years away from where Kino lived.

The woman took his hand and guided it to the scars, making him touch each one in turn. There were scars on her breasts, and beside her vagina. He traced those dark, hard marks, as if he were using a pencil to connect the dots. The marks seemed to form a shape that reminded him of something, but he couldn't think what it was.

They had sex on the tatami floor. No words exchanged, no foreplay, no time even to turn off the light or lay out the futon. The woman's tongue slid down his throat, her nails dug into his back. Under the light, like two starving animals, they devoured the flesh they craved. When dawn began to show outside, they crawled onto the futon and slept, as if dragged down into darkness.

Kino awoke just before noon, and the woman was gone. He felt as if he'd had a very realistic dream, but of course it hadn't been a dream. His back was lined with scratches, his arms with bite marks, his penis wrung by a dull ache. Several long black hairs swirled around his white pillow, and the sheets had a strong scent he'd never smelled before.

The woman came to the bar several times after that, always with the goateed man. They would sit at the counter, speak in subdued voices as they drank a cocktail or two, and then leave. The woman would exchange a few words with Kino, mostly about music. Her tone was the same as before, as if she had no memory of what had taken place between them that night. Still, Kino could detect a glint of desire in her eyes, like a faint light deep down a mineshaft. He was sure of it. And it brought everything vividly back to him—the stab of her nails into his back, the sting of his penis, her long, slithering tongue, the odor on his bedding.

As he and the woman spoke, the man with her carefully observed Kino's expression and behavior. Kino sensed something viscous entwining itself about the couple, as if there were a deep secret only the two of them shared.

At the end of the summer, Kino's divorce was finalized, and he and his wife met at his bar one afternoon, before it opened, to take care of a few last matters.

The legal issues were quickly settled, and the two of them signed the necessary documents. Kino's wife was wearing a new blue dress, her hair cut short. She looked healthier and more cheerful than he'd ever seen her. She'd begun a new, no doubt more fulfilling, life. She glanced around the bar. "What a wonderful place," she said. "Quiet, clean, and calm—very you." A short silence followed. "But there's nothing here that really moves you": Kino imagined that these were the words she wanted to say.

"Would you like something to drink?" he asked.

"A little red wine, if you have some."

Kino took out two wineglasses and poured some Napa Zinfandel. They drank in silence. They weren't about to toast to their divorce. The cat padded over and, surprisingly, leaped into Kino's lap. Kino petted it behind its ears.

"I need to apologize to you," his wife said finally.

"For what?" Kino asked.

"For hurting you," she said. "You were hurt, a little, weren't you?"

"I suppose so," Kino said, after giving it some thought. "I'm human, after all. I was hurt. But whether it was a lot or a little I can't say."

“I wanted to see you and tell you I’m sorry.”

Kino nodded. “You’ve apologized, and I’ve accepted your apology. No need to worry about it anymore.”

“I wanted to tell you what was going on, but I just couldn’t find the words.”

“But wouldn’t we have arrived at the same place, anyway?”

“I guess so,” his wife said.

Kino took a sip of wine.

“It’s nobody’s fault,” he said. “I shouldn’t have come home a day early. Or I should have let you know I was coming. Then we wouldn’t have had to go through that.”

His wife didn’t say anything.

“When did you start seeing that guy?” Kino asked.

“I don’t think we should get into that.”

“Better for me not to know, you mean? Maybe you’re right about that,” Kino admitted. He kept on petting the cat, which purred deeply. Another first.

“Maybe I don’t have the right to say this,” his wife said, “but I think it’d be good for you to forget about what happened and find someone new.”

“Maybe,” Kino said.

“I know there must be a woman out there who’s right for you. It shouldn’t be that hard to find her. I wasn’t able to be that person for you, and I did a terrible thing. I feel awful about it. But there was

something wrong between us from the start, as if we'd done the buttons up wrong. I think you should be able to have a more normal, happy life."

Done the buttons up wrong, Kino thought.

He looked at the new dress she was wearing. They were sitting facing each other, so he couldn't tell if there was a zipper or buttons at the back. But he couldn't help thinking about what he would see if he unzipped or unbuttoned her clothes. Her body was no longer his, so all he could do was imagine it. When he closed his eyes, he saw countless dark-brown burn marks wriggling on her pure-white back, like a swarm of worms. He shook his head to dispel that image, and his wife seemed to misinterpret this.

She gently laid her hand on top of his. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm truly sorry."

Fall came and the cat disappeared.

It took a few days for Kino to realize that it was gone. This cat—still nameless—came to the bar when it wanted to and sometimes didn't show up for a while, so if Kino didn't see it for a week, or even ten days, he wasn't particularly worried. He was fond of the cat, and the cat seemed to trust him. It was also like a good-luck charm for the bar. Kino had the distinct impression that as long as it was asleep in a corner nothing bad would happen. But when two weeks had passed he began to be concerned. After three weeks, Kino's gut told him that the cat wouldn't be coming back.

Around the time that the cat disappeared, Kino started to notice snakes outside, near the building.

The first snake he saw was a dull brown and long. It was in the shade of the willow tree in the front yard, leisurely slithering along. Kino, a bag of groceries in hand, was unlocking the door when he spotted it. It was rare to see a snake in the middle of Tokyo. He was a bit surprised, but he didn't worry about it. Behind his building was the Nezu Museum, with its large gardens. It wasn't inconceivable that a snake might be living there.

But two days later, as he opened the door just before noon to retrieve the paper, he saw a different snake in the same spot. This one was bluish, smaller than the other one, and slimy-looking. When the snake saw Kino, it stopped, raised its head slightly, and stared at him, as if it knew him. Kino hesitated, unsure what to do, and the snake slowly lowered its head and vanished into the shade. The whole thing gave Kino the creeps.

Three days later, he spied the third snake. It was also under the willow tree in the front yard. This snake was considerably smaller than the others and blackish. Kino knew nothing about snakes, but this one struck him as the most dangerous. It looked poisonous, somehow. The instant it sensed his presence, it slipped away into the weeds. Three snakes within the space of a week, no matter how you considered it, was too many. Something strange was going on.

Kino phoned his aunt in Izu. After bringing her up to date on neighborhood goings on, he asked if she had ever seen snakes around the house in Aoyama.

"Snakes?" his aunt said loudly, in surprise. "I lived there for a long time but can't recall ever seeing any snakes. I wonder if it's a sign of an earthquake or something. Animals sense disasters coming and start to act strange."

“If that’s true, then maybe I’d better stock up on emergency rations,” Kino said.

“That might be a good idea. Tokyo’s going to get hit with a huge earthquake someday.”

“But are snakes that sensitive to earthquakes?”

“I don’t know what they’re sensitive to,” his aunt said. “But snakes are smart creatures. In ancient legends, they often help guide people. But, when a snake leads you, you don’t know whether it’s taking you in a good direction or a bad one. In most cases, it’s a combination of good and evil.”

“It’s ambiguous,” Kino said.

“Exactly. Snakes are essentially ambiguous creatures. In these legends, the biggest, smartest snake hides its heart somewhere outside its body, so that it doesn’t get killed. If you want to kill that snake, you need to go to its hideout when it’s not there, locate the beating heart, and cut it in two. Not an easy task, for sure.”

How did his aunt know all this?

“The other day I was watching a show on NHK comparing different legends around the world,” she explained, “and a professor from some university was talking about this. TV can be pretty useful—when you have time, you ought to watch more TV.”

Kino began to feel as if the house were surrounded by snakes. He sensed their quiet presence. At midnight, when he closed the bar, the neighborhood was still, with no sound other than the occasional siren. So quiet he could almost hear a snake slithering along. He took a board and nailed shut the pet door he’d built for the cat, so that no snakes would get inside the house.

One night, just before ten, Kamita appeared. He had a beer, followed by his usual double White Label, and ate a stuffed-cabbage dish. It was unusual for him to come by so late, and stay so long. Occasionally, he glanced up from his reading to stare at the wall in front of him, as if pondering something. As closing time approached, he remained, until he was the last customer.

"Mr. Kino," Kamita said rather formally, after he'd paid his bill. "I find it very regrettable that it's come to this."

"Come to this?" Kino repeated.

"That you'll have to close the bar. Even if only temporarily."

Kino stared at Kamita, not knowing how to respond. Close the bar?

Kamita glanced around the deserted bar, then turned back to Kino. "You haven't quite grasped what I'm saying, have you?"

"I don't think I have."

"I really liked this bar a lot," Kamita said, as if confiding in him. "It was quiet, so I could read, and I enjoyed the music. I was very happy when you opened the bar here. Unfortunately, though, there are some things missing."

"Missing?" Kino said. He had no idea what this could mean. All he could picture was a teacup with a tiny chip in its rim.

"That gray cat won't be coming back," Kamita said. "For the time being, at least."

"Because this place is missing something?"

Kamita didn't reply.

Kino followed Kamita's gaze, and looked carefully around the bar, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. He did, though, get a sense that the place felt emptier than ever, lacking vitality and color. Something beyond the usual, just-closed-for–the-night feeling.

Kamita spoke up. "Mr. Kino, you're not the type who would willingly do something wrong. I know that very well. But there are times in this world when it's not enough just not to do the wrong thing. Some people use that blank space as a kind of loophole. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Kino didn't understand.

"Think it over carefully," Kamita said, gazing straight into Kino's eyes. "It's a very important question, worth some serious thought. Though the answer may not come all that easily."

"You're saying that some serious trouble has occurred, not because I did something wrong but because I didn't do the right thing? Some trouble concerning this bar, or me?"

Kamita nodded. "You could put it that way. But I'm not blaming just you, Mr. Kino. I'm at fault, too, for not having noticed it earlier. I should have been paying more attention. This was a comfortable place not just for me but for anybody."

"Then what should I do?" Kino asked.

"Close the bar for a while and go far away. There's nothing else you can do at this point. I think it's best for you to leave before we have another long spell of rain. Excuse me for asking, but do you have enough money to take a long trip?"

"I guess I could cover it for a while."

“Good. You can worry about what comes after that when you get to that point.”

“Who are you, anyway?”

“I’m just a guy named Kamita,” Kamita said. “Written with the characters for *kami,* ‘god,’ and *ta,* ‘field,’ but not read as ‘Kanda.’ I’ve lived around here for a long time.”

Kino decided to plunge ahead and ask. “Mr. Kamita, I have a question. Have you seen snakes around here before?”

Kamita didn’t respond. “Here’s what you do. Go far away, and don’t stay in one place for long. And every Monday and Thursday make sure to send a postcard. Then I’ll know you’re O.K.”

“A postcard?”

“Any kind of picture postcard of where you are.”

“But who should I address it to?”

“You can mail it to your aunt in Izu. Do not write your own name or any message whatsoever. Just put the address you’re sending it to. This is very important, so don’t forget.”

Kino looked at him in surprise. “You know my aunt?”

“Yes, I know her quite well. Actually, she asked me to keep an eye on you, to make sure that nothing bad happened. Seems like I fell down on the job, though.”

Who in the world is this man? Kino asked himself.

“Mr. Kino, when I know that it’s all right for you to return I’ll get in touch with you. Until then, stay away from here. Do you understand?”

That night, Kino packed for the trip. *It's best for you to leave before we have another long spell of rain.* The announcement was so sudden, and its logic eluded him. But Kamita's words had a strange persuasive power that went beyond logic. Kino didn't doubt him. He stuffed some clothes and toiletries into a medium-sized shoulder bag, the same bag he'd used on business trips. As dawn came, he pinned a notice to the front door: "Our apologies, but the bar will be closed for the time being."

Far away, Kamita had told him. But where he should actually go he had no idea. Should he head north? Or south? He decided that he would start by retracing a route he often used to take when he was selling running shoes. He boarded a highway express bus and went to Takamatsu. He would make one circuit of Shikoku and then head over to Kyushu.

He checked into a business hotel near Takamatsu Station and stayed there for three days. He wandered around the town and went to see a few movies. The cinemas were deserted during the day, and the movies were, without exception, mind-numbing. When it got dark, he returned to his room and switched on the TV. He followed his aunt's advice and watched educational programs, but got no useful information from them. The second day in Takamatsu was a Thursday, so he bought a postcard at a convenience store, affixed a stamp, and mailed it to his aunt. As Kamita had instructed him, he wrote only her name and address.

"Think it over carefully," Kamita had told him. "It's a very important question, worth some serious thought." But, no matter how seriously he considered it, Kino couldn't work out what the problem was.

A few days later, Kino was staying at a cheap business hotel near Kumamoto Station, in Kyushu. Low ceiling, narrow, cramped bed, tiny TV set, minuscule bathtub, crummy little fridge. He felt like

some awkward, bumbling giant. Still, except for a trip to a nearby convenience store, he stayed holed up in the room all day. At the store, he purchased a small flask of whiskey, some mineral water, and some crackers to snack on. He lay on his bed, reading. When he got tired of reading, he watched TV. When he got tired of watching TV, he read.

It was his third day in Kumamoto now. He still had money in his savings account and, if he'd wanted to, he could have stayed in a much better hotel. But he felt that, for him, just now, this was the right place. If he stayed in a small space like this, he wouldn't have to do any unnecessary thinking, and everything he needed was within reach. He was unexpectedly grateful for this. All he wished for was some music. Teddy Wilson, Vic Dickenson, Buck Clayton—sometimes he longed desperately to listen to their old-time jazz, with its steady, dependable technique and its straightforward chords. He wanted to feel the pure joy they had in performing, their wonderful optimism. But his record collection was far away. He pictured his bar, quiet since he'd closed it. The alleyway, the large willow tree. People reading the sign he'd posted and leaving. What about the cat? If it came back, it would find its door boarded up. And were the snakes still silently encircling the house?

"Are you sure you can cure me of leg cramps?"

Straight across from his eighth-floor window was the window of an office building. From morning till evening, he watched people working there. He had no idea what kind of business it was. Men in ties would pop in and out, while women tapped away at computer keyboards, answered the phone, filed documents. Not exactly the sort of scene to draw one's interest. The features and the clothes of the people working there were ordinary, banal even. Kino watched them

for hours for one simple reason: he had nothing else to do. And he found it unexpected, surprising, how happy the people sometimes looked. Some of them occasionally burst out laughing. Why? Working all day in such an unglamorous office, doing things that (at least to Kino's eyes) seemed totally uninspired—how could they do that and still feel so happy? Was there some secret hidden there that he couldn't comprehend?

It was about time for him to move on again. Don't stay in one place for long, Kamita had told him. Yet somehow Kino couldn't bring himself to leave this cramped little Kumamoto hotel. He couldn't think of anywhere he wanted to go. The world was a vast ocean with no landmarks, Kino a little boat that had lost its chart and its anchor. When he spread open the map of Kyushu, wondering where to go next, he felt nauseated, as if seasick. He lay down in bed and read a book, glancing up now and then to watch the people in the office across the way.

It was a Monday, so he bought a postcard in the hotel gift shop with a picture of Kumamoto Castle, wrote his aunt's name and address, and slapped on a stamp. He held the postcard for a while, vacantly gazing at the castle. A stereotypical photo, the kind you expect to see on a postcard: the castle keep towering grandly in front of a blue sky and puffy white clouds. No matter how long he looked at the photo, Kino could find no point of contact between himself and that castle. Then, on an impulse, he turned the postcard over and wrote a message to his aunt:

> How are you? How is your back these days? As you can see, I'm still travelling around by myself. Sometimes I feel as if I were half transparent. As if you could see right through to my internal organs, like a fresh-caught squid. Other than that, I'm doing O.K. I hope to visit sometime. Kino

Kino wasn't at all sure what had motivated him to write that. Kamita had strictly forbidden it. But Kino couldn't restrain himself. I have to somehow get connected to reality again, he thought, or else I won't be me anymore. I'll become a man who doesn't exist. And, before he could change his mind, he hurried out to a mailbox near the hotel and slipped the postcard inside.

When he awoke, the clock next to his bed showed two-fifteen. Someone was knocking on his door. Not a loud knock but a firm, compact sound, like that of a skilled carpenter pounding a nail. The sound dragged Kino out of a deep sleep until his consciousness was thoroughly, even cruelly, clear.

Kino knew what the knocking meant. And he knew that he was supposed to get out of bed and open the door. Whatever was doing the knocking didn't have the strength to open the door from the outside. It had to be opened by Kino's own hand.

It struck him that this visit was exactly what he'd been hoping for, yet, at the same time, what he'd been fearing above all. This was ambiguity: holding on to an empty space between two extremes. "You were hurt, a little, weren't you?" his wife had asked. "I'm human, after all. I was hurt," he'd replied. But that wasn't true. Half of it, at least, was a lie. I wasn't hurt enough when I should have been, Kino admitted to himself. When I should have felt real pain, I stifled it. I didn't want to take it on, so I avoided facing up to it. Which is why my heart is so empty now. The snakes have grabbed that spot and are trying to hide their coldly beating hearts there.

"This was a comfortable place not just for me but for anybody," Kamita had said. Kino finally understood what he meant.

Kino pulled the covers up, shut his eyes, and covered his ears with his hands. I'm not going to look, not going to listen, he told himself. But he couldn't drown out the sound. Even if he ran to the far corners of

the earth and stuffed his ears full of clay, as long as he was still alive those knocks would relentlessly track him down. It wasn't a knocking on a door in a business hotel. It was a knocking on the door to his heart. A person couldn't escape that sound.

He wasn't sure how much time had passed, but he realized that the knocking had stopped. The room was as hushed as the far side of the moon. Still, Kino remained under the covers. He had to be on his guard. The being outside his door wouldn't give up that easily. It was in no hurry. The moon wasn't out. Only the withered constellations darkly dotted the sky. The world belonged, for a while longer, to those other beings. *They* had many different methods. They could get what they wanted in all kinds of ways. The roots of darkness could spread everywhere beneath the earth. Patiently taking their time, searching out weak points, they could break apart the most solid rock.

Finally, as Kino had expected, the knocks began once more. But this time they came from another direction. Much closer than before. Whoever was knocking was right outside the window by his bed. Clinging to the sheer wall of the building, eight stories up, tap–tap-tapping on the rain-streaked glass.

The knocking kept the same beat. Twice. Then twice again. On and on without stopping. Like the sound of a heart beating with emotion.

The curtain was open. Before he fell asleep, he'd been watching the patterns the raindrops formed on the glass. Kino could imagine what he'd see now, if he stuck his head outside the covers. No—he couldn't imagine it. He had to extinguish the ability to imagine anything. I shouldn't look at it, he told himself. No matter how empty it may be, this is still my heart. There's still some human warmth in it. Memories, like seaweed wrapped around pilings on the beach, wordlessly waiting for high tide. Emotions that, if cut, would bleed. I can't just let them wander somewhere beyond my understanding.

"Memories can be helpful," Kamita had said. A sudden thought struck Kino: that Kamita was somehow connected with the old willow tree in front of his house. He didn't grasp how this made sense, exactly, but once the thought took hold of him things fell into place. Kino pictured the limbs of the tree, covered in green, sagging heavily down, nearly to the ground. In the summer, they provided cool shade to the yard. On rainy days, gold droplets glistened on their soft branches. On windy days, they swayed like a restless heart, and tiny birds flew over, screeching at one another, alighting neatly on the thin, supple branches only to take off again.

Under the covers, Kino curled up like a worm, shut his eyes tight, and thought of the willow. One by one, he pictured its qualities—its color and shape and movements. And he prayed for dawn to come. All he could do was wait like this, patiently, until it grew light out and the birds awoke and began their day. All he could do was trust in the birds, in all the birds, with their wings and beaks. Until then, he couldn't let his heart go blank. That void, the vacuum created by it, would draw *them* in.

When the willow tree wasn't enough, Kino thought of the slim gray cat, and its fondness for grilled seaweed. He remembered Kamita at the counter, lost in a book, young runners going through gruelling repetition drills on a track, the lovely Ben Webster solo on "My Romance." He remembered his wife in her new blue dress, her hair trimmed short. He hoped that she was living a healthy, happy life in her new home. Without, he hoped, any wounds on her body. She apologized right to my face, and I accepted that, he thought. I need to learn not just to forget but to forgive.

But the movement of time seemed not to be fixed properly. The bloody weight of desire and the rusty anchor of remorse were blocking its normal flow. The continuing rain, the confused hands of the clock, the birds still fast asleep, a faceless postal worker silently

sorting through postcards, his wife's lovely breasts bouncing violently in the air, something obstinately tapping on the window. As if luring him deeper into a suggestive maze, this ever-regular beat. *Tap tap*, *tap tap*, then once more—*tap tap*. "Don't look away, look right at it," someone whispered in his ear. "This is what your heart looks like."

The willow branches swayed in the early-summer breeze. In a small dark room, somewhere inside Kino, a warm hand was reaching out to him. Eyes shut, he felt that hand on his, soft and substantial. He'd forgotten this, had been apart from it for far too long. Yes, I am hurt. Very, very deeply. He said this to himself. And he wept.

All the while the rain did not let up, drenching the world in a cold chill. ♦

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

Haruki Murakami has published twelve novels in English, including "The Strange Library," which came out in 2014.

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