



短篇小説

女のいない男たち

ドライブ・マイ・カー

村上春樹

信濃八太郎=画

Haruki Murakami

Drive My Car

Translated from the Japanese by Hiraku Harumaki

Kafuku had been in cars driven by women many times and in his experience women drivers could broadly be divided into two types; somewhat too aggressive or somewhat too cautious. There were many, many more of the later than the former - something to be grateful for no doubt. Female drivers were generally more polite and drove with more caution than male drivers. There was of course no cause to find complaint with polite and cautious drivers. Nevertheless, their driving style would frustrate other drivers on occasion.

On the other hand, most female drivers who fall in the "aggressive group" believe themselves to be skilled drivers, apparently, and very often make fun of the too-cautious female driver - proudly believing themselves apart from that group. When they make a bold lane change they are mostly unaware of the sudden braking made by drivers around or their less-than-encouraging declarations.

Other women drivers exist, of course, that belong in neither group - women not too aggressive and not too cautious - women who simply drive *ordinarily*. And among those women were some accomplished drivers. But, even with them, for some reason Kafuku always noticed signs of nervousness while driving. He was unable to identify what those signs were exactly, but as a passenger he always felt conscious of unease on the part of the driver and could never relax as a result. Either his throat became uncomfortably dry, or to fill the silence he started uninteresting and unnecessary conversation.

Of course, once you assume there are good male drivers it also necessitates the existence of poor male drivers. But in most cases, poor male drivers did not give him the impression of nervousness when they drove. Not that those men were particularly relaxed with driving a car - they were probably as nervous as women, in fact - but they somehow seemed able, maybe unconsciously, to isolate that nervousness from their exterior state of mind. They were able to carry out a fairly normal conversation while in control of the car in a way that separated their driving activity from their talking. Kafuku had no idea from where this difference between male and female drivers arose.

There were few times in his every day life when Kafuku drew a distinction between men and women and almost never noticed a difference in ability between them. Due to the nature of his job, Kafuku worked with men and women in equal parts and actually felt more at ease when working with women. They tended to be thorough in detail as well as good listeners. Only in cars was Kafuku conscious of

there being a woman beside him. He had never told anyone his thoughts on the matter, however, not believing it an appropriate topic for discussion.

So when he told Oba, the owner of the automobile repair shop, that he was looking for a professional driver Kafuku lacked an especially positive response when Oba recommended a young female driver. Oba smiled at the look on Kafuku's face as much as to say, "I know what you mean."

"Wait, Kafuku-san. You shouldn't doubt her skill at the wheel. I give you my personal guarantee on it. Just let her take you for a drive at least."

"Okay. Since you seem so sure." Said Kafuku.

The sooner he found a driver the better and Oba was someone he could trust, having known him for fifteen years. Oba had hard, wiry hair and goblin-like features and when it came to cars he was pretty much never wrong.

"I want to look at your alignment just in case, but if that's fine I should get this back to you by two p.m. Thursday. I'll get her to come over then - you can try her out on the roads round here. If it doesn't work out just say so - no need to worry about it."

"About how old is she?"

"Mid-twenties probably. I haven't asked." Said Oba. A frown emerged across his forehead. "There is one thing. Like I said, her driving skills are beyond doubt but..."

"But, what?"

"How can I put it? There's a difficult side to her."

"How so?"

"She's blunt, doesn't talk much, always smoking." Said Oba. "You'll see when you meet her. She's not a giggling girly; almost never smiles and to be honest, she's a bit rough."

"I don't mind that. I wouldn't be able to relax if she was some kind of model. It might start unneeded rumors as well."

"In that case, this might be just what you need."

"Anyway, her driving skills are good then?"

"You can be sure about that. She's not just good for a woman. She's just good."

"What kind of work is she in now?"

"I don't really know. Seems to be living hand to mouth on short-term jobs. She can quit right away if a better offer comes along, at least. A friend brought her over for the shop but business isn't that great and we didn't have enough work on to take another full-timer. We call her up when we need the help - she's got a good head on her shoulders. Doesn't touch alcohol either."

At the mention of alcohol, Kafuku's face darkened. Unconsciously, his right hand moved to his lips.

"I'll meet her here the day after tomorrow then, at two." Said Kafuku. The blunt, reticent, un-girly girl sounded interesting.

Two days later the repairs on Kafuku's yellow SAAB 900 convertible were complete. A bump in the front-right side had been finished beautifully - the fix hardly showed in the paintwork. The engine had been put through routine maintenance, gears adjusted, brake pads and wiper blades replaced, the car washed, tires polished and bodywork waxed. As usual, Kafuku could find no fault in Oba's work. His SAAB had been driven over twenty years and sixty thousand miles. The canvas roof had seen better days and leaked in heavy rain but Kafuku had no plans to buy a newer model. It had no serious issues to date and he was fond of it - often opening the roof and driving open-top throughout the year. He would wear a thick coat and scarf in winter and a hat and sunglasses in summer, drive through the city and take pleasure in shifting through the gears as he journeyed through the streets; looking to the sky at traffic lights to see passing clouds and birds perched on power lines. The car was an essential part of his particular lifestyle. Like a racehorse owner before a race, Kafuku circled and inspected his vehicle.

His wife had still been alive when the car was new; she chose the yellow paint job for the body. They took it out together a lot in the first few years - always Kafuku driving and his wife in the passenger seat. They rode on long trips to places like Izu, Hakone and Nasu. After the first few years his wife stopped riding and Kafuku was left to drive alone most of the time. Although Kafuku had gone out with a number of women since she died, for some reason none of them had ridden in the passenger seat of his car. Other than when work required it, he also never left the city anymore to open up the throttle on country roads.

"Sure, there's signs of wear and tear but it's still a good car." Said Oba-san, carefully rubbing the dashboard as if fondling the haunch of a large dog. "It's of a reliable breed. Swedish cars of that time were especially well built. You have to maintain the electronics but the basic mechanics are sound. You've taken good care of her."

Kafuku was busy signing papers and having his itemized bill explained to him when the girl appeared. She was about five foot five inches tall, not fat but wide-shouldered and of sturdy build. There was a purple oval-shaped mark on the right side of her neck that she seemed unconcerned about enough to leave uncovered and a swathe of dark black hair tied back and out the way. Not beautiful by any mean and, faithful to Oba-san's description, her facial expression was cool. She had marks on her cheeks from childhood acne and large, clear eyes that appeared distrustful somehow. She had wide ears that protruded like radio receivers in a countryside hamlet and wore a male-cut herringbone jacket slightly too big with brown cotton trousers and black converse sneakers. Under the jacket was a white,

long-sleeved t-shirt covering a well-developed chest.

Oba-san introduced Kafuku. Her name was Misaki Watari.

"Misaki is written in hiragana. I'll get a résumé if you want one." She spoke in a tone that was not entirely deferential.

Kafuku shook his head. "No need for a résumé. Can you drive stick?"

"I prefer stick." Replied Misaki frostily, as if a staunch vegetarian was asked if they ate vegetables.

"It's an old car so there's no sat nav."

"Don't need it. I've been a delivery driver for a while. I know the city off by heart."

"Well, then. Can you drive me round the area? We'll open the roof up since the weather's good."

"Where are we going?"

Kafuku thought for a moment. They were close to Shinohashi.

"We'll turn right at the intersection in front of Tengen-ji Temple and stop in an underground parking lot near the Meidi-Ya store. I'll do a little shopping and then we'll go up the hill towards Arisugawa Park, past the French embassy, onto Meiji Dori and back here."

"Okay." Said Misaki, without stopping to confirm the directions or the route. On getting the key she quickly adjusted seat and mirrors - seemingly already aware of the position and function of all the car's controls. After pressing the clutch down and checking the gears, she took a pair of green Ray-Ban sunglasses from her top pocket and put them on. Turning to Kafuku she gave a short nod as if to say, "Ready".

"Cassette tapes?" Asked Misaki, casually looking over the audio system.

"I prefer cassette." Said Kafuku. "Easier than CDs. It let's me practice my lines."

"Haven't seen one in a while."

"When I started driving we used 8-track." Said Kafuku.

Misaki stayed silent, but from her expression seemed clueless as to what an 8-track was.

Just as Oba-san promised she was an excellent driver, controlling the car smoothly and without any sudden jolts. Although most of the ride was spent in traffic she was careful to maintain a constant engine speed, which Kafuku noticed by following her eyes. When his own eyes were closed he could hardly distinguish the gear changes. He could only determine when she changed gear by listening a change in the engine sound. Misaki's use of the brake and gas pedals was also even and respectful. But, the most welcome aspect of her driving was how relaxed she remained throughout. She seemed more capable of relaxing at the wheel than away from it - her harsh expression eased and her eyes softened. She remained reticent,

however, not speaking unless spoken to.

This trait did not necessarily irritate Kafuku, since he himself was not particularly fond of small talk. He was not reluctant to speak on meaningful topics with close friends, but in other circumstances he preferred silence. Kafuku settled down into the passenger seat and absent-mindedly watched the sights of the city pass by. Always having ridden in the driver's seat, the new perspective put everything in a fresh light.

Kafuku made Misaki attempt several parallel parking maneuvers on the traffic-laden Meiji Dori. She managed each one accurately, showing herself very aware and with excellent reflexes. When there was a wait at the lights she smoked and Marlboro seemed her brand of choice, but she never smoked while the car was moving - stubbing her cigarette out as soon as the lights turned green. Kafuku also noticed no imprint of lipstick on her cigarettes. Her nails were not manicured and there was nothing you could describe as make-up on her face.

"I have a few questions I want to ask you." Said Kafuku when they arrived at Arisugawa Park.

"Go ahead." Said Misaki.

"Where did you learn to drive?"

"I grew up in the Hokkaido mountains and I've been driving there since I was eleven. You couldn't get by there if you didn't drive; half the year the roads were iced over so even bad drivers had to be good drivers."

"But you don't practice parallel parking in the mountains."

Misaki did not reply. Apparently it was a question that did not deserve a response.

"Has Oba-san told you why I need a driver so urgently?"

Misaki spoke in a monotone while facing straight ahead. "You're an actor appearing in a play six times a week. You normally drive your own car to work. You don't like using the subway or taxis because you like to practice your lines in the car. But recently you had a minor accident and your license was revoked because you were drinking, and there was a problem with your eyesight."

Kafuku nodded. It sounded like someone describing a dream they had seen.

"When I took an eye test with the police-recommended ophthalmologist they found signs of glaucoma. I have a blind spot in my vision, apparently. In the corner of my right eye though I've never noticed it before."

Kafuku had managed to quash the drunk driving charge due to his low level of blood alcohol. Fortunately, the mass media had not got hold of the story. But the problem with his eyesight could not be kept from his agent. As things stood, there was a chance cars could enter his field of vision unseen from behind on the right. He was told to avoid driving under any circumstances until tests showed the problem was resolved.

"Kafuku-san." Said Misaki. "Can I call you Kafuku-san? Is that your real name?"

"Yes." Said Kafuku. "It's not a common name - and from the sound of it should be lucky when in fact there seem to have been few benefits. No one among my family could be called rich."

After a period of no response Kafuku told Misaki the amount he could pay her per month as his driver. It was not a large amount, but it was at the limit of what Kafuku's agency would provide. While Kafuku was in the public eye to some extent, he took no leading roles on television or in movies and theatre work only paid so much. For someone of his status to employ a driver was an uncommon luxury, even on a temporary basis of just a couple of months.

"Hours of work will vary depending on my schedule, but for the meanwhile I'll mainly be doing theatre work so most of your mornings would be free - you can sleep through to the afternoon. In the evenings I finish by eleven p.m. at the latest and on days I need transport any later than that I'll get a taxi. You'll be getting one day per week off."

"I'm fine with that." Said Misaki, quite readily.

"The work itself is not exactly hard labor. The hardest part will be the time spent doing nothing and waiting ready on standby."

Misaki said nothing. Her lips remained sealed and her face wore an expression of having worked much tougher jobs in the past.

"I don't mind you smoking while the roof is down, but when it's up I'd rather you don't." Said Kafuku.

"Understood."

"Is there anything you want to ask?"

"Not right now." Her eyes narrowed as she carefully shifted the car down a gear. Then she said, "I like the car."

The rest of the drive was spent in silence. On returning to the repair shop Kafuku called Oba to the side to tell him, "I've decided to take her on."

From the day after their first meeting, Misaki became Kafuku's personal driver. She reached his apartment block in Ebisu at half past three in the afternoon, drove his yellow SAAB from the basement car park and gave Kafuku a lift to a theatre in Ginza; with the roof down if it was not raining. On the way, Kafuku sat in the passenger seat reciting his lines to a cassette tape. The play was *Uncle Vanya* by Anton Chekhov, adapted for Meiji Era Japan. Kafuku had the role of Uncle Vanya. He had memorized the entire script but needed to repeat it daily to assure himself of the fact. It was a longstanding habit.

On the way back, they normally listened to a Beethoven string quartet. Kafuku enjoyed Beethoven's string quartet works as he never tired of them, and they were

good accompaniment to both thinking or not thinking anything at all. When he wanted something less high-brow he put on some old American rock like The Beach Boys, The Rascals, Creedence or The Temptations - music that was popular when Kafuku was young. Misaki did not say much about the music he played and Kafuku was unsure whether she liked it, hated it, or could hear anything at all. She never showed her emotions.

Normally, Kafuku was too embarrassed to practice his lines out loud in front of someone, but Misaki's presence did not have that affect. Kafuku was grateful for her impassive indifference. However loud he practiced she acted as if she could not hear a thing. Or perhaps she really could not hear him? She concentrated herself entirely on the car as if immersed in a strange, Zen-like state.

Kafuku also had little clue as to what Misaki thought of him - whether she liked him somewhat, was not interested or curious at all, or the sight of him made her skin crawl and she only tolerated him for the job. Kafuku was not that bothered what she thought of him anyway. He liked her smooth and deliberate driving style and that she never said too much and kept her feelings to herself.

After finishing a play Kafuku quickly removed his makeup, changed clothes and left the theatre. He was not one to linger and had no personal acquaintanceships with other performers. He contacted Misaki on his mobile phone and had her bring the car round to the stage door so his yellow SAAB convertible awaited him when he stepped into the street. By ten thirty, he was back at his apartment in Ebisu. This schedule repeated itself most days.

Occasionally he had other work to do. One day each week Kafuku had to go to a television studio in the city to record an ongoing television drama. It was a standard police show, but it had high viewing figures and a good part for Kafuku. He played a fortune-teller that assisted the female detective protagonist. To fully immerse himself in the role Kafuku used to disguise himself as a real fortune teller and tell fortunes on the street. It had gone so well he gained a reputation for the accuracy of his reading. Shooting ended in the evening and was followed by a hurried journey to the theatre in Ginza. It was the riskiest part of his week. After the matinee performance on weekends he also taught an evening class at an acting school. He liked directing the young students. Travel to and from the school was another of Misaki's responsibilities. As she shuttled him here and there on time and without fuss Kafuku grew used to sitting in the passenger seat with Misaki at the wheel of his SAAB. Sometimes he could even fall asleep.

When the weather warmed up Misaki replaced her men's herringbone jacket and with a thin, summer jacket. She always wore one or other jacket while driving - probably taking the place of a uniform for her. Eventually, the rainy season also came and the roof of the car was up more often than not.

Kafuku often thought of his dead wife while being driven in his car. She had

come to mind more frequently since Misaki started working with him, though he was still unsure why. She had also been an actress, visually stunning and two years his junior. When he started out Kafuku was what you might call a “character” actor, and the parts he received were mainly supporting roles as idiosyncratic types. His face was somewhat long and thin and he had started losing hair from a relatively young age - not the type suitable for lead roles. Meanwhile, his wife was legitimately beautiful and it was reflected in the parts and money she received. As the years went by, however, Kafuku’s status as an actor increased thanks to the idiosyncrasies of his acting. But despite these differences the two of them were able to acknowledge their respective careers, and differences in popularity or earning never caused a problem.

Kafuku had been in love with her. He was deeply attached to her from the moment they met (he was twenty nine years old at the time) and his feelings remained unchanged to the day she died (when he was forty nine). He had not slept with another woman while married to her though presented with many opportunities. He never felt the need to.

His wife, however, had occasionally slept with other men – four in total to Kafuku’s knowledge. That is, he was aware of four recurring sexual relationships she had with other men. She never mentioned them, of course, but when she was seeing another man he knew it implicitly. He was sensitive to that kind of thing. Anyone really in love would understand the signs no matter how distressing was the truth. He could also identify who they were from the tone of voice. They were always an opposite lead in one of her films and tended to be younger. One of her affairs would last for a period of months and have run its course by the end of filming. That same pattern of events occurred four times.

At the time and still to this day he could not understand why she wanted to sleep with other men. They had maintained a good relationship both as friends and as man and wife, and when time allowed they would talk passionately and honestly about all number of things. They worked hard on building trust between them and were well-matched both in terms of personality and physically, thought Kafuku. Acquaintances also saw them as a loving and well matched couple.

So despite all that, *why did she sleep with other men?* Kafuku wished he had the courage to ask her while she was alive, and often persecuted himself with the thought. At one point a few months before she died he had been close to asking. *What did you need in them? What couldn’t you get from me?* But he was unable to bring himself to ask while she lay tormented by pain and close to death. In the end, she left Kafuku’s world without giving a single reason why. With his questions unasked and answers not given, Kafuku’s thoughts lingered on the questions he wanted to ask and the answers he would never receive even as he lifted the bones from her ashes at the crematorium. He was so preoccupied with his thoughts that

the voices of the other mourners hardly registered.

Kafuku was unable to help himself from the dreadful thought of imagining his wife in the arms of another man. When he closed his eyes images of her with various other men appeared. He would rather not see the images but seemed powerless to prevent them. With time these thoughts inched their way into his memories like a sharp knife, cutting profoundly and without mercy. He sometimes considered how much happier he would be if he never knew the truth. But, it was a fundamental position of Kafuku that knowledge was more desirable than ignorance, whatever the suffering it incited. Only knowledge could make one stronger.

More painful than his imagination, though, was the continued effort of living a normal life while ensuring his knowledge of her affairs remained secret. He would maintain a calm exterior while blood coursed violently through his veins, ripping his organs to shreds. Everyday matters, casual conversation and their married life was acted out as normal. This was not something any person could manage, but Kafuku was professional actor and directing a performance while distancing himself from his own self was his bread and butter. And he put everything into the performance though no audience would ever see it.

But putting that aside and the fact his wife occasionally slept with other men, they were quite content with life and their marriage continued without major disturbance. They were both successful at work and both financially stable. They had sex countless times over the course of their twenty-year marriage and from Kafuku's evaluation at least they both enjoyed it. In the time since she died Kafuku had seen a number of women but since found none of the familiar joy he experienced with his wife. The only feeling he experienced was mild *déjà vu*, as if retracing the events of a previous memory.

Since his agency needed her details to pay a salary, Kafuku had Misaki complete a form with her current address, legal domicile, date of birth and driving license registration number. Apparently, she lived in an apartment in Akabane, Kita Ward of Tokyo; her legal domicile was Nakatonbetsu Town, Hokkaido and she had just turned twenty four years of age. Kafuku had no idea where Nakatonbetsu Town was in Hokkaido but her age caught him short.

Kafuku had a daughter who died three days after birth. It happened suddenly and without warning in the hospital nursery in the middle of the night. They said it was congenital problem with her heart valve. Kafuku and his wife had not doubted the hospital's version of events, and even if they had it would not bring back their child. Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, they had not yet given her a name. If she lived she would now be twenty-four years old, thought Kafuku. Every year he put his hands together on the anniversary of her death to pray, and imagined a life

for his daughter has she lived.

The sudden loss hurt them both deeply. The absence created by her death was dark and profound and took a long time to heal, most of it spent in their apartment in silence as bereaved parents unwilling to speak lest they belittle the tragedy of what occurred. Kafuku's wife started drinking large quantities of wine and for a short while Kafuku cultivated an intense interest in calligraphy. Moving his writing brush across the white paper and creating various characters in black ink somehow helped Kafuku see beyond the machinations of his thoughts.

Gradually, and with the mutual support of each other they recovered and moved on from that difficult period. They became more absorbed in work and ardently immersed themselves in imagining and building characters for their new roles. After a time, Kafuku's wife announced she did not want to try for another child and Kafuku agreed. *"I understand. We won't try again. If you think it's for the best that's enough for me."*

Thinking back, it was at that point his wife started her affairs with other men. Kafuku had speculated whether losing the child had awakened some need in her, though his speculation remained unconfirmed.

"Can I ask you something?" Said Misaki.

Kafuku turned to her. He had been looking out the window daydreaming and was surprised at her voice. In the two months they spent riding together she almost never spoke to him.

"Of course." Said Kafuku.

"Why did you become an actor?"

"Well, some girls at my University asked me to join the student drama group. I wasn't particularly interested in theatre at the time - I was a regular short stop in high school and a good fielder, but not good enough for the University team so I went with it thinking I'd see how things went. Plus, I wanted to spend more time with those girls. After a while, I realized I actually liked performing. I liked being able to become someone else for a while during a performance, and then return back to being myself. It was fun."

"You liked being someone else?"

"As long as I can go back to being myself, yes."

"Have you ever thought of not going back?"

Kafuku pondered her question. He had never been asked it before. At that moment, they were heading towards the Takehashi exit on the Tokyo expressway.

"Where else would I go?" Said Kafuku.

Misaki did not add to Kafuku's reply.

In the silence that followed, Kafuku removed his baseball cap, checked its shape and placed it back on his head. As they travelled alongside a large truck-

trailer and its countless pairs of wheels the SAAB convertible felt particularly fragile, like a bobbing dinghy next to an oil tanker.

A little later Misaki said, "I've been wondering about something. It's probably not my place to ask but can I?"

"Sure." Said Kafuku.

"Why don't you have any friends?"

Kafuku looked with curiosity at Misaki's face. "How do you know I don't have friends?"

Misaki shrugged a little. "When you drive someone about every day you notice things."

Kafuku stared at the trailer tires for a short time, then turned and said, "It has been rather a long time since I called someone a friend. I wonder why?"

"Was it that way since you were a kid?"

"No, I had friends as a child of course. But, since turning into an adult I haven't really wanted any. Especially since getting married."

"You didn't need friends as much because your wife was there?"

"Probably. We were good friends after all."

"How old were you when you got married?"

"I was thirty. We met when we worked on the same film. She was in a supporting role and I in a bit part."

Their car advanced slowly through the heavy traffic. The roof was up since the Tokyo expressway was always gridlocked.

"You don't drink alcohol at all?" Asked Kafuku, changing the subject.

"My body can't seem to take it." Said Misaki. "Also my mother used to cause trouble when she was drunk, so that's probably got something to do with it."

"Does your mother still cause trouble?"

Misaki shook her head emphatically. "She's dead. She lost control while driving drunk and crashed into a tree. It was pretty much instantaneous. I was seventeen at the time."

"Sorry for your loss." Said Kafuku.

"It was her own fault." Said Misaki, pragmatically. "And bound to happen eventually, the only question was where and when."

They fell silent for a while.

"Your father?"

"I don't know where he is. He left when I was eight and I haven't seen him since. He hasn't got in touch, either. Mother blamed me for that."

"Why?"

"I was an only child, and she used to say if I had been a nicer, prettier girl he wouldn't have left us, and that he didn't want me because I was ugly."

"You're not ugly at all." Said Kafuku, matter-of-fact. "That's just something

she wanted you to think.”

Misaki shrugged her shoulders. “She wasn’t always that way, but when she got drunk she became belligerent. She used to repeat those things over and over and it hurt. It might be wrong to say but I was frankly relieved when she died.”

They fell silent for longer this time.

“Do you have friends?” Asked Kafuku.

She shook her head. “I don’t have any.”

“Why?”

Misaki stayed silent and narrowed her eyes, concentrating on the road ahead.

Kafuku closed his eyes and briefly tried to sleep. The car repeatedly stopping and starting in the traffic kept him awake despite Misaki shifting gears carefully each time. As if fated, the trailer in the next line of traffic also shadowed them, oscillating ahead of the behind the yellow SAAB.

Giving up on sleep, Kafuku opened his eyes and said, “The last friend I had was nearly ten years ago. A pseudo-friend is probably more accurate. He was six or seven years younger than me. A nice guy, really. He liked to drink so I would go out drinking with him and we’d talk about things.”

Misaki nodded vaguely and waited for Kafuku to continue. He hesitated but decided to go on.

“The truth is, he was one of the men who slept with my wife - though he didn’t know that I knew about it.”

Misaki needed to confirm the story. “You’re saying, this friend had sex with your wife?”

“Yes. I believe he slept with her quite frequently over a period of three or four months.”

“How did you know?”

“Well, she concealed the affair, of course. But I’m quite certain.”

Misaki adjusted the rear mirror while the car was stationary.

“Didn’t his sleeping with your wife get in the way of being friends?”

“Quite the opposite, in fact.” Said Kafuku.

“The main reason I became friends with him was because he slept with my wife.”

Misaki said nothing - again waiting for an explanation.

“How can I put it? I wanted to understand why my wife had ended up with him. Why she wanted to sleep with him. That was my initial motivation, at least.”

Misaki took a deep breath while her chest rose and fell slowly under her jacket. “Wasn’t it hard for you emotionally? To drink across from the person who slept with your wife?”

“Of course, it was difficult.” Said Kafuku. “Unpleasant images came to mind despite myself - it reminded me of things I’d rather have forgotten by then but I

just put on a performance. You could say it was work.”

“You became a different person.” Said Misaki.

“That’s right.”

“Then you went back to being yourself?”

“Yes.” Said Kafuku. “It can be unpleasant but you do return. Though when you do it is in a slightly different position than before. As a rule, you can’t return to how you were one hundred percent.”

A light rain began to fall. Misaki turned on the wipers. “Did you find out why your wife slept with him?”

He shook his head. “No, I didn’t. There were differences between us - things he had that I didn’t. Actually, quite a few things; but I don’t know which attracted her. As people we don’t really act at a level of pinpointing matters so precisely. I mean relating with someone, especially between a man and woman, works on a more general level. It’s more ambiguous than that... more selfish.”

Misaki thought about it for a while and said, “But even though you didn’t get the answer, you stayed friends?”

Kafuku took his baseball cap off again and placed it in his lap. He raised his hand to massage the top of his head.

“What’s the best way to put it? With a serious performance it becomes more difficult to find an opportunity to end it. No matter how hard it becomes for you psychologically, you must end it at the proper exit point. Like in music where a song reaches its conclusion when the right harmony of notes are played... Do you understand what I mean?”

Misaki took a Marlboro out and placed it between her lips. She would not smoke with the roof up so held it there unlit.

“During all that, was he sleeping with your wife?”

“No. No, he wasn’t.” Said Kafuku. “Going that far would have been... too artificial. We became friends a little while after she died.”

“Was he *really* your friend? Or was it just a performance?”

Kafuku considered her question. “Both. Though over time I gradually lost sight of that boundary because that’s what a real performance means.”

Kafuku was able to maintain a personal fondness for the man from the opportunity of their first meeting. His name was Takatsuki. He was tall and good looking - the heartthrob type. In his early forties, his acting was not especially good since he was in no way unique, which limited the parts he could take on. Normally he would be the nice guy. His facial structure was easy on the eyes with a hint of melancholy in his profile that was evidently extremely popular with middle-aged women. Kafuku saw him one day in the waiting room of a television studio six months after the death of his wife. Takatsuki had approached Kafuku to

introduce himself and offer his condolences for her death. Takatsuki explained they worked on a film together and mentioned respectfully that she was a very kind woman. Kafuku acknowledged his condolences. Chronologically speaking, to Kafuku's knowledge, Takatsuki was at the tail end of the list of men his wife slept with. It was soon after her relationship with him ended that she went for tests at the hospital and they found she was ill with already far-advanced uterine cancer.

"I have a request that I hope you can entertain me with." Said Kafuku, after formal greetings were concluded.

"Of course, what is it?"

"If you don't mind, I wonder if you could give me a little of your time. I would like to ask you about your memories of my wife, perhaps over a drink? She often talked of you."

Takatsuki was surprised, though shocked might be a better description in terms of his response. His handsome eyebrows furrowed, and he looked inquiringly into Kafuku's face as if his apparently innocent request concealed another intent. However, Takatsuki saw no signs of an ulterior motive, just as Kafuku affected even more so the unassuming expression of a man whose wife had recently passed away. Kafuku's face appeared like the surface of a lake after widening ripples had left it calm.

"I really just want to hear someone else talk about her." Added Kafuku. "Being alone all the time is honestly rather difficult, though I don't want to make you feel like you're obligated of course."

Takatsuki relaxed visibly on hearing Kafuku's explanation. Kafuku seemed to have no suspicions concerning Takatsuki's relationship with his wife.

"No, it wouldn't be any trouble at all. I'll happily make the time. Though I'm afraid I may not make the best partner for conversation." An easy smile grew across Takatsuki's face and gentle creases formed round his eyes. He had a charming smile. Any middle-aged woman would blush to be shown it, thought Kafuku.

From memory, Takatsuki consulted his schedule. "I have tomorrow evening totally free if that's convenient. Do you have any plans?"

Kafuku said he was also free. All things considered, Kafuku was impressed at how transparent Takatsuki seemed. When he looked into Takatsuki's eyes he felt able to read every thought. Takatsuki looked to be a man without convolution or malice of forethought - the kind of person who simply waited by his hole for someone passing to fall in. Kafuku decided he would not make it as a great actor.

"Whereabouts shall we go?" Asked Takatsuki.

"You decide. I'll go wherever is good for you." Said Kafuku.

Takatsuki mentioned the name of a well-known bar in Ginza. He said if they reserved a booth they could talk openly without being overheard. Kafuku was

familiar with the place. They shook hands and Takatsuki walked away. Takatsuki's hand was soft with long, slender fingers. His palm was warm and perhaps slightly moist with sweat. He was probably nervous.

When he left Kafuku sat down, opened out his hand and stared at it. The feeling of Takatsuki's palm was still fresh on him - *the same palm and fingers that caressed my wife's naked body*, thought Kafuku. *His hands must have caressed every inch of her body gently, tenderly*. Kafuku closed his eyes, took a deep breath and wondered what exactly he was trying to achieve. Then he decided there was one thing he absolutely must do whatever the implications.

Sitting in the bar and sliding a malt whiskey round his glass, Kafuku realized something. Takatsuki was still deeply in love with his wife, and had yet come to terms with her death and all that remained of her as a person was bone and ash. Kafuku could empathize with the feeling. While reminiscing about his wife, Kafuku noticed Takatsuki's eyes almost well up with tears. So much so he instinctively felt like offering his own consolation. Takatsuki was a man unable to keep his emotions to himself, and seemed the type to confess anything under the slightest pressure.

From the way Takatsuki spoke it was his wife who broke off their relationship. She most likely told him it was for the best if did not keep in touch; then never contacted him again. To Kafuku's knowledge her romances (if he could call them that) consisted of a relationship that lasted several months, followed by her proposing a total separation to prevent prolonging the affair. Takatsuki seemed ill prepared to end it so easily and must have wanted a more permanent position in her life.

After her cancer entered its terminal stage and she entered hospice care, Takatsuki contacted her seeking to visit only to receive a flat denial. After her admission to hospital Kafuku's wife had very few visitors. The only people allowed into her room other than the hospital staff were her mother, her sister and Kafuku. Takatsuki seemed dejected at not being able to visit her even once. The news of her cancer must have been a complete shock since he learned of it just a few weeks before she died. He had not yet fully accepted what happened. Kafuku could sympathize though their emotions were of course quite different. Kafuku had been with his wife through her death over a period of weeks as she became a shadow of her former self; and then finally been the one to remove her bones from her ashes after cremation. He had already passed that stage of accepting the fact of her death. It was a huge difference between them.

*It's almost as if I am the one comforting him*, thought Kafuku as they reminisced over memories of his wife. Kafuku wondered what she would have thought to see them together like this. Kafuku considered the ability to think and

feel nothing must be one of death's main benefits.

Kafuku understood something else; that Takatsuki had a tendency to drink too much. With the nature of his job Kafuku saw a lot of drinking (why was it that actors drink so much?) and he in his opinion Takatsuki's drinking was of a type either healthy or sound. Kafuku believed there were two types of drinkers - those who drink to add something to themselves, and those who drink to remove something from themselves. Takatsuki's drinking was clearly the later.

Kafuku was unsure of what Takatsuki wanted to distance himself - perhaps a weakness in his character or an emotional pain from his past, or even a problem that was ongoing in the present. Whatever it was, there was something Takatsuki sought to forget if he possibly could his drinking was a way of dulling or forgetting a recurring pain. He drank at two and a half times the speed of Kafuku. He set quite a pace.

Or maybe the reason he drank so quickly was more immediate? He was after all facing the husband of the woman with whom he had an illicit affair. To be completely relaxed was the more abnormal response. Yet Kafuku was convinced none of those reasons explained Takatsuki's behavior entirely. He must simply be a man incapable of drinking any other way.

Kafuku followed at his own pace, drinking watchfully and attentive of Takatsuki's well being. As the number of glasses increased the apparent nervousness of his drinking partner dissipated, and Kafuku broached the subject of whether Takatsuki was married. Takatsuki was ten years into marriage and had a seven year-old son, but had lived apart from his wife for the last year for mitigating reasons. Divorce was likely in the near future, at which point Takatsuki foresaw that making the decision as to who was to be the primary guardian to their son would pose problems. Whatever happened, Takatsuki said, his son was an essential part of his life and he needed to see him without condition. He showed Kafuku a photograph of a well-mannered boy with handsome features.

The more Takatsuki drank the less inhibited his conversation. It seemed the normal course of events for this actor that was prone to say too much and provide answers without questions. Kafuku's role changed to that of a listener who nodded and made consolatory noises when expected of him, gathering as much information about the relationship between Takatsuki and his wife along the way. Although liking Takatsuki was part of the performance, it was an easy part to play. Kafuku had always been a good listener and, in truth, felt no ill will towards Takatsuki. They also had something very important in common; they were both still in love with the same woman; though the mutual bond that brought them together was borne of how their perspectives differed on the matter. There was much to talk about.

"Takatsuki, if you don't mind could we meet again? I've enjoyed talking with

you and, honestly it's been a while since I felt that way." Said Kafuku as he got up to leave the bar. Kafuku had already paid the tab, though Takatsuki seemed oblivious to its existence or the need for someone to settle it. Drinking made him forget a lot of things, including some probably quite important.

"Of course." Said Takatsuki, looking up from his glass. "I'd be happy to meet again. Talking with you, I feel like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders."

"It must be fate we met like this." Said Kafuku. "My late wife brought us together."

Kafuku's statement was true in more ways than one.

They exchanged phone numbers and shook hands before parting.

That was how they became friends - as drinking buddies kindred in spirit. They remained in regular contact and visited various bars around the city where they talked without any particular purpose. Their destination was always some kind of drinking establishment and they never ate a meal together. Kafuku only saw Takatsuki eat bar snacks during their entire friendship. It was enough to make Kafuku wonder if Takatsuki ever actually ate proper food. Apart from the occasional beer Takatsuki drank only whisky with favorites brands all single malts.

Their conversations varied in topic, but without fail returned to the death of Kafuku's wife. When Kafuku recounted stories from time they spent together years ago Takatsuki listened earnestly, as if collecting and hoarding the memories. Kafuku did not mind and actually enjoyed telling his stories.

One evening, they were drinking in Aoyama at an unassuming establishment in an alleyway behind Nezu Museum. The bar was tended by a quiet man around forty years of age while a thin, grey cat slept in a ball on a display shelf in the corner - it was a stray that made its home there. The bartender played old jazz records on a turntable. Takatsuki and Kafuku both liked the atmosphere and had gone there many times together, though for some reason whenever they did it would to rain. As if on cue, a fine rain began to fall outside.

"She really was a fantastic woman." Said Takatsuki, staring down at his hands resting on the table. They were beautiful hands for a man close to middle aged - no pronounced wrinkles and his nails were well groomed.

"You must have been happy to be with someone like that, to live with her."

"Yes." Said Kafuku. "I must have been happy, like you say. But the happiness I had did come with it's own risk."

"What kind of risk?"

Kafuku lifted his glass, rotating the large ice ball inside. "I knew there was a chance I might lose her at some point. Just imagining the thought used to bring pains to my chest."

"I can understand that completely." Said Takatsuki.

“In what way?”

“Well...” Said Takatsuki, searching for the right words. “About the fear of losing someone as wonderful as your wife.”

“Not from personal experience, though?”

“No.” Said Takasaki. He shook his head as if trying to shake a memory. “Though it’s a situation I can only imagine being in.”

Kafuku said nothing, dragging out the silence for as long as possible.

“But when all is said and done, it was me who lost her, piece by piece, during her last weeks of life and finally when she died. As if she eroded away gradually with time, then was finally ripped up by the roots and washed away... I’m not sure you know what it means.”

“I think I understand.”

*No, you have no idea what I mean,* thought Kafuku.

“The hardest part of all of it.” Said Kafuku. “Is that I... there was a part of her, probably an important part of her that I never really understood. And now she’s dead I’ll be none the wiser until the day *I* die, like a small lock box hidden deep in the ocean. When I remember, it materializes like a physical pain.”

Takatsuki considered for a brief time.

“But, Kafuku-san. We can’t expect to understand someone entirely. Even if we love them deeply.”

“I thought we were close after living together for nigh on twenty years. I thought we trusted each other as friend as well as man and wife. I thought we talked openly about everything. That was my impression at least. Perhaps it’s not how things were. I’m not sure how to explain it but... Maybe I was living with a terrible blind spot.”

“Blind spot?” Said Takatsuki.

“I probably overlooked something important in her. Something right in front of my eyes that I couldn’t recognize for what it was.”

Takatsuki chewed on his lower lip. He finished he drink and ordered another from the bartender.

“I know what you mean.” Said Takatsuki.

Kafuku stared at Takatsuki. Takatsuki met his gaze for a moment then looked away.

“How do you know what I mean?” Asked Kafuku, calmly.

The bartender arrived with a whiskey on the rocks and a new coaster for Takatsuki.

“How do you know what I mean?” Asked Kafuku again, after the bartender had gone.

Takatsuki pondered the question. Something in his eyes wavered a little. Kafuku guessed Takatsuki was unsure what to do next; that he was struggling with

an acute need to unburden himself. In the end, he controlled the impulse.

“We can never understand exactly what goes on in the mind of a woman, can we? That’s all I want to say. And it’s true for any woman. So I don’t think it’s a blind spot only you can have; we all live with a blind spot and I don’t think you need to judge yourself so harshly.”

Kafuku thought on what Takatsuki said. “You’re still generalizing.”

“You’re right.” Admitted Takatsuki.

“What I’m talking about here is my dead wife and I’d rather you didn’t generalize the situation.”

Takatsuki remained silent for a while. “I can see your wife really was a wonderful woman. What I know about her doesn’t come close to a hundredth of what you must know, but I know that’s whom she was. And whatever happened, you have to be thankful to have spent twenty years of your time with a woman like that. That’s what I really think. But, no matter how much you think you understood another person, no matter how much you love them, it’s impossible for you to see unimpeded into their heart. You might try but you’ll only end up hurting yourself. We can only really see inside our own heart, and then only if we really want to and really put in the effort. So in the end, our only prerogative is coming to terms honestly and completely with oneself. If you *really* want to observe others, the only option is look plainly and profoundly at yourself. That’s what I think.”

The words seem to emerge from somewhere deep inside the person sat beside Kafuku. During that moment a door previously hidden opened and his words rang true from his soul. It was no performance at least since Takatsuki was incapable of it. Kafuku looked into Takatsuki’s eyes. This time Takatsuki stared straight back. They held each other’s gaze before, eventually, each acknowledged something in the other and turned away.

On departing they shook hands once again. A light rain was falling. After watching Takatsuki’s beige raincoat disappear into the night Kafuku considered, as he always did, the open palm of his right hand. He recalled that thought again, *that hand caressed my wife’s naked body*.

The oppressive sensation that usually accompanied it did not arise. Kafuku thought to himself, *I guess this happens. I guess this kind of thing happens. It was just her body after all, and isn’t it ash and bone now, anyway? There are more important things. Suppose that was my blind spot? Then aren’t we all living with that same blind spot?* The words spoken by Takatsuki rang loud in Kafuku’s ears.

“Did you stay friends with him for long?” Asked Misaki, staring ahead at the line of cars.

“We remained friends for about six months meeting for drinks maybe twice a

month.” Said Kafuku. “Then we stopped and I haven’t seen him since. He’s called but I ignore it and I haven’t been in contact. He stopped calling eventually.”

“He probably thinks it strange.”

“Probably.”

“You might have hurt him.”

“It’s possible.”

“Why did you stop meeting with him?”

“Because there was no longer any need to perform.”

“So, because you didn’t need to perform there was no need to be friends?”

“Perhaps that too.” Said Kafuku. “But there was another reason.”

“What was it?”

Kafuku remained silent. Misaki glanced towards Kafuku with the cigarette resting unlit on her lips.

“If you want to smoke the cigarette, go ahead.” Said Kafuku.

“What?”

“Light up if you want.”

“But the roof is up.”

“I don’t mind.”

Misaki wound down the window and lit her Marlboro using the car’s cigarette lighter. As she inhaled deeply her eyes narrowed in satisfaction. She held the smoke in for a moment before exhaling slowly out the window.

“They can be fatal, you know.” Said Kafuku.

“Speaking of that, life tends to prove fatal.”

Kafuku smiled. “I guess so.”

“It’s the first time I’ve seen you smile.” Said Misaki.

Now she mentioned it she was probably right, thought Kafuku. It was a long time since he had smiled outside of a performance.

“I’ve been meaning to say this for a while.” Said Kafuku. “When you look properly you’re actually quite pretty. Not ugly in the slightest.”

“Thank you. I’m really just not the attracting type. Like Sonia.”

Taken aback, Kafuku turned to Misaki. “You read ‘Uncle Vanya’?”

“You were reading bits of it out loud every day. Of course I wanted to find out what the story was about. I can be curious as well.” Said Misaki. “*“Oh! How terrible it is to be unattractive. Why was I born so unattractive as this? Why this fate?”* It’s not a happy play.”

“It is rather sad.” Said Kafuku. “*“Oh, my God! I am forty-seven years old. I may live to sixty; I still have thirteen years before me; an eternity! How shall I be able to endure life for thirteen years? What shall I do? How can I fill them?”* People living at that time died around the age of sixty. Uncle Vanya was lucky not to be born today.”

“I looked you up. You’re actually the same age as my father.”

Kafuku did not reply. Instead, he picked a number of cassette tapes and searched the labels for a particular song. In the end, he stopped short of playing anything. Misaki moved the lit cigarette into her left hand and held it out the window. The line of cars had started moving off. Misaki brought her hand back inside and used both hands to shift gears while holding the cigarette in her mouth.

“To tell you the truth, I was thinking of punishing him somehow.” Confessed Kafuku. “The man had slept with my wife, after all.” Kafuku put the cassette tapes back.

“Punish him?”

“I planned to make him suffer somehow; to lower his guard by pretending to be his friend, find a fatal weakness and exploit it to hurt him.”

Misaki frowned at the idea. “What kind of weakness?”

“I didn’t get that far. But he was someone that let his defenses down when he drank so I would have found something. It’s easy to create some kind of problem that would destroy his social credibility, and if that happened he would certainly lose primary guardianship of his son in the divorce. I imagine he would find that hard to deal with, and may never actually recover from it.”

“That’s terrible.”

“Yes, it is.”

“So you wanted revenge because he slept with your wife?”

“Not quite revenge.” Said Kafuku. “No matter what, I couldn’t put what happened out of my mind. I had been at some pains trying to do so, but it was no good. I could not relieve myself of the image of another man’s arms around my wife. It just wouldn’t go away, like a ghost in the corner of every room overlooking me. I thought the feeling would disappear with time after she died but it didn’t, and in reality actually grew stronger. I needed to get rid of this thing that felt like anger inside of me somehow.”

Kafuku wondered why he was confessing these things to a girl the same age as his daughter, from Nakatonbetsu Town, Hokkaido. Once he started speaking, however, he found he could not stop.

“And because of that you wanted to punish him.” Said Misaki.

“Yes.”

“But you didn’t actually do anything?”

“That’s right.” Said Kafuku.

Misaki seemed relieved at his response. She took a short pull on the cigarette then flicked it out the window still alight. That must be the way they did things in Nakatonbetsu Town.

“And I don’t know why, but at some point I suddenly stopped caring for it. Like the ghost haunting me suddenly disappeared.” Said Kafuku. “And I stopped

feeling the anger. Perhaps it wasn't anger after all but something else."

"Whatever it was, you should be glad it's gone and you didn't end up hurting that guy."

"Yes, I know."

"But you still haven't found out why your wife wanted sex with another man, *and with that man in particular*, have you?"

"No, I don't think so. That problem remains unresolved. He was an amiable chap but there wasn't much beyond the smile. He truly seemed to have been in love with her though. He wasn't playing around; he was sincerely shocked when he heard of her death and he was hurt when she refused his request to visit her in hospital. I couldn't help but like the chap; enough that I didn't really mind him as a friend."

Kafuku stopped to assess himself and find words that most closely approached the truth.

"But, to put it bluntly he was not much of a man. He had a nice personality, perhaps. He's handsome, has an attractive smile and is very accommodating, but not the type of person that gets respect - he had obvious weaknesses and was a second-rate actor. My wife on the other hand was a strongly willful and emotionally deep person compared to him. She was someone who could reflect on problems deliberately and of her own initiative. Why did she choose to be drawn to sleep with that pointless man in spite of all that? The idea of it is like a thorn in my side."

"In a way, it almost looks like an insult directed at you. Is that what you think?"

Kafuku thought on it for a moment and acknowledged the idea. "It could very well be that."

"Kafuku-san, I don't think you wife liked him at all." Said Misaki candidly. "That's why she slept with him."

Kafuku looked at Misaki as if gazing over a distant landscape. She switched on the wipers to remove a few spots of rain from the windshield. The new blades squealed shrilly against the glass like children crying in protest.

"It's something any women might do." Added Misaki.

No words came to Kafuku.

"That kind of behavior - it's like an illness, Kafuku-san. It's not something you can understand. Like my father leaving us and my mother putting me through hell. That was their illness acting too. There's no point trying to figure it out; you just have to make do, swallow back the tears and get on with it."

"And so we merely continue the performance?" Said Kafuku.

"That's the way I see it. More or less."

Kafuku sunk deep into the leather seat, shut his eyes and focused his senses to

a point. He attempted to perceive when Misaki shifted gears but it was still impossible; her handling was indiscernibly smooth. There was a change in engine sound but only very little; like a flying insect approaching then withdrawing away, thought Kafuku.

He decided to have a little sleep - ten or fifteen minutes perhaps – then to wake in time to appear on stage and perform once again; to stand in the lights and enunciate his lines. The audience would applaud him and the curtain would fall. He would once again become a stranger for a time and then return to himself, though not quite the same self he left behind.

“I’m going to sleep a little.” Nodded Kafuku.

Misaki continued to concentrate on the road. Kafuku was grateful for the silence.