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# A WILD SHEEP CHASE



Haruki Murakami

*Translated from the Japanese by  
Alfred Birnbaum*

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## ***Part One***

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### **Wednesday Afternoon Picnic**

It was a short one-paragraph item in the morning edition. A friend rang me up and read it to me. Nothing special. Something a rookie reporter fresh out of college might've written for practice.

The date, a street corner, a person driving a truck, a pedestrian, a casualty, an investigation of possible negligence.

Sounded like one of those poems on the inner ap of a magazine.

"Where's the funeral?" I asked.

"You got me," he said. "Did she even have family?"

Of course she had a family.

I called the police department to track down her family's address and telephone number, after which I gave them a call to get details of the funeral.

Her family lived in an old quarter of Tokyo. I got out my map and marked the block in red. There were subway and train and bus lines everywhere, overlapping like some misshapen spider-web, the whole area a maze of narrow streets and drainage canals.

The day of the funeral, I took a streetcar from Waseda. I got o near the end of the line. The map proved about as helpful as a globe would have been. I ended up buying pack after pack of cigarettes, asking directions each time.

It was a wood-frame house with a brown board fence around it. A small yard, with an abandoned ceramic brazier lled with standing rainwater. The ground was dark and damp.

She'd left home when she was sixteen. Which may have been the reason why the funeral was so somber. Only family present, nearly everyone older. It was presided over by her older brother, barely thirty, or maybe it was her brother-in-law.

Her father, a shortish man in his mid- fties, wore a black armband of mourning. He stood by the entrance and scarcely moved. Reminded me of a street washed clean after a downpour.

On leaving, I lowered my head in silence, and he lowered his head in return, without a word.

I met her in autumn nine years ago, when I was twenty and she was seventeen.

There was a small coffee shop near the university where I hung out with friends. It wasn't much of anything, but it offered certain constants: hard rock and bad coffee.

She'd always be sitting in the same spot, elbows planted on the table, reading. With her glasses—which resembled orthodontia—and skinny hands, she seemed somehow endearing. Always her coffee would be cold, always her ashtray full of cigarette butts.

The only thing that changed was the book. One time it'd be Mickey Spillane, another time Kenzaburo Oe, another time Allen Ginsberg. Didn't matter what it was, as long as it was a book. The students who drifted in and out of the place would lend her books, and she'd read them clean through, cover to cover. Devour them, like so many ears of corn. In those days, people lent out books as a matter of course, so she never wanted for anything to read.

Those were the days of the Doors, the Stones, the Byrds, Deep Purple, and the Moody Blues. The air was alive, even as everything seemed poised on the verge of collapse, waiting for a push.

She and I would trade books, talk endlessly, drink cheap whiskey,

engage in unremarkable sex. You know, the stu of everyday.

Meanwhile, the curtain was creaking down on the shambles of the sixties.

I forget her name.

I could pull out the obituary, but what di erence would it make now. I've forgotten her name.

Suppose I meet up with old friends and mid-swing the conversation turns to her. No one ever remembers her name either.

Say, back then there was this girl who'd sleep with anyone, you know, what's-her-face, the name escapes me, but I slept with her lots of times, wonder what she's doing now, be funny to run into her on the street.

"Back then, there was this girl who'd sleep with anyone." That's her name.

Of course, strictly speaking, she didn't sleep with just anyone. She had standards.

Still, the fact of the matter is, as any cursory examination of the evidence would su ce to show, that she was quite willing to sleep with almost any guy.

Once, and only once, I asked her about these standards of hers.

“Well, if you must know . . .,” she began. A pensive thirty seconds went by. “It’s not like anybody will do. Sometimes the whole idea turns me off. But you know, maybe I want to find out about a lot of different people. Or maybe that’s how my world comes together for me.”

“By sleeping with someone?”

“Uh-huh.”

It was my turn to think things over.

“So tell me, has it helped you make sense of things?”

“A little,” she said.

From the winter through the summer I hardly saw her. The university was blockaded and shut down on several occasions, and in any case, I was going through some personal problems of my own.

When I visited the coffee shop again the next autumn, the clientele had completely changed, and she was the only face I recognized. Hard rock was playing as before, but the excitement in the air had vanished. Only she and the bad coffee were the same. I plunked down in the chair opposite her, and we talked about the old crowd.



Most of the guys had dropped out, one had committed suicide, one had buried his tracks. Talk like that.

“What’ve you been up to this past year?” she asked me.

“Different things,” I said.

“Wiser for it?”

“A little.”

That night, I slept with her for the first time.

About her background I know almost nothing. What I do know, someone may have told me; maybe it was she herself when we were in bed together. Her first year of high school she had a big falling out with her father and left the coop (and high school too). I’m pretty sure that’s the story. Exactly where she lived, what she did to get by, nobody knew.

She would sit in some rock-music café all day long, drink cup after cup of coffee, chain-smoke, and leaf through books, waiting for someone to come along to foot her coffee and cigarette bills (no mean sum for us types in those days), then typically end up sleeping with the guy.

There. That’s everything I know about her.

From the autumn of that year on into the spring of the next, once

a week on Tuesday nights, she'd drop in at my apartment outside Mitaka. She'd put away whatever simple dinner I cooked, ll my ashtrays, and have sex with me with the radio tuned full blast to an FEN rock program. Waking up Wednesday mornings, we'd go for a walk through the woods to the ICU campus and have lunch in the dining hall. In the afternoon, we'd have a weak cup of coffee in the student lounge, and if the weather was good, we'd stretch out on the grass and gaze up at the sky.

Our Wednesday afternoon picnic, she called it.

"Everytime we come here, I feel like we're on a picnic."

"Really? A picnic?"

"Well, the grounds go on and on, everyone looks so happy ..."

She sat up and fumbled through a few matches before lighting a cigarette.

"The sun climbs high in the sky, then starts down. People come, then go. The time breezes by. That's like a picnic, isn't it?"

I was twenty-one at the time, about to turn twenty-two. No prospect of graduating soon, and yet no reason to quit school. Caught in the most curiously depressing circumstances. For months I'd been stuck, unable to take one step in any new direction. The world kept

moving on; I alone was at a standstill. In the autumn, everything took on a desolate cast, the colors swiftly fading before my eyes. The sunlight, the smell of the grass, the faintest patter of rain, everything got on my nerves.

How many times did I dream of catching a train at night? Always the same dream. A nightliner stuffy with cigarette smoke and toilet stink. So crowded there was hardly standing room. The seats all caked with vomit. It was all I could do to get up and leave the train at the station. But it was not a station at all. Only an open field, with not a house light anywhere. No stationmaster, no clock, no timetable, no nothing—so went the dream.

I still remember that eerie afternoon. The twenty-fifth of November. Gingko leaves brought down by heavy rains had turned the footpaths into dry riverbeds of gold. She and I were out for a walk, hands in our pockets. Not a sound to be heard except for the crunch of the leaves under our feet and the piercing cries of the birds.

“Just what is it you’re brooding over?” she blurted out all of a sudden.

“Nothing really,” I said.

She kept walking a bit before sitting down by the side of the path

and taking a drag on her cigarette.

“You always have bad dreams?”

“I *often* have bad dreams. Generally, trauma about vending machines eating my change.”

She laughed and put her hand on my knee, but then took it away again.

“You don’t want to talk about it, do you?”

“Not today. I’m having trouble talking.”

She icked her half-smoked cigarette to the dirt and carefully ground it out with her shoe. “You can’t bring yourself to say what you’d really like to say, isn’t that what you mean?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

Two birds flew from nearby and were swallowed up into the cloudless sky. We watched them until they were out of sight. Then she began drawing indecipherable patterns in the dirt with a twig.

“Sometimes I get real lonely sleeping with you.”

“I’m sorry I make you feel that way,” I said.

“It’s not your fault. It’s not like you’re thinking of some other girl when we’re having sex. What difference would that make anyway?

It’s just that—” She stopped mid-sentence and slowly drew three

straight lines on the ground. “Oh, I don’t know.”

“You know, I never meant to shut you out,” I broke in after a moment. “I don’t understand what gets into me. I’m trying my damndest to gure it out. I don’t want to blow things out of proportion, but I don’t want to pretend they’re not there. It takes time.”

“How much time?”

“Who knows? Maybe a year, maybe ten.”

She tossed the twig to the ground and stood up, brushing the dry bits of grass from her coat. “Ten years? C’mon, isn’t that like forever?”

“Maybe,” I said.

We walked through the woods to the ICU campus, sat down in the student lounge, and munched on hot dogs. It was two in the afternoon, and Yukio Mishima’s picture kept ashing on the lounge TV. The volume control was broken so we could hardly make out what was being said, but it didn’t matter to us one way or the other. A student got up on a chair and tried fooling with the volume, but eventually he gave up and wandered o .

“I want you,” I said.

“Okay,” she said.

So we thrust our hands back into our coat pockets and slowly walked back to the apartment.

I woke up to find her sobbing softly, her slender body trembling under the covers. I turned on the heater and checked the clock. Two in the morning. A startlingly white moon shone in the middle of the sky.

I waited for her to stop crying before putting the kettle on for tea. One teabag for the both of us. No sugar, no lemon, just plain hot tea. Then lighting up two cigarettes, I handed one to her. She inhaled and spat out the smoke, three times in rapid succession, before she broke down coughing.

“Tell me, have you ever thought of killing me?” she asked.

“You?”

“Yeah.”

“Why’re you asking me such a thing?”

Her cigarette still at her lips, she rubbed her eyelid with her fingertip.

“No special reason.”

“No, never,” I said.

“Honest?”

“Honest. Why would I want to kill you?”

“Oh, I guess you’re right,” she said. “I thought for a second there that maybe it wouldn’t be so bad to get murdered by someone. Like when I’m sound asleep.”

“I’m afraid I’m not the killer type.”

“Oh?”

“As far as I know.”

She laughed. She put her cigarette out, drank down the rest of her tea, then lit up again.

“I’m going to live to be twenty- ve,” she said, “then die.”

July, eight years later, she was dead at twenty-six.



## ***Part Two***

### **July, Eight Years Later**



### **Sixteen Steps**

I waited for the compressed-air hiss of the elevator doors shutting

behind me before closing my eyes. Then, gathering up the pieces of my mind, I started on the sixteen steps down the hall to my apartment door. Eyes closed, exactly sixteen steps. No more, no less. My head blank from the whiskey, my mouth reeking from cigarettes.

Drunk as I get, I can walk those sixteen steps straight as a ruled line. The fruit of many years of pointless self-discipline. Whenever drunk, I'd throw back my shoulders, straighten my spine, hold my head up, and draw a deep lungful of the cool morning air in the concrete hallway. Then I'd close my eyes and walk sixteen steps straight through the whiskey fog.

Within the bounds of that sixteen-step world, I bear the title of "Most Courteous of Drunks." A simple achievement. One has only to accept the fact of being drunk at face value.

No ifs, ands, or buts. Only the statement "I am drunk," plain and simple.

That's all it takes for me to become the Most Courteous Drunk.

The Earliest to Rise, the Last Boxcar over the Bridge.

Five, six, seven, ...

Stopping on the eighth step, I opened my eyes and took a deep



breath. A slight humming in my ears. Like a sea breeze whistling through a rusty wire screen. Come to think of it, when was the last time I was at the beach?

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Let's see. July 24, 6:30 A.M. Ideal time of year for the beach, ideal time of day. The beach still unspoiled by people. Seabird tracks scattered about the surf's edge like pine needles after a brisk wind. The beach, hmm ...

I began walking again. Forget the beach. All that's ages past.

On the sixteenth step, I halted, opened my eyes, and found myself planted square in front of my doorknob, as always. Taking two days' worth of newspapers and two envelopes from the mailbox, I tucked the lot under my arm. Then I shed my keys out of the recesses of my pocket and leaned forward, forehead against the icy iron door. From somewhere behind my ears, a click. Me, a wad of cotton soaked through with alcohol. With only a modicum of control of my senses.

Just great.

The door maybe one-third open, I slid my body in, shutting the door behind me. The entryway was dead silent. More silent than it

ought to be.

That's when I noticed the red pumps at my feet. Red pumps I've seen before. Parked in between my mud-caked tennis shoes and a pair of cheap beach sandals, like some out-of-season Christmas present. A silence hovered about them, ne as dust.

She was slumped over the kitchen table, forehead on her arms, profile hidden by straight black hair. A patch of untanned white neckline showed between the strands of hair, through the open sleeve of her print dress—one I'd never seen before—a glimpse of a brassiere strap.

I removed my jacket, undid my black tie, took o my watch, with not a inch from her the whole while. Looking at her back called up memories. Memories of times before I'd met her.

“Well then,” I spoke up in a voice not quite my own, the sound piped in.

As expected, there was no reply. She could have been asleep, could have been crying, could have been dead.

I sat down opposite her and rubbed my eyes. A short ray of sunlight divided the table, me in light, her in shadow. Colorless shadow. A withered potted geranium sat on the table. Outside,

someone was watering down the street. Splash on the pavement,  
smell of wet asphalt.

“Want some co ee?”

No reply.

So I got up and went over to grind co ee for two cups. It occurred  
to me after I ground the co ee that what I really wanted was ice  
tea. I’m forever realizing things too late.

The transistor radio played a succession of innocuous pop songs.  
A perfect morning sound track. The world had barely changed in ten  
years. Only the singers and song titles. And my age.

The water came to a boil. I shut o the gas, let the water cool  
thirty seconds, poured it over the co ee. The grounds absorbed all  
they could and slowly swelled, lling the room with aroma.

“Been here since last night?” I asked, kettle in hand.

An ever so slight nod of her head.

“You’ve been waiting all this time?”

No answer.

The room had steamed up from the boiling water and strong sun.  
I shut the window and switched on the air conditioner, then set the  
two mugs of co ee on the table.

“Drink,” I said, reclaiming my own voice.

Silence.

“Be better if you drank something.”

It was thirty seconds before she raised her head slowly, evenly, and gazed absently at the potted plant. A few ne strands of hair lay plastered against her dampened cheeks, an aura of wetness about her.

“Don’t mind me,” she said. “I didn’t mean to cry.”

I held out a box of tissues to her. She quietly blew her nose, then brushed the hair from her cheek.

“Actually, I planned on being gone by the time you returned. I didn’t want to see you.”

“But you changed your mind, I see.”

“Not at all. I didn’t have anywhere else I wanted to go. But I’m going now, don’t worry.”

“Well, have some co ee anyway.”

I tuned in to the radio tra c report as I sipped my co ee and slit open the two pieces of mail. One was an announcement from a furniture store where everything was twenty percent o . The second was a letter from someone I didn’t want to think about, much less

read a letter from. I crumpled them up and tossed them into the wastebasket, then nibbled on leftover cheese crackers. She cupped her hands around the coffee cup as if to warm herself and fixed her eyes on me, her lip lightly riding the rim of the mug.

“There’s salad in the fridge,” she said.

“Salad?”

“Tomatoes and string beans. There wasn’t anything else. The cucumbers had gone bad, so I threw them out.”

“Oh.”

I went to the refrigerator and took out the blue Okinawa glass salad bowl and sprinkled on the last drops from the bottle of dressing. The tomatoes and string beans were but chilled shadows. Tasteless shadows. Nor was there any taste to the coffee or crackers. Maybe because of the morning sun? The light of morning decomposes everything. I gave up on the coffee midway, dug a bent cigarette out of my pocket, and lit up with matches that I’d never seen before. The tip of the cigarette crackled dryly as its lavender smoke formed a tracery in the morning light.

“I went to a funeral. When it was over, I went to Shinjuku, by myself.”

The cat appeared out of nowhere, yawned at length, then sprang into her lap. She scratched him behind the ears.

“You don’t need to explain anything to me,” she said. “I’m out of the picture already.”

“I’m not explaining. I’m just making conversation.”

She shrugged and pushed her brassiere strap back inside her dress. Her face had no expression, like a photograph of a sunken city on the ocean floor.

“An acquaintance of sorts from years back. No one you knew.”

“Oh really?”

The cat gave his legs a good stretch, topped it off with a puff of a breath.

I glanced at the burning tip of the cigarette in my mouth.

“How did this acquaintance die?”

“Hit by a truck. Thirteen bones fractured.”

“Female?”

“Uh-huh.”

The seven o’clock news and traffic report came to an end, and light rock returned to the airwaves. She set her coffee back down and looked me in the face.

“Tell me, if I died, would you go out drinking like that?”

“The funeral had nothing to do with my drinking. Only the rest one or two rounds, if that.”

A new day was beginning. Another hot one. A cluster of skyscrapers glared through the window.

“How about something cool to drink?”

She shook her head.

I got a can of cola out of the refrigerator and downed it in one go.

“She was the kind of girl who’d sleep with anyone.” What an obituary: the deceased was the kind of girl who would sleep with anyone.

“Why are you telling me this?”

Why indeed? I had no idea.

“Very well,” she picked up where I trailed off, “she was the kind of girl who’d sleep with anyone, right?”

“Right.”

“But not with you, right?”

There was an edge to her voice. I glanced up from the salad bowl.

“You think not?”

“Somehow, no,” she said quietly. “You, you’re not the type.”

“What type?”

“I don’t know, there’s something about you. Say there’s an hourglass: the sand’s about to run out. Someone like you can always be counted on to turn the thing over.”

“That so?”

She pursed her lips, then relaxed.

“I came to get the rest of my things. My winter coat, hats, things I left behind. I packed them up in boxes. When you have time, could you take them to the parcel service?”

“I can drop them by.”

She shook her head. “That’s all right. I don’t want you to come.

You understand, don’t you?”

Of course I did. I talk too much, without thinking.

“You have the address?”

“Yes.”

“That’s all that’s left to do. Sorry for staying so long.”

“And the paperwork, was that it?”

“Uh-huh. All done.”

“I can’t believe it’s that easy. I thought there’d be a lot more to it.”



“People who don’t know anything about it all think so, but it really is simple. Once it’s over and done with.” Saying that, she went back to scratching the cat’s head. “Get divorced twice, and you’re a veteran.”

The cat did a back stretch, eyes closed, then quickly nestled his head into the crook of her arm. I tossed the coffee mugs and salad bowl into the sink, then swept up the cracker crumbs with a bill. My eyes were throbbing from the glare of the sun.

“I made out a list of details. Where papers are led, trash days, things like that. Anything you can’t figure out, give me a call.”

“Thanks.”

“Had you wanted children?” she suddenly asked.

“Nah, can’t say I ever wanted kids.”

“I wondered about that for a while there. But seeing how it ended up like this, I guess it was just as well. Or maybe if we’d had a child it wouldn’t have come to this, what do you think?”

“There’re lots of couples with kids who get divorced.”

“You’re probably right,” she said, toying with my lighter. “I still love you. But I guess that’s not the point now, is it? I know that well enough myself.”

## The Slip

Once she was gone, I downed another cola, then took a hot shower and shaved. I was down to the bottom on just about everything—soap, shampoo, shaving cream.

I stepped out of the shower and dried my hair, rubbed on body lotion, cleaned my ears. Then to the kitchen to heat up the last of the coffee. Only to discover: no one sitting at the opposite side of the table. Staring at that chair where no one sat, I felt like a tiny child in a De Chirico painting, left behind all alone in a foreign country. Of course, a tiny child I was not. I decided I wouldn't think about it and took my time with my coffee and cigarette.

For not having slept in twenty-four hours, I felt surprisingly awake. My body was hazed to the core, but my mind kept swimming swiftly around through the convoluted waterways of my consciousness, like a restless aquatic organism.

The vacant chair in front of me made me think of an American novel I'd read a while back. After the wife walks out, the husband keeps her slip draped over the chair. It made sense, now that I thought about it. True, it wouldn't really help things, but it beat

having that dying geranium staring at me. Besides, probably even the cat would feel more comfortable having her things around.

I checked the bedroom, opening all of her drawers, all empty.

Only a moth-eaten scarf, three coat hangers, and a packet of mothballs. Her cosmetics, toiletries, and curlers, her toothbrush, hair dryer, assortment of pills, boots, sandals, slippers, hat boxes, accessories, handbags, shoulder bags, suitcases, purses, her ever-tidy stock of underwear, stockings, and socks, letters, everything with the least womanly scent was gone. She probably even wiped o her ngerprints. A third of the books and records was gone too—anything she'd bought herself or I'd given her.

From the photo albums, every single print of her had been peeled away. Shots of the both of us together had been cut, the parts with her neatly trimmed away, leaving my image behind. Photos of me alone or of mountains and rivers and deer and cats were left intact. Three albums rendered into a revised past. It was as if I'd been alone at birth, alone all my days, and would continue alone.

A slip! She could have at least left a slip!

It was her choice, and her choice was to leave not a single trace. I could either accept it or, as I imagined was her intention, I could

talk myself into believing that she never existed all along. If she never existed, then neither did her slip.

I doused the ashtray, thought more about her slip, then gave up and hit the sack.

A month had passed since I agreed to the divorce and she moved out. A non-month. Unfocused and unfelt, a lukewarm protoplasm of a month.

Nothing changed from day to day, not one thing. I woke up at seven, made toast and coffee, headed out to work, ate dinner out, had one or two drinks, went home, read in bed for an hour, turned off the lights, and slept. Saturdays and Sundays, instead of work, I was out killing time from morning on, making the rounds of movie theaters. Then I had dinner and a couple of drinks, read, and went to sleep, alone. So it went: I passed through the month the way people X out days on a calendar, one after the one.

In one sense, her disappearance was due to circumstances beyond my control. What's done is done, that sort of thing. How we got on the last four years was of no consequence. Any more than the photos peeled out of the albums.

Nor did it matter that she'd been sleeping with a friend of mine

for a long time and one day upped and moved in with him. All this was within the realm of possibility. Such things happened often enough, so how could I think her leaving me was anything out of the ordinary? The long and the short of it was, it was up to her.

“The long and short of it is, it’s up to you,” I said.

It was a Sunday afternoon, as I dawdled with a pull-ring from a beer can, that she came out with it. Said she wanted a divorce.

“Either way is ne with you then?” she asked, releasing her words slowly.

“No, either way is not ne with me,” I said. “I’m only saying it’s up to you.”

“If you want to know the truth, I don’t want to leave you,” she said after a moment.

“All right, then don’t leave me,” I said.

“But I’m going nowhere staying with you.”

She wouldn’t say any more, but I knew what she meant. I would be thirty in a few months; she would be twenty-six. And if you considered the vastness of the rest of our lives, the foundations we’d laid barely scraped zero. All we’d done our four years together was to eat through our savings.

Mostly my fault, I guess. Probably I never should have gotten married. At least never to her.

In the beginning, she thought she was the one un t for society and made me out to be the socially functioning one. In our respective roles, we got along relatively well. Yet no sooner had we thought we'd reached a lasting arrangement than something crumbled. The tiniest hint of something, but it was never to be recovered. We had been walking ever so peacefully down a long blind alley. That was our end.

To her, I was already lost. Even if she still loved me, it didn't matter. We'd gotten too used to each other's role. She understood it instinctively; I knew it from experience. There was no hope.

So it was that she and her slip vanished forever. Some things are forgotten, some things disappear, some things die. But all in all, this was hardly what you could call a tragedy.

July 24, 8:25 A.M.

I checked the numerals of the digital clock, closed my eyes, and fell asleep.



## ***Part Three***

**September, Two Months Later**

4

### **The Whale's Penis and the Woman with Three**

#### **Occupations**

To sleep with a woman: it can seem of the utmost importance in your mind, or then again it can seem like nothing much at all.

Which only goes to say that there's sex as therapy (self-therapy, that is) and there's sex as pastime.

There's sex for self-improvement start to nish and there's sex for killing time straight through; sex that is therapeutic at rst only to end up as nothing-better-to-do, and vice versa. Our human sex life—how shall I put it?—differs fundamentally from the sex life of the whale.

We are not whales—and this constitutes one great theme underscoring our sex life.

When I was a kid, there was an aquarium thirty minutes by bicycle from where I lived. A chill aquarium-like silence always pervaded the place, with only an occasional splash to be heard. I could almost feel the Creature from the Black Lagoon breathing in some dim

corner.

Schools of tuna circled 'round and 'round the enormous pool.

Sturgeon plied their own narrow watercourse, piranha set their razor-sharp teeth into chunks of meat, and electric eels sputtered and sparked like shorted-out lightbulbs.

The aquarium was filled with countless other fish as well, all with different names and scales and fins. I couldn't figure out why on earth there had to be so many kinds of fish.

There were, of course, no whales in the aquarium. One whale would have been too big, even if you knocked out all the walls and made the entire aquarium into one tank. Instead, the aquarium kept a whale penis on display. As a token, if you will.

So it was that my most impressionable years of boyhood were spent gazing at not a whale but a whale's penis. Whenever I tired of strolling through the chill aisles of the aquarium, I'd steal off to my place on the bench in the hushed, high-ceilinged stillness of the exhibition room and spend hours on end there contemplating this whale's penis.

At times it would remind me of a tiny shriveled palm tree; at other times, a giant ear of corn. In fact, if not for the plaque—WHALE



GENITAL: MALE—no one would have taken it to be a whale's penis.  
More

likely an artifact unearthed from the Central Asian desert than a product of the Antarctic Ocean. It bore no resemblance to my penis, nor to any penis I'd ever seen. What was worse, the severed penis exuded a singular, somehow unspeakable aura of sadness.

It came back to me, that giant whale's penis, after having intercourse with a girl for the very first time. What twists of fate, what tortuous circumnavigations, had brought it to that cavernous exhibition room? My heart ached, thinking about it. I felt as if I didn't have a hope in the world. But I was only seventeen and clearly too young to give up on everything. It was then and there I came to the realization I have borne in mind ever since.

Which is, that I am not a whale.

In bed now with my new girlfriend, running my fingers through her hair, I thought about whales for the longest time.

In the aquarium of my memory, it is always late autumn. The glass of the tanks is cold. I'm wearing a heavy sweater. Through the large picture window of the exhibition room, the sea is dark as lead, the countless whitecaps reminiscent of lace collars on girls' dresses.

"What're you thinking about?" she asked.

“Something long ago,” I said.

She was twenty-one, with an attractive slender body and a pair of the most bewitching, perfectly formed ears. She was a part-time proofreader for a small publishing house, a commercial model specializing in ear shots, and a call girl in a discreet intimate-friends-only club. Which of the three she considered her main occupation, I had no idea. Neither did she.

Nonetheless, sizing up her essential attributes, I would have to say her natural gifts ran to ear modeling. She agreed. Which was well and good until you considered how extremely limited are the opportunities for a commercial ear model, how abysmal the status and pay. To your typical P.R. man or makeup artist or cameraman, she was just an “earholder,” someone with ears. Her mind and body, apart from the ears, were completely out of the picture, disregarded, nonexistent.

“But you know, that’s not the real me,” she’d say. “**I** am my ears, my ears are me.”

Neither her proofreader self nor her call girl self ever, not for one second, showed her ears to others.

“That’s because they’re not really me,” she explained.

The office of her call girl club, registered as a “talent club” for appearances, was located in Akasaka and run by a gray-haired Englishwoman whom everyone called Mrs. X. She’d been living in Japan for thirty years, spoke fluent Japanese, and read most of the basic Chinese characters.

Mrs. X had opened an English-language tutorial school for women not five hundred yards from the call girl office and used the place to scout promising faces for the latter. Conversely, several of the call girls were also going to her English school. At reduced tuition, of course.

Mrs. X called all her call girls “dear.” Soft as a spring afternoon, her “dears.”

“Make sure to wear frilly undies, dear. And no pantyhose.” Or “You take your tea with cream, don’t you, dear?” She had a firm understanding of her market. Her clientele were wealthy businessmen in their forties and fifties. Two-thirds foreigners, the rest Japanese. Mrs. X expressed a dislike for politicians, old men, perverts, and the poor.

A dozen long-stemmed beauties she kept on call, but out of the whole bouquet my new girlfriend was the least attractive bloom. As

a call girl, she seemed no more than ordinary. In fact, with her ears hidden, she was plain. I couldn't figure out how Mrs. X had singled her out. Maybe she'd detected in her plainness some special glimmer, or maybe she thought one plain girl would be an asset. Either way, Mrs. X's sights had been right on target, and my girlfriend quickly had a number of regular customers. She wore ordinary clothes, ordinary makeup, ordinary underwear, and an ordinary scent as she'd head out to the Hilton or Okura or Prince to sleep with one or two men a week, thereby making enough to live on for a month.

Half the other nights she slept with me for free. The other half I have no idea how she spent.

Her life as a part-time proofreader for the publishing house was more normal. Three days a week she'd commute to Kanda, to the third floor of a small office building, and from nine to five she'd proofread, make tea, run downstairs (no elevator in the building) and buy erasers. She'd be the one sent out, not because anyone held anything against her, but because she was the only unmarried woman in the company. Like a chameleon, she would change with place and circumstance, able, at will, to summon or control that

glimmer of hers.

I rst became acquainted with her (or rather, her ears) right after I broke up with my wife. It was the beginning of August. I was doing a subcontracted copywriting job for a computer software company, which brought me face-to-face, so to speak, with her ears.

The director of the advertising rm placed a campaign proposal and three large black-and-white photos on my desk, telling me to prepare three head copy options for them within the week. All three photos were giant close-ups of an ear.

An ear?

“Why an ear?” I asked.

“Who knows? What’s the difference? An ear it is. You’ve got a week to think about ears.”

So for one whole week I ear-gazed. I taped the three giant ears to the wall in front of my desk, and all day, while smoking cigarettes, drinking coffee, clipping my nails, I immersed myself in those ears.

The job I nished in a week, but the ear shots stayed taped up on my wall. Partly it was too much trouble to take them down, partly I’d grown accustomed to those ears. But the real reason I didn’t take the photos down was that those ears had me in their thrall. They

were the dream image of an ear. The quintessence, the paragon of ears. Never had any enlarged part of the human body (genitals included, of course) held such strong attraction for me. They were like some great whirlpool of fate sucking me in.

One astonishingly bold curve cut clear across the picture plane, others curled into delicate ligrees of subtle shadow, while still others traced, like an ancient mural, the legends of a past age. But the supple sh of the earlobe surpassed them all, transcending all beauty and desire.

A few days later, I rang up the photographer for the name and number of those ears.

“What’s this now?” asked the photographer.

“Just curious, that’s all. They’re such striking ears.”

“Well, I guess as far as the ears go, okay, but the girl herself is nothing special. If it’s a young piece you want, I can introduce you to this bathing-suit model I shot the other day.”

I refused, took down the name and number of the ears, thanked him, and hung up.

Two o’clock, six o’clock, ten o’clock, I kept trying her number, but got no answer. Apparently she was going about her own life.

It was ten the next morning before I nally got ahold of her. I introduced myself briefly, then added that I had to talk to her about some business related to the advertisement and could she see clear to having dinner with me.

“But I was told the job was nished,” she said.

“The job is nished,” I said.

She seemed a bit taken aback, but didn’t inquire further. We set a date for the following evening.

I called for a reservation at the fanciest French restaurant I knew.

On Aoyama Boulevard. Then I got out a brand-new shirt, took my time selecting a tie, and put on a jacket I’d only worn twice before.

True to the photographer’s warning, the girl was nothing special.

Plain clothes, plain looks. She seemed like a member of the chorus of a second-rate women’s college. But that was beside the point as far as I was concerned. What disappointed me was that she hid her ears under a straight fall of hair.

“You’re hiding your ears,” said I, nonchalantly.

“Yes,” said she, nonchalantly.

We had arrived ahead of schedule and were the rst dinner customers at the restaurant. The lights were dimmed, a waiter came

around with a long match to light the red taper on our table, and the maître d'hôtel cast shy eyes over the napkins and dinnerware to be sure all was in place. The herringbone lay of the oak floorboards gleamed to a high polish, and the waiter walked about with a click of his heels. His shoes looked loads more expensive than mine. Fresh bud roses in vases, and modern oils, originals, on white walls.

I glanced over the wine list and chose a crisp white wine, and for hors d'oeuvres *pâté de canard*, *terraine de dorade*, and *foie de boudoir* à *crème fraîche*. After an intensive study of the menu she ordered *potage tortue*, *salade verte*, and *mousse de sole*, while I ordered *potage d'oursin*, *rôti de veau avec garnie persil*, and *a salade de tomate*. There went half a month's salary.

"What a lovely place," she said. "Do you come here often?"

"Only occasionally on business," I answered. "The truth of the matter is, I don't usually go to restaurants when I'm alone. Mostly I go to bars where I eat and drink whatever they've got. Easier that way. No unnecessary decisions."

"And what do you usually eat at a bar?"

"All sorts of things. Omelettes and sandwiches often enough."

"Omelettes and sandwiches," she repeated. "You eat omelettes