

HARUKI MURAKAMI



**with
the
beatles**

TOMINE

What I find strange about growing old isn't that I've got older. Not that the youthful me from the past has, without my realizing it, aged. What catches me off guard is, rather, how people from the same generation as me have become elderly, how all the pretty, vivacious girls I used to know are now old enough to have a couple of grandkids. It's a little disconcerting—sad, even. Though I never feel sad at the fact that I have similarly aged.

I think what makes me feel sad about the girls I knew growing old is that it forces me to admit, all over again, that my youthful dreams are gone forever. The death of a dream can be, in a way, sadder than that of a living being.

There's one girl—a woman who used to be a girl, I mean—whom I remember well. I don't know her name, though. And, naturally, I don't know where she is now or what she's doing. What I do know about her is that she went to the same high school as I did, and was in the same year (since the badge on her shirt was the same color as mine), and that she really liked the Beatles.

This was in 1964, at the height of Beatlemania. It was early autumn. The new school semester had begun and things were starting to fall into a routine again. She was hurrying down the long, dim hallway of the old school building, her skirt fluttering. I was the only other person there. She was clutching an LP to her chest as if it were something precious. The LP "With the Beatles." The one with the striking black-and-white photograph of the four Beatles in half shadow. For some reason, I'm not sure why, I have a clear memory that it was the original, British version of the album, not the American or the Japanese version.

She was a beautiful girl. At least, to me then, she looked gorgeous. She wasn't tall, but she had long black hair, slim legs, and a lovely fragrance. (That could be a false memory, I don't know. Maybe she didn't give off any scent at all. But that's what I remember, as if, when she passed, an enchanting, alluring fragrance wafted in my direction.) She had me under her spell—that beautiful, nameless girl clutch-

ing "With the Beatles" to her chest.

My heart started to pound, I gasped for breath, and it was as if all sound had ceased, as if I'd sunk to the bottom of a pool. All I could hear was a bell ringing faintly, deep in my ears. As if someone were desperately trying to send me a vital message. All this took only ten or fifteen seconds. It was over before I knew it, and the critical message contained there, like the core of all dreams, disappeared.

A dimly lit hallway in a high school, a beautiful girl, the hem of her skirt swirling, "With the Beatles."

That was the only time I saw that girl. In the two years between then and my graduation, we never once crossed paths again. Which is pretty strange if you think about it. The high school I attended was a fairly large public school at the top of a hill in Kobe, with about six hundred and fifty students in each grade. (We were the so-called baby-boomer generation, so there were a lot of us.) Not everyone knew one another. In fact, I didn't know the names or recognize the vast majority of the kids in the school. But, still, since I went to school almost every day, and often used that hallway, it struck me as almost outrageous that I never once saw that beautiful girl again. I looked for her every time I used that hallway.

Had she vanished, like smoke? Or, on that early-autumn afternoon, had I seen not a real person but a vision of some kind? Perhaps I had idealized her in my mind at the instant that we passed each other, to the point where even if I actually saw her again I wouldn't recognize her? (I think the last possibility is the most likely.)

Later, I got to know a few women, and went out with them. And every time I met a new woman it felt as though I were unconsciously longing to relive that dazzling moment I'd experienced in a dim school hallway back in the fall of 1964. That silent, insistent thrill in my heart, the breathless feeling in my chest, the bell ringing gently in my ears.

Sometimes I was able to recapture this feeling, at other times not. And other times I managed to grab hold of it, only to let it slip through my fingers.

In any event, the emotions that surged when this happened came to serve as a kind of gauge I used to measure the intensity of my yearning.

When I couldn't get that sensation in the real world, I would quietly let my memory of those feelings awaken inside me. In this way, memory became one of my most valued emotional tools, a means of survival, even. Like a warm kitten, softly curled inside an oversized coat pocket, fast asleep.

On to the Beatles. A year before I saw that girl was when the Beatles first became wildly popular. By April of 1964, they'd captured the top five spots on the American singles charts. Pop music had never seen anything like it. These were the five hit songs: (1) "Can't Buy Me Love"; (2) "Twist and Shout"; (3) "She Loves You"; (4) "I Want to Hold Your Hand"; (5) "Please Please Me." The single "Can't Buy Me Love" alone had more than two million preorders, making it double platinum before the actual record went on sale.

The Beatles were, of course, also hugely popular in Japan. Turn on the radio and chances were you'd hear one of their songs. I liked their songs myself and knew all their hits. Ask me to sing them and I could. At home when I was studying (or pretending to study), most of the time I had the radio blasting away. But, truth be told, I was never a fervent Beatles fan. I never actively sought out their songs. For me, it was passive listening, pop music flowing out of the tiny speakers of my Panasonic transistor radio, in one ear and out the other, barely registering. Background music for my adolescence. Musical wallpaper.

In high school and in college, I didn't buy a single Beatles record. I was much more into jazz and classical music, and that was what I listened to when I wanted to focus on music. I saved up to buy jazz records, requested tunes by Miles Davis and Thelonious Monk at jazz bars, and went to classical-music concerts.

This might seem strange, but it wasn't until I was in my mid-thirties that I sat down and listened to "With the Beatles" from beginning to end. Despite the fact that the image of the

girl carrying that LP in the hallway of our high school had never left me, for the longest time I didn't feel like actually giving it a listen. I wasn't particularly interested in knowing what sort of music was etched into the grooves of the vinyl disk she had clutched so tightly to her chest.

When I was in my mid-thirties, well past childhood and adolescence, my first impression of the album was that it wasn't that great, or at least not the kind of music to take your breath away. Of the fourteen tracks on the album, six were covers of other artists' works. The covers of the Marvelettes' "Please Mr. Postman" and Chuck Berry's "Roll Over Beethoven" were well done, and impress me even when I listen to them now, but, still, they were cover versions. And of the eight original songs, apart from Paul's "All My Loving," none were amazing. There were no hit singles, and to my ears the Beatles' first album, "Please Please Me," recorded basically in one take, was far more vibrant and compelling. Even so, likely thanks to Beatles fans' unquenchable desire for new songs, this second album debuted in the No. 1 spot in the U.K., a position it held for twenty-one weeks. (In the U.S., the title of the

album was changed to "Meet the Beatles," and included some different tracks, though the cover design stayed almost the same.)

What pulled me in was the vision of that girl clutching the album as if it were something priceless. Take away the photograph on the album cover and the scene might not have bewitched me as it did. There was the music, for sure. But there was something else, something far bigger. And, in an instant, that tableau was etched in my heart—a kind of spiritual landscape that could be found *only* there, at a set age, in a set place, and at a set moment in time.

For me, the major event of the following year, 1965, wasn't President Johnson ordering the bombing of North Vietnam and the escalation of the war, or the discovery of a new species of wildcat on the island of Iriomote, but the fact that I acquired a girlfriend. She had been in the same class as me in freshman year, but it wasn't until sophomore year that we started going out.

To avoid any misunderstanding, I'd like to preface this by saying that I'm not good-looking and was never a star

athlete, and my grades in school were less than stellar. My singing left something to be desired, too, and I didn't have a way with words. When I was in school, and in the years after that, I never once had girls flocking around me. That's one of the few things I can say with certainty in this uncertain life. Still, there always seemed to be a girl around who was, for whatever reason, attracted to me. I have no clue why, but I was able to enjoy some pleasant, intimate times with those girls. I got to be good friends with some of them, and occasionally took it to the next level. The girl I'm talking about here was one of these—the first girl I had a really *close* relationship with.

This first girlfriend of mine was petite and charming. That summer, I went on dates with her once a week. One afternoon I kissed her small yet full lips and touched her breasts through her bra. She was wearing a sleeveless white dress and her hair had a citrusy shampoo scent.

She had almost no interest in the Beatles. She wasn't into jazz, either. What she liked to listen to was more mellow music, what you might call middle-class music—the Mantovani Orchestra, Percy Faith, Roger Williams, Andy Williams, Nat King Cole, and the like. (At the time, "middle class" wasn't a derogatory term at all.) There were piles of such records at her house—what nowadays is classified as easy listening.

That afternoon, she put a record on the turntable in her living room—her family had a large, impressive stereo system—and we sat on the big, comfy sofa and kissed. Her family had gone out somewhere and it was just the two of us. Truthfully, in a situation like that I didn't really care what sort of music was playing.

What I remember about the summer of 1965 was her white dress, the citrusy scent of her shampoo, the formidable feel of her wire bra (a bra back then was more like a fortress than like an item of underwear), and the elegant performance of Max Steiner's "Theme from 'A Summer Place'" by the Percy Faith Orchestra. Even now, whenever I hear "Theme from 'A Summer Place,'" that sofa comes to mind.

Incidentally, several years later—1968,



as I recall, around the same time that Robert Kennedy was assassinated—the man who had been our homeroom teacher when we were in the same class hanged himself from the lintel in his house. He'd taught social studies. An ideological impasse was said to be the cause of his suicide.

An ideological impasse?

But it's true—in the late sixties people sometimes took their own lives because they'd hit a wall, ideologically. Though not all that often.

I get a really strange feeling when I think that on that afternoon, as my girlfriend and I were clumsily making out on the sofa, with Percy Faith's pretty music in the background, that social-studies teacher was, step by step, heading toward his fatal ideological dead end, or, to put it another way, toward that silent, tight knot in the rope. I even feel bad about it sometimes. Among all the teachers I knew, he was one of the best. Whether he was successful or not is another question, but he always tried to treat his students fairly. I never spoke to him outside of class, but that was how I remembered him.

Like 1964, 1965 was the year of the Beatles. They released "Eight Days a Week" in February, "Ticket to Ride" in April, "Help!" in July, and "Yesterday" in September—all of which topped the U.S. charts. It seemed as if we were hearing their music almost all the time. It was everywhere, surrounding us, like wallpaper meticulously applied to every single inch of the walls.

When the Beatles' music wasn't playing, it was the Rolling Stones' "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction," or the Byrds' "Mr. Tambourine Man," or "My Girl," by the Temptations, or the Righteous Brothers' "You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'," or the Beach Boys' "Help Me, Rhonda." Diana Ross and the Supremes also had one hit after another. A constant soundtrack of this kind of wonderful, joyful music filtered out through my little Panasonic transistor radio. It was truly an astounding year for pop music.

I've heard it said that the happiest time in our lives is the period when pop songs really mean something to us, really get to us. It may be true. Or maybe not. Pop songs may, after all, be nothing but pop songs. And perhaps

our lives are merely decorative, expendable items, a burst of fleeting color and nothing more.

My girlfriend's house was near the Kobe radio station that I always tuned in to. I think her father imported, or perhaps exported, medical equipment. I don't know the details. At any rate, he owned his own company, which



seemed to be doing well. Their home was in a pine grove near the sea. I heard that it used to be the summer villa of some businessman and that her family had bought and remodelled it. The pine trees rustled in the sea breeze. It was the perfect place to listen to "Theme from 'A Summer Place.'"

Years later, I happened to see a late-night TV broadcast of the 1959 movie "A Summer Place." It was a typical Hollywood film about young love, but nevertheless it held together well. In the movie, there is a pine grove by the sea, which sways in the summer breeze in time to the Percy Faith Orchestra's horn section. That scene of the pine trees swaying in the wind struck me as a metaphor for the young people's raging sexual desire. But that may just have been my take on it, my own biased view.

In the movie, Troy Donahue and Sandra Dee are swept up in that kind of overpowering sexual wind and, because of it, encounter all kinds of real-world problems. Misunderstandings are followed by reconciliations, obstacles are cleared up like fog lifting, and in the end the two come together and are married. In Hollywood in the fifties, a happy ending always involved marriage—the creation of an environment in which lovers could have sex legally. My girlfriend and I, of course, didn't get married. We were still in high school, and all we did was clumsily grope and make out on the sofa with

"Theme from 'A Summer Place'" playing in the background.

"You know something?" she said to me on the sofa, in a small voice, as if she were making a confession. "I'm the really jealous type."

"Seriously?" I said.

"I wanted to make sure you knew that."

"O.K."

"Sometimes it hurts a lot to be so jealous."

I silently stroked her hair. It was beyond me at the time to imagine how burning jealousy felt, what caused it, what it led to. I was too preoccupied with my own emotions.

As a side note, Troy Donahue, that handsome young star, later got caught up in alcohol and drugs, stopped making movies, and was even homeless for a time. Sandra Dee, too, struggled with alcoholism. Donahue married the popular actress Suzanne Pleshette in 1964, but they divorced eight months later. Dee married the singer Bobby Darin in 1960, but they divorced in 1967. This is obviously totally unrelated to the plot of "A Summer Place." And unrelated to my and my girlfriend's fate.

My girlfriend had an older brother and a younger sister. The younger sister was in her second year of junior high but was a good two inches taller than her older sister. She wasn't particularly cute. Plus, she wore thick glasses. But my girlfriend was very fond of her kid sister. "Her grades in school are really good," she told me. I think my girlfriend's grades, by the way, were only fair to middling. Like my own, most likely.

One time, we let her younger sister tag along with us to the movies. There was some reason that we had to. The film was "The Sound of Music." The theatre was packed, so we had to sit near the front, and I remember that watching that 70-mm. wide-screen film so close up made my eyes ache by the end. My girlfriend, though, was crazy about the songs in the film. She bought the soundtrack LP and listened to it endlessly. Me, I was much more into John Coltrane's magical version of "My Favorite Things," but I figured that bringing that up with her was pointless, so I never did.

Her younger sister didn't seem to

like me much. Whenever we saw each other she looked at me with strange eyes, totally devoid of emotion—as if she were judging whether some dried fish at the back of the fridge was still edible or not. And, for some reason, that look always left me feeling guilty. When she looked at me, it was as though she were ignoring the outside (granted, it wasn't much to look at anyway) and could see right through me, down to the depths of my being. I may have felt that way because I really did have shame and guilt in my heart.

My girlfriend's brother was four years older than her, so he would have been at least twenty then. She didn't introduce him to me and hardly ever mentioned him. If he happened to come up in conversation, she deftly changed the subject. I can see now that her attitude was a bit unnatural. Not that I thought much about it. I wasn't that interested in her family. What drew me to her was a much more urgent impulse.

The first time I met her brother and spoke with him was toward the end of autumn in 1965.

That Sunday, I went to my girlfriend's house to pick her up. I rang the bell over and over but no one answered. I paused for a while, then rang it again, repeatedly, until I finally heard someone moving slowly toward the door. It was my girlfriend's older brother.

He was a shade taller than me and a bit on the hefty side. Not flabby but more like an athlete who, for some reason, can't exercise for a while and packs on a few extra pounds, just temporary fat. He had broad shoulders but a relatively long, thin neck. His hair was dishevelled, sticking out all over the place, as if he'd just woken up. It looked stiff and coarse, and he seemed about two weeks overdue for a haircut. He had on a crew-neck navy-blue sweater, the neck loose, and gray sweats that were baggy around the knees. His look was the complete opposite of my girlfriend's—she was always neat and clean and well groomed.

He squinted at me for a while, like some scruffy animal that had, after a long hibernation, crawled out into the sunlight.

"I'm guessing you are . . . Sayoko's friend?" He said this before I got a word out. He cleared his throat. His voice

DECEMBER

It was never supposed to snow here, and yet
it was snowing, big flakes tearing down
over the Edwards Plateau like the sky
had crumbled. My friend and I drank

cold wine while our children played
inside with masks
on a big white bed. Another afternoon,
my daughters sang a song about lords
and camp that I didn't

understand, but they didn't like me
to ask what it meant, and
instead of answering rolled down the hill
in their pajamas. Their
first secret. Then:

first bright-red manicure, first
chipped nail, first note taped to the door
saying don't come in. I went
to the museum instead
and stared a long time

at the draft on which Anne Sexton
had scrawled "At last I found you, you funny
old story-poem!" and felt a happy

was sleepy, but I could sense a spark of interest in it.

"That's right," I said and introduced myself. "I was supposed to come here at eleven."

"Sayoko's not here right now," he said.

"Not here," I said, repeating his words.

"She's out somewhere. She's not at home."

"But I was supposed to come and pick her up today at eleven."

"Is that right?" her brother said. He glanced up at the wall beside him, as if checking a clock. But there was no clock there, just a white plaster wall. He reluctantly turned his gaze back to me. "That may be, but the fact is she's not at home."

I had no clue what I should do. And neither did her brother, apparently. He gave a leisurely yawn and scratched the back of his head. All his actions were slow and measured.

"Doesn't seem like anybody's at home now," he said. "When I got up a while ago nobody was here. They

must have all gone out, but I don't know where."

I didn't say anything.

"My father's probably out golfing. My sisters must have gone out to have some fun. But my mom being out, too, is a little odd. That doesn't happen often."

I refrained from speculating. This wasn't my family.

"But, if Sayoko promised she'd be here, I'm sure she'll be back soon," her brother said. "Why don't you come inside and wait?"

"I don't want to bother you. I'll just hang out somewhere for a while and then come back," I said.

"Nah, it's no bother," he said firmly. "Much more of a bother to have the bell ring again and have to come and open the front door. So come on in."

I had no other choice, so I went inside, and he led me to the living room. The living room with the sofa on which she and I had made out in the summer. I sat down on it, and my girlfriend's

envy, happy for her
but not for me.

Then: first time on ice skates,
chick-chicking around the rink, a string
of beads draped over one daughter's head
and my gold necklace still tangled
by the sink. Snow

rolled over the prairie and held
the fence shadows when we threw
golden hay to the ponies who lived outside
all winter. The black-and-white barn cat
was still alive

and ate nervously in the garage,
where snow chains glittered on the floor. One night
I told a restaurant it was my husband's birthday
and they gave us a sundae. It was
his birthday, and at this point

we were far from the Edwards Plateau.
I can't remember when we left for that trip but I know
on the last day of December we had to go home
and in the airport, waiting for the plane, I arranged
our winter coats so that mine
was holding everyone else's.

—Cecily Parks

brother eased himself into an armchair facing me. And once again let out another long yawn.

"You're Sayoko's friend, right?" he asked again, as if making doubly sure.

"That's right," I said, giving the same reply.

"Not Yuko's friend?"

I shook my head. Yuko was her taller kid sister.

"Is it interesting going out with Sayoko?" her brother asked, a look of curiosity in his eyes.

I had no clue how to respond, so I stayed silent. He sat there, waiting for my reply.

"It's fun, yes," I said, finally finding what I hoped were the right words.

"It's fun, but it's not interesting?"

"No, that's not what I mean . . ." My words petered out.

"No matter," her brother said. "Interesting or fun—no difference between the two, I suppose. Hey, have you had breakfast?"

"I have, yes."

"I'm going to make some toast. Sure you don't want any?"

"No, I'm fine," I replied.

"How about coffee?"

"I'm fine."

I could have done with some coffee, but I hesitated to get more involved with my girlfriend's family, especially when she wasn't at home.

He stood up without a word and left the room. After a while, I heard the clatter of dishes and cups. I stayed there alone on the sofa, politely sitting up straight, my hands in my lap, waiting for her to come back from wherever she was. The clock now read eleven-fifteen.

I scanned my memory to see if we really had decided that I would come at eleven. But, no matter how much I thought it over, I was sure that I'd got the date and time correct. We'd talked on the phone the night before and had confirmed it then. She wasn't the type to forget or blow off a promise. And it was odd, indeed, for her and her fam-

ily to all go off on a Sunday morning and leave her older brother by himself.

Puzzled by it all, I sat there patiently. Time passed excruciatingly slowly. I'd hear the occasional sound from the kitchen—the faucet turning on, the clatter of a spoon mixing something, the sound of a cupboard opening and closing. This brother seemed the type who had to make a racket, whatever he did. But that was it, as far as sounds went. No wind blowing outside, no dogs barking. Like invisible mud, the silence steadily crept into my ears and plugged them up. I had to gulp a few times to unblock them.

Some music would have been nice. "Theme from 'A Summer Place,'" "Edelweiss," "Moon River"—anything. I wasn't picky. Just some music. But I couldn't very well turn on the stereo in somebody else's house without permission. I looked around for something to read but didn't spot any newspapers or magazines. I checked out what was inside my shoulder bag. I almost always had a paperback I was reading in my bag, but not that day.

When we went on dates, my girlfriend and I often pretended that we were going to the library to study, and I put school-related items in my bag to keep up the pretense. Like an amateur criminal making up a flimsy alibi. So the only book I had in my bag that day was a supplementary reader for our school textbook "Japanese Language and Literature." I reluctantly pulled it out and started flipping through the pages. I wasn't what you'd call a *reader*, who goes through books systematically and attentively, but more the type who finds it hard to pass the time without something to read. I could never just sit, still and silent. I always had to be turning the pages of a book or listening to music, one or the other. When there was no book lying around, I'd grab anything printed. I'd read a phone book, an instruction manual for a steam iron. Compared with those kinds of reading material, a supplementary reader for a Japanese-language textbook was far better.

I randomly flipped through the fiction and essays in the book. A few pieces were by foreign authors, but most were by well-known modern Japanese writers—Ryunosuke Akutagawa, Junichiro

Tanizaki, Kobo Abe, and the like. And appended to each work—all excerpts, except for a handful of very short stories—were some questions. Most of these questions were totally meaningless. With meaningless questions, it's hard (or impossible) to determine logically if an answer is correct or not. I doubted whether whoever had come up with the questions would even have been able to decide. Things like "What can you glean from this passage about the writer's stance toward war?" or "When the author describes the waxing and waning of the moon, what sort of symbolic effect is created?" You could give almost any answer. If you said that the description of the waxing and waning of the moon was simply a description of the waxing and waning of the moon, and created no symbolic effect, no one could say with certainty that your answer was wrong. Of course there was a relatively reasonable answer, but I didn't really think that arriving at a relatively reasonable answer was one of the goals of studying literature.

Be that as it may, I killed time by trying to conjure up answers to each of these questions. And, in most cases, what sprang to mind—in my brain, which was still growing and developing, struggling every day to attain a kind of psychological independence—were the sorts of answers that were relatively unreasonable but not necessarily wrong. Maybe that tendency was one of the reasons that my grades at school were no great shakes.

While this was going on, my girlfriend's brother came back to the living room. His hair was still sticking out in all directions, but, maybe because he'd had breakfast, his eyes weren't as sleepy as before. He held a large white mug, which had a picture of a First World War German biplane, with two machine guns in front of the cockpit, printed on the side. This had to be his own special mug. I couldn't picture my girlfriend drinking from a mug like that.

"You really don't want any coffee?" he asked.

I shook my head. "No. I'm fine. Really."

His sweater was festooned with bread

crumbs. The knees of his sweats, too. He had probably been starving and had gobbled down the toast without caring about crumbs going everywhere. I could imagine that bugging my girlfriend, since she always looked so neat and tidy. I liked to be neat and tidy myself, a shared quality that was part of why we got along, I think.

Her brother glanced up at the wall. There was a clock on this wall. The hands of the clock showed nearly eleven-thirty.

"She isn't back yet, is she? Where the heck could she have gone off to?"

I said nothing in response.

"What're you reading?"

"A supplementary reader for our Japanese textbook."

"Hmm," he said, inclining his head slightly. "Is it interesting?"

"Not particularly. I just don't have anything else to read."

"Could you show it to me?"

I passed him the book over the low table. Coffee cup in his left hand, he took the book with his right. I was worried that he'd spill coffee on it. That seemed about to happen. But he didn't spill. He put his cup down on the glass tabletop with a clink, and he held the book in both hands and starting flipping through.

"So what part were you reading?"

"Just now I was reading Akutagawa's story 'Spinning Gears.' There's only part of the story there, not the whole thing."

He gave this some thought. "'Spinning Gears' is one I've never read. Though I did read his story 'Kappa' a long time ago. Isn't 'Spinning Gears' a pretty dark story?"

"It is. He wrote it right before he died." Akutagawa overdosed when he was thirty-five. My supplementary reader's notes said that "Spinning Gears" was published posthumously, in 1927. The story was almost a last will and testament.

"Hmm," my girlfriend's brother said. "D'ya think you could read it for me?"

I looked at him in surprise. "Read it aloud, you mean?"

"Yeah. I've always liked to have people read to me. I'm not such a great reader myself."

"I'm not good at reading aloud."

"I don't mind. You don't have to be good. Just read it in the right order, and that'll be fine. I mean, it doesn't look like we have anything else to do."

"It's a pretty neurotic, depressing story, though," I said.

"Sometimes I like to hear that kind of story. Like, to fight evil with evil."

He handed the book back, picked up the coffee cup with the picture of the biplane and its Iron Crosses, and took a sip. Then he sank back in his armchair and waited for the reading to begin.

That was how I ended up that Sunday reading part of Akutagawa's "Spinning Gears" to my girlfriend's eccentric older brother. I was a bit reluctant at first, but I warmed to the job. The supplementary reader had the two final sections of the story—"Red Lights" and "Airplane"—but I just read "Airplane." It was about eight pages long, and it ended with the line "Won't someone be good enough to strangle me as I sleep?" Akutagawa killed himself right after writing this line.

I finished reading, but still no one in the family had come home. The phone didn't ring, and no crows cawed outside. It was perfectly still all around. The autumn sunlight lit up the living room through the lace curtains. Time alone made its slow, steady way forward. My girlfriend's brother sat there, arms folded, eyes shut, as if savoring the final lines I'd read: "I don't have the strength to go on writing. It is painful beyond words to keep living when I feel like this. Won't someone be good enough to strangle me as I sleep?"

Whether you liked the writing or not, one thing was clear: this wasn't the right story to read on a bright, clear Sunday. I closed the book and glanced up at the clock on the wall. It was just past twelve.

"There must have been some kind of misunderstanding," I said. "I think I'll be going." I started to get up from the sofa. My mother had drummed it into me from childhood that you shouldn't bother people at home when it was time to have a meal. For better or for worse, this had seeped into my being and become a reflexive habit.

"You've come all this way, so how



about waiting another thirty minutes?" her brother asked. "How about you wait another thirty minutes, and if she's not back by then you can leave?"

His words were oddly distinct, and I sat back down and rested my hands in my lap again.

"You're very good at reading aloud," he said, sounding genuinely impressed. "Has anybody ever told you that?"

I shook my head.

"Unless you really grasp the content, you can't read like you did. The last part was especially good."

"Oh," I answered vaguely. I felt my cheeks redden a bit. The praise seemed misdirected, and it made me uncomfortable. But the sense I was getting was that I was in for another thirty minutes of conversation with him. He seemed to need someone to talk to.

He placed his palms firmly together in front of him, as if praying, then suddenly came out with this: "This might sound like a weird question, but have you ever had your memory stop?"

"Stop?"

"What I'm talking about is, like, from one point in time to the next you can't remember at all where you were, or what you were doing."

I shook my head. "I don't think I've ever had that."

"So you remember the time sequence and details of what you've done?"

"If it's something that happened recently, yes, I'd say so."

"Hmm," he said and scratched the back of his head for a moment, and then spoke. "I suppose that's normal."

I waited for him to continue.

"Actually, I've had several times where my memory has just slipped away. Like at 3 P.M. my memory cuts out, and the next thing I know it's 7 P.M. And I can't remember where I was, or what I was doing, during those four hours. And it's not like something special happened to me. Like I got hit on the head or got sloppy drunk or anything. I'm just doing my usual thing and without warning my memory cuts out. I can't predict when it's going to happen. And I have no clue for how many hours, how many days, even, my memory will vanish."

"I see," I murmured, to let him know I was following along.

"Imagine you've recorded a Mozart symphony on a tape recorder. And when

you play it back the sound jumps from the middle of the second movement to the middle of the third, and what should be in between has just vanished. That's what it's like. When I say 'vanished' I don't mean that there's a silent section of tape. It's just gone. Do you get what I'm saying?"

"I guess so," I said in an uncertain tone.

"If it's music, it's kind of inconvenient, but no real harm, right? But, if it happens in your real life, then it's a pain, believe me. . . . You get what I mean?"

I nodded.

"You go to the dark side of the moon and come back empty-handed."

I nodded again. I wasn't sure I completely grasped the analogy.

"It's caused by a genetic disorder, and clear-cut cases like mine are pretty rare. One person out of tens of thousands will have the disorder. And even then there'll be differences among them, of course. In my last year of junior high, I was examined by a neurologist at the university hospital. My mom took me."

He paused, then went on: "In other words, it's a condition where the sequence of your memory gets messed up. One

part of your memory gets stashed away in the wrong drawer. And it's next to impossible, or actually impossible, to ever find it again. That's how they explained it to me. It's not the kind of terrible disorder that can be fatal, or where you gradually lose your mind. But it does cause problems in daily life. They told me the name of the disorder and gave me some medication to take, but the pills don't do a thing. They're just a placebo."

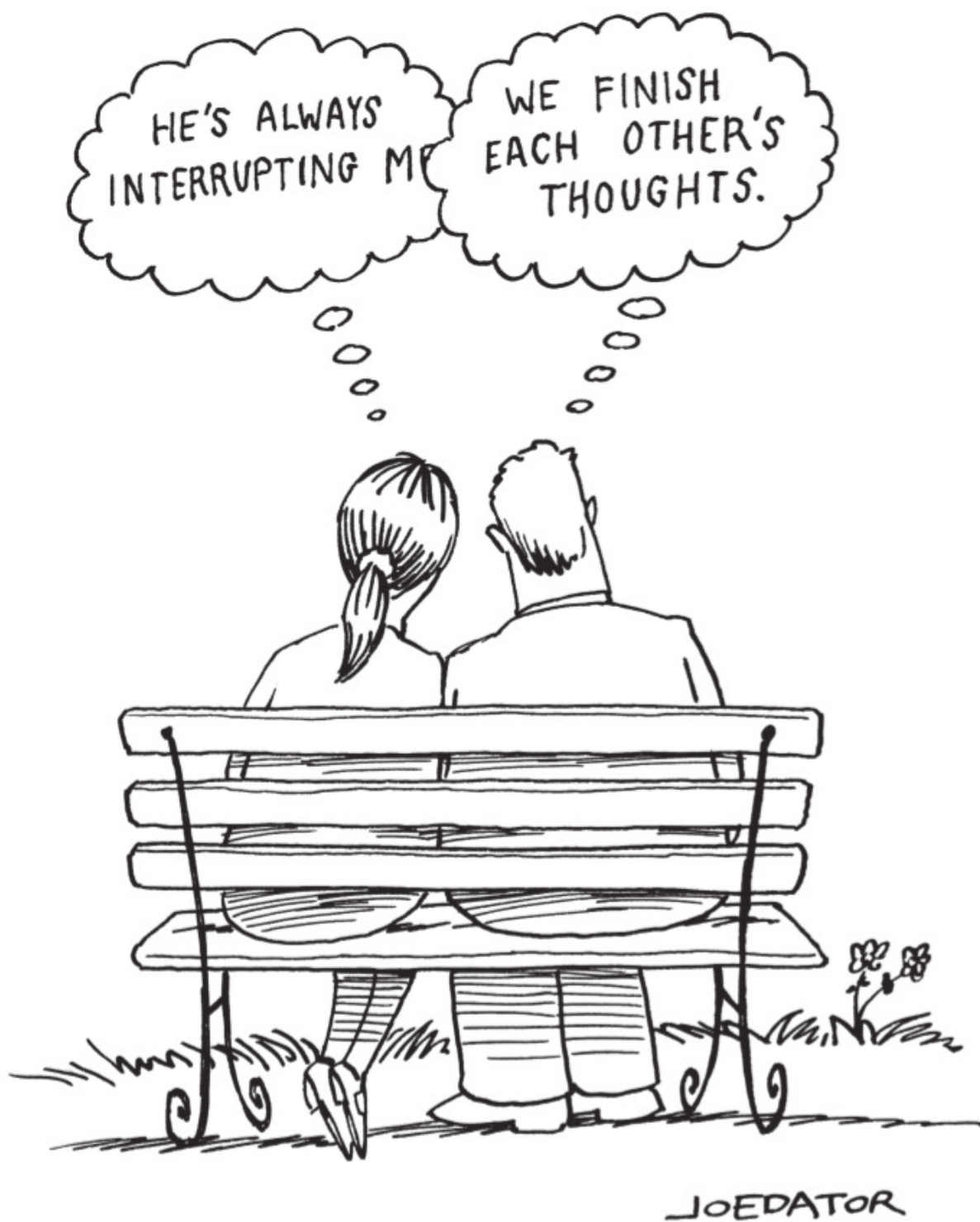
For a moment, my girlfriend's brother was silent, studying me closely to see whether I understood. It was as if he were outside a house staring in through a window.

"I have these episodes once or twice a year now," he finally said. "Not so often, but the frequency isn't the issue. When it happens it causes real problems. Even if it's only seldom, it's pretty awful having that kind of memory loss and not knowing *when* it'll happen. You get that, right?"

"Uh-huh," I said vaguely. It was all I could do to follow his odd, rapid-fire story.

"Like, say it happens to me, my memory suddenly cuts out, and during





that lapse I take a huge hammer and bash somebody's head in, somebody I don't like. No way you can just write that off by saying, 'Well, now, that's awkward.' Am I right?"

"I'd say so."

"The cops'll get involved and if I tell them, 'The thing is, my memory flew away,' they're not going to buy that, now, are they?"

I shook my head.

"There are actually a couple of people I don't like at all. Guys who really piss me off. My dad's one of them. But when I'm lucid I'm not about to bash my dad on the head with a hammer, am I? I'm able to control myself. But, when my memory cuts out, I have no clue what I'm doing."

I inclined my head a fraction, withholding any opinion.

"The doctor said there's no danger of that happening. It's not like, while my memory's gone, somebody hijacks my personality. Like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. I'm always myself. It's just that that recorded part skips from the middle of the second movement to the middle of the third. I'm always able to control who I am, and act normally for the most part. Mozart doesn't suddenly transform into Stravinsky. Mozart remains Mozart—it's just that one part disappears into a drawer somewhere."

He clammed up at this point and took a sip from his biplane coffee cup. I was wishing I could have some coffee myself.

"At least, that's what the doctor told me. But you gotta take what doctors tell you with a grain of salt. When I was in high school it scared the crap out of me, thinking I might, when I

didn't know what I was doing, bash one of my classmates on the head with a hammer. I mean, when you're in high school you still don't know who you are, right? Add the pain of memory loss to that and you can't stand it."

I nodded silently. He might be right.

"I pretty much stopped going to school because of all that," my girlfriend's brother went on. "The more I thought about it, the more frightened I got, and I couldn't bring myself to go to school. My mom explained the situation to my teacher, and even though I had way too many absences, they made an exception for me and let me graduate. I imagine the school wanted to get rid of a problem student like me as soon as it could. But I didn't go on to college. My grades weren't so bad, and I could have got into some kind of college, but I didn't have the confidence to go out. Ever since then, I've been loafing around at home. I take the dog for a walk, but otherwise I hardly ever leave the house. These days I don't feel as panicky, or whatever. If things calm down a little more, I think maybe I'll start going to college."

He was silent then, and so was I. I had no idea what to say. I understood now why my girlfriend never wanted to talk about her brother.

"Thank you for reading that story to me," he said. "'Spinning Gears' is pretty good. A dark story for sure, but some of the writing really got to me. You sure you don't want any coffee? It'll just take a minute."

"No, I'm fine, really. I'd better be going soon."

He glanced again at the clock on the wall. "Why don't you wait till one, and if nobody's back by then you can leave. I'll be in my room upstairs, so you can see yourself out. No need to worry about me."

I nodded.

"Is it interesting, going out with Sayoko?" my girlfriend's brother asked me one more time.

I nodded. "It's interesting."

"What part?"

"How there's so much about her I don't know," I replied. A very honest answer, I think.

"Hmm," he said, mulling it over. "Now that you mention it, I can see that. She's my kid sister, blood-related, the same genes and all, and we've been

living together under the same roof since she was born, but there are still tons of things I don't understand about her. I don't get her—how should I put it? What makes her tick? So I'd like it if you could understand those things for me. Though there may be things it's best not to try to figure out."

Coffee cup in hand, he rose from the armchair.

"Anyway, give it your best shot," my girlfriend's brother said. He fluttered his free hand at me and left the room.

"Thanks," I said.

At one, there was still no sign of anyone returning, so I went alone to the front door, slipped on my sneakers, and left. I walked past the pine forest to the station, jumped on the train, and went home. It was an oddly still and quiet Sunday autumn afternoon.

I got a call from my girlfriend after 2 P.M. "You were supposed to come next Sunday," she said. I wasn't totally convinced, but she was so clear about it that she was probably right. I meekly apologized for going to her place a whole week early.

I didn't mention that while I was waiting for her to come home her brother and I had a conversation—maybe "conversation" wasn't the right word, since I basically just listened to him. I figured it was probably best not to say that I'd read Ryunosuke Akutagawa's "Spinning Gears" to him, and that he had revealed to me that he had an illness with memory lapses. If he hadn't told her these things, there wasn't any reason for me to.

Eighteen years later, I met her brother again. It was the middle of October. I was thirty-five then, living in Tokyo with my wife. My work kept me busy and I hardly ever went back to Kobe.

It was late afternoon, and I was walking up a hill in Shibuya to pick up a watch that was being repaired. I was heading along, lost in thought, when a man I'd passed turned and called out to me.

"Excuse me," he said. He had an unmistakable Kansai intonation. I stopped, turned around, and saw a man I didn't recognize. He looked a little older than me, and a tad taller. He had on a thick gray tweed jacket, a crew-neck, cream-

colored cashmere sweater, and brown chinos. His hair was short, and he had the taut build of an athlete and a deep tan (a golf tan, it looked like). His features were unrefined yet still attractive. Handsome, I suppose. I got the sense that this was a man who was pleased with his life. A well-bred person was my guess.

"I don't recall your name, but weren't you my younger sister's boyfriend for a while?" he said.

I studied his face again. But I had no memory of it.

"Your younger sister?"

"Sayoko," he said. "I think you guys were in the same class in high school."

My eyes came to rest on a small tomato-sauce stain on the front of his cream-colored sweater. He was neatly dressed, and that one tiny stain struck me as out of place. And then it hit me—the brother with sleepy eyes and a loose-necked navy-blue sweater sprinkled with bread crumbs.

"I remember now," I said. "You're Sayoko's older brother. We met one time at your home, didn't we?"

"Right you are. You read Akutagawa's 'Spinning Gears' to me."

I laughed. "But I'm surprised you could pick me out in this crowd. We only met once, and it was so long ago."

"I'm not sure why, but I never forget a face. Plus, you don't seem to have changed at all."

"But you've changed quite a lot," I said. "You look so different now."

"Well—a lot of water under the bridge," he said, smiling. "As you know,



things were pretty complicated for me for a while."

"How is Sayoko doing?" I asked.

He cast a troubled look to one side, breathed in slowly, then exhaled. As if measuring the density of the air around him.

"Instead of standing here in the street, why don't we go somewhere where we

can sit down and talk? If you're not busy, that is," he said.

"I have nothing pressing," I told him.

"Sayoko passed away," he said quietly. We were in a nearby coffee shop, seated across a plastic table from each other.

"Passed away?"

"She died. Three years ago."

I was speechless. I felt as if my tongue were swelling up inside my mouth. I tried to swallow the saliva that had built up, but couldn't.

The last time I'd seen Sayoko she was twenty and had just got her driver's license, and she drove the two of us to the top of Mt. Rokko, in Kobe, in a white Toyota Crown hardtop that belonged to her father. Her driving was still a bit awkward, but she looked elated as she drove. Predictably, the radio was playing a Beatles song. I remember it well. "Hello, Goodbye." *You say goodbye, and I say hello.* As I said before, their music was everywhere then.

I couldn't grasp the fact that she'd died and no longer existed in this world. I'm not sure how to put it—it seemed so surreal.

"How did she . . . die?" I asked, my mouth dry.

"She committed suicide," he said, as if carefully picking his words. "When she was twenty-six she married a colleague at the insurance company she worked at, then had two children, then took her life. She was just thirty-two."

"She left behind children?"

My former girlfriend's brother nodded. "The older one is a boy, the younger a girl. Her husband's taking care of them. I visit them every once in a while. Great kids."

I still had trouble following the reality of it all. My former girlfriend had killed herself, leaving behind two small children?

"Why did she do it?"

He shook his head. "Nobody knows why. She didn't act like she was troubled or depressed. Her health was good, things seemed good between her and her husband, and she loved her kids. And she didn't leave behind a note or anything. Her doctor had prescribed sleeping pills, and she saved them up and took them all at once. So it does seem as though she was planning to kill herself. She

wanted to die, and for six months she stashed away the medicine bit by bit. It wasn't just a sudden impulse."

I was silent for quite a while. And so was he. Each of us lost in our own thoughts.

On that day, in a café at the top of Mt. Rokko, my girlfriend and I broke up. I was going to a college in Tokyo and had fallen in love with a girl there. I came right out and confessed all this, and she, saying barely a word, grabbed her handbag, stood up, and hurried out of the café, without so much as a glance back.

I had to take the cable car down the mountain alone. She must have driven that white Toyota Crown home. It was a gorgeous, sunny day, and I remember I could see all of Kobe through the window of the gondola. It was an amazing view.

Sayoko went on to college, got a job at a major insurance company, married one of her colleagues, had two children, saved up sleeping pills, and took her own life.

I would have broken up with her sooner or later. But, still, I have very fond memories of the years we spent together. She was my first girlfriend, and I liked her a lot. She was the person who taught me about the female body. We experienced all sorts of new things together, and shared some wonderful times, the kind that are possible only when you're in your teens.

It's hard for me to say this now, but she never rang that special bell inside my ears. I listened as hard as I could, but never once did it ring. Sadly. The girl I knew in Tokyo was the one who did it for me. This isn't something you can choose freely, according to logic or morality. Either it happens or it doesn't. When it does, it happens of its own accord, in your consciousness or in a spot deep in your soul.

"You know," my former girlfriend's brother said, "it never crossed my mind, not once, that Sayoko would commit suicide. Even if everybody in the whole world had killed themselves, I figured—wrongly, it turns out—she'd still be standing, alive and well. I couldn't see her as the type to be disillusioned or have some darkness hidden away inside. Honestly, I thought she was a bit shallow. I never paid much attention to

her, and the same was true for her when it came to me, I think. Maybe we just weren't on the same wavelength. . . . Actually, I got along better with my other sister. But now I feel as though I did something awful to Sayoko, and it pains me. Maybe I never really knew her. Never understood a thing about her. Maybe I was too preoccupied with my own life. Perhaps somebody like me didn't have the strength to save her life, but I should have been able to understand something about her, even if it wasn't much. It's hard to bear now. I was so arrogant, so self-centered."

There was nothing I could say. I probably hadn't understood her at all, either. Like him, I'd been too preoccupied with my own life.

My former girlfriend's brother said, "In that story you read me back then, Akutagawa's 'Spinning Gears,' there was a part about how a pilot breathes in the air way up in the sky and then can't stand breathing the air back here on earth anymore. . . . 'Airplane disease,' they called it. I don't know if that's a real disease or not, but I still remember those lines."

"Did you get over that condition where your memory flies away sometimes?" I asked him. I think I wanted to change the subject away from Sayoko.

"Oh, right. That," he said, narrowing his eyes a bit. "It's kind of weird, but that just spontaneously went away. It's a genetic disorder and it should have got worse over time, the doctor said, but it just up and vanished, as if I'd never had it. As if an evil spirit had been expelled."

"I'm glad to hear that," I said. And I really was.

"It happened not long after that time I met you. After that, I never experienced that kind of memory loss, not even once. I felt calmer, I was able to enter a half-way decent college, graduate, and then take over my dad's business. Things took a detour for a few years there, but now I'm just living an ordinary life."

"I'm glad to hear that," I repeated. "So you didn't wind up bashing your father over the head with a hammer."

"You remember some dumb things, too, don't you," he said, and laughed out loud. "Still, you know, I don't come to Tokyo on business very often, and it seems strange to bump into you like this in this huge city. I can't help but

feel that something brought us together."

"For sure," I said.

"So how about you? Have you been living in Tokyo all this time?"

"I got married right after I graduated from college," I told him, "and have been living here in Tokyo ever since. I'm making a living of sorts as a writer now."

"A writer?"

"Yeah. After a fashion."

"Well, you were really great at reading aloud," he said. "It might be a burden to you for me to tell you this, but I think Sayoko always liked you best of all."

I didn't reply. And my ex-girlfriend's brother didn't say anything more.

And so we said goodbye. I went to get my watch, which had been repaired, and my former girlfriend's older brother slowly set off down the hill to Shibuya station. His tweed-jacketed figure was swallowed up in the afternoon crowd.

I never saw him again. Chance had brought us together a second time. With nearly twenty years between encounters, in cities three hundred miles apart, we'd sat, a table between us, sipping coffee and talking over a few things. But these weren't subjects you just chatted about over coffee. There was something more significant in our talk, something that seemed meaningful to us, in the act of living out our lives. Still, it was merely a hint, delivered by chance. There was nothing to link us together in a more systematic or organic way. (Question: *What elements in the lives of these two men were symbolically suggested by their two meetings and conversations?*)

I never saw that lovely young girl again, either, the one who was holding the LP "With the Beatles." Sometimes I wonder—is she still hurrying down that dimly lit high-school hallway in 1964, the hem of her skirt fluttering as she goes? Sixteen even now, holding that wonderful album cover with the half-lit photo of John, Paul, George, and Ringo, clutching it tightly as though her life depended on it. ♦

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

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