

FICTION

# U.F.O. IN KUSHIRO

BY HARUKI MURAKAMI



*The kitchen of a damaged home in Kobe, Japan, after the 7.3-magnitude earthquake there in 1995.*

Five straight days she spent in front of the television, staring at crumpled banks and hospitals, whole blocks of stores in flames, scvred rail lines and expressways. She never said a word. Sunk deep in the cushions of the sofa, her mouth clamped shut, she wouldn't answer when Komura spoke to her. She wouldn't shake her head or nod. Komura could not be sure that the sound of his voice was even getting through to her.

Komura's wife came from way up north in Yamagata, and, as far as he knew, she had no friends or relatives who could have been hurt in Kobe. Yet she stayed planted in front of the television from morning to night. When he got up, Komura would make his own toast and coffee, and head off to work. When he came home in the evening, he'd fix himself a snack with whatever he found in the refrigerator and eat it by himself. She'd still be glaring at the late news when he dropped off to sleep. In his presence, at least, she ate nothing and drank nothing and never went to the toilet. A stone wall of silence surrounded her. Komura gave up trying to break through.

And when he came home from work on Sunday, the sixth day, his wife had disappeared.

Komura was a salesman at one of the oldest audio-equipment stores in Tokyo's Akihabara "Electronics Town." He handled high-end stuff and earned a sizable commission whenever he made a sale. Most of his clients were doctors, wealthy independent businessmen, and rich provincials. He had been doing this for eight years and had earned a decent income right from the start. The economy was healthy, real-estate prices were rising, and Japan was overflowing with money. Wallets were bursting with ten-thousand-yen bills, and everyone was dying to spend them. The most expensive items were often the first to sell out.

Komura was tall and slim and a stylish dresser. He was good with people. In his bachelor days, he had dated a lot of

women. But after getting married, at twenty-six, he found that his desire for sexual adventures simply—and mysteriously—vanished. He hadn't slept with any woman but his wife during the five years of their marriage. Not that the opportunity had never presented itself—but he had lost all interest in fleeting affairs and one-night stands. He much preferred to come home early, have a relaxed meal with his wife, talk with her awhile on the sofa, then go to bed and make love. This was everything he wanted.

Komura's friends were puzzled by his marriage. Next to his clean, classic looks, his wife could not have seemed more ordinary. She was short, with thick arms, and she had a dull, even stolid, appearance. And it wasn't just physical: there was nothing attractive about her personality, either. She rarely spoke, and her expression was often sullen.

Still, though he himself did not quite understand why, Komura always felt his tension dissipate when he and his wife were together under one roof; it was the only time he could truly relax. He slept well with her, undisturbed by the strange dreams that had troubled him in the past. His erections were hard; his sex life was warm. He no longer had to worry about death or venereal disease or the vastness of the universe.

His wife, on the other hand, disliked Tokyo's crowded urban life style and longed for Yamagata. She missed her parents and her two older sisters, and she would go home to see them whenever she felt the need. Her parents operated a successful inn, which kept them financially comfortable. Her father was crazy about his youngest daughter and happily paid her round-trip fares. Several times, Komura had come home from work to find his wife gone and a note on the kitchen table telling him that she would be visiting her parents for a while. He never objected. He just waited for her to come back, and she always did, after a week or ten days, in a good mood.

But the letter his wife had left for him five days after the earthquake was different: "I am never coming back," she had written, and gone on to explain simply but clearly why she no longer wanted to live with Komura. "The

problem is that you never give me anything," she wrote. "Or, to put it more precisely, you have nothing inside you that you can give me. You are good and kind and handsome, but living with you is like living with a chunk of air. It's not your fault. There are lots of women who will fall in love with you. But please don't call me. Just get rid of the stuff I'm leaving behind."

Not that she had left much of anything behind. Her clothes, her shoes, her umbrella, her coffee mug, her hair dryer: all were gone. She must have packed them in boxes and shipped them out after he left for work that morning. The only things still in the house that could be called "her stuff" were the bicycle she used for shopping and a few books. The Beatles and Bill Evans CDs that Komura had been collecting since his bachelor days had also vanished.

The next day, he tried calling his wife's parents' house in Yamagata. His mother-in-law answered the phone and told him that his wife didn't want to talk to him. She sounded somewhat apologetic. She also told him that his wife would be sending him the necessary divorce forms soon and that he should sign them and send them back right away.

Komura answered that he might not be able to send them back right away. This was an important matter, and he wanted time to think it over.

"You can think it over all you want, but I don't think that'll change anything," his mother-in-law said.

She was probably right, Komura thought. No matter how long he waited, things would never be the same. He was sure of that.

Shortly after he sent the papers back, Komura asked for a week off from work. February was a slow month, and he had already told his boss what was going on in his life. He had no trouble getting permission.

A colleague of Komura's named Sasaki came over to him at lunch and said, "I hear you're taking time off. Are you planning to do something?"

"I don't know," Komura said. "What should I do?"

Sasaki was a bachelor, three years younger than Komura. He had a delicate build and short hair, and he wore

*This story, which was inspired by the 1995 earthquake in Kobe, Japan, was originally published in The New Yorker's March 19, 2001, issue.*

round, gold-rimmed glasses. He talked too much and had a certain overconfident air about him, which a lot of people disliked, but he got along well enough with the easygoing Komura.

"What the hell—as long as you're taking the time off, why not travel somewhere nice?"

"Not a bad idea," Komura said.

Wiping his glasses with his handkerchief, Sasaki peered at Komura as if examining him for some kind of clue.

"Have you ever been to Hokkaido?" he asked.

"Never," Komura said.

"Would you like to go?"

"Why do you ask?"

Sasaki narrowed his eyes and cleared his throat. "To tell the truth, I've got a small package I'd like to send to Kushiro, and I'm hoping you'll take it there for me. You'd be doing me a big favor, and I'd be glad to pay for the ticket. I could cover your hotel in Kushiro, too."

"A small package?"

"Like this," Sasaki said, shaping a four-inch cube with his hands. "Nothing heavy."

"Something to do with work?"

Sasaki shook his head. "Not at all," he said. "Strictly personal. I just don't want it to get knocked around, which is why I can't mail it. I'd like you to deliver it by hand, if possible. I really ought to do it myself, but I haven't had the time to fly all the way to Hokkaido."

"Is it something important?"

His closed lips curling slightly, Sasaki nodded. "It's nothing fragile, and there are no 'hazardous materials.' There's no need to worry about it. They're not going to stop you when they X-ray it at the airport. I promise I'm not going to get you in trouble. The only reason I'm not mailing it is I just don't *feel* like mailing it."

Hokkaido in February would be freezing cold, Komura knew, but cold or hot it was all the same to him.

"So who do I give the package to?"

"My sister. My younger sister. She lives up there."

Komura decided to accept Sasaki's offer. Thinking it over would have been too much trouble. He had no

reason to refuse, and nothing else to do. Sasaki called the airline immediately and reserved a ticket for two days later.

At work the next day, he handed Komura a box like the ones used for human ashes, only smaller, wrapped in manila paper. Judging from the feel, it was made of wood. It weighed almost nothing. Broad strips of transparent tape were wrapped around the package, over the paper. Komura held it in his hands and studied it for a few seconds. He gave it a little shake, but he couldn't feel or hear anything moving inside.

"My sister will pick you up at the airport," Sasaki said. "She'll be arranging a room for you. All you have to do is meet her at the gate."

Komura left home with the box in his suitcase, wrapped in a thick shirt. The plane was far more crowded than he had imagined it would be. Why were all these people going from Tokyo to Kushiro in the middle of winter? he wondered.

The morning paper was full of earthquake reports. He read it from beginning to end on the plane. The number of dead was rising. Many areas were still without water and electricity, and countless people had lost their homes. Each article contained some new tragedy, but to Komura those tragedies registered as oddly lacking in depth. The aftermath of the earthquake was like a distant monotonous echo to him. The only thing he could give any serious thought to was his wife's drawing ever further away.

When he grew tired of thinking about his wife and of following the lines of type, he closed his eyes and napped. When he woke, he thought about his wife again. Why had she followed the earthquake reports with such intensity, from morning to night, without eating or sleeping? What had she seen that he didn't see?

Two young women wearing overcoats of similar design and color approached Komura at the airport. One was fair-skinned and maybe five feet six, with short hair. The area from her nose to her full upper lip was oddly extended,

in a way that made Komura think of short-haired hoofed animals. The other woman was closer to five feet one and would have been quite pretty if her nose hadn't been so small. Her long hair fell straight to her shoulders. Her ears were exposed, and there were two moles on her right earlobe which were emphasized by the earrings she wore. Both women looked to be in their mid-twenties. They took Komura to a café in the airport.

"I'm Keiko Sasaki," the taller woman said. "My brother told me how helpful you have been to him. This is my friend Shimao."

"Nice to meet you," Komura said.

"Hi," Shimao said.

"My brother tells me that your wife recently passed away," Keiko Sasaki said, with a respectful expression.

Komura waited a moment before answering, "No, she didn't die."

"I just talked to my brother the day before yesterday. I'm sure he said quite clearly that you had lost your wife."

"I did. She left me. But, as far as I know, she's alive and well."

"That's strange. I couldn't possibly have misheard something so important." She gave him an injured look. Komura put a small amount of sugar in his coffee and stirred it gently before taking a sip. The liquid was thin, with no taste to speak of. What the hell am I doing here? he wondered.

"Well, I guess I did mishear it. I can't imagine how else to explain the mistake," Keiko Sasaki said, apparently satisfied now. She drew in a deep breath and bit her lower lip. "Please forgive me. I was very rude."

"Don't worry about it. Either way, she's gone."

Shimao said nothing while Komura and Keiko spoke, but she smiled and kept her eyes on Komura. She seemed to like him. He could tell from her expression and her subtle body language. A short silence fell over the three of them.

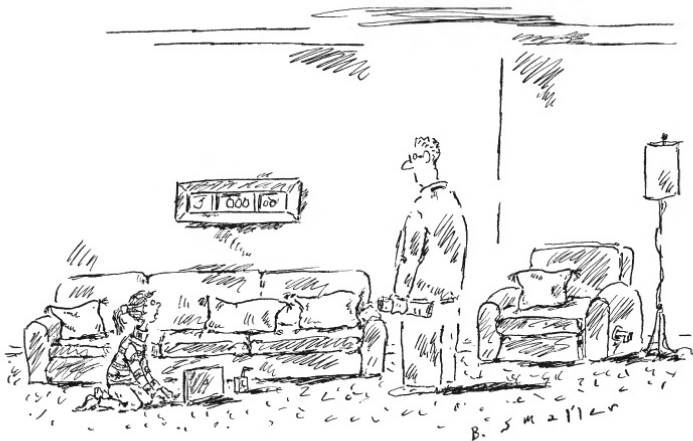
"Anyway, let me give you the important package I brought," Komura said. He unzipped his suitcase and pulled the box out of the folds of the thick shirt he had wrapped it in.

Keiko stretched her hands across the

*A bridge in Nishinomiya, Japan, fourteen miles from Kobe, after an earthquake struck on January 17, 1995.*



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*"I'm not wasting my life online—I'm building my brand."*

table, her expressionless eyes fixed on the package. After testing its weight, she did the same thing Komura had and gave it a few shakes by her ear. She flashed him a smile as if to signal that everything was fine, and slipped the box into her oversized shoulder bag.

"I have to make a call," she said. "Do you mind if I excuse myself for a moment?"

"Not at all," Komura said. "Feel free."

Keiko slung the bag over her shoulder and walked off toward a distant phone booth. Komura studied the way she walked. The upper half of her body was still, while everything from the hips down made large, smooth, mechanical movements. He had the impression that he was witnessing some moment from the past, shoved with random suddenness into the present.

"Have you been to Hokkaido before?" Shimao asked.

Komura shook his head.

"Yeah, I know. It's a long way to come."

Komura nodded. Then he turned to survey his surroundings. "Strange, though," he said, "sitting here like this, it doesn't feel as if I've come all that far."

"Because you flew. Those planes are too damn fast. Your mind can't keep up with your body."

"You may be right."

"Did you want to make such a long trip?"

"I guess so," Komura said.

"Because your wife left?"

Komura nodded.

"No matter how far you travel, you can never get away from yourself," Shimao said.

Komura was staring at the sugar bowl on the table as she spoke, but then he raised his eyes to hers.

"It's true," he said. "No matter how far you travel, you can never get away from yourself. It's like your shadow. It follows you everywhere."

Shimao looked hard at Komura. "I bet you loved her, didn't you?"

Komura dodged the question. "You're a friend of Keiko Sasaki's?"

"Right. We do stuff together."

"What kind of stuff?"

Instead of answering him, Shimao asked, "Are you hungry?"

"I don't know," Komura said. "I feel kind of hungry and kind of not."

"Let's go and have something warm, the three of us. Eating something warm will help you relax."

Shimao drove a small four-wheel-drive Subaru. Keiko Sasaki sat next to Shimao, and Komura had the cramped rear seat to himself. There was nothing particularly wrong with Shimao's driving, but the noise in the back was terrible, and the suspension

was nearly shot. The car had to have more than a hundred thousand miles on it. The automatic transmission slammed into gear whenever it downshifted, and the heater blew hot and cold. Shutting his eyes, Komura imagined that he had been imprisoned in a washing machine.

No snow had been allowed to accumulate on the streets in Kushiro, but dirty, icy mounds stood at random intervals on both sides of the road. Dense clouds hung low, and, although it was not yet sunset, everything was dark and desolate. The wind tore through the city in sharp squeals. There were no people out walking. Even the traffic lights looked frozen.

"This is one part of Hokkaido that doesn't get much snow," Keiko explained in a loud voice, looking back at Komura. "We're on the coast, and the wind is strong, so whatever piles up gets blown away. It's cold, though, *freezing* cold. Sometimes it feels like it's taking your ears off."

"You hear about drunks who freeze to death sleeping on the street," Shimao said.

"Do you get bears around here?" Komura asked.

Keiko giggled and turned to Shimao. "Bears!"

Shimao gave the same kind of giggle.

"I don't know much about Hokkaido," Komura said by way of excuse.

"I know a good story about bears," Keiko said. "Right, Shimao?"

"A *great* story!" Shimao said.

But their talk broke off at that point, and neither of them told the bear story. Komura didn't ask to hear it. Soon they reached their destination, a big noodle shop on the highway. They parked in the lot and went inside.

Komura had a beer and a hot bowl of ramen noodles. The place was dirty and empty, and the chairs and tables were rickety, but the ramen was terrific, and when he had finished eating Komura did, in fact, feel more relaxed.

"Tell me, Mr. Komura," Keiko said, "do you have something you want to do in Hokkaido? My brother says you're going to spend a week here."

Komura thought about it for a moment but couldn't come up with anything that he wanted to do.

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"How about a hot spring? I know a little country place not far from here."  
"Not a bad idea," Komura said.  
"I'm sure you'd like it. It's really nice. No bears or anything."

The two women looked at each other and laughed again.

"Do you mind if I ask you about your wife?" Keiko asked.

"I don't mind."

"When did she leave?"

"Hmm . . . five days after the earthquake, so that's more than two weeks ago now."

"Did it have something to do with the earthquake?"

Komura shook his head. "Probably not. I don't think so."

"Still, I wonder if things like that aren't connected somehow," Shimao said with a tilt of her head.

"Yeah," Keiko said. "It's just that you can't see how."

"Right," Shimao said. "Stuff like that happens all the time."

"Stuff like what?" Komura asked.

"Like, say, what happened with somebody I know," Keiko said.

"You mean Mr. Saeiki?" Shimao asked.

"Exactly," Keiko said. "There's this guy—Saeiki. He lives in Kushiro. He's about forty years old. A hair stylist. His wife saw a U.F.O. last year. She was driving on the edge of town all by her-

self in the middle of the night and she saw a huge U.F.O. land in a field. *Whoosh!* Like in 'Close Encounters.' A week later, she left home. Just disappeared and never came back. They weren't having any domestic problems or anything."

"And it was because of the U.F.O.?" Komura asked.

"I don't know why. She just up and left. No note or anything. She had two kids in elementary school, and she just walked out. Not a word from her since," Keiko said. "The whole week before she left, all she'd do was tell people about the U.F.O. You couldn't get her to stop. She'd just go on and on about how big and beautiful it was."

She paused to let the story sink in.

"My wife left a note," Komura said.

"And we don't have any kids."

"So your situation's a little better than Saeiki's," Keiko said.

"Yeah. Kids make a big difference," Shimao said, nodding.

"Shimao's father left home when she was seven," Keiko explained with a frown. "Ran off with his wife's younger sister."

A silence settled over the group.

"Maybe Mr. Saeiki's wife didn't run away but was captured by an alien from the U.F.O.," Komura said, to change the subject.

"It's possible," Shimao said with a

sombre expression. "You hear stories like that all the time."

"You mean like you're-walking-along-the-street-and-a-bear-eats-you kind of thing?" Keiko asked. The two women laughed.

The three of them left the noodle shop and went to a nearby love hotel. It was on the edge of town, on a strange street where love hotels alternated with gravestone dealers. The hotel Shimao had chosen was an odd building, constructed to look like a European castle. A triangular red flag flew on its highest tower.

Keiko got the key at the front desk, and they took the elevator to the room. The windows were tiny, compared with the absurdly big bed. Komura hung his down jacket on a hanger and went into the toilet. During the few minutes that he was gone, the two women managed to run a bath, dim the lights, turn up the heat, turn on the television, examine the delivery menus from local restaurants, test the light switches at the head of the bed, and check the contents of the minibar.

"The owners are friends of mine," Keiko said. "I had them get a big room ready. It's a love hotel, but don't let that bother you. You're not bothered, are you?"

"Not at all," Komura said.

"I thought this would make a lot more sense than sticking you in a cramped little room in some cut-rate business hotel by the station."

"I'm sure you're right," Komura said.

"Why don't you take a bath? I filled the tub."

Komura did as he was told. The tub was huge. Komura felt almost uneasy soaking in it alone. The couples who came to this hotel probably took baths together.

When he emerged from the bathroom, Komura was surprised to see that Keiko Sasaki had left. Shimao was still there, drinking beer and watching TV.

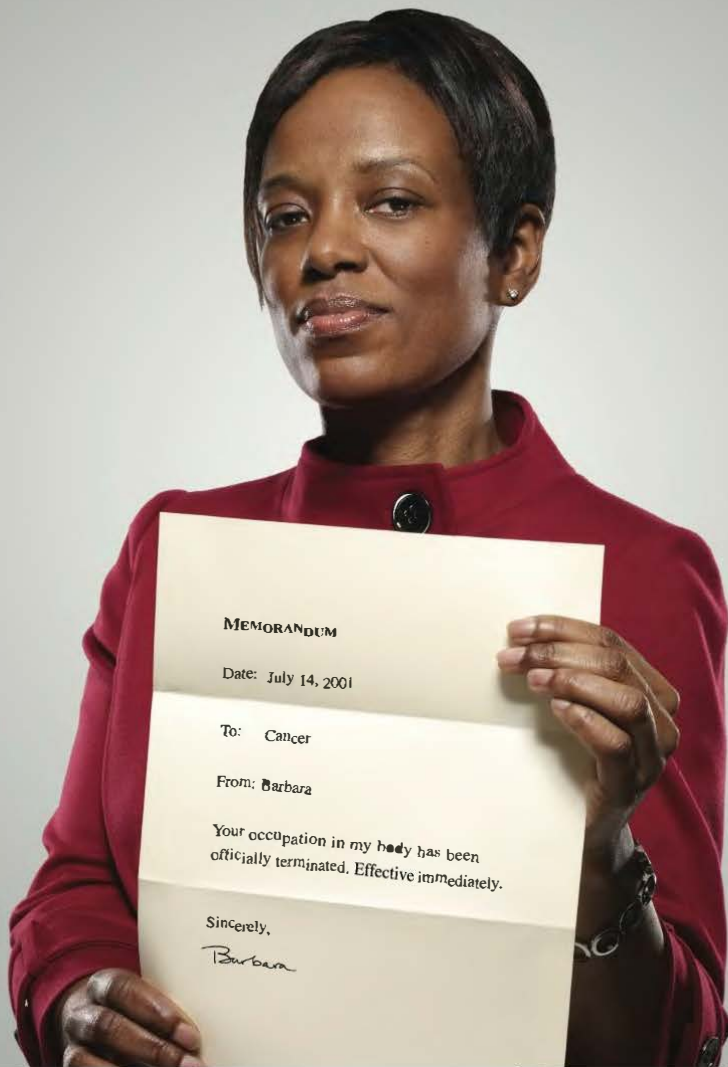
"Keiko went home," Shimao said. "She wanted me to apologize and tell you that she'll be back tomorrow morning. Do you mind if I stay here a little while and have a beer?"

"No," Komura said.

"You're sure it's no problem? Like, you want to be alone, or you can't relax if



*"You might as well turn back—all they have is cheese."*



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somebody else is around or something?"

Komura insisted that it was no problem. Drinking his beer and drying his hair with a towel, he watched TV with Shimaō. It was a news special on the Kobe earthquake. The same images appeared again and again: tilted buildings, buckled streets, tearful old women, confusion, and aimless anger. When a commercial came on, Shimaō used the remote to switch off the TV.

"Let's talk," she said, "as long as we're here."

"Fine," Komura said.

"What should we talk about?"

"In the car, you and Keiko said something about a bear, remember? You said it was a great story."

"Oh, yeah," she said, nodding. "The bear story."

"You want to tell it to me?"

"Sure, why not?"

Shimaō got a fresh beer from the refrigerator and filled both their glasses.

"It's a little raunchy," she said. "You don't mind?"

Komura shook his head. "No, go ahead."

"I mean, some men don't like hearing a woman tell certain kinds of stories."

"I'm not like that."

"It's something that actually happened to me, so it's a little embarrassing."

"I'd like to hear it if you're O.K. with it."

"I'm O.K.," Shimaō said, "if you're O.K."

"I'm O.K.," Komura said.

"Three years ago—back around the time I started college—I was dating this guy. He was a year older than me, and he was the first guy I had sex with. One day, the two of us were out hiking—in the mountains way up north." Shimaō took a sip of beer. "It was fall, and the hills were full of bears. That's the time of year when the bears are getting ready to hibernate, so they're out looking for food and they're really dangerous. Sometimes they attack people. They'd done an awful job on a hiker three days before we went out. So somebody gave us a bell to carry with us. We were supposed to shake it while we walked to warn the bears that there were people around. Bears don't attack people on purpose. I mean, they're pretty much vegetarians. They don't have to attack

people. What happens is they suddenly bump into people in their territory and they get surprised or angry and they attack out of reflex. If you walk along ringing your bell, they'll avoid you. Get it?"

"I get it."

"So that's what we were doing, walking along and ringing the bell. We got to this place where there was nobody else around, and all of a sudden he said he wanted to . . . do it. I kind of liked the idea, too, so I said O.K., and we went into this bushy place off the trail where nobody could see us, and we spread out a piece of plastic. But I was afraid of the bears. I mean, think how awful it would be to have some bear attack you from behind and kill you while you're having sex! I would never want to die that way. Would you?"

Komura agreed that he would not want to die that way.

"So there we were, shaking the bell with one hand and having sex. Kept it up from start to finish. *Ding-a-ling! Ding-a-ling!*"

"Which one of you shook the bell?"

"We took turns. We'd trade off when our hands got tired. It was so weird, shaking this bell the whole time we were doing it! I think about it sometimes even now, when I'm having sex, and I start laughing."

Komura gave a little laugh, too.

Shimaō clapped her hands. "Oh, that's wonderful," she said. "You can laugh, after all!"

"Of course I can laugh," Komura said, but, come to think of it, this was the first time he had laughed in quite a while. When was the last time?

"Do you mind if I take a bath, too?" Shimaō asked.

"No," Komura said.

While she was bathing, Komura watched a variety show m.c.'d by a comedian with a loud voice. He didn't find it the least bit funny, but he couldn't tell whether that was the show's fault or his own. He drank a beer and opened a packet of nuts from the minibar. Shimaō stayed in the bath for a very long time. Finally, she came out wearing nothing but a towel and sat on the edge of the bed. Dropping the towel, she slid between the sheets like a cat and lay there staring at Komura.

"When was the last time you did it with your wife?" she asked.

"At the end of December, I think."

"And nothing since?"

"Nothing."

"Not with anybody?"

Komura closed his eyes and nodded.

"You know what I think," Shimaō said. "You need to lighten up and learn to enjoy life a little more. I mean, think about it: tomorrow there could be an earthquake; you could be kidnapped by aliens; you could be eaten by a bear. Nobody knows what's going to happen."

"Nobody knows what's going to happen," Komura echoed.

"*Ding-a-ling*," Shimaō said.

After several failed attempts to have sex with Shimaō, Komura gave up. This had never happened to him before.

"You must have been thinking about your wife," Shimaō said.

"Yup," Komura said, but in fact what he had been thinking about was the earthquake. Images of it had come to him one after another, as if in a slide show, flashing on the screen and fading away. Highways, flames, smoke, piles of rubble. He couldn't break the chain of silent images.

Shimaō pressed her ear against his naked chest.

"These things happen," she said.

"Uh-huh."

"You shouldn't let it bother you."

"I'll try not to," Komura said.

"Men always let it bother them, though."

Komura said nothing.

Shimaō played with his nipple.

"You said your wife left a note, didn't you?"

"I did."

"What did it say?"

"That living with me was like living with a chunk of air."

"A chunk of air?" Shimaō tilted her head back to look up at Komura. "What does that mean?"

"That there's nothing inside me, I guess."

"Is it true?"

"Could be," Komura said. "I'm not sure, though. I may have nothing inside me, but what would *something* be?"

"Yeah, really, come to think of it. What *would* something be? My mother was crazy about salmon skin. She always used to wish that there were a kind of



salmon that was made of nothing but skin. So there may be some cases when it's better to have nothing inside. Don't you think?

Komura tried to imagine what a salmon made of nothing but skin would be like. But even supposing there were such a thing, wouldn't the skin itself be the something inside? Komura took a deep breath, raising and then lowering Shimao's head on his chest.

"I'll tell you this, though," Shimao said. "I don't know whether you've got nothing or something inside you, but I think you're terrific. I'll bet the world is full of women who would understand you and fall in love with you."

"It said that, too."

"What? Your wife's note?"

"Uh-huh."

"No kidding," Shimao said. Her caring rubbed against the skin of his chest.

"Come to think of it," Komura said, "what's the something inside that box I brought up here?"

"Is that bothering you?"

"It wasn't bothering me before. But now, I don't know, it's starting to."

"Since when?"

"Just now."

"All of a sudden?"

"Yeah, once I started thinking about it, all of a sudden."

"I wonder why it's started to bother you now, all of a sudden."

Komura stared at the ceiling for a minute. "I wonder."

The two listened to the moaning of the wind. The wind came from someplace unknown to Komura, and it blew past, to another place unknown to him.

"I'll tell you why," Shimao said in a low voice. "It's because that box contains the something that was inside you. You didn't know that when you carried it here and gave it to Keiko with your own hands. Now you'll never get it back."

Komura lifted himself from the mattress and looked down at the woman. Tiny nose, moles on her earlobe. In the room's silence, his heart beat with a loud,

dry sound. His bones cracked as he leaned forward. For a split second, Komura felt as if he were on the verge of committing an act of incredible violence.

"Just kidding," Shimao said, when she saw the look on his face. "I said the first thing that popped into my head. It was a lousy joke. I'm sorry. Don't take it personally. I didn't mean to hurt you."

Komura forced himself to calm down and sank his head into his pillow again. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The huge bed stretched out around him like a nocturnal sea. His heart was still pounding.

"Are you starting to feel a little as if you've come a long way?" Shimao asked.

"I'm. Now I feel as if I've come a very long way," Komura answered honestly.

Shimao traced a complicated design on Komura's chest with her fingertip, as if casting a magic spell.

"But really," she said, "you're just at the beginning." ♦

(Translated, from the Japanese, by Joy Rubin.)

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