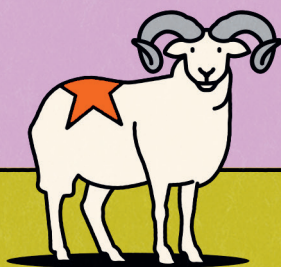
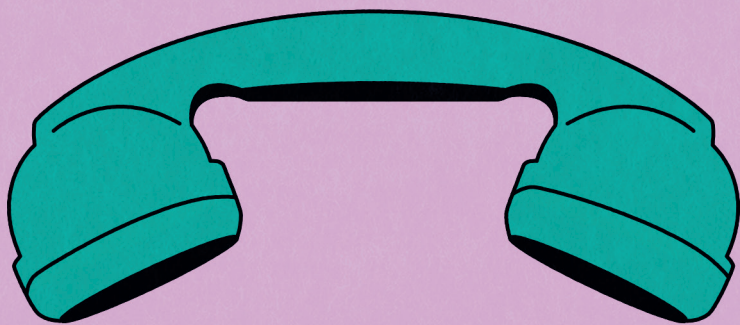


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HARUKI MURAKAMI  
**A WILD SHEEP CHASE**

'A highly accomplished piece of craftsmanship'  
*New Yorker*

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## HARUKI MURAKAMI

In 1978, Haruki Murakami was twenty-nine and running a jazz bar in downtown Tokyo. One April day, the impulse to write a novel came to him suddenly while watching a baseball game. That first novel, *Hear the Wind Sing*, won a new writers' award and was published the following year. More followed, including *A Wild Sheep Chase* and *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, but it was *Norwegian Wood*, published in 1987, that turned Murakami from a writer into a phenomenon.

In works such as *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, *1Q84*, *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running* and *Men Without Women*, Murakami's distinctive blend of the mysterious and the everyday, of melancholy and humour, continues to enchant readers, ensuring his place as one of the world's most acclaimed and well-loved writers.

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HARUKI MURAKAMI  
**A WILD SHEEP  
CHASE**

TRANSLATED FROM THE JAPANESE BY  
Alfred Birnbaum

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## Introduction

The novel *A Wild Sheep Chase*, which I published in 1982, was a memorable work for me in many ways.

First of all, the style was very different from what I'd written previously. The emphasis this time was more on storytelling, and consequently the novel ended up being much longer than my previous ones. In that sense the novel was a literal new *adventure* for me. (The Japanese title translates as *An Adventure Concerning Sheep*.) And on a personal note, this was the first novel I wrote as a full-time, professional novelist.

Up till then I'd been running a small jazz bar in Tokyo. We'd play jazz records, with live performances, too, on occasion. Not to brag, but it was a fine little bar, and did pretty well. While I ran the bar, I published the short novels *Hear the Wind Sing*, *Pinball 1973*, and the short story collection *Slow Boat to China*, as well as my translation of a collection of F. Scott Fitzgerald's short stories.

But having, as it were, two irons in the fire, I'd reached my limit. From a physical standpoint there was absolutely never enough time. I tried cutting back on my work at the bar, but still my writing work was more than I could handle just by doing it late at night at my kitchen table. And with my day job keeping me hustling, it was getting harder and harder to focus on writing. I had to keep the account books for the bar, make sure we had enough

supplies, and fill in if an employee took time off (mixing cocktails, making sandwiches). And as part of the job, I had to deal with unspecified numbers of people every day. For someone like me, who's not that sociable to begin with, that was quite a bother, and more than tiring. Before I became known I could just go about my business, but once I became known as a novelist things became more of a hassle.

So I made the decision to close the bar and retreat to the countryside in Chiba and focus solely on writing for the time being. I figured if it didn't work out, I could start from scratch all over again. I was young and was confident I could make a living wherever I was.

Most people I knew opposed my decision. The business was doing well, they said, and trying to make a living solely as a writer was too risky. Shouldn't you just continue the way things are now? they asked. But I really wanted to put myself in a more favorable environment and see what I was capable of. It's strange now that I look back on it, but at the time the question—an obvious one—of how talented I might be as a writer never even crossed my mind.

My lifestyle did a complete 180 after I left Tokyo and moved to Chiba Prefecture (way out in the countryside). The biggest change was my schedule. Up till then work at the bar kept me up until two or three in the morning, but after closing the business I started going to bed at ten pm and getting up at six. I also began running, up to the point where the following year I ran a full marathon. I seldom went out drinking now, instead raising eggplants and tomatoes in my garden, and I started listening to classical music. And before long I quit smoking. I seldom met people anymore and started traveling abroad. A complete overhaul of my life, in other words.

Considering my age at the time (I was thirty-two) this might have been the perfect time for a change. There was a glamorous aspect to living in the city, but I wasn't the type who did well with glamour. And the literary world and mass media, which at first seemed very appealing, showed their true colors over time as I got more familiar with them. There were, naturally, some amazing people involved in those worlds, with admirable intentions and involved in admirable activities. But honestly, I was more often disappointed than impressed by what was going on. I figured it was time to leave.

It was winter when I wrote *A Wild Sheep Chase*. I began at the

end of autumn and finished at the beginning of spring. I found staying at home the whole time, working on a novel during an entire winter, wasn't bad at all. *Once I get through this, it'll be spring* I told myself as my pen raced along the pages. (There weren't any word processors or computers back then.)

In the fall I travelled to Hokkaido to collect material for the novel. I wanted to find out more about the ecology and history of sheep. I hardly ever do any background research when I write a novel, and this was the sole exception. At the Sapporo city hall I collected material on sheep farming, and in the small town of Shibetsu I spoke with a scholar who was researching sheep raising.

So why sheep? There was a reason (not much of a reason) why sheep (the concept of sheep) had taken root in a corner of my mind, and that led me to write the novel. At that point I didn't have a plot or anything else in mind. All I had was the desire to write a novel with the title *An Adventure Concerning Sheep*.

Back in Chiba I worked my way through the first part of the novel, which wasn't connected with sheep, but as I did, I found, strangely enough, the whole feeling of the novel heading in a *sheep-like* direction. There was a strange reality, as if it was sheep bringing the novel together. And finally, the entire story went off on its own, in directions I'd never expected. As I got engrossed in chasing after the story, I ended up with a much lengthier work than I'd written up till then. This novel took a great deal of concentration on my part. Once I set foot in that world it was hard to extricate myself. Certainly not the kind of work I could do while managing the bar—having two irons in the fire. I realized then, when all is said and done, what a violent thing a long novel is. A writer has to somehow knock it down, and tame it, otherwise he'll be thrown off and trampled. Harmony and cooperation have nothing to do with it. It's black or white—you either win or lose.

What made me happiest when I completed *A Wild Sheep Chase* was the confidence I gained that I could make it now as a full-time, professional writer. This wasn't some theory I turned over in my head, but a physical sensation I could actually touch with both hands. A writer might be lauded in the press, but without that tangible feeling he will always be fearful; likewise, if you grasp that feeling you won't be so afraid, no matter how much abuse comes your way. I think this is a sensation that only those who

actually make something can feel. And *A Wild Sheep Chase* definitely gave me that response. Which is why I didn't care much about what critical commentary said about it.

*A Wild Sheep Chase* sold over 100,000 copies in the six months after it was published in Japan, and readers' reactions were positive. I knew I could make a living now, and it was a good start for me as a professional writer.

*A Wild Sheep Chase* was the first of my works to be translated and published abroad. Many Americans who read it commented that it was a "pure political novel." And there were many interpretations of what the sheep in the novel meant. Some saw it as a mythological, indigenous symbol, with the novel depicting the process by which that grew more heated as it came into contact with the global. I didn't intend any of that when I wrote it, but I did find those viewpoints pretty intriguing. Especially since I don't think any Japanese readers or critics read the book that way.

At any rate, for me when I was young, the novel *A Wild Sheep Chase* marked a memorable, new starting point. There's still a long way to go, I thought then, and I have to brace myself. And it was true—there really was a long road ahead.

Haruki Murakami, 2023  
(Translated by Philip Gabriel)

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PART ONE



A PRELUDE

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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 flap 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 spiderweb, the whole area a maze of narrow streets and drainage canals.

The day of the funeral, I took a streetcar from Waseda. I got off 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 filled with standing rainwater. The ground was dark and damp.

She'd left home when she was sixteen. Which may have been 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-fifties, 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 stuff of every-

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

I forget her name.

I could pull out the obituary, but what difference 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 suffice 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 flew 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, fill 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. Ginkgo 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 flicked 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 off 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 mean to shut you out,” I broke in after a moment. “I don’t understand what gets into me. I’m trying my damndest to figure 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 flashing 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 off.

“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-five,” she said, “then die.”

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

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PART TWO



JULY,  
EIGHT YEARS LATER

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## *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 off 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.

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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?

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 fished 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, fine 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 off my watch, with not a flinch 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 coffee?”

No reply.

So I got up and went over to grind coffee for two cups. It occurred to me after I ground the coffee 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 off the gas, let the water cool thirty seconds, poured it over the coffee. The grounds absorbed all they could and slowly swelled, filling 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 coffee 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 fine 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 coffee anyway."

I tuned in to the radio traffic report as I sipped my coffee and slit open the two pieces of mail. One was an announcement from a furniture store where everything was twenty percent off. 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 first 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 filed, 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 off her fingerprints. 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 other.

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 the 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 fine with you then?" she asked, releasing her words slowly.

"No, either way is not fine 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 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 unfit 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