MURAKAMI

BLIND WILLOW, SLEEPING WOMAN

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About the Author

Haruki Murakami was born in Kyoto in 1949 and now lives near Tokyo. He is the author of many novels as well as short stories and non-fiction. His works include *Norwegian Wood*, *A Wind-up Bird Chronicle*, *Kafka on the Shore*, *After Dark* and *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*. His work has been translated into more than forty languages, and the most recent of his many international honours is the Jerusalem Prize, whose previous recipients include J.M. Coetzee, Milan Kundera, and V.S. Naipaul.

ALSO BY HARUKI MURAKAMI

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The Elephant Vanishes
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What I Talk About When I Talk About Running

HARUKI MURAKAMI

BLIND WILLOW, SLEEPING WOMAN

TRANSLATED FROM THE JAPANESE BY
Philip Gabriel and Jay Rubin

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

INTRODUCTION TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

To put it in the simplest possible terms, I find writing novels a challenge, writing short stories a joy. If writing novels is like planting a forest, then writing short stories is more like planting a garden. The two processes complement each other, creating a complete landscape that I treasure. The green foliage of the trees casts a pleasant shade over the earth, and the wind rustles the leaves, which are sometimes dyed a brilliant gold. Meanwhile, in the garden, buds appear on flowers, and colourful petals attract bees and butterflies, reminding us of the subtle transition from one season to the next.

Since the beginning of my career as a fiction writer in 1979 I have fairly consistently alternated between writing novels and short stories. My pattern has been this: once I finish a novel, I find I want to write some short stories; once a group of stories is done, then I feel like focusing on a novel. I never write any short stories while I'm writing a novel, and never write a novel while I'm working on short stories. The two types of writing may very well engage different parts of the brain, and it takes some time to get off one track and switch to the other.

It was only after I began my career with two short novels, *Hear the Wind Sing* and *Pinball*, in 1973, that I started, from 1980 to 1981, to write short stories. The first three I ever wrote were 'A Slow Boat to China', 'A "Poor Aunt" Story', and 'New York Mining Disaster'. I knew little about short-story writing then so it was rough going, but I did find the experience really memorable. I felt the possibilities of my fictional world expand by several degrees. And readers seemed to appreciate this other side of me as a writer. 'A Slow Boat to China' was included in my first English short-story collection, *The Elephant Vanishes*, while the other two can be found in the present collection. This was my starting point as a short-story writer, and also the point at which I developed my system of alternating between novels and short stories.

'The Mirror', 'A Perfect Day for Kangaroos', 'Dabchick', 'The Year of Spaghetti', and 'The Rise and Fall of Sharpie Cakes', were all in a collection of 'short shorts' I wrote from 1981 to 1982. 'The Rise and Fall of Sharpie Cakes', as readers can readily see, reveals my impressions of the literary world at the time of my first being published, in the form of a fable. At the time, I could not fit in well with the Japanese literary establishment, a situation that persists to the present day.

One of the joys of writing short stories is that they don't take so long to finish. Generally it takes me about a week to get a short story into some kind of decent shape (though revisions can be endless). It's not like the total physical and mental commitment you have to make for the year or two it takes to compose a novel. You go into a room, finish your work, and leave. That's it. For me, at least, writing a novel

can seem to drag on for ever, and I sometimes wonder if I'm going to survive. So I find writing short stories a necessary change of pace.

One more nice thing about short stories is that you can create a story out of the smallest details – an idea that springs up in your mind, a word, an image, whatever. In most cases it's like jazz improvisation, with the story taking me where it wants to. And another good point is that with short stories you don't have to worry about failing. If the idea doesn't work out the way you hoped it would, you just shrug your shoulders and tell yourself that they can't all be winners. Even with masters of the genre like F. Scott Fitzgerald and Raymond Carver – even Anton Chekhov – not every short story is a masterpiece. I find this a great comfort. You can learn from your mistakes (in other words, those you cannot call a complete success) and use that in the next story you write. In my case, when I write novels I try very hard to learn from the successes and failures I experience in writing short stories. In that sense, the short story is a kind of experimental laboratory for me as a novelist. It is hard to experiment the way I like to do inside the framework of a novel, so without short stories I know I would find the task of writing novels even more difficult and demanding.

Essentially I consider myself a novelist, but a lot of people tell me they prefer my short stories to my novels. That doesn't bother me, and I don't try to convince them otherwise. I am actually happy to hear them say that. My short stories are like soft shadows I have set out in the world, faint footprints I have left behind. I remember exactly where I set down each and every one of them, and how I felt when I did. Short stories are like guideposts to my heart, and it makes me happy as a writer to be able to share these intimate feelings with my readers.

The Elephant Vanishes came out in 1991 and was subsequently translated into many other languages. Another collection in English, *after the quake*, was published in 2002 (2000 in Japan). This book contained six short tales all dealing in one way or another with the 1995 Kobe earthquake. I wrote it in the hope that all six stories would form a unified image in the reader's mind, so it was more like a concept album than a short-story collection. In that sense, then, the present book, *Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman*, is the first real short-story collection I have brought out abroad in a long time.

This book naturally contains some stories I wrote after *The Elephant Vanishes* appeared. 'Birthday Girl', 'Man-Eating Cats', 'The Seventh Man' and 'Ice Man' are some of these. I wrote 'Birthday Girl' at the request of the editor when I was working on an anthology of other writers' stories on the theme of birthdays. It helps to be a writer when you're selecting the stories for an anthology, since if you are short of one story you can write it yourself. 'Ice Man', by the way, is based on a dream my wife had, while 'The Seventh Man' is based on an idea that came to me when I was into surfing and was gazing out at the waves.

To tell the truth, though, from the beginning of 1990 to the beginning of 2000 I wrote very few short stories. It wasn't that I had lost interest in short stories. I was just so involved in writing a number of novels that I couldn't spare the time. I didn't have the time to switch tracks. I did write a short story from time to time when I had to, but I never focused on them. Instead, I wrote novels: *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*;

South of the Border; *West of the Sun*; *Sputnik Sweetheart*; *Kafka on the Shore*. And in between, I wrote non-fiction, the two works that make up the English version of *Underground*. Each of these took an enormous amount of time and energy. I suppose that back then my main battleground was this – the writing of one novel after another. Perhaps it was just that time of life for me. In between, like an intermezzo, was the collection *after the quake*, but as I said, that really wasn't a short-story collection.

In 2005, though, for the first time in a long time I was struck by a strong desire to write a series of short stories. A powerful urge took hold of me, you might say. So I sat down at my desk, wrote about a story a week, and finished five in not much more than a month. Frankly, I could not think of anything else but these stories, and I wrote them almost without stopping. These five stories, published recently in Japan in a volume entitled *Tokyo Kitanshu* (*Strange Tales from Tokyo*), are collected at the end of this book. As the title indicates, all share the theme of being strange tales, and were brought out in Japan in a single volume. Though they share this theme, each story can be read independently, and they do not form a clear-cut, single unit as did the stories in *after the quake*. Come to think of it, however, everything I write is, more or less, a strange tale.

*

'Crabs', 'A "Poor Aunt" Story', 'Hunting Knife' and 'Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman' have all been greatly revised prior to their translation, so the versions here differ significantly from the first versions published in Japan. With some of the other older stories, too, I found spots I wasn't pleased with and made some minor changes.

I should also mention that many times I have rewritten short stories and incorporated them into novels, and the present collection contains several of these prototypes. 'The Wind-up Bird and Tuesday's Women' (included in *The Elephant Vanishes*) became the model for the opening section of the novel *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*, and likewise both 'Firefly' and 'Man-Eating Cats', with some changes, were incorporated as parts of, respectively, the novels *Norwegian Wood* and *Sputnik Sweetheart*. There was a period when narratives I'd written as short stories, after I had published them, kept expanding in my mind, developing into novels. A short story I had written long ago would barge into my house in the middle of the night, shake me awake and shout, 'Hey, this is no time to be sleeping! You can't forget about me, there's still more to write!' Impelled by that voice, I would find myself writing a novel. In this sense, too, my short stories and novels connect inside me in a very natural, organic way.

H.M.

BLIND WILLOW, SLEEPING WOMAN

WHEN I CLOSED my eyes, the scent of the wind wafted up towards me. A May wind, swelling up like a piece of fruit, with a rough outer skin, slimy flesh, dozens of seeds. The flesh split open in mid-air, spraying seeds like gentle buckshot into the bare skin of my arms, leaving behind a faint trace of pain.

'What time is it?' my cousin asked me. About eight inches shorter than me, he had to look up when he talked.

I glanced at my watch. 'Ten twenty.'

'Does that watch tell good time?'

'Yes, I think so.'

My cousin grabbed my wrist to look at the watch. His slim, smooth fingers were surprisingly strong. 'Did it cost a lot?'

'No, it's pretty cheap,' I said, glancing again at the timetable.

No response.

My cousin looked confused. The white teeth between his parted lips looked like bones that had atrophied.

'*It's pretty cheap*,' I said, looking right at him, carefully repeating the words. '*It's pretty cheap, but it keeps good time*.'

My cousin nodded silently.

*

My cousin had a bad right ear. Soon after he went into primary school he was hit by a baseball and it wrecked his hearing. That doesn't keep him from functioning normally most of the time. He attends a normal school, leads an entirely normal life. In his classroom, he always sits in the front row, on the right, so he can keep his left ear towards the teacher. And his marks aren't so bad. The thing is, though, he goes through periods when he can hear sounds pretty well, and periods when he can't. It's cyclical, like the tides. And sometimes, maybe twice a year, he can scarcely hear anything out of either ear. It's like the silence in his right ear deepens to the point where it crushes out any sound on the left side. When that happens, ordinary life goes out the window and he has to take some time off from school. The doctors are basically stumped. They have never seen a case like it, so there's nothing they can do.

'Just because a watch is expensive doesn't mean it's accurate,' my cousin said, as if trying to convince himself. 'I used to have a pretty expensive watch, but it was

always off. I got it when I started secondary school, but I lost it a year later. Since that I've gone without a watch. They won't buy me a new one.'

'Must be tough to get along without one,' I said.

'What?' he asked.

'*Isn't it hard to get along without a watch?*' I repeated, looking right at him.

'No, it isn't,' he replied, shaking his head. 'It's not like I'm living off in the mountains or something. If I want to know the time I just ask somebody.'

'True enough,' I said.

We were silent again for a while.

I knew I should say something more, try to be kind to him, try to make him relax a little until we arrived at the hospital. But it had been five years since I saw him last. In the meantime he had grown from nine to fourteen, and I had gone from twenty to twenty-five. And that span of time had created a translucent barrier between us that was hard to traverse. Even when I had to say something, the right words just wouldn't come out. And every time I hesitated, every time I swallowed back something I was about to say, my cousin looked at me with a somewhat confused look on his face. His left ear tilted ever so slightly towards me.

'What time is it now?' he asked me.

'Ten twenty-nine,' I replied.

It was ten thirty-two when the bus finally rolled into view.

*

The bus that came was a new type, not like the one I used to take to senior school. The windscreen in front of the driver was much bigger, the whole vehicle like some huge bomber minus the wings. And the bus was more crowded than I had imagined. Nobody was standing in the aisle, but we couldn't sit together. We were not going very far, so we stood next to the rear door at the back. Why the bus should be so crowded at this time of day was a mystery. The bus route started from a private railway station, continued up into a residential area in the hills, then circled back to the station, and there weren't any tourist spots along the way. A few schools along the route made the buses crowded when children were going to school, but at this time of day the bus should have been empty.

My cousin and I held on to the straps and poles. The bus was brand new, straight from the factory, the metal surfaces so shiny you could see your face reflected in them. The nap of the seats was all fluffy, and even the tiniest of screws had that proud, expectant feeling that only brand new machinery possesses.

The new bus, and the way it was unexpectedly crowded, disconcerted me. Maybe the bus route had changed since I last went on it. I looked carefully around the bus and glanced outside. But it was the same old view of a quiet residential district I remembered well.

'This is the right bus, isn't it?' my cousin asked worriedly. From the moment we got aboard I must have had a perplexed look on my face.

'Not to worry,' I said, trying to reassure myself as much as him. 'There's only one bus route that goes by here, so this has got to be it.'

'Did you used to take this bus when you went to senior school?' my cousin asked.

'Yes, that's right.'

'Did you like school?'

'Not particularly,' I said. 'But I could see my friends there, and it wasn't such a long ride.'

My cousin thought about what I had said.

'Do you still see them?'

'No, not for a long time,' I said, choosing my words carefully.

'Why not? Why don't you see them?'

''Cause we live so far away from each other.' That wasn't the reason, but I couldn't think of any other way to explain it.

Right next to me were sitting a group of old people. Must have been close to fifteen of them. They were the reason the bus was crowded, I suddenly realised. They were all suntanned, even the backs of their necks dark. And every single one of them was skinny. Most of the men had on thick mountain-climbing types of shirts; the women, simple, unadorned blouses. All of them had small rucksacks in their laps, the kind you'd use for short hikes into the hills. It was amazing how much they looked alike. Like a drawer full of samples of something, all neatly lined up. The strange thing, though, was that there wasn't any mountain-climbing path along this bus line. So where in the world could they have been going? I thought about this as I stood there, clinging to the strap, but no plausible explanation came to mind.

*

'I wonder if it's going to hurt this time – the treatments?' my cousin asked me.

'I don't know,' I said. 'I didn't hear any of the details.'

'Have you ever been to an ear doctor?'

I shook my head. I hadn't been to an ear doctor once in my life.

'Has it hurt before?' I asked.

'Not really,' my cousin said glumly. 'It wasn't totally painless, of course; sometimes it hurt a *little*. But nothing terrible.'

'Maybe this time it'll be the same. Your mum said they're not going to do anything much different from usual.'

'But if they do the same as always, how's that going to help?'

'Well, you never know. Sometimes the unexpected happens.'

'You mean like pulling out a cork?' my cousin said. I glanced at him, but did not detect any sarcasm.

'It'll feel different having a new doctor treat you, and sometimes just a slight change in procedure might make all the difference. I wouldn't give up so easily.'

'I'm not giving up,' my cousin said.

'But you have kind of had enough of it?'

‘I guess,’ he said, and sighed. ‘The fear is the worst thing. The pain I imagine is worse than the actual pain. Do you know what I mean?’

‘Yes, I know.’

*

A lot of things had happened that spring. A situation developed at work and I ended up quitting my job at a small advertising firm in Tokyo where I had been working for two years. Around the same time I broke up with my girlfriend; we’d been going out since college. A month after that my grandmother died of intestinal cancer, and for the first time in five years I came back to this town, compact suitcase in hand. My old room was just as I had left it. The books I had read were still on the shelf, my bed was still there, my desk, and all the old records I used to listen to. But everything in the room had dried up, had long ago lost its colour and smell. Time alone had stood still.

I had planned to go back to Tokyo a couple of days after my grandmother’s funeral to run down some leads for a new job. I was planning to move to a new apartment, too; I needed a change of scenery. As the days passed, though, it seemed like too much trouble to get off my backside and get going. To put a finer point upon it, even if I had wanted to get up and get going, I couldn’t. I spent my time holed up in my old room, listening to those records, rereading old books, occasionally doing a little weeding in the garden. I didn’t meet anybody, and the only people I talked to were members of my family.

One day my aunt came to visit and asked me to take my cousin to a new hospital. She should take him herself, she said, but something had cropped up on the day of the appointment and she couldn’t. The hospital was near my old senior school, so I knew where it was, and since I had nothing else on, I couldn’t very well refuse. My aunt handed me an envelope with some cash in it for us to use as lunch money.

This switch to a new hospital came about because the treatment he had been getting at his old hospital hadn’t done a thing to help. In fact, he was having more problems than ever. When my aunt complained to the doctor in charge, he suggested that the problem had more to do with the boy’s home environment than anything medical, and the two of them went at it. Not that anybody really expected that changing hospitals would lead to a quick improvement in his hearing. Nobody said as much, but they had pretty much given up hope that his condition would ever improve.

My cousin lived nearby, but I was just over a decade older than him and we had never been what you’d call close. When the family got together I might take him somewhere or play with him, but that was the extent of it. Still, before long everyone started to look at my cousin and me as a pair, thinking that he was attached to me and that he was my favourite. For a very long time I could not work out why. Now, though, seeing the way he tilted his head, his left ear aimed at me, I found it strangely touching. Like the sound of rain heard long ago, his awkwardness struck a chord with me. And I began to catch a glimpse of why our relatives wanted to bring us together.

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The bus had passed seven or eight bus stops when my cousin anxiously looked up at me again.

'Is it much further?'

'Yes, we still have some way to go. It's a big hospital, so we won't miss it.'

I casually watched as the wind from the open window gently rustled the brims of the old people's hats and the scarves around their necks. Who *were* these people? And where could they possibly be headed?

'Hey, are you going to work in my father's company?' my cousin asked.

I looked at him in surprise. His father, my uncle, ran a large printing company in Kobe. I had never given the idea a thought, and nobody ever dropped a hint.

'Nobody's said anything about that,' I said. 'Why do you ask?'

My cousin blushed. 'I just thought you might be,' he said. 'But why don't you? You wouldn't have to leave. And everybody would be happy.'

The taped message announced the next stop, but no one pushed the button to get off. Nobody was waiting to get on at the stop either.

'But there's stuff I have to do, so I have to go back to Tokyo,' I said. My cousin nodded silently.

There wasn't a single thing I *had* to do. But I couldn't very well *stay here*.

The number of houses thinned out as the bus climbed the mountain slope. Thick branches began to throw a heavy shadow across the road. We passed some foreign-looking houses, painted, with low walls in front. The cold breeze felt good. Each time the bus rounded a curve the sea down below popped into view, then disappeared. Until the bus pulled up at the hospital, my cousin and I just stood there, watching the scenery go by.

'The examination will take some time and I can handle it alone,' my cousin said, 'so why don't you go and wait for me somewhere?' After a quick hello to the doctor, I left the examination room and went to the cafeteria. I had barely had a bite for breakfast and was starving, but nothing on the menu whetted my appetite. I made do with a cup of coffee.

It was a weekday morning and one small family and I had the place to ourselves. The father was in his mid-forties, wearing a navy-blue-striped pair of pyjamas and plastic slippers. The mother and little twin girls had come to pay a visit. The twins had on identical white dresses and were bent over the table, serious looks on their faces, drinking glasses of orange juice. The father's injury, or illness, didn't seem too serious, and both parents and children looked bored.

Outside the window was a lawn. A sprinkler ticked as it rotated, misting the grass with a silvery spray. A pair of shrill long-tailed birds flew right above the sprinkler and disappeared from sight. Past the lawn there were a few deserted tennis courts, the nets gone. Beyond the tennis courts was a line of zelkovas, and between their branches you could glimpse the ocean. The early-summer sun glinted here and there off the small waves. The breeze rustled the new leaves of the zelkovas, ever so slightly bending the spray from the sprinkler.

I felt as if I had seen this scene, many years before. A broad swathe of lawn, twin girls slurping up orange juice, long-tailed birds flying off who knows where, netless tennis courts, the sea beyond … But it was an illusion. It was vivid enough, an intense sense of the real, but an illusion nonetheless. I had never been to this hospital in my life.

I stretched my legs out on the seat opposite, took a deep breath and closed my eyes. In the darkness I could see a lump of white. Silently it expanded, then contracted, like a microbe under a microscope. Changing form, spreading out, breaking up, re-forming.

It was eight years ago when I went to that other hospital. A small hospital, next to the sea. All you could see out of the window were some oleanders. It was a hospital, and it smelled of rain. My friend's girlfriend had her chest operated on there, and the two of us went to see how she was doing. The summer of our last but one year in senior school.

It was not much of an operation, really, just done to correct the position of one of her ribs that curved inwards a bit. Not an emergency procedure, just the type of thing that would eventually have to be done, so she reckoned why not take care of it now. The operation itself was over quickly, but they wanted her to take her time recuperating, so she stayed in the hospital for ten days. My friend and I rode there together on a 125cc Yamaha motorcycle. He drove on the way there, I drove on the way back. He had asked me to come. 'There's no way I'm going to a hospital by myself,' he'd said.

My friend stopped at a sweetshop near the station and bought a box of chocolates. I held on to his belt with one hand, the other hand clutching tightly the box of chocolates. It was a hot day and our shirts kept getting soaked, then drying in the wind. As my friend drove, he sang some nothing song in an awful voice. I can still remember the smell of his sweat. Not too long after that, he died.

*

His girlfriend had on blue pyjamas and a thin gown sort of thing down to her knees. The three of us sat at a table in the cafeteria, smoked Short Hope cigarettes, drank Cokes, and ate ice cream. She was starving and ate two sugar-coated doughnuts and drank cocoa with tons of cream in it. Still, that didn't seem enough for her.

'By the time you get out of here you're going to be a regular blimp,' my friend said, somewhat disgustedly.

'It's OK – I'm recovering,' she replied, wiping the tips of her fingers, covered in oil from the doughnuts.

As they talked I glanced out of the window at the oleanders. They were huge, almost like a forest unto themselves. I could hear the sound of waves too. The railing next to the window was completely rusted from the constant breeze. An antique-looking ceiling fan nudged the hot, sticky air around the room. The cafeteria had the smell of a hospital. Even the food and drinks had that hospital odour to them. The girlfriend's pyjamas had two breast pockets, in one of which was a small gold-

coloured pen. Whenever she leaned forward I could see her small, white breasts peep out of the V-neck collar.

*

The memories ground to a halt right there. I tried to remember what had happened after that. I drank a Coke, gazed at the oleanders, sneaked a look at her breasts – and then what? I shifted in the plastic chair and, resting my head in my hands, tried to dig down further in the layers of memory. Like gouging out a cork with the tip of a thin-bladed knife.

I looked off to one side and tried to visualise the doctors splitting open the flesh of her chest, sticking their rubber-gloved hands inside to straighten out her crooked rib. But it all seemed too surreal, like some sort of allegory.

That's right – after that we talked about sex. At least my friend did. But what did he say? Something about me, no doubt. How I had tried, unsuccessfully, to make it with a girl. Not much of a story, but the way he told it, blowing everything up out of proportion, made his girlfriend burst out laughing. Made me laugh as well. The guy really knew how to tell a story.

'Please don't make me laugh,' she said, a bit painfully. 'My chest hurts when I laugh.'

'Where does it hurt?' my friend asked.

She pressed a spot on her pyjamas above her heart, just to the right of her left breast. He made some joke about that, and she laughed again.

*

I looked at my watch. It was eleven forty-five but my cousin still wasn't back. It was getting close to lunchtime and the cafeteria was starting to get more crowded. All sorts of sounds and voices mixed together like smoke enveloping the room. I returned once more to the realm of memory. And that small gold pen she had in her breast pocket.

… Now I remember – she used that pen to write something on a paper napkin.

She was drawing a picture. The napkin was too soft and the tip of her pen kept getting stuck. Still, she managed to draw a hill. And a small house on top of the hill. A woman was asleep in the house. The house was surrounded by a stand of blind willows. It was the blind willows that had put her to sleep.

'What the devil's a blind willow?' my friend asked.

'There is a kind of tree like that.'

'Well, *I* never heard of it.'

'That's 'cause I'm the one who created it,' she said, smiling. 'Blind willows have a lot of pollen, and tiny flies covered with the stuff crawl inside her ear and put the woman to sleep.'

She took a new napkin and drew a picture of the blind willow. The blind willow turned out to be a tree the size of an azalea. The tree was in bloom, the flowers

surrounded by dark green leaves like a bunch of lizard tails gathered in a bunch. The blind willow did not resemble a willow at all.

'Do you have a cigarette?' my friend asked me. I tossed a sweaty pack of Hopes and some matches across the table.

'A blind willow looks small on the outside, but it's got incredibly deep roots,' she explained. 'Actually, after a certain point it stops growing up and pushes further and further down into the ground. As if the darkness nourishes it.'

'And the flies carry that pollen to her ear, burrow inside, and put her to sleep,' my friend added, struggling to light his cigarette with the damp matches. 'But what happens to the flies?'

'They stay inside the woman and eat her flesh – naturally,' his girlfriend said.

'*Gobble* it up,' my friend said.

*

I remembered now how that summer she'd written a long poem about the blind willow and explained it all to us. That was the only homework assignment she did that summer. She made up a story based on a dream she'd had one night, and as she lay in bed for a week she wrote this long poem. My friend said he wanted to read it, but she was still revising it, so she turned him down; instead, she drew those pictures and summarised the plot.

A young man climbed up the hill to rescue the woman the blind-willow pollen had put to sleep.

'That's got to be me,' my friend said.

She shook her head. 'No, it isn't you.'

'You sure?' he asked.

'I'm sure,' she said, a fairly serious look on her face. 'I don't know why I know that. But I do. You're not angry, are you?'

'You bet I am,' my friend frowned, half joking.

Pushing his way through the thick blind willows, the young man slowly made his way up the hill. He was the first one ever to climb the hill once the blind willows took over. Hat pulled down over his eyes, brushing away with one hand the swarms of flies buzzing around him, the young man kept climbing. To see the sleeping woman. To wake her from her long, deep sleep.

'But by the time he reached the top of the hill the woman's body had basically been eaten up already by the flies, right?' my friend said.

'In a sense,' his girlfriend replied.

'*In a sense* being eaten by flies makes it a sad story, doesn't it?' my friend said.

'Yes, I guess so,' she said after giving it some thought. 'What do you think?' she asked me.

'Sounds like a sad story to me,' I replied.

*

It was twelve twenty when my cousin came back. He was carrying a small bag of medicine and had a sort of unfocused look on his face. After he appeared at the entrance to the cafeteria it took some time for him to spot me and come on over. He walked awkwardly, as if he couldn't keep his balance. He sat down across from me and, like he'd been too busy to remember to breathe, took a huge breath.

'How'd it go?' I asked.

'Mmm,' he said. I waited for him to say more, but he didn't.

'Are you hungry?' I asked.

He nodded silently.

'You want to eat here? Or do you want to take the bus into town and eat there?'

He looked uncertainly around the room. 'Here's fine,' he said. I bought lunch tickets and ordered the set lunches for both of us. Until the food was brought over to us my cousin gazed silently out the window at the same scenery I'd been looking at – the sea, the row of zelkovas, the sprinkler.

At the table beside us a nicely decked-out middle-aged couple were eating sandwiches and talking about a friend of theirs who had lung cancer. How he'd quit smoking five years ago but it was too late, how he'd vomit blood when he woke up in the morning. The wife asked the questions, the husband gave the answers. In a certain sense, the husband explained, you can see a person's whole life in the cancer they get.

Our lunches consisted of Salisbury steaks and fried white fish, salad and rolls. We sat there, across from each other, silently eating. The whole time we were eating the couple next to us droned on and on about how cancer starts, why the cancer rate's gone up, why there isn't any medicine to combat it.

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'Everywhere you go it's the same,' my cousin said in a flat tone, gazing at his hands. 'The same old questions, the same tests.'

We were sitting on a bench in front of the hospital, waiting for the bus. Every once in a while the breeze would rustle the green leaves above us.

'Sometimes you can't hear anything at all?' I asked him.

'That's right,' my cousin answered. 'I can't hear a thing.'

'What does that feel like?'

He tilted his head to one side and thought about it. 'All of a sudden you can't hear anything. But it takes a while before you realise what's happened. By then you can't hear a thing. It's like you're at the bottom of the sea wearing earplugs. That continues for a while. All the time you can't hear a thing, but it's not just your ears. Not being able to hear anything is just *part* of it.'

'Does it bother you?'

He shook his head, a short, definite shake. 'I don't know why, but it doesn't bother me that much. It *is* inconvenient, though. Not being able to hear anything.'

I tried to picture it, but the image wouldn't come.

'Did you ever see John Ford's movie *Fort Apache*?' my cousin asked.

'A long time ago,' I said.

'It was on TV recently. It's really a good movie.'

'Um,' I affirmed.

'In the beginning of the movie there's this new colonel who's come to a fort out west. A veteran captain comes out to meet him when he arrives. The captain's played by John Wayne. The colonel doesn't know much about what things are like in the west. And there's an Indian uprising all around the fort.'

My cousin took a neatly folded white handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his mouth.

'Once he gets to the fort the colonel turns to John Wayne and says, "I did see a few Indians on the way over here." And John Wayne, with this cool look on his face, replies, "Don't worry. If you were able to spot some Indians, that means there aren't any there." I don't remember the actual lines, but it went something like that. Do you get what he means?'

I couldn't recall any lines like that from *Fort Apache*. It struck me as a little abstruse for a John Ford movie. But it had been a while since I'd seen the film.

'I think it means that what can be seen by anybody isn't all that important … I guess.'

My cousin frowned. 'I don't really get it either, but every time somebody sympathises with me about my ears that line comes to me. "If you were able to spot some Indians, that means there aren't any there."'

I laughed.

'Is that strange?' my cousin asked.

'Yep,' I laughed. And he laughed. It'd been a long time since I'd seen him laugh.

After a while my cousin said, like he was unburdening himself, 'Would you look inside my ears for me?'

'Look inside your ears?' I asked, a little surprised.

'Just what you can see from the outside.'

'OK, but why do you want me to do that?'

'I don't know,' my cousin blushed. 'I just want you to see what they look like.'

'OK,' I said. 'I'll give it a whirl.'

My cousin sat facing away from me, tilting his right ear towards me. He had a really nicely shaped ear. It was on the small side, but the earlobe was all puffy, like a freshly baked madeleine. I'd never looked at anybody's ear so intently before. Once you start observing it closely, the human ear – its structure – is a pretty mysterious thing. With all these absurd twists and turns to it, bumps and depressions. Maybe evolution determined this weird shape was the optimum way to collect sounds, or to protect what's inside. Surrounded by this asymmetrical wall, the hole of the ear gapes open like the entrance to a dark, secret cave.

I pictured my friend's girlfriend, microscopic flies nesting in her ear. Sweet pollen stuck to their tiny legs, they burrow into the warm darkness inside her, sucking up all the juices, laying tiny eggs inside her brain. But you can't see them, or even hear the sound of their wings.

'That's enough,' my cousin said.

He spun round to sit facing forward, shifting around on the bench. 'So, see anything unusual?'

'Nothing different as far as I could see. From the outside at least.'

'Anything's OK – even a feeling you got or something.'

'Your ear looks normal to me.'

My cousin looked disappointed. Maybe I had said the wrong thing.

'Did the treatment hurt?' I asked.

'No, it didn't. Same as always. They just rummaged around in the same old spot. Feels like they're going to wear it out. Sometimes it doesn't feel like my own ear any more.'

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'There's the number 28,' my cousin said after a while, turning to me. 'That's our bus, right?'

I'd been lost in thought. I looked up when he said this and saw the bus slowing down as it went round the curve coming up the slope. This wasn't the kind of brand new bus we'd ridden over on but one of the older buses I remembered. A sign with the number 28 was hanging on the front. I tried to stand up from the bench, but I couldn't. Like I was caught up in the middle of a powerful current, my limbs wouldn't respond.

I'd been thinking of the box of chocolates we'd taken when we went to that hospital on that long ago summer afternoon. The girl had happily opened the lid to the box only to discover that the dozen little chocolates had completely melted, sticking to the paper between each piece and to the lid itself. On the way to the hospital my friend and I had parked the motorcycle by the seaside, and lain around on the beach just talking and hanging out. The whole while we'd let that box of chocolates lie out in the hot August sun. Our carelessness, our self-centredness, had wrecked those chocolates, made one fine mess of them all. We should have sensed what was happening. One of us – it didn't matter who – should have said something. But on that afternoon, we didn't sense anything, just exchanged a couple of dumb jokes and said goodbye. And left that hill still overgrown with blind willows.

My cousin grabbed my right arm in a tight grip.

'Are you alright?' he asked me.

His words brought me back to reality, and I stood up from the bench. This time I had no trouble standing. Once more I could feel on my skin the sweet May breeze. For a few seconds I stood there in a strange, dim place. Where the things I could see did not exist. Where the invisible *did*. Finally, though, the real number 28 bus stopped in front of me, its entirely real door opening. I clambered aboard, heading off to some other place.

I rested my hand on my cousin's shoulder. 'I'm alright,' I told him.

Translated by Philip Gabriel