

HARUKI MURAKAMI

MEN WITHOUT
WOMEN

STORIES



ALSO BY HARUKI MURAKAMI

FICTION

1Q84

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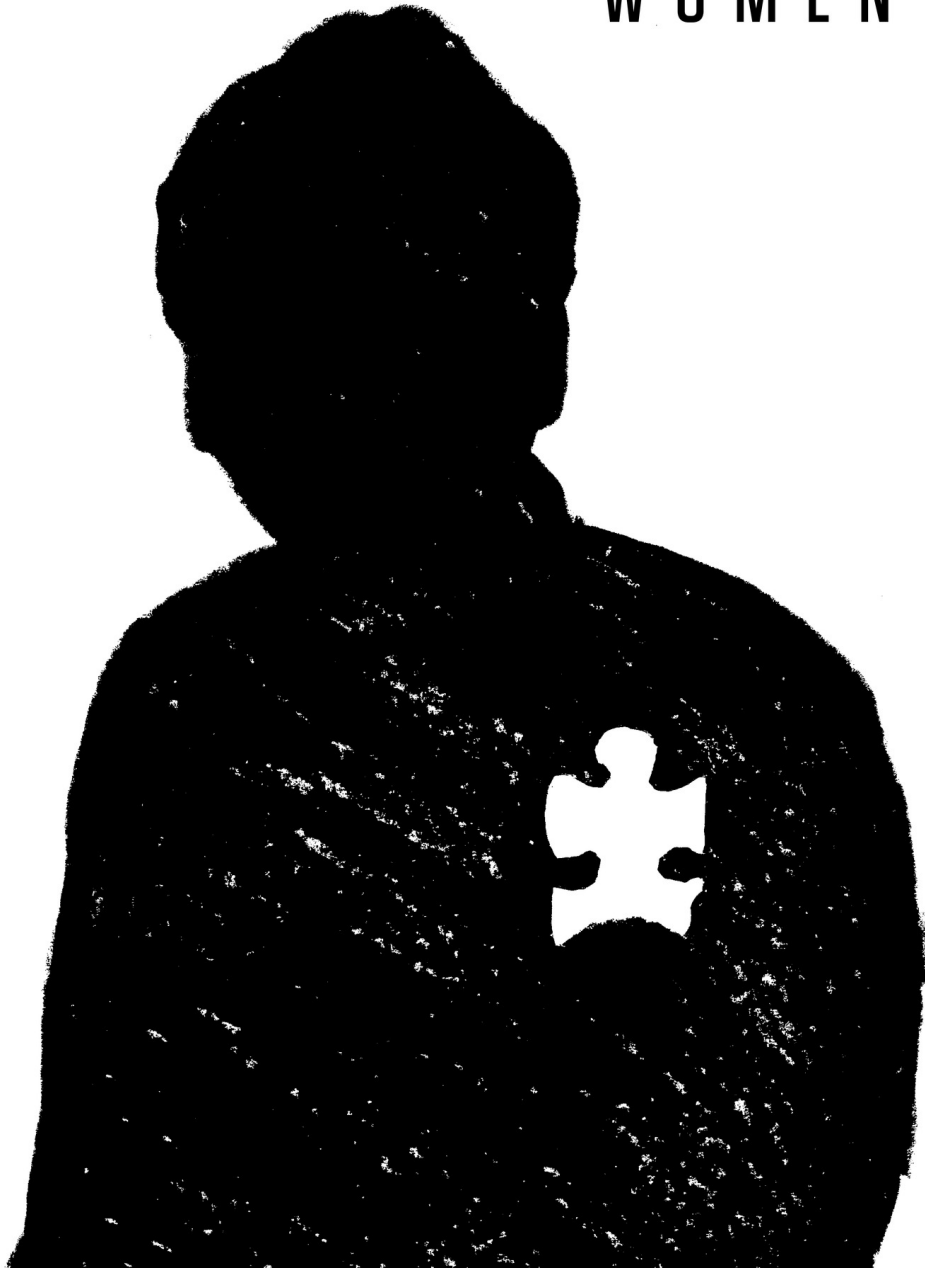
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What I Talk About When I Talk About Running: A Memoir

MEN WITHOUT

WOMEN



H A R U K I M U R A K A M I

M E N W I T H O U T

W O M E N

S T O R I E S



Translated from the Japanese by
Philip Gabriel and Theodore Goossen

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DRIVE MY CAR

BASED ON THE MANY TIMES he had ridden in cars driven by women, Kafuku had reached the conclusion that most female drivers fell into one of two categories: either they were a little too aggressive or a little too timid. Luckily—and we should all be grateful for this—the latter were far more common. Generally speaking, women were more cautious than men behind the wheel. Of course, that caution was nothing to complain about. Yet their driving style tended to irritate others on the road.

Most of the aggressive women, on the other hand, seemed convinced they were great drivers. In most cases, they showed their timid sisters nothing but scorn, and were proud that they, at least, weren't like that. They were oblivious to the gasps and slammed brakes that accompanied their sudden and daring lane changes, and to the less-than-complimentary words directed at them by their fellow drivers.

Of course, not all women belonged to one of those two groups. There were those *normal* drivers who were neither too aggressive nor too cautious. Some could even be called experts. Nevertheless, somehow or other, even with those expert female drivers, Kafuku usually sensed a certain tension. There was no concrete reason that he could point to, but from where he sat in the passenger seat he felt a kind of friction in the air, and it made him tense. His throat would turn dry, or he would start saying foolish, totally unnecessary things just to bury the silence.

Certainly there were good and bad male drivers too. Yet in most cases their driving didn't create the same charged atmosphere. It wasn't that they were especially laid back. In reality, they were probably tense too. Nevertheless, they seemed to be able to separate their tension and who they were in a natural—likely unconscious—way. They could converse and act normally even while focused on the road. As in, *that belongs there and this*

belongs here. Kafuku had no idea where this difference between men and women drivers came from.

Kafuku seldom drew distinctions between men and women in his daily life. Nor was he apt to perceive any difference in ability between the sexes. There were as many women as men in his line of work, and he actually felt more at ease working with women. For the most part, women paid closer attention to details, and they listened well. The only problem occurred when he got in a car and found a woman sitting beside him with her hands on the steering wheel. That he found impossible to ignore. Yet he had never voiced his opinion on the matter to anyone. Somehow the topic seemed inappropriate.

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Thus when Oba, who ran the garage where he serviced his car, recommended a young woman to be his personal driver, Kafuku looked less than thrilled. Oba smiled at his reaction. Yeah, I know how you feel, the mechanic's face said.

“But she's one heck of a driver. I can guarantee that, no problem. Why don't you meet her and see for yourself?”

“Sure, since you recommend her,” Kafuku said. He needed to hire a driver as quickly as possible, and Oba was someone he trusted. He had known the impish man with hair that bristled like wire for fifteen years. When it came to automobiles, Oba's word was as good as gold.

“To be on the safe side, I'm going to take a look at your wheel alignment, but assuming that's okay, you can pick up your car the day after tomorrow at two p.m. Why don't I ask the girl to come then too, so you can check her out, maybe have her drive you around the neighborhood? You can level with me if you don't like her. No skin off my nose if you don't.”

“How old is she?”

“Never got around to asking. But I would guess in her mid-twenties,” Oba said. Then he gave a slight frown. “Like I said, she's a great driver, but...”

“But?”

“Well, how should I put this, she's not exactly the congenial type.”

“In what way?”

“She’s brusque, shoots from the hip when she talks, which isn’t often. And she smokes like a chimney,” Oba said. “You’ll see for yourself when you meet her, but she’s not what you’d call cute, either. Almost never smiles, and she’s a bit *homely*, to be honest.”

“That’s not a problem. I’d feel uncomfortable if she were too pretty, and there could be nasty rumors.”

“Sounds like it might be a good match, then.”

“Apart from all that, she’s a good driver, right?”

“Yeah, she’s solid. Not just for a woman, but as a driver, pure and simple.”

“What kind of work is she doing now?”

“I’m not too sure. I think she scrapes by as a convenience store clerk, courier service driver, stuff like that. Short-term jobs she can drop right away when something better pops up. She came here on a friend’s recommendation looking for work, but things are a bit tight, and I can’t take on anyone full time right now. I give her a shout when I need extra help. But she’s really reliable. And she never takes a drink.”

Kafuku’s face darkened with the mention of liquor, and his fingers unconsciously rose to his lips.

“The day after tomorrow at two it is, then,” Kafuku said. Brusque, close-mouthed, not at all cute—he was intrigued.

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Two days later, at two in the afternoon, the yellow Saab 900 convertible was fixed and ready to drive. The dented right front fender had been returned to its original shape, the painted patch blending almost perfectly with the rest of the car. The engine was tuned, the transmission readjusted, and new brake pads and wiper blades installed. The car was freshly washed, its tires polished, its body waxed. As always, Oba’s work was flawless. Kafuku had owned the car for twelve years and put nearly a hundred thousand miles on it. The canvas roof was showing its age. When it poured he had to worry about leaks. But for the time being, Kafuku had no

intention of buying a newer vehicle. Not only had the Saab never given him any major trouble, he was personally attached to it. He loved driving with the top down, regardless of the season. In the winter, he wore a thick coat and wrapped a scarf around his neck, while in the summer he donned dark sunglasses and a cap. He would drive around the city, shifting gears with great pleasure and looking up to take in passing clouds and birds perched on electric wires whenever he stopped at a traffic light. Those moments had been a key part of his life for many years. Kafuku walked slowly around his car, inspecting it closely like a horse before a race.

His wife had still been alive when he had purchased it new. She had chosen the yellow color. During the first few years, they had often gone out for drives together. Since his wife didn't have a license, Kafuku had always been the one behind the wheel. They had taken a number of road trips as well, to places like Izu, Hakone, and Nasu. Yet, for what was now nearly ten years, he had always driven alone. He had seen several women since his wife's death, but none had ever sat beside him in the passenger seat. For some reason, the opportunity had never arisen. Nor had he ever taken the car outside the city, apart from those times when work made it necessary.

"There's some inevitable wear and tear, but she's in good shape," Oba said, running his palm over the dashboard, as if stroking the neck of a large dog. "Totally reliable. Swedish cars of this age are built to last. You have to keep your eye on the electrical system, but they're fundamentally sound. And I've been looking after this baby really well."

While Kafuku was signing the necessary papers and going over the itemized bill, the young woman showed up. She was about five foot five, not at all fat but broad-shouldered and powerfully built. There was an oval-shaped, purple birthmark to the right of the nape of her neck that she seemed to have no qualms exposing. Her thick jet-black hair was fastened at the back, to keep it out of her way. No matter how you looked at her she was hardly a beauty, and there was something off-putting about her face, as Oba had suggested. The remnants of teenage acne dotted her cheeks. She had big, strikingly clear eyes that looked out suspiciously on the world, their dark brown irises all the more striking because of their size. Her large, protruding ears were like satellite dishes placed in some remote landscape. She was wearing a man's herringbone jacket that was a bit too heavy for

May, brown cotton pants, and a pair of black Converse sneakers. Beneath the white long-sleeved T-shirt under her jacket Kafuku could see her larger-than-average breasts.

Oba introduced her to Kafuku. Her name was Watari. Misaki Watari.

“There are no kanji for Misaki—it’s written in hiragana,” she said. “If you need a résumé I can get you one.” Kafuku detected a note of defiance in her voice.

“No need for a résumé at this stage,” he said, shaking his head. “You can handle a manual shift, correct?”

“I prefer manual,” she said in an icy tone. She sounded like a staunch vegetarian who had just been asked if she ate lettuce.

“It’s an old car, so there’s no GPS.”

“I don’t need it. I worked as a courier for a while. I’ve got a map of the city in my head.”

“Why don’t we take a little test drive? The weather’s good so we can put the top down.”

“Where would you like to go?”

Kafuku thought for a moment. They were not far from Shinohashi.

“Take a right at the Tengenji intersection and then drive to the underground parking lot at the Meijiya supermarket, so I can do a bit of shopping. After that we’ll head up the slope to Arisugawa Park, and then down past the French embassy and onto Gaien Nishi Dori. Then we’ll swing back here.”

“Got it,” she said. She asked for no further details about the route. Taking the key from Oba, she quickly adjusted the driver’s seat and the mirrors. It appeared she already knew where all the buttons and levers were located. She stepped on the clutch and tested the gears. Then she pulled a pair of green Ray-Ban sunglasses from the pocket of her jacket and put them on. She turned and nodded to Kafuku to signal she was ready to go.

“A cassette player,” she said as if to herself, glancing at the audio system.

“I like cassettes,” Kafuku said. “They’re easier than CDs. I use them to rehearse my lines.”

“Haven’t seen one of those for a while.”

“When I started driving they were all eight-track players,” Kafuku said.

Misaki didn't reply, but her expression suggested eight-track players were something new to her.

As Oba had guaranteed, she was an excellent driver. She operated the car smoothly, with no sudden jerks. The road was crowded, with frequent stoplights, but she was focused on changing gears smoothly. The movement of her eyes told him that. When he closed his own eyes, though, he found it next to impossible to tell when she shifted. Only the sound of the engine let him know which gear the car was in. The touch of her foot on the brake and accelerator pedals was light and careful. Best of all, she was entirely relaxed. In fact, she seemed more at ease when driving. Her blunt, impersonal expression became softer, and her eyes gentler. Yet she was every bit as taciturn. She would answer his questions and nothing more.

The absence of conversation didn't bother Kafuku. He wasn't good at small talk. While he didn't dislike talking to people he knew well about things that mattered, he otherwise preferred to remain silent. He sat back in the passenger seat and idly watched the city streets go by. After years behind the wheel, the view from where he now sat seemed fresh and new.

He had her parallel park several times on busy Gaien Nishi Dori, a test she passed easily with a minimum of wasted effort. She had a good feel for the car, and her timing was perfect. She smoked only when they were stopped at traffic lights. Marlboros seemed her brand of choice. The moment the light changed she snuffed out the cigarette. Her butts had no lipstick on them. Nor were her fingernails polished or manicured. She seemed to wear virtually no makeup.

“Mind if I ask you a few questions?” Kafuku said when they were approaching Arisugawa Park.

“Go right ahead.”

“Where did you learn to drive?”

“I grew up in Hokkaido, in the mountains. I started driving in my early teens. You have to have a car in a place like that. The roads are icy almost half the year. You can't avoid becoming a good driver.”

“But you don't learn how to parallel park in the mountains, do you?”

She didn't answer that. Doubtless she found the question not worth bothering with.

"Did Oba explain to you why I need a driver all of a sudden?"

Misaki answered in a flat, emotionless voice, her eyes trained on the traffic ahead. "You're an actor, and you're on stage six days a week at the moment. You have always driven to the theater. You don't like taxis or taking the subway. That's because you rehearse your lines on the way. Not long ago you had a minor accident and your license was suspended. Because you'd been drinking a little, and there was a problem with your eyesight."

Kafuku nodded. It felt as if someone were describing her dream to him.

"The eye exam the police required turned up a trace of glaucoma. It appears I have a blind spot. On the right side, in the corner. I had no idea."

The amount of alcohol involved was negligible, so they had been able to hush it up. No one had leaked it to the media. But theater management couldn't ignore the problem with his eyesight. As things stood, a car might approach him from behind on his right side, and he would miss seeing it. Management thus insisted that he stop driving, at least until tests showed the problem had been fixed.

"Mr. Kafuku?" Misaki asked. "Is it all right if I call you that? It's not a stage name?"

"It's an unusual name, but it's really mine," Kafuku said. "The kanji mean 'House of Good Fortune.' Sounds auspicious, but there hasn't been any payoff as far as I can see. None of my relatives are what you could call wealthy."

After a period of silence, Kafuku told her the chauffeur's salary. Not a lot of money. But it was all his theater could afford. Although his name was well known, he wasn't famous like TV and movie stars, and there was a limit to how much money could be made on the stage. For an actor of his class, hiring a personal driver, even if only for a few months, was an exceptional luxury.

"Your work schedule will be subject to change, but these days my life is centered around the theater, which means your mornings are basically free. You can sleep till noon if you wish. I'll make sure you can quit by eleven at

night—if I have to work later than that I'll take a taxi home. You will have one day off every week.”

“I accept,” Misaki said simply.

“The work shouldn't be that taxing. The hard part will be waiting around for hours with nothing to do.”

Misaki did not respond. Her lips were set in a straight line. The look on her face said that she had tackled far more difficult jobs.

“I don't mind if you smoke while the top is down,” Kafuku said. “But please don't when it's up.”

“Agreed.”

“Do you have any conditions?”

“Nothing in particular.” She narrowed her eyes as she carefully downshifted. “I like the car,” she added.

They drove the rest of the way without talking. When they arrived back at the garage, Kafuku called Oba over to give him the news. “I've decided to hire her,” he announced.

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Misaki started working as Kafuku's personal driver the next day. She would arrive at his Ebisu apartment building at half past three in the afternoon, take the yellow Saab from the underground garage, and drive him to a theater in Ginza. They drove with the top down unless it was raining. Kafuku practiced his lines on the way, reciting with the cassette recording. The play was a Meiji-era adaptation of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*. He played the role of Uncle Vanya. He knew the lines by heart, but ran through them anyway to calm his nerves before a performance. This was his long-standing habit.

As a rule, they listened to Beethoven string quartets on the way home. Kafuku never tired of them—he found them perfectly suited to thinking or, if he preferred, thinking about nothing at all. If he wanted something lighter, he chose classic American rock. Groups like the Beach Boys, the Raspals, CCR, the Temptations, and so on. The popular music of his youth. Misaki never commented on his selection. He couldn't tell if his music pleased or