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HARUKI
MURAKAMI

84

A NOVEL





ALSO BY HARUKI MURAKAMI

FICTION: AFTER DARK AFTER THE QUAKE BLIND WILLOW,



SLEEPING WOMAN DANCE DANCE DANCE THE ELEPHANT VANISHES



HARD-BOILED WONDERLAND AND THE END OF THE WORLD KAFKA ON



THE SHORE

NORWEGIAN WOOD

SOUTH OF THE BORDER, WEST



OF THE SUN SPUTNIK SWEETHEART A WILD SHEEP CHASE



THE WIND-UP BIRD CHRONICLE NONFICTION UNDERGROUND:

8

THE TOKYO GAS ATTACK AND THE JAPANESE PSYCHE WHAT I



TALK ABOUT WHEN I TALK ABOUT RUNNING: A MEMOIR

4

HARUKI MURAKAMI

**TRANSLATED FROM THE JAPANESE
BY JAY RUBIN AND PHILIP GABRIEL**



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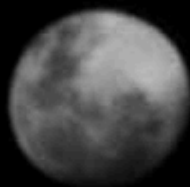
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It's a Barnum and Bailey world,
Just as phony as it can be,
But it wouldn't be make-believe
If you believed in me

"It's Only a Paper Moon,"
—Billy Rose and E. Y. "Yip" Harburg





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Reader's Guide

BOOK 1 APRIL-JUNE



CHAPTER 1

Aomame

DON'T LET APPEARANCES FOOL YOU

The taxi's radio was tuned to a classical FM broadcast. Janáček's *Sinfonietta*—probably not the ideal music to hear in a taxi caught in traffic. The middle-aged driver didn't seem to be listening very closely, either. With his mouth clamped shut, he stared straight ahead at the endless line of cars stretching out on the elevated expressway, like a veteran fisherman standing in the bow of his boat, reading the ominous confluence of two currents. Aomame settled into the broad back seat, closed her eyes, and listened to the music.

How many people could recognize Janáček's *Sinfonietta* after hearing just the first few bars? Probably somewhere between “very few” and “almost none.” But for some reason, Aomame was one of the few who could.

Janáček composed his little symphony in 1926. He originally wrote the opening as a fanfare for a gymnastics festival. Aomame imagined 1926 Czechoslovakia: The First World War had ended, and the country was freed from the long rule of the Hapsburg Dynasty. As they enjoyed the peaceful respite visiting central Europe, people drank Pilsner beer in cafés and manufactured handsome light machine guns. Two years earlier, in utter obscurity, Franz Kafka had left the world behind. Soon Hitler would come out of nowhere and gobble up this beautiful little country in the blink of an eye, but at the time no one knew what hardships lay in store for them. This may be the most important proposition revealed by history: “At the time, no one knew what was coming.” Listening to Janáček's music, Aomame imagined the carefree winds sweeping across the plains of Bohemia and thought about the vicissitudes of history.

In 1926 Japan's Taisho Emperor died, and the era name was changed to Showa. It was the beginning of a terrible, dark time in this country, too. The short interlude of modernism and democracy was ending, giving way to fascism.

Aomame loved history as much as she loved sports. She rarely read fiction, but history books could keep her occupied for hours. What she liked about history was the way all its facts were linked with particular dates and places. She did not find it especially difficult to remember historical dates. Even if she did not learn them by rote memorization, once she grasped the relationship of an event to its time and to the events preceding and following it, the date would come to her automatically. In both middle school and high school, she had always gotten the top grade on history exams. It puzzled her to hear someone say he had trouble learning dates. How could something so simple be a problem for anyone?

"Aomame" was her real name. Her grandfather on her father's side came from some little mountain town or village in Fukushima Prefecture, where there were supposedly a number of people who bore the name, written with exactly the same characters as the word for "green peas" and pronounced with the same four syllables, "Ah-oh-mah-meh." She had never been to the place, however. Her father had cut his ties with his family before her birth, just as her mother had done with her own family, so she had never met any of her grandparents. She didn't travel much, but on those rare occasions when she stayed in an unfamiliar city or town, she would always open the hotel's phone book to see if there were any Aomames in the area. She had never found a single one, and whenever she tried and failed, she felt like a lonely castaway on the open sea.

Telling people her name was always a bother. As soon as the name left her lips, the other person looked puzzled or confused.

"Miss Aomame?"

"Yes. Just like 'green peas.' "

Employers required her to have business cards printed, which only made things worse. People would stare at the card as if she had thrust a letter at them bearing bad news. When she announced her name on the telephone, she would often hear suppressed laughter. In waiting rooms at the doctor's or at public offices, people would look up at the sound of her name, curious to see what someone called "Green Peas" could look like.

Some people would get the name of the plant wrong and call her “Edamame” or “Soramame,” whereupon she would gently correct them: “No, I’m not soybeans or fava beans, just green peas. Pretty close, though. Aomame.” How many times in her thirty years had she heard the same remarks, the same feeble jokes about her name? *My life might have been totally different if I hadn’t been born with this name. If I had had an ordinary name like Sato or Tanaka or Suzuki, I could have lived a slightly more relaxed life or looked at people with somewhat more forgiving eyes. Perhaps.*

Eyes closed, Aomame listened to the music, allowing the lovely unison of the brasses to sink into her brain. Just then it occurred to her that the sound quality was too good for a radio in a taxicab. Despite the rather low volume at which it was playing, the sound had true depth, and the overtones were clearly audible. She opened her eyes and leaned forward to study the dashboard stereo. The jet-black device shone with a proud gloss. She couldn’t make out its brand name, but it was obviously high end, with lots of knobs and switches, the green numerals of the station readout clear against the black panel. This was not the kind of stereo you expected to see in an ordinary fleet cab.

She looked around at the cab’s interior. She had been too absorbed in her own thoughts to notice until now, but this was no ordinary taxi. The high quality of the trim was evident, and the seat was especially comfortable. Above all, it was quiet. The car probably had extra sound insulation to keep noise out, like a soundproofed music studio. The driver probably owned his own cab. Many such owner-drivers would spare no expense on the upkeep of their automobiles. Moving only her eyes, Aomame searched for the driver’s registration card, without success. This did not seem to be an illegal unlicensed cab, though. It had a standard taxi meter, which was ticking off the proper fare: 2,150 yen so far. Still, the registration card showing the driver’s name was nowhere to be found.

“What a nice car,” Aomame said, speaking to the driver’s back. “So quiet. What kind is it?”

“Toyota Crown Royal Saloon,” the driver replied succinctly.

“The music sounds great in here.”

“It’s a very quiet car. That’s one reason I chose it. Toyota has some of the best sound-insulating technology in the world.”

Aomame nodded and leaned back in her seat. There was something about the driver's way of speaking that bothered her, as though he were leaving something important unsaid. For example (and this is just one example), his remark on Toyota's impeccable sound insulation might be taken to mean that some other Toyota feature was less than impeccable. And each time he finished a sentence, there was a tiny but meaningful lump of silence left behind. This lump floated there, enclosed in the car's restricted space like an imaginary miniature cloud, giving Aomame a strangely unsettled feeling.

"It certainly is a quiet car," Aomame declared, as if to sweep the little cloud away. "And the stereo looks especially fine."

"Decisiveness was key when I bought it," the driver said, like a retired staff officer explaining a past military success. "I have to spend so much time in here, I want the best sound available. And—"

Aomame waited for what was to follow, but nothing followed. She closed her eyes again and concentrated on the music. She knew nothing about Janáček as a person, but she was quite sure that he never imagined that in 1984 someone would be listening to his composition in a hushed Toyota Crown Royal Saloon on the gridlocked elevated Metropolitan Expressway in Tokyo.

Why, though, Aomame wondered, had she instantly recognized the piece to be Janáček's *Sinfonietta*? And how did she know it had been composed in 1926? She was not a classical music fan, and she had no personal recollections involving Janáček, yet the moment she heard the opening bars, all her knowledge of the piece came to her by reflex, like a flock of birds swooping through an open window. The music gave her an odd, wrenching kind of feeling. There was no pain or unpleasantness involved, just a sensation that all the elements of her body were being physically wrung out. Aomame had no idea what was going on. *Could Sinfonietta actually be giving me this weird feeling?*

"Janáček," Aomame said half-consciously, though after the word emerged from her lips, she wanted to take it back.

"What's that, ma'am?"

"Janáček. The man who wrote this music."

"Never heard of him."

"Czech composer."

"Well-well," the driver said, seemingly impressed.

“Do you own this cab?” Aomame asked, hoping to change the subject.

“I do,” the driver answered. After a brief pause, he added, “It’s all mine. My second one.”

“Very comfortable seats.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” Turning his head slightly in her direction, he asked, “By the way, are you in a hurry?”

“I have to meet someone in Shibuya. That’s why I asked you to take the expressway.”

“What time is your meeting?”

“Four thirty,” Aomame said.

“Well, it’s already three forty-five. You’ll never make it.”

“Is the backup that bad?”

“Looks like a major accident up ahead. This is no ordinary traffic jam. We’ve hardly moved for quite a while.”

She wondered why the driver was not listening to traffic reports. The expressway had been brought to a standstill. He should be listening to updates on the taxi drivers’ special radio station.

“You can tell it’s an accident without hearing a traffic report?” Aomame asked.

“You can’t trust them,” he said with a hollow ring to his voice. “They’re half lies. The Expressway Corporation only releases reports that suit its agenda. If you really want to know what’s happening here and now, you’ve got to use your own eyes and your own judgment.”

“And your judgment tells you that we’ll be stuck here?”

“For quite a while,” the driver said with a nod. “I can guarantee you that. When it backs up solid like this, the expressway is sheer hell. Is your meeting an important one?”

Aomame gave it some thought. “Yes, very. I have to see a client.”

“That’s a shame. You’re probably not going to make it.”

The driver shook his head a few times as if trying to ease a stiff neck. The wrinkles on the back of his neck moved like some kind of ancient creature. Half-consciously watching the movement, Aomame found herself thinking of the sharp object in the bottom of her shoulder bag. A touch of sweat came to her palms.

“What do you think I should do?” she asked.

“There’s nothing you *can* do up here on the expressway—not until we get to the next exit. If we were down on the city streets, you could just step out of the cab and take the subway.”

“What is the next exit?”

“Ikejiri. We might not get there before the sun goes down, though.”

Before the sun goes down? Aomame imagined herself locked in this cab until sunset. The Janáček was still playing. Muted strings came to the foreground as if to soothe her heightened anxiety. That earlier wrenching sensation had largely subsided. What could that have been?

Aomame had caught the cab near Kinuta and told the driver to take the elevated expressway from Yohga. The flow of traffic had been smooth at first, but suddenly backed up just before Sangenjaya, after which they had hardly moved. The outbound lanes were moving fine. Only the side headed toward downtown Tokyo was tragically jammed. Inbound Expressway Number 3 would not normally back up at three in the afternoon, which was why Aomame had directed the driver to take it.

“Time charges don’t add up on the expressway,” the driver said, speaking toward his rearview mirror. “So don’t let the fare worry you. I suppose you need to get to your meeting, though?”

“Yes, of course. But there’s nothing I can do about it, is there?”

He glanced at her in the mirror. He was wearing pale sunglasses. The way the light was shining in, Aomame could not make out his expression.

“Well, in fact, there might be a way. You *could* take the subway to Shibuya from here, but you’d have to do something a little ... extreme.”

“Something extreme?”

“It’s not something I can openly advise you to do.”

Aomame said nothing. She waited for more with narrowed eyes.

“Look over there. See that turnout just ahead?” he asked, pointing. “See? Near that Esso sign.”

Aomame strained to see through the windshield until she focused on a space to the left of the two-lane roadway where broken-down cars could pull off. The elevated roadway had no shoulder but instead had emergency turnouts at regular intervals. Aomame saw that the turnout was outfitted with a yellow emergency phone box for contacting the Metropolitan Expressway Public Corporation office. The turnout itself was empty at the

moment. On top of a building beyond the oncoming lanes there was a big billboard advertising Esso gasoline with a smiling tiger holding a gas hose.

“To tell you the truth, there’s a stairway leading from the turnout down to street level. It’s for drivers who have to abandon their cars in a fire or earthquake and climb down to the street. Usually only maintenance workers use it. If you were to climb down that stairway, you’d be near a Tokyu Line station. From there, it’s nothing to Shibuya.”

“I had no idea these Metropolitan Expressways had emergency stairs,” Aomame said.

“Not many people do.”

“But wouldn’t I get in trouble using it without permission when there’s no real emergency?”

The driver paused a moment. Then he said, “I wonder. I don’t know all the rules of the Corporation, but you wouldn’t be hurting anybody. They’d probably look the other way, don’t you think? Anyway, they don’t have people watching every exit. The Metropolitan Expressway Public Corporation is famous for having a huge staff but nobody really doing any work.”

“What kind of stairway is it?”

“Hmm, kind of like a fire escape. You know, like the ones you see on the backs of old buildings. It’s not especially dangerous or anything. It’s maybe three stories high, and you just climb down. There’s a barrier at the opening, but it’s not very high. Anybody who wanted to could get over it easily.”

“Have you ever used one of these stairways?”

Instead of replying, the driver directed a faint smile toward his rearview mirror, a smile that could be read any number of ways.

“It’s strictly up to you,” he said, tapping lightly on the steering wheel in time to the music. “If you just want to sit here and relax and enjoy the music, I’m fine with that. We might as well resign ourselves to the fact that we’re not going anywhere soon. All I’m saying is that there *are* emergency measures you can take if you have urgent business.”

Aomame frowned and glanced at her watch. She looked up and studied the surrounding cars. On the right was a black Mitsubishi Pajero wagon with a thin layer of white dust. A bored-looking young man in the front passenger seat was smoking a cigarette with his window open. He had long hair, a tanned face, and wore a dark red windbreaker. The car’s luggage

compartment was filled with a number of worn surfboards. In front of him was a gray Saab 900, its dark-tinted windows closed tight, preventing any glimpse of who might be inside. The body was so immaculately polished, you could probably see your face in it.

The car ahead was a red Suzuki Alto with a Nerima Ward license plate and a dented bumper. A young mother sat gripping the wheel. Her small child was standing on the seat next to her, moving back and forth to dispel its boredom. The mother's annoyance showed on her face as she cautioned the child to keep still. Aomame could see her mouth moving. The scene was unchanged from ten minutes earlier. In those ten minutes, the car had probably advanced less than ten yards.

Aomame thought hard, arranging everything in order of priority. She needed hardly any time to reach a conclusion. As if to coincide with this, the final movement of the Janáček was just beginning.

She pulled her small Ray-Ban sunglasses partway out of her shoulder bag and took three thousand-yen bills from her wallet. Handing the bills to the driver, she said, "I'll get out here. I really can't be late for this appointment."

The driver nodded and took the money. "Would you like a receipt?"

"No need. And keep the change."

"Thanks very much," he said. "Be careful, it looks windy out there. Don't slip."

"I'll be careful," Aomame said.

"And also," the driver said, facing the mirror, "please remember: things are not what they seem."

Things are not what they seem, Aomame repeated mentally. "What do you mean by that?" she asked with knitted brows.

The driver chose his words carefully: "It's just that you're about to do something *out of the ordinary*. Am I right? People do not ordinarily climb down the emergency stairs of the Metropolitan Expressway in the middle of the day—especially women."

"I suppose you're right."

"Right. And after you *do* something like that, the everyday *look* of things might seem to change a little. Things may look *different* to you than they did before. I've had that experience myself. But don't let appearances fool you. There's always only one reality."

Aomame thought about what he was saying, and in the course of her thinking, the Janáček ended and the audience broke into immediate applause. This was obviously a live recording. The applause was long and enthusiastic. There were even occasional calls of “Bravo!” She imagined the smiling conductor bowing repeatedly to the standing audience. He would then raise his head, raise his arms, shake hands with the concertmaster, turn away from the audience, raise his arms again in praise of the orchestra, face front, and take another deep bow. As she listened to the long recorded applause, it sounded less like applause and more like an endless Martian sandstorm.

“There is always, as I said, only one reality,” the driver repeated slowly, as if underlining an important passage in a book.

“Of course,” Aomame said. He was right. A physical object could only be in one place at one time. Einstein proved that. Reality was utterly coolheaded and utterly lonely.

Aomame pointed toward the car stereo. “Great sound.”

The driver nodded. “What was the name of that composer again?”

“Janáček.”

“Janáček,” the driver repeated, as if committing an important password to memory. Then he pulled the lever that opened the passenger door. “Be careful,” he said. “I hope you get to your appointment on time.”

Aomame stepped out of the cab, gripping the strap of her large leather shoulder bag. The applause was still going. She started walking carefully along the left edge of the elevated road toward the emergency turnout some ten meters ahead. Each time a large truck roared by on the opposite side, she felt the surface of the road shake—or, rather, undulate—through her high heels, as if she were walking on the deck of an aircraft carrier on a stormy sea.

The little girl in the front seat of the red Suzuki Alto stuck her head out of her window and stared, open-mouthed, at Aomame passing by. Then she turned to her mother and asked, “Mommy, what is that lady doing? Where’s she going? I want to get out and walk too. Please, Mommy! Pleeease!” The mother responded to her cries in silence, shaking her head and shooting an accusatory glance at Aomame. The girl’s loud pleading and the mother’s glance were the only responses to her that Aomame noticed. The other drivers just sat at the wheel smoking and watching her make her way with

determined steps between the cars and the side wall. They knit their brows and squinted as if looking at a too-bright object but seemed to have temporarily suspended all judgment. For someone to be walking on the Metropolitan Expressway was by no means an everyday event, with or without the usual flow of traffic, so it took them some time to process the sight as an actual occurrence—all the more so because the walker was a young woman in high heels and a miniskirt.

Aomame pulled in her chin, kept her gaze fixed straight ahead, her back straight, and her pace steady. Her chestnut-colored Charles Jourdan heels clicked against the road's surface, and the skirts of her coat waved in the breeze. April had begun, but there was still a chill in the air and a hint of roughness to come. Aomame wore a beige spring coat over her green light wool Junko Shimada suit. A black leather bag hung over her shoulder, and her shoulder-length hair was impeccably trimmed and shaped. She wore no accessories of any kind. Five foot six inches tall, she carried not an ounce of excess fat. Every muscle in her body was well toned, but her coat kept that fact hidden.

A detailed examination of her face from the front would reveal that the size and shape of her ears were significantly different, the left one much bigger and malformed. No one ever noticed this, however, because her hair nearly always covered her ears. Her lips formed a tight straight line, suggesting that she was not easily approachable. Also contributing to this impression were her small, narrow nose, somewhat protruding cheekbones, broad forehead, and long, straight eyebrows. All of these were arranged to sit in a pleasing oval shape, however, and while tastes differ, few would object to calling her a beautiful woman. The one problem with her face was its extreme paucity of expression. Her firmly closed lips only formed a smile when absolutely necessary. Her eyes had the cool, vigilant stare of a superior deck officer. Thanks to these features, no one ever had a vivid impression of her face. She attracted attention not so much because of the qualities of her features but rather because of the naturalness and grace with which her expression moved. In that sense, Aomame resembled an insect skilled at biological mimicry. What she most wanted was to blend in with her background by changing color and shape, to remain inconspicuous and not easily remembered. This was how she had protected herself since childhood.

Whenever something caused her to frown or grimace, however, her features underwent dramatic changes. The muscles of her face tightened, pulling in several directions at once and emphasizing the lack of symmetry in the overall structure. Deep wrinkles formed in her skin, her eyes suddenly drew inward, her nose and mouth became violently distorted, her jaw twisted to the side, and her lips curled back, exposing Aomame's large white teeth. Instantly, she became a wholly different person, as if a cord had broken, dropping the mask that normally covered her face. The shocking transformation terrified anyone who saw it, so she was careful never to frown in the presence of a stranger. She would contort her face only when she was alone or when she was threatening a man who displeased her.

Reaching the turnout, Aomame stopped and looked around. It took only a moment for her to find the emergency stairway. As the driver had said, there was a metal barrier across the entrance. It was a little more than waist high, and it was locked. Stepping over it in a tight miniskirt could be a slight problem, but only if she cared about being seen. Without hesitating, she slipped her high heels off and shoved them into her shoulder bag. She would probably ruin her stockings by walking in bare feet, but she could easily buy another pair.

People stared at her in silence as she removed her shoes and coat. From the open window of the black Toyota Celica parked next to the turnout, Michael Jackson's high-pitched voice provided her with background music. "Billie Jean" was playing. She felt as if she were performing a striptease. *So what? Let them look all they want. They must be bored waiting for the traffic jam to end. Sorry, though, folks, this is all I'll be taking off today.*

Aomame slung the bag across her chest to keep it from falling. Some distance away she could see the brand-new black Toyota Crown Royal Saloon in which she had been riding, its windshield reflecting the blinding glare of the afternoon sun. She could not make out the face of the driver, but she knew he must be watching.

Don't let appearances fool you. There's always only one reality.

Aomame took in a long, deep breath, and slowly let it out. Then, to the tune of "Billie Jean," she swung her leg over the metal barrier. Her miniskirt rode up to her hips. *Who gives a damn? Let them look all they want. Seeing what's under my skirt doesn't let them really see me as a*

person. Besides, her legs were the part of her body of which Aomame was the most proud.

Stepping down once she was on the other side of the barrier, Aomame straightened her skirt, brushed the dust from her hands, put her coat back on, slung her bag across her chest again, and pushed her sunglasses more snugly against her face. The emergency stairway lay before her—a metal stairway painted gray. Plain, practical, functional. Not made for use by miniskirted women wearing only stockings on their otherwise bare feet. Nor had Junko Shimada designed Aomame's suit for use on the emergency escape stairs of Tokyo Metropolitan Expressway Number 3. Another huge truck roared down the outbound side of the expressway, shaking the stairs. The breeze whistled through gaps in the stairway's metal framework. But in any case, there it was, before her: the stairway. All that was left for her to do was climb down to the street.

Aomame turned for one last look at the double line of cars packed on the expressway, scanning them from left to right, then right to left, like a speaker on a podium looking for questions from the audience now that she had finished her talk. There had been no movement at all. Trapped on the expressway with nothing else to occupy them, people were watching her every move, wondering what this woman on the far side of the barrier would do next. Aomame lightly pulled in her chin, bit her lower lip, and took stock of her audience through the dark green lenses of her sunglasses.

You couldn't begin to imagine who I am, where I'm going, or what I'm about to do, Aomame said to her audience without moving her lips. *All of you are trapped here. You can't go anywhere, forward or back. But I'm not like you. I have work to do. I have a mission to accomplish. And so, with your permission, I shall move ahead.*

Aomame had the urge at the end to treat her assembled throng to one of her special scowls, but she managed to stop herself. There was no time for such things now. Once she let herself frown, it took both time and effort to regain her original expression.

Aomame turned her back on her silent audience and, with careful steps, began to descend the emergency stairway, feeling the chill of the crude metal rungs against the soles of her feet. Also chilling was the early April breeze, which swept her hair back now and then, revealing her misshapen left ear.