


FICTION

An underwater photograph of a pond. A white lotus flower is in bloom in the upper left. Large green lily pads with prominent veins are scattered throughout. The water is a clear, deep teal color. A white circular graphic is centered on the page, containing the author's name and the title.

Haruki
SCHEHERAZADE
Murakami

Each time they had sex, she told Habara a strange and gripping story afterward. Like Queen Scheherazade in "A Thousand and One Nights." Though, of course, Habara, unlike the king, had no plan to chop off her head the next morning. (She never stayed with him till morning, anyway.) She told Habara the stories because she wanted to, because, he guessed, she enjoyed curling up in bed and talking to a man during those languid, intimate moments after making love. And also, probably, because she wished to comfort Habara, who had to spend every day cooped up indoors.

Because of this, Habara had dubbed the woman Scheherazade. He never used the name to her face, but it was how he referred to her in the small diary he kept. "Scheherazade came today," he'd note in ballpoint pen. Then he'd record the gist of that day's story in simple, cryptic terms that could make to baffle anyone who might read the diary later.

Habara didn't know whether her stories were true, invented, or partly true and partly invented. He had no way of telling. Reality and supposition, observation and pure fancy seemed jumbled together in her narratives. Habara therefore enjoyed them as a child might, without questioning too much. What possible difference could it make to him, after all, if they were lies or truth, or a complicated patchwork of the two?

Whatever the case, Scheherazade had a gift for telling stories that touched the heart. No matter what sort of story it was, she made it special. Her voice, her timing, her pacing were all flawless. She captured her listener's attention, tantalized him, drove him to ponder and speculate, and then, in the end, gave him precisely what he'd been seeking. Enthralled, Habara was able to forget the reality that surrounded him, if only for a moment. Like a blackboard wiped with a damp cloth, he was erased of worries, of unpleasant memories. Who could ask for more? At this point in his life, that kind of forgetting was what Habara desired more than anything else.

Scheherazade was thirty-five, four years older than Habara, and a full-time housewife with two children in elementary school (though she was also a registered nurse and was apparently called in for the occasional job). Her husband was a typical company man. Their home was a twenty-minute drive away from Habara's.

This was all (or almost all) the personal information she had volunteered. Habara had no way of verifying any of it, but he could think of no particular reason to doubt her. She had never revealed her name. "There's no need for you to know, is there?" Scheherazade had asked. Nor had she ever called Habara by his name, though of course she knew what it was. She judiciously steered clear of the name, as if it would somehow be unlucky or inappropriate to have it pass her lips.

On the surface, at least, this Scheherazade had nothing in common with the beautiful queen of "A Thousand and One Nights." She was on the road to middle age and already running to flab, with jowls and lines webbing the corners of her eyes. Her hair style, her makeup, and her manner of dress weren't exactly slapdash, but neither were they likely to receive any compliments. Her features were not unattractive, but her face lacked focus, so that the impression she left was somehow blurry. As a consequence, those who walked by her on the street, or shared the same elevator, probably took little notice of her. Ten years earlier, she might well have been a lively and attractive young woman, perhaps even turned a few heads. At some point, however, the curtain had fallen on that part of her life and it seemed unlikely to rise again.

Scheherazade came to see Habara twice a week. Her days were not fixed, but she never came on weekends. No doubt she spent that time with her family. She always phoned an hour before arriving. She bought groceries at the local supermarket and brought them to him in her car, a small blue Mazda hatchback. An older model, it had a dent in its rear bumper and its wheels were black with grime. Parking it in the reserved space assigned to the house, she would carry the bags to the front door and ring the bell. After checking the peephole, Habara would release the lock, unhook the chain, and let her in. In the kitchen, she'd sort the groceries and arrange them in the refrigerator. Then she'd make a list of things to buy for her next visit. She performed these tasks skillfully, with a minimum of wasted motion, and saying little throughout.

Once she'd finished, the two of them would move wordlessly to the bedroom, as if borne there by an invisible current. Scheherazade quickly removed her clothes and, still silent, joined Habara in

bed. She barely spoke during their love-making, either, performing each act as if completing an assignment. When she was menstruating, she used her hand to accomplish the same end. Her deft, rather businesslike manner reminded Habara that she was a licensed nurse.

After sex, they lay in bed and talked. More accurately, she talked and he listened, adding an appropriate word here, asking the occasional question there. When the clock said four-thirty, she would break off her story (for some reason, it always seemed to have just reached a climax), jump out of bed, gather up her clothes, and get ready to leave. She had to go home, she said, to prepare dinner.

Habara would see her to the door, replace the chain, and watch through the curtains as the grimy little blue car drove away. At six o'clock, he made a simple dinner and ate it by himself. He had once worked as a cook, so putting a meal together was no great hardship. He drank Perrier with his dinner (he never touched alcohol) and followed it with a cup of coffee, which he sipped while watching a DVD or reading. He liked long books, especially those he had to read several times to understand. There wasn't much else to do. He had no one to talk to. No one to phone. With no computer, he had no way of accessing the Internet. No newspaper was delivered, and he never watched television. (There was a good reason for that.) It went without saying that he couldn't go outside. Should Scheherazade's visits come to a halt for some reason, he would be left all alone.

Habara was not overly concerned about this prospect. If that happens, he thought, it will be hard, but I'll scrape by one way or another. I'm not stranded on a desert island. No, he thought, I am a desert island. He had always been comfortable being by himself. What did bother him, though, was the thought of not being able to talk in bed with Scheherazade. Or, more precisely, missing the next installment of her story.

"I was a lamprey eel in a former life," Scheherazade said once, as they lay in bed together. It was a simple, straightforward comment, as offhand as if she had announced that the North Pole was in the far north. Habara hadn't a clue what sort of creature a lamprey was, much less what one looked like. So he



"Does anybody read script?"

had no particular opinion on the subject. "Do you know how a lamprey eats a trout?" she asked.

He didn't. In fact, it was the first time he'd heard that lampreys ate trout.

"Lampreys have no jaws. That's what sets them apart from other eels."

"Huh? Eels have jaws?"

"Haven't you ever taken a good look at one?" she said, surprised.

"I do eat eel now and then, but I've never had an opportunity to see if they have jaws."

"Well, you should check it out sometime. Go to an aquarium or someplace like that. Regular eels have jaws with teeth. But lampreys have only suckers, which they use to attach themselves to rocks at the bottom of a river or lake. Then they just kind of float there, waving back and forth, like weeds."

Habara imagined a bunch of lampreys swaying like weeds at the bottom of a lake. The scene seemed somehow divorced from reality, although reality, he knew, could at times be terribly unreal.

"Lampreys live like that, hidden among the weeds. Lying in wait. Then, when a trout passes overhead, they dart up and fasten on to it with their suckers. Inside their suckers are these tongue-like things with teeth, which rub back and forth against the trout's belly until a hole opens up and they

can start eating the flesh, bit by bit."

"I wouldn't like to be a trout," Habara said.

"Back in Roman times, they raised lampreys in ponds. Uppity slaves got chucked in and the lampreys ate them alive."

Habara thought that he wouldn't have enjoyed being a Roman slave, either.

"The first time I saw a lamprey was back in elementary school, on a class trip to the aquarium," Scheherazade said.

"The moment I read the description of how they lived, I knew that I'd been one in a former life. I mean, I could actually remember—being fastened to a rock, swaying invisibly among the weeds, eyeing the fat trout swimming by above me."

"Can you remember eating them?"

"No, I can't."

"That's a relief," Habara said. "But is that all you recall from your life as a lamprey—swaying to and fro at the bottom of a river?"

"A former life can't be called up just like that," she said. "If you're lucky, you get a flash of what it was like. It's like catching a glimpse through a tiny hole in a wall. Can you recall any of your former lives?"

"No, not one," Habara said. Truth be told, he had never felt the urge to revisit a former life. He had his hands full with the present one.

"Still, it felt pretty neat at the bottom of the lake. Upside down with my mouth fastened to a rock, watching the fish pass overhead. I saw a really big snapping turtle once, too, a humongous black shape drifting past, like the evil spaceship in 'Star Wars.' And big white birds with long, sharp beaks; from below, they looked like white clouds floating across the sky."

"And you can see all these things now?"

"As clear as day," Scheherazade said.

"The light, the pull of the current, everything. Sometimes I can even go back there in my mind."

"To what you were thinking then?"

"Yeah."

"What do lampreys think about?"

"Lampreys think very lamprey-like thoughts. About lamprey-like topics in a context that's very lamprey-like. There are no words for those thoughts. They belong to the world of water. It's like when we were in the womb. We were thinking things in there, but we can't express those thoughts in the language we use out here. Right?"

"Hold on a second! You can remember what it was like in the womb?"

"Sure," Scheherazade said, lifting her head to see over his chest. "Can't you?"

No, he said. He couldn't.

"Then I'll tell you sometime. About life in the womb."

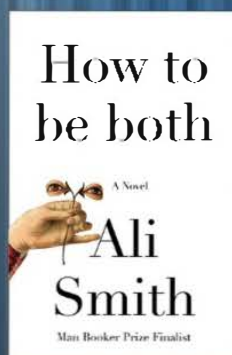
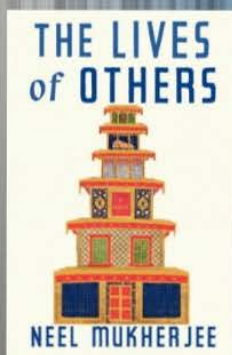
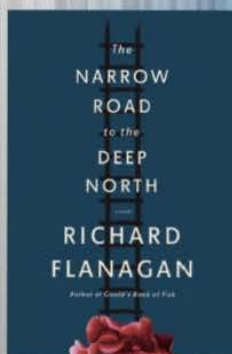
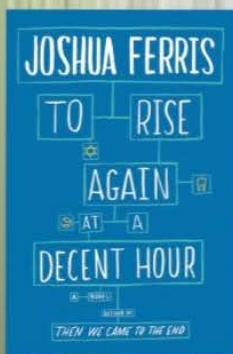
"Scheherazade, Lamprey, Former Lives" was what Habara recorded in his diary that day. He doubted that anyone who came across it would guess what the words meant.

Habara had met Scheherazade for the first time four months earlier. He had been transported to this house, in a provincial city north of Tokyo, and she had been assigned to him as his "support liaison." Since he couldn't go outside, her role was to buy food and other items he required and bring them to the house. She also tracked down whatever books and magazines he wished to read, and any CDs he wanted to listen to. In addition, she chose an assortment of DVDs—though he had a hard time accepting her criteria for selection on this front.

A week after he arrived, as if it were a self-evident next step, Scheherazade had taken him to bed. There had been condoms on the bedside table when he arrived. Habara guessed that sex was one of

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her assigned duties—**or** perhaps “support activities” was the term they used. Whatever the term, and whatever her motivation, he’d gone with the flow and accepted her proposal without hesitation.

Their sex was not exactly **obligatory**, but neither could it be said that their hearts were entirely in it. She seemed to be **on guard**, lest they grow too enthusiastic—just as a **driving instructor** might not want his students to get too **excited** about their driving. Yet, while the love-making was **not** what you’d call **passionate**, it wasn’t entirely **businesslike**, either. It may have begun as one of her **duties** (**or**, at least, as something that was strongly encouraged), but at a certain point she seemed—if only in a small way—to have **found** a kind of pleasure in it. Habara could tell this from certain subtle ways in which her body responded, a response that delighted him as well. After all, he was not a wild animal penned up in a cage but a human being equipped with his own range of emotions, and sex for the sole purpose of physical release was hardly **fulfilling**. Yet to what extent did Scheherazade see their sexual relationship as one of her duties, and how much **did** it belong to the sphere of her personal life? He couldn’t tell.

This was true of other things, too. Habara often found Scheherazade’s

feelings and intentions **hard** to read. For example, she wore plain cotton panties most of the time. The kind of panties he imagined housewives in their thirties usually wore—though this was pure conjecture, since he had no experience with housewives of that age. Some days, however, she turned up in colorful, frilly silk panties instead. Why she switched between the two he hadn’t a clue.

The other thing that puzzled him was the fact that their lovemaking and her storytelling were so closely linked, making it **hard** to tell where one ended and the other began. He had never experienced anything like this before: although he didn’t love her, and the sex was so-so, he was tightly bound to her physically. It was all rather confusing.

I was a teen-ager when I started breaking into empty houses,” she said one day as they lay in bed.

Habara—as was often the case when she told stories—found himself at a loss for words.

“Have you ever broken into somebody’s house?” she asked.

“I don’t think so,” he answered in a dry voice.

“Do it once and you get addicted.”

“But it’s illegal.”

“You betcha. It’s dangerous, but you still get hooked.”

Habara waited quietly for her to continue.

“The coolest thing about being in someone else’s house when there’s no one there,” Scheherazade said, “is how silent it is. Not a sound. It’s like the quietest place in the world. That’s how it felt to me, anyway. When I sat on the floor and kept absolutely **still**, my life as a lamprey came back to me. I told you about my being a lamprey in a former life, right?”

“Yes, you did.”

“It was just like that. My suckers stuck to a rock underwater and my body waving back and forth overhead, like the weeds around me. Everything so quiet. Though that may have been because I had no ears. On sunny days, light shot down from the surface like an arrow. Fish of all colors and shapes drifted by above. And my mind was empty of thoughts. Other than lamprey thoughts, that is. Those were cloudy but very pure. It was a wonderful place to be.”

The first time Scheherazade broke into someone’s house, she explained, she was a high-school junior and had a serious crush **on** a boy in her class. Though he wasn’t what you would call handsome, he was tall and clean-cut, a good student who played on the soccer team, and she was powerfully attracted to him. But he apparently liked another girl in their class and took no notice of Scheherazade. In fact, it was possible that he was unaware she existed. Nevertheless, she couldn’t get him out of her mind. Just seeing him made her breathless; sometimes she felt as if she were going to throw up. If she didn’t do something about it, she thought, she might go crazy. But confessing her love was out of the question.

One day, Scheherazade skipped school and went to the boy’s house. It was about a fifteen-minute walk from where she lived. She had researched his family situation beforehand. His mother taught Japanese language at a school in a neighboring town. His father, who had worked at a cement company, had been killed in a car accident some years earlier. His sister was a junior-high-school student. This meant that the house should be empty during the day.

Not surprisingly, the front door was locked. Scheherazade checked under the



“Will you buy us booze?”

mat for a key. Sure enough, there was one there. Quiet residential communities in provincial cities like theirs had little crime, and a spare key was often left under a mat or a potted plant.

To be safe, Scheherazade rang the bell, waited to make sure there was no answer, scanned the street in case she was being observed, opened the door, and entered. She locked the door again from the inside. Taking off her shoes, she put them in a plastic bag and stuck it in the knapsack on her back. Then she tiptoed up the stairs to the second floor.

His bedroom was there, as she had imagined. His bed was neatly made. On the bookshelf was a small stereo, with a few CDs. On the wall, there was a calendar with a photo of the Barcelona soccer team and, next to it, what looked like a team banner, but nothing else. No posters, no pictures. Just a cream-colored wall. A white curtain hung over the window. The room was tidy, everything in its place. No books strewn about, no clothes on the floor. The room testified to the meticulous personality of its inhabitant. Or else to a mother who kept a perfect house. Or both. It made Scheherazade nervous. Had the room been sloppier, no one would have noticed whatever little messes she might make. Yet, at the same time, the very cleanliness and simplicity of the room, its perfect order, made her happy. It was so like him.

Scheherazade lowered herself into the desk chair and sat there for a while. This is where he studies every night, she thought, her heart pounding. One by one, she picked up the implements on the desk, rolled them between her fingers, smelled them, held them to her lips. His pencils, his scissors, his ruler, his stapler—the most mundane objects became somehow radiant because they were his.

She opened his desk drawers and carefully checked their contents. The uppermost drawer was divided into compartments, each of which contained a small tray with a scattering of objects and souvenirs. The second drawer was largely occupied by notebooks for the classes he was taking at the moment, while the one on the bottom (the deepest drawer) was filled with an assortment of old papers, notebooks, and exams. Almost everything was connected either to school or to soccer. She'd hoped to come across something personal—a diary, perhaps, or

letters—but the desk held nothing of that sort. Not even a photograph. That struck Scheherazade as a bit unnatural. Did he have no life outside of school and soccer? Or had he carefully hidden everything of a private nature, where no one would come across it?

Still, just sitting at his desk and running her eyes over his handwriting moved Scheherazade beyond words. To calm herself, she got out of the chair and sat on the floor. She looked up at the ceiling. The quiet around her was absolute. In this way, she returned to the lampreys' world.

"So all you did," Habara asked, "was enter his room, go through his stuff, and sit on the floor?"

"No," Scheherazade said.

"There was more. I wanted something of his to take home. Something that he handled every day or that had been close to his body. But it couldn't be anything important that he would miss. So I stole one of his pencils."

"A single pencil?"

"Yes. One that he'd been using. But stealing wasn't enough. That would make it a straightforward case of burglary. The fact that I had done it would be lost. I was the Love Thief, after all."

The Love Thief? It sounded to Habara like the title of a silent film.

"So I decided to leave something behind in its place, a token of some sort. As proof that I had been there. A declaration that this was an exchange, not a simple theft. But what should it be? Nothing popped into my head. I searched my knapsack and my pockets, but I couldn't find anything appropriate. I kicked myself for not having thought to bring something suitable. Finally, I decided to leave a tampon behind. An unused one, of course, still in its plastic wrapper. My period was getting close, so I was carrying it around just to be safe. I hid it at the very back of the bottom drawer, where it would be difficult to find. That really turned me on. The fact that a tampon of mine was stashed away in his desk drawer. Maybe it was because I was so turned on that my period started almost immediately after that."

A tampon for a pencil, Habara thought.

Perhaps that was what he should write in his diary that day: "Love Thief, Pencil, Tampon." He'd like to see what they'd make of that!

"I was there in his home for only fifteen minutes or so. I couldn't stay any longer than that: it was my first experience of sneaking into a house, and I was scared that someone would turn up while I was there. I checked the street to make sure that the coast was clear, slipped out the door, locked it, and replaced the key under the mat. Then I went to school. Carrying his precious pencil."

Scheherazade fell silent. From the look of it, she had gone back in time and was picturing the various things that had happened next, one by one.

"That week was the happiest of my life," she said after a long pause. "I scribbled random things in my notebook with his pencil. I sniffed it, kissed it, rubbed my cheek with it, rolled it between my fingers. Sometimes I even stuck it in my mouth and sucked on it. Of course, it pained me that the more I wrote the shorter it got, but I couldn't help myself. If it got too short, I thought, I could always go back and get another. There was a whole bunch of used pencils in the pencil holder on his desk. He wouldn't have a clue that one was missing. And he probably still hadn't found the tampon tucked away in his drawer. That idea excited me no end—it gave me a strange ticklish sensation down below. It didn't bother me anymore that in the real world he never looked at me or showed that he was even aware of my existence. Because I secretly possessed something of his—a part of him, as it were."

Ten days later, Scheherazade skipped school again and paid a second visit to the boy's house. It was eleven o'clock in the morning. As before, she fished the key from under the mat and opened the door. Again, his room was in flawless order. First, she selected a pencil with a lot of use left in it and carefully placed it in her pencil case. Then she gingerly lay down on his bed, her hands clasped on her chest, and looked up at the ceiling. This was the bed where he slept every night. The thought made her heart beat faster, and she found it difficult to breathe



normally. Her lungs weren't filling with air and her throat was as dry as a bone, making each breath painful.

Scheherazade got off the bed, straightened the covers, and sat down on the floor, as she had on her first visit. She looked back up at the ceiling. I'm not quite ready for his bed, she told herself. That's still too much to handle.

This time, Scheherazade spent half an hour in the house. She pulled his notebooks from the drawer and glanced through them. She found a book report and read it. It was on "Kokoro," a novel by Soseki Natsume, that summer's reading assignment. His handwriting was beautiful, as one would expect from a straight-A student, not an error or an omission anywhere. The grade on it was Excellent. What else could it be? Any teacher confronted with penmanship that perfect would automatically give it an Excellent, whether he bothered to read a single line or not.

Scheherazade moved on to the chest of drawers, examining its contents in order. His underwear and socks. Shirts and pants. His soccer uniform. They were all neatly folded. Nothing stained or frayed. Had he done the folding? Or, more likely, had his mother done it for him? She felt a pang of jealousy toward the mother, who could do these things for him each and every day.

Scheherazade leaned over and sniffed the clothes in the drawers. They all smelled freshly laundered and redolent of the sun. She took out a plain gray T-shirt, unfolded it, and pressed it to her face. Might not a whiff of his sweat remain under the arms? But there was nothing. Nevertheless, she held it there for some time, inhaling through her nose. She wanted to keep the shirt for herself. But that would be too risky. His clothes were so meticulously arranged and maintained. He (or his mother) probably knew the exact number of T-shirts in the drawer. If one went missing, all hell might break loose. Scheherazade carefully refolded the T-shirt and returned it to its proper place. In its stead, she took a small badge, shaped like a soccer ball, that she found in one of the desk drawers. It seemed to date back to a team from his grade-school years. She doubted that he would miss it. At the very least, it would be some time before he noticed that it was gone. While she was at it, she

checked the bottom drawer of the desk for the tampon. It was still there.

Scheherazade tried to imagine what would happen if his mother discovered the tampon. What would she think? Would she demand that he explain what on earth a tampon was doing in his desk? Or would she keep her discovery a secret, turning her dark suspicions over and over in her mind? Scheherazade had no idea. But she decided to leave the tampon where it was. After all, it was her very first token.

To commemorate her second visit, Scheherazade left behind three strands of her hair. The night before, she had plucked them out, wrapped them in plastic, and sealed them in a tiny envelope. Now she took this envelope from her knapsack and slipped it into one of the old math notebooks in his drawer. The three hairs were straight and black, neither too long nor too short. No one would know whose they were without a DNA test, though they were clearly a girl's.

She left his house and went straight to school, arriving in time for her first afternoon class. Once again, she was content for about ten days. She felt that he had become that much more hers. But, as you might expect, this chain of events would not end without incident. For, as Scheherazade had said, sneaking into other people's homes is highly addictive.

At this point in the story Scheherazade glanced at the bedside clock and saw that it was 4:32 P.M. "Got to get going," she said, as if to herself. She hopped out of bed and put on her plain white panties, hooked her bra, slipped into her jeans, and pulled her dark-blue Nike sweatshirt over her head. Then she scrubbed her hands in the bathroom, ran a brush through her hair, and drove away in her blue Mazda.

Left alone with nothing in particular to do, Habara lay in bed and ruminated on the story she had just told him, savoring it bit by bit, like a cow chewing its cud. Where was it headed? he wondered. As with all her stories, he hadn't a clue. He found it difficult to picture Scheherazade as a high-school student. Was she slender then, free of the fiab she carried today? School uniform, white socks, her hair in braids?

He wasn't hungry yet, so he put off preparing his dinner and went back to the book he had been reading, only to find that he couldn't concentrate. The image of Scheherazade sneaking into her classmate's room and burying her face in his shirt was too fresh in his mind. He was impatient to hear what had happened next.

Scheherazade's next visit to the house was three days later, after the weekend had passed. As always, she came bearing large paper bags stuffed with provisions. She went through the food in the fridge, replacing everything that was past its expiration date, examined the canned and bottled goods in the cupboard, checked the supply of condiments and spices to see what was running low, and wrote up a shopping list. She put some bottles of Perrier in the fridge to chill. Finally, she stacked the new books and DVDs she had brought with her on the table.

"Is there something more you need or want?"

"Can't think of anything," Habara replied.

Then, as always, the two went to bed and had sex. After an appropriate amount of foreplay, he slipped on his condom, entered her, and, after an appropriate amount of time, ejaculated. After casting a professional eye on the contents of his condom, Scheherazade began the latest installment of her story.

As before, she felt happy and fulfilled for ten days after her second break-in. She tucked the soccer badge away in her pencil case and from time to time fingered it during class. She nibbled on the pencil she had taken and licked the lead. All the time she was thinking of his room. She thought of his desk, the bed where he slept, the chest of drawers packed with his clothes, his pristine white boxer shorts, and the tampon and three strands of hair she had hidden in his drawer.

She had lost all interest in schoolwork. In class, she either fiddled with the badge and the pencil or gave in to daydreams. When she went home, she was in no state of mind to tackle her homework. Scheherazade's grades had never been a problem. She wasn't a top student, but she was a serious girl who always did her assignments. So when her teacher called on her in class

and she was unable to give a proper answer, he was more puzzled than angry. Eventually, he summoned her to the staff room during the lunch break. "What's the problem?" he asked her. "Is anything bothering you?" She could only mumble something vague about not feeling well. Her secret was too weighty and dark to reveal to anyone—she had to bear it alone.

"I had to keep breaking into his house," Scheherazade said. "I was compelled to. As you can imagine, it was a very risky business. Even I could see that. Sooner or later, someone would find me there, and the police would be called. The idea scared me to death. But, once the ball was rolling, there was no way I could stop it. Ten days after my second 'visit,' I went there again. I had no choice. I felt that if I didn't I would go off the deep end. Looking back, I think I really was a little crazy."

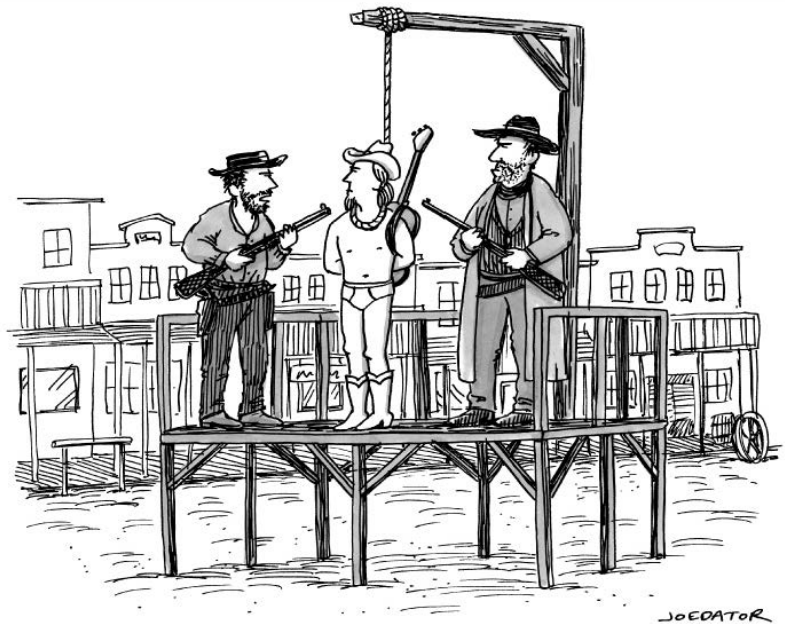
"Didn't it cause problems for you at school, skipping class so often?" Habara asked.

"My parents had their own business, so they were too busy to pay much attention to me. I'd never caused any problems up to then, never challenged their authority. So they figured a hands-off approach was best. Forging notes for school was a piece of cake. I explained to my homeroom teacher that I had a medical problem that required me to spend half a day at the hospital from time to time. Since the teachers were racking their brains over what to do about the kids who hadn't come to school in ages, they weren't too concerned about me taking half a day off every now and then."

Scheherazade shot a quick glance at the clock next to the bed before continuing.

"I got the key from under the mat and entered the house for a third time. It was as quiet as before—no, even quieter for some reason. It rattled me when the refrigerator turned on—it sounded like a huge beast sighing. The phone rang while I was there. The ringing was so loud and harsh that I thought my heart would stop. I was covered with sweat. No one picked up, of course, and it stopped after about ten rings. The house felt even quieter then."

Scheherazade spent a long time stretched out on his bed that day. This time her heart did not pound so wildly, and she was able to breathe normally. She could imagine him sleeping peacefully be-



"Because you're not naked, and you're not a cowboy, that's why!"

side her, even feel as if she were watching over him as he slept. She felt that, if she reached out, she could touch his muscular arm. He wasn't there next to her, of course. She was just lost in a haze of daydreams.

She felt an overpowering urge to smell him. Rising from the bed, she walked over to his chest of drawers, opened one, and examined the shirts inside. All had been washed and neatly folded. They were pristine, and free of odor, just like before.

Then an idea struck her. She raced down the stairs to the first floor. There, in the room beside the bath, she found the laundry hamper and removed the lid. Mixed together were the soiled clothes of the three family members—mother, daughter, and son. A day's worth, from the looks of it. Scheherazade extracted a piece of male clothing. A white crew-neck T-shirt. She took a whiff. The unmistakable scent of a young man. A mustiness she had smelled before, when her male classmates were close by. Not a scintillating odor, to be sure. But the fact that this smell was his brought Scheherazade unbounded joy. When she put her nose next to the armpits and inhaled, she felt as though she were in his embrace, his arms wrapped firmly about her.

T-shirt in hand, Scheherazade climbed the stairs to the second floor and lay on his bed once more. She buried her face in his shirt and greedily breathed in. Now she could feel a languid sensation in the lower part of her body. Her nipples were stiffening as well. Could her period be on the way? No, it was much too early. Was this sexual desire? If so, then what could she do about it? She had no idea. One thing was for sure, though—there was nothing to be done under these circumstances. Not here in his room, on his bed.

In the end, Scheherazade decided to take the shirt home with her. It was risky, for sure. His mother was likely to figure out that a shirt was missing. Even if she didn't realize that it had been stolen, she would still wonder where it had gone. Any woman who kept her house so spotless was bound to be a neat freak of the first order. When something went missing, she would search the house from top to bottom, like a police dog, until she found it. Undoubtedly, she would uncover the traces of Scheherazade in her precious son's room. But, even as Scheherazade understood this, she didn't want to part with the shirt. Her brain was powerless to persuade her heart.

Instead, she began thinking about

what to leave behind. Her panties seemed like the best choice. They were of an ordinary sort, simple, relatively new, and fresh that morning. She could hide them at the very back of his closet. Could there be anything more appropriate to leave in exchange? But, when she took them off, the crotch was damp. I guess this comes from desire, too, she thought. It would hardly do to leave something tainted by her lust in his room. She would only be degrading herself. She slipped them back on and began to think about what else to leave.

Scheherazade broke off her story. For a long time, she didn't say a word. She lay there breathing quietly with her eyes closed. Beside her, Habara followed suit, waiting for her to resume.

At last, she opened her eyes and spoke. "Hey, Mr. Habara," she said. It was the first time she had addressed him by name.

Habara looked at her.

"Do you think we could do it one more time?"

"I think I could manage that," he said.

So they made love again. This time, though, was very different from the time before. Violent, passionate, and drawn out. Her climax at the end was unmistakable. A series of powerful spasms that left her trembling. Even her face was transformed. For Habara, it was like catching a brief glimpse of Scheherazade in her youth: the woman in his arms was now a troubled seventeen-year-old girl who had somehow become trapped in the body of a thirty-five-year-old housewife. Habara could feel her in there, her eyes closed, her body quivering, innocently inhaling the aroma of a boy's sweaty T-shirt.

This time, Scheherazade did not tell him a story after sex. Nor did she check the contents of his condom. They lay there quietly next to each other. Her eyes were wide open, and she was staring at the ceiling. Like a lamprey gazing up at the bright surface of the water. How wonderful it would be, Habara thought, if he, too, could inhabit another time or space—leave this single, clearly defined human being named Nobutaka Habara behind and become a nameless lamprey.

He pictured himself and Scheherazade side by side, their suckers fastened to a rock, their bodies waving in the current, eying the surface as they waited for a fat trout to swim smugly by.

"So what did you leave in exchange for the shirt?" Habara broke the silence.

She did not reply immediately.

"Nothing," she said at last. "Nothing I had brought along could come close to that shirt with his odor. So I just took it and sneaked out. That was when I became a burglar, pure and simple."

When, twelve days later, Scheherazade went back to the boy's house for the fourth time, there was a new lock on the front door. Its gold color gleamed in the midday sun, as if to boast of its great sturdiness. And there was no key hidden under the mat. Clearly, his mother's suspicions had been aroused by the missing shirt. She must have searched high and low, coming across other signs that told of something strange going on in her house. Her instincts had been unerring, her reaction swift.

Scheherazade was, of course, disappointed by this development, but at the same time she felt relieved. It was as if someone had stepped behind her and removed a great weight from her shoulders. This means I don't have to go on breaking into his house, she thought. There was no doubt that, had the lock not been changed, her invasions would have gone on indefinitely. Nor was there any doubt that her actions would have escalated with each visit. Eventually, a member of the family would have shown up while she was on the second floor. There would have been no avenue of escape. No way to talk herself out of her predicament. This was the future that had been waiting for her, sooner or later, and the outcome would have been devastating. Now she had dodged it. Perhaps she should thank his mother—though she had never met the woman—for having eyes like a hawk.

Scheherazade inhaled the aroma of his T-shirt each night before she went to bed. She slept with it next to her. She would wrap it in paper and hide it before she left for school in the morning. Then, after dinner, she would pull it out to caress and sniff. She worried that the odor might fade as the days went by, but that didn't happen. The smell of his sweat had permeated the shirt for good.



"I hate check writing, but, hey, it pays the bills."

Now that further break-ins were out of the question, Scheherazade's state of mind slowly began to return to normal. She daydreamed less in class, and her teacher's words began to register. Nevertheless, her chief focus was not on her teacher's voice but on her classmate's behavior. She kept her eye discreetly trained on him, trying to detect a change, any indication at all that he might be nervous about something. But he acted exactly the same as always. He threw his head back and laughed as unaffectedly as ever, and answered promptly when called upon. He shouted as loudly in soccer practice and got just as sweaty. She could see no trace of anything out of the ordinary—just an upright young man, leading a seemingly unclouded existence.

Still, Scheherazade knew of one shadow that was hanging over him. Or something close to that. No one else knew, in all likelihood. Just her (and, come to think of it, possibly his mother). On her third break-in, she had come across a number of pornographic magazines cleverly concealed in the farthest recesses of his closet. They were full of pictures of naked women, spreading their legs and offering generous views of their genitals. Some pictures portrayed the act of sex: men inserted rodlike penises into female bodies in the most unnatural of positions. Scheherazade had never laid eyes on photographs like these before. She sat at his desk and flipped slowly through the magazines, studying each photo with great interest. She guessed that he masturbated while viewing them. But the idea did not strike her as especially repulsive. She accepted masturbation as a perfectly normal activity. All those sperm had to go somewhere, just as girls had to have periods. In other words, he was a typical teen-ager. Neither hero nor saint. She found that knowledge something of a relief.

When my break-ins stopped, my passion for him began to cool. It was gradual, like the tide ebbing from a long, sloping beach. Somehow or other, I found myself smelling his shirt less often and spending less time caressing his pencil and badge. The fever was passing. What I had contracted was not something like sickness but the real thing. As long as it lasted, I couldn't think straight. Maybe everybody goes through a crazy period like that at one time or another. Or maybe it was something that happened

only to me. How about you? Did you ever have an experience like that?"

Habara tried to remember, but drew a blank. "No, nothing that extreme, I don't think," he said.

Scheherazade looked somewhat disappointed by his answer.

"Anyway, I forgot all about him once I graduated. So quickly and easily, it was weird. What was it about him that had made the seventeen-year-old me fall so hard? Try as I might, I couldn't remember.



Life is strange, isn't it? You can be totally entranced by something one minute, be willing to sacrifice everything to make it yours, but then a little time passes, or your perspective changes a bit, and all of a sudden you're shocked at how its glow has faded. What was I looking at? you wonder. So that's the story of my 'breaking-and-entering' period."

She made it sound like Picasso's Blue Period, Habara thought. But he understood what she was trying to convey.

She glanced at the clock next to the bed. It was almost time for her to leave.

"To tell the truth," she said finally, "the story doesn't end there. A few years later, when I was in my second year of nursing school, a strange stroke of fate brought us together again. His mother played a big role in it; in fact, there was something spooky about the whole thing—it was like one of those old ghost stories. Events took a rather unbelievable course. Would you like to hear about it?"

"I'd love to," Habara said.

"It had better wait till my next visit," Scheherazade said. "It's getting late. I've got to head home and fix dinner."

She got out of bed and put on her clothes—panties, stockings, camisole, and, finally, her skirt and blouse. Habara casually watched her movements from the bed. It struck him that the way women put on their clothes could be even more interesting than the way they took them off.

"Any books in particular you'd like

me to pick up?" she asked, on her way out the door.

"No, nothing I can think of," he answered. What he really wanted, he thought, was for her to tell him the rest of her story, but he didn't put that into words. Doing so might jeopardize his chances of ever hearing it.

Habara went to bed early that night and thought about Scheherazade. Perhaps he would never see her again. That worried him. The possibility was just too real. Nothing of a personal nature—no vow, no implicit understanding—held them together. Theirs was a chance relationship created by someone else, and might be terminated on that person's whim. In other words, they were attached by a slender thread. It was likely—no, certain—that that thread would eventually be broken and all the strange and unfamiliar tales she might have told would be lost to him. The only question was when.

It was also possible that he would, at some point, be deprived of his freedom entirely, in which case not only Scheherazade but all women would disappear from his life. Never again would he be able to enter the warm moistness of their bodies. Never again would he feel them quiver in response. Perhaps an even more distressing prospect for Habara than the cessation of sexual activity, however, was the loss of the moments of shared intimacy. What his time spent with women offered was the opportunity to be embraced by reality, on the one hand, while negating it entirely on the other. That was something Scheherazade had provided in abundance—indeed, her gift was inexhaustible. The prospect of losing that made him saddest of all.

Habara closed his eyes and stopped thinking of Scheherazade. Instead, he thought of lampreys. Of jawless lampreys fastened to rocks, hiding among the waterweeds, swaying back and forth in the current. He imagined that he was one of them, waiting for a trout to appear. But no trout passed by, no matter how long he waited. Not a fat one, not a skinny one, no trout at all. Eventually the sun went down, and his world was enfolded in darkness. ♦

(Translated, from the Japanese, by Ted Goossen.)

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Haruki Murakami on "Scheherazade."