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# CONFESSIONS OF A SHINAGAWA MONKEY

By Haruki Murakami

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Illustration by Hisashi Okawa

I met that elderly monkey in a small Japanese-style inn in a hot-springs town in Gunma Prefecture, some five years ago. It was a rustic or, more precisely, decrepit inn, barely hanging on, where I just happened to spend a night.

I was travelling around, wherever the spirit led me, and it was already past 7 P.M. when I arrived at the hot-springs town and got off the train. Autumn was nearly over, the sun had long since set, and the place was enveloped in that special navy-blue darkness particular to mountainous areas. A cold, biting wind blew down from the peaks, sending fist-size leaves rustling along the street.

I walked through the center of the town in search of a place to stay, but none of the decent inns would take in guests after the dinner hour had passed. I stopped at five or six places, but they all turned me down flat. Finally, in a deserted area outside town, I came across an inn that would take me. It was a desolate-looking, ramshackle place, almost a flophouse. It had seen a lot of years go by, but it had none of the quaint appeal you might expect in an old inn. Fittings here and there were ever so slightly slanted, as if

slapdash repairs had been made that didn't mesh with the rest of the place. I doubted it would make it through the next earthquake, and I could only hope that no temblor would hit while I was there.

The inn didn't serve dinner, but breakfast was included, and the rate for one night was incredibly cheap. Inside the entrance was a plain reception desk, behind which sat a completely hairless old man—devoid of even eyebrows—who took my payment for one night in advance. The lack of eyebrows made the old man's largish eyes seem to glisten bizarrely, glaringly. On a cushion on the floor beside him, a big brown cat, equally ancient, was sacked out, sound asleep. Something must have been wrong with its nose, for it snored louder than any cat I'd ever heard. Occasionally the rhythm of its snores fitfully missed a beat. Everything in this inn seemed to be old and falling apart.

The room I was shown to was cramped, like the storage area where one keeps futon bedding; the ceiling light was dim, and the flooring under the tatami creaked ominously with each step. But it was too late to be particular. I told myself I should be happy to have a roof over my head and a futon to sleep on.

I put my one piece of luggage, a large shoulder bag, down on the floor and set off back to town. (This wasn't exactly the type of room I wanted to lounge around in.) I went into a nearby soba-noodle shop and had a simple dinner. It was that or nothing, since there were no other restaurants open. I had a beer, some bar snacks, and some hot soba. The soba was mediocre, the soup lukewarm, but, again, I wasn't about to complain. It beat going to bed on an empty stomach. After I left the soba shop, I thought I'd buy some snacks and a small bottle of whiskey, but I couldn't find a convenience store. It was after eight, and the only places open were the shooting-gallery game centers typically found in hot-springs towns. So I hoofed it back to the inn, changed into a yukata robe, and went downstairs to take a bath.

Compared with the shabby building and facilities, the hot-springs bath at the inn was surprisingly wonderful. The steaming water was a thick green color, not diluted, the sulfur odor more pungent than anything I'd ever experienced, and I soaked there, warming myself to the bone. There were no other bathers (I had no idea if there were even any other guests at the inn), and I was able to enjoy a long, leisurely bath. After a while, I felt a little light-headed and got out to cool off, then got back into the tub. Maybe this decrepit-looking inn was a good choice after all, I thought. It was certainly more peaceful than bathing with some noisy tour group, the way you do in the larger inns.

I was soaking in the bath for the third time when the monkey slid the glass door open with a clatter and came inside. "Excuse me," he said in a low voice. It took me a while to realize that he was a monkey. All the thick hot water had left me a bit dazed, and I'd never expected to hear a monkey speak, so I couldn't immediately make the connection between what I was seeing and the fact that this was an actual monkey. The monkey closed the door behind him, straightened out the little buckets that lay strewn about, and stuck a thermometer into the bath to check the temperature. He gazed intently at the dial on the thermometer, his eyes narrowed, for all the world like a bacteriologist isolating some new strain of pathogen.

"How is the bath?" the monkey asked me.

"It's very nice. Thank you," I said. My voice reverberated densely, softly, in the steam. It sounded almost mythological, not like my own voice but, rather, like an echo from the past returning from deep in the forest. And that echo was . . . hold on a second. What was a *monkey* doing here? And why was he speaking my language?

"Shall I scrub your back for you?" the monkey asked, his voice still low. He had the clear, alluring voice of a baritone in a doo-wop group. Not at all what you would expect. But nothing was odd about his voice: if you closed your eyes and listened, you'd think it was an ordinary person speaking.

"Yes, thanks," I replied. It wasn't as if I'd been sitting there hoping that someone would come and scrub my back, but if I turned him down I was afraid he might think I was opposed to having a monkey do it. I figured it was a kind offer on his part, and I certainly didn't want to hurt his feelings. So I slowly got up out of the tub and plunked myself down on a little wooden platform, with my back to the monkey.

The monkey didn't have any clothes on. Which, of course, is usually the case for a monkey, so it didn't strike me as odd. He seemed to be fairly old; he had a lot of white in his hair. He brought over a small towel, rubbed soap on it, and with a practiced hand gave my back a good scrubbing.

"It's got very cold these days, hasn't it?" the monkey remarked.

"That it has."

"Before long this place will be covered in snow. And then they'll have to shovel snow from the roofs, which is no easy task, believe me."

There was a brief pause, and I jumped in. "So you can speak human language?"

"I can indeed," the monkey replied briskly. He was probably asked that a lot. "I was raised by humans from an early age, and before I knew it I was able to speak. I lived for quite a long time in Tokyo, in Shinagawa."

"What part of Shinagawa?"

"Around Gotenyama."

"That's a nice area."

"Yes, as you know, it's a very pleasant place to live. Nearby is the Gotenyama Garden, and I enjoyed the natural scenery there."

Our conversation paused at this point. The monkey continued firmly scrubbing my back (which felt great), and all the while I tried to puzzle things out rationally. A monkey raised in Shinagawa? The Gotenyama Garden? And such a fluent speaker? How was that possible? This was a *monkey*, for goodness' sake. A monkey, and nothing else.

"I live in Minato-ku," I said, a basically meaningless statement.

"We were almost neighbors, then," the monkey said in a friendly tone.

"What kind of person raised you in Shinagawa?" I asked.

"My master was a college professor. He specialized in physics, and held a chair at Tokyo Gakugei University."

"Quite an intellectual, then."

"He certainly was. He loved music more than anything, particularly the music of Bruckner and Richard Strauss. Thanks to which, I developed a fondness for that music myself. I heard it all the time. Picked up a knowledge of it without even realizing it, you could say."

"You enjoy Bruckner?"

"Yes. His Seventh Symphony. I always find the third movement particularly uplifting."

"I often listen to his Ninth Symphony," I chimed in. Another pretty meaningless statement.

"Yes, that's truly lovely music," the monkey said.

"So that professor taught you language?"

"He did. He didn't have any children, and, perhaps to compensate for that, he trained me fairly strictly whenever he had time. He was very patient, a person who valued order and regularity above all. He was a serious person whose favorite saying was that the repetition of accurate facts was the true road to wisdom. His wife was a quiet, sweet person, always kind to me. They got along well, and I hesitate to mention this to an outsider, but, believe me, their nighttime activities could be quite intense."

"Really," I said.

The monkey finally finished scrubbing my back. "Thanks for your patience," he said, and bowed his head.

"Thank *you*," I said. "It really felt good. So, do you work here at this inn?"

"I do. They've been kind enough to let me work here. The larger, more upscale inns would never hire a monkey. But they're always short-handed around here and, if you can make yourself useful, they don't care if you're a monkey or whatever. For a monkey, the pay is minimal, and they let me work only where I can stay mostly out of sight. Straightening up the bath area, cleaning, things of that sort. Most guests would be shocked if a monkey served them tea and so on. Working in the kitchen is out, too, since I'd run into issues with the food-sanitation law."

"Have you been working here for a long time?" I asked.

"It's been about three years."

"But you must have gone through all sorts of things before you settled down here?"

The monkey gave a quick nod. "Very true."

I hesitated, but then came out and asked him, "If you don't mind, could you tell me more about your background?"

The monkey considered this, and then said, "Yes, that would be fine. It might not be as interesting as you expect, but I'm off work at ten and I could stop by your room after that. Would that be convenient?"

"Certainly," I replied. "I'd be grateful if you could bring some beer then."

"Understood. Some cold beers it is. Would Sapporo be all right?"



"That would be fine. So, you drink beer?"

"A little bit, yes."

"Then please bring two large bottles."

"Of course. If I understand correctly, you are staying in the Araiso Suite, on the second floor?"

"That's right," I said.

"It's a little strange, though, don't you think?" the monkey said. "An inn in the mountains with a room named *araiso*—'rugged shore.' " He chuckled. I'd never in my life heard a monkey laugh. But I guess monkeys do laugh, and even cry, at times. It shouldn't have surprised me, given that he was talking.

"By the way, do you have a name?" I asked.

"No, no name, per se. But everyone calls me the Shinagawa Monkey."

The monkey slid open the glass door, turned, and gave a polite bow, then slowly closed the door.

**I**t was a little past ten when the monkey came to the Araiso Suite, bearing a tray with two large bottles of beer. In addition to the beer, the tray held a bottle opener, two glasses, and some snacks: dried, seasoned squid and a bag of *kakipi*—rice crackers with peanuts. Typical bar snacks. This was one attentive monkey.

The monkey was dressed now, in gray sweatpants and a thick, long-sleeved shirt with "I♥NY" printed on it, probably some kid's hand-me-downs.

There was no table in the room, so we sat, side by side, on some thin zabuton cushions, and leaned back against the wall. The monkey used the opener to pop the cap off one of the beers and poured out two glasses. Silently we clinked our glasses together in a little toast.

"Thanks for the drinks," the monkey said, and happily gulped the cold beer. I drank some as well. Honestly, it felt odd to be seated next to a monkey, sharing a beer, but I guess you get used to it.

"A beer after work can't be beat," the monkey said, wiping his mouth with the hairy back of his hand. "But, for a monkey, the opportunities to have a beer like this are few and far between."

"Do you live here at the inn?"

"Yes, there's a room, sort of an attic, where they let me sleep. There are mice from time to time, so it's hard to relax there, but I'm a monkey, so I have to be thankful to have a bed to sleep in and three square meals a day. Not that it's paradise or anything."

The monkey had finished his first glass, so I poured him another.

"Much obliged," he said politely.

"Have you lived not just with humans but with your own kind? With other monkeys, I mean?" I asked. There were so many things I wanted to ask him.

"Yes, several times," the monkey answered, his face clouding over slightly. The wrinkles beside his eyes formed deep folds. "For various reasons, I was driven out, forcibly, from Shinagawa and released in Takasakiyama, the area down south that's famous for its monkey park. I thought at first that I could live peaceably there, but things didn't work out that way. The other monkeys were my dear comrades, don't get me wrong, but, having been raised in a human household, by the professor and his wife, I just couldn't express my feelings well to them. We had little in common, and communication wasn't easy. 'You talk funny,' they told me, and they sort of mocked me and bullied me. The female monkeys would giggle when they looked at me. Monkeys are extremely sensitive to the most minute differences. They found the way I acted comical, and it annoyed them, irritated them sometimes. It got harder for me to stay there, so eventually I went off on my own. Became a rogue monkey, in other words."

"It must have been lonely for you."

"Indeed it was. Nobody protected me, and I had to scrounge for food on my own and somehow survive. But the worst thing was not having anyone to communicate with. I couldn't talk with monkeys or with humans. Isolation like that is heartrending. Takasakiyama is full of human visitors, but I couldn't just start up a conversation with whomever I happened to come across. Do that and there'd be hell to pay. The upshot was that I wound up sort of neither here nor there, not part of human society, not part of the monkeys' world. It was a harrowing existence."

"And you couldn't listen to Bruckner, either."

"True. That's not part of my life now," the Shinagawa Monkey said, and drank some more beer. I studied his face, but, since it was red to begin with, I didn't notice it turning any redder. I figured this monkey could hold his liquor. Or maybe with monkeys you can't tell from their faces when they're drunk.

"The other thing that really tormented me was relations with females."

"I see," I said. "And by 'relations' with females you mean—?"

"In short, I didn't feel a speck of sexual desire for female monkeys. I had a lot of opportunities to be with them, but never really felt like it."

"So female monkeys didn't turn you on, even though you're a monkey yourself?"

"Yes. That's exactly right. It's embarrassing, but, honestly, I could only love human females."

I was silent and drained my glass of beer. I opened the bag of crunchy snacks and grabbed a handful. "That could lead to some real problems, I would think."

"Yes, real problems, indeed. Me being a monkey, after all, there was no way I could expect human females to respond to my desires. Plus, it runs counter to genetics."

I waited for him to go on. The monkey rubbed hard behind his ear and finally continued.

"So I had to find another method of ridding myself of my unfulfilled desires."

"What do you mean by 'another method'?"

The monkey frowned deeply. His red face turned a bit darker.

"You may not believe me," the monkey said. "You probably won't believe me, I should say. But, from a certain point on, I started stealing the names of the women I fell for."

"Stealing their names?"

"Correct. I'm not sure why, but I seem to have been born with a special talent for it. If I feel like it, I can steal somebody's name and make it my own."

A wave of confusion hit me.

"I'm not sure I get it," I said. "When you say you steal people's names, does that mean that they completely lose their name?"

"No. They don't totally lose their name. I steal part of their name, a fragment. But when I take that part the name gets less substantial, lighter than before. Like when the sun clouds over and your shadow on the ground gets that much paler. And, depending on the person, they might not be aware of the loss. They just have a sense that something's a little off."

"But some do clearly realize it, right? That a part of their name has been stolen?"

"Yes, of course. Sometimes they find they can't remember their name. Quite inconvenient, a real bother, as you might imagine. And they may not even recognize their name for what it is. In some cases, they suffer through something close to an identity crisis. And it's all my fault, since I stole that person's name. I feel very sorry about that. I often feel the weight of a guilty conscience bearing down on me. I know it's wrong, yet I can't stop myself. I'm not trying to excuse my actions, but my dopamine levels force me to do it. Like there's a voice telling me, 'Hey, go ahead, steal the name. It's not like it's illegal or anything.' "

I folded my arms and studied the monkey. Dopamine? Finally, I spoke up. "And the names you steal are only those of the women you love or sexually desire. Do I have that right?"

"Exactly. I don't randomly steal just anybody's name."

"How many names have you stolen?"

With a serious expression, the monkey totalled it up on his fingers. As he counted, he was muttering something. He looked up.

"Seven in all. I stole seven women's names."

Was this a lot, or not so many? Who could say?

"So how do you do it?" I asked. "If you don't mind telling me?"

"It's mostly by will power. Power of concentration, psychic energy. But that's not enough. I need something with the person's name actually written on it. An I.D. is ideal. A driver's license, student I.D., insurance card, or passport. Things of this sort. A nametag will work, too. Anyway, I need to get hold of an actual object like one of those. Usually, stealing is the only way. I'm pretty skilled at sneaking into people's rooms when they're out. I scout around for something with their name on it and take it."

"So you use that object with the woman's name on it, along with your will power, to steal a name?"

"Precisely. I stare at the name that's written there for a long time, focussing my emotions, absorbing the name of the person I love. It takes a lot of time and is mentally and physically exhausting. I get completely engrossed in it, and somehow a part of the woman becomes a part of me. And my affection and my desire, which until then had no outlet, are safely satisfied."

"So there's nothing physical involved?"

The monkey nodded sharply. "I know I'm just a lowly monkey, but I never do anything unseemly. I make the name of the woman I love a part of me—that's plenty for me. I agree it's a bit perverted, but it's also a completely pure, platonic act. I simply possess a great love for that name inside me, secretly. Like a gentle breeze wafting over a meadow."

"Hmm," I said, impressed. "I guess you could even call that the ultimate form of romantic love."

"Agreed. But it's also the ultimate form of loneliness. Like two sides of a coin. The two extremes are stuck together and can never be separated."

Our conversation came to a halt here, and the monkey and I silently drank our beer, snacking on the *kakipi* and the dried squid.

"Have you stolen anyone's name recently?" I asked.

The monkey shook his head. He grabbed some of the stiff hair on his arm, as if making sure that he was, indeed, an actual monkey. "No, I haven't stolen anyone's name recently. After I came to this town, I made up my mind to put that kind of misconduct behind me. Thanks to which, the soul of this little monkey has found a measure of peace. I treasure the names of the seven women in my heart and live a quiet, tranquil life."

"I'm glad to hear it," I said.

"I know this is quite forward of me, but I was wondering if you'd be kind enough to allow me to give my own opinion on the subject of love."

"Of course," I said.

The monkey blinked widely several times. His thick eyelashes waved up and down like palm fronds in the breeze. He took a deep, slow breath, the kind of breath a long jumper takes before he starts his approach run.

"I believe that love is the indispensable fuel for us to go on living. Someday that love may end. Or it may never amount to anything. But even if love fades away, even if it's unrequited, you can still hold on to the memory of having loved someone, of having fallen in love with someone. And that's a valuable source of warmth. Without that heat source, a person's heart—and a monkey's heart, too—would turn into a bitterly cold, barren wasteland. A place where not a ray of sunlight falls, where the wildflowers of peace, the trees of hope, have no chance to grow. Here in my heart, I treasure the names of those seven beautiful women I loved." The monkey laid a palm on his hairy chest. "I plan to use these memories as my own little fuel source to burn on cold nights, to keep me warm as I live out what's left of my own personal life."

The monkey chuckled again, and lightly shook his head a few times.

"That's a strange way of putting it, isn't it?" he said. "*Personal* life. Given that I'm a monkey, not a *person*. Hee hee!"

It was eleven-thirty when we finally finished drinking the two large bottles of beer. "I should be going," the monkey said. "I got to feeling so good I ran off at the mouth, I'm afraid. My apologies."

"No, I found it an interesting story," I said. Maybe "interesting" wasn't the right word, though. I mean, sharing a beer and chatting with a monkey was a pretty unusual experience in and of itself. Add to that the fact that this particular monkey loved Bruckner and stole women's names because he was driven to by sexual desire (or perhaps love), and "interesting" didn't begin to describe it. It was the most incredible thing I'd ever heard. But I didn't want to stir up the monkey's emotions any more than was necessary, so I chose this more calming, neutral word.

As we said goodbye, I handed the monkey a thousand-yen bill as a tip. "It's not much," I said, "but please buy yourself something good to eat."

At first the monkey refused, but I insisted and he finally accepted it. He folded the bill and carefully slipped it into the pocket of his sweatpants.

"It's very kind of you," he said. "You've listened to my absurd life story, treated me to beer, and now this generous gesture. I can't tell you how much I appreciate it."

The monkey put the empty beer bottles and glasses on the tray and carried it out of the room.

The next morning, I checked out of the inn and went back to Tokyo. At the front desk, the creepy old man with no hair or eyebrows was nowhere to be seen, nor was the aged cat with the nose issues. Instead, there was a fat, surly middle-aged woman, and when I said I'd like to pay the additional charges for last night's bottles of beer she said, emphatically, that there were no incidental charges on my bill. "All we have here is canned beer from the vending machine," she insisted. "We never provide bottled beer."

Once again I was confused. I felt as though bits of reality and unreality were randomly changing places. But I had definitely shared two large bottles of Sapporo beer with the monkey as I listened to his life story.

I was going to bring up the monkey with the middle-aged woman, but decided against it. Maybe the monkey didn't really exist, and it had all been an illusion, the product of a brain pickled by long soaks in the hot springs. Or maybe what I saw was a strange, realistic dream. If I came out with something like "You have an employee who's an elderly monkey who can speak, right?" things might go sideways, and, worst-case scenario, she'd think I was insane. Chances were that the monkey was an off-the-books employee, and the inn couldn't acknowledge him publicly for fear of alerting the tax office or the health department.

On the train ride home, I mentally replayed everything the monkey had told me. I jotted down all the details, as best as I could remember them, in a notebook that I used for work, thinking that when I got back to Tokyo I'd write the whole thing out from start to finish.

If the monkey really *did* exist—and that was the only way I could see it—I wasn't at all sure how much I should accept of what he had told me over beer. It was hard to judge his story fairly. Was it really possible to steal women's names and possess them yourself? Was this some unique ability that only the Shinagawa Monkey had been given? Maybe the monkey was a pathological liar. Who

could say? Naturally, I'd never heard of a monkey with mythomania before, but, if a monkey could speak a human language as skillfully as he did, it wouldn't be beyond the realm of possibility for him to also be a habitual liar.

I'd interviewed numerous people as part of my work, and had become pretty good at sniffing out who could be believed and who couldn't. When someone talks for a while, you can pick up certain subtle hints and signals and get an intuitive sense of whether or not the person is believable. And I just didn't get the feeling that what the Shinagawa Monkey had told me was a made-up story. The look in his eyes and his expression, the way he pondered things every once in a while, his pauses, gestures, the way he'd get stuck for words—nothing about it seemed artificial or forced. And, above all, there was the total, even painful honesty of his confession.

My relaxed solo journey over, I returned to the whirlwind routine of the city. Even when I don't have any major work-related assignments, somehow, as I get older, I find myself busier than ever. And time seems to steadily speed up. In the end I never told anyone about the Shinagawa Monkey, or wrote anything about him. Why try if no one would believe me? Unless I could provide proof—proof, that is, that the monkey actually existed—people would just say that I was "making stuff up again." And if I wrote about him as fiction the story would lack a clear focus or point. I could well imagine my editor looking puzzled and saying, "I hesitate to ask, since you're the author, but what is the theme of this story supposed to be?"

Theme? Can't say there is one. It's just about an old monkey who speaks human language, who scrubs guests' backs in the hot springs in a tiny town in Gunma Prefecture, who enjoys cold beer, falls in love with human women, and steals their names. Where's the theme in that? Or the moral?

And, as time passed, the memory of that hot-springs town began to fade. No matter how vivid memories may be, they can't conquer time.

**B**ut now, five years later, I've decided to write about it, based on the notes I scribbled down back then. All because something happened recently that got me thinking. If that incident hadn't taken place, I might well not be writing this.

I had a work-related appointment in the coffee lounge of a hotel in Akasaka. The person I was meeting was the editor of a travel magazine. A very attractive woman, thirty or so, petite, with long hair, a lovely complexion, and large, fetching eyes. She was an able editor. And still single. We'd worked together quite a few times, and got along well. After we'd taken care of work, we sat back and chatted over coffee for a while.

Her cell phone rang and she looked at me apologetically. I motioned to her to take the call. She checked the incoming number and answered it. It seemed to be about some reservation she'd made. At a restaurant, maybe, or a hotel, or a flight. Something along those lines. She talked for a while, checking her pocket planner, and then shot me a troubled look.

"I'm very sorry," she said to me in a small voice, her hand covering the phone. "This is a weird question, I know, but what's my name?"

I gasped, but, as casually as I could, I told her her full name. She nodded and relayed the information to the person on the other end of the line. Then she hung up and apologized to me again.

"I'm so sorry about that. All of a sudden I just couldn't remember my name. I'm so embarrassed."

"Does that happen sometimes?" I asked.

She seemed to hesitate, but finally nodded. "Yes, it's happening a lot these days. I just can't recall my name. It's like I've blacked out or something."

"Do you forget other things, too? Like you can't remember your birthday or your telephone number or a PIN number?"

She shook her head decisively. "No, not at all. I've always had a good memory. I know all my friends' birthdays by heart. I haven't forgotten anyone else's name, not even once. But, still, sometimes I can't remember my own name. I can't figure it out. After a couple of minutes, my memory comes back, but that couple of minutes is totally inconvenient, and I panic. It's like I'm not myself anymore. Do you think it's a sign of early-onset Alzheimer's?"

I sighed. "Medically, I don't know, but when did it start, you suddenly forgetting your name?"

She squinted and thought about it. "About half a year ago, I think. I remember it was when I went to enjoy the cherry blossoms. That was the first time."

"This might be an odd thing to ask, but did you lose anything at that time? Some sort of I.D., like a driver's license, a passport, an insurance card?"

She pursed her lips, lost in thought for a while, then replied. "You know, now that you mention it, I did lose my driver's license back then. It was lunchtime and I was sitting on a park bench, taking a break, and I put my handbag right next to me on the bench. I was redoing my lipstick with my compact, and, when I looked back, the handbag was gone. I couldn't understand it. I'd looked away for only a second, and I didn't sense anyone nearby or hear any footsteps. I looked around, but I was alone. It was a quiet park, and I'm sure if somebody had come to steal my bag I would have noticed it."

I waited for her to go on.

"But that's not all that was strange. That same afternoon I got a call from the police, saying that my handbag had been found. It had been set outside a small police station near the park. The cash was still inside, as were my credit cards, A.T.M. card, and cell phone. All there, untouched. Only my driver's license was gone. The policeman was quite surprised. Who doesn't take the cash, only the license, and leaves the bag right outside a police station?"

I sighed quietly, but said nothing.

"This was the end of March. Right away, I went to the Motor Vehicles office in Samezu and had them issue a new license. The whole incident was pretty weird, but fortunately there wasn't any real harm done."

"Samezu is in Shinagawa, isn't it?"

"That's right. It's in Higashioi. My company's in Takanawa, so it's a quick taxi ride," she said. She gave me a doubtful look. "Do you think there's a connection? Between me not remembering my name and losing my license?"

I quickly shook my head. I couldn't exactly bring up the story of the Shinagawa Monkey.

"No, I don't think there's a connection," I said. "It just sort of popped into my head. Since it involves your name."

She looked unconvinced. I knew it was risky, but there was one more vital question I had to ask.

"By the way, have you seen any monkeys lately?"

"Monkeys?" she asked. "You mean the animals?"

"Yes, real live monkeys," I said.

She shook her head. "I don't think I've seen a monkey for years. Not in a zoo, or anywhere else."

Was the Shinagawa Monkey back to his old tricks? Or was another monkey using his M.O. to commit the same crime? (A copy monkey?) Or was something else, other than a monkey, doing this?

I really didn't want to think that the Shinagawa Monkey was back to stealing names. He'd told me, quite matter-of-factly, that having seven women's names tucked inside him was plenty, and that he was happy simply living out his remaining years quietly in that little hot-springs town. And he'd seemed to mean it. But maybe the monkey had a chronic psychological condition, one that reason alone couldn't hold in check. And maybe his illness, and his dopamine, were urging him to *just do it!* And perhaps all that had brought him back to his old haunts in Shinagawa, back to his former, pernicious habits.

Maybe I'll try it myself sometime. On sleepless nights, that random, fanciful thought sometimes comes to me. I'll filch the I.D. or the nametag of a woman I love, focus on it like a laser, pull her name inside me, and possess a part of her, all to myself. What would that feel like?

No. That'll never happen. I've never been deft with my hands, and would never be able to steal something that belonged to someone else. Even if that *something* had no physical form, and stealing it wasn't against the law.

Extreme love, extreme loneliness. Ever since then, whenever I listen to a Bruckner symphony I ponder that Shinagawa Monkey's *personal life*. I picture the elderly monkey in that tiny hot-springs town, in an attic in a rundown inn, asleep on a thin futon. And I think of the snacks—the *kakipi* and the dried squid—that we enjoyed as we drank beer together, propped up against the wall.

I haven't seen the beautiful travel-magazine editor since then, so I have no idea what fate befell her name after that. I hope it didn't cause her any real hardship. She was blameless, after all. Nothing was her fault. I do feel bad about it, but I still can't bring myself to tell her about the Shinagawa Monkey. ♦

*(Translated, from the Japanese, by Philip Gabriel.)*

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*Haruki Murakami published his fourteenth novel in English, "Killing Commendatore," last year.*

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