FICTION

KAHO

BY HARUKI MURAKAMI

July 1, 2024
“I’ve dated all kinds of women in my life,” the man said, “but I have to say I’ve never seen one as ugly as you.”

This came after they’d had dessert, while they were waiting for coffee to be served.

It took a moment for his words to sink in. Three, maybe four seconds. The statement came out of nowhere, and Kaho couldn’t immediately read his intentions. As the man was pronouncing these blunt, alarming words, he was smiling the whole time. A gentle, mostly friendly type of smile. There wasn’t even a hint of humor in what he said. He wasn’t making a joke; he was completely serious.

The only way that Kaho could think of reacting was to take the napkin from her lap, toss it onto the table, grab her purse from the chair beside her, stand up, and, without a word, leave the restaurant. That would, most likely, be the best way to deal with the situation.

But somehow Kaho couldn’t. One reason for this—one that occurred to her only later on—was that she was genuinely startled; a second reason was curiosity. She was angry—of course she was. How could she not be? But, more than that, she wanted to know what in the world this man was trying to tell her. Was she really that ugly? And was there something beyond this remark?

“Saying you’re the ugliest may be a bit of an overstatement,” the man added after a pause. “But you are the plainest woman I’ve seen, no doubt about it.”
Kaho pursed her lips and silently studied the man’s face, her eyes fixed on him.

Why did this man feel the need to say something like that? On a blind date (which this sort of was), if you don’t like the other person that much, then you can just not get in touch afterward. Simple enough. Why insult her to her face?

The man was probably ten years or so older than Kaho, handsome, his clothes spotless and impeccable. He wasn’t exactly Kaho’s type, though he looked like he came from a good family. He had a photogenic face—that might be a more accurate way of putting it. Add a couple of inches to his height and he could have been an actor. The restaurant he chose, too, was cozy and stylish, the dishes tasty and refined. He wasn’t what you’d call talkative, but was decent enough at keeping a conversation moving—and there had been no awkward silences. (Oddly, though, when she looked back on it later, she couldn’t remember what they’d talked about.) During dinner, she’d found herself warming to him. She had to admit it. And then, out of nowhere—this. What was happening here?

“You might find this strange,” he said in a calm voice, after two espressos had been brought to their table. It was as if he could read Kaho’s mind. He dropped a small sugar cube into his espresso and quietly stirred it. “Why did I have dinner to the very end with someone I find ugly—or maybe I should say, whose face I don’t like? After we’d drunk the first glass of wine, I should have been able to just cut the evening short. It’s a complete waste of time, isn’t it, to take an hour and a half and eat a three-course dinner? And why, at the very tail end of the evening, do I have to say something like that?”

Kaho remained silent, staring at the face of the man across the table. Her hands clutched the napkin in her lap tightly.

“I think it’s because I couldn’t stifle my curiosity,” the man said. “Probably I wanted to know what a really homely woman like you was thinking, how being so homely actually affects your life.”
And was your curiosity satisfied? Kaho wondered. Of course, she didn’t ask it out loud.

“And was my curiosity satisfied?” the man asked, after taking a sip of coffee. There was no mistake here: he could read her thoughts. Like an anteater licking an anthill clean with its long, thin tongue.

The man shook his head a fraction and returned his cup to the saucer. And answered his own question. “No, it wasn’t.”

He raised his hand, called the waiter over, and paid the bill. He turned to Kaho, bowed slightly, and went straight out of the restaurant. He didn’t even look back.

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Truth be told, since she was little Kaho had never been that interested in her looks. The face she saw in the mirror didn’t strike her as either beautiful or especially ugly. It didn’t disappoint her or make her happy. Her lack of interest in her face stemmed from the fact that she didn’t feel that her looks were affecting her life in any way. Or perhaps it was better to say that she’d never had an opportunity to know if they were. She was an only child, and her parents had always showered her with an affection that was likely unconnected to how pretty she might or might not be.

Through adolescence, Kaho remained indifferent to her looks. Most of her girlfriends brooded over their appearance and tried every makeup trick in the book to improve it, but she couldn’t understand this urge. She spent very little time in front of the mirror. Her only goal was to keep her body and her face appropriately clean and neat. And that was never a particularly difficult task.

She attended a coed public high school and had a few boyfriends. If the boys in her class had voted for their favorite female classmate, she would never have won—she wasn’t that type. Still, for some reason, in every class she was in, there were
always one or two boys who were interested in her and showed it. Kaho had no clue what it was about her that interested them.

Even after she graduated from high school and started attending an art school in Tokyo, she seldom lacked for boyfriends. So there was no need for her to worry about whether she was attractive or not. In that sense, you could say she was lucky. She always found it quite odd that friends who were far better-looking than she was agonized over their looks, in some cases undergoing expensive plastic surgery. Kaho could never fathom this.

And so when, a little after her twenty-sixth birthday, this man she’d never met before bluntly told her she was ugly, Kaho was deeply confused. Instead of feeling shock at his words, she was, quite simply, unsettled and bewildered.

It was her editor, a woman named Machida, who’d introduced her to the man. Machida worked at a small publishing company in Kanda, mainly putting out books for children. She was four years older than Kaho, had two children herself, and edited the children’s books that Kaho created. Kaho’s picture books didn’t sell all that well, but between those and her freelance work doing illustrations for magazines she made enough to get by. At the time of the date, Kaho had just broken up with a man her own age whom she’d gone out with for a little over two years, and was feeling unusually down. The breakup had left a bad taste. And, partly because of this, her work wasn’t going well. Aware of the situation, Machida set up the blind date for her. It might be just the change of pace you need, she told her.

Three days after Kaho met the man, Machida called her.

“So how was the date?” she wasted no time in asking.

Kaho gave a vague “Hmm,” skirting a direct answer, and then asked a question of her own. “What kind of person is he, anyway?”
Machida said, “Honestly, I don’t know that much about him. Sort of a friend-of-a-friend kind of thing. I think he’s near forty, single, and works in investments of some kind. He’s from a good background, and good at his job. No criminal record, as far as I know. I met him once and we talked for a few minutes, and I thought he was handsome and seemed pleasant enough. He’s a little on the short side, I’ll admit. But then Tom Cruise isn’t that tall, either. Not that I’ve ever seen Tom Cruise in person.”

“But why would a man so handsome, pleasant, and good at his job have to go to the trouble of going on a blind date?” Kaho asked. “Wouldn’t he have plenty of women he could go out with?”

Machida said, “I suppose so. He’s very sharp, efficient at his job, but I happened to hear that his personality is a little quirky. I decided not to mention that, since I didn't want to prejudice you before you met him.”

“A little quirky,” Kaho said, repeating the words. She shook her head. Could you really call that a little quirky?

“Did you exchange phone numbers?” Machida asked.

Kaho paused a moment before replying. Exchange phone numbers? “No, we didn't,” she said finally.

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Three days after this, Machida called her again.

“I'm calling about the handsome Mr. Sahara. Can you talk?” she said. Sahara was the name of the man with whom she had the blind date. Pronounced the same way as the desert. Kaho put down her drawing pen and shifted the receiver from her left hand to her right. “Sure. Go ahead.”
“Last night, he called me,” Machida said. “He said he’d like to see you again, and wondered if you two could talk. He sounded pretty serious.”

Kaho couldn’t help but gasp, and was silent for a while. *He wants to see me again so the two of us can talk?* Kaho couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

“He wants to see me again so the two of us can talk? Kaho couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

“Kaho-chan,” Machida said, sounding concerned. “Are you listening?”

“Yes, I’m listening,” Kaho said.

“He seemed to like you. So what should I tell him?”

Common sense dictated that she say no. He had, after all, said such horrible things right to her face. Why would she ever need to see that kind of person again? But she couldn’t reach a decision at this point. Several doubts converged in her brain, all jumbled together.

“Can I think about it?” she asked Machida. “Let me call you back.”

Kaho ended up seeing Sahara one more time, that Saturday afternoon. They arranged to meet during the day, for a short time, with no meal or alcohol involved, at a place where they could talk quietly, though there could be other people nearby—these were Kaho’s conditions, which Machida conveyed to him.

“Odd conditions for a second date,” Machida commented. “You’re being extremely cautious.”

“I suppose,” Kaho said.

“You haven’t hidden a wrench in your purse or anything, right?” Machida said, and laughed happily.

That might not be such a bad idea, Kaho thought.
The last time they’d met, Sahara had looked as if he were on his way home from work, in a nice dark suit and tie, but this time he had on a casual weekend outfit—a thick brown leather jacket, slim jeans, and well-worn-in work boots. Sunglasses stuck in his breast pocket. Quite a stylish look.

Kaho arrived a little later than the set time, and when she got to the hotel lobby Sahara was already there, texting someone. When he spotted Kaho, a faint smile rose to his lips and he closed the leather flap on his cell-phone cover. There was a motorcycle helmet on the seat beside him.

“I ride an 1800cc BMW,” Sahara said. “Of all the BMWs, this one has the highest displacement and the engine makes the nicest, boldest sound.”

Kaho didn’t say anything. I couldn’t care less what you ride—a BMW motorcycle, a tricycle, or an oxcart—she silently muttered to herself.

“I bet you’re not at all interested in motorcycles, but I thought I’d mention it anyway, just F.Y.I.,” Sahara added.
This guy knows how to read my feelings, Kaho thought again.

A waitress came over and she ordered coffee. Sahara ordered chamomile tea.

“By the way, have you ever been to Australia?” Sahara asked.

Kaho shook her head. She’d never been to Australia.

“How do you like spiders?” Sahara asked, forming a fan in the air with both hands.

“Arachnids? The kind with eight legs?”

Kaho didn’t reply. She hated spiders more than anything, but wasn’t about to reveal that.
Sahara said, “When I went to Australia, I saw a spider the size of a baseball mitt. Just looking at it gave me the creeps. Made me shudder. But the locals actually welcome them into their homes. You know why?”

Kaho remained silent.

“Because they’re nocturnal and they eat cockroaches. They’re what you’d call useful, beneficial bugs. Still, imagine having spiders that eat cockroaches. I’m always amazed by how clever and magnificent the structure of the food chain is.”

The coffee and the herbal tea came, and for a while the two of them sat before their drinks without speaking.

“I imagine you find it kind of odd,” Sahara said after a few minutes, his tone formal. “That I wanted to see you again like this.”

Again Kaho didn’t respond. She didn’t dare to.

“And I must say I’m truly surprised that you would agree to see me again,” Sahara said. “I feel thankful, but I was astonished that you’d agree to it after that rude thing I said. No—what I said went beyond rude. It was an unforgivable insult that tramples on a woman’s dignity. When I say that to women, most of them never agree to see me again. Which is only to be expected, really.”
Most of them—Kaho repeated his words in her mind. That shocked her.

“Most of them?” she said, speaking for the first time. “You mean that you’ve said the same thing to all the women you meet? You’re saying . . .”

“Exactly,” Sahara readily admitted. “I tell all the women I meet exactly what I said to you: ‘I’ve never seen anyone as ugly as you.’ Usually when we’re enjoying dinner and dessert has just been served. With this kind of thing, timing is everything.”

“But why?” Kaho asked, her voice dry. “Why do you have to do something like that? I don’t get it. You hurt people for no reason? You spend time and money just to insult them?”

Sahara tilted his head a little and said, “Why—that’s the real question. It’s too complicated to explain. Instead, why don’t we talk about the effects such a statement has. What always surprises me is the reaction of the women I say that to. You might think that, having those awful words said right to their face, most people would fly into a rage, or else laugh it off. And there are people like that. But not that many, really. The majority of women are . . . simply hurt. Deeply, and for a long time. In some cases, they blurt out something weird. Something hard to comprehend.”

Silence reigned for a while. After a time, Kaho broke it. “And you’re saying you enjoy seeing those reactions?”

“No, I don’t enjoy it. I just find it strange. How when women who are obviously beautiful, or at least well above average, are told to their face that they’re ugly how amazingly flustered or hurt they get.”

The coffee she hadn’t touched, steam rising from it, was steadily growing cold.

“I think you’re sick,” Kaho said firmly.
Sahara nodded. “I guess so. You’re probably right. I might be sick. Not to excuse myself or anything, but in a sick person’s eyes it’s the world that’s even sicker. Right? Listen—nowadays people severely attack lookism. Most people loudly denounce beauty contests. Say the words ‘ugly woman’ in public and you’ll get beaten up. But check out TV. And magazines. They’re full of ads for cosmetics, plastic surgery, and spa treatments. No matter how you look at it, it’s a ridiculous, meaningless double standard. A farce, really.”

“But that doesn’t justify hurting other people for no reason, does it?” Kaho countered.

“Yes, you’re right,” Sahara said. “I am sick. That’s an undeniable fact. But, depending on how you look at it, being sick can also be enjoyable. Sick people have their own special place that only sick people can enjoy. Like a Disneyland for the disturbed. And, fortunately for me, I have the time and money to enjoy that place.”

Without a word, Kaho stood up. Time to put an end to this. She couldn’t talk to this man anymore.

“Hold on a sec,” Sahara said to Kaho as she stood there. “Could you give me just a bit more of your time? It won’t take long. Five minutes is enough. I’d like you to stay and hear me out.”

Kaho hesitated for a few seconds, then took her seat again. She didn’t want to, but there was something in the man’s voice she found hard to resist.

“What I wanted to say to you was that the reaction you had was different from anyone else’s,” Sahara said. “When you were assaulted by those awful words, you didn’t panic, didn’t respond in anger, didn’t laugh it off, and didn’t look so hurt by it. Without letting any of these trite emotions take over, you just gazed at me. As if you were studying some bacteria under a microscope. You’re the only one who’s ever reacted that way. I was impressed. And I thought, Why doesn’t this woman
feel hurt? If there is something that would deeply wound her, well, then, what is it?”

“So you’re doing this,” Kaho said, “setting up these elaborate meetings, over and over, just to see women’s reactions? That’s it?”

The man inclined his head. “There haven’t been all that many. Just when the opportunity presents itself. I never use a dating app or anything. Things that are too simple are boring. People I know introduce me, and I meet only women whose backgrounds I know about. Old-fashioned, omiai-type arranged meetings are the best. The old-school approach. I find that exciting.”

“And then you insult the woman?” Kaho said.

Sahara didn’t respond. He merely gave a smile that soon subsided. He held his hands out in front of his chest, studying them for a while. As if checking whether there had been any changes in the lines in his palms.

“I was wondering if you’d go riding with me on my motorcycle,” he said, looking up. “I brought along an extra helmet for you. The weather’s good today, and we can enjoy tooling around. I just passed five thousand kilometres on the odometer, and the horizontally opposed engine BMW’s so proud of is tuned to perfection.”

An undeniable rage boiled up inside Kaho. It had been some time since she’d felt this angry. Or perhaps it was the first time ever. We can enjoy tooling around? What the hell was he thinking?

“I’ll pass,” Kaho said, keeping her emotions under wraps, her voice as calm as she could manage. “Do you know the No. 1 thing I want to do right now?”

Sahara shook his head. “What would that be?”

“To put some distance between me and you, even a little distance. And scrub off this filth that’s on me.”
“I see,” Sahara said. “Indeed. Well. I guess I’ll have to unfortunately give up on tooling around this time. But what do you think? You think wanting to get some distance from me will work out?”

“What does that mean?”

Somewhere a baby cried. The man glanced in that direction, then looked right at Kaho.

“Before long, I think you’ll understand,” he said. “Once I’m interested in people, I don’t let them go that easily. And you might find this surprising, but, in terms of distance, we’re not that far apart, you and I. See, people can’t escape the structure of the chain. No matter how much they don’t want to see it, even if they want to have nothing to do with it. Swallowing something and being swallowed are two sides of the same coin. Front and back, credit and debit. That’s the way the world is. We will probably, I think, meet again somewhere.”

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I should never have seen this man again, Kaho thought. She was sure of this as she strode quickly toward the exit. When Machida called me that time, I should have made that clear. “No, thanks,” I should have said. “I never want to see that person again.”

It was curiosity. Curiosity that led me here. I think I wanted to find out what in the world this man was aiming at, what he wanted. I think I wanted to know that. But that was a mistake. He used curiosity as bait to skillfully lure me in, just as a spider would. A chill ran up her spine. I want to go somewhere warm, she thought. The desire couldn’t be stronger. A southern island, with a white beach. Lie down there, close my eyes, shut off my mind, and let the sunlight wash over me.

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Several weeks went by. Kaho, of course, wanted to drive any thoughts of that man, Sahara, from her mind as soon as she could. Shove this pointless episode, one that had nothing to do with her life, somewhere she’d never see it again. And yet, as she worked at her desk at night, the man’s face suddenly, unexpectedly, rose up in her mind. Smiling faintly, gazing, for no particular reason, at his long, delicate fingers.

She started spending more time in front of the mirror, much more than she ever had. She’d stand in front of the bathroom mirror, carefully checking every detail of her face, as if reconfirming who she was. And it occurred to her that she wasn’t much interested in any of it. This was definitely her face, yet she could find nothing that dictated that it had to be her face. She even started to envy her friends who’d had plastic surgery. They knew—or at least believed they knew—which part of their face, surgically altered, would make them more beautiful, more satisfied with their looks.

My own life may be taking a clever revenge on me: she couldn’t help thinking this. When the right time comes, my life may simply take away what I owe. Credit and debit. Kaho understood that, if she’d never met that guy, Sahara, she never would have thought this way. He may have been patiently waiting, for the longest time, for me to show up in front of him, she thought. Like an enormous spider waiting for its prey in the dark.

Occasionally, a large motorcycle would speed by on the street outside her apartment late at night, when everyone was asleep. Whenever she heard the low, dry throbbing, the drumbeat of the engine, her body trembled ever so slightly. Her breathing grew ragged, and cold sweat oozed from her armpits.

“I brought along an extra helmet for you,” the man had said.
She pictured herself riding on the back of that BMW motorcycle. And she imagined where that powerful machine would take her. What kind of place would it take me to?

“In terms of distance, we’re not that far apart, you and I,” the man had said.

Six months after that strange blind date, Kaho wrote a new children’s book. One night, she was dreaming she was at the bottom of a deep sea, and when she woke up she felt as if she were suddenly being tossed to the surface, floating up from the sea bottom. She went right to her desk and wrote the story. It didn’t take long to finish.

The story was about a girl who goes in search of her face. At a certain point, the girl had lost her face; someone had stolen it while she was asleep. So she had to do something to get it back.

But she couldn’t remember at all what her face had looked like. She didn’t even know if it was a beautiful face or an ugly one, round or thin. She asked her parents, her siblings, but for some reason no one could recall what sort of face it was. Or else no one was willing to tell her.

So the girl decided to set out alone on a face-seeking journey. For the time being, she found a face that would fit her, and pasted it on where her own face should be. Without a face of some kind, people she met along the way would find her strange.

The girl walked all over the world. Climbed high mountains, crossed deep rivers, walked across vast deserts, managed to make her way through savage jungles. She was sure that if she came across her face she’d recognize it right away. Since this is a very important part of my existence, she told herself. As she travelled, she met many people, and had all kinds of odd experiences. She was nearly trampled by a
herd of elephants, was attacked by a huge black spider, was almost kicked by wild horses.

A long time passed as she walked everywhere, examining countless faces as she went, yet she never found her own face. What she saw were always the faces of others. She didn’t know what to do. And before she knew it she was no longer a girl but an adult woman. Would she never be able to find her own face again? She fell into despair.

As she was sitting at the tip of a cape in a northern land, crying in utter hopelessness, a tall young man in a fur coat appeared and sat down beside her. His long hair gently waved in the wind from the sea. The young man gazed into her face and, smiling broadly, said this: “I’ve never seen a woman with such a lovely face as yours.”

By then, the face she’d pasted on had become her true face. All sorts of experiences, all kinds of emotions and thoughts, had joined together to create her face. This was her face, and her face alone. She and the young man were married, and lived happily in this northern land.

For some reason—and Kaho herself wasn’t at all sure why—this book seemed to spark something in the hearts of children, especially girls in their early teens. These young readers excitedly followed the girl’s adventures and trials as she set off into the wide world in search of her face. And when, in the end, the girl found her face and discovered inner peace, readers breathed a sigh of relief. The writing was simple, Kaho’s illustrations symbolic, monochrome line drawings.

And that tale—the work of writing and illustrating it—brought a kind of emotional healing to Kaho as well. I can live in this world as me, just as I am, she realized. There’s nothing to fear. The dream she’d seen at the bottom of the sea had taught her that. The anxiety she’d felt in the middle of the night grew fainter. Though she couldn’t say it was gone completely.
The book sold steadily, through word of mouth, and got a good review in a newspaper. Machida was thrilled.

“I’m thinking this children’s book may become a long-term best-seller. I just get that feeling,” Machida said. “It’s a completely different style from your other books, which surprised me at first. But I wonder, where did you get the idea for it?”

After thinking about it for a moment, Kaho replied. “In a very dark, deep place,” she said. ♦

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

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Haruki Murakami has published more than a dozen novels, including “1Q84” and “Norwegian Wood.” His latest, “The City and Its Uncertain Walls,” is due out in English in November.

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