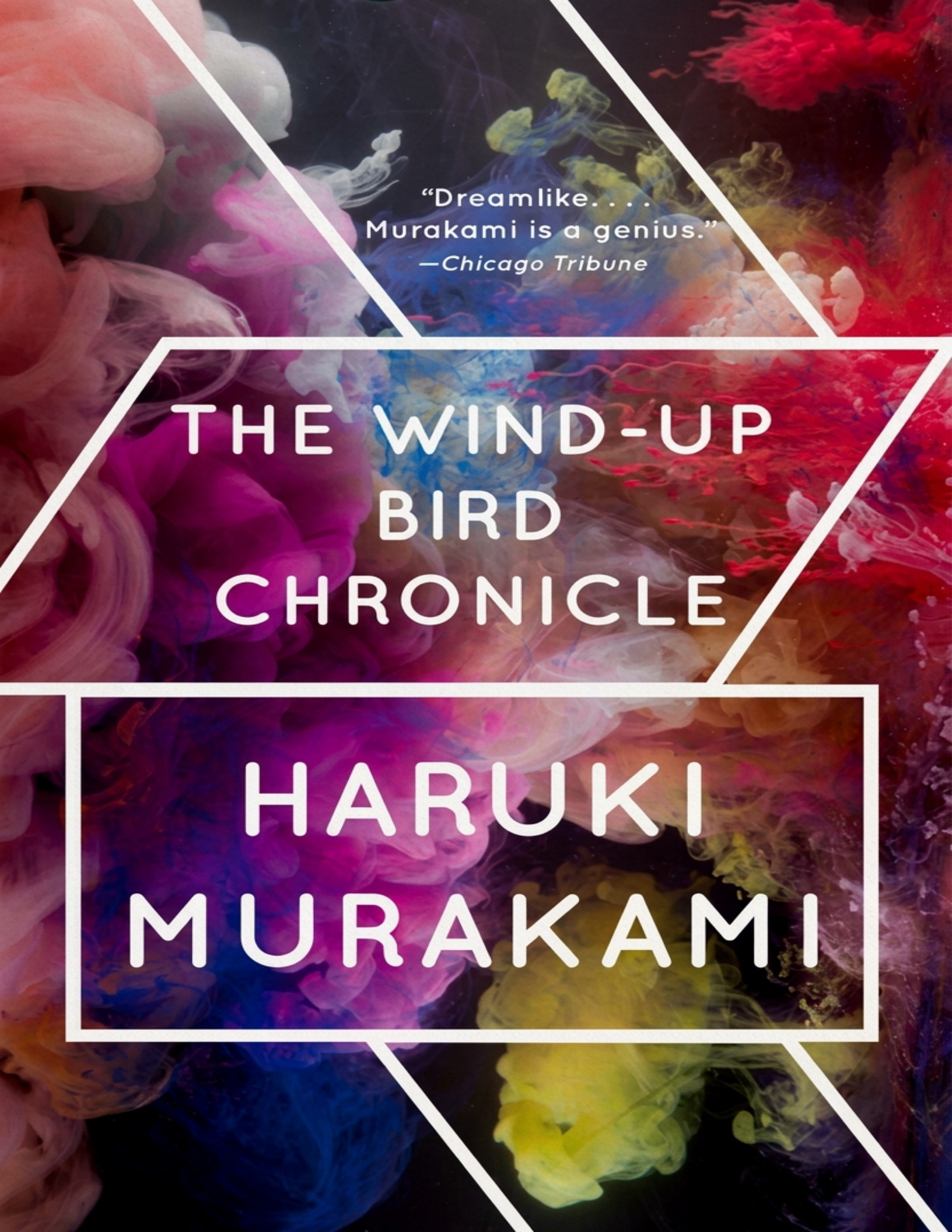




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Murakami is a genius."
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THE WIND-UP
BIRD
CHRONICLE

HARUKI
MURAKAMI

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—*Boston Globe*

The
Wind - Up
Bird
Chronicle

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

Translated from the Japanese by J A Y R U B I N

V I N T A G E I N T E R N A T I O N A L

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Book One: The Thieving Magpie

June and July 1984

Tuesday's Wind-Up Bird

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Six Fingers and Four Breasts

When the phone rang I was in the kitchen, boiling a potful of spaghetti and whistling along with an FM broadcast of the overture to Rossini's *The Thieving Magpie*, which has to be the perfect music for cooking pasta.

I wanted to ignore the phone, not only because the spaghetti was nearly done, but because Claudio Abbado was bringing the London Symphony to its musical climax. Finally, though, I had to give in. It could have been somebody with news of a job opening. I lowered the flame, went to the living room, and picked up the receiver.

"Ten minutes, please," said a woman on the other end.

I'm good at recognizing people's voices, but this was not one I knew.

"Excuse me? To whom did you wish to speak?"

"To *you*, of course. Ten minutes, please. That's all we need to understand each other." Her voice was low and soft but otherwise nondescript.

"Understand each other?"

"Each other's feelings."

I leaned over and peeked through the kitchen door. The spaghetti pot was steaming nicely, and Claudio Abbado was still conducting *The Thieving*

Magpie.

“Sorry, but you caught me in the middle of making spaghetti. Can I ask you to call back later?”

“Spaghetti!? What are you doing cooking spaghetti at ten-thirty in the morning?”

“That’s none of your business,” I said. “I decide what I eat and when I eat it.”

“True enough. I’ll call back,” she said, her voice now flat and expressionless. A little change in mood can do amazing things to the tone of a person’s voice.

“Hold on a minute,” I said before she could hang up. “If this is some new sales gimmick, you can forget it. I’m out of work. I’m not in the market for anything.”

“Don’t worry. I know.”

“You know? You know what?”

“That you’re out of work. I know about that. So go cook your precious spaghetti.”

“Who the hell—”

She cut the connection.

With no outlet for my feelings, I stared at the phone in my hand until I remembered the spaghetti. Back in the kitchen, I turned off the gas and poured the contents of the pot into a colander. Thanks to the phone call, the spaghetti was a little softer than *al dente*, but it had not been dealt a mortal blow. I started eating—and thinking.

Understand each other? Understand each other’s feelings in ten minutes? What was she talking about? Maybe it was just a prank call. Or some new sales pitch. In any case, it had nothing to do with me.

After lunch, I went back to my library novel on the living room sofa, glancing every now and then at the telephone. What were we supposed to understand about each other in ten minutes? What *can* two people understand about each other in ten minutes? Come to think of it, she seemed awfully sure about those ten minutes: it was the first thing out of

her mouth. As if nine minutes would be too short or eleven minutes too long. Like cooking spaghetti *al dente*.

I couldn't read anymore. I decided to iron shirts instead. Which is what I always do when I'm upset. It's an old habit. I divide the job into twelve precise stages, beginning with the collar (outer surface) and ending with the left-hand cuff. The order is always the same, and I count off each stage to myself. Otherwise, it won't come out right.

I ironed three shirts, checking them over for wrinkles and putting them on hangers. Once I had switched off the iron and put it away with the ironing board in the hall closet, my mind felt a good deal clearer.

I was on my way to the kitchen for a glass of water when the phone rang again. I hesitated for a second but decided to answer it. If it was the same woman, I'd tell her I was ironing and hang up.

This time it was Kumiko. The wall clock said eleven-thirty. "How are you?" she asked.

"Fine," I said, relieved to hear my wife's voice.

"What are you doing?"

"Just finished ironing."

"What's wrong?" There was a note of tension in her voice. She knew what it meant for me to be ironing.

"Nothing. I was just ironing some shirts." I sat down and shifted the receiver from my left hand to my right. "What's up?"

"Can you write poetry?" she asked.

"Poetry!?" Poetry? Did she mean ... poetry?

"I know the publisher of a story magazine for girls. They're looking for somebody to pick and revise poems submitted by readers. And they want the person to write a short poem every month for the frontispiece. Pay's not bad for an easy job. Of course, it's part-time. But they might add some editorial work if the person—"

"Easy work?" I broke in. "Hey, wait a minute. I'm looking for something in law, not poetry."

"I thought you did some writing in high school."

“Yeah, sure, for the school newspaper: which team won the soccer championship or how the physics teacher fell down the stairs and ended up in the hospital—that kind of stuff. Not poetry. I can’t write poetry.”

“Sure, but I’m not talking about great poetry, just something for high school girls. It doesn’t have to find a place in literary history. You could do it with your eyes closed. Don’t you see?”

“Look, I just can’t write poetry—eyes open or closed. I’ve never done it, and I’m not going to start now.”

“All right,” said Kumiko, with a hint of regret. “But it’s hard to find legal work.”

“I know. That’s why I’ve got so many feelers out. I should be hearing something this week. If it’s no go, I’ll think about doing something else.”

“Well, I suppose that’s that. By the way, what’s today? What day of the week?”

I thought a moment and said, “Tuesday.”

“Then will you go to the bank and pay the gas and telephone?”

“Sure. I was just about to go shopping for dinner anyway.”

“What are you planning to make?”

“I don’t know yet. I’ll decide when I’m shopping.”

She paused. “Come to think of it,” she said, with a new seriousness, “there’s no great hurry about your finding a job.”

This took me off guard. “Why’s that?” I asked. Had the women of the world chosen today to surprise me on the telephone? “My unemployment’s going to run out sooner or later. I can’t keep hanging around forever.”

“True, but with my raise and occasional side jobs and our savings, we can get by OK if we’re careful. There’s no real emergency. Do you hate staying at home like this and doing housework? I mean, is this life so wrong for you?”

“I don’t know,” I answered honestly. I really didn’t know.

“Well, take your time and give it some thought,” she said. “Anyhow, has the cat come back?”

The cat. I hadn't thought about the cat all morning. "No," I said. "Not yet."

"Can you please have a look around the neighborhood? It's been gone over a week now."

I gave a noncommittal grunt and shifted the receiver back to my left hand. She went on:

"I'm almost certain it's hanging around the empty house at the other end of the alley. The one with the bird statue in the yard. I've seen it in there several times."

"The alley? Since when have you been going to the alley? You've never said anything—"

"Oops! Got to run. Lots of work to do. Don't forget about the cat."

She hung up. I found myself staring at the receiver again. Then I set it down in its cradle.

I wondered what had brought Kumiko to the alley. To get there from our house, you had to climb over the cinder-block wall. And once you'd made the effort, there was no point in being there.

I went to the kitchen for a glass of water, then out to the veranda to look at the cat's dish. The mound of sardines was untouched from last night. No, the cat had not come back. I stood there looking at our small garden, with the early-summer sunshine streaming into it. Not that ours was the kind of garden that gives you spiritual solace to look at. The sun managed to find its way in there for the smallest fraction of each day, so the earth was always black and moist, and all we had by way of garden plants were a few drab hydrangeas in one corner—and I don't like hydrangeas. There was a small stand of trees nearby, and from it you could hear the mechanical cry of a bird that sounded as if it were winding a spring. We called it the wind-up bird. Kumiko gave it the name. We didn't know what it was really called or what it looked like, but that didn't bother the wind-up bird. Every day it would come to the stand of trees in our neighborhood and wind the spring of our quiet little world.

So now I had to go cat hunting. I had always liked cats. And I liked this particular cat. But cats have their own way of living. They're not stupid. If a cat stopped living where you happened to be, that meant it had decided to go somewhere else. If it got tired and hungry, it would come back. Finally, though, to keep Kumiko happy, I would have to go looking for our cat. I had nothing better to do.

•

I had quit my job at the beginning of April—the law job I had had since graduation. Not that I had quit for any special reason. I didn't dislike the work. It wasn't thrilling, but the pay was all right and the office atmosphere was friendly.

My role at the firm was—not to put too fine a point on it—that of professional gofer. And I was good at it. I might say I have a real talent for the execution of such practical duties. I'm a quick study, efficient, I never complain, and I'm realistic. Which is why, when I said I wanted to quit, the senior partner (the father in this father-and-son law firm) went so far as to offer me a small raise.

But I quit just the same. Not that quitting would help me realize any particular hopes or prospects. The last thing I wanted to do, for example, was shut myself up in the house and study for the bar exam. I was surer than ever that I didn't want to become a lawyer. I knew, too, that I didn't want to stay where I was and continue with the job I had. If I was going to quit, now was the time to do it. If I stayed with the firm any longer, I'd be there for the rest of my life. I was thirty years old, after all.

I had told Kumiko at the dinner table that I was thinking of quitting my job. Her only response had been, "I see." I didn't know what she meant by that, but for a while she said nothing more.

I kept silent too, until she added, "If you want to quit, you should quit. It's your life, and you should live it the way you want to." Having said this

much, she then became involved in picking out fish bones with her chopsticks and moving them to the edge of her plate.

Kumiko earned pretty good pay as editor of a health food magazine, and she would occasionally take on illustration assignments from editor friends at other magazines to earn substantial additional income. (She had studied design in college and had hoped to be a freelance illustrator.) In addition, if I quit I would have my own income for a while from unemployment insurance. Which meant that even if I stayed home and took care of the house, we would still have enough for extras such as eating out and paying the cleaning bill, and our lifestyle would hardly change.

And so I had quit my job.

I was loading groceries into the refrigerator when the phone rang. The ringing seemed to have an impatient edge to it this time. I had just ripped open a plastic pack of tofu, which I set down carefully on the kitchen table to keep the water from spilling out. I went to the living room and picked up the phone.

“You must have finished your spaghetti by now,” said the woman.

“You’re right. But now I have to go look for the cat.”

“That can wait for ten minutes, I’m sure. It’s not like cooking spaghetti.”

For some reason, I couldn’t just hang up on her. There was something about her voice that commanded my attention. “OK, but no more than ten minutes.”

“Now we’ll be able to understand each other,” she said with quiet certainty. I sensed her settling comfortably into a chair and crossing her legs.

“I wonder,” I said. “What can you understand in ten minutes?”

“Ten minutes may be longer than you think,” she said.

“Are you sure you know me?”

“Of course I do. We’ve met hundreds of times.”

“Where? When?”

“Somewhere, sometime,” she said. “But if I went into that, ten minutes would never be enough. What’s important is the time we have now. The

present. Don't you agree?"

"Maybe. But I'd like some proof that you know me."

"What kind of proof?"

"My age, say?"

"Thirty," she answered instantaneously. "Thirty and two months. Good enough?"

That shut me up. She obviously did know me, but I had absolutely no memory of her voice.

"Now it's your turn," she said, her voice seductive. "Try picturing me. From my voice. Imagine what I'm like. My age. Where I am. How I'm dressed. Go ahead."

"I have no idea," I said.

"Oh, come on," she said. "Try."

I looked at my watch. Only a minute and five seconds had gone by. "I have no idea," I said again.

"Then let me help you," she said. "I'm in bed. I just got out of the shower, and I'm not wearing a thing."

Oh, great. Telephone sex.

"Or would you prefer me with something on? Something lacy. Or stockings. Would that work better for you?"

"I don't give a damn. Do what you like," I said. "Put something on if you want to. Stay naked if you want to. Sorry, but I'm not interested in telephone games like this. I've got a lot of things I have to—"

"Ten minutes," she said. "Ten minutes won't kill you. It won't put a hole in your life. Just answer my question. Do you want me naked or with something on? I've got all kinds of things I could put on. Black lace panties ..."

"Naked is fine."

"Well, good. You want me naked."

"Yes. Naked. Good."

Four minutes.

“My pubic hair is still wet,” she said. “I didn’t dry myself very well. Oh, I’m so wet! Warm and moist. And soft. Wonderfully soft and black. Touch me.”

“Look, I’m sorry, but—”

“And down below too. All the way down. It’s so warm down there, like butter cream. So warm. Mmm. And my legs. What position do you think my legs are in? My right knee is up, and my left leg is open just enough. Say, ten-oh-five on the clock.”

I could tell from her voice that she was not faking it. She really did have her legs open to ten-oh-five, her sex warm and moist.

“Touch the lips,” she said. “Sloooowly. Now open them. That’s it. Slowly, slowly. Let your fingers caress them. Oh so slowly. Now, with your other hand, touch my left breast. Play with it. Caress it. Upward. And give the nipple a little squeeze. Do it again. And again. And again. Until I’m just about to come.”

Without a word, I put the receiver down. Stretching out on the sofa, I stared at the clock and released a long, deep sigh. I had spoken with her for close to six minutes.

The phone rang again ten minutes later, but I left it on the hook. It rang fifteen times. And when it stopped, a deep, cold silence descended upon the room. Just before two, I climbed over the cinder-block wall and down into the alley—or what we called the alley. It was not an “alley” in the proper sense of the word, but then, there was probably no word for what it was. It wasn’t a “road” or a “path” or even a “way.” Properly speaking, a “way” should be a pathway or channel with an entrance and an exit, which takes you somewhere if you follow it. But our “alley” had neither entrance nor exit. You couldn’t call it a cul-de-sac, either: a cul-de-sac has at least one open end. The alley had not one dead end but two. The people of the neighborhood called it “the alley” strictly as an expedient. It was some two hundred yards in length and threaded its way between the back gardens of the houses that lined either side. Barely over three feet in width, it had