

## Barn Burning, by Haruki Murakami

I met her three years ago at a friend's wedding reception, here in Tokyo, and we got to know each other. There was nearly a dozen years' age difference between us, she being twenty and I thirty-one. Not that it mattered much. I had a lot else on my mind then, and didn't have time to worry about things like age. Plus, I was married, but that didn't seem to bother her either.

She was studying with a famous mime, and working as an advertising model to make ends meet. But she usually found it too much trouble to go out on the modeling assignments she was given, so her income didn't amount to much. What it didn't cover, her boyfriends made up. Of course, I don't know for sure. But things she said, seemed to hint at that kind of arrangement.

As I mentioned, when I first met her she told me she was studying mime. One night, we were out at a bar, and she showed me the Tangerine Peeling. As the name says, it involves peeling a tangerine. On her left was a bowl piled high with tangerines; on her right, a bowl for the peels. At least that was the idea. Actually, there wasn't anything there at all. She'd take an imaginary tangerine in her hand, slowly peel it, put one section in her mouth, and spit out the seeds. When she'd finished one tangerine, she'd wrap up all the seeds in the peel and deposit it in the bowl to her right. She repeated these movements over and over again. When you try to put it in words it doesn't sound like anything special. But if you see it with your own eyes for ten or twenty minutes (almost without thinking, she kept on performing it) gradually the sense of reality is sucked right out of everything around you. It's a very strange feeling.

"You're pretty talented," I told her.

"This? It's easy. It has nothing to do with talent. What you do isn't make yourself believe that there are tangerines there. You forget that the tangerines are *not* there. That's all."

I could see we were going to get along.

We didn't go out all that often. About once a month, twice at most. I'd call her up and ask her where she'd like to go. We'd have something to eat, have a few drinks in a bar, and talk up a storm. I'd listen to her talk, she'd listen to me. We had hardly anything in common to talk about, but that didn't matter. I guess you'd say we were friends. Naturally, I paid for everything, all the food and drink. A few times she called me up, usually when she'd run out of money and was hungry. On those occasions she ate like you wouldn't believe.

I was completely relaxed when I was with her. I could erase everything from my mind - all the work I didn't want to do, the jumble of senseless ideas people carry around in their heads. She had that

effect on me. She didn't talk about anything in particular. Often I would just keep nodding my head, not really picking up the gist of her words. But listening to her made me feel relaxed, as if I were gazing at drifting clouds far off in the distance.

In the spring of the year after we met, her father died, and she inherited a little money from him. At least that's what she told me. She said she wanted to use the money to go to North Africa. I don't know why she picked North Africa, but I went ahead and introduced her to a woman I knew who worked at the Algerian Embassy in Tokyo. So off she went to Algeria. As things turned out, I went to see her off at the airport. She carried just one beat-up old bag with a few changes of clothes stuffed inside. Going through the luggage check, she looked more like she was going home to North Africa than taking a trip there.

"Are you going to come back to Japan?" I asked her, jokingly.

"Of course I am," she replied.

Three months later she was back, seven pounds lighter and tanned a deep brown - and with a new boyfriend. It seemed the two of them met at a restaurant in Algiers. Since there weren't many Japanese there, they grew close. As far as I knew, he was the first steady boyfriend she'd ever had.

He was in his late twenties, tall, impeccably dressed, and well-spoken. His face was somewhat expressionless, but he was handsome enough, and came across as a pleasant sort of guy. His hands were large, with long fingers.

I knew that much about him because I went to pick her up at the airport. A telegram had come all of a sudden from Beirut with just the date and flight number. When the plane arrived (four hours late, because of bad weather) the two of them appeared at the gate arm in arm, looking like some nice young married couple. She introduced me to him, and we shook hands. He had the firm handshake of a person who'd lived abroad a long time. She said she was dying for a bowl of tempura and rice, so we went to a restaurant, and she had some while he and I had a couple of draught beers.

"I'm in the import-export business," he told me. But he didn't say anything more about it. Maybe he didn't want to talk about his job, or maybe he thought I'd find it boring. I didn't ask any questions.

When she'd finished her tempura, she gave a deep yawn and said she was sleepy. She looked like she was going to fall asleep right on the spot; she had the habit of nodding off at the most unexpected

times. He said he'd take her home by cab. I told them the train would be fluster for me. I had no idea why I'd gone to all the trouble of coming out to the airport.

I'm glad I could get to know you," he said, somewhat apologetically.

"Same here," I replied.

I saw him again several times after that. Whenever I ran into her, there he'd be, right beside her. And if I had a date with her he'd drive her to wherever we were supposed to meet. He drove a silver sports car, German. I know next to nothing about cars, so I can't really describe it well.

"He must be pretty well off, don't you think?" I asked her once.

"Yeah," she answered without much interest. "Guess so."

"I wonder if you can make that much in foreign trade."

"Foreign trade?"

"That's what he told me. He said he was in foreign trade."

"Well, I guess he must be. But I don't know. He doesn't seem to be working anywhere. He meets a lot of people and makes a lot of phone calls, but he doesn't seem to be too wrapped up in it."

Just like Gatsby, I thought. A young man who's a riddle. I thought, you have no idea what he does, really, but he never seems to be hurrying for money.

She called me one Sunday afternoon in October. My wife was out of town visiting some relatives, so I was home all alone. It was a beautiful, clear Sunday, and I was gazing at the trees in the garden, eating an apple. I must have eaten seven apples that day. This happens from time to time—I get a pathological craving for apples.

"We were just in the neighborhood and wondered if we could drop by," she said.

"We?" I asked.

"Him and me," she said.

"Sure, come on," I said.

"O.K.—we'll be over in half an hour," she said.

I lay vacantly on the couch for a while, then got up and showered and shaved. I couldn't decide whether I should straighten up the house, and in the end decided not to. There wasn't enough time to do a thorough job of it, and if it can't be done right, I thought, better not bother with it at all. The room was littered with books, magazines, letters, records, pencils, and sweaters, but it didn't look that messy.

A little after two, I heard a car pull up to the house. When I opened the door, I saw the silver sports car at the curb. She stuck her face out the window and waved. I showed them where to park, behind the house.

"Well, here we are!" she said with a smile. She wore a light shirt that showed the outline of her figure through it, and an olive-green miniskirt.

He had on a navy-blue blazer. Somehow he seemed different, probably because of his two-day growth of beard. Getting out of the car, he took off his sunglasses and stuck them in his pocket.

"I'm really sorry to drop in like this all of a sudden on your day off," he said.

"No problem," I said. "Today is a day off for me. And I was just ready for some company."

"We brought a meal," she said, and she hauled a large white paper sack from the rear seat of the car.

"A meal?"

"Nothing special. We just thought that since we dropped in on you on a Sunday we'd better bring something to eat," he said.

"Great. All I've had today is apples."

We went inside and laid the food out on the table. Quite a spread: roast-beef sandwiches, salad, smoked salmon, and blueberry ice cream—and plenty of everything. While she arranged it all on plates, I got some white wine out of the refrigerator and uncorked it. It looked like we were having ourselves a little party.

"Let's eat. I'm starved," she said, famished as usual.

We munched our sandwiches, ate our salad, and helped ourselves to the smoked salmon. When we'd polished off the wine, we drank some canned beer from the fridge. One thing you can always count on at my place, is a fridge full of beer. His color didn't change at all, no matter how much he drank. I'm a pretty good beer drinker myself. She had a couple of cans with us, and in less than an hour the table was lined with empties. She selected a couple of records from the shelf and set them on the player. The first album was Miles Davis.

We talked about audio equipment for a while, and he fell quiet. Then he said, "I've got some grass, if you'd care for a smoke."

I wasn't sure how to react. I'd just given up smoking cigarettes a month before; it was touch and go whether I could shake the habit for good, and I had no idea what effect smoking marijuana would have on me. But I decided to give it a try. He took out the dark-colored leaves in a foil wrapper from the bottom of the paper sack, rolled the grass into a sheet of cigarette paper, and licked the glued edge. He lit up with his lighter and took a few drags to make sure the joint was going before passing it over to me.

We sat there silently for a while, smoking without speaking. Miles Davis was over, and a collection of Strauss waltzes began to play. Not your usual programming, I thought. But not bad.

After we finished the first joint, she said she was sleepy. She hadn't gotten enough rest the night before, apparently, and the three beers and the grass knocked her out. I showed her upstairs and put her to bed. She asked to borrow a T-shirt. I gave her one. She stripped down to her underwear, pulled on the shirt; and lay down on the bed. "Are you cold?" I asked, but she was already snoring away. Shaking my head, I went back downstairs.

In the living room her boyfriend was rolling a second joint. He was something. Given a choice, I'd rather have snuggled up next to her in bed and taken a good nap, but that was out. I smoked the second joint with him, the Strauss waltzes still going. For some reason I remembered a play we'd done back in grade school. I was the owner of a glove shop. A baby fox comes in looking for gloves, but he doesn't have enough money to buy them.

"You can't buy gloves with that," I say. The villain.

"But Mama is so cold. Her paws are all chapped. Please!" the baby fox begs.

"Sorry, but it's not enough. Save up your money and come back later. If you do—"

"—sometimes I burn down barns," he said.

"Excuse me?" I said. I was drifting off, and I must have heard him wrong.

"Sometimes I burn down barns," he said again.

I looked at him. He was tracing the design on his lighter with the tip of his fingernail. He sucked the marijuana smoke deep into his lungs, held it there for ten seconds, then slowly let it out. The smoke swirled up like ectoplasm from his mouth. "I brought this stuff back from India," he said, "The best they had. You smoke this and all kinds of memories rush out at you. Light, smells, things like that. The quality of your memory" - he paused in a leisurely way, and, as if searching for the right words, lightly snapped his fingers a couple of times - "is like something you've never experienced before. Don't you think so?"

I do, I told him. I was lost in memories of the commotion on the grade-school stage, of the smell of paint on the cardboard scenery.

"I'd like to hear about the barns," I said.

He gazed at me. His face, as usual, was expressionless.

"You don't mind me telling you about it?" he asked.

"Go right ahead," I replied.

"It's very simple, really. You pour gasoline around, throw on a lighted match and whoosh! It's all over. Takes less than fifteen minutes to burn to the ground. Of course, I'm not talking about large barns. More like sheds, really."

"So..." I said, and I stopped. I couldn't figure out how to go on. "So why do you burn down barns?"

"Is it strange?"

"I'm not sure. You burn barns, and I don't. Obviously there's a difference between the two."

He sat there blankly for a time. His mind seemed all twisted around, like putty. Or maybe it was my mind that was all twisted around.

"I burn roughly one barn every two months," he said. And snapped his fingers again. "That seems about the right pace. For me, that is."

I nodded vaguely. The right pace?

"So, are these your own barns you burn?" I asked.

He looked at me as if he had no idea what I was talking about. "Why would I burn down my own barns? What makes you think I own so many barns?"

"So, what you're telling me," I said, "is you burn other people's barns, correct?"

"That's right," he said. "Of course that's right. Other people's barns. So it's illegal. Just like you and me sitting here smoking grass - definitely against the law."

I was silent, resting my elbows on the arms of the chair.

"I burn other people's barns without their permission. Of course, I always choose one that won't turn into a four-alarm blaze. I don't want to start a fire—just burn down barns."

I nodded, and snuffed out the stub of the joint. "But if you're caught you'll be in trouble. It's arson, after all. You blow it and you could wind up in jail."

"I won't get caught," he said casually. "I pour on the gasoline, strike a match, and take off. Then I have a good time watching it all from a distance with binoculars. I won't get caught. The police aren't going to comb the streets over a lousy little barn burning down."

He was probably right, I thought. And no one would ever think that a well-dressed young man driving an expensive foreign car would be running around torching barns.

"Does she know about it?" I asked, pointing upstairs.

"She doesn't know a thing. Actually, I've never told another soul. It's not the kind of topic you can bring up with just anybody."

"Then why me?"

He spread the fingers of his left hand straight out and rubbed his cheek. The whiskers made a scratchy, dry sound, like a bug crawling over a taut sheet of paper. "You're a writer, so I thought you must be interested in patterns of human behavior. Writers are supposed to appreciate something for what it is, before they hand down a judgment. Besides, I wanted to talk about it with someone. The way I'm explaining it might be a little weird, I guess. The world's full of barns, that are, almost waiting for me to burn them down. A barn all by itself beside the ocean, a barn in the middle of a rice paddy . . . Anyhow, all kinds of barns. Give me fifteen minutes, and I'll burn them to the ground, so it looks like there was never any barn there to begin with. No one gets choked up over it. It just . . . disappears. Whoosh!"

"But you're the one who judges that they're expendable, right?"

"I don't judge anything. The barns are waiting to be burned. I just accept that. I merely accept what's there. It's like the rain. The rain falls. The river swells up. Something gets carried away in the flow. Is the rain making a judgment? It's not like I'm out to commit an immoral act. I have my own code of morality."

We sat there, silent and still for a while, waiting, it seemed, for the glow to wear off. I had no clue what I should say next. I felt as if I were looking through a train window watching a weird landscape flash in and out of view.

"Care for another beer?" I asked after a while.

"Thanks. Don't mind if I do."

I brought out four cans from the kitchen, along with some Camembert cheese. We had two beers each and ate the cheese.

"When was the last time you burned down a barn?" I asked him.

"Let me see." He thought for a while. "This summer, the end of August."

"And when are you going to burn down your next one?"

"I don't know. I'm not going by some schedule, circling dates on the calendar. I burn a barn when I get the urge to."

"But when you want to burn one, there isn't always the kind you're looking for just waiting for you, is there?"

"Of course not," he said quietly. "So I make sure I've got a good one picked out in advance."

"Have you, already decided on your next barn?"

Frown lines formed between his eyes. And he breathed in a rush of air through his nose. "Yes. I've already found it"

I didn't say anything, just sipped at what was left of my beer.



"It's a wonderful barn. It's a long time since I've seen one so well worth burning. Actually, I came over here today to check it out."

"You mean it's around here?"

"Very close by," he said.

So ended our discussion of barns.

He woke up his girlfriend at five, and apologized again for having dropped in on me out of the blue. Even though he'd drunk a huge amount of beer, he was cold sober. He drove the car out from behind the house. It had one small nick, near the headlight.

"I'll keep an eye out for those barns," I said in farewell.

"Right," he said. "Anyhow, remember it's right nearby?"

"What do you mean, 'barns'?" she asked.

"Just something between us men," he replied.

"I see," she said.

And they disappeared.

The next day, I went to the bookstore and bought a map of the part of town where I live. Map in hand, I walked the neighborhood, marking with a pencil the location of every barn. Over three days, I explored an area two and a half miles in each direction. My home was on the outskirts of town, with quite a few farms still around, so there were lots of barns. I counted sixteen.

The barn he planned to burn must be one of those. The way he'd said that it was right nearby made me sure it wasn't beyond the area I'd covered.

Next, I made a careful check of each of the sixteen barns. First, I eliminated the ones too close to other people's houses. Next, I crossed off the ones that had farm tools and pesticides inside - that is, ones

that looked as though someone was using them every day. I was sure he wouldn't want to burn one of those.

That left five barns. Five barns that could be burned. The kind that could burn down in fifteen minutes, and would burn clear to the ground—and wouldn't be any loss. But I couldn't decide which of the five he'd pick. It was a question of personal preference. I was dying to find out which one it would be.

I spread out the map and erased all but five of the "X"s I'd made. Then I got out my T-square, French curve, and divider, and I mapped out the shortest route that would pass all five barns and take me back home. The route curved along the river and over some hills, and ended up being four and one-third miles.

At six the next morning I put on my jogging outfit and running shoes and ran the length of the course I'd mapped out. Since I usually do three and a half miles every morning, adding an extra mile didn't bother me too much. The scenery wasn't bad, and though there were two railroad crossings along the way, they didn't really slow me down.

The course circled the athletic grounds of the college near my house, then ran along the river and nearly two miles up a deserted dirt road. The first barn was halfway up the road. Then the course cut through a wood and up a slight slope. Another barn. A little way off, there was a stable for a racetrack. The horses might kick up a little ruckus if they saw a fire, but that's all; they wouldn't get hurt or anything.

The third and fourth barns looked alike, like two ugly old twins. They were only two hundred or so yards apart. Both of them were dilapidated and filthy. If you were going to burn down one of them, you might as well burn the pair.

The last barn stood beside a railroad crossing, at about the three-and-a-half-mile mark. It was clearly abandoned. It faced the road and had a tin Pepsi-Cola sign nailed to it. The building itself - I'm not sure you could even call it a building anymore - had mostly collapsed. It fit his description - a building just waiting for someone to commit it to the flames.

I stopped in front of the last barn, took a few deep breaths, then crossed the railroad tracks and headed home. The run took thirty-one minutes and thirty seconds.

I ran the same course every morning for a month. But none of the barns burned down. Sometimes the thought hit me that maybe he was trying to get *me* to burn down a barn. As if he'd filled my head with the image of a barn burning and were steadily inflating it more and more, like putting air in a bicycle tire. There were even times when I thought that, as long as I was waiting for him to do it, I might as well go ahead and strike a match and burn one down. It's just a beat-up old barn, right?

But that's going too far. After all, it's not me who burns barns, it's him. No matter how much the image of burning barns might swell up in my head, I'm just not the barn-burning type. Maybe he decided on some other barn somewhere. Or was too busy to find the time to burn one.

I didn't hear from her at all.

December came, and with it the end of fall, and the morning air turned cold. No change in the barns, just white frost covering their roofs. The world moved on as always.

The next time I saw him was that December, a few days before Christmas. Wherever you went, Christmas carols were playing. I was busy walking around town buying presents for all sorts of people. Over near Nogizaki, I spotted his car in the parking lot of a coffee shop. There was no mistaking that silver sports car, with the small scratch next to the left headlight.

Without thinking, I went inside. The interior of the shop was dark, with a strong aroma of coffee. People's voices were muted, and baroque music played softly in the background. I spotted him right away. Seated by the window, he was drinking cafe au lait.

I just said hello. I didn't tell him I'd seen his car parked out front; I happened to come into the shop and happened to run into him.

"Mind if I sit down?" I asked.

"Not at all," he said.

We chatted for a while. But our conversation went nowhere. We didn't have much to say to each other, and his thoughts seemed to be elsewhere. Even so, he didn't appear to mind my sharing his table. He told me about the harbor in Tunisia. And about the shrimp they catch there. It wasn't that he felt obliged to talk; he just wanted to tell me about the shrimp. But the story ran out halfway through, like a trickle of water being sucked up by sand.

He raised his hand, called a waiter over, and ordered a second cup of cafe au lait.

"By the way, whatever happened to that barn?" I ventured to ask him.

A trace of a smile played at the corners of his mouth. "Ah-you still remember, I see," he said. He took his handkerchief out of his pocket, wiped his mouth, and put the handkerchief back in his pocket. "I burned it, of course. Burned it right down. Just like I said I would."

"Near my house?"

"Yes. Right nearby."

"When?"

"A while back, ten days after we dropped by your house."

Then I told him how I marked the locations of the barns on a map - how I ran past them once a day. "So I couldn't have missed it," I said.

"You're quite meticulous, aren't you?" he said brightly. "Meticulous and logical. But you must have overlooked it. That happens sometimes. A thing's too close, and you miss it."

"Well, I don't get it."

He straightened his tie and glanced at his watch. "It's too close," he said. "But I have to be going. Why don't we have a nice long talk about it next time? You'll have to excuse me, but someone's waiting for me."

There was no reason to keep him any longer. He stood up and put his cigarettes and lighter in his pocket.

"Oh, by the way, have you seen her since that day?" he asked.

"No, I haven't. Have you?"

"No. I can't get hold of her. She isn't in her apartment, I can't get through by phone, and she hasn't been going to her mime class for a long time."

"I imagine she just took off for somewhere. She's done that a number of times."

He stood there, hands stuck in his pockets, and stared at the tabletop. "With no money, for a month and a half. She's not the kind who can make it on her own, you know." He snapped his fingers inside his pocket a couple of times. "She doesn't have a cent," he continued. "Or any real friends, either. Her address book is crammed, but those are just names. There's not a single person she can depend on. You're the only one she trusted. I'm not saying that to be polite. You were someone special to her. Even

made me a bit jealous. And I'm not the kind of person who's ever jealous." He gave a slight sigh and looked at his watch again. "I've really got to be going. Let's get together again sometime."

I nodded. But the right words wouldn't come out. It was always that way. Whenever I was with him the words just wouldn't flow.

I tried calling her a couple of times after that; until the phone company shut off her phone. I was a little worried, so I went to her apartment. Her door was locked. A sheaf of junk mail was stuffed in her mailbox. I couldn't locate the building supervisor, so I couldn't even find out if she still lived there. I tore a page from my appointment book, wrote a note saying, "Get in touch with me," wrote my name, and dropped it in her mailbox.

Not a word.

The next time I visited her apartment, there was someone else's nameplate on the door. I knocked, but no one answered. Just like the last time, the building supervisor was nowhere to be found.

So I gave up.

That was almost a year ago. She just disappeared.

I still run past the five barns every morning. No barn in my neighborhood has burned down. And I haven't heard about any barn burning. December's come again, and the winter birds fly overhead. And I keep on getting older.