Kafka on the Shore

Haruki Murakami

Chapter 1

The Boy Named Crow
"So you're all set for money, then?" the boy named Crow asks in his characteristic sluggish voice. The kind of voice you have when you've just woken up and your mouth still feels heavy and dull. But he's just pretending. He's totally awake. As always.

I nod.

"How much?"

I review the numbers in my head. "Close to ¥400,000 in cash, plus some money I can get from an ATM. I know it's not a lot, but it should be enough. For the time being."

"Not bad," the boy named Crow says. "For the time being."

I give him another nod.

"I'm guessing this isn't Christmas money from Santa Claus."

"Yeah, you're right," I reply.

Crow smirks and looks around. "I imagine you've started out by rifling drawers, am I right?"

I don't say anything. He knows whose money we're talking about, so there's no need for any long-winded interrogations. He's just giving me a hard time.

"No matter," Crow says. "You really need this money and you're going to get it – beg, borrow or steal. It's your father's money, so who cares, right? Get your hands on that much and you should be able to make it. For the time being. But what's the plan after it's all gone? Money isn't like mushrooms in a forest – it doesn't just pop up on its own, you know. You'll need to eat, a place to sleep. One day you're going to run out."

"I'll think about that when the time comes," I say.

"When the time comes," Crow repeats, as if weighing these words in his hand.

I nod.

"Like by getting a job or something?"

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"Maybe," I say.

Crow shakes his head. "You know, you've got a lot to learn about the world. Listen – what kind of job could a 15-year-old kid get in some far-off place he's never been to before? You haven't even finished junior high. Who do you think's going to hire you?"

I blush a little. It doesn't take much to make me blush.

"Forget it," he says. "You're just starting out and I shouldn't lay all this depressing stuff on you. You've already decided what you're going to do, and all that's left is to set the wheels in motion. I mean, it's your life. Basically, you have to go with what you think is right."

That's right. When all is said and done, it is my life.

"I'll tell you one thing, though. You're going to have to get a lot tougher if you want to make it."

"I'm trying my best," I say.

"I'm sure you are," Crow says. "These last few years you've grown a whole lot stronger. I've got to hand it to you."

I nod again.

"But let's face it – you're only 15," Crow goes on. "Your life's just begun and there's a ton of things out in the world you've never laid eyes on. Things you never could imagine."

As always, we're sitting beside each other on the old sofa in my father's study. Crow loves the study and all the little objects scattered around there. Now he's toying with a bee-shaped glass paperweight. If my father was at home, you can bet Crow would never go anywhere near it.

"But I have to get out of here," I tell him. "No two ways about it."

"Yeah, I guess you're right." He places the paperweight back on the table and links his hands behind his head. "Not that running away's going to solve everything. I don't want to rain on your parade or anything, but I wouldn't count on escaping this place if I were you. No matter how far you run. Distance might not solve anything."

The boy named Crow lets out a sigh, then rests a fingertip on each of his closed eyelids and speaks to me from the darkness within.

"How about we play our game?" he says.

"All right," I say. I close my eyes and quietly take a deep breath.

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"OK, picture a terrible sandstorm," he says. "Get everything else out of your head."

I do as he says, get everything else out of my head. I forget who I am, even. I'm a total blank. Then things begin to surface. Things that – as we sit here on the old leather sofa in my father's study – both of us can see.

"Sometimes fate is like a small sandstorm that keeps changing direction," Crow says.

Sometimes fate is like a small sandstorm that keeps changing direction. You change direction, but the sandstorm chases you. You turn again, but the storm adjusts. Over and over you play this out, like some ominous dance with death just before dawn. Why? Because this storm isn't something that blew in from far away, something that has nothing to do with you. This storm is you. Something inside you. So all you can do is give in to it, step right inside the storm, closing your eyes and plugging up your ears so the sand doesn't get in, and walk through it, step by step. There's no sun there, no moon, no direction, no sense of time. Just fine white sand swirling up into the sky like pulverised bones. That's the kind of sandstorm you need to imagine.

And that's exactly what I do. I imagine a white funnel stretching vertically up like a thick rope. My eyes are closed tight, hands cupped over my ears, so those fine grains of sand can't blow inside me. The sandstorm draws steadily closer. I can feel the air pressing on my skin. It really is going to swallow me up.

The boy called Crow rests a hand softly on my shoulder, and with that the storm vanishes.

"From now on – no matter what – you've got to be the world's toughest 15-year-old. That's the only way you're going to survive. And in order to do that, you've got to figure what it means to be tough. You following me?"

I keep my eyes closed and don't reply. I just want to sink off into sleep like this, his hand on my shoulder. I hear the faint flutter of wings.

"You're going to be the world's toughest 15-year-old," Crow whispers as I try to fall asleep. As if he were carving the words in a deep blue tattoo on my heart.

And you really will have to make it through that violent, metaphysical, symbolic storm. No matter how metaphysical or symbolic it might be, make no mistake about it: it will cut through flesh like a thousand razor blades. People will bleed there, and you will bleed too. Hot, red blood. You'll catch that blood in your hands, your own blood and the blood of others.

And once the storm is over you won't remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won't even be sure, in fact, whether the storm is really over. But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm you won't be the same person who walked in. That's what this storm's all about.

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On my fifteenth birthday I'll run away from home, journey to a far-off town and live in a corner of a small library. It'd take a week to go into the whole thing, all the details. So I'll just give the main point. On my fifteenth birthday I'll run away from home, journey to a far-off town, and live in a corner of a small library.

It sounds a little like a fairy tale. But it's no fairy tale, believe me. No matter what sort of spin you put on it.

1

Cash isn't the only thing I take from my father's study when I leave home. I take a small old gold lighter – I like the design and feel of it – and a folding knife with a really sharp blade. Made for skinning deer, it has a five-inch blade and a nice heft. Probably something he bought on one of his trips abroad. I also take a sturdy, bright pocket torch from a drawer. Plus sky-blue Revo sunglasses to disguise my age.

I think about taking my father's favourite Sea Oyster Rolex. It's a beautiful watch, but something flashy will only attract attention. My cheap plastic Casio watch with an alarm and stopwatch will do just fine, and might actually be more useful. Reluctantly, I return the Rolex to its drawer.

From the back of another drawer I take out a photograph of me and my older sister when we were little, the two of us on a beach somewhere with grins plastered across our faces. My sister's looking off to one side so half her face is in shadow and her smile is neatly cut in half. It's like one of those Greek tragedy masks in a textbook that's half one idea and half the opposite. Light and dark. Hope and despair. Laughter and sadness. Trust and loneliness. For my part I'm staring straight ahead, undaunted, at the camera. Nobody else is there at the beach. My sister and I have on swimsuits – hers a red floralprint one-piece, mine some baggy old blue trunks. I'm holding a plastic stick in my hand. White foam is washing over our feet.

Who took this, and where and when, I have no idea. And how could I have looked so happy? And why did my father keep just that one photo? The whole thing is a total mystery. I must have been three, my sister nine. Did we ever really get along that well? I have no memory of ever going to the beach with my family. No memory of going anywhere with them. No matter, though – there's no way I'm going to leave that photo with my father so I put it in my wallet. I don't have any photos of my mother. My father threw them all away.

After giving it some thought I decide to take the mobile phone with me. Once he finds out I've taken it, my father will probably get the phone company to cut it off. Still, I toss it in my backpack, along with the adapter. Doesn't add much weight, so why not. When it doesn't work any more I'll just throw it away.

Just the bare necessities, that's all I need. Choosing which clothes to take is the hardest thing. I'll need a couple of sweaters and pairs of underwear. But what about shirts and trousers? Gloves, scarves, shorts, a coat? There's no end to it. One thing I do know, though. I don't want to wander around some strange place with a huge backpack that screams out, Hey, everybody, check out the runaway! Do that and

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someone was bound to sit up and take notice. Next thing you know the police will haul me in and I'll be sent straight home. If I don't wind up in some gang first.

Any place cold is definitely out, I decide. Easy enough, just choose the opposite – a warm place. Then I can leave the coat and gloves behind, and get by with half the clothes. I pick out wash-and-weartype things, the lightest ones I have, fold them neatly and stuff them in my backpack. I also pack a three-season sleeping bag, the kind that rolls up nice and tight, toiletries, a rain poncho, notebook and pen, a Walkman and ten discs – got to have my music – along with a spare rechargeable battery. That's about it. No need for any cooking gear, which is too heavy and takes up too much room, since I can buy food at the local shop.

It takes a while but I'm able to subtract a lot of things from my list. I add things, cross them off, then add a whole lot of other things and cross them off, too.

My fifteenth birthday is the ideal point to run away from home. Any earlier and it'd be too soon. Any later and I would have missed my chance.

During my first two years in junior high, I'd worked out, training myself for this day. I started practising judo in the first couple of years of grade school, and still went sometimes in junior high. But I didn't join any school teams. Whenever I had the time I'd jog around the school grounds, swim or go to the local gym. The young trainers there gave me free lessons, showing me the best kind of stretching exercises and how to use the fitness machines to bulk up. They taught me which muscles you use every day and which ones can only be built up with machines, even the correct way to do a bench press. I'm pretty tall to begin with, and with all this exercise I've developed pretty broad shoulders and pecs. Most strangers would take me for 17. If I ran away looking my actual age, you can imagine all the problems that would cause.

Apart from the trainers at the gym and the housekeeper who comes to our house every other day – and of course the bare minimum required to get by at school – I hardly talk to anyone. For a long time my father and I have avoided seeing each other. We live under the same roof, but our schedules are totally different. He spends most of his time in his studio, far away, and I do my best to avoid him.

The school I'm going to is a private junior high for kids who are upper class, or at least rich. It's the kind of school where, unless you really blow it, you're automatically promoted to the high school on the same campus. All the students dress neatly, have nice straight teeth, and are as boring as hell. Naturally I have zero friends. I've built a wall around me, never letting anybody inside and trying not to venture outside myself. Who could like somebody like that? They all keep an eye on me, from a distance. They might hate me, or even be afraid of me, but I'm just glad they didn't bother me. Because I had tons of things to take care of, including spending a lot of my free time devouring books in the school library.

I always paid close attention to what was said in class, though. Just as the boy named Crow suggested.

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The facts and techniques or whatever they teach you in class isn't going to be very useful in the real world, that's for sure. Let's face it, teachers are basically a bunch of morons. But you've got to remember this: you're running away from home. You probably won't have any chance to go to school any more, so like it or not you'd better absorb whatever you can while you've got the chance. Become like a sheet of blotting paper and soak it all in. Later on you can work out what to keep and what to unload.

I did what he said, as I almost always do. My brain like a sponge, I focused on every word said in class and let it all sink in, worked out what it meant and committed everything to memory. Thanks to this, I hardly had to study outside the classroom, but always came out near the top on exams.

My muscles were getting hard as steel, even as I grew more withdrawn and quiet. I tried hard to keep my emotions from showing so that no one – classmates or teachers alike – had a clue what I was thinking. Soon I'd be launched into the rough adult world, and I knew I'd have to be tougher than anybody if I wanted to survive.

My eyes in the mirror are as cold as a lizard's, my expression fixed and unreadable. I can't remember the last time I laughed or even showed a hint of a smile to another person. Let alone myself.

I'm not trying to imply I can keep up this silent, isolated façade all the time. Sometimes the wall I've erected around me comes crumbling down. It doesn't happen very often, but sometimes, before I even realise what's going on, there I am – naked and defenceless and utterly confused. At times like that I always feel an omen calling out to me, like a dark, omnipresent pool of water.

A dark, omnipresent pool of water.

It was probably always there, hidden away somewhere. But when the time comes it silently rushes out, chilling every cell in your body. You drown in that cruel flood, gasping for breath. You cling to a vent near the ceiling, struggling, but the air you manage to breathe is dry and burns your throat. Water and thirst, cold and heat – these supposedly opposite elements combine to assault you.

The world is a huge space, but the space that will take you in – and it doesn't have to be very big – is nowhere to be found. You seek a voice, but what do you get? Silence. You look for silence, but guess what? All you hear over and over and over is the voice of this omen. And sometimes this prophetic voice pushes a secret switch hidden deep inside your brain.

Your heart is like a great river after a long spell of rain, spilling over its banks. All signposts that once stood on the ground are gone, inundated and carried away by that rush of water. And still the rain beats down on the surface of the river. Every time you see a flood like that on the news you tell yourself: That's it. That's my heart.

Before running away from home I wash my hands and face, trim my nails, swab out my ears and brush my teeth. I take my time, making sure my whole body's well

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scrubbed. Being really clean is sometimes the most important thing there is. I study my face in the mirror. Genes I inherited from my father and mother – not that I had any recollection of what she looked like – created this face. I can do my best not to let any emotions show, keep my eyes from revealing anything, bulk up my muscles, but there's not much I can do about my looks. I'm stuck with my father's long, thick eyebrows and the deep lines between them. I could probably kill him if I wanted to – I'm definitely strong enough – and I can erase my mother from my memory. But there's no way to erase the DNA they passed down to me. If I want to drive that away I'd have to get rid of me.

There's an omen contained in that. A mechanism buried inside me.

A mechanism buried inside you.

I switch off the light and leave the bathroom. A heavy, damp stillness lies over the house. The whispers of people who don't exist, the breath of the dead. I look around, standing stock-still, and take a deep breath. The clock shows 3 p.m., the two hands cold and distant. They're pretending to be non-committal, but I know they're not on my side. It's nearly time for me to say goodbye. I pick up my backpack and slip it over my shoulders. I've carried it any number of times, but now it feels so much heavier.

Shikoku, I decide. That's where I'll go. There's no particular reason it has to be Shikoku, only that studying the map I got the feeling that's where I should head. The more I look at the map – actually every time I study it – the more I feel Shikoku tugging at me. It's a long way south of Tokyo, separated from the mainland by water, with a warm climate. I've never been there, have no friends or relatives there, so if somebody started looking for me – which I doubt they will – Shikoku would be the last place they'd think of.

I pick up the ticket I'd booked at the counter and climb aboard the night bus. This is the cheapest way to get to Takamatsu – just a little more than ¥10,000. Nobody pays me any attention, asks how old I am, or gives me a second look. The bus driver mechanically checks my ticket.

Only a third of the seats are taken. Most of the passengers are travelling alone, like me, and the bus is strangely silent. It's a long trip to Takamatsu, ten hours according to the schedule, and we'll be arriving early in the morning. But I don't mind. I've got plenty of time. The bus pulls out of the station at eight, and I push my seat back. No sooner do I settle down than my consciousness, like a battery that's lost its charge, starts to fade away, and I fall asleep.

Some time in the middle of the night a hard rain begins to fall. I wake up every once in a while, part the chintzy curtain at the window and gaze out at the highway rushing by. Raindrops beat against the glass, blurring street lights alongside the road that stretch off into the distance at identical intervals as if they'd been set down to measure the earth. A new light rushes up close and in an instant fades away behind us. I check my watch and see it's past midnight. Automatically shoved to the front, my fifteenth birthday makes its appearance.

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"Hey, happy birthday," the boy named Crow says.

"Thanks," I reply.

The omen is still with me, though, like a shadow. I check to make sure the wall around me is still in place. Then I close the curtain and fall back to sleep.

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