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The Tale
of
KAHO
Haruki Murakami

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Haruki Murakami

Shinchosha · 2026

The Tale of Kaho (■■■)

by Haruki Murakami

Originally published in Japanese by Shinchosha Co., Ltd., Tokyo, 2026.

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First published as individual stories in Shincho magazine:

"Kaho" — June 2024

"The Anteater of Musashi-Sakai" — May 2025

"Kaho and the Queen of Termites" — November 2025

"Guardian Angel, Elephant Eggs, and Scarlett Johansson" — March 2026

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Chapter One: Kaho and the Motorcycle Man

“I’ve had similar dates with all sorts of women so far,” the man said.
“Honestly, I’ve never met anyone as ugly as you.”

That happened while we were waiting for the coffee after finishing our dessert.

It took her a few seconds, about three or four seconds, to understand the meaning of his words. Because the words were so abrupt, Kaho hadn’t

immediately grasped his intention. Moreover, the man even had a smile on his face when he uttered such blunt, almost aggressive words—a gentle, almost friendly smile, though devoid of any humor. Yes, this man wasn't joking; he genuinely believed it.

In that situation, the first thing that comes to Kaho's mind is to pick up the napkin from her lap, put it on the table, grab her handbag from the chair next to him, stand up without a word, and walk straight out of the restaurant. That would probably be the wisest course of action.

However, Kaho didn't do it then for some reason. Looking back, she realized the reasons were twofold: pure shock and curiosity. Of course, she was angry—it was impossible not to be. But more than anger, she wanted to know: What was this man trying to say to me? Was I really that ugly? And was there any further development in this matter?

"Saying you're the ugliest might be a bit of an exaggeration." The man paused slightly, then added as if to add something, "But saying you're the least attractive is pretty much true."

Kaho pressed her lips into a straight line, staring intently and silently at the man's face.

Why go out of the way to say those things? If you're so dissatisfied with someone you've just met on a blind date, you can simply cut ties and not contact them again. It's a simple matter; why humiliate someone to their face?

The man was probably ten years older than Kaho, impeccably dressed, and handsome. While not exactly Kaho's type, he could perhaps be described as having well-mannered, regular features and a very photogenic face. If he were a bit taller, he might have been an actor. The restaurant he chose was small and elegant, and the dishes served were both delicious and refined. He wasn't exactly talkative, but he was a good conversationalist, never letting the conversation break down or become awkward (although

afterwards, she couldn't remember exactly what they talked about). And during the meal, she even developed a gentle fondness for him—she had to admit it. However, suddenly, things turned out this way. What had happened?

"You might find this strange."

After the two cups of espresso were served, the man spoke in a gentle voice, as if he could see right through Kaho. Then he added a small sugar cube to the coffee and stirred it quietly with a spoon.

"So why would I be willing to have dinner with someone so ugly—no, someone whose looks I don't like—until the very end? I could have just had an aperitif, exchanged a few perfunctory words, and called it a day. Spending an hour and a half on a set meal seems like a waste of time. And why bring up this topic at the very last minute?"

Kaho simply watched the man's face silently across the table. Her hands were tightly gripping her napkin on her knees.

"I think it's because they couldn't suppress their curiosity."

The man said, "I think I want to know what women like you, who are not good-looking, think about, and how the fact that you are not good-looking has affected your life."

Was her curiosity satisfied? Kaho wondered to herself. Of course, she didn't say it aloud.

"So, has that curiosity been satisfied?" the man asked, taking a sip of coffee and frowning slightly.

Without a doubt, this man instantly read Kaho's mind. It was as if an anteater had licked a termite nest clean with its long, thin tongue. Then, as if by reflex, she recalled the appearance of a real anteater—to shift her gaze to something completely unrelated, even if only for a moment, to escape this bizarre reality before her. She pictured a large, black female anteater. The anteater, too, raised its head, looking at her with large, dark eyes, a

clear look of curiosity in them, as if asking, "What are you doing in a place like this?"

"What am I doing here?" Kaho wondered.

"So, was that curiosity satisfied?" the man repeated. Then he shook his head slightly, put the espresso cup back on the saucer, and answered himself, "No, it wasn't."

After speaking, the man raised his hand to call the waiter and quickly paid the bill with his credit card. Then he gave Kaho a slight bow, stood up, and walked straight out of the store without looking back. Only Kaho and the female anteater used as a metaphor remained.

In fact, Kaho had never cared much about her appearance since childhood. Looking at her face in the mirror, she neither thought she was particularly beautiful nor particularly ugly. She was neither happy nor frustrated by it. The reason she was uninterested in her face was because she had never realized that her appearance had ever had any impact on her life. Perhaps it should be said that she never had the opportunity to develop that awareness. As an only child, she didn't have to compare herself with her siblings, so she had no reason to feel inferior, and her parents almost never commented on her appearance.

Kaho's mother had regular features and a small face, and was often praised as a beauty. She also looked much younger than her actual age. Unfortunately (or rather), Kaho didn't inherit that look. She inherited more of her father's DNA. However, she never felt particularly regretful about not being born a beauty. Frankly (of course, she never said this), she didn't particularly like her mother's appearance. She always felt that her father's slightly rugged but honest face had more depth, and she preferred it. If it were Van Gogh, he might have painted a beautiful portrait of his father, such as "Portrait of a Pediatrician in Urawa."

Even after entering puberty, Kaho's indifference and lack of concern about her appearance remained unchanged. Many of her female friends were deeply troubled by their looks, going to great lengths to put on makeup, but she couldn't quite understand that feeling. She spent very little time in front of the mirror. Maintaining basic cleanliness of her body and face—that was the only thing she cared about. And it wasn't anything particularly difficult.

She attended a co-educational public school where she had several boyfriends. She wasn't the type to win many votes in class polls for female popularity among the boys. But for some reason, there were always one or two boys in each class who would develop a romantic interest in her and approach her. Kaho herself didn't know exactly what they were interested in about her.

After graduating from high school and attending an art university in Tokyo, she was almost never short of male companions. Therefore, she had no need to worry about her appearance. In that respect, she could be considered lucky. But one thing in particular struck her as utterly unbelievable: her female friends, who were undeniably more attractive than herself, genuinely worried about their looks, sometimes even undergoing expensive plastic surgery. That was beyond her comprehension.

And so, after her twenty-sixth birthday, when the man she had just met bluntly told her she was "ugly" at dinner, Kaho was truly at a loss for words. Rather than feeling angry or hurt by his rudeness, she was simply taken aback.

The person who introduced her to the man was a female editor named Machida. She worked at a small publishing house in Kanda, mainly publishing books for children. Machida was four or five years older than Kaho, had two young children, and edited Kaho's picture books. Although the picture book sales weren't huge, the income from illustrations was

enough for Kaho to live a normal life without her parents' support. At that time, Kaho had just broken up with her boyfriend of over two years, who was the same age as her, and was extremely depressed because the breakup had been anything but pleasant. During that period, her work was also not going well. Ms. Machida noticed all of this and arranged a blind date for Kaho, just to change her mood. She didn't reveal anything about the man beforehand. Ms. Machida said that this would create more suspense. But Kaho couldn't help but tilt her head and mutter to herself: Could this really be considered suspense?

Three days after meeting the man, Ms. Machida called.

"So, how's the date?" she asked as soon as the call connected.

Kaho gave a vague hum, not answering directly, but instead asked, "Well, speaking of which, um—what kind of person is that person?"

Ms. Machida said, "To be honest, I don't know him very well. He's probably a friend of a friend. He's probably close to forty, single, and works in the securities industry. He seems reliable, capable, and doesn't have a criminal record. I've only met him once and we had a brief chat. He's quite handsome and seems like a nice person. As for his height, maybe a little short. But Tom Cruise isn't tall either. Of course, I've never met Tom in person."

"But why would someone so handsome, kind-hearted, and capable go on a blind date?" Kaho said. "Surely someone like that has no shortage of female companions."

Ms. Machida hesitated for a moment before saying, "Well... how should I put it? I've heard that he's quite quick-witted and very capable at work, but his personality might be a bit eccentric—though I haven't had a chance to ask him exactly what's eccentric about him. Anyway, I don't want you to have any preconceived notions before we actually meet, so I deliberately didn't mention these things."

"He might be a little eccentric in personality." Kaho mechanically repeated the other person's words, then shook her head slightly at the phone, somewhat speechless. Could something like that be brushed off with "a little eccentric"?

"So," Ms. Machida said, "did you exchange phone numbers or anything?"

Kaho held the receiver, pausing for a moment. Exchange phone numbers? Then she said, "No, we didn't."

Three days later, Ms. Machida called again.

"It's about that handsome Mr. Sahara from last time. Is it convenient to talk now?" she asked. Sahara was the name of Kaho's blind date, pronounced the same as "desert."

Kaho put down her paintbrush and switched the receiver from her left hand to her right. "Sure, please go ahead."

Ms. Machida said, "Mr. Sahara contacted me last night and asked if we could meet again to continue our conversation from last time."

Kaho gasped upon hearing this, remaining silent for a long while. Another meeting to continue the conversation? Kaho could hardly believe his ears.

"Kaho," Ms. Machida's voice was filled with worry, "Are you listening?"

"Yes, I'm listening," Kaho said.

"It seems he really likes you. So, how should I reply to him?"

Logically, the answer should be "no." To be met with such harsh words, even insults, in person—what's the point of seeing such a person again? Yet Kaho couldn't make a decision on the spot. Several doubts tangled and intertwined in her mind, a chaotic mess.

"Could I think about it for a moment?" Kaho said to Ms. Machida. "I'll call you back later."

As a result, Kaho met with Sahara again that Saturday afternoon. It had to be during the day, for a short time, without eating or drinking, and in a quiet place where people could come and go—these were the conditions Kaho proposed through Machida.

“Hmm, for a second date, these are certainly unusual terms,” Machida said. “You could say they’re quite cautious.”

“It’s just a feeling,” Kaho said.

“But don’t go carrying a wrench in your handbag, okay?” Machida said, laughing cheerfully.

Kaho thought to herself: This idea might not be so bad.

Last time, Sahara seemed to have gone to the appointment after get off work, dressed in a smart dark suit with a paisley tie; this time, however, he was dressed casually for the weekend: a dark brown leather jacket, skinny blue jeans, and perfectly fitting work boots. A pair of Ray-Ban green sunglasses was tucked into his breast pocket. Quite stylish.

Kaho deliberately arrived a little later than the agreed time. When he reached the hotel lobby lounge, Sahara was already there, texting someone on his phone. He saw Kaho, smiled slightly, and closed his phone. A motorcycle helmet sat on the seat next to him.

“I ride a BMW 1800cc,” Sahara said. “It has the largest displacement among BMW motorcycles, the engine sounds very pleasant, and it makes a bold beat. By the way, I like the word ‘motorcycle’ more than ‘motorcycle’ or ‘motorcycle’.”

Kaho didn’t say anything. She thought to herself: Whether you ride a BMW “motorcycle,” a tricycle, or an oxcart, it has nothing to do with me.

“You probably have absolutely no interest in motorcycles or anything like that, but just so you know, consider this a side note for your consideration,” Sahara added, with a subtle wink.

Now Kaho was certain once again: this man really could read my mind.

The waitress came over, and Kaho ordered coffee. Sahara ordered herbal tea, chamomile.

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

Kaho silently shook her head. She had never been to Australia.

"Do you like spiders?" Sahara asked, fanning out his fingers in the air.

"Spider, an eight-legged spider."

Kaho didn't answer. She was terrified of spiders, but there was no need to tell him specifically.

Sahara said, "When I was in Australia, I saw a spider as big as a baseball glove. It was terrifying to look at and made me feel scared. But the locals actually welcomed it into their homes. Why is that?"

Kaho remained silent.

"Because this creature is active at night and eats cockroaches. It's a beneficial insect, a useful insect. But it's amazing that there are spiders that eat cockroaches. The ingenuity and splendor of the food chain structure always amazes me."

Coffee and herbal tea were served, and the two of them sat in silence for a while, each looking at their own drink.

A moment later, Sahara spoke in a serious tone: "You must be wondering why I would want to see you again."

Kaho still didn't answer, but just silently stared at his face.

"So, to be honest, I'm very surprised that you agreed to see me again," Sahara said. "I'm grateful, but even more surprised. After being treated so rudely by me, you're still willing to see me again. No, that was more than just rude; no matter how you look at it, it was an unforgivable insult that trampled on a woman's dignity. Most women would never have appeared in front of me again after hearing such words. Of course, that's only

natural.”

“Most women—” Kaho repeated the other person's words in her mind. This shocked her.

“Most women?” Kaho finally spoke. “So, you've said similar things to every woman you've ever met? That is—”

“That’s right,” Sahara readily admitted. “I’ve said almost the exact same thing to every woman I meet, just like I did to you. ‘This is the first time I’ve met a woman as ugly as you.’ Usually, it’s after a pleasant dinner and some delicious dessert. Timing is everything in these situations. You should understand that, right? Find the perfect moment, and then—”

“Why?” Kaho's voice was dry. “I don't understand why you would do something like this? Why hurt other people's feelings so pointlessly? It's time-consuming, laborious, and a waste of time and money.”

Sahara tilted her head slightly and said, “Why—that’s a fundamental question. Once we start talking about that, things get complicated. Let’s talk about the effect of that sentence first. What always surprises me is their reaction when they hear that sentence. When someone says something so offensive to your face, most people would probably either get really angry or just laugh it off—you might think so too. Of course, there are people like that. But they are surprisingly few. Most women... are just hurt, deeply and for a long time. Sometimes they will say strange things, things that are hard to understand.”

The silence lasted for a while, so close they could hear each other breathing. Kaho broke the silence.

“Are you enjoying witnessing this reaction firsthand?”

“It's not enjoyment. It's just that I can't help but find it strange. Women who are beautiful no matter how you look at them, or whose appearance is obviously above average, are excessively frightened or hurt when someone points out their ugliness to their face.”

The cup of coffee, which she had never touched before, was steaming in front of her, but it had definitely gone cold.

"I think you're sick," Kaho said firmly. "This isn't normal."

Sahara nodded. "Yes, perhaps that's true. I might be sick. But I'm not trying to justify myself; in the eyes of a sick person, it's the world that's sicker. Listen to me, in this era, appearanceism is strongly condemned. Many people criticize beauty pageants. Saying 'ugly woman' in front of a crowd will definitely get you attacked. But if you turn on the TV, flip through a magazine, it's full of advertisements for cosmetics, plastic surgery, and beauty salons. This is clearly a double standard. Perhaps it should be called a meaningless farce."

"Even so, that doesn't mean you can hurt others," Kaho retorted.

"Yes, you're right," Sahara admitted. "What you said makes a lot of sense. Yes, as you said, I'm sick. That's almost an indisputable fact, and I'm happy to admit it. However, being sick can also be a pleasant thing if you look at it from another perspective. For sick people, there is a special place that only patients can enjoy, just like Disneyland is tailor-made for patients. And I am fortunate enough to have enough time and money to savor that place."

Kaho stood up without a word. That was enough; there was no need to talk to this man anymore.

"Wait a minute," Sahara said to her as she stood up. "Please, give me a little more time, okay? It won't take long, just five minutes. Please sit down and let me finish what I have to say."

Kaho hesitated for a few seconds before sitting down again. She hadn't really wanted to do this, but there was something irresistible in the man's voice.

"What I want to tell you is that your reaction to what I said is unlike anyone else's," Sahara said. "Even after hearing such hurtful words, you

didn't panic, you didn't get angry, you didn't laugh it off, and you didn't seem particularly hurt. You didn't easily show those stale emotions; you just stared at me straight in the eye, like you were examining a pathogen under a microscope. You're the only one who has ever reacted this way. I'm quite impressed by that. Then I wondered, why wasn't this woman hurt by such hurtful words? Why is that? If anything could truly hurt her, what could it be?"

Suppressing her emotions, Kaho asked, "Is it just for this reason that you repeatedly arrange these meticulously planned meetings?"

The man tilted his head slightly. "No, not that many times. I just do it when the opportunity arises. I basically don't use dating apps or anything like that. Things that are too simple are mostly boring. I've tried a few times, but it's all a waste of time. Meeting a woman through a mutual acquaintance, someone whose background is clear—that kind of old-fashioned blind date is the best. That classic scenario excites me the most."

"And then insult the other party?" Kaho said.

Sahara did not answer. A faint smile had just appeared on his lips when he immediately withdrew it. Then he spread his hands out in front of his chest and stared at his palms with a scrutinizing gaze for a moment, as if checking for any changes in the lines on his hands.

"If you'd like, how about we go for a motorcycle ride?" He looked up and said, "I've also packed a spare helmet for you. The weather's nice today, I think it'll be a comfortable ride. This bike has just over 5,000 kilometers on it, and BMW's proud horizontally opposed engine is in excellent condition."

A surge of undeniable rage welled up within Kaho. He hadn't felt such pure anger in a long time, perhaps not even the first time in his life. A comfortable ride? What on earth was this man thinking?

"Let's skip the drive." Kaho took a deep breath and said in as calm a voice as possible, "Do you know what I want to do most right now?"

Sahara squinted and silently shook his head a couple of times, as if to say, "What is it?"

"What I want to do most right now is to get as far away from you as possible, and then thoroughly wash off all the grime that's stuck to me."

"I see," Sahara said. "I see. In that case, I'm sorry, we'll have to cancel the drive. I must respect your feelings. But, how should I put it, is it really that easy to get as far away from me as possible?"

"What does that mean?"

The sound of a baby crying anxiously came from somewhere in the distance. The man glanced in that direction, then looked directly at Kaho's face again.

"You'll understand sooner or later," the man said. "You might find it surprising, but in terms of distance, we've never been that far apart. What you devour and what you are devoured are two sides of the same coin. Heads and tails, debit and credit. That's what the world is like. There's a tail and a head, and a head and a tail. We'll probably meet again somewhere else in some form. It's something like fate, whether you like it or not."

I can't see this man again—Kaho thought strongly as she walked quickly towards the hotel door. I really should have told Ms. Machida clearly on the phone: No, I never want to see that person again.

curiosity.

Curiosity had led me here. I wanted to know what this man's intentions were, what he was seeking. But I was probably wrong. Perhaps he had laid the bait of curiosity, luring me here as subtly as a spider. The thought sent a chill down my spine. She longed for a warm place. A small island in the south, with endless white sand beaches. She wanted to lie there, close her

eyes, think of nothing, and bask in the sunlight.

Weeks passed. Of course, Kaho wanted to forget about Sahara as quickly as possible. She wanted to dismiss him as a pointless interlude, unrelated to the main plot of her life, to squeeze him out of her memory and tuck him away in some inconspicuous corner. But when she worked alone at her desk at night, the man's face would unconsciously appear before her. He wore a faint, almost imperceptible smile, scrutinizing each of her slender, delicate fingers with a meaningful expression. Like a creature dwelling in the ocean examining its subtle tentacles.

And she started spending more time in front of the mirror than before. Standing in front of the bathroom mirror, she meticulously examined every tiny detail of her face, as if re-measuring it. Then she realized again that she was almost completely uninterested in any of it. It was indeed her face, a face she had seen for so long, a face she had grown accustomed to. Yet she couldn't find the inevitability of it being her inherent face. Kaho even envied her friends who had undergone plastic surgery. They at least understood—or believed they understood—which parts of their faces they needed to technically modify to become more beautiful, to become more satisfied with themselves. But I can't do that. I don't understand it.

Perhaps I'm suffering a subtle revenge from my own life—a predetermined deadline that keeps repeating itself, my life attempting to strip me of what I'm rightfully entitled to all at once. Like balancing accounts—yes, debits and credits. Kaho thought, if I hadn't met Sahara, I probably wouldn't have had such a strange thought. Then she gently shook her head. He might have been patiently, for a long time, waiting for the right moment to appear before me. Like a giant spider lurking in the darkness, waiting for its unsuspecting prey to come.

Sometimes, in the dead of night, when everyone is fast asleep, large motorcycles would drive past the road in front of Kaho's apartment.

Whenever she heard that unique, dry, drum-like engine sound, her chest would tremble slightly. Her breathing would become rapid, and cold sweat would seep from her armpits.

"I've also prepared a spare helmet for you," the man said.

Sometimes, Kaho would unconsciously picture herself sitting on the back of that BMW motorcycle. Then she would imagine where that powerful, heavy machine—that ferocious mechanic from Bavaria—would take her. Where exactly was it taking her?

"To be honest, we weren't that far apart to begin with," the man said.

About two months after that strange, matchmaking-like meeting, Kaho finished a new picture book. One night, she had a long dream deep in the ocean, but suddenly woke up, took a deep breath, and slowly rose back to the real world. All around her was pitch black, as dark as could be. The clock beside her pillow pointed to 1:30 a.m. She got out of bed, turned on the light, heated some coffee, sat down at her desk, and began to translate the long story from her dream into words and pictures. She had to write it down before she forgot it. Yes, this was a dream of great significance to her. Her life wasn't the kind that could be controlled by ledgers, simply processed by debits and credits. She continued drawing the story as she recalled it, until dawn.

It's a story about a young girl searching for her own face. One day, the girl lost her face. While she slept, someone stole it. So she has to find it back no matter what.

But she couldn't remember what her face used to look like. Was it beautiful or ugly, round or long? She had no clue. She asked her parents, she asked her brothers, but somehow no one remembered what she used to look like, or perhaps no one was willing to tell her.

So, the girl decided to embark on a solo journey to find her own face. She temporarily used whatever face she could find that was barely usable,

placing it where her own face should have been. After all, if she had no face at all, people she met would definitely find her strange, and explaining why she was embarrassed every time would be too much trouble.

The young girl traveled the world on foot. She traversed towering mountains, crossed deep rivers, traversed vast deserts, and ventured into dense jungles. Though the journey was arduous, she never gave up. She firmly believed that once she encountered her own face, she would instantly recognize it. After all, it was an indispensable part of her being. Along her journey, she encountered countless people and experienced all sorts of wondrous things: she narrowly escaped being trampled by a herd of elephants, was attacked by a spider the size of a baseball glove, and almost got kicked by a wild horse. On a path deep in the jungle, she brushed past a gentle pair of anteaters. She nodded slightly in greeting, and the anteaters returned the gesture with a gentle nod. "Be careful of the ferocious jaguars," the anteater wife kindly warned her.

And so, over the long years, she traveled to every corner of the world, seeing countless faces, yet she could never find her own. All she saw were the faces of strangers. It seemed there was nowhere left to look. She didn't know what to do. And in the course of this continued search for her face, without realizing it, she was no longer a girl, but a grown woman. Was she destined to never find her own face? Was she to spend the rest of her life wearing this makeshift face? Thinking this, she fell into despair.

Just then, at the edge of a northern country's cape, as she was weeping alone, with nowhere to turn, a tall young man in a white fur coat approached and sat down beside her. His long hair was gently ruffled by the sea breeze. The young man looked at her face, smiled, and said:

"Oh my, I've never met a woman as beautiful as you before."

Yes, that face, which had initially been a makeshift patch, had now truly become her own. It was the various encounters of her journey, the