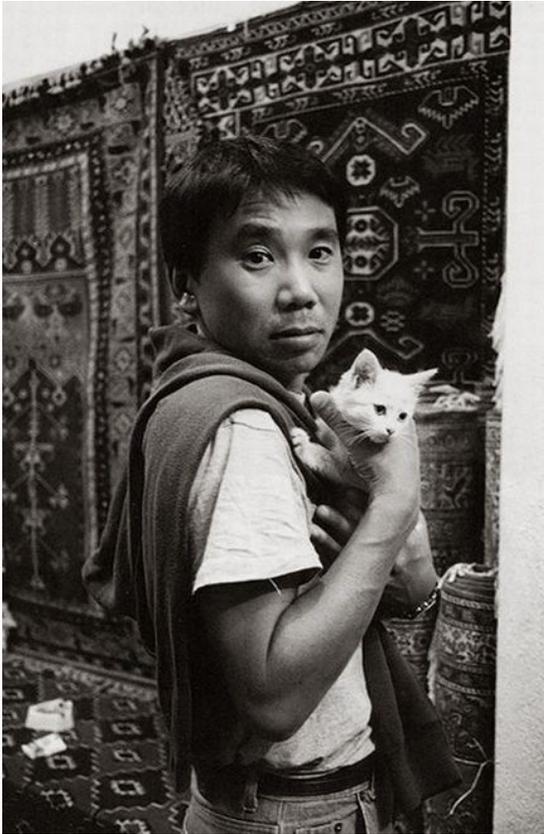


Dabchick (1981)

By Haruki Murakami (村上春樹) (Japan)

Translated from the Japanese by Jay Rubin



Haruki Murakami
born 1949

When I reached the bottom of a narrow concrete stairway, I found myself in a corridor that stretched on forever straight ahead-- a *long* corridor with ceilings so high the passageway felt more like a dried-up drainage canal than a corridor. Lacking decoration of any kind, it was an authentic corridor that was all corridor and nothing but corridor. The lighting was feeble and uneven, as if the light itself had finally reached its destination after a series of terrible mishaps. It had to pass through a layer of thick black dust that caked the fluorescent tubes installed at irregular intervals along the ceiling. And of those tubes, one in three was burnt out. I could hardly see my hand before my eyes. The place was silent. The only sound in the gloomy hallway was the flat slapping of my tennis shoes against the concrete floor.

I kept walking: two hundred yards, three hundred yards, maybe half a mile, not thinking, just walking, no time, no distance, no sense that I was moving

forward in any way. But I must have been. All of a sudden I was standing in a T-shaped intersection.

A T-shaped intersection?

I fished a crumpled postcard from my jacket pocket and let my eyes wander over its message: "Walk straight down the corridor. Where it intersects at right angles with another corridor, you will find a door." I searched the wall in front of me, but there was no sign of a door, no sign there had ever been a door, no indication there would ever be a door installed in this wall. It was a plain, simple concrete wall with no distinguishing features other than those shared by other concrete walls. No metaphysical doors, no symbolic doors, no metaphorical doors, no nothing. I ran my palm over long stretches of the wall, but it was just a wall, smooth and blank.

There must be some mistake, I was sure.

Leaning against the wall, I smoked a cigarette. Now what? Was I to forge onward or go back?

Not that the answer was ever seriously in doubt. I had no choice. I had to go on. I was sick of being poor. Sick of monthly payments, of alimony, of my cramped apartment, of the cockroaches in the tub, of the rush-hour subway, sick of everything. Now, at last, I had found a decent job. The work would be easy, the pay astoundingly good. Bonuses twice a year. Long summer vacations. I wasn't about to give up now-- just because I was having trouble finding one lousy door. If I couldn't find the door here, I would simply go on until I did find it.

I pulled a ten-yen coin from my pocket and flipped it. Heads. I took the corridor to the right.

The passageway turned twice to the right, once to the left, down ten steps, and turned right again. The air here made me think of coffee Jell-O: it was chilly and strangely thick. I thought about the prospect of a salary, about the refreshing cool of an air-conditioned office. Having a job was a wonderful thing. I quickened my steps and went on down the corridor.

At last there was a door ahead. From this distance, it looked like a ragged, old postage stamp, but the closer I came the more it took on the look of a door-- until there could no longer be any doubt.

I cleared my throat and, after a light knock on the door, I took a step back and waited for a response. Fifteen seconds went by. Nothing. Again I knocked, this time a little harder, then stepped back to wait. Again, nothing.

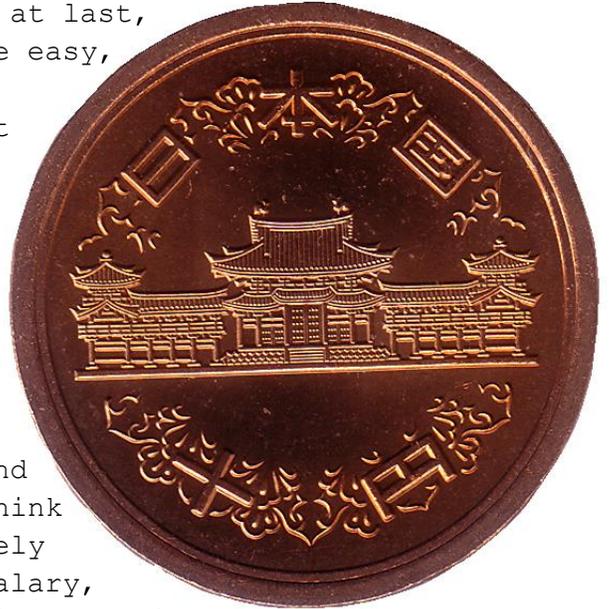
All around me, the air was gradually congealing.

Urged on by my own apprehension, I was taking a step forward to knock for a third time when the door opened soundlessly, naturally, as if a breeze had sprung up to swing it on its hinges, though to be sure, nature had nothing to do with it. The click of a switch came first, and then a man appeared before me.

He was in his middle twenties and perhaps two inches shorter than I. Water dripped from his freshly washed hair, and the only clothing on his body was a maroon bathrobe. His legs were abnormally white, and his feet as tiny as a child's. His features were as blank as a handwriting practice pad, but his mouth wore a faintly apologetic smile. He was probably not a bad man.

"Sorry. You caught me in the bath," he said, drying his hair with a towel.

"The bath?" I glanced at my watch in reflex.



"It's a rule. We have to bathe after lunch."

"I see."

"May I ask the nature of your business?"

I drew the postcard from my jacket pocket and handed it to the man. He took it in his fingertips so as to avoid wetting it and read it over several times.

"I guess I'm five minutes late," I said. "Sorry."

He nodded and returned the card to me. "Hmmm. You'll be starting to work here, then?"

"That's right."

"Funny, I haven't heard about any new hires. I'll have to announce you to my superior. That's my job, you know. All I do is answer the door and announce people to my superior."

"Well, good. Would you please announce me?"

"Of course. If you'll just tell me the password."

"The password?"

"You didn't know there was a password?"

I shook my head. "No one told me about a password."

"Then I can't help you. My superior is very strict about that. I am not to let in anyone who does not know the password."

This was all news to me. I pulled the postcard from my pocket again and studied it to no avail. It said nothing about a password.

"They probably forgot to write it," I said.

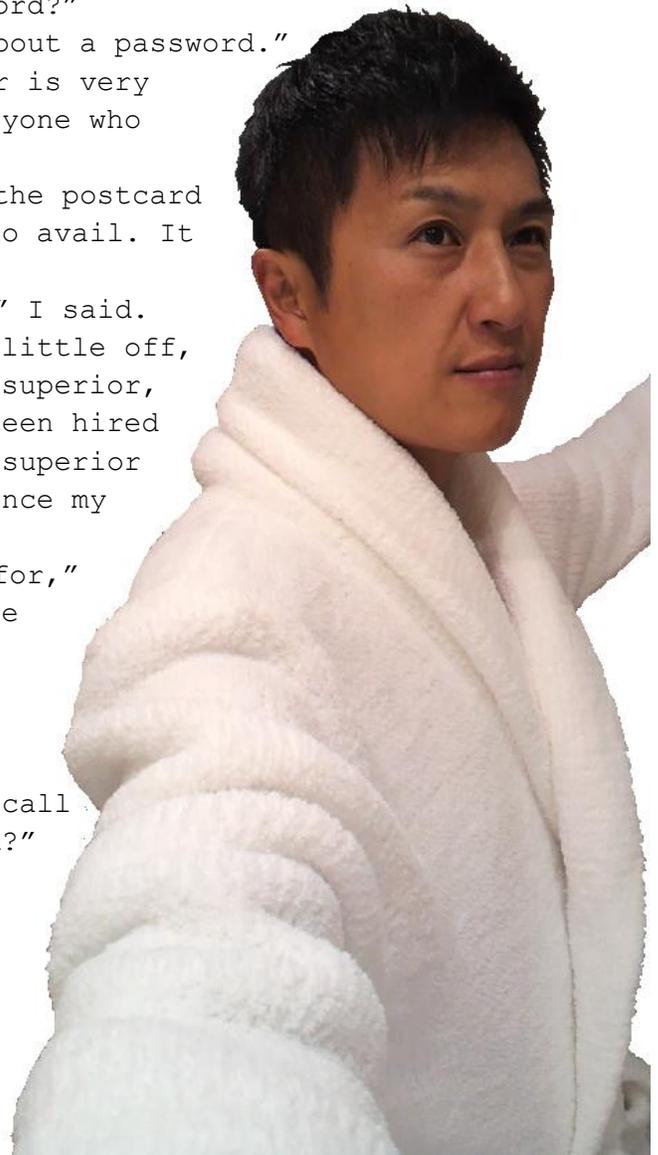
"The directions for getting here were a little off, too. If you'll just announce me to your superior, I'm sure everything will be fine. I've been hired to start work here today. I'm sure your superior knows all about it. If you'll just announce my arrival..."

"That's what I need the password for," he said and began groping for a cigarette only to find that his bathrobe had no pockets. I gave him one of my cigarettes and lit it for him with my lighter.

"Thanks, that's very nice of you," he said. "Now, are you sure you can't recall anything that might have been a password?"

I could only shake my head.

"I don't like this picky business any better than you do, but my superior must have his reasons. See what I mean? I don't know what kind of person he is. I've never met him. But you know how people like that are-- they get these brainstorms. Please don't take it



personally."

"No, of course not."

"The guy before me announced someone he felt sorry for because the person claimed he 'just forgot' the password. He was fired on the spot. And you of all people know how hard it is to find work these days."

I nodded. "How about it, then?" I said. "Can you give me a hint? Just a little one."

Leaning against the door, the man exhaled a cloud of smoke. "Sorry. It's against the rules."

"Oh, come on. What harm can a little hint do?"

"Yeah, but if it ever got out, I'd be in deep trouble."

"I won't tell a soul. You won't tell a soul. How'll they ever know?"

This was a deadly serious business for me. I wasn't about to give up.

After some indecision, the man bent close to my ear and whispered, "Are you ready for this? All right, now, it's a simple word and it has something to do with water. It fits in your hand, but you can't eat it."

Now it was my turn to mull things over.

"What's the first letter?"

"D," he said.

"Driftwood," I ventured.

"Wrong," he said. "Two more."

"Two more what?"

"Two more tries. If you miss those, you've had it. I'm sorry, but I'm risking a lot here, breaking the rules like this. I can't just let you keep on guessing."

"Look, I really appreciate you giving me a chance like this, but how about a few more hints? Like how many letters in the word."

He frowned. "Next you're gonna ask me to tell you the whole damned thing."

"No, I would never do that. Never. Just tell me how many letters there are in the word."

"OK. Eight," he said with a sigh. "My father always told me: Give somebody a hand and he'll take an arm."

"I'm sorry. Really."

"Anyhow, it's eight letters."

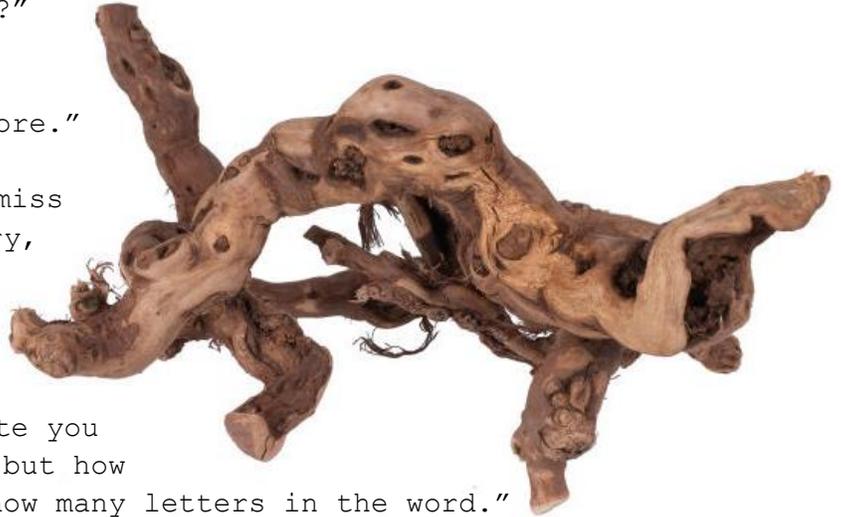
"Something to do with water, it fits in your hand but you can't eat it."

"That's right."

"It starts with a D and it has eight letters."

"Right."

I concentrated on the riddle. "Dabchick¹," I said finally.



¹ a small water bird with a pointed bill; a member of the grebe family of water birds

"Nope. Anyway, you can eat a dabchick."

"You sure?"

"Probably. It might not taste good," he added with less than total conviction. "And it wouldn't fit in your hand."

"Have you ever seen a dabchick?"

"Nope," he said. "I don't know anything about birds. Especially water birds. I grew up in the middle of Tokyo. I can tell you all the stations in the Yamanote Line in order, but I've never seen a dabchick."

Neither had I, of course. I didn't even know I knew the word until I heard myself saying it. But "dabchick" was the only eight-letter word I could think of that fit the clues.

"It's got to be 'dabchick,'" I insisted. "The little, palm-sized dabchicks taste so bad you couldn't get a dog to eat one."

"Hey, wait a minute," he said. "It doesn't matter what you think; 'dabchick' is not the password. You can argue all you want, but you've got the wrong word."

"But it fits all the clues-- connected with water, fits in your hand, you can't eat it, eight letters. It's perfect."

"There's just one thing wrong."

"What's that?"

"'Dabchick' is not the password."

"Well, then, what is?"

He had to catch himself. "I can't tell you."

"Because it doesn't exist," I declared in the coldest tone I could manage. "There is no other eight-letter word for a thing connected with water that fits in your hand but you can't eat it."

"But there is," he pleaded, close to tears.

"Is not."

"Is."

"You can't prove it. And 'dabchick' meets all the criteria."

"I know, but still, there might be a dog somewhere that likes to eat palm-sized dabchicks."

"All right, if you're so smart, tell me where you can find a dog like that. What kind of dog? I want concrete evidence."

He moaned and rolled his eyes.

I went on: "I know everything there is to know about dogs, but I have never-- ever-- seen a dog that likes to eat palm-sized dabchicks."

"Do they taste *that* bad?" he whimpered.



"Awful. Just awful. Yech!"

"Have you ever tasted one?"

"Never. Do you expect me to put something so gross in my mouth?"

"Well, no, I guess not."

"In any case, I want you to announce me to your superior," I demanded. "'Dabchick.'"

"I give up," he said, wiping his hair once again with his towel.

"I'll give it a try. But I'm pretty sure it won't do you any good."

"Thanks," I said. "I owe you one."

"But tell me," he said. "Are there really such things as palm-sized dabchicks?"

"Yes. Without a doubt. They exist somewhere," I said, though for the life of me I couldn't tell how the word had popped into my head.

The palm-sized dabchick wiped his glasses with a velvet square and let out another sigh. His lower right molar throbbed with pain. Another trip to the dentist? he thought. I can't take it anymore. The world is such a drag: dentists, tax returns, car payments, broken-down air conditioners... He let his head settle back against the leather-covered armchair, closed his eyes, and thought about death. Death as silent as the ocean bottom, as sweet as a rose in May. The dabchick had been thinking about death a lot these days. In his mind, he saw himself enjoying his eternal rest.

"Here lies the palm-sized dabchick," said the words engraved on the tombstone.

Just then his intercom buzzed.

He aimed one angry shout at the device:

"What!"

"Someone to see you, sir," came the voice of the doorman. "Says he's supposed to start work here today. He knows the password."

The palm-sized dabchick scowled and looked at his watch.

"Fifteen minutes late."

