

*Michiko Kakutani
and the Sadness
of the World!*

Joseph Michaels

*I met the lady years ago. Little did I know,
we would have a long future together.*

—John Updike

I

(20—)

An earthquake rolls across the City just as night begins to rise. M2 at the most, it's not enough to cause a panic, though several chandeliers are set to swinging, and all across the grid ambulance technicians (as per a new Health and Safety initiative set in place, largely, by the formidable and formidably senescent voting population) walk the streets in groups of two or more, given the unenviable task of rooting out the home-bound and making sure they're all okay.

By the time the news comes on at six, only one casualty has been listed in relation to the event: an elderly woman living alone

in a rent-controlled apartment on the Lower East Side; her head stove in violently when the heavy shelf above her bed—occupied to rather impressive effect by a collection of first edition folios—slips off its runners in the temblor and falls with a squashy thud directly upon the old woman's head. The landlord is the first to find her, slipping through the rooms of her apartment (one of the roaming groups of EMTs holding up his rear) and calling out her name ever-so-congenially in the hopes of a response. This is when he finds the body. Panicking, he jumps atop the corpse—bed springs wobble precariously—and proceeds to try and breathe new life into his tenant's flattened skull, coming up for air eventually with his lips brutalized in a carmine hue and bits of gray matter sticking out from between his teeth. Never in his life has he taken a course in CPR. He's practically eating her. And the EMTs look on; huddled, five of them, by the room's back wall; repulsed, yet at the same time incredibly curious as to how this whole thing's going to turn out.

News vans pull up within the hour. The landlord, though evidently shocked, does not attempt to weep. This disappoints everyone. Given the chance before cameras to quantify the woman's character, eyes focused ineradicably, profoundly, on the hollow spot of light just center of the lens's arc, he says exactly this: 'She used to be famous, you know?'

II

(1959)

She shares a birthday with Richard Nixon, Vice President of the United States, who smiles on the television screen, a burst of cathode rays from beyond the shadow-mask, and walks kyphotic about a marbled room, stopping occasionally to shake the hands of men twice his age. He reaches in; the double-hander. Shook so hard their wattles dance.

And miles and years away, M. Kakutani turns four years old. She has asked her father for a pony.

At the party—held on-site at the capacious Kakutani residence in New Haven, Connecticut, with all M.'s friends around (for this is what they call her, M., the whole three syllables of her first name deemed much too hard on the tongue for these four-year-olds to hazard)—things are just now winding down. Parents check their

watches; the piebald exoskeleton of a torn piñata lies dead in the corner of the room, victim of a hate crime; and all around the place ice-cream cake is served, Day-Glo with dye that matches exactly the shade of cheap conical hats worn by the disaffected youth. (Though, at a quick scan of the perimeter now, even some of the parents have them on—the hats—with gumband chinstraps loosening, itchy, as they sit with their children and spoon cake grimly; knees thoroughly knocked.) It's been a bore, really—or so everyone will doubtless whisper as they leave here tonight. Already, even before the cake came out, three whole families were called away for urgent life-or-death emergencies, eliciting slow appetent looks from the nearby parents (especially the ones with the conical hats), and were apparently in so much of a rush that they forgot entirely their own allotment from the shiny bags of party favors, individually labeled and stacked up by the father in neat geometric patterns at the side of the porch, just beyond the front door, encompassing such festive goods as dense notebooks of quadrille paper, a flipbook depicting the first law of thermodynamics, teeth cracking bubble-gum, lemniscate keychains, and several back-issues of an MAA-produced comic book called *Euclid's Last Leg*.

People sigh: distinct molecules of sadness circling the waned festivities without any real reason or weight; the sadness of exhaustion, of boredom, of the heightened realization that (though it isn't even all that great) sometime soon this will have to end. The room grows quiet.

III

(2007)

Norman Mailer is in the supermarket tonight, at D'Agostino's in New York City, in town for a book tour—to meet his publicist—and making his way up Meat. Nearby, a middle-aged man is losing his shit. He searches, stunned, for some slip of paper and asks if it's really him. 'I'll show you the penknife,' Norman growls and signs the guy's receipt, with extra loops on 'N' and 'M', while the fan's eyes grow gibbous in a kind of oddly ecumenical terror, reminding Mailer once again of that one poor scout he killed, bludgeoned to death with the business end of a red-hot spatula, while stationed as a cook in the Philippines in 1944. As his stories reach an end, more

and more he thinks about this moment: a mixture of terrible pride and even-worse guilt. He throws bacon vigorously into the cart and galumphs on back to Bread.

The myth of the supermarket in aisle five: divining pyramids of creamed corn, palettes of microwaveable soup. M. looks into her basket, finishing up; her once-a-week ritual of Just the Essentials, done quickly, in less than half an hour, as she sprints from aisle to aisle and out of the fluorescent light. It nearly plagues her, this place. She is never so alone as she is in a crowd. Turning the corner, blindly, she bumps into Mailer's cart. They make eye contact, the two of them, each unsure of the other, as when hunters prey in awe before the moment of their taking, only here there is no act. Only stagnant. He, with his big jug-ears and uneven zygomatics; she, with her pantsuit and hair: the former growing out with the latter growing thin, and each day the two of them—Mailer and her—are more similar in age.

In a moment, they will pass. They will look up and apologize, each beneath their respective breaths and each, after a few seconds, looking back (just slightly) over the shoulder with eyebrows raised and cheeks pulled low in that so obviously scoping-out kind-of-way. It's only for a second, from cart's push to glancing eyes across the back.

So much is fact, one knows—but what do they see?

Michiko is a weird woman who seems to feel the need to alternately praise and spank. So she gave The Moor's Last Sigh a fantastic review, and panned the book before that.

—Salman Rushdie

The stupidest person in New York City is currently the lead reviewer of fiction for the New York Times.

—Jonathan Franzen

IV

(1961)

The father, he had taken her with him to work one day—one day, as all stories are known to say—he showed her his classroom, where

he taught, and how the kids all used to gaze and breathe heavy and take a lot of meds whenever he was around; how they all looked up to him (when they weren't looking down at books); and together, father and daughter, they toured the campus; they made cheap jokes at an undergraduate's expense; they ate the cafeteria food, wallowing in histrionic disgust with noses pinched by the bridge at just the mention of that ineradicable and quote/unquote 'five-spice' chicken. And at the end of the day, in the almost-night, he grabbed his daughter by the shoulder and he told her, one day—*one day*—this would be her school too. And so it will be. He makes certain.

V

(20—)

An old friend from out of town—a former Eli actually—calls her up in the middle of the night, the hour way past decency, M. picking up her phone only by some unknown weight of habit leftover from the day. They agree to meet for lunch some day: beer and shepherd's pie (the friend's choice, not M.'s) at the White Horse Tavern on Hudson and Eleventh.

When the day comes, they're the only ones there in the place, the rest of the tables vacant; chairs upturned, balanced on soft blondwood edges, and casting great atramentous shadows in the dim-light room. They exchange pleasantries in all matter of insubstantial things (viz. weight, dress, flesh-tones, general vitality of intonation) and as they lean in together for hello-hugs and a pretense-kiss, M. looks up to the wall: a giant portrait of Dylan Thomas.

The friend is thin with an aureate ring and five 2x3 (i.e. mini-wallet-size) photos of the exact same child in the exact same pose, the whole stack of which she flourishes quite readily. She fans them out atop the table, asking M., who must suppress a groan at the idea, to pick which one she likes the best.

For the first half-hour, the conversation is stilted (over a dozen retreats to the topic of weather), but as the afternoon expires, M. begins to find it enjoyable—or at least remotely so. She's not even sure why, but for one of the only times in her life she feels as if she does not have to be smart; that, of all things, in a dolt she finds some manneristic purity, and laughs incredibly at the smallest

things, unbelievably impressed with herself when the friend from out of town laughs too—as if she were not alone—calling M., quote/unquote, ‘a real riot.’

VI

(1959)

The father, seeing his daughter (The Birthday Girl) across the room: he lopes across in five quick strides; he lifts her up—thin algid hands tucked warmly beneath her armpits—and walks her outside, through French doors, out to their backyard, where they sit and face each other, awkward, in the almost-night. Rich-red pizza sauce is on her chin; ice-cream owns her hands.

He winks—his only daughter—and reaches behind himself to proffer not a pony, as she had asked, but a small wooden puzzle-box (a Burr puzzle, he calls it) with a lonely balloon tied off at the top, in lieu of a bow. (The physics of him ever hiding this present behind his back, a mere man at his merest blocking the entire pneumatic float of a balloon, are not to be determined.) Something drifts among the trees.

Yellow: the balloon’s color, the xanthous shade of a jaundiced babe; the particular pigment of her father’s eyes, as seen through yellow tint in the bright sunglasses he always wears around the house. Only once has M. seen her father without them—the glasses—it was in the breakfast nook one morning; she had woken up early and found him, dressed for work in a wrinkled suit as he stared tragically into a bowl of Shredded Wheat.

She looks at the balloon, vaguely intrigued; she tugs at its knot atop the puzzle-box, and takes the string in one small fist.

VII

(2003)

A man named R— killed himself today. Reading the newspaper, M. realizes she knows him—or *knew* him, rather, as the case would be. He did it in public, on his lunch break, with a self-inflicted Semtex explosion at the corner of Hudson and Eleventh. They went to the same analyst, and for what seemed like the longest time, he had the appointment directly after hers; his slouched-like figure a common

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naos antiquity from the doctor's silent waiting room. He checked his watch a lot and had a profound interest in *People* magazine. He took her on a date one night, back in the 90s, but never again after that.

VIII

(20—)

'I'm writing a novel,' says the friend from out of town, as she makes her signature on the receipt.

'Good luck with that,' laughs M., the words and tone slipping, justified, almost accidental, in light of all the humor. But the friend looks shocked—not terribly so, though enough to make her jaw fall a bit lower than usual; taken aback in some small accurate way as the bartender mills about and refills ice-water. A significant pause.

M. cringes: she raises her shoulders, an empathetic frown.

'Sorry,' she says. 'You know how it is.'

IX

(2004)

She changes analysts to ring in the year and finds a guy on the Upper West Side not far from Riverside Park, where she goes and walks along the esplanade after her sessions with the man. A strict epiphenomenalist, his very practice is absurd. They sit together once a week, twice on bad weeks; she comes to him and tells her stories, deep inside his office, designed specifically as a series of gradually siphoning tunnels that merge along their overlapped courses and wane to one long hallway leading straight into the analyst's hub, the dense heart of the place; cleaner than any room M.'s ever seen and ample with the site-specific smell of a years-old rental car.

He sits across from her in a leather chair, legs crossed twice (once at knee and once at ankle) so they twist together like a helix: more lines, educed like time, and added to the tunnels all around them. Every week, M. discovers new resentment for the fact that he does not shave. He sits there—not even pretending to listen—and plays lightly with the gum Arabic tips of his waxed mustache, which is considerable.

'Did you know him?' he asks.

'Never.'

X

(1969)

Over the summer she gets a job. She gets paid minimum wage, delivering pizzas for Planet Pizza, which takes its name from the enormous metal Saturn spinning on the roof—its planetary ring, the cosmic dust, now replaced by the gigantic sixty-inch crust of a pepperoni pizza.

Mr. Blent, M.'s boss and the owner of the place, is himself something of a round-pie stylist. He makes all the pizzas with his own two hands, and for the past two years has been larynx-deep in the rather faith-testing process of filing an appeal with the Brothers McWhirter, making the claim that his establishment—and his establishment alone—serves what is regionally known as the quote/unquote 'Largest Slice of Pizza in the World.' It is eight inches across at the widest point (i.e., at the crust), but—as the McWhirters' correspondence implies—this whole World's Records game is not just about a few cheap provincial claims. It is about facts, they say, and facts (again, as implied) are simply a matter of perspective, the Planet Pizza slice being merely one-fourth of a pie, and therefore not in actuality the Largest Slice.

Nevertheless, a sign out front continuously advertises the Largest Slice presence (M. puts it there every day, first thing in the morning)—and the slice, Mr. Blent allows, has all but made his reputation in the greater New Haven area, where among the clientele it is frequently spoken of, though rarely ordered.

XI

(1994)

She laughs at his joke, though it isn't really funny. He puts his beerstein next to hers (sans coaster, both, to the admonition, not without provocation, of a pissed-off looking barkeep) and when the glasses are removed, two pale rings of condensation link up in a lemiscate wetness on the blondwood bar. With his finger, he draws out the shape. She allows him to take her home. They slip through rooms, fumbling with each other's clothing; he reaches over and turns on the television, saying that he can only make love when David

Letterman's on. She tries not to think about this. He pushes himself inside her and stays on top for the entire time, though craning his neck in a leeward style to catch the TV's glare. He's too shy to force her around, his breath heavy and altered as they move themselves together. M. begins to sweat. He's kind of a large man actually, she realizes now that his clothes are off, so much so that she keeps her eyes open, locked about his pendulous gut, scared of what might happen should he lose his balance in the act: meaty thighs enclosed around quite decently corpulent sides and back. His movement makes the noise, a conflagration of sounds, like the noises made by old men leaving a buffet line as they slap at their distended tummies and gustatorily moo. And just when she's about to climax—miracle of miracles; him hovering slackly above her (trying to kiss her but really just chewing on her lower lip)—right at that moment, she closes her eyes.

They watch Letterman the rest of the night. He has several dozen episodes, taped and stocked up on the side. She leaves in the morning.

XII
(1960)

Nighttimes before bed, he plays with his daughter's hands. No fairy tales—they're not his thing—and on the rare occasions that he tries to read them, he stumbles sadly through in broken English, gets exhausted before the end and stops it there, making up the rest: marrying off villains and killing off characters that ought to stay alive—at which point the daughter is forced, then, to turn out the lights and try and get some sleep, but quite naturally she cannot (so disturbed is she by the events of her father's tale), and so for the next three hours she just lies there, sweating, alone, in a darkened room in a rictus of perfect horror.

So he does this instead. He rubs his daughter's fingers, uncomfortably coos, and counts the stubby digits. One two three four five.

'Count with me,' he always says.

One two

three four

five.

*For distinguished criticism, five-thousand dollars
(\$5,000) awarded to Michiko Kakutani of the
New York Times for her passionate, intelligent
writing on books and contemporary literature.*

—Pulitzer Board, 1998

XIII

(20—)

Even though she has an office, most of the work is done at home. She sits up tonight (bad taste from this afternoon's luncheon), preparing for her next review: a retrospective piece on *The Public Burning* by Robert Coover. To accurately characterize her intense dislike of the novel, she has decided to write her text from the point-of-view of a brick wall. A thesaurus lies in her lap; she thumbs through, seeking out the blandest words she can find.

After leaving from the Tavern this afternoon, walking around the City—just getting lost—she caught sight of herself, imbedded, in the dark reflective glass of a window on Fifth Avenue: her movements mimetic in the frame and her face gone achromatic in the overwhelming absence of tone. Since turning fifty, she has held an express interest in avoiding all mirrors at all costs, and the contours of her face, as she applies in the morning what increasingly diminished amount of make-up she can still bring herself sensibly to wear, are near-instinctual by now. Her bathroom at home is utterly devoid of all reflective surfaces and even the crystal wineglasses she keeps put away inside her wood grain cabinets are pragmatically frosted to a kind of tawdry faux-igloo effect. The last time she really looked at herself, caught by the sight of her own features like she was today on Fifth Avenue, it required a fifteen minute pep-talk and then a subsequent forty-minute debriefing, her hands chopping up and down expressively at her sides and her words filled with such unctuously encouraging phrases as 'You can do this,' 'It'll be fine,' and—her favorite of all—'Goddammit, you're a *woman*.' She went home and tried to sleep; she couldn't sleep and tried to write.

And, thinking now, at times—at her desk, with work like this—it almost seems a drug. There is something building inside her, and pressing fingerpad to pushbutton, it occurs to her (quite suddenly,

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really) that this is the most alive she will ever be; the way her mind runs out from under itself like a dozen vaudevillian tablecloths swept away from a crowded dinner, and in that way she is no one at all: unseen, unknowable, a brick fucking wall: and for this slightest moment, like a mind seesawing at dormancy on the valence edge, she is at peace.

XIV

(1973)

It is after hours in the Professor's Lounge. On the table: a pristine folio edition of Kafka's collected works, whose quilted spine and slightly ecru-colored leaves exude an odor (almost palimpsest) with every crack. M. sits down, visibly tired, while an upperclassman T.A. stands above her, pointing out different sections of the text.

'So Josef K., right? What do you make of him?' He is trying as hard as he can not to sound like a professor.

'What do you mean?' M. says. 'He didn't really do anything.'

The T.A. stands up straight; he pushes his lips off to one side of his face and makes an almost clicking noise with his tongue. Only twenty-two years old, and the supraorbital vein in his forehead is already making routine appearances in times of deep frustration.

'What makes you so convinced?'

A significant pause.

'Couldn't he be guilty, too—do you think?'

'Wait,' she says. She pushes the book away; not really forcefully, but just enough body language to let him know that she's completely confused. 'You're saying he's—'

The T.A. smiles.

'But how?'

'*Complicity*,' he says, bending his body, halfway at the waist; thin frame arcing out across the book.

XV

(1959)

With a rough thumb, he wipes the pizza sauce from his daughter's chin. Looking down, the inner loop of a party-favor keychain, he wonders if it could be different.

'It's about that time,' he says. He picks the puzzle-box from up off the floor, where M. had put it last to get at the balloon. 'It's been a long day.'

Laughing now, she winds the string around her fist, reeling in the prized balloon—yellow; closer to her—so she might meet it, and view it, on her own strict terms.

XVI

(1983)

Her first week writing for the *New York Times*: she rents an apartment in the Bowery, just above a plasma clinic and across the street from Yin's Delight (Served Hot Always, reads the sign). At the edges of the street, a series of ten high-pressure mercury vapor lamps flicker on in the almost-night. Some are broken; pale borosilicate glass crunched up into little pieces and pushed off in puddles to the side.

In her apartment, radioactive mice are living in the walls. Mouse traps rest idly in the corners of the room. Late one night, one of the bars snaps back, waking her from sleep: a squeak (less rodential than human, disturbingly enough), and then the slow scraping sound of a half-dead irradiated mouse literally dragging itself—with trap—across the bedroom floor. It grunts softly, reminding her of her father. In the morning, it is gone; she calls pest control within the hour, and some guy in a uniform comes at four, right as she's about to start tucking into some Yin's Delight; his name (with the words Service Representative about two millimeters below it) sewn onto the lapel in a kind of cursive lunchbox font. He says as long as the mouse didn't die, she'll be saved from the smell; that mice are tricky things, especially when they're all contaminated like that; capable of anything, the damned things are, even life. He shows her the pictures to prove it. But she wishes he would go, and is made to say things like 'All right' and 'Okay' after every time he pauses—yet he just wriggles his eyebrows and makes vague sexual passes at her for the next two hours, so that by the time he finally leaves her food is cold and the sign across the way (Served Hot Always) is just a tad too cruel.

The following night, everything's back to normal. The mouse traps disappear, as do the mice and men. Black shades drawn

around the bedroom window and the air conditioner's off. In a room this dark, the world seems small.

XVII

(— — —)

She's in this canoe, paddling alone on the East River. The sun sets; ochreous light caught up at the water's edge, coruscating with the most molecular of intensities as light bounces back off the tide and blinds a nearby seagull. Stopping for a moment, she watches it fall; framed against the cirrus, like a clang-bird in the sky; a tiny splash into the river.

On the grassy esplanade to her right stands a man in soft cream colors. This is me. The colors fade into my flesh; I wave one hand above my head as the wind wrestles with my hair. Seeing as she does not stop, I start to move—running along at the rate of her paddling—the imprint of my thick-treaded shoes sinking down inside the warm spring spodosol.

'Hey, Michiko,' I yell. 'Hey, it's me.'

She feels no panic, as one might feel in the moments of a distant memory; the absence of emotion in the presence of a dream; she passes me by, paddling on.

'I just wanted to—'

But she is too fast, taking the river to its edge, then out into Long Island Sound and up the Quinnipiac. For days she's on this one canoe—back home to New Haven, to see her father one last time before he dies.

And the farther out she goes on this little wooden thing, the more removed she feels, the numbness spreading, until eventually she is not herself at all, and she is just watching from a distance, like astral projection, from some point beyond the cirrus twists where she cannot feel a thing and her eyesight is immense.

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