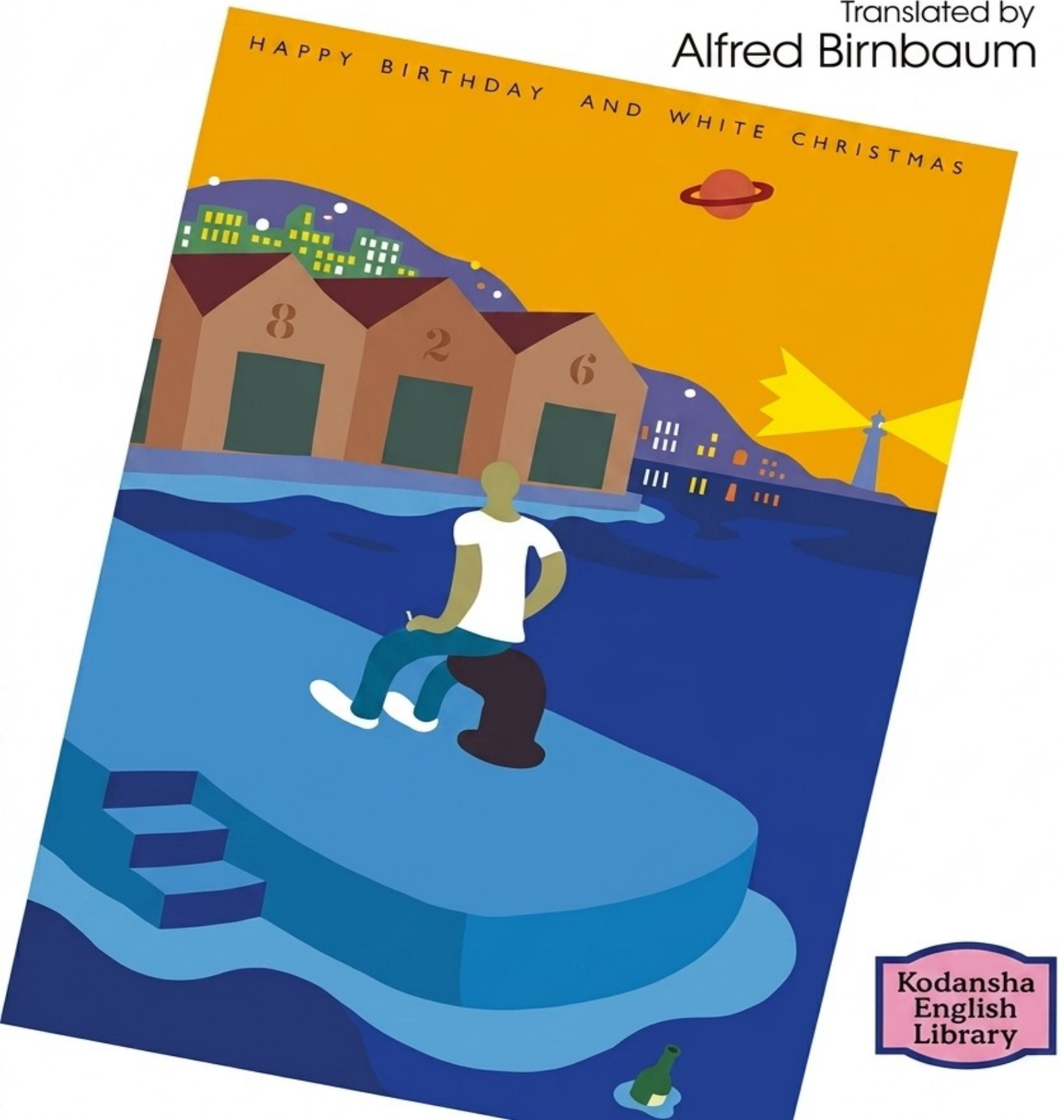


風の歌を聴け

HEAR THE WIND SING

Haruki Murakami

Translated by
Alfred Birnbaum



Hear the Wind Sing

Haruki Murakami

KODANSHA INTERNATIONAL

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“There’s no such thing as perfect writing. Just like there’s no such thing as perfect despair.”

A writer I happened to meet when I was in college told me this. It was a long time before I finally understood what those words meant, but just knowing them was a kind of comfort that put me at ease. There’s no such thing as a perfect writing style. However, in spite of that, the thought of actually writing something always filled me with a sense of hopelessness, because the things I was able to write about were fairly limited. For example, if I were to write about elephants, I’d have had no idea what words to use. That’s what it was like.

I struggled on with this dilemma for eight years. Eight years—that’s a long time.

Of course, there’s a limit to how much you can try to learn about things, but it’s not as painful as being old. At least, that’s what they say.

From the time I turned twenty, I strived to live my life this way. Thanks to this, I took painful blows from others, I was deceived, misunderstood, and I also had many strange adventures. Lots of people came around to tell me their stories, and their words flew over my head as if crossing a bridge, and they never came back. During that time, I’d keep my mouth shut, not telling anybody anything. And that’s how I came to the end of my twenties.

Now, I think I’ll tell a story.

Of course, there’s not a single solution to the problem, and once the story’s over, things will probably still be just as they were. In the end, writing a story isn’t a means of self-therapy, it’s nothing more than a meager attempt at self-therapy.

But, telling a story honestly is extremely difficult. As much as I try to be honest, the words I’m looking for always seem to sink into dark depths.

I'm not trying to make excuses. At least what I'm writing here is the best I can do. There's nothing else to say. Still, here's what I'm thinking: way before you're good at it, maybe years or decades before you're good at it, you can save yourself, I think. And when you do, the elephant back on the plains will be able to tell his story with words more beautiful than your own.

* * *

I learned a lot about writing from Derek Hartfield. Almost everything, I should say. Unfortunately, Derek Hartfield himself was the embodiment of a 'simple' writer. If you read his work, you'll understand what I mean. His writing was hard to read, his plots were haphazard, and his themes were childish. However, in spite of all that, among the few extraordinary writers who brandished their writing as a weapon, he was unique. Hemingway, Fitzgerald, the other writers of his time, even compared to them, the militancy of his writing has never wavered, in my opinion. Unfortunately, even at the very end, Hartfield could never get a clear grasp of the shape of his own enemy. When it was all said and done, it was a very simple affair indeed.

Eight years and two months, that was how long his own simple battle lasted, and then he died. In June of 1938, on a sunny Sunday morning, clutching a portrait of Hitler with his right hand and an open umbrella in his left, he jumped off the roof of the Empire State Building. The singular manner of his life, nor that of his death, ever became a subject of great intrigue.

I had the good fortune to receive a copy of Hartfield's already out-of-print first novel during the summer vacation of my third year of middle school, while I was laid up with a skin disease that had taken over my crotch. The uncle who'd given me that book came down with bowel cancer three years later, had his body cut into ribbons from head to toe, and with plastic tubes jammed into his bodily entrances and exits, died upon their painful removal. The last time I saw him, his shriveled up, reddish-brown features had contracted severely, his body resembling that of a sly monkey.

* * *

In all, I had three uncles, but one of them died in a suburb of Shanghai. Two days after the war ended, he stepped on one of the land mines he'd buried himself. The third uncle, the sole survivor, became a magician and went around touring all of Japan's hot springs.

* * *

On the subject of good writing, Hartfield said something that went like this:

“The writer who writes literature, that is to say the writer who ensconces himself in his work, always checks his distance. The important thing isn't what he perceives, it's the ruler he uses.”

—If it Feels Good, What's the Problem?, 1936

I stared at the ruler I held timidly in my hand the year Kennedy died, and from then it was fifteen years later. In those fifteen years I'd found that I'd really given up a lot. Like an airplane with an engine on the fritz, expelling luggage, seats, then finally the sorry stewardesses, in those fifteen years I discarded every possible thing, but I'd gained almost nothing in the way of wisdom.

As a result of that, and I don't know if I'm right about this or not, I've lost all my convictions. Even if it makes things easier, my worst fear is that when I get old and I'm facing death I'll wonder what the hell I've got to show for any of it. After I'm cremated, I doubt even a single bone will remain.

“People with dark souls have nothing but dark dreams. People with really dark souls do nothing but dream,” went a favorite saying of my late grandmother.

The night she died, the very first thing I did was to reach my arms out and softly close her eyes. As I did this, the dream she'd held for seventy-nine years ended the way a summer shower stops falling on pavement, and after that there was nothing left.

* * *

I'll write about writing once more. This is the last thing I have to say about it.

For me, writing is a terribly painful process. Sometimes I spend a month unable to write a single line, other times, after writing for three straight days and nights I realize everything I've written is all wrong.

Nevertheless, in spite of all that, writing is also a fun process. Compared to the difficulties of living, with writing it's a lot easier to find meaning. Maybe it was in my teens when this fact finally hit me, and I was surprised enough to be dumbfounded for a week. If I could lighten up just a little, the world would move according to my whims, the value of everything would change, the flow of time would be altered...that's how I felt.

The problem with that, as I realized, would come much later. I drew a line in the middle of a piece of notebook paper, filling up the left side with things I'd gained, and in the right side listing things I'd lost. The things I'd lost, trampled to pieces, things I'd given up on long before, things I'd sacrificed, things I'd betrayed...in the end I just wasn't able to cross these out and cut my losses.

The things we try our hardest not to lose, we really just put create deep abysses in the spaces between them. No matter how long your ruler is, it's an immeasurable depth. The most I can do in writing it down is merely to make a list. Not even with short stories or literature, not even through the arts. Just a notebook with a line drawn down the middle of its first page. There might be some kind of a small lesson in this.

If you're looking for fine art or literature, you might want to read some stuff written by the Greeks. Because to create true fine art, slaves are a necessity. That's how the ancient Greeks felt, with slaves working the fields, cooking their meals, rowing their ships, all the while their citizens, under the Mediterranean Sun, indulged in poetry writing and grappled with mathematics. That was their idea of fine art.

Those people digging around in the refrigerator at 3am, those are the only people I can write for. And that, is me.

2

This story begins on August 8th, 1970, and lasts for eighteen days, meaning it finishes on August 26th of that same year.

3

“All those rich fuckers can just go to hell!”

The Rat had his hands on the counter, looking depressed as he shouted this to me.

Or maybe he was shouting at the coffee grinder behind me. The Rat and I were sitting next to each other at the bar, and he had no reason to shout at me like that. But, at any rate, when he was finished yelling, he drank his seemingly delicious beer wearing an expression of contentment.

Naturally, nobody in the vicinity paid any attention to his shouting. The small bar was overflowing with customers, and each and every one of them were shouting at each other the same way. It was like being on a sinking ship.

“Parasites,” he said, shaking his head in what looked like revulsion. “Those guys can’t do shit. I look at those guys acting all rich, and it just pisses me off.”

With my lips on the thin rim of my beer glass, I nodded in silence.

On that note, the rat shut his mouth and gazed at his hands on the counter, turning them over and gazing at them intently, again and again, as if they’d been in a bonfire. I gave up and looked up at the ceiling. He inspected each of his fingers in turn, and we couldn’t start our next conversation. It was always like this.

Over the course of that summer, like men obsessed, we drank enough beer to fill a 25-meter swimming pool and our peanut shells would have carpeted the floor of J’s Bar at a depth of five centimeters. If we hadn’t done so, the tedium of the summer would have been unbearable.

On the counter of J’s Bar was a picture smeared by tobacco-stained fingers, and at those times when I was bored out of my mind, I never grew tired of staring at that picture for hours on end. Its pattern made it look like

it was made to be one of those inkblot pictures they used in Rorschach tests, and to me it looked like two green monkeys pitching tennis balls that had fallen out of the sky.

When I said as much to J, he stared at it for a minute and nonchalantly said yes it did, when I put it that way.

“What do you think it is?” I asked.

“The monkey on the left is you, the monkey on the right is me. I toss out bottles of beer, and you toss me the money to pay for them.”

I drank my beer in admiration.

“They piss me off.”

After the Rat finished gazing at all his fingers, he said it again.

This wasn't the first time I'd heard the Rat badmouthing the rich, and again, he really did hate them. The Rat's own family was fairly rich, but when I pointed that out to the Rat, he'd say, 'It's not my fault.' At times (usually when I'd had too much to drink) I'd say, 'It is your fault,' and afterwards I'd feel pretty bad about it. Because he did have a point.

“Why do you think I hate rich people?”

Said the Rat one night, continuing his argument. It was the first time our conversation had advanced this far.

I shrugged my shoulders as if to say I didn't know.

“I'll just come right out and say it, rich people have no imagination. They can't even scratch their own asses without a ruler and a flashlight.”

‘Coming right out and saying it’ was how the Rat often prefaced his statements.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. They can't think about anything important. They only pretend like they're thinking about things...why do you think that is?”

“No idea.”

“They don't need to. Sure you need a little brainpower to get rich, but to stay rich you don't need any at all. The way satellites in space don't need gasoline. It's okay just to keep going round and round in the same place. But that's not me, and that's not you. We have to keep thinking if we want to

survive. From the weather tomorrow to the stopper in the bathtub. Don't you think?"

"Maybe that's just how it is."

Having said his piece, the Rat took a tissue out of his pocket and blew his nose loudly. I honestly had no way of knowing if he'd really said all he wanted to say.

"Still, in the end, we all die just the same," I said, testing him out.

"Oh yeah, oh yeah. Everybody's gotta die sometime. But until then we've still got fifty-some odd years to go, and a lot to think about while we're living those fifty years, and I'll just come right out and say it: that's even more tiring than living five thousand years thinking about nothing. Don't you think so?"

That's how it went.

I'd first met the Rat three years before, in the spring. It was the year we both entered college, and the two of us were completely smashed. Why in the hell we were, at sometime after four in the morning, stuck in the Rat's black Fiat 600, I almost can't remember. We probably had some mutual friend. Anyway, we were sloppy drunk, and as an added bonus the speedometer was pointing at eighty kilometers-an-hour. Thanks to all that, we broke through the park's immaculately-trimmed hedges, flattened a thicket of azaleas, and without thinking, not only smashed the car into a stone pillar, but came away without a single injury, which I can't call anything but a stroke of luck.

Awakened by the shock, I kicked away the broken door and climbed out. The hood of the car was knocked ten meters away, coming to rest in front of the monkey cage, and the front end of the car bore the giant imprint of a stone pillar. The monkeys seemed to be terribly upset at being jarred awake by the noise.

The Rat, with his hands still on the steering wheel, was leaning forward, not because he was hurt, but because he was vomiting onto the dashboard the pizza he'd eaten just an hour before. I clambered up onto the roof of the car and peered through the sunroof onto the driver's seat.

"You okay?"

"Mm, but I might've drank too much. You know, with the throwing up and all."

"Can you get out?"

"Pull me up."

The Rat cut the engine, took his pack of cigarettes from the dashboard and put it in his pocket, then slowly seized my hand and climbed up onto the roof of the car. Sitting side-by-side on the roof of the Fiat, we looked up at the dawning sky, silently smoking who knows how many cigarettes. For some

reason, I was reminded of a tank movie starring Richard Burton. I have no idea what the Rat was thinking about.

“Hey, we’re pretty lucky,” said the Rat five minutes later. “Check it out, not a scratch on us. Can you believe it?”

I nodded. “The car’s busted, though.”

“Don’t worry about that. I can always buy another car, but luck I cannot buy.”

I stared at the Rat, shocked. “What are you, rich or somethin’?”

“Something like that.”

“Well, that’s great.”

To this, the Rat said nothing, just shaking his head a few times as if unsatisfied. “Still, anyway, we’re lucky.”

“Yep.”

The Rat crushed out his cigarette under the heel of his tennis shoe, throwing the butt towards the monkey cage.

“Say, how about the two of us become a team?

Together, we could do just about anything.”

“What should we do first?”

“Let’s drink beer.”

We went to a nearby vending machine and bought a half-dozen beers, then we walked to the beach. We layed ourselves down on the beach, and when we were finished drinking our beer, we gazed out at the ocean. It was incredibly good weather.

“You can call me ‘Rat,’” he said.

“How’d you get a name like that?”

“I forget. It was a really long time ago. Back then I used to hate being called that, but now I don’t care. For some reason I’ve gotten used to it.”

After we tossed our empty beer cans into the ocean, we leaned against the embankment, putting our duffel coats under our heads as pillows and sleeping for an hour. When I woke up, my body was pulsing with some kind of mysterious energy. It was a really strange feeling.

“I feel like I could run a hundred kilometers,” I told the Rat.

“Me too,” he said.

However, in reality, what we ended up doing was paying off the damage to the park in installments to the municipality over three years.

5

The Rat never read books. He never ran his eyes across anything more than the sports pages or his junk mail.

Sometimes, when I'd be killing time by reading a book, he'd peek at me curiously like a fly looking at a flyswatter.

"Why do you read books?"

"Why do you drink beer?"

After eating a mixed mouthful of pickled horse mackerel and vegetable salad, without making eye contact, I asked him again. He thought it over for a long time, but it took him five minutes to open his mouth.

"The good thing about beer is that it all comes out as piss. Like a double play with one out to go, there's nothing left over."

Having said that, he watched as I continued to eat.

"Why are you always reading books?"

After washing down my last mouthful of horse mackerel with beer and cleaning my plate, I grabbed the copy of *L'Education sentimentale* I'd been reading and started flipping through the pages.

"Because Flaubert's already dead."

"You don't read books by living people?"

"Living authors don't have any merit."

"Why's that?"

"Dead authors, as a rule, seem more trusting than live ones."

I said this as I was watching the rebroadcast of Route 66 on the portable television in the middle of the counter. The Rat thought about my answer for a minute.

"Hey, how about living authors? Aren't they usually trusting?"

"How should I put this...I haven't really thought about it like that. When they're chased into a corner, they might become that way. Probably less

trusting.”

J came over and set two cold beers in front of us.

“And if they can’t trust?”

“They fall asleep clutching their pillows.”

The Rat shook his head, looking upset.

“It’s strange, I’ll give you that. Me, I have no idea.”

So said the Rat.

I poured the Rat’s beer into his glass, and with his bottle half-empty he sat there thinking.

“Before this, the last time I’d read a book was last summer,” said the Rat, “I don’t remember who wrote it or what it was about. I forget why I even read it. Anyway, it was written by some woman. The protagonist was this thirty year-old fashion designer girl, and somehow she starts to believe she’s come down with some incurable disease.”

“What kind of disease?”

“I forget. Cancer or something. Is there something more terminal than that? Anyway, she goes to this beach resort and masturbates the whole time. In the bath, in the forest, on her bed, in the ocean, really, all kinds of places.”

“In the ocean?”

“Yeah...can you believe it? Why write a story about that? There’s so much else you could write about.”

“Beats me.”

“Sorry for bringing it up, that’s just how the story went. Made me wanna throw up.”

I nodded.

“If it were me, I’d write a completely different story.”

“For example?”

The Rat ran his finger along the edge of its beer glass as he thought it over.

“How about this? The ship I’m on sinks in the middle of the Pacific.

“I grab a life preserver and look at the stars, floating all alone in the night sea. It’s a quiet, beautiful night. From nearby, clinging to another life preserver like mine, a young girl comes swimming over.”

“Is she cute?”

“Oh yeah.”

I took a swig of beer and nodded.

“It’s a little ridiculous.”

“Hey, listen. So we’re still floating in the ocean together, chatting. Our pasts, our futures, our hobbies, how many girls I’ve slept with, talking about TV shows, what we dreamed about the night before, stuff like that. Then we drink beer together.”

“Hold on a sec, where the hell did you get beer?”

The Rat considered this for a moment.

“It’s floating there. It’s beer in cans, floating over from the ship’s mess hall. Together with the canned sardines. Is that okay?”

“Sure.”

“During that time, the sun comes up. ‘What are you going to do now?’ she asks, then adds, ‘I’m going to swim to where I think an island should be.’

“‘But it doesn’t look like there’s any islands. What’s more, if we just float here drinking beer, an airplane will definitely come to rescue us,’ I say. But she goes off swimming by herself.”

The Rat pauses to catch his breath and drink beer.

“For two days and two nights, the girl struggles to make her way to some island. I stay there, drunk for two days, and I’m rescued by an airplane. Some years later, at some bar on the Yamanote, we happen to meet again.”

“And then the two of you drink beer together once again?”

“Sad, don’t you think?”

“Sure,” I said.

6

The Rat's stories always follow two rules: first, there are no sex scenes, and second, not one person dies. Even if you don't acknowledge it, people die, and guys sleep with girls. That's just how it is.

* * *

"Do you think I'm wrong?" she asked.

The Rat took a sip of beer and shook his head deliberately. "I'll just come right out and say it, everybody's wrong."

"What makes you think so?"

"Hm," the Rat grunted and licked his upper lip. He made no effort to respond.

"I thought my arms were going to fall off with how hard I swam to get to that island. It hurt so much I thought I was going to die. Over and over I kept thinking about it. If I'm wrong, then you must be right. I struggled so hard, so why were you able to just float on the ocean's surface doing nothing?"

When she said this, she laughed a little, looking depressed with her eyes crinkling at the corners. The Rat bashfully dug around randomly in his pocket. For the last three years he'd wanted so much to smoke a cigarette.

"You'd rather I died?"

"Heh, a little."

"Really? Only a little?"

"I forget."

The two of them were silent for a moment. The Rat felt compelled to say something.

"Well, some people are just born unlucky."

"Who said that?"

"John F. Kennedy."

When I was little, I was a terribly quiet child. My parents were worried, so they took me to the house of a psychiatrist they knew.

The psychiatrist's house was on a plateau overlooking the sea, and while I sat on the waiting room sofa, a well-built middle-aged woman brought me orange juice and two donuts. I ate half a donut, carefully, as if trying not to spill sugar on my knees, and I drank the entire glass of orange juice.

"Do you want some more to drink?" the psychiatrist asked me, and I shook my head. We sat facing each other, just the two of us.

From the wall in front of me, a portrait of Mozart glared at me reproachfully, like a timid cat.

"Once upon a time, there was a kind-hearted goat."

It was a spectacular way to start a story. I closed my eyes and imagined a kind-hearted goat.

"This goat always had a heavy gold watch hanging around his neck, and he always walked around panting heavily. What's more, this watch was not only heavy, but it was also broken. One time, his friend the rabbit comes along and says, 'Hey goat, why are you always lugging around that broken watch? It looks so heavy, don't you think it's useless?'

'It really is heavy,' said the goat. 'But, you know, I've gotten used to it. Even though it's heavy, even though it's broken.'

The psychiatrist paused and took a sip of his own orange juice, then looked at me, grinning. I said nothing, waiting for him to continue his story.

"So one day, it's the goat's birthday, and the rabbit brings a small box with a pretty ribbon as a present. It was a shiny, glittering, very light, and yet stillworking new watch. The goat was incredibly happy and hung it around his neck, then went around showing it to everyone."

The story suddenly ended there.

“You’re the sheep, I’m the rabbit, and the watch is your soul.”

Feeling tricked, all I could do was nod. Once a week, on Sunday afternoon, I rode a train and then a bus to the psychiatrist’s house, eating coffee rolls and apple pies and pancakes and croissants topped with honey while receiving my treatment. It took an entire year, but thanks to all those sweets, I got stuck going to the dentist. With civilization comes communication, he said. Whatever can’t be expressed might as well not exist. Nil, nothing. Suppose you’re hungry. You say, ‘I’m hungry,’ and even that short phrase will suffice. I’ll give you a cookie. You can eat it. (I was now holding a cookie.) If you say nothing, there’s no cookie. (The psychiatrist then hid the plate of cookies under the table with a sadistic look on his face.) Nothing. You get it? You don’t want to talk. But you’re hungry. Without making words, you can’t express your hunger. Here’s a gesture game. Come watch this. I grabbed my stomach like it was hurting. The psychiatrist laughed. I had indigestion.

Indigestion...

After that, the next thing we did was ‘free talking’.

“Tell me about cats. Say whatever pops into your head.”

I pretended to think about it, then shook my head back and forth.

“Anything you can think of.”

“They’re animals with four legs.”

“So are elephants.”

“Cats are much smaller.”

“What else?”

“They live in the house, and they can kill mice if they want.”

“What do they eat?”

“Fish.”

“How about sausage?”

“Sausage, too.”

That’s how it went.

What the psychiatrist said was true. With civilization comes communication. Expression and communication are essential; without