

Ewa Maria Slaska

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Dear Mr Murakami
this letter is a novel written at the beginning of the New Chinese Year.

Dear Mr Murakami,
just for you to know: You were born January 12, 1949. (Many happy returns!) I was born 9 months later, on 2nd September. I am a cow and you are a rat. Your year finished shortly after your birthday. Now it is my year. The Year of a Cow. La vache qui rit. It began on January, 26th.

We are both writer. You the famous one, me not. I am a Polish writer living in Germany, you a Japanese one living in US.

Last week I decide, I have to write a letter to you. You will see, why. I will send it to your publishing house in Köln and they will send it to you. It is very nice of them and I am grateful they are ready to do it.

This letter is a long story with some other stories inside, Mr Murakami, so be prepared.

With many many greetings

Yours sincerely

Ewa Maria Slaska

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Writing a letter to Haruki Murakami

Reading *Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman* 1

Dear Mr Murakami, I begin with a quotation of your own text "Chance Traveller" as it was published in Harpers.

You, Haruki Murakami, are speaking to us as the narrator staying before the curtain, delivering prologue.

"The reason I've turned up here is I thought it best to relate directly several so-called strange events that have happened to me. Actually, events of this kind happen quite often. Some of them are significant and have affected my life in one way or another. Others are insignificant incidents that have no impact at all. At least I think so.

Whenever I bring up these incidents, say, in a group discussion, **I never get much of reaction.** Most people just make some noncommittal comment, and it never goes anywhere. It never jumpstarts the conversation, never spurs someone else to bring up something similar that's happened to him. The topic is like so much water flowing down the wrong channel and being sucked up in a nameless stretch of sand. No one says anything for a while, then invariably someone changes the subject.

At first I thought I was telling the story wrong, so one time I tried writing it down as an essay. I figured if I did that maybe people would take it more seriously. But no one seemed to believe what I have written. "You've made it all up, right?" I don't know how many times I've heard that. Because I'm a novelist, people assume that anything I say or write must have a touch of make-believe. Granted, my fiction contains more than its share of invention, but when I'm not writing fiction I don't go out of my way to make up meaningless stories."

So, Mr Murakami, I believe you, I take up, what you have said, it jumpstarts the conversation (one-sided, well, but it doesn't matter), it spurs me to bring up something similar, that's happened to me or to somebody I know very well. Vous l'avez voulu, George Dandin.

Reading *A Wild Sheep Chase*

At the beginning there was a novel *A Wild Sheep Chase*. Your first novel I've read. Reading in a tube. Absolutely inside this book suddenly I looked up and saw a young man sitting opposite to me reading the same novel. At the same time he also looked at me. We didn't spoke to each other. We only noticed the merely fact. Nothing important.

Your books are good. But you know it. For me they are more. They do things. In me and around. Supposedly you know it too.

They meet in a tube. Read in German. Doesn't matter. I read your books in German, English and Polish.

Reading *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*

It happened on 1st April last year. A fool day. But you know it. I think you know the all details about the European culture better than most of us.

It happened to me (to me?) on 1st April. One week before I borrowed your novel *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* from my nephew. I already read it almost to the end, but as there were only few pages left, I fall asleep (it was because of the spring time change, which make me always falling out of sleep balance). After an hour I waked up and started to read further. I read already a scene in a hotel. Toru Okada, the main person, is in hotel, where he probably

meets his lost wife. He is not sure, he never saw this person in hotel. It was always dark as he was there. If he was there at all. Now he is in that hotel and there is a light in, but in that very moment, he will see that woman, the light suddenly switched off. As I read it, a lamp in my room switched off too. I thought it was a bulb, but no, it was not a bulb, all lights in my flat were off. I went to check the security plugs, but, alas, no, they were also ok. So I knew I have to check also the entire house security. I went out of my flat. The neighbours were already in the hall, they said, the main security plug is fully ok. We went out. The whole street was without light. I went back home, made a candle light and read your book to the end. Then Martha, a young woman renting a room in my flat, came back from the university. We didn't want to sit in a dark flat, not even being able to make tea (we have only an electrical stove and / or cooking machine), so we went to the walk. We found a lot of people doing the same, so the streets were really crowded. Everybody spoke about the light being out of operation. Strange, but people were not nervous. They were rather jolly and friendly to each other. It was almost like Sylvester or carnival. Everybody said, it was funny, while there were some streets with light and other ones without. Nobody understood why. On the Bergmannstrasse, the main street in our part of the town, which was dark, we saw the ambulance car of electricity service. It had flashing orange warning lights. We went to it, wanting to ask the security men, whether they know, our street, which is quite far away, is also without light. But the car was dark inside and there was nobody to ask. We stood there a while looking at the orange bulbs. Do something, said Martha and in that very moment the light revived in the whole street. People shouted "hurray!" and it was even better than Sylvester. Hallelujah!

Mr Murakami, you switched the light off in the whole district, but Martha and me repaired it, just looking at the service car. Here you are!

So, you see, Mr Murakami, it is like that with you and me in Berlin.

Reading *Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman 2*

Eight months are gone. Now it is January 2009. I am reading *Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman*. In Polish. By "The Seventh Man" I asked myself, what I will tell being in such an imaginary situation as in that story. We are sitting in a room, everybody is telling about something strange, what had happened to him. Or to her. It is a similar situation in "Crabs". Or even better. The story teller was telling you and only you his story. He had your full attention only for what he was saying. Whatever. If I have a chance of telling you the story, what will I say you?

Next day I went to visit my friend, Anna. She was ill, lying in bed, wanting something, not really knowing what. Shall we see a film together? No, I answered, I have no time. I have to go soon. So tell me the story. She said I shall tell her a story.

They were many stories. They had to be. First about you. Than about us. And than the proper story. The story for you. My friend Anna is a reader but she read just another books. So I had to tell her about you. I gave her a short explanation. You are a very good Japanese writer, who's books we used to read since years. "We" means my son, my nephew and me. My son gave me the first book of you to read. *A Wild Sheep Chase*. Then I started to buy your books for him. *Kafka on the Shore* for example. As you already know, last year I borrowed *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* from my nephew and as Christmas gift last year he gave me the *Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman*. Well, I tell her, you write strange stories, but no fantasy. They are neither magicians nor witches in your books, no magical utensils and not a trace of parapsychology. But they are strange.

Mister Murakami, please believe me that I did not read yet your novel "Chance Traveller". That I first read a day after and it is why I write that letter. In "Chance Traveller" you spoke exactly about those matters I told my friend a day before. Whatever. So, I said, since

yesterday I am thinking about the stories I could tell Murakami being a sort of "The Seventh Man". Of course, I could tell her the story about electricity crash and *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, or even about meeting a man in a tube, reading *A Wild Sheep Chase*. But they are not that sort of stories. They are good, no question, but they are stories about you. Not for you.

For you I found another stories. One of them I told my friend Anna. It is about normality. It is a long story. Another ones are short and I begin with them, just for having it done.

Keukenhof

Some years ago I went to Holland for a short trip. Some sightseeing, some meetings with friends and a visit in Mauritshuis in Den Haag (The Hague) to see a gorgeous exhibition of Jan Vermeer van Delft. I used to travel all around the world to see his pictures. He is my best painter as you are my best writer, taking this place as third, because Marcel Proust and than Gabriel Garcia Marquez possessed this place before you. On the last day I went to Keukenhof. It was spring, a proper time to visit the park there. The park people write on their homepage: "Nowhere else in the world are the flowers and colours of the spring as glorious as at Keukenhof. You get the opportunity to see millions of bulbs in flower, fantastic flower shows and the largest sculpture park in the Netherlands and is the most photographed place in the world. Enjoy the spring!" Truly it is impressively, how many flowers they show. Tulips, irises, daffodils, crocuses, narcissus. In thousands. But not lily of the valley! I was sure I am wrong. There must be also the lily of the valley. Somewhere. It was as being Gerda in that Andersen story of Snow Queen, wandering through the witch garden and looking for roses and finding not a one. I went systematically through the whole park of Keukenhof, path for path, looking right, looking left. Nothing. Tulips, irises, daffodils, crocuses, narcissus. Even first roses. Amaryllis. Tulips, irises, daffodils, crocuses, narcissus. And no one lily of the valley! I went fully resigned out of the park into the economic part of it, hidden behind a tiny little forest. Nobody erred there. The trees were still dark, sheetless, greenless. That colourful park was prepared for the tourists making photos, the real nature was not so photogenic. But there I found my lilies of the valley. They were pale, weak and thin. Nobody cared about them, they were not for show. They were only for me.

Well, the question is, did I made them or did I found them? You shall be sure, I wanted to find them, so it happened like I wanted. I am rather not so sure.

Kreuzberg

Writing about tourists making photos one think immediately about Japanese. Sorry, but it is like that. I mean in Europe it is like that. Japanese tourists making photos are proverbial. I am living in Kreuzberg. It is a famous part of Berlin. No, it is not. It used to be. In 80 an alternative way of life was invented and practiced there. You could find every sort of strange people in Kreuzberg, punks and old hippies, lesbians and gays, pacifists, softies, vegetarians and vegans, and even florans, if you know, what I mean, foreigners, artists without success, singles, not married couples, mothers with illegitimately children, preferably coloured, looser, being proud of being a looser, junkies and unemployed, you see, every sort of opponents of normal social structures including clothes and hair style were to meet in Kreuzberg.

Now almost 30 years later we are not so wild, we became more calmly and are not so in fashion as we used to be, but it is still nice to live here. We have two big public parks in Kreuzberg, one with a high hill, one of the highest in Berlin. We call it mountain! 66 meter! On the top of it there is a monument erected in 19 century for a German victory against France. It is why it is called Victoria Park. Belonging to the „mountain“ and to the monument there is also an artificial waterfall of 24 meter height.

I am living in a street leading directly to waterfall. It makes me always happy even thinking about it. I am really happy living to the foot of a mountain with a waterfall. In winter there is no water in waterfall. They close the water for a cold half of the year, mostly on the 1st of November and open it again in April. But there are some years there is no water in a waterfall even in a warm half of a year. It is because of money. Yes, it costs money, to keep the water running in waterfall. But even then sometimes the waterfall would be open again for some days or weeks and you can never tell why or when. It takes a bit of my happiness away if in summer there is no water running in Victoria waterfall. If so, getting out I always use to look to the waterfall to check, let say, the water situation.

It was a sunny summer work day. Let say Tuesday. Nothing special on that day. Just Tuesday. I went shopping and a short look to the waterfall said me snafu, situation as usually, no water. Half an hour later coming back home suddenly I saw water glistening in the sun. They let the water flow! Hallelujah!! I run into my flat, let my bags lay, took sun glasses, book and cigarettes and run to the waterfall. I was one of the first there but soon there were many people at the waterfall. Mothers with Kids, old couples, some vagabonds, young women wearing glasses, all with books in their hands. A Turk family. We were quite a party. All of us sitting on the benches or stones or just staying on a small bridge, looking eagerly to the troubled water. I thought, it was like a *Miracolo a Milano*, everybody coming out to see sunshine, or maybe like in Japan, when thousands are going to see the plum trees in blossom. And the Word became Flesh. After half an hour three Japanese, two young women and one boy, came to the bridge and made photos. They posted themselves with water in a fond, separately and all together, making all sorts of obligatory photos to the topic "Me and a waterfall in Berlin".

Why did they come? There was not such a question by all the others. They were like me, people living in the neighbourhood, looking every day to the waterfall, checking almost automatically, whether there is water or not. But how did that Japanese get the new? No idea. But they did. They did, they come, they made photos and went. We stay somewhat longer, but it was not the same. Something was gone. So we went too. Taken away as a photo the miracle was over as soon as it happened.

Normality

It is a true story. Because one person who is concerned in this story is still alive, I feel obliged to change some details, even if the chance she read these lines is rather small.

I was growing up in a strange family of artists and voyagers. My mother was a painter, my father musician and seaman. The friends of them, mostly ten or more years younger than they both, were also artists, art students, or at least interested in film, music, poetry, paintings and all that jazz. Of course also jazz. With the exception of my mother they all were also interested in exploring the world. Alpinists, sailors. Overwhelming the elements. Strong men and interesting women trying to keep a pace. In this group of maybe ten or fifteen people the most important was K. He was older than the rest of them, just slightly younger than my parents. He was the first who came. The rest, they all came to us because of his recommendation. There were ones which came just a couple of time and than vanished, but the "hard core" stayed truthfully through years and even decades. K. and his girl friend, Maria, with whom he parted after some years, but she also stayed as a home friend in a group. Then D. and three brothers J. and their young beautiful sister, which became the next girl friend of K. and which is my main person in that story, let say, Agnes.

They were coming every day. They ate with us, they slept on a guest couch or just on the floor. The house was full of loudly played music and smoking people. Always discussing, always finding something new and exiting, laying a lot of weight in interests, behaving and looking different as the "normals".

I am not sure, but I think, they came as I was six or almost seven, shortly before I started going to the school. At least ten years they lived partly in our home rejecting all forms of stabilisation. After ten years the group began to lose its homogeneity. In the time coming, the young women left, getting married to somebody else, with the exception of Agnes. Then the first male member of the group married too. They were still friends, but there was no more that group of young angry men as it used to be such a long time. They were not angry any more, and maybe also not so young.

Only K. stayed himself from yore, intelligent, brisk, critical and angry, difficult, still living in informally relationship with Agnes. But Agnes, even Agnes, was with years floating tired of that form of life. They were together ten, maybe even fifteen years, but she was in a first line a sinister, strange and unpleasant situation in communistic-catholic Poland.

She wanted a normal life.

They married. My God, how long time it was before they did it at least. In that time I finished my study and married also, only one year later.

Then he went to a sailor trip. Maybe it was that proverbial last drop. Agnes decided to divorce. In her letter send to him overseas she wrote, she need stability and a normal life. She doesn't want to be a wife of never settled angry man.

His yacht never turned back. Only her letter came back. The sailors' community in the whole world searched it two years long in all waters, passable or not passable. Live or dead. Nothing was found. It vanished and the story went to the chronicles of world yachting.

Her letter came back and was opened by her mother in law. Which hated Agnes. And hated her even more after reading, what she wrote. She told it everybody and everybody told it again and again.

Agnes was neither divorced nor widow. And she was pregnant. Our sons were born in almost the same time.

But her son was born incurably ill. Abnormally.

So, it is my story for you. A story about a woman wanting a normal life.

If you have read it till now, I thank you.