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HARUKI MURAKAMI

PINBALL, 1973

Translated from the Japanese by
Ted Goossen

Brief ENCOUNTERS
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I enjoyed listening to stories about faraway places so much that it became a kind of sickness.

Back then, a good ten years ago now, I went around asking everyone to tell me about where they were born and raised. In those days there must have been a real shortage of good listeners, because everyone I approached talked to me with great enthusiasm. When rumor got out about what I was doing, people I'd never laid eyes on started showing up just to tell me their stories.

They rambled on and on about anything and everything, as if tossing stones into a dry well, then left feeling satisfied. Some told their stories in high spirits, others in anger. There were stories that felt clear and direct, and other stories that seemed pointless from start to finish. There were boring stories, sob stories, and tongue-in-cheek, off-the-wall stories. Always, though, I listened to what they had to say as attentively as I could.

For whatever reason, they all seemed compelled to get their story out—if not to a specific person, then to the world at large. It made me think of a cardboard box packed with monkeys. I would extract one monkey after another, carefully dust it off, slap it on the bum, and release it into the fields. I had no idea what happened to

the monkeys after that. Probably they spent their lives gnawing on acorns somewhere, then died off. Such was their fate.

Truth be told, it was a laborious task, with little reward. Had a contest been held that year to determine the World's Best Listener, I would have won hands down. My prize? Probably a box of kitchen matches.

One of the people who talked to me came from Saturn, while another was from Venus. Their stories were especially memorable. I'll quote the guy from Saturn first.

"It's f-freezing cold . . . up there," he groaned. "Just thinking about it drives me n-nuts."

He belonged to the radical group occupying Building Nine on our campus. Their motto was "Action determines ideology, not vice versa." What determined action was never made clear to me, though I asked. Building Nine was equipped with a water cooler, a telephone, a hot-water heater, and, on the second floor, a really cool music room with two thousand records and Altec A5 speakers. Compared to other occupied buildings on campus (like Building Eight, which stank like a bicycle racetrack toilet), it was paradise. The group shaved with hot water every morning, made all the long-distance phone calls they wanted in the afternoon, and gathered to listen to records in the evening. By the time autumn came around they were all classical music aficionados.

Is it true that they were blissing out to Vivaldi's "Il cimento dell'armonia e dell'invenzione" at full blast when the riot police's third division came crashing into Building Nine that perfect cloudless November day? Whether fact

or fiction, it endures as one of the more heartwarming legends revolving around the year that was 1969.

It was thus to the accompaniment of the distant strains of Haydn's Piano Sonata in G minor that I picked my way under and through the tottering pile of benches that served as a barricade for Building Nine. For some reason it felt nostalgic, as if I were making my way up a camellia-covered slope to visit my girlfriend's home in one of the nicer parts of the city. The guy from Saturn pushed their most comfortable chair in my direction, handed me a beaker filched from the science labs, and filled it with lukewarm beer.

"Gravity is a lot stronger up there," he said, continuing his story. "I know a guy whose foot got crushed when he spat out a wad of chewing gum. It's h-hell!"

"You don't say," I answered. By that time, I had mastered a repertoire of three hundred stock responses that I could draw on to keep my respondents talking.

"The s-sun is tiny, too. Like an orange on home plate seen from center field. So it's always dark," he sighed.

"Then why doesn't everyone leave?" I asked. "There must be nicer planets to live on."

"Beats me. Maybe 'cause they were born there. It's like that. Take me, for example. I'm going home to Saturn when I graduate. To make it a b-better place. It's the r-r-revolution."

Anyway, I just love stories about faraway towns. I stash some of them away in my mind, like a bear preparing for hibernation. If I close my eyes, I can picture the streets, line them with dwellings, hear the voices of the residents. I can even feel the gentle yet unmistakable

rhythms of their lives, distant people whose paths I may never cross as long as I live.

On occasion, Naoko would tell me her stories. I can still remember every word.

"I don't know what to call the place," she said in a bored voice, her cheek resting on her hand in the bright sunlight of the student lounge. Then she gave a little laugh. I waited for her to continue. She was a girl who spoke slowly and chose her words with care.

We sat at a red plastic table, a paper cup stuffed with cigarette butts between us. The light streamed through the tall windows like in a Rubens painting, neatly dividing our table down the middle so that my right hand was illuminated and my left was in shade.

It was the spring of 1969, and we were both twenty. New students wearing new shoes, carrying new course catalogs, their heads crammed with new brains, packed the lounge. Throughout our conversation we heard complaints and apologies as people bumped into each other.

"I mean," she continued, "you can't even call it a real town. There's just a railroad track and a station. A pathetic two-bit station the engineer could zip right past in the rain."

I nodded. For a full thirty seconds we sat there in silence, watching the cigarette smoke curl in the sunlight.

"And there's always a dog walking the platform from one end to the other. That kind of station. Got the picture?"

I nodded again.

"When you step out of the station there's a little

roundabout and a bus stop. And a few shops . . . Really sleepy-looking places. Go straight from there and you bump into a park. There's a slide and three sets of swings."

"Is there a sandbox?"

"A sandbox?" She thought for a moment before nodding, as if to confirm her recollection. "Yes, there's one of those too."

We fell silent again. I gingerly extinguished my cigarette, which I had smoked down to the butt, in the paper cup.

"It's a nowhere kind of town. Why anyplace so boring was put on this earth is beyond me."

"God reveals Himself in many forms," I said.

Naoko shook her head and laughed. It was a regular sort of laugh, the kind you'd expect from a girl who had received straight As in school; yet for some strange reason it lingered long after she had left, like the grin of the Cheshire Cat in *Alice in Wonderland*.

But what excited me most was the thought of meeting the dog that walked up and down the platform.

Four years later, in May 1973, I did go alone to that station. I wanted to see that dog. In preparation, I shaved, donned a necktie for the first time in six months, and put on a new pair of cordovan shoes.

I stepped down from the sorry old suburban local train, whose two rusted passenger cars looked ready to disintegrate at any moment, and inhaled the smell of fresh grass. It was a fragrance from picnics long past; even the May breeze seemed to be reaching me from some distant time.

When I listened carefully, I could hear skylarks singing overhead.

I let out a long yawn, sat down on a platform bench, and lit up a cigarette in disgust. The energy I had felt when I left my apartment early that morning had vanished. It was the same old thing over and over again. An endless *déjà vu* that got worse each time around.

At one time in my life I had gone to sleep each night sprawled on the floor with a group of friends. In the morning some guy would step on my head. Sorry, he'd say. Then I'd hear the sound of pissing. The same old thing.

With my cigarette hanging from the corner of my mouth, I loosened my tie and began rubbing the soles of my new shoes back and forth on the concrete platform. I was trying to lessen the pain in my feet. They weren't killing me, but the soreness was making me feel disjointed, as if my body were out of whack.

The dog was nowhere to be seen.

Out of whack . . .

It's a feeling I get a lot. As if I'm trying to put the jumbled pieces of two different puzzles together at the same time. When I get that way my solution is to drink whiskey and go to bed. The next morning, though, I feel even worse. The same old thing.

When I opened my eyes this time, there were two girls, twins, in bed with me, one on each side. I had awakened to a girl beside me many times before, but

needless to say, this was the first time I had found myself next to twins. They were fast asleep, their noses touching my shoulders. It was a cloudless Sunday morning.

A short while later, they woke up at almost the same time, shimmied into the T-shirts and jeans they had dropped beside the bed, trooped into the kitchen without a word, brewed coffee, made toast, took butter out of the fridge, and spread everything out on the table. Not a move was wasted—it looked as if they'd been doing this for years. Outside my window, some kind of bird was perched on the chain-link fence that encircled the golf course, rattling away like a machine gun.

"So what are your names?" I asked the girls. I was in rough shape—my head was splitting.

"They're not much, as names go," said the one sitting on my right.

"That's a fact," said the one on my left. "Just about useless. Know what I mean?"

"Sure," I said.

We sat there at the table, them on one side, me on the other, nibbling our toast and sipping our coffee. Terrific coffee, too.

"Will it be a hassle, us not having names?" one of them asked.

"I don't know."

They thought about it for a while.

"If we need names," the other suggested, "why don't you choose them for us?"

"Call us what you like."

First one would speak, then the other. Like a sound