

"A Long Way from The Stuffed Cabbage"

Translated by *Kazuo Uekura*

Sometimes I meet a person who says "I've had so many interesting experiences that I can write lots of books about them." I think I've heard quite a few people say the same thing especially since I came here. This doesn't mean that Americans say such a thing, but that many Japanese living in America often do. What they say might be probably true, because it's quite challenging to live away from their home country, and they must have encountered various kinds of exciting happenings in this country. It's quite natural that they should have a strong wish to tell their story to someone else.

Of course, I don't know if they are really going to write their own novels someday. But I can only say this after all; despite the background as a writer who has written quite a number of novels so far, I've almost never had any "truly exciting" incidents in my private life. No doubt I might have had something exciting as a person living more than 40 years, such as meeting a strange and mysterious person or being greatly shocked by a sudden change of destiny. Some memory, I can't tell you what it is though, makes me smile and some still makes me so sore. Thrilling things once quivered me with excitement. Nevertheless I guess you must also have gone through such things as I have experienced in my life. I've never met anyone who can be said to have experienced "such an unbelievable happening as no one ever had even in this large world." If I were quite a stranger to writing novels and asked if I can declare to people that "I've got so much stock of interesting topics for my writing," then my answer to this question will be "No." Definitely "No." What I could do is just confess honestly that "My life was somewhat interesting in its way, but not interesting enough to write a novel about it."

For all this, in a very rare occasion we stumble upon people who encountered incredible experiences in this world. I like their story telling since a boy, and I often ask them to tell their own episode. I have no idea of using their story as a subject for my novel, but I just feel like listening to them. Various tales exist; some of them are stunning, moving, heartily laughable, and chilling me with fear. Their narrative is sometimes so enchanting as to make me forget to go to bed. It is true that "Fact is stranger than fiction." But it is not always true that the person, who has gone through such an excitement, can write a novel as stimulating as his experience. There might be a writer like Jack London (an American novelist 1878-1916) who makes up extraordinarily interesting books from his plentiful, extraordinary experiences, but judging from my knowledge, such a novelist is rather exceptional.

Though this is my private opinion, people are inclined to be captured by the keen sense of helplessness while actually writing them down once they suffer overwhelming experiences. Painful is the stress when one cannot reproduce or convey vividly to others, however hard he tries, what he's experienced so intensely. In my case, the stronger is the intention to "write about a particular subject in a particular way," the harder it becomes to start writing and to

express myself. This stress somewhat resembles the irritation one feels when he cannot describe to another person what he experienced so vividly and realistically in his dreams. All words I use to narrate my feeling of the moment fail incessantly to describe what I wish to, and then they begin to betray me.

To the contrary, there are some people, despite their lack of experiences, who can find out something funny and something pitiful in a trivial incident from their unique viewpoint which is quite different from that of others. They can recreate their findings into a different form and tell other people more comprehensibly about them. These people are standing much closer to novelists.

Anyway I have no experience in my life which is really worth telling you about. I can understand why John Irving said something to the effect that "If I write my books based on my personal experiences, my readers will probably fall asleep after the first 20 pages." In my case, less than 20 pages. It is generally believed that writers create their works under the influence of various real experiences, though. For instance, when I published my first novel, my acquaintances around me suddenly started to become restless and nervous. They began to keep a distance from me though we had been enjoying a casual relationship until that time. At first I couldn't make out why, but after talking to them, I noticed they gave the cold shoulder to me for fear that I might use them as the models for my next book. We've been getting along with one another since they found that I had no intention to write such kind of novels.

Since I came to the States, I've visited lots of universities and talked with many American students. I've talked publicly before a large audience, too. But I feel more comfortable when speaking face to face in a small class, using my own words and following my own casual style. Sometimes after class, all of us went to a pub and enjoyed an open and frank conversation over a glass of beer. In such an atmosphere, there is no difference between American and Japanese students. Students, who assumed an affected attitude in the presence of a teacher during the session, now get relaxed and recover the childish sparkle in their eyes.

They are usually the students interested in Japanese Literature or Japanese, but for many of them, this is the first time in their life to meet a novelist. Therefore they are very eager to know something very realistic about a novelist, for instance, what kind of creature a writer is, what kind of ideas he has, and what kind of life he is living. Some of them wish to write a novel themselves, too. These novelist-oriented students are keenly interested to know how they can start writing a novel or become a novelist. Most typical questions asked by them are as follows:

1. What did you want to write in your university days?
2. How did you publish your first novel?
3. What do you think is the most essential for writing novels?

From my standpoint as a private writer, I find it almost impossible to expand my case into the level of all writers and to teach them that "Novelists are such-and-such people" or "This is the

way to write a novel" or "You can become a writer in this way." I also find it meaningless to suggest to them knowingly some "correct" theory of becoming a novelist. So I show them my concrete example, saying that "In my case I am like this." Besides, they much prefer the quick, descriptively "colorful" start-up example to the logical, abstract theory or concept.

In this "concrete and colorful" way, wherever I went, I explained to the students how I became a novelist, and I happened to notice that it was nearly good luck itself that made me a writer. Sometimes I am deeply impressed by the fact that I could become a writer.

When a student, I was certainly thinking of writing something. More specifically, I wanted to write film scenarios. Scenarios first, and then novels, for I felt interested in films. That is why I chose to enter the Film & Drama Course in Waseda University, but I gave up writing scenarios halfway, thinking it didn't fit me. I didn't have the slightest idea of what to write or how to write in those days. Neither any material nor any theme did I have to write about. Such a person could never start writing a script (or anything else), which was a self-evident fact. But I liked to read film scripts anyway, so I went to the Drama Museum on campus almost everyday, if not attending classes, and devoured all the film scripts in the West and in the East through all ages. Looking back on my student days now, I think this devouring helped me so much. Therefore, I think I can give a piece of advice to younger people, having a wish to write something, that "you need not force yourself to write something when you can not." I wonder if this might help them or not though.

Then I graduated from Waseda, got married, and started working. (No, it is opposite. I married, started working, and then graduated from university.) Driven by the severe everyday life, I totally forgot my wish to write something. To clear off my debts, I had to work from early in the morning till late at night like "a whipped carriage-horse," which sounds like a non-literary cliché, though. I continued it for seven years. As my bar served the "stuffed cabbage", for instance, I had to cut a full bag of onions into tiny pieces every morning. Still now I can manage to cut plenty of onions in a short time even without shedding tears. My hands automatically and swiftly move as if they knew how to do it.

"Do you know the knack of slicing onions without tears?" I ask my students sometimes. "No," they say.

"Finish cutting them before tears start dropping." A big laughter occurs.

When it comes to the topic like this, a lively sparkle appears in my students' eyes. That might be partly because they've rarely heard such a story in their regular classes, and partly because they more or less have a sort of vague anxiety about their future: "What kind of life course am I going to follow?" "What kind of possibility can I find there?" I can understand their sense of instability about their present position and their future. Around the age of twenty, I was as unstable as they are now, or my case must have been far worse than what the word "unstable" means. If a god appears here and asks me if I'd like to go back to the age of twenty again, I will probably decline by saying "I appreciate your offer, but I am quite satisfied with the way I am now." If you pardon me, I want to say frankly "To hell with my twenties."

Then at the age of 29, a sudden impulse of writing a novel knocked on me. Now I'll explain about it more. It was an early afternoon in spring and I went to see a baseball game between Yakult Swallows and Hiroshima Carp in Jingu Baseball Stadium. Lying down in the outfield bleacher, drinking beer, and when a player named Hilton hit a double, I made a sudden resolution that "Now it's time for me to start writing a novel." This is how I started to write a novel.

When I give such an explanation to my students, all of them make a stunned face. "That means ah...the ball game meant something very special to you?" "I don't think so. The spring sunshine, the taste of beer, the flying two-base-hit ball, all these elements got together and they stimulated something in me, I guess," I explain. "All I needed was the time and the experience to identify myself. It doesn't have to be a special experience. It doesn't matter that they are just a series of ordinary experiences. But they have to be the experiences that are embedding themselves deeply in my body. When a student, I couldn't find out what to write despite the itch for writing something. I needed the seven years and hardships to discover the theme for my writing, I guess." "If you hadn't gone to the ball game stadium on that April afternoon, you would not be a writer now, Mr. Murakami?"

"Who knows?"

I really mean it; "Who knows?" If I hadn't been in the stadium that afternoon, I might have lived my ordinary life without writing any novels. But as a matter of fact, I was in the empty outfield bleacher of Jingu Stadium on that spring afternoon - yes the stadium was really empty in those days - and lying down, watching Dave Hilton hit a beautiful double into left field, I came to write my first book "Hear The Wind Sing." It might have been the only "extraordinary" incident in my life.

"Mr. Murakami, do you think something similar will happen in everybody else's life?"

"I have no idea." That is the only answer I can give. "But I imagine something similar, if not exactly the same, will more or less happen to anybody else. The instance of revelation must sometime visit you when various things suddenly get connected to each other. Well, at least, don't you think our life would be happier if we believed such a moment is sure to come?"

Anyway I think I learned quite a few things from my job. A few years ago a book titled "All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten" became a big bestseller here in the U.S., and in my case the same thing can be said: "All I need to know I learned in my jazz bar." I acquired various knowledge at the schools that I attended, but frankly speaking, this kind of knowledge didn't help me very much when writing a novel. I have no idea of maintaining that the school education is meaningless, but I rarely met a situation when it came home to me how important my school education was. When I was a small boy, my mother told me that "If you don't work hard now, you will have regrets for not having studied harder after having grown up." Her advice gave me a vague feeling that she might be right, but still I can't understand what she really meant. That's because after grown up, I've never regretted that "I should have studied harder when young." It is my twenties that taught me some truth about

how I should live, and in those days I was literally engaged in physical labor day after day. I spent every day in my twenties working both physically and desperately hard in order to pay my debts every month. I could not think about anything else even if I tried. But as a result, that kind of hard labor nourished me most. Labor was the best teacher to me and my "true university."

For instance, managing a bar, I have a lot of customers every day, and not everybody necessarily likes my place, or more accurately, just a few of them do. But strange to say, you can manage to carry on your business if one or two customers out of ten really like your place and if they wish to "drop by this bar again." Sometimes you can have a better result when only a few out of ten really love your place rather than when eight, or nine customers merely feel that "it is not bad." This lesson came home to me, while I was running my bar, through the pains as if to have all the bones in my body crushed. Even when many people speak harshly about my book, I can believe, firmly and in the daily sense brewed through my own experiences, that it doesn't matter so long as one or two of them intuitively understand what I want to express. It became an invaluable lesson to me. Without these experiences, it might have been much harder for me to live as a novelist and some malicious comments on my book might have disturbed my own pace. When I talked about these things with Ryu Murakami (one of the contemporary writers in Japan; his novel "Almost Transparent Blue" in 1976 won the coveted Akutagawa Award and the Gunzou Award for New Writers), he was impressed and exclaimed that "You are really great, Haruki. I'll get mad by not being praised by all of the ten critics." But his comment, on the contrary, impresses me because it certainly sounds like himself.

Though I have no idea of boasting of myself - it isn't even worth boasting of, I'm not a person to think by using my brain, but rather a person to do so by actually moving my body. I am a person who can learn or write only through the body. That is because I used to make my living by making use of my body from morning till night. That is everything the word 'work' meant to me. This character of mine sometimes makes me feel out of place in "the world of literature." Partly this sense of "out of place" might have urged me to go abroad and live away from Japan for such a long time. The reason I cannot do without my favorite jogging and swimming may have the same origin.

About writing a novel, I have almost nothing to "teach" to my students. "All you have to do is *live actually*. If you really wish from the bottom of your heart to write something or to express yourself to somebody else, the time is sure to come when you can *write something* despite the fact that you can't write anything well now. Until that time you carefully continue to pile up your daily experiences one by one as if to lay bricks one after another. For example, love someone seriously, "I say, and then some student responds that "I can do it, too," which makes all of them laugh. Another student asks "What shall I do, if such a time doesn't come to me?" Some giggle. In such an instance, without any hesitation, I quote a vocal teacher's cruel line from Orson Welles's "Citizen Kane"; "Some people can sing, others can't"

When I won the Gunzo Award for New Writers with my first novel, and I said to all the people around me that "My first book I've written recently won me the Gunzo Award for New

Writers," none of them believed my words. Instead, they thought I was joking. Probably some of them, I'm convinced, still have a deep doubt about the fact that I'm called a novelist. In their eyes, I guess, I look something different from a novelist.

Away from those days, away from Japan, and a long way from the stuffed cabbage, now I look back on my past life and I think that our life is very hard to explain, whether we have "exciting experiences" or not.

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