

Princeton - Introduction -

It was in the summer of 1984 that I visited Princeton, New Jersey for the first time.

I took an Amtrak train from Washington D.C. and on my way to New York, I got off the train at Princeton Junction and took a taxi and went to the university. 1984 was the presidential election year between Reagan and Mondale. Everywhere I heard "Born in the USA" by Bruce Springsteen, and Michael Jackson was wearing the silver glove due to getting burned on the hand. (That sounds like just a few years ago. Maybe because I'm getting older)

The reason I came to Princeton was simple; Princeton University was the school F. Scott Fitzgerald graduated from and I wanted to see its campus myself. I had no special purpose for my visiting except that. My train stopped at Princeton and probably, I thought, I would have no business coming here again in my future, which made me to decide to drop in the university. After rambling on campus, looking at his own hand written manuscript in a special room at the library, walking around the town, and staying one night at a shabby motel "Princeton Motor Lodge," I jumped on the Amtrak again and went to New York. I still remember that the town gave me a peaceful and pastoral impression. It was during the summer vacation and few people were seen on spacious campus and the town looked drowsy. When jogging in the morning, I stumbled upon many rabbits and squirrels around the area. (The next time I visited, the fields were replaced by a big shopping mall.)

Another thing I clearly remember was the taxi I took at Princeton Junction. Nowadays lots of taxis are waiting in front of the railway station, but when I arrived there, there happened to be no taxi. The shuttle train between the station and the university was out of service then, I forgot the reason, though. The Princeton Junction station is located all alone in vacant fields, and you could find no house where people are living. The passengers who got off at the station were only four; a woman in her mid-twenties, a black man around twenty, me and my companion. All we could do was sit in front of the station and wait for a taxi.

It was quite a long time before a taxi came up. We had started to worry about ourselves when, eventually, one taxi appeared. Feeling relieved, all four of us pooled the one taxi. The woman took a seat beside the driver and the rest of us occupied the back seat. The taxi-driver was a middle-aged big white guy. The taxi started with our sense of relief, but after a while the black man next to me deliberately took his hair spray can out of a suitcase, and after shaking it up and down, started to spray on his hair. I could not understand why he did such a thing in a taxi-cab, but anyway the rest of us could hardly bear it. He kept on spraying and finally the driver pulled the car to the curb, got out, opened the back door and shouted furiously to the black man saying "You get out here!" At first, he grumbled and resisted, but maybe intimidated by the tough-guy-appearance of the driver, he got out with his suitcase, showing no further protest. He must have been stoned on drugs. The driver returned to his seat and continued to

drive, and carried three of us to town, as if nothing had happened.

A little later, the driver said to us as if to spit out that "We had no one like that here before." "After inviting the business complex in the suburbs of town, ever more narcotics began to flow into this area. What on earth will become of this town in the next several years?"

Seven years later, I revisited Princeton. This time I was going to stay at the university for a long period. When chatting with an American in Japan, I said something to the effect that "I'd like to get relaxed and write novels in a quiet place without any disturbance." Then he promptly met a person related to Princeton University and made an actual plan for going abroad. He said to me "Now Princeton University is inviting you. Your residential place has already been reserved. Pack everything up and go there by the end of next January." I like this kind of American alacrity.

It was the fall of 1990 when we started packing and preparing for our stay in the U.S. Though at that time we had just finished a three-year stay in Europe and come back to Japan, we were starting again to stay abroad without exactly noticing why. I felt it was a bit hectic, but I didn't want to lose the good chance to live in Princeton anyway.

The Gulf War broke out when I was on the way to the American Consulate. In a taxi heading for Akasaka, we heard the news on the radio tell us that the American forces attacked Baghdad with missiles. It was not a good sign for us. We couldn't feel at ease to live in America when it was at war with a country, even if the country was very far away. But all the paperwork had been finished, and we had no choice but to go to the U.S. As a result, we had no war-influence on our stay, but we didn't feel comfortable in the patriotic and macho mood of the society. Once I saw a student demonstration on the campus of Princeton with a placard that read "The Gulf War is something...." I remembered "the good old anti-war protest," but when I watched more carefully, I found it was a "pro-war" demonstration. I have no intention to interfere in somebody else's affairs, but I took the fact to heart that the times have really changed. Later when I talked with a student at Rutgers University(it is a more average university though), the student said "It is because of Princeton, Mr. Murakami. We had an anti-war protest all right." Later in Princeton we had violent trouble when pro-war students attacked anti-war students and snatched their placards and broke them.

But anyway that war came to a successful end, and when we started feeling at ease, the next turbulence occurred; the rise of Japan bashing throughout the country before the approaching 50-year anniversary of Pearl Harbor. This atmosphere was generated partly by the patriotism uplifted following the Gulf War, and partly because Americans were searching for an outlet for their frustration toward the lasting dull economy in the country. I don't know how it was reported in Japan, but I felt it rather tough to live actually in that kind of social ambiance. Besides a sense of uncomfortableness, the air surrounding me often had something like a thorn pricking me. Especially when December came, I rarely went out except shopping and often stayed at home. It was not only the case with me, but all the Japanese here felt something similar. In such a delicate time, a certain Japanese politician (you know who he is) made some remarks which rubbed Americans the wrong way, which really made me wonder

what on earth the Japanese politician was thinking and made me so furious.

In one of those days, I was invited to dinner by an American acquaintance of mine, and at the dinner table, a white American (he was a retired professor though) let it slip and called me "You Jap...." in the conversation. That made all the people present deadly silent as if all of them had cold water poured on their head, and the host turned ghastly pale. This was the worst thing that could ever happen at an American dinner table. The person in question didn't seem to notice that he let these words out at all. Later the host called me aside and made an excuse by saying that "Haruki, he has no malicious intention, so please forgive him. When young, he was recruited by the navy and fought against Japan in the Pacific Ocean. The military education he received still remains with him. We never have any private antipathy to you all." I replied that "I got it, so please don't worry." Actually I didn't care about it, but still now I remember how strained the people present were. This was a rare experience.

With these kind of incidents, my first year was rather tense to me. It was rather a heavy year for Americans and for us as well. Soon after this, the riot hit Los Angeles. Throughout the year, I shut myself up indoors and I was writing a long novel. I seldom went anywhere and didn't do almost anything else. After undergoing mysterious twists and turns, this long novel split into two cells; one became a rather long short novel (or a rather short long novel) "Kokkyou no minami, Taiyo no nishi" and the other a rather long long novel "Nejimakidori Chronicle."

Following this intensive year and a short break, my wish to write something like an essay gradually became stronger. Successfully I came to publish a series of my essays every month in a little magazine "Book" from Kodansha. The length of each essay was twenty-one or two pages of 400-character manuscript paper, and this was the longest essay I had ever published. But while writing a series of essays for one and half years,

I never felt each essay was too long. As is often the case with writers, I am rather a type of writer who thinks while writing words. Materializing my thought into words and rethinking about it in a visual way, it often helps me a lot. In that sense, writing as many as twenty-one or two pages every month gave me a wider range of thinking. Probably during the past one-year stay in America, various things, I think, have been piled up which must be interpreted into words along with a careful consideration.

Consequently the taxi driver's anxiety in 1984, implied in his whisper "What will become of this community in the next several years?", might be partly right and partly not. In the point that Princeton is still a peaceful and beautiful town beyond worldly affairs, his apprehensions ended up as needless fears. In spite of the increase of shopping malls, the ready-built houses for sale, and the occasional traffic jams in the morning and evening rush hours, the basic characteristic of the town has scarcely changed. But his anxiety has been realized in that the U.S., including this small community, has undergone some changes. Looking carefully at this country from inside, I feel keenly that it is a serious task to keep winning the wars one after another. Despite the collapse in the Vietnam War, this country won the Cold War and the Gulf War, but this doesn't necessarily mean that the citizens of this country became happier than

ever before. People seem to be even more at a loss in the predicament of serious problems than ten years ago. Both nation and its people, I think, need to meet with some setbacks or defeats in their turning point. But if asked whether the U.S. can be replaced by some other countries providing as definite and powerful sense of value as this country does, my answer is negative. In this sense, a sense of exhaustion that the Americans are feeling in general resembles some itching uncomfortableness in which the present Japanese are placed. In brief, this can be explained as follows; the exhaustion of America caused by the distinct idea about what they should do or where they should go, and the uncomfortableness of Japan without any clear-cut belief that we are headed in the right direction. When facing these two choices between distinctiveness and ambiguity, the Japanese might feel what a heavy burden it is to choose their way to lead in future..

Writing essays for this book gave me the opportunity to think over various matters. But no conclusive answer is given in almost any facet where some crucial value judgment is needed. Therefore, regrettably, this book doesn't help you get "the instant understanding of America." As an author, I am gratified if this book will be "a hint" to your understanding of the States.

December, 1993

In Boston

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