

DO THE FISH IN THE AQUARIUM KNOW IT'S RAINING OUTSIDE?

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translated from the Bulgarian by Eireene Nealand

To E.

A letter to a lost sister

I lose myself in you and your story. I fall in love with every single moment of your life while we talk on benches and under street lamps, at three o'clock in the morning. Or at your place, while drinking tea with rum, while you are telling me about the man who loved you, who wrote a book about the two of you. He tried to stop loving you, to stop heroin, to get clean, to make a new start. That's why he began to drink a liter of vodka each day. Then later, while you were writing a letter to say you loved him, he jumped from the thirteenth floor. You didn't know it was so serious. You hadn't seen each other for months. And suddenly, without knowing why, even as we speak, it pops into your head, the last sentence of his book, "*Do the fish in the aquarium know it's raining outside?*" Your eyes are wet. You ask if I want more tea. You pour it into my cup without waiting for an answer. Outside, it rains.

You tell me about your sister who is a singer in New Orleans. Her name means Dawn. She has long blond hair, tied in a braid, a wide smile. She sings in small smoky bars, and plays the saxophone, lives on the streets or in the hallway of a friend's place, where she sleeps on a red sofa-bed on Mondays and Thursdays, during the day, when it is free, because at night and the rest of the week, if there's a demand, she and her friend lie there with clients. Your brother's a painter, suffers from depression. A beggar in San Francisco. I like his painting, of a sad man with warm colors and a head cut in half, yellow and red. Hung crooked. The night you were raped, you were hitchhiking. You were only thirteen. For three hours no one wanted to pick you up. You were freezing. He tried to kiss you. The first man you dared to trust.

You tell me all this late in the evening, near the lake with the lilies, while old alcoholics shout in the distance, and on the bench beside us a young couple kisses under the pale light of the street lamps; a full moon, which reminds you of your mother and father, in the evening, on the beach, in the Bay Area of San Francisco, smoking marijuana and listening to "I'd Love To Change The World" by *Ten Years After*, talking about spiritual experiences and getting to know the depths of the soul and mind. Later, they take LSD and hallucinate, while children bathe butt-naked in the ocean, some chasing the waves with happy shouts, others riding dogs as if they are horses.

I am falling in love with certain moments of your life! With particular events! With the days you spent with your hippie parents, during the 60s, when you lived in Golden Gate Park. You woke in the grass, your forehead and clothes wet with dew. For breakfast— marijuana. You children, of course, were allowed only one puff. Then, you'd go to some restaurant in the Haight to use the toilet and take a bath in the sink. The owners threw you out. Shouted at you. No one understood the free love. No one understood your freedom. You laughed together with your sister from your father's second wife, and with your brothers from your mother's first boyfriend. And with filthy clothes and muddy hands and faces, you begged on the streets and in restaurants, asking for food.

Once a year you hitchhiked together to visit your grandparents in Boston. They renounced their daughter forever, because she left college, ran away with your father and other dropouts and beatniks, to live in the streets, and in the woods, on the beach, to ruin good lives. Your grandparents didn't allow your father to cross into their yard. Quietly, your mother herded you in. *"Mom, why don't we have a house like this? Can't we live here?"* That's what you asked when you entered your grandparents' luxurious home. Hearing, your grandmother threw your mother a look. She rolled her eyes and replied: *"We don't have a house like this because we have freedom."*

With your brothers and sisters you ran and chased each other around the yard while your mother picked flowers from the well-ordered garden, while your grandmother looked on with her strict gaze, making reproachful remarks: *"Such irresponsibility! Take care of your kids at least! They are ragged and barefoot! Like beggars!"* All the while, your mother was stringing your grandmother's flowers into a crown, setting it on her head. Then she burst into laughter. She walked to the gate, closing the iron door behind her, turning, and clutching the bars, and looking at her home through them at the figure of her mother, concluding: *"Real life is on the other side, Mom. We don't need anything but love and freedom."* Then, together with your father you raised your thumbs on the highway and hit the road again ... Towards your new home, somewhere out there, under the clear blue sky ... The sunrise in the morning was the only sure thing in your life.

I can sit for hours and listen to your story. No matter where we are—at the fountain, on the street, at the lake, under the street lamps, at the bus stop, at night, during the day. When you are talking nothing else exists. Only your story and your past. The place, where I am now. I exist in this past of yours. It becomes mine. I have the feeling that we have met before, that we have been together much longer. We have met years ago, many years ago. In the '60s and '70s,

somewhere on the West Coast, at the festivals in Monterey and Woodstock. I've seen your blue eyes sparkling in the sun and merging with the sea. I know your parents. From books and from movies. The hippies who protested the war in Vietnam! I ran out there with you, with your brothers and sisters, naked, among the boys and girls making love, not war. Those who loved each other to the sounds of the Grateful Dead and Jimi Hendrix, under the stars. Those who changed the world by changing their perception of it with drugs or simply by waiting with wide eyes for the morning sunrise, seeing things that do not exist. As we do together. We don't exist if we don't get into each other's stories, exactly in those small hours during the night when it's raining outside but we do not know it. We only see the drops on the window, flowing slowly, like someone's tears ...