

Maja Peter

*To Dance Again*  
Novel

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*Extract translated by Donal McLaughlin*

Alice has sold her dancing shoes and gone into retirement. She spends her days doing housework and meeting friends for coffee; exchanges emails with her former dancing partner, now resident in Thailand. She sits at her kitchen table, drawing, while someone she doesn't know, called 'Alexander', has her music requests played on the radio. Should she write to him?

It is time for Fleur, a grammar school pupil, to choose a career. Her parents have separated. Mother is job-hunting. Father doesn't have any time. She meets Alice on a train, when the latter is on her way to first meet Alexander. They become friends, and the lives of Fleur and Alice slowly begin to change.

In lively, subtle fashion, Maja Peter tells the story of two generations coming together; tells of being young, and getting older; of loneliness and longing; and of very secular wounds to which saints do not minister.

'Her first novel shows what a talent she is'.  
*Tages-Anzeiger* re the novel *Eine Andere*

Is the bottom part of the leg or the torso? Alice puts her pencil down, gets up from the kitchen table, and goes to look at her back in the hall mirror. She's not able to look over her shoulder. Before, she could. She steps back, with one leg, and turns her head as far as she can. Her eyes still don't get far enough round. Instead, the back of her neck hurts. She should have known.

On the radio, the queen of the night falls silent, a waltz starts, three-quarter-time. A waltz adds spice to life, Alice had used to tell her pupils, before. She raises her arms, as if someone were about to clasp her; does some rock-turns. Right, left, right. Left, right, left. Should that ever be no longer possible, she won't want to live. Does a dance exist that adds spice to death?

The music rises. Alice goes with it. The waltz could be a request from this Alexander. The fact he remembered her name! What did he say again? 'Last week, you played a polka for Alice Maag. I liked it so much, I'd like to hear it again.'

A man with similar likes. One who doesn't accompany her to a concert, just to be courteous. Not like Fritz, who found classical music boring. The orchestra would barely have started when he'd turn to the women and men around him, change his sitting position, be massaging his hands. Alice goes into the kitchen: a swaying walk. She turns the radio up. She thought she was happy with Fritz, nonetheless. It wasn't his fault that wasn't enough for her. She sits down, draws a skirt for the tango dancer that covers her bottom and legs.

'Listener Alice Maag recently requested a waltz by Prokofiev. I hope she also likes the one from the *Rosenkavalier*.'

Alexander. She has to meet him. She could ask the request-show presenter whether she'd forward a letter to him.

Sending a strange man a letter. What's she supposed to write? I've always wanted a man with the same musical taste. I'm curious to know what you look like. Or: is there something else you should add? Martin would know what to do. She looks at the clock. In Thailand, it's nine in the evening. He'll still be awake.

There are roars in the background when the receiver is lifted. 'Hi, Martin, is that you?'

'Alice! Wait a minute,' the voices in the background get quieter. 'Sorry, I was watching a fight on TV. How are you?'

'I need your advice.'

'What about?'

'This man on the radio. I'd like to meet him. What should I write to him?'

'Dear Herr So-and-so, I'd like to meet you.'

'I can't do that.'

‘Why?’

‘I don’t want to make a fool of myself.’

‘What’s foolish about that? He has said himself he’s interested in your music.’

‘I can’t.’

‘Then I don’t know what to do either.’

‘Don’t give me that!’

‘Write that you enjoy his music requests.’

‘Where would I be without you, Martin! Speak to you soon.’

Alice hangs up. Martin. His voice, his arms round her. They were her home. At eighteen, they squeezed timidly. Alice had difficulty reading the touches. At tournament times, they trained their way away from any misunderstandings. Martin had them licked. In the final years, weak signals were enough for them to understand each other. She knew every flicker of his body. If a quarrel was looming, his left arm would be stiff. If Martin was sad, his lead was limp. When he was happy, his arms became hers, they’d four feet, were two sides of the same coin. Does he dance with his boyfriend too? She looks out the window. On the roof ridge, opposite, a crow is picking at something round. A nut? Alice can’t fathom what ties Martin to Pong. He’s cheerful, Martin says, gentle. Says, every day, how good Martin is looking, how big he is, how strong. ‘In Switzerland, I’d just be an old man.’ What’s more, in Thailand, it never gets really cold, it’s never grey, the food’s good, the people likable. There’s always time for a word, and a smile. That wouldn’t be enough for her - to emigrate, to join a man she knows only from five five-week holidays, with whom she can’t speak in her own tongue. ‘I’ll learn Thai,’ Martin said before he left. ‘I’m starting a new life.’

*Dear Alice,*

*How are you today? Did the man on the radio get in touch? Out of curiosity, I listened on the internet to old request shows. How nice to hear your voice! I try to imagine you sitting at the kitchen table, drawing and listening, but I can’t. You, and sitting quietly! I can see you dancing. Sweeping the studio with your energetic steps. I can’t recall you even strolling. And now, in my imagination, you’re supposed to do what only old people do: listen to a request show, telling the world, via the radio, that you exist, still. Are we so old, Alice?*

*I feel ancient. The heat hits me for six. In the afternoons, I loll with Pong on the teak bench behind the counter, and let the fan blow at me. Yesterday, it stirred up memories of salsa nights. Clothes sticking to backs; feet slipping in shoes; faces glowing. I wanted to tell Pong, but then just left it. He wouldn’t understand. Not only because I speak Thai only moderately, and he, English; but because latino music isn’t popular here. People with Latin temperaments are seen as uncouth. A lady customer told me recently that Italians were uncivilised, didn’t have any culture. Do you know why? Because they gesticulate when they speak, and are loud. Thais speak quietly even when they call for the waiter in a restaurant.*

*My old life is gone. I can’t tell people about it. Pong and his family can’t imagine a life in Europe. Pong’s world has the same radius as his shop, extended by the living rooms of his family, by foreign films and Thai television series. Switzerland features in two ways: the Matterhorn, and the church (that I’d never seen before) in Meggen. At the beginning of our relationship, I showed people photos of my apartment, of our dance studio, of*

*performances. From those, they concluded that I was rich. They saw in my furnishings the décor of an American TV soap. As I find that unpleasant, I don't show the photos anymore.*

*Pong is afraid of travelling to Switzerland. The cold, the food, the money, the language. Bread doesn't agree with him, he says (Thais think we eat mainly bread). I think, meanwhile, too, he wouldn't feel at ease in Europe.*

*Suddenly, I mind being far away from my past. I will die here, surrounded by sacks of rice, tins of coconut milk, and the smell of curry. If I'm lucky: on the teak bench behind the counter, and not in the hospital. The TV will be on, a velvety male voice will be advertising powder, I'll hear the word 'sabai' (sense of well-being). Maybe someone, wanting to buy gnat poison, will call my name. The fan cools my cold forehead; Pong calls a doctor; is cleaning and crying. And me?*

*Fortunately, I live in a Buddhist country. I can't go to hell here. At most, another life awaits me. Maybe as an ant. Maybe as a monk. Or as a performing bear.*

*Alice, I miss you. I wouldn't have to explain to you why I didn't go to my father's funeral. Here, I'm a bad son for doing that. Thais can't understand someone not looking after their relatives. We're visited almost daily by Pong's nephews, cousins or siblings.*

*Dear one, I almost forgot to tell you the best part. A few days ago, a young customer told me, all excited, about a dance parade. It seems to be something comparable to our idea of a waltzing city. Too bad, we didn't get to realise it.*

*Okay, I now need to dust the shop. Let me know how the story continues with that man.*

*Big hug,*

*Martin.*

Alice steps under the shower and lets the water run over her head. The dancing city. Couples waltz through the streets, become the river that, in three-quarter time, flows onto the squares and carries passers-by away. People float out of houses, drift in circles. The turning makes them dizzy, but they don't fall, they take off. No-one can elude the pull of the bodies. Trams and cars stop as dancing couple cut across them, laughing, oblivious of all around them. Even those spectators who resist doing the steps, wag their heads and tap their feet till the dancers slow down; drop – exhausted - onto the tarmac; and look up at the sky. Alice brushes her skin. It curls under the pressure. Yes, Martin, we are old.

After her morning wash, she pours herself some tea and sits down at the computer with her cup.

*Dear Performing Bear,*

*Are we old? Of course, we are, after such a long time. We've known each other, after all, for over fifty years already! In the earliest picture I have of you in my head, you're pressing your lips together and looking past me at the ground. That must have been in one of the first weeks of the course. You pushed me around, I counted the beats. Was that us, Martin?*

*When I look back, you're almost always there. With no-one else did I spend as much time as with you; no-one else did I tell so much. It is from you that I learned how a man thinks and feels. I remember your first risotto, and your rage when we were sneered at, as 'provincial' at international tournaments. I can still feel how your father's contempt made you suffer. Our panic at the possibility of failure is, thank God, long gone.*

*My body is no longer what it was. Recently, I overstretched my neck when I wouldn't accept that I can no longer look over my shoulder. Something is always hurting. If I'm lucky, the pains go once I've done my gymnastics. Sometimes, they accompany me for days. The doctor says it is wear and tear. As long as that's all it is. Other people's heads give out.*

*In the house opposite me, from one day to the next, a resident has vanished. Last week, I saw a removal van outside it. Young men loaded a bed, together with the duvet, a chest of drawers, and a few bags. I thought a lodger was moving out, or someone was disposing of old things. I didn't associate the van with the old neighbour I occasionally see at the kitchen window – saw, as I now know. The curtains are gone, and a painter whistles from the kitchen. A woman.*

*The neighbour has moved into a home, I take it. Did she go round the rooms again before she got in the car? Is she relieved not to have to climb so many stairs anymore? Oh Martin, though I think living in a home has its attractions, I dread it. Having to get up in accordance with the rules. Eating what others cook for me. Sitting at the table with people that drool. That I find disagreeable. I hope it won't come to that.*

*You're amazed I'm taking things more calmly. I've no other choice. Since I stopped helping out in places, there has been nothing to keep me on my toes. There would be space for someone like Alexander.*

She looks out. In the kitchen window of the neighbour who moved out, is the reflection of her own window. In the rowan tree, birds are jumping from branch to branch.

*Have I told you about Elsa and Susanne, with whom Britt and I occasionally drink coffee? I know them from Gym for the Elderly. Elsa used to be a chef in the inn at the centre of the village. Thanks to her, a few delicacies have been added to my recipe collection. Beef olives, filled with beetroot and horse radish. Aubergines with a pomegranate sauce. Pea puree with peppermint. Susanne is married to a former director, lives in a big house, and is always on the run. Inviting people, attending courses, helping a neighbour with her admin, looking after grandchildren, going to the hairdresser, pedicure, manicures, a face lift. It's odd. Her hair and forehead are those of a young woman. The way she walks, thinks, her voice and her hands, those of an old one. The last time she was at my place for coffee, Britt and I had to help her up from the sofa. Britt sends her regards, incidentally.*

*You see, my life has become a request programme. Sometimes, I can think of nothing I could ask for. I tell myself, 'The cupboard needs cleaned out again,' or 'You've wanted, for ages already, to go to the Textiles Museum.' Instead of doing something, I just sit there, sit waiting for something to happen. But nothing does.*

*I move between the village centre, the kitchen, the living room and the balcony. In the village, I chat to a shop assistant. In the kitchen, I look across at the neighbours; from the living room and study, at the rowan tree. The best view of life, I have from the balcony. I can see the cats. The local women. People out for walks. Cars, birds.*

*The cats sit, waiting, all day. Do they know, what for? When the local women pet them, they speak to them too. I don't hear what they say. But they speak. Always. Can you pet without saying anything? Little children, holding their grandfathers' and grandmothers' hands, balance on a low wall, facing the road. The bigger children rush ahead, or*

*saunter along behind. Crows scurry along the roof ridge opposite, eyeing the robins and thrushes in the rowan. I can tell the tweets of the different birds apart now. I can hear a cat creeping up on them. You're amazed, aren't you?*

*You write about death. Why, suddenly? I find it hard to use the word in connection with you. As if I'd entice death by doing so. It should keep its distance, Martin! Unimaginable: suddenly no longer hearing from you. Please tell Pong to inform me if anything happens to you. A terrible thought. More terrible than my own death. If you die, you'll be missing. If I die, everything will dissolve. The conceivable, the conceiving. But I don't want to yet. There must be still more to come.*

*That you, in Buddha territory, won't be sent to hell, is - on the one hand - reassuring. On the other, you'll miss out on all the naked men there. Oh well, perhaps sex with ants also has its attractions. Oh Martin, let's entice life, and enjoy the curry as well, and for as long, as we can!*

*With warm wishes,*

*Alice.*

*PS: What are the terms and conditions, if you want to come back as a cat?*

*Dear Martin,*

*I understand you. Being alone is marvellous. No discussing when it's time to clean; no filthy mood that proves to be contagious; no negotiating which programmes to watch. I can't imagine sharing the apartment. But going to the cinema with someone again is a joy.*

*I saw a dance film with Alexander. It reminded me of the time we did tournaments together. Fine-tuning the movement, losing yourself in the music. It's not possible to live more intensely.*

*Alexander and I sat politely side-by-side. There can be no talk of 'throwing myself in his arms', my dear. I'll never do that again. Do you remember the actor with his 'I didn't want to. I can't help it if you're so beautiful.' As I say.*

*As for 'old school', all I can say is: that's us, whether we try or not. The one question is: are we part of the 'new old' or the 'old old'? Does that difference exist in Thailand too? The 'new old' were described in a newspaper report here as: active, mobile and keen to consume. The accompanying photographs were of strident old women. They were all very slim, very beautiful, incredibly well-groomed, carefully made-up. Were wearing very expensive clothes, big jewellery, unusual spectacles. Underneath, it said something like 'The freedom of the new old knows no limits.'*

*Next to them, I am a mouse. Or what they mean by 'old old'. I own neither pink spectacles (I didn't wear any when I met Alexander) nor a feather dress, and I don't consider hours spent pinning up your hair, doing make-up, painting your nails, studying fashion magazines, shopping and undergoing liposuction as 'freedom from the social pressure always to standardise things', as it was called in the article.*

*Alexander dresses conservatively. The material and the cut are things he appreciates, and he doesn't like throwing away things. Squandering material is a sin, according to him. When we're together, we get carried away and ramble on. He, for instance, observed recently that people in the city are looking more and more alike. That led us to the question whether, or not, beauty can be bought. I think it can. Healthy eating, a good haircut, clothes that fit well, nice teeth, are all a question of money. He didn't agree. A*

*sense of beauty, he said, has to do with attentiveness and education. He can fairly insist, I tell you. He'll remain adamant about his opinion until I've presented all the arguments. Shortly before I get grumpy, he'll say, 'An interesting way of seeing it', or 'I've not considered it from this perspective before.' No-one has challenged me like that for a long time now.*

*Have I written to you about Fleur, the young person from the neighbourhood I've met? It was on the train, on my way to my first meeting with Alexander. She asked me to participate in a project at her grammar school, a dance-theatre project involving different generations.*

*Yesterday was the first rehearsal. I thought, when it comes to dance matters, I could easily hold my own with other old people, but after the first exercise, the woman directing it said, 'Alice, forget the dancer within.'*

*You strive all your life for elegance, for posture, and are proud of your body having internalised it, and then someone says, 'Off with that.' I'd have liked nothing better than to run out of the rehearsal. The next task, thank God, was more gratifying. We'd to practise leading, like we two used to with our pupils. My partner was a young man, mop of brown curls, dimples in his cheeks. You'd have liked him (I think Fleur liked him too). He seems to be very committed to the theatre, was so eager and keen. As we parted, he said he wished he'd a grandma like me. How pleased I was!*

*Fleur took photographs throughout the rehearsal. She made herself invisible, but was very attentive. She seems to take life very seriously. Without me asking her to, she drew a map, how to get from the station to the hill where the school is, waited outside for me, and introduced me to the other girls and the director. Thanks to her, I didn't feel out of place – and yet I barely know her. Her colleagues seem more self-assured than her. One has a playfulness about her, and a strong will. Another knuckles down in the background. If I understood correctly, she's responsible for costumes and set design.*

*On the way home, Fleur told me her father, an architect, moved out two years ago. She rarely sees him. Since her parents separated, her mother has been working at the residents' registration office, but is looking for something new. Shortly before Fleur was born, she completed a degree in Art History. After having the baby, she built up the school library - as a volunteer. A gregarious woman. I saw her at the courtyard party.*

*While we were speaking about her parents, Fleur remained very reserved. Only when we started talking about photography, did she come to life. She's fascinated by the votive paintings in the church at the monastery. We were there together once, do you remember? 'The paintings are grotesque,' Fleur said. 'They're supposed to be proof it pays to believe. Yet, the way it is painted, you have to laugh at the misfortune of the people.' I argued that more dramatic depictions would turn the church into a chamber of horrors. She laughed so much, there were tears in her eyes.*

*When I asked her whether she went to church often, she looked at me aghast, sneered at the naivety of the faithful. 'Instead of doing something about all the suffering, they just fold their hands in their laps. They don't lift a finger, but feel as if they're above the others,' she said, indignantly. I said, I envied these people their trust in God. Hearing that, she got into her stride. 'And what if you trust in God, and then he leaves you in the lurch?'*

*The photo I'm sending you, she took when we first met on the train. I think it's very good, even if the woman in it irritates me. In the past, I saw wrinkles and white hair as signs of wisdom. Nowadays, they represent imperfection and mortality for me.*

*Martin, at the end of the year, we'll see each other. I'm looking forward to it.*

*With warm wishes,*

*Alice.*

*END OF EXTRACT*

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